

Creative Narration: Finding Soulfulness through a Desperate Search for My Soul

Jason C. Whitehead

When you want to truly get to know someone, what do you look for? For me, a good relationship comes down to learning a person's meaning-making, stories, ideas, and possibilities. Anyone can find out details and information; we can also ask for points of clarification or gather data. However, what really helps us know someone are the stories that shape their lives. These are the narrative moments of why or how; they capture the meaning and essence of someone's interpretation of an experience and they offer a glimpse into the way they are incorporating it broadly into their lives. Stories creatively reveal a person's identity and sense of self, and they also give clues about where the divine lives in these experiences. Yet sometimes these same stories hinder our ability to experience the world in life-giving ways.

As a pastoral psychotherapist, I spent a year and a half working with Sara, a deaf member of a Baptist community in Virginia. A survivor of mental, physical, and sexual abuse, Sara often seemed to struggle with the tension between justice and forgiveness. She worried about the status of her

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abuser's soul, believing this family member was headed to hell. Sara wrestled with her anger, desire for justice and reconciliation, and a sincere hope for her abuser's salvation. I often describe Sara as the person who sent me on a lifelong imaginative journey of theological reconstruction. I had no answers for her, no lasting balm for her anger, grief, or sadness. The sacred and theological stories I could manage to dredge up in our sessions contained many of the same problems she had wrestled with for many years before meeting me.

LOSING MY SOUL

Today, it is Sara's stories about the soul that give me pause. My reflections on those times were that I had no way of thinking about the soul as something other than substantive. As such, my theology of the soul pertained to salvation, individuality, and immortality, which allowed me to objectify Sara and her abuser. In reflection, empathy for the abuser, which might have helped Sara reframe the relationship, became impossible. He became an unredeemable object, and we found it difficult to find relief, hope, or a way forward through the morass. Despite her artistic inclinations and my own creative interjections, when it came to the circumstances of the soul, we came up with little to no creative possibility. She longed to connect and reconcile, yet my memory of that time was that she believed the abuser unrepentant and thus too stained and mottled for anything new to arise. In time, I took up a similar stance.

Growing up in an evangelical Calvinist tradition, Sara's stories fit my theological view of the world—and then, suddenly, they didn't. The more we circled her stories, the more my theological worldview began to fray at the edges. I can't exactly put a finger on the moment—it was a couple of months after our last appointment—but that theological worldview and that kind of faith and that way of being and seeing others stopped working for me.

At some point, I stopped worrying about my soul and my salvation. As a result, the relational dynamics and pains and joys of the world grew more prominent in the present. Looking back, I wonder if those early views of the soul hampered my therapeutic work and if I would have been a better therapist in that relationship with Sara without them. These many years later, I think I am better for giving up on my soul. Likewise, I hope the people I love

and interact with and work with are better overall for that moment when my individual soul no longer mattered to me. At the same time, giving up on my ideas about the substantive soul left me with no replacement; I had nothing that honored the complexity of the world and what it meant to be human and to be human in relationship to something divine.

(DESPERATELY) SEEKING THE SOUL

I began thinking in earnest again about the soul as my work in student formation increased. Students would share stories of epiphanies or their feelings about how being in a school of theology was the right thing at the right time. They would talk about their spirits and their souls, exploring stories that felt both familiar and foreign to me. In those relational moments, I felt I was missing something in my vocabulary that honored the sacredness of theirs. In an effort to discern a way forward, I returned to the spaces that informed my thinking and practice: the neurosciences, which have offered me numerous ideas about the human brain and its capacities; psychology, which has given me a vocabulary to talk about human beings and the inter-related complexity of our lives; and, theology, which has been the lifeblood of my interpretations of the world and all its myriad relationships. None of these disciplines seemed to offer the kind of remedy I was seeking.

Theology, Science, and Psychology

Generally speaking, science and psychology have all but done away with the soul, replacing it with terms such as self, consciousness, identity, mind, or psyche.¹ Popular American Christian theology emphasizes the individualistic and personal salvific qualities of the soul.² Even most progressive theologies want to maintain the soul as an individualized substance. The problems with these views are legion. With the scientific view, we often get the sense that human beings are little more than a physical substance. Thus, everything can be explained through the physical processes of the body. Concepts like the soul are little more than superstitious diversions from truly understanding what it means to be human. As someone who often appeals to science in his work, I find this view of humanity extremely untenable, yet the current theological and philosophical answers to this view are equally unsatisfying for me. “Non-reductive physicalism”³ and “the soul as information”⁴ are attempts to appeal to the science of humanity

without fully going down the road of reductionism. Both views have their merits—they appeal to science, understand the complexity of systems, and take into account both the complex ways bodies are constructed and the impact of sociocultural influences on our lives. However, these still incorporate the sense that the soul is an individualized component of the self. It is a separate internal interpretive capacity.

From the religious and philosophical side, humans have been debating the substance of the soul since Plato. Whether wrestling with the concept of the dualism of the spiritual and earthly realms and thus the dual substances of body and soul or the Augustinian view of our souls as dim mirrors of the divine housed in human flesh, we have debated the role, substance, and rise of the soul.⁵ These concepts rely on the soul as an individualized substance. It is something personally owned. The soul is still *the* soul. It is an object, changeable or not, that is reflective of the divine within; it is a substance—my substance, your substance. It is the genesis of questions such as, Are you saved? Is all well with your soul? What part of me lives after I die? As I see it, when these questions dominate the conversation about the soul, it leads to the possibility of more separation, more competition, and more denigration, dehumanization, oppression, and spiritual abuse.

In my search to find a soul story I could share with Sara and students, I have been left wanting. Even process-relational theology, a theological system that meaningfully orients the world for me, closely associates the soul within the functioning of a person's brain. The soul is a society or synthesis of sequenced and accumulated high-grade life experiences.⁶ Thus, my soul is increased and dynamically changed and challenged through experience. It shifts and is shaped through relational activity, but it is still an 'it,' and it is still mine or internal to me. Moreover, the appeal to the idea of high-grade life experiences is problematic for persons who live and interpret life atypically.⁷

THE SOUL IN SUMMARY

I am resigned to the notion that I may live the rest of my life without a soul. If it merely maintains its current conceptual shape, then I am okay with this possibility. For me, the problems with the traditional notions of the soul are not just philosophical and theological but practical as well. The theological traditions of my birth and of my own choice seem to make me

unable to shake the need for the soul to be something substantive. The sciences I rely on to help me describe humanity offer little wisdom despite the vast fields of knowledge they offer. I can see a remedy on the horizon, but before heading in that direction I want to finish naming reasons why we should move toward that remedy.

Objectification of the Soul

The primary source of my struggles with the soul comes from its objectification. As used with the definite article, *the* soul has become an individualized and internal substance through which we discern the worth of self and one another. As such, our primary religious accountability to one another is related to the status of the other's soul. As an evangelist, I become concerned with formulas and prescriptions meant to scrub the soul clean of its detritus and render it right before God. Yet once I hear confirmation of your salvation there is little need to continue in relationship. My duty is complete as your soul is prepared. As long as the soul is an object, there is little reason for me to see parts of myself overlapping with parts of yourself. This objectification provides the impetus for disconnection rather than ongoing relational activity.

Along with this limited accountability to another, objectification can lead to perceived limits in relational responsibility.⁸ The concept of individually owned souls prioritizes one's own salvation over one's responsibility to God or the divine and neighbor. It emphasizes the position that once things are right with my soul, then it is God's responsibility to take care of me and the world. Moreover, once something is objectified, it can be categorized, compared, deified, dehumanized, oppressed, and/or freed. Objectification simplifies the leap to otherness, losing any semblance of complexity or nuance in the relationships humans have with one another. From here the slope steepens. As philosopher Michael Horne describes it, "evil acts begin when an individual makes, or members of a group make, assertions about the 'naturalness' of their own acts and, correspondingly, the 'unnaturalness' of the acts of others."⁹ This leads to a second and larger problem of the substantive soul, which is typicality.

Normalization of the Soul

Cultures and religious traditions are notorious for normalizing a set of features, calling them human, and idealizing them. When someone does

not measure up to these qualities our propensity toward degradation, exclusion, and dehumanization is exposed. Whether taking on a dualist or monist view of humanity, any reliance on a substantive soul creates possibilities for typifying what it means to be human. This notion of normality presents opportunities for implicit or explicit othering and/or dehumanizing the soul and thus the person as well.

As we move to a physicalist (monist) account of the soul within contemporary frames, we see the dependence on cognitive and neural capacities to complete a concept of the soul. In these theories, there is allegiance to higher cognitive functioning to normalize a meaning-making process or provide ample reflection of complex stimuli. Granted, we might assume that these views of the soul are amenable to those who live with neuro-atypicalities, yet there is little to no mention of this nuance. It begs the question regarding neuro-atypical persons, who may function with different levels of interpretive complexity and/or memory continuity, How do historical views of the soul take shape in ways that are more harmful than helpful? Part of this question arises from our reliance on individual cognitive functioning and self-creative capacities to express what it means to be fully and/or normally human. With a “normalized” soul and anthropology it is easier to demonize or even idealize difference. Moreover, viewing the soul through complex interpretive schemas perpetuates the idealization of purposiveness¹⁰ as central to what it means to be human.

REIMAGINING SARA’S STORIES

Sara’s stories take on a different tinge with these issues of the soul in mind—her anger at those who provided the typical purposeful responses that she should “pray more”; her rage at the suggestion that she forgive and forget when her body was ravaged with the scars and memories of her abuse; her sadness as she looked from the outside at people who proclaimed the healing of their own wounds as guides for her healing without listening to her stories and trauma; her isolation from others, as her almost complete deafness separated her from both hearing and non-hearing communities. Her relationships seemed to lack connection and brought out mistrust in Sara. In reflection, these interactions proclaim the danger of understanding the soul in the manner we do today. Disconnected proclamations, simple

remedies, individualized concern, and theological typicality are the results of substantive views of the soul. I believe it is time for a change.

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOULFULNESS

I am proposing a re-orientation toward “radical interdependence”¹¹ and interrelatedness that requires a shift in our thought and activity toward a relational understanding of the world. To introduce this shift, I want to turn to some theological and theoretical ideas to introduce the concept of “soulfulness.” In short, soulfulness signifies a radical move from thinking about the divine within us to the divine between us.¹² It replaces the soul as substance with soulfulness as relational activity. As such, this requires re-imagining some theological ideas alongside relationally oriented theories of the self.

A Return to Process

Like many process thinkers, I describe the basic constituents of the world as drops of experience signified in relational events. Thus, what matters in this world is the process of relational activity between objects. Relational activity forms the primary interpretive milieu in which we live and move and become, negating the elevated importance of substance without denying its relevance. In this particular case, it recasts soul/soulfulness as verb rather than noun. Feminist theologian Lucinda Huffaker described this relationality as “God and world, humans and nature [sharing] a continuous organic relation rather than a hierarchy of dominants and subordinates . . . nature is not the alien other that must be subdued so that humans can thrive, but humans and nature are interconnected in a complex web that must be nurtured for our mutual sustenance.”¹³ What arises from this thinking is twofold. First, how we relate matters more than any hierarchy of substance. Second, the emphasis on relational activity requires a different understanding of human connectivity to the world. As Leslie A. Muray, another process thinker, puts it, “there is neither *absolute* distinction nor *absolute* identity between the self (or any subjective experience) and ‘the other,’ no *absolute* boundary between the self (or any subjective experience) and the world. The web of relationships is the nurturing (or obstructive) matrix for the richness of experience in the becoming moment.”¹⁴

Certainly, we experience the world in embodied ways. However, in this view we are a part of the whole rather than apart from it. We sense, take in information about, process, and react to an experience, but these happen in interdependent relationships rather than privileged isolation. We interpret, but those interpretations are always negotiated in relationship. Furthermore, all relationships are subject to interconnected dynamics that influence the relative meaning, influence, and outcome of those experiences. The cosmos is envisioned as “constantly interacting, constantly social, always in process, and always dynamic.”¹⁵ Soulfulness, in this theological frame, is the activity of recognizing the divine in relationships as well as reimagining our relationships to honor that presence. It signifies our openness to and capacity to see our interconnectedness and interdependence through dynamic relational processes.

Soulfulness as the Breath of Life

The Hebrew concept of *ruah* provides an important metaphor for this radical interconnectedness. Among its many meanings, *ruah* can often signify the “the particular process of breathing in which the dynamic vitality of the human being is expressed”¹⁶; likewise, it can denote “an instrument of God’s action [i.e., wind]”¹⁷ or “God’s dynamically creative, beneficent, and angry presence in the world.”¹⁸ *Ruah* is a relational, dynamic, creative, and vital term in our understanding of human existence. At various places in the Hebrew Bible, it signifies God’s spirit/wind and the human breath of life.

As a metaphor, *ruah* continues to shift from substance to activity, from the soul to soulfulness. In this way, we breathe in from the world that which sustains and provides life, hold it, and return it to the world. Likewise, soulfulness is the act of taking in relational experiences of the world and holding them briefly before returning them. To be soulful is to experience the divine in our myriad relationships; it is an expressive quality that recalls the immanent presence of the divine in the world and seeks to be open to the possibilities offered by that relational dynamic. Just as one loses consciousness when one tries to hold one’s breath for too long, holding one’s soul internally stifles its vitality and stunts its relational creativity. It is interesting that we often recommend breathing exercises when entering a meditative state or to calm anxiety or an active mind. To access the sacred, we breathe, and the sacred comes to us out of a relationship with the external world rather than an internal substance.

Thus, soulfulness is a part of the dynamics of relational activity. It is expressed in a radical interdependence that calls into question Christian representations of human beings and human flourishing.¹⁹ Soulfulness, as an active relational component, is a quality of becoming rather than being; it is the promise that as we breathe in together the immanent presence of the divine, it will renew us in ways that connect us more broadly to the created world and as we breathe out, soulfulness directs our attention to creative and novel possibilities in our immanent relationships. As such, soulfulness imbues each relational moment with an awareness of influence from the immanent presence of the divine as a part of the interpretive milieu. Soulfulness pushes beyond the absolutes of subject and object into relationality itself to connect us in ways that increase the beauty and harmony of the world's experiencing moments. When considering soulfulness as apart from individual human substance, cognition, or organization, we must consider that it is a capacity of a panentheistic divinity that meets us where we are and seeks relationship for no reason other than its valuing and love for that which it relates to.

Soulfulness through Social Construction

Practically speaking, soulfulness as a dynamic relational activity requires us to think about its expression. Our capacities for soulful relational activity require some thought about knowledge, identity, and the self as an active relational object. Social constructionists and narrative identity theorists provide additional tools to shape this idea of soulfulness. Grounding ourselves in these theories helps us think about the practical implications of soulfulness as a radically interdependent and interrelated activity.

Social constructionism points to the shaping of reality, knowledge, and self through a relational perspective rather than only a unified, objective, coherent truth. Within the framework of social constructionism, the negotiation of meaning in an experience through narrative means becomes the primary sources of knowledge.²⁰ Social constructionist theories develop "a relational account of human action [in which] . . . behind the façade of unity, coherence and wholeness lies an oppositional world of discord. However, it is a world of enormous potential, gaining daily in dimension."²¹ Relationships and meaning require negotiation, whether among human actors or other subject-object relationships. In these narratively constructed experiences we are privy to the possibilities and potentialities that expand an un-

derstanding and interpretation of the self. Simply put, my identity is not fixed, static, or even unified; rather, I am an amalgamation of multiple narratives acted out in a variety of settings where I receive feedback, commit parts of these relational stories to memory, and enact portions of them in subsequent spaces. Society, culture, persons, soul, objects all provide relational feedback that co-creates an identity performed in a particular place and time. I am conditioned, and my performance conditions others. Thus, human beings are “a part of cultures, sub-cultures, socio-politico-economic groups, families and other institutions, they are a part of us, constitutive of our very selfhood.”²²

Our relationships are not just constitutive; they are also a source of creativity. As an interpretive framework, “One of the most compelling features . . . is the way [social construction] favors the co-creation of new realities, that is, fresh ways of describing and explaining that carry with them new possibilities for action.”²³ Co-creative activity parallels how process theology describes the relationships between the world, the divine, and its myriad actors. It favors the role of negotiated meanings through the narrative “telling” of the experience.

In turn, this pushes back against the typicality often expressed in theological anthropology. Returning to those who are neuro-atypical, even profoundly so, there is a narrative negotiation through which they are a part.²⁴ There are co-created moments of empathy, tenderness, frustration, anger, joy, and grief that are conveyed in acts of interdependent care and justice. What we say matters; what we do matters; what we bear witness to co-creates a reality in spaces that embody particular values. Social constructionism is profoundly relational, requires constant negotiation and mutuality, and is a radical orientation toward relational values and aesthetics over claims of ultimate truth. Within this socially constructed frame, we take in stories, hold them, and release them into the world. What we release feeds into the soulfulness of our context, and it also conveys a dynamic identity, relationally negotiated for that moment.

Soulfulness in Narrative Identity

According to Christie Cozad Neuger, narrative identity starts with the assumption that people live their lives in keeping with the story/narrative that they create early and then ‘thicken’ throughout life. This narrative has many strands within it, even potential contradictory strands, which are held together by foundational interpretive assump-

tions. These assumptions, story lines, and plots are generated through personal experiences, familial roles and stories, institutional influences, and larger cultural themes.²⁵

Over time, we develop certain stories that are easier to tell. These main plot lines and adventures form many of the roots of the next stories; they remain with us over time but always carry with them an element of creativity and fiction. Thus, in the performance of my identities I develop patterns, retrieving certain experiences and performing them over again. What is meaningful about this is that the narratives we perform are dynamic. Due to the emotional content, values, relational actors, openness to experiencing soulfulness, and long-held meanings, each new experience offers the opportunity for novelty.²⁶ I may perform an identity in similar fashions, but I will never perform it the same way twice; there are always complicating relational factors to any new experience that require me to adjust my performance as I interact with another in real time. That said, our dominant narratives “aid in the structuring of our life stories, and these dominant narratives can be debilitating or liberating.”²⁷ Thus, we become bound by certain stories; we hold our breath around particular narratives that can limit our imagination and relational access to an experience. Likewise, there are oppressive influences from the external world that limit our ability to reconstruct stories and that hamper novelty or relational creativity.

SOULFULNESS AS CREATIVE NARRATION

Through the theology, metaphor, and theories presented above, I believe there is a case to be made for reorienting ourselves away from a substantive soul and toward the dynamic relational process of soulfulness. Before concluding with a case study, I want to discuss a concept that will help us think practically about soulfulness: creative narration. Creative narration is the relational expression of everyday soulfulness.

First, narrative is a performance; it is an artful expression that permeates a relational experience. Narration deals with storytelling in its broadest sense. It is a negotiated performance of fact and fiction between all the relational partners in an experience. There is what I experience and what you experience of me; there is what I feel and how I empathize with your response and what you feel, empathize with, and experience; there is aesthetics and beauty, fact and science; there is body language and value language

and, yes, soulful language. Narration is personally developed and experienced yet socially constructed; it features not only what I believe and experience happening in each moment but also familial, cultural, racial, and other narratives woven into my stories. Narrative binds us to past experiences we have accepted and repeated so that they become us; it also portends a future as we partially reconstruct stories and tell them while filling in gaps with our imagination.²⁸ I perform stories that reveal important things about me; at the same time, you tell stories about me that socially reconstruct that performance. Additionally, narratives from other sources limit and/or expand our access to imaginative possibilities. These may call into question our confidence, ability, relationality, and responsibility; in the same breath, they may call us to creatively reconstruct an experience to acknowledge the interrelational divine milieu and act in ways that reveal the aims of the divine in that space.

Thus, as Ann Pederson puts it, creativity is “a social process that requires a social context. . . . Creativity occurs within the natural rhythms and happenings of everyday life.”²⁹ Far from being an individual set of special talents, creativity is a way of seeing and interacting with our experiences of the world. “We are designed to be creative; we feel good when we discover something new. Novelty is necessary for the future of who we are as a species on this planet. . . . Our future is emergent, not predetermined by our past.”³⁰ When our narrative performances interact in open and loving relationships and we are open to taking on (breathing in) a part of the narratives of others, that space is ripe for creativity and novelty. Empathy, compassion, harmony, beauty, care, and justice, are just some of the felt qualities of these performances, and they provide catalysts for interpretation as we briefly hold the narrative before we exhale and return it.

Furthermore, as Norman Pittenger writes, “The created or creaturely harmony, the beauty in contrast held in creative tension, is for a theist nothing other, nothing less, nothing more, than a disclosure of the divine activity . . . in the creative advance towards novelty and therefore towards enrichment and increasing satisfaction of aim.”³¹ There is no contrast without relationship, no tension without interaction; soulfulness is the revealing of divine activity calling forth novelty and beauty. Just as one does not own the divine or the sacred, one cannot own a soul, and to say that the soul arises from within one’s own complexity is to deny a pervasive and persuasive sacred presence in the world. Soulfulness is the ability to perform our stories

in the presence of the *ruah* of the divine and to realize there is more in that performance than what is within oneself.

EVERYDAY SOULFULNESS

Creativity is part of the natural rhythms of everyday life, and thus soulfulness should permeate the fabric of our relationships. We do not need to wait for Pauline epiphanies to experience the ways in which the divine lures us into a creative renarration of experiences. If the sacred and divine is truly present everywhere, then so too is the possibility of a soulful experience. Unfortunately, I cannot go back a dozen years and start over with Sara. What I can do is learn from those stories and allow them to help me creatively renarrate how I am present today. The following narrative involves a recent student interaction following a unit of clinical pastoral education (CPE).³²

I am a lot of things, one of which is a person who helps students discern their vocational path, along with their distinct strengths and challenges. In this role, I often conduct interviews with students following a unit of (CPE) to explore how this experience can shape further personal, professional, and educational goals. Our CPE debriefs include a conversation centered on the supervisor's evaluation, the student's vocational aspirations, and a look at their remaining school coursework.

Recently, I completed a debrief with Annette, a gay clergyperson preparing for ministry in a progressive religious tradition. Her unit took place in a more conservative region of the country, and her CPE cohort all came from different, social, cultural, and religious locations. Overall, they were religiously conservative, mostly male, and straight. In passing, Annette had cautiously described the unit as exhausting and not altogether positive.

Opening her evaluation, I prepared for the worst, remembering personal experiences and evaluations that had not gone as well as I had hoped. Determined to keep my stories from becoming Annette's, I took a few deep breaths and dove in. As I worked through the details of the unit, a feeling formed in me that I could not quite describe. The evaluation felt different from previous evaluations of other students. I decided to note these feelings and, if the opportunity to explore them came up, I would share them with Annette.

When the appointed time came, Annette and I connected via Google Hangouts. We moved through some standard questions and examined points in the evaluation that stuck out for either of us. Annette expressed some frustration about moments when she felt she wasn't cared for by her cohort or supervisor. She reflected on some of the events in the evaluation, and expressed some surprise at a burgeoning vocational interest revealed during the unit. As our time drew toward a close, she asked me two questions. Her first concerned advocacy for herself and others in her social and cultural location within the largern CPE network. I tried to support her desire to write letter, but also to temper her expectations that these alone would bring about the change she desired.

Her second question reopened that ambiguous space for me. She asked me if this felt like a "normal" evaluation. My response was simply "no." I then spoke a bit about the ambiguity that I felt upon reading it the first time. I explained that I felt there was a tone to the writing or words that seemed different. When she asked me to explain, I described what felt to me as lament on the part of the supervisor, coupled with a deep appreciation of and admiration for Annette.

Annette's stories of the CPE unit were shaded by distrust of her supervisor and cohorts. They were marred by a feeling of betrayal and her helplessness to effect change in that moment. What I offered was a different narrative on the evaluation of the unit. As we walked through the difference in our interpretations, I pointed her in the direction of the words and situations chosen by the supervisor to describe Annette. Together, we mulled over the possible emotional, tonal, and narrative implications of our two experiences with the evaluation. Annette had not read the evaluation in the same way, but she could see that it was possible to interpret it in the manner I suggested. She agreed to ponder this a bit more on her own. I also offered the interpretation that this lament and admiration, if true, might do more to spark change than letters of advocacy.

As we closed our meeting, we thanked one another for each person's presence and honesty. Upon reflection, this is one of the better CPE debriefs I have experienced. Our commitment to the relational process, openness to hearing one another, and greeting the different ways we interpreted the experience with curiosity and creativity implied for me a soulful awareness in the conversation. Vulnerability on the part of Annette and myself played a large role in establishing trust; likewise, it allowed for a dynamic relational

space that moved beyond our two perspectives and into a moment of creatively negotiated meaning. Together, we could negotiate a relationship that moved beyond sharing information into creative narration. Soulfulness was the lure we both felt to relate and perform in ways that opened us to another's experience and perspective.

As I took in the evaluation, upon letting go of the data and information, something remained that informed my experience of that supervisor and unit of CPE. The same can be said for Annette. Likewise, as she told the story of her experiences and I offered observations, we took in the performance of the other and held certain things to be valuable as we released the stories we were holding. Our relational activity created a space larger than the confines of the debrief, and we acknowledged something more than what we had performed to that point. I would describe this "something more" as an experience of soulfulness; it was something in the relational activity that lured us beyond the words and performance to negotiate the meaning of what had transpired in the unit, evaluation, and debrief. For me, I found beauty in the ability to find the words to share and not hold so tightly the emotional heft of the evaluation. It also creatively influenced what I see possible in future debriefs and what I might look for in a person's performance in terms of their awareness and reflective capacities that could connect them to possible sacred transformations within relational activity.

CONCLUSION

South African theologian John de Gruchy remarked that, "Christian hope finds its fulfillment not in the salvation of individual souls, but in the restoration of all things."³³ Admittedly, my ideas are a far swing in the opposite direction of our historical formulations. It does not fully fit into most of the theologies (including most process theologies) we have constructed throughout our history. At the same time, it is not meant to. Soulfulness, experienced as creative narration, is meant to grab your imagination, and encourage us to think beyond the substantive weight we have given to salvation, immortality, and individuality. I do not deny the need to pay heed to our embodiment, but challenge the notion that soul is only an inhabited quality. In this is true, then how does the sacred call us into relationship to connect? How does empathy and compassion connect us across differ-

ence? How do we talk with one another and honor the sacredness of that relationship?

My response to these questions is to point to the sacredness of relationship, and to state that it is our performance of our dominant theological stories that often denies soulfulness. If we are concerned with a substantive soul hidden within individuals, there is no way to fully love one another. Self-interest, self-love, and self-loathing will dominate the landscape if we can only see the soul and not experience in relationship the soulful activity that permeates the fabric of the world and the performance of life. Without oversimplifying, it may be time to become a people of the great commandment rather than a people of the great commission. To love a neighbor is to see part of oneself in their story; it is to understand our co-creative influence in the world, and how that shapes identity and relationships. Soulfulness, at every turn, connects rather than converts.

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NOTES

- 1 For an analysis of views related to the soul, see Bruce A. Stevens's "Death of Soul and Birth of Consciousness," *Colloquium: The Australian and New Zealand Theological Review* 39, no. 1 (May 2007): 90–102. Additionally, Nancey Murphy describes the basic scientific view of humanity as reductionistic. This simply means that there is nothing beyond the substance of our physical bodies. Nancey Murphy, "Do Humans Have Souls? Perspectives from Philosophy, Science, and Religion," *Interpretation* 67, no. 1 (2013): 37.
- 2 This would include some evangelical circles that de-emphasize the communal aspects of religion and focus on personal salvation as the proper course of action, divorcing the person from their responsibilities in co-creating, building, and maintaining the beloved community on earth. Moreover, this is a direct repudiation of the prosperity gospel and its neoliberal influences, as well as popular television, radio, and media preachers who neuter any message of mutual accountability in Christian community and our responsibility to a wider world. A recent article from *The Washington Post* clarifies some of the mainstreaming of this practice of Christianity. Michael Horton,

- “Evangelicals Should Be Deeply Troubled by Donald Trump’s Attempt to Mainstream Heresy,” Jan. 3, 2017, *The Washington Post*, accessed January 4, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/01/03/evangelicals-should-be-deeply-troubled-by-donald-trumps-attempt-to-mainstream-heresy/?utm_term=.e81bd100249c.
- 3 See Nancey Murphy, “How to Keep the ‘Non’ in Nonreductive Physicalism,” *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 9, no. 2 (2009): 5–16. In this article, Murphy describes nonreductive physicalism as “the view that humans are indeed purely physical organisms, but their complex neural systems and culture are the sources of their rationality, morality, spirituality, and free will.” (p. 5). This is an important nuance but still focuses on individual substances as the source of “the soul.”
 - 4 See Mark Graves, “Consciousness, Trauma, and Health: A Cognitive Systems Response to Payne, Walsh, and Oman,” *Pastoral Psychology* 60, (2011): 907–20. Here, Graves defines the soul as “the relationships that provide meaning to the person, and development of the soul makes the person meaningful within their physical, biological, social-cultural, and religious context” (p. 909). Again, this is a good view and is closer to what I am advocating. However, this definition seeks a substantive soul that is personally viable, lending itself to an individualistic interpretation, in my view.
 - 5 For a wonderful history of conceptualizations of mind, body, and soul, see Alison J. Gray, “Whatever Happened to the Soul? Some Theological Implications of Neuroscience,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 13, no. 6 (2010): 637–48.
 - 6 See John Cobb Jr., *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965) and Gordon Jackson, *Pastoral Care and Process Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1981) for examinations and definitions of a process view of the soul.
 - 7 This includes persons with minor to significant cognitive, intellectual, developmental, and emotional differences. Much of our theology is written for neurotypical persons whose brain functioning follows culturally established norms. Concepts of the soul most often reify neurotypical views of humanity. What I argue here is that soul as activity mitigates this and allows persons the distinctiveness of their experience without some of the pitfalls of substantive souls. David Scott’s 2016 dissertation, *The Limits of Human Flourishing: Reconstructing Theological Anthropology in Light of Cognitive Disability* (PhD diss., Iliff School of Theology and University of Denver) provides a helpful reconstructive theological anthropology for persons experiencing life through profound neuro-atypicalities.
 - 8 I certainly understand the importance of justification and sanctification, yet they remain internal capacities of faith rather than relational considerations of the faithful.
 - 9 Michael Horne, “Evil Acts Not Evil People: Their Characteristics and Contexts,” *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 53 (2008): 669.
 - 10 See Scott, *The Limits of Human Flourishing*, for a wonderful refutation of the idea of purposefulness as central to human flourishing.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, 36.
 - 12 See Jaco Hamman’s *Becoming a Pastor* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007) for another sense of living in this in-between space. His second chapter on the capacity to imagine

provides a view of the process of creativity and of pastors' need for it in order to live fully into their vocation in this world.

- 13 Lucinda A. Huffaker, "Feminist Theology in Process Perspective," in *Handbook of Process Theology*, ed. Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 181.
- 14 Leslie A. Muray, "Politics in Process Perspective," in *Handbook of Process Theology*, ed. Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 221.
- 15 Bradley Shavit Artson, *God of Becoming and Relationship: The Dynamic Nature of Process Theology* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing), 9.
- 16 Heinz-Josef Fabry, "Ruah," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterwick, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 378.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 381.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 387.
- 19 What I argue here is that soul as activity mitigates a number of issues related to the soul. Soul/soulfulness as activity allows persons the distinctiveness of their experience without some of the pitfalls of substantive souls. David Scott provides a helpful reconstructive theological anthropology for persons experiencing life through profound neuro-atypicalities. Through soulfulness we may begin to see someone for who they are rather than for what they contribute. Soulfulness provides an interpretive lens that adds to the quality of a relationship an element of the divine presence in that space. See Scott, *The Limits of Human Flourishing*.
- 20 Narrative here connotes the myriad ways we communicate through verbal and non-verbal means, embodiment and presence. Narrative must be broadly construed for it to be understood fully. It is not just the telling of stories but also how the stories are conveyed, arranged, emotionalized and acted out through our presence in relationship to others.
- 21 Kenneth Gergen, "Therapeutic Challenges of Multi-Being," *Journal of Family Therapy*, 30 (2008): 336.
- 22 Leslie A. Muray, *An Introduction to the Process Understanding of Science, Society, and the Self: A Philosophy for Modern Humanity* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 19.
- 23 Kenneth Gergen, "Constructing Spirit, Spiritualizing Construction," in *Spirituality, Social Construction, & Relational Processes*, ed. Duane Bidwell (Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications, 2016), 79.
- 24 Although we often think of narratives as driven by words and language, let us also consider that narratives are created in our activities and treatment of one another. That is, stories develop when we bear witness to one another's lives. A narrative is a co-created reality (not always equally created) that is negotiated within an experience, and much of the language of our stories is communicated without words.
- 25 Christie Cozad Neuger, *Counseling Women: A Narrative Pastoral Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 43.

- 26 It is important to note that not all novelty is positive or constructive. A narrative can socially construct an oppressive presence just as it can construct a liberative one.
- 27 Brandon McKoy, "Seeing through the Mirror: A Christian Pastor's Encounter with Social Constructionism," in *Spirituality, Social Construction, & Relational Processes*, ed. Duane Bidwell (Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications, 2016), 116.
- 28 For more about imagination, its promise and pitfalls, and the way our brain reconstructs memories and stories with generous imaginative gaps, see David Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past: Story, Ritual, and the Human Brain* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003) and Jason C. Whitehead *Redeeming Fear: A Constructive Theology for Living into Hope* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2013).
- 29 Ann Pederson, "Creativity, Christology and Science: A Process of Composition and Improvisation," in *Creating Women's Theology: A Movement Engaging Process Thought*, ed. Monica A. Coleman, Nancy R. Howell, & Helene Tallon Russell (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 164.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 166.
- 31 Norman Pittenger, "Beauty in a World in Process," *Andover Quarterly* 17, 4 (1977): 247.
- 32 The name of the student has been changed. In addition, the student has seen this write-up, provided feedback, and given permission for me to tell this story.
- 33 John de Gruchy, "Retrieving the Soul: Understanding the Soul as Complex, Dynamic and Relational," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 149 (2014): 69.