

PROLOGUE

One day you awaken to a new sensation.

Something beckons, but the *beckoner* remains out of sight.

The feeling may seem to depart for a time, but it always returns, quietly tugging at your attention. Your senses quicken in its presence. You are drawn to follow, but you have no idea where you are called to go, or how you are going to get there.

The beckoning persists. In time, you sense that your own ever-present yearning is turning to meet it.

There may come a singular moment. It does not come for everyone. But for you, it comes. In that moment, the yearning merges into a crescendo of *knowing*. Deep in your heart, you *know* that you have to follow this call. To your surprise, the mere idea of not going, even into an utter unknown, now hovers about you like a dark, suffocating cloud.

So you have to respond. Even so, your first step forward is cautious, tentative. The yearning soon senses its object and changes into an attraction – subtle at first, struggling to push past your persistent doubt. This insistent sense of attraction magnetizes you in this direction instead of that – toward *this* relationship, or *this* teacher, or *that* place or work, or even *this* notion or idea.

Time passes. The attraction grows, compelling you now. You watch its play and discover a paradox. Time and again, the attraction brings you to experiences that are not what you have projected them to be. With each new experience, there is an element of surprise – disappointment, rejection, pain, sorrow, a sense that you have made a mistake, ironic laughter. You question this attraction and the choices you have made in response to it. You remain drawn, yet you hesitate to trust it. Still, you find yourself learning valuable lessons. You become more discerning. You see more deeply into the circumstances and people that attract you. You trust more and more in yourself. You feel less a victim in the world. Life circumstances begin to feel less a struggle and more an opportunity for connection and growth. Nevertheless, mystery remains.

You persist. The lessons begin to illuminate a thread that extend from your experiences in the external world to your own internal sense of yearning. You begin to ask, *Why have I made these choices? From where does this yearning come?*

You realize that the journey has entered an internal landscape. The sense of attraction has turned in on itself. You find yourself talking to yourself more and more. You ask, *And who is asking these questions?* Finally, the question *Who am I?* explodes into your consciousness with all the subtlety of a neon billboard flashing in the dark night of your journey. That question is quickly followed by another. *And why am I here?*

There comes a magic moment in which you *suspect* the presence of your own soul. You suspect that the beckoner is *there* – some *something* in some *somewhere* distinct from your personality, your ego, your thoughts, your emotions, distinct even from your heart.

Your search deepens. You look for ways to know this soul, to reveal it to your own eyes. In time, you suspect that *your* attention is the *soul's* attention. You sense, now and again, that the soul's eyes are looking out upon the world through your eyes.

That strange sense – that you are looking out upon the world through the soul's eyes – gives way to a deeper exploration. You find that the soul's attention can be anywhere. It may be fragmented, or it may be focused. You encounter unusual experiences, some that you hesitate to share with others. Mysterious memories may arise – memories that may seem to come from another life.

And at some magical crossroad of your internal journey, you find that the soul finds itself looking out upon the world through the *heart* – that organ of perception than which no sight or sense is more powerful. There is a new and powerful sensation – a distinct joy that attends this simple heart-looking.

The question *Who am I* begins to have an answer. You hear, *I am the soul*. Then, simply, *I am*. The soul has infused the personality, and the former indistinct identity of the personality -- the ever shifting amalgam of thoughts and feelings -- has merged into a clear and singular sense of identity.

As the soul explores this new heart-sight, your own body comes again into view, but in a different light than before. There is a strange and new resonance. The soul senses an attraction for the body that was not present before. Sensing into the body, the soul senses that the body feels also an attraction for the soul. In time, this mutual attraction grows, even as it is apparent that the body is hesitant and perhaps fearful, and though the soul often feels the discomfort of an outsider looking in.

As the soul becomes more and more at home in the heart, the senses of the body become more available to the soul, allowing the soul to navigate the world of matter – the *world* – with increasing skill and pleasure. The attention that moved inward and found itself to *be* the soul now begins to move again outward. And, as the soul deepens even further into the heart's vast field, it finds itself able to connect at will with subtle dimensions beyond the body and time and space – fields made of the frequencies that we have called *heaven* and *angels* and *guides* and *spirits*, fields encoded with information that come to us as voices, insights, intuitions, visions, extraordinary sensory experiences and knowings. And, tuning that connection carefully through the extraordinary lens of the heart, the soul finds those very particular fields that seem to await the soul's own attention – fields that speak directly to the soul's purpose in the world.

As the soul gazes out from its new home in the heart, it sees a dimly lit path. The path disappears into darkness, but the soul knows that it must follow, if only it can find the means. The soul calls out – a prayer to heaven, a prayer for its mate to appear, a prayer for guidance. The prayers become a burning desire. *Come my love*, it cries out.

Desire resonates with desire. So many respond. The soul may become confused, distracted. And yet the soul settles down once more, anchoring itself in the heart and calling all of its attention back to itself. And there, the soul listens more carefully, more skillfully.

Across the vast expanse of the heart's field, the soul senses the approach of a golden thread of the most pure tone, the deepest resonance. Can it be? *Come my love*, the soul hears. It is the voice of the body itself.

Like a wild horse that has fallen in love with the one – the only one – it would consent to ride it, the body races also to the heart, where awaits the soul. In the body, the soul finds its legs, its partner, its first and most true mate – matter, *mater*, the means of manifestation – the one that powers the soul's purpose.

Like the strike of a serpent – like spark races through tender – the body arcs to the soul and soul to body, igniting the alter of the heart into a burning *passion*.

And – as magic follows magic – Heaven arcs in a lightning-like stroke, cutting a brilliant path through soul and body and across the burning alter of the heart. As soul has penetrated the body, Heaven penetrates deeply now into the waiting Earth, following the luminous pathway the soul has forged, moving through the embodied soul itself. Electrified and magnetized by Heaven and Earth, the soul's former trickling sense of its purpose surges, now a great river – a cascading free fall of passion powering down change's ever deepening escarpments, a standing wave that connects Heaven to Earth. The subtle light of the soul's path explodes into brilliance – laser-like, focused, strong and brilliant.

The body's nostrils flair with a sudden, deep in-breath. The path insists. The soul responds. There is a new confidence. The soul cannot see the end, but looks out through the heart, and heart senses the way one bold step at a time. A deep sense of adventure floods the soul, and excitement fills the body.

Now, beneath the body's feet, the earth heaves, calling to the awakening soul. Soul-sight turns to the earth, finding there the Heart of the Earth gaping open -- inviting the now embodied and behearted soul to enter and explore the earth's own mysteries. The soul surrenders, and earth pulls it into herself, turning with her intimate embrace the secret key that opens the door to the myriad earth fields -- the mother fields of waters, winds, plants, stones, mountains, animals and all other living beings on the planet -- that now offer their treasures in support of the soul's journey and its ultimate work. Energies pour themselves into the soul's open heart. Everything is alive. Everything is connected. Everything awaits the soul's invitation for relationship. Everything stands ready to support the quickening journey of the soul.

The dance has truly begun.

INTRODUCTION

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The Soul's Critical Path

Everyone has heard it said – our experience of the world depends on how we look at it.

There is no richer life you can experience than the one seen through the eyes of your own soul living out the fullness of its destiny. But there is nothing inevitable about the onset of one's destiny. Destiny can define our lives only if we learn to gather our souls into our hearts, focus our attention there, and look out upon the world with the eye of the soul gazing through the lens of the heart. I call that way looking a *soul perspective*. Getting your own soul perspective in control of your life will make more difference than you can imagine – one that will become radically apparent in your relationship with yourself, with others, and with those powerful spirit helpers arrayed from heaven to earth who await for you to awaken to the alliances they offer to support your soul's journey.

Getting your soul perspective in control of your life is a process of skill development. Getting that skill involves disciplined work. Few of us understand that how we look at the world depends on learning two things: how to control our own attention and where to put it. Most of us have given control of our attention almost completely away – far away from the heart that provides both a home for the soul in the body and the basic guidance system for the soul's navigation of its journey.

This book tells the a story of how I came to a soul perspective in my own life. My soul destiny is unique to me, as yours is to you. Yet, I sense that my journey revealed the shape of a fundamental soul trajectory that is common to all souls sojourning on the planet. There appears to be common terrain that all earthbound souls must navigate, along with identical stages through

which soul consciousness evolves toward that more skilled soul perspective. And, with hindsight, I can see that a somewhat more direct path across this terrain was possible. I call that more direct path – the one with less meandering and backtracking than is inevitable – *the soul's critical path*.

A *critical path* is the shortest distance between two points – the sequence of dependent steps that determine the minimum time needed to carry out an operation. The *soul's critical path* is the shortest distance between the point at which the soul first touches into the dense consciousness of the body and the point at which the soul becomes fully and consciously embodied, begins to control the personality, successfully partners with the body, and then – and only then – becomes capable of an open ended and co-creative collaboration with heaven and earth. In that collaboration lies our absolutely unique destinies.

I start my narrative with a shortened version of a story told by Plato about a soldier named Er, who got brief but powerful soul perspective by the fortuitous accident of a near death experience on the battlefield. Er's story holds valuable information about how our soul journeys are powerfully shaped from the start, before we are born. My story picks up where Er's leaves off, telling of gradual soul awakenings that came for me over time, as they come for every embodied soul that begins the process of remembering who it is and where it came from.

Like Er, I also had a near death experience that revealed to my surface personality the underlying presence of a soul. But that was just one of many peak experiences that together revealed a *process of soul emergence* here on the planet, in the body and in the personality. And my story takes place in a radically different setting than Er's – a postmodern American culture that includes what is simultaneously the most rich and confusing offering of spiritual traditions ever to come to a single place at a single time. A soul journey set in these times offers both rich opportunities and a very unique set of challenges – precisely what souls need for their own special work.

My purpose in this book is to suggest the importance of adopting a soul perspective; to describe how one moves from the soul unconsciousness that accompanies birth to the very acute consciousness that attends a fully engaged soul perspective; and to describe the distinct *stages of consciousness* that emerge along the *critical path* by which the awakening soul more quickly evolves.

My method is to describe what I perceive to be the core essence of this process as illustrated by the events that have marked my own soul evolution and by the frame provided by Er's story. That core essence is present most strongly in a fusion of very divergent traditions that have migrated to American shores – primarily in the forms of Asian meditation and indigenous shamanic practices. Both of these huge containers provide valuable soul tools. At the same time, they do not translate easily into our own postmodern culture – one that is very different from the cultures in which those traditions arose. Yet, America provides a perfect opportunity in which to fuse the core essences of those traditions into a new and powerful synthesis that defines a critical path for these times.

My own experience suggests that the adoption of a soul perspective together with a sense of the soul's critical path are the most practical and efficient steps we can take to bring our souls

forward amidst the cultural complexity of postmodern America. The notion of a critical path may help you to emerge through that complexity to a new simplicity. Simple is not necessarily easy, but it remains easier than the challenge presented by trying to navigate complexity without a soul perspective. Without that perspective, we are left to navigate by means of mind, emotions and the default personality they largely control. These were not designed to adapt to rapid change, and they are not faring well as the rate of change increases.

This introduction will set the stage for the story of a soul journey that emerges in the chapters that follow. An initial understanding of that setting is very important, since it defines the very real but not so apparent challenges of the postmodern terrain across which we must first journey through several stages of consciousness to arrive at a soul perspective. The story that unfolds over the balance of this book is a story of that first journey. As the book ends, we find ourselves looking out over the threshold of a second journey. The first journey takes us over the terrain of our fate. The second journey is itself the life of destiny – with all of its purpose, passion and power – for which our souls ultimately make this rigorous sojourn to the planet.

Plato's Story of Er

Though left for dead on the battle field, Er was not dead. The body had become, for the moment, inhospitable to Er's soul. Separated by the shock of the trauma of an injury to the body, Er's soul awakened to find itself in a place between heaven and earth. There, in what appeared as a meadow, Er saw souls gathering.

In the meadow, souls were being prepared for joining with bodies on the earth. Er watched as each soul received a guardian angel that would assist the soul on its earth journey. The souls were then instructed to choose the kind of life each would lead. Some souls chose the mantle of power or the allure of riches in the life to come. Others chose, in Plato's telling of the story, more wisely.

That choice made, the souls were led away from the meadow. In four days time, the souls arrived at a broad and beautiful column of light that extended from heaven to earth. There, Er saw the whirling Spindle of Necessity suspended from the column of light. As souls were led beneath the Spindle, the three sisters of Fate wove the fate and destiny of each. Their fate fixed, and their destiny securely veiled, the souls were led to the River of Forgetting and instructed to drink. Er observed that some souls drank more. Some drank less. As they slept, the souls were swept away and into bodies awaiting them on the earth.

Our Own Soul Stories

From Er's time, fast forward two and a half millennia.

Each of our souls is taking a sojourn upon the earth – a brief appearance in time compared

to the timeless nature of soul continuity. Like the souls that Er observed, we also drank from the River. Arriving here on planet earth, each of us has forgotten to one degree or another who we are, where we came from and why we came. Who can know who drank more, and who drank less?

Either way, soul remembrance tugs urgently at the soft underbelly of our consciousness. That insistent tug is the nascent soul trying to muster enough energy and traction to move the dead weight of our forgetfulness into a momentum of soul purpose that can travel at the speed of passion. The story of that purpose has its own life force, and the nascent soul yearns to live that story. British satirist Terry Pratchett says that people typically think they shape their story, but that it is really the other way around. There is a story in each of us, one might say, trying to find its way out, trying to shape our lives. It is a soul story.

Each of our soul stories is absolutely unique in its detail and the potential of its purpose, passion and power. Yet, there is a universal structure to the narrative of those stories. There is a beginning, an end, and many mysterious adventures in the middle. In every story, fate holds destiny in its tight grip, and the process of wrestling our destinies free from that grip provides far more drama than most of us would prefer. For every story, there is an initial set and setting – the mind set of the forgetful personality by which we filter and attempt to organize our life experience, and the physical, cultural and geographical setting that provide the resistance against which our stories unfold. And in every story, there is a dual question that lies at some depth below the surface of the personality: *Who am I, and why am I here?*

The question seldom arises directly until it has already come to us in myriad indirect ways. For example, there comes a point when we cannot resist wondering about the persistent voices in our heads, the yearnings in our chests, and the feelings in our guts. At some point, we wonder whether there is a meaning or purpose beyond the never ending scramble for security and sustainable, nurturing relationship. Some of us use words like *soul path*, *spirituality*, or *personal growth* – even *I just want to have more fun* or *I want to feel better* or *I want a relationship* – like files that contains our dreams, efforts and aspirations. All of these are questions that hint of the bigger and persistent question: *Who am I, and why am I here?*

You know that you are a person who can feel better, who can have more fun from life, who has some important role to play, who has love to give if only someone could appreciate it. Yet the person who aspires is often also identified with the personality that feels blocked. The person who aspires may wonder what she would prefer to do if she didn't always give in to and go along with what others want. Embedded in these feelings is the soul's rather more distant voice, seeking to express its own preferences to a personality whose attention is distracted by voices and events outside itself.

Soul preferences may be as basic as *what color do I like*, *what food do I prefer*, *who is my favorite musician*, and *how does my body want to be touched*. Such individual preferences do not reflect the depth of the soul's nature, but they do hint at the soul's ultimate desire. For all of us, the soul's greatest desire is to combine its special gifts with a clear life purpose that is quite distinct from the dreams that our parents and a consumer culture have projected upon us – dreams that our

personalities have often embraced because the dreams of the nascent soul remained hidden.

At some point along the way to answering that question, your personality may experience an overwhelming soul imperative bursting forth, scrambling the personality's hold on your consciousness, long before you are able to see the shape of the personality that will eventually emerge to reflect this powerful soul force. At such times, you may feel outright diagnosable. And you may be. Diagnosis can be culture's way of imposing its story on yours, trying to pull you back from the edgy unique to the fat middle that is *normal*.

We all need some help from time to time, but the help needs to be about getting our soul story up and balanced on its own legs, so that it can overwrite the old stories of victimization and the tragic surrender to culture's preferred story. It does not help to tranquilize the soul's story. Quieting the soul's voice with pharmaceutical strength suppressants risks soul death even as careful use might create a little breathing room from the chaos of culture so that we can feel more deeply into our soul natures. Yet it is important to remember that the pain we feel in our lives – both physical and emotional – is the soul reaching out in the only way to which the personality will finally pay attention.

The question of *identity* – *who am I?* – is present at every moment in our lives. It is not enough to say that I am a mother, or a woman, or a lawyer, or a Buddhist/Christian/Pipe-carrier/roller derby champion, or an addict, or a person who likes dogs. These are things that we do or feel or believe, but they do not reach so far as to describe who we *are*. And if we cannot know who we are in a very general sense (*I am a soul*), we will not find ourselves in any specific sense (*and my destiny is to . . .*). Without a sense of who we are, we are little likely to understand how our fate hides within it our destiny. Without that soul sense, we are little likely to *choose* to face fate down in order to coax our destiny out from behind that fate. .

Answering the identity question in postmodern America is quite different than in Er's time. My own eclectic soul journey may not be typical of Americans, but it is quintessentially present-day American – one that smacks of the chase to realize the American dream in the setting of the shopping mall. Amidst more than three decades of active participation in the life of a small community where I practiced law and raised a family, I also gradually gave vent to a soul desire that my conventional life could not satisfy. That desire pulled me along a path parallel to that of my more conventional life – a path that I have only in retrospect seen simultaneously as both an archetypal and absolutely individual soul journey. In time, I began to understand how the soul journey included my conventional life, and was not separate from it. What I thought to be the conventional part was a critical part of my own soul evolution waged by means other than what we often put into the category of “spiritual.”

During these years of parallel processing, peak “spiritual” experiences began to accumulate like stars emerging in the darkening sky of my conventional life. Yet, it was difficult to make sense out of these experiences relative to the momentum of my conventional life. I didn't recognize those peaks as my soul peeking out from beneath layers of unconscious cultural conditioning. Later experiences began to provide the information that would connect the dots into an understanding of

how each experience in some way built upon or related to an earlier one, and that each were relevant to a process of soul maturation.

That continually evolving understanding eventually gave way to a sense of identification with my own soul, and a growing partnership between soul and body. It was as though I had dived deep and recovered pearls – each beautiful on its own – long before awakening to the notion of stringing them together into a powerful and beautiful statement of my own soul identity finding its place within the frame of my body and personality. What was consistent and apparent throughout that time was an unyielding soul desire that pulled me forward, sideways and – it felt sometimes – backwards.

That pull led to decades of meditation from both Eastern and Western traditions, years of yoga and qi gong practice, sitting in ceremony with spiritual teachers and shamans across a variety of traditions, vision questing gifted with unanticipated experiences of unconditional love and clairaudience, sweat lodges that provided a sense of community and an opportunity for emotional and physical release, medicine wheel practice that emerged into an ironically modern change map, pilgrimage to sacred mountains of the Andean Cordillera in southern Peru, and a course of cross-cultural and scientific readings that attempted to herd all of these experiences into a coherent understanding for a modern mind. Occasionally, I would find some affirmation or clue in my reading, but I found that my own direct experience continually trumped reading as a means of discovering my own soul nature.

During this time, I experienced many visions. There were spontaneous visions, including a dramatic insight into the then relationship between my own feminine and masculine natures – *nuclear winter* would have been a fair descriptor. This particular vision – I share it in the chapters that follow – grew into a template for the *inner marriage* of the masculine and feminine that remained unconsummated for the many years it took to acquire the skills that were the necessary condition of the relationship that the notion of marriage implies. There were other visions induced by the trance state of shamanic journeys that provided a continuing source of soul-level information and support from guides from the beyond dimensions. There were visions induced by drinking plant medicines in ceremony with *curanderos* in Peru and Costa Rica that gradually brought me to an experience of unconditional love of such intensity that my body and soul felt connected to the planet for the first time. After the plant medicines provided healings, they began to provide information – information that would begin to string the pearls of earlier experiences together into understandings that would further my soul journey. And there was a pivotal vision induced by the thoroughly modern psychodynamic technique of a *deathbed psychodrama*. My encounter with psychodrama resulted in a near death-like journey to a place I could only interpret to be the soul's home in heaven – an event that helped me to resonate strongly with Plato's story of Er. I use the word *heaven* not because I understand what it means, but because I need some word to refer to what I can't understand – a big tent of a word in which clowns and elephants can delight our hearts without our having to know where the circus came from or where it will go next, even if we run away and join up.

These visions occurred over a period of about eleven years. Taken together, I ultimately saw them as a process that began with various *healing* experiences. By *healing*, I mean anything that more finely tunes the receptive capacities of the body by releasing the unconsciously held trauma that

holds our physical sensitivities in a defensive posture that cannot be present to the world. The process continued with *direct transmissions of information* that we can access only when our receivers have been tuned finely enough to hear that other-dimensional information despite the cultural din and chaos that surrounds us. And sometimes we tune to that other-dimensional information without the benefit of a healing because the depth of our trauma has so driven our attention out of the body that it connects in the vast elsewhere. Psychologists call this condition *disassociation*. Sometimes, disassociation is the only form of respite that our struggling souls can find in the moment.

That same soul desire, combined with the more noisy desires of the body, also led me to most powerful of spiritual techniques: *the intense mirroring found in intimate relationships*. The powerful mirroring of relationship provides the feedback that is essential to any personal change and to integrating that change into the day to day of our lives. Ram Das quipped that relationship is the “fast path” to awakening – too hard for him, he said with only small humor and great insight. Because all relationship – conscious or not – invites mirroring, relationship reliably provides the challenges that serve up the insights we call *awakenings* – if we are ready to receive them. If peak experiences are the occasional nights when the soul escapes to dining out, intimate relationship provides the daily bread of our dining in.

This mirroring notion of relationship includes far more than human relationships. We are in constant *connection* with our environment, whether we are awake to that connection or not. Because of that connection, we are also inevitably in *relationship* with the changing elements in our environment that invite us to adapt, or else. The environment is itself an infinite variety of subtle fields that both make up and hover about the dense reality of time and space. Our relationships – conscious or unconscious – with these fields also invite the awakenings of insight. Like our human relationships, the outcomes of these other relationships directly reflect whether our presence and action in the world is informed by a skillful perspective.

Awakenings invite our personalities to become aware of the presence of our souls, and to an understanding that we need more *skill* in *all* relationships – between each other, between soul and body, between body and earth, between earth and soul, and between soul and heaven – so that our relationships provide more than a series of projections, heartaches, disappointments, crashes and the tragic waste of the opportunities that this life presents. A relationship crash is just a crash unless our skill of attention renders it into a gift of insight that magnetizes a growth toward soul potential. It was in the jungle experience of the visionary plant medicines that I began to suspect that *the whole of human experience can be expressed as an exercise first in becoming aware of the inherent connection of all things, and second in creating skillful relationship* (although we routinely try to get it the other way around). As the plant medicine began to impart information, it succinctly set forth a few simple rules of relationship by which we can more skillfully navigate this rough and fated terrain in order to put our feet firmly on the path of our destiny. I will share that information in later chapters.

If we are to ignite the passion that fuels our own soul journeys, we have first to overcome our forgetting, restore the fullness of our attention to the soul field, attend to the process of how the

soul *connects through the heart*, and then attend to how it *relates*. Then the soul's attention can go anywhere and everywhere, and there is little more interesting, breathtaking, supportive or powerful than that.

So, in sharing the story of my own journey here, it feels as though I take my place around the ancestral fire where sat also Er, and share with those who are drawn to circle this e-fire the modern equivalent of the ancient oral transmission that stories represent. Er sits in the fire circle still, where he and I will pass the talking stick back and forth throughout this book. I hope both stories will help you to learn how to ignite and navigate your own soul story.

America's Spiritual Mall

America – and the postmodern culture that is America's primary export throughout the world – largely determines both the *set and setting* of our soul stories and journeys. That set and setting are characterized by a spiritual confusion and distractions present nowhere more than today's America and to a degree perhaps unparalleled in human history.

America has become a literal mall of spiritual teachings, with all of the materialistic undercurrents and overtones that also define secular American consumption in general. The economic prosperity of America, and the relative openness of its popular and spiritual culture – in contrast to its increasingly conservative political, legal and religious culture – has encouraged the importation of all of the world's spiritual traditions. The presence of so many choices provides an incredible opportunity for soul exploration in ways simply not possible for an individual in earlier times, as well as an opportunity for incredible confusion.

In any of the largest of America's cities, one can access every Asian spiritual practice, of which perhaps Buddhism is the most familiar. Words like *Tai Chi*, *Zen* and *yoga*, along with *meditation*, have come to the front row of American vernacular. *Zen* and the less familiar Mahayana form have morphed into the singularly American form called *mindfulness*. This meditation technique has become the focus of much research – the sanitizing American gateway into the conventional and mainstream – and has been found to foster many positive health benefits. The Institute of HeartMath has also morphed an ancient form of heart centered meditation into a stress management technique that may feel more relevant and accessible to a postmodern culture that is more assailed by stress than the desire to discover compassion or one's own soul. As with *mindfulness*, this heart centered technique has also been scrutinized by research sufficient to demonstrate its positive impact upon health outcomes. Similarly, Richard Davidson's research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has demonstrated that a compassion focused meditation technique has direct and positive effects on both the neurological system and emotional states.

There are many other spiritual practices that hold a growing attraction for Americans. Various forms of shamanism are available and taught all across America, from Native American to Celtic to African and Meso- and South American. Traditional forms are morphing in response to their integration into an American culture. In America, everyone can aspire to be a shaman, never

mind that shamans in indigenous cultures do not become recognized as such by the possession of a credit card and attendance at a few workshops. Few of us would choose the means by which the *Q'ero* of southern Peru recognize the selection of a shaman, which is to be struck three times by lightning and to survive, after which the rigorous training begins.

In America, Judaism, Islam and Sufism are also present, along with various approaches to Christianity. Wiccan and Pagan practices are on the rise. Indeed, all of the world's religions are present here, alongside the growing demographic of "spiritual but not religious." Atheism is a strong religious force in America, devoted to the belief in scientific reductionism as the highest form of epistemology and based in the faith that absence of objective evidence is objective evidence of absence.

Medicinal plants that accelerate our efforts to break through ordinary states of consciousness – such as mushrooms, ayahuasca, mescaline and peyote – are used in America despite a general legal prohibition that brooks only minor exceptions for sanctioned religious use. On the other hand, tobacco – also regarded as a medicinal plant in the jungle – has been poisoned and diluted with addictive additives and is regarded, consequently, as a poison.

The spread of many of these spiritual programs and plant experiences is now made possible by workshops and retreats. For many people, these gatherings have taken the place of long term family and ethnic affiliation with traditional religious organizations or village based indigenous traditions. This new delivery system, aided by the marketing engine of technology, has allowed for mixing and matching of these traditions, just as I have experienced, without the requirement of an identification with a particular religious or ethnic group.

While this mixing and matching encourages evolution of practice and belief, the mixing and matching also leads to melding. Melding results in causing the very real cultural differences among these traditions to disappear. The mixing and matching also has the potential to reveal core essences present in each that are common to all – core essences that invite a new synthesis or fusion that may be available to more people in America than elsewhere. At the same time, those core essences are still largely hidden beneath persistent cultural veneers. Those cultural veneers make it difficult to penetrate to a core essence without years of diligent practice within the frame of a single tradition, making a valuable synthesis across several traditions difficult to achieve. The deep dive into a single tradition, while extraordinary and valuable in itself, may deny the opportunity to make the cross-tradition comparisons that reveal a common core essence. I suspect that no single tradition contains the rich essence that mixing of traditions offers. My personal preference and inclination has been to taste several traditions and to look for the synthesis amidst the change that is challenging those traditions.

So, despite the availability of so many shifting opportunities for the exploration of traditional spiritual systems, there are challenges that inhere in the richness of that opportunity. And there is another challenging shift that is not commonly recognized – one that is also very specifically American.

The Paradox of the Mall

At the same time America has become the beneficiary of multiple spiritual traditions, it has begun to explore them in an setting entirely different than the settings which have spawned those traditions. Like our own Native American traditions, the Asian and indigenous traditions now presenting themselves to the American spiritual consumer arose entirely in cultures that were – as an every day practical fact – *earth connected*.

America is the first country in the history of humans not to be earth connected. We have taken the last step necessary to accomplish that remarkable threshold by leaving small scale family farming behind – a process that was substantially complete shortly after World War II. There were earlier and other forms of earth connection that preceded farming, but the family farm was the last that larger numbers of Americans experienced. Most of the family farms that have not disappeared have been effectively turned over to the control of corporations that are now global in their reach. Those corporations are destroying small scale farming around the world by focusing on the bottom line of the quarterly shareholders' statement instead of the very dangerous consequences of their policies and practices.

Even as this tragic trend is moving around the world, it happened first and most dramatically in America. Because of this, America has become a kind of laboratory that allows us to observe what happens when people are separated on a large scale from a connection with the land. While there is much being written about how this revolution of disconnection with the land is affecting health, food security and prospects for human viability on the planet, I am aware of little written about how this disconnection affects spiritual practice.

As we Americans sit to practice our mindfulness meditation or stand do our Tai Chi, we do so in a culture that is no longer earth connected in any meaningful, practical, day to day manner. Earth connection for Americans has itself become an arcane spiritual practice – something that would-be shamans and Wiccans and progressive Buddhists do, often on weekends, retreats, new moons, or the changing of seasons. I've laughed at myself for paying hundreds of dollars to a teacher to “put me out” on a vision quest – just sitting on the side of a hill for days. Of course, I'm grateful I did – the experience was life changing for me. In the city where I live, I recently heard of a woman who, for a modest sum, will let her customers gather eggs from her henhouse, milk her goats, pick her tomatoes, and make soft mozzarella cheese in her kitchen before dining on her farmside deck. I think this is wonderful, but I find it ironic that such simple processes have been lost to a culture so quickly that we find ourselves buying it back from well intentioned facilitators in bits and pieces.

I did not grow up on a farm, but I did grow up in the 1950's in a neighborhood where my elderly neighbor let me dig my imaginary fort beneath her lilac bush and eat from her garden. I played with my childhood friends from an early age in the nearby foothills of the Rocky Mountains. We rode our bikes away from adult supervision for hours or a day at a time. We built fires in those hills to cook our Boy Scout dinners years before we were old enough to have drivers' licenses, and we let our imaginations guide our daylong treks into those hills. We grew up *in the dirt*. And the earth's dirt nurtured us and held us in its unconditional embrace. That experience is gone for most

children in our industrial and technological culture, and that not insignificant fact is directly related to the rapid rise of childhood attentional and health disorders.

Because the day to day agrarian connection with the earth was a reality present – in the background, as it were – for the traditions now imported to America, there is often little taught by those traditions about the importance of the day to day connection with earth, even as those same traditions expressly honor Mother Earth in ceremonies that we dutifully learn to practice on our available weekends. But as we honor Her, we often also fail to see Her in the pavement, brick, plastic and steel of our everyday lives. We have disconnected from the omnipresence that matter – *mater* – also represents in the lives. We live unconscious of the *mater* in our own bones and blood and of the effects of disconnecting matter with our minds from the Earth *Mater* in our minds. Consequently, the teaching of meditative traditions in a non-earth connected culture may have a paradoxical and unintended consequence.

Let us consider the example of mindfulness meditation. This form encourages the de-entrenchment of our attention from thoughts and emotions. However, when we have pulled our attention back from the turmoil within and around us, our attention does not rest in a default relationship with the nurturing environment of the earth, as more likely occurred in the Zen monasteries and Mahayana ashrams where the practice developed. In a typical American context, the attention begins to float more freely from a body whose consciousness is already disassociated from the body.

In a disassociated state, a person already feels disconnected from and unable to sense his own body. It may feel as though the consciousness is projected outside the body, and that is literally the case. Television helps to induce this state, as do alcohol and other drugs. Projection and fantasy are forms of disassociation. If we are disassociated, we do not experience pain as intensely. We do not have access to our powerful bodily sensors. We do not have access to our heart's subtle guidance. We can't feel the earth beneath our feet. In a spiritual context – and it is ultimately all a spiritual context – we may use this disassociation to trip out in the form of “shamanic journeying” or “deep meditation,” but it is still a disassociation unless the destination of those trips is skillfully connected to one's own heart centered soul. I was interested to hear recently of an emerging group within the Transcendental Meditation community of Fairfield, Iowa, that has adopted a new theme of “waking down” in an apparent acknowledgment of the ungrounding effect of the “waking up” that is the object of that common and powerful meditation form. Zen and mindfulness can easily have the same ungrounding effect. There are teachers of mindfulness and Zen who have incorporated the additional element of a heart or body focus of attention, but that is a step added by insightful and grounded teachers, not necessarily a strict application of either the traditional practice or the transitional form by which it is being brought to Americans.

While we might intentionally disassociate in order to explore the infinite realms of consciousness, that is not the usual objective of the typical American who might resort to mindfulness meditation. Dealing with stress, depression, illness or PTSD is a more likely motivation. We know that stress is epidemic in this culture, and that its presence is an early marker for virtually all of the primary diseases with which the health care system is already overwhelmed.

Quite apart from the growing epidemics of “physical illnesses,” it seems to me to be indicative of an epidemic when one in six is taking a prescription for attention disorder. Attention disorders, whatever else they represent, are a form of disassociation. One in five American adults has a “diagnosable mental illness,” most of which is or includes depression. Chronic depression, whatever else it may represent, is a state of disassociation from what is going on in the body. PTSD, however defined, is also a disassociation. Disassociation by meditation can deepen that separation, even while it improves the health markers that are negatively affected by stress.

What is unclear from a conventional psychotherapeutic view is what is disassociated from what, because conventional culture and psychology simply do not have a theory or construct that includes the soul or otherwise explains the nature of the missing attention. As I will discuss in the chapters that follow, the indigenous peoples have a clear view on that. Trauma, a shaman would likely say, fragments the soul. I would translate that to say that trauma fragments the soul’s hold on its own consciousness, preventing the soul from paying attention to itself. A primary shamanic tool is to retrieve that disassociated attention and restore it to the soul so that the soul can again operate on full power – a state most people seldom if ever experience. It is not clear that mindfulness helps to heal soul level disassociation, and it appears to me that it can exacerbate it. I say that not to criticize meditation or mindfulness, but to suggest that we need to look more closely at how to use these valuable techniques skillfully.

A second example can be drawn from shamanism itself. Many Americans have embraced the practice of shamanic journeying. Until some time after the arrival of Americans and Europeans in indigenous villages, one did not find shamans holding classes on how to journey, as is now commonplace in America. Taking an out of body journey from a body from which the consciousness is already disassociated does not necessarily bring the soul into a constructive relationship with the body. To the contrary, it can simply enhance the pre-existing disassociation and any troublesome psychological states that accompany it. And it is not the village shamans who are cashing in on this new American demand. There are probably more spiritual entrepreneurs than shamans, and it is these entrepreneurs who are using the village shamans as the attraction that captures the credit card. Like corporate marketers, these folks have little motivation to watch after the side-effects of what they are selling. On the other hand, while I have concern about such negatives of this new spiritual business, I also see that something of deep value is getting to America that would not otherwise get here. Just as is the case with meditation, shamanic journeying is a valuable tool for supporting the emergence of the soul, but it needs to be approached with some understanding of the complexities of using these techniques in a disassociated culture.

There is a flip side to the easy availability of spiritual programs in America. With those programs have come teachers from those traditions who now operate in a culture unlike their own. More than one traditional guru has found that the practice which elevated and sustained him in his home culture did not protect his “higher” consciousness from crashing into the complexity of postmodern American culture, including its rampant materialism and sexuality. Sexual and financial exploitation of students by teachers is not uncommon. It is no less true of “shamans” than “gurus.”

This is not a criticism of meditation or shamanic practice, both of which I regard to be

important tools for bringing attention into the heart as a means of bringing the soul into control of the personality. It is simply an observation that we cannot be simplistic in our assumptions about the transferability of the wisdom traditions of other cultures which have now presented themselves for our “consumption.”

Here is the paradox. The off-migration from American farms has contributed to the availability of labor to fuel the new American prosperity. That prosperity has afforded us the time, money and cultural freedom to explore new spiritual avenues. Yet, the off-migration from the earth has made it difficult to get the benefit of those new spiritual programs without much deeper understanding of how to use them.

And that same off-migration and the prosperity that has followed has been further fueled by advances in science and technology, wherein lies another paradox that affects our ability to access this smorgasbord of spiritual offerings.

The Paradox of Science

A mere hundred and fifty years ago, someone living in rural America might have identified more with the life of Er or many of today’s transitional indigenous cultures than with the life of today’s twenty-five year old. The major difference is the emergence of science and technology. In the blink of an evolutionary eye, science and technology have come into their own as very powerful forces.

The methodology of science is to separate and reduce in order to observe more finely the separate elements of a thing. The assumption of many scientists – though not all – is that understanding the ultimate nature of the thing *can* be understood by reduction. Wholeness cannot be reduced. Because the methodology of science is limited to observing by separating, it is not surprising that science has difficulty with observing wholeness, which is the hallmark of a soul perspective. For those scientists who have naively adopted the method of science as a dogma of religion – that there are no wholes but only parts – it is a frequent, if not necessary, step for those of us who *believe* in science to believe also that reality is simply a pile of parts, and that everything is, ultimately, separate.

One cannot experience one’s own soul by a process of separation. Souls are of the nature of consciousness itself in a form more subtle than the dense matter by which consciousness also manifests. Consciousness itself cannot be understood from a parts perspective, since it is the very fabric of the whole. Matter, which is the domain of science, is part of consciousness, not the other way around, although those scientists who believe in science as dogma rather than method argue just the opposite despite the absence of scientific evidence to support their position. For those who connect experientially with consciousness and without the presumption that everything is reducible, it is almost inevitable to accept the possibility that *everything is conscious, because our experience with consciousness connects us to everything*. Souls operate within the frame of the whole of consciousness, which includes both matter and those realities that transcend and contain matter.

Souls can reduce *and* transcend – be and see the part, while being and seeing the whole. These are simply different motions within a single dance. The motion toward separation is simply the opposite pole of the motion toward connection.

Science, by its emphasis on an “everything is parts” perspective, engages in another important and dangerous presumption, which is that consciousness and intelligence arise in the brain, rather than the other way around. It does seem that the brain is the situs of rationality and logic – the highly touted critical thinking emphasized in our educational system. Consequently, the belief that brain as the center of intelligence makes it a rational leap to conclude that intelligence and rationality are one and the same. Such a perspective, on the other hand, causes us to neglect a rigorous scientific examination of the other – and obvious – alternatives, including the apparent intelligence of the heart. How many people have you heard say “follow your head”?

The gold standard of scientific inquiry is the randomized double blind study. It is thought to provide *objectivity*, which is the hallmark of rationality and detached scientific observation. Such a study may tell us something about a hypothetical average human. It tells us what *might* happen if someone takes an aspirin, but tells us little about what happens when *you* take an aspirin. It might tell us whether a government program is working to achieve its intended objective or not. It might suggest whether a new heart medication is killing more people than it saves. But, while such a study might be scientific and objective, it tells us little or nothing about an individual. And there is nothing more individual than a soul and its unique design. The only way to study a soul is to *be* that soul, and the only way to be that soul is to bring our attention fully back to it.

So there is nothing that science has to say about souls. There is no objective evidence that the postmodern, scientific American mind can find to support the truth of Er’s story (or put the lie to it either). Souls do not submit to science, even though soul insights often inform the process of science. Subjective experience is the only means of exploring one. If you put too much emphasis on science and too little on personal experience, you simply won’t have the opportunity to be your soul and get the story started.

It is these ways that our American setting has cultivated a particular *set*: a mind set dominated by a scientific and brain centric perspective that – unintentionally but nevertheless effectively – tends to deny us the experience of consciousness and thereby contributes to disassociation of consciousness from the body and its variety of expressions of intelligence that are among the many manifestations of consciousness. Our *setting* is a landscape polluted with toxins and distractions – one in which we are separated from a direct connection with dirt, trees, natural grasses and plants, clean waters and a deep awareness of our own bodies. Bringing more disassociation to that circumstance, even with a spiritual motivation, doesn’t necessarily improve our lives, much less bring our souls forward, even if it lowers our blood pressure.

That many scientists cannot grasp a notion of consciousness in its wholeness is not a criticism of scientific method in itself. Science, at its shining best, is simply a perspective, and a beautiful one at that. Science has provided the practical means of technological advancement. Now, the insights of quantum physics have begun offer a new language and vision with which to explore the vibratory

mechanisms by which consciousness operates. However, is not and will never be a complete perspective. The challenge with which modern American culture is confronted is that the dogmatic religion of science (there is nothing but parts that randomly form into bigger parts) has managed to overshadow the other perspectives which humans naturally have, including those of the heart, the gut, the more visual/holistic right brain, and the absolutely unique perspective of your own heart connected soul. This overshadowing almost defines modern day America.

The paradox is simple. Science has contributed greatly to the American prosperity that accounts for the availability of so many spiritual traditions. At the same time, its overshadowing of the other approaches to consciousness diverts our attention from the very perspective necessary to use those traditions in support of our soul exploration.

A Soul Perspective

What is a soul perspective and how is different from a scientific perspective? We can find both of its most important elements of Er's story.

Er's story is told from the perspective of a soul. The perspective of a soul is not the common belief that "I have a soul," or an openness to possibility of the soul's existence. These are mental approaches, more akin to scientific hypothesizing. The soul perspective is far more than that. It is a perspective that arises from a full-on identification with the soul: *I am the soul*. If you could hear the soul speak, it's primary message would be an emphatic *I am!* A soul perspective becomes a powerful driver of behavior when the that full-on identification subsumes the personality, so that our day to day behaviors flow directly from the soul's clear and self aware purpose for being on the planet.

Er's story related the individual, personal experience of Er's soul. The personal experience of *being the soul* is not a matter of belief, or faith, but a full-on merger of the focus of consciousness – attention – into the soul and its experience. It is a *knowing* that arises only from direct experience and that has nothing to do with information that comes to us from some external source, such as books or the narratives of the experiences of other people, or from scientific studies. It cannot be objectified, nor reproduced in the lab. It is the experience from which the statement *I am the soul* becomes a direct statement of my personal truth, fully and subjectively experienced without the need for any external affirmation of that experience.

With that full identification and merger, there comes a knowing that the terrain of the body and the earth are necessary destinations for the soul on this journey – a home away from home yet to be fully discovered and occupied. There is a knowing that the body and earth are the partners with whom the soul will dance if the necessary preliminaries can be successfully negotiated. That complete engagement *as* the soul opens the door to an entirely different experience than can be had from a perspective unconsciously identified only with a body/mind and personality that have not given themselves over to the soul's perspective.

In our post-modern scientific culture, this necessarily individual experience is often denigrated as *merely* subjective. By subjective, we mean *personal*. In a culture that has a preference for *objective evidence based upon scientific and detached observation*, personal experience is typically regarded as unreliable for use as evidence of any general truth. By *objective* is meant a process of gathering information that is not tainted by an individual bias or view. When we urge *objectivity*, we suggest that individual experience is simply irrelevant to any truth in which science might be interested. Scientists worry about their work being tainted by personal perspectives. Soul work is the ultimate in personal perspectives. The scientific search for general truths has come to trump the importance of personal truth, and it has denied to some scientists – and those of us who have subordinated ourselves to a scientific perspective – a conscious and personal encounter with consciousness.

One experiences the soul not by observing it, but by merging the attention fully with it. We do that by bringing our attention first to the heart. Though little recognized as such, the heart is an organ of perception. There is nothing more subjective than the heart. That is its strength, not a weakness. And, the most immediate subject in the heart's field of perception is the soul. When it comes to living one's own life, uncovering and developing your own soul gifts, overcoming the struggle of fate, and opening the door to your own destiny – it turns out that a heart-based soul perspective is more important than scientific theories or the brain's vaulted rationality. The most effective way of dealing with disassociation is to bring attention to the heart and then return it to the soul itself. That is why, when a shaman does a "soul retrieval" for a client, the retrieved soul is blown into the client's heart. The shaman is returning the soul's capacity for soul level self-knowledge.

That is not to say that a soul perspective is incompatible with a scientific perspective. The two offer the potential of a powerful collaboration. But, if the scientific perspective drowns out a soul perspective because the voice of a dogmatic, reductionist, brain centric science dominates the scientific community and permeates American culture, then a dangerous imbalance can result. And it already has, decades ago.

The Dangerous Imbalance of Parallel Perspectives

Writing almost one hundred years ago, Sri Aurobindo – the Oxford educated Indian freedom fighter, poet and prodigious author of Yoga philosophy – saw this challenging soul context emerging. He wrote, in essence, that the prodigious capacity of the mind to create in the external world was, even then, overpowering the capacity of the immature soul to manage attention in soul ways:

At present mankind is undergoing an evolutionary crisis in which is concealed a choice of its destiny; for a stage has been reached in which the human mind has achieved in certain directions an enormous development while in others it stands arrested and bewildered and can no longer find its way. A structure of the external life has been raised up by man's ever active mind and life-will, a structure of an

unmanageable hugeness and complexity, for the service of his mental, vital, physical claims and urges, a complex political, social, administrative, economic, cultural machinery, an organised collective means for his intellectual, sensational, aesthetic and material satisfaction. Man has created a system of civilisation which has become too big for his limited mental capacity and understanding and his still more limited spiritual and moral capacity to utilise and manage, a too dangerous servant of his blundering ego and its appetites. [Life Divine, 1053-54].

Aurobindo died in 1950. He wrote long before American culture became a caricature of the trend Aurobindo earlier observed, before television and pharmaceuticals began to dominate the consciousness, before technology became the pre-eminent means of manipulating consciousness and stimulating consumption, before a heart-disconnected mind brought the study of war to a nuclear level, and before people separated so radically from the land that food had become a dangerous instrumentality in the hands of an unregulated industry. The picture painted by his commentary, if not more true now, is at least far more apparent.

Aurobindo saw the domination of consciousness by an externally oriented mind without the balancing influence of by an equally skillful soul based consciousness to be possibly fatal for humankind. America's current economic and political system – based in a notion of consumerism that demands infinite and unending growth to accommodate growing population and life style expectations – will without question fail, and our illusions of the reliability of a material security with it. Although it only recently seemed unimaginable in the prosperous America that had become a new-normal for a couple of generations of Americans, this fragile bubble is on the verge of bursting. That burst will be followed by suffering on a scale we don't want to imagine.

Reductionist science and the heart-disconnected mind that have fueled American prosperity now largely contributes to America's system failure in all of its economic and political structures. Following our off-migration from the land, in a period of about six decades, America has found and then dropped its industrial capacity, lost the capacity to grow its own food, made food into a commodity, become the primary consumer in the world, become a debtor nation instead of a creditor nation, reversed a positive trend in life expectancy, become dependent upon foreign investment, poisoned itself with processed foods and the pollution that has accompanied an unregulated agricultural and energy economy, transferred its wealth predominately to a tiny proportion of its citizens, given political institutions over to demagogues, lost the capacity to educate its young despite the prodigious amounts spent, given control of our economy over to the barons of technology and finance, begun to raise our children fearfully and indoors, given our rather understandable emotional responses over to the pharmaceutical and alcohol industries, and quietly embraced pornography – itself a powerfully addictive engine of disassociation – as a partner in the drive to finance the continuing development of communications technology. We medicate ourselves and our children and imprison more adults than any other country.

I would suggest that the most immediate cause of these changes is the separation of people from farming, which is tantamount to separating people from the earth. The deeper cause and context of this separation has been the emergence of narrow minded scientific and brain-centric

culture. The limitation of science and the culture it has spawned has been the reliance of on the lens of perception found in that aspect of human consciousness that we call the *mind*, and its neglect of the lens of perception found in the aspect of human consciousness that we call the *heart*, where resides our access to our own souls.

Soul Challenges, Soul Opportunities

So, there are paradoxical challenges to the soul's earth sojourn in postmodern America. In today's America, almost the entire spiritual wisdom of the world is laid before us like a vast smorgasbord. Ironically, filling one's plate from this abundance is as difficult as filling it from scarcity. With this smorgasbord before us, Americans have followed our usual gustatory practice – piling our plates, sampling this and that, mixing it up, and often finding it to be more than we can digest.

The circumstance of America's immanent system failure simply suggests that we may want to eat and drink from this spiritual smorgasbord somewhat more efficiently than the typically long apprenticeship that comes with traditional approaches. If we are focused on the soul work that can be accomplished in *this* lifetime, one might no longer choose to sit at the guru's gate for years before our ardor earns us entry, or to apprentice to the shaman for a similar time – even if we can find a such a good and wise teacher. We must learn how to transition the imported wisdom traditions into American culture without making fast food of them and – at the same time – not get caught in unnecessary traditional practices that stop the faster forward movement of the soul emergence that our times now invite so strongly. Indeed, it is time to move forward from the system of master teachers and gurus and learn how to use the tools that allow us to teach ourselves through the resources directly available to our own recovered soul consciousness.

I know that this brief commentary seems to contain some huge negatives. For those not in touch with the soul, the rapidly emerging changes will mean more fear. Religious fundamentalism will grow upon the promise of saving “souls” for a better life after death. It is fearful personalities, not souls, that are concerned with being saved.

From the perspective of an individual soul, these observations are not negatives at all. The soul thrives on challenge of any flavor. Our cultural transition simply presents another form of the challenge upon which the soul thrives. In the mysterious and unfathomable process by which souls choose to come to the planet, the presence of a greater challenge is attractive, and your own soul may have already responded to the opportunity that now presents itself. You are here for a reason – a soul reason. American culture will provide endless opportunities for your soul in the days to come.

From the perspective of the evolution of consciousness of humankind as a whole, however, the trend of humankind remains as Aurobindo observed. It seems tragic that we humans should be the very means of our own demise, which seems quite possible now. Yet, in each of our souls resides the impulse to counter that likelihood. As Aurobindo also observed, the awakening soul responds to this crisis with “the feeling that there is not other solution than the spiritual cannot but

grow and become more imperative under the urgency of critical circumstance.” [Life Divine 1060] In other words, while the fragmented soul may want to run and hide from the darkness that appears to lie ahead, the maturing soul remains called to awaken itself through the facility of that very challenge – whatever presents itself – and to continue to look through that awakening for the means of forwarding the evolution of consciousness. We must simply do the work that is in front of us, and that is the soul’s natural inclination as it gathers itself to move forward in pursuit of its own purpose.

What is in front of us is a particular opportunity presented by America’s spiritual mall. We can do just as the elder Peruvian shaman Don Umberto suggested in his speech to a small gathering of Americans that I attended in 2004. “Our children will not learn our traditions,” he said. “You white people need to learn them, take them back to your homes, mix and match them, and evolve them. Let the Eagle fly with the Condor.”

We can synthesize. We can distill the essences. We can, as I heard Swami Rama suggest as he spoke of the multiplicity of spiritual traditions, eat the seed and throw away the shell. We can, as Peruvian shamans say of the hummingbird, drink the nectar from many flowers. This is the face of the emerging and particularly American fusion of spiritual traditions into a wide open embrace of core process – a trimmed down, streamlined process that arises from a soul perspective and stands respectfully on the shoulders of our ancestors without imposing upon ourselves the robes or feathers of their traditions.

The New American Fusion: A Stereoscopic Vision

The widespread importation of spiritual models from other cultures has not resulted in a clear way to guide the soul’s engagement with its fate in American culture. I am aware that the mere suggestion that traditional spiritual models do not fully address a radically different American culture may be read to dishonor the beauty and wisdom of those traditions, or to insult the commitment made by Americans who have put on the robe or feather of an extant tradition. Yet, it is clear to me that these traditions are quickly losing appeal, if not relevancy, for souls that must cope with an environment quite unlike that in which those traditions arose. I understand that I am taking a position rather than reciting an accepted fact, and that the truth of that assertion requires a much deeper examination than I propose here. I am comfortable with my own felt sense that changing times demand a new approach for growing numbers of nascent souls on the slippery slope of rapid cultural change.

The critical path approach draws upon precisely the same functions of consciousness that the traditional approaches attempt to cultivate. But there are very important differences in how I propose to address the richness of these traditions. First, I propose to *essentialize* those functions, by emphasizing the common elements of learning both how to control attention and where to place it. Mindfulness meditation, for example, is an essentialization of the process of controlling attention, but it does not work in an expansive way with the question of where to place a controlled attention function. Second, I propose to place these essentialized processes firmly within the *larger frame* of a soul perspective. Third, I propose to suggest that placing attention within the embodied soul

centered within the human heart field allows us to gain the ability to put our attention in contact with the fields of soul relevant information that reside beyond time and space. Fourth, I want to show how a postmodern soul perspective must adapt in an earth disconnected culture – by bringing parallel perspectives into the partnership of a *stereoscopic view*. The postmodern circumstance creates for the first time the *imperative* of learning how to look with soul consciousness through the lens of the mind and the lens of the heart simultaneously. As with our physical eyes, a stereoscopic view adds dimension unattainable by either single view.

And I want to communicate this soul approach in plain language – to the best of my ability – free of cultural overlays unnecessary to a stripped down approach to the individual soul journey. I believe that the context and elements of the soul journey can and need to be stated simply for a generation of people. I suspect that many members of a younger generation will not embrace traditional views or the extraordinarily deep study required to penetrate them from the outside. I sense that they are already rejecting the outcome of the mental view that now dominates our culture. That is not to say that work is unnecessary. A soul perspective also demands that skills be acquired, milestones be accomplished, and initiations be received and integrated. Yet, none of these require an experience dependent upon years of residence in a monastical setting or devotion to a teacher whose cultural background does not relate to the culture in which our own fates are operative. That recognition is not inconsistent with the importance of honoring and acknowledging with gratitude the indebtedness we owe to those spiritual ancestors upon whose shoulders we stand.

The identification of a critical path for soul work is about the emergence of a particularly American form of spirituality. America was founded in a process of stepping away from the control of European spiritual traditions. America's own culture formed over time from a mix of European, Meso-American, African, Asian and shamanic cultures. What happened in America's political and religious emergence from the dominance of an authoritarian monarchy and a repressive clergy is now happening at a new and far more powerful level. There is a new spiritual evolution and emergence of individual souls that will, in an analogous way to America's first revolution, leave behind the attachment to the guru/priest/minister/shaman system of spiritual teaching. Our own individual spiritual emergence will not and cannot rely any longer on the disciple/devotee/member relationship that represents a past era of the evolution of consciousness. A critical path approach is certainly not about founding a new religion or cultivating a new tradition. America is now quickly stepping beyond a mere mixture of spiritual traditions to the possibility of a synthesis that is beyond the bounds of any particular tradition or religion. It is about individuals breaking free from both, taking what is valuable, leaving the rest, and empowering the forward movement of consciousness, one soul at a time. A new community of spiritual evolution is emerging, and we have not yet seen its shape. But one can feel it coming.

Taking all of the spiritual antecedents of humankind, it remains for us to create a synthesis that is more than the sum of its parts. A *pragmatic, direct spiritual path* can emerge – what I call *critical path spirituality* – one that goes to the heart in order to restore attention to the soul and to explore more deeply what it means to be human in a universe made of consciousness at a time of great change when pragmatic and direct are very practical considerations.

The challenge before us is to merge the parallel perspectives. It is not enough to look at the world through the heart alone, and far too dangerous to regard the world through the mind alone. We need to learn to see ourselves as souls, and look with soul eyes through the lens of mind and heart simultaneously.

That learning is a soul path. On that path, there are stages.

POSTSCRIPT

As I am finishing the book, Darlene and I are just a few weeks away from getting on the plane for a return to Peru of several months. The preceding several weeks have included – amidst our other preparations – the resolution of the relationship challenges of *this* time that have called us to the deeper skills of attention to which we each aspire in our relationship. I say “resolution” humbly, since I trust that there will be other challenges as the soul seeks to penetrate the personality more powerfully in each of us and uses the mirror of relationship as one means. For this time, at least, it is clear that our efforts have yielded sweet fruit. We have arrived at a plateau in our relationship on which neither of us can imagine undertaking the journey ahead with anyone else. We are each returning to the jungle to see if *grandmother* is also amenable to a deepening of our respective relationships with her. It has been such a blessing. Our experience has brought us to trust that there is always more information.

And, in my meditation on this morning after I have felt the book come to a place of completion, I heard these words: *Writing is a sacred act.*

There is a moment when something that precedes the forming up of an idea pushes on the membrane of my consciousness, no more or less than the unattended soul subtly inspires us to breathe. With as little force as an angel’s breath, heaven suggests a *way* – of thinking, designing, combining, playing, moving, knowing. The energy of this small push we have called the *masculine*. If the energy we have called the *feminine* is amenable to an awakening, she feels this soft pushing in. In such a moment, she turns her attention to receive it, and offers the dense flesh of *her* form – all of the means of *mater* – to give body to this *way*. These two can play, and something can emerge from that union, but not without the act of the writer, the inventor, the composer . . . the lover. The heart of each of these creatives is a fulcrum – an edge, an ecotone, the lovers’ bed – where infinity rubs up against the matter of space/time.

The soul of the writer is an appearance in time of the one who *listens* to heaven, and *invites* earth to take in what is heard. It is not paradoxical to think of language as feminine when we know it to be of the body, to be of the nature of earth and manifesting form. Language is a container no less than the womb that carries the most delicate of heaven’s momentum. Writing is first and always a joining of the masculine and the feminine in the fecund act of creation, however unskillful. In those blessed moments when I can feel the soft push of heaven’s presence, words tumble from my mind to race toward this heavenly emissary, competing with each other to embrace that beautiful sense and make love to it. In a rare moment, the singularly beautiful word that can contain heaven’s messenger takes him in, and each finds its love. In that moment, the writer/matchmaker gives witness to a mysterious marriage of heaven and earth that ignites the word with a power that none – not heaven, not earth, not a writer – alone can claim. That power belongs to itself.

I hope that there was at least one such ignited word in this book.

John Davidson
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