

Psychotherapy and the Care of Soul
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Since our theme for this month is the “care of the soul” I think I need to be clear with you how I will be using the word “soul.” “Soul” means different things to different people. To many an African-American, soul refers to ethnic food and music. To many in the traditional faith communities the soul is the part of each person that survives physical death and joins with others and God. I am not talking about any of that today. Spiritual writer Tom Rapsas said: “According to the dictionary, [soul is]...’a person’s moral or emotional nature, their sense of identity’—but in reality, we know it’s something that’s indefinable. A soul can’t be seen or touched, it can only be perceived within, and even then its presence is often fleeting.” This gets closer to how I am using the term in this talk.

Several well-known psychotherapists of the past described their work as at least in part, spiritual. These include Carl Jung, James Hillman, Thomas Moore, Alfred Adler, Viktor Frankel, Rollo May, John Wellwood, Scott Peck, and Erich Fromm among others. Many ministers receive training in counseling and psychotherapy because of the close connection between the well-being of the soul and of the mind. There has always been an overlap between the psychological and the spiritual dimensions of life. The Latin word “psyche” means soul, so originally psychology was the study of the soul. In this sense psychotherapy has been referred to as the “healing of the soul.” The current emphasis in psychotherapy on “mindfulness” relates it to Buddhism, and again pointing to the overlap between psychotherapy and spirituality.

Least you think that heard-headed atheists don’t talk about the soul please know they do. Although atheist Richard Dawkins rejects the traditional religious concept of a soul separate from the body that survives death, he defines the soul he believes in this way: “Intellectual or spiritual power; high development of the mental faculties; deep feelings and sensitivity.” Dawkins quotes this latter definition from the Oxford English Dictionary. Whether we accept or reject the idea of a soul that survives death I suspect most of us do accept the concept of the soul as an intellectual and spiritual power, deep feelings, genuineness, and sensitivity.

For me the soul also relates to the idea of self-actualization, a term which means being our most complete selves, achieving at our highest capability, and being most in tune with our true selves. I think of the soul as the spiritual self; that which connects to what is sacred or holy. You may remember I spoke about the spiritual self as an answer to one of the “Five Big Theological Questions,” the question of “Who am I?”

Rabbi Michael Learner describes the soul as the sense we have that we are more than the sum of our choices, traits and dispositions. He says we feel we

have a “capacity for freedom and transcendence...something that goes beyond the agenda set by our parents, teachers, and economic and social pressures.” There is some quality that is “more about ourselves than we can put into words. “...it pulls us toward love and a sense of Unity with All Being, toward goodness and a desire to make things right as best we can understand, and toward a purpose...that our lives can have a deeper meaning than the accumulation of power and wealth...Soul is the personal manifestation of spirit in our own being.” Soul is not a thing that can be easily defined or identified scientifically. In spiritual terms, “The capacity for self-transformation and inner healing is part of what we mean by having a soul—the soul is the part of us that energizes us to go for our highest ethical and spiritual vision of what we can be.”

Learner explains that spirituality includes the following elements: “An experience of love and connection to the world and to others; a recognition of the ‘ultimate Unity of All Being;’ a conviction that the universe bends towards love; awe, wonder and radical amazement; a joyous and compassionate attitude toward oneself and others; a deep trust that there is enough for all and that all deserve an equal share of the earth’s resources; a sense that there is an energy that transcends physical reality; a conviction that our lives have meaning through our connection with the ultimate goodness of the universe.” So it appears we experience the spiritual with our souls.

Having defined what I mean by soul and spirit I now want to focus on psychotherapy. My clinical psychology internship supervisor taught, that as people undergoing psychotherapy improve, they become more spiritual. I have realized the truth of this assertion more and more over the years of my practice. Early in my professional development as a psychologist I came to regard the writings of the renowned psychoanalyst and social philosopher Erich Fromm, author of *The Art of Loving*, as a guiding influence. Many of the ideas in the rest of this talk come from the book, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, also by Erich Fromm. He referred to the psychoanalyst as the “doctor of the soul.” Fromm took a view of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis that was similar to that of my internship supervisor, and Fromm speaks to my soul.

At least some people who come to an analyst or other therapist don’t suffer from psychiatric disorders. Instead they suffer from problems in living. Therapists often relate problems in living to “personality disorders” or “character disorders.” The list of problems in living typically associated with personality disorders include, lack of self-esteem, marital difficulties, lack of satisfaction in work, shyness and so on. Freud was the first psychotherapist to connect problems in living with character, and was the first to analyze character as a method of psychological healing. Erich Fromm was a student of Freud, and agreed on this point, but he parted company with Freud over other aspects of theory. For Freud, the primary drives and motives in people were biological and for Fromm they were social and interpersonal. Fromm saw inner conflict and unresolved interpersonal issues as blocks to the full development of human potential, and

psychological and spiritual wellness. These were the blocks he sought to cure. The analysis of character or personality was part of the method Fromm used.

Here is a case example from Dr. Fromm's book, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, to illustrate what might be a problem of the "soul" rooted in personality or character disorder. A 24 year-old man came to Fromm reporting that he had been feeling miserable for the past two years during which time he had been working in his father's successful factory. The young man was moody, he didn't enjoy his work and he often had sharp verbal disputes with his father. In addition he had difficulty making even the smallest decisions. These problems started soon after graduating college. He majored in physics and was told by his instructors he had potential in that field. However his father insisted the son come to work in the business with the expectation of taking over, as the father was planning to retire. The father had no other children and had spent a lifetime building the business. The son had given in to the father's insistence to join the firm.

There are a couple of ways to look at this case. In one view the father's need is quite reasonable. The son is behaving rebelliously perhaps out of a deep-seated antagonism. The son's interest in physics is based only on a desire to oppose his father's wishes and frustrate him. In this view the goal of the therapy would be to help the son to see that his feelings about his father are unreasonable. In the alternative view of this case the son is suffering from a lack of assertiveness. The son has allowed the father to dissuade him from his true career desire of physics. The father has the right to ask his son to participate in the business, but not to demand, and the son needs to follow his own career preferences. The goal of the therapy from this viewpoint is to help the son to overcome his fear of his father so he is free to make his own choices. The son's hostility in this second view is not the cause of the son's difficulty but rather the result of giving in to his father against his own wishes. We might say that in the second view, the goal of the therapy is to liberate the soul of the son. From the psychodynamic perspective, the son's symptoms of moodiness, difficulty making decisions, and arguments with his father are signs that point to a deeper place where the healing needs to occur. This younger man needs to declare his independence and find his own voice. He needs a therapist who doesn't oppose his inner strivings (as his father does) but rather affirms them. The son likely would never learn to be happy following the life his father expects of him.

Here is a second example, a composite of some cases in my private practice. A young woman came to see me following her divorce. She was suffering from depression including feelings of guilt over the divorce and also repressed anger at her ex-husband for his refusal to work to save the marriage. She was shy and tended to avoid social activity outside of work. The woman has several unrealistic expectations including that all marriages should be forever and must be perfect. If her marriage was not perfect it was her fault. She also believed it was her responsibility to perform every duty and task perfectly and to please everyone in her life, including both her work and personal life. As you can imagine this

created quite a burden and caused intense anxiety and procrastination. It also prompted her to avoid people so she didn't have to face expected rejection for failing to achieve their expectations of her. As a young child this client had felt responsible for, and overwhelmed by, her father's depression. Her inability to help her father was, to herself, proof of her inadequacy. During middle school years two close friends moved away, and as a result she felt abandoned and less worthy as a person. This client needed to learn that her father's depression was not her fault nor was her friends' leaving. Her worth as a person was not dependent upon these things or upon doing every task to perfection. She came to understand it was not her job to please everyone. As she improved and freed from unrealistic expectations, her anxiety and depression lessened, and she was able to enjoy interacting with others much more. It became easier for her to make decisions and complete tasks, and her confidence in herself improved. She grew into a more secure and more peaceful sense of herself.

Perhaps it is true that the soul in each of us has a calling that we need to learn to listen to and foster in order to be fully self-actualized. In the words of Erich Fromm, "...there are inherent laws within human nature and human functioning...[which] cannot be violated without serious damage to the personality." Sometimes following "the path of the soul" places a person in conflict with cultural and/or family expectations. For Fromm, if we seek only to live up to the expectations of others we betray our "higher selves." The betrayal is also a path to psychological and also physical distress. It is by honoring our own internal calling that we become what our potential and talents allow and our life energy can be focused on our authentic self-created goals.

For Fromm, psychodynamic therapy is a means to cure the soul and is as much a spiritual as a psychological endeavor. Psychodynamic therapy helps a person to become aware of her own or his own truth. The search for inner truth is the path to freedom and independence. From our birth, each of us is faced with the challenge of moving from a state of dependency to that of independence and peace within oneself. Many people never achieve full independence and remain emotionally overly dependent upon others throughout their lives. The personal declaration of independence is associated with a kind of existential anxiety. It takes a leap of faith to realize that we are each separate beings responsible for our own actions. Those who have not taken this leap of faith don't develop fully their personal powers of "reason and love," as Fromm declared it.

Fromm attributed extreme nationalism, racism, and other extreme political affiliations that create the sense of division between "us and them," as stemming of the failure to achieve full psychological independence. He said to be fully mature one needs to feel a kinship with all people not just those who look the same, or are from the same nation, social class or political party. To quote Fromm again, "The growth of reason and of all rational value judgments requires that [we] overcome the incestuous fixation with its criteria of right and wrong based on familiarity." To mature we must learn to embrace the wider world

beyond the familiar grounding of our childhood. Even those who don't outwardly suffer from dissatisfaction and the problems of living I described earlier may not have achieved emotional maturity. A person fearful of autonomy may turn to various forms of escape to, "be protected from the frightening experience of being alone with [oneself] and looking into the abyss of [one's] own impotence and human impoverishment." Escapes can include reliance on alcohol, drugs, and other addictions and compulsions, overindulgence in media etc., or extreme isolation.

In her keynote address at the MDD meeting in October Dr. Kendyl Gibbons talked about the dimensions of "spiritual maturity." She said the core of spiritual maturity is the capacity for self-reflection and self-awareness. The method of psychotherapy Fromm described and practiced aims at this same ability. It is through the process of self-awareness, self-understanding and self-compassion that healing of the soul occurs. Gibbons said this ability, is the result of psychological maturity and does not emerge in most people until sometime in their mid-twenties at the earliest.

Religions were intended to encourage emotional maturity and the love of humankind. Fromm interprets the Garden of Eden story, in which Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge, not as a sin of disobedience, but as a move towards emancipation. Abraham and Moses had to leave their homes in order lead others to freedom. The message of the Hebrew prophets was about truth, love and justice. When a country demands loyalty of its citizens to the degree that it stifles the expression of truth, love and justice it must be defied or else the soul of the individual is lost. A government can be overly controlling just as a parent might be, with a stifling effect on human potential, initiative and creativity. Religions of the world in many instances have had a similar, repressive influence on humanity. Fromm interpreted the biblical story of the Exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt as symbolizing the human quest to escape the bonds of dependency moving towards the "Promised Land" of freedom and justice and love. To achieve emotional maturity and to have healed one's soul is to be able to love. All the great religions of the world teach us to "love your neighbor as yourself." For Fromm the failure to love is the basis of all psychological problems. By "love" Fromm means, "a capacity for the experience of concern, responsibility, respect, and understanding of another person and an intense desire for that person's growth." The aim of psychotherapy is to help the client gain or regain the capacity for love and including self-love. Anything short of this in psychotherapy would be superficial change according to Fromm. "Anyone who loves his neighbor but does not love himself [herself] shows that the love of neighbor is not genuine. If the attitude of affirmation and respect does not exist towards oneself it does not exist at all. The aim of humanistic religion is the ability to love productively, to love without greed, without submission and domination, and to love from the fullness of one's personality," or one's soul.

A client in psychotherapy may complain of feelings of guilt. Sources of guilt might include, guilty for not being good enough towards parents, not doing well enough with work, or for hurting another person's feelings. Guilt is often accompanied by feelings of inferiority or feelings of personal defect. There may be an unconscious desire for punishment. For Fromm, guilt may stem from what he calls an "authoritarian orientation." What a client with guilt might fear the most is the loss of love of an authority figure. The goal of the therapy is to help the client transition to the awareness of her, or his, own personal sense of conscience as opposed to that stemming from the fear of the loss of love of an authority figure, operating as guilt.

Once the client in therapy has overcome what Fromm calls the "authoritarian reaction" to her or his guilt that client is more available to what he called a "humanistic religious experience," or what I think would now be best called a "spiritual experience." The client has the opportunity to explore the dimensions of the soul. One begins to be attentive to the sense of mature conscience. One keeps asking what is the right thing to do. The psychological "cure of the soul" leads to the ability to see the truth, to love, and to become free and responsible.

For Fromm becoming ethical enhances the opportunity for spiritual experiences. He described three aspects of spiritual experiences. One aspect is wonder and puzzlement at the nature of existence and our place in it. To be spiritual is to be questioning about life and in a state of wonder. The second characteristic of spiritual experience is the focus on what Paul Tillich termed "ultimate concern;" that is, seeking to understand life's deepest meaning, or as Fromm put it "the fulfillment of the tasks life sets for us." Anything that doesn't contribute to the welfare of the soul and the realization of the true self is of secondary importance. Besides the sense of wonder and the appreciation of "ultimate concerns," Fromm regarded the third aspect of spiritual experience as the mystical. He described this as a feeling of oneness with all people, all life, the world and the universe. From conversations in our Fellowship I know many of you have had such experiences. These experiences correspond to the first of our UU six sources, "the experience of transcendence and wonder." This third feature of spiritual experiences is the feeling that one is part of the whole; one is merged with nature. At that moment we become "a thread in the texture of the universe," as Fromm put it.

Fromm goes on to say, "If psychoanalysis is effective it is not because the patient accepts new theories about the reasons for his unhappiness but because he acquires a capacity for being genuinely bewildered; he marvels at the discovery of a part of himself whose existence he had never expected." When as a result of successful therapy a person is brought in touch with parts of self previously excluded from consciousness one becomes aware of both most admirable and detestable aspects of humanity. And when we are in touch with our own capacity to do evil we are less inclined to judge others and more inclined to promote what is good.

In conclusion, the care of the soul from a humanistic psychoanalytic perspective is the process of encouraging psychological and spiritual maturity. We care for our souls when become free from the bonds of dependency. We learn to hear our own voice and follow our own true calling. We require less admiration and approval and we become more focused on promoting love and justice. We are more able to stand against oppressive and immoral powerful others. We become more dedicated to the process of the healing of the world because we see clearly that each of our individual souls is bound up with that of others. We understand more deeply “the interconnected web of existence,” and our part in it. Many forms of psychotherapy besides humanistic psychoanalysis attempt to help a client achieve this result. One of the greatest satisfactions in my life has been the opportunity to witness such personal transformations.

May all of you experience such transformations.