

Hollis' New Book Shines a Light on the Shadow

reviewed by Van Waddy

Reading James Hollis' *Why Good People Do Bad Things: Understanding Our Darker Selves*, is like taking a virtual reality tour of everything we never wanted to know about ourselves only to see it all again from a different perspective. Hollis' unsparing, laser-sharp discernment spirals like a persistent searchlight with slow, deliberate accuracy, first here, then there, then squarely on the reader. My hand up to hide, my heart open to hear, I was, at times, squirming in my chair.

Taking on the subject of the Shadow, Hollis, teacher extraordinaire, leaves no stone unturned in exploring this complicated, unconscious collusion in each of us to avoid becoming our real self. He compassionately demonstrates how each

of us, in our infancy, bends under the necessity of foregoing our own instinctual desire to express ourselves spontaneously in order to gain the acceptance of our parents and cultural milieu. We internalize these parental messages about ourselves and who they say we are, adapt to what this requires of us, and who we *really* are, what we are summoned to incarnate in the world, falls into our Shadow. We *adapt* in order to get approval and love. We soon become our adaptations.

He defines Shadow as "all those aspects of ourselves that make us uncomfortable with ourselves" and demonstrates how our "complexes" – those historically charged clusters of energy, organized around a particular personal experience in our past -- aid in protecting our Shadow's "territory." These energies form our first and deeply-entrenched anxiety management strategies (projection, denial, avoidance, repression) to assist us in avoiding knowing what we don't want to know about ourselves. We project on to others aspects of ourselves that make us uncomfortable with or about ourselves. These energies and strategies feed our Dark Shadow.

Willing to share his own background experiences of childhood woundings at the hands of his parents and how he worked through these, Hollis makes it clear for the reader how to identify the messages and stuck places in one's own personal history. Where we find our Shadow work, he says, is where our fears are found, where we are most ugly to ourselves, and where we make the many daily deals, adaptations and denials that only deepen our darkness.

Our "stuck places" touch back to our archaic fears. They are there to "challenge us to crack into the abyss of the unimagined future" and can help us rediscover the trail to the larger life we lost sight of when we rushed to *adapt*. Our Shadow material will be found in what we are avoiding.

If we are really going to do Shadow work, Hollis remarks, we have to become psychological: "Where does this come from within me? Where have I been here before? What does this feel like?" Where and with whom did I have this feeling/experience before? "We must ask this of every impulse, every behavior, every pattern," he says.

The metaphoric searchlight I suggested earlier turns: With his chapters exploring the Shadow in intimate relationships with its mechanisms of projection and transference, on the Collective Shadow, on the Institutional Shadow, and on the Shadow of Modernism, Hollis turns up the heat.

In the workplace, "all employees are at the mercy of the dominant complexes of the leadership." The Shadow of any organization, says Hollis, is constituted by that which threatens the ego in charge. It requires a "recovery of soul" to come to consciousness in such a setting: What does the soul want here, not the ego? The Shadow of any institution always contains the unexamined Shadow of each of us, "with our archaic issues of anxiety management and self-interest."

Hollis is unsparing in his critique of government, the

Van Waddy is a psychotherapist in Atlanta.
See www.vanwaddy.com

greed and corruption in our economic system, of our country's laws that discriminate against sexual identities and preferences, of the denial in all of us that allowed *those others* to execute a Holocaust, to dehumanize their captives in order to eliminate them. All vision is lost when anxiety management and self-interest are activated, he says. "All one has to do is find a 'reason,' because a 'reason', a putative 'just cause' can justify anything."

"We have learned from history's repeated atrocities that for a murderous regime to prevail, one need not gather psychopaths, one has only to mobilize ordinary citizens, frighten them, co-opt them, seduce them, or lull them to sleep. That is all it takes!" I leave it to the reader to experience for himself/herself this powerful critique of the Shadow at work in what we think of as our highly civilized society. "Our 'progress' does not save us," says Hollis.

Hollis cites Shakespeare's Hamlet (deeply conflicted within) and Goethe's Faust (with his reckless passion to know and possess all) as examples of our *modern sensibility*. "Faust" announces that the Devil is gone but evil has been democratized: "The Evil One is gone, the evil ones remain." "Evil is not 'out there' on some metaphysical plane," Hollis paraphrases. "It is in us, in our daily acts, in the history we beget." We encounter this in our Institutional Shadow.

I resonated deeply with Hollis' chapter on the "Shadow Side of God" in which he critiques the magical thinking of our human tribe that projects a quid pro quo mentality onto "the blank screen of the inscrutable universe: If I do this, you will do that; or, if I fail to do this, you may do that." These are our archaic parental imagoes, our security complexes, says Hollis. He recalls the story of Job and says, "Job is the story not of the Shadow of God, but of our Shadow problem with that mystery we call God," the shadow side of the theologies we manufacture to serve our needs.

"The problem of evil is rather a problem of that part of us that splits life into opposites – like good and evil, life and death – when clearly nature, or divinity, makes no such split at all." "We are challenged to embrace the idea that the transcendent energies of the universe, which we experience as contradictions, are somehow one, somehow purposive, somehow explicable, albeit not to us." "Ending suffering is not an option; but bringing compassion to those who suffer is redemptive of their common condition." The enemy in dark moments is not the gods, but despair.

But, you ask, how were we to know? After all, Hollis smiles, we are all "recovering children, stumbling about in big bodies, big roles, big consequences," the only variance between us, "our tensile strength, our resiliency, our will to become." When we finally reclaim our personal authority in the second half of life, we realize "we are not our history, not what happened to us, and how it all got internalized. We are our aspirations. We are what wishes to come into the world through us, the will of the gods." We listen to the soul's agenda for us, not our ego's agenda.

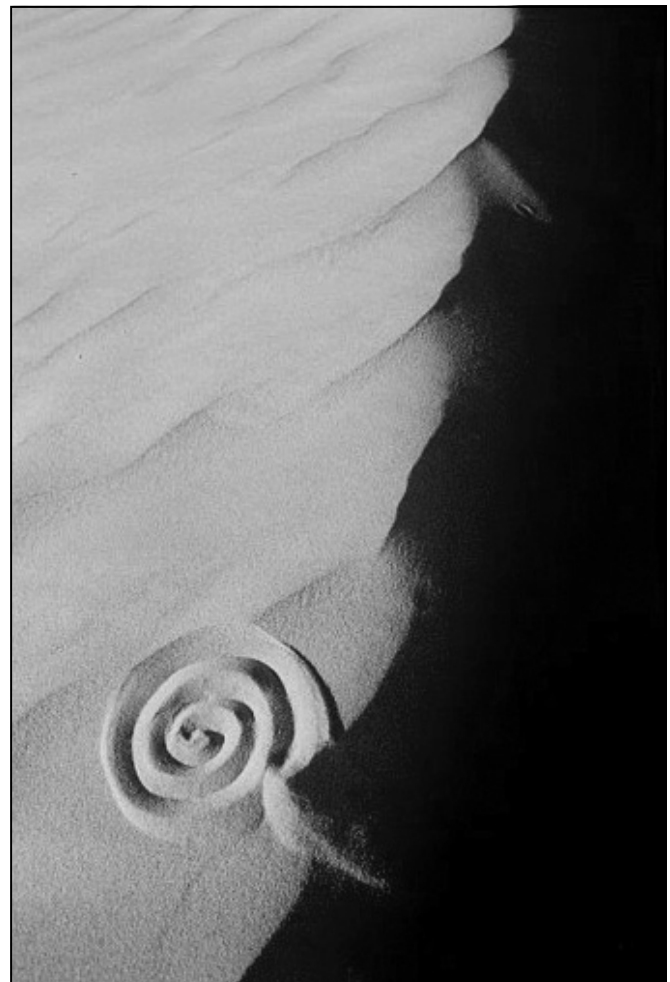
Who we really are, what we uniquely offer the world, has been safely held for us in that aspect of the Shadow we call the Positive Shadow, what some call our Golden Shadow. Self-forgiveness and acceptance of ourselves *as we are* be-

comes the task for this part of our homecoming. "Only the conventional ego thinks it is supposed to be rational, predicable, manageable." "We are here to meet our summons, *our summons*, on this road of personal brokenness, doubt, despair, defeat, cowardice and contradiction, with only scattered moments of luminosity."

Hollis ends with a chapter on Shadow Work, offering 7 thoughtful questions to guide us through our own personal Shadow work. His book has carried us through the highs and lows of being truly human, with all our darkness, often despicable, bafflingly loveable. "So the life we all conduct from the narrow, biased lens of consciousness is a mistake," he says, "a *necessary* mistake."

"In our adaptations we diverge from the path our nature desires. In our quisling collaboration with fear, we settle for the lesser. But we are bound to and through these errors, and our most profound human struggle is found in standing in the meeting point, the spiritual nexus between our individuation assignment and our human frailties."

The Shadow is not something to defend against, but to be met head-on, eventually integrated into the whole of us, for "when we meet our Shadow, there we are most fully in the game, most completely in the arena in which meaning is won or lost, and life more fully lived." ■



Stu Jenks—Tatooine, California, 2000