

Self Study and Exploration

To be aware of the narratives that undergird a life is critical to living fully in the world. Getting underneath the surface of ourselves requires so much. We must step out of our comfort zones and into the unknown, into stories about ourselves and our culture that we are not yet aware of. These stories shape our lives more than we know. Getting acquainted with the inner landscape requires letting go of the familiar, surrender, and an openness to surprise. It takes a warrior to enter the darkness of one's own experience and stay long enough to see what is there. Examining oneself requires a return to the past, to the landscape of embodied memory, to discover and recover what we have hidden within.

Self-study means having the courage to enter the mystery of our inner lives, face what we encounter, and reclaim what has been left behind. The anger you were told wasn't nice, the power you were told to hide, the tears you were told were weak—when explored, these shadowy aspects hold wisdom that help us to live more wholly in the world. Liberation personally and collectively, depends on our willingness to befriend the darkness of our inner experience, celebrate the gifts we hold, and reclaim the pieces of ourselves that have been hiding within it.

This journey starts with getting to know our own sacredness; getting to know who we are from a deep place of love and belonging that starts from within. From this place of the sacred self, we can begin to see ourselves more clearly, both our strengths and weaknesses, and we begin to be open to what we do not know yet in ourselves. This journey into the mystery of self is best supported by:

- Having [a basic understanding of the shadow](#) and [the psycho-spiritual developmental journey](#).
- A [mentor](#) to love and guide you along the way,
- An [embodied spiritual practice](#) to keep you close to the ground and the sacred,
- and [a community](#) to reflect back what you cannot see for yourself.

Below we will unpack the shadow briefly and speak to the importance of mentoring. We will explore community further in the Build Beloved Community section and please refer to *The Sacred Self* and the *Reclaiming Relationship with Our Bodies* sections above in regards to spiritual practice.

The Shadow

The shadow is that which has been denied or repressed in our individual psyches. Robert Bly (1988), author of *A Little Book on the Human Shadow* writes,

We notice that when sunlight hits the body, the body turns bright but it throws a shadow, which is dark. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. Each of us has some part of our personality that is hidden from us. Parents and teachers in general, urge us to develop the light side of our personality...to become successful. The dark part then becomes starved.

Over the years, many of us receive praise for certain qualities or behaviors, and are criticized for others. We learn to hide the criticized parts of ourselves and to live out of the places within us that shine. We collect what has been denied in a “long black bag” and to reclaim these aspects of ourselves, we must open the bag and explore what lives in the darkness. This is shadow recovery. If a person has not learned the tools to navigate unknown (or even for those who have), this inner landscape can be uncomfortable at best, and terrifying at worst. This is why we so often avoid it.

There is power in facing the personal shadow, and when we courageously and creatively face the unknown, it affects our lives and our relationship to the world. To enter the shadow is to enter the darkness of the unknown and to meet the limits of one’s humanness. When I close my eyes and enter into a relationship with the darkness of my inner experience, I have no idea what I might encounter. I might meet repressed feelings, memories that have retreated to the recesses of the psyche, and experiences that rest in the body born from one’s ancestry.

Finding our way in the darkness is a path that must be chosen and requires the light of consciousness. Joseph Campbell the great mythologist calls this the hero’s journey, where those who choose to depart the habit of their lives, enter the “belly of the whale”, and return to share the wisdom they have received with the world. Bly calls this exiling, hunting, and retrieving the shadow. Committing to this journey does have an effect on the way in which we live. When we shine light into the darker corners of ourselves we lighten our load in many ways.

The more we explore the shadow creatively and courageously, the less dense it becomes. When we choose to become vulnerable we tear open the shadow to let light shine through, and the light does not rest once it is known. It leads us more deeply into the darkness to know it (and ourselves) ever more fully. In shadow recovery, the journey is not linear. We spiral inward toward a deeper knowing that is first known personally and grow into a wider sense of connectedness with the world. “[T]ruly to grow...is the capacity to grow inward, grow down, into the moss of our soul and let it become the soil for our blossoming” (Snowber, 2009). This is in stark contrast to what we are seeing today in the world. Connection to the outer world begins with

connection to self, and we cannot have connection without a willingness to be vulnerable (Brown, 2012). The personal can become interconnected when we go deep enough to touch that which includes our personal story, but goes beyond it at the same time.

When we talk about the shadow, we are talking about darkness. Whatever is hidden away from the light of day is in the shadow, and if left unaddressed, it will come forward in other ways (Neumann, 1990). We cannot separate the shadow from its dark nature. Therefore how I perceive the darkness deeply affects my willingness to engage the shadow within. To read more about this connection between shadow and darkness, click [here](#).

The Art of Mentoring

A mentor is an important part of sustaining a sense of the sacred, and the sacred is experienced when we are awake to who, and where we are. Jon Young, author of [The Coyote Guide and founder of Coyote Mentoring](#) says that mentors expose our edge, or in other words they lead us into shadow terrain or the inner places that we do not know. [In his video on mentoring](#) he says, “If I am unaware of something as an individual, it will be the mentor that calls me on that, and helps me to see that I have a blind spot” (Young, 2010). To have someone who has engaged in self study, and can hold a lantern further down the path, is crucial in learning how to develop new ways of being in the world.

Mentoring is a sacred and ancient art. In the Irish Celtic tradition the guide or teacher is called an anam cara, which means “soul friend,” and is an important part of learning how to live from the sacred sense within us. The soul friend is there to assist the student in seeking out “the Fire that will burn...most keenly” ([DeWaal, 1997](#)) by not just colluding with the student but challenging her as well. In the yogic tradition there is great reverence for one’s teacher, as written here in the sacred Indian text of the [Bhagavad Gita](#), “If you seek enlightenment from those who have realized the truth, prostrate before them, question them, and serve them. Only then are you open to receive their teachings of sacred knowledge”. In the Christian tradition, we see Jesus guiding his disciples regularly by living as an example of what was needed.

To have integrity as a mentor, the discipline of self-study is required. And not only is hard work essential, the inspiration or the artistic nature of mentoring must also be

acknowledged for transformative mentoring to take place. Celeste Snowber, scholar in the field of arts-based research writes, “The sculptor does not just place a preconceived image and sculpt it on the face of the marble, but sits with the marble long enough to know intimately its texture, form and shape. With precision, skill, artistry and intuition, the sculptor honors the marble’s innate qualities and allows the image to emerge and come to life from stone. The sculptor must honor the nature of the stone and have a certain respect for its intrinsic nature in order for the new form to be released. Both the mentor and artist draw on other aspects of human nature, which contribute to art-making, leadership or mentoring. The visual artist must look intently at form or the musician must listen acutely to sound, or the choreographer must feel the movement impulse. Mentoring and art-making involve an invitation to put aside preconceived agendas and see and discern how a piece of art is taking shape.” Snowber encourages us to see a person as a work of art, being present as the beauty of another emerges. To see another in this way, inspiration must be sought by the mentor.