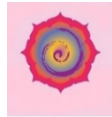


THE CAVE OF THE SAINTS

A SPIRITUAL NOVEL

KENNETH ROSE



AnahataRose

Houston

AnahataRose Books

Houston, Texas

Email: krose51@outlook.com

Amazon Author Central: [amazon.com/author/kennethrose](https://www.amazon.com/author/kennethrose)

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1 DISCOVERING THE HIDDEN CAVE

The café was full, and there was no place to sit and drink my coffee, so I went outside, where I saw that it was a bright spring afternoon. The light of the sun fell like a sheet of thin gold on the parking lot, and I realized that I had been so caught up in writing my dissertation that I hadn't noticed till just now that winter was over. A sloping meadow behind the café led to a ridge behind a white barn in a onetime dairy farm. The meadow and a circle of protecting trees were engulfed by a business campus and a strip mall bordering a congested road. This sight aroused an intuitive sense of knowing within me, and I felt drawn by a gentle force to explore this isolated patch of countryside in the middle of the city.

The slope of the grassy field, strewn with tiny bursts of bright yellow buttercups and faded blue cornflowers, led toward a stand of cherry trees, which were now in their moment of fullest bloom. The soft glow of the pale pink blossoms awakened within me a vague memory of something long forgotten, but the image wouldn't come clear, although it loomed as an inviting presence on the borderline between forgetting and remembering. I sensed that the image would come clear if I kept walking.

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When I broke through the covering of trees at the crest of the ridge, I saw a river sparkling below in the clear light of the spring sun as it curved at a bend in its flow. The bend opened out onto a wide vista of water shimmering with dazzling light between the spreading banks of the river. When I was a child, I had venerated dust-dappled shafts of light cutting through dark rooms and church sanctuaries as messengers from the shining realm lying directly above my mind. Concentrating on these radiant messengers brought thinking and bodily movements to a standstill, and an inner light dawned in my soul. I loved this gentle light without conditions or doubts because there was nothing to fear or question in it. I was too young then to think of this vision as a clue to the meaning of life, but I knew that it was a special light and that it cared for me without reserve. Whenever this light appeared in my mind, I intuitively offered the full capacity of my entire being to it for its own purposes and concerns. Gazing down at the shining river, I sensed a splash of the old holy light shining at the back of my mind, and I suspected that my life, like the bending river below, was going to bend in an unexpected direction.

I descended to the shoreline and began to walk into the curve as the river widened. It was early evening, and the sun was dipping into the wide face of the spreading stream. Darkness was falling, but I felt no alarm as I walked. I had a hunch that a life-shifting encounter awaited me. Here and there was evidence of camps set up by itinerants and homeless people. Perhaps, I thought, some of the people holding up signs asking for help or work at traffic intersections in town spent their nights

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here cooking and warming up at makeshift campfires. I glanced up at the rock wall hiding the city behind a ridge. The ceaseless movement of the river over many slowly passing millennia had cut this valley through a thick bed of red sandstone. As I followed the river toward the fading sun, the surrounding walls rose higher as the course of the river deepened in the valley.

As twilight descended, the river and the rocks began to fade into an indistinct colorlessness. I was considering turning back before total darkness fell when a flash of light glinted from the rock face above me. I looked up and saw what seemed to be a rough-hewn staircase, visible now only in the fading sunlight. Caution suggested that I return to the café or go home, but an inner voice full of the light of my childhood visions suggested that I climb to the source of the sudden light.

Up close to the staircase, I saw only the first step, but, as I made my ascent, the next step appeared out of the gloom just when I arrived at it. Each step called for an act of unseeing faith, yet I was confident that I would find the next step. I paused halfway up to the source of the now steadily shining light to look at the steps behind me, which glowed gently as they fell back to the river. They didn't seem to be the product of human activity, and their placement might be seen by another climber as a lucky accident. Accident or not, they led me directly up to the light, which turned out to be a curving sheet of gleaming black obsidian, a volcanic glass, reflecting what seemed to be the last beacon of sunlight over the now dark valley.

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The light did not fade from view as I approached the smooth obsidian outcrop, which suggested that it was not from the setting sun. I glanced at the final veil of sunset fading to the west over the river, and, as I turned to place a hand admiringly on the smooth stone surface shining in the darkness, I saw that it formed an archway over an entrance to a cave. I looked into the cave and saw that the reflected light came from inside the cave and not from the setting sun. Seeing this, I was overcome by a wave of meditative stillness, and the world behind me vanished from awareness. The cave was bright with a warm, inviting light, and I felt like an awaited guest. I crossed the threshold, sat down, and spontaneously crossed my ankles over my thighs in *padmasana*, or lotus pose. I looked around to trace out the source of the light, such as a fire or a lantern. As my eyes adjusted from the darkness outside to the brightness of the light inside, I saw that the cave was spherically shaped, which reminded me of the bare enclosures in the abandoned underground kivas that I had sat in meditatively on a visit to Chaco Canyon in New Mexico. The cave seemed to be uninhabited, which raised the question of the light's source.

Almost as soon as I sat down, the light began to dim until the cave turned completely dark, but I was neither startled nor afraid. I noted that my mind was bathed in the sense of calmness that had begun to settle over me when I walked down to the river from the café. I soon saw that the darkness was not absolute—a soft glow emanated from the cave's walls. This was an intimate light, like the fading embers of a burning log or the winking light of a firefly in the twilight. The glow of the walls was

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not uniform, and there seemed to be multiple focal points of light, each evenly distant from the others and emerging from the walls at eye-level like paintings in an art gallery. Or sculptures. Or what I could now clearly see—faces of saints and deities looking expectantly at me.

Slowly the glowing points of light came into focus, and I saw what seemed to be multiple self-illuminated niches of varying colors containing the visible forms of a gallery of sacred beings, some of whom I recognized while others were unknown to me. Some were saintly human beings who had attained divine status, while others were divine beings—deities—who had incarnated as human beings.

I realized now that the cave was sanctified ground, a holy place, and I sensed that many other pilgrims and seekers had sat where I now sat. Our inner intelligence guides us to act in ways appropriate to various situations. Science calls this instinct, but it is an innate knowledge of the form or order of the universe, which we access consciously and unconsciously. As hardly more than infants, we seem to know how to move our hands to receive nourishment without learning each move step-by-step from our caregivers.

This innate wisdom guided me to give proper respect to this sacred cave and its divine visitors. I stood up and returned to the entrance of the cave and removed my shoes. A naturally formed basin capturing a trickle of fresh water flowing through patches of moss in the cave's walls stood by the entrance. I purified my face, hands, and feet with the water and reentered the sanctuary and prostrated myself on the floor of the cave with my arms fully extended above my head toward the holy personages.

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Filled now with an inner glow of spiritual happiness, I sat in the lotus pose in the center of the cave gazing upon the glowing niches. Then a light scuffling of feet at the cave's entrance alerted me that someone besides the saints was now with me in the cave.