"A profound and moving love story of original insight, written at the frontier of life and death."

-David Whyte, author of The Heart Aroused

LOVE is stronger than DEATH

the MYSTICAL UNION of TWO SOULS

CYNTHIA BOURGEAULT

WITH FOREWORD BY
BROTHER DAVID STEINDL-RAST



15th Anniversary Edition New Preface by Author



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This powerful book, written by an Episcopal priest, tells of her intense relationship with Brother Raphael Robin, a seventy-year-old Trappist monk and hermit. Both believed that a relationship can continue beyond this life, and here Cynthia Bourgeault describes her search for that connection before and after Robin's death. Deeply enriched by Bourgeault's knowledge of the teachings of G.I. Gurdjieff and of Christian mysticism, their vibrant, provocative, beautifully written story adds a profound new dimension to our understanding of human love and the possibility of survival beyond the grave.

Modern day mystic, Episcopal priest, writer, and internationally known retreat leader, Cynthia Bourgeault is the author of eight books including: The Wisdom Jesus, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, and The Meaning of Mary Magdalene. She divides her time between solitude at her seaside hermitage in Maine and a demanding schedule traveling globally to teach and spread the recovery of the Christian contemplative and Wisdom path. She is the founding Director of both The Contemplative Society and the Aspen

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The Mystical Union of Two Souls

CYNTHIA BOURGEAULT

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ness to go to bat for a risky manuscript by an e a crucial difference to its seeing the light

er of Sounds True in Boulder, Colorado, for ections.

nbers of Rafe's immediate family—Tommy, lene Robin; Brother Laurin Hartzog; and welcomed me into their homes and shared of their family history that have helped me better the man I am privileged to call friend,

Foreword



YOU ARE ABOUT TO READ A LOVE STORY. True, this account is not easy to classify, but with its boy-meets-girl plot—refreshingly told from the girl-meets-boy perspective—a love story it is. Who can pigeonhole love stories anyway? I like to group them according to the four seasons of the year, of a lifetime, of kisses. Each season of love has its distinctive kisses: the awkward, teeth-bumping kisses of sweet breath springtime; summer kisses burning with passion; the kisses of harvest time heavy with memories; and those tenderest kisses of snowflakes on parted lips which delight our second childhood as they delighted our first one.

The love story you are about to read bears buds, blossoms, and fruit, all at once, like the branch of an orange tree fragrant with bloom and heavy with yield at the same time. There is a spring-like briskness to the way Cynthia Bourgeault makes the plot sparkle at every turn like a freshly minted penny. The falling in love of these two mature adults does not lack the giddy dizziness of a first falling, yet they manage to transform the momentum of that headlong plunge into a rising in love. Theirs is a verdant rising: not a rocket-like lift-off, but the gnarled growing of a tree that stretches so high into the summer sky precisely because it is so deeply rooted. Two unlikely lovers—Rafe, a Trappist hermit, and Cynthia, an Episcopal priest—they explore together not just the heights but

also the depth of their trust that "God is love: and those who abide in love abide in God, and God in them" (1 John 4:16). To abide in love means to keep on growing, willing to suffer all the growing pains. As we read on, we see how the two begin to reap the harvest by becoming real people. They refuse to count the cost, minding less and less how much it hurts to become real. We watch them laugh and cry their way into realms of which T. S. Eliot says, "We must be still and still moving/Into another intensity/For a further union, a deeper communion...." ("East Coker," V). Inescapably this autumnal journey is bound to lead into the dead of winter.

While it is true that every good love story embraces all four seasons, and this one does, too, *Love Is Stronger Than Death* celebrates, above all, winter. Tracks of snowmobiles crisscross the scenes of this narrative. Its lovers wear heavy boots, and the footprints they leave in mud and snow are inseparable from the trail their story leaves on these pages. Their first meeting happens on a clear, cold winter day; their last one, too. Winter is a time of crisis, sifting out what must die from what will survive. Their love survives and becomes ever more truly itself after one of them dies. "Love is most nearly itself/When here and now cease to matter" (T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," V). With the experience of this truth, the book reaches its high point and pushes current notions about life-beyond-death to an exciting new level. The author makes a unique contribution to this area, a contribution that is likely to stimulate discussion and to startle some readers.

Winter is a time of deprivation, of bereavement. Rilke says of it: "One among winters is so endlessly winter/That, if you winter through that one, your heart will forever endure" (Sonnets to Orpheus: II). And he admonishes lovers: "Be ahead of all winter!" The lovers of this story are "ahead of winter"; they prepare themselves for the winter of their love in the midst of a wintery setting. The snowdrifts of their Rocky Mountain surroundings become an un-

trust that "God is love: and those who abide and God in them" (1 John 4:16). To abide in a growing, willing to suffer all the growing we see how the two begin to reap the harvest ple. They refuse to count the cost, minding the it hurts to become real. We watch them by into realms of which T. S. Eliot says, "We noving/Into another intensity/For a further union...." ("East Coker," V). Inescapably this bund to lead into the dead of winter.

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intentional metaphor for the winter of their monastic environment. Reading between the lines, one is confirmed in the suspicion that monastic life in the West has reached the dead of winter—a creek thickly frozen over but flowing powerfully underneath, ice cracking everywhere. Fierce frost splits even rock. None of our structures is indestructible. But here, too, winter sifts out what is vital from what is bound to die. As Thomas Merton said, only hours before his death, the monastic longing for total transformation "cannot be extinguished. It is imperishable. It represents an instinct of the human heart."

Following that perennial instinct, driven by their passion for becoming real at last, the lovers in this story are genuine monastics, no matter how startling their relationship. They are "ahead of all winter" and are already searching for "next year's language"-one of their favorite concepts. Those of us who remember Trappist ascetics in perpetual silence and strict enclosure may be shocked at a hermit sipping cappuccino in his cell with a woman. I myself am a hermit and I must admit that I skipped a breath. No more than that, though: after all, a hermit does not cut connections, but explores unconventional ways of connecting. My own are internal connections, but what matters is the intensity, not the form. If we need to get shocked in order to drop romantic notions of what is and what isn't monastic, this will be a healthy shock. One thing is certain: This is not an anti-monastic book. On the contrary. It is ablaze with passion for the one essential task of the monk: total inner transformation. This love story deserves a place in every monastic library. It is an exploration of the monk's pursuit at its daring best.

Cynthia Bourgeault faces the difficult task of letting us see "pentecostal fire/In the dark time of year," bringing to mind T. S. Eliot's mid-winter imagery in "Little Gidding." In order to tell a story in which "between melting and freezing/The soul's sap quivers," she

adopts an intriguing format. Fluid narrative sections alternate with crystalline speculative reflections. Although these reflective passages draw on Gurdjieff, Jacob Boehme, and other unconventional sources, the theological underpinnings of this book are sound. Its spirituality, far from violating monastic tradition, pushes the understanding of traditional values higher and deeper. Let me quote a passage on celibacy to show what I mean:

Celibacy must be *purified* of avarice and self-protectiveness: that part which would hold itself back from complete self-giving in order to protect its own spiritual
self-interests. ... That was the "narrow spot" Rafe and I
always found the most challenging to negotiate: how to
embrace a celibacy that was not at the same time a withholding of self, a flight into holiness; but was a complete
and shared realization of "everything that could be had
in a hug...." But it does exist. There is a celibacy which
is a complete outpouring of sexual passion at a level
so high and intense that every fiber of one's being is
flooded with beatitude.

I feel tempted to quote at greater length, but this is unnecessary since an index is provided to assist serious students of spirituality. So I leave you to find for yourself what will help you on your own journey of love beyond death.

Brother David Steindl-Rast, OSB Mount Saviour Monastery, Pine City, New York