

Shadow-Boxing: Wrestling with Romantic Partners

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From:

Romancing the Shadow: A Guide to Finding Gold in the Dark Side

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In a famous Greek myth of romance, Eros insists that Psyche make love to him in the dark. Like Eros, many of us want to remain hidden when our passions loosen the reins of the ego's control. We long to know the Other, but not to be known. We ask probing questions, but reply with half answers. In a myriad of ways, we run from being seen and avoid becoming vulnerable, disguised in tight personas and baggy clothes, hiding in sordid addictions and clandestine habits.

And yet, right alongside the urgent longing to know the Other and the refusal to be known is the converse longing: the urgency to be known and the refusal to see. Like Psyche, we open our arms to love but may not open our eyes. We consent to temporary blindness, giving our sweet love to unknown others, people who are not what they seem, people who become strangers with the light of dawn. Like Psyche, we follow the lead of Eros, god of love -- and

when we light a candle in the dark, we are shocked at his Otherness.

For this reason the divinity of desire has been called Eros the bittersweet. With the sweetness of love, the bitterness of shadow is evoked. And our desire, which seems to be such an intimate friend, comes to appear as a hostile enemy that brings longing, envy, and even hate in tow.

We long for wholeness, a greater unity that stems from meeting the Beloved, our other half. Eros, our archetypal longing, causes us to reach for that which is missing; our desire is organized around this radiant absence. And we yearn to melt into the Beloved, to find there the missing piece, and to lose ourselves in a paradise of everlasting love. Jung expressed this universal quest of the human soul in this way: "The soul cannot exist without its other side, which is always found in a 'You.' Wholeness is a combination of I and You, and these show themselves to be parts of a transcendent unity whose nature can only be grasped symbolically."

Yet, as the god spreads its wings of desire, it blinds us to the reality of what is there. In this chapter we move from the tentative exploration that defines dating to the spell cast by romantic love and the infamous blindness that results. We will learn, through the stories of many couples, how romance leads us through dark alleys to the meeting with the Other, the stranger who appears in our most intimate moments to sabotage our feelings of familiarity, safety, and love. And we will show how shadow-work can transform the painful consequences of romantic blindness, so that eyes blinded by persona can see ever more deeply into soul. By reexamining relationships from romance to marriage in the context of the shadow's hidden needs, eventually we can move from shadow-boxing with the Other to shadow-dancing with the Beloved. We can pierce the veil of illusory projection and see our partner with clear perception. Then we will discover that the Beloved is both the solution and the problem; the Beloved is the answer and the question to be asked again and again.

Who do we spend our entire life loving?

Meeting the Other: Projections Hit Their Targets

When two people meet and feel a deep connection with one another, their hearts open like flowers. So do their imaginations. Five-year-old Ned, a blond-haired blue-eyed cutie, played in the park with his parents when a young girl, about his age, approached. She said, "You look just like John Smith in the Pocahontas movie." Ned grinned and his little chest filled with air. He announced to his parents that he had a new girlfriend.

Projection begins at a young age. We view it as a natural, unavoidable process, not a

pathological problem to be rid of or a symptom to be cured. Through projection, the unconscious mind expels both positive and negative traits, attributing them to other people, whereby they can become conscious. Because by definition the unconscious is hidden, like the dark side of the moon, we need to discover indirect ways to catch glimpses of it. And projection is a primary way of doing so.

Rob, an architect in his forties who has been married to his second wife for ten years, recalled how he met his first in an instantaneous romantic projection. "I walked into a college dorm and saw this blond-haired girl sitting on the couch. She was swinging her legs, wearing bobby sox and loafers, to the music of Simon and Garfunkel. I walked up and told her that we would be married one day. She told me I was nuts. But two years later, we were husband and wife." Five years later, they divorced.

Carrie described a first date with Vince, who appeared on a motorcycle in black leather boots and jacket. She stood on the balcony above and said to herself, "My Romeo has arrived."

Projection is like shooting an invisible arrow. Each of us carries a kind of archer's quiver strapped onto our backs. Every so often an arrow shoots out unpredictably, and we say something nasty or we fall in love. When we turn around to find out where the arrow came from, the quiver moves out of sight.

If the receiver has a soft spot to receive the projection, it sticks. For instance, if we project our anger onto a dissatisfied mate or our seductive charms onto a good-looking stranger, then we hit the target and the projection holds. From then on the sender and receiver are linked in a mysterious alliance, which could feel like erotic passion, intense disgust, or unbearable envy.

Julia, 29, a slight, wirey woman who works as a pastry chef, reported breathlessly that she had found the man of her dreams two weeks before. She knew nothing about him, but because of the look in his eyes and the sound of his voice she was certain that they would be married by the end of the year. The therapist asked her to write a short piece about her internal experience of the moment of their encounter :

Her eyes seek the Fit, the match between her world and his. The parallel lines, the flush corners, the edges that rub up against each other. She feels for the Fit, the mesh, the weave that joins her with him.

She saw him in a moment across the empty, white-walled room. She saw him with her whole

body. It cried out with the Fit. It moved her toward him relentlessly on a one-way vector; no return. He sat still, waiting. Her body sat nearby and began to pulse. The air between them felt thick, resonant, palpable. The Fit was screaming from her cells.

She looked into his eyes and said, slowly, "I've been waiting for you for so long." He nodded and said, slowly, "I know." The Fit smiled in her cells. Nothing had prepared her for this moment. She was perfectly prepared.

We might wonder why the sender shoots these arrows into others. Poet Robert Bly uses the following metaphor: When we were very young, we had a 360-degree personality, which radiated energy from all directions. But the adults around us could not tolerate this much exuberance. So, in their own discomfort, they unintentionally but inevitably betrayed us by shaming and humiliating us for certain feelings, such as vulnerability, or behaviors, such as competition, which we then learned to hide. Our teachers may have scolded us for other behaviors, such as daydreaming, or our priests may have imposed terrible guilt for our sexual feelings. These denied, disowned parts of our souls --anger or depression, jealousy or resentment, intellectuality or sensuality, athletic or artistic ability -- get exiled into the dark. As a result, the full circle of energy that was our birthright is sliced away piece by piece, leaving only a thin, proper facade to greet the world.

When we begin dating, as a natural part of development the shadow goes in search of its lost traits in others in an effort to recover the full range of our personality -- the gold in the dark side. Like Star Trek's doctor Bones, who does a high-tech DNA check on his patients within minutes of their first contact, the shadow scans for a love fit, looking for the "one." When we find romance and fall in love, our unconscious fantasy image of the Other often is a composite of familiar parental qualities, which we inherited through identification, and our own neglected traits, which we banished into shadow through repression. When we feel a harmonic match with another person, a seemingly magical feeling of familiarity or resonance -- the Fit -- a part of us begins to believe that our soul's dream of acceptance and belonging can be fulfilled.

Without our knowing it, the shadow is at work attempting to recreate early childhood relationship patterns with a secret mission -- to heal old wounds and feel loved. We view this inevitable childhood projection as the first stage of romance, a kind of fusion that may feel like living inside of an egg shell, an enclosed form in which the couple feels nurtured and self-contained. Like two chicks in the shell, they feed one another on love, which speeds the growth and development of both. Other friendships may fall away as the partners imagine meeting all of each other's needs and fulfilling all of each other's desires.

Then, one day, inevitably the shell cracks -- and the relationship breaks down. The old rules, often unspoken, which previously provided security ("You are all that I need" or "I pay for everything so we have sex when I want it" or "You carry the feelings for both of us") no longer hold, and the partners face a crisis of commitment. Once the shell has been cracked, it cannot be put back together again. The partners may try, but they have entered a new stage of relationship: they are now too well developed to remain fused. For those who do not know that this is a natural developmental crisis, the relationship will end, and the partners inevitably attempt to recreate the egg shell with the next person. But for those who can negotiate the new rules, which allow for greater individuality and authenticity, the partners can go play in the chicken yard -- a larger psychic space with more room for individuality and clear boundaries -- and yet remain a couple. Then the relationship can begin again.

What traits does your lover carry for you, which creates the unconscious attraction between you? What do you give away to him or her that might be returned to your own treasury? How would that influence the way you live your own life?

Complementing the Other: Two Parts Make a Whole

At the same time as we send projections, we also carry them for others. Some people tend to draw certain kinds of projections toward them. The receivers' shadows also try to heal old wounds through being seen deeply, feeling adored or respected. But those who receive the arrows of projection pay as steep a price as those who send them: being seen via projection is not being seen authentically. For example, women who carry Aphrodite energy speak about the pain of feeling objectified as an image of beauty and of being envied by other women; at the level of soul they often feel unseen and misunderstood. And men who are chosen for their Adonis sex-appeal or their wealth and power also may question whether they are viewed as objects or seen in their authenticity.

The shadow's aim of completion via the new partner explains why opposites attract -- optimists and pessimists, pursuers and distancers, extroverts and introverts, artists and scientists, pragmatists and spiritual seekers together make one whole. Consequently, through an unspoken division of labor, many couples operate like one person, trading strengths and weaknesses with the Other throughout a period of compensation.

Then they may discover, at some point down the road, that just those traits in the partner that seemed the most attractive -- part of the shadow's solution -- become the least attractive -- part of the problem. "He's so strong and commanding" becomes "He's such a power freak." Or

"She's so sensitive and nurturing" becomes "She's so overly emotional and dependent." Of course, because we have rejected these qualities in ourselves, at some deep level we are repelled by them in the other person.

Without shadow-work, shadow-boxing is inevitable: as the partners reject their disowned qualities in the Other, they get drawn into painful, repetitive fights, inevitably ending up hurt and angry and perhaps separating from each other. In defending against the pain, we also defend against the love. But with shadow-work, a partner may rediscover his or her own rejected traits in the projections and learn to romance them. In this way, the sources of conflict can be viewed as sources of opportunity: the relationship becomes a means to find gold in the dark side both in ourselves and in our partners. As a result, our partner, who felt like an enemy, becomes an ally to our soul. And the relationship deepens.

But other problems may arise as well. When one partner begins to re-own lost parts of him or herself, the Other no longer needs to compensate for a lack and therefore no longer serves as the source of the partner's sense of wholeness. Ted, who was attracted to Carol's outdoor Artemis qualities, her love of nature and animals, is now a competent camper himself and no longer depends on her to blaze the trails outdoors. If their relationship were based, even to some degree, on her competency and his incompetency, chaos could result. The two would need to discover deeper sources of connection.

Shirley believed, since she was a young child, that she was unintelligent and uncreative, so she created a sexual shield to feel and appear attractive and to compensate for her feelings of inferiority. She habitually became romantically involved with highly creative but unavailable men, seeking that which she yearned for outside of herself. As she gradually discovered her own creative voice, her unconscious attraction to creative, unavailable partners faded. Eventually, she used her seductive powers less and her authentic feelings more to establish contact with men.

Joel, a 46-year-old screenwriter, was divorced by his homemaker wife after a twelve-year marriage. Accustomed to intimacy and a supportive woman, he felt surprised at the strength of his attraction to Ellen, a stock broker, who clearly thrived in her autonomy. During their first six months of dating, they enacted the Daphne and Apollo myth: he pulled her in, while she pushed him away.

As they became more romantically involved with each other, they entered the egg shell stage: Joel did not wish to face his separateness and independence and tried to feel safe through

fusion with Ellen. In response, she created a power shield and clung to her separateness for safety, judging his dependency needs and her own as unacceptable. Whereas he feared abandonment most of all, she feared being overwhelmed by his neediness.

Their patterns quickly became problematic: Joel felt that he could never get enough love from Ellen, as if he stood at the watering hole but was not allowed to drink. Ellen, self-contained like an Athena-style woman, felt smothered, unable to breathe her own air. When her emotional claustrophobia reached a peak, a destructive part of her picked up a metaphorical sword and lashed out at Joel with cruel words, cutting their intimacy in an effort to restore her sense of safety. Each time this pattern recurred, they faced a crisis of commitment.

Slowly, with the help of their therapist, the partners discovered which characters were at work: the Fuser and the Distancer. They found that this pair of opposites had been split between them, each side carried by the Other and shadow-boxing with one another. So, their shadow-work involved making conscious the disowned traits in themselves. As Joel slowly learned to find an authentic sense of security within himself, he began to uncover a shadow character that held his need for separateness and a healthy distance. He no longer panicked when he felt alone, fearing that he might disappear; he even gradually grew to enjoy solitude. Eventually, he could tell Ellen that he loved and honored her independence, even though it felt shadowy to him. As a result, she could feel more deeply accepted for who she was, not simply for his fantasy projection of her.

As Ellen slowly allowed herself to feel loved, she began to feel more emotionally dependent on Joel, even to need him, uncovering a shadow character that held her own need for intimacy. She was deeply afraid of these vulnerable feelings, which she had repressed for a long time. And sometimes, when Joel pulled away, she felt humiliated by her own feelings of dependency. But the authentic nature of their growing love allowed her to build trust in herself, in Joel, and in the relationship itself. Eventually, she learned to witness her automatic tendency to brandish the sword and power shield. At times, she would backslide and separate from Joel in an abrupt way, hurting him deeply. Then, together they would remind each other that Athena, not Ellen, had taken control and issued a call, and they would seek to hear her deeper need.

With ongoing shadow-work, they continued to bring more of themselves into conscious awareness and thus into their relationship, exposing denied aspects of their personalities and opening up new avenues of intimacy. Eventually, the two discovered together that Ellen's fear of fusion is just the other side of Joel's fear of abandonment.

Where does the shadow sabotage your intimacy? When does your fear of fusion cause you to appear distant and aloof? When does your fear of abandonment cause you to surrender your authentic voice and your independence in an effort to feel safe?

These disowned compensatory traits, when projected onto a partner, can become threatening because they stir up taboo shadow feelings. For example, initially a man may be drawn to a woman's open sexuality, then find her behavior inappropriate as his wife. This pattern may stem from the archetypal split known as the Madonna/Whore syndrome, in which a woman may carry either the elevated projection of Mother -- purity, kindness, and compliance -- or the devalued projection of Mistress -- sensuality, instinct, and bodily hungers. During dating, a man may be attracted to the "whore" quality of a sensual woman, but he would never take this character home to his family. And he may feel that the mother of his children must be "pure," like his own mother. With this split the man may find himself lamenting the loss of his sexual desire and unconsciously rendering himself incapable of maintaining a satisfying sexual relationship because to have sex with Mother is taboo. Thus his underlying negative attitudes toward sex may have been buried in the shadow during dating and only become evident during later stages of romance or marriage.

This pattern has deep cultural roots in religious teachings, as well as individual roots in a man's psychology. If a man with a puritanical character at the table has cast his own bodily eros into the shadow to live a "pure" life, banishing the wildness of Dionysus and labeling others as hedonists, then he cannot tolerate these energies in his partner. As a result, he may turn her into a mother figure, a sexless caretaker who is supposed to love him unconditionally and display no shadow of her own. In some cultures, where this pattern is seen as the norm, men may turn to a mistress to fulfill their more sexual Dionysian needs.

Or a woman initially may be attracted to a man who appears to be upbeat, optimistic, even ecstatic. As our client Lorraine put it, "When I met Josh, he had a radiant sparkle and boundless energy. He just seemed to live life so fully and was not brought down by petty problems."

But after a few months Lorraine wanted more vulnerability from Josh and could no longer tolerate his high energy and seemingly automatic positive attitude. In fact, she came to believe that he habitually denied his more difficult feelings and defended against them with learned optimism. As they spent more time together, she noticed that he drank several cups of coffee in the morning and again in the afternoon. When she suggested that he was addicted to caffeine, he denied it and agreed to cut down his coffee intake to prove her wrong. But, as his energy level dropped, he grew weary and moody and had to admit that she was correct. Lorraine, in

turn, needed to support the less energetic, more moody Josh if she wanted more emotional authenticity.

In these cases, a partner may begin to discourage a troublesome quality or shadow character in the Other: He may shame her sexual desires; she may criticize his lack of emotional range. In response, the receiver of the projection may begin to feel judged and diminished in just the way that he or she did by a parent, which caused the wound in the first place. In this way, the shadow achieved its goal -- to recreate the past.

Compensation is only the most obvious solution to the shadow's dilemma. Many couples have more complicated unconscious dynamics than a simple balancing act of disowned traits. In what psychologists call projective identification, one partner unconsciously identifies with the other person's rejected part, or shadow character, and acts it out. For instance, if a husband has cast his rage into the shadow and never shows angry feelings, the wife may grow angrier and angrier, unconsciously carrying them for the pair. Just as family members split the pie of shadow material among them, the couple splits it between them. As a result, one appears highly emotional, the other highly rational, such as a feeling-oriented mother's daughter paired with a thinking-oriented father's son or, alternatively, a sensitive, intuitive mother's son bonded with an intellectual, independent father's daughter. Other combinations: one partner appears upbeat, the other depressed; one appears neat, the other messy; one appears to need intimacy, the other to need distance. One may even become an alcoholic, the other a teetotaler. In this way, a process that is actually internal to both people is externalized, becoming an interpersonal conflict and creating the Other, the worthy opponent, the shadow-boxing partner.

Consequently, the sender is protected from seeing those traits in himself and can instead criticize and try to change them in his mate. The receiver, who carries the dirty laundry that doesn't fit with the sender's persona, then becomes "the problem," the person who needs to be fixed. From the ego's point of view, the lover may seem strangely unfitting -- too unhappy, too messy, too loud, too shy, too indulgent, too prudish. But from the shadow's point of view, the lover may seem strangely familiar -- like a parent or even like the flip side of oneself.

If the shadow did its work of finding an appropriate fit with a partner, the relationship recreates early patterns -- and thereby provides an opportunity for consciousness. Thus we suggest that the early stages of romance are determined primarily by the shadow's needs and form the bases for the initial attraction and the development of later, more conscious stages of relationship, which occur in real time with a Beloved, rather than as a repetition of the past with a projected Other.

Who lives in your lover's shadow? A slut, an artist, a helpless child, a violent tyrant, a reclusive monk, a free spirit. How do you relate to these characters in him or her? How do you discourage their expression in your partner in subtle ways because they do not fit your image of him or her?

The Breakdown of Projections: Meeting the Witch and the Tyrant

The two kinds of romantic projections -- partners as parents, partners as gods -- inevitably rattle and break down, often causing a crisis of commitment. At that crucial moment in every relationship, the most familiar person becomes a stranger. Then one or both partners proclaims, "This is not what I expected." "This is not the person I married." "I thought I knew you so well, but I was wrong."

The partners may suffer shock and disbelief. Then the feeling of betrayal sets in. We suggest that there are three reasons for this series of events: First, the romantic partner is not who we thought she or he was. But, if the shadow did its work, our partner is exactly the right one -- and exactly the wrong one. As one couple put it: "She has everything I need -- and everything I hate." "Yes," said the Other in response. "He has everything I need -- and everything I hate."

That is to say, the ideal projection of parent or god rattles -- and another face appears suddenly on the loved one. As one woman said, "He's like a stranger with secret desires that are not like him. But it is him." The quiet, nonthreatening woman turns into a jealous, demanding, nagging complainer -- her partner's worst nightmare. The strong, efficient man turns into a needy, dependent control freak -- his partner's bad dream. When these shadow characters emerge, shattering the illusions of romance, they reveal such unknown, unexpected aspects of personality that the observer may feel, all at once, that trust between them is broken. The partners face a crisis of commitment.

Second, the romantic process is not what we thought it was. That is, we are no longer at home in old, comfortable patterns that feel familiar. Instead, we are face to face with the Other, the stranger, the unpredictable one who lives inside the Beloved. And the process, which had been moving toward greater and greater safety in intimacy, seems to be halted.

Finally, we are not who we thought we were. The humbling revelation of our own shadow sides can be as abrupt and disconcerting as the discovery of our partner's. One woman told her therapist that she habitually used sarcasm as a shield, out of her fear of having her feelings rejected. But when her partner reported that her sarcastic tone hurt him deeply, she felt great

sadness and remorse. In discovering these aspects of our own shadows, we feel humiliated in our own nakedness and rush to hide, thereby creating obstacles to intimacy and another crisis of commitment. Or we may feel overwhelming guilt and responsibility for the disillusionment and suffering of our loved ones.

The shattering of these illusions may happen gradually, like peeling off the layers of an egg shell, so that bit by bit, even over many years, we come to have a more clear perception of our partners and ourselves. For instance, a man may keep an alcohol dependency hidden from his wife or a woman may use tranquilizers or anti-depressants secretly to control her moods. When the mate finds clues to these behaviors after years of secrecy, he or she may be outraged and betrayed, feeling as if life had been shared with a stranger.

Or the shattering may happen suddenly, like the egg shell cracking open, so that in one moment we feel we know one another, and in the next we are living with a foreign intruder. A friend told the story of walking into her kitchen where her new husband stood in his bathrobe with his back to her. She looked down and saw his "boney knees" sticking out from under the robe -- and in that moment her perception of him shifted from a refined, elegant musician to a vulnerable, limited man.

Just that part of us which may project perfection onto our partners may, in turn, become critical of all that is not perfect about them. That's why the goddess can shift so quickly into the witch, or the king can pick up the whip of the tyrant, or the hero in an instant can seem ordinary, fading into insubstantiality like a dream figure. Like Randy, a mother's son who projects spiritual purity onto Betsy but uncovers in her a volatile, distant mother; and Betsy, a father's daughter who projects a spiritual hero onto Randy but unearths in him a controlling, invasive father, each of us seeks the light and unwittingly finds the darkness.

As projections break down and we meet our partners' shadow characters, as well as our own, the tasks of relationship become more complex: to romance the dark side and to hold onto the soul connection, the archetypal unity that joins us together; to see through the illusion of Beauty to the Beast and to see beyond that to the authentic beauty that lies at the heart of our loved ones. To be able to contain both the light side and the dark is a great developmental step -- and a promise of romancing the shadow.

Our objective, then, is not to live without projection; that is an impossible task. We will naturally and automatically turn our partners into our parents as the shadow tries to make us feel safe and loved. To uncover the gold in this personal projection, we need to continually see

through it while mining it for insight, and at the same time stay related to the other person as a real human being.

We also will naturally and automatically turn our partners into gods as the powerful archetypes sweep us off our feet. To uncover the gold in this archetypal projection, we need to continually see through it while staying related to the other person as a mortal human being -- and honor our deeper vision, which can see god in the Beloved, a transpersonal reality and an ongoing source of aliveness and inspiration.

Redefining Successful Relationship: From Shadow-boxing to Shadow-dancing

A conscious relationship does not breed complacency; it does not offer the security of a warm blanket. Instead, a relationship is a cauldron in which to cook the soul. Its aim is heat, not warmth; movement, not rest. The goal of a relationship, then, is not to make order or to sit back and relax in an idyllic paradise. Rather, it aims to share the mystery of evolution -- and evoke evolution through confrontations with the shadow.

In this context, we would call any relationship successful that calls forth love, healing, and awareness, even if it ends after a few dates. If one partner identifies a new character and awakens to shadow awareness, he or she may not repeat an old pattern in the next round. And that new quality of consciousness may help to create a much more satisfying intimacy the next time. If one partner feels a deeper sense of authenticity, recovering buried parts or unrealized gifts, then healing has taken place. If one partner learns to see through a particular projection and view the Other with greater clarity, then both have a better chance of knowing what they want in the next relationship.

As two partners make the transition from non-committal, experimental dating to the safe enclosure of the egg shell, the projection takes hold. They make agreements and maintain relationship rules that permit them to feel more safety and intimacy. But eventually the shadow erupts and they face a crisis of commitment. Romancing the shadow, they may move into the chicken yard, experiencing more intimacy and independence. Continuing to do shadow-work at times of conflict, eventually they may move from shadow-boxing to shadow-dancing, the topic of the next chapter. To make this transition, each partner will want to remember the needs of the soul, which offers depth and a connection to the sacred dimension. If we can learn to differentiate between the needs of ego, shadow, and soul, we will have a key to a deeply rewarding life of intimate partnership.

In the opening myth, Psyche vowed to Eros to make love with him in the dark. But her curiosity took hold of her and she lit a candle in their bedchamber, illuminating the god in all his splendor. Betrayed, Eros fled, the love bond fractured.

On one level, Psyche did not have the faith to keep her agreement to remain in the dark. When she broke it, the relationship ended. But on another level, Psyche, whose name means soul, refused to remain in the garden of the unconscious. Like Eve, she chose knowledge and sacrificed the innocence of the original relationship, enabling it to become something more. This act set Psyche on her own path of consciousness: she underwent difficult trials, including a journey to the underworld, until she was reunited with her Beloved once more in a deeper bond, which is the topic of the next chapter.

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