

On the Soul (in Plain Language)

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When most people use the word *soul*, they are reaching for a word that points to the inside of a human life where fear and hope live, where shame takes root, where love lands or doesn't, where meaning either comes together or slips away. Of course, for many the term also refers to something that lives on after this life. I'll address that at the end of this article.

What follows is an attempt to describe the inner life – the life of the soul -- in plain language, using some of the best work from psychoanalysis and contemporary neuroscience. I'm going to talk about Freud, Jaak Panksepp, Mark Solms, and Karl Friston—but my aim is not to impress you with names. It's to make sense of what actually happens in us and between us: how the soul is formed, how it defends itself, how it can change, and what this might mean for spiritual care.

I'll assume you're open to the word *soul*, but not that you hold a particular set of religious beliefs. I'll also lean toward a dual-aspect monist view: that we are one being, not two glued together—body and soul as two “faces” of the same underlying reality, one accessible from the outside (through science) and one from the inside (through lived experience).

Soul, mind, and the “apparatus of the soul”

Freud used an awkward but revealing term in German: **Seelenapparat**. Literally, it means *apparatus of the soul*. From the very earliest translators of Freud until today, this rich term has been rendered into English as “the mind,” stripping away the resonance of *Seele*—soul.

Freud was not talking about a ghost. He was trying to describe the organized system behind our inner life: the way desires, fears, memories, and conflicts are arranged and processed. That's the *apparatus*.

To keep things clear, it helps to distinguish three layers:

- The **apparatus** is the embodied system itself: brain, nervous system, body, and all the patterns inscribed there over time.

- The **mind** is what that apparatus is *doing*: thinking, perceiving, remembering, imagining, dreaming.
- The **soul**, in the way I'll use the word here, is the *lived interior* of all that: what it is like, from the inside, to be this person with this story.

These are not three different substances. They are three ways of looking at one reality:

- From the outside: we see a brain–body system, with circuits and hormones and electrical storms.
- From the inside: we *feel* longing, terror, joy, deadness, envy, gratitude, trust.

Dual-aspect monism simply says: these are two perspectives on one life. If you are religious, you may go on to say that this one life is also held in, addressed by, or opened to God. But the basic picture works whether you use that language or not.

Feeling at the center: where consciousness begins

Most of us were taught to equate “consciousness” with **thinking**. I’m conscious when I’m awake, rational, and able to say what’s going on. On that view, the soul looks like a kind of inner commentator sitting behind the eyes.

Yet careful work in affective neuroscience suggests something very different. Jaak Panksepp, a pioneer in the field, spent his life studying the emotional lives of animals. He found that if you stimulate certain **deep regions of the brain**—in the brainstem and the subcortex—you don’t get ideas or images. You get **feelings**.

Across mammals, he could evoke at least seven identifiable emotional systems: SEEKING (curiosity, drive), FEAR, RAGE, PANIC/GRIEF (separation distress), CARE, LUST, and PLAY. When these systems are activated, the animal *behaves differently* and, as far as we can tell, *feels differently*. They are not neatly labeled thoughts. They are raw *modes of being*.

Mark Solms, a South African neuropsychologist and psychoanalyst, takes this seriously and draws a key conclusion: **consciousness begins as feeling**. Before we have language, before we have a story, before we can reason, our interior life is shaped by these basic affective states—states that are rooted in the body’s needs for safety, connection, exploration, and reproduction.

If you translate that back into more traditional language, it sounds like this:

The soul is affective at its core. Before it reflects, it feels.

Cortex and “higher” thinking matter very much, but they are *latecomers*. They sit on top of, and constantly answer to, this older emotional foundation.

The predicting soul: how the inner life stays alive

A second line of work, associated with Karl Friston, gives us a different angle on the same reality. Friston thinks about the brain as a **prediction-making organ**. From his vantage point, any living system survives by constantly:

- predicting what is likely to happen next,
- comparing those predictions with incoming reality,
- and minimizing the gap between the two.

This gap is often called *prediction error*. If the discrepancy is small and manageable, we feel relatively settled. If it is large and chronic, we experience distress: anxiety, rage, shame, despair. The system is being told, “Your expectations of the world are not keeping you safe; something has to change.”

Solms takes Friston’s math and joins it to Panksepp’s feelings. The result is a compelling picture:

- The **apparatus of the soul** is a living system that constantly builds and revises *expectations* about self, others, and the world.
- These expectations are not just ideas; they are **embodied habits** of feeling and reacting.
- **Affect**—good and bad feelings—is the soul’s way of *registering* how well or poorly its expectations are working in the real world.

When your inner map of reality is roughly accurate and your basic needs are being met, your emotional life—your soul—will tend to feel more at ease. When your map is badly mismatched with reality, or reality itself is brutal, your soul will tell you: it hurts to live like this.

Once again, we are not dealing with a detached observer in the head. We are dealing with a **living, feeling, predicting organism**, viewed from the inside.

Memory as the soul’s inner map

If the apparatus is always making and revising predictions, **memory** becomes central. But in this context, “memory” means more than what you can consciously recall.

Contemporary neuroscience talks about multiple memory systems: explicit memory for facts and events; procedural memory for skills; emotional and bodily memory for patterns of feeling and reaction. All of this together forms your **inner map of the world**.

Some of that map you can put into words:

- “My father loved me, but he was distracted.”
- “I had a strict religious upbringing.”
- “I remember the night in the ICU when everything changed.”

Much of it you cannot. It shows up instead as:

- the flinch when someone raises their voice, even if you “know” you’re safe;
- the conviction that no one will really stay, even if the people around you are devoted;
- the hollow place that opens whenever someone says “God,” even if you can still recite the creeds.

These are **unconscious expectations**, learned through repeated emotional experience. In Friston’s language, they are your **priors**: the assumptions the system brings to each new moment about what people are like, what you are like, and what the world (or God) is like.

You may sincerely espouse beliefs that contradict these priors—“I am a beloved child of God,” “People care about me,” “My needs matter”—but if your deep emotional memory says otherwise, your soul will respond according to its *lived* history, not its *stated* doctrine.

Reconsolidation: how deep patterns change

For decades, we thought of memory like files in a cabinet: you encode them, you store them, and later you retrieve them more or less intact.

More recent work has overturned that picture. It turns out that when you **re-activate** a memory, you render it temporarily **labile**—soft, open to change. It has to be “saved” again in a process called **reconsolidation**. In that window, the memory can be **updated** with new information.

At an emotional level, three elements tend to matter:

1. The old pattern is **fully alive** in the present: not just discussed, but felt.
2. Something happens that **contradicts** what that pattern predicts.
3. In that emotionally charged moment, the system **integrates the new experience**, and the memory is stored differently.

Imagine someone who has learned, over many years, “If I show fear, I will be shamed, dismissed, or abandoned.” That expectation may never have been explicitly stated, but it is etched into their nervous system. Now imagine that, in the presence of a chaplain, therapist, or friend, they actually *do* show fear. They tremble, they choke up, they admit “I’m terrified.”

The old inner map predicts what comes next: ridicule, silence, a quick change of subject, or a pious platitude that indirectly tells them to shut it down.

Instead, something different happens. The other person stays. Listens. Perhaps even says, “It makes so much sense that you feel this way. I’m not going anywhere.”

The **prediction error** is enormous. The soul, at some level, has to say: “This does not fit the old map.”

If such moments are rare, the old map may quickly reassert itself: “That was a fluke.” But if they happen repeatedly, in roughly the same emotional territory, the underlying expectation begins to change. The next time the person approaches fear, their body is *slightly less certain* that exposure equals annihilation. Over time, the whole pattern may soften. They may still feel afraid, but they feel less *alone* in their fear.

That is reconsolidation in the wild. It is not mere cognitive “reframing.” It is a **biological rewriting of the soul’s map**, accomplished through specific kinds of lived experience.

Unconscious priors: what about what we cannot remember?

This raises an obvious question. Much of our most potent shaping happens before we have language, or in situations of such intensity that they never become clear narrative memory. Abuse in early childhood, chronic shaming, experiences of religious terror, atmospheres of neglect: these often leave **traces without stories**.

What, then, of those **unconscious priors**—expectations that drive us but that we cannot name and may never fully remember?

The crucial point is this: **the soul can change even when it cannot fully explain itself**.

Unconscious priors show themselves not in articulate belief but in **patterns**:

- the way your muscles tense around certain topics;
- the impulse to apologize for existing when you take up space;
- the automatic expectation, in prayer, that silence equals rejection;
- the sense that joy must be damped down, because catastrophe always follows.

We don’t have direct access to these priors as concepts, but we have access to their *effects*: in the body, the emotions, the relationship unfolding in front of us.

In any sustained, safe enough relationship, these patterns are **evoked**. They show up between patient and chaplain, analysand and analyst, parishioner and pastor, friend and friend. The work, then, is not to force a memory where none is available, but to:

- notice, together, **what keeps happening now**;
- stay with the feeling as it arises, rather than fleeing it or smothering it with premature reassurance;
- offer and receive **new responses** in exactly those hot spots where the old map expects the worst.

Over time, through repetition, the statistics change. The nervous system learns: “It is *sometimes* possible to reveal myself and not be humiliated; to express need and not be punished; to be angry and not be abandoned.”

No single insight “solves” it. But the prior—“It always goes that way”—gradually loses its absolute status. Again, the map changes. The soul finds itself a little less trapped in inevitability.

“Renewing of the mind”: a theological phrase with psychological depth

For many people shaped by Christian language, Paul’s phrase “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” sits quietly in the background. It is easily misunderstood in purely cognitive terms, as if Paul were urging his readers to replace bad ideas with good ones.

If you hear “mind” here in the richer sense of **Seelenapparat**—the whole soul-apparatus with its memories, affects, defenses, and expectations—the phrase becomes remarkably contemporary.

To be “transformed” is to undergo a **revision of the soul’s deep priors**:

- about who I am and what I’m worth,
- about whether the world is purely hostile or also hospitable,
- about whether others (or God) can be trusted with my vulnerability,
- about whether hope is foolish or realistic.

To “renew” the mind, in this sense, is not merely to learn new propositions. It is to participate in the **ongoing reconsolidation of emotional memory**, such that the soul’s map becomes more truthful, more spacious, more capable of bearing the weight of reality.

You do not have to share Paul’s theology to recognize something of your own experience here. Most of us, in one way or another, know what it is to be *stuck* in an old pattern, and also what it is to be *changed*—slowly, and often against our expectations—by new kinds of relationship and meaning.

Life after death? The limits of this account

At this point, many people will ask: “But what about the soul as something that lives on after death? Where does that fit?”

The honest answer is that **neuroscience and psychoanalysis do not and cannot decide that question**. They study the soul’s embodied life: how inner experience arises, how it is structured and reshaped over time, what happens when the brain is damaged, how trauma and healing alter the inner map.

Within a dual-aspect monist frame, we can say this much:

- In this life, the soul is the **inner aspect** of a living, embodied process.
- The “apparatus of the soul” is the outer aspect of that same process: the brain–body system, observable and measurable.

- The patterns of our interior life—our loves, fears, loyalties, meanings—are clearly shaped by what happens to that apparatus.

Whether that inner aspect in some way **persists beyond death**, and if so in what form, is a metaphysical and religious question. Different traditions answer it differently. The perspective sketched here neither proves nor disproves any of those answers. It simply says: while we are alive, *this* is how the soul appears to work.

For a chaplain, that is already more than enough to guide practice.

What this means for chaplaincy and spiritual care

If you are a chaplain, pastor, spiritual director, or caregiver, you do not need to talk about prediction error or reconsolidation at the bedside. But you are profoundly involved in the processes these words name.

In plain terms, your presence can help to:

- **evoke** deep patterns of expectation in the person before you: about authority, care, God, abandonment, shame;
- **hold** the emotions those patterns generate—terror, anger, numbness, despair—without fleeing, fixing, or plastering them over with clichés;
- **offer** new experiences in precisely the places where the old map anticipates the worst: staying instead of withdrawing, telling the truth instead of minimizing, making room for lament instead of rushing to hope.

You cannot erase a lifetime of pain or undo structural injustice by the power of your good intentions. But in a very literal, embodied sense, you can stand with someone at the edge of their most frightening expectations and *be different there*. And that difference can, over time and across encounters, help the soul revise its most entrenched predictions about what is possible.

Whether or not the person believes in God, whether or not you use explicit religious language, that is **deep soul work**. It attends to the “apparatus of the soul” without reducing the soul to a mechanism. It honors the mystery of inner life while taking seriously the ways it is shaped in and through the body, the brain, and our shared history.

And if you do speak of God, grace, or Spirit, this framework can sit quietly underneath that language, helping you recognize that what you are witnessing in the hospital room or the prison cell is not just “coping” or “compliance.” It is the living, aching, sometimes renewing work of the soul itself—feeling, predicting, remembering, defending, and, when conditions are right, being changed.

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