

The Shadow

*“Who knows what evil lurks in the heart of man...?
The Shadow Knows”*

With these words, a popular radio program of the 1940's invited an entire generation of American children into the imaginary world of "The Shadow." A few years later, in the 50's, my brother and I watched the Lone Ranger and Tonto, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, and Hopalong Cassidy (riding white and palomino horses) gallop across our tiny black-and-white TV screen in pursuit of legions of bad guys (riding dark horses), whom they invariably caught and locked up behind bars where they belonged. White horses and dark horses, good guys and bad ones: the world was neatly divided into these two camps. Evil lurked in the hearts of the bad guys, but the good guys' hearts were clean and pure, and we knew whose side we were on.

C. G. Jung grew up in the shadow of his Swiss Reform pastor father, who held the same worldview, the conviction that "God's in his Heaven and all's right with the world." Except that it wasn't, and deep in his heart Pastor Jung knew it and young Carl did too. As a boy Jung was disturbed by troubling dreams, fears of a "black man" dressed like a Jesuit, and mysterious fainting spells. He began to imagine that his ego "consisted of two contradictory aspects," his "No. 1" and "No. 2" personalities, both of which were "extremely limited, subject to all possible self deceptions and errors, moods, emotions, passions, and sins."* Both were "childish, vain, self-seeking, defiant, in need of love, covetous, unjust, sensitive, lazy, irresponsible, and so on." No clear division between light and darkness, good and evil, existed here. Jung realized at a very early age that evil lurked "in here" as well as "out there," in his own heart as well as in the heart of man. It is not surprising that throughout his life and work he struggled with the problem of the shadow.

As a young student at the University of Basel, Jung had the following dream:

"It was night in some unknown place, and I was making slow and painful headway against a mighty wind. Dense fog was flying along everywhere. I had my hands cupped around a tiny light which threatened to go out at any moment. Everything depended on my keeping this little light alive. Suddenly I had the feeling that something was coming up behind me. I looked back and saw a gigantic black figure following me. But at the same moment I was conscious, in spite of my terror, that I must keep my little light going through night and wind, regardless of all dangers. When I awoke I realized at once that the figure was... my own shadow on the swirling mists, brought into being by the little light I was carrying. I knew, too, that this little light was my consciousness, the only light I have. My own understanding is the sole treasure I possess, and the greatest. Though infinitely small and fragile in comparison with the powers of darkness, it is still a light, my only light."

Jung interpreted this powerful dream to mean that he must leave his "No. 2" personality behind and "go forward against the storm," keeping the little light of his consciousness burning at all costs. Coming as it did in the first half of his life, this dream propelled Jung into the outer world of "study, moneymaking, responsibilities, entanglements, confusions, errors, submissions, defeats." But he also decided that "under no circumstances ought I

to deny ["No. 2"] to myself or declare him invalid." The image of the "gigantic black figure" at his back stayed with him and informed his image of the shadow for the rest of his life.

In 1948 Jung gave a brief lecture on the shadow to the Swiss Society of Practical Psychology. At this time he was in his 70's and had lived through two World Wars and numerous encounters with the shadow in his own personal and professional life. Now he regards the shadow with measured objectivity and great respect. His writing has a sardonic tone, as though he has come to an uneasy stand-off in his negotiations with the enemy. He states that the shadow is one of the three archetypes which has *"the most frequent and the most disturbing influence on the ego."* (The others are the *anima* and *animus*.) It consists of the inferior and "primitive" aspects of the psyche -- those traits which we regard as undesirable, "bad," or sinful. While the shadow is *"the most accessible"* of the three archetypes and therefore *"the easiest to experience,"* it is *"a moral problem that challenges the whole personality."* Coming to terms with it requires *"considerable moral effort"* because we do not want to admit that we ourselves possess the dark qualities we despise. We unconsciously project our shadow outward and see it in others rather than becoming conscious of it in ourselves. In Jesus' words, we see the mote in our neighbor's eye but are blind to the beam in our own.

How do we know when the shadow is lurking in our own hearts, and how can we come to terms with it? Jung gives us some hints when he writes that the shadow has *"an emotional nature, a kind of autonomy, and accordingly an obsessive or, better, possessive quality."* If we are feeling unusually emotional about someone or something -- if it feels as though our emotions have us rather than our having them -- then we might begin to suspect that the shadow is not far from us. If we feel that we cannot stand another person (think of Bill Clinton and Kenneth Starr), then it is very likely that the other represents significant shadow qualities for us. Whenever we want to protest, "Oh, no, that's not me -- I'm not like that!", then it's very likely that we are.

My own experience tells me that Jung was right when he observed that becoming conscious of the shadow *"meets with considerable resistance"* and *"frequently requires much painstaking work extending over a long period."* It is painful, even humiliating, to acknowledge our own *"primitive, inferior"* emotions and impulses. The work must proceed slowly, gently, one step at a time, *"with insight and good will."* I also agree with Jung that it is not possible to assimilate the shadow completely. It is, after all, an archetype, and therefore it has a collective aspect which can never be totally integrated into



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the individual ego. The shadow will always be bigger than we are: our little lights may grow brighter, but the darkness will always be there, just beyond the boundaries of consciousness.

While I was studying in Zurich, I often heard Jungian analyst Ian Baker speak of "recycling the shadow." This image offers us a new way of approaching the shadow and suggests that working with it is like creating a compost pit or recycling our household waste. In our "throw-away" culture we regard refuse such as coffee grounds, wilted

vegetables, newspapers and aluminum cans as so much garbage to be tossed away as soon as possible. Similarly, we regard shadow material such as disturbing thoughts and fantasies, painful emotions, and upsetting dreams as psychological garbage. We want to get rid of it, forget about it, sweep it under the rug, deny that it exists. But what would happen if we began to think of it instead as psychological gold? What if we engaged our own shadow material by writing down our dreams, accepting that we sometimes have "negative" thoughts and feelings, and withdrawing our projections onto others? This would be the psychological equivalent of starting a compost pile in the back yard or deciding to recycle our old papers, bottles and cans. Instead of bundling our "dirty stuff" up in plastic and leaving it by the curb to be hauled away to the landfill, we would sort it out, clean it, plow it back into the soil of our inner gardens or re-process it to be used in new and creative ways. This work can be hot, dirty, smelly, and boring. It requires commitment, courage, patience, persistence, and imagination. The results, however, are well worth the effort. Less trash clogging up the environment. Conservation of our natural resources. Brighter flowers and juicier fruit in our gardens. Surprising inventions such as sweaters made from plastic bottles and notebook covers made from old tires. Mental and emotional well-being. Compassion

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towards ourselves and others. Creative work. Maybe even a measure of wholeness.

Another memory from Switzerland: I am driving through the countryside with a German friend. It is a balmy warm Spring day and the car windows are rolled down. Lovely aromas waft through the air, delighting our senses. Then we pass a large, well-kept farm with a sizable manure pile beside the barn door. Suddenly the sweet aroma changes to something far less delightful. As we hold our noses, my friend tells me that in Europe a

farmer's wealth is measured by the size of his manure pile. The more wealth, the more cows, and the

more cows, the more manure! We agree that this farmer must be very wealthy indeed, and laughingly drive on.

Perhaps it is so with the shadow: the bigger and darker and smellier it is, the wealthier we are -- if we are able to see it as wealth and learn how to use it. It can be garbage or compost, a manure pile or 99% pure gold. We are the farmers: the work is up to us.

—Susan Olson

* This and other quotations are taken from Jung's autobiography, Memories. Dreams. Reflections (London, Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), pp. 107ff., and from his Collected Works. Vol. 9 ii (London, Routledge, 1968), p. 8f.