

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 3 (Excerpt)

At the Crossroads

Do you remember how life yearned out of childhood toward the “great thing”? I see that it is now yearning forth beyond the great thing toward the greater one.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

From Breakdown to Breakthrough

Sometimes it's very difficult to understand what's happening to us. Losing control of our emotions can be a frightening experience. One morning Janice, who had been a sixth grade teacher for seventeen years, began weeping in her classroom and was unable to stop. One of her friends brought her to my office, hoping I'd be free during the lunch hour.

Choking back her tears Janice said, "I'm a fake! I'm supposed to be a professional, but, but . . . I just can't do it anymore. I can't get my life together. I yell at my own children, my marriage stinks, and I'm supposed to know what to do about it. Well I don't. I don't like my husband. I don't like myself. I hate the way I look. I hate my body. I feel stupid and the harder I try to . . . fix everything, the worse it gets." And the tears began to flow again.

As you would expect, Janice was scared and ashamed of breaking down in public. She was also shocked at the vehemence of the exclamations that poured out as soon as she sat down in my office. A little later when we were discussing the anger in her outburst, we discovered it had a deeper dimension. She said, "It seems like the whole world conspires to make me feel bad about myself. Every time I pass a magazine rack I see all those articles about losing weight, improving your sex life, looking attractive, feeling empowered, and being happy, organized, and successful. Just seeing them makes me feel like a total failure, and I hate myself. Sometimes I even buy the magazines, read the articles, and then feel even worse."

I've met many women who share Janice's distress over the messages the media sends to them. And yet, we know better—or at least we should. For in spite of all the research and best-selling books that remind us about the negative effects our culture's messages have on women and adolescent girls, the stream of them continues—preying on their desire to feel good about themselves and turning life into a process of never feeling good enough to be satisfied.

After a few days when Janice returned to school, many of her colleagues asked how she was doing. Several of them even shared their stories of depression, marital tensions, and experiences in

therapy. These gestures of compassion and understanding were precious to Janice, because thanks to these friends she no longer felt like a total failure and all alone. The openness of a few friends also made our work together easier because they helped her realize that many competent people in our society are having similar difficulties.

When Janice was able to ease up a bit on blaming herself, she was able to begin exploring her anger in all its fullness. Previously, she had only directed it inwardly. Now as she retraced her childhood, for the first time she began to get angry at her parents. She resented the way her father had criticized her as a young girl, demanding good grades and behavior but rarely rewarding her with praise, warmth, or understanding. And, as she grew into a young woman, her developing femininity seemed to scare him rather than please him. She also resented her mother's never-ending concern with appearances. The more Janice talked the more she realized she was discovering new things about herself. In the past she had described her early life as an average childhood. Now she was beginning to understand that it was full of life-shaping events that seeded the direction of her life's story. In fact, the more she learned about herself the more she began to grudgingly respect her depression as a turning point that forced her to begin the efforts to open up her life. She decided to talk to her family doctor and with his help, she requested disability leave from her job. Janice wanted the time to recover, which meant time to fully understand what her "breakdown" was all about.

Learning to value her depression didn't mean she immediately began feeling better. There were still days of tears and of not getting off the couch. Days when she would proclaim, "It's no use. I'm ruining my life and my children." And, "I'm too old to change and God knows nobody else is going to." But she remained in analysis, coming to see me twice a week and in every session she spoke from and about her depression. We lived in it together and never treated it like a disease.

During that time I simply listened to her with interest and acceptance. We also discussed the memories, feelings, and frustrations

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she was discovering as she reminisced and explored her psyche. Like most of us, she knew at some level she'd held in many feelings during her life. But when they began to emerge she was surprised to find out how far back in her life they went and how strong they were. While her feelings were coming out on their own I urged her to pay careful attention to them. I simply wanted her to appreciate and share in the previously unacknowledged part of her story that was now coming into expression. And as we went along I observed the slow, subtle shift in tone and vitality that was taking place in her.

In her lowest moments Janice frequently said she should never have become a teacher. I didn't take her statement literally because I realized how much being a teacher had meant to her previously and how respected she was in her community. Then one day she said, "I'm a good teacher and I know that. And I need to learn, too. I need to find my center and stay balanced, and not be thrown by all the pressures of accountability and the threats of complaining parents when their children aren't doing well. Or when they're not doing enough. Or when it's too much." Janice raked her slender fingers through her hair. "I always feel I'm doing something wrong. That it's my fault."

Janice uncovered piece after piece of the sacrifices she'd made to become a good teacher, a choice she made initially because she couldn't figure out anything else she wanted to do. Early in her career she wanted to impress her supervisors, and this desire led her to teach children what they needed to know to do well on standardized tests rather than what she thought was important for their educational foundation. The more she let her need to please and impress authority figures dominate her judgment, the more she regretted her career choice. But at the same time she couldn't help talking about her concern for children and our educational system. Janice was finding out that deep down she really is a teacher. She was also recognizing that her anxieties about having her classes excel on test scores, pleasing the parents of the children she taught, and impressing her school's administration were stealing the enjoyment from her work. While she was discovering that teaching was

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her heartfelt vocation, it was becoming obvious that the anxious, perfectionistic aspects in her were being replaced. She was becoming a stronger, more independent, and less driven woman.

Early in her depressed state Janice could only see her experience as a breakdown, the ending of a familiar life and the collapse of long-held values and viewpoints about how life is supposed to be. However, as feelings poured out of her and she began to get a sense of her life as a story, she saw that her depression was forcing her to broaden her perspective and to become more complete as a person. In reality it had made her stop and reassess her life. It was telling her that things weren't going well at all and she had better find out why they weren't and how she really felt about the way her life was affecting her. To her surprise she discovered that being a hardworking perfectionist was a condition driven by anxiety and instead of being a strong character trait it was destroying her, while working with her depression was strengthening her and giving her a new sense of self-confidence and solidity.

Janice is continuing to work and grow. Her story thus far shows that no matter how ashamed and alone we feel in our difficulties, we are not so isolated after all. And that the expectations and pressures of our society exacerbate our pain. Furthermore, Janice's breakdown marked the necessary end to an old way of life and the potential for a new one. The experience became its own teacher and a preparation for change.

