

THE LIGHT CHANGED (THE SOUL: PART 3)

By Michael Ventura

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The subject is the soul and the form is the essay, and the trouble is ... they don't easily mesh. When the essay, as a literary form, was developed by the likes of Charles Lamb, Voltaire, and Emerson, it was seen as a contemplation: The writer *essayed* (attempted) the consideration of a subject. The form was digressive, ruminative. But now the essay has mutated into "the article," an object for use. By the conventions of "the article," I owe you now something concrete and graspable, to flesh out the issues that have been raised (in parts 1 and 2) about the soul. An article poses questions which it is the writer's responsibility to answer, for as a culture we believe that all questions ultimately have answers and that for each problem there is a solution. (Older cultures call this trait our "optimism" and even our "naïveté.") So we have come to take articles like this one as utilitarian exercises that supply something useful, an insight, a tool, that will bring us closer to some sort of formula applicable to daily life -- and that is certainly possible with many subjects, but not with the soul.

For the soul is not declarative, it is suggestive.

The soul does not supply solutions. It sends messages. It beckons. We follow its (often vague) beckonings, or we don't. We listen -- sometimes from 10 feet away, sometimes from a great distance. In questions of the soul we must take, or reject, one another's testimony on faith, for we journey through a society that pays lip service to the concept of "soul" but neither respects it nor seriously recognizes its existence. Yet we use the word all the time and understand one another perfectly when we say that someone has "sold her soul" or "lost his soul." We mean that such people have, through choice or desperation, surrendered their integrity and forsaken their allegiance to their true selves -- people who have been emptied of something essential, something crucial to their standing as fully alive human beings. We require no explanation for the phrase found on ancient maps, "here there be soul-eaters," for soul-eaters have left their scars on all of us. The soul-eater may be a job, a neighborhood (be it slum or suburb), an addiction, the loneliness of a deadened marriage, academic or corporate aridity, but, however it comes about, we *know* what an absence or sickening of soul looks and feels like. And we know what it means to endure people who sicken our souls or to be in the presence of those precious ones who quicken our souls. When, as the 23rd Psalm says, something "restoreth" our souls, we know *that*, and we will risk much to defend our soul's restoration -- or, failing to defend it, we know ourselves for cowards. And when something fills or completes or meets or enhances your soul, no one has to explain to us that exaltation -- we know that's when we feel most alive. We know it, and yet it is almost incommunicable. Which is a strange thing about the soul: The more intense our knowledge of it, the more mute it leaves us.

So if I say I finally connected with my soul, in an indestructible way, at an intersection where all realms crisscrossed ... I know it sounds like hooey. Nevertheless, we must try to speak to each other or, as my friend Deborah says, "the pearl becomes a grain of sand."

Austin, 1994. Shortly before my 49th birthday. It had been a difficult season, wasteful and fruitful by turns. One important friendship had deepened, another was nearing its

end. One relationship, or love, or whatever it was, was disintegrating, and I was being pretty much a shit about it. Other passions were being, shall we say, explored. And, oh yes, I was in the throes of beginning a novel and, as usual, everything I thought I was going to write fell away while unexpected forces and themes rose from I don't know where and demanded expression ... I felt I was bursting and imploding at the same time; I was raw, moody (some would say sulky), very vulnerable and reflexively trying to cover my vulnerability with a veneer of attitude. Messy, in short. Not the state of mind in which one expects a revelation.

I was walking north on the west side of Congress Avenue, on my way to the Little City coffee shop to read my *New York Times*, something I did often that season. It was not quite noon. There was nothing remarkable about the weather or about anything else. I was north of Sixth Street, at I can't remember which intersection -- except that it was an intersection like thousands of others, a boulevard crossed by a side street and governed by a traffic signal. Nine years before, an old therapist had asked me: "Do you have *any* idea who you are 10 feet away from a typewriter?" That question had begun, and in a way had overseen, the stripping down of a life I didn't know how to live anymore and the beginning of a life that was genuinely mine (messy, yes, but mine). That therapist's question had gradually reawakened my awareness of what I call, for want of a better word, my soul. Now, crossing that street, going north on Congress, a sudden and strange and unexpected thing happened:

My soul cohered with my life. Just like that.

The problem with the experience, insofar as writing about it is concerned, is that it happened without an act of will and even without a story that can be told. Which goes against our Western proclivities. In Western cultures we speak of "goals" and "issues" and whatnot, conceiving life as a story, the story of a sequence of decisions and choices. But life is not simply decisions and choices, and it doesn't behave with the orderliness of a story; life calls to us from depths we can merely guess at, and sometimes a life suddenly coheres for no apparent reason, at no apparent instigation. As to an explanation of the experience, I can only offer the words of one Abu Yazid al-Bistami, who (if memory serves) was a medieval Arab philosopher: "This thing we tell of can never be found by seeking, yet only seekers find it." I had sought for a long time, and not found. And then, at an intersection on Congress, what I sought found me.

On a day like any other I stood at a street corner, waiting for the traffic light to change from red to green. The light changed. I stepped from the curb. And then it seemed I was walking in slow motion, when ... suddenly ... certainly unexpectedly ... I felt enveloped by an awareness ... *all* the elements of what I am ... cohered ... all the notes became a chord, a discordant but beautiful harmony ... I am *this* man, sad and full of longing, and my sadness is itself a song ... I am *this* man, attached to infinity by an unbreakable strand we call the "soul," through which come messages beyond my experience ... I am so happy to be alive, to be allowed a part in the great procession that we call Eternity ... I am not a *creation* of the Universe, I am an *expression* of the universe. A creation is *made*, it is a separate thing; but if I am an expression then I am *something being expressed*, like a spoken word. While a word exists it is alive in the mouth and breath, intimately connected to its expresser. As we are *being expressed* we are still in the mouth, the body, of God or the universe. Perhaps this is the mystery of "in the beginning was the Word."

I felt, in slow motion, crossing that intersection, my sadness, my longing, my beauty, my contradictions, my paradox, my failures, my gifts, my messiness ... I felt *all*

of it, all at once, as part of that which *expresses* me, breathes me, speaks me. I said aloud, "I am a word in the mouth of God" ... while I exist, in whatever difficulty of form, I am that word, within a sentence I cannot conceive of, but to which I am necessary (or I would not exist). Like one word in a sentence or song, I am necessary for the expression of something larger than myself, something I cannot comprehend. "Remember this moment," I said aloud, somewhere in the middle of the street. "*This* is who you are," I said to myself.

I was so immersed in the experience that it's a wonder I wasn't struck by a car.

This vividness faded, it all faded, by the time my foot hit the opposite curb. I stood stock-still. "Remember," I said aloud. And I have. This experience is my reference point, almost a tuning fork. My soul was no longer distant, and no longer a concept or even an experience; my soul was a song that was me ... *I* was, I am, a song that is still being sung. It's a crude metaphor but: I am the words, and my soul is the melody, and I have only to recall this brief strange walk across an intersection on Congress to feel a realignment of body and soul in this stripped-away, honest moment. And then life went on.

This is the last of a three-part series, an expanded version of an article published in September's *Psychotherapy Networker*.

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