

Text from the Tradition: Care of the Soul by Thomas Moore

The Soul (text drawn from pp. viii, 5, 14, 122, 205, 224, 233-5, 247, 285-6, 288, 304, 289)

Tradition teaches that soul lies midway between understanding and consciousness, and that its instrument is neither the mind nor the body, but imagination. 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. 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. Taking an interest in one's soul requires a certain amount of space for reflection and appreciation. By becoming interested in these phenomena, we begin to see our own complexity. Love of soul asks for some appreciation for its complexity. Often care of the soul means not taking sides when there is a conflict at a deep level. It may be necessary to stretch the heart wide enough to embrace contradiction and paradox.

One of the central difficulties involved in embarking on care of the soul is grasping the nature of the soul's discourse. The intellect works with reasons, logic, analysis, research, equations, and pros and cons. But the soul... presents images that are not immediately intelligible to the reasoning mind. It insinuates, offers fleeting impressions, persuades more with desire than with reasonableness. The soul's indications are many, but they are usually extremely subtle. Just as the mind digests ideas and produces intelligence, the soul feeds on life and digests it, creating wisdom and character out of the fodder of experience. Again, we can see the importance of imaginal practices such as journals, dream work, poetry, painting, and therapy aimed at exploring images in dream and life. The intellect wants to know; the soul likes to be surprised. Intellect, looking outward, wants enlightenment and the pleasure of a burning enthusiasm. The soul, always drawn inward, seeks contemplation and the more shadowy, mysterious experience of the underworld. The intellect wants a summary meaning—all well and good for the purposeful nature of the mind. But the soul craves depth of reflection, many layers of meaning, nuances without end, references and allusions and prefigurations. A soul-oriented spirituality begins in a reevaluation of the qualities of the soul: subtlety, complexity, ripening, worldliness, incompleteness, ambiguity, wonder.

Care of the soul requires craft (*techne*)-skill, attention, and art. To live with a high degree of artfulness means to attend to the small things that keep the soul engaged in whatever we are doing, and it is the very heart of soul making. Living artfully, therefore, might require something as simple as pausing. Some people are incapable of being arrested by things because they are always on the move. The vessel in which soul making takes place is an inner container scooped out by reflection and wonder. Many of the arts practiced at home are especially nourishing to the soul because they foster contemplation and demand a degree of artfulness, such as arranging flowers, cooking, and making repairs. We care for the soul slowly by honoring its expressions, by giving it time and opportunity to reveal itself, and by living life in a way that fosters the depth, interiority, and quality in which it flourishes. When imagination is allowed to move to deep places, the sacred is revealed.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

Unless we've taken courses in philosophy, it is quite likely that we have not reflected deeply on exactly what the soul is and what meaning it has in human experience. It is likely however, that if you taste a certain food or hear a snippet of a song, you might intuitively recognize it as soulful, no special classes required. I was surprised when, teaching a *graduate* theology course, a number of my students quite simply asked, what is the soul? How is it different than spirit? Is it more material or spiritual? Where is it located? What does it do after a person dies? What difference does it make when we tend to it while we are alive?

One of reasons I appreciate Thomas Moore's treatment of the soul is because he situates the soul solidly as a third thing—it is neither spirit itself, nor is it the body in itself; its function and place is somewhere in-between. If we treat the soul as too bodily, the concrete expressions of our morality and ethics will suffer; if we treat the soul as too spiritually, the exaggerations of our devotion and piety will likely cause others to suffer. When we treat the soul as it is—a mediator—we can enjoy the delights of particular, concrete pleasures in daily life, and also be at ease with the flights of imagination and the subtleties of increased consciousness that accompany the committed spiritual life.

Moore also insists that care of the soul is quite ordinary; it does not require elaborate ritual or specialized coursework in order to flourish. As a therapist, Moore writes at-length about maladies of the soul and the seeming negative symptoms that show up in daily life and relationships when the soul wishes to express its discontent or desire. He cautions against categorizing our negative and dark experiences as oppositional to soul-work. On the contrary, the soul often makes it way through muck, misery, and mystery. Often, the shadow of a trigger we react to, or a quality we dislike in ourselves or others, is the specially-packaged invitation of our soul asking us to look more deeply.

When we regularly pause for spiritual practice; when we commit to a habitual pattern of widening and deepening our reflective lenses; when we allow beauty or truth to arrest our attention in daily living, we make space for care of the soul.

Questions for Reflection:

- Which foods, music, or beautiful places feed your soul?
- Are you more likely to notice your soul-at-work in ordinary activity or in focused spiritual activity?
- In your own mind and heart, what is the soul and what is it up to in your life?