



Simple Gifts

Words to Inspire the Spirit

IMMANUEL CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

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How Much Does the Soul Weigh?

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

The answer is 21.3 grams, or roughly three-quarters of an ounce. We know this from experiments conducted by the good doctor Duncan MacDougal of Haverhill, Massachusetts. In 1907 he weighed seven dying nursing home patients just before and just after their deaths. He even had a group of dying dogs which he used as a control group. His conclusion: the human soul weighs exactly 21.3 grams.

Now this sounds to our 21st century ears more than a little quaint. It is on par with those hyper-rationalist explanations for mysterious events in the Bible. For example, before climate change the Sea of Galilee occasionally froze, so maybe Jesus was walking on ice floes. Or, tectonic forces might have caused a transient parting of the Red Sea, affording safe passage to the Hebrews fleeing Pharaoh's charioteers.

But I'm not ready to dismiss all such speculation. Perhaps Dr. MacDougal was on to something: maybe when the soul leaves the body, the body loses a tiny, but real amount of weight. After all, I've been present at the deaths of

hundreds of people, and I can attest that something does seem to happen at that moment.

For twelve years, once or twice a week, I was the overnight house officer at my local hospital. It was grueling work, especially since I generally had a full schedule of patients to attend to the following day. But I needed the money – medical school debt to pay off, kids at fancy schools.

Looking back, it was not only exceedingly tough work; it was also very meaningful in shaping who I am spiritually. At 3 a.m., it was just the chaplain and me in the basement call room talking about the meaning of it all. It was a time to reflect, my own *Dark Night of the Soul*, as 16th century poet and mystic, St. John of the Cross, describes it.

One of my main duties was to “run the codes,” the attempts to revive patients whose hearts had stopped. Many clearly were not going to survive. After an appropriate time, I would give the order to stop what was by then a futile resuscitation effort. Looking up at the clock on the wall, I stated the time of death. Then I stepped out into the hall and said a quick prayer for my lost patient: the same process over and over again, hundreds of times over the years.

And that’s how I came to recognize that the soul has a weight. I could sense something leaving the body of the patient. At the same time, I felt different myself. I don’t know if I was suddenly 21.3 grams heavier, but I did feel like I was more substantial. A sense of gravity, of being more solid, more rooted came over me. I’ve often wondered if this is what the Christian mystic Simone Weil was trying to get at in the collection of her writings *Gravity and Grace*, her profound musings on our existence and eternity.

One of the most searing images in the Old Testament is the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37. Most of us know this passage not primarily from the Bible, but rather from James Weldon Johnson’s spiritual, *Dem Bones*. There is something about that image of *dem dry bones* taking on new life that reflects my own experience attending the dying. Was I feeling new growth in my own being even at the moment of death of my patient?

I do not know whether the soul weighs 21.3 grams. The number seems overly precise. But I do know that the death of anyone has real implications

for the living. It is not only in the sorrow, in the grieving of friends and family. Nor is it just in the joy we can sometimes bring ourselves to feel when we remember and reflect on the lives of those we loved and who loved us. There is something else going on every time one of God's children dies.

In our tradition, we call it the soul. I may not be able to weigh it accurately, but I know it is real. In the middle of the night, I have been graced with the chance to hold it in my hands. I can promise you, the soul has weight.

Hear the [Delta Rhythm Boys](#) singing "[Dry Bones](#)" as you reflect on this message.