

From:
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C H A P T E R I

*Honoring Symptoms as
a Voice of the Soul*

Once a week people in the thousands show up for their regular appointment with a therapist. They bring problems they have talked about many times before, problems that cause them intense emotional pain and make their lives miserable. Depending on the kind of therapy employed, the problems will be analyzed, referred back to childhood and parents, or attributed to some key factor such as the failure to express anger, alcohol in the family, or childhood abuse. Whatever the approach, the aim will be health or happiness achieved by the removal of these central problems.

Care of the soul is a fundamentally different way of regarding daily life and the quest for happiness. The emphasis may not be on problems at all. One person might care for the soul by buying or renting a good piece of land, another by selecting an appropriate school or program of study, another by painting his house or his bedroom. Care of the soul is a continuous process that concerns itself not so much with “fixing” a central flaw as with attending to

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the small details of everyday life, as well as to major decisions and changes.

Care of the soul may not focus on the personality or on relationships at all, and therefore it is not psychological in the usual sense. Tending the things around us and becoming sensitive to the importance of home, daily schedule, and maybe even the clothes we wear, are ways of caring for the soul. When Marsilio Ficino wrote his self-help book, *The Book of Life*, five hundred years ago, he placed emphasis on carefully choosing colors, spices, oils, places to walk, countries to visit—all very concrete decisions of everyday life that day by day either support or disturb the soul. We think of the psyche, if we think about it at all, as a cousin to the brain and therefore something essentially internal. But ancient psychologists taught that our own souls are inseparable from the world's soul, and that both are found in all the many things that make up nature and culture.

So, the first point to make about care of the soul is that it is not primarily a method of problem solving. Its goal is not to make life problem-free, but to give ordinary life the depth and value that come with soulfulness. In a way it is much more of a challenge than psychotherapy because it has to do with cultivating a richly expressive and meaningful life at home and in society. It is also a challenge because it requires imagination from each of us. In therapy we lay our problems at the feet of a professional who is supposedly trained to solve them for us. In care of the soul, we ourselves have both the task and the pleasure of organizing and shaping our lives for the good of the soul.

Getting to Know the Soul

Let us begin by looking at this phrase I have been using, “care of the soul.” The word *care* implies a way of re-

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sponding to expressions of the soul that is not heroic and muscular. Care is what a nurse does, and “nurse” happens to be one of the early meanings of the Greek word *therapeia*, or therapy. We’ll see that care of the soul is in many ways a return to early notions of what therapy is. *Cura*, the Latin word used originally in “care of the soul,” means several things: attention, devotion, husbandry, adorning the body, healing, managing, being anxious for, and worshiping the gods. It might be a good idea to keep all these meanings in mind as we try to see as concretely as possible how we might make the shift from psychotherapy as we know it today to care of the soul.

“Soul” is not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance. I do not use the word here as an object of religious belief or as something to do with immortality. When we say that someone or something has soul, we know what we mean, but it is difficult to specify exactly what that meaning is.

Care of the soul begins with observance of how the soul manifests itself and how it operates. We can’t care for the soul unless we are familiar with its ways. Observance is a word from ritual and religion. It means to watch out for but also to keep and honor, as in the observance of a holiday. The *-serv-* in observance originally referred to tending sheep. Observing the soul, we keep an eye on its sheep, on whatever is wandering and grazing—the latest addiction, a striking dream, or a troubling mood.

This definition of caring for the soul is minimalist. It has to do with modest care and not miraculous cure. But my cautious definition has practical implications for the way we deal with ourselves and with one another. For example, if I see my responsibility to myself, to a friend, or to a patient in therapy as observing and respecting what the soul presents, I won’t try to take things away in the name of health. It’s remarkable how often people think they will be better off without the things that bother them. “I need to get rid of

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this tendency of mine,” a person will say. “Help me get rid of these feelings of inferiority and my smoking and my bad marriage.” If, as a therapist, I did what I was told, I’d be taking things away from people all day long. But I don’t try to eradicate problems. I try not to imagine my role to be that of exterminator. Rather, I try to give what is problematical back to the person in a way that shows its necessity, even its value.

When people observe the ways in which the soul is manifesting itself, they are enriched rather than impoverished. They receive back what is theirs, the very thing they have assumed to be so horrible that it should be cut out and tossed away. When you regard the soul with an open mind, you begin to find the messages that lie within the illness, the corrections that can be found in remorse and other uncomfortable feelings, and the necessary changes requested by depression and anxiety.

Let me give some examples of how we might enrich rather than deprive ourselves in the name of emotional well-being.

A thirty-year-old woman comes to me for therapy and confesses, “I have a terrible time in relationships because I become too dependent. Help me be less dependent.”

I am being asked to take some soul stuff away. I should go to my toolbox and take out a scalpel, extractor, and suction pump. Instead, on the principle of observance, and not inclined in any case to this kind of pilfering, I ask, “What is it you find difficult about dependence?”

“It makes me feel powerless. Besides, it isn’t good to be too dependent. I should be my own person.”

“How do you know when your dependency is too much?” I reply, still trying to speak for the soul’s expression of dependency.

“When I don’t feel good about myself.”

“I wonder,” I continue in the same direction, “if you could find a way to be dependent without feeling disempowered? After all, we all depend on each other every minute of the day.”

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And so the talk continues. The woman admits she has always simply assumed that independence is good and dependence bad. I notice from the conversation that despite all her enthusiasm for independence, she doesn't seem to enjoy much of it in her life. She is identified with the dependency and sees liberation on the other side. She has also unconsciously bought into the prevailing notion that independence is healthy and that we should correct the soul when it shows some desire for dependence.

This woman is asking me to help her get rid of the dependent face of her soul. But that would be a move against her soul. The fact that her dependency is making itself felt doesn't mean it should be bludgeoned or surgically removed; it may be asserting itself because it needs attention. Her heroic championing of independence might be a way of avoiding and repressing the strong need of something in her to be dependent. I try offering some words of dependence that don't have the connotations of wimpiness that seem to bother her.

"Don't you want to be attached to people, learn from them, get close, rely on friendship, get advice from someone you respect, be part of a community where people need each other, find intimacy with someone that is so delicious you can't live without it?"

"Of course," she says. "Is that dependence?"

"It sounds like it to me," I reply, "and like everything else, you can't have it without its shadows: its neediness, inferiority, submission and loss of control."

I had the feeling this woman, as seems often to be the case, was avoiding intimacy and friendship by focusing these qualities into a caricature of excessive dependency. At times we live these caricatures, thinking we are being masochistically dependent, when what we actually are doing is avoiding deep involvement with people, society, and life in general.

Observing what the soul is doing and hearing what it is saying is a way of "going with the symptom." The temptation is to compen-

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sate, to be drawn toward the opposite of what is presented. A person fully identified with dependency thinks that health and happiness lie in the achievement of independence. But that move into opposites is deceptive. Oddly, it keeps the person in the same problem, only from the opposite side. The wish for independence maintains the split. A homeopathic move, going with what is presented rather than against it, is to learn how to be dependent in a way that is satisfying and not so extreme as to split dependence off from independence.

Another way of disowning the soul is merely to dip your toes in the sea of fate. A man came to me depressed and completely dissatisfied with his job. He had been working in a manufacturing shop for ten years, and all that time he planned his escape. He was going to go to school and enter a profession that he liked. But while he planned and kept his mind continually on his escape, his work in the shop suffered. Years went by and he was always dissatisfied, hating his job and wishing for the promised land of his ambitions.

“Have you ever thought,” I asked him one day, “of being where you are, of entering fully this job that you’re putting your time and energy into?”

“It’s not worth it,” he said. “It’s beneath me. A robot could do it better.”

“But you do it every day,” I observed. “And you do it badly, and you feel bad about yourself for doing it badly.”

“You’re saying,” he said incredulously, “that I should go to this stupid job as if my heart were in it?”

“*You’re* in it, aren’t you?”

He came back in a week to say that something had changed in him as he began to take his “stupid” job more seriously. It seemed that by entering his fate and emotions he might begin to taste his life and possibly find a way *through* his experience and into his ambitions. The sheep of his work fantasies had been wandering every-

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where but in the shop. He had been living an alienated and divided life.

Observance of the soul can be deceptively simple. You take back what has been disowned. You work with what is, rather than with what you wish were there. In his poem "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" the poet Wallace Stevens wrote, "Perhaps the truth depends on a walk around a lake." Therapy sometimes emphasizes change so strongly that people often neglect their own natures and are tantalized by images of some ideal normality and health that may always be out of reach. In "Reply to Papini," Stevens put the matter more broadly, in lines that James Hillman has taken as a motto for his psychology. "The way through the world is more difficult to find than the way beyond it."

Renaissance philosophers often said that it is the soul that makes us human. We can turn that idea round and note that it is when we are most human that we have greatest access to soul. And yet modern psychology, perhaps because of its links to medicine, is often seen as a way of being saved from the very messes that most deeply mark human life as human. We want to sidestep negative moods and emotion, bad life choices and unhealthy habits. But if our purpose is first to observe the soul as it is, then we may have to discard the salvational wish and find deeper respect for what is actually there. By trying to avoid human mistakes and failures, we move beyond the reach of soul.

Sometimes, of course, it can be difficult to honor the soul's dramatic ways of expressing itself. An intelligent and talented young woman once came to me with the complaint that she was having trouble with food. She was embarrassed to bring up this symptom that had been at the center of her life for three years. She would eat almost nothing for a few days, then she would gorge and throw up. The cycle was completely out of her control, and it seemed that it would never end.

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How do we observe these rites of the soul that are painful and even life-threatening? Does it make sense to give a place to horrible symptoms and hopeless compulsions? Is there any necessity in these extreme states that are beyond all rational control? When I hear a story like this and see a person so distressed, I have to examine carefully my own capacity for observance. Am I repulsed? Do I feel a savior figure rising up in me who will do anything to save this woman from her torment? Or can I understand that even these extraordinary symptoms are the myths, rituals, and poetry of a life?

The basic intention in any caring, physical or psychological, is to alleviate suffering. But in relation to the symptom itself, observance means first of all listening and looking carefully at what is being revealed in the suffering. An intent to heal can get in the way of seeing. By doing less, more is accomplished. Observance is homeopathic in its workings rather than allopathic, in the paradoxical way that it befriends a problem rather than making an enemy of it. A Taoist tone colors this care without heroics. The *Tao Te Ching* says (ch. 64), "He brings men back to what they have lost. He helps the ten thousand things find their own nature, but refrains from action." This is a perfect description of one who cares for the soul.

It is not easy to observe closely, to take the time and to make the subtle moves that allow the soul to reveal itself further. You have to rely on every bit of learning, every scrap of sense, and all kinds of reading, in order to bring intelligence and imagination to the work. Yet at the same time, this action-through-nonaction has to be simple, flexible, and receptive. Intelligence and education bring you to the edge, where your mind and its purposes are empty. Many religious rites begin with washing of the hands or a sprinkling of water to symbolize the cleansing of intention and the washing away of thoughts and purposes. In our soul work we could use rites like these, anything that would cleanse our minds of their well-intentioned heroism.

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The soul of this young woman was portraying its current myth through the imagery of food. Over several weeks we talked about the place of food in her life, in the past and in the present. She talked about her discomfort in the presence of her parents. She wanted to wander around the world. She hated the idea of being home, and yet she was forced for economic reasons to live with her parents. She also had memories of a brother touching her immodestly once, just for a second. She hadn't been abused, but she was extremely sensitive about her body. Our conversations led to the mixed feelings she had about being a woman.

Then one day she brought me a dream that I thought captured the mystery that was at the heart of her problem. A group of elderly women were preparing a feast outdoors. They were stewing a great variety of food in huge pots over fires. The dreamer was invited to join the cooking and become one of the women. She bristled at first—she didn't want to be identified with those old gray women in peasant black dresses—but finally joined them.

The dream presented this woman with what she was most afraid of: her primordial femininity. Although she enjoyed her long blond hair and her girlfriends, she profoundly hated having periods and living with the possibility of one day bearing a child. The dream, which I took as promising, assumed the form of a primitive initiation into a mystery closely related to her symptoms. And it seemed to present her with a solution: become acquainted with the ancient and profound roots of womanhood and discover finally how truly to nourish yourself.

Even though it took place in sleep, the dream was an effective ritual. Our role was not to interpret the various figures, but to appreciate the significance and importance of the rites. Why would this woman feel so anxious about a crowd of old women standing over great pots of stew? As we talked over her fears about the women and their actions, certain themes in the dreamer's life came to light, such as specific thoughts about her body that disturbed her, and

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particular women in her family she wanted nothing to do with. She talked about her father's affection for her and her mixed feelings about him. It wasn't so much that the dream had a particular *meaning* that explained her symptoms, but that it generated deeply felt thoughts and memories, all related to the food problems. The dream helped us to feel her drama more intensely and to imagine it more precisely.

To feel and imagine may not sound like much. But in care of the soul there is trust that nature heals, that much can be accomplished by not-doing. The assumption is that being follows imagination. If we can see the story we are in when we fall into our various compulsive behaviors and moods, then we might know how to move through them more freely and with less distress.

What the great sixteenth-century physician, Paracelsus, said about healing applies to care of the soul: "The physician is only the servant of nature, not her master. Therefore, it behooves medicine to follow the will of nature." In caring for the soul, we imagine that even as troublesome a symptom as bulimia has its own will and that "curing" in some way means following that will.

Observance has considerable power. If you observe Christmas, for instance, you will be affected by that special season precisely because of your observance. The mood and spirit of the time will touch your heart, and over time, regular observance may come to affect you deeply. Or if you are a pallbearer at a funeral, if you sprinkle dirt or holy water at the grave, your observance places you deep within the experience of burial and death. You may remember that moment vividly for years. You may dream about it for the rest of your life. Simple gestures, taking place on the surface of life, can be of central importance to the soul.

Modern interventional therapy sometimes tries to solve specific problems and can therefore be carried out on a short-term basis. But care of the soul never ends. The alchemists of the Middle Ages

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seem to have recognized this fact, since they taught their students that every ending is a beginning. All work on the soul takes the form of a circle, a *rotatio*. People in therapy often say to me, "Aren't you tired of hearing the same things over and over again?" "No," I respond. "I'm quite happy with the old stuff." I keep in mind the alchemical *circulatio*. The life of the soul, as the structure of dreams reveals, is a continual going over and over of the material of life.

In memory we never tire of reflecting on the same events. I spent many summers in my childhood on a farm with an uncle who told stories endlessly. This, I now see, was his method of working the raw material of his life, his way of turning his experience round and round in the rotation that stories provide. Out of that incessant storytelling I know he found added depths of meaning. Storytelling is an excellent way of caring for the soul. It helps us see the themes that circle in our lives, the deep themes that tell the myths we live. It would take only a slight shift in emphasis in therapy to focus on the storytelling itself rather than on its interpretation.

Learning to Love the Soul

One of the crucial things I have learned from my apprenticeship to James Hillman, the founder of archetypal psychology, is to nurture my curiosity about the ways of the psyche. He claims that a psychologist ought to be a "naturalist of the psyche." The professional should always be "in the field," as Hillman himself is without respite. In this sense a psychologist is someone who, like a botanist, is unusually preoccupied with nature, human nature. If this is true in professional psychology, it is also true in the care of soul that any of us can cultivate. This kind of care begins in deep curiosity about the ways the psyche shows itself, in others and in oneself.

Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* is largely this kind of psy-

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chologizing. He analyzes his own dreams and arrives at theory from his self-analysis. He writes as though he is intensely interested in the ways of his own soul. He tells stories and dreams, not unlike my uncle, whose stories also condensed into a theory about life. We could all be a Freud to our own experiences. Taking an interest in the soul is a way of loving it. The ultimate cure, as many ancient and modern psychologies of depth have asserted, comes from love and not from logic. Understanding doesn't take us very far in this work, but love, expressed in patient and careful attention, draws the soul in from its dispersion in problems and fascinations. It has often been noted that most, if not all, problems brought to therapists are issues of love. It makes sense then that the cure is also love.

Taking an interest in one's own soul requires a certain amount of space for reflection and appreciation. Ordinarily we are so identified with movements of the psyche that we can't stand back and take a good look at them. A little distance allows us to see the dynamics among the many elements that make up the life of the soul. By becoming interested in these phenomena, we begin to see our own complexity. Usually we feel that complexity as it hits us unawares from outside, in a multitude of problems and in confusion. If we knew the soul better, we might be ready for the conflicts of life. I often have the sense, when someone tells me anxiously about some knot they find themselves in, that what they perceive as an impossible and painful situation calling for professional intervention is simply the complexity of human life once again manifesting itself. Most of us bring to everyday life a somewhat naive psychological attitude in our expectations that our lives and relationships will be simple. Love of the soul asks for some appreciation for its complexity.

Often care of the soul means not taking sides when there is a conflict at a deep level. It may be necessary to stretch the heart wide enough to embrace contradiction and paradox.

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A man in his fifties came to me once and told me with considerable embarrassment that he had fallen in love.

"I feel stupid," he said, "like an adolescent."

I hear this often, that love arouses the adolescent. Anyone familiar with the history of art and literature knows that from the Greeks on down love has been portrayed as an untamable teenager.

"Oh, you have something against this adolescent?"

"Am I ever going to grow up?" he asked in frustration.

"Maybe not," I said. "Maybe there are things in you that will never grow up, maybe they shouldn't grow up. Doesn't this sudden influx of adolescence make you feel young, energetic and full of life?"

"Yes," he said, "and also silly, immature, confused and crazy."

"But that's adolescence," I responded. "It sounds to me like the Old Man in you is berating the Youth. Why make being a grown-up the supreme value? Or, maybe I should ask, who in you is claiming that maturity is so important? It's that Old Man, isn't it?"

I wanted to speak for the figure who was being judged and attacked. This man had to find enough space in him to allow both the Old Man and the Youth to have a place, to speak to each other and over time, maybe over his entire lifetime, to work out some degree of reconciliation. It takes more than a lifetime to resolve such conflicts. In fact, the conflict itself is creative and perhaps should never be healed. By giving each figure its voice, we let the soul speak and show itself as it is, not as we wish it would be. By defending the adolescent, being careful not to take sides against the mature figure, I showed my interest in his soul, and the man had an opportunity to find a way to contain this archetypal conflict of youth and age, maturity and immaturity. In the course of such a debate the soul becomes more complex and spacious.

A Taste for the Perverse

One effective “trick” in caring for the soul is to look with special attention and openness at what the individual rejects, and then to speak favorably for that rejected element. For the man I was just discussing, feeling adolescent was something he saw as a problem. I tried to see value in that “problem” without sharing the man’s distaste. We all tend to divide experience into two parts, usually the good and the bad. But there may be all kinds of suspicious things going on in this splitting. We may simply have never considered the value in certain things that we reject. Or by branding certain experiences negative we may be protecting ourselves from some unknown fears. We are all filled with biases and ideas that have snuck into us without our knowing it. Much soul can be lost in such splitting, so that care of the soul can go a long way simply by recovering some of this material that has been cut off.

What I am talking about here is a version of Jung’s theory of shadow. For Jung, there are two kinds of shadow: one consists of the possibilities in life that we reject because of certain choices we have made. The person we choose to be, for example, automatically creates a dark double—the person we choose not to be. This compensatory shadow varies from one person to the next. For some people sex and money are looming shadows, while for others they are simply part of life. Moral purity and responsible living can be shadow aspects to some. Jung also believed there is an absolute shadow, not relative to our life choices and habits. In other words, there is evil in the world and in the human heart. If we don’t recognize this, we have a naive attitude that can get us into trouble. Jung thought the soul can benefit by coming to terms with both kinds of shadow, losing some of its naive innocence in the process.

It appears to me that as we open ourselves to see what our soul is made of and who we really are, we always find some material that

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is a profound challenge. My middle-aged man had to reevaluate his adolescent feelings of silliness. My bulimic young woman had to come to grips with her complicated relationship to her father and her feelings about her brother. To some extent, care of the soul asks us to open our hearts wider than they have ever been before, softening the judging and moralism that may have characterized our attitudes and behavior for years. Moralism is one of the most effective shields against the soul, protecting us from its intricacy. There is nothing more revealing, and maybe nothing more healing, than to reconsider our moralistic attitudes and find how much soul has been hidden behind its doors. People seem to be afraid that if they reflect on their moral principles they might lose their ethical sensitivity altogether. But that is a defensive approach to morality. As we deal with the soul's complexity, morality can deepen and drop its simplicity, becoming at the same time both more demanding and more flexible.

I would go even further. As we get to know the soul and fearlessly consider its oddities and the many different ways it shows itself among individuals, we may develop a taste for the perverse. We may come to appreciate its quirks and deviances. Indeed, we may eventually come to realize that individuality is born in the eccentricities and unexpected shadow tendencies of the soul, more so than in normality and conformity. One who cares for the soul becomes someone at ease with idiosyncrasies and the unexpected. When I lecture on shadow to therapists-in-training, I sometimes ask them, "Where is the line of perversity drawn for you, where is the place where you come up against your own fear and repulsion?" Some people say that sexual abuse is that line, and I wonder how they can work professionally with abused or abusing patients. Others say it is violence of any kind. Others find sexual fantasy perverse. We might ask ourselves the same question. Where do I run up against a wall when I look into my own heart? What is the limit?

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Care of the soul is interested in the not-so-normal, the way that soul makes itself felt most clearly in the unusual expressions of a life, even and maybe especially in the problematical ones. I recall once being visited late at night by a woman in her late fifties. Her husband had just left her after twenty-five years of marriage. She didn't think she could go on. No one in her family, she kept repeating, had ever been divorced. Why had this happened to her? I noticed that of all the possible thoughts that could preoccupy her at this difficult time, the worst was the thought that she wasn't like the rest of her family. Something serious must be wrong with her, she thought. In a dark way, her individuality was asserting itself in this ordeal. I imagined that this in fact might be the "purpose" of the event: to bring her around to a sharp sense of her own uniqueness.

It is no accident that the history of art is filled with grotesque images—bloody and twisted crucifixions, gracefully distorted bodies, and surrealistic landscapes. Sometimes deviation from the usual is a special revelation of truth. In alchemy this was referred to as the *opus contra naturam*, an effect contrary to nature. We might see the same kind of artful unnatural expression within our own lives. When normality explodes or breaks out into craziness or shadow, we might look closely, before running for cover and before attempting to restore familiar order, at the potential meaningfulness of the event. If we are going to be curious about the soul, we may need to explore its deviations, its perverse tendency to contradict expectations. And as a corollary, we might be suspicious of normality. A facade of normality can hide a wealth of deviance, and besides, it is fairly easy to recognize soullessness in the standardizing of experience.

Care vs. Cure

A major difference between care and cure is that cure implies the end of trouble. If you are cured, you don't have

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to worry about whatever was bothering you any longer. But care has a sense of ongoing attention. There is no end. Conflicts may never be fully resolved. Your character will never change radically, although it may go through some interesting transformations. Awareness can change, of course, but problems may persist and never go away.

Our work in psychology would change remarkably if we thought about it as ongoing care rather than as the quest for a cure. We might take the time to watch and listen as gradually it reveals the deeper mysteries lying within daily turmoil. Problems and obstacles offer a chance for reflection that otherwise would be precluded by the swift routine of life. As we stop to consider what is happening to us and what we're made of, the soul ferments, to use an alchemical word. Change takes place, but not according to plan or as the result of intentional intervention. If you attend the soul closely enough, with an educated and steadfast imagination, changes take place without your being aware of them until they are all over and well in place. Care of the soul observes the paradox whereby a muscled, strong-willed pursuit of change can actually stand in the way of substantive transformation.

Ancient psychology, rooted in a very different ground from modern therapeutic thinking, held that the fate and character of each of us is born in mystery, that our individuality is so profound and so hidden that it takes more than a lifetime for identity to emerge. Renaissance doctors said that the essence of each person originates as a star in the heavens. How different this is from the modern view that a person is what he makes himself to be.

Care of the soul, looking back with special regard to ancient psychologies for insight and guidance, goes beyond the secular mythology of the self and recovers a sense of the sacredness of each individual life. This sacred quality is not just value—all lives are important. It is the unfathomable mystery that is the very seed and heart of each individual. Shallow therapeutic manipulations aimed at restoring normality or tuning a life according to stan-

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dards reduces—shrinks—that profound mystery to the pale dimensions of a social common denominator referred to as the adjusted personality. Care of the soul sees another reality altogether. It appreciates the mystery of human suffering and does not offer the illusion of a problem-free life. It sees every fall into ignorance and confusion as an opportunity to discover that the beast residing at the center of the labyrinth is also an angel. The uniqueness of a person is made up of the insane and the twisted as much as it is of the rational and normal. To approach this paradoxical point of tension where adjustment and abnormality meet is to move closer to the realization of our mystery-filled, star-born nature.

Obviously, care of the soul requires a different language from that of therapy and academic psychology. Like alchemy, it is an art and therefore can only be expressed in poetic images. Mythology, the fine arts, religions of the world, and dreams provide this priceless imagery by which the soul's mysteries are simultaneously revealed and contained. For guidance we can also turn to many different experts, especially to poetic-minded soul searchers such as the ancient mythographers and tragedians, Renaissance doctors, Romantic poets, and our modern depth psychologists, who respect the mystery of human life and who resist the secularization of experience. It takes a broad vision to know that a piece of the sky and a chunk of the earth lie lodged in the heart of every human being, and that if we are going to care for that heart we will have to know the sky and earth as well as human behavior. This is exactly the advice of the Renaissance doctor Paracelsus: "If the physician understands things exactly and sees and recognizes all illnesses in the macrocosm outside man, and if he has a clear idea of man and his whole nature, then and only then is he a physician. Then he may approach the inside of man; then he may examine his urine, take his pulse, and understand where each thing belongs. This would not be possible without profound knowledge of the outer man, who is nothing other than heaven and earth."

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The Greeks told the story of the minotaur, the bull-headed flesh-eating man who lived in the center of the labyrinth. He was a threatening beast, and yet his name was Asterion—Star. I often think of this paradox as I sit with someone with tears in her eyes, searching for some way to deal with a death, a divorce, or a depression. It is a beast, this thing that stirs in the core of her being, but it is also the star of her innermost nature. We have to care for this suffering with extreme reverence so that, in our fear and anger at the beast, we do not overlook the star.