

I Am Goldmund: My Spiritual Odyssey With Narcissus

by Charles Frode

Chapter 1: Beginning of the End

"My dear friend,' he whispered, 'I cannot wait until tomorrow. I must say farewell to you now, and as we part I must tell you everything.'" i
"If I know nevertheless what love is, it is because of you. I have been able to love you, you alone among all men. You cannot imagine what that means. It means a well in a desert, a blossoming tree in the wilderness. It is thanks to you alone that my heart has not dried up, that a place within me has remained open to grace." ii

Herman Hesse

Narcissus and Goldmund

All I ask of you is forever to remember me as loving you. iii

Brother Paul Williams

TWO ASTONISHING AND TRANSCENDENT WHIRLWINDS—one public and one private—punctuated the end of my earthly relationship with Brother Paul. But before those twin mystical events could augur the writing of this memoir—on a too perfect, blue-skied mid-Sunday morning in February of 2001, in the middle of flipping a flawless crepe onto the warming plate in the oven, my cell phone began buzzing irritably against the counter, and I struggled to get the thin pancake doubled over onto the hot plate in one piece and still get the call because I sensed an odd urgency in the moment. That call would signal the beginning of the end.

"Can I speak to Charles Frode please? This is Brother John at New Clairvaux monastery."

Why is Brother John calling me after so many years of being away from the...Oh, my God! Something's wrong with Paul...

I had fled the monastery years ago, and I'd been blissfully married to a modern Aztec princess, my dear wife, Elvira, for thirteen years. I'd driven up to see my old friend, Brother Paul, several months previous during the summer break from teaching creative writing to budding 10th grade public school authors, and I spent a few days at the monastery visiting with him in our characteristic way. In the chilly early hours before 6 am Mass and then work, we would huddle in his tiny office in the old brick barn and talk of old times and new life. If he was able to take off work that day, we would spend all morning walking the familiar north-south, east-west gravel roads through the prune or walnut fields, or—if it was too hot—using one of the cool guest houses for our dialogue and reminiscence.

While walking out by Deer Creek on the north side of the monastery where Ishi's people hunted, fished, and left there fragments of their lives, Paul mentioned that he had a persistent pain in his side that had been bothering him, but he played it down in his characteristically modest way and instead complained of old age aches and pains. We continued to talk of the many authentic ways of experiencing God, what it means to love all kinds of other people, the blessings of my marriage with my dear Elvira, my children and their personalities and proclivities, the future of the monastic life both Eastern and Western, and how each of us was growing in our individual lives of prayer, silence, spiritual presence. I left Brother Paul with a long embrace, affirmations of our friendship and the love for each other we had always kept protected and private, and along with sincere promises to write, but not email, heavens, not email!

“Charles, I'm sorry to be calling you like this but. . .”

Brother John had known Paul since the early fifties when they and a score of brother monks had ventured out from Kentucky's 150 year-old Gethsemani Abbey to found a daughter monastery in California, and I knew the two had been friends.

I sensed what he was going to say before he added, “I know Paul told you he was ill...but I thought you should know that he has slipped into a coma and is unconscious and I...I thought you might want to come up here while you still have a chance to...”

I called the substitute teacher service right after the last crepe, arranged for someone, anyone, to take my classes for three days, and the next morning I was humping the speed limit on Highway 101 and then Interstate 5 north up the midsection of California to tiny, out-of-the-way Vina between Sacramento and Corning. As I left the outskirts of Salinas in the middle of what would turn out to be my family's last year in California, I recalled the many other times I had bussed and then later driven up eagerly and excitedly to the monastery to visit my friend. This time I knew there would be no walking, no talking, no embracing, no reminiscing, no sharing of lives because Paul had pancreatic cancer, and it was the end. Brother John was one of the few at the monastery who knew of my friendship and love for Brother Paul, and I felt his usual graciousness and love in calling me to inform me that they had sedated my Narcissus for the pain, and that he was unconscious to the world.

Who would I find, what would I say to my Narcissus, what did I expect to do if he was unconscious, what would happen when I arrived at the monastery?

No one noticed when I steered slowly through the quiet little town of Vina onto the back street that led to the monastery. I didn't see a soul as I drove through the stone gate and parked by the guest houses. Nobody bicycled down to greet me and get me situated in a



guesthouse room. Not one person would remember me except for a few monks who were still alive there—the novice master, the abbot, a few others perhaps, Brother John, of course. I wandered to the shade of one of the huge old maples and sat in one of the simple benches located

for the view out across the new vineyards.

My mind wandered here and there around the monastery grounds where I, we, had strolled together, worked together, learned about ourselves, embraced and cried together, prayed and meditated, but my consciousness paid no attention to the memories.

I was in a no-man's-land of waiting, emptiness, attending to the ultimate focus of friendship and love, the never and the always of these ultimate events, just sitting on the hard, weathered bench, waiting for someone, waiting for no one, waiting alone, waiting with everyone in the world who ever waited.

“Hello...has anyone helped you?” I didn't know the voice, nor did I recognize the monk who was walking over to mercifully pop the fragile bubble of my mental exile.

“Of course, I will let Brother John know that you are here; he's expecting you. You knew Brother Paul when you were here before?”

Time in a monastery is unhurried except at harvest time, and even then time is treated not as an enemy but more as a teacher. Brother John pedaled down under the huge maples an hour later, parked his rickety balloon-tired cruiser, and called out my name as he strode over to where I was still sitting flooded in reverie where the flotsam of melancholy would bump painfully into my heart now and then, and the jetsam of vivid images of my time at the monastery accumulated until I realized that some part of me still belonged there, even if for just a few more days, a few more hours. The always innocently smiling monk and I embraced, exchanged small talk a brief moment, then he shocked me.

“We just got word from the doctor that no one can see Paul. He's unconscious in the infirmary, and no one knows how much longer he has. So they're limiting...”

I thought of the days, weeks, months, years I had not taken the time to visit my dear friend Brother Paul, the one with whom I was eternally tied in silence now as a spiritual partner—mind and heart, passion and prayer, intellectual man and feeling man, my Narcissus and his Goldmund. I thought of the letters I had waited too long to answer, thought of loving so many other people, loving that relegated little-by-little the love we had for each other to an overlooked corner of my heart. I thought of never seeing Paul again, and I was devastated.

“Isn't there some way I can...?” There have been a few times in my life when I have begged, implored, entreated someone for something I needed desperately.

“I will see what I can do, Charles...In the meantime, let me show you your room, and if there is any hope, I will come and get you.”

I sat in the cool, sparse, air conditioned concrete block room and thumbed through my worn, underscored, and dog-eared copy of *Narcissus and Goldmund* pausing here and there at the heavy underlining, reading whatever caught my eye, musing over the events of life, realizing that Paul and I had lived out fully and deeply the archetype that Hermann Hesse so sensitively fleshed out in his book. I had never anywhere else read of such a forceful friendship, and Paul and I had been careful not to share the personal and archetypal power of our friendship with just anyone. Only Brother John and the abbot knew of our friendship, and I was counting on that to open the infirmary door to Paul’s room.

I awoke later from deep sleep to a quiet but firm knocking on the door of the small guest room. It was dusk, and Brother John was insistent that I hurry down to see Paul before the evening meal. As I walked through the cloister, I looked for the familiar, the comforting—the covered cloister walkway, the family orchard, the door into the cool church. I noticed the new—several faces I didn’t recognize, the infirmary, and I felt like both an intimate and a stranger at the same time as Brother John ushered me into the new infirmary building so cool and quiet. He opened the nearest door for me, touched my shoulder and nodded that I should enter, then quietly closed the door after me.

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- i Hesse, 311.
 - ii Hesse, 306.
 - iii Personal correspondence