

Another inconvenient truth: The breath of God in every human

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

I love looking at old photographs; it's the closest thing to time travel that I know. I find myself staring at century-old black and white photos taken on the streets of large cities. I look at the people. I search their faces, wondering what was going on in their minds. Often they are turning toward the camera—an item that was much less common then—with a shocked expression. They seem as fascinated to be a part of the captured moment as I am to witness it.

Here's an odd question: How much time is captured in a still image? The shutter speeds of the earliest cameras were so slow that in some old photos you see the ghostly, blurred images of people who were walking by while the shutter was open. It's as if the camera was trying to show a full second of reality in a single image.

Modern camera shutters, by contrast, are so fast that the fraction of light they capture seems like a perfectly frozen moment of time. You could measure the shutter speed, of course, and determine how much time is represented in a photo. But for practical purposes, a modern photograph shows us the elusive present moment, the “now,” the razor-sharp edge where reality exists between the mythical, indescribable states we call the past and the future. Perhaps photographs fascinate us because they represent this present moment—the only reality we have. And yet that moment is impossible to see without a camera.

My middle daughter is photogenic. Her face is a kind of motion picture that displays the story of her life in flowing expressions. When I take a picture of her, I halt that movement and capture one instant of her life. For some reason, her pictures are almost always pleasing to the eye. When I look at them they seem to do her justice. They look like her. I've never seen her perfectly frozen in time, of course, but the moments we catch in her photographs seem to reflect the reality of who she is.

There were other moments that the camera might have captured. Awkward moments between one expression and another. Embarrassing moments with her

eyes half closed between blinks and her lips twisted in a transition between a smile and a laugh. These are the moments we usually capture in pictures of my oldest daughter. Although she is cute as a button, with bright and lively eyes, she is not photogenic. Every picture seems to catch her in an awkward moment.

What makes one person photogenic and another not? I will tell you this: there is something guarded about my oldest daughter. She is hesitant to show herself to the world. This is her nature, and it shows in her relationship to the camera. It's as if she keeps the beauty of her existence hidden behind awkward smiles and blinks. She isn't fond of having her picture taken and will try to avoid it if she can. She is as hard to catch and understand in life as she is to capture in a photograph.

I've been told that people in some cultures are naturally shy and suspicious of cameras. When they see an instant of their life captured on film, they fear that the camera has taken their soul, their essence, some essential and spiritual part of them. We are quick to dismiss such ideas, but just as myths speak ancient human truths, people in these cultures often find creative ways to express ancient human realities.

Equating a photograph with the soul makes some sense to me. A soul, like the present moment, is a kind of singularity, an indefinable thing between the physical world and, well, some other kind of world. Perhaps we might call it a spiritual world.

In the Bible the idea of the soul is present from the very beginning. God breathes into the earthy flesh of Adam and he suddenly becomes "a living soul." Both Hebrew and Greek have words that we translate as soul, but it is hard to pin down their exact meanings. The idea seems to be that the soul is you, who you are, the essence of you. It is what makes you unique. Your soul is your thoughts, your personality, your way of seeing the world, the good and even the bad in you.

Do our souls have any measurable presence in the physical world? Is our reality, as some scientists suggest, contained completely within the electric impulses and mysterious memories stored in our brain tissue? Could the soul be weighed? I do not know the answer to that question. No one does, and I believe that no one ever will. We can no more define and quantify the breath of God than we can understand the present moment in time. Both are realities that intersect our physical world but cannot be weighed, measured or understood. They exist in another kind of reality.

And that is a good thing. What we cannot understand we tend to treat with a certain honor and respect. It really doesn't matter if the soul is a purely spiritual thing, or if it exists in the physical reality of the brain. Either way, the essence of what it means to be human is beyond our understanding.

Like the breath of God.

This brings us to another reality, one that we do not want to face. If it's true that every human being carries the breath of God as a part of her essence, then every human being is worth more than all the riches and all the kingdoms of the world put together.

Does anyone want to put a price tag on the nephesh, the human soul?

Al Gore recently won an Oscar for his documentary film about global warming. The title, *An Inconvenient Truth*, is appropriate because the social changes the film calls for are upsetting to modern life. Here's another inconvenient truth: if you believe in the nephesh, then one small child killed and registered as collateral damage in a war is worth more than the combined gross national products of both warring nations. If nations were to accept that truth, it would create some difficult foreign policy issues. But they won't accept that truth. No nation will ever allow cultural fidelity to the idea of a soul because the idea turns everything upside down. It's socially devastating—like suddenly granting that every penny is worth a million dollars.

What are we as Christians to do with this inconvenient truth? We bear witness to the reality and the ramifications of the nephesh, the breath of God. Here we are, surrounded by millions of whiffs of God's breath, and we have no idea what to do with that reality.

This much we can say with certainty. Christian people ought to be the most insanely radical peacemakers that the world has ever seen. Our view of human life should be so high that the rest of the world would stand in awe of us. Either that or they would point at us and laugh: Look at those crazy Christians. There isn't anyone those nutcases won't love. Murderers, terrorists, racists, rich people who steal from the poor—they love everyone!

"Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus once said. "For they are the children of God." Every human being is a child of God. Perhaps it is up to those of us who know this to shout it loudly in our world. Ultimately the world will reject our call for

peace—another inconvenient truth. Ours is a broken world, and part of our brokenness is not understanding the value of the human soul. But even in this world of sin, it should be said that those who claim the name of Christ love others more deeply and with a greater passion than any other people this world has ever seen.

The One who once said “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” deserves that much from us.