

Shadow Dancing

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photo of Katheryn by

Try as much as possible to be wholly alive, with all your might, and when you laugh, laugh like hell and when you get angry, get good and angry. Try to be alive. You will be dead soon enough.

William Saroyan

If a way to the better there be, it lies in taking a full look at the worst.

Thomas Hardy

First breath Last breath

What if we embraced death and shadow as a part of our lives from our first breath? What if we saw death as an ally right up to our very last breath? What if we breathed ourselves back into wholeness?

By celebrating our “unspeakable” shadow through creative expression, simple ritual and breath, we can reclaim wholehearted engagement with our lives. By including and reconnecting to all of ourselves, we are able to be more dynamic, energized, and complete.

Shadow Bags

What are we most afraid of in life? What do we deem “ugly” and repulsive in others and in ourselves? What lies at the center of all that we deem unacceptable?

The term “shadow” was coined within the work of Carl Gustav Jung and Marie Louise von Franz to refer to “the parts of ourselves that we are unable to know.” In the ‘80’s Robert Bly explored the origins of shadow which he saw as a split between our original radiance (“living

globe of radiant energy”) and what we do to conform and survive. Everyone has a shadow, which begins to develop in childhood. We do what we need to do to please those who care for us and about whom we care most. As a result, we deny negative feelings. We place those unloved, unacknowledged, devalued, unaccepted bits of ourselves into the background of our psyches and try to forget they exist. Bly referred to this place as the “long black bag we drag behind us”¹

Once we become curious and aware of our *shadow bags* we can be more fully present, alive and heartfelt. Once the unspeakable is given space to speak, we unleash vast energy and space inside ourselves. What is it that we cannot live with in ourselves? All the things which we are but do not want to be or own in ourselves (our being sacred, powerless, poor, ugly, powerful, strong, fragile, brilliant, thick) need to simply be.

Thinking about the presence of a “shadow self,” many people conclude that the only aspects that go into that bag are “bad” or “negative” qualities. This is not true. Many of our long bags are filled to overflowing with wonderful, delightful, bold, courageous aspects of ourselves which simply had no way to be expressed in the families, schools, religious traditions, or communities in which we grew up. A little boy sent home from school with a note from the music teacher saying, “this child is tone deaf,” may never try to sing again. Then at age fifty, holding his first grandchild, he croons a long forgotten lullaby and discovers he can carry a tune.²

What is the nugget in the middle of all of this

shadow? "... If I am feeling anxiety, I would usually claim that I am a helpless victim of this tension, that people or situations in the environment are causing me to become anxious. The first step is to become more fully aware of anxiety, to get in touch with it, to shake and jitter and gasp for air - to really feel it, invite it in, express it - and thus realize that I am responsible, that I am tensing, that I am blocking my excitement and therefore experiencing anxiety. I am doing this to myself, that that anxiety is an affair between me and me and not me and the environment. But this shift in attitude means that where formerly I alienated my excitement, split myself from it and then claimed to be a victim of it, I now am taking responsibility for what I am doing to myself."³

Let us be curious about our shadow bags rather than shadow boxing in vain for the rest of our lives. Be with the shadow. Be with every bit of it. Breathe it in. When this is possible, there is expansion such that our hearts can sing more fully. We can breathe more deeply. We can begin to reclaim our wholeness and radiance by becoming more conscious about who we really are.

Swan Song

... Once you put a dead guy in the room, you can talk about anything ...

Recently, I had a wonderful evening with a group of friends, all of us avid BBC *Radio 4* listeners. After a tasty shared feast, we sat back and listened to a web cast of an earlier program focused on the writings and poetry of those who work with the dying. It was wonderful. We were moved to tears and so much laughter. And the line that sticks out most to me is, "*Once you put a dead guy in the room, you can talk about anything.*" It is so true. It is this very phenomenon that allowed me much more access to my own shadow bag. My own experiences with death have ripped me open and down to my core...what is a little bit of exposed shadow bag next to that? I discovered that by allowing space for this "exposure" I also allowed myself much more space to be loved, held, supported and accepted.

A couple of years ago, a close friend died very suddenly and unexpectedly of a massive heart attack. In his case, there was no pain, no contraction, and no fear. It was very fast and complete.

I was the only other person there when this occurred. It was, of course, shocking and scary. But mostly, it was a very beautiful and moving experience to midwife this deathing. It was awesome! I had heard and enjoyed the idea that death could be stunning and peaceful, but never really believed its existence to be much more than the stuff of fairy tales. (It felt a bit like the theoretical existence of orgasmic birthing ... I "ordered" one of those but did not quite manage to acquire that one.)

At a certain point it dawned on me that my friend's life had passed on and that all the CPR⁴ in the world was not going to bring him back. I then became quickly aware that of how similar death and birth are. First breath. Last breath. Death was patiently standing by the whole time.

In the hours / days / months following my friend's death, shadowy parts of me which I deemed too "ugly", like my deep vulnerability, were exposed to others. Rather than to reject my "ugly" vulnerability it was welcomed and remarkably seen as my softness and even as deep beauty. It proved to be a formative learning experience for me.

What a privilege to be a part of both of these important markers in our lives:

Birth. Death.

First breath. Last breath.

Another quote from that same *Radio 4* broadcast: "*When the worst has already happened, the best is somehow possible ...*"

Heart, Art and Shadow

To fill the hour - that is happiness; to fill the hour and leave no crevice for a repentance or an approval.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

What if we could create an external image of these shadow aspects of ourselves to explore? What if we could wrap it up literally and figuratively with our heartline? What would happen if we were to take back and integrate / eat our

shadow aspects?

Bly says, "*So the person who has eaten his shadow spreads calmness, and shows more grief than anger. If the ancients were right that darkness contains intelligence and nourishment and even information, then the person who has eaten some of his or her shadow is more energetic as well as more intelligent*". In Bly's *Little Book on the Human Shadow*,

he suggests "... that in order to "eat the shadow" we need to do more than identify it; we need to ask others to give us back our disowned traits, as well as use creativity to integrate them."⁵

As a visual artist and an arts therapist, I am a big fan of art as a tool for self-discovery. I find that I can speak volumes, process, and problem solve most effectively with simple expressive arts. I recently was creatively exploring the questions: "what does it take to give 100% of myself to what I do? What supports this? What is at the root of what inspires me?"

I put these questions through a regimen of mask making, free painting exercises and improvisational movement. What emerged over and over were variations on the theme of wholeheartedness, which includes and encompasses shadow. The rich thick black "compost" of shadow perforated with iridescent crystal and wrapped in the golden thread of my heartline. The beautiful fiery bold mask reclaiming and eating its shadow back. This shadow aspect is surrounded with a golden heartline thread as well. In movement, the heavy gravitational pull of earth is punctuated with bold sweeping graceful flying movements. Wholeness, for me, could not exclude shadow or heart. My 100% needs both. I am reminded of how Jung refers to the essence of shadow as "pure gold".

One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.

C.G. Jung

What if we saw death as an ally? What if we embraced death and shadow as a part of our lives from our very first to our last breath?

My wish is to be fully alive until I die. I also wish to inspire this in others. Through the use of creative expression we can work more dynamically and effectively with our shadow aspects. We can unearth hidden jewels and gold in ourselves that have been hidden away, sometimes for a very long time. If we make the invisible visible, there are our treasures! If we accept our shadow

aspects, allow them just to be, even celebrate them, anything becomes possible! Through creativity we can take responsibility for our hidden gold, our lives and our world ... from our first breath to our last breath.

Katheryn Trenshaw

Katheryn Trenshaw is an American artist and teacher now based in the UK. She teaches and exhibits her paintings and sculpture throughout Europe and the US. She is currently creating a new *International Center for Expressive Arts* based in Devon England. Her most recent retreat is entitled *Shadow Dancing*.

To receive upcoming events schedule or learn more see www.ktrenshaw.com.

Other notes:

- 1 A Little Book on the Human Shadow by Robert Bly
- 2 Understanding Shadow and Projection in Circles and Groups by Meredith Jordan and Christina Baldwin
- 3 The Spectrum of Consciousness by Ken Wilber
- 4 Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation
- 5 Meeting the Shadow: The Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature eds Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams

We can alchemically transform our shadow into gold.

*I dreamt last night
Oh marvellous error,
That there were honeybees in my heart,
Making honey out of my old failures.*

Antonio Machado