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AND THE
ROSE

The Wedding of Spirituality and Sexuality

BUD HARRIS, Ph.D.



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CHIRON PUBLICATIONS • WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Harris, Clifton Tumlin Bud, 1937–

The fire and the rose : the wedding of spirituality and sexuality / Bud Harris.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-888602-42-5 (alk. paper)

1. Self-actualization (Psychology) 2. Jungian psychology. 3. Spirituality. 4. Sex. I. Title.

BF637.S4H36 2007

155.3'2—dc22

2007010503

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We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

—T. S. ELIOT, *FOUR QUARTETS*, "LITTLE
GIDDING"

Chapter 1 (Excerpt) Desire's Initiations

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Throughout the centuries mystics have felt that everything we see is a metaphor for a reality beyond our everyday perceptions. In their perspective the objects, events and persons of ordinary existence hint at the nature of the Divine, and indeed make the Divine present in some fashion. In the Eleusinian mysteries of ancient Greece, the predecessor of the Western mystical tradition, visionaries saw the cycle of renewal in nature as a metaphor for how we experience the eternal mysteries of life. We live in the creativity of an ever-renewing world, a world of birth, life, death and rebirth. In this cycle of nature, it is *transformation* brought about by new birth that conquers death.

It is often hard to grasp and accept this simple-sounding reality in a practical way. But once something happens that causes us

to think about ourselves in a larger way and to become dissatisfied with our lives, we cannot go back to our old way of living. We can use all of the practical, hardheaded arguments we can marshal about how good our life is, how much we've invested in our current position or how we've no right to complain, but our little voice of doubt will not be silenced. Even grand plans for a successful future will only overwhelm it for a short time. We need to take the step of letting our old personality die so a new and larger one can be born.

Let me give you several examples drawn from my practice. Once John became a fairly successful man and began to have a little leisure time, he started to wonder about his childhood. He became aware that he was troubled by the fact that his father had not protected him from his mother's furious tantrums. After careful deliberation he realized that he could no longer continue the superficial relationship he had developed with his father because of unanswered questions from their past. He didn't know how his father would react when he began to question him about this period of their lives. But he felt compelled by his desire to find out more about the events that had shaped who he was. To proceed, he thoughtfully and carefully opened a discussion with his father and waited to see how it would transform their relationship.

Sylvia initially thought her depression was simply "her" problem. Then she slowly figured out that her marriage had gone stale while her husband was buried in work and responsibilities. Her depression was the result of her repressed desire for a more loving and vital relationship. With some devoted work, Sylvia learned that we can't recapture the magic of the past in our relationships. Simplistic attempts at repair, like a night out, a vacation or redecorating the house, don't change much, and the hope of an easy, comfortable solution usually turns out to have been a disappointing illusion. Once the magic is lost, something new has to be discovered or constructed. It may mean a new commitment to each other, a new vision of the future together or new ways of affirming, understanding and appreciating each other. Once Sylvia and her husband had become distant from the love they had once experi-

enced, she had to learn how to challenge her relationship in a new way that would help their love and interest be reborn. Of course her husband shared just as much responsibility in recognizing and initiating their needed transformation as she did. But, as in most cases, the person who gains awareness of the problem first needs to go ahead and act.

The same was true of Suzanne, a middle school teacher, who had once loved her job and was now bored by it. She had separated from the joy she had once known in her work. Trying to soothe herself with platitudes about how fortunate she was to have a job in a tight job market, to have such a good boss or to work so close to home, didn't help her for long. Nor did the belief that if she could only finish out her time until retirement, she would finally be free to do what she loved. The compromises she was making to stay in a situation she had outgrown were gradually eroding her soul. In these situations willpower isn't enough. Creativity, risk, struggling and transformation are called for when our soul begins to desire for us to live in a larger way. Suzanne had to find a way to transform her job into something challenging and engaging, and even considered finding a new one.

While I'm talking about our personal experiences, the same principles hold true for our cultural experiences. We cannot return to the days before multiculturalism, or to when more simplistic religious answers sustained us, or when we had a lifelong model for our workplace and personal relationships. We must continue to work for transformation, because it is the vehicle that carries life toward completion.

We do this by fully acknowledging our desires and risking mistakes, not by carefully following the scripts of tradition and expectation, as outlined by our culture and our families. Myths, fairy tales and literature are a reservoir of resources offering vivid and various examples of transformation. Beauty transforms the Beast through the love revealed in the suffering caused by her very human mistakes. Cinderella becomes a princess by risking everything for a joyful evening of living far beyond her seeming potential. The phoenix rises from the ashes after being consumed by fire. Scrooge is transformed

by a renewed longing for life after facing his inner demons. These examples of transformation are repeated in story after story, reflecting the wisdom of knowing life's patterns.

It is helpful to remember that we cannot "return to the good old days," nor can we successfully follow a program to produce an "ideal projected future." Nor can even the most "realistic," "hard-headed" work repair a now stagnant and deteriorating situation. For the archetypal pattern of life clearly informs us that survival is achieved only through *transformation*. This is a useful psychological premise that I try to remember whenever I feel like I am trying to swim upstream or find myself in despair over the muddle my life is in.

* * *

If sexual desire represents the creative, transformative force of the universe, then it naturally propels us into the cycle of nature. But what about the life of the spirit, that second powerful aspect of the soul? Is there a cycle of the spirit similar to nature's creative cycle? If there is, are we also compelled into it? And do the two cycles ever intersect? It has taken me years of reflection and struggle to conclude that there is such a cycle, a conclusion I believe my mother also reached as she was dying. The spiritual cycle seeks regeneration by having our life grow barren, frustrating and empty, leaving us stuck between the safety of a flat life that is slowly wearing down our spirit and the desire for a more invigorating way of living.

The longings of our soul for a life of worth, meaning, and purpose may move with less initial urgency than sexuality, but will ultimately build up to the power of a tidal wave. To progress out of a situation that is diminishing our spirit we usually have to let go of many ways we have structured our lives and defined ourselves. In the cases we saw earlier, John may have had to let go of the adage that his father "did the best he could at the time" or that it would be disrespectful to confront him now on such an ancient

topic. Sylvia had to risk turbulence and a possible failure in communication in order to try to renew her marriage. Suzanne also had to risk violating conventional wisdom and her parents' teachings about the importance of not threatening her secure status in order to enliven her work. These situations may sound more psychological than spiritual to you. But I believe that whenever we are talking about deepening a relationship, bringing new integrity to it, renewing love or seeking new vitality in life, we are also entering the spiritual realm.

For example, Prince Siddhartha, the future Buddha, discovered that he had to leave a luxurious life and seek to understand suffering and discover life's meaning to satisfy his soul's quest. We too must frequently leave the luxury of the fixed patterns we have lived, often those approved of by our families, friends and traditions, in the search for a life that is filled with vitality. The story of Siddhartha's journey into Buddhahood is a metaphor showing how spiritual birth was an initiation into a new life that would reflect his longing for meaning.

Traumatic events may transform our lives in a similar way. Because of her response to her illness, my mother's experience of cancer became what Jungian psychology calls a *transformational* ordeal, or an initiation in the spiritual sense. At first she fought it, denied it and did everything medically possible to cure it. Then she fully accepted it. Acceptance did not mean that she stopped treatment or gave up hope. She realized, rather, that her illness was the focus of her life. She learned that when we fight against the emotional effects of events that engender true suffering, we may find ourselves crushed by depression. Wisely, she chose to develop her own spiritual path, one of giving up the things she was attached to—including the illusion that she had any kind of control over her life or even the ability to maintain her dignity. She must have figured out that her life was being stripped of everything except love, pain and God. By choosing this path she remained animated until the end.

I don't know how she made this choice. Was it because of her religious background? Did she receive a spiritual call of some sort? Did she have an insight that changed her perception, or a dream?

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Or was it simply her desire to find a greater sense of peace and refuge from her suffering? By the time I thought of these questions, the people who might have answered them were gone. But I believe that the question she faced, between spiritual growth and despair, is generally in the background of all our lives.

The fact that a murderous disease can become creative and transforming reflects the paradoxical power of life and spirituality in a stunning manner. I am not speaking of any kind of shallow bliss or reconciliation, but an ability through suffering—emotional or physical—to let go of our human attempt to control mortality. In this way, we are exposed to the great coming and going of life, which leads to a feeling of participation in the secret wisdom of the Divine.