

TEXT

Some people say it holds the echo of the sea. I say, “No.” When I bring a seashell to my ear, I hear the sounds of my soul.

With a roar my soul convulses: turbulent waves crashing; spray mixing with wind and scraping its way through hostile terrains of anguish or confusion. Then comes calm, with soft, insistent whispers. Like light rain, perhaps, or easy waves in a lake lying full and sated in its bed. My soul longs to overflow. Because a soul is not a thing. A soul is a doing.

A soul races out to touch a sunrise, as if playful fingers could dip sky colors and smudge streaming ribbons of rose and grey and violet. When I close my eyes, I know I am larger than my body. I embrace a spring morning until it releases fragrant promise. Then my soul drinks in summer sunlight. I throb with life: like a journeying vine or a bud ready to burst with honeyed color. Later, when wind turns cold, I gather brown leaves into a crisp rustle and I become an autumn day. In winter I dash across fields in wisps of snow. Then I’m the moon’s silver gaze, watching the earth dream of warmth to come.¹

A Greek philosopher taught that, in the beginning, there was only one soul. A Universal Soul, existing beyond time and space.² This soul was complete and perfect. Yet it still felt a desire to express itself. So in a magnificent outflowing, the Universal Soul gave birth to the cosmos: planets and stars and the manifold forms of life.

Some say that my soul is a fragment of that first divine perfection. So is yours. We are parts of that whole, fellows with other fragmentary souls, bound to one another and to a universe made of the same fundamental stuff.

Somehow my soul understands this: I only exist because of my connections. Then comes amazement. Revelation. And transformation. “Here I am, amid all of this.” Tangled up with those I love and those who always test my affections. Suddenly bound to a stranger who tells of joy or pain. I hear trees crying for water during drought, and I weep with them. Whales sing their ocean songs, and the lips of my soul murmur their exuberant prayers.

This is the wellspring of joy: when I join and share the lives of other beings. When my soul flows forth to touch ideas captured in pigment or collage; when it swells with the beauty of a mathematical idea, or rides the waves of musical exploration.

These are the tidal movements of a soul that seeks and loves. Perhaps I hear the ebb and flow when I hold a seashell to my ear. The spiral form traces the shape of the universe, spinning ever-outward, like the solar wind, into nebulae and the nurseries for infant stars.³ A mystical path that transports my soul toward the vast All.

And that carries me back. Because my soul needs to understand: What is my essence, my purpose? What might I offer this world? And so my soul streams back into itself, coiling smaller, ever smaller, seeking answers. Until it collects somewhere and everywhere within me.

I hear it. Ripples of energy. Cascading passion and joy. Waves of desire to know and burgeon forth again.

¹ In an essay called, “The Over-Soul” (1841), Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.”

² The 3rd-century Greek philosopher, Plotinus, proposed this idea of the Universal Soul, and it influenced Medieval Christian ideas of the soul and the origin of the universe. In addition, Plotinus’ writings helped give rise to a form of thinking called “organicism” —a way of thinking about the fundamental wholeness of physical and spiritual existence.

³ The 12th-century German abbess and mystic, Hildegard de Bingen, used the seashell as a metaphor for the spiral shape of the universe and for the driving force of energy that enlivens the cosmos. Inspired by her powerful religious visions, Hildegard was a prolific writer, visual artist, and composer.