



You and Your Shadow

We all have elements of our nature that we dislike, suppress, reject, disown, or deny, and psychologists describe this as the metaphorical Shadow. It's always behind us, where we've put it out of our conscious sight.

Here's a quote from Robert Bly's Little Book on the Human Shadow:

"When we were one or two years old we had what we might visualise as a 360-degree personality. Energy radiated out from all parts of our body and all parts of our psyche. A child running is a living globe of energy. We had a ball of energy all right; but one day we noticed that our parents didn't like certain parts of that ball. They said things like, "Can't you be still?" Or "It isn't nice to try and kill your brother." Behind us we have an invisible bag, and the parts of us our parents don't like, we, to keep our parents' love, put in the bag. By the time we go to school our bag is quite large. Then our teachers have their say: "Good children don't get angry over such little things." So we take our anger and we put it in the bag. ...

"Then we do a lot of bag-stuffing in high school. This time it's no longer the evil grownups that pressure us, but people our own age. ... I watched my daughters experience it. I noticed with dismay how much they put into the bag, but there was nothing their mother or I could do about it. Often my daughters seemed to make their decision on the issue of fashion and collective ideas of beauty, and they suffered as much damage from other girls as they did from men.

"So I maintain that out of a round globe of energy the twenty-year-old ends up with a slice... a thin slice left – the rest is in the bag..."

Does any of this sound or feel familiar? So much of ourselves is hidden in the bag, in the Shadow. And listen, much of this suppression is necessary for survival. We don't want to be rejected by the tribe, or we will die. ...

The Shadow is a huge, deep subject and there are many wonderful books about it. Some of our Shadow may include the mean and monstrous in us; but some of it also includes fine qualities in us that we refuse to believe we have. Good and bad, we can never shake off our Shadow; it's an intrinsic part of us. But what we can do, and it's a wonderful thing to do, is to face up to it, own it, and make peace with it. There's wondrous learning and marvellous energy in the Shadow that we are only using a thin slice of.

There are many people who, quite understandably, because they want only to be nice and do no harm, insist that they 'don't do anger' and 'never hate'. But this isn't only denial; it's saying that anger and hate are always bad, and that's just not true - they exist with good reason. And even Jesus lost his temper.

It's often easier to see other people's shadows in action than our own. There are the people who have wonderful qualities and big, generous hearts, but who behave badly in certain spheres. Stories abound of good and evil, the noble or beastly or mean: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, King Kong, Godzilla, Caliban, Scrooge, Hannibal Lecter. Then there are stories of impossibly larger-than-life heroes like Ulysses, Superman, James Bond, Indiana Jones. Notice that both heroes and monsters can be tremendous fun.

Looking into the undesirable or unacknowledged great parts of your nature can be great fun too, although it can be scary. Acknowledging that you have a Shadow and making some peace with all that's in it can make life easier in several ways:

You don't have to fight to repress stuff so much all the time, and that gets tiring.

It's simple self-acceptance.

It helps you be less judgmental of others for having Shadows.

And it helps you feel less inclined to project onto others.

By disowning your Shadow, you may be weakening your psychological defences; so, by owning it, you strengthen your defences.

If you want to be playful, you can picture an inner Shadow monster - a dragon, or a dinosaur, or a shark. It could be cute and fluffy if you need to sweeten the pill; or terrifying if you enjoy that. Whatever it is, when you embrace it, you embrace amazing wild, hidden power inside yourself. ...

In recent years, social media has played a big part in directing our attention yet further away from Shadow. We edit ourselves carefully on Facebook and Instagram, presenting only our so-called 'best bits', the prettiest pictures of ourselves and our lives. But this intolerance of our own less beautiful nature seems also to have made us less tolerant of others' flaws, mistakes, or just points of view, and disconnected us from our consciences. The result has been a growing pandemic of polarised opinion, trolling and toxic hatred.

Because the bombshell is this: what infuriates you about other people is your own Shadow in action. So, if you find yourself irritated by someone, it's fascinating, illuminating and liberating if you can muster the courage to dig deep and uncover that part of you that you're projecting onto them. It can be shocking and difficult to accept traits and behaviours that upset, infuriate, or disgust you when you're upset, furious or disgusted by someone or something else. But the strange and wonderful thing about learning to own this part of your Shadow, in all its monstrous, shady glory, is that it grows your empathy, kindness, non-judgment and tolerance of others and of yourself.

Robert Johnson wrote, "Unless we do conscious work on it, the Shadow is almost always projected: this is, it is neatly laid on someone or something else so we do not have to take responsibility for it."

Just as equally, hero-worship is giving other people the responsibility for what's great in you. By engaging with that part of you that you love and admire in others but don't believe exists in yourself, can plug you back into more of that glorious ball of energy that you stuffed away long ago.

If you are prone to cycling self-hatred, please do not do Shadow work, and seek help.

But if you're up to the task, make sure to uncover what's wonderful in you that you have buried, as well as what's ugly. Look at all the people you admire and what you admire about them.

Confronting and owning your inner superstar, your inner god or goddess, as well as the inner monster in your Shadow, can be one of the most liberating and healing journeys you can embark upon.

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