

Be Careful When a Naked Person Offers You a Shirt

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There is a widely accepted wisdom that the people in our lives who are most irritating represent a part of us that we have difficulty accepting. Most people resist claiming the parts of themselves or their history that reminds them of their own perceived imperfections. Psychologist Carl Jung called this aspect of self – the part we like to judge, disown, and reject – the shadow. The shadow represents our hidden aspects and parts we preferred didn't exist. Yet we can no more get rid of these aspects than we can get rid of a literal shadow created when walking down the sidewalk on a sunny day.

Shadow traits are relative to each person, defined in the eye of the beholder. While the essence of a characteristic simply "is what it is," the mind is trained to judge and evaluate. For example, one person might perceive a trait to be dramatic, another as expressive, lazy or relaxed, energetic or hyperactive, and so on. A person may be seen as an entrepreneur or workaholic, creative financier or predatory lender, revolutionary or terrorist.

Resistance to embracing one's shadow is natural, a part of our shared humanity. While it is impossible to get rid of our shadow, we can choose how we relate to it. Our ego defense mechanisms would have us deny or repress these traits or project the qualities onto other people. However, rejecting parts of ourselves limits access to our creativity, resources, and humanity. For this reason, accepting and learning from our shadows makes us more whole.

Nations, just like individuals and families, also have shadows. Recognizing the American national shadow is tremendously challenging to the American identity. The "American Experiment" and its uniqueness has been heralded as the greatest country in the world. From our nation's inception, the dominant trait emphasized has been our originality. We have been taught that patriotism means seeing our country as not only exceptional, but superior to other nations. Admitting that the U.S. has a shadow forces us to see that there are ways in which we are just like everyone else. What could be more un-American or unpatriotic?

With all that is truly remarkable about our country's history, we have forgotten that it was created by founding fathers and mothers with human traits. While history tends to mythologize them, they had flaws, imperfections, and shadows just like each of us. Mythologizing history by defending colonial ancestors keeps us from learning and growing as a nation. It prevents us from acknowledging the price paid by those who experienced colonization, enslavement, and other forms of oppression throughout U.S. history. Conversely, demonizing these same Europeans perpetuates a historical view of the colonized and enslaved primarily as victims. Doing so precludes us from seeing the strength, resilience, and dignity of indigenous and African American ancestors and the human limitations of European ancestors.

Debilitating Self-Reliance

Many clients in my therapy practice experience life's struggles with an underlying belief that there is something wrong with them, not only for the experience that they are going through, but for needing support to help them through it. Their expectation of self-reliance is often unrealistically high. They may intellectually recognize their human need for support and community, yet struggle with embodying or easily living out these needs.

The shadow side of America's idealized entrepreneurial, "pull yourself up by your boot straps" citizen is debilitating self-reliance. The Western mind's assessment that self-reliance is always a positive trait goes against human nature's deeper wisdom. People need each other. This takes nothing away from their ability to function autonomously. Historian David McCullough reminds us, "There is no such thing as 'a self-made man or woman'—we all are influenced by people around us."

The Shadow Knows

Imagine bringing together 10 people with whom you have had challenging experiences: former spouses or partners, family members, coworkers, friends, or neighbors. Imagine a neutral person interviewing the group for honest feedback, the kind most of us prefer not to hear, regarding their experiences of you.

- Would there be any themes to their comments?
- Would you be able to see the grains of truth in these reflections?
- If not, what would you do, say, or think to defend yourself against their comments?
- Are any of these qualities, the ones in their comments or those in your defensive reaction, in any other members of your family?
- If so, what is your relationship like with them? Do you tend to reject or accept these traits or the person who has them?
- How much energy would be available for other purposes if you were somehow released from having to defend yourself against whatever has been revealed, simply accepting it for what it is, without judgment or criticism?
- If you were able to compassionately acknowledge, "Yes, this is a part of me," how might this acceptance affect you, your relationships, your outlook on life?

Ability to maintain a sense of self and balance even in the midst of difficult circumstance or feedback is called "ego strength." Imagine what effect it might have on our country if it had the ego strength to solicit

feedback from other countries, both perceived allies and perceived enemies. Military defense is the largest line item in the U.S. budget. Its place of priority is not only about national security; it may be one of the most potent reflections of America's need to defend itself from its own shadow. Unfortunately, when we commit so many resources to defending ourselves from the truths of our history, we have fewer resources to commit to the needs of the citizenry.

Releasing the inclination to defend against truth and claiming the need of others leads us to genuine humility and congruent action. Facing today's challenges in America requires an ability to look honestly at our history and its shadows, respecting that our fates and future are entwined with each other. There is no more time for hiding from our shadows. Maya Angelou once commented, "I don't trust people who don't love themselves and yet tell me, 'I love you.'" There is an African saying: Be careful when a naked person offers you a shirt."

Lisa Iversen, MSW, LCSW, has been a Systemic Family Constellations practitioner since 1999 and a psychotherapist since 1993. She is the author of Ancestral Blueprints: Revealing Invisible Truths in America's Soul (Family Constellations West, 2009). Her areas of expertise and interest include transgenerational trauma, mental illness in families, effects of war in family and American culture, relationship between individual-collective healing, post-colonial healing, integration of indigenous and western healing approaches, visibility of feminine rooted wisdom, and ancestral resonance in daily living. Lisa lives in Bellingham, Washington with her husband and daughter. To learn more, visit www.ancestralblueprints.com.