



# Radical Mischief

Burnout has become both a buzzword and a badge; self-diagnosed, aestheticised, and endlessly commodified. But what if our exhaustion isn't just a symptom of capitalism, but a spiritual rupture calling for something older, stranger, and more subversive? This essay ventures beyond wellness platitudes and doomer memes to reframe shadow as a sacred saboteur, and mischief as the quiet rhythm of resistance.

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I recently had a conversation with a friend working a corporate law job in London, who was telling me about the big and boozy office dinner her boss had put together as a way to make amends for the hostile behaviour he'd exhibited during his most recent burnout.

There was something about the way she said the word *burnout*, as if it were some commonly understood, regular occurrence, as if understanding what she meant was a given. Of course, this grown man, in charge of an office of 200+ employees, having monthly meltdowns consisting of wildly inappropriate and abusive behaviour followed by a week-long hiatus of self-medication and isolation, was a given.

Unless you're chronically offline, you've probably also heard the term "crash out" being thrown around lately. My friends and I use it when one of us is going through a sort of riot of the restrained self, a grown-up tantrum, and it's become perfectly normal to periodically expect (usually by way of spam posting on our finsta accounts), and even applause.

Call it what you want: burnout, a crash out, being cooked; these terms are now so easily and humorously thrown around that we've lost sight of the underlying, troubling truth beneath them: a collective collapse of self.

And while everything we condemn can (and is) being traced back to capitalism, if you allow me, I'd like to go a little deeper, to suggest that what we're witnessing is actually the surfacing of something older and more elusive: a spiritual dissonance between who we perform as, and who we actually are.

The psychoanalytic world might call this the emergence of *the Shadow*: the hidden, disavowed parts of the psyche we suppress in order to function. But my aim here is not to write a Jungian treatise, and is, in fact, in (gentle) protest against the tidy ways we've been taught to approach, pacify, or even try to destroy this so-called darkness within.

In a post-Jungian world, we've inherited fragments of psychological vocabulary without the architecture to hold them. Online, particularly through the filtered lens of the wellness industry, the shadow has become something to "heal" like a product defect; another thing to "process," "journal about," or "light a candle for." Here, I present the shadow not as an affliction, but as an indivisible omnipresence.

Instruction fills a hand, but insight frees it.  
If you're shown a method, you'll repeat it.  
If you understand the logic, you'll invent your own.





The crisis lies in how easily we're offered false comfort disguised as understanding. We're constantly promised that we can "feel better," as if *feeling* is the problem. We pacify ourselves with mindless consumption, affirmations, self-diagnosis (and therefore, medication), and a soft, aestheticised spirituality that never gets its hands grimy.

Shadow work, as it's been sold to us by the mob of crystal-toting online "wellness" gurus, becomes another optimisation tool, folded into our performance of curated wellness and self-branding. It joins the soup of commodified identity markers, proof that we're "doing the work," when in fact we're being marketed to. The shadow becomes something we accessorise rather than encounter.

This collective anxiety we're all feeling, and the consequential burnout, is simply the shadow tapping on the glass, begging to be remembered. Not destroyed, detoxed, or transcended, but acknowledged, and even cultivated.

In Sufi philosophy, the part of the self most closely resembling the shadow is called the Nafs; the egoic, wild self. The nafs is not an enemy to be vanquished, but a being to be remembered and refined through the rhythm of existence.

Through dhikr, translated as remembrance, Sufis do not silence the shadow, but invite it to sit beside them. The nafs is a portal, and when we exile it, it returns as burnout, addiction, and overperformance. But when we let it move and rupture, it begins to harmonise and settle into the body like breath.

This logic echoes in North African practices like Zār and Stambeli, where trance and rhythm serve as ritual technologies of collective healing. As one Tunisian healer describes in "*The Tunisian Stambeli: A Cry Against Shackles and the Whips of the Executioner*":

"The scream in Stambeli is not pain. It is exorcism. It is a way of saying, 'I am still here.'"

Rhythm, here, is not aesthetic; it is survival. It is the body remembering itself back into relation, and wholeness. The enemy of remembrance to me, is avoidance, and in the current zeitgeist, I see two parallel responses to burnout, both of which fail to recognise its invitation:

#### Toxic Wellness Culture

The cheerleaders of healing who serve as mascots for self-optimisation. The influencers who tell you to "just let it go," the commodified shadow work kits, the TikToks that say "you can't heal in the same environment that broke you", while selling crystals sourced from child labour.

This aesthetic spirituality thrives on pacification. It flattens the shadow into something decorative, soft repression with good lighting.

#### Toxic Pessimism Culture

The "doomer" counterpoint—the belief that collapse is not just imminent but chic.

Shadow here is stylised into cynicism, and suffering becomes a performance. Healing is treated as naive, even unsophisticated.

The overlooked irony is that it's still performance, just inverted. Both operate on extreme individuation and fail to address the role we have as part of a collective.

But shadow is not healed in isolation. It is transformed in relation, in collective rhythm as an ecosystem, each movement a feedback loop of presence, disruption, and return.

And it is in relation, especially, that Islamic teachings offer an essential wisdom: that healing is, in its deepest form, collective.

Mercy in Islam, *rahma*, is never self-contained. It expands outward, binding individuals into networks of care. One cannot attain *peace* (*salaam*) without offering it.

Collective prayer, cadence, and restoration. These are not metaphors, they're the real technologies of healing. This is perhaps why, in thinking through what resistance and collective transformation might actually require, both politically and spiritually, I found myself drawn to mischief: not as a distraction, but as a radical and age-old practice of seeing, sensing, subverting, and rerouting.

In my research about mischief, I quickly came upon the archetype of the Trickster. It felt inevitable as my idea of mischief had always been rooted in the mythical and the literary. One figure I would often return to was Puck, from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Puck isn't just a jester or comic relief, he's the orchestrator of entanglements. He pulls strings, derails order, and folds illusion into reality, not with malice, but with a kind of knowing play. He doesn't just narrate the story. He bends it. That's what makes him a storyteller.

A narrator simply tells you what happens. A storyteller manipulates, imagines, and builds, reshaping what could be. The Trickster is a storyteller who operates from deep within the world, rethreading the seams of meaning.

Across cosmologies, the Trickster is known as the wanderer of thresholds, the god of liminal space and sacred uncertainty. A quiet, cunning observer who stirs the pot, not to cause chaos, but to bring truths to light.

He appears as many different names and faces: Eshu in Yoruba mythology. Ghede in Haitian Vodoun. Nasreddin Hodja in Sufi folklore. Coyote and Raven in Native stories. And, loosely, The Fool in the Tarot, moving with practised ignorance (sometimes depicted as a sort of child-like guilelessness), only to reveal a deeper cunning.

It was Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* that gave precise language to what I had been intuiting all along: that the Trickster isn't just a character, but a sacred saboteur and world constructor.

At the time I encountered Hyde's work, I was in a season of my life where I seemed to be causing quite a lot of disruption in the lives of those around me. And while this had been true to some extent for as long as I could remember, what differed this time was how certain I felt in the necessity of it. I kept thinking of myself as a kind of catalyst, believing that the small fires I sparked were, in fact, forms of revelation.

The Fool in Tarot is a signifier of new beginnings, of opportunity, of unlimited potential, and is therefore, unsurprisingly, labelled card 0 in the deck. A cup completely empty and ready to be filled: the ultimate state of potentiality.

To me, the Trickster is both a step ahead and a step behind the Fool if we assume, for ease's sake, that the Fool begins as an embryonic figure. The goal, ultimately, is to return to ourselves by completely emptying, but first, one must embody the Trickster, who both fills his own cup and dares others to tip theirs over, for the sake of revealing what settles at the bottom.

The Trickster moves with the same practised ignorance, but only for the sake of a cunning result. The kind of cunning that, as Deardorff (2004) writes:

"When you experience an undeniable truth, you will beg, borrow, and steal.

You will rearrange your whole life, forsake everything, just to serve what is real."

There is integrity, and even a sense of reformism, in the idea of someone who must fulfil something at any cost.

In Jessica Dore's substack essay *Offering: Fall Equinox 2022*, she introduces Chretien de Troyes' version of the Grail story to present the character of the Fool as "often wise, and medicine-bringers... arriving as glory cloaked in shame." She then interpolates the Trickster figure, after positing a series of philosophically imbued societal questions, as follows: "These questions insist on the alternate. They take nothing for granted.

They are daring, audacious, probably offensive, and definitely problematic in that they trouble something so settled it takes years sifting the landscape with a fine-toothed comb to even notice that it's there.

These questions outdo themselves. They are much more than detectives gathering information—they stimulate feelings and new thoughts.

When we ask them, we become Tricksters, making worlds."

This, for me, is the heart of it. While I do think the ultimate spiritual objective is to reach the state of the Fool (to be so pure and knowledgeable in your own unknowing, so demilitarised in your willful ignorance that you've surpassed all) I chose the word *mischief* as the successor to the word *radical* because being above it all implies you are not amongst it.

And to be radical today, *truly* radical, is to stand among. To mobilise within. There's a reason the term reads: *comrade* in arms.

Not as an escape artist, but as a geomancer, a gestaltist, a geomythologist.

One who observes the world's architecture of feeling and cracks it open, who challenges and breaks language to let the metalanguage of intuition, rhythm, and flux rupture and disrupt.

This is what the Trickster teaches us.

Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, speaks of "sly civility": a form of postcolonial resistance where colonised subjects subvert domination through half-agreement, trickery, and double meaning.

A subtle form of sabotage that masks disobedience in apparent agreement, and mischief as mnemonic code.

Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, called this the *carnavalesque*: a communal ritual of inversion where the low becomes high, the sacred is mocked, and joy becomes truth-telling.

Chaos becomes clarity. Humour becomes revolt. The Trickster embodies all of this. He laughs truth into being, and plays the sacred.

He doesn't escape the system, he glitches it from within. So, how do we do it? How do we turn shadow into sacred? For me, it lies in ritual, but not the solemn kind.

Ritual as play. Mischief as method. A suspension of belief (or disbelief) in service of the imaginative act of world-building, both for yourself and those around you.

In ancient rituals like Zār and Stambeli, belief loosens. Even sceptics surrender to the intuitive initiatives of movement and chaos.

The archive of pain, of repression, is set alight. The scream becomes sonic medicine.

"You do not cure the jinn by ignoring it. You invite it to speak. You name it. You drum until it names you back."

This is what I mean by radical mischief. Not chaos for its own sake, but the holy rhythm of remembering, of collective remembering.

"In the mundane, nothing is sacred. In sacredness, nothing is mundane."  
— Dōgen Zenji

I've always been drawn to fire, not for its violence, but for its ability to render everything new. In Greek mythology, Hephaestus, the god of fire, was not just a destroyer but a shaper.

There's something deeply honest in that: the idea that to forge is to burn. That building new worlds might first require setting the old ones alight. That flux is not a crisis, it is the condition of aliveness. ●







