



Giving voice to your soul



Ruth Groff and Cath Hancox describe their creative work with personal development groups in training counsellors

Introduction

The story of *The Soul Bird*, by Michal Snunit,¹ gave birth to an organic expression of 'soul', from which evolved a pragmatic, progressive dialogue within the personal development (PD) groups we, the authors of this article, lead at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. We draw on our own narratives as two lecturers to preserve student confidentiality and demonstrate the voice of the soul.

Ruth



My soul bird

In the quiet space deep within, I hear a mournful and soulful 'wooo-oo-oo-oo' sound. A familiar sound, a longing sound, and a belonging sound that brings me home. This meditative sound calls me into relationship with my God, myself and ultimately into relationship with others. It is my soul bird – the mourning dove, who reminds me that I am safe and to hold hope for what is yet to become. It emerges deep within, reminding me to once again take flight.

'Deep down,
inside our bodies,
lives the soul.
No one has ever seen it,
but we all know it's there.
Not only do we know it's there,
we know what's in it, too.'¹

Approximately 10 years ago, I was introduced to *The Soul Bird*, a short story by Michal Snunit.¹ I remember, at the time, resonating with me as it provided further insight into my own soul bird as well as some awareness of my client's soul birds. However, the treasured short story found itself within a cluttered drawer, waiting to be opened. Luckily, the drawer was cleared and the book found its way onto a bookshelf, waiting to be explored.

Reading the short story again with clients and with students has provided new depth and awareness in my work. It brought a language, a metaphor, and new meaning in understanding soul or what is held and treasured so deeply within. Is this spirituality? Is this what we're seeking? Is this what we are seeking together? This unique book, *The Soul Bird*, is a catalyst.

Storytelling is a natural process within the therapeutic relationship, and as a practitioner I have listened to numerous stories. These stories are often non-linear and may appear to be fragmented or twirling around in concentric circles. And yet, when I truly, deeply listen, I can also hear and feel the fluttering of wings, the opening and closing of drawers; along with the clamouring of taking out and replacing treasures.

Cath



My soul bird

As I shut my eyes and open my mind to what emerges, I become aware of the colour yellow. Not a solid yellow, but one that is suffused with light – warm, but in some way delicate, vulnerable. I perceive the light as being in a dark place and as I do this, I see a small yellow canary. As I visualise my bird, I am reminded of learning about this little songbird in school, many years ago. The memory resonates in my being, of the small yellow canary sent down into the coal mines of Wales to alert miners to the presence of toxic gases. As long as the bird sang, they would know it was safe for them. There is something about holding the song for clients in places they fear to tread; but in this moment, leading the personal development group in meditative contemplation of their soul birds, it felt as if my soul bird were saying, 'It's OK; I have been here first; you can breathe here'.

I have had a growing sense of my own spirituality within my work as a person-centred therapist during the last 15

years. What I have noticed, particularly, are times when I feel something occurring within me and my experience with a client that seems more than my emotional response and sense of warm acceptance. It seems to me that a deep empathy, and my own genuineness are present and perhaps intrinsic to these occasions; but the experience itself feels more. I have had a sense of waking up, an emerging consciousness of something that had been on the edge of awareness or in my peripheral vision. As I have grown and developed as a therapist, becoming more congruent in my 'self', less afraid or wary of 'doing it right' and more freely able to be in the relationship, I have developed a trust in the healing nature that truly meeting with someone can bring. Martin Buber sees this intensity of relation in terms of the 'I' meeting with the 'thou' as opposed to the 'it' of the other. He says of this relation: 'No deception penetrates here; here is the cradle of the Real Life'.² So there is something resolutely honest, vital and true here and that, to me, feels 'holy'. In this sense of true meeting, it seems as if the core essence of me, perhaps my 'true self', is connecting and resonating with the 'true self' of the other – this feels like 'soul'. Carl Rogers captures this sense of experience: 'At those moments, it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself, and has become part of something larger. Profound growth and healing and energy are present.'³

Rationale for understanding and working with 'soul'

James Hillman, revises 'soul' as a perspective, not a thing; it is the mediator between what occurs and how we make meaning of it. It is the process through and by which this 'translation' occurs.⁴ 'Soul' is not seen as a religious concept but rather as the meaning of 'psyche'. It is not that which transcends humanity but rather that which anchors humanity in engagement with the visceral reality of living. It is what deepens meaning and experience.

Michael Kearney also recognises this bridging quality of 'soul': 'the living connection between the surface and the unfathomable and meaning-rich depths of who we are.'⁵ His notion of 'soul' suggests a vital, dynamic conduit between what is deep within, perhaps the core sense of self, our 'spirit', and how this is conducted and expressed through engagement with the external.

'Most important is to listen to the soul bird, because sometimes it calls us and we don't hear it. This is a shame – it wants to tell us about ourselves. It wants to tell us about the feelings that are locked up inside its drawers.'¹

This aspect of human beings, which seems to apply to 'soul' or 'spirit', is more than mind, behaviour, emotion and physicality and yet seems for many, if not all, intrinsic to the human experience. As such, this must be important to counsellors and psychotherapists if we are to assist or support our clients towards becoming the whole of who they are, to become 'a person who is more open to all the



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elements of his organic experience'.⁶ We need to be willing to engage and work with 'soul' or 'spirit' and the meaning it has for our clients.

The PD group allows an opportunity to narrate a process of reflection and exploration. In this way it enables students to conceptualise and create their own understanding and experience of their spiritual or 'soul' self – irrespective of religious or non-religious views. This conceptual context usefully supports our understanding of 'soul', and the notion of 'soul bird' provides a pragmatic approach towards accessing and engaging with the 'soul birds' of others.

Barriers to and considerations for working with soul in counselling and psychotherapy

'Some of us hear it all the time.
Some almost never.
And some of us hear it
only once in a lifetime.'¹

When researching 'presence' for my MA in Counselling Practice, I found a paucity of consensual language in relevant contemporary literature concerning experiences that can be considered spiritual in nature. Despite having little problem in accessing a wide discourse around the area, the language seemed open to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Such experiences are difficult to pin down in words, and language can become emotive, assumptive and often misleading; not least, perhaps as words offer different symbolisms to different people. However, if we are to equip the emerging generation of counsellors/psychotherapists to work with the holism of the human being, efforts are needed to find ways to engage with and explore this aspect of ourselves and

others. The nomenclature of 'soul' and 'spirit' commonly recurred within the psychological and psychotherapeutic literature during my research.⁷ However, the value and meaning inherent in this terminology can create a barrier to the depth and richness of spiritual expression in an increasingly secular-centric context which can seem to struggle against its own notions of inclusivity.

An invitation to metaphor and imagination

The soul bird, in inviting a language of metaphor and imagination, through the gift of story-telling, offers a means to transcend potential barriers. Working with students in personal development provoked a shared recognition of an emerging sacredness and beauty that come as a common language, evolving through a co-created experience.

The opportunity to work with notions of 'soul' in this way, allows individuals to construct their own, meaningful concept of 'self' and 'soul'. This journey in itself encourages self-exploration and personal development; but further than this, it provides a compass-like means for ongoing reflection and a way by which to enter into a dialogue efficient for relational depth. In this way, the soul bird provides a transferable method for working with clients, students and supervision in counselling and psychotherapy; ultimately, encouraging the soul bird to take flight and to be free.

'By now you've understood that everyone is different because there's a different soul bird deep inside.'¹

References

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Biographies

Ruth Groff and Cath Hancox lecture on the counselling programmes at University of Wales Trinity Saint David in Swansea. They co-facilitate the personal development groups for the Postgraduate Certificate in Psychotherapeutic Practice: Humanistic, as part of the master's programme.

