“The great malady of the twentieth century, implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is “loss of soul.” When soul is neglected, it doesn’t just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence, and loss of meaning. Our temptation is to isolate these symptoms or to try to eradicate them one by one; but the root problem is that we have lost our wisdom about the soul, even our interest in it.” *

“It is impossible to define precisely what the soul is. Definition is an intellectual enterprise anyway; the soul prefers to imagine. We know intuitively that the soul has to do with genuineness and depth, as when we say a certain music has soul or a remarkable person is soul-ful.”

“Modern psychologies and therapies often contain an unspoken but clear salvational tone…”[Moore is] interested in [a] more humbler approach, one that is more accepting of human foibles, and indeed sees dignity and peace as emerging more from that acceptance than from any method of transcending the human condition.”

“Tradition teaches that soul lies midway between understanding and unconsciousness, and that its instrument is neither the mind nor the body, but imagination…Fulfilling work, rewarding relationships, personal power, and relief from symptoms are all gifts of the soul.”

“It is commonplace for writers to point out that we live in a time of deep division, in which mind is separated from body, and spirituality is at odds with materialism. But how do we get out of this split? We can’t just “think” ourselves through it, because thinking itself is part of the problem. What we need is a way out of our dualistic attitudes. We need a third possibility, and that third [way] is soul.”

To describe this process of bringing soul back into life, Moore borrows a word from this history of Christianity: cura animarum. For hundreds of years the parish priest, and later, the Protestant pastor, were charged with the care of the souls of those who formed his parish or congregation. Moore suggests “when we take up this image and apply it to ourselves, we can imagine the responsibility we have to our own soul…. We can be he curates or curators of our own souls, an idea that implies an inner priesthood and a personal religion. To undertake this restoration of soul means we have to make spirituality a more serious part of everyday life.”

“It [care of the soul] isn’t about curing, fixing, changing, adjusting or making healthy and it isn’t about some idea of perfection or even improvement. It doesn’t look to the future for an ideal, trouble-free existence. Rather, it remains patiently in the present, close to life as it presents itself day by day, and yet at the same time mindful of religion and spirituality.”

“Care of the soul speaks to the longings we feel and to the symptoms that drive us crazy, but it is not a path away from shadow or death. A soulful personality is complicated, multifaceted, and shaped by both pain and pleasure, success and failure. Life lived soulfully is not without its moments of darkness and periods of foolishness. Dropping the salvational fantasy frees us up to the possibility of self-knowledge and self-acceptance, which are the very foundation of soul.”

“The aim of soul work, therefore, is not adjustment to accepted norms…Rather, the goal is a richly elaborated life, connected to society and nature, woven into the culture of family, nation and globe. The idea is not to be superficially adjusted, but to be profoundly connected in the heart to ancestors and to living brothers and sisters in all the many communities that claim our hearts.”

“Care of the soul is not solving the puzzle of life; quite the opposite, it is an appreciation of the paradoxical mysteries that blend light and darkness into the grandeur of what human life and culture can be.”

*boldface mine
Ashbrook notes the cultural ambivalence we have about the concept of soul. As a religious conviction, many have believed the soul and its immortality to be crucial. As a socio-theological concept, soul had its origin in a Hebraic belief in the resurrection as communal. On the one hand, “the experience of African-Americans has brought soul back into widespread usage…Soul has been the vehicle of cultural and political rhetoric. Yet most modern scientists have dismissed the idea of an immaterial and immortal soul…

As pastoral counselors, do we believe that “soul is primarily a mystical quality of spirit – an elusive essence of a person or group? Or is soul primarily a material feature of life – a specific bit of tissue or a literal continuation of oxygen intake? Perhaps soul is merely folk psychology carried over from a pre-scientific past?”

Ashbrook writes, “Soul refers to our making the experience of our lives meaningful…the meaning and making of soul are at the heart of our being the human beings that we are (cf. Charles Gerkin). [Yet] if soul is not an entity, what is it? How can we know it?

“Soul refers to core and characteristic ways people experience and express reality. It is not a ‘thing’ separable from all that people are…[rather] we can only think of soul as a process or an experience of making meaning through memory. Quite simply, soul expresses meaning, and the making of meaning depends on memory. To mind the soul is to attend to meaning making.

Quite simply, soul is that which each one of us can call our own. It is our unique essence, that which distinguishes us from everything else in the universe, a “faithful knowing [that] is our experiencing what matters most in life, a meaning-making that is the equivalent of integrating our experience.”
“Gifts of Depression”
“In a society that is defended against the tragic sense of life, depression will appear as an enemy, an unredeemable malady…Faced with depression, we might ask ourselves, ‘What is it doing here? Does it have some necessary role to play?’…Depression may be as important a channel for valuable ‘negative’ feelings, as expressions of affection are for the emotions of love.”

“What if ‘depression’ were simply a state of being, neither good nor bad, something the soul does in its own good time and for its own good reasons?„Because of its painful emptiness, it is often tempting to look for a way out of depression.” Moore proposes that the anxiety that depression will never end, that life will never by joyful and active again, seems to decrease when we stop fighting it, and turn instead toward “learning from depression …”

“Depression makes holes in our theories and assumptions, but even this painful process an e honored as a necessary and valuable source of healing.” A “peculiar kind of education – learning our limits – may not be a conscious effort only; it may come upon us as a captivating mood of depression…sending us off into fundamental appraisals of our knowledge, our assumptions, and the very purpose of our existence.”

“Care of the soul doesn’t mean wallowing in the symptom, but it does mean trying to learn from depression what qualities the soul needs…. we might also discover that depression has its own angel, a guiding spirit whose job it is to carry the soul away to its remote places where it finds unique insight and enjoys a special vision.”

“The Body’s Poetics of Illness”
“All illness is meaningful, although its meaning may never be translatable into entirely rational terms. The point is not to understand the cause of the disease and then solve he problem, but to get close enough to the disease to restore the particular religious connection with life at which it hints…In a very real sense, we do not cure diseases, they cure us, by restoring our religious participation in life.”
In other words, what is your disease saying to you? What is it trying to get you to pay attention to?
For example, my orthopedic, musculo-skeletal issues are telling me to slow down, learn to trust the flow of life’s unfolding, and experience the renewal of Sabbath rest.

Another way to ask the question is this: What is out of balance in your life right now?
By considering the Seven Core Spiritual Needs, and asking which one(s) may be out of balance, we can re-connect to that dimension of our experience and recover balance and wholeness.

The Seven Core Spiritual Needs**

Dignity: Self-worth and Acceptance. The dignity and worth that derives from simply being a part of God’s creation. It is the capacity to accept oneself in both one’s limitations and successes.

Power: Self-agency and Courage. The capacity to take on the rights and responsibilities of living in the world as it is; to overcome entitlement to negotiate need and desire, to endure for the sake of growth.

Freedom: Repentance and Reconciliation. To be loosed from bondage to mistakes, regret and guilt, and self-destructive habits and addictions. The ability to learn from mistakes, and to change in the face of failure and challenge.

Meaning: Purpose and Vocation. A sense of calling and vocation to obligations beyond oneself to a community; overcoming resignation and detachment to contribute to the well being of the human family.

Love: Intimacy and Community. To give and receive love in relation to others; reaching out, caring and feeling cared for; a sense of belongingness and relatedness.

Rest: Awareness and Surrender. The human need to let go and let be. Finding serenity by surrendering the burden of control and trusting the Mystery of that which is Sacred and holy. Sufficient mindful awareness to release those things beyond our power to control.

Celebration: Gratitude and Worship. The need to experience awe and wonder, to recognize the transcendent and holy in the mundane, to express gratitude for the goodness of life, and ask nothing more.

**Susan E. Lyon (now deceased), Hartford Memorial Hospital, Ct.