

A plea for the soul

It's hard to find your soulmate in someone who doesn't believe you have a soul.



Recently on The Moth Radio Hour a young woman shared the story of her breakup with her boyfriend, a young man for whom she had deep feelings. The problem was that she, a person with a deep faith, a Mormon, struggled with the radical materialism of her boyfriend. For him, there were no souls; the physical world was real, and nothing else. She kept asking him if he believed he had a soul. He couldn't make himself believe that. Eventually, not without a lot of heartache, they broke up. Why? In her words: It's hard to find your soulmate in someone who doesn't believe you have a soul.

Her frustration is becoming more universal. More and more our world is ignoring and denying the existence of soul, becoming soulless. It wasn't always like this. Up until modern times, often it was the physical and the body that weren't properly honored. But things have changed, radically.

It began with Darwin, who rooted our origins more in the history of our bodies than in the origins of our souls; it took more shape in the mechanistic philosophies of the last century, which understood both our universe and ourselves as physical machines; it became more firm as modern medicine and experimental psychology began more and more to explain the brain primarily in terms of carbon complexification and biochemical interactions; it seeped into our higher educational systems as we produced more and more technical schools rather than universities in the deeper sense; and it culminated in popular culture where love and sex are spoken of more in terms of chemistry than in terms of soul. It is not surprising that for most pop singers today the mantra is: I want your body! I want your body! We're a long ways from Shakespeare's marriage of true minds and Yeats' love of the pilgrim soul in you.

Religion of course has always lodged its protests against this but often its understanding of the soul

was itself too narrow to have much power to lure a materialistic culture back into wanting to rediscover and listen to the soul. Ironically, it took a non-religious figure, Carl Jung, to speak of soul again in a way that is intellectually intriguing. And it was in the sick, the insane, the suicidal, and others whose lives were broken that Jung began to hear the cry of the soul (whose demands are sometimes very different from those of the body and whose needs are for much more than simple comfort and the prolonging of life).

Much of Jung's teaching and that of his followers can be seen as a protest for the soul. We see this, for example, in the writing of James Hillman. It's ironic that as an agnostic he was able to speak about the soul in ways that we, who are religious, might envy and emulate. Like Jung, he also drew many of his insights from listening to the soul cry out its meaning and pain through the voices of the sick, the insane, the broken, and the suicidal. Religion, medicine, and psychology, he believes, are not hearing the soul's cry. They're forever trying to fix the soul, cure the soul, or save the soul, rather than listening to the soul, which wants and needs neither to be fixed nor saved. It's already eternal. The soul needs to be heard, and heard in all its godly goodness and earthy complexes. And sometimes what it tells us goes against all common sense, medical practice, and the over-simplistic spiritualities we often present as religion.

To be more in touch with our souls we might examine an older language, the language that religion, poets, mythologists, and lovers used before today's dominant materialism turned our language about the soul into the language of chemistry and mechanism. We cannot understand the soul through any scientific description but only by looking at its behavior, its insatiability, its dissatisfactions, and its protests. A soul isn't explained, it's experienced, and soul experience always comes soaked in depth, in longing, in eros, in limit, in the feeling of being pilgrim in need of a soulmate.

Happily, even today, we still do spontaneously connect the soul to things beyond chemistry and mechanism. As Hillman points out: "We associate the word 'soul' with: mind, spirit, heart, life, warmth, humanness, personality, individuality, intentionality, essence, innermost, purpose, emotion, quality, virtue, morality, sin, wisdom, death, God. As well, we speak of a soul as 'troubled', 'old', 'disembodied', 'immortal', 'lost', 'innocent', 'inspired'. Eyes are said to be 'soulful', for the eyes are 'the mirror of the soul'; and one can be 'soulless' by showing no mercy."

Soullessness: We understand the make-up of something best when we see it broken. So perhaps today we can best understand our soullessness in the growing acceptance of pornography and hook-up sex, where the soul is intentionally and necessarily excluded from what is meant to be the epitome of all soulful experience.

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