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Live Oak UU Fellowship
December 27, 2015

Gifts of the Shadow

When I was a child, my dad used to spend time with me at bedtime. Like many children, I insisted on keeping a light on after the bedtime story and song ritual. I feared all kinds of perils lurking in the dark—imagination can be brutal. My parents tried various strategies to help get me to sleep; I remember negotiating to have the hall light left on, the door open at least a hand's width, and my mom or dad checking my room for monsters every five minutes. At some point, my father talked to me about the *benefits* of darkness: it is soft, it is soothing, it is peaceful, it is tranquil and kindly and comforting. I don't remember if it helped me get to sleep at the time, but I've always been grateful to him for this vision of nocturnal serenity.

“The woods are lovely, dark, and deep.” ... We're familiar with a tradition of nurturing, sheltering darkness. There is also a strong cultural current of negative associations with darkness, blackness, and shadow. Unitarian Universalist author and religious educator Jacqui James writes:

Blackmail, blacklist, black mark. Black Monday, black mood, black-hearted. Black plague, black mass, black market.

Good guys wear white, bad guys wear black. We fear black cats, and the Dark Continent. But it's okay to tell a white lie, lily-white hands are coveted, it's great to be pure as the driven snow. Angels and brides wear white. Devil's food cake is chocolate; angel's food cake is white!....white is esteemed. It is heavenly, sunlike, clean, pure, immaculate, innocent, and beautiful. At the same time, black is evil, wicked, gloomy, depressing, angry, sullen.

James goes on to point out how this common duality informs and reinforces racism, consistently attributing negative connotations to black and positive associations to white. The black-white duality that pervades our culture shapes our conversation about race and ethnicity in ways that implicitly validate unjust systems and institutions.

At the same time, the duality of dark and light affects our spiritual and psychological health. Often we find ourselves conflicted, “divided against ourselves,” experiencing inner struggle. We fight against our faults and shortcomings, striving to be all good, all perfect.

Psychologist Carl Jung called the dark side of human nature the “shadow.” It consists of unconscious layers of the psyche and also parts of the personality we subconsciously disown or reject. This may be the result of early social conditioning, when shame or disgust are evoked in the course of learning

to mind our Ps and Qs. Like trash, we throw it away—except (as with trash) there is no “away.”

Contents of the shadow influence our thoughts and feelings without our conscious awareness. We often experience this influence as caused by another person. Psychologists call this mental process *projection*. Just as a shadow in the landscape creates the illusion of something not really there, feelings arise from within us that we believe to be targeting us from outside. The more intense our reaction to the error or shortcoming or annoying behavior of another—the greater our feeling of annoyance—the more likely the irritating attribute we see in the other is an unconscious, unclaimed personality trait of our own. To put it another way, someone else can't “push buttons” or “activate triggers” if they aren't there.

Thinking of our flaws, faults, weakness, shortcomings, and unpleasant behavior as contents of the *shadow* offers a helpful perspective. Remember when Peter Pan got separated from his shadow, and Wendy had to reattach it for him? How relieved and happy he was? What if we were able to reconnect with our personal shadow? What if we could see with clarity through the monster's shadow to the harmless bush or tree that is really there? What if we recognize that the shadow's content may not be entirely negative, and that embracing it makes available personal resources we may not have known we possess? What if embracing the shadow unlocks creativity, spontaneity, and inspiration?

Recognizing and affirming the buttons and triggers that activate our unpleasant reactions to others can bring greater harmony to our relationships; reclaiming our own “baggage” can *lighten* our emotional burdens.

“Luke, I am your father.” Remember this scene from Star Wars V (originally Star Wars II—*The Empire Strikes Back*)? Luke is horrified to learn his relationship to the very embodiment of Evil, Darth Vader. Ultimately this knowledge gives him—and us—a new understanding of Darth Vader and a new appreciation of the power Luke himself inherits.

Carl Jung didn't invent the concept of the reclaiming the shadow. For example, Jesus says (in the King James translation): “And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” *Matthew 7:3*. In Psalm 139 the poet addresses God, saying: “If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me, even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee, but the night shineth as the day. The darkness and the light are both alike to thee” (*vv. 11-12*) In Islam, the *nafs* refers to the part of the self roughly corresponding to Jung's idea of the shadow—with which one struggles in faith to give up bad intentions and bad manners.

The struggle is real! Should you wish to take advantage of this dark season to explore your shadow and tame its negativity, here are some ideas to help

recognize the buttons and triggers that call up the shadow's contents. *When you find yourself*

- reacting to another's expression of feeling defensively, perhaps saying things you later regret
- striving for perfection (an impossible goal) instead of excellence (doing your best)
- arguing with other people's expressions of feeling, as though feelings were subject to debate
- doing the same thing repeatedly despite negative consequences
- too often experiencing anger, jealousy, or envy
- speaking or acting from fear of what others will think
- feeling contempt for someone you formerly admired
- holding on to resentment, even though it's painful

When we do recognize buttons and triggers of the negative charge that resides in the shadow, what to do then? First, just to know and embrace it can be a great relief. It's liberating to know we don't have to be entirely rid

of unpleasant traits and painful emotions to begin feeling better.

“Whoops, there it is, that thing, again.” When this happens, cranky reactions subside, to some extent, on their own. Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says that rather than repressing our anger—which only makes it worse—embracing it is like embracing a crying baby: the baby feels relief right away.

In cases of persistent distress, we can ease the upset with activities that help us explore our hidden, inner life. Writing a letter to the person who “pushes your buttons” can be amazingly revealing. Somehow the writing process illuminates the inner workings of psyche, allowing us to recognize the part our own shadow plays in relationship dynamics. You may want to burn or shred the letter when you're done—perhaps even ritually.

Another technique is to make a *list* of resentments you hold—all that you can think of. When you come to a stopping point, add a statement of release. The resentments won't completely disappear, but they will have less influence over your thoughts, feelings, and actions.

I also recommend spiritual practice: something that reinforces integration of mind and body, such as yoga, tai chi, or meditation. These practices help develop self-awareness and nurture an ability to observe the mind at work.

Being able to witness your own thoughts as they occur supports self-knowledge, spiritual wholeness, and psychological well being.

Above all, it is important to embrace the darkness, in our experience of the world and within ourselves. Like the darkness of lovely long nights, the shadow hides plenty of natural phenomena, some of which we may fear. It is normal to feel anxious about the unknown. For the sake of our own well being, for the sake of our relationships, for the sake of peace and justice at every level, it is well worth taking the risk: the risk of welcoming the darkness and reclaiming the shadowy parts of ourselves.

I close with these words from UU minister, Kendyl Gibbons:

There is, finally, only one thing required of us:

that is, to take life whole,

the sunlight and shadows together;

to live the life that is given us

with courage and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment

out of the vastness of time

for all our wondering and loving.

Therefore let there be no half-heartedness;
rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain,
in its yearning, in its praise.

Then shall peace enfold our days,
and glory shall not fade from our lives.

So may it be.