

EMBRACING YOUR SHADOW

(Learning to love the dark)

By Kerri Ryan MA

How much are you aware of the shadow or dark side of your nature? Are you aware when you act out or respond to situations that trigger undesirable behaviours or reactions? I know when I began this exploration many years ago, I didn't understand the power of my unconscious behaviours and the extent they to which they influenced my life, and inevitably not in a positive way. So how do we begin to recognise our shadow nature? The shadow side contains our anger, our raw controlling emotions, our addictions whether for promiscuous sex, illicit drug taking, or alcohol abuse, egotistical behaviour, lies, eating disorders, bad parenting, despair, codependency, loneliness, crime, depression, shame, madness – you name it – we all have a shadow whether we are aware of it or not. The problem is that when we deny the shadow or dark side of our nature, the pressure builds up until like a seething volcano it explodes out of control, because the dark can no more be denied than the light.

So why do we avoid investigating our shadow side? Why do we deny the parts of ourselves that we think unacceptable to speak of in polite company, refusing to deal with the dark emotional pain and behaviours, shoving them unexplored deep down inside? Western culture teaches us from childhood that the dark is a bad, scary place. We associate the dark with death and sin and hell. We stereotype dark skinned people and make them bad. The dark is a place where demons or monsters lurk and the Prince of Darkness is the evil bad guy.

The opposite of all that of course, is pure and light. We are always taught to seek out the light and stay away from the dark. When we observe nature though, we see that dark is just the other polarity of light. Night follows day, the moon waxes from an inky blackness to a glowing fullness and back again. The seasons change from long light summer filled days, to long dark winter nights.

In each of these instances, the dark side represents a place and a time for rest and renewal. We ourselves also naturally need to cycle between the light and the dark. The shadow side of our nature belongs to the watery depths of our psyches, our subconscious, where we discover aspects of ourselves that aren't spoken of in polite company. Society teaches us to always stay calm and centered, behave appropriately, be in control and above all, you must look good! So let me ask you, what are you hiding in your shadow side that you don't want to acknowledge even to yourself, let alone have others identify?

Acknowledging your shadow behaviours is the first step you must take towards healing them. Because they live in the unconscious, they run your life from the back seat and often see you engage in behaviours that are totally out of control. I have been flawed to discover some deeply ingrained shadow aspects operating in my own life as I investigate my dysfunctional relationships with men. Holding disempowering beliefs around the roles of men in my life, I have discovered that as a girl I watched my mother's manipulative and victim behaviours, and took on board her attitudes that basically said "all men are bastards" and used the shadow aspects of her womanhood as the template for my life and how I relate to men. Now at nearly 50 years of age I am astounded to see how the shadow feminine has been playing out all my life, contributing to failed relationships, distrust of

men, and a belief that I will do everything in my power not to be controlled by them. Hardly the basis upon which to engage in a mutually loving and supportive relationship.

When we observe the life of Marilyn Munro we see the tragedy that was her shadow feminine played out on the world's stage. Her sexuality sizzled and was punctuated by drug and alcohol abuse, by the men who wanted to control such a flaming and vibrant energy and the resultant depression and alleged suicide that portrayed the shadow side, out of control and unhealed. Lady Diana was not compared to Marilyn by chance, her life too was played out on a world stage but it was her willingness to share her frailties, her bulimia, her loveless and victimized marriage with an adoring public that saw her move through the pain into some semblance of happiness towards the end of her life. What the public loved about Diana were her frailties, her shadow nature made public. That which is so often hidden in the shadow and made private, was played out for all to witness and that ensured a legacy of popularity and love from a public who too, were not perfect and connected with her at heart level. She was brave enough to expose the shadow feminine to healing and watching on, we all applauded her heroic journey.

We need to be the hero in our own lives and investigate the shadow for ourselves. Do not expect yourself to be perfect. It's totally unrealistic. Own your imperfections and different shaped bodies and addictions and flaws and irrational behaviours and instead of hiding them away in the dark, honour the differences that makes us all human beings with both light and shadow sides. There is no shame in the shadow, only acknowledgement – for in healing the dysfunction, you'll find that your life and the lives of those around you flow in greater harmony and joy, and you expend less energy on behaviours that stymie you.

Stepping into the dark

To face your shadow side for the first time can be a very frightening prospect. To deny its existence will not make it go away, for it will not be denied. To begin healing aspects of your shadow, you first need to identify them. Begin by making a list. What do you hide from your friends and family and would hate for them to know about you? Your list might include:

1. I sometimes scream at my kids and want to hit or beat them.
2. I want more sex than my husband can give me. That's not normal is it?
3. I hate my mother. She always tries to control me.
4. I want to explore occult, pagan, wiccan or new age religions, what will people think of me?
5. I hate my body. I'm afraid of becoming fat, old and unattractive.
6. I'm never any good at learning new things. I always stuff up everything up.
7. Often I find myself drinking a bottle of wine before lunch time just to cope with the stress.
8. I continually check my husbands mobile and car, looking in his pockets trying to find something to prove he's being unfaithful, but I never do. I can't stop myself, I'm so insecure.

Remember, don't tackle everything at once. Choose just one issue at a time. Then you need to acknowledge this to yourself. "Yes, this darkness is a part of me. This is the way that I feel. This is who I am – a woman who is not perfect. I am light and I am dark. The more I acknowledge the parts I disown, the less power they have over me."

What else? The archetypes of different goddesses can act as wayshowers on your journey. Find out more about the dark goddesses and their stories – Hel, Medusa, Hecate, Cerridwen, Morrigan, Baba Yaga, Sheela-na-gig, Nuit, and Nyx. Perhaps create an altar to them, asking for their assistance. On this altar include things that represent your dark side. A black or red candle, a dark stone, animal bones, a snake icon, picture of spider, whatever signifies the dark for you. Find time to light your candle, the dark of the moon is always an appropriate time, and ask for the assistance of the dark goddess and she will begin to work with you. You must then be aware of the subtle influence she will begin to exhibit, or perhaps get ready to be thrown into the dark.

Make friends with the crone / bone mother and fully accept the cycle of death / renewal / birth and acknowledge the times when you need to retreat into quietness and solitude. Set aside time specifically to do just this. A time when you are bleeding is most powerful as the shedding of the blood is another of the potent mysteries of death and release that signal the creation of the new within your own body.

Above all, cut yourself some slack. By acknowledging that you are a combination of the light and dark, see your behaviours less as good and bad but more of how that does or does not serve me. Just by acknowledging that the shadow exists and becoming conscious of behaviours and beliefs that limit you, then you are on your way to nipping them in the bud when they surface. And by all means, don't be afraid to seek professional help if you need to.

Give thanks always that the journey is both dark and light, we were not meant to be pure white spiritual beings without sin living up to some ideal of holy perfection, that's why we were given sensual, emotional, frail and strong bodies and called human beings. Enjoy your discoveries.

