

What's Lurking in Your Shadow?

Have you taken a good look recently at your "dark" or shadow side? Most of us find it much more comfortable to concentrate on our persona, the psychological mask we wear in public. The persona is how we see ourselves, what we'd like to be, and what we'd like others to think we are. While we're polishing our public face, we are unconsciously casting the unacceptable parts of ourselves into our shadow, the part of our psyche that we're unaware of and ignore most of the time.

Part of growing up in a family, a community, and a culture is learning what is and what isn't acceptable. What might be acceptable in some families or cultures is not tolerated in another. In order to get along in any social group or to become *civilized*, you have to know the rules if you want to play in the game of your own family or culture.

What happens during this unconscious process of sorting and discarding the unacceptable parts? We are stuffing more and more into our shadow, but we're usually unaware of all we're dragging along with us. Robert Bly in *A Little Book on the Human Shadow* writes "When we have put a lot in our private bag, we often have as a result little energy. The bigger the bag, the less the energy." Some time or other, the shadow bag must be opened and its contents brought out into the light, if we are to reclaim the discarded parts and gain more energy.

An interesting aspect of the shadow is that we do not see what we have denied about ourselves because we're unconscious of it. For instance, instead of seeing yourself as greedy or lazy, you might *project* these characteristics onto other people. When we project our own shadow qualities, we become acutely aware of these characteristics in **others** while remaining **oblivious** to these same traits in ourselves. The old saying about "the kettle calling the pot black" is another way of describing projection. Have you ever done this?

If the idea of discovering what may be lurking in your shadow intrigues you, the opportunity for exploration awaits you in a new journaling class starting in February, 2007.

—[Helen Slemons](#)