

The Circle of the Soul

I have been a student of psychology all of my adult years, and trying to find meaning and make sense of life. I have learned much, yet being visual, couldn't quite come to a completely clear picture or image until now. Viewing a Joseph Campbell video I learned that the psyche, or soul, was considered a circle by Plato. A circle is appropriate because it is natural, and very common in nature. From the shape of an atom, to water droplets and bubbles, nuts and fruits, the moon, earth, sun, solar system, and the universe, nature adores circles, spheres, and ovals. It is also one of the strongest structures in nature, able to withstand great forces.

It seems we start without a circle, no limits. The boundary arrives as we develop a personality that appears separate and distinct from others and things. In contrast eastern philosophy and now modern science teach that all creation is intimately connected and interdependent, that there really is no separate self. As John Muir said, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."

Campbell goes on to say that this circle has a horizontal line across it that is the threshold of consciousness. I would add this line begins at birth, as prior to that we were essentially unconscious. As we developed physically and mentally our consciousness also develops and expands, so the line lowers and circle enlarges. Eastern wisdom also uses a circle, but divided into equal shares of light and dark as evidenced in the Yin Yang symbol. Note that this symbol often includes a white spot of light in the center of the dark area and a dark spot in the center of the light area showing that even though there are contrasting aspects in the soul of light and dark, neither are absolutes and there is interconnection.

As we grow and develop, our social conditioning develops as well, this Campbell describes as a square on the center line. Part of this square is in the upper conscious area and part in the lower unconscious area containing all of our unknown or repressed conditioning. In cultures where community naturally takes precedence the individual boxes is small and insignificant in deference to the greater good. Not so in the west. In some people the square dominates the circle. This is ego running rampant.

Campbell chooses a square to relate to mans contribution as it is rare in nature, yet we are mad about them. From books and boxes to rooms and buildings, squares and boxes are very common in man's world. I believe the boxes relate very easily to the idea of ego, having the "right" body, education, job, spouse, children, home, car, and so on. I see the color of the boxes as changeable; perhaps red for rage, green for envy, blue for depression, gray for doubt and confusion, white for passion, black for fears and depression, and so on.

The unconscious box contains all the ideas and beliefs of "the shadow;" the dark side of human conditioning that are not consciously known as they are either obscured or unseen. This box is much like the black box on airplanes, recording information methodically over time. This box also moves through many colors and shades as thinking and emotions "color" our perceptions.

The problems come when life energy passes through these boxes and directs our attitudes, opinions, and actions without our conscious knowing. We usually have little or no choice in this, as early experiences leave deep impressions in our bodies and minds well beyond what we are aware of that cause us to react without thinking consciously, without realization.

These boxes grow as we collect and protect our egotistical prizes, opinions, ideas, and beliefs, and shrink with compassionate introspection and the resulting clarity. Also the walls of the ego can become hard as stone or steel, impervious to influence and therefore change. The ultimate goal is to look deeply and discover the contents that we may come to acceptance of the negative aspects of ourselves to understand them and build the necessary compassion and caring to facilitate significant and lasting changes. Only then can the barriers become soft and permeable and doors and windows open up in the walls our consciousness.

The problem with splitting off the "positive" and "negative" sides of the soul so they appear as absolutes is that it tears not only the soul, but all creation in two. Now there is good and bad, right and wrong, devils and angels. Conflict soon arises and opposing factions begin warring between themselves. Life is much too complex and mysterious for that. There are two sides, but only one coin. It is the same with the soul. Peace can only come when we realize the connection and interdependency of all our parts.

It is also easy to think of the boxes as the home of evil, something we should destroy and discard. Yet although it is somewhat of a Pandora's box, it is also a treasure chest filled with gems of insight, so that past hurts that can become healings and rich fuel for our journey. This is our "cross," but also can become our resurrection and ascent to more heavenly realms.

These aspects point out that the boxes are images of limits, that we are boxed in, trapped, and alone in mental prisons. However these images are bounded only by our imaginations, and therefore the possibility of transformation is always available and real. We are not trapped and alone, there is help. It won't be fast, easy, or painless, and it might take hitting a bottom or a suffering a shock or tragedy to shake us out of our entrenchment, but shift happens. Personally, I believe people can change, often in significant, even radical ways slowly over time or suddenly in quantum leaps.

It often seems as if the differing aspects of the soul have their own personalities. If we are fortunate, our soul life begins as a wonder child, in awe and amazement of a perfect and accommodating world resting in our mother or fathers arms, love reflected in her eyes, and the emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual nourishment intimately close. From here stages of development arrive and are resolved or not.

For example, Erick Erikson describes these developmental stages as:

Eighteen months to three years - trust vs. mistrust (drive and confidence)

Three to five years - initiative vs. guilt (purpose)

Six to twelve years - industry vs. inferiority (method and competence)

Twelve to eighteen years - identity vs. role confusion (devotion and fidelity)

Eighteen to thirty five years - intimacy and solidarity vs. isolation (affiliation and love)

Thirty five to sixty five - generativity vs. self absorption or stagnation (production and care)

Sixty five and on - integrity vs. despair (wisdom)

Should any of these stages fail to be fully resolved and integrated, we may become fixated and haunted by them the rest of our lives. Twelve step programs acknowledge a false self is created to deal with the resulting angst and confusion, the "wounded child." As we move into adulthood an inner critic or "critical inner parent" voice may arise and judge us harshly and negatively, questioning and crushing our self esteem on many levels from within. A host of coping mechanisms and survival skills may arise, making life ever more troubled and difficult addictions.

These troubled personalities and character defects would reside in the boxes as well. Hate, chaos, sorrow, ugliness, and other problematic energies live there too. Perhaps the heart can be overwhelmed and sucked into the boxes too as evidenced by psychopathic behaviors, lost in darkness and misery. The overriding character of this aspect is, in a word, fear.

Thich Nhat Hanh teaches us we must take egos tantrums in stride, like a tired and cranky child that should be held and comforted until it calms down. Eckhart Tolle calls these upsets "pain body," and advises it is simply an illness, deserving of compassion rather than resentment. Twelve step considers these character defects, or simply disease or insanity, and works to resolve and heal them. A Course In Miracles tells me it is simply fear in one of its many disguises, a call for love, and so an opportunity to answer with compassion and loving kindness.

The soul circle is much like the ocean where above water it can be clear and peaceful at times, or powerful dark storm clouds can bring wind, rain, waves, thunder, and lightening, yet remain calm in the depths below. Also below the surface another whole world goes on filled with life and mystery. Underwater mountains and valleys contain abundant, diverse, and bizarre creatures as well as the wreckage of past misadventures.

The circle or sphere and the threshold of consciousness are also analogous to the human body as the frenzied, compulsive, thinking of "monkey mind" goes on in the realm of consciousness in our heads. The mind is also somewhat airy and fickle, blown about on the winds of life's travails. Hope is not lost here as although we can't see or control the wind, we can adjust our sails.

Below, the body has its own intelligence, it's own "thinking," that is much more wise and calm. Eckhart Tolle advises that if the messages of the body and brain conflict, listen to the body, it knows the truth. The body is also more connected to the world due to its many senses. It doesn't even need much attention to heal wounds or illness, as this usually occurs naturally.

Like the body, the heart is also below the threshold of conscious, somewhat under conscious influence but well beyond our control. The heart can be hard, heavy, and black, or light, sensitive, and vulnerable. A friend gave me the image of the heart as wounded and sore, an angry clenched fist made of stone or steel. This hardened heart can also be bound in leather straps and covered in layers of armor. My recovery is about carefully peeling off the layers, and melting the heart of

stone or steel until it returns to flesh and blood, and then relaxing the angry fist until it becomes a helping hand.

Through prayer and meditation we can recognize when the ego, pain body, or character defects are activated and in charge and step back to become an observer rather than a reactor to realize that we can choose again, *we have a choice!* We must stop, look, and listen. If it all seems just too dramatic, unfair, and unacceptable to handle, we may yet ignore the raucous screams of ego and listen to the still, small voice of the infinite wisdom and presence of our Higher Power.

This becomes easier and more effective as we learn to practice mindfulness throughout the day. For me, prayer is a conversation with my Higher Power; mentally, verbally, and through journaling. Meditation is finding my center in calm and quiet, my "Being." Insanity is very prevalent in the world, but sanity is also very real and near, waiting within, always available through my wonder child, loving inner parent and Higher Power.

A major benefit of this image is it helps me understand there are differing dynamic "compartments" functioning within the psyche. Therefore I can be angry or suffering about difficulties on one level, yet feel authentically grateful and happy on another. The image here, is being tossed about by a storm, yet still anchored in the deep calm, peace, and contentment below the surface that is always vibrant and alive.

For me it comes back to the first three steps of twelve step programs of which I am a longtime devotee. 1: We are powerless over others and our compulsive thinking, that our lives become unmanageable. 2: We can come to believe a power greater than ourselves that can restore us to sanity. 3: We can decide to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understand God.

I know this can be difficult, especially if our youth was filled with people who were angry, jealous, negative, critical and otherwise abusive as this transfers over to our Higher Power. It can take many years and much hard work to change, but it can be done. Healing and wholeness is just as real as the pain and suffering. No one can do it for us, but together, we can do it!

These steps also mirror the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism somewhat as; 1: Life is difficult. 2: The difficulty is due to ego attachment and aversion. 3: Letting go of ego is the solution. 4: Freedom and happiness lie in the virtuous eight fold paths of: right view, right speech, right livelihood, right mindfulness, right thought, right effort, right action, and right concentration.

So what is the point, the "bottom line?" If you accept this image of soul, now imagine the circle expanding and contracting as we identify with the individual self or spreading out to encompass all creation. Next the boxes also growing or shrinking and the walls getting thicker and thinner as they flash through bright and dark colors in reaction to events perceived or imagined. This is life! If we try to freeze life energy into walls and hold back the flow, it won't work for long. Life must flow!

It is up to you. Will these dark forces run your life? Or are you willing to not only stop feeding them, but also bear the pain of looking into them to see what they are made of, dismantle and

dissolve them, and live for greater good? The key is to keep watch, be the observer, recognize when ego is arising and not take it personally or seriously, and then do the work of healing. Again, it won't be fast, easy, or painless, but it is worth it! You are worth it!

This image is helping me see with the spotlight of mindfulness to clear away the fog of unconscious past conditioning and really be present here and now for myself and others in the best possible way. I am not trapped. I can choose again, and again, and again. No longer must I strive to simply survive, I am now free to thrive and live a truly full, blessed, and abundant life!

Lastly, I'd like to leave you with a few paragraphs from a workshop we did called True Happiness.

Your circumstances and situation are of no consequence in the realm of the infinite of which you are an essential part. In truth, we are not separate from others, nature, or Higher Power, rather we are an important aspect of all creation, intimately connected to and part of everything that is, was, and ever will be. We certainly don't have to go it alone, it wouldn't work anyway; a full and abundant life is always a group effort. It does take a village to raise a healthy child (and adult!), and connections and community.

Your job here is to become your brightest, best, and most beautiful self! To be who *you* are, to connect with the love, joy and beauty of your soul, and spread it throughout the universe endlessly. There is nothing missing, broken, or flawed; you are complete, whole, and perfect as is. You have been suffering from a case of mistaken identity, mistaking yourself for the problems, disease, and insanity of the world. Choose now to identify with the solutions, well being, and sanity of your wonder child, loving inner parent, and True Self.

You are not little, alone, or insignificant. You are the greatest, most glorious gift God has to give, a priceless treasure! The most beautiful, awesome, and amazing thing in existence! Not a peon or a slave, rather, a king or a queen with a kingdom you must rule. You are an angel, here to sing the praises of humanity and creation with your own special vision and voice, so everyone who will listen will hear and join in the joyous song. *Deep inside you know it's true!* Tell yourself in the mirror and shout it out to the world!

You are the creative principle that built the pyramids, mapped astronomy, discovered chemistry and mathematics, dared surgery, painted every masterpiece, and wrote every symphony. In fact, *you* and your life *are* a symphony, an ecstatic celebration of music, dance, and poetry; **YOU are the greatest work of art ever made**, and all of creation gives you a rousing cheer and standing ovation!!!