

D I S C O V E R I N G  
**SOUL-AR** PART I  
 P O W E R™

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**Unleashing the Spirit's Passion, Courage and Creativity**

Recently, I led a program on "Spirituality and Aging: Discovering the Breadth and Depth of Life" for an audience of mostly independent retirees, many former federal government scientists. The enthusiastic response affirmed my strategy: acknowledging a traditional or supernatural being approach to religious belief while exploring a non-deistic spirituality. The Jungian therapist, James Hollis, in his book, *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life: How to Finally, Really Grow Up*, (2005), provided a bridge: "Whatever moves us deeply, occasions awe and wonder is religious, no matter through what venue it may come (page 6)." Hollis also referred to a distinction that spoke to my irreverent side: "It has been said that religion is for those afraid to go to hell, and spirituality is for those who have [already] been there (page 186)." *Done that!*

My goal was to share ideas and experiences that would engage a spiritual spectrum, and eventually a broader age group. I opened with the literal meaning of the word "spirit" — "breath" or "breath of life." Actually, I focused on the first thing stirred by that spiritual breath, for me the deepest part of the human psyche, one's "soul." Hollis also gave me a working definition. "Soul is our intuited sense of our own depth, our deepest running, purposeful energy, our longing for meaning, and our participation in something much greater than our ordinary consciousness can grasp (page 6)." When we ask the meaning of a mood, reflect upon our history, inquire into the dynamics of a physical symptom, ponder a dream, we are in dialogue with soul (page 254)."

Upon sharing this definition, I noted the prevalence of "soul" in our language and culture — "soul mate," "soul music," "soul food," "dark night of the soul," etc. Next, the audience divided into small groups and discussed their understanding of "soul" and where or when soul engagement occurs. Not surprisingly, answers ranged from a house of worship to being in nature while communing with a higher power or listening for a deep, quiet voice within. *Now it was my turn to share a soulful experience.*

**Mandala Movement and Moment**

Nearly thirty years ago I had a most profound discovery of, if not dialogue with, my soul. This transformational experience was part "mystical," part "madness," or at the least off the academic wall. Not surprisingly, I would draw upon this deep and disturbing wellspring to illuminate my unprecedented soulful encounter.

To make a long story short, in 1977, as a doctoral student at Tulane University School of Social Work, I was struggling to find a dissertation topic that fired some passion. At an impasse, I decided to punt — and

went into psychoanalysis. In those days, you could be a patient at Tulane University Medical School working with a senior psychiatric resident for \$10/session. (Three days a week, lying on the couch, talking about myself, I was in narcissistic heaven.) Actually, the analytic approach progressively opened me to deep and tender parts of my emotional memory and psyche. And over the course of nine months, the pain poured out in sobs and waves of grief. You know this process was intense — I even started writing poetry!

However, one day, about nine months into my analytic journey, something very uncharacteristic occurred. I lay down on the couch and realized I had nothing to say. Fortunately, my analyst made his greatest intervention: "Don't say anything." Initially perplexed, I gradually gave in to the silence. (Hey, even if they were inexpensive, as a struggling graduate student I was still paying for those sessions.) It was an uncomfortable silence, but after a short while I simply let go — perhaps for thirty seconds. And then in this quiet space of just being, no conscious or subconscious musings, I was overcome by an unprecedented sensation. Suddenly I have this mysterious and ineffable feeling that I was connected to everything.

Such consciousness luminaries as Freud and Einstein have called this mysterious, higher level consciousness "oceanic." According to noted 20th century psychoanalyst and author, Rollo May, (*Freedom and Destiny*, 1981), in such altered states, "One experiences being absorbed into the universe and the universe being temporarily absorbed into one's self. Grasping the wholeness of the universe comes from one's deeper self (page 181)."

And within minutes, this cosmic connection is somehow mirrored by two seemingly contradictory phenomena:

- 1) the split — an out of body experience where some manifestation of myself (even if it's just a dream-like or hallucinogenic projection) is looking down from the ceiling while I'm lying on the couch, and
- 2) the integration — in my heart and soul there's a vague, inexplicable yet nonetheless tangible feeling of wholeness and self-acceptance. Hmmm...what the heaven and/or hell is going on?

I left the session in a state of bewilderment as much as one of wonderment. At first I started jotting down a list of terms trying to convey the ineffable and oceanic, words like contentment and sensual, but also animation and aggression. I realized a linear listing could not capture the afternoon's sense of wholeness and connectedness. Then I started to position terms like aggression and tenderness and serenity

