

# SHADOW WORK

Getting to Know Your "Darker" Half



**scott jeffrey**

# Introduction

It's always standing right behind us, just out of view. In any direct light, we cast a shadow.

The shadow is a psychological term for everything we can't see in ourselves.

Most of us go to great lengths to protect our self-image from anything unflattering or unfamiliar. And so, it's easier to observe another's shadow before acknowledging one's own shadow.

I came to understand how important knowing my shadow was when I wrote a biography of a spiritual teacher. Seeing the shadow of this teacher helped me understand how someone can show gifts in one area of life while remaining unaware of poor behavior in other areas.

*Every* human being is susceptible to this.

I find working with my shadow a rewarding, yet challenging process. Exploring your shadow can lead to greater authenticity, creativity, energy, and consciousness. This reflective process is essential for reaching mature adulthood (which is rarer than most realize).

Let's start by inspecting what the shadow is and how it comes into being.

*How can I be substantial if I  
do not cast a shadow?*

*I must have a dark side if I  
am to be whole.*

**Carl Jung**

# What is the Shadow?

The shadow is the "dark side" of our personality because it consists chiefly of primitive, negative human emotions and impulses like rage, envy, greed, selfishness, desire, and the striving for power.

However, we cut ourselves off from many of our best qualities too. (I cover the "positive shadow" in a separate guide on [psychological projection](#).)

Everything we deny in ourselves—whatever we perceive as inferior, evil, or unacceptable—becomes part of the shadow. Everything incompatible with our *chosen conscious attitude about ourselves* resides in this dark side.

The personal shadow is the *disowned self*. It represents the parts of us we no longer claim to be our own, including inherent positive qualities. These unexamined or disowned parts of our personality hide within us.

Although we deny them in our attempt to cast them out, we can't get rid of them. *We repress these* qualities; they are part of our unconscious. Think of the unconscious as everything we are not conscious of within us.

We can't eliminate the shadow. It stays with us as our dark brother or sister. Trouble arises when we fail to see our shadow. For then, to be sure, it is standing right behind us.

# How the Shadow is Born

Every young child knows kindness, love, and generosity, but children also quickly learn anger, selfishness, and greed.

These emotions are part of our shared experience. But as we grow up, something happens. Traits associated with "being good" are accepted, while others associated with "being bad" are rejected.

We all have [basic human needs](#), including physiological needs, safety and security needs, and needs for belonging.

As children, when we expressed certain parts of ourselves, we received negative cues from our environment. Maybe we got angry and threw a tantrum.

Our parents reprimanded our outburst and sent us to our room. Or perhaps we acted boldly, playfully, spontaneously, or silly in our first-grade classroom. Our teacher shamed us for our poor behavior in front of the class and told us to sit down.

Whenever it happened—and it might have happened often—it threatened one of our basic needs.

- Would the disapproval of our parents threaten our safety?
- Would the disapproval of our teachers and classmates jeopardize our need to belong?

We adjusted our behavior to gratify our needs and learned to adapt to the external world.

And through this adaption, all the unaccepted or discouraged parts of us in the first 20 years of our lives are bundled together, swept out of view (outside our conscious awareness).

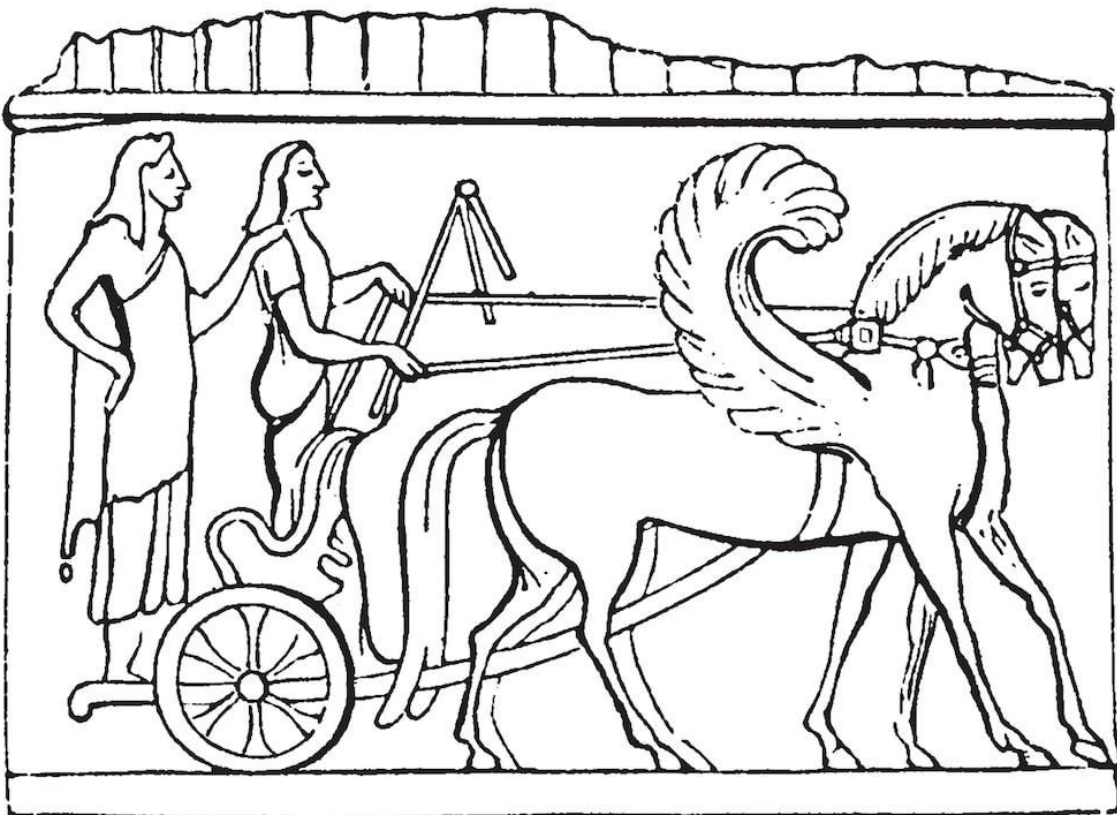
As poet Robert Bly says in [A Little Book of the Human Shadow](#), the child puts all of these unwanted parts into an invisible bag and drags it behind him.

This repression of unwanted parts creates what psychologist Carl Jung called the *personal shadow*.

# Why You Should Get to Know Your Shadow

The ancient Greeks understood the need to honor all of the parts of the psyche. The Greeks worshiped these archetypes as autonomous gods and goddesses.

The Greeks knew a god or goddess you ignored became the one who turned against you and destroyed you. *Any part we disown within us turns against us.* The personal shadow represents a collection of these disowned parts.



So here's the problem: The shadow can operate on its own without us knowing what's happening.

It's as if our conscious self goes on autopilot while the unconscious assumes control.<sup>1</sup> The result?

- We do things we wouldn't voluntarily do and later regret.
- We say things we wouldn't usually say.
- Our facial reactions express emotions we don't consciously feel.
- We psychically transmit negative energy to others close to us.

Remaining unconscious of the shadow hurts our relationships with our spouses, family, and friends. And it impacts our professional relationships as well as our self-leadership abilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Bargh, J. A., & Morsella, E. (2008). The Unconscious Mind. *Perspectives on psychological science: a journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, 3(1), 73–79.  
doi:10.1111/j.1745-6916.2008.00064.x



# The Shadow in Storytelling

Do you remember Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*?

Dr. Jekyll was a respectable gentleman (the "good," conscious side of the personality) who took a potion to separate his darker impulses to create a creature free of conscience named Mr. Hyde (the personal shadow).

Dr. Jekyll could not control the actions of his darker half, leading him to commit unscrupulous acts, including murder. Such is the fate, although usually not so severe, of anyone who denies his or her shadow.

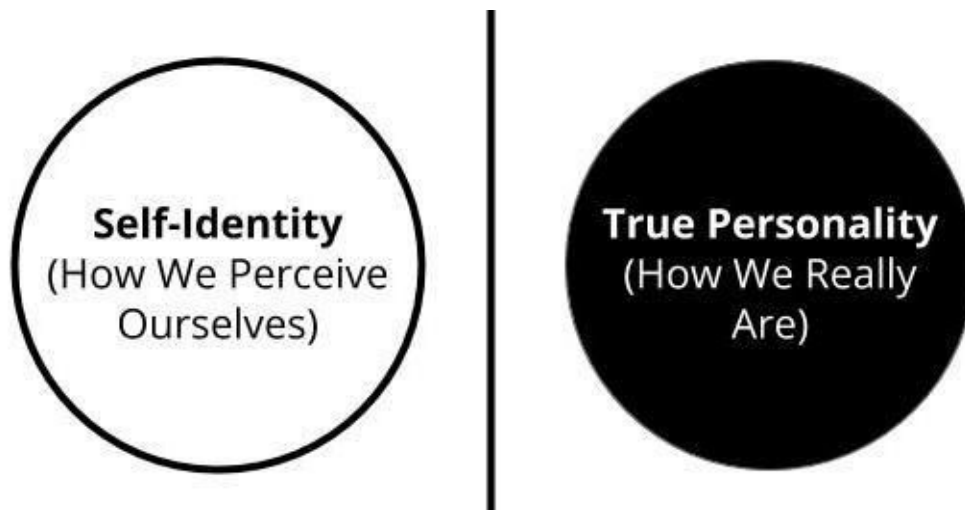


*Looney Tunes did their version of this classic tale in [Bugs Bunny in Hyde and Hare](#).*

# What Happens When You Repress Your Shadow

So what happens to all the parts of ourselves that we sweep out of view? Whatever qualities we deny in ourselves, we see in others. In psychological terms, this is called [projection](#). *We project onto others anything we bury within us.*

If, for example, you get irritated when someone is rude to you, it's a good bet you haven't owned your rudeness. This person may be rude; however, if rudeness and disrespect weren't in your shadow, someone else's rudeness wouldn't bother you so much. This process doesn't happen consciously. We aren't aware of our projections. Our egos use this mechanism to defend itself—to *protect our self-image and self-identity.*



Our false identities of being “good” keep us from connecting to our shadow. These psychological projections distort reality, creating a thick boundary between *how we view ourselves* and *how we behave*.

*Knowing your own  
darkness is the best method  
for dealing with the  
darknesses of other people.*

**Carl Jung**

# Seven Benefits of Shadow Work

The shadow isn't a popular topic. Who enjoys owning their flaws, weaknesses, selfishness, nastiness, envy, hate, and so on?

Focusing on our strengths is more enjoyable and feels more life-affirming.

But we can only run from our shadows for so long. Over time, all of the ego's tricks—repression, denial, suppression, escape—become less effective. What we've been hiding from begins to bubble to the surface.

Exploring the shadow gives us tremendous opportunities for growth and development. Let's look at seven benefits that result from shadow work:

## **1 Improve your relationships (less personal conflict)**

As you integrate your shadow and come to terms with your darker half, you see yourself more clearly. You become more grounded, even more human.

When you can accept your own darker parts, it is easier to accept the shadow in others. As a result, other people's behavior and attitudes won't trigger you as easily.

You'll also have an easier time communicating with others. You may notice an improvement in your relationships with your spouse, family members, friends, and business associates.

## **2 Increase your confidence (the authentic way)**

The personal development movement has conditioned us to look for external strategies for improving our confidence. Some of these strategies are effective, at least in the short term.

For example, do a Tony Robbins'-style "power move" before giving a presentation to a group, and you might subdue your fear of speaking. It can work, temporarily. But ultimately, if you're coming no closer to understanding the source of your anxiety, there's no internal change in your consciousness. That is, there's no authentic development occurring.

Lasting change occurs when you get to the root of this fear, accept it, and integrate it into your conscious personality. And this happens in the course of getting to know and integrating your shadow.

## **3 Develop self-knowledge**

In seeing others and yourself as you are, you'll have a cleaner lens with which to understand yourself (and others).

As you integrate your shadow, you're approaching your authentic self, which gives you a more realistic assessment of who you are. You won't perceive yourself as being too big (inflated) or too small (deflated). Judging others signifies inflation; self-doubt is a form of deflation.

With increased self-awareness, you can assess your environment more accurately. You'll see others and evaluate situations with greater clarity, compassion, and understanding due to your growing self-knowledge.

## **4 Enhance your physical and mental energy**

Dragging around this invisible bag of stuff behind us is draining. It is exhausting work to continually repress and suppress all of the parts of ourselves that we don't want to face in our adulthood.

Fatigue and lethargy plague the unexamined life. Mental suppression can also lead to physical pain and disease. [Dr. John Sarno](#) healed many thousands of patients of chronic back pain by helping them acknowledge the repressed rage in their unconscious.

In working with your shadow, you liberate a vast reservoir of energy you were unconsciously investing in protecting your self-image. This freed energy can improve your physical, mental, and emotional health. It can bring you inner strength and a greater sense of balance, making you better equipped to take on life's challenges.

## **5 Move towards psychological integration (wholeness)**

As long as we deny our shadows and repress certain parts of ourselves, a sense of wholeness and unity is elusive.

How can we feel a sense of wholeness and balance with a divided mind?

Integrating the shadow brings you one step closer to realizing a sense of wholeness. It's a critical step to achieving mature adulthood. An absence of this understanding helps explain why less than 2% of adults realize mature adulthood, according to developmental psychology.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cook-Greuter, S. (2013). Ego Development: Nine levels of increasing embrace. [Retrieved here](#).

## 6 Elevate your creativity

One of the most significant benefits of integrating your shadow is that it unlocks more of your creative potential.

Creativeness, as humanistic psychologists like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers found, is a natural occurrence in mentally healthy (integrated) individuals.

Jung also found that individuals began to engage in various forms of creative self-expression as they progressed along their [paths of individuation](#).

## 7 Dissolve internal resistance to change

How many of our destructive habits are a result of remaining unconscious to our shadow?

Resistance is a term we use to describe internal tension. Internal tension means that our conscious mind is at odds with various parts within our unconscious.

The purpose of shadow work is to help bring these hidden parts to consciousness. And as we integrate these parts, these internal tensions begin to dissolve on their own.

# Five Tips for Engaging Your Shadow

Here are seven things that will make it easier for you to approach shadow work:

## 1 Cultivate Self-Awareness

Seeing the shadow requires us to cultivate a self-reflective mindset—the ability to stop and observe our behaviors, thoughts, and feelings.

Mindfulness meditation practices help us foster nonjudgmental awareness—the ability to stay aware of the present moment without involving the inner critic or other modes of judgment. But, meditation itself isn't enough. Most meditators return to their “normal” state after they meditate.

Self-awareness and self-reflection are a precursor to shadow work because they help us observe and evaluate feelings and emotional reactions without judgment or criticism.

It's for this reason that I emphasize the importance of “finding your Center” in my Shadow Training course.

When you're in the Center, there's less resistance to seeing your shadow because your ego isn't in charge.



## 2 Cultivate Unwavering Self-Honesty

"Practicing self-honesty" is easier said than done. Early life experience conditions us for self-deception. However, self-honesty and integrity are prerequisites for working with the shadow.

It's easy to give lip service to these qualities, but actual self-honesty means being willing to see unpleasant attributes in our behavior and personality that conflict with how we perceive ourselves.

It is usually uncomfortable to come to terms with your disowned parts, which is why the ego invests so much energy in repressing them. Seeing and accepting your insecure selfishness and tyrannical parts, for example, can be challenging—especially if you perceive yourself as a "good person."

Many of us grew up during the self-esteem movement that began in the 1970s. We were praised by our parents and teachers even when there was no merit for this praise. This praising created a false sense of worth (inflation) that masks deeply-rooted insecurity (deflation).

Now, to take an honest look at your attitudes, behaviors, dark thoughts, and emotions requires courage. The rewards are worth the discomfort, as these honest confrontations with your shadow help reduce the splits in your mind. This courageous act unlocks more of your creative potential, opening a new world of possibilities for your internal growth.

### 3 Cultivate Self-Compassion

Before you get to know your shadow, it is helpful to cultivate a sense of friendliness with one's self. In Buddhism, it's called [Maitri](#). Without friendliness and self-compassion, it is difficult to look at our darker stuff.

If you always try to be a good person and strive for perfection, or if you're hard on yourself when you make mistakes, it is challenging to confront your shadow.

If you're accustomed to feeling shame or guilt, you need to [transmute these emotions](#) with friendliness, self-acceptance, and self-compassion.

Conversely, if you think too highly of yourself—a sign of ego inflation—then you'll likely drop down (to deflation) before seeing yourself accurately. Here also, self-compassion is helpful.

Start by accepting your humanness: "to err is human." Remember that we all have a shadow, so there's nothing wrong with facing it. When we ignore the shadow, it owns us, and real problems arise.

I find it helpful to connect to my heart during this process. You can try this:

1. Place your attention on your heart.
2. Breathe in and acknowledge your heart.
3. Breathe out and say to your heart, "Thank you."

It's a simple Buddhist practice offered by [Thich Nhat Hanh](#).

## 4 Reclaim your projections, again and again

Because we repress what we disown within us, we invariably project them onto other people, objects, and the environment.

The fundamental process of shadow work comes down to [owning your projections](#) (traditionally called “recollecting your projections”).

The first step in recollecting your projections is to become conscious of the fact that you’re in a constant state of projecting.

Generally speaking, we are experiencing reality through our projections.

That is, based on experiences from the past and things we’ve seen in films and television, we *project out* images from our mind onto other people and situations. In this way, we are each living our own independent film.

Only by continually collecting these projecting back into us can we begin perceiving reality more clearly.

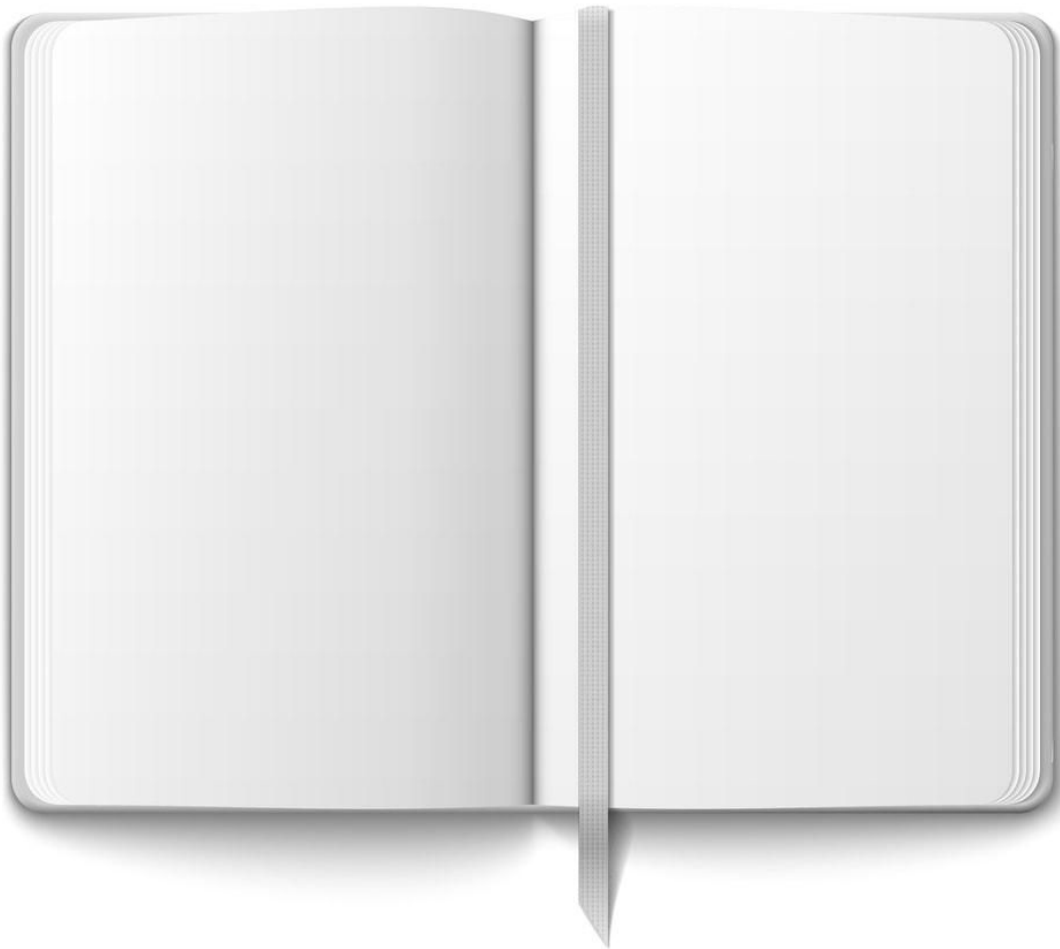
When someone evokes an emotional charge in you, it’s a sign that you’re projecting a disowned quality from your shadow onto this individual. Taking back these projections is an essential step in shadow work.

## 5 Record Your Discoveries

I find it fascinating how some of our disowned parts want to remain out of our awareness.

Similar to how a dream slips out of mind moments after awakening, our disowned parts can elude us—*even after we catch them.*

A writing journal where you record your discoveries about yourself is a remedy. Just be sure to review your insights and findings later on to help encode them into your awareness.



*When you find out that  
there was never anything in  
the dark side to be afraid of  
... Nothing is left but to love.*

**Alan Watts**

# How to Get Started

## **STEP 1: Identify an Aspect of Your Shadow**

Remember that the shadow is elusive; it hides behind us. We each have hosts of defense mechanisms designed to keep our shadows repressed and out of view.

Shining the light of consciousness on the shadow takes a little effort and regular practice. The more you pay attention to your behavior and attitudes, the better chance you have of catching your shadow in the act.

One of the best ways to identify your shadow is to pay attention to your emotional reactions toward other people. Sure, your colleagues might be aggressive, arrogant, inconsiderate, or impatient, but if you don't have those same qualities within you, you won't have a strong reaction to their behavior or the conditions in their personality.

Whatever bothers you in another is likely a disowned part within yourself. Get to know that part, accept it, make it a part of you, and next time, it may not evoke a strong emotional charge when you observe it in another.

So in Step 1, think of somebody you know (partner, friend, relative, boss) and select something about them that irritates you. (You probably already have it top of mind.)

Perhaps you perceive one of your friends as laziness, arrogant, envious, or stupid.

## **STEP 2: See that Attribute or Behavior Within You**

When doing shadow work, it's helpful to remember that what's in one of us, is in all of us.

Sure, not everyone expresses every behavioral attribute *all the time*. But every quality—the good, the bad, and the ugly—is in all of us, waiting for the *right conditions to trigger them*.

So the next step is to bring that quality you see in another (from Step 1) back into you.

For example, let's say you're judging your friend for being lazy. He sits around all day, doesn't want to work, disregards his physical health, and so on.

Was there a time in your life when you were lazy? Maybe things weren't going your way, and you started to lose hope or give up? If not, go back further into childhood. Were you proactive then? Or did you want to sit on the couch and watch TV whenever you could?

Laziness resides in all of us. We all have a part who wants to do nothing, who only wants to experience fleeting pleasures.

Someone else's laziness wouldn't bother you unless you're repressing your laziness. Once you see the laziness within, you'll have less frustration with your friend.

### STEP 3: Engage in Inner Dialogue

Many forms of inner work call you to engage in an active dialogue with various parts of yourself.

At first, this might seem like a scary idea since we have a belief that only “crazy people” talk to themselves. The reality is, however, that we all have many [subpersonalities](#)—numerous unrecognized, autonomous parts in our mind.

Various integrative therapies offer ways of working with these disparate parts, including:

- Jung’s [Active Imagination](#)
- Schwartz’s [Internal Family Systems](#)
- Stone and Winkleman’s [Voice Dialogue](#)
- Assagioli’s [Psychosynthesis](#)

The parts within us that we don’t know are aspects of our shadow. When we don’t pay attention to these parts, they have a way of influencing our behavior.

Have you ever done or said something and then wondered why you did or said it? An archetype or *part* in you was taking charge. Every so-called “accident” is an archetype hijacking your behavior.

Who hasn’t experienced self-sabotage?

Our disowned parts aren’t trying to hurt us, but when we ignore or deny them, they often do.



By dialoguing with these various parts in our imagination or a journal, we can integrate them into our conscious mind. Then, they become our allies instead of our enemies.

So, here, talk to that part of you that you acknowledged in Step 2. For example, get to know that lazy part. See what it wants from you, what it likes, and how it feels about how you live your life.

A few key questions are:

- Who are you?
- What's important to you
- What do you want from me?
- What are you trying to show me?

Be patient and open to what this part has to say.

## **STEP 4: Bring the Disowned Quality Back Into You**

Finally, *become* this quality or attribute. In the case of laziness, see yourself as a person that's sometimes lazy.

Remember, no single quality defines you. The error we make by repressing our shadow is that we deny that many of these qualities exist within us. That's why we project them onto others, get irritated, and judge them.

Like with Step 3, owning a "darker" part of you may feel uncomfortable as you're acknowledging something inconsistent with your self-identity. As such, your ego will naturally resist it.

You can make statements to yourself or say out loud, for example:

- I am lazy.
- I am arrogant.
- I am stupid.
- I am jealous.
- I am dull.
- I am clever.
- I am witty.

The last two examples are positive attributes as the shadow can reveal positive repressed qualities we project on others as well.

Experience the part of you expresses these traits as fully as possible. Avoid making the process abstract or conceptual: *just BE it*. Now you can re-own and integrate this quality in yourself.

# Facing Your Own Shadow

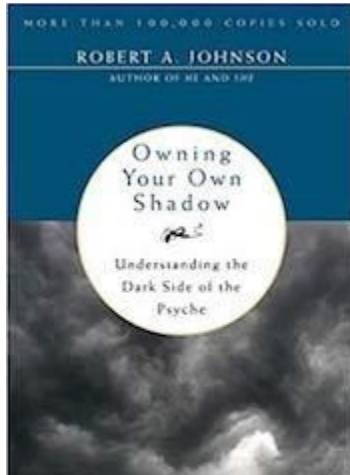
American philosopher Alan Watts possessed a unique gift for translating complex psychological and philosophical ideas into beautiful, practical, and concise poses.

[Click here for Watt's discourse on facing your shadow.](#) (It's worth the 15 minutes.)



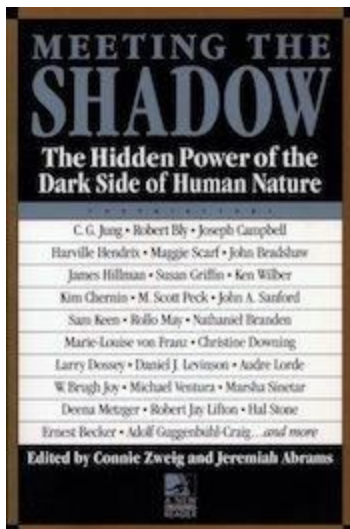
## Further Reading

Here are my favorites about the shadow:



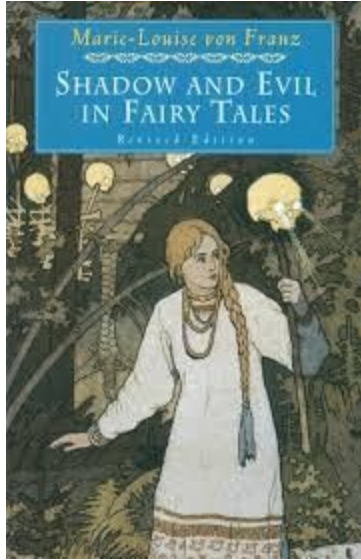
**[Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche](#)** by Robert Johnson

The first book I recommend to anyone interested in learning about the shadow is by Robert Johnson. Johnson has a gift for communicating difficult concepts for us lay readers.



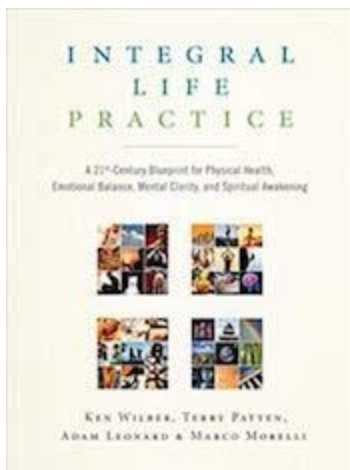
**[Meet Your Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature](#)** edited by Connie Zweig & Jeremiah Abrams

A collection of essays and excerpts from a wide range of writers, psychologists, philosophers, and poets explores and exposes the shadow. It opens your mind to the diverse ways the shadow influences our lives.



**[Shadow and Evil in Fairy Tales](#)** by Marie-Louise von Franz

Marie-Louise von Franz was Jung's closest and top students. An accomplished analyst herself, von Franz focused her attention on exploring the psyche through myths and fairy tales. *Shadow and Evil in Fairy Tales* provides an enlightening inside look at the shadow. (I recommend all of her work to those interested in this topic and understanding the psyche.)



**[Integral Life Practice](#)** by Ken Wilber, et al.

*Integral Life Practice* has an excellent chapter on the shadow with practical exercises to help you work with your shadow. Wilber also crafted an excellent description of the shadow in one of his earlier works, *No Boundary*. You can [read this description here](#).

## Read More Psychology Guides

[Jung's Individuation Process: A Map for Psychic Wholeness](#)

[Psychological Projection: Reclaim the Best Parts of Yourself](#)

[A Beginner's Guide to Working with Archetypes](#)

## About the Author

For over two decades, Scott Jeffrey has been [helping high-performing entrepreneurs](#), CEOs, best-selling authors, and thought leaders access their superhuman potential.

He accomplishes this by integrating principles, insights, and methods from [Jungian psychology](#), Taoist philosophy, [humanistic psychology](#), [qigong](#), alchemy, transpersonal studies, [emotional intelligence training](#), and other modalities to help leaders scale their businesses without burning out.

Past clients include Kohl's Department Stores, Scheels, LA Lakers, Turner Classic Movies, The Life is good Company, and dozens of successful entrepreneurs.

Scott's the founder of CEO sage, a self-leadership training and development platform. His true passion is writing, connecting ideas, and sharing knowledge. Scott has authored numerous books including *Creativity Revealed: Discovering the Source of Inspiration*, published over 65 [in-depth guides](#) as well as over 100 articles on personal, psychological, professional, and organizational development.

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