

Photo credit Christopher Campbell

FINDING THE GOLD IN THE SHADOWS

What secrets lie hidden within you? It is through working on oneself, revealing the source of our own shadows, that we can discover renewed energy and how to be of best service to our clients, argues Ipek Ütün.

Almost 15 years ago, under a grey sky, I was in a cab to go to a retreat centre near Oxford, to experience my first Shadow Work® weekend, full of anticipation and curiosity. I was one of the leaders of a global women's leadership program and we wanted to become senior leaders to be able to deliver the programme in our native language. There was only one prerequisite: to work on our shadows. I was aware of the concept of the shadows, but I didn't know you could 'work on them'. I was curious, excited and anxious about what I was going to experience and discover about myself!

It was a transformative experience for me. I discovered how and why I suppressed my power and reclaimed it. My process continued to unfold after the weekend. After about a month, I had a dream. In my dream there was a big earthquake. I was in my apartment. The house started moving and one of the walls came down, I could see the sky and I wasn't afraid! I interpreted this dream as the power I have denied all those years, breaking free. After that experience, I continued working with my shadows and finally had the courage to become a Shadow Work® Facilitator and Coach. Over the years I have become interested in some other areas like inclusion, conflict resolution and more ancient ways of living in our full potential as a child of this earth. Surprisingly they all involved and had different ways of working with shadows. So, I had the privilege of working on my shadows as well as facilitating my clients, groups and teams to work with theirs.

The meaning most people make of the 'shadow' is generally negative attributes. I love Richard Bly's description of personal shadows as 'everything we put in the invisible bag' not to lose our parents' love, he adds. Maybe it wasn't ok to show our anger or our creativity was judged, maybe they made fun of us for crying or we were shamed around our sexuality; maybe it was too risky to feel or speak up, or maybe a spontaneous action or inaction was the problem; or we observed something in the family and decided never to be like that. The possibilities are infinite. What we know is, as we grow, we keep putting those parts that might bring us shame or deny us love into the bag. We start to live our lives with much less than who we can be. In this regard, working with shadows is opening locked doors, finding new sources of energy or a journey of 'remembering' who we are in our wholeness.

Shadow Work is also associated with mining for gold. Why? Because when we suppress or deny parts of ourselves, we suppress a vital source of energy. From a shadow perspective, there is only energy; as Shakespeare says there is 'Nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so'.

Let's look at that with an example. Assume Sarah gets angry when her little brother takes her teddy bear, and her mother gets really upset with her every time this happens. She tells her 'Good girls don't get angry like this, they are nice to their brothers!' So, Sarah decides not to get angry and be nice. She might start believing 'I am bad because I'm getting angry', or 'Nobody will love me if I am not nice' or any other belief that would make it a 'sin' and 'shameful' to be so. Fast-forward to an adult Sarah. It is possible she is trying to be nice to everyone at all costs, over-give, prioritise others' needs over hers, not say 'no' to things she doesn't want. People could be crossing her boundaries and she would still try to be 'nice'. Here is the problem: our anger is a much-needed emotion for us to take action if somebody crosses our lines. It helps us to stand up for ourselves. Nor can we suppress anger forever: it will eventually blow up somewhere, probably when it is not needed!

When Sarah was young she probably didn't have much choice: the risk of not getting Mom's love was too high. The problem as an adult is to continue using the same strategy which is not serving anymore. She might believe people wouldn't love her if she wasn't nice or if she got angry. Ironically that's likely what causes problems in her relationships. Healthy relationships need healthy boundaries; and anger is our alert system and our fuel to take necessary action.

So, finding the gold for Sarah would mean to discover how that energy is present inside and how much she deserves to access her anger; or, that it is ok if some people don't like her, she can even enjoy that. She deserves to be loved anyway! What a release of suppressed energy after all those years.

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We have many locked rooms inside. They form an 'inner gang' to not allow our full expression. It's remarkable how many talented people believe they are a 'fraud' inside, or a statue of success for others believing in 'not being good enough' so trying more and more. As Campbell says 'The very cave you are afraid to enter turns out to be the source of what you are looking for.'f. So what calls for our attention in a painful way, is the path to the treasure we seek. It is not a one-stop journey.

What happens when we find the gold? In my experience, there is an unleashing of energy and it needs tending. There are years of habits that feed the old limiting beliefs. We realise a fresh, new, energising truth about who we are: a new path. The more we intentionally choose that path in our small to big decisions, the more we start living by our new sense of self, the stronger it will become. The ghosts of our shadows will continue showing up here and there, yet they will be less powerful and you can interrupt them more quickly instead of losing yourself in them. It requires attention and dedication for yourself. For Sarah, it might be catching herself and declining an invitation for a coffee when she is tired, or as she is about to accept a new request, saying 'no'.

What does it mean for us as coaches? Jung says 'Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to a better understanding of ourselves'. So, if a certain type of client irritates you as a coach, you can be curious what it tells to you about you. Can you be just like that person in some way? Or maybe, you need to be a little like that person? Maybe it is one of your locked rooms. When we are aware of our shadows, we can keep them in front of us.

Let's assume I am a team coach who believes I am not good enough. My shadow might show up in my facilitation as looking for perfection in a way that makes things more difficult unnecessarily, or doing things to get the approval of my client. I might even be inclined to create some drama in the process to be the one that 'saves' and supports the client, all unconsciously to prove that I am 'good enough'. Keeping this in front of us means we will recognise it quickly. Shadows grow in the dark and lose their power with light and as we see them, we can interrupt easily and return to our more grounded centre. This way our capacity to hold our clients expands.

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In all the work I have done in the last decade about shadows, I have seen that our stories and how we are wounded changes, but we unite in being wounded. So, our self-work as a coach helps us develop a better understanding about our clients as well as ourselves. We can grow in keeping our hearts open when we face a challenging behaviour, knowing it is coming from a wounded place. Judgement is replaced by curiosity and compassion. As we expand to who we can be, we will realise more of our potential and provide a better service professionally for our clients.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ipek supports leaders, teams, coaches, facilitators and individuals to live and lead with their full potential. She is an Executive Coach, Mentor, Supervisor, Team Coach, Lewis Deep Democracy Elder and Shadow Work® Facilitator who supports her clients globally. She is affiliated with Yale University as their Leadership Coach in e-MBA program. She makes working with deeper patterns driving any challenging situation easy and personal or systemic transformation possible.

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