

“Living in the Shadows” by Kevin Barwick

November 12, 2017



Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

Why Be Polite

When do we live,
When do we stand up to ourselves
When forces rage against authenticity?
When will we hold up mirrors of God's love,
Reality and fierceness?
Will we become battering rams of freedom
And flags of generosity and peace?
How will we say no to injustice and hurl love letters
Into fires of discrimination, loneliness and platitudes of
grandiosity?

No, I will not be polite

When it comes to tamping down my real self,

My real feelings, my real loving.

(Read twice) (2017)

I, for some time now, have been exploring the meaning of shadow, the unconscious, our inner parts, if you will, to understand their nature and value to my life. I seem to be only scratching the surface as it comes to interfacing their meaning and allowing them to help transform my life.

Today, in our brief time together, I'd like to highlight and tap a bit on that glass that surrounds all of us, i.e. shadows that we may unconsciously carry around with individually and as a church. Please don't roll your inner eyes and say "Here we go again. Somebody else is going to judge us for what we're doing or not doing." That couldn't be further from the truth.

Somebody once told me that one of the gifts I bring to the world is that of a "stoker." That is, someone who sees the calm beautiful embers and little flickers of fire. Then I stir it all up by throwing another log on it to see it's life, energy and broader potential. I can't help it sometimes. Truth, curiosity or whatever often propels me to be unsatisfied with the status quo, to be unwilling to watch the cute little normal fire, and see possible potential wasted. So, here I am, doing it again, messing with something that potentially will make you, as it constantly does me, uncomfortable and make your soul ache.

Shadow. Those parts of us that we tend to hide, minimize, repress or even deny. It's the parts of us that we don't want people to see in us. We might be ashamed or fearful, and therefore, create protective layers or façade of what I want you to see in me. It's those parts we have learned over the years that has helped us to survive and get through life. They

are not "bad," but they are parts of us.

And I believe that we bring those shadows into our spirituality, and often turn it into religion. Let me give you an example. When I was younger I believed that God, whoever or whatever God was, wanted, no demanded me to live a sacrificial self-effacing life. On the surface that's sounded devotional, even holy. God would have it no other way! Well, my "holiness," really turned into a quest for correctness and obedience, not free and reckless love as a follower of Christ. Another one... "The truth will set you free," Jesus said. I was told to learn the Bible. Study it. My religious story, in part, was the more I learned the Bible, I.e. facts, stories, timelines, exegetical Greek sentences, the freer I'd get. Getting the Bible, I thought, was for me a religious shadow. I now believe, however, what sets me free-er and free-er is Jesus' radical, counter-intuitive, against-the-grain, no bull shit, not concerned about traditional sermon language, non-tribal, not living for one's self, non-survivalist way of thinking.

I wonder if we stopped and thought about it. What shadow survival techniques did you employ as it related to your spirituality, or better yet, your religion? How did you view God? Was he some celestial slot machine, always at your beckon call? We're you angry that "he" was always called a he? We're you confused, even baffled like me, why there were so many conflicted aspects of God's graciousness and God's seeming absence as it related to the world's poverty? How did you handle your questions? Did they turn into a "Don't ask, don't tell" attitude, saying "God's ways are too mysterious for us to know. Just let it go." The clear frustrating implication was to follow the "religion" of following the set rules like being a "nice Christian," be obedient at all costs, don't challenge religious structure, church leaders must have the answers to life (they went to seminary, you know), and my favorite, ask what would Jesus do? He has all the answers we

need.

[I invite you to become uncomfortable and turn to someone near you, and share one of your religious shadow stories that became part of your life. Take a minute to think and then find someone to share.]

What you just did is what I believe to be one of the first steps in living a life of wholeness, the fullness that Jesus spoke about. It's the step of walking into your darkness and be willing and open to learn a new way of living. It's like Jesus who was willing to step out of his misogynistic, legalistic, tribal protective shadow barriers, beyond his fear-imposed levels of security. We must walk into our darkness and break down walls that hold us back from loving others, or elevating ourselves by putting others down, by creating new language to honor and respect all peoples, whether their color, nationality, sexual orientation, levels of wealth and/or religious orientation. Are we ready to hurl love letters into fires of misogynistic or other better-than-thou discrimination? Or will we simply be polite?

I know I am for the most part preaching to the choir here regarding our religious shadow. We have worked on this intentionally and deliberately for many years. School of Christian living classes have been taught. Sermons have been preached . Mission groups have shared of their shadow struggles.

Yet, we don't want to give up our need to keep learning, to keep fighting, to stay open and honest of the prejudices and fears that will arise in us. We must keep moving forward. Here at Seekers, what shadow or shadows tends to show up? What "darknesses" do we need to walk into each week, month or year? Each death? Each election?

I wonder, just wonder, if I might hurl a love letter or two to us all. And please don't take these as judgmental, but just an

attempt at stoking the fire. I wonder if there is shadow in how we love each other, I.e. do we try too hard to be inclusive. I mean if we have to try hard, then where is the Devine love? Also, do we sometimes hide behind the mantel of sacrifice? That is, do we try so much to help others that we don't nurture our inner life as well. Also, related to the former, is there a deep inner longing to be good, to be of service, in order to be in God's favor and in Seekers' favor? Richard Rohr calls this "meritocracy," i.e. that God favors us based on our good deeds. Also, is there shadow in developing harmony over unity? Is it more important to blend, or do we need to learn to deeply strive with one another. Or, is there shadow around being resistant to move away from Church of the Savior tradition? Or, related to that, is there possibly shadow in believing we've done this Christian thing right? "We've made it. Nothing needs to change!"

Again, and in conclusion, my intention is to not find fault, nor to suggests answers right now, but simply to make us uncomfortable by stirring up the embers. I'm hoping that we will, as Sonya Dyer, has said, "hold the paradox." May we hold the paradoxes, learn to love even better, not be comfortable, willing to go into the darkneses of our life, and find truth and freedom by way of pushing back and breaking down barriers of tribal/superior thinking. Brothers and sisters in Christ, hurl your love letters into the fires around you. In truth, they will never burn up.