

ROBERT FULGHUM

AUTHOR OF
ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED
IN KINDERGARTEN

IT WAS ON FIRE
WHEN I LAY
DOWN ON IT

*It Was on Fire
When I Lay
Down on It*



Robert Fulghum



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IT WAS ON FIRE WHEN I LAY DOWN ON IT

"...a small-town emergency squad was summoned to a house where smoke was pouring from an upstairs window. The crew broke in and found a man in a smoldering bed. After rescuing him and dousing the mattress, the obvious question was asked, 'How did this happen?'

"His response: 'I don't know. It was on fire when I lay down on it.'"

So begins the title piece of Robert Fulghum's new book. As he sums it up, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It* captures the human dilemma perfectly: "Out of the frying pan and into the hot water." From this tongue-in-cheek insight into human nature, Fulghum goes on to open our eyes to the wonder in everyday life.

From burning beds to driver's ed, from a disastrous wedding to the joy of tree climbing, from the rewards of grandparenthood to simple but surprising wisdom from the head of a Zen Buddhist monastery, Robert Fulghum's gift for finding the meaning *in* life rather than the meaning *of* life permeates every page of this book.

It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It is even richer and more moving than Robert Fulghum's number one best-seller, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. That collection of uncommon thoughts on common things swept the nation. Fulghum's message is so universally appealing that *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* will be published around the world in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Holland, Belgium, France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Japan, Korea, Brazil, Sweden, Israel, Norway, Spain, and Central and South America.

A work of humor and compassion, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It* complements Robert Fulghum's memorable first book and will delight his readers everywhere.

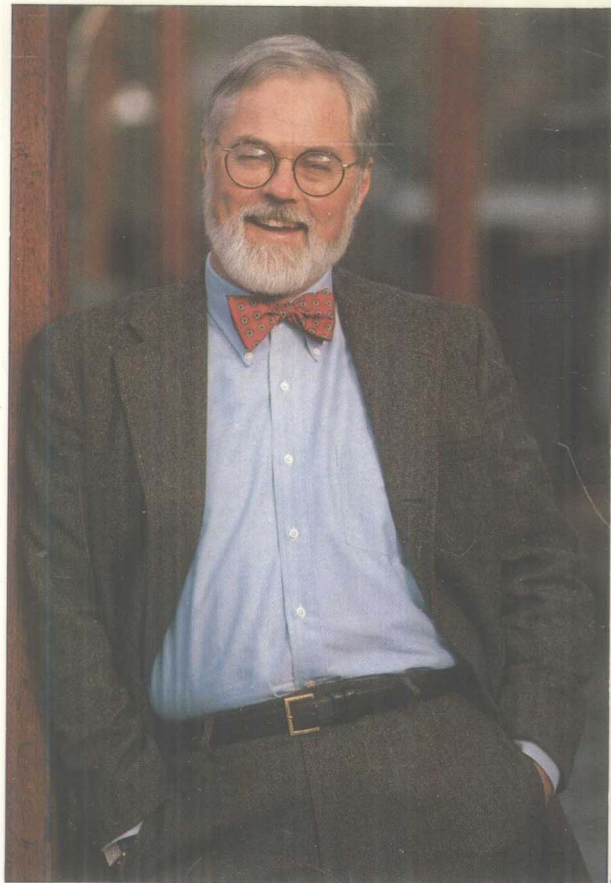


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If you ask him for his business card, you will find that it simply says *Fulghum*. The card reflects an open-ended notion of what his occupation might be. ROBERT FULGHUM has been a working cowboy, IBM salesman, professional artist, folksinger, parish minister, bartender, teacher of drawing and painting, writer, and amateur philosopher. He is still working on what he wants to be when he grows up. In the meantime, he lives with his wife on a houseboat in Seattle and is in training to be a grandfather...

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*I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge—
That myth is more potent than history.
I believe that dreams are more powerful than facts—
That hope always triumphs over experience—
That laughter is the only cure for grief.
And I believe that love is stronger than death.*

FROM THE AUTHOR TO THE READER:

Show-and-Tell was the very best part of school for me, both as a student and as a teacher. Not recess or lunch, but that special time set aside each week for students to bring something important of their own to class to share and talk about.

As a kid, I put more into getting ready for my turn to present than I put into the rest of my homework. Show-and-Tell was *real* in a way that much of what I learned in school was not. It was education that came out of my life experience. And there weren't a lot of rules about Show-and-Tell—you could do your thing without getting red-penciled or gonged to your seat.

As a teacher, I was always surprised by what I learned from these amateur hours. A kid I was sure I knew well would reach down into the paper bag he carried and fish out some odd-shaped treasure and

attach meaning to it beyond my most extravagant expectation. It was me, the teacher, who was being taught at such moments.

Again and again I learned that what I thought was only true for me . . . only valued by me . . . only cared about by me . . . was common property.

Show-and-Tell was a bit disorderly and unpredictable. What the presentations lacked in conventional structure was compensated for by passion for the subject at hand.

The principles guiding this book are not far from the spirit of Show-and-Tell. It is my stuff from home—that place in my mind and heart where I most truly live. This volume picks up where I left off in *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, when I promised to tell about the time it was on fire when I lay down on it.

The form of this book is a reflection of the life from which it is drawn; here is not a collection of well-crafted essays, but the ongoing minutes from a one-man committee meeting, gussied up a bit for bringing to class. An amateur's job. I would read these pages to you if I could, but since that's not possible, I have a suggestion that verges on a request. You know how it is when you get a letter in the mail from a friend far away and you tear it open and start reading it and somebody else in the room says "Read it out loud"

and you do and you talk about it as you go along,
adding your own observations and explanations?
Read it like that. Show and tell.

—Robert Fulghum

*It Was on Fire
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A TABLOID NEWSPAPER CARRIED THE STORY, stating simply that a small-town emergency squad was summoned to a house where smoke was pouring from an upstairs window. The crew broke in and found a man in a smoldering bed. After the man was rescued and the mattress doused, the obvious question was asked: “How did this happen?”

“I don’t know. It was on fire when I lay down on it.”

The story stuck like a burr to my mental socks. And reminded me of a phrase copied into my journal from the dedication of some book: “*Quid rides? Mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur.*” Latin. From the writings of Horace. Translated: “Why do you laugh? Change the name, and the story is told of you.”

It was on fire when I lay down on it.

A lot of us could settle for that on our tombstones. A life-story in a sentence. Out of the frying pan and

into the hot water. I was looking for trouble and got into it as soon as I found it. The devil made me do it the first time, and after that I did it on my own.

Or to point at this truth at a less intense level, I report a conversation with a colleague who was complaining that he had the same damn stuff in his lunch sack day after day.

“So who makes your lunch?” I asked.

“I do,” says he.

We’ve got some fine old company in this deal.

Saint Paul bemoaned the fact that “I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate.”

And the Greek dramatist Euripides puts these words in Medea’s mouth just before she murders her own children: “I know what evil I am about to do. My irrational self is stronger than my resolution.”

Psychiatrists make a lot of money off this dilemma, and theologians make a lot of noise. But not only is it unresolved, it is unresolvable. One lives with the dilemma, and in the living takes comfort in the company of those who habitually lie down on burning beds of one kind or another. It would be better if we could simply lay claim to the beds we choose as our own and get on with it.

And one more thing.

About the man in the burning bed in the story. As with most of what we see other people do, we don't know *why* they do it, either. If our own actions are mysteries, how much so others'? Why did he lie down on the burning bed? Was he drunk? Ill? Suicidal? Blind? Cold? Dumb? Did he just have a weird sense of humor? Or what? I don't know. It's hard to judge without a lot more information. Oh sure, we go ahead and judge anyhow. But maybe if judgment were suspended a bit more often, we would like us more.

God, it is written, warned his first children, Adam and Eve. He made it clear. Don't eat that piece of fruit—it will lead to trouble. You know the rest of the story. . . .

And part of that story is here in this book.

