



THE
STIRRING
OF
SOUL
IN THE
WORKPLACE

ALAN BRISKIN

An Excerpt From

The Stirring of Soul in the Workplace

by Alan Briskin

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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Part One



Perceiving the Soul

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The Wilderness Within

Ancient Views of the Soul

The journey is difficult, immense, at times impossible, yet that will not deter some of us from attempting it. . . . I can at best report only from my own wilderness. The important thing is that each man possess such a wilderness and that he consider what marvels are to be observed there.

Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey*

Andy is in his mid-thirties. He graduated with an M.B.A. from a prestigious university and sees himself as particularly skilled in transition management. He describes himself as comfortable with ambiguity and positive in his outlook on managing change—confident that he can help others with the difficult task of organizational transition.

When a reengineering was announced in his organization, he welcomed the opportunity for himself and his organization, which he saw as too insular and too reluctant to change. Told that an entire layer of senior administrators would be removed, he remained optimistic even though he was in one of the positions likely to be terminated. “Everyone was walking around with their heads down and filled with gloom,” he said of his peers, “but I’m feeling upbeat about the changes. Sure, there’ll be pain, but I’m not a victim. If I stay with the organization, that’ll be fine, and if I don’t, that’s OK too.”

Note: All vignette characters in this book are composites and are not meant to indicate specific individuals; all are identified pseudonymously.

In the next six months, a great deal changed. He found his ideals shattered, first by disquieting minor inconsistencies and later by a feeling of assault on his personal integrity and dignity. He was one of the few administrators among his peers who had not been terminated during the reorganization, but now that seemed a detail to him.

During the course of the transition, an outside consulting firm was hired to evaluate senior managers for potential new roles in the company. Andy's colleagues, subordinates, and superiors were asked to assess his value to the new organization. He was informed, almost by chance in a hallway, that their findings had been communicated to the CEO, who would be reviewing Andy's future in the organization. Andy was told when and where to report for the review. He was also told that a second consulting firm, hired to support employees being terminated, would be available following the interview.

The interview did not go well. There were high hopes for him in the organization, the CEO said, but nothing was mentioned about where Andy would be going or what he might be doing. The feedback on his performance was cursory, with the CEO stating that the consultants' interviews were confidential and therefore could not be discussed. The CEO did mention, however, that Andy didn't seem to be managing the transition very well. He seemed moody and not handling change in a particularly positive manner. The CEO referred obliquely to reports that at times Andy was perceived as losing control. He said that change was painful for everyone, but at Andy's level the expectation was that people should be able to cope. The CEO held out the hope that whatever Andy's new assignment, it would be an opportunity for him to grow and develop.

Andy felt convicted on charges he could not determine, let alone refute. He felt that he was supposed to be pleased with the interview, but what he actually felt was that he was being told he was a reclamation project. His performance ratings during the years of service to the organization had never been anything but positive.

Somehow, and without explanation, he had become a problem that needed to be fixed.

Andy found himself in crisis, a crisis that echoed deep within him. The certainty he had felt about himself was shaken. The self-confident, forward-looking individual he knew himself to be now gave way to new aspects of his personality that seemed foreign and uncomfortable. Something was stirred up within him, feelings and emotions that he had trouble recognizing as his own.

The soul, as I use the word in this book, stands for the *multiplicity of selves* within each of us; their interactions and struggles are the threads that weave the self together. In tension with this interior complexity are the constant pressures, from within and without, to foreclose the mystery of our many selves. Understandably, we fear that the unknown may be dangerous. But to care for our soul—a timeless struggle made more urgent by modern society—we must combat those forces that would reduce us to just a singular self. The soul represents the mysterious, multifaceted dimension of our personality, never fully known, yet a source of vital influence.

How does such a way of looking at soul become relevant to and reflect our experience in the workplace? How can we bring more of ourselves into the workplace and into our own awareness? When is it we are most likely to confront different parts of ourselves and the organizations we work in?

For Andy, the rupture of his singular self led to a period of deep reflection. He felt as if veil after veil of illusion had been lifted from his sight, as if all he had done to rationalize his image of himself and his image of the organization had suddenly shifted. Where he had seen only individual pain, now he saw patterns of behavior that hurt people. Where he had accepted pain as necessary and inevitable during change, now he saw examples of abuse that were unnecessary and damaging. And more critically, he saw a different picture of himself emerging.

He was not only the strong, willful individual who had previously focused his attention outward, analyzing how others coped

and viewing his role as helping others to cope better. Now, feeling vulnerable, he noticed more how much he held back, even from himself, his emotional reactions to events. He became aware that his instinct to analyze others was a protective mechanism, motivated as much by a sense of others' being dangerous as by a wish to help people cope better. And he saw that even his supposed strength at coolly analyzing situations was at times also an urgent attempt to distance emotions.

He described this new awareness of himself as revitalizing, as if he were a diver discovering new treasures beneath the surface of his previous awareness. He specifically discounted these discoveries as major insights; instead he saw that he had been aware of these things before, but never with the same attention and significance. What he found so revitalizing was not the discoveries themselves, but the depth of self that he had not known was waiting there for him. Before, he had been so enamored with his intellectual skills of figuring out and fixing problems that he had never perceived a need to plunge into the murky and shifting recesses of his own mind. Now he laughed at his image of himself as being comfortable with ambiguity; he was actually terrified of it. He had just never considered ambiguity as something that might last long enough to disturb him.

Andy began to express a new kind of confidence, though tentatively. A curtain had been pulled back, revealing his past and hinting at a new possibility for his future; options existed where before there had been linear direction. He saw that his personality had not been shaped entirely by conscious will and effort but rather by what the world threw at him. He had responded to events outside his control and then, after the fact, said he had chosen rational responses. He was not a victim, but neither did he always control events or his responses to them. Andy found this revelation liberating because he had carried into his adult life a terrible burden that he *could* control events, if only he could figure out the right thing to do.

Andy saw the irony that the CEO's hurtful feedback triggered a personal journey that might not have happened if all had gone well. He was at a loss for words to describe his sadness at the thought that this period of reflection might not have occurred. He imagined himself looking into a mirror and seeing a face appear that had not been there before—and disappearing just as suddenly. The joy at seeing this face was life affirming, but the notion that he might never have glimpsed it was disturbing, filling him with feelings of loss. He thought, however, that he had no intention of thanking the CEO.

Andy did not use the word *soul* to describe his experience. Yet his “double vision,” the face he knew and the other face that appeared for an instant in the mirror, had the quality of multiplicity that is an aspect of soul. Andy was not describing just an insight into his personality. He was describing a mystery, a self he was but dimly aware of, one that had darker features and that contradicted essential aspects of his conscious personality. Yet his experience was of a person finding a relative long thought dead or never born. How could he be whole without this other person? How could he see the world differently, more contoured, and with greater dimension, if not through the eyes of this other face? There were few people he could talk to about this experience, he said. Who would believe him?

In the modern organizations that have developed over the past 150 years of the industrial revolution, there has emerged a concept of an *individual* personality, shaped by the necessities of work and the internal control individuals are required to have over themselves. This view has created a schism within the psyche of individuals, a fundamental polarization between wanting more control and a desire to experience ourselves as part of a mystery that is beyond our control. We seem often at cross purposes with ourselves, preaching the virtue of control and practicing its opposite.

The soul as multiplicity implies a dimension to the self much greater than what we know about ourselves consciously. Thomas

Moore talks of a soul infinite in capacity, full of mystery, and contradictory in its designs over our life. Oscar Wilde, who wrote about the soul from his prison cell, said that only the shallow know themselves: if you know yourself, you have not touched the depths. But to know something of these depths, we first must be able to see in new ways.

Seeing with Soul

I was once in a photography class in Yosemite Valley. Other amateur photographers and I hoped to capture some of the beauty and grandeur of the granite rock faces and flowing waterfalls with our high-tech photographic gear. There was only one problem. It was raining so heavily that there was virtually nothing to see. Clouds covered the mountains, the fields and streams were gray, the movement of the water was almost invisible in the pelting rain. Our cameras were useless; one well-placed drop of rain could short-circuit the electronic brain, making the camera fire repeatedly or shut down entirely. Our instructor, an old hand at the idiosyncrasies of nature photography, cautioned us to remain aware of the constantly shifting light and the changing shapes of the mountains wreathed by the clouds. She encouraged us to see with a “third eye,” to practice *seeing* with heightened awareness. Art, she reminded us, does not reproduce the visible. Art renders visible.

So I was staring at El Capitan with my third eye, only it felt like my two eyes and a headache. There was nothing much to see; the granite rock was almost completely invisible, the trees and streams flat in the dull gray overcast of the day. I was mostly engaged in an internal conversation with myself about not becoming frustrated. “What does it mean to render visible?” I asked myself.

When my attention returned to the mountain, I saw that something was happening. The rain had lessened by degrees, and suddenly feelings within me began to stir. Pulling out my camera, I framed different sections of the mountain with my lens. I saw some-

thing otherworldly, something I could not have seen were I staring numbly at the scenery. I got an image in my mind of the trees in partial silhouette staring at the mountain in awe, their sharp triangular shapes huddled together below the mysterious outcropping of rock that hovered above them. I now understood that to render visible is to see through the visible into a world that becomes animated with imagination.

Seeing through and beyond is essential in our work as well. We cannot know ourselves, or the workplaces we are part of, in any depth unless we engage the full breadth of our humanity, vitality, and understanding.

The elusive nature of knowing how to see with the soul requires a certain stillness and attentiveness. Stillness creates an opening in the surface world of things. Attentiveness leads us out from the thicket of thoughts, events, and beliefs that snare us. How could I see through the flat gray landscape of an overcast day if I was snared by my frustration with technology, my disappointment with the weather, and my confusion with mystical abstractions calling me to see with a third eye? The instructor's comment to watch the light was both a concrete suggestion and a metaphor for finding a way below my conscious thoughts and beyond the limits of my vision. Attending to the light brought a hidden awareness to the surface that rendered visible not just a landscape of trees and cloud and rock but one of mood and emotion and fantasy.

So it was with Andy in the story that opens this chapter. He knew himself too well. There was no mystery to his responses. Through his frustration, he learned that any reasonable person reviewing a common body of facts would not, as he believed, come to a conclusion similar to his. Frustration taught Andy, as it taught me, to sense greater depth and complexity and to open to mystery. The challenge of finding soul in organizations, as in life, is to embrace not only what we see, hear, and understand but also to attend to what we don't know, what we cannot see at first glance or hear on first listening.

The soul in its multiplicity is an idea directly contradicting the literal, rational, unitary interpretation of events so common in organizations. The soul speaks in the language of metaphor, fantasy, and emotion. I watched clouds taking on different shapes and colors with each subtle shift in the wind and nuance of light; that is exactly how the unconscious feels to me when I pay attention to it in myself. My thoughts, moods, fantasies, and emotions are constantly shifting, rearranging, coming in and out of focus. What is real for the soul is different from what is real for the objective manager who assumes a reality that can be discovered through external facts and reasoned argument. Below the surface of reason is an unconscious wilderness animated by feelings of awe and danger.

We need an approach to soul that respects its own complex language, that allows us to see its stirrings in the workplace and in our own hearts. Soul reminds us of what has been forgotten and disowned. We bring more of ourselves into the workplace when we remember what we have come to achieve and what struggles we must face.

The soul's vitality as an idea lies in its capacity for renewal, a conception born in the depth of human imaginings about the limitations and infinite potentialities of being human. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who decried that God was dead, insisted that we should keep soul alive, for it is "one of the oldest and most venerable of hypotheses" (Thiele, 1990, p. 52). Why is this so? What is it about the soul as a symbol that it can remain open to new forms of interpretation, yet still represent a timeless attribute of beauty, human fragility, and the longing for meaning? How does one approach the soul?

Ancient Wisdom About the Soul

As far back as we can trace, concepts of the soul have been diverse, with multiple meanings in varied contexts. The word *soul* is used so frequently today that it has become something of a projection screen from which we each can envision our own particular mean-

ing. Soul is a concept used in religion, literature, philosophy, poetics, psychology, politics, and now increasingly in the world of management and the workplace. The *Soul of Business* by Tom Chappell has become a best-seller, Bolman and Deal write about *Leading with Soul*, and Tom Peters uses the word *soul* repeatedly in his books on the changing workplace. But soul is an ancient idea, central to traditions in both the East and the West.

The soul as an ancient hypothesis seems to touch at least four core themes vital to human health and resilience. The first, linked with early Greek writings, is that soul is associated with the underworld, a place of depth and shadowy realities. The underworld is what gives us dimension and connection to unconscious facets of ourselves.

The second, evident in Greek and Hebrew stories, is that soul is associated with our vitality, the source of animation, essence, and renewal.

Third, soul is a place of union among opposites, the joining of spirit and matter, the light and dark aspects of the whole person. This theme is found in Hebrew as well as Taoist philosophy.

Fourth, soul contains a spark of the divine, a bridge to the qualities of a supreme being or a cosmic aspect to consciousness. Gnostic myths portray this theme vividly.

These themes overlap and move off in uncountable directions. Each theme relates to creation myths or stories about the origin of the soul and the responsibilities associated with having souls. No tradition holds exclusive rights to knowing what stirs soul into being. What is common among the themes is that soulmaking is an odyssey of self-discovery that connects us to the world and to our duties in this life. To approach the soul means to go deeper, down into a place in which past and future blur, where what we strive for and what drives us can be glimpsed.

The Greek Idea of the Soul

The Greek word for soul, *psyche*, also meant *butterfly*. This suggests to us both a certain gentleness and a consideration of the soul's

ability to take flight. If we approach the soul with too rigid a definition, we risk caging its essentially “wild” nature. If we approach soul with objective reason, we risk pinning its wings to study it. And if we sentimentalize it, making it only a concept for our best intentions, then we risk it flying away from our benevolent net. To approach the soul with respect and rigor, we must be prepared to appreciate its capacity for metamorphosis, its contradictory nature, its habits of taking flight and remaining still. We must be prepared to follow its path as it has appeared in ancient traditions and as it still appears in our day-to-day lives.

In ancient Greek literature, *The Odyssey* is a vivid portrayal of what it means to go down into the depths of an underworld. Odysseus, Homer’s protagonist, is told by Circe that he must consult the shades (disembodied souls) in the land of the dead if he is to continue his journey. In Hades, he meets his dead mother, whom he wishes to embrace:

Three times I started toward her, and my heart was urgent to hold her, and three times she fluttered out of my hands like a shadow or a dream, and the sorrow sharpened at the heart within me, and so I spoke to her and addressed her in winged words, saying: “Mother, why will you not wait for me, when I am trying to hold you, so that even in Hades with our arms embracing we can both take the satisfaction of dismal mourning? Or are you nothing but an image that proud Persephone sent my way, to make me grieve all the more for sorrow?”

So I spoke, and my queenly mother answered me quickly: “Oh my child, ill fated beyond all other mortals, this is not Persephone, daughter of Zeus, beguiling you, but it is only what happens, when they die, to all mortals. The sinews no longer hold the flesh and the bones together, and once the spirit has left the white bones, all the rest of the body is made subject to the fire’s strong

fury, but the soul flutters out like a dream and flies away”
[Knox, 1993, p. 158].

Homer’s image of the soul, slipping and fluttering away from the body, gave way in Greek art to the portrayal of the soul as a butterfly, and later as a beautiful young girl with wings. The soul hypothesis of this ancient Greek story is that of an essence that can fly away from the limbs, out through the mouth, the chest, or a wound in the body. Ironically, the origins of the Greek soul hypothesis reflect less a psychological or moral concept of the soul than an attempt at physical description of it.

This ancient Greek story is more, however, than a physical description of the soul after it leaves the body. It stimulates our imagination, offering a picture of an underworld that lies beneath our journey, our personal odyssey. Odysseus is forced to consult the souls of the dead prophets and make offerings to shades from his past and from recent battles. Without these offerings, the dead will not speak the truth. Odysseus must listen to their prophecies, even though he may not fully understand them, and he must mobilize all his strength. His mother wonders how he even came to Hades: “My child, how did you come here beneath the fog and darkness and still alive? All this is hard for the living to look on” (Knox, 1993, p. 157).

At times we too have to consult parts of ourselves that are difficult to hold onto. We too are disrupted from our goals, obliged to make an offering of our time in order to pay attention to realities we may have resisted. We too wonder, “How did I get here? How, amidst the confusion and darkness, can I see what I need?” The meaning of Odysseus’s journey to the underworld still echoes in our individual and collective imagination, carried forward by modern interpreters of ancient myth and in the works of twentieth-century depth psychologists such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Jung wrote: “The dread and resistance which every natural human being experiences, when it comes to delving too deeply into himself is,

at bottom, the fear of the journey to Hades” (Jung, [1953] 1968, p. 336).

The underworld is where the deeper part of our soul resides, where the shades of our collective past and our multiple selves still live. Sometimes we are obliged, like Odysseus, to confront these shadowy selves, but the cost of refusing to go there can be severe. When the conscious mind attends only to what lies at the surface, the deeper parts of our soul no longer animate us, no longer offer us counsel, prophecies, and warnings. The butterfly takes wing.

Lessons from the Greek Idea of the Soul

From the Greek myths we have come to understand the soul as the source of vitality, physical presence, and animation. The Latin root, *anima*, meaning breath or soul, is the source of our English word *animation*. When we lose our souls, metaphorically, we lose our animation, our natural rhythms—including the most natural of all our instincts, the flow of our breath. We hold tightly, we try to stay in control, but we are no longer “animated” by our deeper self.

Observe any meeting or group encounter where something significant is left unsaid. There is that moment when we notice a deadening in the conversation. We might say the meeting is empty or even soulless. What is often meant is the absence of any vigor, any physical presence of the people participating. At these moments, we fear the journey to Hades, far below the surface of the situation, where danger lurks in the form of a spontaneous eruption of the truth or the expression of a strong emotion. For it is in this underworld that we repress from consciousness what we both yearn for and fear.

To shut out the underworld, to constrain the unconscious, is to foreclose the individual and collective odyssey that we must undertake to wrest meaning from the commonplace and mundane. If we attend to only the surface of reason, staying in control, trying to make sense, we often find ourselves frustrated with the outcome. The bridge to the underworld follows a meandering course, not

unlike the soul that meanders from the body in death or sleep. The hypothesis that we have souls, and that they can leave us, reminds us that awareness is not solely in the realm of our surface consciousness. To remain animated, physically present in our bodies, aware of what is happening around us, we must stay alert to what is happening inside us and to us.

I learned this the hard way, in a conference designed to bring out the relevance of unconscious processes in groups. I was still in graduate school and one of my instructors, an African American woman, was the conference director. She inspired fear and respect from the conference participants. In leading a session of the whole group, she seemed deadly serious and annoyed with the quality of our interpretations about our group's behavior. The more we participants in the conference tried to make sense of events, the more I found myself empty and numb. Finally, at a point of uncomfortable silence that seemed to last forever, her assistant director commented that it was important to attend to our fantasies.

I immediately took a breath and sensed the tension in my shoulders and neck. From out of nowhere (or from out of the underworld), I had an image of the director as secretly enjoying our discomfort. I spoke out, reporting my *fantasy*. I said I thought she was so turned on by our struggling that in the evening between sessions she probably snuck out to a local blues club and danced the night away in pink hot pants. The mood of the room was so still as I spoke that my immediate thought on finishing was that I could kiss my graduate degree goodbye. From out of this stillness, however, came gales of laughter. The severe expression of the director melted and she looked down at the floor, stifling a laugh. The energy in the room shifted, the sense of an oppressive weight was lifted.

The soul is expressed in images, metaphor, and stories. We had come to the conference to struggle with the effects of unconscious behavior, and here I was pointing out a contradiction: that our very ineffectiveness was a demonstration of our capability. Our struggle was in some fashion a gift to the director. I had given the group an

image and a story of the director that made an *undersense*, that got underneath our unspoken fear of disappointing her. The image of this stern woman dancing in hot pants permitted some relief from the oppressive nature of our reasonable—but superficial—explanations of group behavior.

I am sure there are a variety of explanations for the laughter, but for me there was another valuable lesson in this episode. I learned something about what it was like to find myself in an underworld of fog and darkness. I had allowed myself to listen for activity in my unconscious, and to let it animate my actions. The fantasy of the director in hot pants blended both my irreverence for what was happening and my respect for her. It felt, however, as if I had announced a discovery from below, a discovery not completely of my making although one having my unique stamp. I discovered that the soul that resides below can be both personal and an expression of the group's consciousness.

The Ancient Hebrew Idea of the Soul

The underworld is not the exclusive domain of the soul. Soul also stands for the grittiness and earthiness of the human spirit. In Hebrew scripture, the soul hypothesis begins with the creation story of how a divine being gathered up the dust of the earth and made a human being from lifeless matter. Many of us know this story from childhood, a religious story about the first creation of a human being, as opposed to a scientific explanation of how humans evolved. What may be less known is that this story can also be understood as one of the earliest and earthiest of the soul hypotheses, one proposing that body and spirit are inseparable.

The King James translation of the Bible describes the creation of the first human being as follows: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." The living soul is an outcome of matter animated by spirit. In other English translations, living

soul is defined simply as human being. But isn't the soul something inside the human being? How could something supposedly inside the body be synonymous with a human being?

The answer lies in the Hebrew words distinguishing "dust of the ground," "breath of life," and "living soul." In Hebrew, the word for the phrase "dust of the ground" is *adamah*. Adam gains his name from the root of this word, literally meaning *earth*. The soul's earthiness, its grounding in the realities of matter, is suggested by this early relationship between Adam and *adamah*. Here the soul, in contrast to a butterfly that takes flight, is associated with the muck, the impurities, the richness, and the grittiness of the earth.

The second term, "breath of life," in Hebrew is *ruach*. God gathered the earth together and breathed into its shape *ruach*, Hebrew for breath or wind, but also rendered in English as *spirit*. In other words, God breathes spirit into lifeless matter, and the result is a living soul. Spirit—as distinct from soul—is the wind of a divine inspiration. Spirit comes from higher up and descends into the body. The metaphor suggests that for the spirit nature to have reality, it must be embodied, it must join with the physical nature. Soul is in the middle, holding together spirit and body, lofty inspiration and physical limitation.

Nephesh is the Hebrew word for "living soul." Among its many meanings, it suggests a human being animated by breath. For the ancient Hebrews, soul suggested neither body nor mind, but rather the totality of instinct, emotion, and thought. In contrast to Greek ideas that influenced later Jewish and Christian theology, the living soul did not have a continued existence after the death of the body. It ceased to exist when the physical body died.

Soul is a gift of divinity, but it is also something closer to life, connected to the mundane and everyday. The living soul of Hebrew scripture is not something inside or outside, but rather a term that weds divinity with humanity, spirit with body, and the beating of the human heart with sacred inspiration. By *not* distinguishing the soul as exclusively the realm of mind as opposed to body, or feeling

as opposed to thought, or higher as opposed to lower, the soul hypothesis of the ancient Hebrews avoids the dualities that will come later with the institutionalization of philosophy and religion. The living soul hints at a mysterious union of opposites: being human includes both the base textures of the earth and the ethereal nature of the heavens. This is a soul of both appetite and vision.

The living soul has meaning today as a metaphor for coping with the contradictions and limitations of modern life. The soul that is made up of the earth does not move away from failure, disillusionment, or inferiority. This soul is comfortable with instinct, unperturbed by the desires, needs, and longings of the body. For this soul, the struggle amidst contradictory urgings is not simply tolerated but acknowledged as necessary. This soul knows that it must extract a deeper meaning from the ongoing feast of possibilities that lie before it. In living, there are times of fierce combat within ourselves, times that demand heroic efforts to mediate contradictory impulses within ourselves. The living soul expresses appreciation and respect for the multiplicity of drives, instincts, and emotions that at times oppose reason and virtue. Nietzsche, who had a unique feeling for this heroic aspect of the living soul, wrote that "struggle is the perpetual food of the soul, and it knows well enough how to exact the sweetness from it" (Thiele, 1990, p. 11).

The body that is brought to life by the wind of spirit can also appreciate striving for greater awareness and higher values and seeking greater consciousness. Spirit suggests a transcendence of the mundane, a capacity to see far off into other worlds and into other dimensions. Creativity can be an outcome of feeling the wind of inspiration move through us. Teamwork can be a function of group inspiration. The body that is quickened by spirit is capable of extending beyond itself because it is comfortable with intuition, imagination, and metaphor.

The soul of the ancient Hebrew hypothesis holds together the middle, what is heavier and darker than spirit alone because it has body but also what is lighter and less predictable than matter devoid

of spirit. Soul suggests that matter and spirit need each other. Spirit, without being embodied, has no substance, while matter that has lost touch with spirit's breath becomes an inanimate body, corrupted and shallow.

Lessons from the Hebrew Idea of the Soul

In organizations today, soul can no longer hold the middle between the material and the spiritual world. Instead, there is too often a polarization between cries for spirit on the one hand and recognition of the harder, harsher realities of what really matters in the business world. The consequences are that the spiritual and the material have been split off from one another. The search for spirit has become a thin and airy call for abstract workplace virtues such as teamwork, responsibility, accountability, and inspired leadership. The material world is now associated with fierce competition that leads to the corruption of the corporate body. In *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore emphasizes this point by suggesting that polarization intensifies the pathological aspects of both the material and the spiritual. The more compulsively materialist we become, the more desperate and neurotic we become in our search for spiritual fulfillment.

This was illustrated to me in a recent walk through a local bookstore. On the shelves marked *Business* were titles such as *Den of Thieves* and *Liars Poker* (tales of greed on Wall Street), *Free Fall* and *Too Big to Fall* (on the demise of Eastern Airlines and Olympia & York), *True Greed* and *Barbarians at the Gate* (on the takeover of RJR Nabisco), *False Profits* and *Rude Awakening* (on corruption and mismanagement at BCCI and General Motors), as well as general titles such as *Crashes and Panics*, *The Morning After*, and *Capitalist Fools*. These titles evoke the most materialistic and corrupt passions of the soul: greed and arrogance, fear and dominance, foolishness and dishonesty. Turning my head only slightly, I observed a second list of titles under the heading *Management*. If I had not known better, I would have wondered if someone was playing a joke on me.

These titles were uniformly idealistic and spiritual in the sense of being abstract and lofty in their aspirations. They touched on leadership, ethics, teamwork, and global responsibility to community and ecology. The titles included *Stewardship* and *Alchemy of a Leader*, *The Wisdom of Teams* and *The Corporate Coach*, *Principle Centered Leadership* and *The Healing Manager*. If I were simply innocent, I might have wondered how Business could be so ruthless and demeaning while Management could be so kindly and visionary. But I am not so innocent. I recognize here what I face daily in my practice as an organizational consultant. The demands of the workplace can be absolutely ruthless and crushing, while the dreams of the people in the same workplaces can be inspiring.

The ancient Hebrew passage reminds us that soul holds the middle between the most corrupt passions and the loftiest of ideals. We cannot compartmentalize these attributes as neatly as a bookstore can categorize titles under Business and Management. We are the whole story, both the passions and the visionary ideals. Forgetting this simple lesson adds to the polarization of the spiritual from the material. People are not simply good or bad, sacred vessels or physical commodities. When spirit loses its depth and substance, when it does not descend into the realities of the body, then we can say it has no soul. And when the body no longer seeks the struggle brought about by vision and ideals, then we might also say that the coarseness of life is no longer leavened by spirit, breathed fresh each day into a living soul.

The polarization of the spiritual and material is so much a matter of course that we often cannot easily see how it colors our day-to-day lives. Tom, a manager in a corporate communications department of a large apparel company, thought he had found a balance between his spiritual needs and his corporate identity. He worked for a company that was well known for its charitable contributions, had won numerous awards for its philanthropic activities, and was rated highly by progressive investment money managers. The community-mindedness of the firm was one of its

chief marketing assets. The spirit of the company's corporate giving matched well with Tom's own interest in spiritual pursuits and social responsibility; he meditated regularly, volunteered his time in community activities, and took an active interest in Buddhist philosophy.

During his time with the company, however, something changed. He became aware of a discrepancy between the company's public persona and how it actually operated. He felt constant pressure from above to tell a story that wasn't true. As he grew more cynical, he became more reserved and cautious. He found himself putting more and more distance between his corporate identity and his personal life, becoming a collector of antique cars and restoring them on weekends. He repeatedly clashed with his boss and realized that, for sheer callousness, he could never match either his boss or other senior managers. Secure yet unhappy, he could say he was staying primarily for the salary and benefits. In a conversation with a management consultant hired to increase team building in his department, Tom acknowledged how skeptical he had become of any real improvement in the way the company operated. He said he was now working for "fuck-you money." One of these days, he said, he would have made enough money to go into his boss's office and say, "Fuck you, I'm out of here."

Tom began having trouble sleeping at night. Downsizing in his department increased his numerous responsibilities and decreased his empathy for others. When a local newspaper ran an expose that his company, along with other high-profile apparel makers, was subcontracting with sewing shops exploiting Asian women in windowless rooms at below-minimum wage, he exploded to a friend: "Don't they know that if we don't stay competitive, the work just goes overseas and these women won't have any work? Don't they understand this is a ruthless industry?"

Tom's job was to protect the company's image. In a strange way, his job was made easier by no longer really believing in his company. The more disillusioned he became, the easier it was to

compartmentalize, to immerse himself in work on weekdays and then tinker with his cars during the weekend. He took medication for his disturbed sleeping, and he meditated more fervently. He found himself calling consultants for any number of proposed change projects, but he never followed up. He had to admit to himself that he was profoundly lonely, but he blamed his boss and the downsizing for the demoralization of his staff. He could no longer even recognize what he really believed. He came to imagine this is what it meant to be a lost soul.

The Hebrew hypothesis of soul suggests that the spiritual and the material are inseparable. Tom cannot balance the ledger by meditating more fiercely in proportion to working more compulsively. He cannot change the deteriorating relationship with his workplace by restoring antique cars. He cannot excuse the exploitation of workers by rationalizing that he also feels abused. The signs of psychic disturbance—troubled sleep, rationalizing, sense of loneliness, identifying with whatever was convenient—all point to a soul in crisis, a mind and body unable to be penetrated by spirit or mobilized by an instinct for what matters. Tom, the whole person, the living soul, finds himself troubled and ill at ease. We might even say that he has lost not so much his soul as his appetite and vision of the soul's responsibility to hold together the spiritual and material.

Tom's predicament, his loss of appetite to struggle with contradiction, his absence of being able to see into the darker recesses of his own and his company's motivations, mirrors a dilemma of modern times. We are all confronted with our conflicting needs to fashion a balance between a personal life that is internally fulfilling and a work life that is stimulating and to some measure externally meaningful. The Hebrew soul hypothesis suggests that being whole implies not simply parallel journeys between these two aspirations but a relationship between the inner and outer worlds. The living soul, the whole human being, is where the inner and the outer world meet.

The Soul in Gnostic Thought

If the soul, as a metaphor for the whole human being, can function as a bridge to an unconscious underworld, then it may also provide a path to a cosmic divinity. The theme of the soul as a transcendent source—a way of practicing eternity—is illustrated by traditions as diverse as Taoism in the East and Christianity in the West. The transcendent suggests the mystery of rebirth, whether of a physical reincarnation, or the renewal of crops after a winter frost, or a reimagining of what it means to be fully human. The transcendent qualities of the soul hint at the awe of nature that has inspired people throughout human history. In the transcendent, we glimpse the eternal, the pattern that is unknowable yet repeats itself again and again through the tapestry of our lives.

The transcendent qualities of the soul were a central motif of Gnostic thought of the first and second centuries of the Christian era. Gnostic writing, branded as heresy by the institutional Christian church, most likely blended Greek, Hebrew, and early Christian views as well as Egyptian and other non-Western religious traditions. Gnostic influence is echoed in the writings of William Blake and W. B. Yeats as well as in the philosophical writings of Rudolf Steiner and the psychology of Carl Jung.

Gnostic legend portrayed the creation of souls as an outcome of an overarching unity that ceased to exist. The story that is told is of a time before time, when there existed only light. The wholeness of the light was shattered, hurtling fragments of the divine unity throughout the universe. The light in flight through the heavens gathered density, lodging in the souls of individuals, tiny sparks hidden within the physical body.

Gnosis, concerned with the struggle for an awareness of these sparks within, hypothesized that in each of us is a particle of the transcendent unity. The particle in each of us is minute, yet it contains the infinite, the “world” as Blake said, “in a grain of sand.” The Gnostic legend of how souls were created provides a metaphorical

link to the heavens, a way of knowing the world beyond the limiting organs of perception. June Singer, a psychologist and interpreter of the relevance of Gnosis today, wrote:

The intent of the ancient writers as well as of our own contemporary search for meaning springs from the same source—namely, the desire to liberate the sparks of divinity that have been embedded in the natural world from its beginning. These glimmer—sometimes in the wisdom of old crones, sometimes in the precocious questions of an innocent child. The sparks wander through the centuries, surfacing as Faust in the poetic imagination of Goethe, shining in the symphonies of the child Mozart. . . . It may be that a spark is present in every person, yet many do not recognize it in themselves [Singer, 1992, p. xix–xx].

The contemporary search for meaning, the question of our individual and collective destiny, was echoed centuries ago by the Gnostic teacher Valentinus, who asked: “Who am I? What have I become? Whereunto have I been thrown? Whereto do I speed? Wherefrom am I redeemed? What is birth, what rebirth?” These are the soul’s questions. They are questions of origin and destiny, redemption and revelation, choice and fate. They are questions that alert us to our responsibilities in life, our place among others, and our connection to divinity.

The Gnostic soul links a cosmic divinity with the human being, who through direct experience—through trial and ordeal—must discover and recover the knowledge hidden within. The soul hypothesis of Gnosis is fundamentally opposed to institutional codes of conduct or group definitions of morality. Morality acts as a false guide because it cuts too clear a path through the wilderness that everyone must journey. We must each make our own path through

wrestling with our fate, through engagement with our creative impulses, and through expressing our own heart.

To approach the soul of Gnosis, we must be prepared to lose some part of our normal ways of ordering and organizing our world. We must be ready to be awakened at a moment's notice, as from a daydream concerning the details of our life. When we talk of losing ourselves in a walk along the ocean, in creative pursuit, or in work that means something, then we glimpse the soul as described by the Gnostics. The soul hypothesis of Gnosis reminds us that our lives are not our own, at least not in the way we normally talk about our lives. Diane Ackerman, author of *A Natural History of the Senses*, described the sensation of losing the normal boundaries of day-to-day reality during her intense periods of writing, as a realization that her life was not her own, "as if my soul has been kidnapped. I can only explain it as a form of love" (Madrigal, 1994, Review p. 7).

Lessons from the Gnostic Idea of the Soul

Laurel, a client of mine, was the chief of anesthesiology in a midsized hospital. She resented how a subordinate, a key manager, dressed in short skirts and flowery blouses. She mentioned repeatedly how this manager never wore a white coat and how this directly affected her credibility with other physicians and technicians. Laurel admired aspects of her manager's performance but did so grudgingly, pointing out many ways the manager did not support her. I asked if there were clear expectations about both dress and performance, but Laurel changed the subject to recount an incident in which her manager contradicted her in front of a physician colleague.

Sensing I was barking up the wrong tree, I remarked that she seemed to have very strong expectations of herself and was conflicted about what it was appropriate to ask of a subordinate. She agreed, saying she wanted to be partners with this women and was uncomfortable with a hierarchical relationship. She also began talking about her own experience, twenty-five years earlier in medical

school, of wanting to prove herself in an environment that was largely male and very competitive. “What was it like being a woman in such an environment?” I asked. She reflected for a moment and told me a story about one of her very first classes. The male professor had said, somewhat offhandedly, that physicians wore white coats to hide their genitals. He said it was important that physicians not be seen as having gender.

Laurel told me this story matter-of-factly, noting that at first she had been taken aback but over time had come to see his comment as sensible and appropriate. We talked briefly about how this experience might be influencing her views of the manager’s dress, but we drew no grand conclusions from the memory. I did suggest, however, that our expectations of what others should do and how they should be were often buried in assumptions that we rarely took the time to examine.

To my surprise, Laurel returned after an extended vacation and announced that she now felt much less resentment toward her manager: “I wanted her to be an extension of myself, thinking like I thought, making decisions the way I would.” She explained how she realized that her desire to be partners with this woman had been only on her (Laurel’s) terms. Laurel would have an opportunity to apply her new insight when the two of them next met; it would be “the first time I’ve met with this woman with the assumption that we might have different approaches and need to discuss them openly,” she said.

Laurel told me that during her vacation she had spent time hiking and exploring in Peru, climbing along the high ridges of the Andes. She described losing herself in thought, being back in medical school, remembering and feeling again what that was like. She thought about how much she had internalized a concept of partnering and teamwork as meaning that one does what the institution expects. She recalled how in her first classes she felt uneasy and isolated but overcame those feelings by satisfying her instructor’s expectations. What mattered to her now was not to repeat this

process with her subordinate: “I actually like the fact that we are different.” She smiled, “It actually frees me from worrying about what I’m doing wrong with her.” She implied an awareness that she herself could be different, not only the uneasy student who must conform but also an individual who held many competing values.

The soul is spurred by thought that awakens memories and feelings, prompting new assessments of what is significant. Losing herself in the Andes, Laurel discovered a new awareness of herself. She described no mystical experience or life-changing insight, but she sensed something that allowed her to reimagine her concept of partnering with others. The soul hypothesis of Gnosis suggests that we earn wholeness a piece at a time, discovering directly from our own experience how to navigate the mundane and extraordinary events of our lives.

The connection to our own experience as a source of insight propels us forward to new discoveries. The sensation is not so much learning something new as being reminded of our own humanity. The stirring of soul whispers of our dignity and the dignity of others. It can be found in the most unlikely places and situations.

In the inner city of Richmond, California, a contractor working for a local development company found himself increasingly robbed of his compassion as he spent time in neighborhoods with crack houses and “hubba heads,” men and women who were addicted, tormented, and dangerous. He bought a pistol and kept a double-barreled shotgun in his truck. He learned to react quickly and violently to threats; he felt nothing but disgust and hatred for the burnt-out “humanity” of the neighborhoods. Returning to his truck one day, he found a man bent over the door. Without the slightest hesitation, he grabbed the man and rammed his head into the truck. As the man’s head hit the window with a thud, the contractor’s only worry was that the glass would break:

I violently turned him toward me, prepared to exact an instant conviction with a sentence of pain. I don’t

remember what he said, but his face was permanently burned into my memory. He stood there bundled in several layers of stinking clothing and a dirty, torn ski hat. His weathered face looked terrified. His sunken eyes were the saddest I'd ever seen. He had both hands raised in submission, and one of them held a Bic razor. My anger turned to shame when I realized he had been using my mirror to shave himself, in one small grasp at regaining an element of his humanity [Kendall, 1993, p. 12].

In an instant that began with burning rage and a reflexive desire for retribution, a spark of the divine humanity buried within each of us was revealed. In the sunken and sad eyes of this man, the contractor saw a mirror of his own profound detachment and alienation. The contractor could see with other eyes; like Andy imagining a glimpse of a second face in a mirror, or Laurel finding sanctuary for another part of herself, he found a compassion that had become exiled. The Gnostic hypothesis lives on today in our capacity to find a hidden soul through tests and trials, to see an "other" and find reflected some part of our own divine humanity and grace. The contractor and my clients discovered an "other" in themselves, and the revelation propelled them forward to new discoveries and new modes of action.

The Many Voices of the Soul

The soul remains a vital metaphor, particularly during periods of change, because it speaks to timeless longings for meaning and purpose. We often feel that rationality and science have abandoned us to answer on our own the most fundamental questions of human existence. Some turn to traditional religions, others to new-age philosophies. We can all turn to the soul as a way to ground ourselves in something "outside of" and larger than ourselves. Beneath the contemporary language of enhancing workplace productivity

(accountability, empowerment, teamwork) lie deeper questions about where we are going, how we will survive, what really matters, what we will surrender. These are the soul's questions. We cannot access the values implied by these business terms if we forsake the deeper underlying questions they imply.

The thread that is woven through the ancient ideas of the soul is that there are many selves whose interactions and struggles shape our thought and our consciousness in general. The journey to Hades is a story of the multiplicity of souls that inhabit an underworld, offering the individual soul advice, prophecy, and counsel—if one learns how to listen. In the Hebrew hypothesis of a living soul, each human being is both flesh and spirit. Our physical nature is fused with our spiritual nature, the breath of life that is blown into us from celestial forces. And the Gnostic vision of a unity of light shattered into fragments that lodge in each individual also suggests many forces that are at once unknowable yet revealed to us through our life experience.

The soul hypothesis of this book is about achieving a greater comfort with the awareness of the many selves within us: flesh and spirit, heaven and underworld, earth and sky. The tension of these apparent opposites strives to link us with the meaning of being a whole human being. I think we miss the value of these stories if we take them too literally, trying to pin down, for example, how a psyche that flutters away like a butterfly in death can also be a living soul that has no existence after the body dies. Each ancient tradition finds its own way, through stories and images, to express the multiplicity of forces inherent in being fully human. Taken together, these ancient soul hypotheses express the importance of appreciating how soul can mean one's essence and vitality as well as a bridge to underworlds and a path to cosmic spheres.

The Dance of Souls in Organizations

The themes that link Andy, Tom, Laurel, and the contractor center on how each of us struggles with different parts of ourselves,

wrestling with assumptions and internal personalities hidden from conscious awareness. Tom, who takes “fuck-you money” during the workday and seeks transcendence on weekends, cannot reconcile his divided loyalties. Laurel, who wants partnership but is frustrated with her subordinate, wrestles with her own assumptions about being a genderless physician yet a woman who can respect the choices of others. Andy, who prided himself on developing others and remaining undisturbed by ambiguity, finds new regard for his fears and limitations. And the contractor, who rediscovered compassion in the act of seeking retribution, finds that he allowed the hopelessness of his environment to shape his own internal worldview. These are stories of the multiplicity of the soul, brought down to earth by the realities of interaction with other souls and with our social realities.

To approach the soul in organizations, we must be able to hold in our minds the dance of souls interacting within larger and larger circles of participation. The multiplicity that lies within one individual makes even a relatively simple interpersonal interaction complex. If we try to imagine group interaction, the complexity to understand what is happening multiplies arithmetically. The implication, however, is not that we should give up trying to comprehend; rather, we must appreciate that the tensions in each individual soul can also be felt as forces in the larger and larger circles of interacting souls. Each individual wrestles with essential questions of meaning and purpose, power and assertiveness, competence and inclusion—as do groups, organizations, and societies. We might consider the soul as a microcosm that resembles the macrocosm, as in ancient stories where the individual soul resembles the cosmos. The question is how to look at the whole.

Looking at the whole requires an ability to stand back far enough to see the outline of patterns that weave together complexity and multiplicity. In organizations, this is difficult because the farther back we stand the greater the loss of detail. We associate loss of detail with loss of control, with information that is no

longer meaningful. We try to reduce complexity, ignore multiplicity. We look at the whole only to reduce it to its component parts: technology, information systems, human resources, market influences, and so on. Thus the idea that each individual soul is also an imprint of the tensions in larger and larger social spheres is disconcerting at first. Yet understanding in depth what one person is experiencing can provide vital clues to what others are going through. Andy's story, for example, opens a window on how others in his organization might be experiencing the tension between the rhetoric of caring and the behavior of superiors. His individual story is a fragment of what might exist as a pattern in his organization and in other organizations as well. In fact, Andy himself was embroiled with a subordinate who found Andy's performance review of him painfully distant and punitive. When we stand back far enough, we begin to see that patterns of tension take on meaningful form at levels as basic as the individual, yet extending to greater and greater networks of interaction.

Standing back means gaining enough distance to see patterns in the sweep of human history as well as in the psychological makeup of the individual. The importance of the soul, anchored by archetypal themes but constantly being reimagined, is that it is a reminder that our search to picture the human soul is always tentative. We are not searching for fixed patterns or the ability to reduce the turbulence of the soul to an unchanging formula. Rather, we are searching for caution and a note of realism in the challenge to create organizational and social settings for the whole human being. The loss of soul in organizations, an experience common to many of us, must be seen against the backdrop of history and the choices made along the way. Yet the opportunity remains that the more we can account for the multiplicity of selves that lie in one body, the greater our chance of imagining settings that might do this for everyone.

this material has been excerpted from

The Stirring of Soul in the Workplace

by Alan Briskin

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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