

Soulcraft

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Chapter 1

Carrying What Is Hidden as a Gift to Others

.. To be human
is to become visible
while carrying
what is hidden
as a gift to others....

— David Whyte

There's so much more to who you are than you know right now. You are, indeed, something mysterious and someone magnificent. You hold within you — secreted for safekeeping in your heart — a great gift for this world. Although you might sometimes feel like a cog in a huge machine, that you don't really matter in the great scheme of things, the truth is that you are fully eligible for a meaningful life, a mystical life, a life of the greatest fulfillment and service. To enter that life, you do not need to join a tribal culture or renounce your religious values. You do not necessarily need to quit your job, sell or give away your home, or learn to eat only vegetables. You do, however, need to undertake a journey as joyous and gratifying as it is long and difficult. You will perhaps have to make sacrifices of the greatest sort along the way, but you will not be able to determine what they might be before you start. Nonetheless, to put things in proper perspective, please remember that at no point will you be asked to sacrifice any social roles, material objects, or self-images that you won't lose anyway at the time of your final breath. Something at your core prays you won't reach that moment without having courageously embarked, years earlier, upon the mystical journey of the soul.

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There is a great longing within each of us.

We long to discover the secrets and mysteries of our individual lives, to find our unique way of belonging to this world, to recover the never-before-seen treasure we were born to bring to our communities. To carry this treasure to others is half of our spiritual longing. The other half is to experience our oneness with the universe, with all of creation. While embracing and integrating both halves of the spiritual, Soulcraft focuses on the first: our yearning for individual personal meaning and a way to

contribute to life, a yearning that pulls us toward the heart of the world — down, that is, into wild nature and into the dark earth of our deepest desires.

Alongside our greatest longing lives an equally great terror of finding the very thing we seek. Somehow we know that doing so will irreversibly shake up our lives, our sense of security, change our relationship to everything we hold as familiar and dear. But we also suspect that saying no to our deepest desires will mean self-imprisonment in a life too small. And a far-off voice within insists that the never-before-seen treasure is well worth any sacrifices and difficulty in recovering it.

And so we search. We go to psychotherapists to heal our emotional wounds. To physicians and other health-care providers to heal our bodies. To clergy to heal our souls. All of them help — sometimes and somewhat. But the implicit and usually unconscious bargain we make with ourselves is that, yes, we want to be healed, we want to be made whole, we're willing to go some distance, but we're not willing to question the fundamental assumptions upon which our way of life has been built, both personally and societally. We ignore the still, small voice. We're not willing to risk losing what we have. We just want more.

And so our deepest longing is never fulfilled. Most often, it is never even meaningfully addressed.

The nature-based people native to all continents know that to uncover the secrets of our souls, we must journey into the unknown, deep into the darkness of our selves and farther into an outer world of many dangers and uncertainties. They understand no one would casually or gleefully choose such a thing. Indeed, most people would not begin without considerable social and cultural pressure in addition to the great intrapsychic drive to wholeness. And although the journey is a spiritual one, it is *not* a transcendental movement upward toward the light and an ecstatic union with all of creation. It is a journey downward into the dark mysteries of the individual soul. This is a journey on which, as the great German poet Rainer Maria Rilke put it, we are asked to trust not our lightness but our heaviness:

How surely gravity's law,
strong as an ocean current,
takes hold of even the smallest thing
and pulls it toward the heart of the world.

Each thing—
each stone, blossom, child—
is held in place.
Only we, in our arrogance,

push out beyond what we each belong to
for some empty freedom.

If we surrendered
to earth's intelligence
we could rise up rooted, like trees.

Instead we entangle ourselves
in knots of our own making
and struggle, lonely and confused.

So, like children, we begin again
to learn from the things,
because they are in God's heart;
they have never left him.

This is what the things can teach us:
to fall,
patiently to trust our heaviness.
Even a bird has to do that
before he can fly.

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People have felt the downward pull to soul since the beginning of time.

In the mythologies of the world, we find innumerable stories of the hero's or heroine's descent to the underworld. The Greeks told the tale of Orpheus, the fabulously skilled musician who traveled to Hades to find and revive his dead bride, Eurydice. He succeeds at the rescue but then, as he leads her back to the daylight world, loses her again (and this time forever) when he disobeys the gods by turning around to make sure she is still there.

Persephone, the daughter of the fertility goddess, Demeter, is abducted by Hades, the lord of the dark underworld, to be his bride. Eventually, Zeus sends Hermes to rescue Persephone (with only partial success: she must spend one-third of each year below).

The Anglo-Saxon Norsemen told the story of the hero-warrior Beowulf, who descends into a dreadful swamp to do battle with the monster of all monsters, Grendel's mother. Beowulf slays the beast but returns as part monster himself.

From the ancient Sumerian world comes the myth of the goddess of heaven, Inanna, who descends to the netherworld to confront her dark sister, the goddess

Ereshkigal, who kills Inanna and hangs her corpse on a peg. Two mourners are sent to Ereshkigal by Enki, the god of waters and wisdom, and secure Inanna's release, but Inanna must send a substitute to take her place in the netherworld.

The Nubian people of Saharan Africa recount the story of a young woman who, because of her beauty, is spurned by the other women of the village. In her despair, she descends to the bottom of a river, a very dangerous place, where she encounters a repulsive old woman covered with horrible sores who asks the young woman to lick her wounds. She does and is thereby saved from the monster of the depths. She returns to the village with great gifts.

Such myths and stories are found in countless cultures. They imply we each must undertake the journey of descent if we are to heal ourselves at the deepest levels and reach a full and authentic adulthood, that there are powerful and dangerous beings in the underworld who are not particularly friendly or attractive, and that we are forever changed by the experience. In contemporary Western cultures, we live as if the spiritual descent is no longer necessary; we live without realizing that the journey is meant for each one of us, not just for the heroes and heroines of mythology.

In his classic text *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the great mythologist Joseph Campbell identified in rich detail the universal patterns and themes underlying the journey of descent as found throughout world mythology. These patterns and themes reveal what we can expect on our own underworld journeys.

The hero or heroine of mythology represents you and me, the everyday self (the *I*, or ego). If and when you embark upon the underworld adventure, it begins the same way it does in myth — by leaving home. You leave your commonplace world and roles and your familiar way of understanding yourself. Soon (at the threshold of the underworld, the kingdom of the dark) you encounter a demon — a shadowy element of your own unconscious — that guards the passage. This is the first test. There are two ways you can continue at this point. If you defeat the demon or conciliate it (perhaps by making an offering or using a charm), you enter the underworld “alive” (with some ordinary awareness remaining). If you are slain or dismembered, on the other hand, you descend in “death” (stripped of all normal awareness). But you descend either way, and that's what's most important.

You then journey through what Campbell called “a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces.” This is precisely how the underworld feels — although exotic and uncanny, the beings you encounter there seem to know you because, after all, they embody the previously denied aspects of your larger self.

Your underworld encounters help you in two ways. Some of them further undermine or defeat your former understanding of self and world, while other encounters provide you with helpers or magical aid, supporting your more soul-rooted way of being. At the climax of the journey — it's actually a nadir on an underworld excursion — you undergo a supreme ordeal that puts a decisive end to your old self-image (ego death) and leads to your reward, the recovery of your core soul knowledge.

This recovery may be experienced in a variety of ways: union between your conscious self and soul, perhaps embodied in a sacred marriage or sexual union with a god or goddess; soul knowledge confirmed by a divine being; an experience of self as a carrier of sacred powers; or the discovery of a treasure or boon.

Returning to the middleworld, you are now more consciously aligned with your soul's purpose. Your world is thereby restored both inwardly and outwardly — inwardly in that your image of the world and your place in it has become whole again but in an utterly new and expanded way, and outwardly in that you return with a sacred task to perform in your community, a gift that contributes to the healing and wholing of the world.

The gift you carry for others is not an attempt to save the world but to fully belong to it. It's not possible to save the world by trying to save it. You need to find what is genuinely yours to offer the world before you can make it a better place. Discovering your unique gift to bring to your community is your greatest opportunity and challenge. The offering of that gift — your true self — is the most you can do to love and serve the world. And it is all the world needs.

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We can create contemporary methods to facilitate the underworld journey.

For thousands of years, we have been living in a culture that “protects” us from the hardships and dangers of the descent, a world in which everything is more or less predictable and where most people emulate those getting the greatest socioeconomic rewards. It is a world from which the true elders have largely disappeared, the elders who once possessed intimate knowledge of soul and who waited for us at the underworld threshold to guide us across.

Yet, knowledge of the mystical journey remains available. In addition to world mythology, it can be found in the shamanic traditions of nature-based peoples, in the esoteric branches of the great world religions, in the few remaining mystery schools, in the verses of the soul poets, and in modern depth psychology. Most importantly, this

knowledge is always and everywhere found within the souls of each of us and in the remaining wild places of the world.

But once we've identified the universal patterns of descent — as articulated by Campbell and others and as found in nature and our own souls — how do we activate those patterns in contemporary Western life?

This question has been at the heart of my work as a psychologist, wilderness guide, and ally to the underworld journey. *Soulcraft* makes the bridge from the recognition of archetypal patterns to the actual *experience* of the descent. It provides practices and pathways to initiate and deepen the journey. Some of these methods are modern adaptations from the cultural wisdom of the ages, and others are what my colleagues and I discovered by simply rolling up our sleeves, along with our participants, and diving into the mysteries.

With the support of nature and an underworld guide, our souls can show us how to re-create a relationship with mystery. We have only to learn how to look and then take our next step upon the journey.

Each of the soulcraft practices presented in these pages is designed to be used hand in hand with the others. The introspective practices complement and animate the outer, nature-oriented approaches, and each method deepens and extends the results from every other.

But *Soulcraft* provides more than a grab bag of tools and practices. It encourages a way of life that emphasizes meaning and mystery, celebrates the depths and magnificence of our individuality, and helps reintroduce to Western civilization that other, downward-bearing half of the spiritual journey.

Such an integrated approach to soul discovery and embodiment is what nature-based people have always possessed. Imitating native people of any land or tradition, however, is unnecessary and can be disrespectful to them and to ourselves and, ultimately, of limited value for people who are not born or adopted members of those cultures. *It is time for us in the Western world to create our own contemporary and practical path to soul, generated in part by our intimate relationship to land and place.*

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The most effective paths to soul are nature-based.

Nature — the outer nature we call “the wild” — has always been the essential element and the primary setting of the journey to soul. The soul, after all, is our inner wilderness, the intrapsychic terrain we know the least and that holds our individual

mysteries. When we truly enter the outer wild — fully opened to its enigmatic and feral powers — the soul responds with its own cries and cravings. These passions might frighten us at first because they threaten to upset the carefully assembled applegart of our conventional lives. Perhaps this is why many people regard their souls in much the same way they view deserts, jungles, oceans, wild mountains, and dark forests — as dangerous and forbidding places.

Our society is forever erecting barriers between its citizens and the inner/outer wilderness. On the outer side, we have our air-conditioned houses and automobiles, gated communities and indoor malls, fences and animal-control officers, dams and virtual realities. On the inner side, we're offered prescribed "mood enhancers," alcohol, and street drugs; consumerism and dozens of other soul-numbing addictions; fundamentalisms, transcendentalisms, and other escapisms; rigid belief systems as to what is "good" and what is "bad"; and teachings that God or some other paternal figure will watch over us and protect our delicate lives.

But when we escape beyond these artificial barriers, we discover something astonishing: nature and soul not only depend on one another but *long* for one another, *are*, in the end, of the same substance, like twins or trees sharing the same roots. The individual soul is the core of our human nature, the reason for which we were born, the essence of our specific life purpose, and ours alone. Yet our true nature is at first a mystery to our everyday mind. To recover our inmost secrets, we must venture into the inner/outer wilderness, where we shall find our essential nature waiting for us.

Thomas Berry, the cultural historian and religious scholar, reminds us that the word *nature* comes from the Latin *natus*, "to be born," and that the nature of a thing "has to do with that dynamic principle that holds something together and gives it its identity." The human soul functions in the same way: the soul holds our individuality together and gives us our identity. *Soul* and *nature* are only slightly different ways of talking about the essence of a thing, whether a stone, a blossom, or a person. The soul of a blossom is its essential nature. Our human souls consist of those aspects of self that are most natural, that are most *of nature* — the aspects of self to which nature herself gave birth.

Nature depends on us to embody our souls. The world cannot fully express itself without each of us fully expressing *our* selves. Diminished human soul means diminished nature. Just as nature longs for the embodiment of our souls, our souls long for a world in which nature can embody itself fully and diversely.

When, at long last, we gaze into our own depths, we see the same kind of enchantment, and resilience we see in undisturbed nature. And when we journey far enough from the routines of our civilized lives — in space or in cultural distance, far

enough, that is, into wilderness — we see reflected back to us the essential qualities of our deepest selves.

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The underworld journey is not at all the same as psychotherapy and it is a far cry from a nature walk or an Outward Bound course.

The practices in this book will help you reach the boundary of the world within which you have defined and limited yourself (as we all do), and, when you are sufficiently prepared, help you cross that threshold and dive toward the beautiful and terrifying shapes of your own soul. We'll explore practices such as discovering nature as a mirror, confronting your own death, extended periods of solitude and/or fasting, the art of wandering, working with your sacred wound, the way of council, self-designed ceremony, understanding nature's signs and omens, interspecies communication, trance dancing, and the arts of shadow work and of soulful romance.

Although soulcraft methods can be employed in a variety of settings, sometimes in your own home, the reader must be forewarned: the underworld journey is, in most cases, neither easy nor painless, and even the best psychotherapist will be of limited value as you proceed. There is no quick fix for the alienation from soul. Cultivating a relationship to soul and transforming your life take time and hard work.

Although soulcraft practice almost always generates psycho-spiritual benefits, the *full* encounter with soul requires the surrender of control and predictability. Your ego must be shocked or shifted in a way that extracts you from your surface life. This book helps you prepare for and invoke such major shifts in consciousness.

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The pull toward soul feels like an earthquake in the midst of your life.

The journey of descent begins with a *call to adventure*, a stirring declaration from the depths, from the gods and goddesses, that it is time to leave behind everything you thought your life was supposed to be. The call is much more than an urge for an extended vacation, a challenging project, or a new career or social scene. You may *think* you are simply going to leave home for a while, learn something new, and return to what you always thought was yours, but you will not in fact be in control. You might one day return to the place where home existed and find only ashes.

In the industrialized Western world, the call comes without warning, without help from elders, and without a formal rite of passage. Although unexpected, the call is preceded by ominous tremors. For me, those tremors rippled beneath the ground of my early professional career.

The university was the world for which my family, education, and aptitude — my entire life — had prepared me. By my mid-twenties, I was successful enough to be in danger of becoming entrenched and inflated. I imagined I would one day hold an endowed chair at an Ivy League university; all I had to do was collect data, publish papers, and receive one promotion after another.

Academia was such a good fit for my personality, I could easily have dissipated my life there. Yet, beneath the veneer of outward success, I was an insincere stranger in a strange land of crowded classrooms and deadly committee meetings. I had little passion for the academic life — intellectual interest and ambition, yes, but no true devotion or enthusiasm. But I never thought of leaving — what else was there?

Still, I could not deny that my deepest motivations were social and financial security, professional status, and self-aggrandizement. Unbeknownst to me at the time, my university life arrested me in an immature identity. The sprouting tree of my career did not have its roots dug into the deeper desires of soul.

In lieu of a genuine initiation in my teens or twenties, I simply transferred my dependencies from my human parents onto an institutional, academic “parent.” For others in our society, the new parent is a corporation or a church, a government job, a professional society or partnership, a business, or the military. For yet others, there are the deadly havens of gang membership, codependent relationships, or addiction.

I heard the call to adventure a few times in my early twenties, but I didn’t know who or what was calling. Finally, on that winter day in the Adirondacks, I got rattled in a way I couldn’t ignore. As I ascended Cascade Mountain on snowshoes, climbing toward a gold and blue dome, I felt emotionally torn: on the one hand, I exulted in the freedom and wildness of the mountains — untamed nature, where I felt most at home. On the other, I dragged my professorial life behind me like an anchor. I wondered why I didn’t find my career more fulfilling and hoped I only needed a little more time to get settled.

But, upon reaching the summit, my understanding of life changed and my adolescent trance ended. Lost in a sea of white peaks, I was pierced by an unfathomable sadness for a loss that was at once mine and not mine, and a hope for something bigger than I knew to hope for. Sadness and hope coursed through my veins and gathered in my belly. I stood perfectly still, hardly risking a breath. Half-crazed, I

scanned every facet of the vast snowscape below as if something precious and essential to me was hidden there, in a concealed valley or the shadow of a river bend.

Then, the truth exploded into my awareness. I heard myself gasp. There was no denying it: my university tenure track was a spiritual dead end and I simply had to leave, despite my promising career, despite the inevitable incomprehension from family and colleagues, despite my not knowing where I would go, how I would survive, or who I would be. I would have to abandon my students and all those boxes of painstakingly gathered and unanalyzed data.

Campbell referred to such earthquakes as moments in which we are “summoned by destiny,” our “spiritual center of gravity” shifting “from within the pale of society to a zone unknown.”

Responding to a call on the summit of a New York peak was the central turning point of my life. My journey of descent began, mythically and literally, at the moment I drew my eyes away from the promise glimmering far below and turned to take my first step off that snow-shrouded mountain.

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In the Western world, many are called but few respond. Entry into the life of the soul demands a steep price.

Perhaps you remember a time when *you* heard the call to adventure. Often it comes near the end of formal education. As a senior in high school or college, you may have felt an overwhelming desire to chuck it all, to leave everything behind and wander into the world. Alarmed, you wondered if this would mean saying good-bye to everyone you loved and everything you had worked so hard to create.

But this is precisely how it works: We don't enter soulful adulthood merely by reaching a certain age, birthing or raising children, or accepting certain “adult” responsibilities. We must undergo an initiation process that *does* require letting go of the familiar and comfortable. Through ordeals and ecstasies, we come to know what we were born to do, what gift we were meant to bring to the world, what vision is ours to embody.

Entry into the life of the soul — a life of passion, enchantment, and service — demands a steep price, a psychological form of dying. We do not easily give up our claim on the good life of extended adolescence, what Jungian analyst James Hollis refers to as our “first adulthood.” Nature-based societies, understanding this, provide their youth with extensive preparation for the encounter with soul followed by an

arduous initiation rite. These rites, now beginning to reappear in our own society, facilitate the radical shift in consciousness required to turn our focus from familiar egocentric concerns to those of the soul, from our first adulthood to our second.

In contemporary Western society, the underworld journey is neither understood nor encouraged by the majority of parents, teachers, health professionals, or cultural leaders, to say nothing of mainstream business, science, or politics. Yet a genuine soulful adulthood is possible for everyone. We need to restore the ways of soul initiation — but not by adoption of other cultures' traditions or rites; rather, through the creation of our own contemporary and diverse models that better fit our postindustrial selves.

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It's not too late.

One of the saddest yet strangely hopeful discoveries of recent years is that many profound soul encounters occur for the first and only time on a person's deathbed. The fact of one's imminent death is obviously an ego crisis of the greatest magnitude, one that allows soul to break through into consciousness. Any hospice worker can tell you stories that support this. A border is crossed and the familiar falls away to be replaced by something the personality has never before seen. At these moments, the ego recognizes what the soul has always known.

Although it is the greatest blessing to experience such an opening at any time in life, what a shame that for so many this does not occur until the very end, if at all. Imagine the years and depths of fulfillment that might have been enjoyed if it were otherwise, and the creative, life-affirming contributions that might have been offered by so many!

Rilke reminds us that it is never too late to embark upon the mystical descent to soul:

You are not dead yet. It is not too late
To open your depths by plunging into them
And drink in the life
That reveals itself quietly there.

I have had the privilege of accompanying thousands of people — from age sixteen to eighty — as they enter life-changing thresholds: endings, beginnings, crossroads, upheavals, crises, and periods of emptiness or healing. Crossing these thresholds, they plunge into depth and mystery. You, too, can make such a crossing. In

these pages, you will find stories of people like you who have encountered their souls in the wilderness of their lives. It's not too late for you no matter how tired or skeptical you might be. And it's as natural as being born or dying, as natural as a snake shedding its skin, a tree dropping its leaves, a thundercloud releasing rain . . . or a caterpillar forming its cocoon.

Chapter 2

Groundwork: A Briefing for the Descent to Soul

It doesn't interest me if there is one God
or many gods.
I want to know if you belong or feel
abandoned.
If you know despair or can see it in others.
I want to know
if you are prepared to live in the world
with its harsh need
to change you. If you can look back
with firm eyes
saying this is where I stand. I want to know
if you know
how to melt into that fierce heat of living
falling toward
the center of your longing. I want to know
if you are willing
to live, day by day, with the consequence of love
and the bitter
unwanted passion of your sure defeat.

I have heard, in *that* fierce embrace, even
the gods speak of God.

— David Whyte

Like many of my contemporaries, I received childhood training in a Western religion but no true spiritual mentorship; nothing in my youth addressed the longing for meaning or sacred mysteries or that helped me understand the nature of human consciousness. Beginning in my college years, my first spiritual openings came through Eastern paths — Zen, Kundalini Yoga, Taoism, Sufism, and Tibetan Buddhism. But something essential seemed missing even then. Although these disciplines opened consciousness

to the peace and joy of the eternal present — to God’s love, perhaps — they seemed dry and austere, too distant from the full human experience. In addition to peace of mind, I sought something more wild, earthy, and sensual, something spiritually fulfilling in a juicier and more personal way. Like the poet, I wanted to find out, not just about God but what was uniquely meaningful and essential to me — what I would be willing to die for, and “how to melt into that fierce heat of living.”

My conviction grew that an essential distinction was being overlooked by all of the spiritual paths I had studied. After years of wondering and exploring, I began to suspect there were actually *two* realms involved in spirituality, not one. But none of the teachers with whom I had studied nor any books I read spoke about two realms. Gradually, I began to discuss my speculations with friends. This helped. Eventually, I found a few books and articles that referred to two realms, confirming a fundamental distinction virtually unmentioned in contemporary society.

Most religions omit or obscure the underworld half of the spiritual journey. Those of us coming to understand this are in a position similar to women raised in Western religions who have long suspected that half the story — the divine feminine — has been left out. But this similarity is not coincidental. As we shall see, the wild, earthy, sensual half of the spiritual journey *is* the half that the uninitiated masculine mind experiences as feminine and therefore as nonessential and perhaps undesirable or even harmful.

The differences between the two realms of spirituality — and how they *both* differ from psychotherapy — are the keys to understanding what I call “soulcraft.”

Spirituality is that sphere of experience that lies beyond the commonplace world of our surface lives and that opens our awareness to the ultimate and core realities of existence. There are two realms of spirituality. They are distinct yet complementary. Together they form a whole. Either alone is incomplete.

One realm of spirituality turns upward toward the light, aids us in transcending our (ego’s) insistence that the world be just a certain way and not any other, helps us to disidentify from the commotion of the strategic mind so we can reclaim the inner quiet, peace, and wholeness of our true nature, and assists us in cultivating the blissful experience of being fully present in the moment and one with all of creation.

Soulcraft is an exploration of the *other* realm of spirituality, which leads not upward toward God but downward toward the dark center of our individual selves and into the fruitful mysteries of nature. This journey of descent prepares us to live in the world with its harsh need to change us, as David Whyte says, and shows us where and how to make our stand, firmly and uniquely. On this half of the spiritual journey, we do

not rise toward heaven but fall toward the center of our longing. Although equally sacred and perhaps even more ancient than the journey of ascent, this second spiritual realm may be unfamiliar to people of Western cultures.

Spirit and Soul: Transpersonal Ascent and Descent

Life invites us to grow in many ways — physically, emotionally, interpersonally, and spiritually. Spiritually, we can grow in two directions: toward spirit, on the one hand, and toward soul, on the other.

Now these are loaded terms: *spirit* and *soul*, words used in so many ways within so many traditions that it's difficult to know what we ourselves mean by them. Yet I haven't found better alternatives. The best solution is to tell you exactly how I use these two words. My uses might be different from yours, but don't get hung up on the words; keep in mind that what's most important are the meanings explained below, not the words themselves.

By *soul* I mean the vital, mysterious, and wild core of our individual selves, an essence unique to each person, qualities found in layers of the self much deeper than our personalities. By *spirit* I mean the single, great, and eternal mystery that permeates and animates everything in the universe and yet transcends all. Ultimately, each soul exists as an agent for spirit.

The concept of *soul* embraces the essence of our *particular* individuality. This individuality reflects our unique and deepest personal characteristics, the core and enduring qualities that define our personhood, the true self, the “real me.” Soul is what is most wild and natural within us.

David Whyte's poetry offers several evocative images for soul: “that small, bright and indescribable wedge of freedom in your own heart,” “the one line already written inside you,” the “one life you can call your own,” the “shape [that] waits in the seed of you to grow and spread its branches against a future sky,” and “your own truth at the center of the image you were born with.”¹

In contrast to *soul*, the concept of *spirit* points to what all people, all things, have in common, our shared membership in a single cosmos, each of us a facet of the One Being that contains all. Spirit both transcends all things and is immanent *in* all things. Spirit, in other words, can be thought of as something majestic “out there,” something removed from ordinary life; but spirit is simultaneously that which infuses all and

everything — the land, the air, the animals, all peoples, our human creations, our own bodies and selves.

Soul embraces and calls us toward what is most unique in us. Spirit encompasses and draws us toward what is most universal and shared.²

Our human souls are embodied (i.e. made visible in the world) through our *core powers*, our deepest and most enduring powers, those central to our character and necessary to manifest our soul-level uniqueness. Our core powers can be divided into our most central values, abilities, and knowledge.³ Our *core values* are the ideals for which we would be willing to die and for which we in fact live. Our *core abilities* are the natural talents or gifts indispensable for performing our soul work; these abilities are developed effortlessly or are capable of being honed to exceptional levels. Our *core knowledge* consists of those mysterious, soul-level things we know without knowing how we know them and that we acquire without effort; they are the facts essential to performing our soul work. My core powers, for example, allow me to weave cocoons of transformation. These powers include the value — my utter conviction — that what humanity most needs now is a contemporary path of initiation into soulful adulthood; the ability, for example, to weave cocoons or to interweave Zen and alacrity; and the knowledge of what an effective context for transformation looks and feels and sounds like. I am an apprentice to these powers.

Few people begin to consciously recognize their core powers until sometime after their teen years. In the Western world, most people *never* come to know themselves this way. Soul discovery requires a lot of work.

The soul is the sacred realm of our most heartfelt purposes, our unique meanings, and the ultimate significance of our individual lives.⁴ Soul holds the keys to our central lessons — and to the gifts that are ours and ours alone to carry to others.

The soul is like an acorn. Just as the acorn gives instructions to the oak about how to grow and what to become, the human soul — a type of spiritual blueprint — carries an image or a vision that shows *us* how to grow, what gift we carry for others, the nature of our true life. Unlike oaks, however, we humans are the one part of creation capable of ignoring or refusing the flowering of our own souls.

Spirit and soul are both sacred; they imbue life with meaning, beauty, and mystery. Spirit and soul are both spiritual or transpersonal — they exist beyond the personal, beyond the conventional mind or personality. They might each be referred to as the “sacred Other.”

Soul is that sacred Other whose purposes each person has been uniquely designed to serve. Even though the soul is at our very core, soul appears to the

conscious self as mysteriously other. Spirit is the ultimate Other that encompasses all that exists. Nature, as the universe itself, is either synonymous with spirit or is immanent spirit. What all three have in common — soul, spirit, and nature — is their wild Otherness, the fact that they are indisputably beyond what we can create or control or claim as possession. We belong to and serve the Other. We are here to serve the soul. Spirit creates *us*. We don't own the land; the land owns us.

Your soul is transpersonal and other because it is deeper and far more expansive than your conscious mind. Your soul encompasses many qualities of which you are not yet aware and may never become aware, including qualities you may flatly deny. Your soul may desire, for example, that you sing your heart songs, or that you assist others through major life transitions, but maybe you don't have a clue about this. Or, if you do have a clue, you might refuse that desire out of fear, a sense of unworthiness, or any number of other "good" reasons. As you delve into the mysteries of your soul, you discover your core powers and learn to integrate them into your daily choices and actions.

Spirit, of course, is transpersonal, too. It is independent of *any* beliefs or knowledge you have about yourself, no matter how shallow or deep, ridiculous or sublime. Spirit is not so concerned with the particularities of your life direction. Spirit simply invites you to return to spirit (and the universal essence of your self) through surrender to the present moment. You can also come into alignment with spirit by responding to the bidding of your soul. Soul is ultimately an agent for spirit. And a *healthy* ego or personality is an agent for soul and, by extension, for spirit as well.

Although both are transpersonal, spirit takes you in one direction from the conscious mind or personality, and soul takes you in the other. The movement toward spirit is a journey of ascent, a journey of transcendence, while the movement toward your soul is a journey of descent or what Thomas Berry calls "in-scendence," a journey that deepens.^{FN}

Transcendence is commonly associated with the rising sun (and thus the compass direction of east), an ascension to the boundless emptiness of space, a journey into the upperworld, a union with the light — conversing with angels or the ascended masters.^s

The soul path is often associated with the *setting* sun (and thus the direction of west), the descent to our earthy roots, into the wildness of the soil and the soul, a journey into the underworld, a voyage into darkness or shadow as in the apparent destination of the sun as it sinks below the western horizon.

People who live excessively upperworld lives take a transcendental view of everything. They tend to see light, love, unity, and peace everywhere. They are attracted to the Course in Miracles or aspire to “enlightenment” via an ungrounded approach to Buddhism. They avoid getting dragged down into the particulars of life or actively addressing the social, political, or environmental deterioration of the world. They want to exist above it all and are encouraged to do so by many approaches to spirituality. But eventually they feel the downward pull of dark events in the world, in their families, or within their own psyches. They resist, perhaps submitting only after a great struggle.

People who live excessively underworld lives see the world darkly. They tend to see hidden meaning, mystery, and the undoing of things everywhere. They gravitate toward the occult and the paradoxical. They prefer the night or the shadows and may find themselves addicted to the gothic and the arcane. They want to penetrate to the center of everything and to understand it all by standing under. But eventually they feel the upward pull of the light. They resist, but sometimes love brightens and lifts them.

A holistic approach to spirituality interweaves the ascent and the descent, rendering balance to the experience of both the upperworld and underworld.⁶

It is due to its downward and darkward bearing that many people misunderstand or fear the journey of descent. Western religious traditions associate the downward direction with a turn away from the sacred, toward evil and wickedness, toward “hell.” We have been taught that entering the underworld is sinful, suicidal, or a one-way trip reserved for those who have been particularly bad.

Likewise, nature has been rendered as evil. Pan, the Greek’s horned god of the forest, was transformed into the devil of Christian mythology. Most Western cultures have feared wild nature and have thought of it as unruly, a realm whose laws clash with society’s.

We have, in short, been led to believe that nature and soul are not merely wild but inherently dangerous, forbidden, tainted, or evil. This portrayal is not likely to be a coincidence. Perhaps our religious and political forefathers were afraid of the influences of nature and soul, steered us away from the wild, and tried to control or destroy wildness wherever it might be found. Fear of nature and soul is a fear of our own essence.

Some of our cultural forefathers also felt threatened by femininity (their own as well as women’s) and therefore oppressed women, in part because the feminine (in men) is fully conversant with nature and soul. A man’s fear of the feminine is often a fear of his own soul and his own deeper nature.

The uninitiated masculine mind (in both men and women) understands the upperworld as masculine (and thus the preponderance of male gods and male prophets, priests, imams, *roshis*, and yogis) and the underworld as feminine (and thus witches are more common than warlocks). The initiated adult experiences both worlds as equally masculine and feminine, or neither.

The upward and downward journeys support one another. Although distinct — even opposite — they are the two halves of a single path toward fulfillment and wholeness. While either journey alone is better than neither, the two together constitute a more complete spirituality.

Although opposite in one sense, soul and spirit are not in any way *opposed* to one another. They are — to borrow a phrase employed by depth psychologist James Hillman — “two polar forces of one and the same power.”⁷ We might call that one power the transpersonal, the sacred, or the Great Mystery. Spirit is the mystery of the One, of the Light, of eternal life. Soul is the mystery of the unique and the infinitely diverse, of the underworld and depth, of the dark and of death.

Soul shows us how we, as individuals, are different (in a community-affirming way) from everybody else. Spirit shows us how we are *no* different from *anything* else, how we are one with all that exists.

In relation to spirit, everyone has the same lessons to learn; for example, compassion and loving-kindness toward all beings, as Buddhism teaches. Our relationship to spirit makes possible the experience and expression of such universal transpersonal qualities as unconditional love, perennial wisdom, and healing power.

In relation to soul, we each have lessons and qualities as unique as our fingerprints.

Hillman expresses the distinction between soul and spirit in delightfully and characteristically irreverent terms:

Soul likes intimacy; spirit is uplifting. Soul gets hairy; spirit is bald. Spirit sees, even in the dark; soul feels its way, step by step, or needs a dog. Spirit shoots arrows; soul takes them in the chest. William James and D.H. Lawrence said it best. Spirit likes wholes; soul likes eaches. But they need each other like sadists need masochists and vice versa.⁸</sup>

Where soul is associated with the many earthly mysteries, spirit is associated with the one heavenly bliss. Soul opens the door to the unknown or the not-yet-known, while spirit is the realm beyond knowledge of any kind, consciousness without an object.⁹ Soul is encountered in the subconscious (i.e. that which lies *below* awareness), while spirit is apprehended in states of *superconsciousness*. Both are associated with

states of ecstasy (i.e. outside the ordinary), but the encounter with soul is characterized by dreams and visions of personal destiny, while spirit realization engenders pure, content-free awareness.

When a person experiences ego transcendence or enlightenment, we often say she has merged with the Light or with God, the Self, Buddha-nature, Christ consciousness, Emptiness, or Being — the ultimate sacred Other. This is the Other who is dreaming the world into manifestation, the Other of which our everyday mind is a tiny part, the Other who is both inside us and in whom we are inside.

When a person encounters her individual soul, on the other hand, we are more likely to say she has uncovered her unique gifts, her destiny, her life purpose, or personal meaning. Through soul encounter, she learns why spirit and nature gave birth to the exceptional individual she is and about her particular way of belonging to the world.

The Collective Human Soul and the Human Archetypes

It's not just we humans who have souls. Everything — a rock, the wind, a song, a moment, a building, or a marriage — the earth itself — has a soul, an essential and unique quality. Even the universe has a soul, and we call *that* soul "spirit." So, too, humanity as a collective, as a species, has a soul. Certain essential qualities mark humanness in all times and places — certain enduring themes and patterns called the human archetypes.

Each human archetype consists of an identifiable pattern found in every society and, as a potential, within every human being: the Hero, the Wise and Gentle Queen, the Courageous Warrior, the Virtuous Maiden, the Seductress, the Nurturing Mother, the Holy Child, the Young Redeemer, the Rebel, the Tyrant, the Trickster, the Sacred Fool, the Innocent, the Sage, the Crone, the Magician. A given individual will resonate more with some patterns than others, or at a certain stage more with one archetype than another, but, in any human community, each archetype will be found embodied in someone. The human archetypes represent the patterns and possibilities of being human. Without each of them embodied in some way, a human community and its soul are incomplete.

When people speak or write about "the human soul," sometimes they mean an individual person's soul and other times the collective human soul. It's an important distinction. The former is what is unique about a person; the latter is what is universal

within that unique realm we refer to as humanity. But of course the two are related: an individual's soul is a mosaic of themes from the universal archetypes. One person might embody the Hero and the Monk, while another resonates more with the Wise Old Man, the Fool, and the Trickster. Each individual is a unique collection of archetypes expressing a gestalt as individual as a snow crystal.

Three Realms of Human Development: Ego Growth, Soul Embodiment, and Spirit Realization

Most cultures, traditions, and philosophies emphasize one pole of spiritual development or the other; few embrace both equally. The shamanistic traditions of indigenous, oral cultures emphasize the discovery and embodiment of our unique soul, as do the twentieth-century depth psychologists Carl Jung, Marie-Louise von Franz, James Hillman, Marion Woodman, Robert Johnson, James Hollis, and others. In contrast, the major world religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam focus upon the realization of — or union with — spirit, as do the theories of some transpersonal psychologists such as Ken Wilber, or the lessons of contemporary spiritual teachers such as Eckhart Tolle.

Spirit realization and soul embodiment, together as spiritual pursuits, contrast with a third realm of human development, the healing and growth of the everyday personality — the ego — and its relationship to the human body and to other people.

In many traditions, these three realms correspond to three different worlds. The upperworld is the home of spirit, the underworld the home of souls, and the middleworld the home of our human personalities and bodies. The middleworld represents the personal and interpersonal (including the social and political) and the upper and lower worlds represent the two poles of the transpersonal, or spiritual.

Different sets of practices are employed to facilitate development in the three realms, although some individual practices support progress in more than one of the three worlds.

The middle realm of ego growth includes the healing of emotional wounds, the development of personal bonds, the cultivation of physical grace and emotional expression, and the blossoming of empathy, intimacy, and personality-level authenticity. A healthy ego is skilled in imagination, feeling, intuition, and sensing, in addition to thinking. Adequate ego growth is essential to personal well-being and cannot be

bypassed through the other two realms. Meditation practice by itself is not going to facilitate growth in this realm; nor is the journey of descent.

Ego growth takes time and effort, and indeed it is never finished no matter how much we may also be developing transpersonally. There is always more to heal, more to express, and deeper levels of intimacy. In contemporary society, when ego growth has faltered or stalled, we seek help from psychotherapy and related disciplines such as social work, personal coaching, art and movement therapies, and bodywork.

The second realm of development, the underworld of soul embodiment, deepens individuality through the discovery of our particular place in the world and the embodiment of our unique form of service. Soul embodiment is facilitated by practices that I refer to collectively as soulcraft and that include underworld dreamwork and deep imagery journeys, self-designed ceremonies and traditional rituals, wandering in nature, and conversing with birds and trees, the winds and the land itself. Soulcraft practices evoke non-ordinary states of consciousness that reveal aspects of ourselves hidden from everyday awareness. Many of these practices are found in the ancient (and continuing) traditions of nature-based peoples. Currently soulcraft is finding its way back into contemporary Western life through modern mystery schools, through individual disciplines (such as trance dancing and drumming, council work, storytelling, symbolic artwork, soul-oriented poetry, and shadow work), and through the work of depth-oriented psychologists such as Carl Jung and James Hillman.

The third realm of development, spirit realization (sometimes referred to as Self-realization), supports the upperworld journey. On the path of ascent, we *surrender* attachment to individuality and learn to transcend *both* ego identification and soul identification, ultimately seeing through the illusion of a separate self. We ascend toward an ecstatic merging with the Infinite, the Eternal, the Absolute. Development in this realm is brought about by meditative and yogic disciplines, by many religious traditions (especially their mystical branches), and by transcendental paths and schools. Most often, the core practice is meditation, prayer, or contemplation, disciplines that quiet the mind and cultivate peace, stillness, and centeredness in the present.

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The descent — and the darkness into which it leads — have their own value; the journey to soul is not a misfortune or a necessary evil. In Western cultures, we rarely enter the underworld except when abducted, like Eurydice or Persephone, by a great loss or depression. Then the descent can be harrowing indeed as we enter a blackness

we fear we won't escape. With no guides or allies, no preparation or relevant skills, and few inner resources to call upon, we're not likely to enjoy the journey. But we may yet benefit from the experience. Better to be carried off than not go at all. Abduction is the soul's way of pulling us down toward it if we will not voluntarily step through the gates and over the edge. When the descent *is* chosen, it is likely to offer exhilaration and ecstasy as well as frights and ordeals. Initiation has its hardships; yet the descent can be joyous even when it begins with calamity.

Jungian analyst Marion Woodman says the descent need not be about meaningless suffering endured only for the hope it might end someday. When we descend with resistance, we suffer, perhaps getting yanked back by therapeutic interventions or psychiatric medications: no lasting contact with the soul is made. The unprepared person wants to get out of that hellhole as soon as possible and return to the daylight world. The opportunity is thus wasted.

People fear the descent when they are taught to expect either meaningless suffering or suffering with the possibility of a benefit that perhaps they don't even want. But when entered purposefully, with courage, humility, and humor, the downward journey becomes a time of what Woodman refers to as "soul-making."¹⁰

Many ascent-oriented spiritual paths see the descent as simply unnecessary and avoidable, or perhaps as necessary but only a temporary diversion from the ascent, or, at best, an experience from which we can learn something that will help us return to the light. I have heard Buddhist teachers say that paying heed to a vision — even of personal destiny — is a distraction from the spiritual path. The light is seen as the only goal.

Consider, in contrast, that the descent has its own rewards both independent of the ascent and in conjunction *with* it. As Rilke wrote:

If we surrendered
to earth's intelligence
we could rise up rooted, like trees.¹¹</sup>

The rooting (of trees, of our selves) is as important and as necessary as the rising. We have the opportunity to sink roots into soul and rise up with branches in heaven. I like to imagine Rilke would have found the following an equally pleasing verse:

If we surrendered
to earth's intelligence
we could root down ascendant, like trees.

Our spiritual growth is meant to go in both directions, toward the fertile darkness and the glorious light, each of us having the opportunity to bridge earth and heaven — the underworld and the upperworld — through the trunks of our middleworld lives. Rilke saw the intrinsic value of darkness:

You darkness from which I come,
I love you more than all the fires
that fence out the world,
for the fire makes a circle
for everyone
so that no one sees you anymore....¹²

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Although different, the goals and processes of soul embodiment and spirit realization are fully compatible and complementary. We can deepen our individuality and its expression while at the same time transcending our *identification* with that individuality; each process facilitates the other.

Spirit-oriented practices such as meditation help us surrender attachment to a limited understanding of self, a restricted ego identification. The ability to disidentify from a smaller, safer self-concept helps us move downward toward transpersonal soul as well as upward toward transpersonal spirit. Touching soul is easier when our minds are quiet.

Likewise, as we deepen our understanding of our souls, we discover our unique place and value in our communities; we recognize our gifts that will make the world a better place. This reassurance helps us surrender our more limited roles and ego identifications and thereby eases our opening into the realm of spirit.

The descent and ascent are opposite and complementary poles of spiritual development. They share the intention of becoming more present in our lives — present to soul and to spirit and thereby more present to the world. Since the ascent and descent are paired opposites, one cannot exist without the other. The world and the psyche seek balance. Upper and lower. Male and female. Light and dark. Spirit and soul. Right and left. Universality and uniqueness. The ascent and the descent.

There's no conflict between spirit-centered being and soulful doing, between transcendence and incurrence. Each supports and enhances the other. Like Rilke, we discover we can have both:

You see, I want a lot
Maybe I want it all;
The darkness of each endless fall,

The shimmering light of each ascent.¹³

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Ego growth, soul embodiment, and spirit realization are equally vital to growing whole. Although all three components can be engaged concurrently, there is a natural sequence to their unfolding: ego growth is the foundation upon which soul embodiment rests, and the latter, I believe, most effectively galvanizes spirit realization.

Yet some self-development paths omit one or two of the components, or try to make one substitute for another. American Buddhism, for example, has recently endorsed ego growth through psychotherapy, but Buddhists rarely discuss soul-oriented depth work or do not distinguish it from ego growth.

As a practicing psychotherapist for many years, I have found much to be gained by recognizing that true soul work is not therapy, and vice versa. The goals differ fundamentally. Even with some overlap in methods (e.g. both may employ dreamwork, deep imagery, art, or solitude and fasting in nature), soulcraft has an initial underworld goal while psychotherapy functions entirely in the middleworld.¹⁴

Unlike psychotherapy, soulcraft's aim is neither for or against saving our marriages or facilitating our divorces, cultivating our social skills or friendships, enhancing performance or enjoyment in our current careers, raising economic standing, ending our depressions, helping us understand or express our feelings, gaining insight into our personalities or personal histories, or even making us what we would normally call "happier." These outcomes might result from soulcraft, but they are not its goal. The initial goal of the descent is to cultivate the relationship between the ego and the soul, and that is underworld business, business that might, at first, make our surface lives more difficult or lonely, or less comfortable, secure, or happy. Soulcraft practices prepare the ego to abandon its social stability and psychological composure and to be reassigned as an active, adult agent for soul as opposed to its former role as an adolescent agent for itself. Psychotherapy aims for enhanced coping and social adjustment, and soulcraft for initiation and cultural change.

Soulcraft can be counter-therapeutic. It often involves — even requires — a dissolution of normal ego states, which can traumatize people with fragile or poorly developed egos, thereby further delaying, impeding, or reversing basic ego development and social adjustment. A good foundation of ego growth — through psychotherapy or otherwise — is required if soulcraft practice is going to realize its ultimate promise of cultural evolution and soulful service to community. A well-balanced

ego is the necessary carrier of the gift of soul. Soulcraft at the wrong time can undermine the ego's viability. Shadow work, for example, which helps us recover rejected parts of our selves, may not be the best idea for people in the early stages of recovery from substance addictions, sexual abuse, or other emotional traumas. A vision quest or fast would not be advisable for a clinically depressed person. The soulcraft use of hallucinogens, even if they were legal, would not be wisely recommended to children, most teenagers, or adults with poor ego boundaries.

At the same time, psychotherapy can interfere with soulcraft. To move closer to soul, a person might need to leave a relationship, job, home, or role. Some therapists might discourage such changes, fearing an abdication of "adult responsibilities," a lost opportunity for deepened intimacy, or economic self-destruction. Or the client ready for a soul-uncovering exploration of her deepest wound might be counseled that such a journey is unnecessary. Some soulcraft practices — wandering alone in wilderness, practicing the art of being lost, or a solo vision fast — may be deemed nontherapeutic, too dangerous, or even suicidal. Or a therapist might discourage efforts toward soul-rooted cultural change, thinking his client is merely projecting personal problems onto the outer world. Although sometimes therapists would be wise to counsel against soulcraft work, at other times, if the individual *is* ready for the descent or if a sacrifice, psychological dying, or social-cultural risk *is* necessary to encounter or embody the soul, then such counsel would impede the soul journey. Without an appreciation of the soul's radical desires, psychotherapy can interfere with psychological and spiritual maturation and promote a non-imaginative normality that merely supports people to be better adapted cogs in a toxic industrial culture.

Malidoma Somé, an African shaman of the Dagara people, gives us an extreme example of how therapy and soulcraft goals can diverge.¹⁵ When Dagara boys undergo their initiation ordeals, the people of the village realize that a few boys will never return; they will literally not survive. Why would the Dagara be willing to make such an ultimate sacrifice? For the boys who die, this is certainly not a therapeutic experience. Although the Dagara love their children no less than we do, they understand, as the elders of many cultures emphasize, that without vision — without soul embodied in the lives of their men and women — the people shall perish. And, to the boys, the small risk of death is preferable to the living death of an uninitiated life. Besides, when we compare Dagara society with our own, we find that an even greater percentage of our teenagers die — through suicide, substance abuse, auto accidents, and gang warfare — in their unsuccessful attempts to initiate themselves.

In ascent-oriented spiritual disciplines and in some psychotherapies, soul too often ends up as the abandoned stepchild. Sometimes *soul* is used as just another word for *ego*. Transpersonal theorist Ken Wilber, for example, writes of the distinction between “a person’s immortal-eternal spirit and a person’s individual-mortal soul (meaning ego).” At other times, oddly, Wilber uses “soul” as a synonym for spirit.¹⁶ The actual *subject matter* of soul is completely absent from Wilber’s theories.

Buddhist teacher and author John Tarrant has enriched American Buddhism by including *soul* in the conversation. He writes about the importance of emotional healing work and developing the capacity for genuine intimacy — ego growth — but refers to this as “soul” work (to distinguish it from what happens through meditation practice). Jack Kornfield, a popular meditation teacher and psychologist, has written several exceptional books that address the upperworld (the “life of the spirit: the blossoming of inner peace, wholeness, and understanding, and the achievement of a happiness that is not dependent on external conditions”) in addition to the challenges of the middleworld (“from compassion, addiction, and psychological and emotional healing, to dealing with problems involving relationships and sexuality”), but offers little or no attention to the underworld.¹⁷

The Ego

Enormous historical baggage accompanies the word *ego*, which simply means “I” in Latin. Beginning with Freud’s pioneer usage, myriad connotations of the word have accumulated from religious, psychological, and philosophical traditions. There are now so many meanings of *ego*, it would be best to toss the word if it wasn’t so embedded in everyday conversation. But reader beware: I may not be using *ego* in a way familiar to you.

Throughout this book, when I write *ego*, I refer to *a person’s everyday conscious self*. The word *everyday* is key: I mean *the conscious self while in its normal, everyday state of consciousness*.¹⁸ Our state of consciousness — our *way of being conscious* — can and does change, sometimes becoming deepened, heightened, or otherwise shifted. The conscious self in a significantly altered state lies outside what I mean by *ego*. For example, upon emerging from a period of expanded consciousness, we might say, “I was not myself then; that wasn’t the ordinary me, wish as I might it was.” We mean, in essence, that we were conscious but not in our ordinary *ego* state. The observer or witness aspect of consciousness is distinct from *ego*.

Examples of significantly altered states include dreaming or sleepwalking; trance; delusional, amnesic, or fugue states; revelation, vision, or other encounters with soul; and emotions so overwhelming they change self-understanding. At such times, we are not acting or experiencing from ego.

As a hypothetical example, imagine a poet named Walt who writes in his normal state of ego consciousness. But the *source* of his poetry is not his ego. His inspiration, his muse, arises from the dreamworld, from non-ordinary states of love or nature-inspired rapture, or from states of heightened perception during illness, grief, or fasting. Later, Walt, in his normal state, writes, reworks, and polishes his verse.

The ego is only one aspect of the larger self. In most forms of dreamwork, for example, we treat the *me* in the dream as representing the ego, and the other dream persons as aspects of our psyche with which we are not so consciously identified, such as our inner child, our soul, or our shadow. Dreams unmask intrapsychic characters and expose the relationships between them.

At the time of initiation, the ego transforms as a result of the encounter with soul: the ego becomes an agent for soul, but it is still an ego, still *me*.

Even in the highest stages of human development, an enlightened person chooses and acts from ego — from an everyday conscious self — but hers is an expanded ego, so expanded it is quite different from what the rest of us experience as ego.

As you see, I am not using ego in a disparaging way — as in “he’s got a big ego” or “she’s on an ego trip”; I don’t imply selfishness, self-importance, fixation, vanity, or conceit. Although people with immature egos may be selfish, those with mature egos are genuinely loving and altruistic.

Ego refers to a normal and necessary feature of being human. The existence of the ego is what *makes* us human, for better *and* worse. If all goes well in our early development, a healthy ego appears around age four, and then shape-shifts, time and again, as it matures and sees us through a lifetime of adventures. At its inception, the ego is naturally narcissistic, but if it develops wholesomely, guided by both soul and nature, it identifies with an increasingly wider slice of life.

A mature ego understands the occasional necessity of surrendering to — or being defeated by — a force greater than itself, sometimes during the death-rebirth of soul encounter (when ego surrenders to soul) and other times during ego transcendence (when ego surrenders to spirit). Ego obstructs personal development when it gets stuck, lost, or entrenched at any life stage — when it resists change, loss, grief, or radical transformation at the hands of the gods and goddesses.

A Vision with a Task

Each of us is born with a treasure, an essence, a seed of quiescent potential, secreted for safekeeping in the center of our being. This treasure, this personal quality, power, talent, or gift (or set of such qualities), is ours to develop, embody, and offer to our communities through acts of service — our contributions to a more diverse, vital, and evolved world. Our personal destiny is to *become* that treasure through our actions.

Wisdomways throughout the world agree that life's greatest fulfillment sprouts from our sacred work, deeds embodying our soul treasures. Our sacred work is what nature-based traditions call our *giveaway* to our people and place.

The giveaway bridges the opposition between selfishness and altruism. We cannot experience soul fulfillment without performing true service, and vice versa. The theologian Frederick Buechner said this in an elegant way: "our calling is where our deepest gladness and the world's hunger meet."¹⁹

Psychologist Abraham Maslow makes the same point in describing people who are psychologically and spiritually healthiest

Self-actualizing people are, without one single exception, involved in a cause outside their own skins, in something outside themselves. They are devoted, working at something, something which is very precious to them—some calling or vocation in the old sense, the priestly sense. They are working at something which fate has called them to somehow and which they work at and which they love, so that the work-joy dichotomy in them disappears.²⁰

Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet, philosopher, and Nobel laureate, put it this way:

I slept and dreamt that life was joy,
I awoke and saw that life was service,
I acted and behold, service was joy.

Ruth Benedict, the eminent anthropologist, found this concordance between work and joy in all "good cultures" throughout the world. Benedict defined good cultures as those that exhibited *synergy*. In synergistic societies, "the individual by the same act and at the same time serves his own advantage and that of the group. . . .

Nonaggression occurs not because people are unselfish and put social obligations above personal desires, but when social arrangements make these two identical."²¹

What I must do merges with what I want to do; work and play become indistinguishable.

Even in Western society, our deepest yearnings go far beyond a vacation or retirement. We long for a vision of our destiny, and, equally, for a way to carry that vision as a gift to others. The following lines, attributed to sources as diverse as Chief Seattle, Winston Churchill, and Anonymous, say it quite neatly:

A task without a vision is just a job.

A vision without a task is just a dream.

A vision with a task can change the world.

It is this sacred work, this “vision with a task,” that we seek, individually and collectively. The rarity of finding sacred work is at the root of our Western despair and sorrow. When not acknowledged and embraced, our grief is acted out through violence, against ourselves (e.g. addictions, suicide, masochism), each other (e.g. sadism, racism, sexism, war, child abuse, ethnic cleansing), and the environment (e.g. toxic waste, resource depletion, species extinction, forest destruction, environmental degradation). Unacknowledged grief also manifests as depression, anxiety, and a growing sense of meaninglessness.

By consciously honoring our grief — the absence of vision and sacred work — we take our first steps toward soul discovery and personal fulfillment. We begin the return to our true nature.

Soul: Your Place in the More-Than-Human World of Nature

Your soul is your true nature. Your soul can also be thought of as your true place *in* nature. You were born to occupy a particular place within the community that ecophilosopher David Abram calls the more-than-human world. You have a unique *ecological role*, the way you are meant to serve and nurture the web of life, directly or through your role in society. At the level of soul, you have a specific way of belonging to the biosphere, as unique as any maple, moose, or mountain.

“A particular place” also means a specific *physical location*. The Australian aborigines, for example, say that for each person there is one place in the natural world where he most belongs, a place that’s part of him and where he is part of that place. In finding that place, he also finds his true self.

You, too, can reclaim your membership as a natural being in a natural world. The easiest and most direct way to begin is to simply spend time outdoors, quietly, observantly, and gratefully. By innocently immersing yourself in nature, you will

discover, in time, that nature reflects your soul, revealing your particular place in the more-than-human world. Throughout this book, you'll find stories of contemporary people who have discovered their place in just this way.

You can count on wild nature to reflect your soul because soul is your most wild and natural dimension. Nature gives birth to your soul — and that of all other animals and plants on the planet. Your ego, on the other hand, is not born directly from nature, but rather from the matrix of culture-language-family. Soul initiation is often described as a death and a second birth. Like entering a cocoon, your first ego dies and later a soul-rooted ego is birthed, not from culture this time but from the womb of nature.

Wild nature contains all the terrestrial patterns of belonging. Every niche of the world is filled with a life-form that perfectly fits there because it was born to do just that. The wilder the environment, the more complex and diverse it is, and the more likely it contains patterns of belonging that resonate with your destiny. No matter who you are, no matter what possibilities you contain, there are forms and forces in wild nature that will reflect the nuances of your soul.

The poets understand this. Mary Oliver, for example, writes:
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.^{.22</>}

Your soul is both *of you* and *of the world*. The world cannot be full until you become fully yourself. Your soul corresponds to a niche, a distinctive place in nature, like a vibrant space of shimmering potential waiting to be discovered, claimed, . . . occupied. Your soul is *in* and *of* the world, like a whirlpool in a river, a wave in the ocean, or a branch of flame in a fire. As the anthropologist-biologist-ecologist Gregory Bateson shows in his work, psyche is not separate from nature, it is *part of* nature.^{.23}

Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry (the mathematical cosmologist and the cultural historian, respectively) propose in their book *The Universe Story* that everybody and everything not only has a unique place in the world but *is* a unique place:

Walt Whitman did not invent his sentience, nor was he wholly responsible for the form of feelings he experienced. Rather, his sentience is an intricate creation of the Milky Way, and his feelings are an evocation of being, an evocation involving thunderstorms, sunlight, grass, history, and death. Walt Whitman is a space the Milky Way fashioned to feel its own grandeur.^{.24</>}

The essence of the human soul cannot be separated from the wildness of nature. This is why an adequate psychology must be an eco-depth psychology. It's no surprise, even in the contemporary world, that profound encounters with soul often occur during solitary wilderness sojourns, just as they did for the founders of the major religions: Moses on Mount Sinai, Jesus in the desert for forty days, Muhammad in a cave outside Mecca, Buddha under the bodhi tree. For inspiration and vision, we, too, must learn to search outside the customary world of the village, to wander again in the inner and outer wilderness.

The Experience of Soul Loss

When we confine ourselves to the village, we lose touch with our true natures. No wonder soul alienation is suffered by most people in the industrialized cultures of the Western world. The repercussions are seen in every corner of life, on every socioeconomic level, and in every organization. At one time in our lives — or chronically — we've experienced an emptiness at our core, a sense our lives don't make sense, that something essential is missing.

The full experience of soul loss can be terrifying and disorienting. Not knowing how to make contact with soul, we might deny its very existence in order to lessen the grief. But this sorrow is difficult to fully suppress.

Even in our synthetic, egocentric society, the soul stirs in our subterranean depths, endlessly calling, pushing up like a flower through the cracks in the concrete pavement of our lives. We catch glimpses in our dreams and in fragments of poetry and song, in the distant howl of a coyote or in a bird's sudden flight, in sunsets and the rapture of romance.

Many are beginning again to hear the soul's call and want to follow it into the unknown. But there are fears. What will happen to me? What will others think? There are few societal practices or values to support us on the journey. When the soul is heard but not engaged, we fall into a type of sorrow, a soul depression.

We yearn to connect with soul and to live the life that awaits us there. We want to make the world a better place. But it often seems we are drifting further from these goals. It breaks our hearts to see the widespread human misery and environmental degradation. Our fear and despair sometimes erupt as guilt and anger.

Many people fill their days with a thousand and one distractions in an attempt to muffle the cry of their souls. Often these distractions become our addictions —

consumerism, eating disorders, substance abuse, compulsive sex, pornography, workaholism, religious fundamentalism, obsessive thrill-seeking or gambling, and excessive TV watching — all of which contribute further to the deterioration of the world.

As a psychotherapist, I see symptoms of soul loss every day: emotional and relationship problems, anxieties and depressions, addictions and other dependencies. Yet the alienation from soul is more than a mental-health crisis. It is, quite possibly, the most fundamental problem on the planet, the knot at the very center of our dilemmas.

For it's not just our inner afflictions that arise from soul loss; the crises of our outer world can be traced there as well. When we become alienated from soul — our inner nature — we lose respect for outer nature, resulting in pollution and degradation of the environment. The violence and depravity in our cities and among our youth are a direct consequence of soul loss and the absence of soul-oriented initiation rites. When we lose touch with our souls, we don't know what we are good for, and this absence of a sense of purpose and self-worth can lead to increased unemployment, welfare dependence, and economic crises. Shallow politics, impotent government institutions, and our interracial and international conflicts are public embodiments of soul alienation. The instructional failings, absence of meaningful initiations, and moral inadequacies within many of our religious institutions are a spiritual reflection of this loss as well as a generator of it.

We must face the brutal fact that neither religion nor science is going to save us from our self-inflicted tragedies. Our technologies, psychotherapies, politics, and religious organizations have been leading us further every day from wholeness and soul, and from harmony within ourselves, between each other, and between us and the more-than-human world. It is time for a radical change that can only begin within the wild reaches of our individual lives, each of us asking whether our souls may know something that will help.