

ESCAPE FROM THE SHADOW

There was a man who was so disturbed by the sight of his own shadow and so displeased with his own footsteps, that he determined to get rid of both. The method he hit upon was to run away from them. So he got up and ran.

But every time he put his foot down there was another step, while his shadow kept up with him without the slightest difficulty. He attributed his failure to the fact that he was not running fast enough. So he ran faster and faster, without stopping, until he finally dropped dead.

He failed to realize that if he merely stepped into the shade, his shadow would vanish, and if he sat down and stayed still, there would be no more footsteps. - Chuang Tzu

We are afraid of our shadows.

The concept of the Shadow was espoused by psychiatrist Carl Jung to describe those aspects of Self that are judged undesirable, disowned, and buried in the unconscious. Considerable psychic energy is required to keep the contents split away from consciousness. Fear, guilt, and shame surround the Shadow, and attempt to prevent any threatened emergence. Common aspects that comprise the shadow are sexuality, anger and vulnerability.



The attempt is to rid oneself of that which we must not acknowledge to ourselves and others. By disavowing their existence in us, we try and convince ourselves and others these forces do not affect us. We try to escape from ourselves. Here's why it doesn't work.

Repression is not elimination, it is self deception. We cannot "will" ourselves to be different than we authentically are, and attempting to do so only creates conflict and division within ourselves. "Out of sight, out of mind" may work in the external world (when dieting, for instance), but on the psyche's realm "out of sight" merely mean "beyond conscious control." Exiling parts of Self to the dungeon actually increases their power, like a spring that is compressed, and increases the likelihood that Shadow will erupt under stress - ala the commonly used legal defense "I just snapped." Or Flip Wilson's tagline - "The Devil made me do it."

In the same way that people sent to prison (society's Shadow) tend to emerge more hardened criminals, disowned aspects of Self become distorted when not allowed the light of day. I remember a dream in which I was living in a village in a valley in 12th Century England. The ground began shaking and above the hills appeared the face of an enormous young giant. Everyone was panicking, and I was running through the village telling the villagers, "He's not evil. He is clumsy, so be careful, but he's not evil."

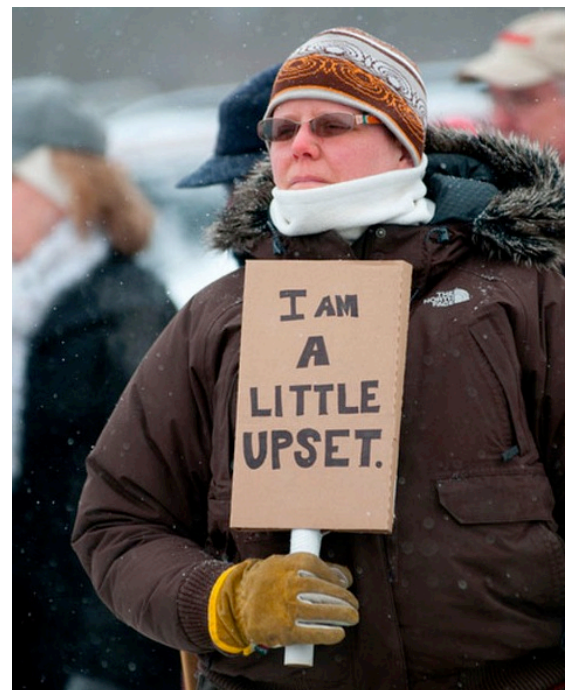
Man creates his own confusion because he goes on rejecting himself, condemning himself, not accepting himself. Then a chain of inner chaos and misery is created. The whole existence accepts you as you are, but you don't. Because of the ideal you cannot live here and now, because of the ideal you condemn yourself. And when you go on comparing yourself with that image, you will always feel that something is lacking, something is missing.

- Osho

So why bother? Why stir up a hornet's nest? Why release the condemned? Several reasons. When you lock away anger/aggression, for instance, you lose the power that is inherent in them. It becomes difficult to draw boundaries, assert oneself, navigate conflict. You become split, you try and be "somebody" different from who you are. Remember the "sensitive men" of the 70's, who rejected their masculine sides in response to the macho way that Shadow was being expressed previously? The knock on them was "wimps." The dream I described above was the emergence from Shadow of repressed masculine energy, and brought with it a dimension of power and security that was missing before.

Next, repressing the Shadow leads to living in constant fear of its emergence. We have to condemn, pass laws, create religious strictures to contain sex. The result? Perverted priests molesting children, and sexuality laced with guilt and dirtiness. It becomes a common event that those who speak out the loudest against sexual expression are the ones caught with their pants down. Literally.

And finally, repressing Shadow only forces it to express itself in some distorted way. Like pornography. Or gladiator worship. It's not going away, no matter how much we try and condemn it. The Balinese make offerings to the demons, they set aside a day each year for the demons to be honored and allowed to expressed themselves in ritualistic dancing, drinking, fighting and feasting. They believe



this expression has a pacifying effect and that the demons, satisfied, will leave them alone the rest of the time. Their culture is healthy, warm and open, with little crime or violence.

It takes courage to go into these dark places and liberate trapped pieces of Self. It's often messy and inconvenient and filled with lots of self judgment. Some people try instead to build their lives on top of a shaky foundation of fear and anger - and in their lives they often experience self sabotage, restricted capacity for intimacy, uncontrolled outbursts of rage, sexual acting out. It may not be easy to face one's self without pretense. But is it any easier to not face it? To live with the pot boiling underneath us and to feel powerless to contain it?

So stop running. Sit in the shade. Relax. Be who you are. Embrace your own nature. What a relief, to not have to be anything other than who you are. Already free. Already whole. Already enough.

We are such strangers to the mystery that we mistake any depth of feeling for sadness, any sense of the unknown for fear, and any sense of peace for boredom.
- Mark Nepo

