



Becoming Whole Practice

Shadows

Think of someone who really annoys or frustrates you. If you could give them one piece of advice, what would you tell them? Write this down on a piece of paper as if you were talking to them: Dear _____ . I wish you would just _____ .

Write your sentence before proceeding to the next part.

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Now, look at your sentence that you have written to this person and make one change. Cross out their name, and put your own name in there. Now read the sentence to yourself. Dear (me) , I wish you would just . Now reflect on your advice.

First of all, how does it feel to be the recipient of your own advice? What was the tone in the letter? Did it feel compassionate, supportive, and encouraging of change? Did it feel blaming, judgmental, or divisive?

Ask yourself if there is any truth in your statement for yourself? Is there something here to learn? Is there a part of yourself that is a little like the person that annoys or frustrates you? Is there something that they do that you don't allow yourself to do? For example, if you wish someone would not be so lazy, is there a part of you that you do not let relax and be carefree? Consider what, if anything, you find in this statement to learn about yourself.

Can you imagine how hard transformation for this person might be? Are there ways their current or past behavior has originated from a place of vulnerability they might be protecting themselves from? Might they also have things they are attached to or afraid of? What blind spots might you both have? Can you find compassion for them and yourself?

There are parts of ourselves called Shadows. Shadows are the parts of ourselves that we dislike or we ignore about ourselves. It is important to pay attention to them, because when we do not, then when we experience them in someone else, it makes us feel great dislike or distaste for them.

Robert Bly writes about shadows with this analogy: When we were young and as we grew up, we had people around us telling us not to be a certain way. Perhaps our parents said we should be responsible, so we carried this invisible bag behind us and put in the bag the side of us that wanted to be spontaneous and irresponsible. Then our community said girls are supposed to be a certain way and boys are supposed to be a different way, and so we put those parts that were not appropriate into a bag. For example, in my culture it is not right for a boy to cry, so many men put away their sensitive sides into this invisible bag. Then friends told us that we had to act a certain way and we put the things that we felt uncomfortable with in the bag. By the time we got older, the bag was very big and heavy. And it still holds the parts of us that we don't like. In fact, we often dislike the same things in other people because we are not willing to recognize the same in our selves. Many men would look down upon another man who is crying because they have been taught that is not okay. Or women are told not to be aggressive, so they may bottle up their anger and one day they do something irrational because their shadow got so strong and wanted to come out.

At an extreme, these tendencies can create fear, hatred, feelings of supremacy and violence. But even in milder ways those who think they are doing good may create harm from unconscious reactivity. We can repeat conditioned or learned behaviors if we are not conscious of them. This includes cultural and systematic belief systems to which we may be blind. Over time, our collective shadows can get built into the organizations, institutions, and systems in which we operate. Mindfulness helps you pay attention so that you become aware of the things that you may not have known were there. If we accept these things in ourselves, we will more easily accept them in others. With awareness, we can begin to understand and integrate our shadows, so that we can dismantle behavior and systems that cause harm.