**The Shadow**

Carl Jung’s concept of shadow was expanded by Robert Bly in A Little Book on the Human Shadow. He asserts that we are born with a 360° personality where all aspects of our human nature are expressed freely and uninhibited. As we are socialized by parents, society, religion and other institutions, we learn that certain expressions are unacceptable. This learning occurs subtly or through experiences that leave lasting wounds.

We often learn lessons of acceptability and appropriateness through angry or shaming responses or some other form of withdrawal of attention and love. When this occurs, we carve out that expression of our human nature and place it in an imaginary bag carried throughout life.

While shadows are often viewed as dark and sinister, other expressions of the 360° personality can end up in that bag as well. For example, children often learn that crying is unacceptable and may repress the expression of sadness as a result. A child’s expression of his/her own power may frighten an insecure parent’s sense of control and cause the parent to act in ways to inhibit those expressions. As a youth, I often pretended to be various entertainers. While those expressions were affirmed, I could have easily been told to stop being silly and get serious resulting in me splitting off the part of my personality that likes to play and perform.

Whether we deny the existence of these parts, they live within and find expression. Have you ever found yourself acting in ways you said you would never act? Have you ever found yourself confused about some action or behavior that is out of your usual character? Both are indications of how shadows emerge and can be starting points for deeper exploration.

What is denied in the self is often observed in others. “You spot it, you got it.” This is known as projection. Having very strong feelings, either negative or positive, about another person’s behavior is often an indication we have come face to face with a disowned part of ourselves.

The sentiment might be, “if it’s unacceptable for me to be like this, no one else should either”. Seeing these characteristics in others also moves us toward seeing them in ourselves, and our strong reactions can serve as a defense against this awareness. If we are projecting what some call *golden shadows*, one may simply not believe they could possess admirable qualities such as courage, strength, or even goodness while easily identifying and affirming them in others.

Much energy is expended keeping shadows out of conscious awareness. It is the nature of what is unconscious to seek ascent into awareness. Consider the energy required to hold a beach ball submerged in water. Consider how efforts to keep that beach ball underwater will inhibit other pleasurable activities one might wish to engage in while at the beach. Just as the beach ball slips from our grasp rising to the surface, shadows escape the grip of repression into expression.

Certain demonstrations of our human nature such as violence and aggression must be contained if we wish to live in a civilized society; however, at the core of any human expression is emotional energy. Reclaiming shadow elements are ultimately about reclaiming the full reserve of energy contained within the 360° personality and learning to channel that energy consciously and with intention in service of effective outcomes in our lives.

Shadows are not easily identified or owned. We disowned these parts of ourselves because of the consequences experienced when they were expressed. For this reason, I seek to create a supportive, non-shaming and unconditionally accepting space for individuals to work toward, once again, being whole; a space where light shines on darkness and darkness is transformed into light.