

LOOKING INWARD

A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY LEADING TO FREEDOM!



We dread becoming more conscious of ourselves and the realities of life. That's why denial holds such sway in our lives. We can only stand a bit of reality at a time.

From earliest years, we're protective of ourselves. At times it's a matter of survival. Some experiences are too painful or fearful to deal with, some realities seem better left alone.

As children, feeling powerless to change such situations, we quickly learn to rely on self-protective defenses of repression and denial.

Repression forces the memory of an event into the unconscious mind; *denial* refuses to acknowledge reality.

We continue these defenses throughout a lifetime, shielding ourselves from hard-to-admit truths.

To assist in this task, we also use other methods to help us repress and deny - like busyness and certain addictions.

At any age we tend to push troublesome realities out of conscious awareness. We deny our personal weaknesses, past traumatic events, and even the uncomfortable fact that one day we will die.

It's actually easier to deny reality than deal with it. It's not right, not healthy, but easier.

Things that are repressed and denied make up what is called our "shadow", so named because they comprise facts hidden from the light of our awareness.

It's important for us to realize, however, that everything hidden within us is still operative.

What is hidden affects us indirectly. It slips out in moods, sarcasm, or indecent behavior; it can be the cause of headaches, anxiety, stress and depression. Our outside health is tremendously affected by our inside health.

Even relationships can be seriously impacted by unrecognized and unshared elements of our lives. That's one of the reasons communication is so crucial for healthy relationships. Unfaced fears, unadmitted feelings, guilt, and other denied parts of us can hold us back from loving and being loved more freely.

There are two possible approaches we can take toward the things we repress and deny. We can keep trying to hide them from ourselves and keep the door shut and the light of awareness turned off.

Or, we can decide to go meet them and deal healthfully with their presence.

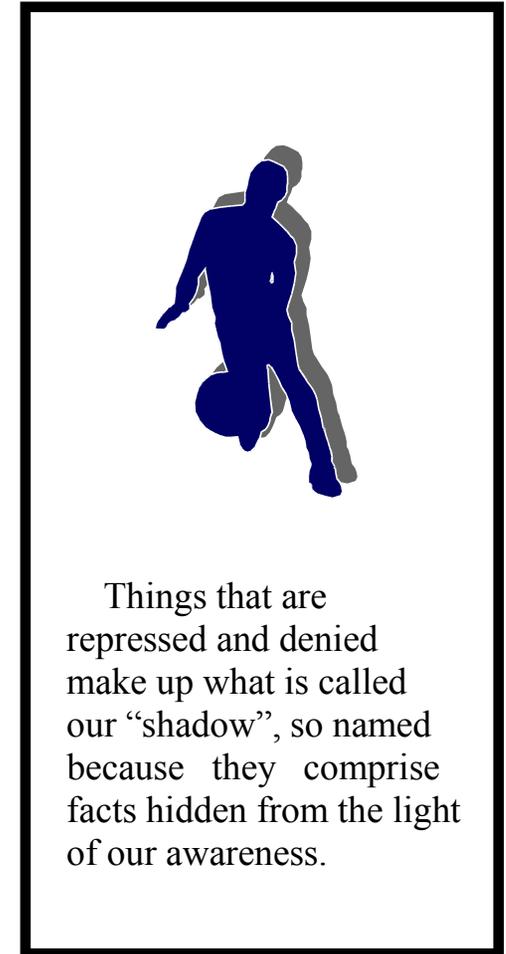
Many more of us choose the former than the latter because the latter is frightening and requires courage and much work. At times it is extremely beneficial to have the help of a competent counselor - emphasis on competent. The blind can't lead the blind.

Those of us who choose the first way of dealing with our shadow usually have a great distrust of being human, of possessing feelings and a body. We believe if we acknowledge our human impulses they will always run wild, and do terrible things. So we rely on repression and denial, on more rules, tighter morality, and higher fences.

When we choose the second way of dealing with our shadow world, we choose the better way.

We cannot afford to look away from what is within us, good or bad. We can't shove a burning wastebasket in the closet and pretend it's taken care of. It smolders, and can burn down the house. We must start by acknowledging our dark side.

We don't deny that it is there, nor call it friend, but by honestly meeting it we can better plan to keep from being overwhelmed by it. In fact, greater shadow awareness can lead to greater morality.



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Text by Lou Guntzelman, a Catholic priest of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati.