

EXPLORING OUR 'DARK' SIDE

by Alice Carlton, LCSW

Think of your most embarrassing moment and you find your 'dark' side.

You know, that part you wish weren't there, the part you want to hide or forget ever existed.

Most of us stuff these moments into the bottom of our memory bags. But you know what happened when you hid those veggies you hated under the tablecloth when Mom wasn't looking? She eventually found them, and you got found out. It's the same way with hidden parts of ourselves. Like neglected children, they eventually cry out for attention.

Those hidden parts can only stay hidden as long as no one lifts up the tablecloth. If the defenses we build around these hidden parts are penetrable, we may unveil them ourselves.. When we form an intimate bond with a romantic partner and live with that person on a daily basis, the tablecloth usually gets lifted eventually. But if they are made of heavy iron mail, even falling in love cannot melt them. Then the relationship may fail, as if we unconsciously choose to hide and be safe rather than to grow in intimacy and experience our full aliveness.

So why do we not go ahead and take that inner journey on our own? What stops us? Let's look a moment at human development.

We are born whole (holly). As Wordsworth so beautifully expressed it: "trailing clouds of glory do we come." Look into the wide open eyes of a newborn and you know this is true. If our parents notice and respond to our needs, we feel great. To the extent they don't, we feel pain. Believing our survival is at stake (and sometimes it is), we do our best to please our caretakers. We hide the needs that weren't met. Somehow they get lost in the shadows.

In most families, only parts of us get nurtured and developed, usually the parts our parents had nurtured and developed in themselves by their parents. What came through the intergenerational transmission process often determines how much of our true nature gets encouraged by our parents. Some unhealthy messages about how to live get passed down. To grow into the magnificent beings we were born to be involves shining light on our dark side. Then those split off parts—our lost selves—can be reclaimed and given the nurturing attention they didn't receive when we were children.

But how do we do this? Here are three ways: attending to our dreams, noticing the traits we most intensely dislike in others, and noticing the traits we most intensely admire in others.

Dreams show us aspects of ourselves that we haven't yet recognized in our waking life.

Once as a young woman newly out of school, I struggled in a work situation that required me to interact closely with someone I found very abrasive and critical. As a child, I was taught always to be a good girl and **never** to rock the boat. One night I dreamed that I physically attacked my obnoxious co-worker. When I awoke, I was horrified. But, as I had been taught, I wrote the dream down just as it occurred, noting the mood, to see what I could learn.

This led to the beginnings of learning to be assertive. Slowly, over time I dared to move into the

middle ground between being the good girl who dared not rock the boat or acting out my dream behavior. I began to express myself more directly, saying clearly what I wanted from my co-worker. Although I did not shed a tear when he left his job, I should have thanked him, because working with him gave me an opportunity to learn to use my own power more effectively. That was an example of working with my shadow.

Finding our lost selves through observing what we despise or admire in others can be a bigger challenge.

I do an exercise with groups or individuals that involves thinking of people you dislike the most and admire the most and listing all the corresponding negative and positive traits. Cull the list down to the top five. Then identify the polarities, ie, rageful vs passive.

In many cases, if we hate rageful people, we lean the other direction and become passive. We let others use us like a doormat and pile up resentment that can build into rage. This energy has to go somewhere. It may implode and create illness, or it may explode and then we blow our stack and feel guilty and horrible afterwards.

Here is an exercise that may help. For the negative traits, fill in the blanks in the following statement: when you decided you could not be _____(negative trait) the positive aspect of being _____(negative trait) that you lost was the ability to be _____. For example, when you decided you could not be rageful, the positive aspect of being rageful that you lost might be the ability to tell your truth. From there you create a personal behavior change request. Such a behavior change request for yourself might be, first, to look for moments in the next week when you hold back your truth and, then, to dare to express it one or two times..

Similarly, when we put those we admire on a pedestal, we often fail to nurture the seeds of greatness in ourselves that we see flowering in them. Looking up to them may prevent us from looking inward to claim those traits we can't imagine finding in ourselves.

We spend our early lives creating our shadow. To become whole means investing time and energy into illuminating it and reclaiming our lost selves. Just as valuable ore is found deep inside the darkest caves, the gems of lost life energy are found deep within our dark side. Replace fear and shame with courage and curiosity and we can become spelunkers of our souls.