

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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CHAPTER 10 (Excerpt)

Sacred Selfishness— Learning to Love Ourselves

I have always tried to understand “love your neighbor as yourself” because it seems so easy for us to treat ourselves harshly and with neglect. I believe the search for peace and joy begins with truly loving ourselves.

—Massimilla M. Harris

Nikos Kazantzakis’s grand novel *Zorba the Greek* begins with a young bookish writer traveling south to the island of Crete. On the last segment of his voyage he spots someone who is his opposite—the grizzled, robust man of action Alexis Zorba—and is immediately fascinated by him. Up to this point the story is similar to Andersen’s fairy tale “The Shadow,” where the young scholar travels south and becomes interested in his shadow. But in the warmer climate the young man in the fairy tale loses his shadow in a manner that eventually leads him to despair and finally destruction. The outcome of Kazantzakis’s story is just the opposite.

Zorba refers to the bookish young man who he has convinced to hire him as “boss,” and it becomes apparent that Boss is the narrator of the story. Boss and Zorba are clearly two completely different kinds of men. Boss is shy and retiring, a man of books, while Zorba is a strong, earthy man educated by experience. We can see this story as an allegory, where Zorba represents the qualities Boss has repressed into his shadow. When we meet someone who personifies helpful aspects of our shadows, we usually find that person fascinating and yet suspicious and intimidating. Interestingly,

however, Boss overcomes his doubts and accepts his attraction to Zorba and pursues his friendship. As the book unfolds it becomes the story of a friendship that grows into love instead of a story of estrangement like we saw in the fairy tale. The journey of Boss and Zorba's developing friendship is a long one, beautifully written and also made into one of those rare films that actually brings a great novel to life. Even though Zorba is moody, sometimes intimidating, and not always easy to understand or get along with, he initiates Boss in the experience of being fully alive. He teaches him to plunge wholeheartedly into living, to experience love, to accept suffering, to take risks, and to laugh at failure. He explains that "life is trouble" and that women must be loved.

Zorba teaches Boss everything the shadow could have taught the scholar in Andersen's fairy tale if they hadn't become separated. In his final bit of advice, Zorba tells Boss he needs a "little madness" to help him cut the string that binds him to his conventional attitudes. As the story approaches its end, Zorba looks at Boss and says, "I've never loved another man as much as I have you." And then Boss asks Zorba to teach him to dance before they part. In the book, Zorba looks at Boss when they've finished dancing and says, "Now that you, my boy, can dance as well and have learnt my language what shan't we be able to tell each other!"



"Love is difficult," the poet Rilke explains in contrast to the sentimental way we like to think of it. We prefer to believe that love brings happiness, ease, companionship, or at least security. And, if love is present there should be no explosions, sharp edges, or potholes in its course. But this perspective trivializes love, makes it shallow and frivolous because we know life isn't like that and so love can't be that way either. And yet we're always trying to make it light and easy, something that anyone can do without developing the strength, commitment, and character required by what Rilke described as "the most difficult of all our tasks."

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Love was demanding for Boss and Zorba. There were many times when Boss was skeptical of Zorba and he felt he was being taken advantage of. Zorba, too, had his moments of frustration with Boss's timid attitude and the distance from life he maintained. The growth of their friendship was a journey of getting to know, accepting, and learning from each other. The same pattern holds just as true when we are trying to learn how to love ourselves in a significant way. Cultivating self-love is also an odyssey with moments of difficulty and of joy. It's an excursion into knowing ourselves, learning to accept and deal with what we discover and how to relate to the new members of our "commonwealth," and struggling with our fear of allowing in a little madness to set us free.

Loving ourselves means recognizing how bound we are to practicality and convention like Boss, who nearly wept when he said, "As a child I had been full of mad impulses, superhuman desires, I was not content with the world. Gradually as time went by, I grew calmer. I set limits, separated the possible from the impossible, the human from the divine, I held my kite tightly, so that it should not escape." Boss, like all of us, learned to limit his imagination and the desires of his heart. The shadow qualities that Zorba pictures—his living from the heart—frees us from these bonds and opens us once again to joy. Years later when Boss reflects on his experiences with Zorba, he concludes that Zorba's purpose in his life was to create joy.

I often get the feeling that self-love is a taboo in our society, something we think of as forbidden, profane, or dangerous. We associate it with excess: We can't have just a little of it, or just enough either. It's all out, like shopping sprees and outlandish vacations. It's a misunderstood term that reflects how little we know about love. Self-love is the firm foundation that determines how strongly we can give love and receive love. Without it our structures of relationship will crumble under the pressure of the smallest storm. Self-love is neither selfish nor narcissistic. I have defined selfishness in its negative sense as being sickly, egotistic, and self-centered, a hunger for power and affirmation that uses others for self-serving ends. Narcissism is also like selfishness in its negative form. It is

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self-infatuation, an obsession that actually reflects an inability to love oneself or anyone else.

I've also defined *sacred selfishness* as a second kind of selfishness that represents the opposite pole of how we usually think of selfishness. Sacred selfishness means making the commitment to become people of *substance*, people who are filled with gold, who aren't hollow or filled with lead. It's a commitment to building the footings that will support our growing capacity to give and receive love. Sacred selfishness leads to what Emerson referred to as "character—a reserve force which acts directly by presence, and without means." We can see this kind of substance developing in Boss through Zorba's instruction. He taught Boss compassion by tenderly caring for a dying old woman who had grand illusions; cunning in the way he tricked a religious order into letting them use the monastery's land; courage in accepting the love of a beautiful widow and in recognizing his desire for her; ambition in the scheme he developed for harvesting the timber on Boss's land; to face death when the old lady died and when the widow was murdered; and finally to laugh when their plans for success failed. In each situation Boss learned to open and change himself and to engage in life in a new, more active way.

Growth is what life is about. And we must realize that when we're beginners in any new phase or activity, especially in something as difficult as the art of self-love; we must be willing to learn step-by-step, experience-by-experience. Otherwise it's too easy to fall into the popular way of thinking that there should be an easy answer, or that self-love can be a change in attitude rather than a journey. All too often we try to make ourselves think love should be easy, even exhilarating, because we've lost our ability to see that our dedication to a great work is rewarding no matter how challenging. Inner work is noble work and I've compared it to constructing a great cathedral or temple, a work that begins with building a solid foundation, and continues as we patiently add piece after piece. At the same time it has an ambitious design in mind, a purpose that combines work and beauty, and in this way it reaches beyond ourselves toward the heavens. Learning about love is also a great work,

and inner work performed in the spirit of individuation is an expression of love.

Thinking about life and love as great works reminds me of a story told by Rachel Naomi Remen. The story begins with three stonecutters being interviewed about building a cathedral in the fourteenth century. When the first stonecutter is asked what he's doing, he replies with bitterness that he's cutting stones into blocks, a foot by a foot by three-quarters of a foot. With a defeated look he complains he'll follow this tedious path for the rest of his life. The second stonecutter, who is performing the same work, answers with more warmth. He tells the interviewer he's earning a nice living for his family, which provides them food, clothes, and a loving home. The third stonecutter, however, responds to the interviewer's question with pride and exaltation that he's participating in the building of a great cathedral that will welcome people for a thousand years. Whether we have the vision to see that we're contributing to a great work often defines the spirit of our lives and whether we live them with a sense of joy and purpose.



Learning to know and dance with our shadows as Boss did with Zorba's help, leads us to the place where we can relate to what Carl Rogers said, "There is no experience that I have had that I cannot share with myself, no fear I cannot understand, no suffering that I cannot care about, because I am human." And yet, in a radically achievement-oriented, bottom-line society, it shouldn't be difficult to understand why we find it hard to have a deep sense of love for ourselves, to have compassion, to suffer with and accept our wounded parts, and to deal with our failures and transgressions with mercy, kindness, and forgiveness.

Many of us have personal secrets that fill us with an inner feeling of shame or inadequacy. We may be blaming ourselves for early failures, missed opportunities, choices made in youthful ignorance or desperation; for abuse we experienced, an unwanted pregnancy,

a period of promiscuity, a failed marriage, or some dishonest or cruel act. Out of fear we've learned to bottle up these events as secrets and push them deep into our unconscious. It may take so much energy to keep them there that we dare not risk putting much intensity into the rest of our lives. Such secrets deter our growth and may block it completely. But when it comes to loving ourselves it's worthwhile to remember that birth comes out of darkness. And in the ancient tradition of the alchemists, darkness was a necessary condition for purification and transformation. The secrets we've held in darkness need to be brought into the light so we can begin distilling them through our hearts until compassion can turn them into gold.

Larry was a man who had carried a devastating secret from childhood to midlife. When he was six years old, a group of older boys, one of whom was his next-door neighbor and baby-sitter, sexually abused and humiliated him. Then they terrorized him into silence. As a result of this experience he learned to live in fear. The more tightly he held his secret, the more he began to fear life in general. He became continually anxious, hypervigilant, a perfectionist who feared making any kind of mistake and being "found out." After blaming himself for being too cowardly to tell his parents, he, like many of us, eventually came to blame himself for the incident. One day when he was feeling particularly hopeless he broke down and told his wife the secret. She urged him to see me. Once the pressure was released, he was in time able to stop blaming himself and to begin feeling love and compassion for that small boy within himself who'd been so betrayed and brutalized. This is the gold that comes out of darkness—the complete alchemical transformation that happens when our secrets are processed in a healing manner. Slowly, Larry became more self-confident, less worried about mistakes, and able to stop seeing the world as a completely hostile place.

Glen was another person with a secret she'd held tightly for years. She had grown up in a troubled home where her father was distant and her mother was often sick with one complaint or another. The atmosphere was depressing and when Glen found herself out of its suffocating influences and in college, she went through a couple of years of wild partying and promiscuity until a pregnancy

scare jolted her into thinking more seriously about how she was living her life. Since then she's been both ashamed and afraid of her sexuality. As we worked together, Glen discovered that understanding that nineteen-year-old girl who needed love and affirmation, and who had no guidance or support from her family, was crucially important. Understanding led to compassion for that lovely, confused young girl, and compassion led to acceptance and forgiveness. The whole process gave her an increased sense of strength and confidence as she realized how much she had overcome during her life. Becoming free of her secret's power allowed Glen to learn how to genuinely express her love and not to fear her sexuality.

Secrets come in many sizes and we lock them away in closets or hidden rooms where they may grow more threatening over time. A man may conceal an early homosexual relationship, a woman an early abortion, or another man the clandestine theft of money from friends. Forgiving ourselves often sounds easy on the surface. But when it comes to the kind of things we keep secret, that we lock away because they scare us or consume our self-respect in the instant it takes to remember them—well, these things are hard to forgive, and they may even make us think we aren't worth forgiving. Self-forgiveness rests on being able to understand who we were at the time and what needs, hurts, fears, and deprivations were driving us. Only then may we meet ourselves with compassion and kindness. Growth in self-knowledge brings healing, and atonement in its deepest sense means to become "at one" with who we are, to reconcile through love with our essential selves. And, our capacity to do this leads us back to the ability to say, "I am human" in its full spiritual sense.



The Great Commandment in the Old and New Testaments that begins with "Love your neighbor as yourself" captures the complex nature of love. Our capacity to genuinely love anyone else is directly related to our ability to love ourselves. Living with self-love

means living with inner integrity, accepting our errors with grace rather than shame, supporting ourselves emotionally in difficult circumstances and when we have to sacrifice our immediate pleasure in the service of a deeper value. Admitting our mistakes promptly, apologizing, or acting quickly to heal problems we've caused rarely make anyone think less of us. And remembering our visions of life, the "cathedrals" that we're building, can support us through the periods when life is sad and difficult.

Love, whether of ourselves or someone else, also requires respect and courtesy and when these qualities are absent, the situation is based on power and not on love. If I drive myself like a machine no amount of self-indulgence equals love. When I am too demanding of others the same thing holds true. If I spend much time in self-criticism I'm not respecting myself. When I criticize other people relentlessly I'm not respecting them. And if I'm courteous to myself I provide an ambiance of feelings that honor the importance of my existence, and I honor other people by treating them courteously.

I love myself even knowing that there are parts in me I don't like, such as my rigidity, my aggressiveness, or my tendency to be sentimental at times. I love myself even when I know there are parts of me I'm still afraid of, the parts that sometimes give in too quickly, take on too much work, or haven't learned to say no well enough. I also love myself knowing there are parts of me I keep imprisoned, like my ability to make quick, scathing comments or to let my anger go into outbursts rather than tracking down what it is trying to tell me. But none of these things make me think I'm bad or immature. Instead, they mean I'm a complex person and that I contain all of our human potentials in some measure—including the ability to be self-destructive. I feel a kinship with some parts of myself, friendship with others, and attraction and fascination with a few. I can experience the whole range of love's possibilities within me, and I don't have to be all "nice," "together," and "normal" to care for myself.

The great paradox in this entire experience is that until we become people of substance capable of loving ourselves, we have little to offer other people and even our best efforts will carry a dark side

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with them. But when we become people of substance our presence will be giving and renewing wherever we go and will enhance the quality and richness of our work and relationships as naturally as flowers give off their scents.

Loving ourselves is a process and while there's no exact formula for it, we've seen that it can grow as we learn more about ourselves. In general self-love evolves in the same way love is built between people. It depends upon us taking the time to cultivate our inner relationships and to learn to understand ourselves better. We have to value our relationships with ourselves enough to use some of the methods we've discussed like journaling, dialoguing, and befriending our dreams. Getting to know our shadows is also necessary. Discovering our un-lived potentials, as Boss found in Zorba, opens us to enthusiasm and a clearer sense of how vigorously we can live. And, as we saw with Larry and Glen, facing our secrets and the self-understanding they can bring will lead to new self-acceptance.

If we don't learn to know ourselves, the best we can do is love a fantasy of who we are, a contrivance, an image or illusion. To know ourselves we must break free enough of the influences in our pasts to recognize the parts of ourselves we've denied and begin to accept our authentic characteristics—those we like and those we don't like.

Loving ourselves is a challenge of the heart to rediscover the feelings and the life we were forced to suppress in order to form our identities and begin our social development. To grow up, fit in, go to school, and eventually get a job we had to learn to deny much of our emotional lives. Yet it's our emotions—fear, anger, joy, and sorrow—that connect us to the experience of being alive, and alert us when our heartfelt values are being touched. The capacity to love in any form depends upon our emotional awareness. Our feelings do more however than connect us to life. They hold the key to living a life of depth, full of imagination, animation, and an awareness of being close to all life.