

A Conversation with Thomas Moore

On the soul of the Gospels and the soul of medicine.

Interview by Matt Laughlin

UH (Unified Health): Thanks for accepting our invitation to interview, Thomas!

TM (Thomas Moore): My pleasure; I was looking forward to it.

UH I have to say while I was personally intrigued by your new book, *Writing in the Sand: Jesus & the Soul of the Gospels*, I wasn't really sure how an interview focused partly on this book would fit with our readership of holistic health practitioners. But then I heard about your upcoming conference and once I read the book I can definitely see how the four central messages you elaborate on totally apply to medicine. I understand you studied the Gospels by removing them from their current and historical contexts in order to focus more closely on the writings themselves, with a strong emphasis on the imagery, story and poetic significance. Would you elaborate on your methodology and intention in writing this work?

TM Yes. It might be helpful to put this in context for myself, too. I have been a psychotherapist for 30 years and have been very interested in the subject of healing in general. After writing *Care of the Soul*, which was published in 1992, I began immediately getting invitations from medical schools and conferences to come and speak. It surprised me at first, but then I realized it isn't so surprising since healthcare is essentially a soulful enterprise.

Fifteen years later I have just completed a book called *Care of the Soul in Medicine*. It's at the publishers now and will be out right after Christmas. I go directly from this book on the Gospels to my book on medicine. These two subjects are very close to my heart and in my mind. They're not separate.

One way that I approached this issue is through my work as a therapist. I discovered – and it wasn't too much of a surprise, just the extent of it – that many of the emotional and relationship problems people have can be traced back to their understanding or misunderstanding of the Gospels. People grew up reading these texts and having them explained by preachers who often tended to be highly moral-



Discover four key words in
The Gospels and their relevance
in health and medicine



istic, inducing guilt and anxiety. This guilt and anxiety has a very negative impact on relationships. In my work as a therapist I saw patient after patient coming to me with a story of how they were having trouble in their marriages or various difficulties in their own lives. And we would begin talking about the way they were taught the Gospels.

What I have done in this book, *Writing in the Sand*, is present the Gospels without guilt and anxiety. That's one of my intentions. It's not that I wanted to apply that idea myself but that I think it's there in the Gospels. When examined closely, I don't think the basis for all of that psychological trouble is there in the texts themselves.

UH So one healing influence of this book is the diminishment of guilt?

TM Yes, and as I say, I don't really start with that idea. I look in the Gospels and I don't see that kind of punitive, guilt inducing figure anywhere. Jesus is not that figure at all. I wonder where all this

fire and brimstone came from. It's not there in the Gospels. As a matter of fact, in the Gospels Jesus is often being differentiated from the religious teachers who are much more moralistic.

UH So while this was not a core intention in writing the book it's certainly an aspect of the work that emerged when you examined the writings themselves.

TM That's right. It wasn't a core focus. I really didn't know what I was going to come up with in looking at the texts. Going back to methodology, what I did was first set aside the bias of interpretation of over 2,000 years. An interesting thing happened: a new idea of what the Gospels were about came through in key words.

I'm very interested in language. In all my books I really focus closely on words. I looked at the Greek words and I looked at how they were used in earlier time before Jesus, trying to get a sense of what their fuller meaning might be. What

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I found is that in many cases the Greek dictionary I used, which is a very large, sophisticated one, will tell a meaning of a word and then note that in the new testament it means something else. And I wondered why do they say this?

UH That's curious.

TM Yeah, it's like saying well, there must be a special meaning. And I think that special meaning comes from that bias. One central example I give in the book is the word *metanoia*, which means a shift in mind. *Noia* means mind, close to our word knowledge. So, it does not mean repent as it's always been translated. In the Greek dictionary it will say the word means changing your mind, except in the New Testament it means repentance.

UH It makes more sense to think of it as a change of mind or knowledge.

TM It does. And it doesn't have the guilt of repentance. If you're supposed to repent it means you must have been bad and you did bad things; your religion becomes guilt-ridden right from the very beginning. The word doesn't say that. The word suggests a shift in the way you see the world or the meaning of the world. That, I think, makes a huge difference. That one word! And that one word is used many, many times in the Gospels.

UH And that's just one of four key words you noticed appear throughout the Gospels.

TM Yes, it is.

UH In your book you discuss how each of these four words is closely associated with four central messages that appear throughout the Gospels.

TM That's right. I looked in the Gospels and I noticed that certain words kept popping up and they were important words obviously. I found there weren't too many other words that came to the surface as strongly. The first word in Greek is *basilea*, which means kingdom. As I thought about this notion of kingdom, I was influenced by the work I do in psychology, which is very much based on a poetic sense and on a real appreciation for images. I take it to mean that when you grasp the philosophy of the Gospels, you enter a different kingdom, you enter a different world because of how you are seeing things now so differently. That is what the *basilea* is, and why it's so important. It's a key word in all the stories. One story after another says that the kingdom is like a mustard seed—small but powerful, or it's like a person walking down the road with a sack leaking grain—open and subtle.

UH It's very intangible and nonlinear.

TM Yes, it's nonlinear. Exactly. What I found is that the word kingdom is really about how you imagine life; once you begin to imagine life differently, you are now in a different imaginal space. That's what the kingdom is, a different world

created by this shift in imagination. I take imagination very seriously, because it's how we picture the world, and therefore has to do with how we develop our values and how we have a sense of meaning. That shift in imagination is really key. It's not easy to do. It's the central thing. So, that's how I understand kingdom.

UH I can see how *basilea* really relates to the word *metanoia*, in that you are reimagining.

TM Exactly. They are connected. Another word that comes up frequently is *therapeia*. It's a very interesting word. It's obviously the source of our word therapy. It comes from the word *theraps* that means nurse or servant. It doesn't mean doctor or healer. That word is used over and over again and is usually translated as healing, or to heal. For example, I was doing some translating the other day and I noticed the Gospels say they brought all these sick people to Jesus to heal them. Their word is *therapeia*. I think, well, the word doesn't really mean to cure. It means to care for. They brought all these people to him so that he could care for them. It's a whole different view. It takes us away from this emphasis on breaking physical laws constantly and being a magician. It's not healing in the sense that suddenly these people are free of all their illnesses; it's that having such a caring attitude, being in this kingdom, means you're always available to be a healer, and people who are in need of healing will come to you.

UH And you're constantly nursed and supported along the path.

TM That's right. That's exactly what it is. It comes right out of the notion that in this kingdom we heal each other, we don't overlook each other. We nurture. We care for. We nurse.

UH And each of these words can't really be understood without consideration of the others?

TM Yes. They're all facets of the same thing. They're all facets of the teachings. They are not separate entities; one depends on the other. So, if you're in this kingdom you are now going to be a healing person. That's just the nature of it. The last word is *agape*, which means to respect. That's my translation of it, looking at the word closely. It means to love, but it means love in the sense to respect or to consider important and precious.

UH To revere.

TM Revere is a good word. That's right. It's a very good word. When you're in this kingdom you have a much broader perspective, you can respect many more people. Story after story tells about how Jesus accepts people who are normally rejected, and he says that's what the kingdom is like. The last shall be first. In other words, people who are normally rejected have a place in this kingdom, because that's the nature of being in this kingdom; you receive and you

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respect those people who are normally rejected.

UH Which, again, is also another antidote to feeling unworthy or guilty for your own shortcomings.

TM Yes. So, you can also see that agape, too, is a healing thing. You're not judging others. It's so interesting because so much of religion has developed where people are judged so much and condemned. In this view, it's the exact opposite. There is a broadening of the heart to accept people you would normally find difficult to accept.

UH And it doesn't necessarily mean that you agree with or accommodate their negativity but you respect and love them despite it.

TM And you don't even condone what they're doing; that's not part of it. It's simply a deep human respect. With that in mind as you read the Gospels you'll find that point being made over and over again very strongly.

To get back to that notion of medicine, I think all of this – this whole kingdom being offered, this new way of being – is a healing one. If people lived this way I think they would be physically healthier.

UH Yes, in your writings you point out that by aligning your life with these core messages it tends to bring about a healing on all levels.

TM On all levels. There's a story in the Gospel of John about a blind man being healed. Once he's healed, the story goes on to talk about being blind morally and the way you see the world. You can't see how things are. The Gospels themselves make this point; the healing is not just physical, but the spiritual, emotional and physical healing are all aspects of the same thing.

UH That reminds me of the distinctions you noted in the Gospels, which differentiate a soul sickness and a physical illness, or a cure and a healing. You write about a woman you knew with a terminal diagnosis who realized that she had been healed, though she was not cured physically. That struck me.

TM Yes. In fact, since I wrote about that woman's experience I have been spending a lot of time in hospitals and I hear that story frequently now. People say I realize now that my illness physically is not going to get better. But now that I have faced this and dealt with things around it I feel I am

cured as a person. My illness will not find a cure but I am healed.

UH What, in your view, did Jesus seem to infer by soul sickness?

TM Much like I was saying before about blindness. When Jesus deals with someone who is sick, he makes a point of taking the sickness to a different level and doesn't just leave it at the physical. It even comes up with this notion of demons and the demonic. It's related to what we're talking about because, again, if the translation is quite physical and not very sophisticated or not very subtle, you get this notion that Jesus is going around like an exorcist chasing devils out of people. But the Greek is more subtle than that. The word used most of the time is daimon, not demon.

Daimon is a word that has been used before the time of Jesus. Socrates talks about his daimon, and later poets and writers have used the notion of daimon; WB Yeats, Jung and others.

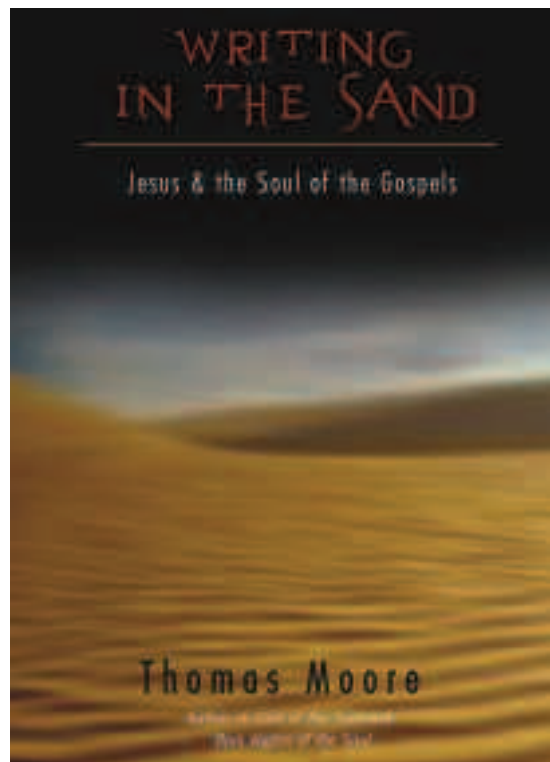
UH Much like a muse?

TM Yes. It's a muse that is neither good nor bad. Yeats, for example, says the daimon is this voice inside of us, or an urge inside of us, that we have to struggle with all the time. It may lead us down the wrong path, so we have to always deal with it and struggle with it. But ultimately, it's our guide. And Jung suggests something very similar, that it's as though you consult yourself. You feel a certain guidance from inside yourself and that is called the daimon. Even Aristotle talked about health being Eudaimonic, meaning daimonically very good, or being in a

good daimonic situation.

UH In that you have faced your demons.

TM Yes. "Face your demons" means dealing with your jealousy, your anger, your addictions. Actually, not your literal demons, but those daimonic urges that affect your life negatively. Passions and longings that are beyond your control and that threaten to destroy you. In general, the daimon in you is actually working for you rather than against you. I think this is what Jesus is about. It's interesting to keep Aristotle in the back of your mind when you're reading about Jesus casting out demons. Instead of translating it as Jesus casting out devils, what I say is that Jesus got rid of the negative daimonic compulsions. The daimonic is a more modern way of seeing it, where it's not so literal and so naive. It's



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real, it's not just metaphor. I say that because some people would accuse me of making it all metaphor. I really don't mean it that way.

UH No. It seems you're striking a balance between the error on the one hand of conceptualizing the daimonic as totally external to yourself or having little to do with your own nature and an error on the other extreme to suggest that the daimonic does not exist or is simply a metaphor.

TM Yes, that's right.

UH I appreciated your contextualization of the word 'possession' and what it means to face your inner demons. You write that Christ is an example of a completely self-possessed being. Would you elaborate on that?

TM I think what you find in all these gospel stories about the daimonic is that when a person is troubled with something, or has not dealt with their demons as we say today, then that daimonic presence is experienced as a possession. It overwhelms their will, and they really have no strength to deal with it. The most obvious example would be alcoholism. It's overwhelming. Alcoholics have to face their demons in order to finally come to a place where the alcohol, an embodiment of deep daimonic conflicts, doesn't have control over them anymore. They are no longer possessed.

You can be possessed by a lot of things. You can be possessed by hatred for foreigners. Xenophobia is a form of possession. Homophobia. Narcissism. Paranoia. I think it's these demonic things that are really making our world so dangerous today. That's why I think the Gospels are important now, because they ask us to face those demons and in a sense to get rid of them, or better, to come to terms with them. The Greek word is 'to toss out.' It means to get rid of that possession. I think what it requires is the facing of the demon, and maybe discovering how it can be useful rather than just getting rid of it. You want to get rid of the alcoholism but not the intoxication with life that the alcohol represents.

UH It reminds me of a basic tenet of psychotherapy that you have to own your downside in order to move forward.

TM Yes, your dark side. Absolutely.

UH A moving thread throughout your book was your emphasis on the very intimate and ultimate trust Jesus had in God the Father. I really appreciated the many ways you

examined what it meant to rely on the Father. Would you comment on some of those core themes you noticed in the Gospel, and this notion of the archetype of the heavenly father?

TM What I wanted to do is get past, if I can, this naive idea of this grandfather in the sky image that we talked about before.

UH A personified something...

TM Yes, but I don't want to get rid of the notion of the very profound, meaningful Father presence, or spiritual entity, because that's what Jesus honors over and again. What I found going back to the Greek Gospel is that whenever it says that Jesus prays to his father, it says 'father in heaven.' The word in Greek is Ouranos, from which we call one of our planets, Uranus. Ouranos is one of the Greek gods, the father god who was primarily identified with the sky; he's kind of a sky spirituality. I think when we look up to the sky in our spirituality, what we're doing is looking at the infinite cosmic aspects of our situation. We're looking beyond all the earthly limitations and concerns we have every day, even the political problems we have on our planet. We're looking beyond them into the sky, to what I would call the Ouranos mystery. And that, I think, is the Father that Jesus is always in relation to.

That's one side of it. The other side I try to show is that Jesus was also very earthly. He loved his friends. He loved to eat. He cooked. He danced. He laughed. He was a great story teller and told story after story. This is a very earthly kind of figure. And he also has this relation to the sky father, to the Ouranos mystery. I

would say this represents two dimensions or what I sometimes refer to as two streams in Jesus' way of life. I think they indicate what it is to follow the Jesus spirituality. It means to be both vastly spiritual, cosmic, and unlimited in your spiritual potential, and at the same time extremely involved in the world and enjoying life's pleasures.

UH Speaking of these two ways to relate to the Father, in my own devotional life, on the one hand relating to the Father as the ultimate source of life and consciousness certainly makes sense intellectually, and in a way, subjectively in prayer, but it is often the very earthly imagery, like the psalms saying "under his wings you shall trust," or other concrete imagery of being supported and protected that also really seem to move my heart. Does that make sense?



TM Yes, it makes great sense. I think what happens when you don't have these two things together – and they come together in Jesus very well – is that you end up with this father in the sky without having an emotional relationship to life itself. Or you end up with a sentimental notion of the Father who takes care of you no matter what. That's not the way life is. It's much more demanding than that. This Father that we pray to, for example, in the Lord's Prayer – Our Father who art in heaven, in Ouranos – is an awesome figure. This is a cosmic notion of Father that requires deep meditation and a very high spirituality. Now the other side of it is that Jesus brings out this deep humanity. You want to have them both together. I would call that spirit and soul together.

UH What do you mean by spirit and soul, based on your understanding of the Gospels?

TM Well, in the Gospels, the word soul is not used very much, actually, while spirit is used very frequently. In literature around the Gospels, like the Greek philosophers and so on, they distinguish between the spirit and soul. The Greek for spirit is *pneuma*; *pneuma* is not so bodily. It's that vastness I was talking about. It has to do with wanting a sense of meaning and living in a very big world, with being concerned with the ultimate questions like mortality and death. The soul, or *psyche*, present in our word psychology, is more about the deep soul of our emotions, our relationships, our sense of belonging, our friends. Jesus is a very soulful figure in that regard, while also being very spiritual. The wonderful thing about him as an image is that he is able to resolve this conflict between spirit and soul. He lives both dimensions fully.

UH Ordinarily one doesn't think of Christ's message to be a teaching on nonduality, but in a way, it brings seeming polarities into a resolution in many of the things you are talking about.

TM I think that's true, and that's the beauty of the gospel image of him. He does not polarize the great spirit from the deep human soul. The philosophers said that the soul that makes us human beings gives us our humanity, and it's the spirit that gives us our vision and our values. That's really, I think, what we are called to be. We need both of these things interpenetrating in our lives just the way Jesus demonstrates.

UH Would you comment on your upcoming book, *Care of the Soul in Medicine*?

TM Yes. First of all, I spent two years visiting a hospital interviewing everyone on the staff and patients monthly, to really feel I was on the inside somewhat. I am not a doctor or a medical person. Based on that experience and on my thoughts and ideas in my work as a therapist, I tried to see how what we've actually just been talking about applies to medicine; how spirit and soul are involved in medical life. Because normally what we do in medicine is we live within the myth of science. We live a philosophy that doesn't take spirit and soul into account, only the physical world. Medicine is especially devoted to that philosophy. I have

been called on the carpet many times now by doctors for saying the things that I'm saying.

When a person goes into a hospital or a doctor's office, they're not just bringing their bodies. That's an illusion; it's false. A living human being is never just a body. If we don't acknowledge the spiritual and soul aspects of the person, we're not really dealing with their illness. In this book I'm not exploring how to heal our physical illnesses is by dealing with our psychological and spiritual issues, so much as how we can at least treat people as though they are spiritual and psychological and emotional beings.

UH How can we fully nurse and care for them?

TM Exactly. How do we care for their souls and spirit when under medical care – I also address the book to patients, asking, how can you take care of your body, soul and spirit when you go to a doctor or when you are in a hospital? It's not just the professionals that have to do this, but patients, too. Patients don't have to be put in that place where they're just a body.

UH I appreciated how in your writings you reference your own personal struggles or experiences as they relate to the material you're exploring. You mentioned that you have had some heart trouble. Is this something you brought into this next book, too?

TM Yes, I did. One of the things I did in this next book was to explore the image of my heart. I tried to personally explore, for myself, what is the history of my own heart? Not as a physical thing, but as the center of my emotional and relationship life. What wounds have I had to my heart over my lifetime? That's not to say this is what caused the heart problem. I don't know what caused the heart problem. I don't have to think cause and effect. What I can do is consider my whole being here and now. When I say my heart is troubled, I want to look not just at my physical heart, but also the heart as the center of my emotional life.

UH You're looking at the heart as a whole. Can you speak to this quality in the context of medical care, and perhaps the relevance of the Gospels in medicine?

TM One thing is that I've been going to a Catholic hospital in Hartford, Connecticut to do research for my book on medicine. This was a hospital founded by nuns from France who knew nothing about medicine, but they founded this hospital. Today, people will say that when they come to the hospital there is a spirit there that they can't put their finger on, but it's different from the public hospital down the street. It has a different spirit.

I have visited lots of hospitals, and when I go to places that are connected to religion not just Catholic religion but other religions as well, I find that these places really do have a mission to care for people in a broader way very much the way Jesus does. They don't turn people away because they can't pay, and they get in trouble for that. But that's part of their work because that's where they are coming from. If you look

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at the mission statement of a hospital you will be able to see whether they have this gospel message or not. And you don't have to be a Christian to have it. Today, a lot of people are listening to the Buddha even though they are not Buddhists. I think a lot of people who are not Christians can read the Gospels and say, this is what we need today because we have created a secular life devoid of this, especially in medicine. We have secularized medicine, and that is to our detriment. We have lost something crucial.

UH We really have... That reminds me of an observation I heard a physician make that in his decades of experiences visiting nursing homes and medical centers, it was the faith-based centers that had a presence or warmth to them. They tended to have more pets on the premises, a greater sense of caring, and were always affiliated with some faith tradition.

TM Yes, and while it's difficult to define you can sense it. People say they sense this; they can't define it very well, but they really sense it. In my experience of doing this for fifteen years, speaking at one conference after another on medicine, I usually bring this element up. I also say that taking care of a patient's family is not just a side issue. This is central to the person's wellbeing and their health. And your capacity as a clinician to talk and listen to your patients is part of your job as a healer, because a person is never just a body. If all of you do is just do the measurements with your instruments and your studies of the physical aspects of this person, you're not doing your complete job.

UH Before we close would you comment on the upcoming conference you're having on October 26th in Hartford, called "Awakening the Imagination in Medicine"?

TM Yes. The one-day conference is sponsored by the Hospital of St. Francis I have been visiting. We invited several

people to speak. James Hillman, who was my mentor, will speak. James Hillman has been working in this area of archetypal psychology, which has also been my work. He and I have been colleagues working together for many, many years. He is brilliant. I really look forward to hearing what he has to say. He just recently had some lung cancer and surgery, so he will be very much aware of hospitals and I am sure he will have a lot of interesting ideas. Another person coming is Michael Kearney, who I met in Dublin. I have lived in Ireland off and on for quite a bit. In the year 2000 I met Michael who was a medical director of a hospice. I went over and spoke to his staff a number of times. He has written a couple of books on this idea of broadening the notion of what medicine is. He is a medical doctor himself, so he has that advantage. There will also be Marcus McKinney who teaches pastoral care at St. Francis hospital. And the other member on our team is Sharon O'Brien, the head of integrative medicine. We are putting all this together to try and reimagine what medicine is.

UH That sounds fantastic, Thomas. I wish you the best with it! And for the readership, I'll also note that you will be speaking at the Hay House I Can Do It Conference in Tampa Florida on November 22nd. Good luck with that, too, and thanks for taking the time to interview!

TM Thanks very much. I appreciate it and enjoyed talking with you.

Thomas Moore is the author of Care of the Soul, which spent forty-six weeks on the New York Times bestseller list, and fifteen other books on deepening spirituality and cultivating the soul in every aspect of life. He has been a monk, a musician, a university professor, and a psychotherapist, and today he lectures widely on holistic medicine, spirituality, psychotherapy, and ecology. He also writes fiction and music and often works with his wife, artist and yoga instructor Joan Hanley. He writes regular columns for Resurgence, Spirituality & Health, and Beliefnet.com. He has two children and lives in New England.

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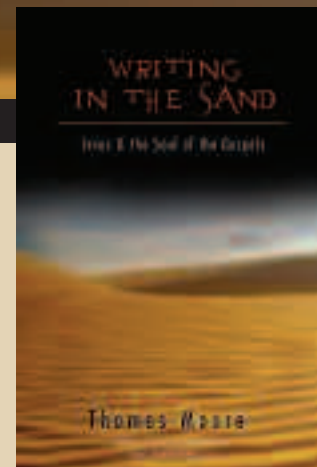
Thomas Moore

Thomas Moore finds striking new meaning in the rich stories and imagery of the Gospels, recasting Jesus as a spiritual visionary with a radical ideal for humanity. Writing in the Sand, offers a fresh, new way of imagining human life and society. It presents Jesus as a world reformer offering a spiritual path to everyone, from every background.



Thomas Moore has written numerous books on spirituality, including the *New York Times* bestseller *Care of the Soul*.

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