

SOULSPEAK:
The Outward Journey of the Soul

Justin Spring

A SOULSPEAK/SPT E-BOOK

Foreword by Stephen Larsen
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Here's what others are saying about SOULSPEAK: The Outward Journey of the Soul:

Justin Spring's poetry, writings, and accompanying recordings resonate with something deep inside us all that is longing to be touched. I felt myself yearning for, and in connection with, deep mystery while reading and listening to the SOULSPEAK materials. I find Mr. Spring's work with disenfranchised individuals to be a beacon that may be a means out of the darkness that inhabits much of our present day lives."

Jerry Wellik, Ed.d. Professor of Special Education, St. Cloud State University

Here is a book that really explains not only the origins of poetry, but how today we can again create poetry as a form of the soul speaking. Justin Spring is passionate and compelling in his pursuit of this pure poetry, what he calls "the outward journey of the soul." And in his text he teaches all of us how to speak from a deeper place, letting the unconscious, or the soul, rise up into language and art. Taking us step by step through the process, he provides specific techniques to break through old boundaries and limitations. Spring's many years of leading poetry workshops have produced a very clear, strong, almost prophetic sense of where art and truth lie, and—more importantly—how to achieve them."

Victoria Sullivan, poet, playwright, editor of PLAYS BY AND ABOUT WOMEN

"In an age in which so much of what people say is social gambit, political rhetoric, make talk cliché, I applaud Justin Spring's powerful technique for returning us to what is truly important, a language that means something, and that echoes vertically as well as sending out ripples horizontally; that is to say, it combines communication with a reference to the soul and the realm of the invisibles. It is a language that you could never be ashamed of having spoken, because you would like these words to echo around the eaves of the universe. They are beautiful, incantatory, descriptive, and wise. They are the glittering mantle in which the soul likes to wrap itself. SOULSPEAK hovers between the realms of the shaman's magic and the priest's incantation, the artist's stroke, and the philosopher's insight. Poetry is a calculus of the emotions, and

if the poem is designed for immortality, also a calculus of the spirit. It describes a curve, an acceleration of realization, an epiphany; in short, the movements of the soul. I advise you to work with this book experientially, try the exercises, sense the vast imponderable soul-animal Spring invokes for us, lying beneath us. Think that God is hovering nearby, just waiting to borrow your voice.”

Dr. Stephen Larsen, Professor Emeritus SUNY, co-author of A FIRE IN THE MIND, A LIFE OF JOSEPH CAMPBELL.

Author's Note

If You Have Purchased This Book Without a CD

Some versions of this book are sold without the accompanying CD. If you have purchased such a version, please be assured it is the same book and can be read and enjoyed as is.

The purpose of the CD is to guide you in creating your own poetic speakings. The oral art of speaking is best learned by listening to it and imitating it. As you listen, your body will begin to remember this ancient, sacred way of speaking.

You can hear what SOULSPEAK sounds like by visiting our web page, www.soulspeak.org and selecting Many Voices. You can order the SOULSPEAK: The Outward Journey of the Soul CD via the web.

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Snow Angels

I was six. No, five, I was five: my first snow.
I remember the angel suddenly coming together
and then bleeding out underneath me
like I was turning myself inside out,
and then I remember awakening to a white field,
because the angels were always a surprise to me,
the way they kept falling in such peculiar positions,
like someone screaming, or dying.

Like the wings.

Friends would take me aside,
tell me the wings were a bit too much:

Like a Babylonian lion's, really. Those wings, they'd say.

They were right of course, but what
could I say to them except

I couldn't help it, that my arms
always moved up and down like that
whenever I fell down out of heaven.

Sometimes I felt like telling them
maybe it would help if they thought of the angels
as small relief-maps of my soul, sudden,
uncontrolled curdlings that occurred
whenever I stopped, opened myself to the sun, or the moon.

And then there were times I didn't know what to say,
except maybe they should think of them
as detailed descriptions of another life.

A life I was living but knew nothing about.

Acknowledgments

This book would never have been written without the aid of my partner in SOULSPEAK, Scylla Liscombe, because without her persistence, encouragement, and insight, SOULSPEAK might never have taken form. I would also like to thank the following poets and musicians and singers, all of whom have been instrumental in the ongoing development of SOULSPEAK as an art form: Joan Adley, Gary Drilling, Ellie Silver, John Le Gasse, Jack Notestein, George de Jong, Eric Wachsman, Jimi Gee, Jane Odle, and Ally Smith. I also owe a huge debt to the teachers, therapists, and students of the Sarasota County School system for providing crucial feedback on the SOULSPEAK process over the years. I would be amiss if I didn't thank the many others who have assisted in preparing and evaluating the manuscript as it took form: Jan Dorsett, who was instrumental in shaping this book, Wayne Bussone, Norma deSofi, Lea and Cliff Huxford, Victoria Sullivan, Fran Johnson, and Meg Chow. And finally, I can find no words adequate enough to thank Pauline Spring, my former wife, friend, and the woman who gave me back my true life.

Foreword Dr. Stephen Larsen

The concept of soul, until the European Enlightenment, has never been disputed in world culture. “Animism,” the oldest mythological stratum according to classical Anthropology, and found on every continent, holds that the entire world is filled with spirit. The idea is glimpsed in the Paleolithic images of dancing shamans, in ceremonial burials in Egypt, in Socrates’ speculations, in Vedic texts, and in fact, in most world mythologies, which envision a soul which “incarnates” in this world, and when the body dies, moves on to a world of spirits, rejoins the ancestors, dissolves into multiple souls, or comes back for another go-round (re-incarnation). In ancient China the soul was seen as compound, some parts falling back into Earth at death while others transmigrated into ethereal heavens. In Christianity, the soul was not only believed to transcend death, but then to stand before God and receive judgment for deeds done while alive in the world (which was the theologians’ answer to how God could allow a world so filled with unfairness as this one, to exist).

In the seventeenth century, Descartes, like many of his contemporaries, was seeking to reconcile the older mythic-theological idea with the new revelations of the physical sciences. He would find the “seat” of the soul in the anatomy. His conclusion was that it dwelt, somehow, in the pineal gland, like a squirrel in its nest. An eighteenth-century scientist turned visionary, Emanuel Swedenborg, made a more plausible guess—that it lay in the cerebral cortex (now recognized as the seat of the “higher faculties”).

Through the nineteenth century, science was discovering the enormous complexities of physiology, and particularly the human nervous system. We were now to be seen as the bi-products of chemistry and biology, with a veneer of social learning. “Nature vs. Nurture” was the controversy of the day. (But the argument left the soul out entirely.) After the discovery of the “bilateral functioning of the cerebral hemispheres” (attributed to Hughlings Jackson in 1864), and the revelations of the psychologies of the unconscious, with Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, it began to be suspected that there was a split at the root of our natures—between the left hemisphere (words and reason) and the right hemisphere (images and myths). [Note that because of a crossover in our anatomy, symbolically, the left hemisphere controls and relates to the right hand, and all symbolism of the “right.” While the right hemisphere relates to the left hand, and the symbolism of the “left” including

that which is *sinister* (Latin-Italian) and *gauche* (French), but which also includes intuition and mental imagery.]

And guess what? Most of the very thinking and communicating about this problematical split has been in words. The left hemisphere, historically, has been in the ascendancy! (Though in Julian Jaynes “Bicameral Mind” theory, the rational ego side equated with the sense of “I” is subject to encounters with the non-dominant hemisphere, which produces hallucination-like experiences interpreted by a person who has them as the voice of a god. Thus the revenge of the non-dominant hemisphere; it pronounces like an oracle or a hidden god, *deus absconditus*. The non-dominant hemisphere is not only the “underdog,” but a crafty one, who manages to get his way through something other than “reason.”)

To be sure, the soul waited in the wings. (See, our metaphor turns visual.) Exiled from the social sciences, soul lurked in the humanities, literature, music, the arts. Joyce, Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Picasso, Debussy. (The soul announces itself even when movements, such as Surrealism, Dada, or Existentialism pronounce its annihilation, because at least it is treated as a worthy antagonist.) And we know how Picasso was unable to keep “primitive art” out of his paintings (more on this in the book) and an unbelievable sense of the daemonic seems to follow his very line.

But what is soul? Is it a “divine fire,” a fragment of God embodied in ourselves? The capacity to dream and to create? An hallucination? An *epiphenomena*, a mere by-product of a brain that contains ten billion neurons (and so it has to entertain itself with the fantasy of immortality, as well as trying to figure out the universe—a task at which it keeps perpetually failing)? Or is it language, the godlike ability to create realities through words, explored years ago by Ernst Cassirer, and currently debated by Leonard Schlain in *The Goddess and the Alphabet?* (Where words are seen associated with patriarchy, and images and symbols with the antique cult of the Great Goddess are associated with matriarchy). Or is the soul consciousness itself, that flickers out when the brain perishes? Clearly it has to do with the way our brains and bodies are organized, so let us pursue this track just a little.

All of the best arts span the human hemispheres, our two kinds of mentality, and thus represent what makes us wholly and completely human: When we try to describe the emotional meaning of an experience, paint an idea,

critically analyze a symphony or a painting, introduce a pastel, romantic atmosphere into a novel, or write a poem that puts images into structured language. We rely on soundtracks in movies to tell us what the emotional “take” on the scene is to be. (And we think of the small boy who said to his parents after seeing a movie of a mugging ambush on a street, “I wouldn’t have gone around that corner if I’d heard that music playing!”) The soul seems to arise as our experience arises; it is alive, and lives where we live; it is neither this nor that, but both and . . .

The soul is there, as the poet Novalis declared, in the “overlap” between the worlds, where “the inner world meets the outer world.” It is also there where the left meets the right, where the swirling waveforms from each hemisphere intersect and create moiré patterns, where images appear out of the smoke, where we are truly haunted.

This, then, leads us to the subject of this book, and to some stories. [Developmental Psychologist Jerome Bruner says that not until we have “narratized” our experience (that is, made it into a story) can we understand it. Word and image, causal inferences, are associated with the left hemisphere. It tells us of the denotative, dictionary meanings of the words and action. But the right hemisphere makes it all make sense in an emotional way. We look at the characters, the situation, and make feeling inference: “If he did this and this, he must have meant that . . .” Story brings words to life.]

Sometimes stories can even nest within stories, and poems as well, as you will see.

The manuscript of *SOULSPEAK: The Outward Journey of the Soul* arrived just a little before Woodstock’s first International Poetry Festival (August 2001). I carried it with me in my briefcase as I went from the theater to the library, to the cafés in town. I heard many dozens of poets recite or read works that varied from the exquisite to the excruciating. But great poets were there: Robert Bly, Billy Collins, Edwin Sanders, Janine Vega, Mikhail Horowitz, intoning and incanting in the bosky vale beneath the late-summer Catskill mountains. And soul in a large sense was present. The readings were passionate, piquant, hilarious, and the hip audience as one organism often laughed at subtle lines in long poems. There was no lack of attention to the poetic experience; in fact, the group’s attention hovered like an invisible entity above the rustic Bearsville theater, discerning, humorous, palpable. The

ghosts of Utopian experiments and failed artists' colonies, Beat poets and psychedelic hipsters gathered around. The air was thick, actinic, volatile.

Between the events, my wife Robin and I went out to a little park behind the theater, with the Aesopus Creek babbling softly nearby. Late afternoon sunlight slanted through the pine and hemlock, tinting pink the exposed granite boulders in the creek bottom.

Robin (pretty and brunette, my wife of thirty-seven years) was lulled by a glass of wine at our creekside brunch, and an overrich diet of mental imagery. She lay curled and sleepy on the soft moss. I sat on a little stone bench and read the instructions for how to "SOULSPEAK." We used the seed words: "mountain, love, green, arms, mother, cold, window." I don't think Robin understood the instructions exactly, so sleepy she was, and that she was allowed to take each seed word and make a separate sentence of it, pausing in between to let images form. So she spoke almost all of them at once. "In the warm darkness, under the mountain, my mother sits in her green dress. The arms of her love cradle all our cold shadows."

Rich imagery flooded my mind and I felt an unexpected rush of emotion at what Robin had just said. I was glimpsing the power of the oral tradition, and the authority of the voice that came with it: the authentic poetic voice that Justin Spring would teach us to evoke, in this book.

There were definitely bad poets at the festival too, so comparison was easy. When they read, shouted, droned, or *kvetched*, I would find myself distracted, or bored, if not just pissed off. But when the poet touched that subterranean power that Spring talks about, my attention was rapt, breathless, respectful. I thought of the archetypal Bard, Taliesin, who rebuked the false poets, praise singers of the cruel King Maelgwyn. Taliesin said that poetry was a "divine fire" and not to be used carelessly, or for the vain praise of men.

As I sat in the warm darkness under the mountain, the scale and implications of what my friend Justin Spring was trying to do broke through. He was trying to teach the art of touching divine fire, and not just for poets in a rarified atmosphere, but for youth at-risk in a ghetto—for the elemental human soul. My mind felt joyous for the path Spring had chosen, not only a path with heart, but one with soul. It was an authentic spiritual experience, without the trappings of religion, to learn the elemental voice, the soul's voice, that

depends, beautifies, and ennobles all our experience.

My mind went back to Columbia University in 1960, when Justin and I were students there. Columbia was a galaxy of talent in those days: Mark van Doren (and his famous son Charles), F.W. Dupee, Lionel Trilling, Jacques Barzun. While the “pre-meds” lurked in the back of our brownstone fraternity house, poring over their books, the “humanities” guys gathered around the front room, the “triple,” where Justin and his friend Joe dwelt—which also became a salon for profound ideas and amazing metaphysical discussions, going on far into the night: Joyce, Pound, Eliot, and Yeats were our main menus.

One semester, finals were fast approaching. At these fey and unstable times Columbia students would respond to the tension either by cramming desperately on the one hand, or escaping to the nearby West End bar on the others. Sometimes the tension exploded into an orgy of water balloon fights up and down the halls. (I think we were all ADD, as well as fairly bright.) Back in at the “triple” Justin Spring and his friend Joe suddenly decided to draw a full, wall-size copy of Michelangelo’s *Damned Sinner*. They worked for days on the masterpiece. When they were finished, all the bleary-eyed “brothers” came to marvel at this final triumph of the right hemisphere—even during the great apotheosis of the left (the final exams). And sure enough, after the “imagery buffers” had emptied themselves out in this peculiar and wonderful way, Justin and Joe finished their term papers in good style, and passed their finals.

A year or two after Justin graduated (he was ahead of me), I had an opportunity to study with the poet Kenneth Koch. Koch not only made poetry come alive for Columbia students, he did the same for high school students in Harlem, just below Morningside Heights on the East side, at a public school where he would teach once a week. He would greet the sea of African and Hispanic faces with “Good morning, poets!” He made poetry come alive for them, and them for us. Koch read us their poems, and them ours, closing a circuit between both populations of his students.

This summer, one of our own projects at the not-for-profit center my wife and I administrate was to teach Joseph Campbell’s “hero’s journey” to inner-city high school students. Among other projects, one of the most powerful was to make a mask. The masks empowered the students to find their voices in much

the same way as Koch and Spring did. In a recent weekend public event in an inner-city park, the young people presented their poems—some with masks and/or music. They also showed personal movies they had made. Their families stood around proudly witnessing all the soul talk—right there in the inner city. The atmosphere was magical and unmistakable: “*Hablamos Alma aqui.*” (Soul is spoken here.) We make SOULSPEAK!

In an age in which so much of what people say is social gambit, political rhetoric, make-talk cliché, I applaud Justin Spring’s powerful technique for returning us to what is truly important, a language that means something, and that echoes vertically as well as sending out ripples horizontally; that is to say, it combines communication with a reference to the soul and the realm of the invisibles. It is language that you could never be ashamed of having spoken, because you would like these words to echo around the eaves of the universe. They are beautiful, incantatory, descriptive, and wise. They are the glittering mantle in which soul best likes to wrap itself.

The best poets know this. They know that if their words are not charged with emotion, painted with color, weighed and balanced (internal structure), and graced with spirit, they will break up like small inconsequential clouds and drift into the realm of unbecoming. The poem should evoke something not graspable in any other way. SOULSPEAK hovers between the realms of the shaman’s magic and the priest’s incantation, the artist’s stroke and the philosopher’s insight. Poetry is a calculus of the emotions, and if the poem is destined for immortality, also a calculus of the spirit. It describes a curve, an acceleration of realization, an epiphany—in short, the movements of soul.

I advise you to work with this book experientially; try the exercises, sense the vast imponderable soul-animal Spring invokes for us, lying beneath us. Think that God is hovering nearby, just waiting to borrow your voice.

As one of my exercises, going through the manuscript of *SOULSPEAK*, I did a written poem. Though I do not consider myself a poet (I have a few prose books in print, and my last one, *The Fashioning of Angels*, has just one poem of mine in it, and one from my wife, Robin), I offer a piece of it to you the reader, nascent poet that you are. (Good morning poets!) and potential student of SOULSPEAK. (To help contextualize the poem, I will share with you that I had just come back from Africa, where I had seen many animals in a marvelous game park in an antediluvian volcano crater [The Pilansberg, it is

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