

Finding Community Within

Getting to Know Your Shadow

Class #3

As we get to know our subpersonalities, we discover that some of these subparts are more hidden than others. We consciously tend to reject or ignore aspects of ourselves because they are not acceptable to us or to others. Carl Jung called these hidden and unacceptable parts our shadow. They tend to be hidden from the "light" of our consciousness. When we stand in the light, we can't see the shadow that is cast behind us. Similarly, these parts stay hidden because they do not believe that they will be accepted if they're seen.

The shadow is not evil. It is simply unknown to us. Jung claimed that ninety percent of our shadow is gold. In other words, our shadow contains our hidden potential. The hidden parts of ourselves hold invaluable energy for us. A treasure lives in our shadow.

One way to get to know our shadow is for us to think about a person that is hard for us to like or to accept. If we take the time to list the qualities of this person, we may notice that many of these negative qualities are hidden within us as well. For example, we may be really bothered by how manipulative someone is. Yet when we are willing to take an honest look at ourselves, we discover that there is a part of us that is equally controlling. Perhaps we control others in a way that is much more subtle, but it is just as effective. The controlling part of ourselves is not acceptable to us. We pretend that it does not exist and, therefore, are not as aware of the ways that we control others or situations. As long as we refuse to be aware of it, we continue to control others in hidden and devious ways. Once we accept and acknowledge the manipulative part of ourselves, we will have less "charge" around someone else that displays these same traits.

Our shadow contains positive qualities as well. If we think about someone that we really admire or to whom we feel attracted and begin to list those qualities that we are drawn to in that particular person, we will probably discover that most of those positive qualities are found in us as well. Again, we have not yet owned these aspects of ourselves.

As we consciously develop one particular quality in ourselves, the opposite quality is developed in our unconscious just as strongly. This opposite quality, which we need to accept and integrate, serves to keep us balanced and whole. For example, we may develop the generous side of ourselves that is always giving to others. Yet as this generous side of ourselves has been consciously developing, the opposite of it is alive and well in our shadow. In this case the polarity of generosity is selfishness. The selfish part of ourselves is unacceptable to us, and so it remains hidden from us in our shadow. Yet to be healthy and whole, there are times in our life when we need to be selfish. There are many times when it is appropriate for us to say "no" to others in order to say "yes" to ourselves. If we do not accept this shadow side of ourselves, we run the risk of becoming unbalanced and unhealthy human beings.

The work with our subpersonalities offers us an excellent opportunity to begin to accept and acknowledge those parts of ourselves that we have previously rejected. Often these parts of ourselves will present themselves to us in shocking forms in our dreams or imagery to get our attention. They can appear as monsters or sinister criminals determined to kill us, and we are afraid of them. We view these parts of ourselves as evil because they have long been unacceptable to us. In actuality, these parts of ourselves need to be acknowledged and are desperately trying to communicate with us.

Many years ago, I dreamt that a giant tortoise was chasing me. I ran as fast as I could ahead of it, frantically slamming and locking a set of steel doors behind me. Despite all my defenses, the giant tortoise broke through each set of doors that I had bolted shut. Finally, because I was exhausted running, I decided to turn and face this monster and kill it by throwing a rock at its head. As I confronted the tortoise, poised to destroy it, it suddenly transformed into a baby turtle. Still angry and frightened I asked harshly, "What do you want?" The baby turtle replied in a very timid voice, "I just want to talk to you. I'm hurting and afraid."

When the monsters, or unacceptable parts of ourselves seem to be chasing us, it is usually because they want to talk to us. When something has been considered unacceptable for so long, it feels angry and inadequate. It feels rejected. We need to be patient with these parts of ourselves, and willing to listen to what is underneath the hardened exterior that they may first present to us. We need to be willing to listen to their anger because they have been shut out for so long. Most importantly, we need to be willing to listen with compassion to their pain.

It is important that we meet each of our subparts honestly. These parts of us will know if we are just trying to change them because they are not "acceptable to us". If we are first willing to accept these parts as they are, then transformation begins to happen, often for the first time, because we are acknowledging aspects of ourselves that have long been hidden. We are accepting parts of ourselves that we have refused to own. These are the shadowy parts of us that have had to live in darkness. They no longer want to be hidden away and judged as evil. They have something invaluable to offer. They are gold.

There will be times when we find it difficult to accept aspects of ourselves. They may still be very threatening to others and, therefore, threatening to us as well. We may find ourselves continuing to judge some of these parts of ourselves or continuing to be ashamed of them. This is when we need to call on our Loving Presence. This Presence is not afraid of any aspect of who we are. This Presence will not judge us and can meet whatever is most needy or most frightening within us. The love can call these subparts out of hiding and can dispel our shame. Our Loving Presence will acknowledge and accept whatever is inside of us with tenderness and compassion. As this happens, and as we learn how to be this way with ourselves, we will heal what is hidden within us.