

Soul Lessons

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“You know of the disease in Central Africa called sleeping sickness...there also exists a sleeping sickness of the soul. It’s most dangerous aspect is that one is unaware of its coming. That is why you have to be careful. As soon as you notice the slightest sign of indifference, the moment you become aware of the loss of a certain seriousness, of longing, of enthusiasm, and zest, take it as a warning. You should realize your soul suffers if you live superficially.”ⁱ

Dr Albert Schweitzer

Superficial living is part of having an eating disorder. This is not to say that those who suffer from these disorders do not have meaningful lives. It is to say that they have lost track of the meaning. They have indeed lost track of what is really important. For example, surely a number on the scale is not more important than one's health, yet those with eating disorders live their lives as if this were the case. In the eating disorder world fitting into a size 4 might be so important that vomiting several times a day in order to stay at this size is acceptable. And those with eating disorders are just taking the current cultural trends to the extreme.

As Carl Hammerschlag says, “The theft of spiritual meaning destroys us at every level—the individual, the family, the neighborhood, the culture, the nation, the fate of the world. The theft of the spirit disables us physically and emotionally.”... “Without any cultural or political *guides* who inspire trust, our perceptions of reality are created by sales professionals. Image has become more important than substance...”ⁱⁱ

As a therapist I believe that part of my work is to serve as such a *guide*. Treating eating disorders is a multidimensional task. Nutritional, medical, psychological, and even genetic factors come into play and all need to be addressed. Even so I strongly believe that in healing eating disorders we must focus not just on eradicating the eating disorder symptoms but on instilling purpose and meaning into our patient's lives. I have seen that once our patients are reconnected to the spiritual, sacred and soulful aspects of life the need for the symptoms diminish. Recovery is enhanced if we as therapists can serve as guides to this end.

As psychotherapists isn't it our duty to help track and guide our patient's psyches to their own higher good? Since the word psyche actually comes from the Greeks and means soul, I believe using the word soul in the previous sentence explains how I see spirituality as a part of my work as a psychotherapist. *Our duty as psychotherapists is to help track and guide our patients souls to their own higher good.*

We are supposed to explore our patient's psyches in psychotherapy. Therapists are supposed to help those they treat to bring awareness to underlying reasons for psychological problems, thus learning lessons about the psyche, or soul.

After reading Thomas Moore's books, *Care of The Soul* and *The Re Enchantment of Everyday Life*, I came to understand that what I have been doing for the past 23 years in my practice has been care of the soul.

I am convinced that eating disorders represent a true disconnect from the soul. I have said many times that the eating disorder symptoms are the voice of the soul and that we must listen carefully and learn from them. At the same time we must instill soulfulness and a spiritual dimension back into the lives of our patients. When one becomes reconnected with sacredness and spirituality the purpose for the eating disorder fades.

Many people come to me who have lost their appetite for church and organized religion and yet, whether or not they know it, they long for spirituality. As I have heard Carl Hammerschlag say, "It is important not to confuse spirituality with religion as religion is only a bridge to spirituality and it is all too common to get stuck on the bridge."ⁱⁱⁱ

In my work I incorporate what I call "Soul Lessons" to help my patients reconnect with the spiritual aspect they are missing. Soul lessons don't have to involve belief in past lives or reincarnation. The goal is to help the patient connect to him or herself as part of a larger whole and to connect to others in a loving, non-judgmental way. I want to help each patient connect to and feel like a part of nature and the universe. I want to instill in each and every one of them a sense of connectedness to a greater purpose than his or her own individual life. Soul Lessons are lessons that parents can teach their children or therapists can teach their patients, either way the goal is in promoting soul growth.

When we can bring back sacredness to trees and awe inspiring reactions to sunsets, when we can get our patients to really grasp the knowledge that we are spiritual beings on a human path and our bodies are our earth suits, the need to starve, vomit or reach a number on a scale becomes erroneous and inconsequential. To say this is not to grasp it. Grasping it takes guidance, intention, and quiet stillness.

One of the soul lessons I guide my patients to experience involves the concept of beginners mind. When I think of beginners mind I am reminded of the recent movie *K PAX*. The actor, Kevin Spacey, comes to pay a visit to earth and takes the form of a human body for his experience here. Since he is not from earth he sees things with a beginners mind. In Zen Buddhism seeing things with a beginners mind is a very spiritual practice to cultivate.

Beginners mind takes ordinary or common things and trains us to really look at them, notice them, appreciate them etc. Imagine tasting an apple or orange for the first time if you were from another planet. Imagine describing it for the first time to your planetary friends. In fact this is a great assignment to do with eating disorder patients. You will find them discovering that because apples are common to us we take for granted this

incredible life form that grows on a tree and provides succulent, juicy, mouth watering, crisp sweetness for our pleasure and nourishment. Patients get in touch with how incredible an apple really is. We all only need to be reminded, perhaps guided to stop, listen and take this all in with gratitude. In the movie K PAX, while eating a banana, Kevin Spacey states, "Your produce alone was worth the whole trip."

Just because we are familiar with something or it is not rare does not mean it is not awe inspiring or exquisite or sacred. The Zen concept of beginners mind is an important concept to keep us in touch with gratitude for all that surrounds us. With beginners mind we can look at things new and fresh. Because we have sunsets every night we take them for granted, yet we do not have to.

Another example of a beginners mind lesson is with the use of flowers. You can do this in an individual therapy session or in a group. I will describe the activity in a group setting.

Describe a Flower

Bring in a vase of flowers, have each patient pick a flower from the vase. Ask them to describe the flower in great detail as if they were a Martian and had to write back home as to what flowers were like on earth. Tell them to use color, sight, smell, touch, and any other senses. Tell them they can use analogies or metaphors.

Ask each patient to share what he or she wrote. Below is an example of what a patient wrote for this assignment.

"My flower is a rose. It is light pink, almost peach, and pink. It is an imperfect circle, made up of petals, which resemble irregular, slightly round, velvet droplets. The petals on the inside are the color of the sun just as it sets over the ocean at sunset.

The flower is not closed and yet not in full bloom. There are about 4 rows of open petals surrounding a tighter bud. The rose is beautiful and fragrant. Each petal itself is not beautiful or very fragrant, only when all of the petals are combined together does its beauty and fragrance show.

The rose has a green stem- straight and hard. It is not beautiful but is necessary to support the flower and give it life. It is what attaches the flower to the earth and makes it grow. There are seven green leaves attached to the middle of the stem, various sizes but all the same shape. The outer ridges of the leaves are serrated. So, though the stem is not beautiful in and of itself, nor is each leaf particularly unique and special, they are needed to give the flower its beauty.

This rose looks so un-defensive, so weak, but roses are not un-defendable, they can protect themselves with thorns.'

After everyone has shared what they wrote have a discussion about how it felt to do this assignment and what they learned listening to what each other wrote. They often will

point out how others saw things they did not or how interesting it was to hear such different versions of the same thing.

I then pick two flowers, like two roses, and show them how one of the roses has a bigger stem and a bigger flower. “Do you think this rose is saying ‘Oh, I am too fat, look at my stem how big it is compared to yours’? Do you think the flowers are all comparing themselves to each other, for example, ‘My petals are not as colorful as yours,’ or ‘I don’t have as many thorns as you do’? No the flowers do not do this. Nor do dogs do this to each other. Comparing is not a natural state. We as humans have learned to compare ourselves to each other and we have to unlearn it. We have to work hard at unlearning it. Imagine if the Martians came down and looked at a field of flowers what they would see? Each flower is unique with its own beauty. And if they looked at us humans they would see that too.”

Next I ask the patients to describe their own body as if they were a Martian and had to send back a description of their body to Mars. I tell them that they have to do this assignment like they did the flower one and that if they write anything derogatory they will have to start over. Once they have done the flower assignment the body one is easier to do albeit harder than describing the flower. Below is an example of what one patient wrote.

My Body

“My body is a vehicle for my soul, my spirit, my energy. Four appendages, which carry me through life. The two lowest, the legs, support me, ground me, and connect me to the earth. They enable me to run, jump, walk, they are strong, and they are curvaceous and feminine.

My legs protect me physically in that they can lead me away from an uncomfortable situation. They kick, they balance, and they stretch. They are connected to my torso at my hips, one of the most feminine parts of the body, the reminder of sensuality. My hips are pendulums, allowing my legs to swing opposite one another, to move. My torso holds my organs which regulate my body, systems, which have both known and unknown functions. My energy flowing throughout. My entire body can be used to strengthen myself, my relationship with the physical.

My torso, the core of my body, holds messages of love, of connection, creativity, spunk. From my torso extends the two other appendages, my arms. My arms give and take, they have five fingered hands at the end which grasp, touch, caress, feel, help. My arms are strong, they are connected to my torso by my shoulders, also durable, but they have the tendency to tighten when I experience emotional fluctuations, a sign of imbalance.

The other extremely feminine part of my body in addition to my hips are my breasts. They give life, sustaining nourishment to my offspring. They add curves to my upper chest. They are sensual, sensitive, beautiful. On the top of my body sits my head.

My head upon my neck, a stem like support from which originates my voice, words, laughter, sobs, screams. One of the many ways I can communicate with the world.

My head is one my most unique features. Externally my head is covered by long strands of sun colored silk, catch it in the right light and it looks like the watercolor recreation of a sunset, every strand a different color. The oval of my head is split by two ocean colored globes, small but powerful, active, taking in the world. The covering of my head, a multi-colored, dotted, smooth, unique protective layer, flawed but functional, special and somewhat rare. Within my circular, sensory center lies the organ which controls everything, allowing me to think, process, use my senses, appreciate, love, intuit, and experience emotions. This is what makes me who I am, gives me the defining characteristics by which people remember me.

My body is also my protection, like the thorns of the roses, it keeps me away from danger. It's my shield but it's also my way to show myself to the world it's my tool to show to the world that I'm strong."

I have a discussion about what everyone wrote and how it felt and how doing the flower assignment helped him or her to do this. We bring up the differences in what people wrote and discuss how what was written has a lot to do with where the person is in there recovery. There are many ways to broaden this assignment .the conversation can go through many levels. Doing assignments like this helps instill a wonder and appreciation that would be hard to get in any other way. First flowers and then their own bodies are seen in a new and different light. Appreciating the body with a beginners mind is an important aspect of healing from an eating disorder.

Quiet Time

Quiet Time is another soul lesson that can be taught by parents to their children or by therapists to their clients. In every spiritual philosophy there is a mention of some kind of meditation, contemplation, or silent prayer. This concept is universal for connecting with the divine source and inner guidance. Due to the limited nature of this article suffice it to say that it is important to teach patients the ability to sit quietly and go inside. This can be done starting with a simple 5 minutes of silence in the room with the therapist or in a group and gradually increasing the time up to 10 or 15 minutes. Eventually the goal is to have patients be able to do this on their own.

“Quiet time is time that we take to be with ourselves in inner silence. When we quiet our minds or suspend our logic, we allow for a quality of thinking that helps us to access our deeper being-our spirit. For centuries philosophers, spiritual teachers, and visionaries have told us; solitude is the richness of self; give attention to the soul; lift the veil that separates you from your universal wisdom; and find a place of stillness so that heavenly forces can pour through you, recreate you, and use you for the betterment of humankind.”^{iv}

Footnotes:

ⁱ Carlson and Shield, ed., *Handbook For The Soul* (New York: Little Brown and Company 1995) 85.

ⁱⁱ Hammerschlag, Carl, *The Theft of the Spirit*. (New York: Simon and Schuster 1993) 25

ⁱⁱⁱ Hammerschlag, personal communication

^{iv} Fodor, Viola, *Desperately Seeking Self*, (Carlsbad, Calif: Gurze Books.1997) 165