

The Soul in Grief: Love, Death, and Transformation
By Robert Romanyshyn

As I recall the first time I read Robert Romanyshyn's *The Soul in Grief*, a veil of sadness passes over me. This poignant book deeply affected me, not only because Romanyshyn's gentle and poetic style envelops one with feeling, but because the subject of the book itself is intimately, honestly, and courageously laid out before the reader. *The Soul in Grief* chronicles the death of Romanyshyn's wife, Janet, and his subsequent journey into the depths of grief and mourning.

My first encounter with Professor Romanyshyn was in 1990 as an undergraduate student at the University of Dallas. I was able fortunately to take a course from him, one year before he departed this school at which he had taught at for over 20 years to become part of the faculty at Pacifica Graduate Institute in California. I remember fondly the atmosphere of his classroom: a circular room, with large wooden tables and chairs forming a circle in the middle of the brick and stone room. Each morning Professor Romanyshyn entered the circle to share with us the story of phenomenological and depth psychology, taking us through each perspective with the patience and wisdom of a well seasoned and experienced guide. My own thinking and teaching styles have been profoundly influenced by Professor Romanyshyn's teaching and writings.

And the reader of *The Soul in Grief* will no doubt also be transformed by Romanyshyn's story. I use the word "story" because, as those who are familiar with his earlier works *Psychological Life* and *Technology as Symptom and Dream* already know, Romanyshyn considers his craft a "story telling," because it is within *story* that we recognize ourselves and the contextual forms in which we participate, the roles to which life calls us, and are thus able to ruminate and to dream, allowing experience to transform us. Within the depths of grief and mourning, then, it is *story* that provides a structure and guidance necessary to traverse the arduous and oftentimes seemingly insurmountable barriers that such inveterate sadnesses generate.

Romanyshyn approaches grieving not as process with "cause and effect" symptoms, but as a nonlinear journey into the depths of the soul. As Thomas More writes in the book's preface, "Don't try to understand, but do try to accept all the many invitations presented here for reverie and reflection. This is not a book of information; it is a book of emotional and imaginal places." Such is the topography of Romanyshyn's story, and its uncertainties and lack of "well-intended" prescriptions are precisely what open up the possibility for us to dwell within its tale.

"In these reveries of mourning, I do not offer a psychology of grief. Rather, I offer something closer to a poetics of the elemental forces of life which lie beyond

psychology." Romanyshyn reveals the point at which psychology, as a scientific enterprise, loses its ability to explain and control. Relating his trials to us, he recounts the desperation to know the reasons "why," the exact medical cause of his wife's death. But in the obsession to know definite answers, he found himself living in medical charts, slips of paper, scientific reports that could not impart the exquisite detail and warmth of body, of memory. Opening himself to the world again, he shares with us a strange, human land that requires us to forfeit our rational explanations.

Romanyshyn imparts many personal revelations to the reader in this book, such as his thoughts on melancholy ("I believe that melancholy is a way the soul deepens mind and seeks to restore to personal life, its collective and transpersonal dimensions"); on reverie ("Reverie is a surrender of the desire to *know* things so that we might once again, at least for a moment, *be* with them"); and on death (" . . . I saw how quickly the breath of death can blow apart the flimsy shelters of security we build for ourselves against the anxiety of losing what we love and what we have").

The Soul in Grief is a valuable resource to all who seek a phenomenology of the grieving journey. Personally, I used this text to supplement the death and dying portion of an adult development psychology course I taught recently. My students found Romanyshyn's text to be not only restorative, but illuminating as well. The students' class discussions confirmed my own suspicions: Romanyshyn's work provides a unique approach that is desperately needed in an era in which the art of languaging often takes second place to a language made sterile by an emphasis on precision and correctness.

But Romanyshyn's own words, a beautiful and humble gift to the world of human experience, will best describe to you the pull of the mystery in the journey that led him to write this book: "So let all this be as it was, and let it all be as it is: the record of one witness whose grief and mourning shattered a human mind and opened an archaic, prehuman world where, by grace and love, it was healed."

Victor Barbetti