

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 7 (excerpt) Beginning the Search for Personal Substance

We do not grow absolutely, chronologically. We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another, unevenly. We grow partially. We are relative. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present, and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present. We are made up of layers, cells, constellations.

—Anaïs Nin

Midlife as a New Beginning

A few years ago, Rob, who had the dream I mentioned earlier, came to me with an interesting situation. He was a big man with square shoulders who carried himself with the confidence of someone who'd built his own business. When he began explaining his situation he seemed energetic and interested in the situation he felt trapped in. "I'm scared. I feel vulnerable," he said. "A few weeks ago my best friend fell into a one-night stand with a woman who had been throwing herself at him. Then as soon as they had sex, she went home and described the whole event to her husband. Now he's threatened my friend. His wife and kids are devastated, and his

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life is wrecked. I'm not really unhappy," he continued, "but I feel like something is missing in my life. I could see myself making the same silly mistake my friend did. I don't dream and plan for the future anymore, I don't feel very much enthusiasm about anything, and now I'm afraid of what I might fall into to fill this void."

Years ago while Rob was starting his business with his wife, Tina, his life had been very exciting. They had lived cheaply, but it didn't matter because they were working and dreaming of their future together. As his business grew they had three children, a boy and two girls. After the children became school age, Tina began her own career as a freelance writer although she also still handled most of Rob's advertising copy.

Rob had decided early in his life that he wanted to be successful and he figured out how to play the game to get there. In fact, he mastered it. Initially he worked for a large company after college and quickly discovered he disliked working for someone else and being bound by the framework of a corporate structure. However, he stuck it out for several years in order to learn enough about the business to help him feel confident that he had the knowledge and connections to strike out on his own. By the time I met Rob, he'd done a fine job of developing what I've called secular substance, a place of esteem and value in society.

Like most of us, Rob had to focus intently on building his life in early adulthood in order to achieve his ambitions. In other words he had to narrow his awareness of what life is about, identify with collective values of success at work and at home, and become respected in his business and community from a conventional point of view.

What had caught Rob by surprise was the erroneous general belief that few major changes are expected of us once we reach adulthood. This notion promotes that we pilot our own planes into a social airspace, and once we reach cruising altitude, we switch our lives onto autopilot. Oh yes, Rob had heard of midlife crises but in his mind they were storms and turbulence that happened to other people. Rob, like so many of us cocooned in the safety of our secular substance, did not understand that life is an evolving process from

beginning to end and that many of the changes we have to make in adulthood come just when we think we have life figured out. Rob was facing a midlife transition just as necessary for his growth as the struggle for identity likely was during his adolescence. In other words, we never stop growing.

Rob's dream signified the tumultuous inner landscape that he and most of us confront when it's time for us to let go of old identities, values, and views of success that have developed and served us since childhood. Letting go of them doesn't mean abandoning them, however. It means they have to leave the center stage and become part of a much larger personality that's being born.

In Rob's dreams the bulldozers that were clearing the woods away from him in his childhood home were preparing the ground for new construction. Perhaps losing the trees and the sanctity of a childhood home required that he paid a price in giving up some of his nostalgia for the old ways that comforted him, or it could have represented a kind of loss of innocence that meant his growth had to be intentional and he couldn't just rely on nature. However, Rob was upset in the dream because powerful forces were at work and he wasn't in control of them. And, he couldn't reach the police who might have been able to enforce the conventional social values on which he previously depended.

In order to make his midlife transition, Rob had to find the courage to face deeper needs and discover the answers to them within himself. He had to face the fragility of his self-esteem and how much of it depended on his being successful and earning recognition, and how he often used this recognition and the financial rewards that came with his position as substitutes for feeling loved. Of course, he had previously hidden these needs even from himself, but they had often fueled his potency and potential as a businessman, while keeping him emotionally childlike, in the incessant way he competed with friends, made demands of his children, and related to women, including Tina, by either idealizing or denigrating them.

If we have found ourselves in a similar situation in our own lives, this is the point where we discover there really is a hole in this game we've mastered—and if we learn something about the

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psychology of this transition then our discovery should become *freeing* rather than threatening. This is a good thing—and a good time in our lives. That’s the joy of it. And, because we have the gift of living longer today, we have the ability to live lives not of regret, but lives that allow us to use this work and wisdom in the world of careers and relationships. Who am I really? is a question that can’t only be answered, but maybe for the first time in history for large numbers of people actually *lived*.

Yet, we all know transformation and a renewed future don’t come without a price, without work and commitment. Rob wasn’t afraid of working, however, because he’d learned from building his business that while such a process can be scary and difficult at times, it can also be exciting and rewarding. As Rob and I continued talking and the surface issues were replaced by the more substantive thoughts and feelings he had been avoiding, his mood darkened. He sat back in his chair and quietly told me how difficult his success had been at times, how it had forced him to do some things he wasn’t proud of or to rationalize doing things he wouldn’t have normally done—how he had lost much of his lightness.

I knew I had to look for a way to hear and understand Rob’s darker actions without judging him. I listened carefully to his experiences as he told me how at one time when his business was in financial trouble he’d overbilled several large companies and how he’d gone for months not paying invoices, claiming they were lost, asking for proof of delivery of the merchandise on the invoices, anything to drag out the time before paying them. He also felt he’d been cold and had rationalized decisions he knew had hurt people as he tried to move ahead. In the large firm he worked for after college, his boss had mentored him generously and invested a lot in Rob’s training and felt betrayed when Rob left and went out on his own. He’d disciplined employees at times, cut their pay when business was difficult, and been slow to give raises on occasion without considering the personal circumstances in their lives. In addition, he believed some of his loyal employees had felt hurt during the early years of his business because he’d demanded a great deal from them without giving them much recognition for how valuable they were.

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More than that, he was aware of the pained look in his children's eyes when he had missed some of their important moments in sports and school. "Hypocritically," he said, "I rationalized that I was doing all of this work for them, for their college and the family's future. The truth is I was doing most of it for me. I need to be successful and I love it."

Rob reacted first to these honest revelations by feeling pain and guilt—pain that beneath the surface, he was greedy and self-centered, a bad person. Whenever we confront the hard truths about ourselves we normally prefer to deny, we naturally take it on ourselves. We feel low, unworthy, horrible, but in fact none of these realities mean that we are bad people. Rather we are good people encountering our own realities, our shadows—in Rob's case, the negative aspects of himself that he hid beneath his good social face and didn't allow into the way he saw himself.

It is crucial to accept our encounters with our shadows because doing so educates us about ourselves. For example, Rob realized his darker characteristics. He also saw how determined he'd been to be successful and that a force was driving him that was stronger than he'd recognized. New insights like Rob's are important for all of us because they ground the way we see ourselves and engender a true sense of humility. If Rob accepts the existence of the aspects of himself he doesn't like, that there is a part of him that can be desperate, cold, power oriented, and deceitful, this awareness will balance and strengthen his personality. Then Rob's actions and productivity will take on a different character. A good person who understands the power of his (or her) dark side is more human, more secure in his person, and paradoxically therefore more open to compassion, joy, and love. Facing the negative parts of ourselves is the first step on the path to developing the sacred substance that comes from knowing ourselves. And only then can we truly understand the value of sacred versus sickly selfishness.

There was still a deep level of the shadow Rob needed to explore. As a child he had felt loved by his parents but never safe and emotionally secure. They had taught him the "reality" of this world as they saw it, which they perceived as a vicious place. In order to

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prepare Rob for it, they were demanding and critical. Rob's father, a middle-level federal employee who made a bureaucrat's living, complained for years about how unrecognized he was, how stupid his bosses were, and how prejudiced they were against him for his ability to "see through them." As a result of this indoctrination, Rob closed off parts of himself early in his childhood. One of these areas was his need to feel loved, understood, and appreciated for who he was. This closure hampered his ability to be open to intimacy later in his life, to let himself be fully known by the people important to him. Deep within himself, beneath the confidence he'd earned by becoming successful, he still had trouble trusting life and other people—he had a lurking suspicion that something bad might happen or that the people he trusted and loved would ultimately let him down or betray him.