

The Hidden Gift of Otherness – What you like least in others could be your best ally

by Miriam Dyak

"I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,

And what can be the use of him is more than I can see."

I remember that little rhyme by Robert Louis Stevenson from a children's anthology of poems my parents gave me in second grade. Most of us feel that way about our shadows; what's the use of it? We're uneasy about something shadowy following us in and out everywhere we go.

Stevenson, who wrote *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, certainly knew more than most people about the shadow side of human beings and how it can be our undoing. I'd like to tell you about how your shadow – what you disown or judge harshly in yourself or others – can not only be useful, it can be your saving grace.

That saving grace comes at the end of the story, though. The story usually begins with pretending I'm all sunshine.

All those "dark" qualities belong to someone else. "Not my shadow!" I protest. "I'm supportive and compassionate, open and accepting. It's not my fault that I keep running into selfish, controlling, judgmental people!"

"I know what you mean," says my best friend. "My boss is hypercritical, downright mean. But me? I've really never had a mean bone in my body. I always try to listen and have loving intentions, so why do I attract a boss like this into my life?"

If you listened only to our conversation, we'd win you over in no time. Who would want to be on the side of selfishness or meanness? Funny thing, though, somewhere else my friend's boss is complaining to his friend, "You wouldn't believe this bird brain we've got working for us; very sweet, listens to everything I say, and then doesn't do anything about it!"

No one would argue for having only day and getting rid of night, but that does seem to be what we do when

faced with personalities that are opposite to our own. Each side can make such a good case for what they value and what they condemn; it's clear one person's darkness is another person's light. Maybe, just maybe, we actually need both.

To my very sensitive friend the kind of focus and analytical ability needed to move forward in business feels hypercritical and even mean. But, she needs some of that clear strong focus in order to be able to take effective action. And, it almost goes without saying that her boss could really use a dose of her sensitivity. In a very real sense they are God's gift to each other, each one carrying the quality the other most needs. The challenge is how do they each recognize and receive the gift the other person is bringing; especially when it comes wrapped in such an unpleasant package?

Here's a simple clue to recognizing hidden gifts. If somebody really pushes your buttons, if they irritate

the heck out of you and you have lots of judgments about their behavior and attitude, then you've hit the jackpot of self-discovery. There's pretty much a guaranteed gift underneath what feels like so much negativity.

How can I get to that gift? I could start by assuming that the other person's behavior makes sense to them. In fact, (using the example about me) they probably don't see themselves as selfish or controlling or judgmental, and it's quite likely they don't perceive me as a paragon of compassion and acceptance either.

I could be curious. How does this other person see themselves? What is it they are trying to accomplish? Could it be that what seems selfish to me is really more self-care and solid boundaries? Perhaps I've been so prejudiced in the direction of openness and acceptance, that I can't recognize the need to set limits. Instead I just judge it as too controlling.

I wonder how this other person sees me? Do I seem hopelessly new age to them? Am I so compassionate that I appear gullible and naive? What happens to me if I'm

always determined to be open and accepting? Well, I probably lose some necessary control in my own life and don't exercise the best judgment.

It's hard to accept differences. We all want others to be just like us, but somehow we always end up having to deal with our opposites. Once I get past my initial judgment and start to be curious about the other person, then I can discover the gift in their way of being. I can start to see through the shadow and find the source of the light that is shining on me and causing me to cast a shadow. It's always something I'm missing, something I need to make me whole.

Obviously I wouldn't want to go overboard and become really judgmental. I wouldn't want to start ignoring others' needs and only take care of myself. But, wouldn't I be more in balance if I had a little more of this other person's energy? Wouldn't a little more discernment, self-care, and boundaries be a real gift for me? You bet it would.

Think about it. Who's really been bugging you lately? What is it that person does

that makes you so crazy? Are they arrogant? Pushy? Don't listen? And what about you? Do you tend to go overboard in the other direction? Do you tend to get walked all over? If so, could you use just a drop of their "arrogance" and being "pushy"? No, I don't mean that you would actually ever be arrogant, never. But would a drop, just a drop, of their energy give you a bit more self-assurance, maybe a tad more assertiveness when you need it most? Try it out. Maybe that shadow really is useful after all.

Miriam Dyak is a counselor and teacher and co-founder of The Voice Dialogue Institute, www.thevoicedialogueinstitute.org. The institute will offer "Deepening Connections," March 14-15, a relationship weekend focused on finding the gold in negative judgments and learning energy tools to increase presence and connection in your life. "The Benefit of People Who Bug You" by Jaimeona Pan-gaia is a great book to read more about the ideas in this article.

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