

Shadow Awareness

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Among my most basic suppositions about human life is my assumption (and, to be uncomfortably honest, it's probably more a belief than an assumption) that every individual psyche contains its own custom-tailored shadow. I could use the plural — shadows — since our demons seem to come in gangs, but I'll stick with the singular in this instance to indicate an entire category. Also, my use of the adjective "custom-tailored" is not meant to imply some sort of Cosmic Master Plan, but merely to suggest that the shadow/shadows within any individual psyche will naturally reflect the particular mix of interior archetypes — whether standard or idiosyncratic — that contribute to the makeup of that living person.

This is one reason why, over my lifetime, I've moved away — at this point, far, far away — from any sort of hero worship or exaltation of saints or avatars. In my world, everyone has feet of clay. *Everyone*. Although I'm not religious, this is an area where I'm in sync with Christianity. We're all sinners. Everybody is fallen, and redemption is worthwhile and often necessary. Unlike Christianity, however, I don't wish to build a religion around the requirement of "salvation" by acceptance of Jesus as my Savior. Redemption for me is not transcendent, but a simpler, more mundane experience of choosing to be our better selves — best, if possible, but better will do in a pinch.

I don't regard animals the same way I do humans, as fallen creatures. Animals seems to me more innocent, authentic, and natural. Although animals are much more intelligent than we tend to assume, it's true also that our big brains have gotten humans into a whole lot of trouble. Among the numerous dimensions of this trouble is the difficulty we experience with identity and presentation. With humans, what is shown is often not real — what you see is frequently not what you get. Instead, our presentation to others is all too often an insincere pose designed to achieve ulterior motives by fooling the audience. Unlike most other animals, our human psyches seem to be divided in a kind of bilateral asymmetry — we are pulled away from centeredness, so that we have a visible side and an invisible side. This was codified for me in my early 30s when I discovered a key axiom from Macrobiotics: "*That which has a front, also has a back. The bigger the front, the bigger the back.*"

[Note: Just as I am not a card-carrying Christian, so I was never a devotee of Macrobiotics. All idealistic groups with avatars are unattractive to me. They seem like cults, so I don't join. Still, profound and life-changing truths can and do

emerge from the strangest places and most unlikely candidates. When I first heard the principle of fronts and backs, that “law” was revelatory for me. It changed how I saw myself, the world, and all the people in it. Along with numerous other similar rules that have deeply impressed me, fronts-and-backs has been a lynch-pin for me ever since.]

All human beings have fronts and backs, but some of us have extremely big fronts and backs to match. This is why the old saying about the treacherous, shark-infested waters of Hollywood’s back-biting egos is so true: *If you want a friend, get a dog*. Dogs and cats (and most other animals) can be trusted. If they love you, the love is unconditional. Their care and affection come with both nearly instant forgiveness and long-term fidelity. Not so with humans. Human love is notoriously fickle — passionate perhaps, but all too often not particularly durable, and sometimes downright insincere.

Animals do not generally engage in seduction. Humans do. And seduction is always linked to eventual betrayal (another profound and practical “law”: Seduction inevitably leads to betrayal). Trusting animals, especially wild ones, does have limits, of course, but trusting humans is always risky. To be safe with another human, you have to be sure that you’ve gone beyond fronts and backs — both your own and your beloved’s — and thus avoided the seduction-betrayal trap. Those are challenging propositions at best, dicey at worst, and all too easy to get wrong. For evidence of that, consider the sobering percentages of estranged family members and ex-partners.

For purposes of this commentary, what interests me most about the shadow aspects of the human psyche is the impact of our awareness of the shadow. Does being aware of our individual shadows make a difference? If not, why not? And if so — if awareness of the shadow does make a difference — then what is the difference?

Can the shadow in the human psyche be expressed in a conscious way? And does that awareness change the way expression of the shadow will occur? We talk of “honor among thieves.” Does that make thievery less onerous? Does the assassin who is thoughtful about his lethal deeds make him any less a ruthless killer? These are hard questions, and the answers may not be simple.

First off, I’m inclined to believe that a spectrum of shadow awareness exists among human beings. Some people are more aware of their own shadows than other people. I would love to know the distribution along that spectrum, but I don’t think any such collective assessment exists or has even been undertaken. Although I believe such exploration to be potentially worthwhile, I can’t cite any authoritative study. Perhaps one exists in the realm of abnormal psychology, but I doubt it. We are left to study this question anecdotally and subjectively, one person at a time. As a result, what we have are typically mere opinions, which is what I’m about to express. I offer my opinions about shadow awareness not because I’m sure they’re correct — I’m not — nor as an argument to convince

anyone to adopt my beliefs, but instead as a way of providing a benchmark against which readers can assess their own experience, opinions, and beliefs.

When we talk about human beings acting out as monsters or demons, we're not discussing only a tiny segment of humanity and human experience. Sure, there are infamous monsters — Hitler and Stalin come to mind as egregious mass murderers, and the psychology of serial killers has been well-studied and popularized. But my sense is that these individuals are unusual and exceptional in their cold, calculated badness. (I'm resisting the word "evil" here because it invokes a fundamentalist religious sensibility that doesn't please me.)

That everyone embodies potential monsters within may seem shocking at first glance, but it's actually so common as to be banal. All of us act out our shadows from time to time. Unconscious expression of the shadow is a routine event in everyday social life, something committed almost blithely by the vast majority of humans. Some of us do this more often than others, and at least a small percentage of us give our shadows free rein as our standard way of conduct in the world.

As one small example among many, misplaced aggression is effectively universal. Who among us has not become frustrated and angry over something (which need not amount to much at all) and then taken out our anger on whoever is within reach, even if that unlucky person was not the cause of our frustration? Has anyone ever reached adulthood without such unwarranted events occurring? I suppose it's possible, but I regard it as unlikely. Still, most of us do not become monsters.

My thesis here (and my longstanding hope) is that awareness of one's shadow, while not preventing expression of harmful or otherwise bad behaviors, is likely to have at least some ameliorating effect in diminishing their wholesale expression. This might occur by toning down the energy invested into acting like a monster, or it could mean that we literally change our actions, choosing a better and more loving expression.

I am quite certain, however, that many of the most monstrous people on the planet, both now and throughout history, do not and did not regard themselves as monsters. They effectively rationalized and justified expression of their shadow as correct, appropriate, or necessary.

For instance, the fire-bombing of German and Japanese cities near the end of World War II was a monstrous expression of the human shadow, and yet I have no doubt that the Americans who planned and carried out those bombings felt completely justified in doing so. I'm sure that people such as American Air Force General Curtis LeMay — a monster if ever there were one — slept soundly in his bed, undisturbed by any pangs of conscience over the killing of civilians which his decisions caused, nor of his Cold War willingness to use nuclear weapons on the people of the Soviet Union.

While I am certain that some people revel in their cruelty and exalt in thievery, fraud, and murder, I think that is uncommon. Not as rare as hen's teeth probably, but nowhere near the norm. My best guess is that the vast majority of the monstrous actors in our world — people who are responsible for much of the sum total of human-caused pain and suffering — are blithely unaware that they are monsters. In fact, many of them feel that they are particularly courageous in their nobility and righteousness. That sounds perverse, but such is the twisted nature of the human need to see ourselves as good. We can literally rationalize anything, and we do.

Many other people — millions of them — become the monster's minions, actively supporting the Big Monsters or, even worse, becoming smaller versions of the Big Monsters without even the slightest realization of their having capitulated to the shadow. And no particular group or demographic has a monopoly on this corruption — not the extreme Right, not the far Left, not young or old, not women or men, not business people or spiritual devotees. Literally anyone can succumb to the assumptions that hatred, cruelty, and harm to others are justified, correct, and necessary.

The neoliberal idea that workers' wages are nothing more than a cost of doing business that owners should reduce to as close to zero as possible is embraced pretty much as a no-brainer in our predatory capitalist culture. That belief implies that business owners owe nothing to their workers and correctly regard them as on a par with machinery. The same is true of the insurance industry, which spends billions to lobby Congress and Americans against universal health care. Again, Monsters in Armani suits. So many of the most commonplace attitudes in business are Monstrous — they are Social Darwinism taken to an extreme of cruelty. I got mine, so fuck you. And yet, the people who believe these attitudes don't regard themselves as Monsters at all.

The upshot is that America is a racket at a level that would be envied by the Mafia. Money and the power to selfishly influence policy win out over every other consideration. We live in a country run largely by Monsters, all of whom deny that they are Monstrous. And the rest of us? Not only do too many of us not call out these Monsters for what they are, we allow them to be celebrated as righteous winners. America's shadow is the massive back to our huge front.

I have no cure for this, no easy solution nor quick fix. Within the past year, I began writing that the monsters have won, and that unhappy conclusion continues to be my perception of where we are here in America. Our country and culture have been shaped by monsters, and monstrous behavior is now acceptable. I think the apparent victory of the monsters is a potent symptom of civilizational collapse, one that I didn't anticipate in advance, but now recognize as having already occurred. The sad truth is that mistrust of most institutions and anger at selected individuals is altogether appropriate. These days, though, the journey from mistrust and anger to outright hatred and

violence is a very short trip. Once other people become "Them," it's damned difficult to invite them back into "Us."

While far from a panacea, the only path back to sanity that I trust is Inner Work on Oneself. By this I mean the willingness to examine and question one's beliefs and assumptions, and to imagine oneself in another person's shoes, especially someone we judge as wrong or bad. Asking, "What if *I'm* wrong" may seem to some like neurotic self-doubt, but that self-criticism is necessary to minimize unconscious self-delusion and feigned superiority. Now, I don't regard what I'm calling Inner Work as airy-fairy or even "spiritual" in some abstract way. This is not about rejecting the village and retreating to the monastery. I think of Inner Work as practical and an essential part of living well in the real world. I also acknowledge that it's very hard to do, that even those of us who have pursued this path for a long time don't always get it right.

Friends and clients often tell me that the majority of human beings are not awake, not self-aware, or not evolved, and that most people hardly ever turn their gaze inward. I find that astonishing, but it's a viewpoint that is obviously prevalent. From that perspective, most of humanity believes that reality is "out there" in concrete and material ways. It's not that they pooh-pooh inner reality, they just have no conscious experience of it and don't really understand that it exists. I'd like to think that's not true at all, but, given the way the world is with all its craziness, it does tend to lobby for a pessimistic view of humanity.

Some people try to soften the blow by suggesting that most of humanity is composed of "young souls" looking to amass mainly external and densely material experience, and that development of overall consciousness comes later. I don't find that comforting, however, because it smacks of a judgment I don't like — the assumption that a few of us are clearly superior and "further along." That strikes me as reflecting how the world is already, and it's not working out well for humanity or life on earth.

That takes me back to my basic presumption, that *everyone* has a shadow. In at least one sense, our job is to become aware of our shadow, so as to be able to truly choose goodness and love over harm and hate. Not just to give lip service to goodness, compassion, generosity and love, but to be able to make our decisions and shape our actions in that spirit.

Personally, I need all the help I can get with that effort in my own life, and I'll do whatever I can within my limited powers to help others do that better. This won't prevent modern civilization from collapsing — that's already baked in. But it might make a difference in how some of us respond to what's coming.