

Shadow as Joy

Arielle Ruggeroli

Expressive Therapies Division of Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences, Lesley University

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Dr. Mitchell Kossak

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Shadow as Joy

I write this paper with the intention to build muscle upon, or perhaps fortify marrow within, the bones that I set in my mid-term. To review briefly, this skeleton is built upon a foundation of inner and outer safety vis a vis nervous system regulation within the body. Such safety initially becomes accessible to the client as result of establishing Winnicott's holding environment within the container of the client-therapist relationship. Nature-based somatic and mindfulness principles of the expressive arts then become an additional source of containment and simultaneously a portal into the unknown—as made tolerable via a temporary suspension of right-brain processing. With the support of the left-brain and its capacity for trust, faith or even momentary bouts of surrender, it becomes possible to recognize the luminosity that resides in this space (Atkins & Snyder, 2018; Bolte-Taylor, 2008; Halprin, 2003; Kenny, 1995; Knill, et al., 2005; Kossak, 2021; McNiff, 1999). Such is the luminosity that Buddhists refer to as the mother-and-child-like re-union that is said to take place at the time of our deaths (Chödrön, 2022). For the transpersonally-inclined, one may lend herself as an offering to the presence of a “third” (Knill, 1994), spirit or god(dess)—as in the guiding imagery I encountered within the Great Mother archetype (Neumann, 2015).

The bones of this skeleton then support the necessary process of releasing attachment to Freudian neuroses in order to meet Jungian notions of shadow, which such forms of freneticism originate and operate to protect us from. John Grisby's disturbing animated clay portrayal of Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* demonstrates fearful human regard to that which is unseen and the insanity created by our avoidance of it (Bullhead Entertainment, 2008); Ironically, resistance to the mere thought of darkness, of suffering, of death or our own mortalities, perpetuates psyche's

captivity within the narrative of suffering itself—inflicting a sort of deadness within the dark shell of a breathing body.

While “the cave” is certainly an accurate metaphor of the human condition, I would like to instead focus on possibilities for the *motivation* of our resistance and the pathways made available by the expressive arts—particularly by accessing Dr. Carl Jung’s contributions of shadow—to address the unmet needs which cause it. In doing so, it becomes possible to face, hold and even embrace our shadows so that an ultimate re-integration of wholeness within soma and psyche (or soul) can take place. In such a state, we make contact with the truth of who we really are: Beings capable of unfathomable good and joy which surmount the destruction and horror that seem to dominate the narratives of the stories we tell ourselves as individuals and as a collective.

Before going any further, however, I have a few qualms to hash out with Dr. Jung. If shadow is the “part of us which contains all the repressed and wounded recollections from childhood”, then there must remain more than mere darkness and maladaptive, self-destructive complexes to be uncovered (Halprin, 2003, p. 177). Among painful memories of what Dr. Gabor Matè calls “small-t trauma” and/or “big-T trauma”, also lies dormant the luminosity of the inner child that needed to be dimmed down, made dull or abandoned completely in order to attain the acceptance and sense of belonging necessitated for survival as social beings (Matè, 2022). The trauma of not being seen or known for our experiences and for who and what we truly are shoves the light of the child further beneath the bushel of unconsciousness (van der Kolk, 2014, as cited in Matè, 2022, p.23). Working with shadow then becomes light-work via the task of reclaiming the essential aspects of ourselves that were cut off in childhood (Halprin, p.177).

I have the sense that these aspects possess the very best of who we are: our own bits of luminosity that demand recovery and that long to be met by the light of our conscious awareness and warmth of our embodiment. Further, I suspect that at least one driving force behind any voluntary decision to go to therapy is directed by the unconscious longing to be in contact with this very luminosity within; In fact, and different from the perverted pursuit of pleasure as suggested by Freud, I believe this longing to be the central driving force behind most human behavior.

In his book, *Perfect Love, Imperfect Relationships: Healing the Wound of the Heart*, therapist, psychospiritual and conscious relationship teacher, John Welwood suggests that many woes encountered in intimate love relationships stem from the belief, or illusion, that we have somehow become separate from love itself. Antidotally, he suggests practices which tap into the wellspring of the very source of love that, by our very nature, is impossible to be separated from. This source of love is our own goodness, beauty or luminosity within. When we are not aware of nor adequately mirrored our own love-ing and love-able nature, we begin to view ourselves and life through lenses of insufficiency and lack—eventually adopting what Welwood calls, the “mood of grievance”, entering into Plato’s cave (Welwood, 2005).

Buddhist meditation teacher and psychotherapist, Tara Brach (2004) refers to such depravity as the “trance of unworthiness” in her book, *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life With the Heart of a Buddha*. What both authors emphasize time and again is the untruth held by the myth of our inherent lack of goodness perpetuated by the internalization of Biblical creationist theory. Throughout the rest of her book, Brach goes on to offer the simple yet potent method of exiting such a trance by stating that “The way out of [this] cage [or cave] begins with

accepting absolutely everything about ourselves and our lives...”—including shadow (Brach, 2004, p.25)

Speaking about acceptance brings to mind notions of loss, death and their companion, grief, specifically within the context of Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s (1969) five proposed stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and *acceptance*. While the order of these stages is by no means prescriptive nor descriptive of the actual felt experience of grief, they possess markers which parallel the archetypal arch that takes place along Joseph Campbell’s (1949) hero(ine)’s journey. Perhaps the most epic task of all becomes the recovery of the inner child where one must embark along a dark journey into the underworld of unconsciousness to reclaim her.

Like Persephone, our task is to traverse between the topside and underneath world; married to Death in the service of Life. In limbo, we may encounter our own denial about the loss of self. We might meet anger and the image of all our projections, assigning blame to those whose fault it was. Maybe we bargain at the gates of Hades, insisting that we are ok until a debilitating depression renders us completely, psychically dead. But until we accept what we have lost, we will not be able to retrieve it (Pearson, 2015).

As Dr. Jung (1935) said, “the toxin provides the antitoxin if we are capable of activating the inherent healing elements within our most natural experiences” (as cited in McNiff, 1998, p.270); In order to truly know the brilliance of our own luminosity, we must encounter the very depths of our shadows. If we think about grief as the shadow of love, there exists no experience nor journey more natural, more ripe with healing balms, salves and antitoxins, than grief itself. However, in shadows so deep as big-t Trauma, death or loss (literal or figurative), the next question remains: How to not get lost down there? The risk we run along this part of the journey

is to become consumed by the darkness we encounter. Depending on how far below consciousness the inner child was banished, one might spend years, decades, a lifetime or several, teasing apart the dense forestry of scar tissue that was built up to protect her.

In my own rumination about and attachment to the darkness of grief—perhaps even my addiction to it—I was recently re-minded about the missing stage of grief and of our symbolic journey that can counter this risk as I was listening to Anderson Cooper’s (2022) latest podcast about the grief and loss of his late mother, Gloria Vanderbilt, titled *All There Is*. In one of the last episodes of this series, Cooper quoted from the father of logotherapeutic thought, Austrian psychiatrist and neurologist, Dr. Viktor Frankl’s (1959) stunning memoir, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Recounting his experience and observations as a Holocaust survivor after four years in various Nazi concentration camps throughout Western Europe, Dr. Frankl depicts tales of mankind’s wicked capacity for hatred and horror alongside evidence of (wo)man’s most redeeming qualities in very the face of such darkness; Such qualities being our tendency and tenacity to move towards that which is living and that which gives life. Moments of curiosity, humor and even enjoyment that Dr. Frankl and other prisoners managed to create and share inside the camps together became morsels of hope that provided the sustenance which their bodies and spirits were otherwise deprived of in the hell incarnated by Hitler and his “Capos” (Frankl, 1959).

Via the “work” of the sort of case study he began upon arrival to the first camp in addition to the imagined connection to his wife that he maintained throughout his time there, Frankl offers the conclusion that *meaning* is what ultimately sustains us when the nightmare of unbroken darkness threatens our ability to recognize the light (Frankl, 1959); As Nietzsche (1889) said, “[S]He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How” (as cited in Frankl,

1959, p.ix). David Kessler (2019) echoes this sentiment in his recent addition of the sixth stage of grief, *finding meaning*.

The human tendency to seek light as encompassed by Dr. Frankl, Nietzsche and Kessler's theories about meaning and its capacity to guide us through the dark is akin to one of the basic principles of humanistic, person-centered psychology. Established by Dr. Carl Rogers, this philosophy has also been adopted as a foundational value within the field of expressive arts therapy and is based upon the "trust in an inherent impulse toward growth in every individual" (Rogers, N.,1993, p.3). Dr. Rogers (1961) also reiterated the role that acceptance plays in allowing the spark of that impulse to catch flame by divulging that "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself as I am, then I can change" (as cited in Brach, 2015, p.24).

Now guided by the lighthouses of acceptance and meaning, we are able to properly return to the topside world where we can visit below the surface as needed. Perhaps a bit stronger and wiser from having survived the deep dive, we once more straddle both worlds of the betwixt and in-between of the Buddhist middle way as we practice the holding of both the light and the dark, consciousness and unconsciousness (Kenny, 1995; McNiff, 1999). Sufi sage and poet Rumi (1207-1273) describes this task gracefully in his famous poem, "The Guest House", as the inviting of all characters of depression, meanness, crowds of sorrows, dark thoughts, shame and malice alongside the *joy* which inevitably shows its face at the door of human experience. Mary Watkins (1984) refers to what Rumi was speaking to as the other way of existing with shadow (or the "ghost" of unconsciousness as she puts it) with the sense of "being inextricably together in this house of being alive" (Watkins, pg.9); In other words, Watkins is describing the wholeness and integration that I referred to earlier as the ultimate aspiration of working with shadow.

I cannot reference Watkins without at least briefly touching on the role of metaphor and the support offered by the dream world in expressive arts therapy. While I found Watkins' book, *Waking Dreams*, a rather dense read, often leaving me with sore eyes and an aching head from the headiness of attempting to intellectualize imaginings which evade intellectual capacity—I managed to receive this reminder: That metaphor, whether presented to us in the unconscious dream of waking life or during the literal unconsciousness of nighttime sleep, is psyche's means of communication on both a collective and individual level (Watkins, 1984).

I'd like to share an anecdote from recent experience to demonstrate my current understanding about how dreams can show up as metaphoric images from psyche throughout the mundane of everyday life and how to use the principles and practices of the expressive arts to work with them. About a month ago, I was visited in a dream by the ghost of a woman who detailed the horrors of her life in a way that somehow got lodged inside my own body. The scream of my own terror woke me up to an eerie feeling of shakiness and fear. Later that day, I went for a walk around a small body of water where I usually make a loop or three. I was ruminating about an issue I had when the thought of this woman popped into my head. As I wondered what she was trying to tell me, I passed the trunk of an old tree where the outline of a figure stood clear as day (see figure 1 below). I immediately drew parallels between its image and that of Roman Catholic iconography of the Madonna; I felt the presence of Mother all around, though Great or Terrible manifestations of her I could not say. By my second or third loop, though I searched tirelessly, I could not again find the tree with the mysterious cloaked figure.

Figure 1:

Cloaked figure in tree



Note: Photo taken at Middlesex Fells. Own work.

Could that have been a waking apparition of the woman from my dream? What could it possibly mean? While I will not detail too much of the personal meaning I have extrapolated from the dream, I will underscore the undeniable metaphorical message I received from the image as it presented itself so clearly along my path: That the archetypal Feminine wants to be known. I have long known her in myself and in life for her most destructive manifestation as the Terrible Mother archetype. Yet, her most positive embodiment of the Great Mother has been my guiding image almost this entire semester, especially since physically encountering this image. Since beginning this course specifically, I have had the feeling that this energy has been mirroring to me the most positive nature of myself, of others and of life as a whole. I think this dream and its accompanying image was Psyche's way of demanding me to see the whole truth, which in my case rendered the positive aspects of shadow to become the locus of my awareness for a change.

Though the dream itself had a very nightmarish quality about it, I have since interpreted this experience overall to indicate that the terrors of life aren't going anywhere but that it is time to notice, embrace and *trust* the joys which abound regardless as a way to counter this aspect; that I am deserving of relief from the nightmare of an unbroken darkness; that it is my birthright to recover and reclaim the luminosity of the very best of me, of my inner child; that it is necessary and ok, to accept what I cannot change and to have the courage to find meaning in the face of that which will never make cognitive sense or be morally just. I have found great comfort and strength in the immensely nourishing and nurturing presence of the Great Mother in my dreams, in nature, in dance, in meditation, written prayer and the mirror of relationship in family and community. The image below is the symbol of the iconographic Madonna that has guided me through the darkness, to this program and back to my own luminous and joyful self (see figure 2 & attached).

Figure 2:

Multimodal Artistic Expression (1 of 2):



Icon, 2022, mixed media.

I'd like to say a bit more about the container and mirror offered to me by the nourishment of the expressive arts and group components of this course. I remember the first conscious contact I made with the role of joy in this work during an intense embodiment exercise earlier in the semester; We were instructed to act out or embody with movement and sound various uncomfortable emotions such as anxiety, anger and depression. I remember feeling very familiar in these states, comfortable even and almost bored of myself upon the act of consciously entering into them—a powerful insight into how the expressive arts can shake us loose from destructive cycles and patterns in itself. However, the tart juice of this exercise was my experience of fear and anticipation about the possibility that we might be instructed to embody something as foreign as joy. While I did not record that we were ultimately invited to embody joy, the anxiety and intrigue of its possibility was one of the initiating sparks of my journey with it.

I met once again the exciting possibility of joy's existence during a class discussion about shadow where Mitchell and my colleagues were gracious enough to allow me to project into the ethers a bit about the suspicion I had detailed in the body of this paper; ideas which echoed sentiments that “shadow isn't all that bad” and “what's there to be scared of?”. This of course was more of my own process unfolding with the help and holding of the group.

However, by far the most singularly powerful moment of all occurred during the offerings of group “presentations” a couple weeks ago. Being given the freedom, space and opportunity to be witnessed for my own authentic expression alongside my studio group members allowed me to experience the possibility of maintaining authenticity while maintaining contact with another; to know and trust that I can yield to what unfolds in the dance of relationship and not lose myself; to feel that I am supported and safe in their presence and in my participation with them; and that equally, my own presence and participation offers something of

value to their experience as well. My spirit was only further uplifted by the poetic reflection that my dear colleague offered and touched me so deeply by. I left that meeting actually seeing myself and the world around me more clearly; I saw in my reflection what I describe in my poem “Mining for Joy” (see figure 3 below & attached).

Figure 3:

Multimodal Artistic Expression (2 of 2):

Mining for Joy

I honor the depth of the wells within;
What was once carved out of me by sorrow unimaginable,
is now vast spaciousness to be filled with joy I thought intangible.

At last, I admit: I would not change a thing
about the people, places and events
that touched me so, so deeply.

I see that I was not inherently defective because of,
nor made less whole by my experience and loss;
Instead I recognize how fortunate I had been to have known love so profound.

I have mined the very bottom of these wells, often running into heavy waters of grief.
Learning to breathe with the water in my lungs,
I neglected to return to the surface—sometimes at my own demise.

I was convinced that I had lost something important; it demanded its own recovery.
They ordered that I come up to the surface, when would I return to “reality”?
Without their knowledge nor even my own, Life’s dream had initiated me on a journey.

Frightening seasons came and went.
Meeting people, places and things driven out of consciousness;
I finally arrived to the bottom of the well only to find a mirror.

Of all the characters I had met along the way,
nothing was as fearsome, as terrifying, as shocking
as the reflection I saw there.

I saw not a monster, there was no demon or reptilian dragon staring back at me.
I saw my face; My face that somehow belonged to an infant, a little girl, an adolescent, a woman, a wife, a mother and
grandmother all at once.

In the mirror I was a leader, I was a healer, I was a student, I was an artist.
I felt revered, I had honor, I was known.
In my dream I was beautiful. I could smile, I could breathe.

I danced and actually allowed myself the pleasure of dance.
After the long famine, I feasted on my own body. I drank myself in.
My feral laugh cleared the dust from my image, soft tears washing away the ash.

I recognized the tenacity of spirit which ferociously dug for traces of Life
even when I was told that death was the end of its existence
—that my own existence no longer was.

I saw that I was good.
I saw the little girl who longed for connection, play, magic and joy.
And for the first time, I saw the face of a woman who was excited to meet her.

The promise of joy had been the ceaseless whisper all along;
entering through cracks of dense fog and illusion,
telling me that I could not carry on without her.

Perhaps my greatest takeaway from this semester is the idea that this work *must* be done in community; We *must* stay in contact and in relationship with another if we are to endure the darkest depths of individual and collective shadow in the service of knowing the brilliance of our greatest luminosity. Recovering the joy within ourselves and others as the very purpose and point of holding the weight of this deep work then becomes the heart of any social justice application that we find.

I came into this program thinking of myself as a sort of Persephone figure, the one capable of holding the depth of any darkness of another; I am Arielle, the mermaid, after all—I thought it my archetypal destiny to reside amongst the shadows and to find my own sense of nourishment without air, sunlight or contact with humanity (that of others or my own). While I may have the lung capacity to sustain dives of considerable depth, I recognize that my limitations as human require my coming back to the earth and basking in the light; and that yielding to these limitations is a great strength.

I close this paper and semester by returning to sentiments of “starting close in” as David Whyte (2012) suggests; starting with the body, the root chakra, the basic goodness of Mother Earth and our own luminous inner children; Shawn McNiff’s (2007) wisdom swirling in my consciousness—reminding me: “The simpler, the deeper” (p.235).

Mitchell, thank you for a nourishing semester.

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