

Series Number Five

The Word, Soul

Photographs 1987 - Essay 2025

Twelve Photographs

Michael Nye

*Is the soul solid, like iron?
Or is it tender and breakable, like
the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?
Who has it, and who doesn't?
I keep looking around me.
The face of the moose is as sad
as the face of Jesus.
The swan opens her white wings slowly.
In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.
. Mary Oliver*

The Word, “Soul”

WE TUMBLE into the words we use as children – like breathing invisible air. Experiences and mistakes give words their gravity and legs. Some words are trivial, some have a serious side, some are as wide as a horizon itself.

The Word, “Soul” and some of its close equivalents, spirit, ego, consciousness, vitality, essence, energy, presence, animating principle, enthusiasm are important words because they fill spaces that ideas need.

Why do words that live below the surface become so interesting? Many religious traditions believe we are given an immaterial essence by a god or gods or some metaphysical presence. Some think the soul is a metaphor connecting us to aspects of our humanity. Soul or essence could simply mean just being alive, or the total sum of our life experiences, or the ability to feel kindness, to express goodness, to appreciate beauty.

Jacques Barzun was born in 1907 in France. He was a cultural historian, philosopher, teacher and writer of many books on education and culture. As a child he met with his great grandmother, a historian after school who was born in 1842. Jacques said, “*she made history come alive*”. Over dinner one night at the age of 100, I remember Jacques talked about Joan of Arc and William James in the same sentence. He used the word, “Soul” as describing someone’s defining character or integrity or of some collective shared identity. Jacques was a human bridge between centuries.

What does a soul have to do with sounds at night, dampness, hedges and dried leaves, new constructed fences, a sleeping dog tied to a post? What does a soul have to do with misery, anxiety, misfortune, or joy, enthusiasm or confidence? What would a soul say about ambivalence, uncertainty or far-away places?

SERIES FIVE: *THE WORD, "SOUL"* was simply wanting to have conversations about heavier words - the entanglement of words – ambiguous words. I also wanted to make portraits. Portraits that point toward a conversation and a present moment. This series could have easily been about the meaning of the word, *"Emergence"* or the emotions of the words, *"Loneliness"* or *"Hunger"* or about the pleasure of the words, *"Daydreaming* or *Satisfaction."*

I interviewed twelve individuals and asked questions about the meaning of the word, "soul". How would they define the word "soul", or "souls"? Did they have a "soul"? Were they certain or uncertain? What were their beliefs based on? I used excerpts with their permission.

Excerpts from:

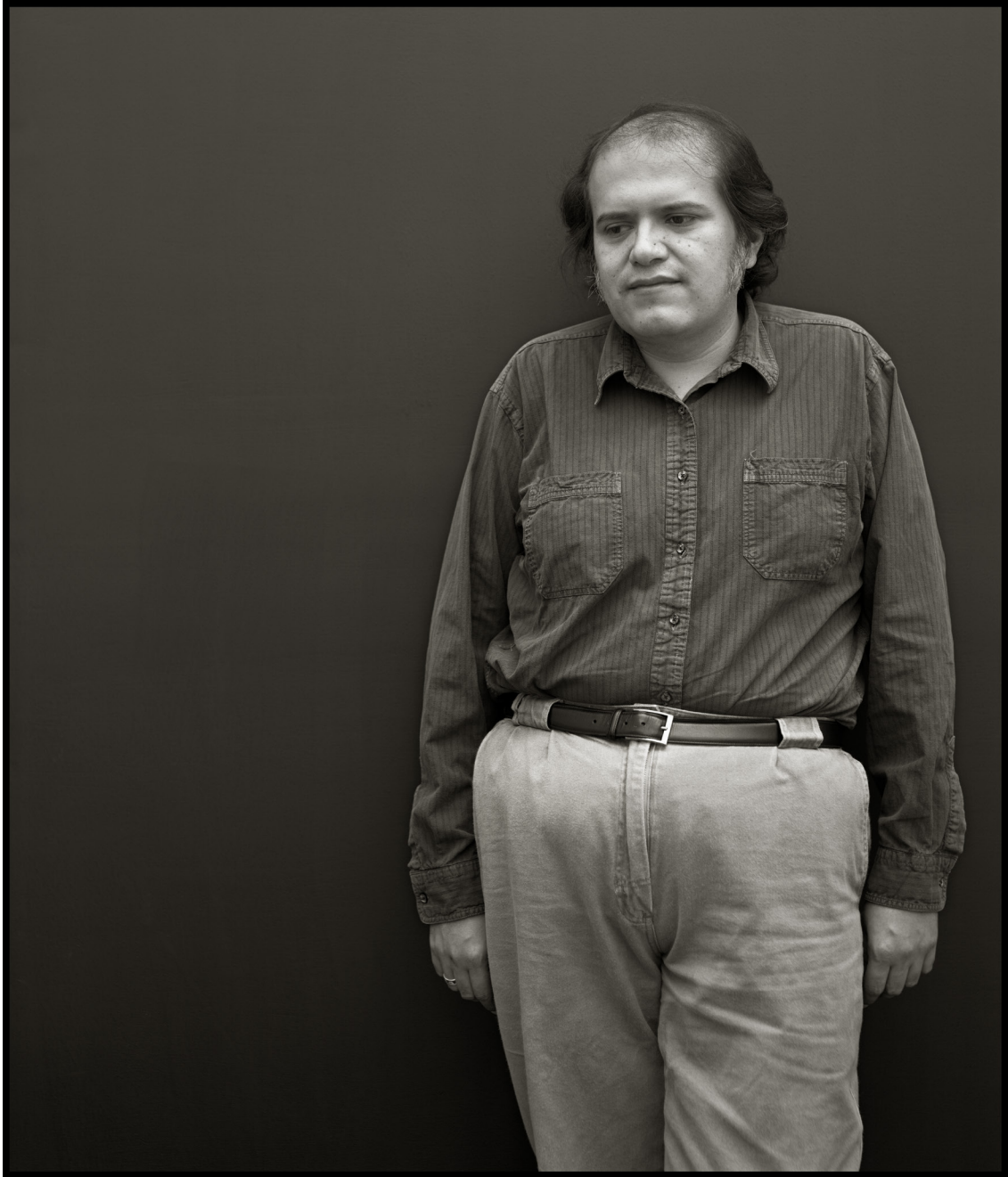
Two poets/writers -- a former prize fighter- boxer, (now cooks pies for a local hotel.) -- architect – housekeeper – musician -- teacher from Mexico City ---- a volunteer --- artist, (*Brain surgery was scheduled the following week, she died shortly thereafter.*) – minister – unemployed & homeless --- an artist -- a carpenter. (Occupations tells us so little about a person.)

Essay - May 2025

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Some days, I don't believe in the soul. The idea seems unreal. If only I had some clarity. Some days I am certain that I have a soul. A soul of colors moving in and out of my body. I feed my soul with knowledge. It needs knowledge.



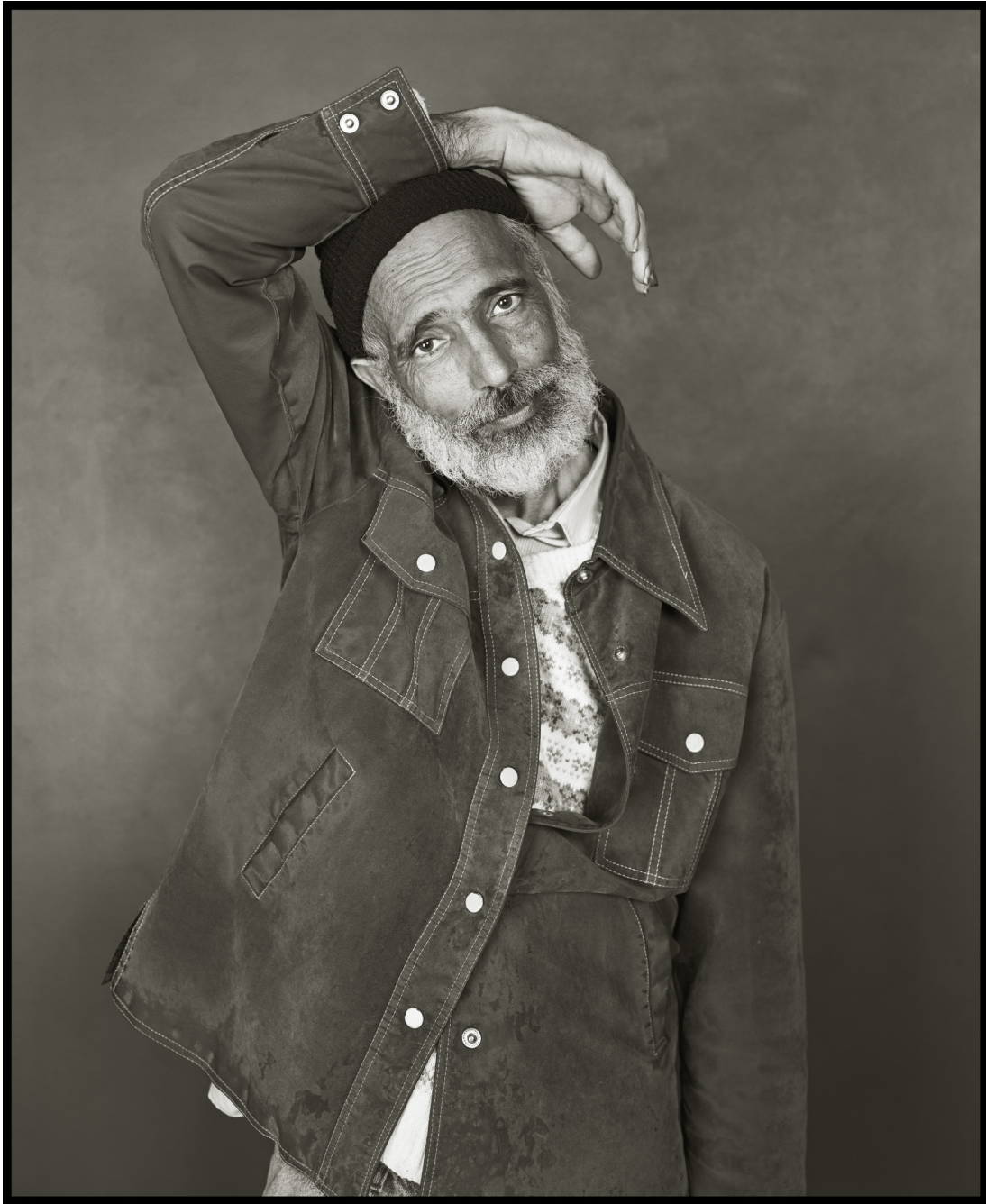
*The soul is a way back to our origins and is tied to dreams and memory.
The soul is a gift, a collected thing that is given to you by your ancestors.
The spirit is different from the soul. The spirit is what you acquire and how
you live. But the soul has existed before you were born. You must look for
your soul.*



I love the second definition my dictionary gives for soul: “energy or intensity, especially as revealed in a work of art or an artistic performance.” Yes! The soul that lives in books, music, art, food, in every passionate creation – in a plate of collard greens and Aretha Franklin on the radio -- that is what keeps me going.



The soul is real. It is the life force that we share. The soul cannot become evil and cannot be harmed. What is important is seeking wholeness with your soul. When I die my soul will have no memory, no intelligence. The only thing that continues is the energy.



My soul has suffered. I'm sorry for that. I have made some mistakes, but I have also been kind. I believe my soul will find some peace and calm after I die. I think souls are real.

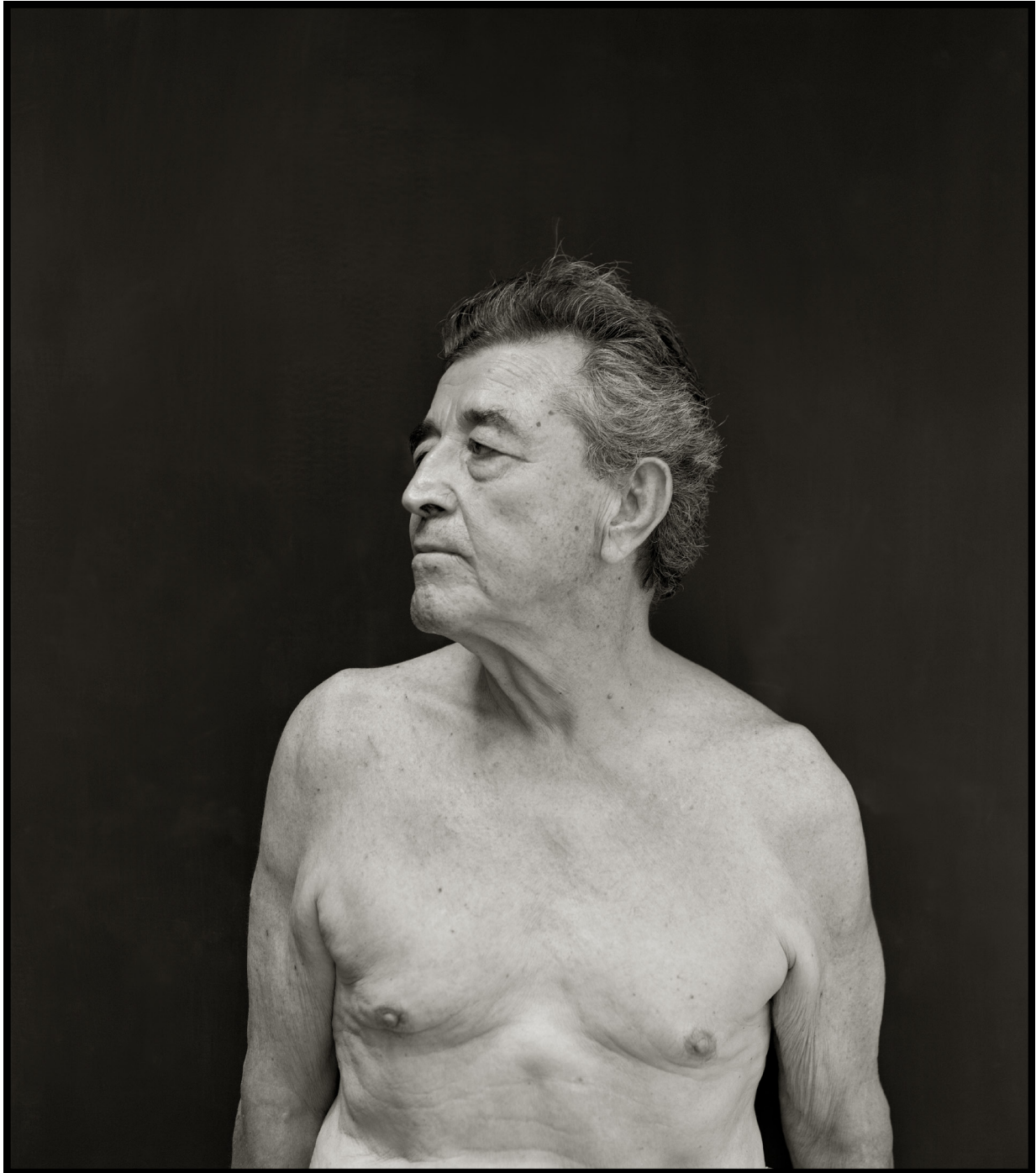


*The soul has to be nothing. The moment you say it is something
you weaken it, you give it impurity. The moment you try to define
the soul, you limit what the soul is.*



In the forest my soul is happy. The trees tower above me, birds call, sun filters through the branches, scents from the dirt, moss and pine come to me. There are many times I have felt any one of the soul sickening feelings: fear, sadness, anger, injustice, violence, discrimination, suffering, hopelessness. When this happens, I turn to friends, to painting, to music, to walking, to cooking and even to humor.

I don't know what happens to the soul when we die; but I believe memories of the deceased become part of the soul of the survivors. The soul has a vast capacity for this memory. The soul gathers the heart of our experiences and weaves them into our capacity to love and survive.



*During my life my soul stays in my heart. It can travel.
Sometimes I cry and I say what is the matter? This is my soul
going from my heart to my mind. It can clean you. When I
die there is no more soul. It disappears.*



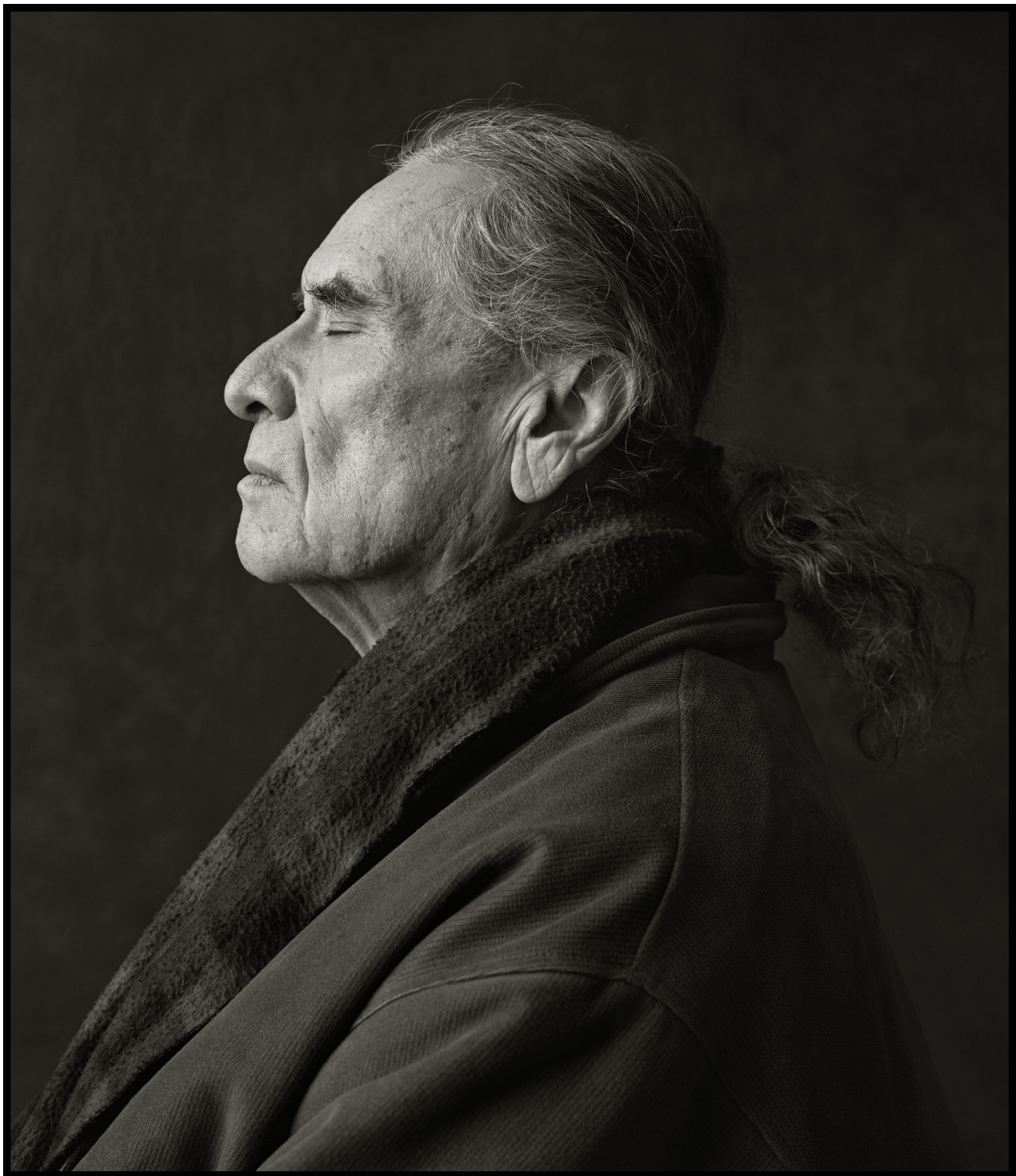
For my soul, I hope to see people that I have loved in my life. To see god. To see something fantastic. That is my hope. That is my wishful thinking. It would be lovely to see the people I have loved again. I'm not sure of anything.



*The soul is the timeless cord that has always connected me to everything.
When I was young, it let me feel old. Now that I am older, it enables me to
stay young. It is the freshness of all being and the ineffable wonder.*



The Soul is the human recorder. Whatever happens in your life your soul is recording it. You can't get by. It records everything. When I die my soul stays with my body until the end of time. My soul will then rise to heaven to be with God.



I think my blindness has enabled me to bridge ordinary from non-ordinary realities. Whereas most people encounter a veil separating this life from the sacred. I feel so much compassion that I weep at the slightest news of other people's pain and sorrows. My blindness has made me into a very sensitive soul. It has enabled me to not see a boundary between these two realms.