

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

by Mark Gorkin, L.I.C.S.W.

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

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

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

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

**Mandala Movement and Moment**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and potency in polar opposition along a North-South, East-West compass-like grid. Eventually, aided by a couple of “Aha” moments, including a childhood memory of compulsively doodling in geometric figures, I conceived an operational structure: a concentric or multi-ringed octagonal design that allowed for polar, circular and sequential relationships among the words.

About two days after my semi-paradoxical foray of capturing the ineffable through words and geometric design, there arose a question from the recesses of my unconscious: “Was this a Mandala?” I headed straight for the library’s big *Oxford World Dictionary*. Without conscious awareness I, in fact, was creating a “Mandala,” the Sanskrit term for “magic circle.” The Mandala is a symmetrical configuration often displaying an Indian rug-like pattern. It is comprised of a central image, connoting seed-like growth potential along with unfolding layers, signifying a progression into deeper psychic-cosmic dimensions. *Mandala*, Jose and Miriam Arguelles, Shambala (1972) contains numerous illustrations.

The symbol has been used to induce meditative states for several millenia. The dictionary also noted that the Mandala was one of the “archetypal symbols” of the “collective unconscious” studied and elaborated upon by early 20th century psychoanalyst, Carl Jung. I had done a smattering of reading on Jung, perhaps just enough to seed the subconscious connection. For the most part, though, these new concepts were a foreign (and somewhat foreboding) language. I had never done careful reading on Mandalas, Jungian archetypes, Eastern religion, mysticism, meditation or altered states of consciousness. The subject had always seemed a little too far out. Obviously, that would all change. In fact, the Mandala would soon become the “Holy Grail” of dissertation pursuits.



As noted earlier, I was definitely “off the academic wall.” Not surprisingly, after a two-year quest, unable to capture systematically in doctoral prose my analytic-mystical-graphical-poetic experience, I succumbed to total mind-body exhaustion. I call those days, “When academic flashdancing whirled to a burnout tango.” I left the doctoral program feeling defeated and humiliated. However, with a new round of grief work, support of friends, the start of a private therapy practice (specializing in stress and burnout, naturally) and regular physical exercise, I was able to rise gradually from the “academic ashes.”

And I was fired up for another challenging if not quixotic pursuit, one that reflected a most important legacy of the Mandala experience. This time it was breaking into TV and radio with no prior media background. Once again a somewhat dubious undertaking, though one that did have lasting influence on:

a) Insight — “The only thing more dangerous than taking a big risk or not taking any risk is taking a risk while minimizing the precarious

reality of the situation,” from my article, “Creative Risk-Taking: The Art of Designing Disorder,” (*Paradigm*, Spring 2001) and

b) Identity — I may not have completed the doctoral dissertation, but I did acquire from the TV editor of *The Times Picayune* the twenty-plus-years-and-still-going-strong, nationally trademarked stage moniker, “Stress Doc”™.

The Mandala moment and aftermath helped me recognize that there was psychic and creative energy inside, smoldering for years, longing to come out. (Also painful splits within my own psyche, for example, the “too good” and “self-sacrificing” child versus the “selfish and shameful” one, waiting to be recognized and nurtured, if not integrated and healed.) And the “creative burnout” interlude along with my five-year, off and on, media adventure helped me realize that psychological understanding expressed with humor and irreverent wit, as opposed to academic parlance, was my essence and path. I had discovered my “psychohumorist”™ voice.

For me, discovering your “voice” equates to the outward expression of your “personality” and “integrity” or your “style” and “substance.” This essential expression in ideas and imagination, music and movement (or some harmonious or cacophonous combination) captures your authenticity, intensity and complexity. It also projects your depth and multifaceted nature. Your true voice is a rich palette allowing you to color your world in the serene and sensual, in the silly and sublime.

Finally, in addition to “Insight” and “Identity” (and the aforementioned “Integration” and “Integrity” noted above) there was another “I”-word. And this word brings us directly back to the Mandala and to the pioneering psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, and his study of this archetypal symbol. For Jung, the Mandala was the quintessential symbol of “Individuation,” the process of grappling with if not reconciling the opposites in a psyche as a pathway to both wholeness and to your deepest and most authentic self. What I am calling “soul.”

“Individuation,” according to the previously cited, James Hollis, “is the lifelong project of becoming more nearly the whole person we were meant to be — what the gods intended, not the parents, the tribe, or, especially, the easily intimidated or inflated ego. One must surrender the ego’s agenda of security and emotional reinforcement, in favor of humbling service to the soul’s intent; ‘what wishes to live through us.’ Our greatest freedom is found, paradoxically, in surrender to that which seeks fuller expression through us. It cuts a person off from the herd, from collectivity, but it deepens the range in which more authentic relationships can occur (page 12).”

“Insight,” “Identity,” “Integration” “Integrity” and “Individuation”... Aha, I think we’ve got it. These “Five I’s” might be conceived as the foundation of my newly coined concept “Soul-ar Power”™. And Part II will flesh out the conceptual skeleton, to help you discover your depths and evolve your “Soul-ar Power” through “Good Grief and Letting Go,” “Mining the Silence,” “Courageous Decisions and Conversations” and “Play and Creativity.” Until next time, *May the Force and Farce Be With You!* ▼

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