

Spring 2001, White Crane discussed the idea of Shadow.
Los Angeles therapist, Roger Kaufman offered these thoughts:

Reclaiming Gay Shadow

Roger Kaufman

Perhaps the most difficult challenge for any Gay man is to face his own Gay Shadow, that disowned region of the mind populated by the most shameful and horrifying aspects of the self. Banished by the ego to fester in the unconscious, the rejected Shadowside continues to exert tremendous influence in us Gay men, inspiring covert psychological agendas and self-destructive behaviors. This age-old repression--universal in all humankind -- has been horribly intensified by two millennia of Christianity. Along with its ruthless demonization of homosexuality, Christian culture has relentlessly shamed the darker aspects of the human psyche, in effect destroying the ability of anyone within its grasp to achieve psychological wholeness. Many leaders in the so-called New Age spirituality movement have taken this schism one step further by trying to make the Shadow vanish completely, dangerously encouraging us to imagine ourselves as all light and love. But now, through our archetypal affinity for psychology -- as well as many other capacities--Gay men have a unique opportunity to descend into the underworld and confront the Shadow, thereby beginning to heal the split between light and dark within ourselves, our community, and eventually, all of humanity.

Facing Gay Shadow is so crucial because our relentless efforts to keep the lid on it have also disrupted our connection with the profoundly beautiful, ecstatic aspects of Gay Soul and Gay Spirit. If these archetypal concepts seem vague or obscure, that is because our continual repression of the Shadow has lead us to an equally severe repression of Gay Spirit. If we can re-open the lid and tolerate our own hells, we may also discover a conscious connection with Gay Spirit that will revolutionize our experience of Gay being.

As Gay-centered psychologist Mitch Walker has written, "...shameful Gay Shadow is our central problem and thus our central doorway." The confrontation with Shadow can actually lead us to discover that we have a Gay Soul -- that magical, powerful universe within each Gay man that is infused with Gay Spirit.

Populating that inner universe are many persons and beings that are a part of us and yet also autonomous from us with independent feelings.

Following C.G. Jung, archetypal psychologist James Hillman has described how the human psyche has the inherent ability to personify its own feelings and images. This is not merely a metaphorical process but an actual psychic coalescence of sub-personalities within each individual, what Jung referred to as the "complexes." Perhaps the most prominent of these personifications are internalizations of our parents (or primary childhood caregivers) that have now become independent persons within. There are also many childlike parts of ourselves -- unacceptable to our parents, religion and culture--that we were forced to repress in our early years. These split-off "part-selves" become distinct within us, exuding strong feelings that they wave as flags in order to get our attention.

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The problem is that many of these strong feelings -- including toxic shame, hurt-rage and hate -- are extremely painful to feel and/or morally unacceptable to other parts of the self or society. It is these inferior feelings and related figures that make up the Shadow. In order to keep them out of awareness, the ego employs a massive arsenal of defenses that is constantly maintaining an internal divide just below the surface of consciousness.

In themselves, the defenses are not all bad. They serve important psychological functions, and each of us relied on them as Gay boys to survive in a hostile environment. But as we age, the defenses become more rigid and inflexible, outliving their original purpose.

Psychoanalysts often say that defense mechanisms are like steel, thereby highlighting their impenetrable nature. This phenomenon can clearly be seen in the example of an alcoholic who is in severe denial about his addiction even as he is destroying himself.

Denial is but one of many powerful defenses the ego employs. All of us also use projection to put disowned parts of ourselves onto others. It is this mechanism that has enabled so many straight people to demonize Gay men and dump their Shadows onto us, but Gay men also use projection frequently, often on each other. A related phenomenon is projective identification, when we unconsciously provoke others to act out our disowned feelings for us. This is why, for example, it can be so weirdly infuriating to be with an apparently "passive" person. Other common defenses include rationalization, intellectualization and displacement of a feeling toward one person onto another.

In order to reclaim our own Shadow, we must each begin the difficult process of confronting and lowering these defenses. This requires an extremely honest, ongoing engagement with ourselves, and substantial assistance where possible from like-minded others who might help us see where we are blind. The process of such self-truth is particularly difficult because when challenged, the defense mechanisms rise up and become even more resistant. For most of us in modern Gay culture, only long-term psychodynamic psychotherapy is likely to provide the consistent focus and attention on those powerful defenses needed to truly crack us open.

What is revealed in the Shadow when the defenses begin to fall? Each individual's experience is unique, but for most Gay men there will be an overwhelming, recurrent experience of toxic shame. This is the kind of corrosive self-hatred that's rooted in the core of an individual's sense of self, a deep feeling that in some basic way I am just not good enough, that I do not even deserve to exist. Such feelings are likely to be particularly strong for so many Gay men because the Gay essence of our personality has been so cruelly shamed by parents, religion and culture throughout our life -- and especially in our formative years.

Fully feeling one's shame is a fundamental achievement in the process of reclaiming Gay Shadow, and yet many of us Gay men settle for feeling "caught" in our shame to avoid an even more tremendous, murderous hurt-rage underneath. When our parents failed to meet our needs as children -- and cruelly snuffed out our pleasure as Gay boys -- we fully felt not just the shame of it but the injustice as well, and were forced to repress the attendant rage in order to maintain our parents' "love."

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In adulthood, this rage re-emerges in all kinds of indirect ways, since it usually cannot be tolerated directly by the conscious self. Smoldering in the unconscious, repressed hurt-rage inspires many covert agendas, as we try to coerce others to satisfy unmet infantile needs. Similar dynamics are sparked by many other painful feelings – including terror, grief and despair--that lurk in the Gay Shadow.

Many years ago, when I began the effort to face my own Shadow, I appeared on the outside to be a moderately functional Gay professional with a lover and a dog. In reality, I existed on the edge of financial and emotional bankruptcy. I was mostly dead to myself, feeling only a constant numb emptiness inside. For several years in psychotherapy I struggled to feel and identify my inferior feelings, making slow progress. Then during a particularly stressful period I was suddenly struck by a case of uncontrollable hiccups that staunchly resisted all efforts to make them go away. Advice poured in from frantic family and friends. My doctor prescribed Thorazine and Klonopin. When those didn't work he gave me Prilosec, Propulsid, Ipecac and Baclofen. An acupuncturist gave me Magnolia Bark and Valerian Root. A neurologist scheduled an MRI.

But none of it helped. The hiccups only got louder and deeper—big heaving jolts that shook my entire body to the core as if I were about to give birth. At the most desperate point I called my therapist, who suggested that maybe there was someone inside of me trying to get my attention. After two more days of hiccups, I finally just stopped all activity, lay on my bed, and listened to them. Then I started to ask the hiccups some basic questions: "What are you trying to say?" and "Who are you?" Eventually I could hear the faint voice of a very shame-ridden, suffering little boy who had been desperately trying to get my attention for decades. As I pushed aside all the "empirical" judgments in my head arguing against the possibility that he could actually exist inside of me--and began to accept this boy as real--the hiccups started to subside. On the ninth day of torment I choked out a bloody mess of phlegm, and then the hiccups stopped. Now I could finally hear within, and a new kind of change could begin for me.

The process that I employed to discover and relate to this devastated little Gay boy hidden in my Shadow was what Jung termed active imagination, a simple method where one can have a dialogue with persons in the psyche in order to amplify their presence and bring them more fully into consciousness. In the case of my hiccups, I found that I was talking with a very distraught, hurt child who after 31 years of being repressed was finally announcing himself to me through an insistent physical symptom. Active imagination can also be a helpful tool with figures from our dreams, difficult feelings beginning to come up, or faint voices heard within. For many Gay men like myself, the toxic shame is so pervasive that it's difficult to imagine there might be anything of value within us, let alone actual persons or part-selves who can be related to. Such a healing process requires a new kind of trust in the validity and realness of our own imagination that has been driven out of us by the shaming judgment of family, religion and even science.

My experience with the hiccups was only the very beginning of a friendship with this crushed Gay boy within, whom I am still getting to know. In order to give him some breathing room, I have had to learn to persistently confront and even scream at internal parental figures who relentlessly shame him. I have also had to avoid a smarmy romanticizing of this boy, who keeps reminding me that he is full of all the most intense, painful feelings that I have been repressing. He is extremely needy, very demanding and

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constantly raging. If not related to consciously, he will inspire me to exploit my friends in order to get soothing. Sometimes I will project aspects of him onto other people, toward whom I feel very judgmental, even disgusted. With practice, I have learned to recognize that when I am feeling this kind of judgmental attitude toward another person, I am actually reacting to some disowned part of myself, either an aspect of this destroyed child or another figure in the Shadow.

It is extremely difficult for any of us to see ourselves fully with complete honesty. The ego's defenses are just too strong to allow this to occur without struggle. This is where the honest emotional reactions from our friends and partners are invaluable in developing self-awareness. When I am unconsciously needy and demanding, a friend's angry confrontation helps me wake up and realize I have abandoned myself. What may appear to outsiders as mean can actually be an act of love. The real cruelty occurs when friends collude with each other's self-hatred, enabling self-destructive behaviors and co-dependent manipulations. As Gay-centered psychotherapist Douglas Sadownick has written, "individuation entails a new definition of friendship and romance, characterized by psychological authenticity, in which poking takes the place of back-scratching and holding takes the place of bitching."

At some level, almost all Gay men yearn for real love and companionship with our comrades, and yet we are so ashamed of our Shadows that we keep up protective walls between one another, settling for superficial connections or even worse. When a friend is strong enough to help break through our defenses, such a caring act may initially feel extremely hurtful because our psychic wounds are so painfully raw to the touch. A good indicator that your Shadow has been provoked is when you start to feel defensive. I have found myself squealing ragefully like a wounded animal when friends have identified my most inferior and shameful qualities. Discovering the extent of one's Shadow -- such as the hate one secretly feels toward self and others -- can be an extremely humiliating experience, usually provoking a resurgence of the defenses.

Learning to tolerate this humiliation and keep the defenses down actually leads to psychological liberation. Only when we develop enough humility to fully acknowledge the realness and depth of our hate is there any possibility of authentic love.

As the ongoing confrontation with one's Shadow continues, one learns to accept and value the most inferior and grotesque parts of the self. This actually engenders a revolutionary shift in perspective, where a Gay man discovers that his inner experience, however painful, is just as real in a subjective sense as the outside world is in an objective sense. When we learn that our shame, rage and hate are real--because we are finally fully feeling them -- then we can begin to more fully imagine that Gay Soul and Gay Spirit are also real. Notions that were abstract or fanciful become tangibly embodied and eventually lived in the most visceral of ways. Once a Gay man can become receptive to it, he can experience the libidinous energy of Gay Soul itself personified by a stunningly beautiful, potent and erect Gay god-man within, a homosexual soul figure, who is our lifelong companion--and the mediator between Gay ego and Gay Spirit. Whenever we feel attracted to another guy -- during sex, at the gym or in pornography -- it is actually our own inner soul figure that we are projecting onto him. Our erections are an invitation to consciously reconnect with this exquisite Gay being who already loves us with a superhuman, cosmic profundity. Yet to fully trust our own subjective imagination and receive this love

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as real requires a kind of heroic self-valuing that can only be achieved through years of struggling to know and partner the self-hatred that is central to Gay Shadow.

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