

Soul Work: Healing Without Faith, Dogma, or Creed

Barbara Thiede

We sat on the sofa in my library, surrounded by walls of books, a fireplace made of antebellum bricks, and hand-hewn beams of the same age. The man who built our modest ranch house in North Carolina came from three generations of bricklayers. He had taken to building materials from houses he was hired to tear down; he integrated old stories into his new home.

The bricks in our library were likely made by local slaves.

We were meeting in a room that witness to the horror of slavery. We were surrounded by shelves of books about the human longing for the divine along with; these neighboring texts describing the Holocaust.

Sarah, a former student of mine, was twenty-three years old. It was the first time I had seen her in the three years since she had graduated from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where I teach. She had been an irrepressible student—precocious, much younger than her peers, and very funny. One day, she appeared during my office hours with notes on a major project she had started for another class. She made wry comments about feeling overwhelmed.

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I asked her to explain the project. I looked at her notes.

“Sarah,” I told her with mock sternness, “this is completely out of control.”

She sighed. “I knew you would say that, Dr. Thiede,” she said. “I just knew it.”

Sarah majored in German and International Studies and minored in Judaic Studies. She took courses in Judaism and in anti-Semitism with me. It was a surprising choice of study. She came from rural North Carolina. She was not Jewish; no one in her family was. Sarah, the child of poor, white, hard-scrabble farmers, the daughter of a violent father and an abused mother, had chosen to study humanity’s worst abuses.

We had talked for at least an hour when I finally asked her: “Sarah, what made you decide to call me?”

“I want you to do my funeral,” she said.¹

Sarah McCurry died eleven months later of colon cancer.

Sarah had been brought up Baptist, she told me during that first talk, but she hadn’t been to church “in forever.” She had remembered from her time at the University of North Carolina that I was a rabbi, and she *knew* she didn’t want some minister talking about hellfire and damnation at her funeral. She was pretty sure, she said, that I didn’t believe in that sort of stuff.

She was right. But as chaplains and pastoral caregivers know, our own beliefs—when it comes to matters of the soul—are not the issue. Those of the people we care for are.

Soul work may have seemed to have its provenance in Christian practice, but such a conclusion can only be reached in ignorance of other religious traditions. Judaism has a rich history and literature regarding the nature of the soul—especially, though not exclusively, in Chassidic texts. But it is unnecessary to be an expert in world religions to understand that soul work is independent of creed, dogma, or faith. One only has to work with the dying.

Then, death itself becomes our teacher, and it offers us this truth: discovering the place of the individual life in the human story is the essence of soul work. This is a task that transcends religion traditions.

Human lives—even our bodies—are made of the stuff of the universe. Eternity speaks no specific religious language. The soul is the essence of the eternal. Thus, the soul cannot be bound to a particular belief or faith.

There is no charge more sacred than to be the guide of the dying. There is no work more universal than the work of the soul. To become the first requires the second.

When Sarah called me, she wanted to avoid being told what she should believe about her illness and imminent death. That I am Jewish was, however, irrelevant to what she sought. At first, she believed she was trying to understand why she was dying. But, over the months she had left, she learned why she had lived.

Making meaning of our lives is not egoistic. Aware of the fragility of our lives while being conscious of our part in the human narrative, we can heal—both – others and ourselves. A conversation of ten minutes becomes a legacy. Reconciliations once rejected as impossibilities become reality. This is not the stuff of Hallmark cards or maudlin movies. This is soul work that transforms; never more so than at the juncture between life and death. It is work that is obviously, clearly independent of religious institutions and their doctrines.

Chaplains and pastoral caregivers know how the world of death opens to a world of life; the dying will take in—fully—the specificity of a single sunset, the rich familiarity of the voice of the beloved, the presence of life eternal. The dying stand at a holy threshold.

In every conversation I had with Sarah, the most essential questions I could ask were about what she was discovering inside, what she knew to be true about herself, about her life. Right away, in our first conversation in my library, Sarah described a kind of intuition she'd always had, a way of knowing things that she couldn't explain rationally. She asked me if I believed in the soul. I asked her to look inside, and listen. Could she find an answer to that question for herself?

What Sarah shared with me was not knowledge acquired through academic study, nor was it any dogma she had learned, but inner wisdom – — truths of the soul. Giving herself permission to access this knowledge was new; it became exciting, even empowering.

Sarah was the one who eventually named this source as her "soul voice." Once she used this phrase, I told her about texts I knew that appeared to describe something similar. She read for herself about the *kol d'mama daka*,

the “soft, murmuring sound” that spoke to the Prophet Elijah, what Jewish tradition names “the still, small voice.”²

As the months progressed, Sarah read sacred—and academic—literature from a variety of religious traditions. She was curious; she wanted proof that she was not alone. But the evidence she discovered was confirmation, not revelation. The latter she found in herself. Her soul voice, she told me, never lied.

As guides for the dying, our questions must help those we care for access what they already know. Their formulations may speak from traditions or customs of their upbringing, of course. But soul work is about truth, so our process neither depends on any creed nor requires, even, any specific profession of faith. Truth is individual and universal. It must be both to be truth.

One day, Sarah called me in a panic. She was shut in a room. Death had filled the room. She was afraid.

I asked her to talk to me about her body, about her feelings, about her fears. She was all curled up, she told me. It was dark, she said. She was terrified.

“What is the darkness telling you?” I asked.

She spoke about the darkness; it seemed to mean an end of everything. It would suck her up and she would disappear. But then she paused.

“It’s not all dark,” she said. “There’s a sliver of white, a misty thing in the room.”

“Can you tell me more?” I asked.

Haltingly, she began to describe a long, cloudlike thing with long fingers. It reached toward her and touched her forehead just between her eyes. Then it stroked over her head and down her spine to its very end, again and again.

That was, as she later described it, her first encounter with her angels.

Sarah was becoming aware, she told me, of an eternal home for her soul. She found companions of that realm, and they spoke to her, even helped her understand her life’s purpose.

Sarah’s process included fear and horror at what was happening to her body; learning to listen to her soul’s voice did not protect her from despair and grief. She resisted the onslaught of death as she welcomed the presence of hope. Despite every terrible medical report, she hoped that her body might heal. She also continued to explore the hope that the death of

her body would not erase the meaning of her life. The first hope could not be realized; the second was.

In her last months, she joked with me about how much her angels seemed to need her, how important she was to them.

"I guess there's work for me there," she said. "Maybe that's what I needed to learn here." She paused, and laughed. "I guess I was a quick learner."

Even in the face of death, there may be healing.³

One of the primary tasks of caring for the soul is understanding the paradox so beautifully described by Rabbi Bunim of P'shiskha. One should always have two pockets in which to carry two *Zettelchen*, two notes, wherever one goes. One note should read, "I am but dust and ashes." The other should state, "The world was created for me." At times, we should reach into one pocket, at times the other. The secret to life is knowing when one note should be read, and when the other.

We are unique, and we are finite. Each of us is part of the story of humanity. We each contribute to that story, and we each leave something behind for those who knew us. In the face of death, we must ask what our lives have meant. We must discover what of ourselves can be called "eternal."

Those who accompany the dying must have the time and the commitment to help those they guide identify the wisdom of their soul and the narrative of their life. That guidance is, perhaps, the most prayerful care pastoral caregivers can offer. It is individual, purposeful, and essential. To sit by the dying and to help them discover and name the gifts they have given the world, the truths they have taught, and the place they have occupied in the narrative of the human endeavor—that is the essence of soul work.

We spend most of our days—even most of our lives—in places of constricted awareness, what Chassidic tradition calls *mochin d'katnut*, a state of small-mindedness. We naturally react to the pain of the moment, the frustrations of the hour. But the work of the soul offers us a way to transcend and even make meaning of our days. Soul work is wisdom work, and it gives us a pathway to *mochin de gadlut*, expanded consciousness.

Nowhere is the entry to *mochin de gadlut* more accessible than when we realize that we stand at the threshold between life and death.⁴ Then, we ask: What is our own life about? And though we all stand at that threshold in any given moment, and though none of us are granted an automatic right to pause there, the opportunity to do so offers revelation that transcends both creed and faith. We learn, then, that the meaning of each individual life's is

simultaneously particular and universal. Discovering that meaning is the work of the soul.

In Jewish tradition, there are many Midrashim, or stories, about the death of our greatest prophet, Moses. They tell us that: Moses, too, knew fear in the face of death. He, too, struggled with mortality. Sentenced to die in sight of the Promised Land and forbidden from stepping foot upon it, Moses begged God to let him live, refusing, as Dylan Thomas wrote, “to go gentle into that good night.”⁵ In desperation, he even suggested fantastic alternatives. Might he, at least, be reincarnated in the Promised Land as a beast or a bird? God refused; Moses was human. There must be an end to every life.

Moses feared the reality of a future without him. According to one story, he is forced to sit in a classroom and listen to his successor, Joshua, teach, while he himself goes unrecognized. The world has gone on without him. He is resentful, confused.

But then he hears his soul speak a wisdom we must all learn: each of us is part of a human narrative. Suddenly, Moses understands, and he cries out in anguish, “Rather a hundred deaths than a single pang of envy. Master of universes, until now I sought life. But now my soul is surrendered to You.”⁶

In the end, it is God, Godself who attends his prophet, taking his soul with a kiss.⁷

Even Moses, Jewish tradition tells us, had to learn to do the soul work of the dying. In *mochin de gadlut*, that state of expanded consciousness, Moses can understand his place in the larger, more expansive narrative he would have to cede to Joshua and those who follow him. He is able, after all, to say goodbye to the life he lived. He understands that: his story is not confined to the parameters of his days; it transcends them. Death, his erstwhile nemesis, is his teacher.

As pastoral caregivers, we take care of the soul by meeting with death—even by living with it. Then, we know grace and purpose. Our work is in the service of a larger narrative. We may live in a house that death, too, inhabits, but it is a sacred house.

Parshat *ayyei Sarah*, “the life of Sarah,” opens with the matriarch’s death and the search for a wife for Sarah’s son, Isaac. Upon meeting Re-

bekah, Isaac takes her into his mother's tent. "Isaac loved her," we read, "and found comfort after his mother's death" (Gen. 24:67). Rebekah, brought into a house of death, proceeds to fill it with life. The cloud of glory that had disappeared with Sarah's death returns. The doors once free to wayfarers now reopen. Blessings that had fled come back, and light reappears.⁸

But death has not been banished from the premises. Rebekah must wake every day to reminders of life's fragility. She would see it in her husband's face; she would feel it in every item she touched. It had all belonged to the woman who had been there before her. Yet she took it upon herself, so the Midrash tells us, to extend the story and be part of the larger narrative of life. The biblical narrative places Sarah's death just after the announcement of Rebekah's birth for a reason. Before the Holy One allowed Sarah's sun to set, the commentary tells us, God caused Rebekah's to rise.⁹ Rebekah lived in a house of death. She neither banished nor replaced death; instead, she acknowledged and understood its presence and its lessons.

So must we.

By the time she died, my former student Sarah had visited many times with those she called her "angels." She spoke about what it would be like to feel their loving presence all the time—without pause. She found a way to live the life she had, to understand its narrative and the power of its legacy. She had learned to listen to the wisdom of her soul.

Few agreed with her choice not to have chemotherapy. Understandably, she faced resistance and denial. But when she looked inside, her "soul voice" told her how she wanted to live. As much as she could, she spent her last year in nature.

Her funeral service was, as she had requested, held outdoors. We stood among the green, easy mountains rising towards the Blue Ridge. We gathered at the little creek where Sarah had learned to swim as a child.

The water bubbled and frothed over a ridge of rock. We put raw gemstones into the jar Sarah had used to bring flowers down¹⁰ to the creek to lay where her aunt's remains had been strewn. Sarah's ashes were spread there, too.

The truest work of the soul is this: to know our particular story in the larger, eternal narrative of life. It depends on nothing more than this awareness that: Soul work is and must be, by its very nature, both particular and universal, both human and eternal.

NOTES

- 1 This essay is dedicated to the memory of Sarah McCurry, a former student of mine at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. In February 2015, she called to tell me that she had just been diagnosed with fourth-stage colon cancer. At the time of that call, Sarah was just shy of twenty-four. She died less than a year later. Death might have been her enemy, but it became her teacher—and mine.
- 2 Kings 19:12. The phrase is not infrequently translated as “the still, small voice,” though I have used a more literal translation here.
- 3 I would like to acknowledge, as a teacher of the Holocaust, that meaningless death is real. Humans are quite capable of inflicting such deaths. But a meaningless death does not equate to a meaningless life.
- 4 This is, of course, true of every moment we live.
- 5 The poem continues: “Old age should burn and rave at close of day.”
- 6 Sefer Ha-Aggadah 103:137. See also Sotah 13b, which alludes, albeit briefly, to the transfer of authority from Moses to Joshua.
- 7 Deut. R. 7:10 and 11:10; Tanhuma, Va-et’hannan, #6; Yalkut, Va-et’hannan, #821 Mi-drash Petirat Mosheh.
- 8 Genesis Rabbah 60:16.
- 9 Genesis Rabbah 58:2.