



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Facing our Shadows”

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Centering Thoughts

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

The very things we wish to avoid, reject and flee from turn out to be the ‘prima material’ from which all real growth comes. Andrew Harvey

We all have a shadow that is part of our total reality. Our shadow is here to point out where we are incomplete. It is here to teach us love, compassion, and forgiveness, not just for others but also for ourselves. Debbie Ford

Sermon

Thank you, band members, for leading one of Pete Seeger’s most memorable songs and for stepping in at the last minute after we cancelled choir practice because of the icy road conditions. I have to think the Universe or God sent the storm just to make it easy for us to include more of Seeger’s songs in our service.

In an interview on Beliefnet’s website, Seeger claimed he joined a Unitarian Church early on because they gave him a place to rehearse. He felt bad about this motive, but he liked the church and he stuck with us. My path crossed his sometime in the late 50s or very early 60s when we both attended Unitarian family-camp weekends in New York. I fondly remember him leading evening sing-alongs while kids like me sat at his feet near a blazing fire. Seeger last appeared at a General Assembly in 2005, though he attended services at the UU Community Church in Manhattan more recently.

I thought today’s subject, our shadows, could easily include a mention of Seeger, but just about any subject could have worked. Seeger spoke and sang out for environmentalism, human rights, love, peace, freedom, and other topics we regularly focus on. By naming many of society’s ills, demanding we learn from our mistakes, and encouraging us to act differently, Seeger exhorted us to face America’s shadow, and he offered a way to turn that shadow into light.

We might not all agree with the particular societal ills or shadows he named, but I hope we agree with the principles which called him to name them. He wanted people to be treated with worth and dignity in the workplace, in the voting booth, and at the lunch counter. He wanted the land, air, and water to be cared for because he recognized our spiritual and practical dependence on clean land, air, and water. He wanted diplomacy to secure world peace, not violence and war. He wanted American hubris and power to be acknowledged and stripped away, thus allowing everyone to sit equally at the table. It is right that we mourn his passing because he was a prophet who sang of all our hopes for greater peace and love. His songs *were* hammers of justice and bells of freedom that blessed our nation and the world. I believe his life modeled what it means to fully live our UU principles.

The shadows Seeger named for America and for us refer to all the characteristics and actions we would like to pretend don't exist or didn't occur, the things we'd like to forget. Carl Gustav 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. (From Robert Bly's, *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*, p2.)

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.

Williamson echoes this. She writes:

One day I looked at something in myself that I had been avoiding because it was too painful. Yet once I did, I had an unexpected surprise. Rather than self-hatred, I was flooded with compassion for myself because I realized the pain was necessary [if I was] to develop [a] coping mechanism.

As Williamson learned, if we can cope with small pains or problems, we gain the skills to cope with larger problems. Although we never wish to have problems, we know life offers them, like it or not. So we need to learn how to cope. Personally, after facing breast cancer and chemotherapy ten years ago, I feel confident I can handle any other disease that comes my way.

That's not say I faced my disease and treatment without fear. I didn't know what my end might be—I still don't, nor do you know your end. But in the middle of my treatment, I didn't need to pretend my fear, or my shadow, didn't exist. I was grateful for the support I received from my UU community. My fear was a gift that helped me become more compassionate with others facing similar circumstances. We spend much of our lives running from shadows when we should accept them for the promises, or lessons, they hold for us.

Similarly, when we get angry and ask someone to forgive us, we're more likely to forgive them when they get angry. We recognize how easy it is to get angry. We don't need to be ashamed of this feeling or pretend it doesn't exist. Anger, frustration, jealousy, all these traditionally negative feelings are very human feelings. We don't need to hide them in a bag or run from this shadow. We need to own them, face them, and diffuse them by forgiving ourselves and by aiming to get less angry, for example, once we accept we aren't perfect.

I'm not here to give you a quick psychotherapy session for which I'm not expert or licensed. But as a spiritual and religious teacher I recognize the intersection of our shadow side, as Jung describes, with religious teaching. Some religions contribute to creating shadows while others acknowledge human behavior less judgmentally. I believe Unitarian Universalism's First Principle places us in this second group, even though Unitarian Universalism has some of its own shadows—guilt and shame typically aren't among them.

Christianity and Islam are more shame-oriented than Judaism, but all three Abrahamic traditions contribute to creating shadows. The Bible begins with a story that warns us to be perfect or we will be turned out of Paradise as Adam and Eve were. But being perfect means denying our human nature. Adam and Eve sinned by disobeying God and eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge, symbolic of all our desires. Indulging in the Seven Deadly Sins, which include greed, lust, sloth, gluttony, wrath, pride, and envy, becomes a recipe for shadow-making. The Ten Commandments inform us how to please God and stay in covenant with God. To lie, cheat, or steal is to risk right relations with God. We cast long shadows with all the hidden stuff we're not supposed to feel or want to do.

These Biblical stories and commandments have value, they teach how to live in right

relationship with God and other people. But when shame and threats of expulsion or excommunication are included, it's not healthy or helpful in my view.

For who hasn't thought about or committed some traditional sins? What were the Puritans thinking when they outlawed singing, dancing, holiday celebrations, and other joys for being sinful when these are life-affirming behaviors? Why is it closer to godliness to keep a clean house? Goodness knows my house is not near and dear to any god's heart.

Taoism and Hinduism are examples of religions with much more accepting views of human fallibility. The yin-yang symbol divides a circle into equal halves, one black, one white. Each side contains a little bit of its opposite color. No person is totally good, no person is totally bad. The two divisions represent neutral opposites like male and female.

After he read my blurb for this service, our own Steve Johnson sent me this quote by Lao Tzu, from the *Tao Te Ching* which expresses something about the shadow:

A great nation is like a great man:
When he makes a mistake, he realizes it.
Having realized it, he admits it.
Having admitted it, he corrects it.
He considers those who point out his faults
as his most benevolent teachers.
He thinks of his enemy
as the shadow that he himself casts.

Jung wasn't so original after all. And like Lao Tzu, Seeger knew nations and people have shadows. Lao Tzu expresses no shame over the shadow. He considers the shadow his teacher. And when he looks at others and sees their shadows, he recognizes that probably what he sees in them is a reflection of his own shadow. Similarly, I know what I hate most about my sister (don't tell her) is her stubbornness and sense that she's always right. Paul tells me I am "frequently wrong, but never in doubt," proof that I share this shadow with my sister. Next time you receive criticism, consider whether it says more about that person and their shadow than it does about you and yours.

Our Unitarian Universalist first principle says we are human, worthy of love, even when we are mean, angry, or selfish. It doesn't forgive us for these less loving behaviors, but it acknowledges that they are part of being human. And part of being spiritual and religious is seeing them and overcoming them, not repressing them or denying them.

Accepting our dark, shadow side doesn't mean we are free to transgress anytime we wish, it doesn't relieve us of the need to apologize when we're less than perfect. It does mean we accept our imperfections, learn from them, then we let go of them, not hide them. Let's cut ourselves some slack!

Every day I encourage you to live your lives more in alignment with your values. To be better than you are today. But you won't be better if you deny or repress the times you show your all too human side. Robert A. Johnson in his book, *Owning Your Own Shadow* [page ix – x], says, “To honor and accept one’s own shadow is a profound spiritual discipline. It is whole-making and thus holy and the most important experience of a lifetime.”

May we do this important holy and spiritual work together. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. When do you feel your ‘shadow’ looming in unhealthy ways? When do you most fear or turn away from what might be described as your undesirable personality traits?
2. Reflect on or share a time you might have explored, embraced, or learned from your shadow side. Or, reflect on what held you back from this discernment.
3. How might you turn the positive energy of facing shadows into positive action?