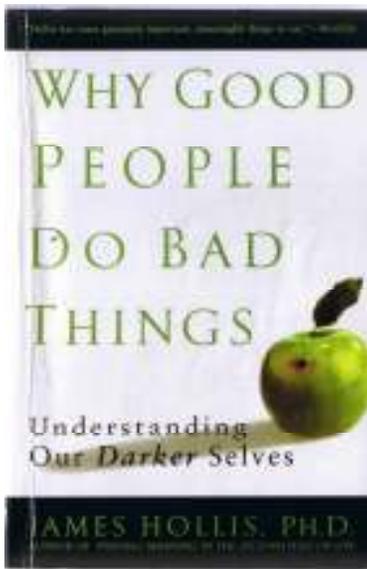


Why Good People Do Bad Things: Understanding Our *Darker Selves*

James Hollis (Gotham Books, 2007).



Suicide bombers. Self sabotaging behaviors. Madmen shooting innocent people. Addictions. Marriage destroying actions. These and a hundred other puzzling behaviors prompted me to read this book. While not providing a definitive “once and for all” solution to the problem of evil, I found it somewhat helpful and am happy to summarize it. As always, summaries are brief and of necessity leave out important information. I’ve gleaned what I consider the salient points. To get the full message I recommend you read the book. It’s hard going at times, hence this roadmap.

Preface

“The human psyche is not a single, unitary, or unified thing, as the ego wants to believe. It is diverse, multiplicitous, and divided...always divided.” (xi).

Hollis, a Jungian psychologist, says we are comprised of “splinter selves,” a “variegated human psyche,” subconscious “contradictory motives,” or what Jung called, “the Shadow.” These inner parts are active, they energize us, and at the same time act independently of consciousness. They are not necessarily evil but can do evil things. We are responsible for what our Shadow prompts us to do even if we do them unconsciously. Society at large is influenced greatly by what goes on in the Shadow. Failure to recognize this makes us vulnerable to its influence; recognizing our Shadow makes us more interesting and less dangerous to ourselves and others.

Skipping ahead, Hollis summarizes our Shadow selves as, “troublemaker, usurper, Devil, demon, antagonist, opposer of ethical life, enemy and subversive legerdemain against our conscious intentions, and most of all, a slippery, ubiquitous confounder of how we wish to think of ourselves.” (183).

Introduction

“How is it that there can be so many discrepancies between our professed values, our presumptive virtues, and our many embarrassing, often destructive, behaviors?” (2).

Every person has “complicated natures,” “hidden agendas,” “splinter selves,” and “complexes.” Some people say these autonomous inner energies are the result of Original Sin, the Fall, or the Devil. It’s hard to admit these Shadow urges “lurk” within us. But failure to come grips with our Shadow determines “quality of life, tenor and outcome of relationships, and the fate of civilization.” (6).

Chapter One: Sundry Shadings of Soul, The Four Forms of Shadow Expression

Freud said that behind aggression, violence, and destruction was a subconscious “darker will.” Jung said these originate from “something deeper, more autonomous,” what he called the Shadow. It is comprised of “all those aspects of ourselves that have a tendency to make us uncomfortable with ourselves.” It “discomforts the sense of self we wish to have.” (9). “It is not synonymous with evil” (9) and can “just as

easily contain what we could consider good, healing, developmental energies.” (9). The Shadow is experienced four different ways.

1. **Unconsciously.** Without realizing it we justify and rationalize away the fact that we are in the grip of motives contrary to our professed values. “Coming to accountability for our own history is the first step in recognizing what has hitherto been unconscious, namely, the presence and activity of our Shadow.” (14).
2. **Projected.** “Our psychic system, in service to historically charged experience as well as anxiety management, floods the new field of experience with data of the old. So we project our inner life, or aspects of it, onto others.” (16). Without realizing it, the things we don’t like about ourselves “in here” are projected onto others “out there.” (17). And thus is born racism, prejudice, and hatred of others.
3. **Possessed by identification.** We can get swept up in the energy of our and others’ Shadow. It usurps our ego and carries us along in the tide. (19).
4. **Integrated into consciousness.** “After a lifetime of blaming others, it is exceedingly difficult for us to finally acknowledge that the only person who has consistently been in all the scenes of that long-running soap opera we call our life is us, and, as a necessary corollary, that we bear some large responsibility for how the drama is turning out.” (21). “The more I am able to identify what works within, the less likely this material will need be played out in the outer world.” (22).

Chapter Two: Paul’s Perplexity, “Though I know the good....”

St. Paul admitted he didn’t always do what was good. He explained it as “weakness of will” and “sin” (25). Hollis says, “narcissistic will, hubris, and original sin” explain the gap between intention and outcome. He then launches into an explanation of depth psychology. This includes:

- Inner invisible forces
- “discrete energies that have a life of their own” (29)
- “powers and principalities that occupy our psychological totality” (30)

Since this is unwelcome news to our fragile egos we dissociate from it with denial, avoidance, repression, suppression, or projection.

A psyche overrun by inner forces raises the question of theodicy. Polytheism and dualism solve the problem: contradiction is inherent in all forms of life (34). Eastern religions solve the problem by calling evil a delusion of the ego. Western religions blame Satan. Fundamentalism harangues the ego, “just say no.”

Hollis’s solution: dialogue with the Shadow. We can’t get rid of the Shadow so our best bet is, “conversation with, mediation among, these separate energies...continuous dialogue, self examination” (36). This is called Shadow work.

Chapter Three: Running Into Ourselves, The Personal Shadow

Our Shadow selves are shaped by childhood experiences. Different cultures create different Shadow selves. “So much for an objective definition of the Shadow!” (41). In this chapter Hollis describes how the Shadow conflicts with other parts of us, namely the drive for sex and anger.

One source of conflict is the clash between sexual urges (eros) and eros-denying messages from parents or priests. "...sustained deflection of eros will sooner or later pathologize in destructive ways." (45).

"The splitting of eros and natural life by cultural imposition is itself a major study, for I know of no one in the modern world who does not share some aspect of this wounding of their nature. How can one not carry such splits, for do we not all internalize cultural complexes that override our natural truths in order to ease our way in the world...? Thus the Shadow is born." (48).

Strip clubs are "an unconscious defense against the open grieving of their souls. The Shadow is not sex; but its excessive importance represents a failed treatment plan for the soul's desire for healing, for connection, for meaning." (50).

"The cost to the human spirit by guilt complexes inculcated by parents, communities, and religious authorities cannot be overemphasized, and has soured the putative sweetness of many, many lives." (54).

"If we are unable to discern the con artist in ourselves, or the thief, or the bully, how would we be able to recognize this behavior in others?" (56).

"The Shadow is not synonymous with evil." (56).

"We have an accountability to something higher than our history, our replicative complexes, even our deepest loyalties!" (58).

Hollis introduces new terms in this chapter.

1. **Anima**: what Jung called a male's inner feminine Shadow energy.
2. **Animus**: what he called a female's inner masculine Shadow energy.
3. **Neuroses** occur "when anger is inordinately suppressed." (52).
4. **Complexes** develop when "affect-laden 'ideas'...take on a life of their own and subject the adult to their continuous influence." (54).
5. **Personas** develop when we put on masks or adopt roles that help us adapt to our inner conflicts. Typically these are developed in the first half of life. "The critical summons of the second half of life is to recover a personal sense of authority, explore, thoughtfully express the personal Shadow, and risk living faithfully with the soul's agenda." (55).

Chapter Four: Pathos, Shadow Invasions in Everyday Life

When we adapt to our environment—family and culture—we risk alienation from our inherent nature. The more we are alienated, the more we are haunted by the Shadow of an unlived life, the more we experience psychopathology: the suffering of the soul. (60). To cope with that suffering we pursue many different "anxiety management systems."

- Avoidance: procrastination and assumed powerlessness.
- Sociopathy: imagining others are out to get us so we hurt them before they hurt us.
- Fundamentalism: ridding life of all ambiguity.
- Phobias: imagining benign objects or activities as threats.
- Routine: imposing order on a chaotic life which when upset leads to anxiety.

- Addiction: “a reflexive, conditioned, and often progressively compelling behavior whose enactment momentarily lowers stress.” (67). Smoking, food, work, etc. Addictions allow us to “avoid feeling what we already feel.” (68).
- Magical thinking, the “failure to engage in a distinction between outer and inner, subjective and objective.” (70). We think our thoughts affect the universe, etc.
- Paraphilias: desire to connect with others in culturally questionable ways. Homosexuality, frotteurism (rubbing against others), sex offenses, sexual fantasies.
- Neuroses: being both wounded and the wound. Our ID is wrapped up in suffering.
- Antisocial personality: Wielding power for protection from imagined threats by others.
- Paranoid personality: a life governed by fear and the core belief we are powerless.
- Narcissism: Using others to prop up a deficient self, feeling entitled, lack of reciprocity.
- Borderline personality disorder: to quell the terror of abandonment we blame, create drama, and walk away vindicated that others are untrustworthy.
- Compulsive personality: Perfectionists, control freaks, the passive-aggressive.

To do “Shadow work” we must identify what we’re avoiding. (79). “When we do not look within, something within is looking at us nonetheless, subtly making decisions for us. We wish to respect our pathos—our suffering—yet not be passive or pathetic.” (82).

Chapter Five: Hidden Agendas, The Shadow in Intimate Relationships

Shadows influence marriages. “Reason and conscious intention can subscribe to a code of behavior, and yet are easily overthrown by the power of the non-rational inner world.” (85).

Our Shadows first develop in relationship to our care givers, parent-child encounters, as well as sociopolitical, economic, and environmental influences. We either feel overwhelmed or abandoned by these forces. If we feel overwhelmed we respond with avoidance, power struggles, or compliance. If we feel abandoned we respond by identifying with the rejection, getting into power struggles, or addiction. “How can any relationship flourish amid such ghostly presences? And is any relationship ever free of such Shadow agendas?” (90).

When we are in the presence of an intimate Other (spouse, loved one, friend) we reenact childhood themes and roles. Any number of patterns learned in childhood can reemerge:

- We reject Other’s advice and influence when we feel threatened by engulfment
- We get anxious when they pull away; we feel abandoned
- We comply out of fear
- We become caretaker to the Other
- We control, dominate the Other
- We threaten, stalk, badger, abuse those we fear will leave us
- We can’t tolerate ambiguity, force agreement, and deny differences

Behind these conflicts is our Shadow subconsciously influencing us. Hollis asks rhetorically, “How free ever, then, is such an important choice as marriage, when one is in service to an archaic imago and its attendant strategies?” (91).

“To what degree can I truly love the Other by keeping my own needs from dominating them?” (94).

“The Shadow issue haunts most relationships and constitutes the chief source of unhappiness, blaming, and stuckness.” (96).

To achieve a happy marriage Hollis recommends each individual take responsibility for their Shadow, recognize the hidden motives behind mate selection, quit “projecting” and “transferring” our issues onto our partners, and endure the existential angst of growing up not dependent on our partners. (106).

Chapter Six: One Multiplied, The Collective Shadow

Shadows join forces. Yours and mine sometimes join for good—people helping people during natural disasters. And sometimes for ill—looting, war, mass hysteria. “There are not that many individual madmen in any age, but great collective lunacy does indeed occur because charismatic madness touches and activates the ‘mad parts’ in otherwise sane people.” (114).

To affect change in universities, churches, governments, corporations, businesses, armies, and more there needs to be, says Hollis, a “recovery of the soul.” (126).

Chapter Seven: Lowest Common Denominator, Institutional Shadows

What originates in one’s individual Shadow coalesces into social, corporate, and institutionalized dysfunction--Imperialism, war, Holocaust, genocide, racism, etc. “Institutions can carry a very large Shadow.” (137). “Whether the institution is a corporation, a religious, academic, or charitable body, or a government, it has its own limited vision and always begets a Shadow agenda and a Shadow cost.” (138).

“As necessary as the ego is to the individual psyche, so institutions are to our culture. Yet as we have seen, the ego is so easily supplanted by the split-off-parts of the psyche that great harm may be brought to self and others.” (144-145).

As despairing as this diagnosis may seem, Hollis offers a way out “Only vigilance, awakened conscience, and aroused consciousness, allied with a civic commitment and healthy skepticism, can challenge the Shadow of institutionalized life. Skepticism is based on the very sound premise that even in the most well-intentioned the Shadow is present, active, and on the move.” (146). The more we are able to identify the Shadow in ourselves the more we’ll be able to recognize the Shadow in institutions.

Chapter Eight: Progress’s Dark Edge, The Shadow of Modernism

Modern secularism emerged when the Black Death killed 40% of Europe. It caused a disquietude in the religious world view. Using Faust as his guide—making a deal with the devil always has its consequences—Hollis pits technological advances against the concurrent psychological and spiritual angst and concludes progress isn’t always progressive.

“My presumption that I always act with virtuous intent is reframed by the fact that every choice I make has hidden costs, some of which prove harmful to me and to those whom I love.” (153).

“Evil is not ‘out there’ on some metaphysical plane; it is in us, in our daily acts, in the history we beget.” (154).

“Both progress and meliorism are noble fantasies.” (158). Meliorism is the belief that the scourges of mankind—war, poverty, disease, ignorance—can be eradicated. Citing literary figures Robert Lewis Stevenson (*Jekyll and Hyde*), Dostoyevsky (*Notes from Underground*), Shakespeare (*Hamlet*), Hannah Arendt (*Becoming Eichmann*), Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*), and others, Hollis points out how morally bankrupt humanity is despite technological advances.

Chapter Nine: Dark Divinity, The Shadow Side of God

According to Hollis theology is comprised of the following three ideas.

1. It is “subjective.” (167). This means humans write theology, not God.
2. “There is no good, no evil.” (167). What humans call evil is subjective and relative.
3. Theology is either polytheistic (tolerant of ambiguity) or monotheistic (intolerant of ambiguity).

Monotheists grapple with the problem of evil and create theodicies. “But the contradictions of most theistic positions are then driven underground, only to surface later as troubling paradox, or unacceptable ambiguity.” (169).

The story of Job illustrates the human tendency to engage in “magical thinking...sacred contracts” which are “presumptive, hubristic, and delusory.” (170). “Job is the story not of the Shadow of God, but of our Shadow problem with that mystery we call God.” (171).

“The supreme deities are not, apparently, concerned with good or evil. They simply Are, in all their inscrutable mystery. So-called ‘natural evil’ is simply nature naturing. And so-called ‘moral evil’ is very slippery in its definitions, so often a function of variable cultural contexts.” (172).

Hollis implies that any problem we have with God and evil is a symptom of our fragile egos. God’s message to Job was to change his, “reductive expectations.” (173), the message of Greek tragedies was to conform to the mysterious will of God, and the message of Augustine was to protect God’s goodness by explaining evil as from Satan. Leibniz’ message was “evil helps make the presence of good possible” (174). (Voltaire mocked Leibniz’ view). Archibald MacLeish’s message in his play *J.B.* was, “bring the balm of human compassion.” (177). Jung’s message in his work *Answer to Job* was, “God is thus to be humanized, and enlightened.” (178). Hollis backtracks a bit and adds, “It is our theology that needs healing” (178) and we need to “embrace the mystery.” (179). Ron Rosenbaum in an *Atlantic Monthly* article calls attention to the horrifying ability of humans—Osama Bin Laden, Third Reich—to do evil in the name of righteousness. (179). The message of Western religion is: evil is the result of a fall from grace (181). The message of Eastern religions is: “release the ego from its bondage to anxiety and desire.” (181). After briefly reviewing these and other theodicies, Hollis’ answer to the problem of evil is like Camus’, admit we are not in charge and “minister to those suffering.” (182).

Chapter Ten: Luminous Darkness, The Positive Shadow

“So what is good about the Shadow, and how might one gain access to this alleged goodness?” (184).

1. Recognize that the Shadow challenges who we think we are but does not control or dictate who we are. (185).
2. Recognize that the Shadow, including anger and the sex drive, often have our best interests in mind, its “positive agenda.” (186).

3. Recognize that the inner conflicts the Shadow stirs up are opportunities to “grow.” (190).
4. Have a “deepened conversation with the Shadow.” “Imagine that something inside you wants to talk to us.” (192).
5. “Consider how healing ... dream[s are]...the soul seeks to reconnect, and to invite consciousness to bear witness to its personal truth.” (193).
6. Accept yourself, Shadow and all. Self-estrangement sabotages all relationships. (196).

Chapter Eleven: Shadow/Work, Encountering Our Darker Selves

It isn't easy to encounter your darker self because it is unconscious. (206). You can't be conscious of your unconscious; that's what makes it UN-conscious. Nevertheless, here are tips on how to access your inner self.

1. Pay attention to your reaction to negative feedback. “Our excessive reaction to small events reveals not only a complex hiding beneath, but quite often a Shadow issue, as well.” (203).
2. Pay attention to your old wounds. What recurring pain do you encounter?
3. Pay attention to your limitations. Shadow work often includes accepting limited good health and accepting suffering. (204).
4. Pay attention to your certitudes. “The damage done by your moral fundamentalisms, with their one-sided pursuit of moral consistency at the expense of the other values that life demands, is as grievous as it is so seldom acknowledged.” (204).
5. Pay attention to how often you stifle genuine interests just to be accepted by others. (205).
6. Pay attention to how often you blame others for, or project onto others, your negative traits. What is it in others that bugs you? It is likely you do the same. “What we hate in the Other is what we hate in ourselves.” (219).

Questions for Shadow Work.

1. List your virtues. Imagine their opposites. Do any of those opposites lurk in you?

If you are honest the opposite trait is dishonest. If you are patient the opposite is impatience. If you are caring the opposite is selfish. Do dishonesty, impatience, or selfishness ever pop up in your life? Those are your Shadow parts to be dealt with.

2. Where in your life are patterns of aggression, avoidance, or repetition?

Do you chronically sabotage relationships, fear success, fear abandonment, end relationships, pick toxic lovers, avoid conflict, habitually control others, become dependent on others' approval, are you prone to flight or fight, do you crave others to take care of you, or reenact drama you learned in your family of origin? These are Shadow parts to be dealt with. “The Shadow task here is not what happened in that distant past, but in his collusive servitude to its archaic admonitions.” (211).

3. What annoys you most about your partner/friends?

We subconsciously choose partners/friends who annoy us. Why? Feeling annoyed like we were in our families of origin is familiar. “Familiar suffering is often preferred to unknown suffering.” (216). Or, we pick someone who reminds us of an earlier annoying person so we can either “fix them” or “punish them.” Or, we pick someone who makes us miserable so we can “anesthetize their pain through work, drugs, or diversion.”

(217). “It requires Shadow work to bring this to the surface and to find that the annoying antagonist is within after all.” (218).

4. Where do you repeatedly undermine yourself?

“The enemy we face is the abiding power of our history.” (222).

5. Where are you stuck in life?

“We are stuck because the stuck places are ‘wired’ to complexes, energy clusters from our history.” (223). Getting unstuck requires taking on our anxiety (224).

6. Where do mom and dad still govern your life?

“Mom and dad” is code for 1) the script you learned as a kid on how to act, 2) the view of yourself that you learned growing up, and 3) the way you learned to relate to others.

7. Do you expect magical solutions, expect rescue, or hope someone will take care of it all for you?

If so it’s an indication that you refuse to grow up. Doing Shadow work means managing your life and your inner parts responsibly.

In conclusion....

“The first place to look for the Shadow is 1) where our fears are found, 2) where we are most ugly to ourselves, or 3) for the many, daily deals we make, the adaptations, and the denials that only deepen the darkness. This challenging paradox remains: We will never experience healing until we can come to love our unlovable places, for they, too, ask love of us. Our sick places are sick because no one, especially not us, loved them.” (235).

Erik’s Amazon review

First the bad news. Four things irritated me about this book and prevented me from giving it 5 Stars.

ONE: His vocabulary was not user friendly. I had to look up “telluric” (page 6), “enfilades” (page 22), “quiescence” (page 44), “folie a deux” (page 108), “recrudescence” (page 110), “vigilance” (page 113), “cerements” (page 228), and “entelechy” (page 229).

As a public service: telluric means, “electric current flowing underground,” enfilades means, “rooms connected in a row,” quiescence means, “not active, not causing symptoms,” folie a deux means, “two people who both believe a crazy idea,” recrudescence means “an outbreak after a period of inactivity,” vigilance wasn’t in the on-line Merriam-Webster’s dictionary I checked, cerements means, “waxed cloth for wrapping a corpse,” and entelechy means, “realizing potential.”

TWO: I don’t get the cover. Is that a worm in the apple indicating disease? Is it a reference to Adam’s apple? Did a good child do something bad, namely, give their teacher a green apple?

THREE: This book is repetitious. This could be either poor editing or an intentional teaching device. Either way, the book could be at least 20% shorter without serious loss.

FOUR: And most importantly, blaming bad actions on our Jungian inner Shadow begs the question, “Where do Shadows come from?” Hollis sites parents, socioeconomic forces, and environment as contributing factors. He implies Shadows are universal but not every member of a certain religion blows up buildings, not every married couple divorces, and not every business person embezzles. Why do only some good people do bad things and why do bad people do good things? Hollis never mentions biology, neurology, evolutionary psychology, or our territorial primate ancestors as possible explanations. Hollis acknowledges the ultimate mystery of evil which weakens his title. A more fitting title would be, “Why Good People Maybe Do Bad Things.”

Now the good news: I give this book a strong 4 Stars because understanding our splintered selves is important. If he didn’t solve the riddle of evil he does give good advice, __know thyself and deal with your Shadow self.__ He concludes with, “The first place to look for the Shadow is 1) where our fears are found, 2) where we are most ugly to ourselves, or 3) for the many, daily deals we make, the adaptations, and the denials that only deepen the darkness. This challenging paradox remains: We will never experience healing until we can come to love our unlovable places, for they, too, ask love of us. Our sick places are sick because no one, especially not us, loved them.” (235).