



SOUL AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

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A WORK IN PROGRESS

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Introduction

The *thinking mind*, (AKA the *analytical mind*) and its helpful sidekick reason are wonderful things. In modern American culture, they are the principle tools we use to describe social problems, articulate relevant values and policies, examine alternative solutions, identify the optimal strategies, define appropriate programs, track results, and evaluate outcomes. The Family Housing Fund's website is filled with productions of the thinking mind—descriptions, information, and studies related to the national and local issue of affordable housing. Hopefully, they represent the left-brain at its best and readers will find them useful.

The Fund has recently launched a new section of its website entitled *Spirit, Soul, House and Home* that is devoted to another way of approaching and engaging affordable housing issues. This alternative is commonly associated with the heart, emotion, intuition, imagination, art, and the humanities, and might best be described with the simple but marvelously elusive word *soul*. We decided to include this section because we believe that, in the long run, the most effective and enjoyable way of doing our work is to balance the thinking mind with soulfulness. This poem by Bill Holm seems to express something of this idea:

*Someone dancing inside of us
knows only a few steps:
the "Do-Your-Work in 4/4 Time"
and the "What Do You Expect" waltz.
He hasn't noticed yet the woman
standing away from the lamp,
the one who knows the rumba
and strange steps in jumpy
rhythms from the mountains of Bulgaria
If they dance together,
something unexpected will happen.
if they don't, the next world
will be a lot like this one.*

Spirit, Soul, House and Home is intended to build on the Family Housing Fund's 20th anniversary celebration, which occurred in 2000. In order to mark this important occasion, the Fund commissioned a group of local artists to create works of art that reflected the theme of *home*.



The Fund also commissioned artists to work with children living in affordable housing developments to create community works of art, one of which is featured above. Finally, the Fund sponsored an essay and poetry contest among families who lived in developments that had been conceived and built as affordable housing.

The project sponsored by the Fund greatly exceeded our expectations. A total of 23 artists produced more than 50 works of uniformly high quality. The best and most mobile pieces were used to form a traveling exhibit known as "Home Sweet Home", which was displayed in public spaces throughout the metropolitan area. We used the images to create annual reports in calendar format, note cards, posters, and framed prints. It was a gratifying experience, which greatly enriched our work.

The Fund is now planning a second iteration of this project, which will be known as "Home Sweet Home Again", set to unveil in June 2004. In addition, the Fund intends to commission literary works including poems that revolve around the theme of home. Finally, the Fund is inaugurating a new section of our website, which will be devoted to exploring, in depth, the relationship between the imaginal, mythical, poetic world of soul and our community's critical shortage of affordable housing, including its most tragic consequence—homelessness.

Readers who want to join in a more in-depth exploration of soul and affordable housing are invited to continue reading this essay. Please note that this essay is a work in progress and will continue to grow and transform over time.

The Red Bird

A person's life purpose is nothing but a slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, or love, or passionate work, those one or two images in whose presence his heart first opened.

—Albert Camus



Twelve years ago, I saw myself in a dream, walking in autumn twilight, with beautiful red and gold leaves falling all around me. In the dream I was older—about the age I am today. The purpose of my walk was to collect particularly beautiful leaves. For some reason, none that I saw appealed to me, so I just kept walking. After awhile, I saw money sticking out of a pile of leaves. I pulled it out, organized it in a neat pile and left it there. I continued walking until I came to the opening of an underground chamber, with a wide stairway leading down into the earth. As I started down the stairs, a red bird flew over my left shoulder and I followed it into the chamber. I emerged into a large and wondrous room illuminated by an unknown light source. There was a large pool of still water contained within a low wall, perhaps three feet high. From the direction of the ceiling, the most beautiful red and gold leaves that I had ever seen were falling from a source as hidden as the source of the light. I felt a deep sense of satisfaction and told myself—“Ahh... This is

where I'll find my leaves.” I stood next to the pool, and looked down at the top of the low wall and saw these words etched in the stone: HE INTENDS THE LIBERATED TO KNOW LIFE. I awoke from the dream startled.

This has been my life's most memorable dream. I think of the dream and its images often. Autumn, which was always my favorite season, seems even more significant to me. The September following the dream, I went on long walks when the fall colors came, and took pictures of the foliage, trying to capture the feeling of the dream. When I came across pictures that reminded me of the dream, I saved them and pasted them in a scrapbook. This dream seemed to awaken an interest in the imaginal world and enhanced my ability to read the world symbolically. For some reason, I never tried to interpret the dream because it never seemed right to do so. Perhaps I didn't want the intellect to intrude on such a soulful experience.



Some people who work with dreams caution against analyzing them (or at least over-analyzing them) because this can reinforce the thinking mind's compulsion to understand and, therefore, control everything.

In the years since the dream, red birds began to appear at other significant times in my life. Whenever I saw them, or saw a picture of a red bird, I would feel inexplicably sad, but also encouraged—a paradoxical combination. I had a very extraordinary cousin, Nancy, who cared for my dying father during the year before his death. He was living in Ohio and was afflicted with disabling arthritis. A few years later, when Nancy was dying of cancer, she expressed the wish to return to life as a red bird. I was close to another cousin Michael, a deeply spiritual man who lived in California. The last card he sent me before he died had an image of a red bird on the front. Early in my relationship with my wife Anne, a family of cardinals built a nest in the bushes next to the front porch of her home and I often see a red cardinal in her backyard. I don't think of these red bird sightings as particularly mystical or magical. Rather, I find them reassuring at a visceral level, almost as if someone was watching over me.

So what does all this have to do with affordable housing and the Family Housing Fund? The most striking appearance of the images in this dream occurred in one of the pieces that was submitted for the Family Housing Fund's Home Sweet Home exhibit, although it took me a while to realize it. After the works had been submitted and exhibited, I felt myself especially drawn to a work by Sandra Menefee Taylor. I guess one might say it was the one that resonated most with me. We had prints made of her piece and several others. I had one of the prints framed and I hung it above my desk at my home, simply because I liked it so much. Months went by and then one day, suddenly I looked up at it and I saw the images of the dream. They were so obvious that I wondered why it took me so long to see them, but I'll attribute this to the left-brain static of day to day life. The image, which is depicted partially above and fully on page two, contains leaves and a red bird, but even more importantly, the piece carried the mood of the dream. Because it contained other images

as well, it seemed to expand and elaborate the dream in a natural way. The heart images, for example, led me to the notion that home might be understood as a place, a refuge, both literal and figurative, where one can hear the messages of one's own heart. When I recognized the dream in the print, I felt my work at the Family Housing Fund and our decision to commission art for the 20th anniversary deeply affirmed, as if I had been in the right place for all the time I've worked at the Fund—over 23 years. I also felt inspired to continue to explore the connection of work and the life of the soul not only in a private but in a more public way.

During the same year as the dream, 1990, I developed a very unexpected interest in poetry, although the last poems I could remember reading were those I read as high school English assignments. Up to that point, the occasional poem that I read generally left me confused and unmoved. Yet inexplicably, the world of poetry opened to me and I began reading one anthology after another. My interest in dreams and poetry began to shift my perception, and I developed a growing passion for the imaginal world as a refreshing counterbalance to the intellect. I'm coming to understand that psychologists, artists, and poets have as much to offer in addressing social problems as political scientists and economists. In the words of the poet William Carlos Williams:

*It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there...*

—William Carlos Williams,
Asphodel, That Greeny Flower, Book I

This essay will explore what I have found lifesaving about a soulful perspective: a wellspring of affirmation, perspective, emotional intelligence, lessons in humility, inspiration, stimulus to the imagination, consolation, comfort, courage and truth that penetrates the denial of postmodern life. In the words of the 13th century poet Rumi—a *source of sweetness that always flows and is never less.*

The Dance of Soul and Reason

Change and complexity always outrun our powers of description...When the left-brain confronts the non-linear dimension, it keeps circling around, breaking wholes into parts, retracing its data, and asking inappropriate questions like a reporter at a funeral. Where, when, how, why? We have to inhibit its questions for the moment, suspend its judgment, or we cannot 'see' the other dimension, any more than we can see both perspectives of an optical illusion staircase at the same time—or be swept away by a symphony by analyzing the composition.

—Marilyn Ferguson

Visionaries have traditionally raised alarms about the dangers of reason and the intellect. Often these alarms are fervent, sometimes strident, perhaps because they are intended as wake-up calls. Perhaps they reflect the soul's anger over rejection. They express rage at the thinking mind's capacity for various forms of destructive activity. The artist Goya, for example, said simply that *"The sleep of reason produces monsters."* In a more restrained way, modern author Malidoma Some', speaking from the wisdom of an indigenous tradition, has said: *"Only through poetry can the mind be saved from its own restlessness, constantly wanting to take control of everything as if the lack of control is terminal to the mind. The mind is something that is in service of the heart."*

Similar sentiments are found in many of the world's spiritual traditions. Yogi Ramacharaka writes that: *"The mind has a wonderful range, but nevertheless, man finds himself traveling around and around in a circle, until he realizes that he is confronted continually by the unknown."* The Zen author Daisetz Suzuki reminds us that: *"Man is a thinking reed, but his great works are done when he is not calculating and thinking."* Lao Tsu, author of the *Tao de Ching*, says simply that: *"Those who know do not talk and talkers do not know."* Seng-ts'an says: *"The more you talk about it, the more you think about it, the further from it you go; stop talking, stop thinking, and there is nothing you will not understand."* Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe says, with masterful elegance: *"It does not require many words to speak the truth."*



I hear and respect these admonitions, but fear that they could lead to an alternative imbalance, one in which the left-brain is disrespected rather than the right. This is why I resonate so much with the image of dancing energies, as expressed in the down-to-earth simplicity of Bill Holm's poem *Advice*, quoted in the introduction of this essay:

*If they dance together,
something unexpected will happen
If they don't, the next world
will be a lot like this one.*



Perhaps I'm biased, since I like to think and talk so much. Nevertheless, I believe that the problem is not the thinking mind per se, but the imbalance between mind and soul. The danger occurs when the analytical mind is always on stage, in the spotlight, performing solo. This seems the norm in post-modern society for the processes by which we engage issues such as homelessness and affordable housing. The energy of the soul is certainly present, but generally off stage, behind the scenes, sometimes erupting in surprising and refreshing ways, but generally unacknowledged and repressed, so that it too often appears as skewed, distorted, disruptive.

This is all critically relevant to any organization with a mission to engage social issues, particularly organizations that deal with such fundamental issues as house and home. If the processes by which we engage these issues are out of balance, then our outcomes will be less than optimal, not only in the primary sense of providing homes for families and children in need, but also in terms of contributing our share to the healing of the world. We don't need to be ashamed of thinking and talking. We can celebrate *logos*, celebrate the value of reasoned, thoughtful approaches to defining and accomplishing our objectives. Yet, we could

be more inclusive, more diverse in the truest, most fundamental sense. This, to me, is the underlying *meaning* of the Family Housing Fund's "Home Sweet Home" exhibit. The artists, through their images, blessed and inspired our work, indeed joined in the work, as we did in theirs.

The question then becomes how to invite more dancing.

Dance, when you're broken open.

Dance, when you've torn the bandage off.

Dance in the middle of the fighting.

Dance in your blood.

Dance, when you're perfectly free.

—Rumi

Since the thinking mind is usually in the dominant power position, the first step is to achieve greater consciousness of what's missing. A common theme among champions of the soul is that over-reliance on the thinking mind produces a kind of socially reinforced group trance, often expressed in the metaphor of sleep. The challenge then is to **Wake Up!** and to stay awake, so that it is possible to move with grace, back and forth, from one energy to the other in an evolving dance.

Again, in the words of the poet Rumi:

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell.
Don't go back to sleep!
You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep!
People are going back and forth across the doorsill
where the two worlds meet.
The door is round and open. Don't go back to sleep!*

Those who study the human psyche can help raise awareness as well. In that respect, I have found the ideas of archetypal psychologists Thomas Moore (*Care of the Soul*) and James Hillman helpful. Hillman was a founder of the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture. In his book, *Blue Fire*, Moore says this about Hillman:

Social problems waken the rescuing hero who cannot feel content until he has solved all problems, because his very existence depends on slaying monsters, cleaning stables, and saving cities...Implied in James Hillman's psychology of the world is a radically different way of deal with social problems. It is...closer to traditions of magic, incantation and ritual than modern analysis and treatment plans...The temptation always is to deal with social ills from the spirit: find out what is going on, develop a plan of attack, and get it under control. Hillman's way is to take the labyrinthine way of the soul, to find a cure by entering into the symptom with unremitting imagination...he invites planners, designers, and social and political activists to regard themselves as imaginative psychologists, even as therapists of the soul.

—Thomas Moore

Here, once again, there is need for caution lest one imbalance replace another. Like many of the admonitions of the sages, this quote represents a corrective one-sidedness. Yes, by all means, let's enter the symptom with relentless imagination, but let's keep coming up with our old-fashioned plans of attack, not necessarily to solve the entire problem, but to provide real relief to real families and their children. Let's both re-imagine our work while we make the best use possible of the gifts of the organized,

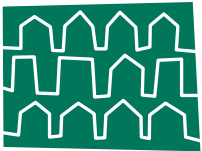


orderly, rational mind to create as many affordable homes as possible. Let's continue doing our "work in 4/4 time" while beginning to dance with the "woman standing away from the lamp."

When I reflected on James Hillman's path of "unrelenting imagination," I thought of poetry as a way to engage the symptoms of stress and dysfunction that result from an imbalance of mind and soul. I once heard poetry described as "healing word music," and I imagine poems as homeopathic remedies, with particular poems providing a form of healing energy for particular symptoms, especially if read aloud. Thus, what follows is an attempt to explore the symptoms poetically, beginning with those that many poets consider primary—fear and denial. One poetic way of engaging fear and denial is through the paths of love and awareness.

*And do not think for you are not ready for thought.
So the darkness will be the light,
And the stillness the dancing.*

—T.S. Eliot



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