

Soul Loss and Soul Retrieval

Maybe you are struggling to get over a relationship breakup, or you know somebody else who is? Or a bereavement? Or the loss of a home or a job? Or maybe you (or they) are still feeling the wounds and effects of a difficult childhood? Or perhaps it is another traumatic experience, such as bullying at school or at work? Or maybe there is a feeling of never really having been the same after a serious illness or accident. Or maybe there are feelings that do not obviously stem from a particular event; apathy maybe; a lack of focus and enthusiasm; depression; addictive behaviours; low self-esteem. If so, then in shamanic terms, the most likely cause is 'soul loss'.

The idea of soul loss is central to shamanism. Shamanism is our oldest spiritual practice. It dates back at least 40,000 years, and is probably much older still. It has been practised by all human cultures. What is amazing is that although shamanic communities are scattered across the four corners of the earth, there is a remarkable consistency of belief and practices between them. This was first noticed by the anthropologist Michael Harner⁽¹⁾, who coined the term 'core shamanism'. One of these core shamanic beliefs is the idea of 'soul loss', and the associated shamanic practice of 'soul retrieval'. This is the idea that part of our soul can literally leave, leaving behind a sense of emptiness and a feeling that 'something is missing'. The treatment is for a shamanic practitioner to find the missing part and persuade it to come back, and help make the person whole again.

The symptoms of soul loss are many. They include:

- a sense of somehow being incomplete; that something is 'missing'
- feelings of numbness or flatness; of just going through the motions
- feelings of hopelessness, apathy and indifference; like a spark is missing
- a sense of being disconnected from life or what is around you; as if you are living in a dream
- depression, ranging from mild, to moderate, through to severe
- feeling lost, indecisive and aimless
- procrastination; time wasting; or finding it hard to sustain focus or effort
- a lack of confidence and self-belief
- having a strong inner critic who puts you down and is always on your back
- phobias and anxieties; fearfulness
- missing memories (where have the memories gone, and why did they go?)
- addictions or other compulsive behaviours and/or thought patterns
- a sense of never having really recovered from a past event
- repeatedly returning to a person, location or behaviour that is unhealthy for you
- inability to move on from an issue or event, despite efforts to do so
- finding it hard to (re)invest in the future with enthusiasm and optimism
- feelings of grief, fear, anger or rage that you cannot seem to shake off
- the feeling that soul retrieval may help.



That last one may seem strange, but in fact it is surprisingly common. This is because, prior to the birth of so-called 'civilisation' from around 4,000BC to the present day, *all* humans practised shamanism. In fact, they did not just practice it (in the way that in the modern world we may, or may not, 'practice' a religion or spiritual path, as if it is an 'optional extra'). People *lived and breathed* shamanism; it was central to them. The vast, vast majority of your ancestors, going back literally thousands upon thousands of generations, knew the symptoms of soul loss. So nowadays, although we have lost the conscious knowledge of it, we still have an ancestral, unconscious, inner knowing that that is what is wrong. And so, for many people it immediately feels right when it is explained to them⁽²⁾.

Physically, the symptoms of soul loss can be pretty much anything. Fatigue is very common, and a weakened immune system. But literally, soul loss can be behind pretty much any illness. We are talking about being in an energetically-weakened, run-down state; it is not surprising then that things may start to go wrong in the physical body too.

There are some obvious causes of the soul part leaving. Traditionally soul loss was said to result from things such as accidents, serious illnesses, shocks and other traumatic events. However there are other causes too...

- abuse; not just sexual, but also physical and mental/emotional too
- prolonged anxiety or fear
- loss and grief
- shame and guilt
- prolonged pain
- giving your soul to another; co-dependent relationships
- domination by another person, or a group (everything from peer pressure to religious cults)
- allowing your soul to be stolen by another, or others
- substance abuse and other addictions (allowing your soul to be stolen by the object of the addiction)
- not being true to oneself; disowning or disallowing parts of oneself

Sometimes soul loss occurs when we do not feel safe, say in the case of a traumatic event. Part of us then leaves, as it does not feel it is safe to stay. Sometimes the part is literally shocked out of the body. It may then still be stuck in the time and place of the traumatic event, literally hanging around it like a ghost (this is why people describe flashbacks, or persistent thoughts or images; part of them is literally still stuck back there). Prolonged situations such as fear, guilt or pain can have a similar effect. Part of us eventually leaves because it could no longer cope (we may say we felt part of us died). Sometimes we give our soul (our power) over to a loved one, and when they die or leave, we feel our heart has been wrenched out. Other times somebody (or even a substance like alcohol or drugs) may 'steal' our soul, by undermining and gradually overpowering us; dominating us and keeping us in chains and tied to them.

Maybe the most subtle (but no less damaging) cause of soul loss is actually what we do to ourselves. Maybe as a child there was something you were repeatedly told never to do, such as: be angry; or upset; or cry; or be noisy; or clever; or naughty; or answer back; or any number of things. As a child, what are you going to do with that bit of you? If you are repeatedly criticised or rejected, punished or shamed if you do this thing, then *in order to survive*, you have to block this part of you off. We do this, usually unconsciously, by adopting what is known as an introject (from the Latin *intrō* = into and *iectiōn* = throwing): something from somebody else that is thrown into us. So an introject is a 'should' or a 'shouldn't', a 'must' or a 'must not' that we adopt and take on board. Psychotherapists would say that this part is then repressed, and that through the process of therapy, this part can be recovered and reintegrated. As a therapist myself, I certainly know this to be true. However shamanism says that sometimes something altogether more startling happens. Sometimes that part is not just repressed, but actually leaves altogether. The (soul) part literally splits off and goes. In this case, there will be only so far that therapy can go. This is when shamanism comes into its own.



So, where does the soul part go? As I said earlier, sometimes it is stuck back in the time period and place of the trauma. Most times though, the soul part drifts further, and literally goes off into realms beyond this one. Sometimes parts flee to safe places in these other realms. And sometimes they gravitate to places of hopelessness and despair. What they need, and what the person they belong to needs, is to come back. This is where soul retrieval comes in. In a soul retrieval the skilled shamanic practitioner leaves their own body and enters into shamanic reality. This is usually (but not always) done to the accompaniment of a shamanic drum or rattle. Working with the help of their power animal(s) and other guides, the practitioner finds the soul part of the person they are journeying for and attempts to persuade it to return. If it agrees to return, the part is then gathered up, brought back to this reality and then literally blown back into the person's body.

The actual process of doing a soul retrieval can seem surprisingly quick. This is because it is happening outside of the time scale of this reality. So the whole process can be done in an hour session. In many cases one session alone is enough. Sometimes a series of sessions are needed, when soul parts are reluctant to return, or when multiple parts have been lost. Sometimes too other shamanic healing is necessary. As well as soul loss we can suffer power loss, and very often it is necessary to do a power retrieval for the person too, usually in the form of what is known as a power animal. Also, when soul parts leave, they leave holes in us. Other things, 'intrusions' can then get in, and need to be removed. The process of removing these is generally known as shamanic extraction.

So too, where there are strong introjects, they may need to be worked with. It is all very well for bringing somebody's soul part back for them. But if the soul part is a part of themselves that they have strong 'shoulds' or 'should nots' about, then if the part is to stay then these will need to be addressed (and this is often where counselling or psychotherapy can pick up the thread again).

The other thing that sometimes happens is that the soul part returns, but the body is still in shock. Shamanism recognises different bits of us, each having different needs. Put simply here, we are made up of body, soul and spirit. What Body needs is to feel safe. So sometimes as well as soul loss there is 'body shock', in which case what is needed is a 'body re-patterning' journey too.

The effects of a good shamanistic soul retrieval (and other shamanic healing) can be dramatic or subtle. But either way, the effects are very often profound. People often describe it as a turning point, not always at the time, but usually in looking back. They experience a return of their self-esteem; their optimism and motivation; health may improve; addictions and compulsions fade away. Just think about what it would be like to have a whole and intact soul, with no bits knocked out, and you will get the picture.

Footnotes

- (1) Harner, Michael. *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing*
- (2) For more information on soul loss the classic book is- Ingerman, Sandra. *Soul Retrieval: Mending the Fragmented Self through Shamanic Practice*

Paul Francis is a shamanic practitioner, psychotherapist and teacher in the U.K. He is the founder of the Three Ravens College of Therapeutic Shamanism. For information on training courses and workshops visit www.therapeutic-shamanism.co.uk. For ethical and skilled shamanic practitioners for soul retrieval and other shamanic work visit www.shamanic-practitioners.co.uk

