

The Seekers Forum Transcript

The Mardi Gras Effect: An Interview with Connie Zweig, Ph.D.

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Hi, this is Mark Matousek. For the past thirty years, Dr. Connie Zweig has been a pioneer in the fields of Shadow-Work and mindfulness practice. She is the founder of the Center for Shadow-Work and Spiritual Counseling, received her doctorate in depth psychology and trained at the Los Angeles Jung Institute. She's also been in private practice in Los Angeles for over two decades, helping thousands of people detect unconscious sources of secret feelings and behaviors and transform them into positive constructive patterns. Dr. Zweig is the author of "The Holy Longing" and "A Moth to the Flame" as well as co-author of two seminal books in the field, "Meeting the Shadow" and "Romancing the Shadow." We spoke recently about the secret wisdom to be found in the shadow and how to bring mindfulness to our forbidden zones as well as compassion on path to authenticity.

MM: Hello and welcome Connie Zweig. I've wanted to speak to you for so many years. I'm a great admirer of your work. I've known of it since *Romancing the Shadow*, so thank you for taking the time to talk to me today.

CZ: Hi, Mark. Thanks for the invitation.

MM: I'd like to start off talking about the idea of there being no consistent self and us being so situationally affected. You know, we go through our lives believing that there is a single 'us' and then people like you come along and say, "No, there's this whole shadow side, that you just put yourself in the right situation and it will come out." It's a big wake-up call for folks. So, how do you think about authenticity when there are so many inconsistent selves in us that can come out at any time?

CZ: That's a great question. I am not of the school that there is no 'Self.' I'm not a practicing Buddhist. I come more out of the Hindi tradition. For me there is a higher Self, or, we could call it an intuitive Self; we could call it a center; we could call it whatever we want. We could call it God within.

MM: Self with a capital 'S.'

CZ: With a capital 'S,' that's right.

MM: We're not talking about self with a small 's.'

CZ: Ok. So because there is this experience of being centered in a higher Self, our spiritual practice is so pivotal to doing shadow work. When we have the experience of a part, what we call a shadow character, erupting, it might erupt in spontaneous anger or in a feeling of jealousy or in cheating or in lying or blaming or greed. Any kind of feeling that is forbidden to the ego that is unacceptable to our self-image. Not the higher Self but to our self-image. That is an example of a shadow part erupting.

Sometimes we recognize it in a critical comment that we don't mean to make. Or in repetitive fight with our partner. Or in a behavior that is unacceptable that we can't understand. And we see it evident now in the larger world quite a lot, you know, with Donald Trump's behavior that is so politically incorrect and makes us feel uncomfortable because he's expressing things that have been buried in peoples' shadows. Like racism. And we can talk about that in the collective if you

want to. So those parts are in all of us. And they are formed early in our childhood through what psychology calls ‘defenses.’

Sometimes they are repressed. Sometimes they are projected onto others. But they are considered unacceptable and sometimes they are denied by the ego, “Oh no, I’d never do that.” “Oh no, that’s impolite.” “Oh no, that’s immoral; I’d never do that.”

Most people are aware that there is some part of them that’s correcting those other parts of them. But they may not be aware of what we’re calling the Self with the higher ‘S,’ which is the part that allows us to come back into equilibrium, and learn how to observe the shadow parts. Without the capacity to observe them, without some space inside our minds so that we can observe them, they take over. We feel controlled and overshadowed by them when they happen.

So, sometimes, if you feel road rage, and you lose control of your temper and you flip the finger at the other driver who cuts you off, the moment in which you lose your center, you lose your capacity to witness your anger and your anger takes control, and for that moment, you’re unconsciously identified with that shadow figure.

So my work has been about teaching people how to break that unconscious identification. “I’m bad.” “I’m an angry person.” “I’m a cheater.” And to come back to the center, and recognize and have a kind of a third-person relationship with that part and dialogue with that part so that we can actually find the virtue in the vice, as you’re calling it. And recognize that that’s not who we are. That’s not who we are. We may have a part that’s critical and judgmental, and a part that’s greedy, but that’s not the essence of who we are as spiritual beings.

MM: And without the witness, without self-awareness and the ability to think about our thoughts, that identification is too strong to break and then we’re caught in destructive behavior? Am I hearing you right?

CZ: Yes. And then those parts act out in destructive behavior. That’s right. So let’s give an example. I have a client, a man came to see me who was cheating on his wife. And he had cheated on his first wife. And he had no idea why he was doing this. The first marriage was very unhappy and he sort of made excuses for himself because his wife was volatile and self-centered, and he was miserable. But in the second marriage, there was a lot of love and a lot of stability and a new baby, and he really wanted that relationship. And yet, this destructive – we can call it self-destructive behavior – kept erupting again. And so he practiced centering – for him it was a Vipassana technique and walking meditation – for different people it’s different practices – and he began to watch the impulse, the internal dialogue and the feelings before he acted out the behavior. And what he began to uncover was that he didn’t feel seen. He didn’t feel desired in his marriages. So he would go and have anonymous sex because he felt desired, he felt surreal, he liked the danger – that part of him – let’s call it the cheater – that part of him had all these needs that he was unaware of.

They were unconscious needs that were getting met when he cheated but not in his marriage. So that was the first kind of layer of shadow work. And he began to express those needs to his wife and see if he could get them met in his marriage because they are valid needs, inside of the

destructive behavior, right? That part of himself, that for a reason, has information in it. We call it the gold in the dark side. It has intelligence in it. It's trying to tell us something. So that was the first layer of the work.

And then as we continued, we began to uncover that he was raised Catholic and in his Catholic upbringing, he was told that he was bad. The original sin is that he was bad, and there was nothing that he could do about it because that's his nature – to be bad. To be evil. To be wrong. And so that cheater part of him was confirming his badness. And when he would act it out, as you said, his higher Self was completely overshadowed. The message was confirmed that he was bad. His nature was bad. So as we began to wrestle with this and do shadow work, he began to realize that all the anxiety that he had felt in his life – the anxiety he felt at work, the anxiety he felt in intimacy – was all connected to this badness, this message that he was bad.

And that if he wasn't good, if he didn't do good behavior at work, [for example] he would be abandoned, and that meant he was a workaholic. So it was actually motivating him but it was a negative motivation not to be bad. And then in his relationship, it was driving him to be good, so he performed as good husband; as a good provider; as a good father. He was performing so he wouldn't feel like he was bad, and then he was acting out the badness in this shadow character, the cheater.

So you can see a couple of things. That there is a lot of knowledge in these shadow parts, but if we dismiss them or repress them, we try to put them back into the closet, we miss out on the gold that's there for our own self-knowledge, for the evolution of our consciousness. And secondly, we miss out on the repair from our childhood because all of them are rooted in childhood messages – all different kinds of messages, different kinds of trauma. And so we miss out on healing those issues if we repress them. And we also miss out on developing this capacity to build and witness. An ability to observe our parts and get to know them in a way that our range expands.

We can expand the range of our lives so that we're not living in a narrow persona, a narrow bandwidth that is always deemed acceptable. Which is really where most people live. People who are trying to be proper. That's where they live. So there's a lot of richness and possibility in exploring these shadow parts, even though they may be scary. And they may feel risky.

The other thing with that client is he was looking for thrill and danger. And he needed to find constructive ways to experience that – that wouldn't blow up his world rather than destructive ways of experiencing – because that's a positive wish. He was at mid-life and he needed more excitement and so you can see there's a lot of the needs inside of the shadow character that have a positive quality to them or a virtue, as you're calling it.

MM: That leads right into the next question, which is the positive function of transgression and the fact that we do need to fall, we need to risk, that we need to go into danger zones. It's part of our passionate nature as human beings, and how much leeway we allow ourselves in that swing between the acceptable persona and the part that wants and needs to risk and transgress.

CZ: Well, I think for some people there can be symbolic transgression rather than physical. Some people can do this through their creative work, through their dreams. For other people that's not enough, and I do a lot of dream work kind of on that theme because in our dreams, so much can happen because there's not rules by that ethical monitor, the super ego. For other people, that's not enough. And so they need to find... my kind of rule of thumb for that, Mark, is as long as you don't hurt yourself or hurt another person, then you can do all kinds of things that might feel frightening. You can face fears, you can find excitement, as long as you don't hurt yourself or other people. Or commitments that you've made. You know, break your word. And that zone is different sizes for different people.

If I can think of an example... you know, yesterday I saw the movie "Captain Fantastic," which I highly recommend. It's about children being raised in the wilderness in kind of a hippie setting with a lot of freedom. And they are extremely agitated but they're home schooled and it kind of explored this question that you're talking about because the kids are... their father has them do dangerous things. They kill animals to survive, they rock climb and break bones, and the question becomes "What is aliveness?" And what is learning to live to survive independently in the woods – the value of that. And what is child abuse? And I think in a way we all wrestle with that. We all wrestle with that for ourselves because we want aliveness.

It's like the movie "Wild." There's so much of this theme out in our culture now because we sort of became very domesticated and civilized. And that wildness is in the shadow. And I think it's one of the reasons that there is so much violence now. Just one of the reasons that people want guns is because we're disconnected from that wildness. And that spontaneity, and that animal instinct in us. It's in all of us. But it's very repressed. And it's coming out now in some of these kind of crooked ways.

MM: You have been writing about this theme and talking about this for so long, and it's a hard thing for a triumphalist, grandiose, narcissistic culture to take in, that it's not in the bright and the big and the winning that we live. Let me read just a beautiful passage of yours.

"To live with shadow awareness is to turn away from the peaks toward the valleys, away from the heights and the rarified air toward the depths and the dark and the dense. It is to turn toward the unpleasant thoughts, hidden fantasies, marginal feelings that are taboo. Our secret lust, greed, envy, rage. To live with shadow awareness is to move our eyes from up to down, to relinquish the clarity of blue-sky thinking for the uncertain murkiness of a foggy morning."

That is so beautiful, and we live in a culture that's addicted to blue-sky thinking. So how can people who are afraid – this will be my last question, Connie – who are afraid of the murkiness of a foggy morning? How can they begin to open themselves to the aliveness of going in the direction and allowing the shadow into their lives?

CZ: That's such an individual question. I don't know if I can generalize about it. Yesterday I saw a couple and she holds all the light side and all the possibilities and everything positive for her. And he's extremely depressed. And he holds the density and the darkness. And I could see that split in this couple. And I think there's a risk that if we don't, as individuals, hold both, that

first of all we lose part with a part of our humanity – with a part of our own humanity – and we also may force another person to carry what we don't carry for ourselves.

And so, some of it is really about how much can you allow [yourself] to see. How much can you allow yourself to feel? How can you allow yourself to know, and still hold on to your truth? Your center. Not be carried away, either by the light or by the darkness. But actually live in your ground, in the center of your reality. Because spiritual evolution – you know we've seen most of the spiritual teachers who we thought were enlightened, act out their shadows. And so without including some psychological work – and most of them came from other cultures and they didn't have the means to do psychological work – so that was split off. But we can see the result of that in every spiritual community from the East. And in the Catholic church. Look at what happened there. Sexuality was in the shadow. So we can see it all around us. And today we can see it in projection because if we just owned the shadows, our own material, it gets projected out. We can see that now in the class divisions of working class people.

You know, hating wealthy people and wealthy people angry at poor people. And cops violent with African-Americans. And native people hating immigrants. This is all shadow projection. And so if we don't do that bit it ourselves, it adds to the collective shadow. And it creates darkness in the world. For some people, their suffering is so much that that's the call that forces them to look inside. For some people, addiction is the call. I think it's different for different people.

MM: But we have to answer that call. We have to take that journey, or as you say, we add to the darkness of the world... that's so beautifully said. Connie Zweig, thank you so much for connecting. I've wanted to meet you for years and years, and you do such beautiful, important work in the world. I salute you and I hope we can talk again soon sometime.

CZ: Mark, I send that back to you, and I thank you so much.