

## **Engaging With the “Dark Side”**

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*Dedicated with love 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’[3].

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. However, there are serious dangers in exposing ourselves to suffering and pain. This is particularly true for those of us who are agents of change; 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 chronic fatigue or other physical symptoms. In burnout we temporarily lose our ability to feel hope and see the beauty that is also in the world and in humanity. I believe that when we are confronted with a reality that looks like it is all darkness, our soul experiences a great sense of danger. Our soul feels so threatened that our natural instinct is to protect ourselves from that darkness. I also believe that darkness in the outside world triggers our own internal darkness. Our internal darkness, or shadow, contains everything that we prefer not to touch within ourselves. For many people it 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 handle the endless barrage of bad news. Even now, I still find it hard to read the daily newspapers and have a tendency to avoid them. 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 last few 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. Before I say anything else about avoidance, I would like to suggest that we adopt an attitude of compassion and forgiveness in the face of avoidance. We need to understand that the degree of avoidance is probably an indication of the depth of pain that is within us.

One common way of avoiding the 'dark side' can be to develop a strong desire to 'do something'. It is as if 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 or teaching my clients too much, 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 (in which I too engage), it is possible to practice them selectively so that the practice itself is a way of avoiding pain, anxiety, discomfort. It is as if we are trying to get a shortcut to bliss and well-being while bypassing the darkness in the world and within ourselves. Trying to look at life as 'all good'[4] is as unrealistic as seeing life as all suffering and pain. In Tibetan Buddhism, believers 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 and therefore contributes to the problems that we are trying to solve. How can we engage with the 'dark side' and not act on the threat that we experience?

## **Seeing the bigger picture**

Some clients try very hard to convince me that the list of problems they bring to me defines all they are. This is understandable behaviour for a person who is in the midst of a crisis or who is suffering very deeply. My gift in therapy, I believe, lies in my ability to not be seduced by what I see, and to 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 human being with infinite dimensions and facets, possibilities dreams, talents, stories, personal and cultural history, dignity and yes, also a lot of trouble, misery and woundedness.

When my clients are in crisis they are 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 temporarily, 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 can be applied when we work with planetary 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 bush, 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' changes depending on our personal circumstances. Sometimes we can feel so positive and strong that we simply do not feel threatened. There are other times though, when 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; and
- When I have emotional 'unfinished business' of my own.

When I am physically unwell and when I am grieving 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 for me.

I believe that feeling overwhelmed 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*, when 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. One of my teachers once taught me a useful rule of thumb. 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 difficult they might be, are not experienced as overwhelming. The 'dark side' can only have a hold on us through our own 'shadow'. Our shadow includes the things in us that we are not aware of, that we do now 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.

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 well-being**

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 close[6]. 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, signalling unsustainable living.

### **Grief and grieving**

Grief is a natural process of adjustment that follows any significant 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, and sometimes in temporary impairment of our short-term memory. 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.

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 tired and therefore a lot of rest is 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 extroverts 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 feel better.

### **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 well-being and self-care in relation to times 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 have a better life, 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-love and self-care? I believe that if our life is incongruent with our work, then ultimately both pay the price.

There is a lot more to say on the subject of self-care. In what follows, I choose to 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 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. It almost sounds as if he 'blames the victim'. There is a growing body of research that shows a strong link between dysfunctional work environments and anything from heart disease to depression[7]. The price is not always small and it is not necessarily just matter of perception.

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 assertively, the organisation has an obligation to take us seriously and not simply ignore or dismiss it. No relationship can be healthy if the needs of one partner 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.

Do you work for an organisation or group 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 the 'enemy'? (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 well-being 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 find 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 and share your experiences. What kind of support is available to you in your work?

### **The existential: Our purpose and sense of meaning and worth**

People who are agents of change can spend a lifetime developing many aspects of themselves in a way that makes them best suited for the job. 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 life? What will happen to your sense of purpose? Your identity? In my brochure I bravely write that "my job is to make myself redundant". But I often ask myself what would really happen to me in an ideal 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?

The way things seem at the moment, it doesn't look like I would have to worry about running out of clients in my lifetime. However, I believe that in order to be a healthy human being I must think about how much of my identity is invested in my work. I believe that there can be danger to both ourselves and our cause, whatever it is, if too much is invested in it. If my whole sense of identity depends on what I do, then my work will be too intense, too 'precious', I will need it too much. This means that underneath the surface, out of my awareness, I might not want my clients to get better, and that every time a client is about to finish therapy, I might feel threatened. Perhaps without being aware I will even encourage clients to stay unwell. If this happens, it means that I have become part of the same system that created the client's problems in the first place. The same principles need to be applied to the relationship between activists and their cause.

My way of addressing this concern is to make sure, as much as I can, that my identity, well-being 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 sense of worth or identity from it. I practice being a human being as opposed to a human doing).

### **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 is not 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'. Then, instead of doing good we can become unintended collaborators with the very system with which we disagree.

In 1993 I attended a three week seminar on teaching the Holocaust and Antisemitism at 'Yad Vashem'[8] in Jerusalem (a research and memorial centre focusing on the Holocaust). During the seminar my colleagues and I were exposed to horrific material for 8 hours every day. It was a very disturbing time for all of us. Close to the end of the three weeks Israel Charney, a compassionate man, a psychologist and a Genocide scholar said to us something which at the time seemed strange and out of place, almost inappropriate. But I think that I now understand his message. I leave you with his words: 'Do not forget to live a full life, eat well, enjoy life and relationships, make love'.

## References

- The Dalai Lama. (1997). *The way to freedom*. London: Thorsons.
- Kottler, J. (2000). *Doing good; Passion and commitment for helping others*. Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge

## Footnotes

[1] [http://oprah.oxygen.com/tows/booksseen/tows\\_book\\_20000424\\_jnacht.html](http://oprah.oxygen.com/tows/booksseen/tows_book_20000424_jnacht.html)

[2] I do not believe that ordinary people exist. I used this term as a way of referring to people whose work does not normally involve engaging with planetary and societal problems.

[3] [http://oprah.oxygen.com/tows/pastshows/tows\\_past\\_20000710\\_d.html](http://oprah.oxygen.com/tows/pastshows/tows_past_20000710_d.html)

[4] People who use spirituality as an escape from pain seem to imply that spirituality has something to do with an all 'positive' or perfect 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.

[5] I have considered the possibility that being able to see my clients full potential comes relatively easily to me because of my personality type (INFP). Irrespective of your personality type, what can you do to develop your ability to see beyond what is presented to you?

[6] Many do not have someone close who can take care of them, and during illness they might feel disappointed, lonely or sad about this. If your need 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 our feelings, that is more likely to wound us.

[7] See for example the work of Robert Karasek:  
<http://www.uml.edu/Dept/WE/karasek.htm>

[8] Yad Vashem is an organisation that was set up for the purpose of study, research and remembrance of the Holocaust. Interestingly, to the best of my knowledge, there is nothing in Yad Vashem's agenda that addresses the need for healing.

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