

Radical Self Acceptance

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Growing up in our culture we all receive messages about what is and isn't acceptable behavior. Thus, we are conditioned to see our personal actions and behaviors in terms of right vs. wrong, good vs. bad. For example, perhaps you were taught in your family that expressing anger was inappropriate or that calling attention to your talents was impolite. Whatever it is, we learn early to disown—to deny—those parts of ourselves that are dubbed socially unacceptable. These disowned parts constitute what is commonly referred to as our “shadow.”

Psychologist John Wellwood uses the image of a beautiful castle with thousands of rooms to describe the experience of early childhood and how it is that the shadow is created. As little children, we explore our glorious castle, room by room, giving full expression to each aspect of our unfolding self. Each room of the castle is beautiful in its own right; each has its own gift to offer. At this early stage, the concepts of “good” and “bad” do not exist.

Then one day, maybe you were two-years-old, someone came to your “castle” and announced that one of your rooms was deficient and that if you wanted a perfect castle you should lock that room; and because you desired the love and approval of that person you complied. With time others came and they, too, passed judgment on your castle's various rooms. Some said certain of your rooms were too conservative; others complained that some of your rooms were too bold; others observed that certain rooms were not seen in any other castle, and so forth. Gradually, you locked off more rooms, relegating these rooms—essential aspects of yourself—to darkness. Eventually, you found yourself confining your life to just a few of your castle's rooms and even forgetting that those other rooms had ever existed.

To become whole requires that we not simply acknowledge our shadow; the challenge is to actually *embrace* our shadow. Indeed, our shadow holds the key to the totality of who each of us is. For in each of us there is courage *and* fear, love *and* hatred, the capacity for bigness *and* smallness, as well as everything in between. There are not “good” parts and “bad” parts of us; it is the aggregation of all parts—the rainbow of being—that constitutes our “isness.”

But, really, why would anyone ever want to “embrace” those very tendencies in themselves—e.g., selfishness, anger, stupidity—that they have been socially conditioned to abhor? One reason is that in accepting our shadow we give ourselves freedom. For example, when I recognize and embrace that there is an aspect of me that I denote as “stupid” (i.e., that I sometimes make mistakes that others might consider “stupid”), I give myself the freedom to step out and take risks. In other words, by accepting—embracing—that I am a person who does stupid things from time to time, I am free to live as me, unshackled by fear of other's judgments—curious, even, to see what delightfully “stupid” thing I might do next. If, on the other hand, I play it safe, blocking myself off from the possibility of making mistakes, my life becomes sterile, dead.

There is another even more important reason for embracing our shadow--namely: What

we refuse to embrace in ourselves, we project out onto the world in the form of judgment, hatred, intolerance, and violence. Take lying. All of us would agree that to lie is wrong and we would probably go the next step and agree that people who are liars are bad people. But in so doing we would fail to acknowledge that to be born human is to be born with the capacity to lie. Though you may not be a pathological liar, consider how you have deceived others in your lifetime. ... Once we embrace this shadow part of ourselves—i.e, that we each have the capacity to lie and deceive—we become less inclined to righteously dismiss others (think politicians, “delinquent” youth, advertisers) who we believe engage in deception.

In sum, by embracing our shadow we offer unconditional love to all aspects of ourselves and, in the process, learn to extend compassion to all human “others.” And most important of all, by embracing our shadow we embrace our children, loving them unconditionally, thereby creating the conditions that lead them to embrace ALL the rooms in their “castle.”