

# **I Am Goldmund:**

## **My Spiritual Odyssey With Narcissus**

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# Preface

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*I'm both humbled and honored that you even think of the possibility of writing a book about our friendship. I must confess that I have some uneasiness about it, but at the moment I feel like waiting and seeing. Vigils, as you said, isn't a bad place to be. i*

Brother Paul Williams

**IT'S MYSTERIOUS AND HAUNTING, ISN'T IT**, that at rare times in our lives we feel attracted irresistibly and against all odds to certain special people. There is a powerful species force that draws us—regardless of our circumstances—to extraordinary individuals with whom we need to harmonize and integrate ourselves. I am about to recount to you my spiritual odyssey with one of those exceptional people, a modern man, a Trappist monk. The story of our friendship is more incredible because in 1930 the Nobel Prize winning author, Hermann Hesse, wrote his world famous novel about just such a fascinating friendship between two singular and compelling medieval men—*Narcissus and Goldmund*. Let me introduce myself. I am Goldmund, and this is my story.

Hermann Hesse's 1930 *Narcissus and Goldmund* soars as one of the 20th century's greatest psycho-spiritual novels. The story of two gifted, passionate, but dissimilar medieval men brought together in a generations-old European monastery deepens and quickens as they discover that the intellectual precision and discipline of Narcissus' ascetic mind and the inquisitiveness and generosity of Goldmund's emotional hunger have sparked an intellectual attraction and love that will grow and flourish for as long as they both live.

It is not only the matchless and bold story of two men whose friendship and love is a model for all friendships, but it is also an articulate illumination of the themes that inspire and trouble men and women throughout the ages. *Narcissus and Goldmund* is a psychological and spiritual guide, a touchstone for seekers searching for guideposts for understanding the deepest forces underlying human nature. Friendship, sexual passion and attraction, domestic stability, the mysterious giving nature of women, men's struggle to find their emotional center, the life of the mind versus emotion, and the powerful function of art in reconciling the antagonism and contradiction of these familiar and daunting opposites that plague human beings to the end—these are authentic challenges that surface regularly in our lives as arenas for our self-realization.

It is a wonderful and profound mystery that Hesse understood the depth and width of Narcissus and Goldmund's friendship half a century before I myself embarked on the selfsame voyage of friendship and love when, at the age of twenty,

I entered a Trappist monastery in northern California where I met my own Narcissus, and where I soon discovered an identical passion and understanding created from archetypal human powers brought together in one place by the unseen but powerful forces in the cosmos. This memoir is the true story of my friendship with Brother Paul and the path of spiritual friendship we have tread together for over forty-five years.

I will be utilizing excerpts from my years of correspondence with Brother Paul and direct quotations from Hesse's novel in order to illuminate and elucidate the remarkable parallels between Hesse's story and mine. Hesse wrote thoughtfully and poetically about the daily struggle to modulate and harmonize the life of the mind and the passion of art embodied in real human beings. He understood firsthand and described intimately the polar attraction of men to women with its powerful animal nature and its tender eroticism. He created moving passages describing the impermanence and precious nature of life in all its natural manifestations. Hesse's novel shimmers at every turn with the deep and vexing struggle of maintaining one's inner vitality and creativity while at the same time seeking and building physical stability and emotional security in the ephemeral world that is ours.

There are so many moving, insightful, and wondrous passages in *Narcissus and Goldmund*, and I have had to restrain my inclination to include in this memoir the numerous ones I have underlined and highlighted time and time again in my personal dog-eared copy. I consider Hesse's work to be a literary touchstone, a scripture, a road map, a textbook, for helping us come to a growing and perhaps ultimate understanding of not only our own individual personal human natures—with all our conflicts, gifts, proclivities, weaknesses, and strengths; but also the basic nature of human beings—the patterns of biological and psychological development that mold us, and the forms of struggle that determine our successes and failures.

If you have read *Narcissus and Goldmund*, you have an inkling of some of the wonderful yet disconcerting territory we will be traversing in this book. If you have not read it, buy your own copy <sup>ii</sup> and read it slowly, thoroughly, thoughtfully, honestly, with your heart open. Highlight the passages that call you back to reread because of their poetic splendor or because the way Hesse synthesizes ideas sparks a feeling or understanding that needs to burn and glow in you. Then pick up this sequel, my story, and be amazed at how the deep patterns of human life are repeated and manifested inexplicably for our edification and enlightenment.

At the end of Hesse's story, after Goldmund has returned many times from his wanderings and adventures to visit his friend at the monastery, Narcissus is finally at Goldmund's bedside as he slips away from life, one of the most moving scenes in the book.

“Deeply shaken, Narcissus listened to his words.”<sup>iii</sup>

“But how will you die when your time comes, Narcissus, since you have no mother? Without a mother, one cannot love. Without a mother, one cannot die”<sup>iv</sup>

In *my* case, I was at my dear friend, Brother Paul’s bedside, *my* Narcissus, as he withdrew his life force from his body back to its origin in the cosmos. Who knows how this memoir would have unfolded if *I* had died and Brother Paul had been left behind? Perhaps it is because I am a writer that the cosmos has entrusted me with the gift of telling our story to those of you with ears to listen. We both felt that it is a story well worth telling. I wish Master Hesse was alive so that I might bow to him in recognition of the truth of his and of our story.

In both this memoir and Hesse’s *Narcissus and Goldmund* you have an opportunity to dig deep, deeper, and discover something priceless about yourself. There is no need to live in a monastery to experience the deepest levels of yourself, of humanity. As you will come to understand in this memoir, your monastery is in your heart. In the very same way that physicists describe how every point in the universe is expanding as if every point was the center, so too wherever you are, you are at the center of the action, the cosmic action, *your* action, ready, primed. There is no need at all to go somewhere else to find something you feel is elusive, out there. There is only the need to respond to the call within yourself to go deeper within. There it is.

You have everything you need to start. The inner light you find within yourself will be as startling and illuminating as you let it be.

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<sup>i</sup> Personal correspondence between Brother Paul Williams and Charles Frode

<sup>ii</sup> My own copy is highlighted, underlined, and stuffed with sticky markers. It has assumed the status of a scripture of sorts as it has travelled with me for the past forty years. All quotations are taken from that edition:

- Hesse, Herman. *Narcissus and Goldmund*. Trans. Ursule Molinaro. New York. Bantam Books Published With Arrangement With Farrar, Straus And Giroux, Inc. 1968

<sup>iii</sup> Hesse, 311.

<sup>iv</sup> Hesse, 311.