

The following is a chapter from Mel's forthcoming book *Soul Survival: A Spiritual Self-Defense Manual for the New Dark Age*. Please feel free to share this with your friends. For more writing and free stuff from Mel visit www.ZenSkull.com.

Soul Survival

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"People are changing. They're becoming less human. It's happening all around us."

I'll bet you've thought nearly the same thing sometimes. In fact, I know you have.

These chilling and prophetic words from Dr. Kibner, a psychiatrist played by Leonard Nimoy in the 1981 re-make of "The Invasion of the Body Snatchers" seem to have leapt from the realm of science fiction to become the epitaph of our age.

You don't need a book to tell you that our humanity is under assault as never before. You and I both feel it every day in a thousand ways, from road rage to the proud display of greed, from an environment drenched in advertising to a wild proliferation of redundant gadgets.

A steadily rising selfishness and breakdown of civility is leading to the collapse of the last great experiment in the freedom of the human soul to define its own "pursuit of happiness." We live in a virtual police state where, as William S. Burroughs put it so succinctly, "Everybody is minding your business because they have no business of their own to mind." Even your soul is not immune to the policemen in your head: the shame, fear and guilt that are the harbingers of soul-death.

As the planet shrinks, there are fewer and fewer places to be alone, to experiment with what it means to be human and to find personal reasons for our existence. There are no more Tahitis for would-be Gaugins, no more Western frontiers for the new millennium's Daniel Boones, no deserts or mountain tops for the new Jesus or Buddha, who would most likely be diagnosed as maladjusted anyway, and given medication instead of meditation.

Our lives are tracked with computers, ID numbers, ubiquitous video cameras, and even urine and blood tests to insure we're all behaving and conforming to the dominant agenda. Our bodies and minds are increasingly less our own to use as we will, unless the exercise of that will involves consumption.

Cogs. Numbers. Teeth on the same gear that grinds the soul relentlessly toward a very near future where otherness, freedom and simple joys will have been bred and frightened out of the human race.

This is all indeed very old news.

Prophets in Biblical times sounded similar celestial alarms; that mankind was wobbling dangerously from a divine orbit.

Asian teachers have for millennia warned of the cheap thrills of materialism and pointed to a greater interior reality.

Western visionaries such as Blake, Whitman and Emerson early on put their ears to the chest of humanity and heard the first wheezes of a soul-chilling future.

More recently, the Western cultural revolution in the late '60s and early '70s appears

to have been the last common gasp for the air of a better world. That great upheaval, like a swiftly receding dream now, seems to have been the last effort to put the brakes to an increasingly suicidal culture that fouls its own nest, erases its past and confuses soul with software.

Apocalypse Now!

In one of his last interviews, poet and cultural activist Allen Ginsberg cataloged this same familiar laundry list of despair. Approaching the end of the last century, it appeared the widespread and dire predictions of Apocalypse were unfounded. The earth didn't crack open and spawn legions of devils. No anthropomorphic deity descended wrathfully from the sky to find

us wanting. Things just seemed to go on as they always had.

Ginsberg found the idea of sudden apocalypse laughable. Anyone with eyes could see that we were smack in the middle of it, he asserted.

"The apocalypse is here," he said. "It's just that its happening slower than the human mind can appreciate." Ginsberg thought the apocalypse had started roughly a hundred years earlier with the rise of unbridled capitalism and earth-damaging technology. His gloomy conclusion?

"I'm glad I won't be around much longer," he said. "I don't believe we'll last a hundred years."

This from one of the last century's most buoyant and optimistic voices.

Our ecosystem is increasingly threatened and the self-righteous blustering of our leaders sound suspiciously like an alcoholic in full blown denial about their self-destructive binges. The accumulation of vast wealth and power by a minuscule portion of the population while poverty and disease explode on a scale unimaginable in previous times suggests a global mind caught in full-blown hallucinatory psychosis. The timeless ideal of human rights, the essential right to choose what sort of life to live according to the call of one's soul, is being roughly trod underfoot in the rapid spread of a brutal system of consumerism in which our choices and freedoms come down to which master to serve, which toothpaste or computer to purchase.

The temper of the times indeed suggests a flatline of the human soul, a switching off of an age-old light.

Hindu philosophy has never doubted the sort of age we live in. According to the sages of the subcontinent, existence is divided into four ages.

Human life begins idyllically at creation, something akin to the garden of Eden. The next two ages get worse by steps as increasing greed and decay enter the world. The fourth and last age the Hindu scriptures call the Kali-Yuga.

It is the worst of times. It is the time when humans devolve and live purely physical lives, when wars, disease and greed rule the land. It is the darkest of ages, but the people of the time are so acclimated to it's slow advance that they are blind to their danger, shrugging it off.

"This is the way its always been," they sigh resignedly, "This is the way it'll always be."

The Hindu apocalypse, unlike the sudden one of Christendom, is more like Ginsberg's, lasting thousands of years, a slow and steady degradation of the human spirit.

At the end of the Kali-Yuga, there is a final destruction represented by the appearance of the mother goddess Kali with her necklace of human skulls, brandishing a bloody knife as she reaps mankind's awful harvest. It ends.

But according to the myth, creation begins anew, fresh and clean, and given a second chance.

Korean Zen master Seung Sahn also believes we are at a very dangerous intersection for the human soul.

"The world is like a ripe fruit right now," he says. "Like ripe fruit, it appears bright and delicious, and people see no problem, but ripe is near to rotten and we are near that time.

"This world is like a rotten fruit and all seems hopeless. But hold on. Inside the fruit are seeds and the fruit must burst open and die to release its seeds. It is the nature of things.

"Everything right now is upside down," says the Zen master, holding his cupped palms around an imaginary globe the size of a basketball in front of his gray robes. "Very soon..."

He rotates the invisible globe in the air, reversing the poles. Smiling, he releases the clear space in front of him and rests his hands in his lap. "See? Those now on the bottom will be on top. And vice versa!"

"Those who hold onto hope will be the seeds when this rotten world burst open and rights itself. They must remember what it is to be human and teach others in the dark times. They are the seeds of a new world."

Will we be granted a second chance? Or have we had our evolutionary fifteen minutes of fame in the universe, a new form of consciousness to rise after us and try the experiment again? Perhaps that essential quality we believe makes us human, the soul, is not the exclusive franchise of the carbon-based two-armed form of life.

Sadly enough, it appears to more and more of us that Ginsberg, Hindu prophecy and Seung Sahn are right. The slow apocalypse they speak of depends upon the erosion not only of the

quality of life, but of the very quality that makes us human: our souls.

In this new Dark Age, it is our souls that are under attack, bought and sold freely. We feel less and want more. We hurt more and heal less. We die daily to ourselves and each other and still believe the good life to be ours.

And like the pod people in "The Invasion of the Body Snatchers," and despite the billions alive, there appear to be fewer and fewer real human beings. There is definitely a lot less soul and a lot more sold.

S.O.S. (Save Our Souls!)

The soul.

Subject of thousands of books, reason for hundreds of religious wars and jihads, topic of

endless debate, source of wonder and guilt, and finally in the end: invisible and untouchable, yet somehow more real than anything on earth.

The soul.

Soul music. Sell your soul to the devil. I pledge body and soul. Search my soul. Soulful. My soulmate. A soul kiss. Soul food. Soul connection. Soul sacrifice. Soul deadening. Le soleil, in French: the sun, the source of all life.

The expressions concerning the soul are as endless as the varieties of the human soul. Like the Supreme Court Justice who said he couldn't tell you what pornography was, but that he knew it when he saw it, we, too, know what soul is, but when pressed to describe it, fall mute. Perhaps silence is the abode of the soul, a lack of definition its very definition.

The dictionary tells us in no uncertain terms that soul is "the principle of life, feeling, thought and action in man, regarded as a distinct entity from the body; the spiritual part of man as distinct from the physical part."

Also: "the emotional part of man's nature."

And this: "high-mindedness, noble warmth of feeling, spirit or courage."

And finally and most important for our present purposes: "A human being, a person."

Let's not belabor a final definition of soul or get lost in the always slippery classification of the spiritual. Like "God," the word "soul," is a fill-in-the-blank word for each of us. The great spiritual traditions tell us that we're lost in a wildly overgrown psychological jungle searching for what is essentially right beneath our noses: ourselves.

The object of our longing is nothing other than our very precious and unique mortal selves, doomed to die as surely as we were blessed to be born. What we do in between the entrance and exit in this theater of life is the play of the soul, the drama of our evolution from dinosaur to deity.

Soul.

What has been taken for granted for most of human history, the very existence of our souls, has become, in this new Dark Age, an increasingly endangered species.

In times past, the very idea of having to protect the existence of your soul would seem not only ridiculous, but faintly blasphemous as well. But then again, in times past, people told each the stories of their souls instead of watching soul-sucking electronic dramas.

Weapons killed us one body at a time, personally, not by the impersonal millions as at Hiroshima.

Autopsies of the Soul

In fact, William S. Burroughs believes the atomic bomb to be a "soul killer." He postulates that the human soul, is, like the rest of the body, based in the material world and that it is akin to what he styles "an electromagnetic field."

The force of atomic explosions, as at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he says, not only "destroys human bodies, but human souls as well." For the first time in history, says the late Beat writer, complete destruction is available, enabling those with the weapons to not only kill, but to cause what he calls "the final death, the

soul death." This frightening possibility eliminates any possibility of a Buddhist reincarnation, a Christian afterlife or indeed anything at all. The final death and the darkest of the dark ages.

So, given this dire analysis, how do we, like Lazarus beneath the touch of Christ, arise from the near-dead and claim our souls as our birth-given potential? Through work, says Gurdjieff, conscious work on the self.

His recipe for creating a soul is hardly original: meditation, diet, renunciation of negativity, good works, a refusal of the world's gloom, attention to the moment, and ultimately, selfless love. These things, he asserts, "crystallize a soul within us" that makes us truly alive and entitled to call ourselves human.

This somewhat bleak teaching of Gurdjieff finds echoes in nearly every spiritual culture around the planet.

Taoist masters teach essentially the same concept, that becoming what they call "a real human being," takes conscious effort, training and perseverance.

Ancient Lakota Sioux teachings agree with the Taoists and affirm the absolute necessity of becoming a "real human being."

The status of "human being" in these traditions is not something taken for granted at birth, but instead viewed as a privilege to be earned. Again, both the Lakota and Taoist traditions prescribe very specific paths and practices whereby we might "crystallize" souls, transcending the animal and becoming god-like in our awakened humanity.

But perhaps the most relevant information concerning our souls comes from the darkly humorous pen of novelist and post-modern philosopher Kurt Vonnegut, who has described our present condition as "spiritual cannibalism."

Vonnegut believes "the soul to be that part us which knows when our minds are sick." Vonnegut often equates the human soul with our capacity for imagination, bemoaning the fact the we have turned from "a society into an audience." And indeed, imagination, as well as souls, is under vicious attack all over the world.

Perhaps then, the imagination is simply the silent longings of the soul in motion. The imagination, it would appear, merely expresses the needs of the soul as the hand expresses the needs of the body. They are, for all intents and purposes, one and the same.

"Healthy people exposed to too many actors and too much scenery," says Vonnegut regarding the saturation of media, "may wake up some morning to find their own imaginations dead."

If the imagination is dead, will anyone be left to mourn its passing? If the mind is sick, can the soul prescribe a cure? The inescapable hurricane of entertainment, the maelstrom of commodities, and a mounting assault on human rights in the name of progress all seem to be an increasing sickness of our common human mind, a "war against the imagination," as poet Diane DiPrima diagnoses it.

Soul Lobotomy

The imagination is to the soul as the rocket is the launching pad. Without a stability of soul, dreams remain earthbound and unrealized. Stable and secure, the soul becomes the spine of the spiritual body, telling us how to stand up on our own hind legs and put our heads in the clouds, even without a rocket.

But how can the soul be stolen? Maybe the tribes who first encountered Western technology weren't that far off when they believed the camera to be a soul stealer. Indeed, pictures of things are increasingly replacing the real things themselves: TV, videos and Internet images replacing real life with a virtual one. We have become consumers of a virtual life, our souls

being stolen hourly with a snap of the shutter, a click of the remote, a movement of the mouse.

The theft of the soul and the rapid shrinking of human potential seems nearly a lobotomy of the soul. Lobotomies, the manipulation and mutilation of the frontal lobes of the brain, are used to adjust psychotics to what is loosely called "reality."

The technique was widely used, sometimes assembly-line style, to be better able to control those individuals who somehow didn't fit in. If you don't "fit in," you're obviously broken and need fixed. Fixing usually means removing the parts that don't slide easily, are in the way or are resistant to easy control. Lobotomy was the fix.

Along with truly dangerous psychotics, strong independent women, political dissidents and visionaries fell under the knife of the

dominant reality model. An improvement perhaps over the stake for witches and the rack for heretics, but all the same, a brutal enforcement of sameness and a sure sign of the soul's ability to frighten those in power.

Lobotomization reduced its patients to a twilight consciousness of emotional flatness and predictability. Resistance to conformity was replaced with slavish compliance. The patient no longer seemed so desperately unhappy and anxious. Cured!

What was removed along with a bit gray matter was some of the soul. Resistance, independence and yes, even desperate unhappiness can be some of the soul's methods of breathing, of staying alive.

An Interview with the Patient

*But how can my soul be lobotomized?
Can it actually be "sucked out like an egg," like
the brains of humans in the '50s sci-fi film "Fiend
Without a Face?"*

**This is how: a drill called fear of life
a scalpel called self-loathing**

**The tools are placed where, according
to Asian teaching, your third eye of wisdom
is meant to open, the very location where
the soul is meant to bloom and make you a
"real human being."**

*But what hand drives the drill?
Whose fingers grasp the scalpel?*

The hands of profit

The fingers of control

But I never signed a consent form.

I never gave permission.

Yes, you did.

Your birth landed you on the operating table of the soul lobotomists.

Your very breath and heartbeat attract them like heat-seeking missiles.

But they look like my hands!

These fingers seem my own.

You've learned well.

You've been assisting with your own lobotomy, administering euthanasia to your own soul.

But what's wrong with being calm, with "fitting in?" I'm so unhappy.

Your unhappiness is not because of your soul, because of your "difference," no matter what you have been told.

Your suffering is a sure sign of the soul's survival, a groggy and stiff stretching of the soul's arms before awakening from a bed of nightmares.

The greater the resistance to the process of lobotomy, the greater your unhappiness.

The more the soul struggles, the more it feels its anesthesia, its restraints.

Surrender of your soul to the scalpels of consumption and conformity will lead only to a living death.

The soul is made happy and healthy when released from restraint, when allowed to breath freedom, not the soul-numbing anesthesia of sameness.

But I can't move.

I can't breath.

I'm helpless.

The drill and scalpel can be thrown away by the hands that hold them: your own.

Look down at them now and unclench them.

There is an antidote for the numbness of soul anesthesia: laughter.

Laugh now. At least chuckle.

There is a prescription for pain: love.

Put your arms around yourself and hug now.

There is a magic word for banishing soul lobotomy.

Say it now:

No!

Will that best part of us, the soul, survive the daily lobotomies? Or will we, like the

unfortunate and complacent citizens in "The Invasion of the Body Snatchers," awake one morning to find pale imitations of ourselves moving zombie-like through what we cynically call "real life?"

The apocalypse seems upon us.

Our souls, those infinitely precious and ultimately indefinable reasons for living, are in danger. How do we hold onto the last shred of our humanity and survive to become the seeds of a new and better world?

The Daily Grind

At the present moment, it seems that saving our souls is much like treading water just to stay afloat. The daily degradation and hourly humiliations pile up, one upon the other, until we

feel ourselves bending and breaking beneath their weight, surrendering a bit at a time to the forces of soul-death.

It begins each morning- the reports of doom and gloom on the tube and in the paper, the dangers of driving, a lack of time for family, a nearly universal rudeness and me-firstness, the rigid schedules of work and play. We jump from box to box.

Boxes everywhere for the containment of the obviously dangerous human soul. Boxes of offices. Boxes of beliefs. Straight lines everywhere, even in career tracks, in education. Corners to capture the round and flowing essence of our beings.

And we get up and do it all over again each and every day. The daily grind. Nose to the grindstone. Grinding away until we're ground

down to a twitching, compliant piece of meat, no longer even recognizable as human if judged by values older than last week's fad or this week's fashion.

Bit by bit, we're whittled away, each stroke of the daily knife cutting us down to a size easily fit into boxes, souls removed for easy handling.

Divorce. Death. Depression. Bankruptcy. Bills. Betrayal. Rudeness, road rage and reduced hopes. The news at large is not good and the news at home worse.

The thousands of degradations, fears and humiliations of daily life become like bytes in a computer program, gradually and insidiously replacing the immortal "bytes" of our original programming: the soul's desire and need for spontaneity, joy and freedom.

The human body was never meant to be a processing unit for commodities, a billboard for ideology and advertising, a repository of despair and diminished expectations. The soul resists these re-programming efforts and we interpret its resistance as depression, as a lessening of joy and a brutish struggle for survival.

We are in danger of misreading these early warning signals of our souls. It is not these things we are experiencing in reality. They are, instead, the soul's nearly inaudible cry for help, its smoke alarm of danger.

A vague and widespread feeling of discontent and powerlessness infects our species like a virus, replicating itself throughout our spiritual systems and infecting the collective unconscious. Transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau captured this soul-destroying

microbe beneath his philosophic microscope a century and a half ago at a time when the new forces of technology, capitalism and nationalism were colliding with older soul values such as community, craft and self-reliance.

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," said Thoreau from his cabin in the woods. His early diagnosis of soul death still describes the gnawing, constant state of low level panic many of us call living. Rural philosopher collides head-on with urban punk over a hundred years later when the Sex Pistols angrily denounced the modern condition as being "Pretty Vacant."

Our souls gasp for breath in an increasingly thin and poisoned atmosphere. The nutrients necessary for the soul's health, things like the free rein of the imagination, daydreaming and

spontaneity, are becoming rarer and rarer, polluted by commerce, media and a bottom line mentality that damns these things as frivolous if they can't be packaged, bought and sold.

In fact, if you exhibit any of these signs of the soul's health and freedom, you risk being branded as anti-social, eccentric or worse. You might possibly end up being adjusted to the new soulless "reality" with prescribed drugs that alter your mind in a very unpleasant ways, hurt economically with diminished career opportunities or even driven to self-destructive behavior, mistakenly believing yourself to be isolated and somehow flawed.

We put our heads down and plunge blindly out the door into the storm, hoping against all evidence for the best: believing there will be a happy ending, some light at the end of the

tunnel, some final answer that will make sense of our often frenzied and fear-filled lives.

The New Dark Age

To subtitle this book "The New Dark Age" might seem excessive or even crazy to some, but if we mean a loss of knowledge and understanding, then we are truly in the dark.

The original Dark Ages referred to the time after the collapse of the Roman Empire when order and knowledge were lost and Europe plunged into superstition and strife. Not until the renaissance did the light return to that part of the world.

In our own time, technology and the profit-motive are reshaping our lives with blinding speed and little consensus. Gadgets for

communication breed without control, marketed as objects of desire. They seem to communicate only the same old message: if it can be invented, it will be used. Usually against us and our souls.

And like the original Dark Ages, order and knowledge are collapsing beneath the invading hordes of gadgets, advertising campaigns and political agendas.

Some might argue we are in the midst of a new renaissance, a re-birth of knowledge. But sadly enough, most of the new knowledge appears to be just more complex ways to re-invent the wheel, more high-tech diversions to entertain and stultify our imaginations, more jeweled chains to bind us.

And communication? We speak to each other of our soul's delights and pains less and less often, letting actors, politicians and media

giants speak for us, colonizing our very dreams and homes with their values, images and ideas.

We are in the process of being souled out. Every bit of attention you give to the soul-killing spectacle around you is a bit of your soul gone forever.

We are still cavemen, only with shinier and more dangerous clubs and campfires. The vast increase in technological knowledge and communication has not been matched with an equal progress in wisdom, love and compassion. We are a million years from the cave and only seconds away from murdering our brother. Dark age, indeed.

Greed stalks the planet and is celebrated as "globalization." Under the banner of planetary culture, entire indigenous ways of life are being

eradicated, whole religious traditions essential to our soul survival destroyed.

One culture, one outlook, and one way of life is being imposed upon all of us without our consent and in the end, we shall have to belly up and pay for all this progress.

The price?

The oldest deal in the world.

The original bargain.

We will have sold our souls to the devil.

We will have traded our soul's salvation for a handful of coins.

We will be as good as dead.

We will not be "real human beings."

We're almost there.

It's nearly too late.

The Devil's Bargain

If, as stated previously, we are presently treading water just to keep our souls afloat in this tidal wave of darkness, then we must face facts.

The great promises of the '60s and '70s , of an unleashing of human potential and the emergence of a humane culture, now seem naive and premature. Cut short and murdered by structures that put profits over people and hardware over hearts, the dreams of that time still linger, like sad ghosts haunting the hallways of our souls.

Maybe another day will fulfill the age-old millennial dreams of the soul and a new sort of human will emerge, like a butterfly from the fear-filled cocoons we have become. Maybe, just

maybe, we can give birth to ourselves as a new species, worthy of the name "human."

But in the meantime, rather than surrendering to depression and pessimism, we have to try and survive, to re-trench. We must hold on. We must help each other's souls survive this very dark patch we are going through. You are not alone.

Despite what we are told, there are many of us fearful for our common future. Alienated, separated and burdened with the thousand cares of the day, we often feel hopeless, like giving up. Sometimes we feel like selling our souls as well.

The pod people in "The Invasion of the Body Snatchers" all testified that "it wasn't that bad after all, being a pod. No pain," they cooed. "No emotions to upset you. It's all very nice and

calm," they said, trying to persuade the last real humans left to join them.

Don't take the devil's bargain.

According to Burroughs, the devil regards "every soul as worth selling, but not every soul is worth buying." How much is your soul worth, how much effort do you want to expend in defending it?

We're All Light

Probably like you, I'm glad to see the above phrase after all this gloomy talk of dark ages, of autopsies of the soul and the devil's bargain. You don't need a book to paint this very black picture for you. You know this stuff in your cells. But you could probably use some help in brightening it up.

Here's a bit of sunshine for the soul:

It appears that none of this is really happening anyway; all this brutality, all the greed, all the everything. As close as science and philosophy can figure, nothing, in the end, really exists. Huh?

That's right, it appears Bob Dylan had quantum physics and Zen down cold when he sang, "It's all just a scheme, babe, a vacuum, a dream, babe, to suck you into feeling like this."

You probably learned this stuff in junior high school physics but believe me, it bears repeating. It probably deserves to be made into a mantra even.

Basically, the theory is that matter, the hard stuff we're made of, as well as nuclear weapons, cereal boxes and hair spray, is made of the same stuff as light. It's all a vibration, just

infinitesimal particles. Matter is the same stuff light itself is made of!

The only difference is that we're slowed down light. We're more closely packed particles. But down down deep at a microscopic level, it's all light and space, just vibrating at different speeds. The only real difference between you and me, and between me and this computer, is really just a matter of perception or perhaps, preference.

The particles comprising the light, according to this theory, are age old. There is no new stuff, no new light. The particles that made dinosaur droppings, that vibrated as the notes of Beethoven's 9th Symphony, and the particles that swirl above us as thunderstorms are all the same thing.

We are as much dinosaur as thunderclouds. And our souls? Those seemingly invisible, ineffable things that animate us and make us human? Light as well, and perhaps the brightest, shiniest, fastest vibrating light of all.

At the core of our suffering humanity and mortal beings, a light surely shines, dimmed somewhat in these dark ages, but shining still. Whether these theories of modern science (and age old Vedanta and Buddhism as well) are true or not, I choose to believe them, much in the spirit of what Vonnegut calls "foma." "Foma," says Vonnegut, in his novel **Cat's Cradle**, "are the "harmless untruths that make us happy."

So be it.

We're all light.

Perhaps if we learn to vibrate our particles at a slightly different rate, things will appear

differently. Perhaps, just perhaps, that's what soul survival is all about, what all the great traditions have been trying to teach us all along: that the light of the soul is the axis around which the human body wobbles and dances. Vibrating at a human frequency, it illuminates the dark places. Slowed down with fear and greed, it allows the darkness to fall.

Think of it!

We're all light.

But how do we even begin to learn the art of illumination?

How do we survive the new Dark Age?

ANSWERS TO THIS QUESTION WILL BE COMING TO A BOOKSTORE NEAR YOU IN THE NOT TOO DISTANT FUTURE. KEEP POSTED AT WWW.MELASH.COM