
Chapter 11 (Excerpt)

LOVE AND WHOLENESS

We can harness the energy of the winds, the seas, the sun.
But the day man learns to harness the energy of love,
that will be as important as the discovery of fire.

—PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, “A SONG OF HOPE IN A CHANGING WORLD”

“**B**eauty and the Beast” was a challenging story for me during my younger years because it lacked the more familiar fairytale characters that I knew. Without a witch, a wicked stepmother, a wolf or even a frog, it seemed bleak. As a child the intuitive message I picked up was that if I was good, kind, and gentle, I would be loved and thereby be turned into a “prince”—that is, someone with a commanding presence who is appreciated and admired. During my midlife passage I took another look at this tale. From a psychological perspective, the Beast, who had initially seemed like an unfortunate, kindly fellow to me as a child, has a darker side to his personality. He demanded everything—the father’s daughter and her complete devotion—all for the price of an eternally blooming rose.

This familiar story—in its original telling, and not its film incarnation—begins as a merchant father is leaving his three daughters for a long trip. Two of them ask for gifts of jewelry upon his return, but the youngest requests only a rose, a simple rose. On his way home the father is dismayed because it is winter and a rose is difficult to find. Eventually he sees a dark castle with its doors open, no one about and a large garden of blooming roses.

As the hapless merchant picks a small bud a monster instantly appears. The merchant begs for mercy, and the monster agrees to spare him on the condition that he will give up his daughter to become the Beast's bride. Back in the village, this lovely daughter enjoys the rose that never dies. But soon she has to keep her father's promise and go to live with the Beast.

The monster is kind, gentle, and generous with her. A few months pass and the girl misses her father so deeply that she feels compelled to visit him. The Beast cautions her that he will die if she fails to return to him, but the girl stays away a long time visiting her father. Finally she returns and finds the Beast dying in the rose garden. Moved to tears, she consents to marry him. At that point he is transformed into a prince; he had previously been turned into a beast by an evil witch.

This story shows how the simple desire for love, in contrast to other more worldly goods, begins our initiation into life. Life is like the beast; it is demanding and requires sacrifice and our full devotion if it is to become loving and transforming. It means that we must leave the safety of home, unconscious living, and the security of conventional values, or we run the risk of a dying life based on the safety of our past. The story reminds me of the many times that Joseph Campbell said we must learn "to live joyfully in the midst of the sorrows of the world." It also reminds me that if we embrace life with love, it never fades or withers and will reward us with a greater capacity for wholeness, wisdom, and compassion.

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Sensuous feelings expressed through our touch, hearing, and taste open our sensitivity to ourselves. Our touch becomes more alive. Our hearing recognizes how important the words and sounds of love are. We become sensitive to our partner's every response through the exquisite varieties of contact and the warmth of closeness that can rise in intensity beyond our ability for words. We can grasp our partner's uniqueness while also feeling in these moments that he or she embodies the essence of the world. Through the other's humanness, we participate in the life force of the universe and our boundaries are pushed to their limits. Yet everything remains intensely personal as the center of our being is touched. It is infused with life energy until it can no longer contain it. Then orgasm explodes the shell of the personal, and we experience another dimension of consciousness. Our vibrating center becomes the center of the world—this is a spiritual experience.

But it doesn't have to stop there. By opening our senses to the wonder and beauty of the world, the spirit in matter becomes alive in everything. It is alive in nature, in what we eat, drink, wear and listen to. Living becomes an art. Sensitivity also teaches us that we must become selective and discriminating, learning to avoid things that offend, diminish and dull us. This may sound simplistic on paper, but it is actually a difficult approach to life. Yet this is a journey where desire doesn't stagnate, spirituality doesn't rigidify, and love doesn't become buried in sentimentality.