

SOUL IN THE RAW: A REPORT FROM LAS VEGAS

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May-June 1997 Psychology Today

With a box of books and a deadline, I drove to Las Vegas to contemplate the word "soul." Was I supposed to define something that no one had pinned down, ever, in all our centuries of Western writing? Do you know how to spell "fat chance?" Still, if you don't take on a dicey assignment like this every now and then--well, you've got no soul. Which may be the beginning of a definition: something about the soul goads you into unknown, difficult, improbable journeys. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Why this soulfully pulsating box of books, and why Las Vegas? Well, my editor sent the damned box. A wide, haphazard sampling from our new soul industry. I dreaded opening it. One way to get me not to read a book is to put "soul" in the title--even if a friend has written it. And one reason I was chosen for this task was, as my editor put it, "You're friends with two of the big soul-guys, James Hillman and Robert Thy." That's true, but it's not like we go drinking together every week. Rather, I could say of each what Thy once said of Joseph Campbell: "I couldn't have had my thoughts unless he had thought his."

Frankly, it appalls me that those two original, irascible, rebellious thinkers now get boxed up with this often icky "soul" fad. They haven't jumped on any bandwagon; they were delving into the mystery of soul for decades before it became profitable. But here they were in this box in my back seat.

And why Las Vegas? The glare and glitter of that city--noisy, blatant, sexy and obsessed with money--is as far as you can get from the oh-so-high-minded, earnest, airy, and elevated assertions found on most of the pages in my editor's box. And part of my "process" (as they say in Southern California, where I live) is that I work best in the midst of contradictions. As Henry Miller put it, "The labyrinth is my happy hunting ground." Where better to consider the soul than in a neon labyrinth?

SoulS Afire

This soul thing ain't exactly news (although maybe the way we've been packaging it is). Americans have been obsessed with soul from the moment they first faced this wild continent--as though its very wildness reached in and pulled their souls to the surface. The Conquistadors' excuse for oppressing Native Americans

was that they were saving souls; as absurd and self-serving as that sounds now, those Spaniards believed it. The Puritans came here for the express purpose of living by their souls' dictates. From those pioneers to Martin Luther King to Ronald Reagan, we've taken our imagery for America from the Bible's book of Revelation: a shining city on a hill--a spiritual image, not a political or economic one.

The very meaning of "America" has always been that this is a place where we are free to live, without restriction, by the dictates of our souls. As Walt Whitman put it, "Here a great personal deed has room." Without the concept of soul, America is just unrestrained desire, and we lose the very impetus that created such a thing as Americans.

And to me, Las Vegas is the American soul at its most naked and extreme. Vegas is America as a stripper, wearing nothing but beads and feathers, a blatant display of our most soul-wrenching paradox: our crass commercialism and the boundless longing that fuels it. And though Vegas is many things to many people, there is one thing it is not: Unlike some of the soul-books in my box, it is not sappy. It is unequivocally the craziest place I've ever seen, and it doesn't care.

The city is a testament to longing and dreams. People come here for the same reason they first came to America, hoping for the big score (as we say in Vegas), the chance to win enough money to live with absolute liberty. And is not a longing for liberty a thing of the soul?

Whether you fly, drive, or go by rail, to get to Vegas you must traverse the Mojave desert, 110 degrees in the shade for half the year. Immense, merciless, the Mojave surrounds the city for hundreds of miles in all directions. It is an ancient tradition for soul-seekers to journey into the desert. We are a culture shaped by such seekers. Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed all lost themselves in the desert in order to find the burning, overwhelming, monotheistic visions that haunt, comfort, guide, and judge us to this day. It was in a desert that Satan offered Jesus anything he wanted, if only he would recognize God's fallen angel. Jesus rejected the deal, but many of us aren't as fastidious. From Conquistadors to goldminers, from Mormons to Las Vegas gamblers, we've been hunting for that devil in deserts ever since. To propitiate a devil is surely one of the darker acts of the soul.

The surreal cacophony of Vegas reminds me of a soul exploding--exploding with desires. Wandering into Vegas is like walking into a collective waking dream painted by Hieronymus Bosch. Look at the casinos, with their fantastic signs and

designs. The Luxor is a pyramid, the only casino/hotel in the world modeled after a tomb (for the Great Pyramid of Egypt, which is the Luxor's theme, is a tomb!) The New York, New York is a single building imitating an entire city. Outside Treasure Island is an enormous shining skull; fronting the Mirage is a volcano. Icons of the culture, to whom we give the status of minor divinities--their presence is everywhere, from the shades of Bugsy Siegel and Frank Sinatra to the warbles of Barbra Streisand and the whispery beauty of Diana Ross. You can find Merlin and King Arthur, Cleopatra, and the entire spectrum of Egyptian gods. Every night at the Mirage magicians cavort with white tigers. There are actual living ghosts--imitators of the dead, from Elvis and Marilyn Monroe to Judy Garland and Roy Orbison, prancing around the stages of the Imperial Palace. And all this is bathed in the otherworldly tint of neon.

As for the cards, dice, and roulette, they were created long ago not as instruments for gambling but as tribal tools for divination. Like all things mystical, they still have the power to induce a trance--just watch a roulette wheel sparkle as it spins, a little whirling galaxy unto itself, tilting on the same laws of fate and chance as any solar system.

And one often hears of people losing their souls in Las Vegas. Surely, a thing that can be lost must exist. To my friends (and great teachers) Hillman and Thy, I would say: Vegas ain't no workshop, baby. This is soul in the raw.

Neon Souls

So I've taken my box of soul-books to a room at the Rio, a casino that harkens back, in decor, to the Vegas of Bugsy and Sinatra, the Vegas that was known as a city without clocks. Its gaming area has a seductive dimness. If you wanted to read a paper, you'd have to lay it out on a blackjack table--the only surface that's bright enough. Here at the Rio people can still pretend they're in a black-and-white movie. I find black-and-white movies soulful, so...here I am.

On the 19th floor, to be specific. The room seems vast because one entire wall is a window, and I like to pull a chair right up to that window--with its view of the entire Strip, all the neons of all those casinos pulsating into the night--and ruminate. Right now, that means reading.

I opened that damned box. Among the books contained within are James Hillman's *The Soul's Code*; Neale Donald Walsch's *Conversations With God*--a very soulful book, I'd been told; Robert Bly's *Meditations on the Insatiable Soul* and *The*

Soul Is Here For Its Own Joy; Richard Dawkins' River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life--soulful in its unrelenting denial of the soul; Jim Wallis' The Soul of Politics; Bruce Goldberg's Soul Healing; Margo Chisholm and Ray Bruce's To The Summit: A Woman's Journey Into The Mountains To Find Her Soul; and of course the books, tapes, and visitations by Thomas Moore that revived the literary use of the word: Care of the Soul, Care-of-the-Soul Vs. Godzilla, Care-of-the-Soul Meets Abbott & Costello...

(I don't mean to be flip--oh, maybe I do--but I'm in Vegas after all, and part of why I came here is to keep my sense of humor in the midst of these sometimes profound but mostly humorless books. Why is it that contemplation of the soul drains the humor out of writers?)

It's a large box, with many more books than I've listed. And I'll be frank. It's difficult to tolerate most of them for more than a few minutes. Take Soul Healing, featuring Bruce Goldberg's descriptions of the past lives of celebrities. According to this doctor, Sylvester Stallone was an American Indian in France beheaded by the Jacobins during the Revolution. How does this stuff get published?

Neale Donald Walsch's conversations with a platitude-addicted character he calls "God" would make my fillings itch no matter where I read it. But here on the 19th floor of the Rio, I can't help hearing the snap and inflection that Billy Crystal would give to "God"'s words: "God suggests--recommends--that you put yourself first. Of course, determining what is best for you will require you to also determine what it is you are trying to do. This is an important step that many people ignore."

Are you laughing yet? I was. Couldn't go on. But the book did make a satisfying thud as I tossed it back in the box. My review, then: a good book to throw across a room.

As for Margo Chisholm's adventures in search of her soul: Except for noting that what I expect to find on a mountaintop is, well, a mountain-top--that said, an over-40 woman climbing the highest peaks in the world is not to be judged by a man sipping whiskey in Las Vegas. I'll pass.

And then there's Richard Dawkins' passionately anti-soul book, River Out of Eden. Dawkins is a Darwinian for whom God is a "utility function." He writes that "nature is not cruel, only pitilessly indifferent...We cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, neither cruel nor kind, but simply callous--indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose." That could be a description of the view from my

window--Las Vegas in all its harsh glory. But to spend so much time and thought denying any purpose in life except the replication of DNA--Mr. Dawkins, if that's how you really feel, why write the book? All books are written with a sense of purpose, and books don't replicate anybody's DNA. Dawkins' behavior contradicts his conclusion.

(Just because I'm being flip, don't think I'm kidding.)

Do I really have to write about my friends in this context? Because even a well-written, thoughtful book like Jim Wallis' *The Soul of Politics* is hitting me wrong. He quotes the only genuinely heroic public figure of our time, Nelson Mandela, saying, "We have triumphed in our effort to implant hope in the breasts of millions of our people"--hope as a breast implant?

Soul for Sale

All these books--and their spawn of workshops, tapes, videos, workbooks, coloring books--treat the soul as a subject to be analyzed, taken apart, affirmed, denied. We're writing instruction manuals for the soul's care, as though it were a Toyota; presuming that there's a place we can go to "find" the thing; using the soul as a selling device, as packaging, as a commercial object to be bought, sold, popularized. This very activity seems to me so hostile to the innate privacy of the concept of "soul," that the soul is being made ridiculous by the company it's forced to keep. A soulful old Sicilian proverb says: "If you live in shit, you start to stink." Even the best writers, with the highest intentions, can't help being tainted when they jump on this bandwagon. A cynic might say that America has become one huge subdivided real estate tract, packaged by the word "soul."

Just what are we doing when we use "soul" as a kind of brand name? Aren't we selling the proposition that this most mysterious, intimate, and elusive of qualities can be dispensed for the price of a book? Doesn't the packaging infect the content? The "virtual America" created by the media has an almost boundless capacity to trivialize whatever threatens its superficiality. Now that my friends Hillman and Thy have become popular, their very popularity has become a vehicle through which to trivialize them as well. But I trust their work to last well beyond the present fad, for they don't treat the soul as an object to be tinkered with but as a force to be reckoned with--a force ultimately more enduring than any virtual reality. For Hillman the soul is the daimon, the primitive essence, the human core that is beyond (and before) environment or biology--it influences everything and is not influenced itself at all,

and it must be cleaved to if one is to be true to oneself. Hillman's delicate yet demanding, uncompromising delineation of this subject has been processed by Thomas Moore into a softened, sweetened, almost unrecognizable substance, candy-wrapped for mass consumption in his *Care of books*. In turn, Bly--particularly in his poetry--circles the mystery of the soul the way a cougar circles a fire: "A dream of moles with golden wings," reads a poem of Bly's, "Is not so bad;/It is like imagining waterfalls of stone deep in mountains./Or a wing flying alone beneath the earth."

The Skinny on Soul

All these soul books, both the serious and the silly, constitute a last-ditch cavalry charge against the chemical invasion of the psyche, the recent notion that all our troubles can be treated with drugs--legal drugs, that is. We may argue about the reasons and the results, but pills are taking over the practice of psychology. There are drugs now for practically every symptom of inner turbulence. The drug-dependent culture (helped along by the enormous publicity resources of the pharmaceutical and insurance industries) plays into our overwhelming materialism--for lately we've been trying to reduce absolutely everything to its most concrete manifestation. We don't talk about destiny anymore; we talk about DNA. We don't ponder our deep-rooted psychological complexes; we discuss symptoms that can be treated by drugs. We speak of the brain as a computer, and the body as a machine. Neither is either, but this paradoxical, unpredictable life seems more controllable when couched in such imagery.

Yet, materialists or not, most of us feel that we are more than the sum total of the parts that make us physically function, including our DNA. The present onslaught of books about the soul is a counterattack, a deep human cry that echoes thousands of years of religion and art--a cry that, while we can be measured, we cannot ultimately be known. There really are more things in heaven and earth, on the subway and in the closet, in the forest and in your lover's eyes, than are dreamt of, calculated, conjured, and fiddled with in your philosophy, America.

The soul movement, if it can be called a movement, lays claim to the dignity of the most basic human mystery: that, whether it can be verified or not, we feel something in the nature of being human that is beyond measurement, even beyond wisdom. And we are not prepared to discount that feeling. Perhaps that feeling is what we call "soul"--a feeling that demands we keep in our vocabulary a word no one quite understands.

In this light, even the foolishness of the worst of those soul books seems more forgivable, for even their foolishness is evidence of what we humans do most consistently, most compulsively: grope for a light in the dark.

BRIGHT NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Every language has a word for soul, yet all shy from a precise definition. Soul is clearly a universal experience. But an experience of what? When we try to answer that, we're on our own.

A Vegas assertion if there ever was one.

And if America is a confrontation of absolutes--material and spiritual, violent and free, ancient and new--then Las Vegas speaks to a confrontation of absolutes within me. And what a confrontation is here: a conflict of classic lights and darks, good and evil. The crassness and the glowing beauty of this city are one and the same. (If you don't think it's beautiful, drive into the mountains that overlook it and gaze upon its lights for a while.) Here is both the most up-front commercialism in the world, and the luminous inner longing it seeks to satisfy. Here is a shameless cheapness of sexual display, and the beauty of what's being displayed. Here is the stripper who said to me, "Just because you can do any damn thing you want in this wild town--well, man, then you'd better have your own boundaries, and they'd better be really yours, or you'll lose your ever-lovin' soul."

Here life seems to be one great pulsating neon-tinted desire--an American vision if ever there was one. Yet here is a constant reminder of the fragility of it all, how everything can be lost with one spin of the wheel or roll of the dice.

As I said a little too quickly in the beginning: Something there is about the soul that goads one onto unknown, difficult, improbable journeys. For isn't the human journey itself--collectively as well as individually--unknown, difficult, and improbable?

With our beautiful and often bizarre variations, with all our mad and maddening behaviors, "replication of DNA" doesn't begin to describe our experience of being human. But the word "soul" does--however vague it may be. We can't escape it. And that may be the most cogent proof of its existence.

In any case it seems to be my soul, rather than my deadline, that keeps me up all night pondering such things. For my part, here on the 19th floor of the Rio, it will be dawn soon, and that's the only time I really enjoy gambling. The Rio's casino will be almost empty and subdued; its diminished din of slot machines, canned music and

scraps of talk will seem to come from farther off, even if you're standing in the middle of it--though the cocktail waitresses will be flashing just as much flesh, the dealers' eyes will be just as inscrutable, and the odds will be with the house, as they are at any hour, anywhere. At dawn in Vegas the neon starts to fade, and as the sun rises the signs flicker off in an irregular pattern all over town. There is the sense that souls have been lost again in the night. Certain dawns here, the air feels thick with them. Some have won their wager with Satan, some have lost, and some have fumed down the deal.

But they keep coming here anyway, longing for something--and longing is soul energy. So I'll go indulge a bit of longing, play some roulette, and drink a little Glenlivet, Joseph Campbell's favorite brand of Scotch. I'll toast all who've lost or found something that corresponds to that odd word which has no final definition--that word which calls into question all definitions, and by its very existence, invites us to explore and test our limits.

Thus a roulette wheel where there's no limit on your bet is, in its way, a soulful thing.

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