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Facing the Collective Shadow

Jürgen W. Kremer and Donald Rothberg

What is the “collective shadow”? How does it manifest? It exists in many forms, some more apparent than others. In North America, for example, people of European descent historically have generally seen Native people and people of African descent as radically different and inferior, as “dark savages,” justifying the near-genocide of the former and the enslavement of the latter. As the more overt violence and oppression have become widely recognized, the initial projections of Native Americans and African Americans as dark, inferior beings have in part been altered. Those groups have since been seen, at least in the examples of their most illustrious members, as having a number of romanticized qualities, which are found less frequently among European Americans: closeness to nature, participation in vital communities, musical and rhythmic talents, ease of movement, and athletic abilities, among others. Yet the effects of past genocide (physical and cultural), slavery, and racism persist, although the horrors are much less visible than they were at the time of the slave block, the massacre at Wounded Knee, or the lynching of blacks. These present day effects, such as poverty, alcoholism, self-hatred, and racism, are often not seen as connected to the past, which is commonly taken to be ever-receding and horrible, and for which persons of European descent today seldom take responsibility. In the projection of “darkness” and inferiority, in violence and oppression, in romantic projections, in the invisibility of current suffering, in the denial of current responsibility, we find the collective shadow.

Collective shadow material may be acted out brutally in repression, wars, massacres, and genocides. It may also hide under the often attractive cloaks of missionary activity, “civilizing” the natives, (re)education (including mandating the use of particular languages), commerce, modernization, progress, and globalization. As is the nature of all shadow material, whether individual or collective, its existence and influence may be pervasive without being obvious. The contemporary genocide of indigenous peoples on many continents, for example, is so often a quiet genocide, taking the form of a kind of internalized colonization, as government, language use, and even ceremonies are remade in the image of the colonizer. In a similar way, while we may notice some of the environmental destruction on the occasion of an oil spill or a nuclear accident like the one at Chernobyl, environmental deterioration is generally a much less visible and much less noticed consequence of the shadow material created by our dissociation from nature.

The collective shadow manifests outwardly in atrocities, persecutions, physical suffering, sickness, malnutrition, alcoholism, rape, poverty, the crime conditioned by poverty and desperation, the death of cultures, and the myriad other ways in which individual and collective human potentials are blocked. It may also manifest more inwardly, amid the complexities of each individual psyche, as hatred toward oneself, one’s heritage, and one’s culture (for both oppressed and oppressor), depression and feelings of impotence, dissociation, the desire for revenge (so that others might experience something like one’s

own pain) and the continued fear of the “other” and that which is like the “other” in one’s own being.

In our inner landscapes, shadow manifestations often appear in ways that are less obvious. For example, a German woman, born in the early 1950s, has parents who were deeply scarred by World War II, with many personal and material losses; yet they have been almost entirely silent about their experiences. The woman chose to leave Germany while in her twenties, lived for a time in Israel, and found herself over the next years having many intimate relationships with Jewish men. A year ago, she had the following dream: She is in a hut, filled with light and full of people, situated on cliffs above the ocean. Outside in the cold and dark is a dark-haired Jewish man named David, alone and hungry. She wants to bring him inside, but internal voices tell her that it is dangerous. She is afraid, yet she feels empathy. She wakes up in fear. When she explored the dream, she interpreted David as representing shadow material that has both personal and collective aspects. Although she has already integrated that shadow to some extent, she still fears bringing it into consciousness (into the hut). She has had many relationships in the past with David, but in a relatively unconscious way. Since the dream, she has had some important communications with her father, in part about World War II. She is ready, she thinks, to further integrate that shadow energy.

The term *collective shadow* refers to a huge, multidimensional, often horrifying, yet elusive aspect of human life.

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Difficult to grasp, contain, and evoke in language, the collective shadow refers to an immensity of harm inflicted by human beings upon each other and the natural world and to the vast aftereffects of such harm in subsequent generations and the entire social body. Theodor Adorno is famous for his dictum that poetry is no longer possible after Auschwitz. But in the postwar work of the Jewish poet (and Holocaust survivor) Paul Celan, for example, we find attempts to deepen and remember language to such an extent that individual and collective suffering can be explored and expressed. We may be brought to the limits of what consciousness can endure—yet needs to endure if there is to be healing, if there is to be awareness and wholeness. At the same time, especially in the face of individual suffering, all accounts and interpretations, such as those we find in this issue of *ReVision*, need to bow and acknowledge the severe limitations of words despite the best intentions of their authors.

Carl Jung spoke of the shadow of the individual as “the ‘negative’ side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and the content of the personal unconscious” (Jung 1917/1966, 66n, quoted in Zweig and Abrams 1991, 3). Von Franz (1964/1968, 174) believed that the individual shadow “represents unknown or little-known attributes and qualities of the ego.” Yet the shadow also carries energies and insights necessary for the wholeness of what Jung called the “self.” Hence, Jung counseled learning about one’s shadow and entering into what he called “long and difficult negotiations” with the shadow. Through such “shadow work,” one becomes enlightened and reduces the shadow’s destructive potential, not so much, as it were, by waging war against the darkness, or abandoning the darkness for an abode of light, but by bringing the darkness to the light, the light to the darkness.

Jung was also concerned with the collective manifestation of shadow material. To speak of the collective shadow is to refer to what historically has often been labeled “evil.” Jung identified the “principle of evil” as involving “naked

injustice, tyranny, lies, slavery, and coercion of conscience” (Jung 1963, 328) and believed that the contemporary world has very little understanding of, or ability to respond to, such evil. (Arguably, he was also, in many ways, quite naive about the collective shadow, particularly as it manifested in the Nazis.) Jung suggested that the primary response to evil by the individual must be the quest for self-knowledge, for wholeness, which presumes the assimilation of shadow material. The individual “must know relentlessly how much good he can do, and what crimes he is capable of” (Jung 1963, 330).

Our approach in this issue of *ReVision*, however, is not exclusively psychological. Nor is it primarily metaphysical, concerned with specifying the source of evil (e.g., whether or not it is independent of humans, whether or not it is derivative in relation to what is “good” or sacred). While making use of the Jungian notions of “collective shadow” and “shadow work,” we wish especially to connect the psychological and spiritual projects of self-knowledge and wholeness with what we might call “collective learning processes.” In such processes, groups, communities, societies, and perhaps humanity as a whole may come to collective wisdom, understanding, and compassion, and effect social action and transformation, particularly in relation to past and potential “evil.” In other words, we are interested in “collective shadow work” carried out both by individuals and by collectivities. How do the principles of individual shadow work help guide collective work? What specifically collective perspectives, guidelines, and practices are necessary for the latter, and how does the development of collective shadow work influence our sense of the nature of individual shadow work?

In this context, following von Franz, we can define the collective shadow as the unknown or little-known aspects of a society and culture, according to the dominant discourses. Our focus in this issue is particularly on those aspects of the collective shadow linked with oppression and suffering (with what Jung called “evil”). The legacies of slavery and racism in the United States, for example, are usually shadow material

for “whites,” but in most ways very conscious for “people of color.” Indeed, the shadow often makes its appearance in social awareness through the presence and activities of the suffering (and sometimes violent) part of the social body. Even if a given issue is known in general outline in a particular society, it can be called a shadow issue if there is evidence of denial, projection, and a lack of taking individual and collective responsibility. Taking responsibility—morally, politically, spiritually—seems particularly crucial. As John Tarrant (1998, 170) suggests, “the courage with which we bear our darkness frees others from having to carry it for us.”

However, using a concept developed for the psychology of the individual to help guide collective learning processes has its dangers. We may “psychologize,” imagining that facing the collective shadow is simply a matter of “adding up” many cases of individual psychological learning. We may lose sight of the distinctively cultural, social, political, economic, and historical (i.e., collective) issues that also need to be addressed. For example, some may speak of survivors of genocide “healing” from their “traumatic experiences,” as if such healing is analogous to a physical healing, which is supposedly complete for the individual. But how does one “heal” if one’s culture has been largely or completely destroyed and one cannot return to one’s former land? Similarly, we may use the concept of “trauma,” as in speaking about the “post-traumatic stress disorder” of those who experienced (as witnesses, victims, or perpetrators) intense violence and suffering. While that concept may help to secure funds, the very use of such language may suggest that the problem is essentially individual, psychological, and even medical (Bracken, Giller, and Summerfield 1995; Young 1995).¹

In the essays that follow, the emphasis is on responding to examples of massive historical suffering, the effects of which persist. We have chosen six examples: slavery and racism, the near-genocide of Native Americans, the Vietnam war, the Holocaust, apartheid in South Africa, and ecological crisis. (We might easily have focused as well on numerous other examples of genocide:

the legacy of thousands of years of sexism or coming to terms with dictatorships and repression.) Our interest is generally twofold:

- to clarify the mechanisms of collective denial, forgetting, projection, and dissociation, and the effects both in individuals and societies when there is not adequate attention to the manifestations of the collective shadow; and
- to explore ways of addressing and transforming the legacies of historical trauma and suffering, both individually and collectively in various ways.

How, then, do we respond to the collective shadow? Looking at the historical record, it seems apparent that collective learning processes in relation to wars, genocide, holocausts, and pervasive oppression are tremendously difficult. As human beings we have much to learn in that regard. Denial, often connected with a wish to "get on with things" and "put the past behind us," seems the most common approach and usually the first reaction. In the current century, we find examples of outright denial, an often deliberate forgetting (e.g., postwar France, Italy, Austria, and even Germany), blanket amnesty to perpetrators, the self-righteous punishment of perpetrators (e.g., the Nuremberg trials), scapegoating, minimal acknowledgment of mistakes, and spreading the blame ("we were wrong, but so were others"—as in the debates in Germany following the attempts by revisionist historians to relativize the Holocaust).

Yet we also find reparation payments (e.g., to Jews, to Japanese Americans interned during World War II), repentance (e.g., Willi Brandt, the German Chancellor, asking for forgiveness in the former Warsaw Ghetto), opening up secret archives (e.g., in the former Soviet bloc), public apologies (more than 100 since 1990, e.g., for supporting atrocities in Guatemala by Clinton, for oppression of the Aborigines by the Australian premier), pilgrimages (to places of great suffering), tribunals, truth commissions (some twenty in all), and the rewriting of history. All these are attempts to deal with difficult, painful pasts (Ash 1998, Irish 1998).

But how do we deal with the past in

such a way that the integration of the shadow occurs deeply and broadly within a population, rather than simply at a symbolic level through leaders or policies? In his essay in this issue on contemporary South Africa, for example, Jim Statman finds that what appears to be a dynamic "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu, coexists with what he takes to be massive denial by whites of the structural and ideological residues of apartheid. What kind of procedures, frameworks, and "containers" help a group, community, or society to open up to the collective shadow, particularly to denial, isolation, privilege, fear, pain, anger and rage, and grief? What leads to taking responsibility and healing? What permits deep collective transformation to take place, toward greater justice, equality, and community?

Remembering and speaking what often seems unspeakable is inevitably a painful process for victims and perpetrators, bystanders and witnesses. Any such process can only be regarded as successful or reasonably complete once the pain, outrage, betrayal, suffering, and all the other feelings have been voiced and heard and once responsibility has been taken. It is only then that the social body as a whole can move beyond the roles of victim and victimizer to creative and healing resolutions. Ash concludes: "What is somewhat biblically called 'truth-telling' is both the most desirable and the most feasible way to grapple with a difficult past" (1998, 40).

Robert Johnson has remarked that "to honor and accept one's own [personal] shadow is a profound spiritual discipline" (1991/1993, x). That applies as well to the collective shadow held in the individual and the collective learning processes about social shadow material. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese poet, Buddhist teacher, and activist, pointed to the spiritual dimension of facing the collective shadow, in a talk given shortly after the Gulf War:

The death of one Iraqi soldier means that one family is suffering, and more than 100,000 Iraqi soldiers and civilians were killed. . . . After any war, the suffering continues on both sides for several generations. Look at the suffering of the Viet-

nam veterans in America and the suffering of the Vietnamese people. . . . that is still going on on both sides. . . . If we practice mindfulness, we will know how to look deeply into the nature of war, and, with our insight, wake people up so that together we can avoid repeating the same horrors again and again. . . . The war is in us, but is also in everyone. . . . Everything is ready to explode, and we are all co-responsible. (1992, 77-78)

There are many spiritual traditions and contemporary approaches with similar perspectives and resources (such as reflections, meditations, practices, ceremonies, and rituals) that may help individuals and communities to face the collective shadow on an ongoing basis.

It is with the above horizons and questions in mind that we asked the contributors to explore the collective shadow.

NOTE

1. We thank Dennis Friedler for discussions on these issues.

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