

Podcast link:

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand with the 50th Edition of Psyche and Soul.

In this edition I shall talk about the redemption of the Shadow at Midlife.

Midlife is the time when the shadow makes its presence felt. Carl Jung used the term “*shadow*” to describe that part of our personality that is repressed because it conflicts with the way we wish to see ourselves and be seen by others. It is that part of our personality we are now unaware of because it was deemed incompatible with our ideal personality and has been conveniently forgotten.

Shadow Formation

Our real self consists of both light and shadow, goodness and ugliness. We have our “angels and demons” –aspects that we admire and appreciate and feel good about and their opposites. Goodness and evil are both residents of our psyche and soul. As writer Henry Nouwen loved to remark, “Where God appears, the evil one is also present.”

However, we tend to hide our demons and would like to appear all angel. So, we create our “*persona*.” In our effort to conform to social expectations, we try to present ourselves to the world in the way the world wants us to be. To live up to an idealistic self-image we suppress aspects of our personality that do not fit the self-image. This image of ourselves that we consciously cultivate and project in order to be and seen in a particular way is our persona.

For example, we and others may have an idealistic image of who a good priest or religious needs to be. We may discover that there are characteristics in us, such as our anger, lust for power, tendency to gossip or our sexual desires that do not fit that image. We suppress these consciously; after a while we forget we suppressed them (Tell a lie over and over and after a while we ourselves will begin to believe it to be the truth!) and they become part of our unconscious. They get swept under the veneer of our proper self. The proper self that we present to the world becomes our persona. In creating the persona, many aspects of our lives get repressed, split off from our conscious self and awareness. These repressed aspects become the “shadow.”

The persona, that masks our real self (Persona originally referred to the mask worn by actors in Greek theatre to represent a character), is not all bad; it does serve a useful purpose. It helps us to adapt to the demands of our social and cultural circumstances. We cannot always say what we really feel, or act on every impulse regardless of circumstances. However, problems arise when we identify with the persona and begin to believe that we *are* the front or the mask that we present to the outer world, and we lose awareness of our true reality, especially the unacceptable aspects of our personality.

The more we identify with an overly good or righteous persona, the darker will be our shadow. Those of us who are religious or priests are especially vulnerable to shadow formation because our vocation involves commitment to very high spiritual values and standards of moral conduct. Understanding of religious life as a call to “perfection” or the priesthood as becoming another Christ, makes us suppress

anything in us that prevents us from appearing perfect or Christlike. Thus, we can easily suppress our angry feelings or our sexual feelings and longings and send these into the deepest basements of our psyche and soul, to become part of our shadow world.

Destructiveness of Shadow

What is destructive about unrecognised shadows is that they continue to be operative in our lives even though we are unaware of their existence. They drive our conscious behaviour, often in dysfunctional and even destructive ways.

When we are surprised by some of our unexpected unbecoming behaviours, it could be a pointer to a shadow. We might have cultivated the image of a gentle, sensitive, patient, understanding and compassionate human being. But during a conversation with someone whose behaviour we are disapproving, we suddenly burst into rage and begin to castigate the person using pretty strong language. In our sober moment, we ask, “What was that? How could I behave like that?” Well, that was our shadow, our repressed anger and resentment breaking through, embarrassing us and shocking others.

Shadow Integration

In midlife we experience the call to live life authentically, to be who we really are, to break out of the tyranny of social expectations. In midlife we hear the invitation from our “soul”—our deep, authentic self --, to recognize our unlived life, our deepest longings that we had repressed.

As the American poet Robert Bly observed, we spend the first half of our lives dissociating the unacceptable parts of ourselves and packing them into the invisible “shadow bag” that we carry on our back. In the second half of life we are invited to collect them back and make them part of our conscious self, and empty that heavy bag that slows down our journey toward wholeness.

During midlife unresolved issues of the past, and feelings buried for years deep in the recesses of the psyche can re-emerge from the unconscious and demand our attention. For those of us committed to a celibate lifestyle, our sexuality in particular, often resides in the shadow. Hence owning up and integrating (not acting out) our sexuality and intimacy needs into our conscious self becomes an important midlife task.

Openness to the experience of intimacy helps us to process many aspects of our self that reside in the shadow. In genuine intimacy we have the freedom to be ourselves, to be “psychologically naked” before the other. We can bare our heart and soul to the other without fear or embarrassment. In that kind of freedom and openness, many aspects of our self that were suppressed rise to the surface of consciousness. We can then process them with our friend and integrate them.

Thomas Keating, Trappist monk and psychologist, highlights this aspect of intimacy: “One characteristic of love,” he wrote, “is that it reduces our defences. When our defences go down, the dark side of our personality emerges. One important aspect of true friendship is the willingness to help each other process that material.” (*Intimacy with God*, p. 72)

Shadow and Spiritual Life

Acceptance and integration of the shadow can have profound impact on our spiritual life. Jung considered shadow-work so important to the health of the soul that he considered it a religious undertaking. In his psychology, getting to know the shadow is a way of redeeming all the rejected and lost parts of the soul.

With the acceptance of the darkness within ourselves, we can become more accepting of others’ weakness and become more compassionate. We also become more free to be ourselves, with genuine self-acceptance based on a more realistic sense of self. We recognise that we need not be perfect for God to

love us; we could be who we are, with our angels and demons. The result is a quantum leap on the spiritual path. Jungian analysts Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon describe the process as follows in the book *Urgings of the Heart* (p. 41)

For as we look at what frightens and shames us and come to know the pain that made us reject ourselves in the first place, we become newly receptive to God's healing grace.... As God's love for those wounded parts of us sinks in, we are able, perhaps for the first time, to love ourselves, dark side and all. We also find ourselves more able to reach out in love and compassion to others because we are less self-righteous and judgmental.

As another Jungian analyst, Robert Johnson, has pointed out, "To honour and accept the shadow is a profound spiritual discipline. It is whole-making and thus holy and the most important experience of a lifetime" (*Owning Your Own Shadow*, p. x).

Reclaiming what has been lost in the shadow is an essential aspect of the inner journey we need to undertake at midlife. To do so we need to listen to the inner voices that have been silenced, feel the feelings that have been deadened, and sense their yearnings. This necessitates slowing down the pace of life and creating solitude in which what is hidden away in the unconscious can slowly emerge into consciousness and being brave enough to acknowledge their presence and integrate them into our conscious persona.

Introspection

Honest answers to the following questions can point to our shadow:

1. *What unacceptable desires and impulses rise to consciousness unexpectedly in our solitudes?*
2. *What are the embarrassing "slips of the tongue" we make?*
3. *Who are the ugly or disreputable characters that appear in our dreams?*
4. *What is it that we intensely dislike or hate in another person or provoke our self-righteous indignation?*

Prayer

When Jesus speaks about the log in our eyes (Mathew 7, 3-5), he was essentially referring to our shadow-something we are not aware of. You could read that passage and stay a while in the presence of God or Jesus himself and ask them to help you recognize and redeem your shadows. And then sit quietly attending to whatever emerges into awareness. End the prayer thanking God for what you have been able to recognise.

May your weekend be happy and safe. Be blessed.
Thank you for listening/reading.

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