

## Hear the Voice of Your Heart through Solitude, Simplicity and Silence

White noise suffuses our office buildings; music, news and sports broadcast in public places; cell phones track us down. Our homes seldom offer refuge either: On go the TVs and stereos as soon as we walk into the house; the computer hums and beeps; we talk.

We seem to rush to fill up the silence, to plug any open space with some sound or another. And yet, only in silence can we hear the voice of our heart.

“Silence allows us to open the door to our unconscious mind, feel the yearnings of our heart, follow the wisdom of our intuition, probe the origin of our aversions and understand the truth of our experience,” writes Richard Mahler, author of *Stillness: Daily Gifts of Solitude, Simplicity and Silence*.

Mahler doesn’t refer to the silence that comes from feeling fearful, the silence that hinders honest relating or the silence that doesn’t utter a word against injustice. The silence that is truly golden is that which takes us off our express trains and guides us inward to a timeless well of strength and replenishment. It becomes a balm for our hurried, feverish pace, a sacred rest, a place where “we at last get in touch with our deepest secrets, strongest passions, fondest wishes and happiest memories.”

Without silence, it’s hard for worthwhile things to catch up with us. When we speak, we hear only what we already know. When we listen, we may learn something.

### How can we reclaim our lost silence, our missing wilderness?

We can start by acknowledging that time spent in silence is not wasted

time. Actually, silence can “pay for itself” by strengthening our inner connection, which expands not only our sense of well-being but also our sense of time.

It’s also helpful to realize that embracing silence does not necessarily mean carving large blocks of time from our busy days. Simply turning off our radios and televisions more often, or choosing when to answer the phone, can make a surprisingly big difference.

A regular practice of meditation, even for only five minutes a day, is often the most recommended silent practice—and it is powerful. But we can incorporate silence into our everyday active lives, as well.

### A few suggestions for practicing active silence:

- Walk in silence, especially in nature. Leave the earphones behind.
- Work side-by-side with others in intentional silence. This is especially effective with physical work such as gardening.
- Do quiet tasks by yourself or as a couple or family, such as knitting, reading, personal letter writing, journaling.
- Eat in silence. This helps us more consciously taste our food and be in gratitude. Cook in silence, too.
- Take a bath—not a shower. No inspirational tapes, no music. Just the sound of the water as it swirls and drips.

Immersed as we are in constant sound and stimuli, the practice of silence is refreshing and needed more than ever. ✱

## 10

### Fears That Can Hurt Us and the Ones We Love

*It’s natural that fear is present in our relationships with loved ones. But when it operates in our life in a way that hurts us or hurts others—through aggression or withdrawal—it becomes a problem. Recognizing these fears and how they affect our life can help us make the necessary changes to get the love we want.*

- 1. Fear of losing freedom.** Tied down, trapped, cornered, stuck—this “claustrophobia” points to mistaken beliefs about what relationships are supposed to be.
- 2. Fear of conflict.** Let’s face it, love can be messy. But it doesn’t have to be destructive. Constructive communication skills can be learned.
- 3. Fear of change.** Change means work, discomfort, uncertainty. But oh, the rewards of growth and depth and renewal!
- 4. Fear of loss of control.** We don’t have to surrender personal power in a healthy relationship.
- 5. Fear of pain.** Ultimately, we must decide whether we trust fear or trust love.
- 6. Fear of being “found out.”** When we hide our true self from those we love, we’re usually afraid that our true self is unlovable.
- 7. Fear of losing self.** Often this comes from watching others (parent, friend, relative) suppress their individuality in relationship.
- 8. Fear of not being enough.** If we fear our own inadequacy, we often expect perfection in our partners.
- 9. Fear of rejection.** To avoid being rejected, we may become pleasers, taking our authentic needs and desires out of the equation.
- 10. Fear of dependency.** Some worry about losing the ability to take care of themselves, some about the responsibility for others. ✱

## A Letter From *Margaret Hood Black*



Our lives today are "noisy." Sound comes to us non-stop through radios and televisions, smart phones and computers, family and co-workers, etc. Constant auditory input is our new normal.

So when was the last time you experienced silence?

The cover article looks at this increasingly rare experience and suggests that simple, solitary silence helps us to listen to what our hearts say is really important.

The Top 10 list points out the need to understand fears within ourselves that can damage or destroy relationships with spouses, children, even co-workers.

Meanwhile, the questions in the quiz this issue help you check in with yourself about how you deal with worry and offer strategies that can help turn your worry into wonder.

Now may also be a good time to explore your own personal "shadow," or "dark side." It's surprising how many gifts the dark side has to offer, as long as you are willing to acknowledge, understand and, yes, even love it.

Finally, the back page story reminds us to pay attention to what's being communicated by our most intimate counselor: our body.

Feel free to share this newsletter. As always, don't hesitate to call if you'd like more information about any of these articles or if you have any questions.

## How Stressed Out Does Worrying Make You?

Worry is a useful response, helping us anticipate—and avoid—danger by taking constructive action. But too often, worry becomes an endless loop that makes it hard to sleep, focus and perform, and stresses our physical systems. Take this quiz to find out how well you handle worry.



### True False

- 1. I write about my fears in a journal to take the power out of them. After writing, creative solutions seem to just show up.
- 2. Getting involved with my family, friends and community gives me a sense of being part of something bigger than myself. When I do that, my worries seem to dissipate.
- 3. I face and take responsibility for problems and commit to a plan of action, rather than worrying about what might happen.
- 4. What really works for me when I'm feeling tense and nervous is to take a long walk, run, bike ride or work out. When I exercise more, I worry less.
- 5. When my worries spin on in an endless loop, I know it's time for a gratitude list. Focusing on the things I am grateful for is like turning my worries inside out.
- 6. I worry mostly about things that, in fact, have a very low probability of actually occurring—dying in a plane crash, going bankrupt, etc.
- 7. Rather than let my nighttime thoughts keep me from getting to sleep, I focus on physical sensations, such as the feel of the sheets and the warmth of my own body.
- 8. I try to catch my worrying as close to the beginning as possible. Then I take some time to relax, breathe deeply and get centered.
- 9. When I'm immersed in my worried thoughts, I bring my attention to my physical sensations, such as speedy heartbeat, sweatiness and shakiness. Paying attention to my body calms my thoughts.
- 10. The more repetitive my worrying becomes, the more persuasive it seems.
- 11. I worry about others because I don't really trust that they can take care of themselves. I've noticed, however, that most of the time, they can.
- 12. When I'm concerned about something, I take action. Then I let go, trusting that I've done all I can do.

If you answered false more often than true, you might try shifting your worry to wonder, which opens up possibilities for curiosity and action rather than dread and immobility. If you would like to work on worry or any other concerns, please don't hesitate to call. \*

# Learning to Love Your "Dark Side"

No one likes to admit to a dark side. —that unconscious part of us that holds all the feelings and beliefs we deny, discount, disown, bury or pretend do not exist.

This dark side may be vengeful, lazy, untrustworthy, rageful. It may never finish what it starts, excel at being greedy, be convinced that you are stupid and unlovable.

We spend huge amounts of energy denying and repressing this shadow self. But the reality is that the more we do, the more havoc it wreaks in our lives.

What many of us don't realize is that the dark side, the shadow, can be a loyal friend, bearing the gifts of depth, integrity, vitality and wholeness—if we choose to meet it and love it.

"Perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once, beautiful and brave," wrote poet Rainer Maria Rilke. "Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something that needs our love."

## How Your Dark Side Develops

Many forces play a role in forming our shadow selves: parents, siblings, teachers, religious leaders, friends, the culture all have their part. One example:

Little Elsie's mother suddenly entered the hospital two months before the birth of twins. When she returned with the newborns, the overwhelmed woman encouraged 2-year-old Elsie to "be independent" and a good big sister. Anger that erupted was severely reprimanded.

Afraid that her mother would leave again, Elsie learned not to rock the boat. She took care of herself, became a pleaser, kept her needs and feelings to herself.

## Revealing the Gifts of the Dark Side

Today, Elsie, a single mother, is uncomfortable with much intimacy in her personal relationships. She smiles a lot and has trouble saying "No" to requests for help, works late into the night, and rarely takes a day for herself. She doesn't "do" anger publicly, but at home, she sometimes explodes at her children.

Working to integrate these lost and neglected parts of her is challenging, Elsie says. But doing so is helping her to commit to a deeply nurturing relationship, "indulge" in more self-care and bring more humor to her parenting.

"I'm realizing how much energy it has cost me to keep this stuff underground," she says. "I'm trying to say 'Yes' more often to myself. And I cheer inside when my children tell me how mad they are!"

These, then, are the gifts of shadow work:

- More genuine self-acceptance
- Less guilt and shame associated with our negative feelings and actions

- Fewer emotional eruptions during our daily lives a clearer and more accurate picture of others (uncolored by shadow projections)
- The opportunity to heal relationships through more honest self-examination.

## What's in Your Shadow?

Awareness of the elusive shadow is always the first step towards the treasure box that lies within your shadow. Here are some effective detective tools:

**Examine your exaggerated negative feelings about others.** Look at the characteristics of the people in your life whose behavior pushes your buttons, at people you dislike or hate, at what irritates or angers you the most. When we are blind to our own shadow traits, we often "project" these traits onto others.

**Notice what you really admire in others.** Perhaps, growing up, it was not acceptable to be powerful, creative, intelligent or empathetic. In addition to projecting our shadow onto others, we can also project our "greatness," not realizing that it is actually our own.

**Examine your impulsive and inadvertent acts.** A slip of the tongue can reveal shadow traits. So can "forgetting" things or getting sleepy when it's time to talk about uncomfortable subjects.

**Study your dreams.** The shadow often appears in our dreams as a figure of the same sex whom we react to with fear, dislike or disgust. Observing this figure's actions, attitudes and words can help identify shadow traits.

**Examine situations in which you feel humiliated.** Keep an "over-reaction diary" to record when you are possessed by strong feelings of shame or anger, or when your behavior is off the mark in some way.

**Observe your distractions.** Do you work too many hours? Overeat? Numb your feelings with drugs or alcohol? What feelings are you avoiding?

**Track down the inner critic and victim.** Write the internal dialogue between the powerful, critical, demanding part of you and the weak part that apologizes and makes excuses. Both are voices of the shadow.

Ultimately, as author James Hillman says, the cure of the shadow is rooted in love.

"How far can our love extend to the broken and ruined parts of ourselves, the disgusting and perverse?" he writes. "How much charity and compassion have we for our own weakness and sickness? How far can we build an inner society on the principle of love, allowing a place for everyone?" \*



# Listening to the Wisdom of Your Body

We're not taught from early on to pay attention to internal messages from our body. And as a result, we too often ignore the information it gives us—information we need to function at our best.

We take an extra-strength aspirin rather than investigating what's causing our head to ache. We use caffeine or sugar when we feel tired, rather than hearing our body's message about needing rest or recognizing our fatigue as an early symptom of burnout we'd do well to heed. A look at our pets may be all the message we need about the value of naps.

We fail to take into account the thousand little messages communicated to us by how we're holding ourselves: the mouth that's pinched and tight rather than relaxed. The fact that our shoulders are up around our ears, the knot of tension in our stomach as we promise to do something when closer consideration might tell us we are already over-extended.

These days we're notorious for putting deadlines ahead of the protests of aching bones or inadequately nourished bellies. (Is there hidden wisdom in calling a due date

a dead-line in the first place?) Instead of asking our body what it wants, we go for the quick fill-up or the comfort food that may be the last thing we really need.

So what to do to give your body an equal say in how you use it?

**Start with the breath.** Breathing consciously is a major part of body awareness. Turn off thoughts and just let yourself experience the inflow and outflow of breath. Label them, "In. Out. In. Out." Note how and where you are breathing or failing to, a clear sign something important is going on.

**Allow yourself quiet time.** Sit for ten minutes just observing yourself, even (especially!) in the middle of a busy day.

Take a walk or a nap. Allow time to do nothing. Soak in a hot tub rather than taking a quick shower.

**Get a massage.** It's not self-indulgence to be massaged; it wakes up the whole nervous system and helps you tune in.

**Use your journal to dialogue with your**

**body.** Ask your body how it's feeling and what it wants. Give that sore wrist or stiff lower back a voice and let it tell you what its message is.

**Eat when hungry, sleep when tired.**

Take a week and really pay attention to your body's most basic needs. Do your real rhythms for eating and sleeping conform to the habits you've established? If they don't, change them!

**Do a body inventory to**

**relax.** Start with your toes and work upwards. Scan your body from the inside. Or try tensing each part slightly, then relaxing it to release residual tension.

**Practice mindfulness.** Get used to tuning in to your

physical self, wherever you are, whatever you're doing.

If, for example, your body suggests rolling down a grassy hillside or taking flight on a playground swing, why resist? Its impulses hold the key to your well-being! \*



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