



Drinking the Dragon: Stories of The Dark Nights of Soul

by

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Excerpt from

Chapter Four: ON THE MOUNTAIN: Exploring the Dark Night of Soul

“The Shadow”

*This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.
Shakespeare*

That Darn Shadow

Because the path of initiation is a spiral, the process can invoke several dark night experiences. As we have already seen, the dark night often includes confronting the dark depths in oneself and in the culture. Sacred wisdom teachings of old prepared those on the path to meet their demons; it was known that meeting the shadow is an integral part of spiritual experience. Contemporary New Age teachings have often emphasized transcendence and “light” without giving due acknowledgment to the lunar journey of the dark night.

Shadow-work is a disagreeable but necessary task on our path toward spiritual maturity. In fact, we may be “put” in situations to deal with people who bring out the very *worst* in us so that we are forced to see the parts of ourselves that are hidden to us (but not to others). When I was a public school teacher in my early twenties, I team-taught with a woman who was incessantly self-referential; she talked about herself, her family, her boyfriend, her ideas--her everything--to the exclusion of everyone else around her. She sucked the air right out of the room. I thought she was irritating, intolerable, and overbearing—and yet I unaccountably elected to teach with her for a second year! What I was compelled to face was my *own* self-involvement and narcissism; for a while, this person was a reflection of my own immature self-absorption. And until this was brought to realization—and I took responsibility for making changes in myself—this woman and I were “joined at the hip.”

In Alcoholics Anonymous, shadow-work corresponds to Step Four of the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-Step Program. It is recommended that recovering addicts undertake “a searching and fearless moral inventory” of themselves based on the premise that “...the process of discovering who I really am begins with knowing who I really don't want to be.” Participants are advised to make an inventory of resentments, anger, guilt, fear and anxiety, sexual conduct and attitudes, perceived short-comings and character defects. During Step Four, members learn to “drink the dragon” instead of alcohol, to face their demon-dragons instead of escaping them, to swallow true spirit instead of the spirits produced by the distillation of a fermented grain. Making an inventory of personal “negatives” seems to be a

devastating task for already fragile egos, but the sincere and often painful effort to confront, own and modify personal failings can lead to patience, understanding, and compassion for oneself and others.

Only through the darkness can you get to the light.
Carolyn Myss, Spiritual Madness

Fleet Maull

Buddhist teacher (“sensei”) Fleet Maull discovered the exhilaration of both Eastern philosophy and LSD in high school. As a young man, he left the States to live among the Quechua people in the Peruvian Andes for a number of years, renewing his studies of Eastern ideas and spirituality while gradually becoming involved in the cocaine trade as a source of income. He later moved to Boulder Colorado and became a student of Trungpa Rinpoche, a prominent Tibetan Buddhist teacher who founded Naropa University, the first Buddhist-inspired university in North America. “It was a crazy life, mixing drug use and trafficking with active involvement in the spiritual community,” he stated in a interview for *Tricycle Magazine*.¹ After graduating from Naropa with an M.A. in contemplative psychotherapy, Fleet would spend half the year participating in meditation and spiritual study programs and the other half smuggling drugs. It all came to an end in 1985. “I was indicted, my property was seized, and was threatened with spending life in prison.”² He considered fleeing; his teacher advised him to stay to face his shadow-life.

Fleet was sentenced to 14 years in federal prison for drug trafficking. The noise, chaos, hopelessness, boredom, anger and hostility of prison life made it a “hell realm” for Fleet. “It was a time of terrible fear, darkness, and despair,” he admitted. Fleet began to fully face his shadow self: “I’d let down my teacher, my community, myself, but the most devastating part was what I had done to my family, my son and his mom.”³ Acknowledging the waste he had made of his life, he began to meditate for several hours each day. While serving his sentence, Fleet founded two national organizations: the Prison Dharma Network, which helps prisoners learn meditative practices as transformational tools, and the Prison Hospice Association, which cares for ill and dying prison inmates. When recent statistics show one in a hundred adult Americans in jail,⁴ Fleet’s call for correctional institutions and programs that genuinely support rehabilitation and personal transformation is timely and essential.

As founder and director of the Colorado Peacemaker Institute, Fleet has incorporated shadow work into leadership programs which promote peace and positive social change. In the intensive peacemaker certification program, participants engage in “The Event,” a plunge into transformational shadow and grief work in order to develop what Fleet has called “greater depth of being.” Fleet also leads students on Auschwitz Bearing Witness Retreats, in which they “unflinchingly bear witness to the impact of evil on individual human lives, not just collections of people but individuals.”⁵ He acknowledged that when he visited Auschwitz during the first retreat in 2001, he knew that he needed to deal with “perpetrator energy”: “I know in my gut that there is no ‘them’.”⁶ Fleet teaches that we must face evil, bear witness to it, persist in the practice of not turning away. He believes in the humanity of those who learn to open their hearts. Even in the hostile prison environment, Fleet found that the most hardened inmates and guards would eventually reveal their humanity. Ultimately, Fleet believes in the healing power of love and reconciliation.

NOTES

¹ Peter Alsop, "The Prison Monk," *Tricycle*, Spring, 2004.

² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁴ "More than One in 100 U.S. Adults in Prison," news article by Adam Liptak for *The New York Times*, February 29, 2008.

⁵ Fleet Maull. "Post Auschwitz Retreat Reflections While Flying Home," Fleet Maull Blog, November 12, 2007.

⁶ *Ibid.*