

SOUL, BODY, SPIRIT

by
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This text is excerpted from *Practical Knowledge of the Soul* (pp. 54-57), published by Argo Books in 1988. That work in turn is a translation by Mark Huessy and Freya von Moltke of Rosenstock-Huessy's *Angewandte Seelenkunde* (1924), which ERH first outlined as early as 1916. What I have done essentially to those three pages in *Practical Knowledge*, originally presented as straight prose like the rest of the work, is to re-cast them line-by-line in a poetry format. Those pages are so pithy and so fundamental to Rosenstock's work as a whole, that I felt they deserved the emphasis that only the format of free verse can give, compelling the reader to pause and contemplate every line. Most important, whereas no one questions the reality of the human body, soul and spirit are subject to mystification and their existence doubted. The body is categorized as natural; soul and spirit as somehow supernatural and their reality suspect. It is impossible to read these lines and not bring into question the validity of that division.

Norman Fiering (2011)

Everything about men and women
That has to do with
The total duration and unity
Of their existence
Belongs to the soul.

Destiny, profession, marriage,
Children, honor, fame,
Disappointment, suffering, sacrifice,
Personal names —
All these things are given meaning
From the fact that they
All belong to one united line,
A single life story.

One's bodily, material needs, on the other hand,
Start with daily bread
And with daily requirements
Of shelter, clothing, and urges.
From the solely material point of view,
Marriage is only an expansion of sex
and reproductive urges;
Professions are only an expanded concern
for daily bread;
And so forth.
And yet, an immense difference remains.

No matter how many daily wages
Are added together, they will not equal
The course of a life;
No matter how many sexual acts, they will not equal
A marriage.
So for men and women,
The material things about them
Are summed up in their concern
For units of time shorter than the
Span of their own lives.

This explains the immense importance
Material things have
For people without
Real destiny in their lives,
For the proletariat and for all other
People who have fallen prey to daily life.
It also explains the limits of material concerns,
Which remain passing in comparison
With the course of a whole life.

The powers and needs of the spirit,
by contrast,
Go above and beyond the time limits of souls.
We call only those things spiritual
That are destined and appropriate for
More than one soul. . . .
We should understand all matters of the spirit
As an inherited succession of souls.

The spirit usually takes hold of more than one person.
When it does, rarely, move one person,
As in the case of a genius, then it does so
Only in order to reach others through him.

Spirit is a power of mankind,
The soul a power of man or woman,
The body a power of nature in man.

The specific essence of the soul
Has to do with times and tenses.
Time spans of the spirit
are longer than those of the soul,
And time spans of the body
are shorter than those of the soul.

An individual man neither has spirit
Nor is spirit,
As little as he is just a body.
Rather the spirit has the man,
And the man, in turn, has
A body, many changing bodies.

A person remains inspired
only insofar as, and as long as,
He finds himself within
A structure that reaches out beyond him, and
Only as long as he lives and acts
on the basis of it.
Matters of the spirit are
Above the human level; in fact,
They transcend everything already organized.

For although every corporation, every club,
Every country, and every profession

Has "its own" spirit to which the members
are subject,
Still, all of these collective groups

Are themselves subject to
The One Spirit.

Most of the spirit that touches
and captures
An individual man is this kind of
Middle-level spirit,
Not *the* spirit, but a kind of spirit
Vis-à-vis an individual.

Because our souls
Tend not to be up to
The spirit first-hand,
The spirit that typically seizes us as individuals
Tends to be this kind of
Second-, third-, or fourth-hand spirit,
The spirit of derivative collective personalities.

Yet even these third-hand derivations have to
Transcend the individual or
They cease being part of the spirit, and then,
At that moment, their spiritual power
is extinguished. . . .
The stronger the souls of a people,
The more directly they can bear spirit.

It is the weakness of our souls that leads us nowadays
To dress up the oldest spiritual white elephants
in the world with pathetic seriousness.
Not being up to original life,
These weakened souls fall prey
To the derivatives,
To the "isms" instead of the "doms,"
To the spirits instead of the spirit,
To superstition instead of faith.

Offshoots of the spirit
Should exercise power over our souls
Only as long as they retain the strength
Of the original spirit from which
They are descended, that is,
The strength to pull us beyond ourselves.

A person who cannot think
Beyond his own advantage
Has been abandoned by the spirit.
A family or a nation that cannot
think beyond its own advantage
Has been abandoned by God and by the spirit,

For the power of the future has slid away
from it,
The power that could have lifted the family or nation
Beyond the advantages and prejudices
They have had hitherto.

In the life of the spirit,
Only the spirit itself is unchangeable.
Everything it grasps must change.
So all individuals or communities that
Want to remain unchanged and unchangeable
Are putting themselves on
The same level as the spirit,
Which is presumptuous.

The soul to be inspired
Must remain open to change.
Obedience to the appeals of the spirit
Is the life of the soul.