

The Soul of Counseling

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This essay summarizes several major ideas from my recent book 'The Soul of Counseling' (Impact Publishers Feb. 2005)

The 'Soul of Counseling' arises from the three major themes in our current professional culture. The first theme is that we have neglected the soul in the study of psychology. I find it odd that our profession has explored so little about the human soul. We disguise our discomfort with the idea of soul by using the Greek word *psyche*, and formalize it in using the academic title 'Psychology' which literally means the study of the soul. Yet, in fact, we do not, and have not studied the soul. We study parts of the human condition such as cognition, affect, physiological response, and social behavior, but as professionals, we have failed to take a stand on whether or not we even have a soul! In the preponderance of our professional literature, soul and spirit are only mentioned in conjunction with religion.

Our sense of self and individual well-being are founded in our experiences of belonging within family, friends and community, where we are loved, accepted, acknowledged and valued. The richness of these experiences is spiritual in nature, and may not simply be reduced to cognitive, affective or socially interactive phenomena. We can touch and feel the spiritual impact of kindness, encouragement, gratitude, and other expressions of our soul. To disregard these spiritual acts is to miss the essence of our humanness.

The second theme that urges me to write about the soul is that I believe we have entered an era when the *ordered* world of technology and data-driven accountability norms and policies have introduced a dissonance with our need for intimacy, our need for community, friendship, and family. The traditions of our culture seem to be shifting from a more nurturing way of being toward a more frenetic network of superficial connection to everything and everybody. Our bureaucracies, and thus our workplaces, and governments at all levels have long been moving toward policies that tend to dehumanize as they standardize templates for the guidelines on how things are to be done. We lose a bit of our soul with an over-reliance on data.

Thirdly, the ‘Soul of Counseling’ arises out of our growing awareness and acceptance of the spiritual diversity among cultures. As informed citizens and educators, we have come to honor and respect the diversity of the different and the disenfranchised. With our emerging multicultural understanding, the door has been opened for us to examine the diversity of spiritual beliefs among cultures and sub-cultures. Because of the cultural norms of earlier times, we did not allow ourselves to examine such soul issues or spiritual matters, because they were seen as too ethereal. There was no encouragement to discuss love or related topics since this might invite leaving the hallowed grounds of western science. In spite of this, Carl Rogers (1961) had the courage to attend to matters of the soul in his person-centered approach in counseling. He just didn’t label it as spiritual. To gain acceptance and viability, he would have to use terms more amenable to the behavioral sciences of his time, so he called love “unconditional positive regard.” Perfect for the time! Our cultural norms have become more tolerant, and we have transcended our earlier more narrow and provincial viewpoints as we see the larger and more complex world of cultures and varied sub-cultures.

Several assumptions about human experience that are fundamental in considering our soul as the center of our being and at the very heart of counseling. For example, we are more than our thoughts; we are more than our emotions; and we are more than our behavior, although these are all indicators of the state of our soul. I am positing that all genuine compassion and caregiving are spiritual and come from our soul, which is our wellspring of love. Brian Thorne (1988) puts it this way:

My spirit and your spirit are what ultimately define us:
it is our spirit that gives meaning and direction to our
experience, it is our spirit that determines our identity
and it is our spirit which bears the mark of mortality.
We are body, mind and spirit but it is the spirit that

breathes life and gives light - or colludes, with death and darkness. The existentialists' question: 'who am I?' can only be satisfactorily answered in terms of the spirit.

In most cultures, religion has been so dominant in defining our spiritual life that any independent thinking, thoughtful reflection or discussion that diverges from traditional religious doctrines is considered somewhat heretical. If we as individuals accept this label of heretical out of feared consequences, we empower religion, and further abdicate our personal responsibility to think for ourselves. If we fail to look within ourselves to claim our spirituality in the face of negative judgment and fear of rejection, we yield to cultural conformity and ready-made answers that don't invite discussion or individual thinking. Questions arise: How do we explore our most sacred self without dishonoring and disconnecting from our families and significant others? How do we access this dimension of our reality? How do we discover that we can be spiritual without being religious? How willing are we to wrestle with these issues as individuals, apart from our group of Methodists, Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, or...? The questions come easily, but the answers are much more challenging. It's rare to find those who are willing to separate themselves from the norms of the religious traditions of their particular sub-culture, and come face to face with their own personal stand on the questions. Here is an interesting example: At the annual convention in 2005 of the American Psychological Association (ACA), Division 36, which is concerned with The Psychology of Religion, voted 57% to 43% to change their division title to The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality. Bylaws require a two-thirds majority and so it didn't happen. Tradition prevails, and the status quo remains. But the fact that a majority of this group thought that human spirituality should be studied apart from, as well as with religion is an important sign of the shift in our current attitudes on the subject. I believe there is a very large population of the spiritually non-religious, and this subculture has not been well served in our professional thinking and writing.

In William Miller's (1999) book *Values, Spirituality and Psychotherapy*, Richards, Rector and Tjeltvelt remind us of the growing evidence that the values people hold can promote physical and psychological coping, healing and well-being. They argue that because of that, "...clients' spiritual values should be viewed as a potential resource in psychotherapy rather than as something that should be ignored." We have known for a very long time that wellness must consider the whole person. To me the key elements of this view of wholeness include: spiritual awareness of self and others; intimacy connections (family

and friends); physical fitness; appreciation for our historical and cultural gifts of literature, music, science and art; recreation and renewal; and a purposeful life.

Witmer and Sweeney (1992) summarize several research findings on the important relationship between social support, interpersonal relationships and health. Among other findings, they reported that in a ten year study of 2,754 adults in Michigan, it was revealed that those persons with the least social contacts had two to four times the mortality rate of the better socially connected. Clearly there is something spiritual happening creating these outcomes. Isn't it time we acknowledge these acts of social support as spiritual because they are? We don't need to continue to research this question any more than we need to re-invent the wheel; the message is clear: *There is a power in love, and it is spiritual power from the soul of one to the soul of another.* The intimacy of laughter and crying, human touch, and the sense of belonging, acceptance and caring from those who love us all, heal us, and nurture us. These are essential for life.

I believe there are four tenets that support our thinking toward a theory of soul in counseling. Tenet 1: Within each of us there is a soul; an awareness of self as an autonomous being. Tenet 2: Our soul mediates all of our thoughts, feelings, choices and actions. Tenet 3: Human life depends on love. Tenet 4: All life seeks to survive and to fulfill itself.

The application of these ideas of soul in counseling reach across all disciplines in the spectrum of education and human services. Certainly in schools, the obvious areas of health education, comprehensive guidance curricula and delivery of same, early intervention programs, art, music and academic advising. Soul issues are existential issues in that the focus is on awareness of self and others, and on being present in engaging with the spiritual dimensions of everyday living. We are waking up and coming to see that our spiritual energy is manifest in every thought, attitude, belief and action. Certainly any act of love, any expression of gratitude, reverence and respect stems from the quality of our spiritual life.

We must start early in education if we are going to sow the seeds for transformation and create the kind of world we want. We need to make it our priority to pass on to our children the best of what is known about being fully human. In our human service professions, we need to honor the depth, breadth and centrality of our spiritual life, the essence of our humanness. We should make certain that these most

significant of encounters are taught as our highest values and passed on with more than haphazard or random lessons.

Peter Guerra (1998) acknowledges that character education is making a comeback. He cites the twelve universal values on which the Character Education Institute bases its work: honor, courage, convictions, honesty, truthfulness, generosity, kindness, helpfulness, justice, respect, freedom, equality. All these issues can be woven into the fabric of our lessons, our interactions, and into specific curricula to develop character in our students throughout the twelve or thirteen years we have them in schools. Schools are the only social agency in our culture where we have the opportunity for ongoing preventative and developmental programs. They are the only institution for the common good through which every child will pass, and the younger the child is when we intervene, the better the outcome. Character education *is* spiritual development.

I close with a piece from *The Prophet*, by Kahlil Gibran (1951), who reminds us that all work is empty save when there is love, and that work is love made visible.

And what is to work with love?

*It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your heart,
even as your beloved were to wear the cloth*

*It is to build a house with affection,
even as your beloved were to dwell in the house*

*It is to sow the seeds with tenderness and reap the harvest with joy
even if your beloved were to eat the fruit*

*It is to charge all the things you fashion with a breath of your own
spirit.*

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