

## GIFTS FROM THE SHADOWS

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Carl Jung was one of the fathers of psychotherapy and also provided the spiritual insight that led to the eventual creation of all twelve-step programs. He coined the term “the shadow” and described it as the unconscious repository of an individual’s unacceptable impulses and characteristics. Disowned and unacceptable parts of ourselves are shoved out of our awareness into the shadow. The parts of ourselves living in the shadow are not dead or inactive, they have energy and they “act-out” as the impulses, desires and behaviors we do not fully understand.

Born as whole human beings, we used the shadow to hold those parts of ourselves that we learned were bad or unacceptable. We can describe these disowned parts thus: Your “lost self” is comprised of those parts of yourself that you were forced to repress because of the demands of parents or society. Your “false self” is the facade that you erected to fill the void created by the repression and by a lack of adequate nurturing. Your “disowned self” is comprised of the negative parts of your false self that met with enough disapproval that they were subsequently denied.

The only portions of this complex collage that you are routinely aware of are the parts of your original being that are still intact and certain aspects of your false self. Together, these elements form your “personality” (the way you would describe yourself to others). Your lost self is almost completely out of your awareness; you have suppressed almost all connections with these repressed parts of your being. Your disowned self hovers just below your level of awareness and is constantly threatening to emerge. It takes a lot of energy to hold this part in check and, during times of high stress, it may break free momentarily. To keep this part hidden, you have to actively deny it or project onto others.

In projection, we see in others what is also in ourselves, but denied. In the rooms of recovery, we often hear that we should not judge others because when we point at others faults there are three fingers pointing back at our self. This is a truism based on knowledge of projection. For example: If we were raised in a home where we learned that anger was not an acceptable emotion, we might have shoved our anger into the shadow and never learned how to express it appropriately. As adults, we may have felt uncomfortable with our anger and, when we felt it, quickly stuffed it. Anger stuffed into the shadow eventually gets manifested in a sideways fashion, such as passive-aggressive behavior, misplaced anger, sudden outbursts of rage incongruous with the trigger, a negative attitude, depression, or in a number of other ways. We don’t see our self as angry but, through projection, we may find that we have many angry people in our life.

In recovery, a common mistake is trying to extinguish “character defects” (the things we don’t like about ourselves) as quickly as we can. No matter how hard we pray and do recovery work, the character defects remain. This is, in part, because we don’t understand the shadow and the gift that our repressed parts have for us. We cannot eliminate parts of ourselves - that is how parts of who we really are got stuffed into the shadow in the first place. The opposite course is the true path. We must learn how to identify, embrace and integrate the lost self. Herein lies the path back to wholeness.

It is important to keep in mind that the shadow does not just contain so-called negative parts – it also contains portions of our beauty and goodness that we cannot own.

Integration entails a multi-stepped process. Identification is an early step. One method is to make a list of the primary characteristics of each person you know. Be sure to include what you like, as well as what you dislike, about each person. Now, make one master list of all the light (positive) characteristics you identified and a list of all the dark (negative) characteristics. Examine both lists, keeping in mind that what we see in others we are also. Can you own both the light and dark sides as part of who you are?

We may resist the idea that we embody what we strongly perceive in others. However, owning our shadow parts brings wholeness. We cannot wish away these parts and be whole people with good self-esteem. Every quality contains a gift, if developed and used appropriately. Having owned these parts of our self, we need to discover the gift. Then we can work with it to reintegrate it.

Write a statement about the gift that each characteristic you identified brings with it. For example, anger may contain the gift of power to do what is necessary to take care of one self. Being unable to say “no” may bring the gift of compassion - can you give it to yourself? Work with each characteristic until you can understand it and own that it is (or at least may be) part of who you really are.

The world is a mirror and we can choose to look at our self through it any time.