Living an Ethical Life and the Shadow

By Christina Becker, Jungian Analyst

What does it take to live an ethical life? Is it worth doing? What are its components? If you asked people on the street, you would probably get as many answers as the people asked. One person might say to live ethically is to be a good person, another might say it is to be generous, compassionate, to honour one's mother and father, and someone else might say it is being environmentally conscious, to be involved in social activism. When you come to the essence of the conversation, you conclude that all ethics and morality are relative and reflect a particular context. We are then left with a moral relativism that argues that there is no universal standard by which to measure human behaviour.

At the same time, ethics dominate media headlines – more drastically, it is ethical breaches and lapses that have been the focus of our attention. They are a hot topic and as a society we are bombarded daily with the apparent lack of morality and of sound ethical judgement in public and corporate life. We are left with a conundrum. Our outrage at the abuse of power and public trust is indicative of our true feelings about this behaviour and that something is lacking in the values of the individuals involved. Yet the current paradigm of a moral relativism does not guide us or provide direction in what is right or wrong.

However, is there another perspective at which to look at living an ethical life? In this view, we might agree that there is a universal or archetypal standard by which we can assess ethical behaviour. It might also be possible to embrace a psychological perspective.

Margaret Somerville, the controversial Director of the Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law at McGill University, came to the same conclusion as Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist, did at the turn of the last century, in her recent Massey Lectures entitled "The Ethical Imagination: Journeys of the Human Spirit" She suggests that at the core of a universal idea of morality and ethics is the right of every person to become fully themselves. Jung's concept for this was Individuation. In my book "The Heart of the Matter: Individuation as an Ethical Process" (Chiron Publications 2004) I explore how the process of individuation and the confrontation with the unconscious is fundamentally an ethical endeavour.

What do we mean by individuation and is it different from individualism? Jung believed that individuation was a process of differentiation and self-realization by which everyone finds her uniqueness and becomes the person that she was meant to be. The ultimate goals are wholeness, integration and to live our destiny in the world. Living such a life involves living a life of meaning, of value and of being closely in touch with ourselves. Individuation is not the same as individualism. Individualists promote the unrestricted exercise of individual goals and desires. Ego desires and intentions are paramount and any external interference to the individual is opposed. Individuation, on the other hand, demands

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that our conscious selves acknowledge we are not the main mover of our life. On the contrary, we are subject to the larger movement of the psyche that may or may not support our conscious or ego intentions.

A lot is at stake if we do not live an ethical life. Our relationships become complicated and dysfunctional. We threaten existence on the planet with our neglect. Our corporate structures crumble.

In spite of all the benefits, it is not an easy path. Walking it requires integrity and courage to meet the resulting challenges. The individuation journey invariably confronts ego's ideals and perceptions by the larger totality of the psyche and by the darker impulses that live there. In this path, we must face and take responsibility for the shadow in ourselves, in our organizations, and in our society.

Coining the word "shadow" has been one of Jung's significant contributions to modern psychology. Yet, Freud was the first one to recognize that there are psychic contents operating outside of our awareness. We know the idiom "Freudian slip" – the slip of the tongue, forgetfulness or an action that appears against our will. Poet and writer Robert Bly uses the image of the big black bag. In this black bag we throw everything that has wounded us or embarrassed us and we carry around behind us.

Jung's definition of the shadow is "the thing that we do not wish to be". The shadow reflects all that is in us and that we refuse to acknowledge and deny out of shame, guilt or embarrassment. We commonly think of the shadow as evil. It is only evil to our sense of self that has evolved through the adaptation to parents and societal expectations. Therefore, the shadow could contain positive attributes and talents as well as negative ones.

Another way to look at this is through the concept of energy. The psyche consists of energy and as we know from physics that energy cannot be destroyed. In order to deal with undesirable or threatening energy, it is necessary to repress it or to push it underground. However, such an act only forces the energy to re-emerge in an unexpected inconvenient or uncomfortable way. Shadow energy then becomes covert and thrives nicely unseen by the light of day only to disrupt our lives. The autonomous acts that surface from the possession by the shadow run contrary to our stated intentions and test our ethical approach to life.

We all know the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Dr Jekyll is an upstanding Victorian doctor by day and by night, his alter ego is the demonic monstrous Mr, Hyde. Modern examples of the shadow are seen everywhere. A young man is unable to deal with his sexuality decides to become a priest and take a vow of celibacy. Later in his life, he is unable to contain his sexual urges and abuses young boys. He feels deeply ashamed every time he does it and vows never to do it again, only to repeat these acts over and over again. Under the influence of alcohol, a woman is a different person and becomes overly aggressive and enraged with the people closest to her. When she is sober, she recoils at her own behaviour so ashamed that she declares she will never to do again until the next drink.

So how do we find out what our shadow is? Shadow energy reflects all that we cannot face in ourselves. Our defence mechanisms of denial and suppression will ensure that the shadow remains covert. We can know this by the associated embarrassment that we often feel after our shadow has hijacked us. There are however a number of things that we can do if we are up to the challenge.

Solicit feedback from others: In asking others, we open ourselves up to hearing what others see that we do not see ourselves. These are our blind spots.

Examine our projections: Jung wrote that what we do not make conscious will come to us in the form of fate in the outer world. Projection is a natural way for the psyche to get to know itself. Who do we admire? Who do we hate? These questions will lead us to the shadow's hiding place.

Examine our slips of the tongue: Our shadow can often hijack our words and we say things that we did not consciously intend. We are left wondering why we said what we did? If we examine what we have said that embarrassed us, we often find that there is an element of truth.

Work with our dreams: The psyche will often present figures in a dream of the same gender. This figure could be a long lost childhood friend, or someone who we have a strong emotional reaction to. Working with the dream figure can elucidate repressed attributes in the dreamer.

In conclusion, living an ethical life and a psychological symbolic life must entail taking responsibility for the shadow and to embrace our integrity. Integrity not only reflects the quality of someone who gives precedence to moral considerations over self-interest. It also means wholeness, that state of being unbroken. Therefore, when we are fully ourselves and in our wholeness, we are also living an ethical life, taking responsibility for our life, and acknowledging and owning the impacts that our shadow has on others. **S**

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