

Soul Searching

The concept of an immortal soul is one that many of us hold to, although our perspectives may be wildly dissimilar. We might believe in heaven, nirvana, reincarnation, or simply the bliss described by those who have reported on near-death experiences. Judging by the popularity of books such as *“Proof of Heaven”* by Dr. Eben Alexander, there is an enormous curiosity about this mysterious essence that we believe continues beyond our physical death.

At the same time, over 60% of Canadians also believe in the evolution of the species over millions of years, according to a [2012 Angus-Reid survey](#). How can that be reconciled with a belief in the soul?

Many accept that we had common ancestors in the slow creep of life from single cells to mammals to primates, our family tree constantly dividing into new branches, with the family Hominidae splitting from the orangutan family around 14 million years ago. Before roughly a couple of million years ago, when we began what’s inelegantly called our *encephalization* process, our ancestors still had brains about the size of chimpanzees. Anatomically modern humans have existed for about 200,000 years.

So, at what point would the soul have come into existence?

This question occurred while reading a lovely, meditative book, *“The Eternal Soul”*. No doubt my reflections on it had gotten cross-pollinated with a TV documentary or science show of some sort. Or perhaps it was the wording of one of the passages that prompted it: *“From the moment the soul leaves the body and arrives in the Heavenly World, its evolution is spiritual, and that evolution is: The approaching unto God.” “The soul is ...the first among all created things to declare the excellence of its Creator....”*

My line of reasoning went something like: I’m assuming you can’t be “a little bit” eternal or “gradually” immortal. So was there a moment when, through a spectacular evolutionary leap, we crossed some threshold and were graced with an immortal soul? And are we alone in having achieved this status?

This seemed doubtful, one of those half-baked theories that seem to abound when it comes to matters that go beyond the measuring cup. Getting tied in knots by terminology always complicates things, and the words *soul* and *spirit* have myriad meanings. Allow me to offer a few definitions that might provide a useful common vocabulary, borrowed from the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith.

The essential quality of the “soul” is free will, that is, the power to either develop qualities such as justice, wisdom and compassion or to give way to corruption, greed, and aggression. The “rational soul” is a term that includes the mental faculties that allow us to discover the secrets of existence, visible and invisible. Much as in First Nations teachings, all things – minerals, vegetables, animals – are said to have a spirit, each with its own characteristics. According to Bahá’í teachings, the “*rational soul*” more or less serves as the definition of the “*human spirit*”.

This may be key: that the essence of all of creation is Spirit, expressed in more ways than we can count, in a universe too large to fathom.

The flower is part of the plant, and in one sense its “*raison d’être*”, the culmination of its journey. The human spirit or rational soul is a flowering of the material world, developing like a seed in the water and clay of creation, its beauty otherworldly in every sense. “Eternal” may be incomprehensible to our inner primate but our spirits immediately and intuitively understand.