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## The World's Best Lover

By Trebbe Johnson

Four years ago, when I was 50 years old, I fell in love with a young man who was assisting on a wilderness rites of passage program that I was leading in the mountains of southwestern Colorado. The force of this unexpected, unsearched-for attraction was so compelling that it seemed to me there must be some way of exulting in what was happening.

Back home, walking in the woods behind our house, I wrestled with my options. I could sneak off and have an affair with this man, indulge in deceit, guilt, and the likelihood of destroying a marriage I was truly happy in. That I would not do. Another approach was simply to deny the whole thing and say to myself: <sup>1</sup>I'm married, this is wrong. I will not think of it again.<sup>2</sup> But how could I shut my heart to such an upheaval of longing and allurements? It would have seemed like the worst kind of betrayal of myself and my work, which focused on fearlessly exploring all parts of the essential self. And anyway, even though I would not enter into an extramarital affair, I certainly did not believe that monogamy meant refusing even to acknowledge the occasional sweet sting of Eros's arrow. A third choice was to view the whole event as a psychological issue, to identify the man who captivated me as someone on whom I was projecting my own inner needs, and to tunnel in for some serious work on myself.

I chose a fourth way. I decided to follow the trail of the passion itself. Actually, it was more of an imperative than a decision, for what I was experiencing made me feel as if I had been ripped wide open, breached by longing. I felt that what I really yearned for was to fall into the embrace of some great force, to communicate with unknowable mystery, to know as my lover not a human man, but the whole world. So began my quest for the inner Beloved, a concept (known by different names) that runs through the myths of diverse cultures, shows up in world religions as a metaphor for the search for God, has inspired ecstatic poets from Sufis to John Donne, and features in Jungian psychology.

The poet Rumi wrote <sup>3</sup>There is some kiss we want with our whole lives.<sup>2</sup> The <sup>3</sup>kiss<sup>2</sup> we want is a sense of oneness with our self and our surroundings. We long to be at home wherever we go, to be in love with the moment, to engage passionately with the people we meet and the things we do. We long for a personal connection with some force that is greater than ourselves call it God, the Goddess, a Higher Power, Earth, the Life Force, quantum physics, the Tao that transcends our understanding and inspires us to create ourselves beyond our perceived limitations.

Our guide to the fulfillment of this yearning is what I learned to call the Beloved, the inner presence who draws us forth toward our own becoming, who is felt in the blood and with the heartbeat, heard in nuggets of intuition, creative inspiration, and a sensible delight in who we are. The Beloved is the irresistible force of attraction that calls us into the unknown and onto the path meant just for us, making itself known as a vividly felt, deeply personal, always beguiling companion in the life of a man or woman. Allurement the compelling force that entices us to hurl our energy into

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what evokes our curiosity and fascination is the spice the Beloved holds before our noses to get our attention. It coaxes us to break out of our old and comfortable routines and take a bold leap in a new direction for the sake of something we are falling in love with, be it a person, a place, a social cause, a project, an idea.

Does every intriguing invitation that whets our appetite come from the Beloved? Not at all. The question to ask if there is any doubt is whether the act we contemplate brings out the best in ourselves and somehow ennoble others. A <sup>2</sup>call<sup>2</sup> to sink deeper into debt by buying a new television or to sneak off for a mid-afternoon tryst in a hotel room with your boss is probably not an invitation from the Beloved but a prompting from the greedy, often powerfully erotic force that limits us by distracting us from our true (often fearsome) path. The Beloved's allurements, rather, is a longing that opens instead of limiting the lover. It is the force Goethe called the Holy Longing, comparable to the wild enthusiasm of the moth, <sup>3</sup>insane for the light,<sup>2</sup> to be consumed by the seductive flame.

In classical Greece, the figure who helped a person negotiate his way in and around that magnetizing force was an actual semidivine agent called the daimon. The daimon remembered why a person was born and served not only as a personal guardian but also, according to Plutarch, as <sup>3</sup>the mediator of supernatural knowledge to the human being he watches over.<sup>2</sup>

For Carl Jung, the daimon was no figment of the imagination but a real force to be respected, listened to, and entered into dialogue with. He saw the daimon as a personification of the integrated Self, which might emerge when individuals are able to cease projecting the needs of their own psyches onto others and to truly accept and integrate all their own complex opposites.

Although I had read about the Beloved in myth and poetry, the concept became personal as I grappled with my own explosive passion. Shortly after I began my quest, nature provided a vital clue. On a walk in Utah's Canyonlands, where I was leading a wilderness program, it struck me that all the world was searching for its Beloved: the desert flower turned eagerly toward the sun; the river hastened toward the sea; the canyon wren, singing without cease its ribbon of song, yearned for its mate. I realized that if I could live as if every step brought me closer to the arms of a waiting lover, that I could move with passion and eagerness, motivated by what called me forth rather than by what pushed from behind, such as a sense of obligation or the expectations of others. I began to take more time to follow these allurements, whether that meant becoming actively involved in a social issue that tugged at my heart or detouring from my paths (both physical and metaphysical) to explore some new and beckoning curiosity. I became more open and vulnerable, sharing my search with others, whose fascination with the subject prompted me to develop workshops in which people could meet and come to know the Beloved in their own hearts.

What is the face of this soul guide to our true and fearsome path? The Beloved that people encounter is the one most needed at that particular time in their life to bring them further into their own completion. In workshops I lead, men and women discover an astonishing array of Beloved figures that seem to bear no relation to their ages, upbringings, or sexual orientations. People have encountered a native warrior, a Harvard professor, light, the Virgin Mary, a waltz partner in a tuxedo, and a spirit in a backyard oak tree. For some people, the Beloved is felt as a physical force, a powerful surge of sexual energy or warmth in the belly. My own concept of the Beloved has changed over the years from a figure who resembled the young man I was so enchanted with to a Berber poet, tall and graceful, who keeps me moving forth as if the world itself were a lover waiting to be discovered.

Whatever we perceive it to be, the daimon, said Yeats, is our destiny and <sup>3</sup>would ever set up to the hardest work among those not impossible.<sup>2</sup> In the company of the Beloved, we may feel at last empowered to undertake the hard work that is <sup>3</sup>not impossible<sup>2</sup> and that we have long put off. My own journey with the Beloved has changed my life. It revived my postmenopausal sexuality and shifted the foundations of my attitude toward my own femininity. It deepened my relationships with my husband, my friends, my colleagues, and my clients. It emboldened me to offer programs, as well as ideas and approaches within those programs, in a more spontaneous and effusive manner, unafraid of being judged. It showed me how to walk into the world as into the arms of a waiting lover.

This is the role of the Beloved, to move always slightly ahead of us, tempting us to take the next step into the mystery of our own passionate soul. Thus we must ever go forth, becoming bigger than we dreamed we could be, taking chances, developing into ourselves waiting for the Beloved to turn around and draw us into the next place of allurements.