

**BRINGING YOUR  
SHADOW  
OUT OF THE  
DARK**

**Breaking Free from the  
Hidden Forces That Drive You**

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**sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

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# 1 AN INSIDE LOOK AT OUR SHADOW

**OUR SHADOW** is the place within each of us that contains what we don't know, don't like, or deny about ourselves. Calling it our shadow is fitting because of its lack of illumination; what it's storing is being kept in the dark, to whatever degree. Wherever we go, our shadow goes with us, whether we're aware of it or not.

Our shadow holds our unattended and not-yet-illuminated conditioning—all the programmed ways we act, think, feel, and choose without knowing why. It also contains all that we've disowned, pushed aside, or otherwise rejected in ourselves; whatever in us about which we insist, “That's not me”; whatever in us we're out of touch with or keeping out of sight, such as the roots of our unresolved wounding. Things we may find in our shadow include:

- Fear, especially in the form of core-level anxiety
- Anger, including anger that's been converted into aggression
- Shame, particularly when we associate it with humiliation and rejection
- Empathy, especially when we equate it with being too soft
- Less-than-flattering intentions, such as being “good” in order to stay in control

- Resistance, especially when our no to something is muted or muzzled
- The child in us, particularly when we're avoiding or minimizing our childhood wounding
- Our inner saboteur, featuring us playing victim to self-defeating behaviors
- The nonsexual factors driving our sexuality, such as wanting to be wanted
- Grief, especially in its raw depths and unsullied intensity
- Our bigness and beauty—the ennobling qualities we've learned to suppress

A quick way to get a sense of what our shadow contains is to identify something we don't like about ourselves, perhaps a quality we wish we didn't have and therefore tend to push away or ignore as best we can. Initially we'll probably only see the presenting surface of this quality—such as an out-of-proportion insecurity or irritability—not realizing that this is but the tip of the proverbial iceberg. However, once we realize there's more to this disliked quality of ourselves than we're seeing, we're likely going to feel more open to exploring it and its origins. And the more we explore, the more likely we are to realize that the quality we've disowned is, in fact, a quality that can be helpful to us.

For example, Terry's wife complained that whenever she was upset with him, he shut down. Terry understood that this behavior of his was a problem and wished he could stay open to her, connected to her. The trouble was, he felt vulnerable whenever his wife was unhappy with him, and feeling like this made him very uncomfortable. So he pushed away both his vulnerability and discomfort by shutting down.

Once Terry began to explore his shadow, he found there not only his vulnerability but also what he originally associated—and still associates—with being vulnerable: being humiliated. As a boy, when

he was mocked and degraded by his brothers and he started to cry, he was belittled even more by them. Remembering this and emotionally connecting it to his current circumstances, through some counseling, helped him start experiencing his vulnerability not as a weakness but as a source of strength. As a result, he became able to remain emotionally connected to his wife, even when she was upset with him.

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## A BEGINNING PRACTICE

### Bringing Your Shadow Elements More into the Open

Finish the first incomplete sentence as spontaneously as possible, out loud, and then immediately write down what you just said. Do the same for the rest of the list. Then revisit each of your responses, adding anything further that comes to you.

Something in me I often feel aversion toward is \_\_\_\_\_.

The emotion I'm least comfortable expressing is \_\_\_\_\_.

What I have a hard time admitting in an argument is \_\_\_\_\_.

What I'm most hesitant to express in a relationship is \_\_\_\_\_.

What I least want others to know about me is \_\_\_\_\_.

I don't like admitting that I am \_\_\_\_\_.

When I feel shame, what I usually do is \_\_\_\_\_.

What I most readily judge others for is \_\_\_\_\_.

I tend to give away my power when \_\_\_\_\_.

Your responses point to things that are probably in your shadow, whether partially or fully.

Don't be concerned about clarity here. What matters is that you're turning toward your shadow, accessing some curiosity about what may be in it. Looking inside is a process of ongoing discovery; treat it as such.

## Relating to What's Contained in Our Shadow

In order to know our shadow, we need to learn how to skillfully relate—not just intellectually, but also emotionally, somatically, and spiritually—to the qualities and behaviors housed in it, no matter how ugly or unsavory they seem to us.

It can be helpful here to *personify* a particular element as a guest we've invited into our living room—perhaps a difficult or unpleasant guest or perhaps one we've invited in reluctantly, but a guest nonetheless—taking a seat in front of us. Our guest might be our anger, our shame, our fear, a part of our body, our aversion toward a certain class of people, our unwillingness to take responsibility in a particular area of our life—whatever we'd rather not face in ourselves, whatever we haven't faced in ourselves, whatever in us we're trying to keep out of sight.

Anne kept her anger not just at a distance but also muted. Her father was a physically abusive rageaholic, and the rest of her family were terrified of ever expressing their own anger. So they swallowed it, stuffed it down, fled from it—whatever increased their sense of safety. When Anne embraced a spiritual path as an adult, she loved the peace she found there, and on this path, anger was considered to be unspiritual and far from wholesome, which confirmed her early experiences. With her anger bound in her shadow, she struggled with others crossing her boundaries; she tried to stay sweet and nonconfrontational, never pushing back. She tended to accommodate her friends' needs far past the point of taking care of herself, and she wished she didn't always “have to” yield to their needs and demands.

Eventually Anne recognized not only that she (and her spiritual path) had confused anger with aggression and ill will, but also that her anger was mostly stored in her shadow. As she turned toward her anger for brief but meaningful periods, letting herself feel it arising

and expressing it with care, she began to see through the aggression and ill will she had associated with it. She began to know her anger more deeply. Gradually her anger ceased being something to reject or keep in her shadow and became more and more of an ally, a resource, a heartfelt fiery force to harness and use for life-giving purposes (such as establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries).

Whatever in ourselves we're keeping in the dark doesn't go away just because we don't see, hear, or feel it. In fact, the more we push it away or ignore it, the stronger and more rooted it becomes, insinuating its way into our everyday life. The longer we cage an animal—especially in a dark, easy-to-forget cage—the worse it may behave once it's let out or gets out. This is not the animal's fault. The same applies to our shadow elements. The further or more forcibly we push them into the dark, the more monstrous or alien they will seem.

Again, consider anger. When it has been long suppressed, muted, muzzled, locked up in darkness, it will likely show up in far-from-healthy forms once it breaks out of its confinement. This doesn't mean that anger itself is a bad or unwholesome thing; its overcontainment and mistreatment is the problem.

Meeting and exploring our anger—or any other emotion—in a compassionately contained, well-lit space allows us to see it more clearly, deepening our capacity to express it in ways that serve our well-being and the well-being of others. There's no true escape from our shadow elements, for they are parts of us, no matter how removed from us they may seem to be.

## **The Relevance of Working with Our Shadow**

The idea of *the shadow* has been around for a while in various forms, but it remains on the fringe of mainstream culture, as does the idea of *shadow work*. However, exploring our shadow doesn't have to be an arcane, archetypal, or otherwise too limiting or solely intellectual consideration. We need to see, feel, and know it deeply, without bypassing its visceral reality and its industrial-strength impact on our choice-making capacity and destiny. And we need to explore it not generically but in a specifically personal way.



Turning toward our shadow—however slightly—is a shift from abstraction to direct experience. It’s also a shift from the comfortably familiar to the edgily unfamiliar, the unknown, the hidden forces that are driving us.

My client Mark had an affair and lied about it to his wife. She found out the full truth, and in the year following the discovery, he had been “good,” behaving as impeccably as he could. His wife was grateful for this but remained uneasy. When he told me he wished she would trust him again, I responded that her mistrust wasn’t based just on what he did but also on her sense that what led him to cheat on her was still in him, undercover. I saw his internal division: there was sincerity, hurt, and a subtle flatness in his left eye, but something darker and harder was emanating from his right eye. I had him face me and cover his left eye with his left hand, and then I guided him into expressing what he felt as he looked at me through his right eye: aggression and entitlement, tightly coiled but very much present.

As his right-eye feelings and expression intensified (with my guidance), the part of him that wanted to keep being sexual with other women started to emerge. I told Mark that I wanted to meet this aspect of him fully. With more direction, he became very alive and very passionate. He no longer tried to present himself as good and considerate. Instead, he let the part of him that wanted to act out have uninhibited expression, without any apology. As he did so, what also surfaced was the teenager in him who had ached to be popular and freely sexual. He was immensely relieved now that this aggressive, entitled part of himself was no longer hidden or masked with good intentions. By bringing it out into the open, he began to develop a healthy relationship to it, ceasing to lose himself in it so that it no longer could overpower him.

When his wife witnessed him taking consistently good care of this part of himself—and vulnerably admitting to her when it arose instead of just fusing with or dissociating from it—she started to feel safer with him. As her trust in his transparency and commitment to relating skillfully to this younger part of himself deepened, he felt even more motivated to work in depth with his shadow.

Turning toward our shadow is the significant first step of a courage-deepening, life-affirming adventure that asks much from us

and gives back more than can be imagined. Working sincerely and in depth with our shadow is a powerfully liberating labor, affecting every area of our life, furthering our capacity to become intimate with everything—everything!—that we are. Nothing gets stranded in the dark. Nothing gets left out.

The more that we ignore our shadow, both personally and collectively, the more it dominates and *operates* us, with disastrous consequences. Our increasingly perilous times call for us to wake up to our shadow, to face and know our shadow very well, to work with it in enough depth so that it can no longer run us. Staying oblivious to our shadow, as is especially common in political and corporate arenas, simply reinforces our dysfunction, regardless of our achievements.

Knowing our shadow and working with it in depth can't be sideline pursuits; they are necessary practices if we are to really unchain ourselves from our conditioning and embody a life in which our differences only deepen our shared humanity. Bringing our shadow elements out of the dark and working with them may seem optional at first, but eventually doing so becomes—if we wholeheartedly give ourselves to it—not only a foundational invitation but also a sacred demand, a necessary journey packed with uncommonly deep healing and awakening.

We must approach, meet, and work with our shadow if we are to live a more liberated and truly responsible life in which awareness, love, and integrity function as one. It takes courage to face our shadow and work with it, but the very act of doing so deepens our courage.

The more that we explore our shadow, the more easily we step into the adventure of bringing all that we are—high and low, dark and light, soft and hard—into the circle of our being, giving our internal diversity the shared ground of our heart and essential presence. Bringing the contents of our shadow out of the dark so we can work with them *is* a risk because of the potential changes it will catalyze, but not working with them is a much greater risk, personally and collectively.

Let's not leave our shadow unexplored and unknown. To meet and illuminate it, to relate to it skillfully, to make wise use of it, is a great gift to all of us. Given the state of the world, perhaps the most relevant practice we can do is work in depth with our shadow, whatever the scale.

## 2 OUR CONDITIONING

**OUR CONDITIONING** is how we're each uniquely programmed to behave, think, feel, and choose. Our default ways of acting—behaviors we automatically or unquestioningly activate—together express our conditioning. These go-to behavioral patterns are wired into us by the impact of past events.

Our shadow is *packed* with the conditioning we haven't examined or sufficiently faced and that we're allowing to continue unchecked—a Pandora's box bulging at the seams, the lid only held in place by the strength of our ignorance of its contents. We can't leave our conditioning uninvestigated if we are to truly know ourselves.

All of us have conditioning, but most of us don't really know our own conditioning very well. Furthermore, we may be averse to exploring it, except perhaps intellectually, being spellbound by such notions as "It's all in the past" or "What's done is done." Though we may think we're done with our past, our past isn't necessarily done with us—and it won't be until we recognize its impact on us and begin the work of not letting ourselves be run by it, of bringing it out of our shadow.

### How Our Conditioning Forms

Contrary to much of popular thought, we aren't born as blank slates; even at birth, we come already equipped with filters-to-be for our experience. At first we may only react through the filter of our appetite, interacting with life in a largely reflexive way. But even in very early infancy, something deeper, something not confined to genetic

programming, may shine through the cracks, awake and vividly present. Hormonal input, already-determined behavioral leanings, genetic presets—all play their part in fleshing out our non-environmental conditioning. So much is ready to be set in motion from the moment of our birth, and we aren't in a position to do anything about it, any more than a baby lion can change its mind and become a baby seal.

Nongenetic—that is, environmental—programming makes its entrance very early and has great influence on us, given that we're in no position to resist. Environmental factors exert their own conditioning pressures. The social rules of our family and culture, as well as the directions dictated by our parents' unresolved wounding, intrude.

I remember my father—once again—roaring at me. I was five and terrified, unable to hold back my tears. He snapped, “Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about!” I knew very well from experience that he meant whipping out his belt or the ironing cord and repeatedly bringing this down on my outstretched hands and wrists, but I couldn't stop crying. This scene was horribly familiar to me, like a recurring nightmare from which there is no escape. Even when my father wasn't angry, I got the feeling he didn't like me, didn't want me, that he thought of me an unwelcome outsider. Any anger I had toward him had to be shoved out of sight, into my shadow. Not that I knew this at the time, but it was a matter of pure survival, dictated by my fear, my sense of danger. My environment, in the person of my father, was conditioning me to redirect or suppress my anger, and to treat my vulnerability as a liability.

By the time we have—or are—a conventional self (perhaps initially marked by the recognition that it's us we're seeing in a mirror), we're already implanted with various shoulds, directives, behavioral expectations, and so on. Our deepest qualities might still peek out through this conventional self now and then, but it inevitably takes up more and more space, pushing the rest of us into the background, into our shadow, fully or partially. Our incoming conditioning—even when delivered with the best of intentions—invades us with mycelial ambition, spreading through us not just physically but also energetically and psychologically, taking root in us, its branding more than skin-deep.

As a boy, I hated my father, hated my servility before him; I hated my smallness, my skinny child's body, my trembling voice. His shaming of me soon turned into my shaming of myself. In our drama of bullied and bully, I longed to be the impossible-to-shame hero before whom the bully couldn't help but flee, the hero whom the audience couldn't help but applaud, the hero who'd rescue my downtrodden mother from my tyrant father. This fantasy, reinforced by my comic-book heroes' steely bravery, kept me from being fully crushed. The hurt fueling such fantasy became increasingly housed in my shadow, so that I became cut off from my heart.

As I continued to be overpowered, beaten down, and shamed, my sensitivity morphed into extreme shyness and self-loathing. My mother's refusal to stop my father from shaming me only underscored my sense of worthlessness. At the same time, my aggression toward him was festering, hidden and amplified by my fantasies of being in a position where no one could overpower me. The seeds of my armoring sprouted. My shadow, of which I had no awareness, housed not just my hate of my father but also much of my vulnerability, empathy, and softness, since such qualities obstructed the hardness I sought.

As our conditioning establishes itself in us, it so dominates our psychological and emotional landscape that we normalize it. One result of this is that our core self, our essential individuality, may become alien or *lost* to us. Such is the trance we're in until we begin to awaken to our actual condition.

## Shifting Out of Automatic

To live with our conditioning unquestioned and unseen is a kind of imprisonment, commonly masquerading as the "normal" human condition. Though we may intuit, at least to some degree, that we're trapped, we still tend to invest a lot of energy in seeking effective distractions from this sense of imprisonment, perhaps visualizing freedom as a more comfortable place, without seeing that this apparent freedom actually may be just another kind of prison. Getting out, breaking out, isn't just a matter of awakening but also of growing up,