

Occasional Note #2

Particularity

Dear Gang,

In this Occasional Note I want to reflect a bit on the experience of the soul in its most particular and unique earthy aspects. This thinking arises both from my work with clients over the years, and more recently, in the three session series individual consultation I do which focuses on the dynamics of spiritual crisis and transition in the client's life. It also springs from my recent work on the quartet of poems, "Soul Canticles", which I sent you a while ago. And I find it coming more and more into my teaching of Spiritual Psychology and the exploration of how you recognize the presence and "behavior" of the soul on earth, so to speak, in the specific details of people's experience, and, from this recognition, how you help the soul fully ground its energies and force in personal behavior and in being fully alive, day to day, on earth.

I think there is a tendency sometimes in spiritual work to look for, and support, the more inner and universal aspects of spiritual experience and to assume that, when we are thus connected, and when we transcend our limitations, our ego, and experience a connection with all Life that takes us beyond ourselves, we will then change how we live. This, of course, is true to a degree, and this "upward", or "inward", movement toward the soul is very powerful and liberating. But what is sometimes missed, or not emphasized enough, is the complementary movement "downward" or "outward" of the "soul force", as Gandhi termed it, through the psyche and personality and its infusion of the particulars of a given life, and the choices that spring from this experience which bring about very specific changes in attitude and behavior. Clearly both movements are part of the process of soul-realization, but the second, I believe, could use more attention-- thus this Note.

What I am after, first, is learning to see the soul in the particularity of a person's experience, honoring the details of this experience, and holding the differentiation and uniqueness of personal life within this context as equal in importance to the experience of spiritual unity. In this sense spiritual beauty and power lies more immediately in the details rather than in a generalized sense of holiness, and when a person is infused with soul force, he, or she, remains still a very specific person with a very specific personality, psyche, body, and life through which this force is grounded and expressed. Further, the realization of this particular soul on earth will come only in the specifics of how this person acts moment to moment, and over time. The biblical "by their deeds ye shall know them" has often been distorted by being used as a critical judgment, but in essence it is pointing to this full grounding, or embodiment, of soul force in behavior.

Last year I gave a talk about this for the staff at Canyon Ranch which I entitled "The soul seldom wears white". The principle underlying this adage is particularity. By this I mean that the soul will most often manifest through particulars of a person's experience which are already "in their experience" and

which are unique to them. These particulars may be examples of a more general pattern, or archetype, but the actual experience will always be particular to that person, and, if this unique detailing is not recognized and honored, there is a subtle loss of soul, and the loss of an opportunity to see how exactly the soul is working in that person's life. What I did in the talk was to give some tips as to how to spot the soul in its particularity in a person's experience, whether or not that person is aware of it, and often they are not. So, for example, I suggested that we examine the person's experience to see how they are making a soul-connection and don't realize it. I told the story of the woman who every night before she went to bed, after she had turned out the light, raised the shade so she could see the morning light on the trees outside the window when she woke. I told the story of the man who always sits at the same table by the window with his coffee and muffin, so he can watch the passersby and quietly feel his connection to the larger human family. I also suggested we look at what spiritual qualities people tend to project onto others, or on a cause, or place, or object, which they could then consciously re-own as their own soul qualities. These projections are always very specific and unique.

I also listed ways in which, in my experience, the soul shows up disguised, so to speak, in the specifics of personal experience. Among these were the following:

- experience of specific meaning and personal importance
- specific deeply held values and cherished qualities
- a sense of rightness and conviction about specific issues
- experience of deep aliveness at a certain moment, involving whole body and being
- experience of gratitude for particular event, or person, in life
- a sense of suitability, that something really fit them to be, or do
- admiration of "heroes" and other people, living and dead
- certain sacred times and places in memory, or current reality
- certain stories, poems, plays, movies, fairy tales
- an aesthetic appreciation for certain art works, or genres of art
- specific religious sayings, adages, "folk" wisdom
- specific memories of certain holidays and special life-events

- experience with Nature--this is perhaps the most common particular
- intimate relationships with animals and plants, wild and domestic
- love of certain ideas and curiosity and wonder about them
- certain aspects of the world about which they are troubled/ outraged
- certain aspects of the world which they love passionately
- certain aspects of their experience for which they are deeply grateful
- specific learning from a crisis, and from a particular suffering, or sorrow

In most of these cases, the person is not aware that a soul connection is being made through these particulars, or that soul force is present in them. But as this is brought to their attention, they begin to realize that the soul is much more immediate and embedded in their life than they realized, that it is not off somewhere in heaven, but right here on earth in their daily experience. And, once realizing this, they can then cultivate these experiences more consciously and intentionally, and also study how they block them, so that increasingly more and more soul force is available in their present consciousness, in their choices, and so in their behavior and life.

From a theoretical point of view, what I am saying is that the soul is embedded in our experience as well as transcendent to it, and that the details of our life carry the soul force, and that, just as in a hologram, the whole is held in every part. From a systems perspective we can say that the soul is the context for our experience, or organizing principle, and thus it is, paradoxically, both beyond and embedded in our personal experience. So we can find ourselves right here, if we can find this spiritual perspective within which to hold our immediate and unique experience. This is essentially what a skilled therapist, teacher, or parent does – helps the person discover the potential that is already there embedded in experience and develop and release it in such a way that the personal life responds more and more fully to the intent of the soul for expression and realization.

This is the first step – to see the soul in the particulars of a life and to help a person make this connection both to whom they already are (embedded soul) and to whom they are becoming (transcendent soul) which, in essence, is the same thing. The second step is to help a person bring this soulforce into the specifics of behavior in daily life – what we often refer to as "grounding". What is valuable about seeing the particulars within a spiritual context is that the whole endeavor of soul-realization, then, is much closer to home to begin with. Often you are amplifying and extending behavior that is already quite vivid in the person's experience. Or you are finding small steps within the specific context of a person's

daily life that he/she can take that will allow more soul force to flow in daily ways. In both instances, you are always doing this in very specific and detailed ways that are appropriate and possible for that person's life at that particular time. You want the step to be tailor-made so that the person succeeds, or, if there are difficulties, they are not overwhelming, and adjustments can be made while the intention is sustained. It is here that all the techniques of behaviorism can be used, yet what is different is that the context is spiritual, the soul the modifier of behavior rather than the environment. I believe, in fact, that cognitive-behavioral work is going in this direction, though in this field of work the soul is not named explicitly.

So we practice a kind of spiritual behaviorism in this second step with the intent to bring about real change in a person's life – not just new awareness, but actual new behavior based on that awareness. This is bringing the soul fully to earth. The first arena of focus for this change is personal attitudes and behavior toward oneself and the immediate others of one's life, but this work can extend as well to the arenas of political, economic, and ecologic life and to change in these arenas of both attitudes and behaviors. This is the natural direction for the soul force to flow as it comes through the psyche and personality more and more coherently. Maslow is quoted as saying, in effect, "Let's deal with these personal issues as well and quickly as we can so that we can get on to the really important issues that trouble humankind and the planet". Personal and spiritual work, then, become, not ends in themselves, but necessary preparation for living a full and active life in the world and engaging in the issues that we face collectively at this time in history. They are means to these ends. And it seems the deeper we as souls can go into life on earth, and engage directly with its sorrows and beauty in tangible ways, the more joy we experience. So soul work is not only to change ourselves, but to change the world.

A term that John Stasio, one of the members of this network, uses for this perspective is "incarnational spirituality". As I understand it, he is speaking about our, as souls, deep intent to be as fully embodied in the personal and collective life of the world as possible without, of course, losing our connection to Spirit, or whatever we call that larger unitive context. The implications of this, as I have tried to touch here, are that, 1- we see how the soul is already here in the details of our experience and honor and affirm that, and 2- we work to expand the soul's inflow and influence both in our personal attitudes and behaviors day to day and in the larger systems and structures which hold our collective life as a culture, nation, species. Surely, the world right now needs this infusion, and in all directions we are seeing the results of its lack, and of an epidemic spiritual disconnection and starvation, rampant loss of soul and loss of a spiritual context for action, and consequent suffering of huge and planetary proportions. Perhaps in this next century we will do better. It is definitely up to us.

I send you my very best wishes, wherever and however in the world you are.

much love Tom

P.S.

Two further notes. One a story, the other a poem.

The story is about a older colleague of mine, Edith Sullwold, a Jungian analyst, who expressed to me in a conversation several years ago her antipathy for the term "elder" to describe a person who was growing older and wiser, as she was. In this she was not objecting to the emerging status of a wise person experiencing the fruition of individuation, but to the general categorization implied in the term. To her aging was becoming more and more particular and unique in the expression of her gifts and soul, more and more individual, not general, and she felt that the term robbed people of their beauty and particularity as seasoned souls.

Second, a friend sent me this poem recently and I include it here, both because, as you may know, golden retrievers have played a big part in my spiritual development, and also because it exemplifies so beautifully what I have been writing about here.

GOLDEN RETRIEVALS

by Mark Doty

Fetch? Balls and sticks capture my attention
seconds at a time.

Catch? I don't think so.

Bunny, tumbling leaf, a squirrel who's - oh joy - actually scared.

Sniff the wind, then

I'm off again: muck, pond, ditch, residue
of any thrillingly dead thing. And you?

Either you're sunk in the past,

half our walk, thinking of what you never can bring back,

or else you're off in some fog concerning - tomorrow,
is that what you call it?

My work: to unsnarl time's warp

(and woof!), retrieving, my haze-headed friend, you.

This shining bark, a Zen master's bronzy gong, calls you here,
entirely, now: bow-wow, bow-wow, bow-wow.