

## HOW TO WOO THE SOUL

-Elizabeth Lesser

Meditation is a way of relaxing into the mystery of existence, without looking for answers, without clinging to security. But a funny thing happens to me as I relax into the mystery. In the vast expanse of infinite consciousness, unbiased by my worried and judgmental mind, I sometimes touch on answers. I taste something better than security. Every now and then, in my moments of stillness, when my heart is blessedly open, I stumble upon the soul, my distinct ray of infinite consciousness. The truth of who I really am—the part I want to guide me, the part that is always with me, wherever I go, here and forever—makes an appearance.

The molecular biologist and meditation teacher, Jon Kabat-Zinn, wrote a book called *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. For years I thought the title meant one thing, and now I think it means something else. When I first read the book, I was at the tail end of a long chapter of my life in which I basically felt bad at the core of who I was. The final blow was when I got divorced—this was proof that wherever I went, there I was...in all my badness.

“Wherever you go, there you are”...the phrase was a nagging reminder that wherever I went, I would haul my problems with me, as if I was dragging a sack filled with personality flaws and behavioral scars into every new situation: a new relationship, a new place, a new job. So, I better clean up my act if I wanted to have a different kind of everyday life. Of course, there is truth in that worldview: looking honestly at the ways in which you create your own problems, and taking responsibility for the mistakes of the past, are good things to do. But I think Dr. Kabat-Zinn meant something more encompassing when he called his book, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*.

I think Dr. Kabat-Zinn is saying that wherever you go, you also bring your truest self—your core goodness, the original self untainted by the coping mechanisms born in childhood and honed in the stresses of adulthood. Wherever you go, you also bring your eternal self, your authentic presence, your soul. You haul that around too. And it’s always there for you, always ready to give you wise counsel. Whenever you feel out of your element and exposed, insecure or jittery, just a few breaths away is your clear and sweet inner self—like sap

running in the maple tree; like honey in the hive. Wherever you go, you can come home to your soul in the center of yourself. You can ask it for guidance, strength, and vision. Wherever you go, there you are.

When I was trying to help my sister Maggie woo her own soul—especially when she was hopeless and heartbroken in the midst of cancer treatment—I would liken the soul to the sap in the center of the maple tree, because Maggie was a connoisseur of maple syrup. She loved everything about it—the syrup itself, the process of making it, and the maple tree in all seasons. I would tell Maggie to imagine herself as a maple tree, and that in the center of her tough, scarred, defended exterior was a vein of sweet sap, a powerful well of authenticity. Each one of us—every single human—arrives with that potent goodness. It's our birthright, the truth of who we are. I would tell Maggie to trust her basic goodness, to tap it, to use it. I think this is the purpose of life—to tap our sweet sap, to boil it in the heat of daily life, and to turn it into a gift. I think we can do that, even when we're scared or sick, even when we are dying.

What fuel would you rather put in your tank as you travel through life? Sweet syrup? Or some bitter brew that spews toxic cynicism and despair? You have that choice every day. Every day I try to choose the bright sweetness at the center of myself, no matter what is going on in my life. It's not always an easy choice. The hounds of despair bark at me, and they, like all miserable forces, want company. Misery and despair are persuasive fellows. They tell compelling tales about the fruitless nature of life. They make fun of the Pollyannas who believe in the sweet sap at the core. They want everyone to go down with the ship of gloom. Choosing sweetness can feel like an unreasonable act in the presence of cynics. But don't cave to the cynics. There's truth in its sweetness, there's power in its seeming naiveté, there's courage in its golden light. If you make the choice into a habit, you can woo the soul back into your life, and the hounds of darkness will slink back into the woods.

### *A Practice to Woo the Soul*

Here is a practice I taught to Maggie, sitting in the window seat of her home. Its seeming simplicity is disarming, which makes it effective, especially for those of us who over-think and over-do. Every time you feel yourself slipping into despair or bitterness, shame or meanness toward yourself or others, take your hand and bring it gently to the top of your head. Stroke your hair (or bald spot) as if you were patting the little head of a baby, or your dog or cat. Pat your head, and whisper (or say silently to yourself), “good girl”, “good boy” or whatever endearment you would say to your most precious child or beloved pet. Do this for just a minute or less—don’t make it into a big deal. But do it often; every time you feel yourself sinking into self-recrimination or cynicism, pat your head (or if that seems too childish, place your hand on your heart and feel the warmth spreading into your chest, and bathing you with acceptance and love.) You can do this practice anywhere. If you are at work you can pretend you’re fixing your hair or scratching an itch. After a while just a touch creates a Pavlovian response of gentle self-forgiveness, inner harmony, even joy. The soul comes out of hiding when you forgive yourself for being a regular old human being with a case of mistaken identity.