

Care of the Soul

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The world's many traditions all share stories of unfulfilled longing – poignant and powerful, they point to a part of the human experience to which everyone can relate: the deep sadness of separation – separation from home, separation from loved ones, separation from self.

One thing that the world's religious traditions hold in common is the view that the separation at the root of these stories represents a need for something that can't be met by anything outside of ourselves. They describe a journey into the most mysterious dimension of all: a journey within.

This is reflected in the Sufi tradition, where the reed flute stands as a powerful metaphor for the plight of the human soul, cut off from its source yet longing for reconnection, union and fulfillment. Listen to its sound.

The Reed Flute

by Rumi

Listen to the story told by the reed,
of being separated.

“Since I was cut from the reedbed,
I have made this crying sound.
Anyone apart from someone he loves
understands what I say.
Anyone pulled from a source
longs to go back.”

How does this longing speak to you? Do you relate to the myths and legends of longing and loss? Ancient Egypt's Isis seeking her lost brother, Osiris? Then there's

the Greek story of Eros and Psyche, of deep, profound, transformative love found and lost, and then found again?

And isn't that story echoed in the basic story for many of our entertainments: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl? The themes of romantic love surely convey our attempts to satisfy this deep inner longing.

And then there are stories of mysterious lands where all is peace and joy, wonder and fulfillment – like the lost land of Shangri-La in Hilton's novel, *Lost Horizon*. It tells of a land of unspeakable beauty, of a people so peaceful and wise that they seem like gods incarnate. Discovered once and then lost forever, the memory of such a place can haunt the human spirit with a poignant melancholy for a paradise lost.

These tales tend to take four basic forms: the nostalgia, the discovery, the quest, and the fulfillment.

The most basic form of nostalgia is a longing for the safety and simplicity of childhood, also represented by Adam and Eve's expulsion from the paradise of the Garden of Eden. This is a longing for a life uncorrupted by worries of acceptance, achievement, or survival – a wonderland often richer in recollection than it was at the time.

Another form is awakening and discovery, represented by Joseph Campbell's hero's journey – the initiation. This features a person who stumbles upon an experience so profound that his or her life direction is forever changed by this vision of a reality deeper than our day-to-day lives.

This is often connected with the next stage in Campbell's hero's journey: the quest. What has been seen forever changes the landscape of one's imagination. What was a glimpse becomes the inspiration for a lifetime of seeking. The Exodus story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness reflects this form.

And then there's the story of fulfillment, of the promise of a land of milk and honey where swords are hammered into plowshares and justice rolls down like waters, and peace like an ever-flowing stream. The obvious model for this is the vision of Heaven, but perhaps only slightly less obvious is the longing to create the

Beloved Community, a holy sanctuary where all can feel safe, nurtured, and loved, a true Heaven on Earth.

I'd like to tell you about a study done with some piglets, with baby pigs.

Pigs, being one of the most intelligent non-primate animals, were used in the study because they have a large emotional center in the brain, similar to humans. In different behavioral trials, non-traumatized pigs were compared to pigs that had been traumatized by being weaned from their mother early.

In one trial, a piglet is lowered into a pool of water and released. (They swim really well.) The non-traumatized piglet swam around the edge until he located a submerged platform, and then climbed onto it so he could stop swimming. The traumatized piglet, as soon as it hit the water, simply panicked. It swam erratically, crying out the whole time, and never found the platform.

Ten minutes later, they repeated the test. The first piglet immediately swam straight to the platform, and did so each time thereafter. Sadly, the traumatized piglet showed no improvement, and panicked every time, never finding the platform.

Humans are a lot like these baby pigs. Most children, not being severely traumatized, have the capacity to find an emotional stability in the midst of challenge. This is often recalled as the safety and simplicity of childhood, which is slowly and systematically replaced by stress-based training at home and at school. We're taught that security is not an inherent quality of life, but can only be found in achievement of one sort or another – like good grades or good behavior.

Nostalgia for the simple goodness of childhood is often the result of this. Once we've learned that the world requires us to plan, prepare, and act in certain ways, we tend to lose forever the natural feelings of safety and security that had once been ours by birthright. We become like the stressed pigs, struggling in the waters of life, often unable to find a place to stand.

But we long for that safety so deeply that we tend to create artificial safe places to stand instead. We weave complex structures of imagination – things like beliefs, attitudes, and opinions – to which we can cling as certainties. While they may help us feel a certain kind of safety, they also limit us from directly experiencing

the world within and around us. We can become caught up in a world that conforms to our beliefs and opinions, a world of right and wrong where we're really heavily invested in being on the right side of things. After all, that's where our safety and security lies.

But, of course, this kind of adaptation is only a stop-gap strategy. It can never fill the void left by our lost security; it can never give us what we truly seek. Our overinvestment in worldly affairs leads us astray, as William Wordsworth wrote over 200 years ago: "The world is too much with us, getting and spending, early and late we lay waste our powers." And Ralph Waldo Emerson was suggesting we choose a more inward focus when he wrote in his 1844 essay on "Character" that "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."

The poet, Denise Levertov has her own take on this in her poem, "Primary Wonder," where she wrote:

Days pass when I forget the mystery.
Problems insoluble and problems offering
their own ignored solutions
jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber
along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing
their colored clothes; cap and bells.

And then
once more the quiet mystery
is present to me, the throng's clamor
recedes: the mystery
that there is anything, anything at all,
let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
rather than void. . . .

Some children weren't fortunate enough to have had a safe enough childhood to give them that fundamental sense of security. Some children are stressed so badly that they are like the traumatized pigs. They can't find a place to stand. And, of course,

there are no pure versions of this. We're all a mixture of security and trauma, some more able to find safety than others.

I was one of those traumatized children – I didn't even begin to appreciate how deeply until I was in my forties. I entered life anxious and depressed, seeking safety and security, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find a place to stand. The little I knew was that I was anxious and in pain, but couldn't find any kind of relief.

So I was motivated to do something about it. I studied psychology and philosophy in my teens, looking for answers. I found some, but they were all academic and circular. They seemed interesting enough, but didn't have the power to relieve me of my suffering.

When I discovered Eastern religions I thought that, perhaps, a door had been opened for me into the realm of possibility. Especially with Zen Buddhism, which seemed to invite an approach that echoed the scientific method. It didn't ask for belief, it simply suggested that the nature of human experience was such that if I tried doing certain things (like meditation), other things (like peace) might come about.

And then I attended a weekend Zen retreat with Philip Kaplau, the first Western Zen master, and this changed everything. Encountering a person who embodied the claims of Zen – that full and complete enlightenment was possible – was like the initiation stage of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey. After that, everything was different. I had no idea as to whether I could complete the journey, but I had evidence that it was possible.

I also had no idea how soon I would need these new tools I'd found. As many of you know, I had an especially virulent form of cancer when I was 21. Cancer treatment was still primitive in 1971, and most stage 3 cancers were not survivable. Faced with imminent death, I gave myself over to the spiritual disciplines I'd learned.

I began to grieve. I mourned for all the things I loved: my friends and family, my body and senses, my thoughts and feelings. It seemed that all these were all

based on a bodily existence which would soon no longer support them. I tried to discover what might be left.

I used a negative meditation I had learned from the practice of Raja Yoga. I examined everything in my life, saying, “Not this, not that.” Not my body, not my senses, not my emotions, not my thoughts. What was left? What I found was the experience of a consciousness that was deeper than my own sense of self. I resided gratefully within its radiant strength. It gave me peace despite the travails of pain and hopelessness. In the midst of darkness, I was filled with a transfiguring light, and that was enough. I was healed.

This discovery was as unexpected as it was profound. I had no precedent for knowing where these practices would lead. But they led me to a place of safety, stability, and sanctuary deep within myself. Those around me saw the change, too. I became a beacon of spiritual energy and light. But it was all in the context of impending death, which gave it a rather macabre cast.

I had finally found a secure place to stand within my own experience, but it was in a place I’d never expected to find it: a place with no past or future, no thoughts and no anticipation. It was the human experience of the eternal now. I had discovered my own soul.

I rested in its strength and light through several difficult surgeries and months of radiation treatment. But as my survival stretched into the future, as the crisis began to pass, so did the presence of my soul. Of course, I couldn’t forget the experience; I knew it was an inseparable part of me – perhaps more real than anything I’d ever known. But the experience wasn’t permanent. It faded and left me.

I felt a bit like Jesus on the cross, crying, “My Lord, My Lord, why have you forsaken me?” Under the pressures of the cancer crisis, I had achieved something unprecedented. But as the pressures faded, so did the presence. I just wasn’t ready to maintain what I’d found.

So I became a seeker after the soul. I studied the spiritual texts of every religious faith I could find. I studied with priests, monks, roshis, gurus and shamans, trying to retrace my steps, questing for that miraculous wonderland of peace, light, and joy that I knew to be at the center of my being.

I learned. I grew. I matured, and eventually found what I'd lost through years of dedicated practice. And I know firsthand what many people think of as a speculation: the soul is real. It is as real as any other part of me, and more real than many. It's as intimately present as my breath, as imminent as existence itself. And it can only be experienced by learning to live fully in the present moment, free of the artificial support systems of thought, memory, opinion, and belief.

The soul is often criticized as some kind of fantasy connected with the longing for eternal life. I understand how this association came about, but I know it to be irrelevant. The soul is a real part of the human experience, deep at the center of every human being. It is characterized by peace, love, joy and compassion – all the things religions promote.

And it can only be found in a place deep within ourselves that is beyond the stresses, strains, and opportunities of life. Mohandas Gandhi said, "There is no way to peace. Peace is the way." The Vietnamese Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh, expanded this to include, "There is no way to happiness. Happiness is the way."

True peace and happiness do not come about because of what happens to us. They are already there within us, waiting to be found. This is the drama and paradox of the human soul: all that we seek is already there.

As Thomas Moore, psychotherapist and former Catholic monk, wrote in his wonderful book, *The Care of the 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."

Moore continued, "Care of the soul is inspiring. . . 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."

This is the soul. Some speculate on transcendent dimensions with which it might be connected, but those speculations are unnecessary. It is real. It is there. It

doesn't require a belief in anything supernatural or otherworldly. And only the soul can satisfy that deep longing at the heart of human experience, connecting us to the source of our being, and bring us the peace that is truly beyond understanding.

Care of the soul – *this* is what church is *for*. It can transform communities as well as individuals. I invite you to join in the adventure.

May it be so.