

Engaging With the “Dark Side”

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*Dedicated to the staff and students at the Social Ecology Department,
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and to activists and people who do good, everywhere.*

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At a recent Social Ecology Research Group meeting, we were shown some statistics about the severely run down state of our planet and of humanity. Several students admitted to feeling overwhelmed and depressed. I believe that such feelings, in the face of the hard facts of our current global reality, are not the sole domain of Social Ecology students. I suspect that many have a similar experience when confronted with the latest human or ecological catastrophe in the mass media.

Late last year James Nachtwey, who calls himself “an anti-war photographer”, appeared on the *Oprah* show, where he was interviewed about his book *Inferno*. This work is a collection of photographs “disclosing some of today’s harshest examples of man’s inhumanity to his fellow man.” From “...Somalia’s famine to genocide in Rwanda, from Romania’s abandoned orphans to the lives of India’s “untouchables”, from war in Bosnia to conflict in Chechnya.”¹ When asked what the “ordinary”² individual can do in response to his photos, Nachtwey paused for a long moment and then said, “When confronted with images of pain and suffering, don’t shut down or turn away. Stay engaged. Force yourself to be moved by what you are seeing...Keep it alive emotionally within yourself”.

Nachtwey is right that we must not shut down in the face of suffering. Feeling something about what we see is the first condition towards making a difference to our fellow human beings, to animals and to the planet. But of course this is easier said than done. There are limits to what even kind and caring people are able to tolerate emotionally. There are serious and very real dangers in exposing ourselves to a lot of suffering and pain. This is particularly true for those of us who are at the “front-line” of human tragedy. This includes, but not limited to, people working in fire and rescue services, ambulance officers, police, counsellors and psychotherapist, youth workers, teachers, ministers of religion, prison officers, doctors, nurses and other hospital staff. It also includes agents of change. These are people whose life’s work is aimed at making things better for various social groups, animals, the environment or individuals. By the nature of the work we do, we receive a disproportionate dose of the “dark matter” of life. One of the worst dangers in being exposed to a high dose of “dark matter” is to become overwhelmed and disillusioned. I think of it as being tempted by the “dark side”. The temptation is to begin to believe that darkness is all there is.

Some call this condition “burnout”, others call it “secondary traumatisation”, still others might focus on exhaustion or other physical symptoms. Whatever you call it, what happens is that we temporarily lose our ability to feel hope and see the beauty and goodness that are also in the world and in humanity. Our perception goes out of balance and we focus more on the “half empty” part of the glass instead of the whole glass.

¹ <http://www.jamesnachtwey.com/> (Last accessed 2 May 2012)

² The word “ordinary” here refers to people whose work does not normally involve engaging with planetary and societal problems.

When we are confronted with a reality that looks like it is all darkness, when we witness or hear about gross injustice or cruelty, we experience a great sense of danger. We can feel so threatened that our natural and healthy instinct is to protect ourselves from that darkness.

Darkness in the outside world also has the power to trigger our own internal darkness. Our internal darkness, or “shadow” as Carl Jung called it, contains everything that we prefer not to touch, see or acknowledge within ourselves. It’s the no-go zone in ourselves. For many people the shadow contains a good deal of pain and woundedness.

Avoidance

One of the ways that we can respond to the external and internal threat is by withdrawing emotionally and/or physically. This is what people do when they close Nachtwey’s book. When I was still living in Israel there was a long period of time when I stopped watching the news and reading the newspapers. I just couldn’t cope with the relentless barrage of bad news and negativity. (My own avoidance did not stop me from criticising others for theirs. I openly accused friends and family of avoiding reality and of not caring)

My experience as a therapist in the past thirteen years has been humbling. It taught me to be much more compassionate, with myself and others. Although I consider avoidance a serious problem, I can now understand—rather than judge—the tendency to avoid the dark side of life. The degree of avoidance is probably an indication of the depth of pain that is within us.

Paradoxically, a common way of avoiding the “dark side can be to develop a strong desire to “do something’ about it”. Although we would often believe that we are acting for the benefit of others, in fact we try to “fix” the situation so that the “bad” thing will go away and not hurt *us* anymore. Under such circumstances we operate out of our own need (to feel safe) rather than in response to the need of those whom we are trying to help. I know that I am no longer effective as a therapist when I find myself offering solutions or explanations, teaching or preaching to my clients, at the expense of true engagement and presence. At such times I almost always discover that I am avoiding discomfort; protecting myself from having to engage with pain. Some forms of activism can fall under this category.

Notwithstanding the enormous value of spiritual practices such as meditation for example, it is possible to practice them in such a way that the practice itself becomes a way of avoiding pain, anxiety or discomfort. It is as if we are trying to get a shortcut to bliss and wellbeing while bypassing the darkness in the world and within ourselves. Trying to look at life as “all good”³ is as unrealistic as seeing life as all suffering and pain. In Tibetan Buddhism, monks regularly contemplate their own death and suffering. Their aim is to expand their consciousness so that they can grasp the totality of life, as they believe Buddha was able to do. They believe that to avoid the dark side is simply to be out of touch with reality (The Dalai Lama, 1997).

The dangers of engaging with darkness are obvious and our defences are understandable. However, our avoidance takes us further away from doing good. It also causes us to avoid what we need to address within ourselves. How can we engage with the “dark side” and not act on the threat that we experience?

³ People who use spirituality as an escape from pain or discomfort imply that spirituality has something to do with an all “positive” or perfect perception of reality. I believe that true spirituality has more to do with what *is*, with *all there is*, the good and the bad, light and shadow, the joyful and the painful.

Seeing the bigger picture

Some clients try very hard to convince me that the list of problems they bring to me defines them; that this list of problems is all they are. This is understandable for a person who is in the midst of a crisis or who is suffering very deeply. I make sure that I am not “seduced” by what I see hear, and I keep in mind that my client is larger than his or her present crisis or “issues”[5]. As a humanistic therapist, I simply refuse to believe that people *are* their problems. The client before me is a full human being with infinite dimensions and facets, possibilities, dreams, talents, stories, personal and cultural history, dignity and yes, also possibly a lot of trouble, grief, misery and woundedness.

When my clients are in crisis they are temporarily unable to feel hope or see the “light at the end of a dark tunnel”. Because I maintain a vision of the whole of the person, I am also able to be the “custodian” of hope and vision for my clients, until such time when they are capable of holding it for themselves. I do so without forgetting their problems, and I hold the hope only as long as is necessary. As soon as my clients are ready, I pass it back to them. Knowing when the right time is, depends on how well I engage with the client. If I try to pass it back too quickly, it might mean that I am avoiding the discomfort of the client's troubles and the client is likely to feel abandoned by me. Seeing the client as a whole person also helps me maintain a balanced view of life.

The same principle applies when we work with all kinds people and problems. Even in the midst of despair and devastation, the human spirit is alive somewhere. For those of you who are working with groups of victims it is important not to forget the dignity of their unique wholeness. You must remember their strengths, their full spirit, and their desire for meaning. They are more than just victims. There is always dignity and spirit somewhere and we must be prepared to see it even in the midst of enormous suffering. If we cannot see the full humanity in victims or the dignity in a devastated piece of nature, I do not believe that we can truly make a difference. If we see only the problems, we risk objectifying those whom we are trying to help. The world needs us to view it as more than just a collection of problems to be fixed or eliminated.

When are you more likely to suffer burnout?

Our capacity to be tempted by the “dark side” varies depending on our personal circumstances. Sometimes we can feel so positive and strong that we simply do not feel threatened. But at other times we might be more vulnerable. So far I have learnt that I am more vulnerable to being drawn into the ‘dark side’:

- When I am physically unwell;
- When I am grieving or adjusting a big life change; and
- When I have emotional “unfinished business” of my own.

When I am physically unwell and when I am grieving or adjusting to change I need to be taken care of. My ability to be with people who are in need is naturally diminished. If I try to force myself to be with others in need when I am myself in need, I am likely to feel impatient, irritable, drained and resentful. When I am not conscious that I am in need, these feelings are a useful beacon to alert me. If I feel impatient with a client or if I am too eager to “fix”, I immediately suspect that something is going on with me

I believe that feeling overwhelmed in any circumstances is an overreaction. In the face of a traumatic story I might feel angry and sad. These feelings are appropriate. But if my emotional experience is *overwhelming*, then instead of anger I might feel blind rage, or instead of sadness I might experience overwhelming pain, despair or depression. These are signs that some of my *own* unfinished business is being triggered by something in my present experience. There is a useful rule of thumb we

use in my profession. If the emotional response to a situation feels overwhelming, then the issue is probably 90% in the past and only 10% in the present.

Appropriate emotional responses, no matter how deep or difficult, are not experienced as overwhelming. The “dark side” can only have a hold on us through our own “shadow”. As I mentioned earlier, our shadow includes the things in us that we are not aware of, that we do not acknowledge or that we have denied because for some reason we have not been able to face them. Since we all have wounds, we are all at risk at some time or another. It all depends on whether a new experience happens to press the right “buttons” in us.

Reflection: When are you more likely to be “tempted” by the dark side? I encourage you to reflect on your life and try to identify the circumstances when you might be more vulnerable to burnout. Think about situations when you feel irritable, impatient, try too quickly to fix or change circumstances or people, or when you find yourself shutting down emotionally and withdrawing. Try to notice the difference between appropriate feelings and disproportionate, overwhelming ones. Reflect on the last time you experienced an overwhelming response. What do you think was being triggered within you at that time?

Caring for our own well-being when we are vulnerable

In order to avoid burnout we need to have enough self-awareness to know when we are likely to be vulnerable. The next step is to develop an awareness of our needs when we are vulnerable, and know how to meet them.

Physical wellbeing

When I am ill I need to rest and eat properly so that I can allow my body to heal. I might also need medical attention and a lot of TLC from someone close⁴. It is obvious that during illness I must not work. It is important to allow as much time as needed so that the body can truly heal and recover. If we do not, the illness might manifest itself in a lingering low-key drain on our energy, that can point to unsustainable living.

Grief and grieving

Grief is a natural process of adjustment that follows any significant life change. Even a positive and desirable change will be accompanied by grief. It is a process that helps us create a “bridge” between the world as it was before the change, and the world as it is now. Grief can be accompanied by some physical symptoms and changes in appetite. It may also be accompanied by a temporary loss of excitement or interest in things that are otherwise central to us, impairment of our short-term memory and difficulty concentrating. People sometimes report feeling as if they have suddenly become stupid or having a sense that they are going crazy. In times of grief most people tend to focus more on the “negative” side of life.

Grief does not need a resolution or a cure. It is not an illness or a pathology but rather a natural process that simply needs to be experienced as much as possible without interruption. Un-grieved grief can make us ill, and in the long run it can develop into depression.

⁴ Many people do not have someone close who can take care of them, when they are ill. During an illness they might feel disappointed, lonely or sad about this. If your needs cannot be met, at least make sure that you allow yourself to feel your feelings about this fully without judging them, avoiding them, numbing them or trying to fix them. It is not so much our life events that hurt us. It is the lack of both internal and external permission to have and feel *all* of our feelings, that is more likely to wound us.

Grief is often misdiagnosed as depression by both professionals and the suffering individual. This is a serious problem because an otherwise natural and healthy process is being inappropriately and unnecessarily pathologised. Although they may look similar from the outside, the difference between grief and depression is that grief is a dynamic process that has energy in it, and depression seems to be stagnant and lacking in energy.

During grief we are likely to feel exhausted and therefore a lot of rest and sleep might be needed. We might also need a lot of time and space to be able to reflect. We might need a shoulder to cry on, or someone we can talk to who does not need anything from us. During grief even strong extraverts become more introverted for a while. Grief is therefore an inappropriate time for activism or for being in a helping position. If grief is grieved properly, it will end and you will go back to feeling like yourself again. (To learn more on grief and adjustment to change, see my article at: www.fullyhuman.co.uk/grief)

Unfinished business

When unfinished business is triggered our work can be impaired. Our judgement might be coloured by a past context, and we might not be able to see things for what they are in the here-and-now. When you become aware that something unresolved has been triggered, different tasks may be required. You might need to see a therapist to work through it, or you might engage with the issue in other ways through art, a ceremony, writing letters, writing in a journal or any other strategy that you know works for you. If you are not sure, experimenting with different ways can help you discover what best works for you.

Self-care as a way of life

In the previous section I referred to wellbeing and self-care in when we are particularly vulnerable. However, it is important not to wait for a crisis but to develop an attitude of self-care as a way of life.

A fundamental point about self-care is congruence. If you are a person whose life's work involves helping others, then it would not be congruent to not do the same for yourself. I sometimes come across therapists whose physical and emotional wellbeing suffers terrible neglect and I wonder how capable they are of really helping their clients. I feel uncomfortable when I meet doctors who are chain-smokers or appear stressed, overworked and exasperated. What message or example do they give to their patients about self-care and living a healthy life? I believe that if our personal life is incongruent with our work, then both pay the price.

Reflection: Of course there is a lot more to say on the subject of self-care. In what follows, I focus on our work environment, the role of supervision, and the existential aspect of our work. In addition to these points I encourage you to reflect on what self-care means to you personally. Ask yourself what areas in your life are already informed by an attitude of self-care, and in what areas this is still missing? Also, what helps you or stops you when you try to care for yourself? Are your life and work congruent?

Our work environment

Jeffrey Kottler (2000) surprised and disappointed me when he advised counsellors and others who do good, to just “get on with it” if they work in organisations that are poisonous and uncaring. He says, “Mutter to yourself and feel resentful. But if you are truly serious about helping others, you will likely pay a small price in terms of environmental dysfunction. It is not usually that big of a deal... unless you make it so”.

I strongly disagree with Kottler and think that he is sending the wrong message here. There is a growing body of research that shows a strong link between dysfunctional work environments and anything from heart disease to depression⁵. The price is not always small and it certainly is not always just a matter of perception. There can be very serious things that are wrong in the work environments. For example, you might have the misfortune of having a team member or worse, a manager, who has a personality disorder⁶. There can be unfair and unreasonable work conditions, expectations or demands. There are situations where work is poorly organised, where people are expected to do the impossible and where the system sets people up to fail. Such circumstances can lead to serious physical and psychological harm in innocent people who are just trying to do their job well. .

There is a world of possibilities between embarking on a crusade to change your organisation, and being a martyr or a hero. We are in a relationship with organisations and they have to care for us as much as we care for them. This means that when we are aware of a need and express it in a reasonable way, the organisation has an obligation to take us seriously. No relationship can be healthy if the needs of one side are always sacrificed for the sake of the other. Yet, I believe that this is what happens in many organisations, where the organisational needs often take precedence over the needs of individuals. There is no magic in size and big is not more important or worthy than small.

Reflection: Do you work for an organisation that is likely to understand your needs? Or are you working in a an environment where you are discouraged from having needs; where needing anything is considered a weakness; or where when things do not go so well for you, you risk becoming marginalised? (I encourage you to ask the same questions about your home environment as well.)

The role of supervision

Most therapists, whether they work in private practice or in agencies, see a supervisor on a regular basis. A supervisor is usually an older, and more experienced therapist whose role is to be a skilled mentor and advisor. Good supervisors challenge, guide, educate, listen, reassure and validate. They are familiar with the work of the supervisee but they are not involved in it directly and so can remain reasonably objective. They are there partly to help therapists deal with what comes up for them in the course of their work, and help identify unfinished business.

Supervision is seen as absolutely essential for the wellbeing of both therapists and their clients. This is so precisely because of the potentially disturbing nature of our work and the danger of burnout. Many people use informal sources of support in their work environment. Whilst this can be beneficial, it is also important that organisations provide their employees with formal, consistent, skilled and reliable supervision. There needs to be someone available with whom you can debrief, share your experiences in a confidential and safe space.

The existential dimension: Purpose, meaning and identity

People who do good can spend a lifetime developing many aspects of themselves to make sure they are suited for their jobs. This is a big investment. Now, imagine that everything is fixed. Everything you worked for is now fine: no more famine, disease, war or misery, and the environment is healthy. What will happen to you and your

⁵ See the work of Robert Karasek on job strain. Examples of references to his work: <http://www.workhealth.org/strain/jsdef.html> last accessed 30 April 2012, <http://www.workhealth.org/strain/briefintro.html> last accessed 30 April 2012,

⁶ See for example: John Clarke. (2005). *Working With Monsters*. Random House Australia. Clarke is a forensic psychologist with a great deal of expertise in personality disorders and how they affect others.

life? What will happen to your sense of purpose? Your identity? In my practice leaflet I write that “my job is to make myself redundant”. But I often ask myself what would really happen to me in a perfect world, where everyone is healthy and there are no more clients? Who and what will I be? What about all the years and effort that I invested in developing and polishing my skills?

My way of addressing this is to make sure, as much as I can, that my identity, wellbeing and sense of worth do not come only from my work. Yes, I feel satisfaction and pride when my work goes well, but it is not the same as getting my entire sense of worth or identity from it.

In summary

- Anyone who is an agent of change and who works in an field where there is great need, trauma, suffering, injustice, physical, emotional and spiritual destruction is always potentially at risk of being drawn into the “dark side”.
- The secret to being well does not lie in not having problems. It is in knowing ourselves and living our lives with self-care and self-compassion and honesty. We need to know our needs, have appropriate strategies in place to meet them, and the willingness to use these strategies. In particular, we need to know when we are most at risk of burnout and we must be committed to our own ongoing personal development.
- Being well at all levels protects us from losing our balance and being sucked into the “dark side”. If we are not well, we not only lose our effectiveness but we risk losing our excitement and joy in life, our sense of purpose, our ability to relate to others intimately and meaningfully, our physical health, and maybe even life itself.
- We need to live congruently. The way we live our own lives needs to be congruent with the purpose of our work. If it is not, we risk becoming another casualty of the “dark side”. Instead of doing good we can become unwitting collaborators with the very problem we are trying to solve.

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