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The Journal of Mind and Behavior
Winter 1999, Volume 20, Number 1
Pages 93–102
ISSN 0271–0137

Words from the Soul: Time, East/West Spirituality, and Psychotherapeutic Narrative. Stuart Sovatsky. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998, 241 pages, $59.50 hardcover, $19.95 paperback.

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This is no ordinary book. Despite its modest title, and its unassuming scholarly exterior and format, this brilliant book is a wide-ranging but skillfully targeted attack both on the dominant model in psychology — which Dr. Sovatsky believes is primarily psychoanalytic — and on the *Zeitgeist* of modern Western civilization (with which the former is allied). Drawing from Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Foucault, Kierkegaard, Buddhism, Indian yoga and his twenty-five years experience as a psychotherapist, the author has written a ground breaking work. Unlike other critics of psychoanalysis (e.g., Masson, 1985) who have demonstrated that some of the empirical assumptions (or putative facts) upon which psychoanalysis is based are false, Sovatsky goes further and argues that its basic a priori philosophical orientation— faith-less, hope-less, retro-spective, methodologically suspicious — is itself at fault (see also Farber [1998]; as well as Webster [1995] from a secular position.) Furthermore, Sovatsky provides readers with a new paradigm for psychology based on a radically non-reductionistic vision of human possibility. (Of course from the perspective of the dominant paradigm this is unrealistic or, more pejoratively, "grandiose.")

Although I am approaching *Words from the Soul* as a philosophical argument for change, it is also an excellent primer on (transpersonal) psychotherapy, as well as a profound and provocative meditation (as the title itself suggests) — on life, death, time, meaning, eternity and the spiritual quest. To engage with Sovatsky on all these topics would take me far beyond the compass of this review. Furthermore, in this time of social and cultural crisis there is a quality of urgency imparted to arguments for cultural paradigm shifts. And it is probably more than incidental that Sovatsky mentions several times that the paradigm he is advocating has broader social-policy and cultural implications, and states that "much more than another form of psychotherapy looms before us as a redemptive–healing path" (p. 177). Thus I believe the approach taken in this review is justified.

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Let me preface these remarks by explaining that when Sovatsky uses the term "conventional therapy," he is referring to all forms of psychotherapy that are based on the psychoanalytic premise that infancy and childhood provide the interpretative context for understanding clients' present lives and difficulties. Psychoanalysis, thus broadly conceived, is — the author believes — the dominant paradigm in psychology, and the basis for most of the talking therapies. (Sovatsky does not discuss the biochemical model which provides the rationale for psychopharmacological interventions.)

The core idea enshrined by high-brow psychoanalytic theories and pop psychology alike seems innocent and uncontroversial: adults are impaired (to varying degrees) by traumas inflicted in their childhood or in infancy by parents who failed to minister adequately to their developmental needs. (This idea, imported into psychoanalysis by Freud's disciples, is a modification of Freud's theory which posited that these traumas were products of phantasies, not of actual occurrences.) The psychoanalytic problematic is that of the individual who cannot genuinely live in the present because she is fixated on the traumatic, and thus "unfinished," past. The remedy lies in examining, re-experiencing and symbolically reenacting the past, thus lifting its *spell* and freeing the individual to live in the present.

But this rarely happens. Instead, the patient in psychoanalysis, or in any form of conventional therapy as Sovatsky defines it, becomes increasingly enthralled with the past and spends months or years unraveling the skein of his or her developmental history in an attempt to decode its real, i.e., psychoanalytic, meaning. In weekly — or more frequent — therapy sessions the patient reexperiences recovered traumatic memories, while expressing her pain and suppressed rage at the perpetrators, hoping that eventually enough insights and/or catharses will be accumulated to banish the past forever. (For those trained as "transpersonal psychologists," as Sovatsky was, the process is even longer because of the preoccupation with "in utero, neonatal and, of course, past-life experiences," p. 13.) If the therapist is not of the stoical *classical* psychoanalytic school he or she will invariably reward the patient for the revelation of her psychic wounds with the most highly cherished therapeutic elixir of modern times: an effusion of warm "empathic" understanding.

Preoccupied with the past, life passes us by, unnoticed. We miss "the tremulous joy of the unique and fleeting present" (p. 13). Sovatsky paraphrases John Lennon, "Life is something that happens when we're busy analyzing yesterday's conversation" (p. 13). The psychoanalytic and the psychotherapeutic project have failed to break the *spell of the past*. On the contrary, the therapeutic life has itself become a trap — and often a *refuge* from the challenges of the present and future — that makes it virtually impossible (to quote the watchword of another 1960s icon) to "be here now."

There is a powerful sense of dramatic conflict in this book which derives from its implicit narrative structure: the story begins in the present with its central character, humanity, tormented and held captive by the spell of the past — which is actually (today) *the spell of psychoanalytic thought*. Seeking to escape its plight it sought guidance from agencies within its midst — conventional therapists — whose well-intentioned but inept efforts have succeeded only in tightening the shackles that hold human beings in bondage. But there is another unrecognized option which the author reveals to his readers: we can abjure the status quo based on the ways of the past, and the illusory security it seems to provide, and accept the challenge of the present–future with all its novelty and attendant risks. The author believes that in order to accomplish this, leadership is needed, guides who will help human beings

to chart this new course, therapists who will fulfill the vocational responsibilities that conventional therapists have unwittingly betrayed. Thus Sovatsky evidently hopes that his book will help to create such a leadership, a cadre of practitioners of "soteriological therapy" which, in contrast to conventional therapy, focuses not on understanding and re-experiencing the past, but on carefully attending to and appreciating the present moment and realizing that it contains within it the seeds of redemption, and the opportunity for the soul's growth toward "its own greatest hopes and happinesses" (p. 41). Sovatsky's narrative is inevitably inconclusive — it quite deliberatively tends to a denouement that lies beyond the book's pages, in our future.

Sovatsky pans his literary camera focus back and forth, capturing and presenting to us word-image snapshots of two entirely different worlds, two disparate forms of life. As two separate montages begin to form in our mind, each new juxtaposition — the author is unrelenting — increasingly jars us until we are jolted awake into a (Zen) satori-like state that oscillates between awed reverence and stunned horror. On the one hand, we are shown the world of the normal human being, bearing the burden of the past, unredeemed, long-suffering, living under the spell of the psychoanalytic curse, sleep-walking through life. On the other hand, we observe the world of the awakened person, delivered from the troubles of the past, living in soteriological time oriented toward the present and future, savoring each precious moment of life, partaking of the grace the passing time bestows, living under the spell of wonder, and of awe of the vast Eternal.

Sovatsky assesses psychoanalysis' impact upon American society and culture, as well as psychotherapists' more direct impact upon their patients. The psychoanalytic idea caught fire in the collective imagination of North Americans in the last several decades and it has spawned a "therapeutic culture" which far from freeing persons from the past has made them its eternal victims. Pop psychology has become a new religion — at the same time as it bears the imprimatur of medical science — in modern culture, and its debased image of the modern man/woman as quintessential victim is embraced by many as the clue to their identity: "Abandoned, betrayed, shame bound, a mere survivor of . . . , healing from emotional primal wounds, inexcusably denying one's rage, burdened with original pain, emotionally incested by toxic parents, filled with unmet needs, in search of a hurt, inner child — such is the melodramatic vernacular of pop psychology" (p. 115).

The therapeutic culture spawns a variety of therapeutic narratives which serve to mediate individuals' sense of personal identity, destiny and meaning: "And, since ours has become a linguistic, dialoguing consciousness, a story-to-tell is fashioned, a painful history of the present as, somehow, the (fallen) past reverberating still" (p. 114). As this story echoes in our minds, the openness of the present constricts until we are left with the tragic sense of living in a hopeless "foregone, fated world" (p. 115), determined by our past. This story, this sentence of doom, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for the person who accepts it, as he or she selectively filters out memories and experiences which belie it.

Clients in conventional therapy learn to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to all their experiences.Their experiences are depleted of their rich phenomenological content, their vectors to persons and events in the present and to the developing future, and read as mere signs pointing to the real life which exists only in the past, e.g., love or anger for one's spouse is *really* "transferential," a reactivation of infantile feelings toward one's mother or father. However, this hermeneutic move is made not after the fact, but in the flow of experience itself: thus the individual is

detached from his experiences, he is not really living. Sovatsky states that the client exists within the temporal domains of "a bloated past, an attenuated present, and a minimalist future" (p. 16).

Clients' engagement with the past is typically emotional, as well as intellectual — they become immersed in their past, or their imagined past. Even when their memories are reliable, "the past" is modified by subsequent experiences, by interpretations and by the particular narrative constructs into which it is incorporated. The therapist's psychoanalytic orientation leads him or her to focus on and to linguistically inflate childhood traumas: a mere loss becomes an "abandonment" and a "betrayal," an abuse is construed as "soul murder" (p. 117). Enthralled in this nightmarish world the client defers the quest for happiness and settles instead for the sadomasochistic gratification of telling and retelling, living and reliving his "harrowing past," and in thus eliciting the compassionate response of his therapist — and others (p. 132).

Sovatsky is not interested in salvaging psychoanalytic theory (in any of its various forms). It has entirely misconstrued the human dilemma: the reality we shirk is not our traumas in the past, but our challenges in the present. Adulthood as a whole is as "developmentally potent" (p. 6) as childhood! In fact it is more so, Sovatsky implies, since the past is over. Much of the book consists of examples and anecdotes from the author's therapeutic practice that demonstrate the potency of adulthood: the opportunities *missed or realized* to risk giving and receiving love and experiencing the "incomparable preciousness of our finite and particular time together" (p. 46). Fulfillment lies in evanescent possibilities — whether, for example, one dares and cares to notice the subtle glimmer of love in the angry gaze of one's lover, and whether one responds to *that*.

Sovatsky states that the therapist must "be experienced in *seeing* hopefulness (where others might not) and in being able *to* mentor clients in each next step forward toward happiness and creative optimism. Most of these steps turn out to be the simple acts of thanking and receiving thanks. They are so simple that they keep being overlooked or done shallowly" (pp. 42–43). The genuine therapist must do the very *opposite* of the conventional therapist who subjects all experiences to a hermeneutic of suspicion: he or she must help clients awaken from "reluctance, doubt, and cynicism" (p. 22). Sovatsky tells a troubled married couple who have just experienced a rare moment of intimacy, and express fear that it will not last, to "share impermanence and uncertainty *with* each other, instead of converting your joyful wonder and awe *into* a mood of interrogative suspicion . . . . Converting joyful wonder into moods of interrogative suspicion and doubt via mere misnaming of the wonder throws you back into your own bad dreaming about things that have nothing to do with Now and its unhappened path into the future. In freeing yourselves, you can go into past memories, but not lost to the present sharing" (p. 22). The intervention, both husband and wife attest, leads to a new feeling of intimacy based on a deepened mutual appreciation, as well as on sharing "the poignant impermanence" of life (p. 23).

Sovatsky's examples demonstrate myriad creative and unexpected ways in which the soteriological therapist can help clients to discover hopeful possibilities — a difficult task in a therapeutic society in which people learn to walk backwards with their eyes on their pasts — and to move forward despite the uncertainty of the future. Sovatsky does not reach for Prozac when confronted by a client with a "clinical depression" — he is confident that even profound despair cannot forbear against the "subtle beauty" and "inexplicable aesthetic mystery" of the "sheer pres-

ence" of another (appreciative) person, and that all symptoms will disappear as the troubled person enters "the soteriological world of compliments, gratitude, apology, forgiveness, play, longing, shyness, poignancy and awe . . ." (p. 124).

Sovatsky's practice is based on a general ontological perspective: "However compelling our sufferings might be [and however coherent the psychoanalytic story of their origins], without the irony of a nearby blessedness, we will fail to grasp the spiritual poignancy of the human condition. Such is the soteriological challenge of faith and promise of eventual deliverance of any religion" (p. 150). This aphorism succinctly and eloquently conveys, in the author's characteristic fashion, a sense of the metaphysical complexity of the human situation. But of course it simplifies: *how nearby? . . .* for *whom? . . . for how long?* As Ernest Becker (1997) observed, "When one lives . . . in Berkeley, California . . . one lives in a hothouse atmosphere that shuts out the reality of the rest of the planet, the way things really are in this world" (p. 281).

I allude to the universal plight of humanity because I think the author's one-sided approach to the meaning of the religious traditions — of the religious heritage of humanity — leaves one with insufficient spiritual resouces to confront the apocalyptic threats of the present age. Not that I would deny the imperative need for criticism of the historical deformations of the great religions — it is rather that I would affirm that these religions have their source in *historical revelations of the divine*, and thus have relevance for us today, *on their own terms*. Sovatsky claims that the spiritual quest is "literally the *feeling* of our own genetico-spiritually propelled maturation" (p. 151), and that all religions and mystical paths constitute the "splendiforous phenomenology" (p. 143) of this post-genital bodily maturation. I recognize the value of focusing on the *psychosexual* aspects of spiritual transformation — but I think Sovatsky is going to extremes and advocating a reductionistic New Age form of neo-materialism. To be certain, Sovatsky frequently uses the grammar of religious faith, for example, "blessedness," but he implies — incorrectly, I think — it is severable from a traditional theocentric context. Thus, for example, I cannot see how Sovatsky's favorite term for the Absolute, "Eternal Impermanence," conveys any genuine sense of the phenomenology of redemption — as does the unfashionable term, "God."

Sovatsky does not adequately address one of the traditional stumbling-blocks to faith — death itself — the fact of our human mortality. This does not even come into view as long as we remain in the therapeutic world convinced that all anxieties are merely reverberations of the past. Existential fear or despair evoked by the intimation of human mortality is not even *identified* in conventional therapeutic accounts — it is more likely to be mistaken for "psychopathology" stemming from childhood traumas, or — in the newest paradigm — a biochemical imbalance resulting from defective genes. Yet as the dialogue with the couple cited above reveals, Sovatsky is keenly aware of life's poignant impermanence — he realizes that this is the ominous shadow that death casts upon our lives. And while impermanence can help us to *appreciate* life's preciousness, Sovatsky sounds a far more rueful note when he observes that our lifetimes "relentlessly slip away" and that even love cannot overcome "the relentless impermanence of the body" (p. 100). Sovatsky does not attempt to reconcile the terrifying "relentlessness" of death with his faith in the "availability" of "temporally inexhaustive succor" (p. 150). It remains as an unresolved, perhaps embarrassing, conflict in his perspective. Thus he confines to a parenthesis his doubts about whether his faith will be sustained during "the interminable moments of dying" (p. 39). This topic takes us again beyond the scope of this review, but I feel compelled to state that at some point a

world-view that assumes physical mortality as a law of nature — or God — rather than as a product of our "fallen" condition is inadequate — and must constitute a limit on our spiritual growth. An alternative perspective — a radical theodicy — can be found in the Eastern Christian theological tradition as expressed by sages ranging from St. Gregory of Nyssa to the 19th century Russian philosopher, Vladimir Solovyov (for references see Farber, 1998 and Berdyaev, 1992). The high eschatological goal of the Orthodox Christian tradition, of *participation in the immortal life of God*, is based on this non-scient*istic* understanding: death is "a mysterious failure of human destiny . . . . God did not create death; he created man for incorruption and true being . . . " (Florovsky, 1976, p. 105).

Let me emphasize that due to the remarkable breadth of Sovatsky's book I have had to be selective in my focus, thus regretably omitting any explication of several provocative subjects, e.g., Sovatsky's theory of "post-genital puberties." I want to conclude by pointing out a few important blind-spots in the author's political perspective. Sovatsky's soteriological alternative to conventional neo-psychoanalytic theory and therapy has broad social implications, as previously noted, because of the social impact of therapy in the prevalent therapeutic culture. Beyond the effects examined in the book, Sovatsky indicates that he believes the conventional therapeutic model is responsible for the tragic failure of liberalism as a force for progressive social change. The dependence of government social welfare programs on the psychoanalytic paradigm inevitably had iatrogenic effects which created a backlash against the liberal agenda itself — while psychoanalysis escaped notice — and thus sabotaged the realization of liberalism's "noble hopes" (p. 7) for social change.

I agree that the kind of paradigm shift — a transformation of the Zeitgeist — that Sovatsky advocates is necessary — but does it really require a new army of soteriological therapists? Is there not something wrong with a society whose members require constant guidance from experts — even better experts — in order to appreciate life? Is there not a point at which even the best therapists become an obstacle to spiritual evolution? And what about the *promise of democracy itself* — by which I mean an educated self-governing citizenry? Sovatsky says nothing about this, though he refers to commentators (e.g., Lasch, Hillman, Kaminer) who have addressed this subject extensively (see also Farber, 1999). Does he realize that institutional changes — transformation of the power relationships in society — are themselves necessary, that individual changes must be incorporated into new kinds of collective associations if they are to endure?

Most importantly, to what extent does the practice and ideology of *professionalism* constitute an obstacle to democratic reconstruction? I would argue that it is precisely because professionalism constitutes a relatively new and increasingly prevalent *mode of domination* supported by the power of the state that professionals have resisted and will continue to resist new socially empowering paradigms such as Sovatsky's (see, for example, Polsky, 1991).[1] The therapeutic welfare state has its own inherent dynamic that is not subordinate to its putative role as protector of the poor. Robert Woodson (1985) aptly termed it the "Poverty Pentagon" and has cogently argued that social workers and other professionals are dependent for their jobs on poverty and thus have a vested interest in its perpetuation. How many therapists are bold enough to commit themselves to creating a society in which they are so successful that they will need to find other means of employment? What will they do then?

[1] *Telos* journal, edited by Paul Piccone, contains numerous essays on this thesis.

It is these kinds of considerations that explain why critiques of the dominant paradigm — for the last forty years — have had virtually *no effect on public policy* in the mental health system, or more generally in the human services. (The only major change in the mental health professions in the last few decades is the development of a close alliance with the pharmaceutical companies, and consequently a greater reliance on psychiatric drugs and biological pseudo-explanations of emotional distress. See Breggin, 1991.) The family therapy movement provides a perfect example of co-optation. The first family therapists in the 1950s (Minuchin, Whitaker, Haley etc.) radically critiqued the psychoanalytic model, and demonstrated in their practice the superiority of a present-focused therapy — like Sovatsky. They rejected as iatrogenic the practice of psychiatric labeling (see Minuchin, 1974) — like Sovatsky. But as the family therapy movement grew it became less challenging of the status quo; the pioneers did not change their approaches but they were reduced to icons with little genuine influence on the direction of the field. Today the practice of family therapists — in the public sector at least — is indistinguishable from that of conventional therapists: they readily adhere to the usual practice of diagnosing troubled persons as "chronically mentally ill," subjecting them to involuntary hospitalization and persuading or forcing them to take disabling pschiatric drugs — misleadingly termed "anti-psychotic" medication (Breggin, 1991).

As to Sovatsky's implication that change can be effected merely by convincing policy-makers to adapt a more effective model, it is revealing that when the renowned pioneer Salvador Minuchin moved from Philadelphia to New York City in 1985, he thought he could transform the chid welfare system — just as Sovatsky advocates — by teaching workers how to replace the iatrogenic pschoanalytic paradigm with a family systems model that focused not on analyzing clients' deficiencies but on building up their strengths. Despite his renown, and his documented high success rate with disadvantaged clients (Minuchin, Montaluo, Guerney, Rosman, and Schumer, 1969), to his surprise child welfare policy makers and administrators rebuffed his offers of advice (personal communication, 1985).

It is for these reasons that I do not believe Sovatsky will find many converts to his new paradigm among the audience to which the book is primarily addressed, transpersonal psychologists. *From the start* it seemed that the main goal of the transpersonal psychology movement (unlike that of the first family therapists) was not to change the world but to slightly modify it — thus its members sought recognition of their legitimacy by their more conventional colleagues, and attempted to carve out a niche for their specialty within the state-regulated mental health professions. This, I submit, is why transpersonal psychologists have virtually ignored the work of R.D. Laing — who constantly attacked conventional therapy from a perspective similar to Sovatsky's until his death in 1989 — and instead pledged allegiance to the psychoanalytic model (as Sovatsky's book makes clear).

Like Laing and Thomas Szasz, Sovatsky realizes that conventional psychiatric diagnoses are arbitrary and act as cues for therapists to respond to individuals in a "differential" manner (p. 64). It is common pratice in all the dominant forms of therapy to regard individuals with "serious mental illnesses" (like "schizophrenia") as incapable of achieving what is within reach for less disturbed, i.e., "normal," persons. It is a reflection of the conformism and opportunism of transpersonal psychologists that they have accepted this practice with one qualification: *some* "schizophrenics" have been misdiagnosed and are really having mystical experiences — termed "spiritual emergencies" (see Sovatsky's critical comments, pp. 4–5,

184–186). But only the (transpersonal) therapist knows the difference. Thus transpersonal therapists sanction the standard psychiatric mistreatment of individuals who are deemed to be genuinely "schizophrenic," and assert their right as professionals to act as the gatekeepers of the psychiatric caste system. The validity of diagnosis is a highly divisive issue, and schizophrenia remains the "sacred symbol of psychiatry" (Szasz, 1976) precisely because it serves as the linchpin in the undemocratic hierarchical system administered by mental health professionals. By exposing the fraudulent nature of the diagnostic enterprise, and by rejecting the allegedly ontological–medical distinction between the sane and the mad, Sovatsky is likely to alienate most of his colleagues, and be treated — in effect — as a heretic.

The general neglect of, or naivete about, the political dimension of human life is the major weakness in Sovatsky's thinking. Perhaps the most significant oversight in this regard is the book's omission of any mention of the concept of what Hannah Arendt referred to as "public happiness," as distinct from "private happiness." If Arendt is correct — if Jefferson was right — that "when man takes part in public life he opens up for himself a dimension of human experience that otherwise remains closed to him and that in some way constitutes a part of complete 'happiness' " (Arendt, 1972, p. 203), then the liberal agenda at its best is flawed (though admittedly a lesser evil than neo-social darwinism), and therapists who would be catalysts of change must redefine the nature of their work and reject their relegation to the private sphere (cf. Hillman, 1992, and McKnight, 1995). Sovatsky ought to realize this: writing books with the intention of influencing others to make policy changes, while insufficient, is one mode of political action.

In conclusion, while I think Sovatsky's narrative account powerfully conveys, within limits, a sense of the nature of the human dilemma, I do not expect to see the denouement he seems to anticipate: the transformation of transpersonal psychologists into a kind of spiritual vanguard who will lead humanity into the promised land. Yet, *Words from the Soul* is arguably the most exciting and spiritually inspired critique of the medical model that has been published since R.D. Laing's *The Politics of Experience* in 1967. It is undoubtedly the most systematic deconstruction of the conventional model that I have read. Let me add lest I be taken for a cynic, that I too have hope that humanity will rise to the Olympian heights to which Sovatsky summons us. And although I have little faith in therapists, I have considerably more faith in independent intellectuals — to whom I recommend this book — and in the "common people." And I know from experience that God works in mysterious ways.

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