

## **Homily – Shadow Boxing**

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Shadow boxing is an exercise, often done by boxers, in which a person throws punches at the air as though there is an opponent. Essentially you are boxing your shadow. It can be good warm up for the muscles before beginning more strenuous exercise. Some of you may remember a famous video of Muhammad Ali shadow boxing next to Howard Cosell. Shadow boxing is also a spiritual practice which I will describe in just a moment.

But first, today's gospel reading is about Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness and being tempted. The story is often used to show that Jesus was sinless, he could not be tempted. This story is also often used to demonstrate some of the temptations that we all must avoid. The temptations of Jesus are often the same temptations that we have in our own lives. In fact we faced them over and over. And, unfortunately many of us have fallen to these temptations. And, if we're being honest, we have fallen to them repeatedly. So the question for me is not how to avoid the temptation, but it's what to do after we have fallen to them again and again. I think part of the answer to that is the spiritual practice of shadowboxing.

In our younger years most of us have learned to be socially vigilant, and always asking the question how am I coming across? Will people like me? Will this be acceptable? Will this help me succeed? Most of us have learned social niceties and protections, so that we can become our idealized self, our persona, our chosen public image, which is essentially our false self.

Persona and shadow are correlated terms. Your shadow is what you refuse to see about yourself, and what you do not want others to see. The more you have cultivated and protected a chosen persona, the more shadow work you will need to do. Conversely the more you live out of your shadow self, the less capable you are of recognizing the persona you're trying to protect and project. It's like a double blindness, keeping you from seeing, and being, your best and deepest self. Curiously, your persona is what most people want from you. They will reward you for it, and so you will naturally choose to identify with it. And, as you do your inner work of shadow boxing, you will begin to know that your self-image is nothing more than just that, and not worth protecting, promoting, or denying.

To protect this image that we have created for ourselves, all the contrary and negative aspects of self have to go underground, hidden from others and even from your own awareness. These forgotten or denied qualities make up what many call the shadow self. Much of the spiritual work on the wisdom journey is the process of

facing the negative parts of yourself that you're not proud of, such as hateful thoughts you have once in a while that you hope nobody knows about, or recognizing the log in your own eyes when you have been confronted with the speck in someone else's eye. This is humiliating, necessary work in every human life, no exceptions. In fact, the purer and holier your well maintain self-image, the more inner negativity and hatefulness you are likely to harbor, and hide from yourself and others.

When we are young, we all identify with our idealized persona so strongly that we become masters of denial and learn to eliminate or deny anything that doesn't support it. Neither our persona nor our shadow is evil in itself, they just allow us to do evil and not know it. Our shadow self makes us all into hypocrites on some level.

Usually everyone else can see your shadow, so it is crucial that you learn what everyone else, except you, know about you. The moment you become whole and holy is when you can accept your shadow self, or, to put it in moral language, when you can admit your sin. Or as the recovery movement puts it, when you finally "do a fearless moral inventory". Only then do you move from unconsciousness to the beginning of consciousness. There needs to be an ongoing struggle, it seems, because the ego makes increasingly clever disguises of the shadow as you get closer to the light.

The closer you get to the light, the more of your shadow you see. Thus truly holy people are always humble people because they are aware of their shadow. As one master teacher, Robertson Davies, cleverly puts it, "avoid spirituality at all costs, it is one humiliation after another." It could have been a great service to Christians if shadow had been distinguished from sin. Sin and shadow are not the same. We were so encouraged to avoid sin that instead many of us avoided facing our shadow, and then we sinned even more, while still remaining blissfully unaware. It is said, "one always journeys on the spiritual path at the price of one's innocence."

Invariably when something upsets you, and you have a strong emotional reaction out of proportion to the moment, your shadow self has just been exposed. So watch for any overreactions or over denials in yourself. The reason that a mature or saintly person can be so peaceful, so excepting of self and others, is that there is not much hidden shadow self left. However, there is always and forever a little more. Shadow work never stops.

The important thing is to learn from your shadow side. Some call this kind of discovery the "golden shadow" because it carries so much enlightenment for the soul. The general pattern in story and novel is that heroes learn and grow from encountering their shadows, whereas villains never do. Invariably, the movies and novels that are most memorable show real character development and growing

through shadow work. As Joseph Campbell put it so well, “where you stumble, their lies your treasure.” When we have public figures who totally deny their shadow, projecting it elsewhere, with the public even applauding them, then our culture is in real trouble. This is much of our political scene today, isn’t it?

Instead, all human life demands some shadowboxing with a shadow side of every reality. If we are not willing to do that, if we want the Republicans or the Democrats to be totally right, or America to be perfect, or a religion to be the only proper path, then we are incapable of depth or truth. When everything becomes a secure “belonging system” instead of a transformational experience, people simply locate themselves inside their little world of shared illusions. The fragile self quickly takes on a sense of identity and power by believing its self-serving illusions. A negative identity is more easily formed than a positive one. It’s easier to react than to choose, to know what I am not than to know who I am.

This morning I want to invite you into the spiritual practice of shadowboxing. Being assaulted by our many temptations seems to be part of our human condition. However, living in the light is as easy as resting in your God given, inborn True Self and it entails a hard, lifelong task of sparring with your shadow. As the False Self is let go then the True Self is revealed once again. We call this work shadowboxing because it’s as if we’re fighting an imaginary, unseen opponent. Our intention is not to conquer the shadow, but to draw it out into the light of our awareness and compassion so we are aware of it. There are many ways to do shadow work, such as paying attention to your dreams, but perhaps the simplest is to observe ourselves in our negative reaction to others. When this happens flip the tables, and put yourself in the other person’s shoes. This should open your eyes to your own baggage rather than the faults of the other person.

Do this necessary work all your life and rest in God’s love for you as you grow into the beauty of your True Self.

*Large parts of this sermon are based on or taken from Richard Rohr’s book “A Spring Within Us.”*