

## The First Task in Learning to Provide SoulCare: Knowing What You're After and What It Takes to Get There



*Larry J. Crabb, Ph.D.*

*Experience: Founder and Director of NewWay  
Ministries in Silverthorne, Colorado*

Let me ask you to write down three names, three names of people who have perhaps recently let you know that something was wrong. They were struggling with something in their lives. As you ponder those three names and as you are writing them down, even right now as I speak, I would like you to right next to each name, just in a word or phrase or short sentence, summarize the concern that they shared with you. Now we have an opportunity for SoulCare. We have a person, a friend perhaps, who has shared a struggle with you and you are thinking about that person now—you have three names. What I would like you to do as you are jotting down those three names—summarizing quickly the nature of the concern that they shared with you—I would like you to look at those three names and circle the one who shared, in your mind, the most difficult concern.

I can recall years ago when I was in private practice, I had my very first case of a young lady struggling with anorexia. She was referred to me by a friend of mine who was a physician. She came in to see me and sat down across from me, and she was obviously very, very thin. Her anorexia was fairly progressed actually. And as we sat to chat, I said to her, “I know that Dr. so-and-so has referred you and that you’re not eating all that you should.” She said, “I’m not hungry.” And she said, “The reason I don’t eat is not only that I am not hungry, but I am also fat.” I remember looking at this girl who weighed, as I recall, about eighty pounds, and saying to myself, “She is not fat.”

How can somebody perceive that they are fat when they are as thin as she is? I did not know what to do. I remember thinking my whole purpose here, the only purpose that I am chatting with this young woman in a professional capacity, was to get her to eat more. I began talking with her about her diet and asked her what she was eating, and it turned out she was eating maybe a half of a sandwich every second day. If I skip my morning snack, I am starved. I could not relate to her, I could not understand her.

I could not resonate with what was happening in her soul. What does it mean to provide SoulCare for this young woman? What does it mean for me to enter her life meaningfully and to know her and to explore her and discover and touch. All I could think of was, I gotta get this girl to eat more. After listening to how much she was eating, or how little she was eating, I said to her about after a half an hour of conversation (and you need to understand that this was done very early in my career—I think I might do a little bit better now—but after maybe a half an hour or longer of conversation), I said to her, “You know, I think I know what you need to do.” And I said it with no power—there was no passion inside of me that excited her to curiosity. Her eyes stayed pretty well fixed on the floor, but she said meaninglessly, “Well what?” My response was to say, “I really think you ought to eat more.” There was no power to that at all. There was no change. All I could think about was here is the goal: she ought to eat more and did not know how to get there.

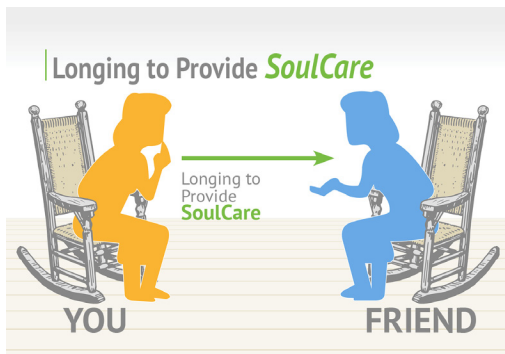
When you are sitting down with somebody and they make something known to you, perhaps the first thing that you need to think about, and this is what I want to talk about in this lesson, is, what are you after? All I could think of was getting this girl to eat more. And because I had what in my mind— and this will sound strange to some of you—was a superficial goal, trying to change her on the outside without ever dealing with her soul, I was lost; I had no idea what to do. What does it mean to go beneath the surface of an anorexic’s life and get into her soul and understand the processes that are going on?

What do you do when a friend comes to you, as one did to me some time ago, and says, “I’m really, really struggling and I would like you to guide me in my spiritual journey”? I said, “What’s happening?” And he said, “My wife just left me . . . after a number of years of marriage . . . and we have a number of children. My wife has left me, and I don’t know what to do. I just feel lost.” What is your goal, what are you trying to accomplish?

Well, you have written down three names, names of people that perhaps recently have made known a concern. Maybe if you are a professional counselor or a very concerned friend that has something as serious as anorexia, or as serious as a divorce, or might have been something much less than that, but somebody has made known to you a concern, and you have circled the name of the person that has made known the concern which strikes you as the most difficult. Now again, just keep in mind a

Longing to Provide

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People don't feel safe when they sense we want to fix them for our sake rather than join them on their journey.

very simple sketch, and we will keep this sketch in our mind in a very obvious kind of a way. Here you are, and you are the one who has longing to provide SoulCare. You have an opportunity now to move toward somebody else in the provision of SoulCare. Why? Because this individual has said to you, "I'm struggling." They have made known some sort of a concern, and as they have made known that concern you have a chance to provide SoulCare. The simplest, most classic opportunity for SoulCare is one person talking to another who shares a burden. And you would like to do something that meaningfully moves into their life.

Think about this. As you sat with that person whose name you have circled, what was on your mind? What were you wanting to do? Something I have observed a thousand times—and I really hope you get the point of what I am about to say—I have observed a thousand times that when people tell me that they feel reluctant to make known a concern to somebody, I have had so many times people have said a burden to me in my professional setting as a therapist and I have said, "Well, who else have they shared this with?" and they said, "Well, nobody." And when I ask, "Well, why not? You have friends. You are in a small group. You have a pastor. You have a spouse. You have other people that are close to you. You've not made known this difficulty to anybody? Tell me, why not?" And the answer I so often get is, "When I share my burden with somebody, all they want to do is fix me. They want to change me." I wonder if my anorexic client years ago knew that I had nothing in my mind, but finding some way to get her to eat more. I am going to change that girl; I am going to see to it she is different. What happens in you when you know that my central agenda is seeing to it that you are different? What people have said to me many, many times is, "I don't feel safe, because the people that I envision myself sharing with don't want to join me on the journey. They want to fix me so they can become more comfortable."

It was not too long ago that a good friend, over coffee, told me that he had been struggling with some pretty significant discouragement that had reached serious levels of depression and despair. And he said that it was just a few weeks ago—he told me over coffee—that he had come to a point where he was not sure whether he wanted to live. He found a day, when he was able to do so, and went off to a secluded area near his home, and he told me he sat for maybe five or six hours just pondering his own life and pondering what was happening in his own soul and pondering whether or not he wanted to keep on living and whether he could

think of a reason to keep on living. Over coffee when he shared this with me, I said to him, “Well, who did you take with you when you went to the mountain top to sit by yourself for a couple of hours?” I knew he had taken nobody, and he said that. He said, “Well, I took no one; I went by myself.” And I asked, “Did you ever think of taking somebody?” And he said, “I would have loved to have had somebody there with me to share the burden and to walk with me on the journey.” And I said, “Tell me why you asked no one to go with you.” And these were his words, “I couldn’t think of anybody who would simply join me. Everybody I could think of would be so unnerved by my problem that they would try to help me. I didn’t want to be helped. I didn’t want to be fixed. I didn’t want to be repaired. I didn’t want to be pressured. I wanted somebody to be with me, as opposed to somebody imposing a solution on my life.”

### | *The First Task:*

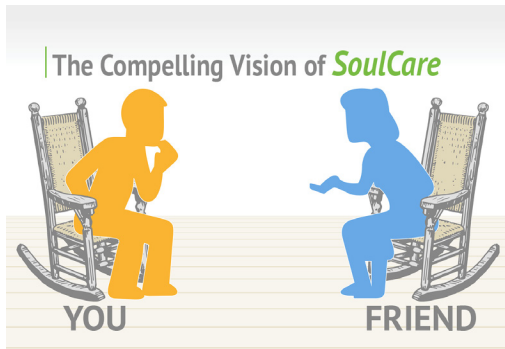
Develop a compelling vision of what could happen in someone’s life.

In this lesson, what I would like us to focus on is what I call the first task in becoming an effective provider of SoulCare, the very first task. As you are sitting with this friend whose name you have listed, whose name you have circled, the first task that I want to suggest that you ponder in providing SoulCare for this individual is to ask, “Do you have a compelling vision for what could happen in their lives that goes way beneath the obvious?” Do you have a compelling vision for what could happen in the woman’s life who is anorexic that goes beyond eating more? Not that that is not important; of course, that matters. Do you have a compelling vision for your friend who is getting divorced? Do you understand what it means to move into that person’s life? This gentleman who has gone through this very difficult divorce said to me recently, “You know, most of my friends have said to me now that I have been divorced for several months, I need to get on with my life and get back to dating. Their vision for me is that I recover from the divorce as evidenced by the fact that I date or maybe get remarried, and that frustrates me. Nobody’s with me, nobody explores me.” What is your compelling vision for people who are going through struggles? What is your vision for the person whose name you have circled?

### | *The Compelling Vision of SoulCare*

What were you thinking could happen in your friend as you heard his or her burden?

What were you thinking could happen in your friend’s life who made known his or her burden? Perhaps your friend, a woman perhaps, shared how distant she feels from her husband. Maybe you are a woman who is having lunch with a good friend and she simply said to you, “You know, my husband is so obsessed with his work. He is forgetting my birthday. We are not involved with each other’s lives. He comes home late. We barely talk. We deal with the kids. We do what has to be done household wise, but we



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is limited vision.

are just so far apart.” What is the first thing that occurred to you? What was your compelling vision? That this woman would learn to feel somehow intimate with her husband? Is that as high as your vision goes?

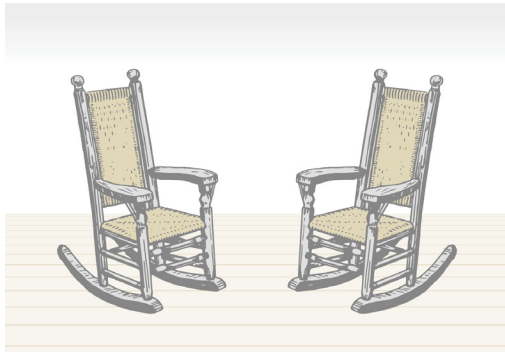
Maybe there was a teenager that you were chatting with, a teenage boy who was mad at his dad. And he shared with you, the youth pastor, he shared with you how angry he was. Did you find yourself thinking, “The vision I have for this kid is that he learns how to forgive his father. That’s the key. I want him to forgive his father and be kinder toward his dad and to have a better relationship with his dad”? Is that the way you wanted to fix things? It is the way I think a lot. Maybe it is the way you think.

Maybe you have talked with a friend who, in a very vulnerable moment, shared with you—a couple of guys, maybe after eighteen holes of golf, you are having your lunch afterward—and your friend says, “Can I let you know something?” You are good buddies. “I travel a lot, and when I am in hotel rooms I can’t resist putting on the pornography. And I know how awful it is, and I know how wrong it is, but I am doing it regularly.” What is your vision for this guy? What are you thinking? Are you thinking, I’ve got to find some way to get this guy off pornography? Is that as high as your vision goes?

Maybe you are talking with somebody whose life has fallen apart. And they feel angry toward God. Are you looking to encourage this person to trust God in the middle of suffering, and are you trying to find some way to make that happen?

In my judgment, perhaps, the greatest obstacle in good conversations—the greatest obstacle to providing effective SoulCare—is limited vision, a vision that is too low. We aim too low when we want to get involved in people’s lives as counselors—I have been trained as a professional counselor. As counselors, our job is to get people changed in their symptoms so that they do not have any more panic attacks, so their obsessive-compulsive disorder is relieved, so that their depression is gone and they feel better. We work very hard at making things different. We have a vision for what should be, and I am afraid that so often in our attempts at SoulCare we go after an objective to which God is not committed. We go after something that we cannot depend on God to use His resources to make happen. We decide that this is what ought to be, and so as Christian carers of the soul we move into people’s lives with a vision of what should be, and we expect





God to cooperate with our expectation of how this person ought to change.

I want you to think out of the box for a moment. Here is the anorexic girl, here is your friend with the divorce, here is the person that you have circled. Suppose that as you are sitting with that individual, you were saying to yourself, “These problems could be used—maybe not solved—these problems could be used to change this person’s interior world to become more like the interior world of Jesus.”

Take that apart for just a moment. You are talking to an individual who is struggling with “whatever” and you are saying to yourself, “Maybe I don’t know how to get her to eat more . . . maybe I don’t know how to comfort this man in his divorce and get him over his hurts so he is willing to take a risk to date again and perhaps to remarry . . . maybe I don’t know how to counsel this woman to respond to her husband in ways that draw him into a more intimate relationship . . . maybe I don’t know how to solve the person’s problems.” But maybe the problems that have come into this individual’s life can be used, maybe not solved (if they can be solved, praise the Lord, that’s wonderful); but maybe, more basically, they can be used so that this person’s interior world actually begins to resemble the soul of Jesus.

What does it mean to care for a soul? What does it mean to cure a soul, to relate in such a way that the soul of the individual with all of these problems actually becomes more like the soul of Jesus? What does that mean? Well, I suggest two things that it means. I would call these the two basic

goals of SoulCare. I would call the next two things that I want to talk about, the compelling vision of SoulCare—what needs to be inside of me, what needs to be inside of you as we are sitting, talking to people who are struggling.

The two goals of SoulCare, the compelling vision of SoulCare are these: Effective SoulCare arouses an appetite for God that because of the Gospel is already there in a Christian. Meaningful, effective SoulCare arouses an appetite for God. I use the word “appetite” very intentionally. If you are hungry, you have an appetite for food. If you like Italian food, you have an appetite for lasagna. There is an appetite within you that just longs for something that you know will taste good and bring satisfaction. Effective SoulCare arouses an appetite for God, such that in the middle of life’s

### | The Two Basic Goals of *SoulCare*

1. Effective SoulCare arouses an appetite for God that is already there and an appetite that is stronger than all other appetites.

### The Two Basic Goals of *SoulCare*

2. Effective SoulCare provokes a consuming experience of God that reduces all other appetites from demands to desires, to second things not first things.

struggles the person actually is aware of their longing to know God, to glorify God, to please God, to enjoy God—an appetite that is already there because of the Gospel. And an appetite that, at least potentially, is stronger than all other appetites. That is the first goal of SoulCare—to arouse an appetite for God—one that is already there because of the Gospel in a Christian, an appetite that literally is stronger than all other appetites.

Imagine that woman who is not enjoying her relationship with her husband, having an appetite to know God that is stronger than having her husband come home and be romantic. That would change her soul to resemble the soul of Jesus—because what was His appetite? Certainly He wanted many things, but His deepest appetite was to please the Father, to reveal the Father, to be in communion with the Father. The first goal of SoulCare: to arouse the appetite.

The second goal of effective SoulCare I would put like this: to provoke a consuming experience of God—not just to arouse an appetite (that's goal one), but now to provoke a consuming experience of God that reduces all other appetites from demands to desires—to second things, not first things. Can you imagine what it would be like to have an appetite for God that just drives you? My heart pants after God as the deer pants after the water brooks. And then to actually have an experience of God where you taste God, where the reality of who God is enters your soul, and you have a consuming experience of the reality of the person of Christ that is so fulfilling, that is so alive, that is so real, that every other desire—may be legitimate and strong—become no longer demands but desires.

Several years ago, I was diagnosed with cancer. And I am grateful to God that one of my desires was realized—I had a good surgeon who was able to cut all the cancerous material out of my body, and I have been declared healthy. But I also am very aware that the cancer could come back. Is that a demand or a desire? Do I have an experience of God that says, “I know Him well enough that I would rather know Him than remain healthy”? I would like to remain healthy too, do not misunderstand me.

I have a very good friend, who after spending some time with me (he was dying of cancer), and he laughed and he said, “Lord, I feel like I know Larry better than I know You. That is a tragedy. God, if it takes the cancer’s progression to deepen my consuming experience of you, so that my enjoyment of you and my knowledge

of you means far more to my soul (I know you better than I know a good friend), if it takes that, then that is what I want.” He had an appetite for God, and God, I believe, met him in a very profound way.

Keep in mind then the two basic goals of SoulCare. And folks, I understand this is out of the box. This is not how we think about talking with people who are anorexic or who are divorced or who are having difficult marriages or whose kids are breaking their hearts. We think about how to solve all these problems and how to use biblical principles and, forgive the phrase but, use God to make all of life more comfortable. Most of us have a compelling vision of making our lives better. The Spirit of Christ comes along and says, “My compelling vision for people is that they have an appetite for God, to know Him as the source of the deepest pleasure and that they have a taste of God (not the full meal, that’s not until heaven), a consuming experience of God, which makes their other desires become less.”

Understand that if you are dealing, for example, with a gentleman struggling with pornography—and perhaps to the point where the label “sexual addiction” is not unreasonable—if you are dealing with that, that if you were to provide effective SoulCare and you were to reach this compelling vision where this pornographer, this man with sexual addiction, actually began to become aware of a thirst for God that was stronger than his appetite for sexual pleasure, and if he began to experience God in a way that said, “that’s more important to me, that’s more alive to me, that stirs something deeper in me than the pornography stirs,” then you would find that the sexual addiction problem is resolved. Do not go after solving the sexual addiction; go after the two primary goals of SoulCare, and you will see good things happen in people’s lives.

Let me describe it this way for you: a friend lets you know the true interior world that he occupies, the true condition of his interior world, he lets you know he is worried. He does not look like it on Sunday morning—he is happy and cheerful. He has let you know he is discouraged—maybe he is complacent, he is superficially happy, whatever. What I want to suggest to you is that the work of SoulCare begins with a longing that springs up within you. Think about what Paul said in Galatians 4:19: “I am in the pains of childbirth until Jesus, until Christ is formed within you, until your soul resembles the soul of Jesus, until your interior world becomes like the interior world of Jesus.” Imagine you



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## SOULCARE

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providing SoulCare, listening to your friends share the struggle and becoming aware of the passion within you like the apostle Paul's and saying how wonderful it would be. Yes, it would be wonderful if the marriage improved, if the anorexic began to eat—that would be so important— but even better, how wonderful it would be if beneath the surface of all these struggles, the soul of this individual developed an appetite for God stronger than all others. How wonderful it would be if they had a consuming experience of God that reduced all other desires, not to demands that seem necessary to happiness and health, but only to desires. In a word, vision that SoulCarers have for the folks for whom they are providing SoulCare is maturity—an appetite for Christ, stronger than all other appetites, and an experience of Christ that reduces all other appetites to second-thing desires, not first-thing demands.

As I read the testimonies of some of the great saints (and I love doing that—I love reading the records and the writings of some of the great saints in the church), I discover that many—I wish more, I wish more in our generation, I wish me, but many—in the history of the church have proved that this is possible—have proved it is possible to actually want Christ more than anything else, and it is possible to experience Christ as a greater pleasure than all other experiences. I long for that to be the case.

Some of you know the story of Augustine whose sexual addiction—and I think that is a fair phrase to use for the struggle that he made known in his book on “Confessions,”—was actually cured, if you will, when he had an experience of what he called “sovereign joy,” that in his words pushed aside his desire for sexual pleasure to a second thing and made it resistible because his appetite for Christ, and his experience of Christ became stronger than anything else. That man was the recipient of SoulCare.

Think for a minute about what that means. Suppose that your vision for people for whom you are providing SoulCare really were as lofty, as high, as seemingly unattainable as the one I am describing. If your vision for people for whom you are providing SoulCare is an appetite for God, an experience of God that is stronger than all other experiences, let me tell you what will happen within you. You will give up. You will give up depending on your own competence. You will give up the pressure of having to make it happen, because you will know that you are out of your league. SoulCarers are out of their league when they are moving toward the compelling vision to which the Spirit is aiming.

Think of yourself caring for the father of a teenage son who is rebellious. And this man is sharing with you in a SoulCare appointment or over lunch, whatever the setting, and he says to you, “My son came home last night at 4:00 in the morning, and he stumbled in the front door and he was drunk.” How do you feel? What do you want to see happen? The father is full of guilt, “What have I done wrong? Where have I failed my boy that he would at age 18 be an alcoholic, be a drug abuser? Where have I failed?” He is full of guilt and you are saying, “I want this man to be relieved of his guilt. Or, maybe he has been a failure as a father. I want to teach him how to be a better father, but I don’t know how to do that. What do I do? I’m providing SoulCare, but I don’t know what to do, I’m lost.” Maybe the father is mad; maybe he is full of anger, not guilt. “How come a kid like mine would turn out like this? I’ve read him the Bible, taken him to church. I’ve been a good dad. And look what he is doing to me? This drives me nuts!” What is your goal as a man providing SoulCare? Suppose the man is spiritually confused, “I have been living for God, but where are the answers? I don’t get the answers to prayer. What does all that mean?” Can you see that your attitude, as you seek to engage with this man at the level of his soul, would be very different if you thought like this?

Suppose you were saying to yourself, “Could this man’s desire to honor God at 4:00 in the morning, when his son stumbles in the door, could this man’s appetite for honoring God, enjoying God, glorifying God, revealing God, being intimate with God, actually be stronger than his desire to see his son straighten out?” Not that the desire would be weak—it would be very strong. But could there be something stronger? Think of the difference it would make if, because of your SoulCare relationship, that compelling vision were reached to this man’s life.

## SOULCARE

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Maybe you are getting the point that SoulCare is not a technique to master. It is not a list of how-tos—i.e., here is the ten steps to effective SoulCare, here is the right sentences to say. SoulCare is something that grows out of a vision for a reality that requires spiritual power to come out of you. What is it going to take for you and me to develop and release that spiritual power as we engage with others in SoulCare so that the compelling vision of becoming more like Jesus actually happens?

In our next lesson, we will begin taking a look at what happens inside of me, inside of you, as the one who wants to provide

SoulCare, so we can actually be used of God to reach that compelling vision.