

The background of the cover features a dark red rose in the lower half, with a vertical flame-like shape in shades of orange and red behind it. The overall color palette is dark, with the rose and flame providing the primary visual elements.

# THE FIRE AND THE ROSE

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*The Wedding of Spirituality and Sexuality*

BUD HARRIS, Ph.D.



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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”

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## Chapter 4

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### RETURNING TO THE SOURCE

The muses are the children of the goddess of memory,  
which is not the memory from up there, from the head,  
it is the memory from down here, from the heart.  
It is the memory of the organic laws of  
human existence that sends forth your inspiration.

—JOSEPH CAMPBELL, THE POWER OF MYTH

About five thousand years ago the ambition-driven young king of Sumer found himself facing a dilemma. King Gilgamesh discovered that he had pushed the people in his kingdom too far, and they had cried out to the gods for a release from their oppression. As it turned out Gilgamesh was a man split against himself. His ambition had caused him to override the natural, emotional side of himself, causing it to remain primitive and his soul undeveloped.

The first time I heard this story I felt that it was talking about me as well as Gilgamesh. Hadn't I done the same thing when I sought to escape my wounded early life by becoming obsessed with ambition? And later, when I was working in therapy to discover how to change my life, wasn't I really looking for the answers to these questions: What stirs my heart? What makes me really come alive? What gives meaning to my struggles? Or, in other words, what does my soul want? For many years, my ability to ask and answer these questions had been trampled by the power driving my quest for normalcy and success, which I then believed was the road to happiness.

As Gilgamesh's story continues, the gods answered the people's pleas by creating a huge man from the earth, a sort of alter ego of Gilgamesh. This man, Enkidu, represented the features of Gilgamesh that he had failed to develop. In psychological terms, he represented the shadow side of the king. In fact, all of us who have been molded by families and society have created our own version of Enkidu as we learned to repress our crude, more earthly characteristics, like our capacity for burning passions, rage, despair, and other deep feeling states—even for joy and ecstasy. In the story the gods believed that struggling with Enkidu would keep Gilgamesh busy and would allow his people to live more tranquil lives, and in fact Gilgamesh and Enkidu grappled with each other vigorously for a long time. Surprisingly, however, they eventually recognized that they were equally powerful and became friends.

Ancient stories like this are subtle and filled with valuable psychological details. They reflect what Joseph Campbell called the “organic laws of human existence,” and what Jung referred to as archetypal patterns. In the Gilgamesh story, we see in symbolic terms the journey that this ambitious man had to take to find a meaningful life. The ancient Sumerians also gave us a similar myth, which told the torturous tale of how the ambitious Queen Inanna had to reconcile with her shadow sister, Ereshkigal, in the underworld. My wife and I explore this myth in detail in our book *Like Gold Through Fire*.

Once Gilgamesh and Enkidu became companions they encountered and overcame many obstacles and challenges, including the threat of being consumed by the love of the goddess Ishtar. Finally, Gilgamesh had to defy the gods in order to insure fertility for his kingdom, though the gods struck Enkidu with a mortal illness in retribution. As he mourned, Gilgamesh began the quest for a plant that would bring Enkidu back to life. Finally he found it beneath the water in a pond. But as he was retrieving the plant, a snake snatched it from his hand.

The story underlines a tragic irony of human existence—that as we develop self-awareness we realize the actuality of our death. It also illustrates that to become split in our characteristics



## RETURNING TO THE SOURCE

wounds our soul, because we cannot develop all of our attributes at once.

At first Gilgamesh lived in denial of this fact. Then he tried to defy death until, tragically, he was forced to accept it. According to Joseph Campbell the acceptance of our death forces us to seek the value of being alive and whole, and to recognize eternity as a presence in our lives. The story also portrays the snake as a symbol of both death and eternal renewal through transformation. The plant brought eternal renewal to the snake, who yearly sheds its skin as a symbol of transformation.

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*Discovering Spirit*

“Spirituality” is one of those words I took for granted until life began to wake me up. Early on, I thought it was the feeling of awe I experienced when watching the sun rise over the ocean, or when standing in a mountain forest, or the wonder at the birth of my children. But as I grew older I figured out that this wonder mixed with reverence is how we respond when we’re directly affected by life’s mysteries. While these feelings have spiritual overtones, I believe spirituality is more complicated, and goes a step deeper, as it includes the desire to bring the vital force of such mysteries into our experiences and the purpose of our lives.

As the years passed, I realized that my feelings of awe and wonder had never compelled me to begin a spiritual quest, or a search for meaning. Rather, my searches had been put into motion in those moments when I was suffering, feeling confused or stuck, or experiencing the kind of dread that leaves me feeling like my life is slipping from me like water down a drain. Our consumer-driven culture teaches us that we should always be winners, getting the job, the grade, the prize, the promotion, the ideal partner and the happy life. But the real teacher in life, the real agent that compels



us to face our life, to re-imagine ourselves, to transform our consciousness, is suffering, failure, dread, loss and grief.

Every new search seems to leave me contending with the meaning of the word “spirit” all over again. I’m not alone in this struggle. Fellow seekers have been grappling with the meaning of this word since it emerged into written language almost three thousand years ago. Our difficulty originates with our need to use verbal concepts to articulate the great experiences of life, which are primarily nonrational. The literal nature of how we interpret and value “rationality” compounds this difficulty. We are so accustomed to valuing the concrete and the objective nature of things that we have trouble expressing the subjective facts of our experience. For example, we may say we want our lives to “work,” when we really mean we want them to be more loving, creative, inspiring or interesting.

In daily life we may use the word “spirit” to describe or arouse our emotions in connection with contests and competitions. For instance, we talk about school spirit before a high school football game. Or we may use it to characterize the mood of a particular era or social group. But to speak of *spirituality* we must go further than these everyday meanings.

In its best sense, the word “spirit” becomes a reservoir of the richest experiences and the deepest reflections of human life, a voice of the soul. In its earliest meanings, it described an animating and creative principle, the breath of life, or the metaphorical wind of fire that aroused and inspired us. When we consciously embrace such a spirit and live under its guidance, we will find ourselves living a “spiritual life.”

As I previously mentioned, Erich Fromm believed that our culture has made a religion out of marketing and economics, which channel our desires away from our inborn need for meaning. He even had a word for people whose guiding spirit or god, as mine did in my twenties, has become success, materialism, competition and appearances: he called us idolaters. This shift of allegiance has left many of our religious institutions hollow as they serve only

the modern principles that run our society rather than the great spiritual truths of the ages. Robert Moore, a Jungian analyst and professor at the Chicago Theological Seminary, notes that religion today helps people “paint up, clean up, fix up,” without addressing deeper human issues—a situation he calls one of the tragedies in modern religious life. Part of this problem comes from the inability of these institutions to bring the age-old truths into the context of our modern culture.

The poet Octavio Paz expands this perspective by warning us that “Eroticism has become a department of advertising and a branch of business.” He believes that the use of sexuality as a marketing tool has debased both the human body and the human spirit. As a result, the deterioration of sexuality and spirituality has turned the human imagination from love to power in ways that often leave us trapped and wound our soul.

When trying to emerge from my life as an idolater, I had a dream one night in which a number of beautiful native male and female slaves were being brutally beaten. It didn’t take much reflection to figure out how mercilessly I was driving myself. In another situation a physician named David consulted me for analysis. David found himself dreaming night after night that he was participating in golf tournaments. With the help of our discussions he concluded that the whole landscape of his life was based on competition. Ellen, another client, had the common reoccurring dream of showing up for an exam unprepared. In a quiet conversation with me she reflected on her drive for success and the anxiety that fueled it, and on how her achievements failed to satisfy her. Under the pressure of our society’s values, competition and anxiety had become David and Ellen’s guiding spirits, overriding the desires of their hearts, the longings of their spirits and the needs of their souls.

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*Creative Suffering*

One reason we fear change and upsetting the people close to us is that our society has indoctrinated us into overvaluing security and happiness. Our religions have also lost much of their ability to help us endure, value and find meaning in suffering. We have as much of an aversion to suffering as we do to loss of control. In fact, we often connect the two. Suffering people make us uncomfortable, and we are frequently revolted by personal encounters of this expression. We treat suffering as something to be denied, avoided or cured. And we see a person who is suffering as someone to be pitied, someone who is unfortunate, if not dysfunctional or actually pathological.

In the book I co-authored with my wife, *Like Gold Through Fire: Understanding the Transforming Power of Suffering*, we described four categories of suffering: natural, developmental, neurotic, and transcendent. Natural suffering follows such things as natural disasters, illnesses, the death of a loved one, and other things connected with the cycles of life and death. Developmental suffering is also in a sense natural, but results from the painful experiences we encounter as we shape ourselves to take a place in society. Developmental suffering comes when we begin taking responsibility for ourselves, making choices, and suffering the consequences brought on by our decisions. It is part of becoming an adult that hopefully teaches us to be self-disciplined and competent in the world we have to live in. It often means learning to study, attending classes, managing our money, or choosing jobs and careers—tasks that are necessary to live effectively but that don't come naturally.

Neurotic suffering is something that arises from a conflict between longing for growth and a lack of courage to pursue that growth. When we settle for a way of life or give up true inner value for fear of displeasing others, we are inviting neurotic suffering. If Tim had remained Mr. Fix-It for everyone and if Angela had never ventured out of her role as family caretaker, they could have ended up as self-pitying and secretly resentful. Such people become increasingly unpleasant to be around, as they find it more and more difficult to contain their unhappiness and self-loathing. Eventually neurotic suffering sours our lives.

We need instead to become aware that neurotic suffering represents an unanswered call, one that is urging us to discover how to grow and live in a new way. That call can frighten us, because it often asks us to risk much of what we value—indeed the very core of what makes our lives comfortable. So it is not surprising that neurotic suffering may arise from our hesitation to fully commit our energy to pursuing our heart's desire. And yet, giving in to our fear and repressing our desire to grow and change often leaves us stuck, anxious, angry, and depressed.

Our last category, transcendent suffering, comes from follow-

ing the impetus of the Divine within us to grow in a way that expresses our unique potentials. Over time we have come to call transcendent suffering *creative suffering* because it represents the growing pains of creating and re-creating ourselves in relationship to our greater Self or the Divine within us. It comes from accepting our desire to grow, to want a life we love and feel complete in, and from facing the fears that are holding us back.

Creative suffering usually begins when we confront ourselves in an effort to live more honestly. In Charles Dickens's popular Christmas story of Ebenezer Scrooge, the demons he faced in the night were pictures of his own shadow. They represented the unconscious values by which he was living, values that had originated in his lonely childhood and were now guiding him toward an isolated, meaningless future. Creative suffering begins as we seek to face and heal the wounds to our soul, discover our shadow, and expand our vision of life.

In the Middle Ages the rituals and traditions of religions carried people through their experiences of natural suffering and helped give a spiritual meaning to them. In times of famine, poverty, illness, or natural disaster, the priest or rabbi offered rituals of healing and atonement, and explanations from scripture that promised a better life in the future. The mystics, too, gave meaning to creative suffering. They took the stance that to become closer to the Divine, one had to go through a painful self-examination and peel off layers of illusion about life and oneself. This was their way of freeing themselves from society's expectations, healing emotional wounds, dealing with their shadow and becoming spiritually authentic.

Suffering in today's world has lost many of its sacred dimensions. Taking time for the spiritual and psychological practices that nurture and transform us—reflecting, journaling, praying, yoga, dreamwork—is often considered selfish or self-indulgent. This is because we have over-learned the cultural command to be active and always doing. Yet, as we saw with Tim and Angela, taking time to listen to our frustration and discontent can change our lives in ways that are ultimately more satisfying—not only for ourselves, but for those we love.