

## The Soul of the Rose

by Lucia Ferrara Bettler

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It is March and our wisteria vines are in bloom, laden with purple grapelike clusters climbing high into the tall elder tree. The wisteria is in bloom, intertwined with wild, luscious pink climbing roses, from my mother's garden, now long gone except for the cuttings rooted in my own. Those fragrant roses tumble and wind to form an arc around the stone statue of Sarasvati, the Hindu goddess of all the arts: poetry and music, sculpture, writing and song. The roses honor her in their extravagant blooming, and I am suddenly immersed in the mystery that is the rose.

Flowers speak of compassion and openness, gratitude and joy, giving and receiving with an open heart. They speak of the rhythms of our lives, as May Sarton wrote, "...holding growth, birth, and death . . . the whole mystery in its short cycle".

A bower of roses creates a special kind of sacred space, filled with a scent that can connect us to the past. Whether freshly cut and placed in a crystal vase with winter greens, or tumbling out of an old watering can, dried for a Victorian potpourri or the center of an herb filled tussie mussie, the rose connects us to our inner selves, to memories of another time, another place, as past and present merge. A dried pressed rose petal, falling out of a precious book, means someone was once deeply loved.

Throughout the ages the rose has symbolized love, life, sexuality and passion, death, the sun, the moon, the heart, the soul, perfection itself. Hafiz, a Sufi poet, calls it the "heart enchanting flower". A precious gift, the rose speaks of beauty, grace, and silence. Rilke wrote in his beloved Rose Poems: "I breathe you in as if you were all of life", and Amanda McBroom, songstress, wrote her famous song "The Rose" to remind us what love is.

What is it about the rose that makes us think of mothers or lovers, friends of the heart, or God? This beauteous flower, representing the many "Beloveds" in our lives, comes to us in many guises, a blossom that touches us deeply in the center of our hearts. The rose is the soul, the part of us that unfolds where there is warmth and nurturing, light and love.

The mystic rose is brimming with symbolism and meaning. One of the oldest flowering plants, she has been honored by poets and writers, musicians and philosophers. With roots in China, she has traveled the world, beloved by all, as each generation reinvents the rose for itself.

Throughout antiquity the rose was associated with myths and legends, ritual and ceremony, and life's pleasures. Along with apples, lilies, pomegranates and myrtle, roses were sacred to Aphrodite & Venus and are now synonymous with weddings, as flower girls

strew petals before the bride.

Egyptian tombs revealed wreaths of Damask-like roses, dating to 170 AD. Crete, Rome and other ancient sites show evidence of roses in art and religion. Roses as a sensuous symbol of love and passion have become almost a cliché... yet...history, magic, art and literature abound in allusions to them. There is Mimi, Puccini's tragic heroine in *La Boheme*. In her aria, *Che Gelida Manina*, she sings that she loves to embroider roses and lilies on silk, so enchanting are they!

Roses abound in art, from Botticelli to the Dutch masters, to Georgia O'Keeffe. In the rose is the garden of Eros, the ancient god of erotic passion, and the rose is also the central image in God's paradise of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In *Flora's Dictionary*, Kathleen Gips, calls her "The daughter of the sky, an ornament of the earth, the glory of spring." In the rose are all of the seductive charms of a woman adorned with dew, perfume and loveliness. She enchants us as she embodies youth and innocence, maturity and passion. She is the flower of a midsummer's night dream. Jennifer Potter begins her tome *The Rose*, with the words, "I remember the day I lost my heart to a rose". Roses live in a world of mystery and romance ... meanings subtly shifting through the centuries. At once she was the rose of pagan Aphrodite, the thirteen petaled rose of Judaism's Kabbalah, the blood of Christ's passion, the sweat of Mohammed's brow, a symbol of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the emblem of Europe's monarchs.

Later monastic communities did much to preserve roses and explore their uses as medicine. *Rosa gallica*, the apothecary rose, was the most famous of those roses, and even today rose essential oil is used as an antidepressant. This valuable scent can open closed hearts and heal broken ones.

Herbalist and Abbess Hildegard of Bingen referred to the rose in her *Physica*, and said that roses would strengthen any medication to which it was added. In amulets it was said to restore "life energy".

Due to its checkered past under Emperor Nero, the Roman Church outlawed the use of roses in church functions. Not to be suppressed for long, from the seventh to the twelfth centuries, the rose became a major Christian symbol. The Blessed Virgin Mary soon came to be honored with roses in medieval abbey gardens, the rose being the emblem of her beauty and her spirit. Called the Mystical Rose, Mary was adorned with a crown of roses in May. Pebbles once used to count prayers gave way to beads made from powdered roses, thus the rosary was born. Out of this devotion to Mary, sprang the Rose Window in Gothic art and architecture, a prime example being the Rose Window of Notre Dame in Paris.

There are paintings of her broken heart surrounded by pink roses, somehow softening the blow of her life's pain.

Her apparitions on earth were often accompanied by roses and their sweet scent. Her famous apparition in Mexico as Our Lady of Guadalupe produced crimson Castilian roses in the dead of winter.

In my little rose garden there is a small statue, which I got years ago from herbalist Betsy Williams, of St. Elizabeth of Hungary holding her apron full of roses.

The legend goes that this "Compassionate Queen" was delivering bread to the hungry against her husband's wishes. When confronted by him on her errand, roses, not

bread tumbled from her apron. There are many saints connected to roses. One of the most well known is the French Carmelite, St Therese of Lisieux ,also known as “The Little Flower”. Upon her death bed she promised to send a shower of roses in the form of grace to those who call upon her. Believers have reported smelling roses when praying to her.

In 2001 I was blessed to visit a village in Southern Turkey, near Isparta, the famous rose growing region. There we saw women and men rise very early to go to the hillsides where the roses grow in long rows. I saw the villagers carrying burlap bags and baskets brimming with the fragrant pink blossoms. The roses were transported to the weighing station and then on the distillery. The scent in the air was overpowering, the steam hot, as it rose from the copper pots. There were rivulets of rose water running down the troughs. The joy with which these rose gatherers shared their lives & the flowers was unforgettable! The scent of the rose did indeed cling to their hands.

A few days later I visited a site sacred to Mother Mary in Ephesus. Holy water from there and the rose oil from the village have been added to our blessing water today.

The rose and its Eastern equivalent, the lotus, are the pattern for the sacred mandala, or cosmic wheel. A mandala is a circle that speaks of wholeness. In Sanskrit it means “to be in possession of one’s essence”. The round moon is a mandala, and so is an egg, and a nest, a fully open rose, the cycle of the seasons, and a rose window. Carl Jung suggested we meditate on these images to center ourselves as a path to peace.

On the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France is a mandala in the form of a labyrinth. It is a metaphor for our journey through life. Walking it sends us to the center of the mandala and back out to the edge on the same path. In surrendering to the winding path, our spirits find healing. That center is often called the rosette—a six petaled rose, a symbol for Mother Mary and of the Grail legends that were prevalent during the High Middle Ages.

What can the rose teach us? Look at the beauty of a faded rose and its parchment like petals. Buddhism teaches us to honor the impermanence of all things, and at the same time live in the present moment, savoring the life in front of us.

I am reminded of love’s longing, and how we all long to belong to ourselves, to our families, to our community, to our earth. We start with ourselves, with the heart center, whose chakra colors, according to Hindu tradition, are green and pink, the color of a lovely rose. We need one another to connect, to go beyond our anxiety and fear. There is a great capacity in us to connect, to love and to care.

Do you remember The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint Exupery? On his small planet, he loved a special rose, his soul friend. Later his friend the fox tells him two important things:

“It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

And “It is the time you have devoted to your rose that makes it so important.”

Our gardens, our herbs and roses are the presence of grace in the world. Garrison Keillor once said, “I believe that all that is essential is unseen, and that all we did for love’s sake was never wasted.”

Sounds a bit like The Little Prince, doesn’t it?

Rumi, a Sufi poet and Dervish, lived in Southern Turkey, not far from the rose growing regions. Coleman Barks in his translation quotes him: "What was said to the rose that made it open in laughter and full blown beauty -that is being said to me now?...I who am in love with the One to whom everything belongs."

Many authors are quick to tell us that, yes, roses are lovely, but they also have thorns—thorns to protect a tender heart, and that love too, can cut us open. One day in 1977, songwriter Amanda Mc -Broom was listening to a song on the radio that said: "Your love is like a razor; my heart is just a scar".

As she drove on she thought, "I don't agree with that." What do I think love is? Suddenly words came pouring into her head, and a song emerged...a song of courage and hope and love.

Listen to her words. It is enough. . .

Some say love, it is a river

That drowns the tender reed.

Some say love, it is a razor

That leaves your soul to bleed.

Some say love, it is a hunger,

An endless aching need,

I say love, it is a flower

And you its only seed.

It's the heart, afraid of breaking

That never learns to dance.

It's the dream, afraid of waking

That never takes the chance.

It's the one who won't be taken

Who cannot seem to give,

And the soul, afraid of dying,

That never learns to live.

When the night has been too lonely,

And the road has been too long,

And you think that love is only for the lucky and the strong,  
Just remember in the winter,  
Far beneath the bitter snow  
Lies the seed  
That with the sun's love, in the spring  
Becomes the rose.