

The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a sandy beach. Several footprints are visible, leading from the foreground towards the water in the distance. The sand is a warm, golden-brown color, and the lighting suggests a sunset or sunrise, with long shadows and a soft glow.

# 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

# SACRED SELFISHNESS

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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A LIFE OF SUBSTANCE



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## CHAPTER 9(Excerpt)

### Facing the Dark and Finding Life

*If we arrange our life according to that principle which counsels us that we must always hold to the difficult, then that which now still seems to us the most alien will become what we most trust and find most faithful.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

“**I**t was as though somebody I hated spoke from my mouth before I could silence him,” said a character from a Graham Greene novel. Have you ever had a similar experience or thought? “I don’t know what came over me.” “I just wasn’t myself.” These experiences happen when something unknown within us takes over, something we don’t officially recognize as a part of ourselves—surprises, little gremlins, we think, who frequently embarrass us. In other words our shadows come to the surface and are revealed. But if we begin to watch these slips closely, especially around midlife, we may find that some of them are trying to move us into new ways of living. Recently a friend of mine had one of these encounters with his shadow. When as a volunteer he was asked to run for president of our local arts alliance, he spontaneously stood up and said, “I’ll do it!” Later he admitted to me, “I don’t know what happened.” He’s a quiet, team-playing sort, someone who had previously shunned any kind of public or leadership role. “But all of a sudden,” he continued, “I knew I wanted to do it and I would do a good job.”

Some time later I was just as surprised at another meeting when

a second friend was asked to chair an important committee and declined. "No, I don't think so" was his immediate reply. Normally this friend relishes leadership roles. "No?" I whispered to him. Looking a little sheepish, he shrugged his shoulders and whispered back, "I surprised myself. But it felt good." In a brief moment, without their realizing what was happening, the shadow had stepped into these two people's lives and changed, at least on that occasion, their habitual way of doing things.

Generally when we talk and read about the shadow, we think of its being our darker side, and therefore dangerous. Perhaps it is because we repress so much of our energy into it. But it also becomes easy to forget how much of our *positive* potential it contains. The process of becoming our own person *begins* with finding out about this shadow, for that is the only way we can learn about the molds that shaped our development. Both of my friends were thrust into new states of mind and behaviors by what appeared to be a simple slip of the tongue. But actually these slips are deceptively powerful and potentially life-changing if we pay enough attention to them. They represent new potentials trying to emerge into the sunlight of our everyday lives and new growth trying to take place in our personalities. They are important and like dreams are our friends if we choose to see them as such; and at midlife and beyond, they become even more so. They represent the potentials we've denied and pushed away.

We build our shadows as we build our identities. They're like two sides of the same coin. Every time we identify with a value such as "It's good to be active and efficient," we reject its opposite—it's as if we've said, "It's bad to be lazy and lackadaisical." Eventually our identities are based on collections of such identifications and they define who we believe we are.

Until we begin to understand the things we've denied, whenever we say the word "I," we are referring to the identifications we have made and are ignoring our capacity to be the opposite of them. For instance, if I think of myself as active and efficient, I am ignoring my capacity to be lethargic and indifferent and the ways that I actually am lazy and lackadaisical. In addition, a person might say:

I am a man, an American, a husband, a teacher. I am active, dynamic, tolerant, competent, romantic; I love nature, enjoy sports, and so on. From an objective point of view, our identifications represent only one way of looking at things—a point of view that was shaped by the forces that influenced our development and temperament. If I choose to be introverted, I reject extroversion. If I'm literal minded, I reject intuition. If I base my decisions on logic, I reject emotions. Each decision becomes a foundation stone in building our identities because these decisions determine how we'll relate to the world, gather information, and make choices.

When we identify with something such as "I am tolerant" or "I am open-minded, fair, and honest," we've identified with values that will form our character structures. As a result of these identifications, everything that's opposite to these becomes something we don't want to be. In other words we don't want to discover how bigoted, prejudiced, inequitable, and crooked we can be. So we repress these capacities into our shadows. The shadow is a frightening reality because any serious encounter with it can threaten who we think we are, how we feel about ourselves, and the value structures we live by.

For instance, if I like to see myself as a friendly, level-headed guy that people can depend on, the experience of an explosive surge of anger will scare me. It threatens my self-image and I'll quickly seek to avoid situations where this may happen. Fear is never far away from any experience that evokes our shadows. For example, if something happens to me that can make me really angry, it forces me to exert a lot of energy trying to stay in control. If I fail, I will feel embarrassed and ashamed—and I'll be reminded once again that I don't have the mastery of my own personality I like to think I have.

Just as small children imagine they can make themselves invisible by covering their eyes with their hands, many adults imagine they can get rid of what they don't like in themselves by not looking at it. You know what I mean. It's that impulse or tendency we all to some degree share that can range from avoidance and procrastination to the little fibs we tell ourselves, or others, to avoid hurt, feelings, criticism, or rejection. Many of these fibs, however, are told



primarily to ourselves so that we will continue to feel good about who we are and how we're handling things. Unfortunately the illusion of *not seeing* our unpleasant characteristics is rapidly expanded to include *not having* them, and this progression leads to seeing these displeasing qualities in other people. In the jargon of psychology we've *projected* them. Projection means attributing the features in ourselves that we've disowned onto someone else. Projection makes me think of Martha, a woman who was mad at the world. However, she denied her anger and talked about how afraid she was of her husband's temper. She had projected her anger and her fear of its power onto her husband. Or in another situation, Barry, a young man who had been brought up to be afraid of women and as a result was always acquiescent and kind to them, wondered why women were always so mean to "nice guys."

On a larger scale, our society, which wants us to be successfully adapted, productive members, teaches us not to do things that may be disruptive to the status quo, the values of our social character. Therefore we are taught to repress our powerful emotions rather than to handle them with skill and understanding. Psychologist and author Kathleen Brehony says in *Awakening at Midlife*, "Very few families teach the healthy expression of anger, for example. We don't say, 'It's okay to be angry but it's not okay to hit.' Instead we say, 'How can you behave like that to your little sister? You're bad. Go to your room.'"

Yet at a later stage, if we don't recover the power to use our emotions on our own behalfs, we'll become the victims of them. Martha may actually provoke her husband into a destructive rage at some point or her anger may also begin to fester in her unconscious until it becomes an illness. Closing our eyes to these emotions doesn't mean they've disappeared, just as holding them in has its effects. If Barry continues placating women, his resentment toward them will build until it becomes a corrosive rage that can sour his life, spoil his relationships, and threaten his health. Reclaiming the emotional power we have repressed into our shadows and learning how using it skillfully can strengthen our personalities lead to better health and more honest relationships.

Our shadows are our most paradoxical aspects. While they seem to be the containers of the dark forces that can threaten the foundation we've built our lives on, they are also the containers of some of our best potentials for achieving balanced, more dynamic, and fulfilling lives. The very anger we were taught to fear and deny, and came to fear and deny even more when we glimpsed its smoldering presence, is like buried gold. If we can learn to safely mine and refine it, we'll be rewarded with new energy, passion, and strength.

Shadow qualities may first appear as a surprise as my two friends discovered when unlikely words sprung from their mouths. Or they may appear as a wound or embarrassment when we feel overly sensitive or resentful, misjudge someone's intentions, or become tongue-tied or uncharacteristically shy. Like dreams, with proper attention these situations can often be transformed into a helpful new awareness that improves our lives. But the *process* of refining qualities from our shadows will cost us something. We may have to lose some of our innocence or experience a feeling of shame. By innocence I mean our naive views of life, the ones that believe the values of our society and families are the true values that provide a meaningful life, that we are who we think we are, that the world is like we have been brought up to see it and we can make (and have made) choices that direct and control our lives. Frequently a loss of innocence means a loss of self-esteem because we realize we are less knowledgeable, well intentioned, virtuous, or competent than we thought we were. And a loss of self-esteem can lead to feelings of shame. I lost some of my innocence and felt some shame as well when I realized I was treating my children as impersonally as my father had treated me, something I'd vowed repeatedly I'd never do. Ellie, a friend of mine who owns her own business, lost a large piece of innocence when she discovered her oldest and most trusted employee had been stealing from her for years. And Rusty, a man in his late thirties who worked with me a few years ago, was appalled when he figured out that he'd been using his moodiness to manipulate his wife.

But the new awareness I gained through my experience caused me to become a more caring father and to enjoy fatherhood more

completely. Ellie became a more mature businesswoman, who paid better attention to the actual nature and performance of her employees; and Rusty became more self-responsible and interested in his growth and healing. Shame and a loss of innocence are important parts of the human journey, and we find them repeatedly preceding experiences of transformation and redemption in the teaching stories of the past. In the ancient Greek tale *The Twelve Labors of Heracles*, Heracles' mythical journey of development begins when in a rage he murders his wife and helpless children. The twelve labors he must complete range from killing a lion, an act of bravery, to cleaning the Augean stables, which have accumulated the manure of three thousand oxen for thirty years, a humiliating task that he accomplishes with strength and intelligence. The labors culminate in a confrontation with death as Heracles overcomes Cerberus, the three-headed dog guarding the underworld, where Heracles encounters several famous ghosts.

The twelve labors, also known as "challenges," which is another meaning of the Greek word that translates as labors, actually have a collective dual purpose. The first is to purify Heracles from his past. The priestess who prescribes his labors also acknowledges his rebirth into a new identity by giving him the name Heracles. Before that his name was Alcides. The second goal of these tasks is to help Heracles attain immortality, which in mythological terms symbolizes full personal authenticity. Jung frequently used this story and its labors to illustrate how hard we must work to overcome the conditioning of our pasts, realize our true identities, and then develop our previously hidden strengths and abilities in order to become unique.

For many years I was troubled by the "slaughter of the innocents" in the Christmas story, the part where King Herod has all of the sons born in Bethlehem during the Christmas period murdered as he attempts to eliminate the Christ child. It took me a long time to realize that if we consider the Christmas story from a psychological standpoint, as a metaphor, symbolizing the birth of the spirit or new life within us, we also need to recognize that such a change requires a sacrifice, a loss of innocence.

## FACING THE DARK

Rilke beautifully sums up the paradoxes within our shadows by saying, "Perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once, beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something that needs our love." In the next pages I'd like to invite you to join me in looking at how our shadows hold our potentials while reflecting many of the paradoxes we live in, and how they help us challenge ourselves to new growth and meaning.