

“Together Again, the Talking Cures”
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Psyche is the Greek word for soul. Etymologically, then, psychology – psyche plus logos – would mean the study of the soul. Is that how we usually think of psychology?

Margaret based her story for all ages this morning on an adaptation of a story grounded in Greek mythology. The original story is called “Cupid and Psyche.” It was first told by a character in a second century novel written by Lucius Apuleius. He probably based it on a hand-me-down folk tale.

The adaptation was made C.S. Lewis in an allegorical fantasy novel for adults called Till We Have Faces. Psyche, or Soul, is depicted in a struggle to reunite with God. In our vernacular, we might call it a struggle for wholeness – to be a part of, rather than apart from, all with which she belongs.

There is something other-worldly about Psyche to which everyone drawn. She is beloved by all, but it is an objectified love. No one asks what Psyche needs. No one sees her for exactly what she is, with nothing added and nothing subtracted. They just swoon and tell her she’s magical, and after hearing it over and over again, she believes it. No wonder she doesn’t feel like she belongs in this very un-magical, objectified kingdom.

So when the fickle object love turns to banishment, she’s less than distraught. And when her banishment leads her to a divine partner who does seem to see her for exactly what she is, she is overjoyed. It feels like a magic spell -- reinforced by the mysterious quality of his nocturnal visits and his insistence that the spell will be broken if he is seen.

The dramatic tension is supplied by Psyche’s sister, Orual, who voices the loudest claim to ownership of this charismatic love object. So naturally, when the misfortune blows over, she importunes Psyche to come back, telling her that a lifting of the banishment can be procured. Psyche resists, fearful of losing her divine partner. Orual can’t understand why her sister won’t just bring the mysterious, magical lover along and come on home. She threatens to turn her back on Psyche forever – in Lewis’ novel, by killing herself, a detail in the story that Margaret softened for the tender ears of our children.

Psyche is caught in the middle. In the end, her connection to Orual prevails. But before she can return home, the magic spell is indeed broken. Psyche is left wandering somewhere beyond the kingdoms of objects and magic forever. Orual is left with a life of sadness and regret at her ruinous determination to possess her sister.

This is a tragic story of defeated souls. How might the outcome have been different if modern-day psychology had been brought into it? Psychology is not monolithic, of course, but observant practitioners of it have mapped its major tendencies.

My sense is that Psyche would have been diagnosed as delusional. Citing her stories of a fantasy husband who can't be revealed without breaking a spell, the psychologist probably would have recommended institutionalization. Orual's distress over her sister's withdrawal into fantasy would have been seen as a realistic expression of loving concern; and her possessive behavior as a justifiably protective attitude toward a loved one unable to protect herself.

The psychologist would have seen the calamitous ending – particularly Psyche's wanderings -- as confirmation of his recommendation of institutionalization. Orual's fleeting vision of Psyche's palace and its immediate vanishing would have been explained as a symptom of acute stress over the disappearance of her sister; and her sadness as reactive depression and guilt over not having intervened sooner. Popular descriptions of Psyche as magical would have been diagnosed as an uneducated but harmless way of verbalizing attraction to a very charismatic person. The banishment would have been marked down as a typical demonizing reaction to a calamity like famine – a social or political problem, but not pathological.

The way modern mainstream psychology looks at human behavior has been a long time in the making. In antiquity, psychology was indeed the study of the soul. In his book, Psychoanalysis and Religion, Erich Fromm, a psychiatrist and philosopher of some note, points to a decline in this conception of psychology during the Industrial Revolution, which he sees as causing an abandonment of higher aspirations and values in favor of materialistic pursuits.

At the beginning of the last century, psychology and the new discipline of psychiatry were evolving from two distinct academic lineages – the first in departments of philosophy, the second in schools of medicine. Fromm describes both as eventually falling into an imitation of the hard sciences, using laboratory methods and metrics. Psychology, he observes, came to concern itself with mental “mechanisms, reaction formations, [and] instincts, but [no longer] with the most specifically human phenomena: love, reason, conscience, [and] values.” Certainly nothing about the soul or spirituality. In fact, it seems fair to say that psychology came to refuse to recognize these latter categories as phenomena at all, because they could not be measured with instruments blessed by the scientific community.

This embrace of pure materialism has been tightened by the movement to managed care insurance programs and ever-increasing reliance on statistical norms to determine the professional response. This is the thrust of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association. One's place on the bell-shaped statistical curve is the measure of sanity or insanity, wellness or pathology, because it is the only yardstick psychology has left. As Fromm states pointedly, “Therapy aiming at nothing but social adjustment can only reduce the excessive suffering of the neurotic to the [statistically determined] average level of suffering” Being well-adjusted is not the same as being well, which really means being whole. Any psychologists continuing to work at being what Plato and Erich Fromm called “physicians of the soul” are doing so in spite of, rather than because of, the inertial direction of modern psychological practice.

There are many different schools of psychology today, of course; but most aim primarily at social adjustment. This form of psychology tries to take an agnostic posture toward questions of values, conscience, morality, and authentic expression of a self larger than physiology, emotion, and intellect. It is a costly indifference.

Humans are inveterate meaning-makers. I see great wisdom in that old joke about how, if you drop a brick and human being off a twenty-story building, both will hit the pavement with about the same physical results. The difference between them, the joke goes, is that on the way down the human being will make up a story about why this is happening to him. Embedded in human stories we will always find a hierarchy of values, assumptions about human nature, and many other things touched on by those difficult questions that modern mainstream psychology seems determined to beg.

This is what both Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Luther Adams are saying when they insist that every person worships something. As Adams observes, a person “may go to church regularly, he may profess some denominational affiliation, he may repeat his creed regularly, but he may actually give his deepest loyalty to something quite different from these things and from what they represent. Find out what that is and you have found his religion.” Erich Fromm adds his voice to this view, saying “There is no one without a religious need, a need to have a frame of orientation and an object of devotion.” And not just any frame and object -- ones that lead to a fulfilling life.

Psychologists are dealing with human behavior, which means they are dealing with human nature. If it is – or even might be -- the nature of humans to yearn for wholeness with self, others, nature, and something beyond the finite possibly called God, then it’s hard for me to see how a psychologist can say, well, that’s someone else’s problem. When psychologists plead agnosticism on questions of human nature that can’t be answered with resources like the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, what they are really doing is embracing the dominant paradigm of society without acknowledging it. That paradigm is materialist, which is to say, anti-spiritualist.

Turning once again to this morning’s story, lest anyone think I’m picking on psychology and psychologists, I don’t believe an intervention by the clergy of traditional religions would have been any improvement on what psychology has to offer Psyche and Orual and all the people they symbolize.

Rather than judging Psyche to be the sick one, the clergy would deify her as a transcendent figure – possibly even a Christ figure – seeking reunion with God. They would see her banishment as foolish resistance to the authority of God. To them, the popular mistake would lie in not worshiping the miraculous Psyche enough, rather than too much.

Traditional religions have had a nasty habit of encouraging people to project their best capabilities onto a god figure, and then abase themselves for the weaknesses and deficiencies they are left with by virtue of projecting away all the good stuff. Freud observed the tendency of children to transform their parents, whom they both fear and are dependent on, into magical, omnipotent authority figures. Religion, Freud argued, is nothing but an adult repetition of this

childhood strategy for dealing with existential anxiety. It was an overgeneralization for which he perhaps should be forgiven, in light of the fact that most of the religions of his day fit this profile.

Traditional religion has bought into the dominant materialist paradigm just as much as psychology. It may seem paradoxical to call traditional religion materialist, given its promises that a magical God will wave a magical wand and make everything all right. It has offered palliatives that point in the same direction as the diagnostics and treatment strategies of psychology – such as pharmacology. That direction is toward the well-adjusted life – a life of learning to ignore or at least accommodate the existential vexations of mortal existence, rather than seeing them as the stuff from which humans can create a noble destiny. [pause]

So, let's see. I've now trashed both modern mainstream psychology and traditional religion. Is there something hopeful still in prospect? I do believe there is, and it lies in both psychologists and theologians being physicians of the soul. A team of ministers and psychologists aspiring to this role might look on the vexations of Psyche and Orual this way.

They would invite Psyche to understand her charismatic gifts in a way that has far more depth and power than merely calling them "magical." She might be brought to ask herself, can I cultivate the ability to use these gifts to awaken others to their own, rather than as a mere feel-good potion?

These soul doctors would work with Psyche to enable her to transcend the terrible occlusion of her view of herself that contributes to the tragic ending of the story: the neglect of her animal nature in favor of her spiritual side. Psyche's yearning for wholeness is noble, but her belief that it can be found in unrelieved otherworldliness is tragically misguided. A wholeness that leaves out her animal nature, as well as her relations with her fellow humans and the natural world, is not wholeness at all, but rather, a state of denial.

This way of conceiving of wholeness would bring Psyche to see her divine partner in a truer light. He actually doesn't see her for what she really is. If he did, he would realize that confining her to an otherworldly palace, cut off from her fellow humans and even from her own animal nature, is no better than the confinement she felt in the kingdom of her birth. His love for Psyche is as possessive as Orual's.

Psyche too has bought into the materialist paradigm of the world. She sees the Kingdom of Glome as a place where a soul cannot live. She cannot imagine the true wholeness that is available in the world, and indeed only in the world: the union of divine and animal natures in the uniqueness of humans.

Turning to Orual, the physicians of the soul can enable her to see that her possessiveness has made her desires not too big, but rather, too small. Instead of seeing her sister as an object of need and desire, she can have a relationship of mutual love with her. Throughout the story, Orual carries Psyche's shadow side – the animal nature that Psyche kept hidden as not being what people want, because the spiritual side is what people are drawn to. Conversely, Orual has kept her own spiritual side in shadow, as have all the people in the kingdom. Their projection of magical qualities onto Psyche has tragically blinded them to their own spiritual capacities.

Everyone has the gift of spirituality. Some people have to work a little harder to unwrap their gifts than others do.

Orual's struggle shows how complementary the contributions of psychology and religion to this physicianship of the soul really are. The psychologist understands the operating principles of human ego and emotion at work in the projections, identity formations, and developmental strategies of the two sisters. The theologian, on the other hand, understands the grander destiny of spiritual wholeness that can be unwittingly and tragically sacrificed by these strategies. Their common mission should be authenticity in human living – ever fuller expression of the true self. The contribution of each would be enhanced by a liberal education in the perspective of the other. This would heighten an appreciation of both the differences between the two disciplines and, at the same time, the wisdom of not trying to draw bright lines between them.

So gimme that old-time psychology. Mix it with some new time-religion. Let the talking cures join forces once again.

Amen.