CHAPTER 10

The Need for Myth,
Ritual, and a
Spiritual Life

I have been emphasizing the soul’s need for vernacular life—its relationship to a local place and culture. It has a preference for details and particulars, intimacy and involvement, attachment and rootedness. Like an animal, the soul feeds on whatever life grows in its immediate environment. To the soul, the ordinary is sacred and the everyday is the primary source of religion. But there is another side to this issue. The soul also needs spirituality, and as Ficino advises, a particular kind of spirituality: one that is not at odds with the everyday and the lowly.

In the modern world we tend to separate psychology from religion. We like to think that emotional problems have to do with the family, childhood, and trauma—with personal life but not with spirituality. We don’t diagnose an emotional seizure as “loss of religious sensibility” or “lack of spiritual awareness.” Yet it is obvious that the soul, seat of the deepest emotions, can benefit greatly
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from the gifts of a vivid spiritual life and can suffer when it is de-
prived of them. The soul, for example, needs an articulated world-
view, a carefully worked out scheme of values, and a sense of relat-
edness to the whole. It needs a myth of immortality and an attitude
toward death. It also thrives on spirituality that is not so transcen-
dent, such as the spirit of family, arising from traditions and values
that have been part of the family for generations.

Spirituality doesn’t arrive fully formed without effort. Religions
around the world demonstrate that spiritual life requires constant
attention and a subtle, often beautiful technology by which spiri-
tual principles and understandings are kept alive. For good reason
we go to church, temple, or mosque regularly and at appointed
times: it’s easy for consciousness to become lodged in the material
world and to forget the spiritual. Sacred technology is largely
aimed at helping us remain conscious of spiritual ideas and values.

Earlier I introduced a client of mine who had trouble with food
and who told me a dream of old women cooking up a hearty out-
door meal. Although this dream was relevant to the young wom-
an’s physical problems with food, I thought it also spoke to the
hunger in her soul for primordial femininity. By eating the food
cooked by the women, she would absorb their spirit; the dream
was a female version of the male Last Supper. In another dream re-
lated to food, she discovered that her esophagus was made of plas-
tic and wasn’t long enough to reach her stomach.

This extraordinary image is a perfect description of one of the
main problems of the modern world: our means of connecting to
our inner work do not reach deep enough. The esophagus is an ex-
cellent image of one of the soul’s chief functions: to transfer mate-
rial of the outside world into the interior. But in this dream it is
made of an unnatural substance that stands for the superficiality of
our age, plastic. And if this soul function is plastic, then we will not
be fed well. We will feel the need of a more genuine means of bring-
ing outer experience deep inside us.
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Just as the mind digests ideas and produces intelligence, the soul feeds on life and digests it, creating wisdom and character out of the fodder of experience. Renaissance Neoplatonists said that the outer world serves as a means of deep spirituality and that the transformation of ordinary experience into the stuff of soul is all-important. If the link between life experience and deep imagination is inadequate, then we are left with a division between life and soul, and such a division will always manifest itself in symptoms.

A person starving herself anorectically evokes in her food rituals vestigial forms of religious practice. Her disdain for her body and her asceticism in denying herself food represent pseudoreligion and symptomatic spirituality. A degree of asceticism is a necessary part of spirituality, but a symptomatic, compulsive approach to the ascetic life only shows how far we are from true religious feeling. As society’s symptom, anorexia could be trying to teach us that we need a more genuine spiritual life where restraint has a place, but not as neurosis. If our spirituality is like a plastic esophagus, then we are starving ourselves, not fasting in a sacred sense.

In many religions, food is a powerful metaphor. Communion, union with divinity, is accomplished by means of food. Taking food into the body is a ritual way of absorbing the god into oneself. In this context, the woman’s dream is especially poignant, since her plastic esophagus interferes with the rite of communion.

All eating is communion, feeding the soul as well as the body. Our cultural habit of eating “fast food” reflects our current belief that all we need to take into ourselves, both literally and figuratively, is plain food, not food of real substance and not the imagination of real dining. In another, less literal sphere, we appropriate information in “sound bites,” another food image, instead of taking life in, digesting it, and making it part of us. Most of our science, physical and social, operates as if there were no interior life, or at least assumes that the interior life has little or nothing to do with the outside world. If the interior life is acknowledged, it is consid-
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Garded secondary, something to tend to once we have taken care of the real concerns of business or daily life. Culturally we have a plastic esophagus, suited perhaps to fast food and fast living, but not conducive to soul, which thrives only when life is taken in in a long, slow process of digestion and absorption.

Psychological Modernism

Professional psychology has created a catalogue of disorders, known as the DSM-III, which is used by doctors and insurance companies to help diagnose and standardize problems of emotional life and behavior with precision. For example, there is a category called “adjustment disorders.” The problem is that adjusting to life, while perhaps sane to all outward appearances, may sometimes be detrimental to the soul. One day I would like to make up my own DSM-III with a list of “disorders” I have seen in my practice. For example, I would want to include the diagnosis “psychological modernism,” an uncritical acceptance of the values of the modern world. It includes blind faith in technology, inordinate attachment to material gadgets and conveniences, uncritical acceptance of the march of scientific progress, devotion to the electronic media, and a life-style dictated by advertising. This orientation toward life also tends toward a mechanistic and rationalistic understanding of matters of the heart.

In this modernist syndrome, technology becomes the root metaphor for dealing with psychological problems. A modern person comes into therapy and says, “Look, I don’t want any long-term analysis. If something is broken, let’s fix it. Tell me what I have to do, and I’ll do it.” Such a person is rejecting out of hand the possibility that the source of a problem in a relationship, for example, may be a weak sense of values or failure to come to grips with mortality. There is no model for this kind of thinking in modern life, where almost no time is given to reflection and where the assump-
tion is that the psyche has spare parts, an owner’s manual, and well-trained mechanics called therapists. Philosophy lies at the base of every life problem, but it takes soul to reflect on one’s own life with genuine philosophical seriousness.

The modernist syndrome urges people to buy the latest electronic gear and to be plugged in to news, entertainment, and up-to-the-minute weather reports. It’s vitally important not to miss out on anything. I’ve seen some extreme examples, like one man who spends most of his day in front of several television monitors keeping track of events from around the world. He doesn’t need all this information professionally, but he feels his life would be empty if he let any gaps appear in his grasp of the news. A woman who manages a computer firm knows the very latest chemical and mechanical medical treatments, and she can tell you the side effects of whatever pill you are taking; yet in private she feels overwhelmed by her failure to get her life on track and settled. Her sickness is not amenable to the literal medications she knows so well, because her ennui is a soul malady.

There sometimes seems to be an inverse relationship between information and wisdom. We are showered with information about living healthfully, but we have largely lost our sense of the body’s wisdom. We can tune in to news reports and know what is happening in every corner of the world, but we don’t seem to have much wisdom in dealing with these world problems. We have many demanding academic programs in professional psychology, and states often have rigid requirements for the practice of psychotherapy, and yet there is undoubtedly a severe dearth of wisdom about the mysteries of the soul.

The modernist syndrome also tends to literalize everything it touches. For example, ancient philosophers and theologians taught that the world is a cosmic animal, a unified organism with its own living body and soul. Today we literalize that philosophy in the idea of the global village. The world soul today is created not by a demiurge or semi-divine creator as in ancient times, but by fiber
optics. In the rural area where I live you can see huge television reception dishes in the backyards of small homes, keeping villagers and country folk tuned into every entertainment and sports event on the earth. We have a spiritual longing for community and relatedness and for a cosmic vision, but we go after them with literal hardware instead of with sensitivity of the heart. We want to know all about peoples from far away places, but we don’t want to feel emotionally connected to them. Our passion for anthropological knowledge is paradoxically xenophobic. Therefore, our many studies of world cultures are soulless, replacing the common bonding of humanity and its shared wisdom with bites of information that have no way of getting into us deeply, of nourishing and transforming our sense of ourselves. Soul, of course, has been extracted from the beginning because we conceive education to be about skills and information, not about depth of feeling and imagination.

Retreat from the Modern World

In the past, people concerned with soul often dealt with these problems of the modern world, which to some degree have long been with us, by seeking out a place of retreat. Jung provides a remarkable example of a person attuned to the soul who adjusted his life not to social reality, but to his feelings of longing and restlessness. In his memoirs he tells how he built a stone tower as a dwelling for himself. It began as a primitive structure and over many years grew into something more complicated. He says he didn’t have an overall plan in mind from the beginning, but he found out that every four years he added to the building. Significantly, to Jung the number four symbolized wholeness. In the end this tower became a sacred space, a place for his soul work where he could paint on the walls, write his dreams, think his thoughts, enjoy his memories, and record his visions. The title of his mem-
oirs, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, reveals the kind of work he accomplished in his tower retreat.

"I have done without electricity," he writes, "and tend the fireplace and stove myself. Evenings, I light the old lamps. There is no running water, and I pump the water from the well. I chop the wood and cook the food. These simple acts make man simple; and how difficult it is to be simple."

The story of Jung’s tower gives us several hints about how to care for the soul, especially when it is threatened by modern life. Whereas psychotherapy generally focuses on isolated personality problems and searches for specific solutions to them, care of the soul concentrates on the everyday conditions of life. If an emotional problem presents itself, the real issue may not be some single trauma or troubled relationship. Maybe the issue is a life set up in such a way that soul is neglected habitually. Problems are part of every human life, and they do not necessarily wither the soul. The soul suffers more from the everyday conditions of life when they do not nourish it with the solid experiences it craves.

Jung’s tower was a personal temple for his spiritual life. Any of us could follow his example and dedicate a room or even a corner of the house for soul work. Jung’s tower helped him create a certain kind of space where he could concretely feel his personal lifetime stretched at both ends, reflectively back into the past and prophetically into the future. His tower was a concrete work of imagination that gave him an exit from modern culture. It is one thing to wish for a way beyond the limits of modernism and another to find an effective means of establishing such an awareness; an effective technology of the soul can be crucial.

Jung remarked that in his tower he felt close to his ancestors—another traditional concern of spirituality. "In the winter of 1955–56," he writes, "I chiseled the names of my paternal ancestors on three stone tablets and placed them in the courtyard of the Tower. I painted the ceiling with motifs from my own and my wife’s arms. When I was working on the stone tablets, I became aware of the
fateful links between me and my ancestors. I feel very strongly that I am under the influence of things or questions which were left incomplete and unanswered by my parents and grandparents and more distant ancestors.”

This remarkable passage demonstrates how much Jung’s inner and outer worlds were in fruitful dialogue with each other. For him, to care for the soul meant building, painting, and carving. His tower stands as the embodiment of his inner urgency for simplicity and eternity. The tower is like a fragment from a dream externalized, an “objective correlative,” to use T. S. Eliot’s phrase, of the inner imagination. Even in his professional writing, Jung took the lead from his soul, as when he launched into an extensive and demanding study of alchemy after a dream pointed him in that direction.

Care of the soul asks us to observe its needs continually, to give them our wholehearted attention. Imagine advising someone with many signs of neglect of soul to build an annex on his house for soul work. It may seem strange or even crazy to do something so expensive and so external to deal with our psychological complaints. Yet it is obvious that soul is not going to be healed solely by means of one hour of interior retreat in the midst of an active modern life. Our retreat from the world may have to be more serious and more constantly present in our lives than a weekly counseling visit or an occasional camping trip.

Getting away from the world has always been part of the spiritual life. Monks secluded themselves in monasteries, ascetics went into the desert, Native American initiates go off on vision quests. Jung’s architectural retreat is another version of this archetypal theme—withdrawal from the world. I am not recommending going off to a monastery as a way of dealing with the modernist syndrome that so seriously threatens the life of the soul. Retreat itself can either be soulful or escapist. Some concrete, physical expression of retreat, however, could be the beginning of a spiritual life that would nour-
ish the soul. It could take the modest form of a drawer where dreams and thoughts are kept. It could consist of five minutes in the morning dedicated to writing down the night’s dream or to reflect on the day ahead. It might be the decision to take a walk through the woods instead of touring the shopping mall. It might be keeping the television set in a closet, so that watching it becomes a special occasion. It could be the purchase of a piece of sacred art that helps focus attention on spirituality. I know a neighborhood where a man leads a small group doing t’ai chi every morning in a small park.

These are modest forms of retreat that serve the spiritual needs of the soul. Spirituality need not be grandiose in its ceremonials. Indeed, the soul might benefit most when its spiritual life is performed in the context it favors—ordinary daily vernacular life. But spirituality does demand attention, mindfulness, regularity, and devotion. It asks for some small measure of withdrawal from a world set up to ignore soul.

Socially we could also recognize the value of retreat in a public way. Parks and gardens could be protected at all costs by a city sensitive to the need of the soul for retreat. Public buildings could have places where workers and visitors could retreat momentarily as part of their care of soul. It was said that in the war Vietnamese refugees abandoned their homes with nothing in their hands but their little shrines. We could easily give more attention to the objects that focus our spirituality and keep it constant. But nothing we do along these lines will be meaningful unless we value soulfulness for its own sake.

**The Rediscovery of Spirituality**

Another aspect of modern life is a loss of formal religious practice in many people’s lives, which is not only a threat to spirituality as such, but also deprives the soul of valuable
symbolic and reflective experience. Care of the soul might include a recovery of formal religion in a way that is both intellectually and emotionally satisfying. One obvious potential source of spiritual renewal is the religious tradition in which we were brought up.

Some people are fortunate in that their childhood tradition is still relevant and lively to them, but others have to search. Many modern people feel detached from their family's religious tradition because it was a painful experience for them or it seems just too naive and simple-minded. Even for these people, though, there is a way that the inherited religion may still be a source of renewed spirituality: anyone can become a “reformer,” a Luther or a Buddha, in relation to their own family religion.

When we look at the history of world religions, in almost every case we see a living tradition. The fundamental insights of every tradition are ever subjected to fresh imagination in a series of “reformations,” and what might otherwise be a dead tradition becomes the base of a continually renewing spiritual sensibility. The process is not unlike the work of Jesus, who made a new law out of the old by replacing the commandments of Mount Sinai with the softer beatitudes of his own Sermon on the Mount, or the many reformations within Judaism itself. It is like the emergence of Zen out of Taoism and Buddhism. An individual's life may reflect this cultural dynamic in religion, going through various phases, experiencing conflicting allegiances and convictions and surviving radical reforms and reinterpretations.

My own experience bears witness to this pattern of religious reformation. I was brought up in a fervent Irish-Catholic family. I'm sure I was in first grade when the nuns decided I was good material for the priesthood. I did what I was told and got good grades. I became an altar boy, which placed me in close contact with the priests. Often in my grade school years I served as an altar boy at funerals and then ate breakfast with the priest before riding to the cemetery. I was being prepared in subtle ways, and it seemed only natural to leave home at thirteen to enter a prep seminary.
I spent many years then singing Gregorian chant, meditating, and studying theology. I lived the religious life happily, not too worried about celibacy or not having a bank account. Following the will of my superiors was the most difficult thing. But my studies in theology were quite progressive. I was reading Paul Tillich and Teilhard de Chardin more passionately than the typical seminary textbooks. My own theological views were reformed so much, in fact, during my last years of study that shortly before I was to be ordained I decided it was time for a major change. It was the late sixties and revolutionary thought was in the air. I left the seminary with the thought that I would never again regard religion and the priesthood with such devotion.

Not long afterward, I had an odd experience. I had been working in a chemical laboratory for the summer. I wore a white lab coat and mixed concoctions according to coded formulas I was given, but I knew nothing about what I was doing. Around me, however, were true chemists. One evening, at the end of the work day, a brilliant young chemist whom I didn’t know well walked with me to the train station. We strolled along the tracks and talked about a variety of things. I told him about my seminary training and the new secularism I was enjoying.

He stopped and looked at me closely. “You are always going to do the work of a priest,” he said in a strange prophetic tone.

“But I was never actually a priest,” I explained.

“No matter,” he said. “You will always do the work of a priest.”

I didn’t know what he was getting at. He was a modern, no-nonsense scientist, yet he was talking like a psychic.

“I don’t understand,” I said, standing on the tracks. “I’ve given up on the idea of priesthood. I don’t feel any ambivalence. I’m glad to be starting a new life in a new world.”

“Don’t forget what I’m saying today,” he said, and then he changed the subject. I didn’t forget.

As the years go by I understand his meaning more and more, although it’s still a mystery. After that summer in the lab I went on to
study music, but I felt something missing in those old musical scores I had to transcribe by the hour. I wandered for a year or so and then found myself getting a degree in a theology department of a nearby college. One day a professor approached me and suggested that I get a Ph.D. in religion. "But I don't want to study formal religion any longer," I explained patiently.

"I know a place," he said, "Syracuse University, where you can study it the way you want to, with the arts and psychology all woven into it." Three years later I had my degree in religion, and I wondered then if this was what the chemist had in mind. It wasn't the priesthood, but it was close.

Now I find myself a practicing therapist writing about transforming psychotherapy by recovering a religious tradition called care of the soul—which originally was the work of a curate or priest. Even though my current work has nothing explicitly to do with the established church, it is deeply rooted in that tradition. Catholicism is being shaped and lived, for better or worse, in this so-called lapsed—I might say radically reformed—Catholic. The teachings I grew up with and studied intensely have now been refined, tuned and adjusted in a personal reformation that I by no means planned, but that apparently is being accomplished. Those teachings are the ultimate source of my own spirituality.

**Everyday Sacredness**

There are two ways of thinking about church and religion. One is that we go to church in order to be in the presence of the holy, to learn and to have our lives influenced by that presence. The other is that church teaches us directly and symbolically to see the sacred dimension of everyday life. In this latter sense, religion is an "art of memory," a way of sustaining mindfulness about the religion that is inherent in everything we do. For
some, religion is a Sunday affair, and they risk dividing life into the holy Sabbath and the secular week. For others, religion is a weeklong observance that is inspired and sustained on the Sabbath. It is not insignificant that in our language each day of the week is dedicated to a god or goddess, from Saturn’s Saturday to Thursday’s Thor to Monday’s Moon. In other languages the dedication is equally clear, as in Italian, where Friday is venerdi, the day of Venus.

In her extraordinary book, *Ordinarily Sacred*, Lynda Sexson teaches us how to catch the appearance of the sacred in the most ordinary objects and circumstances. She tells the story of an old man who showed her a china cabinet filled with items related to his deceased wife. This was a sacred box, she says, in the tradition of the Ark of the Covenant and the Christian tabernacle. In this sense, a box of special letters or other objects kept in the attic is a tabernacle, a container of holy things. Emily Dickinson’s forty-nine ribboned packets of poems, carefully written and stored, are true holy writings, preserved, appropriately, with ritual bindings. We can all create sacred books and boxes—a volume of dreams, a heart-felt diary, a notebook of thoughts, a particularly meaningful album of photographs—and thus in a small but significant way can make the everyday sacred. This kind of spirituality, so ordinary and close to home, is especially nourishing to the soul. Without this lowly incorporation of the sacred into life, religion can become so far removed from the human situation as to be irrelevant. People can be extremely religious in a formal way and yet profess values in everyday life that are thoroughly secular.

An appreciation for vernacular spirituality is important because without it our idealization of the holy, making it precious and too removed from life, can actually obstruct a genuine sensitivity to what is sacred. Churchgoing can become a mere aesthetic experience or, psychologically, even a defense against the power of the holy. Formal religion, so powerful and influential in the estab-
lishment of values and principles, always lies on a cusp between the
divine and the demonic. Religion is never neutral. It justifies and in-
flames the emotions of a holy war, and it fosters profound guilt
about love and sex. The Latin word *sacer*, the root of *sacred*,
means both “holy” and “taboo,” so close is the relationship be-
tween the holy and the forbidden.

I once worked with a woman who had a dose of psychological
modernism. She was a fashion model whose profession was keep-
ing her at a distance from her deep desires, and at twenty-nine she
was feeling over the hill. I noticed in our first few conversations
that she referred several times to her advanced age. No one wants
to hire a model who has a wrinkle or a gray hair, she said. So here
was our first problem. Her career was alienating her from her body
and from her aging.

Growing old is one of the ways the soul nudges itself into atten-
tion to the spiritual aspect of life. The body’s changes teach us
about fate, time, nature, mortality, and character. Aging forces us
to decide what is important in life. This woman was in a profession
that encouraged her to sidestep or work against that natural pro-
cess, and the resulting division was invading both her work and her
more private sense of herself.

She also wanted to have a baby, but she didn’t know how she
could work pregnancy into her hectic schedule and travels. She said
she might be able to get a month free, but she couldn’t see how she
could get more time. She also had to keep her thoughts about hav-
ing a baby to herself. She was afraid her agent might get wind of it
and drop her.

She had been brought up in a Jewish family, but going to temple
as a child had never meant much to her. Now she had no knowl-
dge about her religion nor any emotional loyalty to it. Her focus
was on her work and she loved the quick-paced life it gave her. In
short, she was a jet-setter, and her soul made itself felt only in vague
longings for a more satisfying life, a better marriage, and a baby.
She came to me with a simple goal: "I want a better life. I want to do something about the feeling of emptiness I have every morning when I get up. Help me."

"Do you ever dream?" I asked her. I find that a person cut off from inner thoughts and feelings, caught up in a fast external life, simply cannot get very far when they try to understand themselves consciously. People usually confuse self-understanding with rational analysis. Most of us like to take verbal tests that tell us who we are or we get caught up in the latest psychological fad, but these methods tend to inhibit self-knowledge by shrinking our complexity to a simplistic formula.

Dreams are different. They are a person's own mythology and imagery. They are not easy to understand, but that very fact makes them a good starting point for reflection. As we study our dreams over a period of time, we begin to see patterns and recurring images that offer deeper insight than any standardized test or instant self-analysis can approximate.

"I dream all the time," my client said to me. Then she told me the dream she had had that morning. She was sitting in a restaurant in New York, staring at a plate of food on the table in front of her. She took her fork and lifted white crêpes that were on the plate, and underneath she found two fresh green peas. That was the entire dream.

Sometimes dreams are like Japanese haiku or short lyric poems. You have to sit with them the way you would with a miniature painting or a little piece of verse. A restaurant may seem like such an ordinary setting that we might pass it by. But, as we have seen, it is clear how important and how richly symbolic food is to the soul. Psychological symptoms, too, often manifest themselves in weight gain or loss, in allergies to various foods, or in idiosyncratic eating habits.

The word restaurant itself is suggestive. It means "restore" and goes back further to the word stauros, a stake planted in the ground to help tie things down. Being in a restaurant is not the
same as eating dinner at home. For this person in particular a restaurant was a reminder of the difficulty she had in making a home. She was always on the road, always eating in restaurants.

We also considered the simple poetry of the dream. She had to use a fork to lift up the large, flat, not terribly nutritious crêpes in order to find a more nourishing food, the peas. Tiny as they are, peas offer green sustenance. They were like little green jewels of nutrition hidden by a blanket of white. The color green also suggests hope and growth. We talked about blankets of white in her life, things she considered flat and uninteresting that might cover over some hopeful new possibilities. Her first thought was the drudgery of housework. A baby, of course, wouldn’t solve that problem. She said she also felt a general malaise, a pale sheet of dreariness in her moods, and yet she had the sense that there was life buried under that flatness.

This pea dream reminded me of another I had heard years before, in which a man was in a restaurant and ordered a steak; instead he was served a large platter of beans. That dream sounded like a Zen story to me and led me to reflect for a long time on the value of plain pedestrian food, especially when we consciously order up something more special. Life has a way of plopping extreme ordinariness in front of us when we are entertaining exotic gourmet daydreams.

A few months after the pea dream, the model came to tell me that she was pregnant. Ah, I thought, were those peas wrapped in crêpes also an image of what was going on in her body?

"Being pregnant is having an effect on me," she said. "My job isn’t the only thing in life now. And those worries about getting old are letting up. I don’t get it. And what really has me worried is that I’m reading serious books, for God’s sake!"

Her spiritual development had begun. Spirituality is not only expressed in the eloquent language of the world’s great religions. Out of her pregnancy, this woman began to develop a philosophy.
of life, no small spiritual achievement. She was entering her fate and seeing her life through the processes of her body in a way she had never known before. These were all beginnings—two orbs of green under a white pancake.

I once heard a story about D. T. Suzuki, the early exponent of Zen in the West. He was sitting at a table with a number of distinguished scholars. A man at his side kept asking him questions. Suzuki ate his dinner patiently and said nothing. The man, who obviously had never read a Zen story, then asked: “How would you sum up Zen for a Westerner like me?” With unusual vigor in his voice, Suzuki looked him in the eye and said: “Eat!”

Spirituality is seeded, germinates, sprouts and blossoms in the mundane. It is to be found and nurtured in the smallest of daily activities. Like Lynda Sexson’s china cabinet, the spirituality that feeds the soul and ultimately heals our psychological wounds may be found in those sacred objects that dress themselves in the accoutrements of the ordinary.

**Myth**

In the farcical play *The Frogs*, by Aristophanes, the god Dionysus makes a journey to Hades in order to bring back one of the dead poets. The city is languishing under poor poetry, and the best solution appears to be to resurrect one of the old successful practitioners of the art. In the underworld, Dionysus judges a competition between Aeschylus and Euripides, in the end inviting Aeschylus to save the city from its dearth of poetic depth. Euripides is disqualified for demonstrating his supposed profundity with the line “When we hold the mistrusted trustworthy, and the trustworthy mistrust”—a piece of gibberish that can be heard in any time and place that has lost its soul.

Our current cultural situation fits the pattern of *The Frogs* quite
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closely. We have lost a certain depth in the way we understand our experiences, using language that is often doubletalk and shallow, like the offering of Euripides in hell, in order to describe complex and profound aspects of life. We, too, need a return to the depths and a recovery of a lost appreciation for the poetics of ordinary life. What would we come up with if we sent an ambassador to the deeps to find an adequate language and a poetic form equal to our complicated lives? Like the Greek tragedians and philosophers, we could do no better than to revive a sense of myth.

A myth is a sacred story set in a time and place outside history, describing in fictional form the fundamental truths of nature and human life. Mythology gives body to the invisible and eternal factors that are always part of life but don’t appear in a literal, factual story. Most of the time, when we tell a story about our lives, we couch it in purely human terms. When was the last time you talked about monsters, angels, or demons when you were describing some strongly felt experience? Myth reaches beyond the personal to express an imagery reflective of archetypal issues that shape every human life.

When we are trying to understand our problems and our suffering, we look for a story that will be revealing. Our surface explanations usually show their shortcomings; they don’t satisfy. And so we turn to family themes. Although we take stories of childhood and family literally, I think our recourse to this past is a way of reaching for myth, for the story that is deep enough to express the profound feelings we have in the present. When we discussed the family, I tried to show that memories of mother and father and other family members are acts of imagination, and not just memories. When we talk about what our fathers did or did not do, we are recalling our own actual past and at the same time describing our need for an eternal father, anyone who can play the role of protector and guide, authority and validator. Our memories of the family are a significant part of the mythology by which we live.
In the past few years, a great deal of literature has appeared on the subject of mythology. The strong public response, I believe, has to do with our need for depth and substance in the way we imagine our experience. Mythology from around the world vividly explores the fundamental patterns and themes of human life as you find them anywhere on the globe. The imagery may be specific to the cultures in which the mythology arises, but the issues are universal. This is one of the values of mythology—its way of cutting through personal differences in order to get to the great themes of human experience.

Mythology, for example, often presents a cosmology, a description of how the world came to be and how it is governed. It is important to be oriented, to have some imagination of the physical universe in which we live. That is why many mythologists have noted that even modern science, for all its factual validity, also gives us a cosmology, a mythology in a true sense of the word.

Myth has the connotation of falsehood, as when we judge that an assumption about the way things are is "only" a myth. Myth may seem to be a flight of fancy because its imagery is often fantastic, with many gods and devils or impossible acts and unreal settings. But the fantastic elements in mythology are essential to the genre; they take us away from the realistic particulars of life to invisible factors that are nonetheless real.

Because myth reaches so far in its description of universal ways in which human life plays itself out, it can be an indispensable guide in our self-understanding. Lacking an adequate poetic understanding, like Dionysus in *The Frogs* we are forced to make a journey to the underworld. That journey is not always pleasant. Neurosis and psychosis could be described as the dark form of such a descent, but there is also a lighter version. We could do what Dionysus does, without the dangerous trip to the netherworld: we could resurrect mythmakers of the past by recovering an appreciation for mythologies from around the world.
Mythology is not the same as myth. Mythology is a collection of stories that attempt to portray the myths, the deep patterns, that we live in our ordinary lives. Just as stories of our childhood and family evoke the myths that we live as adults, so cultural mythologies evoke mythic patterns that we may trace in modern life. A mythology from a foreign culture can still help us imagine factors we are dealing with at the deepest levels every day. Mythology teaches us how to imagine more profoundly than sociological or psychological categories allow. This, by the way, is one reason I am cautious about psychological interpretations of mythology: we don't want to reduce the mysteries contained in myth to modern language and concepts that are already insufficient for investigations into our experience.

By reading mythology, we learn how to think more deeply and imagistically. Our current mythology, which we take as literal and not as myth, is a world-view made up of facts, information, and scientific explanations. In this context, the stories and teachings of religion seem to be wholly other, concerned with another world, and so we run up against many conflicts between religion and science. Perhaps if we understood the scientific perspective as a mythology, we might be able to consider other mythologies at the same time.

Myth is always a way of imagining; it is not concerned essentially with fact, except that facts can be the starting point for a mythological story. I remember well a guide in Ireland pointing to a rough gap in a mountain ridge and explaining that it was caused by the Devil taking a giant bite out of the land. Mythology often begins with physical evidence, but then uses it as a springboard for fictions, the truth of which concerns human life and values rather than the physical world that spawned the story. We get it backward when we try to trace mythologies back to their physical sources, thinking then that we have explained the myth.

The same principle holds when we try to explain our current feelings and behavior as caused by events that happened in the
past. Mythological thinking doesn't look for literal causes but rather for more insightful imagining. It considers the past, but the past as myth is different from the past as fact. As myth, the stories we tell about our lives suggest themes and figures that are operative in the present. If we go so far back in time as to be out of history altogether, to Olympus or Eden, then we touch upon the bedrock themes that are the foundation of human existence.

The depth of myth is one of its characteristics that make it a useful means for bringing soul into life. As we have seen, soul is at home in a sense of time that reaches beyond the limits of ordinary human life. The soul is interested in eternal issues, even as it is embedded in the particulars of ordinary life. This, the interpenetration of time and eternity, is one of the great mysteries explored by many religions and is itself the subject of many mythologies.

Contemporary authors who attempt psychological readings of myth are performing a service that is ancient. Our own Western history is filled with literature that explores contemporary meanings of traditional myths. It is important in that effort, however, not to shrink mythology to our own concepts. Rather, mythology could enlarge our psychological thinking to include the mysteries at work in human life that will never be fully explained. Mythology can bring soul to our psychological thinking only if we allow the myths to stimulate our imaginations, not if we translate them into modern psychology.

Mythology can also teach us to perceive the myths we are living every day and to observe those that are particularly ours as individuals. It isn’t necessary to label all our deep, mythic stories with Greek or Roman names. Mythology is an aid to seeing our myths, but each of has our own special demons and divine figures, our own other-world landscapes and struggles. Jung advised us to turn to traditional mythology in order to amplify, to see more clearly and hear more sharply the themes that are special to us. But the important thing is to realize that, although life seems to be a matter of
literal causes and effects, in fact we are living out deep stories, often unconsciously.

We are condemned to live out what we cannot imagine. We can be caught in myth, not knowing that we are acting as a character in a drama. Soul work involves an effort toward increasing awareness of these myths that form the foundation of our lives, for if we become familiar with the characters and themes that are central to our myths, we can be free from their compulsions and the blindness that comes upon us when we are caught up in them. Again, we can see the importance of imaginal practices such as journals, dream work, poetry, painting, and therapy aimed at exploring images in dream and life. These methods keep us actively engaged in the mythologies that are the stuff of our own lives.

The frog chorus in Aristophanes' drama offers a good image for a way of life accommodated to myth. They are amphibious creatures who can live both on the surface and in the depths. In the play, they are able to guide Dionysus and his party to the underworld. In order to enjoy the soulfulness of mythic life, we need this amphibious ability that allows us to know and visit our own deep strata where meaning and values truly are formed.

The frogs tell Dionysus, when he complains about their croaking, that they are loved by Pan, Apollo, and the Muses—those deities who value music and lyrics and who underlie a poetic sensibility in human life. Without poetic awareness, myth turns into rigid fundamentalism, a defensive attitude toward our personal stories. But with the help of the Muses, myth can give depth, insight, and wisdom to everyday life.

Ritual

Historically, myth and ritual are in tandem. A people tells its stories of creation and of its deities, and then it
worshipped these deities and celebrates its creation in rites. While mythology is a way of telling stories about felt experience that are not literal, ritual is an action that speaks to the mind and heart but doesn’t necessarily make sense in a literal context. In church people do not eat bread in order to feed their bodies but to nourish their souls.

If we could grasp this simple idea, that some actions may not have an effect on actual life but speak instead to the soul, and if we could let go of the dominant role of function in so many things we do, then we might give more to the soul every day. A piece of clothing may be useful, but it may also have special meaning in relation to a theme of the soul. It is worth going to a little trouble to make a dinner a ritual by attending to the symbolic suggestiveness of the food and the way it is presented and eaten. Without this added dimension, which requires some thought, it may seem that life goes on smoothly, but slowly soul is weakened and can make its presence known only in symptoms.

It’s worth noting that neurosis, and certainly psychosis, often takes the form of compulsive ritual. We can’t stop ourselves eating certain foods, often “junk food,” again and again. We can’t pull ourselves away from the television set, especially when a program appears that we have grown accustomed to watching. Isn’t this a compulsive ritual? People who are severely disturbed chant ritual-sounding words at inappropriate moments or wear exaggerated costumes or wash their hands compulsively. They make gestures with their hands and arms that exaggerate the meanings they want to express. I knew a man who would cross his index fingers whenever he felt the presence of evil, which was several times in an hour, and a woman who would touch her knee at the end of every sentence she spoke.

Could it be that these neurotic rituals appear when imagination has been lost and the soul is no longer cared for? In other words, neurotic rituals could signify a loss of ritual in daily life that, if pres-
ent, would keep the soul in imagination and away from literalism. Neurosis could be defined as a loss of imagination. We say we “act out,” meaning that what should be kept in the realm of image is lived out in life as if it were not poetry. The cure for neurotic ritualism could be the cultivation of a more genuine sense of ritual in our daily life.

Ritual maintains the world’s holiness. Knowing that everything we do, no matter how simple, has a halo of imagination around it and can serve the soul enriches life and makes the things around us more precious, more worthy of our protection and care. As in a dream a small object may assume significant meaning, so in a life that is animated with ritual there are no insignificant things. When traditional cultures carve elaborate faces and bodies on their chairs and tools, they are acknowledging the soul in ordinary things, as well as the fact that simple work is also ritual. When we stamp out our mass-made products with functionality blazoned on them but no sign of imagination, we are denying ritual a role in ordinary affairs. We are chasing away the soul that could animate our lives.

We go to church or temple in order to participate in that strong traditional ritual, but also to learn how to do rituals. Tradition is an important part of ritual because the soul is so much greater in scope than an individual’s consciousness. Rituals that are “made up” are not always just right, or, like our own interpretations of our dreams, they may support our pet theories but not the eternal truths. I recall a group of nuns many years ago who decided to sing Easter hymns during the Good Friday services because they thought the focus on Christ’s death was too morbid and depressing. Tradition may have known better the importance of feeling the depth of the Good Friday mood, dark as it is. If we are going to give ritual a more important place in life, it is helpful to be guided by formal religion and tradition.

We may want to seek out a church that is more sensitive to the
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traditions of ritual than to passing fads, not for the sake of general conservatism but because deep and multifaceted soul is preserved best in traditions that reflect long periods of time. My upbringing was Catholic, and I recall the bones of a saint and a block of stone in the altar, required even if the altar was made of wood. I could take that information about sacred technology home and recognize that it is important to keep some relics of the family in my house. I don’t mean their actual bones, but maybe a keepsake, or some photographs or old letters. I might also want something made of stone, as a reminder of the vast time in which soul lives compared to my individual life. I also learned from the church that candles should be made of beeswax and that the choice of bread and wine at a dinner is particularly important.

I remember the sacred book on the altar when I was a boy, the missal for the Mass. It was bound in red leather, and its pages were marked with colorful, broad, tasseled ribbons. The text was large, and the directions for the liturgy were written in red letters that were a stark contrast to the prayers in black. I can even now take a lesson from these particulars, for instance, to keep in mind the importance of rubrics—the red-lettered instructions that tell precisely how to perform a rite. In my own mind I could give attention every day to rubrics, to the special way things ought to be done.

Naturally, what I am suggesting could be taken in a superficial manner. Sometimes people get caught up in rituals that have no soul. They play with rubrics in too light a manner. I’m talking about a deep sense of how things can be accomplished, with style, to evoke a dimension that truly nourishes the soul. I don’t recall much sentimentality in the rituals of the Mass when I was a child. Later, I was taught in theology classes that the rituals are effective ex opere operato, “from the thing done,” rather than because of the intentions of the one performing the rite. Maybe this is a significant difference between genuine ritual and playing at ritualism—the
personal intentions and preferences of the one doing the ritual take second place to the traditions and to the ritual that emerges from the materials themselves.

Rubrics cannot arise out of some superficial place. They may be closely tied to the individual's taste and background, but they must also well up from a solid source deep in the person's psyche. Jung's love for his stone carvings was neither sentimental nor experimental. They had an honesty for him and for us who behold them now much later. But that particular form of ritualizing would not be appropriate for everyone.

How interesting it would be if we could turn to priests, ministers, and rabbis in order to get help in finding our own rubrics and our own ritual materials. These spiritual professionals might be better off becoming deeply schooled in such things rather than trained in sociology, business, and psychology, which seem to be the modern preferences. The soul might be cared for better through our developing a deep life of ritual rather than through many years of counseling for personal behavior and relationships. We might even have a better time of it in such a life matters as love and emotion if we had more ritual in our lives and less psychological adjustment. We confuse purely temporal, personal, and immediate issues with deeper and enduring concerns of the soul.

The soul needs an intense, full-bodied spiritual life as much as and in the same way that the body needs food. That is the teaching and imagery of spiritual masters over centuries. There is no reason to question the wisdom of this idea. But these same masters demonstrate that the spiritual life requires careful attention, because it can be dangerous. It's easy to go crazy in the life of the spirit, warring against those who disagree, proselytizing for our own personal attachments rather than expressing our own soulfulness, or taking narcissistic satisfactions in our beliefs rather than finding meaning and pleasure in spirituality that is available to everyone.
The history of our century has shown the proclivity of neurotic spirituality toward psychosis and violence. Spirituality is powerful, and therefore has the potential for evil, as well as for good. The soul needs spirit, but our spirituality also needs soul—deep intelligence, a sensitivity to the symbolic and metaphoric life, genuine community, and attachment to the world.

We have no idea yet of the positive contribution that could be made to us individually and socially by a more soulful religion and theology. Our culture is in need of theological reflection that does not advocate a particular tradition, but tends the soul's need for spiritual direction. In order to accomplish this goal, we must gradually bring soul back to religion, following Jung, who wrote in a letter of 1910 to Freud, "What infinite rapture and wantonness lies dormant in our religion. We must bring to fruition its hymn of love."