

Getting to Know Your Shadow

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Self-knowledge and the courage to embrace one's humanness are essential ingredients in both spiritual and psychological growth. In the psychology of Carl Jung, getting to know one's "shadow" is considered to be the very cornerstone of such growth. Spiritual masters of all traditions support this emphasis and stress the importance of acknowledging one's sinfulness, of conversion of heart, and of true poverty of spirit. Psychology and spirituality agree that human growth and development, whether religious or psychological, depend on one's willingness to look at and accept the truth of who one is.

Jung used the term *shadow* to describe the dark and unknown part of the human psyche. It is that part of me that contains all the unwanted and undeveloped aspects of my personality, the things I am unaware of either because they are incompatible with my conscious personality or because they are potentials unknown to me; for example, sexual impulses, ambition, secret faults, and unused talents. The shadow is like another person in me; it has a personality all its own, one that is likely to be guilt-ridden and seemingly inferior, since it carries all the rejected aspects of my conscious personality.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SHADOW

The shadow is the reverse side of our conscious ideals and values. As individuals, we each have a conscience, a superego or ideal self that represents the kind of person we think we should be. This image is largely formed by our experiences of growing up. As young children we are taught certain values and are judged good when we conform to them and bad when we do not. Gradually we

learn to hide, lie about, or repress those "bad" aspects of ourselves, since these are the things that bring the pain of parental disapproval and punishment. These rejected and repressed parts do not disappear, however; rather, they go underground and form part of what Jung called the personal shadow.

The shadow also contains those parts of us that are in conflict with collective ideals, that is, those ideals valued by groups to which we belong outside the family. For example, when I joined a religious community I identified myself with its values and ideals in such a way that they became my own. Similarly, each group holds up certain attitudes and behaviors for its members to follow; it is expected that all will strive to live up to those ideals. In other words, a group possesses an image, or a superego, that serves as a guide to help each individual to behave in ways that conform to group expectations. If I, as a member of a group, notice things in myself which do not fit the group's image, I will probably try to control the expression of those unacceptable aspects of myself in order to make myself acceptable to the group.

REPRESSION PROTECTS EGO

Here I want to digress briefly to look at the original purpose of repression. Repression is an unconscious defense mechanism that originates in early childhood and serves a necessary protective function that allows ego development to take place. The most important psychological task in childhood is the development of a strong, unified ego-identity. In order to achieve self-identity, a child must repress those aspects of his or her personality that are unacceptable, that do not conform to the par-

ents' image of who the child should be. Sexual impulses, anger, selfishness, and willfulness are qualities that evoke parental disapproval. Consequently, the child learns to hide these feelings, because the message received is that these parts of the self are bad or unacceptable. Repression may become an automatic defense to preserve the child's fragile ego. This process serves to protect the young, insecure ego from feelings of fear and failure that would prevent the development of a strong sense of personal identity. Later in life, however, if repression continues to be a person's major defense, his or her way of dealing with faults and failings, an unhealthy situation develops in which the person's self-image is based on falsehood or illusion.

The shadow, then, is a refuge for any aspects of my total personality that have not been accepted and integrated into consciousness. Just as the image of a shadow would suggest, this part of me is dark and threatening. It may threaten my conscious ideals and values when it works in a negative, destructive way to oppose what my conscious ego strives for. There is usually a division between what the conscious "I" wants and what the shadow wants, and this division often causes us to feel anxious and confused. St. Paul writes of such a division when he says, "I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and find myself doing the very things I hate" (Rom 7:25).

NEED FOR WHOLENESS

Dealing with one's shadow is a task that typically belongs to the second half of life. In the first half of life, we are primarily occupied with the development of a personal identity, as well as with finding our place in life. Until the middle years, most of our psychic energy is needed to pursue these aims and whatever vocation we choose. Once we have achieved them and have made an adequate adaptation to our particular life-style, we begin to feel a new psychological and spiritual need for wholeness and integration. The emergence of this need launches us into the next stage of psychological development, in which the integration of the shadow is the cornerstone.

Does this mean that everyone experiences the need to become whole or to deal with the shadow? Apparently not. It seems, rather, that some people do quite well without ever having to confront their shadow, and can live their life in an unexamined and one-sided way without suffering any ill effects. Although the goal of human development calls for increasing integration, human beings appear to vary greatly in both the desire and the capability for such growth and the work it entails. Those who do experience the need for wholeness are often suffering in some way or other, and it is the desire for

healing (psychological, physical, or spiritual) that compels them to further growth. A few examples will help to make this clearer.

1. A person whose life has gone well enough but who suddenly finds himself in a new situation that he is unable to handle must seek further growth and consciousness in order to deal with the changes in his life. Such an occasion might be a new job for which one finds oneself ill prepared, a difficult problem in a relationship, or some tragedy that deeply affects one.
2. A distressing neurologic symptom that develops forces a person to take a deeper look at herself and her attitudes. Depression, chronic anxiety, and various forms of physical illness and addictions are ways in which the psyche expresses unconscious conflicts and signals to us that we need to look more deeply into ourselves.
3. A person is not suffering in any particular way, but wants to grow spiritually, deepen her prayer life, and improve her relationship with God. Such persons must also deal with the shadow, because as long as it remains unconscious the shadow is capable of undermining all attempts to grow spiritually.

PROBLEMS IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

Religious people may be particularly vulnerable to difficult shadow problems because of the nature of a vocation, which involves a conscious commitment to the very highest spiritual values. There is a psychological law that says that the more we consciously strive for some good, the more its dark opposite will be activated. Thus, if my conscious goal, my ego ideal, is to be like Christ, then my shadow will represent the opposite goal, to be "anti-Christ." The more I think that I am like Christ, the less likely I am to see my sinfulness. Unaware of my own sins, I am keenly aware of those of my neighbors, possibly seeing it as my job to save them. Meanwhile, I neglect my real need, which is to accept and confess my own sins. In the New Testament, Jesus cautions us against falling into this habit when he speaks of removing the speck in one's neighbor's eye while failing to see the log in one's own. The tendency in religious life to equate holiness with perfection makes it particularly difficult for religious men and women to recognize and integrate their shadow side. We need to grow into an understanding of holiness and wholeness that makes room for the imperfect in us as well as the perfect.

RECOGNIZING THE SHADOW

The shadow manifests itself in a variety of ways in our everyday lives. Learning to recognize it when it appears is a valuable means for growth in

self-knowledge. The more we can open ourselves to see the truth of who we are, both strengths and weaknesses, the more whole and holy we can become.

The shadow contains those aspects of ourselves that we do not readily accept as our own; others may see them in us, but we resist doing so, and sometimes even attribute them to others. Such "projecting" of our shadow is common; our environment acts as a mirror for the shadow, and what we see in others is a reflection of what lies deep within ourselves.

By Jung's definition, a man's shadow is masculine and a woman's is feminine. Projection of the shadow is always onto a person of the same sex. We can recognize our shadow in its projected form (that is, when another person is personifying it) by our emotional reaction to that person. When we react strongly to a person of the same sex, either positively or negatively, we can be reasonably certain that that person embodies an aspect of our shadow. That is, we are seeing *ourselves* in that person whom we criticize, whom we cannot stand to be around, who irritates and upsets us, whom we consider to be our enemy—or, alternatively, the person whom we admire, love, idealize. We can tell that a weakness of our own has been projected onto our neighbors when we notice in ourselves a strong compulsion to correct or criticize their behavior. Thus, what we reject in ourselves we observe and deal with in others.

If we want to learn about our shadow, we begin by noticing our reactions to others. What qualities provoke our self-righteous indignation? What characteristics do we value most highly and find most praiseworthy? Who evokes our judgment? our admiration? The answers to such questions may tell us more than we care to know.

Another way in which the shadow expresses itself is as another voice or person inside us—another self—with whom we find ourselves in dialogue. During times of decision making or inner conflict, that other voice that begins to make itself heard may be the shadow engaging us in an internal dialogue.

A further manifestation of the shadow can be served in "Freudian slips"—instances when we mean to say one thing but say another instead. A slip is usually something embarrassing or hostile—something we had no intention of saying. If we honestly examine these mistakes, we might find that they reveal a hidden hurt or anger, which the shadow carries for us until it finds an opportunity to express it.

In dreams, too, the shadow reveals itself. A woman's shadow will appear in the feminine images and persons in her dreams. The known and unknown women in my own dreams reveal to me various qualities of my shadow personality. Similarly, a man's shadow personality will be personified by the masculine images in his dreams. Dreams, then, can be a valuable aid to us



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- IN DIALOGUE WITH A VOICE INSIDE
- IN OUR DREAMS
- IN REACTIONS TO OTHERS

learning about the shadow, for our unspoken motives, hidden faults and failures, unacknowledged virtues and vices, and undeveloped or unrealized potential can come up from the unconscious when our defenses are lowered by sleep.

PROBLEMS IN COMMUNITY

The shadow is always close at hand influencing our perceptions, our decisions, our relationships with others, even our relationship with God. Shadow projections can cause arguments, misunderstandings, and various other relationship problems; many failed relationships can be attributed to unresolvable conflicts created by shadow projections. In community or family life, where people live closely together, shadow problems are likely to be more common and subtler than in other types of relationships. The following examples illustrate this point.

Scapegoating. Scapegoating, the identification and labeling of one person in the group as the problem, is a well-known phenomenon in the Judeo-Christian heritage and a common problem in contemporary group life. Jesus is often seen as a scapegoat, as are many Old Testament prophets before him. Most of us have had some personal experience of this in both work and living situations. Scapegoating is the result of shadow projections: one person in the group is the object of the negative projections of the whole group, and the group believes that this individual is to blame for whatever problems the group has. If only he or she would leave or change in certain ways, then everything would be fine. In other words, all the responsibility within the group is shifted to one member, while the rest of the group assumes the role of the innocent victim. When people live closely together, their projections or expectations inevitably influence each other, for good or ill; we cannot remain neutral to others' projections, but must either live them out or react against them. In scapegoating, the problem has been assigned to a person who is usually forced into living out the negative attributes projected onto him or her.

Perfectionism. In religious communities we occasionally come across someone who seems to have no shadow. He or she is like a saint, without obvious faults or weaknesses, always able to do the right thing, consistently generous and kind, never uncharitable toward anyone. We conclude this is that rare person who is better than human, "the perfect religious." But perfection is not humanly possible: everyone has faults, even saints. No one is perfectly kind, generous, and charitable, all of the time. Where, then, is this person's shadow? Most likely, others in the group are carrying it for him or her. When the person represses his or her dark side, others are compelled to express those human reactions that the "perfect religious"

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denies. In other words, the darkness that I refuse to accept as my own becomes the burden of the group.

Have you ever noticed how "perfect" people affect others? People who are "too good" irritate us with their goodness. Many, if not most, such people are often not truly free of negative thoughts and feelings but are merely hiding them, fearing that openly expressing the emotions they consider unacceptable would make them less perfect and too human.

Their "goodness" makes us feel inferior because it magnifies our own weakness, and at times even seems to draw out our own dark side. For example, we might find ourselves watching for such a person to make a mistake. And if he or she does make one or suffers some misfortune, we may find that we are secretly pleased, because this humanizes the person or brings him or her down to our own level of inferiority. Another type of shadow problem that is frequently found in religious life is manifested by the person who disowns and projects the positive aspects of his or her shadow. In our culture many people suffer from low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority. In religious life, such people are generally passive and dependent on others, see themselves as not having much to offer, and generally feel sorry for themselves. Although they belong to the community, they do not contribute creatively to its life, thinking that they are not "good enough." This is a shadow problem, but in this case, it is not their undesirable qualities but their undeveloped gifts and talents that are repressed and attributed to others. Unaware that inferiority feelings stem from failure to develop unique gifts, they are sensitive to others' achievements. They tend to overvalue the gifts of others, admiring them and wishing to be like them. Instead of fulfilling their own potential and making creative contributions, they put the people they admire on pedestals, burdening them and distancing them with

their idealized expectations. Thus, projection of the "bright shadow" can become an easy way out of the responsibility we each have to develop and use our God-given talents for the service of others.

A MORAL PROBLEM

Dealing with the shadow can become a moral responsibility, as well as a necessity for personal growth. It is apparent from the foregoing examples of shadow problems that we can have a destructive influence on others without either our knowledge or our conscious intent. Shadow projections occur spontaneously in our relationships with others. We do not deliberately project our shadow qualities onto others; it happens before we know it. How, then, can we be morally responsible for something that happens without our consent? The issue here is not that shadow problems exist or that projections occur, but rather the way in which we choose to deal with them when they do occur. It is possible to get to know our own shadow and to recognize it when it is projected onto others. The recognition that we are seeing ourselves reflected in our neighbor enables us to withdraw our projection from whomever it has fallen upon and to deal with it in ourselves. If we do this, we can free ourselves of the compulsion to "take the log out of our neighbor's eye," so to speak, and can acknowledge the one in our own. If we do not, we force others to carry our dark side for us. Perhaps Jesus had this in mind when he said that being his follower requires the willingness to take up one's own cross. The hardest burden to bear is one's own individual nature and fate. This, however, is the essence of moral integrity and, according to Jung, the cornerstone of a truly religious attitude and way of life.

INTEGRATION IS AIM

The reason we try to make our shadow conscious, to get to know it, is not to rid ourselves of it but rather to integrate it. Holiness and wholeness are not to be achieved by cutting away an essential part of the self. We cannot get rid of our dark side.

It is human to have hateful, lustful, or envious thoughts and feelings. If we had no shadow at all, we would be flat and dull, without substance or personality. The shadow gives us depth and character, and integrating it has the effect of filling out our personality, making us fully human and alive. Confronting the shadow and coming to terms with it has a transforming effect, because when we deal responsibly with our dark side, we are freed from its negative power.

There is a wealth of energy bound up in the shadow. When it is made conscious, that energy is available to us to use as we choose. We gradually discover that our faults and failings are not as threatening to our self-esteem as they once were. We find that we are able to love and embrace more of ourselves, to reach out in love and compassion to others; we are less likely to be self-righteous and judgmental, because we know who we are. We may even find that our relationship with God changes. No longer needing to deny our sinfulness, we are more open to and aware of our need for God's healing presence. Even the most shameful sins can be redeemed by a God who sometimes chooses to act where it is dark. In Psalm 139 we are told that for God "even the darkness is not dark . . . and the night is as bright as day . . . darkness and light are the same." The shadow—that dark side of us that we avoid and fear—is a place where we can meet God.

RECOMMENDED READING

- Clift, W. B. *Jung and Christianity*. New York: Seabury Press, Crossroad Books, 1983.
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