

**Life begins
at the end of the
comfort zone.**

Neale Donald Walsch

Part 1: The Shadow

Your Comfort Is Your Prison

The first part of this book is context. What is the Shadow, why do we have it, and why does it matter.

IT WAS MAY 1984. *A six year old boy was being treated for a small cut on his head.*

“Don’t worry, you’re going to be fine,” the nurse said, putting a plaster on.

It was really nothing, but as a six year old boy, they wanted him to feel safe.

The boy was me, and I had been taken by ambulance to a local hospital after a car accident. My uncle was around somewhere, also unharmed.

My father, however, was not. The last time I saw him before I arrived at the hospital, he was behind the wheel of the car. Covered in blood from head to toe. I was told later he had been hit in the forehead with a rock roughly the size of a brick.

I remember seeing the rocks falling off the truck coming towards us. My dad was driving, and I sat behind my uncle in the passenger seat.

I tried to shout something, to warn him. For years after I told myself and those around me that I had seen the rock. I don’t know if that was true.

My father ended up with brain damage after several complications. From that moment on, he was no longer able to be my father in anything but name. He is still alive.

THIS WAS MY first real meeting with Life (capital L). I was witness to what I called “my dad’s accident” for many years. I didn’t allow myself the chance to be a participant.

By denying myself participation I was denying myself the chance to heal. But I was also doing more than that.

I was denying myself ownership. I was giving myself permanent victimhood.

Not only did I lose my dad to brain damage, I also “lost” the chance to recover. I was so distraught and felt so deeply and unfairly treated by the universe, my self-punishment would be so severe there would be nothing the universe could do but save me.

The universe didn’t ride in on a white horse and fix things. I had to do that myself.

This book is not about my trauma, but about how that trauma drove me to find ways to deal with my own story, with my variations of the event, with the different parts I remember. From the time of the accident and growing up, I carried an anger, a frustration, a feeling of deep and imposing unfairness of life.

Although I saw therapists on and off, there never seemed to be anyone who could help me come to terms with the sense that I was both owed by the universe, and I was deeply mistrusting of it.

I had a great interest in reading, and writing became a way out when I was in my teenage years. Writing fiction was a form of journaling for me. I also had the boys' version of a diary.

In Norway where I grew up, every year we'd get a "School Diary," all themed from different comics or characters. Filled with quotes, funnies, and space to plan the week, this was a depository of embarrassment. The adventures of youth on paper.

My fiction writing became my way to let off steam. In fact it was so key to my sense of self, I chose to study Creative Writing. Particularly in my 20s, writing out expressive characters on paper was a great release.

Throughout all of this, I carried with me a sense of self that was broken. I felt I was fundamentally unable to live a normal life. I was carrying with me a monster nobody could see or understand, and I was not able to face it.

I ran away from job opportunities because I dreaded having to justify my skills, justify my existence. I ran away from challenges for a large part of my life. As much as I wanted to, I found it excruciating to imagine "losing." Better to quit than be found out.

I was living the old adage "Easy choices, hard life, hard choices, easy life" to a depressing level of perfection. Throughout my life, I'd always felt "not good enough."

And that showed up as "don't try."

If you don't try, you can't lose. And if you try and you do lose, all love will be taken away. Just like when my father was taken away. The stakes of loss were high.

I didn't know I was avoiding anything. The story I was telling (selling?) myself was that I'm independent. "I don't want a career. I'm happy to go from one place to another."

Secretly, I wanted to be seen. I wanted to be recognised as being great. Living with that level of unaware paradox is exhausting. I'd like to say that I'm "fixed" but the truth is, I still feel like this at times.

But this book could not have been written 20 years ago. Or even five. Not because the method didn't exist, but because I hadn't done enough of the work to write it honestly.

The first story I told myself was that my father had an accident. A later version was that I too had an accident. In the first one I was the guilty survivor. In the second one I allowed myself space to also be a victim, so I could start healing.

There are other stories here, other versions of the event. The problem with the past is that it doesn't exist. Yet it impacts us deeply.

Once we can start to accept that there is no truth in the past, it's only interpretation, we get a powerful set of tools.

An interpretation can be reinterpreted. The past can be changed. The event itself stays the same, the way we understand ourselves, the impact of time, of other people, changes. And that gives us an opportunity to make change for the future.

One of the misconceptions of Shadow work is that it's all about trauma. In many ways, it depends on how you define trauma, of course, but the key here is that it's not all about rummaging around in the past with an expectation that we can fix it. It's not trauma gazing.

The past no longer exists, and it never existed in any human's mind as an objective event. Everyone who saw or experienced an event saw it through their filter of the day, and then decided it had to mean something. This doesn't take away the pain of any event, it just adds a layer of understanding.

Once we see that something in our life has had an impact on us, we can see what that impact was, we can see what we might learn from it, and change our future trajectory.

I grew up feeling guilty for my father's car accident, feeling I could have done something to change it. I also felt a kind of survivor's guilt.

A sense that: why am I ok, when he is in hospital?

It took me many years to acknowledge that this accident also was mine. I was also affected, even though I was physically unharmed. I was emotionally destroyed, and I could only heal once I accepted that.

After the accident, there were other events that affected my outlook on life, but through Shadow Journaling, I was able to revisit, and importantly rewrite, what that meant to me.

It helped me see myself in a new light, and in all honesty, I wouldn't be able to do the work I do now without it. I wouldn't be able to put my name to this, to show up and talk about all of it, without being able to see that I also deserve the good things in life.

I realised that my story didn't hold up. There were too many additional layers. Too many other things that also had had an impact on my life. I could start looking at how I might reframe it.

THE FIRST STEP IS ALWAYS TO CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO.

We don't know exactly how we get to be who we are, but chances are, it's not what we think.

Being able to stop trusting the first thing you say, and

start being honest with yourself about what's under it all, you'll find yourself on a new and exhilarating path.

Doing the work involves discomfort. There's no way around it.

Going into the depth of the soul, the unconscious, and rooting around to find out what's going on often reveals parts of ourselves we didn't expect, or hoped not to find.

This discomfort is also one of the work's most redeeming qualities, because it means there are no short cuts. It doesn't matter who you know or how much money you have.

You can't buy yourself revelation. You can't buy yourself inner contentment or self-acceptance.

DISCOMFORT IS YOUR GUIDE.

If you're not feeling uncomfortable, there's a good chance you're avoiding it, tricking yourself into thinking you're doing the work.

Your ego knows you better than you do, and it will find ways to trick you. It might serve you up a minor issue you can celebrate as an insight. It will make you feel like you've made progress, without having to deal with the bigger things.

While you feel you're really doing the work, the ego has saved the dark secrets for later, ideally never.

How do we know if this is happening? There's no fixed answer to this. Our egos have great ways of steering us clear of moments and things it doesn't want seen. In the end I usually trust my intuition. If it feels too easy to get to the insight, it's probably not something particularly deep. If my ego was giving me too much credit, making me feel good about finding out, chances are it was surface level.

Deep realisations and insights don't leave you feeling "rewarded." They leave you feeling relieved. It's a moment of feeling like a burden has been lifted. That finally you can let go of this heaviness. That a weight shifted, and a path forward seems clearer.

I'm going into heavy territory here, and I'm aware of it. Writing about a topic that brings up terms like "ego", "archetypes", "subpersonalities" will naturally be something that can be both confusing and contentious.

In this book, this is what I mean: the ego isn't bad, it's just running on old programming. Our job is to keep educating it through curiosity. The idea of archetypes, or parts (from Internal Family Systems) or subpersonalities (from Nathaniel Branden), are ideas that are there to help us.

When I talk about the Shadow, I'm talking about the vast

amount of our life we cannot see. All the things we put away for one reason or another. Despite our rejection of these aspects of ourselves, they still show up in our lived life.

“[The shadow is a] long bag we drag behind us ... We spend our life until we’re twenty deciding what parts of ourselves to put in the bag, and we spend the rest of our lives trying to get them out again.”

– Robert Bly

What I’ve always found fascinating about these kinds of topics is the confidence with which some people speak of matters that are invariably individual, and cannot (at this point in time) be reliably measured.

We can’t go in and measure someone’s ego. We can’t measure the depth of the work we do. We can’t say what works better or worse in general, and we can’t reliably say that someone has gotten better, without the person saying so themselves.

The caveat here is of course that this is not a book on clinical psychology nor psychotherapy.

In the world of personal development, of trying to live a more congruent and content life, the only measure that matters is how you turn up in your own life.

When I write about the ego, I write about a part of ourselves

that’s a needed conduit between the unconscious and how we show up in the world. How we show up is a reflection of how well the ego can connect to the depths of who we are.

To illustrate, imagine yourself, your different personalities, your fears, your desires, as a carefully built house of cards. This house was built by the ego, constructed to keep you “safe”.

When we feel life is giving us friction and it’s rubbing us the wrong way, that there’s inner conflict, incongruence, or we just feel stuck, many of us want to find out why.

We then investigate the house of cards to see what might be wrong. The problem is that we might shake the table and house will come crashing down. The ego, in order to protect this fragile identity, will show you a card.

“Here, look at the seven of hearts. That’s when your grandmother said you’ll never amount to anything.” And you recognise it, and you feel the flash of elation of “yes, that’s true!”. And then you stay away from the table.

You’ve just been fed a drop of self-awareness, just enough to keep you satisfied for a while. You had a dopamine rush, an ontological thrill. Creating meaning in your life, and perhaps for the first time, feeling like you’re actually “doing the work”.

You go back, you start looking at more cards. All the

while, your ego is satisfied you're not actually growing. Because growth is when we take the house of cards down and build something of brick.

The solution is to take every card the ego shows you, and instead of returning it to the house, you put it in your pocket. You own it. Every card you see is yours. Keep them, and slowly see the house come down, feel the relief of not having to keep a fragile identity standing.

Slowly you can feel the tension in your body dissipate. You're more content, more free from overthinking, and you can show up with a much more authentic self.

Shadow Journaling is my way of going into all of this, with the intention of growth rather than observation. We cannot observe our way to change. We can start with observation, but we need to take ownership of who we are. Including the Shadow.

This is the process of growth, and this is the process I want to invite you into.

SHADOW PROMPT: YOUR STORY

A lot of the work I do follows a three-stage alchemical process.

Throughout the book you'll find some prompts to help you get into it.

Later you'll get more tools and a deeper dive, but perhaps you're ready for something now?

What's a story you've been telling about a defining moment in your life?

Whose version of events is that, really?

Write a single sentence that begins: "Another way to see it is..."

