

# Awareness of Our Human Shadow Offers Healing

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From before birth, and throughout our lives, our human shadow develops, grows, and influences our daily lives.

**Human Shadow:** when a life event becomes too difficult or scary to deal with or understand at the moment, we often will stuff our anxiety and fear into a place in our mind we call Shadow. We do this naturally, and often unconsciously, to stay physically and emotionally safe from being abandoned, traumatized, shamed, and/or immobilized. At the time, we often deny these feelings to feel safe. In our childhood, abandonment could mean our death if we are left alone to survive.

The psychotherapist, Carl Jung said, “Unfortunately there can be no doubt that man is, on the whole, less good than he imagines himself or wants to be. Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker [darker] and denser it is. If an inferiority is conscious, one always has a chance to correct it. Furthermore, it is constantly in contact with other interests, so it is continually subjected to modifications. But if it is repressed and isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected.”<sup>1</sup>

The poet, Robert Bly, talks about putting our anxieties, anger, and fears into a “shadow bag” that we carry and eventually drag behind us for the rest of our lives.<sup>2</sup> One could look at this as a “shadow backpack” which holds those aspects of our personality that we put in the backpack to ensure our safety. Other people will often see our shadow personalities more clearly than we do. Our shadows show up in how we live and share our lives with others.

An example of how a shadow aspect of our personality was created is when our mother or father yelled at us for accidentally spilling our milk at the dinner table at the age of four or five. At the time, we may have experienced the pain of their anger to the point we could not process, or deal with, what was truly happening. We may have felt abandoned by their love (even for a second). We may have then put those feeling expressions in our shadow backpack. Once they are in the backpack, we will consciously, and unconsciously, do whatever it takes not to re-experience those feelings of fear, abandonment, shame, despair, or other emotions. We may become super-critical of our actions and behaviors. We may be hypervigilant not to spill our milk again or do anything to bring our parents’ disapproval and rage. As children, being belittled, beaten, bullied, abused, neglected, and/or traumatized will influence what we add to our shadow backpack. Not wanting to upset our parents, or any others may play out in the rest of our lives. We can become the “good boy” or “good girl” that is an over-achiever. Always doing more than what is expected to avoid the pain and fear of abandonment experienced as a child.

The challenge for us is to have the courage to look in our shadow backpack that holds some of our memories of feelings, emotions, and pain to allow for understanding and healing. Metaphorically, we do this by taking the backpack off our shoulders and back, bringing it in front of us to see, and opening it

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<sup>1</sup> [Carl Jung: Thirteen Quotations on the Shadow – Jung Currents](#) (accessed March 2, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Bly, *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*, (HarperOne, San Francisco, 1988).

slowly to examine what is inside. Once the shadows in our backpack are revealed it becomes easier to react to situations in the present moment from the “adult self” instead of the “wounded child’s” automatic response. We became resilient survivors, making it through many painful, scary, and traumatic times in our lives. When looking at our own shadow, it is helpful and advisable to do this with the assistance, training, and insights of a professional therapist.

In doing our shadow work, we might learn about why we do, or react to, given situations the way we do. Understanding and acknowledging some of our shadow aspects can bring awareness, healing, and greater well-being to our lives.

As a place to begin, or continue, to explore our own shadow we could explore, reflect on, and/or try out these steps.

- 1) Learn about and acknowledge our own human shadow.
- 2) Notice how our reactions to given life’s situations may be linked with aspects of our shadow. A person’s shame, perfectionism, addictions, overachieving, hyper-vigilance, phobias, etc. often have their roots intertwined with our shadow.
- 3) Have the courage to move our shadow backpack from our back, where it is hidden from us, to in front of us (with a professional therapist’s assistance advised).
- 4) Begin to open our shadow backpack and be present with thoughts and emotions that arise.
- 5) Be gentle with yourself. This takes courage.
- 6) With a greater understanding and emotional connection with the shadow aspects of our personality begin to recognize how our shadow influences our life and relationships.
- 7) Begin to use different languages than we were taught to help us think and act more positively.
- 8) Be mindful of your self-talk. Begin to change negative self-talk into positive self-talk. I am lovable, a good person, smart, energetic, courageous, self-reliant, upbeat, caring, compassionate, involved, a good listener, and so much more. Words are things and have influence and power.
- 9) Remove ourselves from dependency on other people’s reactions.
- 10) Detach from our emotions long enough to realize it was never about us in the first place.
- 11) The fact that our parents (or others) could not love us as we needed at a given time, or period in our life, does not mean that it is our fault.
- 12) Connect with God (Spirit, Creator). Trust God to tell you or show you what is next. Be open and welcoming to those people who show up in your life to love and help you to gain greater understanding and healing.
- 13) Practice living in the present moment, rather than living much of your life focusing on the past or future. All we really have, and always will have, is living in the present moment.

- 14) Look at our shadow from a spiritual point of view:
  - a. We made a mistake, but we are not a mistake.
  - b. We did this stupid thing, everyone does stupid things, and we are loved and capable.
  - c. We are lovable, always been lovable, and will always be lovable.
  - d. Have faith and trust that everything is ok.
  - e. God loves us always. With God's grace, we are forgiven.
  - f. Our next breath reminds us of God's love and grace. Be grateful!
  
- 15) Moving to action:
  - a. Learn about and acknowledge our own human shadow.
    - i. Begin to stop negative thoughts and actions.
    - ii. Be gentle with yourself.
  - b. Love yourself and love others.
  - c. Forgive ourselves, it was not our fault.
  - d. Have the courage to look at our shadow.
    - i. Feeling and acknowledging the pain to facilitate healing.
    - ii. Claiming and utilizing the strong adult part of us.
  - e. Seek a trained professional therapist for insight and guidance.
  - f. Begin to see the human shadow in our family, friends, culture, our nation, our educational institutions, our politics, our religious institutions, and our workplace.
  - g. Begin to see how many of our reactions in life are connected to our shadow.
  - h. Journal, pray, meditate, and create art/music to express pain and foster healing.
  - i. Write letters to loved ones expressing your feelings. If it is safe, send the letter to them or talk to them. Or do not send them the letter, use it only for your own healing.
  - j. Talk to family members about your family of origin, and your roots. Ask your father, mother, grandparents, and others to tell you about their childhoods. Listen for their shadows which are weaved within their shared stories. Notice what is not being shared (family secrets/shadows?) Record it on video or write notes if possible. Begin to connect patterns in your life that have been passed down through your family and culture.
  - k. Love, listen, and mentor others in need.