



## **Spirit and Soul**

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Last month I attended a minister's workshop with the keynote speaker, Thomas Moore. I assume that many of you have read some of his books, *Care of the Soul*, *Soulmates*, etc. Moore is an interesting writer and even more interesting lecturer. He is trained in theology, musicology, and philosophy. For twelve years he lived as a monk. For years he has worked as a psychotherapist deeply influenced by the work of Carl Jung, dreams, myths and archetypes. As a human being he is delightful. Unlike any other lecturers I have met.

While most lecturers, writers, famous-type people disappear after speaking, I found Moore in the most unexpected places. One day he was in the buffet line. Another day he was being buttonholed by a persistent colleague. I walked by, got a whiff of their conversation, and felt badly for him. Another day I found him quietly eating dinner with some colleagues I know. I asked him why he hadn't disappeared. He told me that when he goes someplace he likes to take it in. Listen, even I have to flee from my colleagues and UUs, in general, at times. He really lives what he preaches. Because what he preaches is to go deeper. Go deeper into the life and work of the soul. Not only did he speak and teach at our workshop, but he remained to listen, observe and engage.

What he had to say was difficult for many of us to take in. I suspect it will be difficult for many of you to take in as well. I appreciated this part of his lectures. He made me observe, learn and think in "different" ways, or rather, ways I don't use as often, or am not rewarded for using. To begin with he maintains that there is, in our

Western culture, an unnecessary division between the spirit and soul. What we need is both, in close, shared relationship.

As someone trained in philosophy, he was comfortable taking a term and defining it as he wanted, which philosophers often do. This amused me. I had to walk with him into his view. I had to offer space to wait for his thoughts to develop. No rushing, no five point lists to memorize. He developed a relationship in his lecture for those open to partaking.

Moore defined “spirit” not as I think of it, probably not as you think of it, so let your personal definition go and see if you can make space for his. Spirit involves the elaborate structures of our life like theology and academic life. Based on what he said, I would say that “spirit” is rational, observation-oriented. Moore says that spirit is a good thing, even a great thing, in balance.

Spirit is balanced by soul. As Moore explained “Spirit gives us much and soul makes us human.” Soul is “the font of who we are, and yet it is far beyond our capacity to devise and control.”<sup>1</sup>

*In Care of the Soul* he explains “It might be a good idea to abandon any ideas you may have about living successfully and properly, and about understanding yourself. The human soul is not meant to be understood. Rather, you might take a more relaxed position and reflect on the way your life has taken shape.”<sup>2</sup>

My guess is that right about now some of you are frustrated or think Moore has nothing to say. At about this point in his lecture, one of my 500 colleagues in attendance yelled out “Can you define soul?” Moore smiled (very nicely) and said “No. Just listen.” We roared with laughter. This is the perfect example of spirit and soul at play. Spirit wants definitions, lists, factual observations – all wonderful and necessary things in moderation. Soul wants experience, flexibility, relationship, deepened thought and experience. My colleague, and I assume many of us, want to run ahead with the definition to explain it all, put it to “bed” and move on to something else we believe we can know in a minute. Moore refused, choosing to model soul instead of explaining it with a clear definition. I found this delightful. After the lecture I said to him, “You know, you are preaching to a tough crowd with your message here.” He said “I know.”

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul* (1992), xviii.

<sup>2</sup> xix.

UUs like information, facts. Demographically we are one of the most educated denominations in the United States, up there with our Episcopalian and Jewish friends. Most of us have been significantly rewarded for living in the world of the spirit –law, medicine, education, academia, management and administration. We make good incomes off of it. I attended Harvard, dedicated to the life of the spirit as Moore describes it. It was almost funny at times, in fact it was funny, to be at the most competitive, intelligent, and insecure university, perhaps in the world, trying to develop a religious life and message that could speak to and comfort many people.

Moore began his workshop with a story from the *Gospel of Thomas* (one of the many Christian gospels not included in the *New Testament*). A woman buys a bag of seed with the intent of bringing it home. Unknown to her there is a hole in the bottom of the bag. On her journey home the seeds slowly and continually spill from the bag. The *Gospel of Thomas* tells us that this is the way to the kingdom of heaven. A woman goes to get something she needs, or thinks she needs, and it spills out and by the time she arrives home she is empty-handed, emptied out. This is the way to the kingdom of heaven.

Let me walk this one through for you because my guess is that like me, you live too much in the world of the spirit. What do you think the bag of seed represents? Seeds, food, plans for the future, what else? What does it mean to spill seeds along the way? And what is home?

Moore explained that care of the soul is emptying. And that life, regardless of what we learn, know, or plan, empties us. There is a soul teaching in being emptied. The Buddha understood this. Apparently Jesus did too.

Do you think that emptying is easy? Do you think that emptying is voluntarily chosen? More often than not, emptying comes with failure, pain, tears, and loss. The spirit tells us this is bad. Moore tells us that our pain is often part of our soul's journey, and this is good. Pain makes change. Pain (emotional, physical, mental, spiritual) empties us. This creates space for something else, a change, to fall in.

Five years ago I was in terrible physical pain. I had some serious back problems, and lived with chronic pain for over three years, days and night. It limited what I could do, where I could go, what shoes I could wear, how long I could sit. It prevented me from picking up my son. I stopped lifting my son when he was 16 months old. That is the last time I carried him, and will be the last time, ever. I felt like someone had cut my heart open. I could not pick up my boy and I hurt all the time. I was a failure. I was in hell.

And then, through the three years I learned new habits, tried different doctors, therapies and medications. I tried and failed, tried and failed, tried and failed, until finally I could tell I was making progress. I was getting better. I learned, over several painful years, how to improve. When I crawled out of the hole I had fallen into, I remember thinking that I was like a bowl that had been scoured clean, empty, and shiny. The pain had rubbed and rubbed at me with such force that it cast away old ideas and habits that I no longer needed. I had no choice but to change in order to survive.

For one thing, I no longer thought I had failed. I thought of my injury as a heavy blow that took years of recovery. I no longer thought of myself as a bad mother because I could not pick up my son. We learned he could sit on my lap or next to me if that hurt too much. And today he knows I love him just as much as if I picked him up every day for five years. And I learned patience and how to let go. Do you know that physical pain is worse if you hold on, because then you tighten into it? There is no better teacher than physical pain, if we are willing to empty out and learn the lesson. I crawled out of my hole a different person than when I fell in, and this was not a good thing, it was a great thing. My soul was rubbed empty, and other, better things fell in. Not immediately, but over time. Moore suggests that if you empty your soul, sit with the emptiness. Don't fill it with facts, cures, information, talk, mindless activity. Sit. Empty. Sit. Wait. Be patient. Wait. Enjoy the gift of emptiness and then see what enters.

In retrospect I learned that my extreme personal code of success and failure was, literally, killing me. I was my own worst enemy. Moore told us that the "challenge for prophets is to be the change and not be moralistic." According to Moore, moralism is a sign of neurosis, and neurosis shows itself in a split (this is the psychotherapist in him). Neurosis refers to emotional states such as anxiety, depression, and fear. So overemphasis on, or fearful or anxious splits about religion and politics, male and female, Islam and Christianity, heterosexuality and homosexuality are signs of neurosis, a lack of mental health. Think about this, moralism is a sign of neurosis. My extreme personal code was moralistic and neurotic and it made me hurt more just when I needed help.

My favorite advice was when he suggested, to a group of 500 ministers, that we might be better off enjoying fine shampoo rather than going to church. This, I loved. He encouraged us to enjoy our bath, to enjoy window shopping and other simple pleasures of beauty. He believes these activities nourish the soul, and I agree. His list (he did list this) of soul nourishing activities included emptying, friends, food and wine (he referred to "Jesus the Chef" and the Last Supper), home (whether that is a geographical place or a space inside of you), intimacy, beauty, attachment, pleasure

(stable pleasures like friendship rather than passing pleasures like entertainment), and the bath. These are the areas where we most easily engage myth, story, silence, dreams, art which we need to balance out the messages of spirit we find everywhere. Notice also, that his list of soul nourishing activities does not require advanced education or a lot of money. Certainly you can have both of these, but you don't need them to nourish your soul.

His comment about shampoo was not an insult to church, and it is interesting that many of us would take it that way. Certainly several of my colleagues did. He is not saying shampoo is silly and trivial. Instead he is saying that care of the soul includes care of the body, something we do in the bath, also allowing the body to feel pleasure, which we also do in the bath. Moore explained that in Roman myth the bath is associated with Venus, the goddess of beauty and love. He encouraged us to find a theology of Venus. Think of this, a theology of Venus to nourish the soul. Healthy god talk around the body, pleasure, and sexuality.

He noted that as a society we do not appreciate Venus (or the bath) and this is displayed in our sexism and neglect of the body which can lead to issues like violence and sexual problems. He went further to say that the solution to violence, represented in Roman mythology by Mars the god of war, is Venus. The solution to violence is Venus, which is why shampooing your hair with a special product can be a wonderfully healing, soul nourishing thing to do. Everyone needs some gentle, stable pleasures. Not buying every shampoo on the shelf which would get into advertising and commercialism, nor necessarily buying the most expensive or brand name shampoo, but getting one you enjoy and value, derive pleasure from, this is a way to nourish the soul.

We also nourish the soul with relationships that go deeper. Friendships and attachment that last and deepen. Intimacy that is sustained, valued, and increased with effort. So no, it is not good to work 70 hours a week (unless you financially must) at the expense of family and friends. You are depleting your soul. In our relationship with religion and God he says we must go deeper. We must read and reflect. We must take time. We do not need to run through every topic, but go deeper and reflect on just a few. Give ourselves space to learn in whole ways.

During the question and answer period one of my colleagues asked how, in her work on social justice, she can change others who are limited and because of this limitation, discriminate against others. In short, he told her that she can't change others. That she must embody the change she wants to see. I had come to this position in the past several years myself. It is ignorance and madness to think that we can change others. It is the ultimate act of hubris, insecurity, and moralism (or fundamentalism). To truly

change someone else? A person changes only if she/he really wants to change. We can of course, pretend to change. But as anyone who has lived with addiction or an addict will tell you, people need to choose change.

This past week I attended a call-in hosted by CIRV, the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence at River City Correctional Facility. I watched as the employees of CIRV, all of them former inmates themselves, explain to these young incarcerated men why they should put down their weapons and stop the violence. When you talk to the CIRV employees they are the first people to tell you that they will offer their message of change a daily basis, and only a few men will take it in a year, and that is success to them. They know that these men need to choose to change so they don't end up back in prison or dead or injuring others. They also know that most of the men will not choose to change.

CIRV employees do not think of themselves as failures because of this. They embody the change they want to see and they know that most of these men will not choose to leave their lives of drugs and violence. They show up with the truth burned through the fire of incarceration. When they succeed in helping someone it is not because of moralism, it is because they have been in prison themselves, they understand the allure and they still embody the change they want to see. This work is slower than molasses and there are big losses on the way and this is successful social justice.

Moore talked about caring for the soul, rather than curing the soul. He embraces the problems, missteps of life. He told us that we must create room for Mercury, the trickster god to enter and confound us. According to Moore, Mercury signals the beginning and end of soul work. I found this idea so compelling. Sometimes it is the missteps and uncertainties in life that lead us to deeper understandings about ourselves and others. If you look through your teenager's phone for evidence of drug use, you might be starting soul work. If you engage in some risky behavior, you might be beginning or ending soul work. When we don't know what ground we are standing on, and are full of doubts, we are also open. Moore suggests that when we are too judgmental or certain, we are blind.

This notion does not comfort the spirit side of us that wants facts and answers. And this might not seem like a good enough answer for our UU brains, but it feels real to me. Creating space for constant doubt, and constant openness feels healthy to me. Moore told us to live in holy ignorance, that if we speak of God we must admit ignorance. Only a neurotic person would be certain, or feel the need to convert another to his/her point of view, whether that was fundamentalist religion or humanism.

On the eve of the winter solstice, when the sun appears to stand still and we are uncertain if the light will return, we have a lovely opportunity to rest in the dark, stillness of winter, to nourish our souls with home (whether it be inside or outside), relationship, food, beauty, and stable pleasure. We can rest in the emptiness which we find, which we will. Don't flee, rest in it. We don't need the most expensive presents or designer presents. We need simple, stable enjoyable pleasures that balance our spirit and nourish the soul.