

## Rising from the Fire: The Art of Transformation by David Ulrich

How can we reconcile the immensely destructive force of fire with its equally limitless creative potential? Forest managers light intentional blazes to clear overgrowth and begin anew the cycle of life. A fireplace becomes a hearth, offering heat, light, and survival for the home's residents. And fiery volcanic activity can obliterate what stands in its path all the while creating new land in a matter of hours and days that becomes highly fertile soil in thousands or millions of years. The element of fire—and its life-giving results in the form of heat and light—represent both a powerful metaphor and an undeniable fact of organic and spiritual transformation. Evelyn Underhill, in her classic book *Mysticism*, states unambiguously “No transmutation without fire.” And “Here, as elsewhere... the self must lose to find and die to live.”<sup>1</sup>

I have always been attuned to fire—which later led me to Hawaiian volcanoes—and have a deep affinity with light. In fact, light has become the currency of my profession as a photographer and the intangible aim of my inner search. As a child I felt its presence within and without and intuited that the outer light and inner light were mysteriously fused with each other. The many different flavors of light existed within me and my own living light or darkness was reflected in the world itself.

In my earliest childhood memory, I was in my backyard wading in an inflatable pool that I shared with my next-door neighbor, Sally. We splashed in the water, enjoying its cool moistness on a hot summer's day. What I most remember was being embraced by the sun, by the light of the world, which I relished and drank-in with huge gulps. I felt an appetite, a longing for the light that suffused everything: the grass, the air, the water, myself and Sally, and the living sky. Everything seemed as one, undifferentiated to my young brain, unified by the light.

Years later, in the spring of 1970, I was a student at Kent State University enrolled in a photojournalism class, which was to be my intended major. The other students and I took pictures of campus-wide events along with civic happenings around the small town of Kent, Ohio. The Vietnam War was raging and many of my high school friends were drafted into the military and went to Vietnam; some did not come back.

The May 4, 1970, shooting at Kent State reverberates in American history and transformed my life. Students on campus were protesting President Nixon's decision to send U.S. troops into Cambodia. Ohio Governor James Rhodes called in the National Guard to quell the protest. I watched jeeps and soldiers, with automatic weapons and full military gear, descend on to my campus. An ominous thought entered my mind, “This is

not a battle ground in Vietnam. This is Ohio. What now?" Things heated up. Radical groups descended on the college in support of the student protest, and the National Guard's presence was growing. National Guardsmen and law enforcement began employing bayonets, stabbing people in arms, backs, legs, and even necks, and using gun butts on unarmed students. The war had come to our own soil. I was stunned in disbelief and deeply confused. It was becoming hard to remain a neutral photojournalist.

Suddenly, without warning, on a hill near the Fine Art building, a group of Guardsmen turned towards the crowd of students, knelt in formation and aimed their rifles. No one thought they had live rounds in their clips. I heard the crackling and, at first, did not associate the sound with gunfire. Rifles on TV and in the movies sounded different. Then, I knew, and for thirteen long seconds, twenty-nine Guardsmen fired sixty-seven rounds of .30 caliber armor-piercing bullets directly into the crowd. Some Guardsmen leveled their guns above the people but others took careful aim and shot to kill. Four students were killed immediately; nine were wounded. Bedlam erupted. Everyone was running every which way, except those lying still on the ground.

How could they? What sheer brute mentality would allow killing and maiming your own? The thought horrified me. The Guardsmen would later claim that they felt their lives were in danger, though none of those wounded or killed were armed, and their average distance from the Guardsmen was 345 feet—about the length of a football field.

"What if you knew her and found her dead on the ground?" When I first heard the song, Ohio, by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, I wept, remembering the pain of losing my peers. I put my camera aside and joined the other four million students across the country, who staged a massive student strike and marched most of the night in protest against a government that would kill its own people.

I simply could not integrate the events of Vietnam and Kent State. I experienced what I can describe only as the angst of an inner fire, obliterating my once good nature and middle-class complacency. The weight of depression made its unwelcome debut on my emotional stage. This inner fire raged, fueled by anger and outrage, and I knew I needed to find a way to use creative expression to eternalize and release my torn nature and conflicted feelings.

Burning Baby Doll. Photograph © David Ulrich

Underhill gives clarification by likening the inner fire to the process of alchemy: "The Three Principles being enclosed in the vessel, or Athanor, which is man himself, and subjected to a gentle fire—the Incendium Amoris—the process of the Great Work, the mystic transmutation of natural into spiritual man, can begin. This work ... in the course of its transmutation, assumes three successive colors: the Black, the White, and the Red. These three colors are clearly analogous to the three traditional stages of the Mystic Way: Purgation, Illumination, Union."<sup>2</sup>

I began my purgation with what I now refer to as my "burning baby doll" series of

photographs. With the horrific memory fresh in my mind of Nick Ute's iconic photograph of a young Vietnamese girl running naked on the street in pain with her skin stripped from burning napalm dropped by U.S. warplanes, I looked for and found toy baby dolls discarded in the trash and landfills. I then found a safe location and ritualistically poured gasoline over them, one by one, and lit them on fire—gleefully making photographs of their burning corpses. I am embarrassed to admit that it was a joyful act, but it was a profound release. I began to experience a well of anger and resentment and a burning intensity to protect and renew my dimmed light and my true estate.

Over the next couple of years, creative work in the form of photography and writing gradually regenerated the scorched floor of my inner being. The search for my genuine nature—apart from my conditioning and painful memories—began sprouting new growth amidst the remains of my once comfortable childhood. I made new friends, joined a spiritual community and found teachers—photographers Minor White and Nicholas Hlobeczy—who could light my way and offer guidance in both my efforts in photography and my search for inner transformation. The emotional fire once again, similar to what I knew in my early childhood, gradually gave way to rare and special moments of recognition of an inner light. Further, this luminosity could only be found in silence and not in the raging intensity of my burning inner world.

One distinguishing feature of this period of the time: I was sitting quietly, meditating on a daily basis, and making an active effort to maintain an awareness of myself during parts of the day. My wish to awaken was great. I tried to stay within my body, receive the silence—and listen within. This effort of attention felt like a “knocking on heaven's door,” opening to a source of wisdom lying just beyond the threshold of my consciousness, that seemed to be waiting, wishing to reveal itself to me. This wisdom, this knowledge, I suspect, is always there—it is we that are absent most of the time.

Underhill writes about the illumination stage, “The self emerges from long and varied acts of purification to find that it is able to apprehend another order of reality.”<sup>3</sup> Over the next few months I had the experience repeatedly while sitting of a clear inner voice emerging from the quiet of the mind that would tell me many things about my life; nothing was off-limits. It told me what to eat, who to interact with, and where to make efforts in my life. It even prefigured my moving to the islands of Hawai'i, twenty years later. After a little while, the voice said, “a twenty-six day personal workshop.” And sure enough, from that day forward for twenty-six days, my inner wisdom led me to places and precise moments where the scene and the photographic images I made had something valuable to teach me. I could not have conjured up these images and their precise symbolic language had I tried—nor did I fully understand them. Yet, after many years of living with them, they revealed themselves as exact transcriptions, accurate without a fault of aspects of my essential nature. They were lucid messages from the interior. While this experience was repeated in different forms over the years, this small set of images remains a touchstone. They represent one of my most important discoveries of the role of creative expression in revealing and uncovering core insights from the depths of the mind.

In my sitting practice, I regularly experienced the delicate fire of inner energy moving through my body, up from the pelvic region to my head. I felt whole, as if this energy became an integrating and coordinating force, subordinating the rest of me into its

greater wisdom. As the energy rose through my system, I began to feel another remarkable condition. I felt a deep, generous, intense, and impersonal love that connected me to all living things. I would simply look at my friends, feeling this overwhelming love and compassion, and could say nothing. I could not express the fullness of my awakened love.

The exquisite energy that moved through my centers, up and along my spine, gave a fullness of being, a blissful happiness that accepted all, rejected nothing. All was light; different shades, varying tones, some dark and some radiant but all was light nonetheless. It was ecstatic, as in a state of eros, a longing for light and for union. It really was like turning on a light. Each of the centers were activated and illuminated, similar to how lights may be successively turned on, one after another, in a stairway with seven landings: the base of the spine, sexual region, solar plexus, heart, throat, and the crown of the head. I experienced a definite sensate link between sexual energy and third eye region in a manner that was exquisite and ecstatic. The nape of the neck and back of the head seemed to hold a definite center of wisdom, where I felt pressure and tingling and a finer sensation, like highly purified water. This is where the voice and visions originated.

This energetic movement of energy brought about a powerful sense of inner unity, coordinating my mind, body, and feelings together. I had a taste of the experiential oneness of life, the unity of all living things. It awakened love and compassion, the likes of which I had not experienced. And it attracted intelligence, a wholly new order of knowing. Thomas Merton calls this an experience of God's love. Buddhists call it enlightenment. I have no reference point, so I call my experience a kind of 'temporary wholeness' or 'the seeds of enlightenment.'

Underhill describes this stage of the Mystic Way as Illumination leading toward Union, in which we are definitely shown the way. For most people, this state is unsustainable save brief and illuminating moments. She recounts the celebrated Memorial of the French philosopher Pascal when he writes, "Are you going to leave me? Oh, let me not be separated from you for ever!... But the rhapsody is over, the vision of the Fire has gone."<sup>4</sup> For me also, it was an unendurable thought that the rhapsody was gone—but it served to reveal in tangible form what is possible within the human experience.

I wasn't ready for this gift of heightened consciousness. My emotional and psychological development were insufficient, without a solid foundation and unprepared to sustain this state of wholeness and divine fire. What I learned from these inner experiences was unequivocal: the teacher lies within. A vast source of wisdom and fountain of realization lies in wait for us to turn toward it, to be quiet and receptive enough, and to let the light in and listen to its resonating voices. To this day, when I write or photograph or teach, something is missing without the guiding visions from a deeper place. I alone am not enough. My mind is too small and self-enclosed. These moments of guidance are a form of grace I cannot do without, a grace whose appearance can become an organizing principle to my life and work.

Fissure #8, Kilauea Volcano, Hawai'i, 2018. Photograph © Leslie Gleim

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little over ten years later, the experience of a transforming inner fire repeated itself after losing my right, dominant eye in an impact injury while chopping wood. The nature of the experience and what I learned from it are fully chronicled in a previous Parabola essay.<sup>5</sup> After the injury, I was devastated: from the temporary loss of my profession as a photographer, from the changes in my facial appearance, from my diminished vision and reduced depth perception, and from the fact of an irretrievable loss of a fundamental part of my body. I desperately wanted to be whole again, but that was not to be.

After several weeks of painful non-acceptance of my injured state and empty eye socket, I knew I must let go. This seemed like a foretaste of death, when I must relinquish everything: my body, identity, and self. I reasoned that if I cannot practice letting go of a small part of my body, how will I ever face my own death? This realization transformed my traumatic experience into a decades-long creative journey. What would it be like to learn to see again, this time as an adult? The question excited me in some deep place.

I had the same experience with losing an eye that I had with Vietnam and Kent State. I felt that a volcano had erupted inside of me with devastating force but rich with creative potential. Only this time, the volcano was not just a metaphor. Two years after the injury, I woke up one morning and knew with certainty that I must go to Hawai'i to witness and photograph Kilauea Volcano, which had begun its active eruption in 1983 and continues uninterrupted to the present day. This landscape of powerful destruction and new birth reflected my own fragile process of recovery and healing. It struck me repeatedly that the volcano metaphorically mirrored the action of fire in Underhill's mystic way. It begins with destruction and purgation, follows to renewal and new birth, and results (over many years) into a highly fertile, transformed landscape.

Hawaiian volcano goddess Madame Pele is feared and revered simultaneously for her awesome destructive force and her generative creative power. In a 2018 eruption of Kilauea, 725 acres were destroyed and covered with molten lava, obliterating nearly seven-hundred homes and businesses. As the lava continues its flow into the ocean, new land is created. Since 1960, the Big Island of Hawai'i has grown by two thousand acres of new land, making it one of the youngest land masses on earth, still undergoing its own creation.

The myth of Pele contains two distinct themes: that of Pele the destroyer and that of the shaper of land. Alia Wong observes, "The goddess of fire alone decides when she'll morph from ka wahine 'ai honua—the woman who devours the earth—into the shaper of sacred land."<sup>6</sup> But we do have a choice when the pain of purgation begins. Suffering can bring grace. Our attitude towards suffering makes the difference between rampant destruction and liberating redemption. I struggled to keep in mind at all times that whenever I was willing to sacrifice everything I held dear, something new entered through the portal of loss. Losing my eye felt like the crowning touch of a grand sweep of events that devastated my ego and quaked the very foundations of my life. Several months after my injury, I began to experience a resonating, keen sense of greater openness and receptivity. A new quality of energy began to make itself known, a kind of inner presence and hints of inner peace. And strangely enough, though now handicapped with diminished vision, I began to feel more myself, for the first time in my life since early childhood—fire slowly transforming into inner light. ♦

1 Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism*. New York: Meridian, 1972.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ulrich, David. *Awakening Sight*. New York: Parabola Vol.36, No. 3, Seeing, Fall 2011.

6 Wong, Alia. *Madame Pele's Grip on Hawaii*. *The Atlantic*, 2018.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/05/madame-peles-grip-on-hawaii/560102/>.