



Bud Harris, Ph.D.

“Bud Harris is a lantern on the path – clear eyed, big hearted, and illuminating.”  
—Julia Cameron, author, *The Artist’s Way*

# SACRED SELFISHNESS

A GUIDE TO LIVING  
A LIFE OF SUBSTANCE

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BY BUD HARRIS

*Our Lost Manhood:*

*How to Reclaim the Deeper Dimensions of Your Masculinity*

*The Father Quest:*

*Rediscovering an Elemental Psychic Force*

COAUTHORED WITH MASSIMILLA HARRIS

*Like Gold Through Fire:*

*Understanding the Transforming Power of Suffering*

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## CHAPTER 12 (Excerpt)

### Living the Choice

*Wonder and despair are two sides of a spinning coin. When you open yourself to one, you open yourself to the other. You discover a capacity for joy that wasn't in you before. Wonder is the promise of restoration: as deeply as you dive, so may you rise.*

—Christina Baldwin

#### Life Against Death

The imperative of life is to grow and if we're going to grow as human beings, we must ally ourselves with life, love, and courage and face the struggles that growth entails. Easier to say than to do, you might think. But if we keep life's basic purpose in mind, alive in our reflections, these allegiances may take root within us sooner than we expect. And if instead we fail to grow, we will stagnate and begin to deteriorate, no matter how good we are at presenting the public faces we might be hiding behind. Loren Eisely, a great anthropologist with the heart of a poet, explains how life has always been a fight, how it began by absorbing the energy of the sun until plants burst into existence. He says that life "began like a war with strange chemicals seething under a sky lacking in oxygen; it was waged through long ages until the first green plants learned to harness the light of the nearest star, our sun. The human brain, so frail, so perishable, so full of inexhaustible dreams and hungers, burns by the power of the leaf." Our self-knowledge grows in a similar manner, often out of sight until it comes into our awareness through a building up of tensions, which ultimately are seeking to break through our former limits. We've seen many examples of this process in the stories I've shared with you, with Margaret and Fred who struggled to grow and have their marriage grow, with Janice who woke up to

her own strength through her depression, with Rob who discovered a new beginning at midlife, and with many more. Like them, if we cannot stand the strain of our growthful passages, we end up falling back, which usually means falling back into rigidity and eventually into a wasteland of the heart.

The archetypal images from ancient Greece that picture the illicit affair between Ares, the god of war, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love, show that behind our best public appearances love and war are structured into our natures. In other words if we're going to embrace life and live passionately, we must be able to hold the tension between the limiting effects of old values, obligations, and others' expectations and our need to progress, and be able to endure the inner and outer conflicts this causes. Ares and Aphrodite represent the passionate forces of life, our need to be able to struggle and love as a normal part of existence. They had three children that represented the outcomes of these forces and their effects on us. Wisely, the Greeks named the children Fear, Discord, and Harmony, showing us that living passionately means facing our fears and the troubles we encounter in order to eventually achieve a state of inner harmony. If we're unable to live passionately, we'll have the tendency to repress our strong emotions and project our conflicts outside of ourselves, where they may eventually erupt into violence. These conflicts represent a desire for life that has been blocked by some other force. When an adolescent gets into a major confrontation with an overly rigid parent they are fighting for the freedom they feel the parent is blocking. The rigid stance and the vicious retorts of the parent may reflect how fear has impeded their own desires for independence and opportunity. Such conflicts also take place between lovers, neighbors, business colleagues, classes of people, or between nations, and the principle is frequently the same.

Many centuries ago Aristotle made it very clear that *courage* is the most important of all the virtues because without it we can't practice any of the others. Courage is the nearest star, the sunlight that can fuel our growth. Maya Angelou says we must be courageous about facing and exploring our personal histories. We must find the courage to care and to create internally as well as externally,

and, as she says, we need the courage “to create ourselves daily as Christians, as Jews, as Muslims, as thinking, caring, laughing, loving human beings.”

During the journey of growth we may have to confront the structure of values we’ve been living by, the relationships and jobs we’re in. Growth is not risk-free or guaranteed to be joyful. We may have to make some major changes; we may hurt or disappoint people near to us. Taking such risks is painful and scary. Margaret and Fred discovered they had to redefine themselves and their marriage. Deep down, first Margaret and then Fred wanted to break free of the lives they had been living and the ways they felt limited, but not from each other. While they knew they were suffering and hurting each other, they had to work to see if staying together, setting new boundaries, and opening up their future was possible. The answer to these questions took months of effort to arrive at.

But if we’re in jobs or relationships into which we cannot successfully bring love, then they will depress our spirits, erode our self-esteem, and eventually cause us to dislike ourselves. It’s better to take the risk and suffer the needed losses if there are influences or aspects of our lives of which we must break free. In the long run, breaking free of the forces that imprison our souls is empowering. Living years of useless virtue, inertia, and cowardice—unhappy martyrdom—helps no one. It’s much better to say that all of our conscious lives and energies—all that time lost and reclaimed now—have been dedicated to the growth and liberation of the human spirit, and that the work began with ourselves.



When I drive to work every day I see a tree that is growing in what appears to be an impossible place. Year after year I’ve watched it climb out of a stone wall by an old building. I love to see it and imagine it as a triumph of life over death, of *eros* over *thanatos*, the terms Freud used to define the pull of life against the force of death. Our natures are like that tree. They push us toward growth, and our



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societal values, conventional wisdom, and fear pull us toward the seeming security of refusing to grow, or denying its possibility. Erich Fromm personalized these forces and summed them up as either *a love of life* or *a love of death*. He felt that society inevitably pushes us into a love of death because it urges us to live dutifully and by the values of the culture, rather than to live authentically and creatively.

Two paths, then, with two ends. Which will you choose? The path that leads into the wasteland, however rich and seductive it appears? Or the path through the forest, the path of loving life that begins with self-knowledge? The latter is the only way you can learn to create the conditions for love to take place. If you choose this path, like a faithful knight, you must then take up your sword and shield and seek to enter the forest of your unknown interior. And while this quest is a noble one it's also an attainable one. It isn't about seeking lofty ideals, gaining extraordinary powers, or attaining a special condition. It is, like the legends, tales, and myths you've read about, finally a story, *your* story, simple, inexorable, and as natural as the beating of a heart. It is about finding a way to live fully, by living wholeheartedly.