

Excerpts

Excerpt from the Introduction

(pre-publication version)

Look on my right hand and see—
there is no one who takes notice of me;
no refuge remains to me;
no one cares for me.

I cry to you, O Lord;
I say, "You are my refuge,
my portion in the land of the living."

I stretch out my hands to you;
my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.

Psalms 142:4-5; 143:6

Those of us who are privileged to carry out the ministry of pastoral care are becoming increasingly aware that we have neglected to listen for the soul. What North American mainline Protestant churches once understood to be central in pastoral care is now marginal in pastoral practice. Because we have neglected to foster soulfulness (soul fullness), the church and the world alike cry out like the psalmist of old: "No one cares for me. . . . My soul thirsts for you like a parched land." A jarring dichotomy exists between society's pervasive longing for meaningful spirituality and the faltering pastoral responses of Protestant churches.

The Public Quest for Soulfulness

The world is crying out for the church to be more like the church, to represent the space and place where holiness, meaning, and God can be found, experienced, understood, and reimagined. Yet even at the beginning of a new century, for many, the traditional patterns of religious life remain too patriarchal, inadequate, and even obsolete. For others, the church seems too much in appearance like the world-too busy, too tired, too involved, too

demanding, too unstable, too spiritually impoverished, too leadership deprived.

At the same time that such strong and ambivalent feelings are being expressed about the church, people remain interested in spiritual matters. Spirituality is newsworthy and remains marketable. Pollsters report on religious trends and affiliations. Popular television programs from "Touched by an Angel" to "NYPD Blue" regularly address spiritual matters. Also, the increased plurality of North American society and the visible presence of Eastern religions have heightened our consciousness of spiritual traditions and the spiritual life. People are consistently providing evidence that there is a deep-seated craving for religious sensibilities and rituals. Even taking into account the sentimentality triggered by the Christmas holiday season, the notable increase in attendance at Christmas Eve services can be partly attributed to the fact that people want to connect in some way with the holy mystery of the Christmas event. Some men and women openly confess the need to feel more spiritually connected and alive. These needs are frequently demonstrated through pursuits that seek to merge the psychological, medical, and spiritual paradigms. Zealous interest in Yoga, Tai Chi, massage, meditation, and relaxation therapies, and chiropractic, homeopathic, and naturopathic care indicates that ours is a time of intense personal and social yearning for spiritual wholeness.

In such a climate, it is not surprising that enrollment levels for university and college religious studies courses have soared. People are devising personal spiritual belief systems and seeking with renewed vigor places and practices that put them in touch with spiritual values. Most bookstores contain entire sections on New Age spirituality, women's and men's spiritualities, and alternative health. The number of books (including this one!) published in the last few years with the word soul in their titles is staggering. We gorge on books, hoping to digest clues for fixing our bodies, our businesses, our relationships, our addictions, and now even our souls. No longer are retreat centers the sole/soul enterprise of the church. All sorts of healing, inner renewal, and spirituality centers are springing up in a secular context, advertised as getaway places from the stresses of work and our technological addictions. Alternative and holistic approaches to caring for body, mind, and soul are rapidly finding their way into an eager consumer-driven market. Attending to the soul, in all its emptiness and fullness, has now become a trendy and profitable enterprise. When our hunger is so intense, it seems that we will eat anything put before us that promises nourishment.

Many pastoral caregivers are acutely aware that people are desperately seeking to make connections with holiness, the mystery of life, and the divine force of creation. The reordering of priorities brought about by a decrease in financial resources, changes in employment and work patterns, and external stresses placed upon personal time commitments has led to a lack of balance in life. Many people simply are overextended and unable to discern what leads to a balanced life and what leads to burnout and long-term disability, the new dis-eases of our time. The fact of change has produced increased anxiety and turned up the volume of noise in our souls. So, too, the ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots and a growing discomfort with the idolatrous nature of consumerism have evoked in many a quest for simplicity and a renewed spiritual life.

Protestant churches are now scrambling to respond to this renewed interest in matters of the soul, but it is clear that they are ill equipped to do so. Indeed, they are almost frantic in their quest to catch up with the public's emphasis upon matters of the soul, and they fear that inaction may indeed hasten the demise of the church's capacity to address spiritual matters and care for the soul. The church fears that its failure to attend to the soul has contributed to destructive patterns of disconnection with God, others, ourselves, and the earth.

While the public's interest in soul matters is surging, Protestant churches continue to flounder in their response to this phenomenon. Why is this so?

Excerpt from Chapter One

(pre-publication version)

The Lord God has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear.

Isaiah 50:4-5a

Over and over again, I am struck by the transforming significance and profound simplicity of the ministry of listening. Maybe that is why Simone Weil once reflected upon attention as the only faculty of the soul that gives us access to God. God both wakens our ears so that we may listen and opens our ears so that we may hear. Listening for the soul is the primary and essential form our pastoral care takes when we are concerned with fostering spiritual depth in the lives of those within our faith communities and neighborhoods. As we live our ordinary routines, experiencing moments of difficulty, surprise, and play, we can develop in ourselves and others the habit of listening for the soul. This includes listening for our own soul as we also practice listening for the souls of others. It is about letting our ears be awake and attentive to the voices of yearning, weariness, and supplication in the form of words, holy screams for new life, or sighs too deep for words.

To listen seems like such an ordinary thing; perhaps we too readily underestimate its extraordinary value as an approach to pastoral care. The essential role it can play deserves a closer examination. What might it mean if the people of God had open ears? We need to open our own ears to hear what it means to listen for the soul, and in particular, to discover how we might become habitual in practicing such listening. To enhance our own practice of pastoral care, we need especially to learn from the types of listening done by spiritual directors.

Listening as an Act of Intentionality

I use the term listening deliberately. In many ways, to listen for the soul, both our own and those of others, is more central to life than anything else we do. Pastoral care has spoken historically of "curing the soul," then of "caring for the soul," and more recently of "minding the soul." It seems to me that, unlike the notion of "listening," these approaches seek to avoid damage, find an end to trouble, provide protection by watching over and tending, eliminate disease, see to the safety or well-being of another, and encourage freedom from anxiety or worry. We use regularly such expressions as "plan with care," "handle with care," "leave in your care," "take care of," "not a care in the world," "minding the shop," "minding the baby," "minding the step," "minding one's P's and Q's," or "finding a cure." Clearly, we are concerned with both care and cure as ways of minding; I am not recommending we obliterate the positive dimensions of these approaches to the soul. Sometimes the first things we need to do are provide protection, help the individual recall what is important, and ensure hospitable conditions so that he or she feels safe to tune into the soul's own trembling voice.

I suggest that the term listening be used to describe an overarching framework for pastoral care in our current societal climate. People will still need physical and mental healing of ailments, and they will frequently need help in exploring ways to cope with their immediate problems or crises. But the underlying dimension of the soul, the core of our lives and its denial or cultivation, remains the primary ministry given to the church, and we do this ministry best through the intentional act of listening. If we listen only partially and are too quick to cure the soul, the soul may simply get on with daily living without addressing the deeper issue of how life should be lived now and in the future. The immediate pain may dissipate long enough for familiar routines to be restored and for daily functioning to return, but if the deeper gnawing in the interior life remains unaddressed, the soul's restlessness will be experienced yet again. Our hearts are restless, after all, until they find their perfect rest in God, not in a cure.

Listening for the soul is not a quick fix or a limited intervention. Nor is it haphazard. Cultivating the soul essentially requires attending, in deliberate, habitual, and sustaining ways, to every aspect of our lives and all levels on which we live life, both consciously and unconsciously. To listen is to wait with a posture of alertness, in anticipation of hearing something of the voice and presence of God, who longs for us to be whole and abundantly alive. But we do not listen in order to make God present. We open our ears as a way of responding to the presence of God, who is already and always present in our lives, with or without our recognition.

In placing such a prominent emphasis upon listening, it needs to be said that I am not describing a passive act, but a process that engages us actively in response to what is heard. Listening is about more than a well-honed skill (although certainly skill is involved). Undeniably, listening for the soul will involve those essential skills normally identified with the act of listening, such as expressing interest by caring behavior, using appropriate facial expressions and posture, posing open-ended questions, closely observing nonverbal clues, responding by paraphrasing, clarifying, supporting, probing, understanding, confronting, evaluating, and recommending. Such responses and ways of listening have a necessary function in listening for the soul. To listen for the spiritual dimension in every human experience and life circumstance, however, requires listening with a definite spirit and intentionality. We are listening for more than what is consciously expressed. We are listening for the very voice, presence, or absence of God in the soul, the core of our lives where meaning is created.