

# Shadowplay

## REFLECTIONS



*... how inconceivable it is really to love others (not merely to need them), if one cannot love oneself as one really is. And how could a person do that if, from the very beginning, he has had no chance to experience his true feelings and to learn to know himself?*

—Alice Miller  
*The Drama of the Gifted Child*

*Every part of our personality that we do not love will become hostile to us . . . it may move to a distant place and begin a revolt against us as well.*

—Robert Bly  
*A Little Book On The Human Shadow*

The term *human potential* has become a buzz word in the last couple of decades. It conjures up images of personal growth and New Age spirituality and humanism. Groups and publications carrying this banner use the term positively to refer to our human potential for goodness, wisdom, harmony, and spiritual transcendence. Rarely is mention made of our potential for aggression and violence, selfishness and greed, pettiness and stupidity. These are discounted as throwbacks born out of ignorance or unmet need. All will be made right as we realize our true natures.

But what are our *true* natures? Have we ever experienced our full potential as human beings? (Would we want to if we could?). How do we become who we are? How are our unique individual personalities forged? How do we learn to value certain behaviors and devalue others? Why are we irrationally afraid of, or disgusted by certain emotions and not others? Why are some thoughts and feelings so taboo, and how did they get to be that way?

We lose touch with our “true selves” in early childhood, according to psychoanalyst Alice Miller. She explains how as children, we have a fundamental need to be loved and attended to by our parents, primarily the mother or nurturer. Because of the intensity of this need, we quickly learn which of our actions bring us the desired results of attention, physical contact, and loving acceptance. We learn, for example, that we get more response from mom when we smile than when we are straightfaced; more when we wiggle or coo than when we are still and silent. Thus we begin in early childhood to screen natural expressions, and to learn certain patterns or styles of behavior so that our primary needs for love from the nurturing parent are met.

This “drama,” as Miller calls it, begins our understanding of how the world within us relates to the world outside. So much of who we are seems forged by the responses we received in our early years! If our parents prized the full range of our self-expressions—our sadness and fears alongside our smiles—we are more likely to grow up with a sense of self-respect around which we can shape our unique identities. *We can trust ourselves because our basic nature—not just the “nice part”—has been affirmed from the beginning.* As parents, all of us would like to give our children the basis for such self-confidence and self-respect, but it is not simply a matter of our choosing. To honor the “whole child” in such a healthy manner, says Miller, the parent must have been raised in a similar environment of acceptance.

Sadly, this is rarely the case. As parents, most of us harbor some insecurities because of our own upbringing. When we have children of our own, according to Miller, we use them to fulfill our own unmet emotional needs. The cycle continues, children become our “showpieces;” who we reward with our affection when they act or behave in ways pleasing to us, and punish—overtly through abuse or covertly through the withdrawal of attention and affection—when they do not.

What happens to those “parts” of ourselves that were found unacceptable? They are split off from our conscious sense of who we are. Though we disown them, we do not get rid of them. We hide them, but they do not disappear. They become our *shadow*.

*When we were one or two years old we had what we might visualize as a 360-degree personality. Energy radiated out from all parts of our body and all parts of our psyche. A child running is a living globe of energy. We had a ball of energy, all right; but one day we noticed that our parents didn't like certain parts of that ball. They said things like: “Can't you be still?” Or “It isn't nice to try and kill your brother.” Behind us we have an invisible bag, and the part of us our parents don't like, we, to keep our parents' love, put in the bag. By the time we go to school our bag is quite large. Then our teachers have their say: “Good children don't get angry over such little things.” So we take our anger and put it in the bag. By the time my brother and I were twelve in Madison, Minnesota we were known as “the nice Bly boys.” Our bags were already a mile long.*

—Robert Bly

*A Little Book on the Human Shadow*

Our shadows are fed from many sources. Parents are our primary “shadow-feeders,” but so are our siblings, relatives, teachers, coaches, and our peers. They impact on us individually and directly. What doesn't please these key people creates the shadow most deeply buried and thus, the hardest to unearth. Other “shadow-feeders” work through the communities and cultures in which we live. Most religions are clear about the distinction between those parts of us that are “of God” and those that are “of the devil.” Gender affects shadow: certain feminine aspects of the personality are still taboo for many men in this society, as are many masculine traits for women. Different professions ask us to put away various pieces of our personalities.

The shadows build until we are left, in Bly's image, with “the long bag we drag behind us.” These cast-off parts of our full personalities become a weight we carry behind us throughout our lives. *The more we deny in ourselves, the heavier the bag*

*becomes; the heavier the bag, the more energy we expend dragging it along.* The more energy we expend on our bags, the less is available for self-expression in any positive or creative sense.

On the path to self-discovery we inevitably encounter our shadow. *We see it in others first, in the behaviors we find offensive, odd or threatening,* because shadows are always more easily seen when they are worn by someone else. But we must ask ourselves: Why does this person's anger/timidity/silliness bother us *this* much? Is it really that person we find so obnoxious, or does his behavior trigger deeply buried taboos from our own past? Any quest for wholeness requires the exploration of those human characteristics we find most forbidden, most repulsive, most "unlike us."

Ironically, the more we are able to accept our shadows as parts of our own personalities, the less we need to "project" these parts on others. True self-acceptance leads to a deeper appreciation of those once-frightening "others" in our lives, whether that "other" be a neighborhood bully, a romantic rival, or a "foreigner" raised in a culture unlike our own. Like us, they are probably struggling in their own desperate way for the unequivocal acceptance we all needed as children, but rarely received. The loving pursuit of our own shadows, then, leads us to a common ground of tolerance and respect for ourselves and for others.





## EXCURSION

In *Shadowplay* you are invited to identify some of the discarded parts of your full personality, reflect on when and why these parts of you were put aside, and assess which, if any, might be worthy of reclaiming now.

To bring the elements of the shadow into view, we juxtapose it with your *persona*, the Latin word for “mask.” Jungian psychologists use the term to speak of the masks we wear as we go about playing our many roles in society. *These masks are the opposite of the shadow*, incorporating all those personal characteristics found acceptable (or “adorable,” or “mature” or “cool”) and advantageous by our parents, our peers, and our communities. *Just as the elements of our shadows are artificially absent from our personalities, the elements of our personae are artificially prominent.* Both need to be reflected upon, especially in relation to each other.



◆ ◆ ◆ *Persona* ◆ ◆ ◆

Can you list five human characteristics you would most like to describe you?

We all pick up cues from the world around us that help us create a pleasing personality. Take a few moments to reflect on the major influences on your personality, and the things they prized about you. Use words or phrases to describe these things in the spaces below. Whenever possible, cite specific memories.

*1. Parents.*

*What did your parents prize in you? What do you remember doing (or being) to get "rewards" (love, attention, etc.) from them? Did your parents have "oughts and shoulds" for you ("A girl should always be clean;" "A Johnson ought to always be a leader," etc.)?*

*2. Friends*

*As you grew up, do you remember certain attitudes, behaviors, emotions or values that were prized by your friends? What was "cool?" How much did you bend your personality to fit this mold?*

### *3. Culture*

Who we are “supposed” to be also comes from messages deeply embedded in society. Reflect back on the social influences on your developing personality. What were some of the “oughts and shoulds” you picked up from your community? your schooling? your country? your religion? Be aware of gender issues here; there may have been social expectations placed on you because you were female that did not apply to males, and vice versa.

*4. Which of the characteristics you've just listed remain a part of you today?*

*5. Which of these are most pleasing to you, or bring you the most personal satisfaction?  
Which are most pleasing to those around you?*

*6. Which of the attributes above are the hardest to embody, or seem to put the most strain on your personality?*

◆ ◆ ◆ *Shadow* ◆ ◆ ◆

Can you name five human characteristics you like least in other people?

Much of our native potential was put aside as we sought the love, acceptance, and positive attention we needed. See if you can unearth some of the behaviors, emotions, thoughts and attitudes that were frowned upon, laughed at, or seen as taboo by the following. Try not to judge or censor yourself.

*1. Parents*

*What emotions, habits, or behaviors were most unacceptable at home? How did your parents communicate this to you?*

*2. Friends*

*What was "uncool" while you were growing up? Did your peer groups have clear or rigid ideas about behavior? How did your generation understand the opposite sex? Were there certain things "allowed" one sex but not the other?*

### *3. Culture*

*What aspects of your shadow seem to have their roots in the society you live in? Does your religion see parts of humanity as evil? Does your workplace ask you to leave parts of yourself behind when you walk through the door?*

*4. Which of the above characteristics most disgust you to this day?*

*5. Can you now see anything positive or potentially positive in any of the above characteristics?*

*Could any of these be redeemed, or transformed in such a way that they could become useful to your life? Stretch yourself here; such transformations may not be immediately obvious, but will reveal themselves after closer inspection.*

## ◆ ◆ ◆ *Exchange* ◆ ◆ ◆

After reflecting on the elements of your persona and the elements of your shadow, you may sense a need to exchange some of one for some of the other. You may have outgrown parts of your persona, for example; once they brought you the acceptance you craved, but now they stop you from moving on in your life. Same with your shadow: certain attitudes, or emotions, or behaviors that once threatened those around you may need to be reclaimed now to help you experience more vitality or depth or dependence in your life.

*If you could exchange one element from your persona for one from your shadow, what would they be?*

*Do you have any sense of how this exchange might affect the way you live your life (your personal goals and aspirations, fears and anxieties, degree of self-acceptance)? How might it affect the way you understand and accept others? Are there any significant others in your life that might be most affected (forgiven by you) as a result? Reflect on the effects of such an exchange in the space below.*

