

Caring for our soul



What does it profit you if you gain the whole world but suffer the loss of your own soul?

Jesus taught that and, I suspect, we generally don't grasp the full range of its meaning. We tend to take Jesus' words to mean this: What good is it if someone gains riches, fame, pleasure, and glory and then dies and goes to hell? What good is earthly glory or pleasure if we miss out on eternal life?

Well, Jesus' teaching does mean that, no question, but there are other lessons in this teaching that have important things to teach us about health and happiness already here in this life. How do we lose our souls? What does it mean "to lose your soul" already in this world? What is a soul and how can it be lost?

Since a soul is immaterial and spiritual it cannot be pictured. We have to use abstract terms to try to understand it. Philosophers, going right back to Aristotle, have tended to define the soul as a double principle inside every living being: For them, the soul is both the principle of life and energy inside us as well as the principle of integration. In essence, the soul is two things: It's the fire inside us giving us life and energy and it's the glue that holds us together. While that sounds abstract, it's anything but that because we have first-hand experience of what this means.

If you have ever been at the bedside of a dying person, you know exactly when the soul leaves the body. You know the precise moment, not because you see something float away from the body, but rather because one minute you see a person, whatever her struggle and agony, with energy, fire, tension in her body and a minute later that body is completely inert, devoid of all energy and life. Nothing animates it anymore. It becomes a corpse. As well, however aged or diseased that body might be, until the second of death it is still one integrated organism. But at the very second of death that body ceases to be one organism and becomes instead a series of chemicals which now begin to separate and go their own ways. Once the soul is gone, so too are gone all life and integration. The body no longer contains any energy and it's no longer glued together.

And since the soul is a double principle doing two things for us, there are two corresponding ways of losing our souls. We can have our vitality and energy go dead or we can become unglued and fall apart, petrification or dissipation, in either case we lose our souls.

If that is true, then this very much nuances the question of how we should care for our souls. What is healthy food for our souls? For instance, if I am watching television on a given night, what's good for my soul? A religious channel? A sports channel? A mindless sitcom? The nature channel? Some iconoclastic talk-show? What's healthy for my soul?

This is a legitimate question, but also a trick one. We lose our soul in opposite ways and thus care of the soul is a refined alchemy that has to know when to heat things up and when to cool things down: What's healthy for my soul on a given night depends a lot upon what I'm struggling with more on that night: Am I losing my soul because I'm losing vitality, energy, hope, and graciousness in my life? Am I growing bitter, rigid, sterile, becoming a person who's painful to be around? Or, conversely, am I full of life and energy but so full of it that I am falling apart, dissipating, losing my sense of self? Am I petrifying or dissipating? Both are a loss of soul. In the former situation, the soul needs more fire, something to rekindle its energy. In the latter case, the soul already has too much fire; it needs some cooling down and some glue.

This tension between the principle of energy and the principle of integration within the human soul is also one of the great archetypal tensions between liberals and conservatives. In terms of an oversimplification, but a useful one, it's true to say that liberals tend to protect and promote the energy-principle, the fire, while conservatives tend to protect and promote the integration-principle, the glue. Both are right, both are needed, and both need to respect the other's instinct because the soul is a double principle and both these principles need protection.

After we die we can go to heaven or hell. That's one way of speaking about losing or saving our souls. But Christian theology also teaches that heaven and hell start already now. Already here in this life, we can weaken or destroy the God-given life inside us by either petrification or dissipation. We can lose our souls by not having enough fire or we can lose them by not having enough glue.

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