

“Owning Your Own Shadow”
March 11, 2007
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

We are here to abet creation and to witness to it,
To notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature
So that creation need not play to an empty house.

(Annie Dillard)

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: Truths always come in pairs; one has to endure this to accord with reality.

CONGREGATION: But we often refuse this paradoxical nature of reality and think we can function outside it.

MINISTER: If we try to embrace one side without paying tribute to the other, we degrade paradox into contradiction.

CONGREGATION: Fanaticism is always a sign that one has adopted one of a pair of opposites at the expense of the other.

MINISTER: The high energy of fanaticism is a frantic effort to keep one half of the truth at bay while the other half takes control.

CONGREGATION: Both of a pair of opposites must be equally honored.

MINISTER: If we endure the collision of opposing elements in full consciousness, we embrace paradox.

CONGREGATION: To suffer one's confusion is the first step in healing.

MINISTER: Whenever you have a clash of opposites in your being and neither will give way to the other, you can be certain that God is present.

CONGREGATION: The religious faculty is the art of taking the opposites and binding them back together again, surmounting the split that has been causing so much suffering.

MINISTER: The religious faculty helps us move from contradiction -- that painful condition where things oppose each other -- to the realm of paradox, where we are able to entertain simultaneously two contradictory notions and give them equal dignity.

CONGREGATION: Then, and only then, is there the possibility of grace -- the spiritual experience of contradictions brought into a coherent whole, giving us a unity greater than either one of them.

MINISTER: To stay loyal to paradox is to earn the right to unity.

CONGREGATION: Conflict to paradox to revelation: that is the divine progression.

(Statements from Owning Your Own Shadow, Robert A. Johnson)

Introduction to reading

In nature, in animal life, and in early childhood there is no good and bad. Self-consciousness has not yet evolved; reality has not yet been divided into “yes” and “no” or right and wrong. Thus, there is psychological innocence with no psychological shadow.

There’s an ancient story, very familiar to us, that remembers those days of innocence, the story of our pre-ethical, ancestral parents in the Garden of Eden – to me an endlessly fascinating story, if read psychologically and symbolically rather than literally and theologically.

Read psychologically and symbolically, this story describes the origin of human consciousness, and with it:

- the loss of animal innocence and wholeness;
- the development of ethics and concepts of good and evil;
- the formation of the shadow and the urge to conceal;
- the beginning of both shame and blame;
- the sense of being estranged, having anxiety, and of living in exile;
- and, finally, a hint of a possibility of eternal life.

All of this is part of the development of human consciousness and all of this and more is present in this ancient, mythological story. Please listen to this story once again as I read from Genesis 2:25-3:24 in the Jerusalem translation.

Reading

Now both of them, the man and the woman, were naked, but they felt no shame in front of each other.

The serpent was the most subtle of all the wild beasts that Yahweh God had made. It asked the woman, "Did God really say you were not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?" The woman answered the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees in the garden. But of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden God said, 'You must not eat, nor touch it, under pain of death.'"

Then the serpent said to the woman, "No! You will not die! God knows in fact that on the day you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil." The woman saw that the tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eye, and that it was desirable for the knowledge that it could give. So she took some of its fruit and ate it. She gave some also to her husband who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realized that they were naked. So they sewed fig-leaves together to make themselves loin-cloths.

The man and the woman heard the sound of Yahweh God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from Yahweh God among the trees of the garden. But Yahweh God called to the man, "Where are you?" he asked. "I heard the sound of you in the garden," the man replied; "I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." "Who told you that you were naked?" Yahweh asked. "Have you been eating of the tree I forbade you to eat from?" The man replied, "It was the woman you put with me; she gave me the fruit, and I ate it." Then Yahweh God asked the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman replied, "The serpent tempted me and I ate."

Then Yahweh God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this,

"Be accursed beyond all cattle,
all wild beasts.
You shall crawl on your belly and eat dust
every day of your life.
I will make you enemies of each other:
you and the woman,
your offspring and her offspring.
It will crush your head,
and you will strike its heel."

To the woman Yahweh God said:

"I will multiply your pains in childbearing,
you shall give birth to your children in pain.
Your yearning shall be for your husband,
yet he will lord it over you."

To the man Yahweh God said, "Because you listened to the voice of your wife and ate from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat,

“Accursed be the soil because of you.
With suffering shall you get your food from it
every day of your life.
It shall yield you brambles and thistles,
and you shall eat wild plants.
With sweat on your brow
shall you eat your bread,
until you return to the soil,
as you were taken from it.
For dust you are
and to dust you shall return.”

The man named his wife “Eve” because she was the mother of all those who live. Yahweh God made clothes out of skins for the man and his wife, and they put them on. Then Yahweh God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, with his knowledge of good and evil. He must not be allowed to stretch out next and pick from the tree of life also, and eat some and live for ever.” So Yahweh God expelled him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he had been taken. He banished the man, and in front of the garden of Eden he posted the cherubs, and the flame of a flashing sword, to guard the way to the tree of life.

(Genesis 2:25-3: 24)

“OWNING YOUR OWN SHADOW”

Introduction

This is the third sermon in this year’s Lenten sermon series, Lent traditionally being a time of introversion and self-examination before the extroversion and greater outer activity of the spring and summer seasons.

This year I am using the books and ideas of author, friend, and Jungian psychologist, Robert A. Johnson, as the substance for such self-examination and exploration.

Last week I summarized a number of Johnson’s basic concepts related to the work of Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, including the evolution of our ego-consciousness from the deeper, underlying unconscious matrix. This has to do with the development of a sense of self-identity and self-awareness.

This week I want to explore one aspect of what happens in the development of this self-consciousness, namely, the reality of what has been termed “the shadow.”

“The shadow” is an important, complex, and, to some extent, difficult concept to take in, and I can’t possibly do it justice in the time I have this morning, but I hope at least to make a beginning.

What is “the shadow”?

In the psychology of Carl Jung and those, like Robert Johnson, who embrace his general approach, “the shadow” has to do those aspects of our life that belong to us, at least potentially, that we do not recognize or wish to claim as belonging to us.

Carl Jung once said that “the shadow” is simply the whole unconscious side of the psyche; it’s whatever is not seen by our conscious self.

His colleague, Marie Louise von Franz, describes the shadow as the “dark, unlit, and repressed side of the ego complex.”

(Shadow and Evil in Fairy Tales)

Robert Johnson says:

“The persona is what we would like to be and how we wish to be seen by the world.... The ego is what we are and know about consciously. The shadow is that part of us we fail to see or know.”

(Owning Your Own Shadow, pp. 3-4)

Poet Robert Bly, in a fine little book titled, A Little Book on the Human Shadow, uses a couple of images I find helpful in visualizing the personal shadow and how it gets formed. (In this book, he distinguishes between the personal shadow, the town shadow, and the national shadow.)

A radiant globe of energy

At one or two years of age, says Bly, we have a “360-degree personality.” We are like a “ball of energy.” “A child running,” says Bly, “is a living globe of energy.”

But one day we notice that our parents don’t like certain parts of this radiant “ball of energy.” “Can’t you be still?” “It isn’t nice to try to kill your brother.”

So, to please our parents and retain their love, we begin to stuff those parts of our being that they don’t want into “an invisible bag that we drag behind us.” By the time we get to elementary school, says Bly, this invisible bag is already quite large.

At school, the teachers take over as we continue to learn “appropriate cultural behavior” – and, thus, a lot more goes into the bag.

By adolescence and high school, says Bly, this invisible bag may already be “a mile long.” And then our peers take over. It’s no longer the evil grownups that are the culprits. Indeed, parents watch with dismay as peer pressure causes their youngsters to stuff many wonderful parts of themselves into the bag, while they, the parents, at the same time, might wish that they would stuff some other parts in the bag that don’t seem quite so wonderful during those adolescent years.

At any rate, by the time we're in our twenties, says Bly, we have only a thin slice from that original, radiant globe of energy; the rest is stuffed into this long, invisible bag that we drag behind us.

Then, at this point, two thin, elegant slices may meet and marry. But, says Bly, together they hardly form even one person.

(Examples above are from, "The Long Bag We Drag Behind Us," in A Little Book on the Human Shadow)

In a poem, reflecting on his own life, Bly once said:

I cannot remember years of my childhood.
Some parts of me I cannot find now.

I intended that; I threw some parts of me away
at ten; others at twenty; a lot at twenty-eight.
I wanted to thin myself out as a wire is thinned.
Is there enough left of me now to be honest?

(from "Night Frogs," Sleepers Joining Hands)

So, says Bly, we spend the first twenty-plus years of our lives stuffing parts of ourselves into this invisible bag we drag behind us, and then the rest of our lives trying to retrieve those parts from that bag; or, in Johnson's words, we spend the rest of our lives trying to "own our own shadow."

Both gold and dross in the shadow

Please note that this "shadow," in Jungian perspective, is not just the "negative" parts of ourselves – our selfishness, envy, anger, jealousy, greed, hatred, anti-social and murderous tendencies – it's not just those aspects that go into the bag – but also our "positive" parts – our inventiveness, our distinctiveness, our unusual intelligence, our exuberance, our ecstatic joy – whatever doesn't fit into our particular cultural construct is cut off and goes into the shadow bag.

About this whole shadow-making process, Johnson writes:

"It is also astonishing to find that some very good characteristics turn up in the shadow. Generally, the ordinary, mundane characteristics are the norm [the cultural norm]. Anything less than this goes into the shadow. But anything better also goes into the shadow! Some of the pure gold of our personality is relegated to the shadow because it can find no place in that great leveling process that is culture."

(Owning Your Own Shadow, p. 7)

He adds:

“Curiously, people resist the noble aspects of their shadow more strenuously than they hide the dark sides. To draw the skeletons out of the closet is relatively easy, but to own the gold in the shadow is terrifying.” (p. 8) “From the point of view of the ego, the appearance of a sublime trait might upset our whole personality structure.” (p. 43)

Culture and Shadow

So wouldn't it be simpler if we could simply eliminate this process of creating a shadow in the first place – or at least eliminate the “negative” aspects of the shadow – so that we wouldn't have to go back to try to retrieve those aspects of ourselves again?

Sorry, folks, according to the Jungian perspective, the human enterprise doesn't quite work that way.

The forming of a shadow is inevitably tied to the evolution of self-consciousness. It's inevitable at the individual level, as the story of our ancestral parents in the Garden of Eden illustrates, and also inevitable at the cultural level.

The forming of the shadow is inevitably tied to the civilizing process. Every culture does it; every culture must do it – if there is to be a culture.

What goes into the bag will be different in different cultures. But do not imagine that “primitive cultures,” for example, don't also have an invisible bag containing their shadow. Its contents will just be different, to some extent.

Thus, to again quote Johnson:

“To make light [whatever that light is for a given culture] is to make shadow; one cannot exist without the other.” (p. 17)

“The civilizing process, which is the brightest achievement of humankind, consists of culling out those characteristics that are dangerous to the smooth functioning of our ideals.... Culture takes away the simple human in us, but gives us more complex and sophisticated power.” (p. 5)

One might argue, however, says Johnson, that this civilizing process should not be done too soon with children. He says:

“One can make a forceful argument that children should not be subjected to this division [this separation into acceptable and unacceptable parts] too soon or they will be robbed of childhood; they should be allowed to remain in the Garden of Eden until they are strong enough to stand the cultural process without being broken by it. This strength comes at different ages for different individuals and it requires a keen eye to know when children are ready to adapt to the collective life of society.”

(pp. 5-6)

Form and unused energy

Another way to think about the relation of ego and shadow is in terms of form and unused energy. The ego is related to form, to structure, to identity, to putting together a life. Says Robert Bly, “The ego is in charge of making a social being out of us.”

(A Little Book on the Human Shadow, p. 50)

And the more cultured the form – the more defined, sophisticated, specialized, complicated – the more unused potential goes into the shadow.

For example, to enter a profession that takes years and years of study, discipline, and self-denial inevitably involves a huge accumulation of shadow material. There’s so much you’ve had to push aside to achieve your end.

Or again, with any occasion of high culture – say a concert, an opera, a lecture, a play, a religious service – one can only stand it so long before one begins to get fidgety and antsy.

This is the presence of the other side, the energy of the shadow, making itself known to you ... tap, tap, tapping at the door of your highly developed form. If you ignore that tapping, if you don’t pretty quickly open the door to the other side, there’ll soon be hell to pay.

And so it is that the energy to maintain our cultural products, including our own carefully constructed personalities, eventually runs dry. Again, as Johnson writes:

“The early part of adulthood is devoted almost entirely to discipline. One prepares for a profession, learns the social graces, cultivates a marriage, and improves one’s earning capacity – and all these activities invariably create a large shadow. There are elements we had to leave behind, elements that had to be ‘unchosen’ in order to produce a cultured life. By middle age, the cultural process is mostly complete – and very dry. It is as if we have wrung all the energy out of our character and at this point, the energy of the shadow is very great. We are suddenly subject to explosions that have the power to overturn the product we have worked so hard to create. We may fall in love, break up a marriage, storm out of a job in desperation as we try to relieve ourselves of this monotony.” (p. 49)

What to do when dry

So where do you go when your life has gone dry, when you feel like you are empty form with all the energy withdraw?

Well, where is the energy being held? It’s in the shadow. Thus, it’s time to turn to the other side.

But suppose someone should say: “Other side? What other side? I’m not so sure I know about another side? Help me out here? What is this shadow side you’re talking about? Give me a couple of clues of its existence.”

Projecting one’s shadow

“Okay,” say the Jungians, “maybe now’s a good time to talk about our idea of the projection of one’s shadow.”

The phenomenon of projecting one’s shadow is that of using another person, or nation, or culture as a carrier for your shadow – for those parts of yourself that belong to you but which are not yet recognized as belonging to you.

Others can probably see these shadow parts; they may whisper behind your back about them; but you have not yet seen them as part of yourself.

Such projection can go in two directions. On the one hand, we may ask others to carry our “negative shadow,” those parts of reality that we regard as negative and don’t want to be identified with, that we don’t see as being parts of ourselves.

The “black sheep” of the family is the *designated* shadow carrier for unwanted aspects of a family. (Sometimes the “black sheep” may take on the role with a certain relish.)

Also, of course, our enemies are easy targets for unacceptable and unwanted aspects of our humanity.

This doesn’t mean there might not be a hook in these shadow carriers, or that bad things weren’t done, but the projection of the shadow has to do with the way we relate to the other, namely, that we prefer not to relate, not to see the other as like us.

We keep a distance. We extend the distance. We build up barriers between ourselves and “the other,” which more easily enables us to keep the projection going.

Thus, a clue to a projection of your negative shadow can be the virulence of your hatred and disdain of the other.

Watch what you hate. Watch what you disdain. There’s a clue there for something that belongs to you but has not been accepted.

In other words, if something’s a little over the top, you can bet there’s some connection there. This doesn’t mean you’re exactly like the individual you hate and despise, but you’re in the same ballpark. Maybe it relates to a similar issue with power, or pretentiousness, or impotence, or greed, or fear. If you wonder about your shadow, watch what you hate; watch what you despise.

Positive projection

The other aspect of shadow projection is the projection of your positive shadow upon another – a hero figure that is like a god or goddess for you.

Those positive parts of ourselves that we don't yet see as parts of ourselves and haven't embraced are seen shining gloriously on others who can do no wrong.

And so this can be a clue for you of the “positive” aspects of your shadow hidden from you. Who is a hero for you, someone nearly superhuman, someone far above normal humanity, someone of whom you wouldn't want to hear that they had done something wrong?

Perhaps, again, you keep your distance; you hardly dare get close to them. If you got too close, they might seem too human, and that would ruin the projection.

Again, the projection of the hero onto others doesn't mean that you are exactly like those individuals; but, again, you're in the same ballpark. Something they embody also belongs to you, at least potentially, but you have not yet seen that.

So, in this case: Watch what you love. Watch what you adore. Watch what you worship. This is a clue to your own shadow in its hidden divine dimensions.

A common example of such projection, of course, is the mutual projection of the positive shadow called “falling in love.” Two persons mutually project their positive shadows on the other, and they're off. (I will go into that subject later in my sermon series under the title, “The Psychology of Romantic Love.”)

At any rate, part of the process of owning your own shadow so as to become more whole and to avoid causing more problems for yourself and more mischief in the world than the world already has is to become aware of the projection of your shadow in both its negative and positive aspects.

You start to reel in your shadow projections. You start to become more complex, more fully human.

At the same time, you also allow both your enemies and your heroes to be more human as well. This doesn't solve all relationship problems, but it's a start in the right direction.

Destructiveness and the shadow

And now a question that Johnson addresses: How do you engage the energy of the shadow without having it destroy the life you've built up?

A person must eventually engage the other side – and if not, it will eventually engage you in some very unpleasant ways. As Johnson says, the shadow can accumulate more than

energy than our ego and overwhelm it, as in Robert Louis Stevenson's short novel, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a marvelous story of the relation between the ego and the shadow, and in this case, the total disconnect between the two.

Or, you can find examples in your daily newspaper in which the shadow destructively overwhelms the ego. It's a lot of what makes the news. And perhaps we enjoy reading such news a little too gleefully – so and so fell into shadow, not me!

But, fortunately, in Johnson's view, the other side can be engaged without having it destroy the life and the identity you've built up.

So let's suppose you begin to feel the pull of the other side: The snake slithers in the grass next to you, whispers in your ear, suggests that the life you're living and the commitments you've made have become shackles holding you back. And now you find your energy migrating to other faces, other places.

Are you required to go in these other directions? Must you obey the serpent?

The answer is "yes." To "just say 'no'" won't quite do it. Such simple, straight-forward resistance only increases the pull of the energy, the power of the temptation.

But, says Johnson, you don't have to go there literally and outwardly; you can go there symbolically and inwardly.

There's an interesting thing about the psyche, he says, namely, that it doesn't care how the energy gets lived, just so long as it gets lived. He says:

"The psyche is unaware of the difference between an outer act and an interior one. Our shadow qualities are lived out equally well – from the viewpoint of the [deeper] Self – either way." (p. 52)

So don't avoid the siren call. Instead, engage it, honor it, respect it. But engage it symbolically, ceremonially, inwardly. Write about it, talk about it, read about it, fantasize about it. Find some way to live the unlived life without destroying the life you have built up.

And, if you do it right, you might even find a way to bring some of that energy from the other side into your present life. Maybe the life you've built up is too one-sided, too rigid. Maybe it's just waiting to be adjusted, opened up, renewed.

The shadow and ethical behavior

In the same way, to engage the shadow does not mean you become unethical in your behavior.

Johnson is very clear that he is on the side of culture and wants to enhance and protect culture and the ethical life.

And, paradoxically, the most ethical thing you can do is to try to integrate your shadow before it builds up such energy that you become unethical in a compulsive way. The most ethical thing you can do is embrace your shadow.

The holy place

“To own one’s own shadow is to reach a holy place – an inner center – not attainable in any other way.” (p. 17)

The holy place, for Robert Johnson, is the place of wholeness – not perfection, not purity, but wholeness – that is at the fulcrum point of a teeter-totter (to use one of his analogies).

In the development and evolution of consciousness we divide, we split apart. We send light to one side of the teeter-totter and darkness to the other side – heaven is on one side, hell on the other.

We even divide the power of Being into two sides, with a God of Light on the right side and a Devil of Darkness on the left. (Satan, you might say, is the designated shadow-carrier for God.)

Thus, God is all light, all good, all creative; Satan is all dark, all evil, all destructive – though this simple division gets a little contradictory in natural disasters, which are called “acts of God.”

But, in truth, heaven is boring and hell is horrific, and both are unlivable. Thus, we need to marry the two – the marriage of heaven and hell, as William Blake puts it.

And this marriage, for Johnson, is what true religion is about: consciously re-connecting what has been split apart. It’s not about “holiness” on the right side of the teeter-totter, but about wholeness – conscious wholeness – at the fulcrum point.

This, then, is the human journey: from the unconscious wholeness and innocence of animal life in the Garden of Paradise; to a divided life lived in exile; and, finally, back to wholeness. But now a conscious wholeness, which makes the whole journey worthwhile.

The Mandorla

I conclude with a symbolic image that Johnson speaks of in relation to this process of owning your own shadow. It’s called the “mandorla.”

You may be familiar with a mandala, which in East Indian tradition is a sacred circle in which are present those symbols which represent the wholeness of life and remind us of the unity of life.

A mandorla is the coming together of two such circles so that there is an almond-shaped section in the overlap of the two circles. You can find examples of mandorlas in medieval Christian art. In the overlapped segment the holy figure will be placed, such as the Virgin Mary or the Christ.

This is how the work of reclaiming your shadow works. You take the two sides and bring them together. Where they overlap you have a content that is the creative synthesis of the opposing elements.

The ultimate goal is the complete overlap of the two circles so that gradually more and more is contained in the overlap of the two circles until finally they coincide.

The achievement of that ultimate goal is probably unattainable. But, nevertheless, it is good human work, needed human work, holy human work.

Benediction

Now may peace be in our hearts,
and understanding in our minds,
may courage steel our wills,
and the love of truth forever guide us.

Extinguishing of the Chalice

Now we extinguish our chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on March 11, 2007. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)