

SESSION 1 – CARE OF THE SOUL

Excerpts from Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul* (Harper Collins, NY, 1994):

INTRODUCTION (pp. xi-xix)

The great malady of the twentieth century, implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is "loss of soul." When soul is neglected, it doesn't just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence, and loss of meaning. Our temptation is to isolate these symptoms or to try to eradicate them one by one; but the root problem is that we have lost our wisdom about the soul, even our interest in it. We have today few specialists of the soul to advise us when we succumb to moods and emotional pain, or when as a nation we find ourselves confronting a host of threatening evils. But within our history we do have remarkable sources of insight from people who wrote explicitly about the nature and needs of the soul, and so we can look to the past for guidance in restoring this wisdom. In this book I will draw on that past wisdom, taking into account how we live now, to show that by caring for the soul we can find relief from our distress and discover deep satisfaction and pleasure.

It is impossible to define precisely what the soul is. Definition is an intellectual enterprise anyway; the soul prefers to imagine. We know intuitively that soul has to do with genuineness and depth, as when we say certain music has soul or a remarkable person is soulful. When you look closely at the image of soulfulness, you see that it is tied to life in all its particulars – good food, satisfying conversation, genuine friends, and experiences that stay in the memory and touch the heart. Soul is revealed in attachment, love, and community, as well as in retreat on behalf of inner communing and intimacy.

Modern psychologies and therapies often contain an unspoken but clear salvational tone. If you could only learn to be assertive, loving, angry, expressive, contemplative, or thin, they imply, your troubles would be over. The self-help book of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, which in some fashion I'm taking as a model, was cherished and revered, but was never great art and didn't promise the sky. It gave recipes for good living and offered suggestions for a practical, down-to-earth philosophy of life. I'm interested in this humbler approach, one that is more accepting of human foibles, and indeed sees dignity and peace as emerging more from that acceptance than from any method of transcending the human condition. Therefore, this book, my own imagination of what a self-help manual could be, is a guide offering a philosophy of soulful living and techniques for dealing with everyday problems without striving for perfection or salvation.

During the fifteen years I have been practicing psychotherapy, I have been surprised how much my studies in Renaissance psychology, philosophy, and medicine have contributed to the work. That influence will be evident in this book, as I follow the Renaissance penchant for turning to mythology for insight and cite authors of that time, such as Marsilio Ficino and Paracelsus. These were practical lovers of wisdom who saw patients regularly, applying their highly imagistic philosophies to the most ordinary matters.

I have also taken the Renaissance approach of not separating psychology from religion. Jung, one of our most recent doctors of the soul, said that every psychological problem is ultimately a matter of religion. Thus, this book contains both psychological advice and spiritual guidance. A spiritual life of some kind is absolutely necessary for psychological "health"; at the same time, excessive or ungrounded spirituality can also be dangerous, leading to all kinds of compulsive and even violent behavior. Therefore, I include a section on the interplay of spirituality and soul.

In his studies of alchemy, Jung says that the work begins and ends with Mercury. I think his recommendation applies to this book as well. Mercury is the god of fictions and fabrications, of trickery, thievery, and sleight-of-hand. The self-help idea lends itself to excessive sincerity. I often tell my clients that they should not strive for sincerity so earnestly; a dose of Mercury is necessary to keep our work honest. Therefore, to some extent I see this book also as a fiction of self-help. No one can tell you how to live your life. No one knows the secrets of the heart sufficiently to tell others about them authoritatively.

All of this leads to the heart of the book – care of the soul. Tradition teaches that soul lies midway between understanding and unconsciousness, and that its instrument is neither the mind nor the body, but imagination. I understand therapy as nothing more than bringing imagination to areas that are devoid of it, which then must express themselves by becoming symptomatic.

Fulfilling work, rewarding relationships, personal power, and relief from symptoms are all gifts of the soul. They are particularly elusive in our time because we don't believe in the soul and therefore give it no place in our hierarchy of values. We have come to know soul only in its complaints: when it stirs, disturbed by neglect and abuse, and causes us to feel its pain. It is commonplace for writers to point out that we live in a time of deep division, in which mind is separated from body and spirituality is at odds with materialism. But how do we get out of this split? We can't just "think" ourselves through it, because thinking itself is part of the problem. What we need is a way out of dualistic attitudes. We need a third possibility, and that third is soul.

In the fifteenth century, Marsilio Ficino put it as simply as possible. The mind, he said, tends to go off on its own so that it seems to have no relevance to the physical world. At the same time, the materialistic life can be so absorbing that we get caught in it and forget about spirituality. What we need, he said, is soul, in the middle, holding together mind and body, ideas and life, spirituality and the world.

What I am going to present in this book, then, is a program for bringing soul back into life. This is not a new idea. I am simply developing a very old idea in a way I hope will be intelligible and applicable to us in this particular crucial period in history. The idea of a soul-centered world goes back to the earliest days of our culture. It has been sketched out in every period of our history, in the writings of Plato, in the experiments of Renaissance theologians, in the letters and literature of the Romantic poets, and finally in Freud, who gave us a glimpse of a psychic underworld full of memory, fantasy, and emotion. Jung made explicit what was embryonic in Freud, speaking forthrightly for soul and reminding us that we have much to learn about it from our forebears. Most recently James Hillman, my mentor and colleague, and others in his circle – Robert Bordello, Rafael López-Pedraza, Patricia Berry, and Alfred Ziegler, for example – have presented

a new approach to psychology that is mindful of this history and explicitly follows Ficino's advice to put soul at the very center of our lives.

This book will focus not just on the idea of soul, but on concrete ways we can foster soulfulness in our ordinary everyday lives. To describe this process, I have borrowed a key phrase from Christianity. For hundreds of years the parish priest received into his charge the souls of those who lived within the boundaries of his church. This responsibility, as well as the work he did tending the needs of his people, was known as *cura animarum*, the cure of souls. *Cure* meant "charge" as well as "care." If we take up this image and apply it to ourselves, we can imagine the responsibility we each have to our own soul. Just as the parish priest was available at life's crucial moments, not as a doctor or healer but simply to accompany and tend the soul in times of birth, illness, marriage, crisis, and death, we can respond to our own soul as it winds its way through the maze of our life's unfolding. The role of the curate, as he was called, was to provide a religious context for the larger turning points in life and also to maintain the affectional ties of family, marriage, and community. We can be the curates or curators of our own souls, an idea that implies an inner priesthood and a personal religion. To undertake this restoration of soul means we have to make spirituality a more serious part of everyday life.

You can see already that care of the soul is quite different in scope from most modern notions of psychology and psychotherapy. It isn't about curing, fixing, changing, adjusting or making healthy, and it isn't about some idea of perfection or even improvement. It doesn't look to the future for an ideal, trouble-free existence. Rather, it remains patiently in the present, close to life as it presents itself day by day, and yet at the same time mindful of religion and spirituality.

. . .

The emotional complaints of our time, complaints we therapists hear every day in our practice, include

- emptiness
- meaninglessness
- vague depression
- disillusionment about marriage, family, and relationship
- a loss of values
- yearning for personal fulfillment
- a hunger for spirituality

All of these symptoms reflect a loss of soul and let us know what the soul craves. We yearn excessively for entertainment, power, intimacy, sexual fulfillment, and material things, and we think we can find these things if we discover the right relationship or job, the right church or therapy. But without soul, whatever we find will be unsatisfying, for what we truly long for is the soul in each of these areas. Lacking that soulfulness, we attempt to gather these alluring satisfactions to us in great masses, thinking apparently that quantity will make up for lack of quality.

Care of the soul speaks to the longings we feel and to the symptoms that drive us crazy, but it is not a path away from shadow or death. A soulful personality is complicated, multifaceted, and shaped by both pain and pleasure, success and failure. Life lived soulfully is not without its moments of darkness and periods of foolishness. Dropping the salvational fantasy frees us up to the possibility of self-knowledge and self-acceptance, which are the very foundation of soul.

Several classical phrases describing care of the soul are relevant in the modern world. Plato used the expression *techne tou biou*, which means "the craft of life." When *techne* is defined with sufficient depth, it refers not just to mechanical skills and instruments but to all kinds of artful managing and careful shaping. For now, we can say that care of the soul requires a special crafting of life itself, with an artist's sensitivity to the way things are done. Soul doesn't pour into life automatically. It requires our skill and attention.

Many of our words for psychological work have religious overtones. In Plato's writing, Socrates says that "therapy" refers to service to the gods. A therapist, Socrates says, is a sacristan, someone who takes care of the practical elements in religious worship. Another phrase Plato used was *heautou epimeleisthai*, "care of oneself"; this word for care also described honoring the gods and the dead. Somehow we have to understand that we cannot solve our "emotional" problems until we grasp this mystery that honoring the divine and the departed is part of the basic care that as human beings we have to bring to life.

The later Roman writer Apuleius said, "Everyone should know that you can't live in any other way than by cultivating the soul." Care can also mean cultivation, watching, and participating as the seed of soul unfolds into the vast creation we call character or personality, with a history, a community, a language, and a unique mythology. Cultivation of the soul implies a lifelong husbanding of raw materials. Farmers cultivate their fields, all of us cultivate our souls. The aim of soul work, therefore, is not adjustment to accepted norms or to an image of the statistically healthy individual. Rather, the goal is a richly elaborated life, connected to society and nature, woven into the culture of family, nation, and globe. The idea is not to be superficially adjusted, but to be profoundly connected in the heart to ancestors and to living brothers and sisters in all the many communities that claim our hearts.

Epicurus, a much misunderstood philosopher who stressed simple pleasure as a goal of life, wrote, "It is never too early or too late to care for the well-being of the soul." Epicurus was a vegetarian who urged his followers to cultivate intimacy through letters. He held his classes in a garden, so that as he taught he was surrounded by the simple foods he ate. (Ironically, his name has since become a symbol for gourmet eating and sensuality.) This concept of the value of simple pleasure runs through the entire tradition of thinking about soul. As we try to understand what care of the soul might mean for us, we may want to keep in mind the epicurean principle that the rewards we are seeking may be quite ordinary and may exist right under our noses, even as we look to the stars for some extraordinary revelation or perfection.

These statements of our ancient teachers come from Michel Foucault's book *The Care of the Self*. But the word self implies an ego project. Soul is nothing like ego. Soul is closely connected to fate, and the turns of fate almost always go counter to the

expectations and often to the desires of the ego. Even the Jungian idea of Self, carefully defined as a blend of conscious understanding and unconscious influences, is still very personal and too human in contrast to the idea of soul. Soul is the font of who we are, and yet it is far beyond our capacity to devise and to control. We can cultivate, tend, enjoy, and participate in the things of the soul, but we can't outwit it or manage it or shape it to the designs of a willful ego.

Care of the soul is inspiring. I like to think that it was the theology of soul worked out so painstakingly and so concretely in Renaissance Italy that gave rise to the extraordinary art of that period. The act of entering into the mysteries of the soul, without sentimentality or pessimism, encourages life to blossom forth according to its own designs and with its own unpredictable beauty. Care of the soul is not solving the puzzle of life; quite the opposite, it is an appreciation of the paradoxical mysteries that blend light and darkness into the grandeur of what human life and culture can be.

. . .

Care of the Soul, pp. 5-6:

"Soul" is not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance. I do not use the word here as an object of religious belief or as something to do with immortality. When we say that someone or something has soul, we know what we mean, but it is difficult to specify exactly what that meaning is.

Care of the soul begins with observance of how the soul manifests itself and how it operates. We can't care for the soul unless we are familiar with its ways. Observance is a word from ritual and religion. It means to watch out for but also to keep and honor, as in the observance of a holiday. The *-serv-* in observance originally referred to tending sheep. Observing the soul, we keep an eye on its sheep, on whatever is wandering and grazing – the latest addiction, a striking dream, or a troubling mood.

This definition of caring for the soul is minimalist. It has to do with modest care and not miraculous cure. But my cautious definition has practical implications for the way we deal with ourselves and with one another. For example, if I see my responsibility to myself, to a friend, or to a patient in therapy as observing and respecting what the soul presents, I won't try to take things away in the name of health. It's remarkable how often people think they will be better off without the things that bother them. "I need to get rid of this tendency of mine," a person will say. "Help me get rid of these feelings of inferiority and my smoking and my bad marriage." If, as a therapist, I did what I was told, I'd be taking things away from people all day long. But I don't try to eradicate problems. I try not to imagine my role to be that of exterminator. Rather, I try to give what is problematical back to the person in a way that shows its necessity, even its value.

When people observe the ways in which the soul is manifesting itself, they are enriched rather than impoverished. They receive back what is theirs, the very thing they have assumed to be so horrible that it should be cut out and tossed away. When you regard the soul with an open mind, you begin to find the messages that lie within the illness, the corrections that can be found in remorse and other uncomfortable feelings, and the necessary changes requested by depression and anxiety. . . .