



Soul Esteem, Radical Healing and the Creative Imagination

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Dr. Dina Glouberman

Dear friends and colleagues and fellow seekers,

It is a great honour to be here with you today. It is fascinating to me today to remember that when I first was applying to college, my father, who was a very forward thinker, wanted me to go to Brandeis University because there was a guy named **Abraham Maslow** who he thought was great. As most of you know, Abraham Maslow was the founder of Humanistic Psychology. I went to Brandeis and I never did take a course with Abraham Maslow. One of my friends who did was shocked that when he set an essay question and she handed in an essay on a different topic entirely, he refused to accept it. In those days of the sixties, I thought this an unforgivable offense. When I became a lecturer myself, I felt differently. At that time, I took against him and didn't sign up for his course. But nevertheless, all of Brandeis University was imbued with his spirit.

I want to talk today about what I call **Radical Healing**.

What is Radical Healing? It's the kind of healing when you're not just trying to get the old show back on the road, but rather you've understood that the old show is over, and you need to create or discover that which is your next show, your new way of living that takes everything up a register to a new reality.

To accomplish radical healing, it helps, in my view, to understand the other two components of this talk: soul esteem and the creative imagination. Soul esteem provides the power and direction behind radical healing, and the creative imagination is the road we can travel on in order to heal.

I've been involved in health and healing all my life, as a psychotherapist, a teacher, and a creator of healing environments, be they a weekend group in London, or a fabulous holiday on a Greek island. I have come to see the **soul as the control room that can direct our lives if we listen to it.** But listening to it is sometimes our biggest challenge.

Soul has many meanings. **When I speak of soul, at the simplest level I am talking about our highest or deepest and most loving truth, and the way in which we connect to something larger than ourselves.** To get an image of it, I sometimes suggest that you imagine a big light in back of you, imagine that it is breathing, and then allow yourself to breathe with it. While I pause, try imagining that.

We usually have the opportunity to begin radical healing when we have some kind of crisis in our mental, emotional or physical health. Most recently I have specialized in burnout, because I burnt out myself, and it has taught me a great deal about radical healing. This is because burnout is an illness or a break in one's health that clearly has its origins in the psyche or soul. So in my view do all illnesses, in an ultimate sense, but it is so clear with burnout.

I'm not saying necessarily that stress or unhappiness cause illness, but there is no question that they can trigger illness if we are predisposed for other reasons. So the factors of pollution, genetics, and so on, are all relevant, but the soul cannot be ignored because often it sets the illness process into action

What I found when I studied people who were burnt out was that there was this very typical pattern: we start off full of energy, committed, responsible to the point of over-responsibility, giving to the point of over-giving, spending very little energy on self care. This works as long as we are wholehearted and everyone marvels at us. But then something changes either in us or the situation, and our heart goes out of the situation. At this point we need to step back and listen. Our soul is whispering that something needs to shift. But we don't shift because of some fear connected to our identity. And then we drive ourselves – like a house divided against ourselves – with the accelerator and brake on at the same time, until we reach burnout.

I have an important caution here: not to turn responsibility for our lives into blame. It is not our fault that we are ill or disturbed – we are doing our very best. It may however be a signal that gives us information about how we can take responsibility for honouring ourselves in new ways. There is not something more wrong with people who get ill than with those who don't. In fact, I often find people who have done a lot of work on themselves are getting ill when they weren't before. In the case of burnout for example, the over-responsibility and over-loving that people do is a real expression of an ability to love that may be quite extraordinary. But we also need to learn how to give in a way that honours ourselves as well. Someone who doesn't love or give that much might not get ill from over-giving, but that doesn't make them a better or healthier person. Perhaps they haven't faced this challenge because they haven't got there yet.

The power of becoming ill is that it can force us to go beyond getting the show back on the road and to engage in Radical Healing, which is

a total reorientation on every level from the spiritual to the physical. Lothar Himeise, head of People against Cancer in Germany, found after interviewing hundreds of people who survived what was considered end-stage cancer that the one area of common ground between all of them was a major mental or spiritual shift, after a great deal of emotional and spiritual stocktaking.

The way to Radical Healing, which many people we know do naturally, has a few important components:

Give up hope and keep the faith: this means that we have to give up holding it all together, stop hoping for whatever future it was that we thought we had to have, and yet trust that we will be okay, no matter what the form.

Give the soul a good home: rather than the hovel we may have been living in. In the old story of the goose and the golden eggs, this means that we have to start caring for the goose, rather than the golden eggs.

Live truthfully: putting truth first and everything else second. This is because the road to burnout is always characterized by denial.

Reach out to a soul community: friends, networks, teachers, even books and CDs which help us to be accepted for who we really are and not what we produce or deliver.

Don't leave your joy behind: when we do start going back to a normal life, we need to do it a new way that lets us continue to have joy.

The result is someone who is not so much wholehearted, but rather moving towards wholeness and joy...

One of the most important ways of making these spiritual shifts is through imagery or visualization – what I call Imagework. While words are the language of our rational mind, images are the language of the body, emotions, heart and soul. This language of images has a direct effect on our autonomic or unconscious nervous system. It is difficult just to try to increase your saliva, but if you picture a lemon and imagine tasting it, you'll see the difference. Through images we can locate our deep seated pictures of the world (that come from the past and from society) and also find new ones that direct us towards health and wholeness. You might for example allow an image to emerge of an animal, plant or object that is a metaphor for your life and your relationship to it. Try this now.

Then you work with that, rather than with your conscious rational thoughts, to get to your truth and your possibilities. Or go to a House of Truth. Or time travel to a future when you are happy and healthy and see how you got there.

In my experience, these challenges to people often lead us to feel grateful for the physical or emotional health breakdown we suffered,

no matter how much we paid for it. The simple fact is that we were unable to turn around our life until we had no choice, or indeed until we had nothing to lose.

And as we turned our lives around, and began to live in a way that honours the best in us, the life that we are leading, no matter how long or short it is, became full of a deep faith that all is well, a sense of living well in our body, an honesty, a feeling of meaning and purpose, a loving community, and above all, a joy in being alive, and a wonder about what comes next. All of these have been found to be correlated with a better health prognosis and a longer life. For example, a recent study by Professor Andrew Steptoe shows that happier people have lower levels of fibrinogen, a clotting factor which increases the risk of heart attacks, and of cortisol, and consequently have fewer heart attacks. But above all, we are creating a life that is worthy of us. And this is after all what humanistic psychology has always been about.

This is where I would like finally to introduce the concept of soul esteem. We often talk of self esteem as a positive predictor of so much. One day when I was giving a talk at Skyros, our Greek island holistic holiday centre, I found myself saying that when I started Skyros I had no self esteem but I did have soul esteem. What is soul esteem? It is the willingness to listen to the soul's whispers, no matter what the cost, and without even considering whether you are worthy or not, or even whether you can do it. You do it.

When I started Skyros with my ex husband Yannis Andricopoulos, it was at a time that I had a full time job in which the work atmosphere was quite killing, as well as clients, weekend groups, two babies and no self esteem. But I had soul esteem. This means that I was ready to jump into creating this vision with all my heart and soul, and didn't think about what it would cost me, nor did I consider whether I had the time and space to do it, or whether I was worthy of the challenge or whether there was someone who could do it better. We did listen to these whispers of my soul, and started one of the greatest adventures of our lives.

My book on Burnout has recently been translated into Greek. They gave it the title – *Burnout: Danger or Opportunity*. This challenge is present in all crises, as we know. In the case of a psychological or physical health crisis there are many different kinds of danger, but the opportunity is, I believe, to undertake a path of radical healing.

Building Soul Esteem by learning to listen to and respect the whispers of our souls seems to me to be an essential step on the path of Radical Healing.

Dina Glouberman, Ph.D, is the best selling author of the classic *Life Choices, Life Changes* and of *The Joy of Burnout*. She is also co-founder of Skyros Holistic Holidays and an international trainer and coach. Her website can be found at www.imagework.co.uk