BOOK REVIEW

A Little Book On The Human Shadow | Robert Bly

Reasons For Reading

Stephen Buhner’s high praise of Bly peaked my interest in him. I was especially interested because of the benefits I’ve gained from years of shadow work to this point. This book has a reputation of having deep insight into the nature of the human shadow, and it’s a short-quick read.

Take-Aways

Symbol and metaphor are really useful in understanding shadow-dynamics.

My shadow parts are allies and resources for my most difficult issues and challenges.

Accepting difficult tasks and living them out are essential to discovering and retrieving certain shadow parts.

It’s wise to change your life according to the insights and lessons of shadow-material, whether it reveals itself through art or other means.

SummaReview

This is a short book comprised of five parts — different essays and one interview introducing and discussing different aspects of “the human shadow” concept. Bly begins part 1 by talking about how different cultures and groups have characterized the shadow differently, often relating with it as a negative, harmful thing, in stark contrast and opposition with the “light” side of the personality-ego-complex. However, Bly argues that the shadow side has been misunderstood, and is actually a great resource for developing a resilient, fearless, and harmonious personality. Thus, the subsequent 4 parts explore how to hunt, retrieve, and “eat” our shadows.

“The shadow by definition is that part of ourselves that is hidden from us.” Many people are not aware of having a shadow, but most people are aware of instances where certain unwanted behavior comes out unpredictably, without our conscious intent. In part 2, Bly uses “the long bag we drag behind us” as a metaphor for explaining how we develop a personal shadow throughout
childhood and early adulthood; over time, we learn from friends, family and culture what behaviors and parts of our personality are not acceptable, wanted or desired — these are the parts that go into the bag. Communities, states and nations develop bags as well, and in it are stored many of the fears and insecurities that have never been addressed, dealt with and integrated back into the personal or collective story.

In parts 3-5, Bly shows how we can begin to acquaint ourselves with our shadow parts by paying attention to what and how we project our shadows onto the world; projection is distinct from accurate observation, and by seeing how we attribute certain characteristics or qualities onto people and events in our life, we can get a lens into what we’ve got hiding in “the bag.” “When one ‘projects,’ one is really giving away an energy or power that rightfully belongs to one’s own treasury.” Thus, “eating shadow” becomes a fruitful activity because it reunites us with inner resources that can help us find strength and harmony throughout life; “eating shadow” also relieves us of the burden of hiding parts of ourselves from the world, and thus empowers us to be who we truly are. Leaving the shadow side unexplored increases pathological schism in the personality, leaving only parts of us to live life’s challenges and opportunities.

**Anything Else**

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The positive force of “the witch” archetype is that she knows what she wants. -p.36

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Don’t get caught up in oversimplification and generalizations.

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