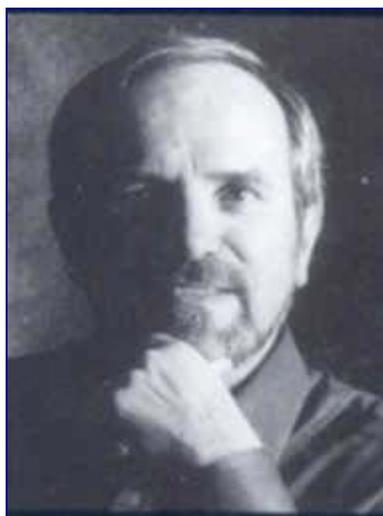


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A READER'S JOURNAL:

Care of the Soul

by

Thomas Moore

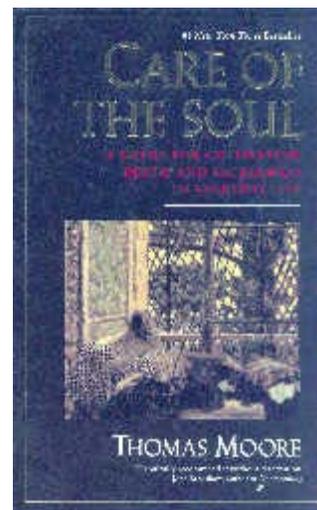
A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in
Everyday Life

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2004

The first chapter's name gives us a thumbnail of this fine book: "Honoring Symptoms as a Voice of the Soul." Consider that title carefully. How many of us honor what we or our doctors call "symptoms" as a message coming to us from our soul? I think the motto,

"Honor Thy Patients' Symptoms" would make a great motto for doctors and therapists of all kinds.



I am reminded of the young man who came to a weekend retreat that Del and I ran some twenty-five years ago. He was a job placement counselor. He spent all of his time talking to people on the phone or in person. He rarely had a moment in his busy day when he was *not* talking like a frantic used car radio commercial to someone. He had all the answers. Then he got sick. He had to stay home in bed for an entire week. Alone. Quiet. With only a couple of visitors with whom he spent quality time in an unhurried conversation. Being sick allowed him to slow down and listen to the voice of his soul, both from inside him and from outside him via close friends in quiet conversation. Sickness, I've found, either provides *protection* from something we would otherwise have done or gives us *permission* to do something we would have otherwise *not* done. The time of his illness gave him permission to be quiet and listen to the voice of his soul.

Everyone knows that the foods we eat come from ourselves or from someone else who cultivates the soil and produces food for our plate. We cannot live without cultivating food for our plate. But what about cultivating our soul? Can we live without cultivating our soil?

[page xvii] The Roman writer Apuleius said, "Everyone should know that you can't live in any other way than by cultivating the soul." Care can also mean cultivation, watching, and participating as the seed of soul unfolds into the vast creation we call character or personality, with a history, a community, a language, and a unique mythology.

Moore tells us that we must be about cultivating our soul and writes this book to show us how to give our soul the care that we otherwise give other more mundane aspects of our life. An irreverent take on this book would be to call it "Care of the Soul for Dummies."

Epicurus knew about taking care of his soul, but shallow exegetes have given his method of care of the soul a bad name over time. The adjective "epicurean" has gone the way of so many fine words, from a descriptive to an evaluative form. Moore sets the matter aright.

[page xviii] Epicurus, a much misunderstood philosopher who stressed simple pleasure as a goal of life, wrote, "It is never too early or too late to care for the well-being of the soul." Epicurus was a vegetarian who urged his followers to cultivate intimacy through letters. He held his classes in a garden, so that as he taught he was surrounded by the simple foods he ate. (Ironically, his name has since become a symbol for gourmet eating and sensuality.)

Never too early, never too late to care for the well-being of the soul -- nowhere does Epicurus mention figuring out or understanding the soul. That would be an idea fomenting in the minds of modern thinkers who are apt, like my young friend in the retreat, to spend so much time trying to understand their soul that they neglect the care which would lead to the well-being of the very thing they are seeking to understand. In fact, what is required is the opposite of understanding — an entering *into* the mysteries of the soul.

[page xix] The act of entering into the mysteries of the soul, without sentimentality or pessimism, encourages life to blossom forth according to its own designs and with its own unpredictable beauty. Care of the soul is not solving the puzzle of life; quite the opposite, it is an appreciation of the paradoxical mysteries that blend light and darkness into the grandeur of what human life and culture can be.

One of the things I love about Thomas Moore is his use of etymology to make his points. Emerson said that every word was once a live metaphor. Through examining the origins of a word, we can often restore the liveliness of expression, the soulfulness, if you will, of a word that has been flattened out or otherwise skewed over time. Here's the first example I observed -- he explains that *observe* comes from tending sheep.

[page 5] Care of the soul begins with observance of how the soul manifests itself and how it operates. We can't care for the soul unless we are familiar with its ways. Observance is a word from ritual and religion. It means to watch out for but also to keep and honor, as in the observance of a holiday. The *-serv-* in observance originally referred to tending sheep. Observing the soul, we keep an eye on its sheep, on whatever is wandering and grazing -- the latest addiction, a striking dream, or a troubling mood.

Another example shows up a bit later when he points out that *profane* means "in front of the temple". Thus "the sacred and the profane" can be seen to refer to being "in the temple and in front of the temple" or if we are observing sheep, "in the herd or out of the herd" or if we are observing our soul, "in our soul or watching it from the outside." The young man above, while sick, was able to contact the sacred (words from his soul) and the profane (words from his friends observing his soul) during his week of quiet recuperation.

If allopathy had offered the young man a drug that would have cured the young man instantly, where would he have gone to get the alone time he needed for his soul? By treating every disease as an enemy that must be eliminated as quickly as possible, allopathy (our prevalent form of Western medicine) removes the opportunity for soul-healing that illnesses would else provide. What is needed a balancing of allopathy with homeopathy from now on. Homeopathy makes a friend of the illness, just as it uses minute amounts of substances to effect a cure that would in larger quantities be considered a poison. Poisons, rightly understood, are concentrated spiritual substances and must be greatly diluted to have a beneficial effect. Arsenic diluted can restore health to a pale, sickly person, but in concentration can kill a robust person. It is allopathic thinking that drives setting of arsenic levels in the environment so low that even beneficial effects are eliminated. Contrast our Western allopathic thinking with the Eastern Taoist homeopathic approach.

[page 10] The basic contention in any caring, physical or psychological, is to alleviate suffering. But in relation to the symptom itself, observance means first of all listening and looking carefully at what is being revealed in the suffering. An intent to heal can get in the way of seeing. By doing less, more is accomplished. Observance is homeopathic in its workings rather than allopathic, in the paradoxical way that it befriends a problem rather than making an enemy of it. A Taoist tone colors this care without heroics. The *Tao Te Ching* says (ch. 64), "He brings men back to what they have lost. He helps the ten thousand things find their own nature, but refrains from action." This is a perfect description of one who cares for the soul.

The Swiss-born alchemist and physician, Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim, better known as Paracelsus, said (page 13), "The physician is only the servant of nature, not her master. Therefore, it behooves medicine to follow the will of nature." There were formerly many Western physicians who ascribed to a homeopathic approach to medicine, but their numbers are much fewer today. One can imagine the medical malpractice suits that

would be brought against an allopathic physician who did too little or one who administered poisons in any dilution to cure a person. Statistics show psychiatrists spend an average of six minutes with a patient. What can one observe in six minutes? What can one do? Administer the *drug du jour* from the armamentarium of the pharmacy which will kill the symptom so quickly that the patient's soul may have to resort to other symptoms until one is found for which there is no readily available weapon to eradicate. Is it any wonder that new bacteria evolve that are immune to every known antibiotic medication? It seems almost as if the bacteria are in league with the patients who need an illness that allopathic doctors are at a loss to solve. When that happens, the patient has to take charge and begin observing the soul, listening to the voice of the soul which is trying to be heard. After all the soul wants to be heard. The patient is not hearing its own soul. The allopathic doctor usually doesn't spend the time necessary to hear the patient's soul -- they are professionals, after all.

[page 29, 30] Professionals think it is their job to understand and correct the family without allowing themselves to be introduced fully to its genius -- its unique formative spirit.

"Open wide," the dentist tells our mouth, and we know what that means -- some tooth condition is going to be addressed by the dentist. When some soul condition needs to be addressed, there are often contradictory and paradoxical indications of what we need to do. What are we to do? "Open wide," Thomas Moore tells our heart.

[page 14] Often care of the soul means not taking sides when there is a conflict at a deep level. It may be necessary to stretch the heart wide enough to embrace contradiction and paradox.

The usual method to approach contradiction and paradox is scoff at the ridiculous choices they provide us, like the man in his fifties who fell in love and Moore tells us he said, "I feel stupid -- like an adolescent." What the man needs is "an opportunity to find a way to contain this archetypal conflict of youth and age, maturity and immaturity. In the course of such a debate the soul becomes more complex and spacious." How can you help your soul become more complex and more spacious? Open wide your heart is one way. Often illnesses force us to do exactly that, and usually after the allopathic anodynes have failed.

In the phrase "dysfunctional family" Moore takes us on another etymological excursion. "Dis" he tells us is "the old Roman name for the mythological underworld." When we are in full health, how does soul enter our life? "Soul enters from below, through the cracks, finding an opening into life at the points where smooth functioning breaks down." (Page 26) When we try to get to the root of the problem, we go underground, to the underworld. When we try to understand the problem, where do we stand -- under the ground of the problem. When we try to discover a solution for the problem we try to get under the covers, to un-cover a solution. When some problem is unconscious, what does that mean -- it is under-consciousness and we must go underground to discover what is waiting for us there.

In the chapter entitled "The Myth of Family and Childhood" is a section on "Father". On January 23, 2004, my father-in-law died. Walking through my library on that day this book I am reviewing was next to a book sticking out on the shelf. I pulled it out to inspect it and it fell open to this section on "Father" on page 33. I read the rest of the chapter and decided to read the entire book. I discovered this book on my shelf where it had been for six years, un-read and un-appreciated. Moore discusses the myth of *The Odyssey* and how it reveals the "Father" to us.

[page 39] Our myth tells us that we will enjoy a restoration of the father once we are separated from the battle of everyday life -- the Trojan war of survival -- and wander from island to island on the great sea of imagination. We will be making father all the while we are surrendering to the winds and weather brought by the gods as our education in the geography and citizenry of the soul. Care of the soul's fathering, therefore, requires that we sustain the experiences of absence, wandering, longing, melancholy, separation, chaos, and deep adventure. There is no shortcut to the father. In soul time it takes ten symbolic years to establish a solid sense of father -- that is to say, odyssey takes place eternally. It has its ending and its rewards, but it is also always in progress. And in the soul, time periods overlap; in part we are always on the sea, always approaching a new island, always returning home to be recognized as father after deeply felt transformative experiences.

The Mother section deals with the myth of Demeter and her daughter Persephone, in which Persephone is kidnaped by a visitor from hell and taken to the underworld. Moore discusses a case when a man has his imagination seized by

artworks.

[page 42] His wife played the part of Demeter, grieving the loss of a comfortable and familiar life, but for him the fascination for his art was so great that he allowed his former life to crumble.

His friends no doubt offered him what Patricia Berry suggests is a defense against the "pull of the underworld" -- namely, "Lose yourself in your work." Let the mundane normalcy of life pull you back from the underworld. God knows that the abduction into the underworld was a necessity as is shown by the complicity of Zeus in the Demeter myth.

[page 44] If Zeus approves, then whatever is happening is truly the will of God. It is in the nature of things to be drawn to the very experiences that will spoil our innocence, transform our lives, and give us necessary complexity and depth.

The transformation in Demeter's life affected the entire Earth because it led to Persephone's eventual return to Demeter with a pomegranate seed in her mouth which required her to return to Hades for one third of the year. During this third, no plants would grow upon the surface of the Earth which corresponds to our winter period of each year. This alternation between growth and death greatly added to the diversity of life on the Earth. This one-third underground period also corresponds to the amount of time we spend sleeping during the course of our lives, roughly one-third. When we experience an abduction into the underworld and return transformed, we can take heart in the myth of Demeter.

One perilous trip many couples take into the unknown is the trip down the aisle to married life. Will it be a happy and prosperous marriage or end in a quick divorce? No guarantees come with the marriage license. When I attended a wedding in Wadden, Germany near the North Sea, the priest had brought with him a living sprig of a grape vine from the Johannisberg region of the Rhine Valley and held it up as a symbol of the fruitful marriage that everyone wished for the lucky couple. The priest was reminding all of the Demeter myth.

[page 48] We could do what the celebrants at Eleusis did in their great celebrations of Demeter: hold a shoot of grain in our hands and recall that life continues to be fruitful in a world that is ever being penetrated by all forms of death.

The next myth that Moore tackles is that of Narcissus. I thought I knew about this myth, but I had a lot to learn from his exposition of the myth. When he is born, Narcissus is given this prophecy by Tiresias, "He will live to a ripe old age provided he never comes to know himself." Moore tells us that this is a strange prophecy because "it indicates that the story is about knowing oneself as well as loving oneself and that self-knowledge will lead to death." Clearly we are in the realm of mystery, he adds.

We next meet Narcissus when he is sixteen and so lovely that many young people are attracted to him. He is filled with a "hard pride", however, so no one can get to him. Echo, a nymph, falls in love with him, but she has this problem of her own: she can only repeat what someone has just said. But Narcissus rejects Echo and she loses her body and becomes a mere voice. She has stumbled into Narcissus before he attained self-knowledge.

[page 58] He represents an image of narcissism that has not yet found its mystery. Here we see the symptom: a self-absorption and containment that allows no connections of the heart. It is hard as a rock and repels all approaches of love. Obsessive, but not genuine, self-love leaves no room for intimacy with another. . . . In other words, the narcissist's *display* of self-love is in itself a sign that he can't find a way adequately to love himself.

Then comes the familiar part, he goes to a still pool and sees this beautiful person in the pool's reflection and falls in love with the form he sees.

[page 59, 60] Ovid describes Narcissus as fascinated by this visage that looks as though it were carved from marble, especially the ivory neck. (Notice the imagery of hardness, a key quality in narcissism.) Like the young people who desired him before, Narcissus feels a great yearning to

possess this form. He reaches into the water, but he can't get hold of it.

The next part is a line out of an old Inkspots song, undoubtedly inspired by this myth, "I talk to the trees, but they don't listen to me." Narcissus asks the trees, "Has anyone ever had as much longing as I have?" This is a meditational path to his own healing or care of his soul.

[page 61] Talking to nature shows that his grief is giving him a new connection to the soul. When soul is present, nature is alive.

America is in love with itself and makes no bones about it. The recent events in Afghanistan and Iraq make that clear. Like Narcissus, America is in love with its own image in a reflecting pool, and the image is one of hardness, a narcissism that has not yet found its mystery. America has a *puer* quality that is found in the young narcissist.

[page 62] America's narcissism is strong. It is paraded before the world. If we were to put the nation on the couch, we might discover that narcissism is its most obvious symptom. And yet that narcissism holds the promise that this all-important myth can find its way into life. In other words, America's narcissism is its unrefined *puer* spirit of genuine new vision. The trick is to find a way to that water of transformation where hard self-absorption turns into loving dialogue with the world.

Moore says that sometimes the reflecting pool's function may be taken up by another person. "In that person I might recognize an image I could love and be." (Page 63, 64) In the case of America, the other person would be another country, such as France or Germany, but since the defection of those two countries in the War for Iraqi Independence, they can no longer provide that function for America. In their place appear the newly independent states of the former Soviet bloc in Europe. When our State department talks about these countries which comprise the Iraqi Coalition, one hears an admiration similar to that of Narcissus for his image in the pool.

I was reading this next passage while my son was visiting me from out of state. He talked about a friend who had very hard and fast concepts of what qualified to be called science and what didn't. It sounded to me like his friend was heavily into the mystery of narcissism, while my son was breaking away from the hard surfaces reflected in the pool that yet attracted his friend.

[page 65] The story in Ovid ends with a colorful detail. His companions look for his body but cannot find it. In its place they find a flower with a yellow center and white petals. Here we see the hard, rigid marble narcissism transformed into the soft, flexible textures of a daffodil, the narcissus. A Renaissance magus would probably suggest that in moment of narcissism we should place some fresh daffodils around the house, to remind us of the mystery we're in. The story begins with rigid self-containment and ends with the flowering of a personality. Care of the soul requires us to see the myth in the symptom, to know that there is a flower waiting to break through the hard surface of narcissism. Knowing the mythology, we are able to embrace the symptom, glimpsing something of the mysterious rule by which a disease of the psyche can be its own cure.

As I read this passage in my reading chair in the living room, I looked over to the cabinet in the dining area upon which a pot of blooming daffodils sat. These yellow daffodils had been bought earlier in the day by my son when we went grocery shopping together. My son is becoming aware of his "moment of narcissism" while his friend has yet to discover the pool in himself in which a deep sense of "I" is grabbing his attention waiting to be recognized for what it really is. What can you and I do if we find narcissistic tendencies in ourselves?

[page 76] If I hear a bit of narcissism shout out of my mouth, I can take the clue and look for those places where I am not loving and tending my soul. The circumstances, the timing, and the particular language of my narcissism tells me exactly where to look and what to do.

In the chapter "Love's Initiations" we discover the story of Tristan and Isolde. Tristan is from the root word *trieste* which means sad and Tristan lives a life of sadness. Lucky for him, he does not live in today's world where his sadness would be labeled depression and he would be given the *medicine du jour* to eliminate his depression. That would be most unfortunate for Tristan, he would be called Depresso and would have none of the thrilling soul-uncovering

adventures that the two lovers have in the tragic love story.

[page 86] When love's sadness visits us, that is Tristan floating on his skiff, trusting and yet moving ever closer to the tragic side of life that redeems his light spirit. It isn't necessary to take a pill or search out a therapeutic strategy to dismiss the feeling, because to dismiss that feeling is to banish an important soul visitor. The soul apparently needs amorous sadness. It is a form of consciousness that brings its own unique wisdom.

One should keep in mind the value that tragedy has in one's life, or else one will become like the embittered Narcissus staring at his own image in a pool, despairing over how unfair life is. The things of the eternal spirit world are the inverse of the things of the ephemeral material world. A beneficial event for the spirit world will resemble a tragedy in the material world. One need only recall Christ's death on the cross for a prominent example of this process.

[page 96] Disappointments in love, even betrayals and losses, serve the soul at the very moment they seem in life to be tragedies. The soul is partly in time and partly in eternity. We might remember the part that resides in eternity when we feel despair over the part that is in life.

What are we to do when we are confronted with something so distasteful that all we wish to do is to push it completely out of our life? Jealousy and envy are two emotions that can fall into that category and Moore takes us through the process of taking ourselves through those emotions.

[page 97] These emotions can be so sickening and corrosive that we don't want to leave them raw, wallowing in them for years and getting nowhere with them. But what can we do short of trying to get rid of them? A clue is to be found in the very distaste we feel for them: anything so difficult to accept must have a special kind of shadow in it, a germ of creativity shrouded in a veil or repulsion. As we have so often found, in matters of the soul the most unworthy pieces turn out to be the most creative. The stone the builders reject becomes the cornerstone.

In the Greek play, Hippolytus is single-mindedly in love with Artemis which leads Aphrodite to become jealous. She causes him to be trampled by his own horses. Moore allows us to recognize the beautiful, but dangerous persona of the Hippolytus person, whose very name means "horse-loosed."

[page 101] But jealousy, like all emotions tinted with shadow, can be a blessing in disguise, a poison that heals. Euripides' play can be seen as a story about curing Artemistic pride. Hippolytus, rigid and closed, is torn apart; that is, his spiritual neurosis is healed by becoming unraveled. The end appears tragic, but tragedy, even in everyday life, can be a form of valuable restructuring. It is painful and in some ways destructive, but it also puts things in a new order. The only way *out of* jealousy is *through* it. We may have to let jealousy have its way with us and do its job of reorienting fundamental values. Its pain comes, at least in part, from opening up to unexplored territory and letting go of old familiar truths in the face of unknown and threatening new possibilities. . . . It is a baptism by fire into a new religion of the soul.

We all come into this life with an agenda in our karmic portfolio. There is some karmic balancing of our past deeds that we must be about. If we ignore the items on our agenda, one of the correcting tools of our soul to get us back on track is the process of envy. What Moore says he wants to know when someone spews their sense of outrage from envy is this: "What is the envy doing there and what it has in mind."

[page 114] The point of caring for the envious soul is not to get rid of the envy, but to be guided back by it into one's own fate. The pain in envy is like pain in the body: it makes us stop and take notice of something that has gone wrong and needs attention. What has gone wrong is that our close-up vision has been blurred. Envy is hyperopia of the soul, an inability to see what is closest to us. We fail to see the necessity and value in our own lives. . . . A person talking about envy is like a religious missionary trying to win converts. Behind the stories of envy is the message: Aren't you as outraged as I am?

Jealousy and envy, Moore asks us to consider, are invitations to us to dive deeper into our own soul "beyond ideas of health and happiness and into mystery."

[page 116] Soul is always attached to life in some way. As symptoms, jealousy and envy keep life at a safe distance; as invitations to the soul, they both offer ways into one's own heart where love and attachment can be reclaimed.

Have you ever lost a job? Due to down-sizing? Been fired? Had to move from a house because the landlord sold it from under you? Lost someone you loved to another? I have. In his chapter on "Soul and Power" Moore tells us that during these times soul and power appear in our lives. I didn't think so at the time, but as I look back to each of these times in my life, I recognize the truth in what he says. Perhaps you will also.

[page 120] What is the source of this soul power, and how can we tap into it? I believe it often comes from unexpected places. It comes first of all from living close to one's heart, and not at odds with it. Therefore, paradoxically, soul power may emerge from failure, depression, and loss. The general rule is that soul appears in the gaps and holes of experience. It is usually tempting to find some subtle way of denying these holes or distancing ourselves from them. But we have all experienced moments when we've lost a job or endure an illness only to find an unexpected strength.

"The path of soul is also the path of the fool" Moore tells us on page 261. If you look at the Fool card of the Ryder Tarot deck, you will see this young man who is atop a rocky tor and is about to take a step into midair over a precipice. The path of the soul takes us to the brink of precipices and sometimes over them, but it is always a path of heart that returns us to our deep inner selves, and, to a life which has over time become flattened and dehydrated, it restores the juice of mystery. The care of the soul takes us on the path of the fool.

[page 304] Care of the soul is not a project of self-improvement nor a way of being released from the troubles and pains of human existence. It is not at all concerned with living properly or with emotional health. These are the concerns of temporal, heroic, Promethean life. Care of the soul touches another dimension, in no way separate from life, but not identical either with the problem solving that occupies so much of our consciousness. We care for the soul solely by honoring its expressions, by giving it time and opportunity to reveal itself, and by living life in a way that fosters the depth, interiority, and quality in which it flourishes. Soul is its own purpose and end.

