

Occasional Note #6

The Embodied Soul: Spirituality in the Twenty-first Century

Introduction

I want to start by saying how grateful I am to the committee for asking me to speak at this conference. It represents for me a return to Psychosynthesis and to San Francisco, a discipline and a city where I have spent important years of my life. It also affords me the opportunity to see old friends and colleagues and to meet new ones.

I have been involved with Psychosynthesis for over thirty years, and, as a young man in the early seventies, studied with Roberto Assagioli in Florence. I was involved with the development of the Psychosynthesis Institute here, and survived its demise in 1980. Philip Brooks and I started a training program here the next year--one that he and Toni have continued until recently-- and then in 1982 my wife, Anne, and I moved East and I started a Psychosynthesis training program in Boston. During the eighties I worked to help Psychosynthesis grow in a number of ways-- through conferences, books, and teaching, both here and in Europe, and then in the nineties recast my work as Spiritual Psychology, which I teach now in North America, Europe, and Russia. The reasons for this change are complex, and it has been a useful endeavor, but even throughout these last thirteen years I have remained, behind the scenes, very connected to the perspectives and spirit of Psychosynthesis, and to its community of practitioners. AAP was founded at the last summer program I hosted at the Concord Institute in 1994 and since then I have stayed informed of its development and encouraged where I could. So now, as this decade and century begin, it is a pleasure to be here again and to feel my long and deep relationship to this discipline and its community. Thank you all.

A New Century

I want to talk this morning a bit about spirituality and share some ideas with you about directions this human experience may be taking in this new century. I then will close with the reading of a poem that speaks to this topic from an artistic perspective. Many of these ideas will probably be familiar to you, and they are incomplete and still growing in my mind, but I hope that in bringing them together in my talk they will be of use for our discussion, and will continue to grow through our dialogue in the next days and beyond.

Spirituality has not always been a welcome guest in professional circles. Until recently professionals, with the exception of clergy, have tended to keep this dimension of human experience at arm's length, and, in most cases, have been loath to acknowledge its place and power within the human being and its capacity to foster healing, development, and maturity. Rather, they have relied largely on scientific/technological approaches and on rational analysis to carry on their practices, and have relegated the spiritual dimension to the realms of subjective and religious experience.

In the last decades this situation has changed quite dramatically. Mental health professionals were the first to recognize that they needed to include the spiritual dimension in their work in order to treat the whole person, and, further, that this dimension held valuable resources that contributed to the improvement in psychological function which they sought. Career counselors also began to recognize this same fact as they worked with people who were in job transition, and they were followed closely by executive coaches and organizational consultants who wanted to improve the work environment. The medical profession has also come to acknowledge this dimension of the patient's experience more and more in the last twenty years and its efficacy in the process of physical healing and health, and, increasingly, doctors are trained in sensitivity to the spiritual dimension as an aspect of physical care. And now in the last years the business community has discovered spirituality and is exploring how the resources of this dimension can bring better job satisfaction and performance to individuals and groups within the corporate culture.

There are many reasons for this change, but a central one is the redefinition of spirituality as distinct from religion. Religion has always held spiritual experience within its parameters, and contained it within religious forms. Recently, however, a growing number of people have come to posit that spirituality is, in fact, the ground from which religious thought and practice spring, and that, whether a person is religious, or not, they have within them this dimension of human experience. Even, in fact, if a person is a declared atheist, this dimension exists within and its resources can be tapped.

Further, it has become clear that the spiritual dimension is an human experience, not simply an idea, or value. It is a lived experience that may, or may not, come to be expressed in religious form, but which is available and valuable to everyone. We are not always able to access this dimension of our experience, and we can become blocked to its resources in various ways, but the fundamental realization from the last decade is that the spiritual dimension is an aspect of every human life, and that it can, when acknowledged, included, and tapped deliberately, contribute significantly to the effectiveness and humanity of professional practice in any field. Of course, Roberto Assagioli and Carl Jung were pioneers in this perspective long ago, and many psychological thinkers in the 20th century followed suit, but it is only in the last years that this inclusion of spirituality as a given has become mainstream in professional practice.

In essence, this experience of the spiritual dimension is one of connection to all Life, a powerful sense of participating in the Universe as oneself, a unique being, and of having a place and part in the whole of the living world. From this core experience flow many attributes, such as courage, wisdom, power, creativity, perspective, joy, and the ability to live fully one's chosen life with vitality and grace. And this is an experience, not an idea-- it is the experience of being fully alive as oneself on earth. This very human experience highlights simultaneously the universality and particularity of our existence and the paradoxical fact of our differences from, and union with, all other life forms. It joins us to all others, while at the same time affirming our unique being. Everyone is capable of this

connection, though it may be impeded in any number of ways, and it is a birthright we share as human beings, even if how we experience it differs from person to person.

I want to emphasize that this "experiential spirituality" is at once common to all people and completely particular to each person's experience. There are no general rules, or forms, by which it can be tapped, but rather there is simply this experience available for each person which both joins them with all beings and affirms their particular personhood. The stunning paradox of human spiritual maturity is that, as we become one with all creation, we also at the same time become completely and uniquely ourselves. Spirituality and the spiritual practices, religious, or not, that spring from it, are what brings us to the realization and expression of what Assagioli called our "Higher Self", and what I term "the soul". This is, for all of you, I am sure, familiar ground and many of you have contributed to this development of the distinction between religion and spirituality.

Transcendence/Embodiment

Traditionally, spirituality has emphasized the experience of transcendence as the central means to this Soul-realization and maturation. In both eastern and western practices we are taught, for the most part, to rise above our attachments, or identifications, to step back and recognize that we are more than any content of our consciousness, that we are a spiritual being who has a psyche and personality, a body, feelings, and mind, but not them. We learn to use our will to dis-identify from, and gain perspective on, whatever our experience is, to rest in the "I", and from there to align our energies with our higher will, the will of the Soul. Sometimes we confuse this experience of transcendence with superconscious infusion, sometimes we confuse it with dissociation, but, rightly used, it does just what it means to, and is a time-honored practice throughout the planet.

There is emerging now, however, another equally basic practice within spirituality that I think we need to pay equal attention to, and learn, just as we have learned the practice of transcendence. This is the practice of "embodiment". By "embodiment" I mean the choice we make, as souls, through an act of will, to incarnate, to enter the material world and to dwell here fully. By "embodiment" I mean the act of descent which the soul chooses again and again over the course of a lifetime and the process by which we, as spiritual beings, come to dwell more and more fully as our unique selves in our flesh, bones, and blood on planet earth. It is becoming clear that spirit resides as much in these choices of embodiment as in those of transcendence, and that, in fact, the two are complementary aspects of the process of Soul-realization, taking the meaning of "realization" in both its senses--becoming aware of who we most are and making that soul real through resonant and consistent attitudes and behaviors in the world.

In religious terminology, we often hear of the dual aspects of the Divine--transcendent and immanent, God beyond and God within-- and these are obviously related to what I am saying, but the importance of embodiment is that it is a conscious act of will. It is a spiritual principle and practice that leads to full human maturity and to the practical, grounded realization, in fact, of the Divine in both

these aspects. This is a very human endeavor, requiring awareness and choice, and one in which we are tested again and again in our capacity to live fully the life we are given and not shy away from any experience we may encounter. The soul needs every experience we have, not just the good ones, and it is only through the full acceptance and bearing of the full spectrum of our human experience that we can realize who we most are on earth. In our excitement about the power of transcendence in spiritual life, we have sometimes neglected the equally powerful and necessary principle of embodiment, and it is for this reason that I want to focus on it here.

Again, this may not be new to you, for there are people in this room who have worked for decades to take Psychosynthesis in this direction, and there are many modalities of psychological practice now that emphasize this carnate dimension of our experience. But the old tendencies to "premature transcendence" are still there, and it does not hurt to raise this issue again.

Owning our Human Experience

In Gestalt parlance, there is a process called "owning" aspects of our experience that have been split off, projected, or repressed, and experiencing them directly. The idea is, as we reown these experiences we have disowned, and integrate them, we move toward human wholeness and maturity. In classic gestalt work, the spiritual dimension remains implicit, but the outcome is the same as what we do at our best in Psychosynthesis--a full embodiment of our wholeness, in the here and now, within the context of the eternal. A way of talking about the practice of embodiment is that of owning, experiencing fully, and integrating aspects of our human existence which we may find difficult to bear. If we do not do this, we tend toward a false transcendence and disembodied existence, which often has the appearance of being spiritual, but which is not rooted, or grounded, in all of our human experience, and so cannot fully hold and express the energies of the soul.

Using this parlance, then, what aspects of our experience do we need to own in order to fully embody our souls?

First is our suffering. We need to choose to descend into our suffering, be it vulnerability, fear, grief, anxiety, anger, despair, loneliness, alienation, and experience it fully. In these experiences are the seeds of healing and transformation, they are the humus of our humanity and vulnerability, and, if we avoid them, or buffer ourselves against them in the many ways we can, we lose an aspect of our soul. We also lose an experience that brings us compassion and opens our hearts and minds to love, that touches us in the social aspect of the soul. Often spirituality, particularly of a transcendent type, is used to rise above this suffering, and keep it at bay. We emphasize "love and light" and fail to realize that in our struggles and sorrows lie the truth of our spiritual path and the experience we need as souls to heal and ripen. This does not mean being taken over by the suffering, as happens when we are unconsciously identified with it, but rather consciously owning and experiencing it as ours, as an aspect of our life which we need as much as the easier moments.

Second is our bodies. All too often spiritual practice is associated with transcending our bodies to some realm that is beyond our senses, and in many religious systems the body has been seen as an impediment to spiritual development and, in the worse case, a source of sin and separation. Certainly unconscious identification with the body can lead to these blocks, but I think it is so important to see the body as the ultimate vehicle of the soul and that our particularity, power, love, and beauty are vested in it. Of course, we need to learn that we are more than our bodies, but we also need to learn that the process of spiritual maturation takes us deeper into our physical experience, not away from it, and that our bodies are sacred and the means by which we fully realize who we are as souls on earth. This includes the experience of infirmity, illness, and aging as well as the experiences of the senses, sexuality, and pleasure. "Incarnation" means quite literally, from the Latin, "to enter into the flesh". To not do this is to remain disembodied and spiritually ungrounded and immature. Those of you who are body workers, or who have worked in the field of Women's Spirituality, are well aware of this need.

Third is death. Again, too often spiritual practice emphasizes eternal life, and getting to a space beyond birth and death. Or, within this polarity, birth is given more importance and we secretly wish that death would just go away. We like birth better. Yet without death there is no birth, without death there is no change and development, without death there is no beauty and preciousness to life. The fact of death is the means by which we realize we are fully, vulnerably human, and it is in confronting and accepting our mortality that we open most fully to our souls. Embodiment enables us to choose our mortality and embrace it, to realize we will not be here forever, and that now is the time to express who we are. Those of you who have worked with chronic illness and the dying are well aware of this need.

Fourth is evil. This is a easily misunderstood aspect of our experience, but one important to our wholeness. We need to own that we have within us the capacity for what is called "evil", that we, no matter how mature we are, still carry the seeds of this extremely separative human attitude and behavior within us. We can choose not to activate these patterns-- and, if we are aware of them, and own them, there is a better chance of that-- but we are less than whole if we repress and/or project them onto others. Embodiment brings us to the recognition that we have this potential for evil within us, and that we, as souls, need to take responsibility for it and include it as part of our mature humanity. None of us are intrinsically "above" evil. And, paradoxically, by owning our capacity for evil, we can choose not to act it out.

There is a story that Thich Nhat Hanh tells about the Buddha and evil. In Buddhism the devil is called Mara. One day Mara is seen approaching the hut in which the Buddha is living. Ananda, the Buddha's chief disciple, is the first to spot Mara approaching and he runs into the meditation hall very upset and calls out to the Buddha "Mara is coming, Mara is coming! What shall we do? Shall we bar the door?". The Buddha calms Ananda and answers, "Why, no, open the door and invite him in for tea. He is our honored guest. For, Ananda, remember, without

Mara, no Buddha."The Buddha knows that Mara is necessary to his wholeness and enlightenment, that he is a whetstone to the blade of his spiritual will. It is only Ananda, the less conscious disciple, who is caught in the polarity of good and bad. Those of you who have worked with cult survivors and trauma victims know of this need.

Fifth is earthliness. By "earthliness" I mean accepting and living our given life on earth as it comes, trusting that what is given is what is needed for us to grow spiritually. We need to descend into our lives, the most mundane and unexciting aspects of them, and savor them for what they bring us. Far too often spirituality with an emphasis on transcendence is used as a means to distance from daily life, and achieve forms of specialness and intensity that distract us from the daily round. Here I am saying that it is in the very daily round that our soul seeks to descend, reside, and be realized, and that we need each detail of our life to achieve Soul-realization. This does not mean, again, that we stay caught passively in aspects of our living that need changing, but it does mean that we choose to stay with the challenges and opportunities of a very human daily life and see it as spiritual in, and of, itself. There is no higher life: ordinary life itself is sacred. I think we all know this need, though it is a challenge to fulfill this calling.

Sixth is the present moment. This is a familiar spiritual idea-- the holy here and now-- but embodiment brings us into it fully through an act of will and a willingness to live this moment, whatever it may bring. There are, then, no better and worse moments, but rather we learn to enter fully whatever the moment is in faith that somehow it is the means to our spiritual liberation and expression. We are so quick to judge one moment as more spiritual than another, and to prefer it, and yet, if it is true that the soul needs all of our experience in order to be realized, then each moment has its place and is, in this sense, divine. Again, I want to stress that this is a choice, much as transcendence is a choice, and that fully living each moment, when we can do it, brings us the spiritual realization we seek right here on earth.

In this light I cannot resist reading one of my favorite poems about a very mundane daily ritual--walking the dog.

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.

Seventh is earth as heaven. Often spirituality projects a place beyond our earthly lives where we are whole, be this heaven, or nirvana, and the promise of spiritual practice is that we will get there, either in this lifetime, or the next. The emphasis is on another place than the earth where things are better, where there is "no sickness, toil, or danger", and in this projection the earth is portrayed as flawed, sinful, painful, whatever. If we see the earth this way, then we begin to fear and devalue it, or amass means to protect ourselves from its woes, and seek to leave it, either psychologically, or sometimes literally, as in cult suicides. Embodiment, on the other hand, is the means by which we embrace fully our lives on earth and the earth as heaven, as all there is, and, paradoxically, as we do this, we begin to bring heaven to earth, so to speak, we begin to value our earthly lives and make this place we live beautiful and better, not only for ourselves, but for all beings. Albert Schweitzer's experience of "reverence for all Life", or Martin Luther King's statement "we will either learn to live together as brothers and sisters, or perish as fools", have behind them the experience of embodiment, and acceptance of the privilege and responsibility of living on earth as a soul. There is nowhere else to go, and, if we realize this, we can then begin to see the earth as the beautiful and vital home she is and to care for her as we would ourselves. We are earthlings, not angels, and our spiritual responsibilities and joys are here, not elsewhere.

Part of this realization of earth as heaven is also that we are at once ourselves and part of all Life on earth. And this brings me back to where we started, but now the context is planetary rather than personal and we can see that embodiment is also a choice both to be ourselves fully and to honor the differences between you and me and all other beings. Often spirituality has emphasized what we have in common through transcending our differences, but here I am saying that we need to own our differences in order to experience the full complexity of how we are actually one. If we posit the existence of a planetary collective soul, analogous to the individual soul, then this soul would need every life on the planet in order to realize itself. And, if this variety were reduced, as it is so much at present, the soul of the earth would lose aspects of its full maturity. These lives include those of plants and animals as well as humans from many cultures.

This affirmation of diversity is a function of embodiment and, paradoxically, leads to an experience of unity right here on earth without any loss of detail and difference. We are still far from recognizing and expressing this realization of diversity as sacred; in fact, we are destroying it as I speak, so we have our work cut out for us. But without it, we will not fully realize who we are as souls on earth, individually and as a species. Those of you who have worked on the ecological and socio-political aspects of Psychosynthesis are well aware of this need.

Soul-Embodiment and the New Spirituality

This dimension of spirituality, this choosing to be fully embodied souls on earth, promotes a spiritual practice that brings us "down and in" rather than "up and out". We need this aspect of spirituality now; we can no longer afford only to transcend and keep a distance from aspects of our experience that are perhaps uncomfortable, but necessary to the full maturation of the soul. Again, transcendence, rightly used, is equally important in this process, but here I am calling for attention to its complement which is often neglected, or ignored. We need to descend as well as transcend, we need to inhabit our bodies and the earth as souls as well as gain perspective on them. We need to embrace our suffering and our death, and be grateful for them as well as to work with them for healing and Soul-realization. We need to welcome what comes in the present moment and live it fully in our bodies, feelings, and minds. We need to own our capacity for evil. We need to welcome differences and learn to live creatively and harmlessly with them. We need to care for our planet home and the species with whom we share it. This is the soul work we need to do now and in the century ahead.

This soul work will lead, I believe, in time, to the emergence of a new spirituality on earth--one that will both affirm our common humanity and celebrate the infinite differences between person and person, culture and culture, nation and nation. The emergence of this new spirituality constitutes a very big shift in consciousness for each person and for humanity as a whole. For eons we have projected the power of the soul onto God, or some such figure, and posited that our soul belonged with God and would return to God when we died. In other words home was not here on earth, but in heaven, or somewhere else. Here I am saying that the soul's home is here on earth, that this is where heaven, or nirvana, is, and that there is no other place to go but here. Heaven is here/now, or Hell, as we choose, individually and collectively.

In this orientation we are reowning, as individuals and as a species, the projection of our soul onto God and are finding the presence of Spirit within our present existence as mature, responsible, connected human beings. It is the nature of our consciousness that makes the world an heaven, or hell, and, as our consciousness expands and transforms, we experience increasingly the healing of the split between heaven and earth and the union of all opposites without loss of any detail of existence. Again, the central paradox of human spiritual maturity is that, as we become one with all creation, we also at the same time become completely and uniquely ourselves.

The challenge, then, is to embody our soul lives as fully as possible here on earth. As long as we live this projection of our soul, which is a kind of ultimate premature transcendence, we are disempowered spiritually, for it allows us to maintain the split between heaven and earth, and to stay immature in the face of the challenges we encounter in living. Conversely, as we reown this projection and realize the spiritual power is within us and within our daily lives, then we realize that we are the ones who are capable of making things better, of realizing heaven on earth.

Again, this may all be familiar to you. I hope so, as I feel strongly the need for this perspective on spirituality and am focusing my own work in these directions. The planet has become small enough for us to realize that we need to learn to live here together as mature human beings, and that we are, in fact, one great family who share a common home. There is no where else to go, nothing else to do but be here now and learn to live in ways that do not harm others, or the earth. Clearly, we have not learned this yet, though I am sure that we can, and that our work can contribute to this. We need to learn to be fully souls on earth, to embody who we most are, and, as we do this, we will come to see the earth as the sacred and most beautiful planet she is, and has always been. We will be at home at last, both in ourselves, and in the wide, wide world.

I want to close by reading one of a set of four poems that speak to this experience of the embodied soul. It is from a collection I published two years ago entitled *On Earth Alive* and is the last poem of four entitled "Soul Canticles". I would like to take some silence together before reading it and then have a moment of silence when it is done, after which I will ring this bell.

Love Now

Strange this journey leading
in the end no where but here,
the path our breathing,
the road our blood.
Yet every step is needed to arrive
where beauty inundates our veins,
suffuses living flesh with darkened light.
No wonder we, so long the wanderers,
can't see at first we're home,
and reach among our gatherings
for further guidance and a map of God.
It seems we've garnered just the things
we needed to resume our way--
wisdom, knowledge, skill, endurance--
but no route opens-- up, or down--

no inner finger points, or probes,
no voice conspires to draw us on.
And yet such sweetness now surrounds,
such nearby celebration,
we scarce can breathe--
no more from ancient fear,
but from this standing still
so close to God.

Amazed, we wonder can this be--
our bodies rooted in the firmament,
sun, moon, stars, and earth confiding
in our hearts and minds?
What is this marvel of a world
that no more falls away
and leaves us longing,
but presses close to see
its cherished progeny?
Stunned by love, we sense
the primal innocence returned,
but nearby dark still spreads its wings.
No, this is new, unknown and intricate,
something of earthy fuse and force
that pours through every living thing.

Here, yes, here is home at last!
We step across the threshold stone,
alive as we have never been,
yet somehow also knowing this was ours
at every step along the way.
And God, who once embraced,
then bade farewell, is here again
so near we breathe together one vast love.

O who can say when earth will end?
Not I, nor you, nor one,
but some sweet breath
that sweeps the planet's face
to keep us company as we lose
and find again our O so ever
human grace.

Thomas Yeomans, Ph.D.

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