

## “Shadow Boxing”

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Psalm 51:16-17

For sacrifice gives you no pleasure; were I to offer a burnt offering, you would not have it. My sacrifice is this broken spirit. You will never scorn a broken and contrite heart.

James 3:14

If inside you have the bitterness of jealousy, or selfish ambition, never make any false claims for yourself or cover up the truth with lies.

Matthew 7:3-5

Why do you observe the splinter that's in your sister's eye, but don't notice the log in your own eye? How dare you say to your brother, 'Let me take the splinter out of your eye,' when all the time there's a log in your own? Take the log out of your eye first, and then you will see clearly enough to take the splinter out of your brother's or sister's eye.

“When I get angry with someone for doing something I don't like, all of my memories of having done something similar vaporize instantly.”<sup>i</sup> Does this sound right? It's taken from Psychology Today online.

Today we are in week four of our look at spirituality using Richard Rohr's book *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*.<sup>ii</sup> So far, we have noticed that while we cannot seem to effect change over our unmanageable lives, God can. We have learned that everyone succumbs to a universal addiction – to our own way of thinking. We open ourselves to God because only God can restore us to sanity. Last week, we accepted that we can rewrite the definition of surrender so that rather than it meaning giving up, surrender means we give of ourselves to others. We give ourselves over to God.

Today, we study Step Four. We “made a searching and fearless moral inventory.”

Those of us who grew up with high parental expectations or in otherwise highly moral or religious homes probably shrink at the thought of more self-examination. Those critical voices are already so loud; we don't want to give them more to feed on. We don't need one more thing to hate about ourselves!

I agree, 100%. But since we have long since internalized those voices, the true value of moral inventory is actually to help us deconstruct them, or at least put them in perspective. You see, this inner examination is not to discover how good or bad we are. “It is to begin some honest ‘shadow boxing’” (30).

Jesus says, “The truth will set you free” (John 8:32). And, it will. But with the baggage we each carry, it will make us miserable first. Because of this, we often avoid the truth-finding we so badly need.

Shadow boxing originally described a form of training in which you spar with an imaginary opponent – arms, legs, hands and feet. I hear it's good exercise.

Shadow boxing becomes a spiritual term when we speak of facing our shadow side. According to psychology, shadow is that part of our being where we stash all those aspects of ourselves that

we don't want to, or cannot, acknowledge. It takes effort and will-power “to become self-aware [enough to] recognise (sic) our shadow”<sup>iii</sup> In order to grow spiritually we need to step intentionally into “struggles with contradictions, conflicts, inconsistencies, inner confusions, and what the Bible calls sin” (31).

I have struggled with some of the apostle Paul's writings. Not having grown up under Hebrew Law I don't understand much of what he write about it. But I like this bit: the Law amplify failures, so that God's grace can be even greater (Romans 5:20). We might say that for the many of us are overly aware of our shortcomings and failures, God uses this awareness as an opportunity to shower us with even more grace.

This is good news! Since we can never perfectly avoid doing what we don't mean to do, it's good to know that the goal is not perfection. It's the struggle, and the wisdom we derive from the experience. As we wrestle with our shadow side, we gain luminosity. We spoke of luminosity a few weeks ago when we reminded ourselves that Jesus says we are the light of the world. That light, that luminosity, comes from letting God shine through us.

To shine, though, we have to surrender our wills over to God – again and again. We have to examine our inner workings. While seldom pleasant, this is good for us. And it's a gift for those around us. As a Franciscan novice master once shared, “We must try to make it easier for others to love us” (32).

Let's think about this. Who are the easiest ones to love? What type of people do you most enjoy being around? It's surely not the one who has all the answers. Or who won't admit to their failings. No, we enjoy “people who are up front and honest about their mistakes and limitations,” and who are growing from them (32).

We value honesty and humility in others. God values them too. We find this humility and honesty in Jesus' parables. The young man who came home to his father, saying, “I messed up. I don't deserve anything” is one example (Luke 15:21). The tax collector who, unlike the religious leader, stands off to the side praying humbly, saying, “God, have mercy on me” is another (Luke 18:13).

We want to be honest but those parts of ourselves that we don't like get in the way. So we put on masks. Think of the stage masks once used in Greek plays. We pretend to be content when something bugs us. We pretend to like hearing something that bores us. We each choose the masks, the personas that seem to suit us best. And the more we use these masks, these false personas, the more shadow self we have.

Your shadow self is not your evil self. It's simply a part of you that you don't want to notice. The part you find offensive or scary or threatening. It is not really unacceptable, but we somehow believe it is. This denial, this choosing not to see, is what allows us to say or do cruel or even evil things without recognizing them as such.

We each have a distinct shadow self. We have things about us we don't want to face. We certainly don't want others to see them. Regular shadowboxing is the practice that brings these unloved aspects of ourselves into our awareness so that we can face them and dismantle them.

For this, we need conflict. But I don't like conflict, you say. Still conflict is what helps us see ourselves most fully. Relationship challenges, ethical dilemmas, moral failures, deflation of our pride, even enemies all help us. Each one is a mirror to highlight what we would just as soon avoid.

Jesus asks us, challenges us really, when he says, “Why do you observe the splinter in your brother's eye and never noticed the plank in your own? How dare you say to your sister let me take the splinter out of your eye, when all the time there's a log in your own?”

It is so much easier for us to see our neighbor's or our spouse's or our friend's error and forget entirely about our own – even when they are doing something we do regularly ourselves. Today, we're reminded again that we need to *see* our own error first, see it completely and honestly.

You've heard that the eyes are the window to the soul? Jesus talks about having something in the eye, because he knows that when we see rightly, our behavior will gradually take care of itself. When we see clearly, we avoid that evil that only thrives through disguises. When we know what is truly good, what is loving, what is needed, the evil cannot reach us. When we are cruelty and destructiveness it's because we are leaving the log where it is. We are letting ourselves remain unaware of our shadow ways.

Jesus also says that the eye is the lamp of the body. The whole body will be filled with light when the eye is sound. When the eye is diseased, the whole body will be in darkness (Matthew 6:22-23).

We need this shadow boxing. Though we might do all in our power to avoid, it we need, regularly, to look within ourselves, to discover what makes us unlovable or unloving. We need to notice the ways in which our masks keep us from being most truly and authentically the persons that God makes us to be.

Take a log out of your own eye first and then you will see clearly enough to help with a splinter in your sister's or brother's eye.

Make some time this week. Set aside all the other expectations and look within.

To help you prepare, take out the colored card you received in your bulletin. Then take this minute while Rob plays to list the defenses you set up to make it easier to avoid noticing your shadow side. The ways you fill your time, ignore suggestions, or otherwise sidestep this part of your spiritual growth.

Surely as we have unpacked Jesus' words this morning, you have come to admit, he's speaking to you. You need to do this.

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<sup>i</sup> Jeremy E Sherman, “Why Spotting Other People's Flaws Makes Us Forget Ours,” Nov 28, 2011 [psychologytoday.com/us/blog/ambigamy/201111/why-spotting-other-people-s-flaws-makes-us-forget-ours](http://psychologytoday.com/us/blog/ambigamy/201111/why-spotting-other-people-s-flaws-makes-us-forget-ours) (last viewed on September 26, 2019).

<sup>ii</sup> This sermon borrows heavily from Richard Rohr's *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, Franciscan Media: Cincinnati, 2011 30-35.

<sup>iii</sup> Harley Therapy, "Your 'Shadow' Self – What It Is, And How It Can Help You," September 7, 2017, [harleytherapy.co.uk/counselling/shadow-self.htm](http://harleytherapy.co.uk/counselling/shadow-self.htm) (last viewed on September 26, 2019).