

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

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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PART I:
Breaking the Mold and
Seeking a Path

Wherever a man goes, men will pursue him and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate oddfellow society.

—Henry David Thoreau

(Excerpt)

CHAPTER 2 (Excerpt)

The Call to Transformation

One thing I did learn from Freud, which has never diminished and has indeed grown with the years, is a habit of careful observation, of heedfulness, in my relationship with the rest of the world. To learn to see what is right in front of one's nose, that is the task and a heavy task it is.

—Robertson Davies

We begin our lives saturated in the belief patterns “everyone” considers normal. The word normal by its nature describes things based on the characteristics of a group. If enough people think it or do it then it’s considered normal. Parents, relatives, teachers, religious leaders, politicians, and the media cooperate in training us to be normal, to value what society values and to want to become functional, productive members of our consumer-oriented middle class. Although many families and religious groups may have alternative ideas, our mainstream culture still stresses this central theme as a way of life. Most of us are proud when our children excel in their honors classes and in competitive sports. While they’re learning to base their self-esteem on the results of competition and achievement, we feel affirmed as parents if they do well. Our families and ever-widening circles of friends, well-wishers, and colleagues want us to assume the roles and characteristics they think are normal—as loving husbands, dutiful wives, caring partners, ambitious hardworking colleagues, all with a positive attitude. On the one hand these pressures help us grow up, form identities, find work, gain some security in the world, or decide security isn’t so important to us. For most of

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us it feels good to be accepted, worthwhile, and part of a community. Having friends, going to parties and family gatherings, organizing cookouts, participating in “the wave” at the ball field, attending soccer and Little League games, and celebrating holidays, anniversaries, birthdays, and promotions join together to enrich our lives.

On the other hand enjoying being part of a community or family has a price. If we accept their values without sufficiently questioning them and cultivating our individuality, we may never learn how to develop our own value structures and live in a manner that satisfies us rather than those around us. These remarks remind me of Wade, whose story was told to me by a concerned associate. He described Wade as a wealthy, but deeply unhappy orthopedic surgeon whose joy in life came from playing tennis, watching sports events on his giant TV screen, and drinking. Wade’s father was an appeals attorney who wanted his son to follow in his footsteps and have a good life. As an attorney in a highly specialized field he felt his career was personally and financially rewarding. Wanting the best for his son, he groomed him to become a physician and sent him to the finest schools. In medical school one of Wade’s favorite mentors convinced him that becoming a surgeon suited his talents and would be financially rewarding. Now in his mid-forties we can say that Wade is very rich and very poor. He is emotionally alone. His children by his first wife consider him harsh and distant; they don’t like him and they rarely visit. His second wife is frustrated and depressed. At a recent party Wade’s colleague suggested he try analysis. “Why?” Wade retorted. “Perhaps understanding yourself might bring some important changes for you, make your life more enjoyable,” his friend responded. “I don’t have time to contemplate my navel,” Wade snapped. “A life that has to be examined is already off track, and my life is on track!” he continued as he moved away from his friend.

When we simply accept the roles and values that are handed to us, we don’t think we have to be responsible for the consequences of how we’re living, or to think through what they mean. It’s easier for Wade to blame the kids, the times, his wife, the litigious nature

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of our society, the disrespect of insurance companies for physicians, the decline of values in society, or anything else when his life isn't suiting him.

Society and its subgroups are always seeking to define our lives, and as long as we meet their expectations and don't get sick or break down, they will reward us with their model of the good life. Wade, who makes money faster than he can spend it, is our social character's idea of success. But the longer we live by external definitions, the less *personal* our choices become and the more impotent we begin to feel. Often we end up living cover stories authored by others that cause us to avoid the possibility of creating our own stories. Wade's perfunctory dismissal of his colleague's well-meant overture is typical, and even understandable: We want to get away from the few people we know who may actually challenge us to take a more honest look at who we are. I sympathize with Wade because I faced the same dilemma. But I also feel sorry for him because he's missing the chance to grow intellectually, spiritually, and lovingly during some of the most important years in his life.

Whoever we are—whether teachers, ministers, doctors, lawyers, homemakers, or something else—it can be alarming to sense even for a moment that there might be a disparity between the cover stories we're living and our inner realities. Getting to know ourselves, *really* know ourselves, can be frightening. Scary dreams can reflect our self-alienation by being filled with wars, storms, and violent or seductive figures, and our fantasies may follow story lines of grandiose sex, fun, success, and power. The startling pictures, metaphors, and plots used by our unconscious minds in their response to how we are living are frequently upsetting because they picture people and events that may be far from what we consider normal.

Eventually Wade's wife, Carolyn, surprised me by coming to see me, not so much because of her husband, but because she had a dream in which she and Wade were asleep in their bedroom and an angel awakened her by touching her shoulder and saying, "Wake up and get out of bed. It's going to be struck by lightning." This dream was so forceful that she wanted to talk to someone who was trained in understanding dreams. I wasn't surprised when she

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reported that Wade thought dreams were worthless and seldom remembered them. "He does have nightmares though. Once or twice a month he wakes up thrashing and terrified. In the last one a vampire was holding him like a lover in an embrace he couldn't break free of. But my dreams are usually different," she continued. "In my last one I was back in college. I was late for an exam and couldn't find the building it was supposed to be in. I've had several of these kind of dreams lately. Once I couldn't read the exam questions because they were in a foreign language."

"Questions scare me," she elaborated after a little prompting. "We have a great house, a great life. Wade financed my business. We should have everything we want. But whenever I let myself think, the questions come, What the hell kind of life is this? Am I happy with Wade? Why does he criticize me so much? Is he drinking too much? How much is too much? Why am I so frightened? I wasn't when I was younger. Why am I depressed? Why do I feel so damn lonely? You see why I don't like questions. They can wreck my life."

Like most of us, Carolyn would rather pretend her life is working than face the potential trauma of changing it. Change for her means that she will have to set it in motion herself and face the consequences. She may have to tell Wade she's unhappy, that she's now working in analysis, and that they both need help. She knows this conversation will threaten him and make him furious.

It takes more courage than we realize to look for help when our lives aren't working or satisfying us. Carolyn has courage and it's by no means rare. Those who find it generally discover self-knowledge liberates our minds and spirits, and there is meaning in our emotions that illuminates the reality of our lives.

We all know that we have a darker nature, that we can be cruel, ruthless, aggressive, and antisocial. Generally we're taught to suppress and control these characteristics and if we don't, society will attempt to control them for us. What's more important in terms of getting to know ourselves is to rediscover the more positive and creative aspects we learned to deny early on because people close to us disapproved of them or approved of other things.

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For instance if we think about Wade as a child, it isn't too hard to imagine his legally trained father telling him to stop daydreaming and study. "You'll need the grades to get in the right college." With such pressure and approval shaping his life I doubt if little Wade ever had much of a chance to fantasize about being something else—an artist, a professional tennis player, or a teacher. If he ever expressed such a thought I can easily hear his parents saying, "You'll never amount to anything that way." "Get real." "You won't make any money doing that." No matter how independent or rebellious we may have appeared while we were growing up, approval and disapproval structured much of what we activated or denied in ourselves.

We learned early to see life through the lens of our generation's social character as it was interpreted by the groups and influences that guided our development. Even the parents who said, "You can be anything you want to be" didn't really seem to mean it because they still wanted us to fit in, be successful, and have high self-esteem. Our desire to be reclusive, write, paint, act, muse, work with our hands, or lose ourselves in spiritual pursuits often ended up being denied due to the influences of well-meaning teachers and parents. Children at the extremes—those who are highly introverted and like to be alone and reading all of the time, or those who are very extroverted and want to talk and interact continuously—feel the shame of being unable to measure up to the moderately extroverted, achievement-oriented, compliant model rewarded in our elementary schools.

I've known a number of people who illustrate these points and you probably have, too. One of them is Debra, who is intensely introverted and spiritual. She wanted to become a nun but her family was aghast at the idea, so she became a successful, but unhappy, therapist. Brian is another person who really wanted to be an artist but drove himself to become a well-known architect. And I think of Ariel, who yearned to be a set designer and work in the theater, but feared taking her creativity seriously. She got married and became a part-time interior decorator. Like many of us, Debra, Brian, and Ariel chose to live cover stories that left them with a sense of

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missed purpose and unfulfilled promise. In these kinds of situations we often think we're making responsible choices and are self-directed but this feeling is an illusion: Our actions are still being governed by the beliefs, values, and preconceptions that structured our formative years.

People like Debra, Brian, and Ariel show how we learn to deny our faith in ourselves and our creativity by the time we begin making career choices. When we overly rely on the conventional path into life, we give up not only our power, but also the urge to understand ourselves better and to make our lives ongoing creations. The world we live in still believes that the sensible approach to life means to have a "cool head." Passionate emotions such as hate, rage, anger, and even passionate love are seen as dangerous states that can easily get us into trouble. But avoiding them out of fear can also be dangerous because we can't be fully alive without them.

Can you imagine how different Debra's life might have been if just one relative had understood her passion and encouraged her, "If you think you love it, give it a try." Or how Brian's choices could have been different had an inspiring teacher been able to explain to him the fury that drove Picasso, or that compelled Cezanne to paint straight through his mother's funeral even though he loved her dearly. And how might Ariel's life have been different if her mother shared Thoreau's skepticism of group values and had urged her to march to her "own music?" Creativity and creative living depend upon our emotional relationships to life. They require passion and persistence and the ability to respond to life instinctually and with the heart as well as the head.

Maturity means that we can experience the power of our full range of emotions. Emotional maturity means we experience vitality, strength, and the enjoyment of becoming who we are. When we don't feel, can't or won't feel, we are usually depressed. We have become overwhelmed and trapped by fear, anxiety, and live like a deer immobilized in the headlights of a speeding car. If we are seeking self-knowledge, emotions are among our best teachers. Anger can be a call to action or it may teach us where our boundaries are, alert us to when they're being violated, or when we're not being

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treated with respect. It urges us to respect ourselves, to stand up for ourselves and our values. Emotions usually become destructive only after they've been stuffed back within us to accumulate in some wounded inner space we try to keep buried. We saw this in the drunken anger of Wade, the rich but miserable surgeon whose bottleneck of feelings hurt and frightened his wife and damaged his marriage. Very likely his anger came from a lifetime of feelings and personal integrity being denied. However, if Wade was willing to explore the meaning in his anger, as some of my examples later in this book do, it could open a passageway to growth and change. Carolyn denied her anger as well and covered it with her depression. But, as we'll see in later chapters these destructive feelings and our emotional suffering can actually become transformative in the right circumstances.

Fearing Change

When we surrender ourselves to the values of our culture and the limited perspective society considers normal, our lives can become emotionally and creatively grim. However, individuation and growth in self-knowledge bring hope because they join our efforts to grow up and become effective members of society into an overall pattern of personal development that goes far beyond what it means to be normal. This process turns our crises into epiphanies, our struggles into inner teachers, and our mistakes into potentials for change that all lead to a more complete and satisfying life. It also teaches us to honor our difficulties and realize that our ability to experience joy is measured by our willingness to search for meaning in our suffering.

There is an important point that can be made about success and its relationship to the individuation process. It's summarized by a wonderful statement that Jung made that says, "If you do the wrong thing with all your heart you will end up at the right place." I believe that he means we're better off pursuing the wrong path as hard as we can than becoming lost in indecision or working