

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 4 (excerpt)

The Hidden Power in the Shadow

To become people of interior substance means we must discover the essential parts of ourselves that are still unconscious. In the terminology of myths and religion, we must begin a journey to our centers. To learn about and experience the contents of our unconscious helps us experience ourselves more completely as human beings, and “bridges” the separations of our “island” selves with the rest of us. This process usually begins with either meeting or being confronted with some part of our shadows, those suppressed parts of ourselves that don’t fit our normal self-images. In

our journey through the next few chapters we will explore a number of situations where people meet their shadows. Our shadows often show up in the form of disowned emotions such as anger, physical symptoms like being overweight, interpersonal conflicts, and the reverse sides of the common social virtues we were taught to admire early in our lives.

As we grew up we were taught to evaluate our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as either good or bad. This way simply ignores the complexity of reality. We may have failed to recognize the value in some of the things we rejected. Or by labeling some things undesirable, we may have been protecting ourselves from the hurtful power of the people whose approval we needed, or from our unknown fears. Most of these decisions were made automatically, unconsciously, without our being aware of what we were doing. As we begin to look inward to see more of what we're made of and who we really are, we're likely to find some very challenging material.

Sometimes our shadows interject themselves straight into our lives. I once knew a woman who was the wife of the minister of a large, well-known church. She came to see me because she had begun shoplifting and found she couldn't stop. While she was telling me her story she was horrified at her behavior: "I could ruin our life," she said. "I can't believe I'm doing this, and I can't stop."

During the time we were getting to know each other I commented that I could imagine how having to always appear nice, appropriately dressed, and even tempered, no matter what the circumstances were, must be frustrating. I likened it to putting one's spontaneity into a closet and locking the door. We wondered together if her individuality was asserting itself through her shadow, or if her anger at feeling imprisoned in a public face needed to be heard more clearly. In a similar vein I wondered if the purpose of this compulsion might be to help her learn to recognize her uniqueness and live in a way that was more creative, clever, and risky. A story that began with feelings of shame and of being out of control and a thief was leading to a transformed perspective of life. As we began to plumb some of the aspects behind the shoplifting, our

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conversation very quickly moved away from despair and from her berating herself for her actions to the secret joy her thievery and the great risks she was taking were giving her. This was a breakthrough. Keep in mind that shame, though sometimes appropriate, is rarely transforming. By looking for the *meaning* in what she was doing, and understanding how much repressed vitality was being sublimated into living dangerously, her inner integrity began to deepen and very quickly her compulsion began to lift. The more she became aware of how her shadow—her repressed energy and possibilities—was rebelling against her suffocation of life, the easier it was for her to make the choices that would bring increased freedom and opportunities.

Thievery is an archetypal theme. Prometheus stole fire from the gods to bring light to human life. In primitive initiation rites the initiators stole the young men from their mothers to free them in order to become adults. And two thieves were crucified next to Christ, another symbolic connection between thievery and redemption or transformation.

Along these same lines I remember a man in his late fifties who was deeply troubled by his continuous and mortifying fantasies of falling in love with adolescent boys. Filled with guilt and fearful, he assured me he had been married for many years and even had grandchildren. While exploring his life I learned he was feeling much older and trapped than his years or health justified. He hated the idea of retirement but felt he would look foolish starting a new career or approach to life. His wife was excited about the prospect of retiring and looked forward to spending their time traveling. While he recognized that some men would relish this kind of life, he admitted that it held little interest for him. Yet he didn't want to tarnish his wife's dreams, especially when he had no other ideas about what to do.

Images of perversion quickly get our attention but they seldom mean that we're perverted. However, we might wonder in a case like this one what might have happened if the man had not looked into his unconscious for the message it was sending. Might he otherwise, in his desperation and confusion, have felt compelled

to act it out? We have seen in Robert Louis Stevenson's thoughtful and dramatic novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* how a respected physician represses his own dark side until it becomes strong enough as an alter ego to take over his personality. While most situations I have seen have neither been as extreme nor as critical, they can turn out unhappily, or even tragic, because someone refused to listen to his or her shadow.

There was, happily, another way for the man to look at what he honestly saw as a crisis for he had encountered another archetypal theme. For instance, the Greek god Zeus fell in love with the young man Gannymeade and made him immortal as his cupbearer. Old age longs for youth, vitality, and new potentials often pictured as a young person in dreams, myths, and stories. If we aren't growing psychologically and spiritually as we become older, an emotional or physical crisis will develop. Our refused potentials will challenge us. Thomas Mann focused his classic novel *Death in Venice* around this theme, where an older man dies pitifully with images of love for a youth he's seen on a beach in his mind.

Novels like *Death in Venice* and other forms of great art are filled with the dark shadowy aspects of human nature—grotesque figures, angry gods, jealous goddesses, debauchery, murdered saints, and bloody twisted crucifixes. Some of these figures, like the beast in the fairy tale "Beauty and the Beast," are redeemable. Other figures, such as the snake-haired Medusa whose countenance turned men to stone in Greek mythology, are not. Because evil is a reality, we have to deal very thoughtfully and carefully with our shadows and be sure to ask someone competent for help if this material gets too threatening.

If we study many of the classic authors such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Baudelaire, Hubert Sellby, and Sylvia Plath, we discover that they often tell the stories of our society's despised and outcast element. The voices from our shadows, whether illustrated in literature and fairy tales, or emanating from our dreams and symptoms, have something to teach us. We may often find that by giving attention and understanding to the messages from our shadows, they may transform and reveal new potentials for us.

The communications from our shadows and even clues as to how we can respond to them are often shown in fairy tales and myths. In one tale a princess may be required to kiss a loathsome frog in order to transform it into a prince. This story shows that in some cases we have to treat an unpleasant aspect of ourselves with love in order to redeem it. In another tale the transformation takes place when the princess angrily slams the hateful frog against the wall. This tale shows that anger can be as transforming as love in the right circumstances. In other examples a beggar may be a god in disguise, a pauper a prince whose throne has been usurped and who has to reconquer his kingdom. Snow White may be the unrecognized values of our hearts that need to take their rightful places in our kingdoms.

The prince who has lost his throne or the girl who has been disenfranchised like Cinderella may represent our potential for richer lives that include new possibilities, inner strength, uniqueness, and integrity. As we continue our journey through these pages you will see examples of these possibilities opening up.

Once you know more about your shadow, how you have hidden potentials both good and evil, you will have a better understanding of how human you are and how many strange, paradoxical things live within you. When you've met and accepted many of the strangers within yourself and dealt honestly with them, it will open your heart and attitudes when you invite *strangers* to your island in the outer world. You will rarely fear them. It's by knowing yourself that you'll find the antidote to hate and alienation both within and without.

Shadows into Substance

In the story language of the unconscious, Ulysses, Ivanhoe, and Robin Hood are, respectively, a king, the son of a king, and a noble knight who have suffered misfortunes. Eventually they triumph and restore a just balance within the domain—their respective homes, or realms, where their true identities will be recognized. Similarly,

in a Sumerian myth, Inanna, the queen of heaven, will journey into the underworld to meet her dark sister and return to the light with a new state of strength and understanding. In "Beauty and the Beast," Beauty is sent alone into the house of the Beast and is tempted to break her bargain and desert him. But the entire situation is transformed when she learns to honor loyalty, love, and compassion.

These archetypal stories represent patterns of inner transformation that signify growth and learning. The woman who was shoplifting met her Beast, the longing for her own strength, independence, and vitality that was being rejected and was therefore being expressed in a negative, frightening form. The man who was fantasizing about young men needed a new prince, a renewed sense of spirit and promise in his life. Most of these stories reflect a general identity crisis going on within us. The Ulysses who washed ashore on his homeland and failed to recognize it toward the end of *The Odyssey* was a far different Ulysses from the ambitious, cocky young man who had set sail for Troy two decades earlier.

Beginning the process of developing sacred substance is usually started by a crisis, by encountering some part of our shadows that sets up an inner or outer conflict. The encounters may be emotional difficulties such as anxiety, depression, marital discord; they may be about compulsions or addictions, or physical disorders such as heart troubles, infections, or fatigue. When we determine to treat our *selves* instead of our symptoms, it means we have to take a look into our unconscious if we really want our treatments to bring healing and new life. Crises and illnesses threaten the sense of order and the assumptions we've built up on our little islands. They threaten the secular substance we have built up, however falsely.

My life reached a turning point when I changed careers in my thirties. But this was in fact the fulfillment of a process that had started a couple of years earlier, when I became depressed. Searching myself and my life, with the stormy ups and downs, fears and excitements that attended my explorations, and facing the potential losses of love and security they might lead to, was my version of Ulysses' turbulent voyage through the Mediterranean.

Sometimes my process was difficult and unsettled; at other

times it was exhilarating. And, like any journey undertaken in rough weather, I often felt an impulse to turn back, a desire to seek comfort in the old home of my dreams or in a warm bed of certainty. It would have been easy to return to my old ways and to the symbols of success that I knew would be supported by the people close to me. But somewhere inside of me a voice was saying, "Yes, go back, and you'll suffer a heart attack within a decade." Deep inside I knew that going back wouldn't satisfy me. I later discovered that the mythic patterns supported my feeling. If the mythic searcher refuses the call to adventure he (or she) invites darkness upon himself. In modern life Jung refers to this act as a regressive restoration of the old way of life and appearances in the face of fear—an act that will result in living a hollow life.

Going forward to a new life does mean rejecting the falseness of the old, but the benefits we gain from our old lives are many and valuable and shouldn't be abandoned. Ulysses' ability as a cunning warrior and leader served him well during his ten years of odyssey, just as we learned many things as we formed our identities that we need to hold on to. The choice isn't "out with the old and in with the new." Though I didn't understand it initially, I realize now that my struggle to become successful in business gave me the foundation of confidence, strength, and courage that enabled me to take other risks, face crises, and make additional life changes.

The trust in life and the confidence we build are like a safety net under a trapeze artist; as the artist swings from pole to pole, life to life, the net is there to break a fall. The wonderful thing is that the net is within ourselves. It is our skills and spirit that carry us over to the other pole. That is how we are able to keep growing, moving from one way to another—by taking the best parts with us.

Once the wife of the minister I was working with understood her shoplifting and how much she enjoyed risk and danger, she became more able to risk being herself and face the potential criticism she feared. When the man who had the fantasies convinced himself that it's OK for a man his age to act with the same trust in life as a younger person and to face the future as one full of potential, he was able to come to an understanding with himself and his wife

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about how he had to live into the rest of his life with his whole heart. And when, at last, Ulysses ends his odyssey, he is a much more complete man of wisdom and maturity than he was as a clever young king and soldier.

Robert Johnson uses the analogy that there is a plan, like the one for a great cathedral or temple, based on the unique potentials within each of us. As years pass the edifice of our lives rises stone by stone if we continue to work and grow. The process takes a lifetime, but as we near the end of our journey and the final blocks go into place, it is only then the magnificent vision of the architect is revealed. We are building our lives and we have to face the challenges and changes that the process of inner growth requires to reap its joy and contentments.