



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Doing the impossible: finding meaning in the senseless

Clay Nelson © 17 March 2019

Friday morning, I had today's service and my talk all prepared. Friday evening, I had nothing to offer. The unthinkable, the unimaginable had happened. New Zealanders had been cast out of the Godzone with tears streaming down our face and our hearts broken. Our Muslim brothers and sisters lay dying and bloodied in a house of prayer. This couldn't happen here, yet graphic news stories and social media told us otherwise. It has shaken us to our core even more than the earthquakes that had come from previously unknown fault lines in Christchurch. As traumatic as those were, they were natural acts. This act of hatred had not previously happened here. We didn't think it could in spite of plenty of evidence that the deadly virus of white nationalism had become epidemic around the world. No house of prayer was safe if its worshippers were the marginalised or people of colour. Homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and racism has crawled out from the rocks they have been hiding under to be greeted as mainstream by right-wing political leaders and print and social media. But we thought we were better than that. We thought that was not who we are.

It is natural after such events to look at who is to blame? I confess I took some comfort when I learned the shooter was an Australian. But admit it, most of the world thinks Aussies and Kiwis are the same thing anyway. But if we go down the road to find someone to blame, we will curtail our own healing. We will be a danger to ourselves and others. We cannot hide behind a curtain of innocence. If there is someone or a group we see as "the other" who we fear or scapegoat or denigrate, even if only silently, we cannot claim innocence.

Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist, coined the phrase 'shadow'. He identified it as the stuff we don't like, the dark, unlit, and repressed side of ourselves, as well as the parts we don't look at—our entire unconscious. According to Jungian analyst Marie Louise von Franz, the shadow is simply a name, a way of visualizing or mythologizing that within ourselves which we cannot directly know.

American poet, author, and activist Robert Bly calls the stuff of our shadow a bag we drag behind us wherever we go. Our bags are heavy with the parts of ourselves that our parents and community or culture don't approve of, that they've taught us to hide. Our shadows include anger, impatience, self-sabotage, shame, violence, addiction, and many other qualities or characteristics our culture often names as negative. But shadows can also be more positive qualities we have been taught to hide, such as competitiveness or aggression in women, sensitivity in men, even unique self-expression or wanting to change the status quo. Everyone has a shadow of some kind.

Even if we try to deny the shadow, it still impacts our lives. Deepak Chopra, Marianne Williamson, the late Debbie Ford, and other spiritual wisdom teachers advise that until we face our light and dark sides, we will never be free of their hold over us. Williamson, co-author of the book, *The Shadow Effect*, with Chopra and Ford, writes:

“We’re often afraid of looking at our shadow because we want to avoid the shame or embarrassment that comes along with admitting mistakes. We feel that if we take a deep look at ourselves, we’ll be too exposed. But the thing we should actually fear is not looking at it, for our denial of the shadow is exactly what fuels it.”

The groundhog lives in a never-ending cycle of emerging from its den and if it sees its shadow, it quickly retreats. Like Bill Murray’s character in the movie ‘Groundhog Day’, it wasn’t until he recognized and faced his shadowy narcissistic dismissal of others and changed his interactions with them could he become free to love, be loved, and realize his full potential. The movie symbolized this blossoming by his becoming a concert-quality pianist, among other accomplishments.

A good short book on the topic is James Hollis “Why Good People Do Bad Things: Understanding Our Darker Selves.” For now, I’ll share with you just a few of the five questions Hollis suggests as fruitful starting points for shadow work:

“Can you imagine the opposite of your virtues?” Can you see the ways that your *strengths*—those things you do well and easily — are also often a clue to your *weaknesses*? To give one common example, the virtue of selflessly caring for others can have a shadow of neglecting one’s self, which can cause resentment or burnout. Conversely, someone with boundaries that are too rigid might be great at self-care, but have a shadow of not connecting well with others. Becoming more aware of your shadow is an invitation for more balance.

“What are the key patterns of your relationships?” — especially avoidance, aggression, or repetition? How have these played out again and again in your relationships with your parents, siblings, significant others, children, and coworkers?

“What *annoys* you the most about your partner, or others in general?” Why that trait in particular? What’s underneath that consistent annoyance? What’s the shadow? What does it remind you of?

“Where do you repeatedly undermine yourself, create harmful replications, produce the same old, same old? Where do you flee from your best, riskiest self?” Unless we become incrementally more conscious of the parts of ourselves that are currently unconscious, the default tends to be unconsciously replicating the same patterns we have been repeating for decades.

“Where do your parents still govern your life — through repetition or overcompensation?” What messages from your childhood have you unconsciously internalized, but never fully interrogated as to whether they are still serving you today?

These questions are not easy, but if you are feeling dissatisfied or “stuck” in your life — or if someone close to you is feeling dissatisfied or “stuck” with your life — shadow work can be a powerful source of insight and liberation.

The shadow — the unconscious — manifests itself not only in our individual lives, but also at the institutional and cultural level. For instance, in the US we are seeing the shadow of American Exceptionalism proclaim itself as the “greatest country in the world.” The rest of the world can only roll their eyes knowing all the ways the US lags behind other countries. Likewise, we Unitarians have our own version of exceptionalism in which we can be tempted

to think that we have everything figured out. That exceptionalism can have a shadow that makes it difficult for us to partner with other groups.

Relatedly, technological progress has helped us feed increasing numbers of people, cure increasing numbers of diseases, and connect us globally in astounding ways. Among the many corresponding shadows of technological progress are climate change, and the ways that our technology is often made affordable through exploitative labor practices in the third world.

The more I explore shadow work, the more I am suspicious of quick fixes, easy promises, and simplistic certainty — because all such approaches tend to willfully deny (or be oblivious to) the shadow side. Instead, I think James Hollis is on the right track that, “the psychological and spiritual maturity of an individual, of a group, even of a nation, is found precisely in its capacity to tolerate ambiguity and ambivalence, and the anxiety generated by both of them”.

May we do the hard work that such senseless acts become a thing of the past.

As-Salaam-Alaikum
Peace be with you.