EXPLORING YOUR FULL SEXUAL POTENTIAL, PART 9: SOUL MURDER





Thirty years ago, Dr. Leonard Shengold MD, introduced the concept of "*soul murder*" to the world of psycho-analytically based therapy. His insights in the book "Soul Murder" (1989) were well acclaimed, and also prove to be useful as a uniting concept that explains why men with same-sex attractions can on the one hand be close to women, but on the other hand fail to fall in love with them. Let us follow his narrative on the way in which the authentic male child cannot be found any more at an adult level, lost in the mists of time.

Although the soul of the authentic child has withered away, yet the yearning for authentic maleness persists. We know that when it is sexualized by the emerging of strong male hormones, it leads to a sexualized yearning for maleness, for male identification, for *ME*. It is not so much a father figure that one is seeking, the search is for the real me. Other men in the street are intriguing. It feels like you are saying: "Look how put together he is. Why can't I be that way, just as confident, just as being me? I am so jealous. I could eat him for breakfast, like a vampire quickly before the sun comes up."

Basically, the male child, the authentic kid, did not come into full bloom. He starts his life on a wild goose chase for male identification. In this journey, maleness seems to become elusive. A frustration may arise of ever belonging to your peers and to society at large. Through insight nevertheless, one can yet become a confident no-worries male, just like everyone else.

Shengold writes:

> *"To abuse or neglect a child, to deprive the child of his or her own identity and ability to experience joy in life, is to commit soul murder. Soul murder is the perpetration of brutal or subtle acts against children that result in their emotional bondage to the abuser and, finally, in their psychic and spiritual annihilation."*

In the psycho-sexual development of men with SSA's, one sees almost invariably the problem of having had too little attention from one parent and experiencing too much closeness to the other. At age 2 to 3, a boy usually gets to identify with his dad, after his mother had been his first identification object since birth. If you ask a man with SSA's about Dad, he will say

"I just can't remember. I can remember a lot of things from my youth, but Dad, no. No images come up".

1. One-way ticket to Squaw Camp

At age 3, boys usually create a healthy distance from mother, knowing they are different. But in a man with SSA's, the emotional bond with the mother, which was there from birth onward, is still present and the developmental umbilical cord to her and to her gender just hasn't been cut through sufficiently. The boy sadly ends up in Squaw Camp.

If we look deeply into these feelings, then we are bound to see a form of what you could call neglect when it comes to being one with Dad. And we see a sort of over-stimulation by the mother who remains so close. The presence of the mother, especially when she is possessive or narcissistic, feels like too-muchness. The weak and distant connection to the father feels like too-littleness. He just wasn't there, or he was emotionally far, far away.

In his book Soul Murder, Shengold explains how in this way the normal development of the child has been frustrated: he calls it soul murder, a rather dramatic term, but it is useful when you focus on what is going on in the child's development.



At this age (2 to 4 years of age) the child cannot handle so much overindulgence from the women in Squaw Camp, nor can he tolerate being neglected by the male in the house, not being seen, not being acknowledged, not having his needs for male affirmation, or attention or approval satisfied. It is considered a trauma in the sense that this stands in the way of the development of a self-confident individual who believes in himself.

After all, the self-image of a child is always a reflection of the way his parents saw him. He mirrors himself in their eyes, and his sense of self-value arises from this bonding in a trusting and safe relationship. A deep sense of inferiority can set in.

No self-confidence; it is as if the soul is empty, a void still needing filling. From the outside, he looks alive and kicking, the bright smiling boy, but on the inside a nagging sense of nothingness and hollowness erodes his birthright to happiness. He dreams of joyfully riding the ponies, but a slow and sad understanding creeps in, that he will never get there. It is just not laid out for him. It is not in the stars.

He can have temper tantrums to gain male attention or to avoid the over-indulgence of a smothering or perhaps punitive mother, but all to no avail. He is trapped, and learns to take the blame for this predicament. "*It is me, I am no good. If I were good, then I would be loved. Therefore, it is me. I am not worth loving, I am not lovable. I will try harder to be a real good boy tomorrow. Then everything will be alright".*



He discovers the strategy of the good-little-boy, and learns to swallow his pride, his hurt, his mixed up feelings and he becomes an even better good-little-boy. His protests seem to distress his parents, and he learns to hide in the shadows, and ultimately to live there.

He has a public life and a private life, and in the latter he can safely indulge in his secret yearnings, an aching heart, bewildered and lost in space. Ultimately, he may find himself living outside of society itself, not physically so, but psychologically: the loner, the dreamer, the artistic kid, the odd man out, the one that does not get picked at the school sports teams. With a sigh, the sports jock announces to the other team-leader at Physical Education lessons: "Alright if we take nerdy Eddy, then you can have cry-baby Billy". The public shaming is a dagger in the breast.

And so sulking Billy learns not to show his grief and loneliness either. No-one is to know. After a good number of years, Billy may find himself even forgetting what "emotional needs" meant in the first place. Hope is lost, and we witness another brick being laid in the wall of late-onset depression.

2. The emerging of murderous rage



A confident male life has been nipped in the bud. Shengold says his soul has been murdered. These feelings are unbearable at an early age. The child is not equipped with the maturity to deal with the situation. He may even come to believe that perhaps he will never be able to handle an emotionally devastating situation. He will feel more or less impotent, and will acquire a great admiration for his peers who, seemingly carelessly, can be master of their universe. This fuels his craving for attachment and identification with these heroes, but he is pulled back by some inner force. What is that force?

Shengold advises to follow the rage.

Every healthy child senses the over-stimulation ("too-muchness") and senses the deprivation

when basic emotional male needs are not met (“too-littleness”). An inner rage grows in the child, a rage onto his parents who are not meeting his instinctual urges.

This angry child is not to be punished. It can be seen as a healthy reaction to an unhealthy situation.

From a professional point of view, it is very instinctive and very appropriate that the child becomes angry and refuses to accept the situation. After all, every puppy and even every kitten will snarl towards an unhealthy situation or decide to draw back and run away. But the child cannot do that. He cannot leave the scene, because he has nowhere to go. There is no alternative, and this heightens his feelings of powerlessness and subsequent rage.

In a temper tantrum, the child may be totally outside himself with rage. He cannot handle these feelings. He is too immature and too dependent, and he cannot, may not, ventilate them towards the abusive parents.



If the child would carry out his murderous rage, then the source of all life, the parent, would be annihilated. That is not the way to go. He needs his folks, so he needs to conceal his rage, and he proceeds to reassure them that all will be well. The more intense the abuse or deprivation, the greater the child rage; but the bigger the child rage, the bigger his fear of annihilation and abandonment, and the more will he reassure his parents: “No problem here”.

We see this phenomenon, for example, in wives of women-bashers who, with two black eyes and bruises over the arm, defend their husband and make up excuses to protect him. They cannot afford to lose him, and they blame themselves in order to make up. This is staggering for an outsider, but it is common practice in abuse cases. The victim ultimately identifies with the aggressor and excuses him/her, because leaving him/her does not appear to be, or is not, an option.

But the rage is there. And it is big. The more the child excuses his parents and takes the blame onto himself, the bigger the rage. But it cannot be ventilated. So, what happens to it? Where does it go?

Once you understand the wild goose chase of where the rage went, then you may understand more about abuse and/or deprivation victims. You will unravel some of the mechanisms of men struggling with SSA’s.

In the Watergate affair, the mysterious source of presidential information, Deep Throat, said in an underground parking building to the two Washington Post journalists (movie: "All The President's Men", 1976): "*follow the money*".



I say when it comes to men with SSA's: "*follow the rage*".

If you find the rage, you will find the authentic child. And at last, you will be able to say hello to him. And if he feels understood, he will become emotional, hug you and say: where have you been all my life?

You will be the first to fully accept him the way he is, with his rage and all: the good-little-boy is really a very naughty little boy, and that is absolutely fine. No problems here, little boy; no problems at all. Tell me about yourself, take your time. No, you are not naughty. You are wonderful. Slow down. Tell me all about it. No, do not apologize. Not to me. To no-one, kid. To no-one. You are amazing.

In doing so, you are contributing to a change in his self-narrative.

3. The wild goose chase of rage

The primordial rage (the deeply felt rage of the authentic child) can be deflected in other directions, anywhere, everywhere except against the abusive or depriving parents. Let us look at some.

(1) First of all, of course, against yourself.

(2) Then against your siblings.

(3) Maybe your older brother beat you to it, and is already deflecting his unacceptable rage against you (seen very often in men with SSA's).

(4) You may also find yourself deflecting it against all people who look like Dad, preferably your same-sex peers. Boy, do we hate them, and boy, do we refuse to interact with them. Perhaps we don't even know how to interact with them, even if we wanted to.

(5) You can deflect it against all people who remind you of authoritative parents: church leaders, political leaders, employers

(6) You can get into conflict (and feel good about it) with people who should be showing

benevolence towards you as a loving parent should (school staff, health care officials, counsellors, life coaches, scientists)

(7) Finally, the rage can be deflected towards those psychotherapists who help you investigate the sources of your original rage and who are reminding you of nagging conflicts, which you thought you had adequately left behind you.

4. Anger turns towards the self

In his book *'The Human Magnet Syndrome'* (2013), Ross Rosenberg demonstrates how these circumstances in childhood can lead to the development of codependency. For many men with SSA's, this process rings true.

This psychological state can be defined as:

> *"A progressive process whereby self-denial and concomitant caring for other family members is based on the assumption that doing so will foster love, closeness, acceptance, and security in the family."*

He explains how the child has generated an enormous rage towards the parents due to the way he was not seen or acknowledged for who he was. The parents are dysfunctional in the sense that they are deeply involved with their own feelings, and see the child as an extension of their own persona, their wishes, and their unfulfilled dreams. The child learns to become a puppet to give the parents a good feeling about themselves. He becomes a good little boy who does not dare to show his parents his rage and his neediness. After all, that could mean total annihilation. At the same time he comes to feel frustrated, bewildered and lonely.

The rage therefore turns onto the self, and this devastating rage crushes his self-esteem, his happiness, and his self-confidence. He feels guilty about his own rage, and he learns to hide this darker side of himself. He would rather hit himself over the head than to ventilate his rage towards the two people he needs, but who use him as an extension for their narcissistic needs and pride. He teaches himself puppet-speech.



5. The consequences of inward rage

Many men with SSA's demonstrate traits of codependency, not necessarily all of the traits, but nevertheless many of these traits are discernible.

In the process of becoming codependent, the child minimizes, alters and denies how he truly feels, because his genuine feelings stand in the way of the expectations of his parents. The father can have high expectations of the son, and more often than not, the boy feels he just can't reach that mark, or will ever reach that standard. So being the perfect good-little-boy becomes his goal, in the vain hope that in this way he will be seen and appreciated and loved after all. He states for himself that he is completely unselfish and dedicated to the well-being of others.

Despite his incessant efforts, sadness oozes in. At an older age, this state of mind becomes apparent. His self-esteem diminishes. He judges everything he thinks, says or does harshly, as never "good enough." It is difficult for him to receive praise or gifts and he does not ask others to meet his needs or desires.

Basically, he feels unlovable and becomes very dependent on the opinion that others have of him, fearing the worst at all times. He feels lousy about himself and imagines that others will no doubt probably uphold the same opinion. He even acquires anticipatory shame: he almost knows for sure that criticism is on its way and this makes him a vulnerable, insecure person. This negative self-image lowers his self-esteem even more.

He does not dare to put his own feelings forward, fearing hurting or alienating other people. He values their opinions more than his own. It is as if he is saying: 'I am just the wallpaper, don't mind me, don't let me get in your way'. He often learns to put his own interests and hobbies aside when he fears that they will stand in the way of other people. When people hurt him, he may swallow his pride and even may tend to be loyal while remaining in harmful situations too long. He is willing to settle for sex, when he actually is seeking love and acceptance.

He assumes that he can only be loved if he has something to offer. He cannot imagine that people just like, want and love him for who he is. As a good boy, he must entice others into liking him, just like he learned to manipulate his parents into seeing him and approving of him in spite of their self-absorbed outlook on life.

But the downside is, that when genuine love and recognition is expressed, he feels that he has manipulated it, that it is not real, that it was just due to his cleverly setting the stage and enticing people to say such a thing. So those expressions of love and recognition do not count; they are fake, so he feels, *"I manipulated it"*.

To deal with the predicament, it becomes a habit to just give more of the same, for lack of knowing any other way. You may find that he is at wits end how to receive a hug.

He discovers ways to get more love and attention. He has found a solution: he becomes a fix-

er, the perfect way to be seen and appreciated, so he hopes. He invests his energy and spirit into this self-sacrifice, often even obsessively so. All too often, though, he is taken for granted, making him feel truly part of the wallpaper.



And so the cycle becomes a treadmill. He knows no other way, he is stuck in the role of a good boy or a Mr. Nice Guy forever. He is shouting out: *'See how well I can help you*'.

But emotionally, it is sign language saying:

> *'Please treat me this way too. I will show you how to treat me, please follow my example, please be there for me too'.*

To no avail, for he is not seen, wallpaper that he is. Modest little Mr. Nobody. He doesn't even know who he is himself. He feels hollow inside. Shengold would say he is a soul murder victim.

And so the little boy, growing into a hollow man, goes full throttle ahead to make himself indispensable for others. In his goal for a worthwhile life, he now believes that most other people are incapable of taking care of themselves. He sees it quite clearly, sensitive man that he is. He attempts to help them by convincing them of what they "should" think and how they "truly" feel. He becomes desperate, he may even fall into the trap of becoming pushy.

People may start taking offense at his unsolicited kindness and smothering love. Ironically he is now becoming a smothering 'mother' himself; he will be horrified to see his repeating her pattern when someone points this out to him. He is unknowingly re-enacting the original drama.

He becomes resentful and can feel hurt and rejected when others will not accept his kind and unsolicited advice. He is always offering help and directions without being asked. You may find him generously giving presents to others, hoping they will see and appreciate him (in his neediness). He almost embarrasses other people in the way he is so thoughtful and appreciative; he always has a gift for the lady of the house, a flower, an exotic gadget of sorts, totally unexpected.

In doing so, he is soliciting love and attention, but knows all too well that he manipulated it. So when he gets it, deep down inside he feels that this love does not really count. It was a

phony well planned flower, and he thinks he is receiving a phony well planned kiss of admiration in return. He just can't believe it. He finds himself locked up in a fake world of emotional despair, adding to his sense of failure and lack of real manliness.

And so to avoid further pain and the further agony of experiencing his hollowness, he avoids emotional, physical, or sexual intimacy. He uses indirect and evasive communication to deal with difficult situations and avoids displays of genuine emotion, because they are a sign of weakness. He is desperate not to let others know how needy he is. He is filled with shame, and anticipates shame when love and contact with others come too close. They confront him with his imagined worthlessness.

This is especially so when the opposite sex comes close to his face. He imagines she will sense his inadequacy as a male, his being a little boy, and he fears rejection or being overwhelmed by her. He does not believe he can handle a situation that he did not create himself. And so he rejects, and the woman backs off, bewildered. "What is the matter with this sweet man, what did I do wrong", so she feels. Another date down the drain.

At work, his neediness may entice him to confuse work relationships with personal relationships. And so he gets himself entangled in a web of weird feelings, emotions and states of double binds with his colleagues, his superiors or subordinates, which may very well ruin his career, no matter how brilliant or kind he may be.

A codependent man becomes a lonely man.

6. A quick fix

Quick fixes for the quest for maleness are available: gay porn, a visit to the park to see anonymous men in the dark who ask no questions, a trip to a gay bar to feel eyes on your body craving and accepting you at last with no questions asked. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with homosexual feelings (I am secular), but having said that, there is nothing intrinsically superior about it either. It should not be viewed as an end in itself. It is just one of those things, a station in life as you travel on your rail road itinerary to find your inner soul and to feel part of the bigger picture of human life.

The ultimate goal is to be one with mankind in the sunshine and not a member of a self-appointed underground ghetto. Your full sexual potential is the ultimate terminal, and the train ride unites your youth to your present state of mind. You seek to alleviate your loneliness and internal sense of neediness and shame. Did you know that in Amsterdam a famous gay-bar even calls itself “getto”? Surely that sense of isolation and self-inflicted apartheid cannot be your birthright! Surely Gay Affirmative Therapists who promote all this, are wrong? Surely you are not “born this way”, born to be an *outsider* for ever more? What gene destines you to withdraw from society and seclude yourself in ghettos? There is no such gene. It is the unveiling of the psycho-sexual development of the child that leads to insight and ultimately to discovering your full sexual potential.



7. Conclusion

The concept of soul murder, although it sounds dramatic, turns out to be a compelling way to get to the bottom of the feelings of those individuals who, as sensitive persons, were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

No amount of praying or avoidance of same-sex attractions will diminish neediness. The solution lies in deeply understanding your past, forgiving yourself, reaching out and stepping out of the treadmill.

In this article we have seen how ‘soul murder’ leads to rage. You wisely chose not to direct this at your parents. So it is directed at the self, as we have seen. But there are other directions it can be deflected as well, as we shall demonstrate in the next articles of this series.

To be continued.

Job Berendsen, MD.

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