

Session 4 mixtape transcript: Shadow

Curated and hosted by Marc Rettig
marcrettig.me/creativity-practice-x6

See final page for links to sources.

David Whyte, *The edge you carry with you*

David Whyte

So this piece is called “The edge you carry with you.” Why is it so difficult to be happy, for human beings? And why is it so difficult to drop down to a place we often only visit rarely, where we experience the rightness of the world more than we do the wrongness, of other people or our circumstances. So this is “The edge you carry with you.”

What is this beguiling reluctance to be happy?
This quickness in turning away
the moment you might arrive
the felt sense that a moment’s unguarded joy
might after all just kill you.

You know so very well the edge of darkness
you have always carried with you,
you know, so very well your childhood legacy:

that particular inherited sense of hurt
given to you so freely by the world you entered

and you know too well by now
the body’s hesitation at the invitation
to undo everything others seemed to want
to make you learn.

But your edge of darkness
has always made its own definition
secretly as an edge of light,

and the door you closed might by its very nature
be one, just waiting to be lent against
and opened.

And happiness might just be a single step away
on the other side of that next unhelpful and undeserving thought.

You’re way your way home now understood
not as an achievement,
but as a giving up a blessed undoing,
an arrival in the body
and a full rest in the give and take of the breath.

This living breathing body always waiting
to greet you at the door.

Always, no matter the long years you’ve been away
still wanting you to come home.

Introduction

Marc Rettig

That was David White from a conversation with Jordan Klepper and Governor John Kasich on *the Kasich and Klepper Podcast*.

3:00

Our theme for this mix is shadow. The dark aspects of our being and the dark aspects of life. There are so many. Facets of this. It's just such a huge part of human experience. And so little talked about in our culture sold little attended to, especially in conversations about creativity or design.

I'm not going to go into the darkest corners of this. Uh, but still something here may be. Uncomfortable for you may bring up something for you. So. Well discomfort is okay, but please take care of yourself, skip or turn it off or take a moment if you need to.

The point is to open our thoughts and our practice to the idea that an aspect of creativity. Is to reintegrate the light and dark aspects of our being and our experience. The shy child in us who feels unworthy of love. Feels inadequate to give something valuable to the world. The wounded parts of our being that. Avoid looking at old harms. As my friend, Tanya says, we look away to be okay. And so deny our wounded selves, the loving arms of our larger selves.

So that's one aspect of shadow the band or orphaned aspects of our individual interior experience and emotions.

Let's also talk about the exterior aspect of this theme, the difficult aspects of the world, the hard parts of life. We'd rather avoid them. Well, what if it's possible? To have a generative relationship with the hard parts of life. I want to suggest that all this internal and external darkness is a valid and incredibly rich source. For creativity. And perhaps one part of growing our creative capacity is to slow patient work of coming into a generative relationship with loss and grief and. The parts of life and ourselves, we prefer to ignore. So to keep this under an hour, I'm not going to spend a lot of time making a clear connection to creativity. Maybe. You write about that or take a walk about that or a sketch about that. For me. This topic gets to the roots and soil from which a full creative life can grow.

...

We haven't been having music in these mixes, but with a theme like "shadow," with a mix that includes topics like death, I think we're going to need a little music from time to time.

6:00

[music]

Introducing Francis Weller

We'll take this in chapters—interior shadow, exterior shadow. But first let's hear more about this possibility of a generative relationship with difficulty, loss, grief. Here is Francis Weller—a psychotherapist and author who refers to himself as a "soul activist". He's had a long practice in grief work, mostly with groups of people.

It was hard to find a nice tidy package for what I'd like to give you from Weller. So I'll start by reading a few paragraphs and a poem from his book, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*. Then there's about seven minutes of audio from him. Then I'll offer a few more quotes from his book, hoping to pass along the sense of possibility I've been finding in these ideas.

Remember, his focus is grief. Loss. That's the language you'll hear from him. And that is one aspect of "shadow." The main reason I'm including him is for the way he tells us that there is another way to engage with the dark stuff, both exterior and interior.

“I have come to have a deep faith in grief, have come to see the way its moods call us back to soul. It is, in fact, one of the voices of the soul, asking us to face life’s most difficult but essential teaching: everything is a gift, and nothing lasts. This is a painful truth. To accept this fact is to live on life’s terms and not to try to deny the simple truth of loss, what the Buddhists call impermanence. When we acknowledge grief, we acknowledge that everything we love, we will lose. No exceptions.”

9:00

“Now, of course, we want to argue this point, saying that we will keep in our hearts the love of those who depart this earth before us: our parents, or our spouse, or our children, or our friends, or, or, or—and yes, that is true. It is grief, however, that allows the heart to stay open to this love, to remember sweetly the ways these people touched our lives. It is only when we deny grief’s entry into our lives that we begin to compress the breadth of our emotional experience and live shallowly. There is a poem from the twelfth century that beautifully articulates this lasting truth about the risks we take when we choose to love.”

For Those Who Have Died

‘Tis a fearful thing
To love
What death can touch.
To love, to hope, to dream,
And oh, to lose.

A thing for fools, this,
Love,
But a holy thing,
To love what death can touch.

For your life has lived in me;
Your laugh once lifted me;
Your word was a gift to me.

To remember this brings painful joy.

‘Tis a human thing, love,
A holy thing,
To love
What death can touch.

“This startling poem goes to the very heart of what I am saying. “It is a holy thing to love what death can touch.” To keep it holy, however, to keep it accessible, we must become fluent in the language and customs of grief. If we don’t, our losses become great weights that drag us down, pulling us below the threshold of life and into the world of death.

My grief says that I dared to love, that I allowed another to enter the very core of my being and find a home in my heart. Grief is akin to praise; it is how the soul recounts the depth to which someone has touched our lives. To love is to accept the rites of grief.”

Now here’s Weller. His first sentence is hard to catch. He’s quoting from a poem by Rilke that says, “I don’t have much knowledge yet in grief, so this massive darkness makes me small.”

Francis Weller

Rilke says, “We don’t have much knowledge yet in grief, so this massive darkness makes us small.” And so in some ways our not having practices to move through grief keeps

our lives small. I consider grief a threshold emotion. In other words, when we step across that threshold and enter the room of grief, it has a way of opening up the rest of our life.

12:00 We, enter the hall then of community, joy. Even Blake, William Blake said, “The deeper the sorrow, the greater the joy.” When we compress the terrain of grief, we also compress the territory of joy and we end up living in a flatline culture. Which is where we are right now. And then when you live in a flatline culture, you rely upon stimulation and stimulants to give you some sense of being alive, because we’re not experiencing genuine joy, nor are we expressing genuine grief.

So these practices become what I call soul hygiene. You know, we know how to take care of our teeth and our hair and our body, we exercise. Those are all hygiene practices. But we forgot about the hygiene of the soul. And to clear out the soul regularly with practices around grief is an absolute necessity.

Denise Levertov had a little sweet poem. She said, “To speak of sorrow works upon it, moves it from its crouched place barring the way to and from the soul’s hall.” So these practices become ways of maintaining a relationship to our own soulful life. But also then to the soul of the world.

If we don’t practice those things, we become more isolated and more disconnected. We are conditioned in a heroic culture to do it yourself. To be on your own, to not need anyone to lean into nothing, and to somehow muscle your way through your sorrow.

And you can’t, you know, it’s important to be with my own melancholy from time to time and to really feel into that. But then I need to bring it back out into community. Because grief has never been private. Grief has always—and our entire story as a species—been a communal process.

So part of what our grief is waiting for is the village to show up. And the village can be small. You know, if we have two or three people gathered. To sit down and say, “Tonight I want to tell you about my sorrow, and I want to hear all about your sorrow.” And there’s nothing broken, nothing needs fixing. What we mainly need is to have someone listen deeply to my sorrow and say it matters.

Marc Rettig Now a little more from Weller’s book, *The wild edge of sorrow*.

“There is some strange intimacy between grief and aliveness, some sacred exchange between what seems unbearable and what is most exquisitely alive.”

“Our broken hearts have the potential to open us to a wider sense of identity, one capable of seeing through the partitions that have segregated self from world.”

“Those who undertake the full journey into their grief come back carrying medicine for the world.”

15:00 “Bringing grief and death out of the shadow is our spiritual responsibility, our sacred duty. By so doing, we may be able to feel our desire for life once again and remember who we are, where we belong, and what is sacred.”

“[Each emotion and experience] has vitality in it, and that is our work: to be alive and to be a good host to whoever arrives at the door of our house.”

“We were not meant to live shallow lives.... .We are designed to encounter this life with amazement and wonder, not resignation and endurance. This is at the very heart of our grief and sorrow. The dream of full-throated living, woven into our very being, has often been forgotten and neglected, replaced by a societal fiction of productivity and material gain.”

“Grief work offers us a trail leading back to the vitality that is our birthright. When we fully honor our many losses, our lives become more fully able to embody the wild joy that aches to leap from our hearts into the shimmering world.”

An example: Jack Gilbert, “Michiko Dead”

Here are two examples of people creating from inside their particular dark places.

First, the poet Jack Gilbert. After the end of a five-year relationship, Jack fell in love with a woman named Michiko. She was a sculptor, twenty-one years younger than him. They married, they moved to Japan, settled there. After years of marriage—I’m not sure how long—Michiko died of cancer when she was 36 years old. Jack published a series of poems that were dedicated to her, and then he went silent. Didn’t publish a thing for 10 years. This poem is called “Michiko Dead.” I think it’s a remarkable example of someone using grief as creative source. He’s clearly sitting in that dark experience as he writes, trying to find expression. This is the poem.

18:00 He manages like somebody carrying a box
that is too heavy, first with his arms
underneath. When their strength gives out,
he moves the hands forward, hooking them
on the corners, pulling the weight against
his chest. He moves his thumbs slightly
when the fingers begin to tire, and it makes
different muscles take over. Afterward,
he carries it on his shoulder, until the blood
drains out of the arm that is stretched up
to steady the box and the arm goes numb. But now
the man can hold underneath again, so that
he can go on without ever putting the box down.

An example: Hanna du Plessis’ list of instructions

A second example.

As Hanna du Plessis lives with the progressing symptoms of ALS, she’s also enrolled in an MFA in creative writing. In one of her assignments, she was asked to play with form through an exercise called a hermit crab essay. You may know that hermit crabs make their home in other creatures discarded shells. A hermit crab essay is an essay that takes the form of another kind of writing.

And here’s Hanna’s list of instructions. She’s using the form of a list of instructions as the shell for an essay. And it’s called, “Getting through the first seventeen hours after learning you might have ALS: a how-to guide.” I’m going to read the first half, and you can follow the links for this mix to read the rest.

1. Take a notebook and pen—one that works—to the doctor’s appointment. When the doctor looks down and sighs as if she’s trying to shed the heaviness you both feel, be sure to have both pen and paper ready. Listen carefully as she says, “I suspect you have ALS.” In that moment your brain might not be working right. That is okay. Try to focus on her words and make the symbols for ALS as many times as needed. She will nod in agreement when her sounds and your scribbles align.

- 21:00
2. Walk out of the appointment and search for your phone. Text the friends who marked their calendars with “After doctor support.” Tell them to meet you at the bar.
 3. Arrive. It’s okay to feel out of sync with all the people giggling around you. Let your friend choose a table. Excuse yourself and visit the restroom. Be mindful, if the bathrooms are gendered, to choose the one that matches yours. Sit down on the toilet seat and cry. If there is no one else or if you feel okay with someone hearing, cry loudly. Then pee. Wash your hands, wipe your face. Wink at yourself. Apply lipstick if that’ll make you feel stronger. Take a tissue to the table.
 4. Join your friends at the table. Be sure to sit where you feel most held. A corner seat is good for that. Allow your friends to order you a drink and choose the appetizers. It’s okay if you forget to consider the happy hour menu.
 5. Ask the questions. This is a good place to ask things. You are not alone now and your friend who holds the world of Google can be trusted to translate. Ask anything. “How long is the average time to live?” “Will I die of suffocation?”
 6. Cry. It’s likely that you don’t often cry in public, but this is the time to break that taboo. Lower your face into the brown paper napkin. Let sorrow rise from inside you. Let it shake your shoulders and escape the narrow passage of your throat.
 7. Ask for jokes. When you start to feel like you are sinking below the surface, ask your friends to tell you jokes. Laugh at all of them, even the dick joke. Search for a joke inside your own mind. It must be there. Allow your laughter to swing into crying and then back into laughter again. If you have never faced death like today, your emotions need a lot of space to roam.
 8. Eat at least ten bites. Your belly will constrict with fear. But all these weeks of tests and waiting have already worn you thin. You need sustenance. Take two french fries between your fingers and dip one in the mayo, one in the ketchup as if they are legs with different colored socks. Chew. Taste the tang. If necessary, use water to help you swallow.
 9. Hug your friends goodbye. Notice their bodies close to yours. Let your nose rest on her buzz cut and breathe in that comforting scent. Feel how thin he feels after his open-heart surgery. Cusp your hand over his soft, warm cheek. Don’t let go of his hand until you split off into your own apartment.
 10. Sit down. It’s okay if you forget to take off your coat and hat, but do remove your gloves. While I want to advise you not to google ALS in this moment, it might be very difficult to refrain from doing so. Set your timer for fifteen minutes.
 - 24:00 11. Answer the phone. When your partner calls, answer. Be honest when he asks you how you are. This is not the time to “be strong.” Allow him to come over, you may really need the company. And he might too.

[Full essay at okaythen.net/first-17-hours]

Can you feel how the metaphor of a heavy box helped Jack Gilbert communicate? And how the list of instructions format brought just enough playfulness of form so Hanna could let us know what it was like without it being too much for either her or us to bear?

Darkness as creative source.

[music]

Our internal black bag—Robert Bly

Let's turn to our interior shadow.

As an introduction, I'm going to read from a thin little book by Robert Bly. It's called *A little book on the human shadow*.

I've picked some selections from chapter two. I hope this gives us, gives you, some language for the idea of our own personal shadow—he uses the term, “our black bag”—and where it comes from.

Here's Bly.

Let's talk about the personal shadow first. When we were one or two years old we had what we might visualize as a 360-degree personality. Energy radiated out from all parts of our body and all parts of our psyche. A child running is a living globe of energy. We had a ball of energy, all right; but one day we noticed that our parents didn't like certain parts of that ball. They said things like: “Can't you be still?” Or “It isn't nice to try and kill your brother.” Behind us we have an invisible bag, and the part of us our parents don't like, we, to keep our parents' love, put in the bag. By the time we go to school our bag is quite large. Then our teachers have their say: “Good children don't get angry over such little things.” So we take our anger and put it in the bag. By the time my brother and I were twelve in Madison, Minnesota we were known as “the nice Bly boys.” Our bags were already a mile long.

Then we do a lot of bag-stuffing in high school. This time it's no longer the evil grownups that pressure us, but people our own age. So the student's paranoia about grownups can be misplaced. I lied all through high school automatically to try to be more like the basketball players. Any part of myself that was a little slow went into the bag.

...

27:00

We spend our life until we're twenty deciding what parts of ourself to put into the bag, and we spend the rest of our lives trying to get them out again. Sometimes retrieving them feels impossible, as if the bag were sealed. Suppose the bag remains sealed—what happens then? A great nineteenth-century story has an idea about that. One night Robert Louis Stevenson woke up and told his wife a bit of a dream he'd just had. She urged him to write it down; he did, and it became “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” The nice side of the personality becomes, in our idealistic culture, nicer and nicer. The Western man may be a liberal doctor, for example, always thinking about the good of others. Morally and ethically he is wonderful. But the substance in the bag takes on a personality of its own; it can't be ignored. The story says that the substance locked in the bag appears one day somewhere else in the city. The substance in the bag feels angry, and when you see it, it is shaped like an ape, and moves like an ape.

The story says then that when we put a part of ourselves in the bag it regresses. It de-evolves toward barbarism. Suppose a young man seals a bag at twenty and then waits fifteen or twenty years before he opens it again. What will he find? Sadly, the sexuality, the wildness, the impulsiveness, the anger, the freedom he put in have all regressed; they are not only primitive in mood, they are hostile to the person who opens the bag. The man who opens his bag at forty-five or the woman who opens her bag rightly feels fear. She glances up and sees the shadow of an ape passing along the alley wall; anyone seeing that would be frightened.

...

But why would we give away, or put into the bag, so much of ourselves? Why would we do it so young? And if we have put away so many of our angers, spontaneities, hungers, enthusiasms, our rowdy and unattractive parts, then how can we live? What holds us together? Alice Miller spoke to this point in her book *Prisoners of Childhood*, which in paperback form is called *The Drama of the Gifted Child*.

30:00

The drama is this. We came as infants “trailing clouds of glory,” arriving from the farthest reaches of the universe, bringing with us appetites well preserved from our mammal inheritance, spontaneities wonderfully preserved from our 150,000 years of tree life, angers well preserved from our 5,000 years of tribal life—in short, with our 360-degree radiance—and we offered this gift to our parents. They didn’t want it. They wanted a nice girl or a nice boy. That’s the first act of the drama. It doesn’t mean our parents were wicked; they needed us for something. My mother, as a second generation immigrant, needed my brother and me to help the family look more classy. We do the same thing to our children; it’s a part of life on this planet. Our parents rejected who we were before we could talk, so the pain of the rejection is probably stored in some pre-verbal place.

When I read her book I fell into depression for three weeks. With so much gone, what can we do? We can construct a personality more acceptable to our parents. Alice Miller agrees that we have betrayed ourselves, but she says, “Don’t blame yourself for that. There’s nothing else you could have done.” Children in ancient times who opposed their parents probably were set out to die. We did, as children, the only sensible thing under the circumstances. The proper attitude toward that, she says, is mourning.

...

When we have put a lot in our private bag, we often have as a result little energy. The bigger the bag, the less the energy. Some people have by nature more energy than others, but we all have more than we can possibly use. Where did it go? If we put our sexuality into the bag as a child, obviously we lose with it a lot of energy. When a woman puts her masculinity into the bag, or rolls it up and puts it into the can, she loses energy with it. So we can think of our personal bag as containing energy now unavailable to us. If we identify ourselves as uncreative, it means we took our creativity and put it into the bag. What do you mean, “I am not creative”? “Let experts do it”—isn’t that what such a person is saying? That’s damn well what such people are saying. The audience wants a poet, a hired gun, to come in from out of town. Everybody in this audience should be writing their own poems.

What to do about it? 1. Stubborn gladness.

Okay. That image of the black bag certainly resonates with me. But what to do about it?

In 2021, my dear friend had a miscarriage, which was a tremendous heartbreak, a real death of a dream for her as she relatively late in life was attempting to start a family. And a number of us gathered on a patch of grass in the neighborhood to have a kind of ceremony of grieving and mutual care and gratitude.

33:00

Well, she asked me to write a poem. It’s a black bag moment! Her grief, my own feelings (which I could barely read), the feelings of her boyfriend, all of our histories around children and family and so on. I had to lean on other poets for my own poem.

I share it here because in that black bag moment I found three clues. One is, don’t try to resolve it or fix it or get to the other side of it, just meet it. Here it is. Be with it. Another is to give words, give expression in any form. Including tears, which are themselves a kind of poem. And the third is the idea of “stubborn gladness” or “stubborn joy.” We took that from Jack Gilbert, and it has been a kind of operating principle for us all as we live through Hanna’s time with ALS.

Here’s what I wrote.

Sometimes when I have no words
I try to listen
to the poets.

This moment, for example.
It's not quite grief, though yes it is.
And there's loss
of a dream that had shown
a sprout above ground.

But there's miracle in it too,
The good kind,
And the freshness of recency
On our soul's cheek.

A December wind,
sharp reminder of life:
I can get too much of it
and also I long for it.

Dickinson says that
"after great pain, a formal feeling comes –
...Remembered, if outlived,
As freezing persons recollect the snow –
First chill, then stupor, then the letting go.

Dear Jack Gilbert says
that some things are like
hearing a bell
and wondering where the sound
is coming from,
and so you search
until you realize, "Oh, there."
and you turn back
and go on your way.

He says, "No need to see the bell,
but the angel lost in our bodies,
the music of our thinking.
We want to know what we heard,
not to get closer."

This is the same man who wrote
of stubborn gladness.
He said we must risk delight.
He said,
"We must have the stubbornness
To accept our gladness
in the ruthless furnace
of this world."

And here's Greg Orr,
who thinks
making words from

miracle and loss
is a sacred act
that creates the world.

He says,
Not the loss alone,
But what comes after.
If it ended completely
At loss, the rest
Wouldn't matter.

But you go on.
And the world also.

And words, words
In a poem or song:
Aren't they a stream
On which your feelings float?

Aren't they also
The banks of that stream
And you yourself the flowing?

What to do about it? 1. Stubborn gladness.

36:00 What to do about it?

Part of my interest in poetry comes from this question, because the poets have been reporting on these inner experiences for a long, long time. There's just too much to summarize in this mix without dehydrating it completely—taking out all the juice.

I think of it as a journey. Not the hero's journey, which is a story of overcoming. It's more like the pilgrim's journey: a story of BEcoming.

And in one version I keep for myself, that journey has stages. Here's a quick tour, just so I can get to the part about what to do about the black bag.

The state of being disintegrated, of denying the shadow and only living on the light side of ourselves—only letting the acceptable side of ourselves out, putting whole parts of ourselves in the black bag, living in ways that please those internalized inner voices that follow the internalized cultural scripts—that state is a kind of sleep. Sleepwalking.

Then noticing the bag, realizing we've been in a sleep state, that's waking. But like the opening lines of Dante's *Comedia* that David Whyte so often repeats, it's waking in a dark wood.

In the middle of the road of my life
I awoke in a dark wood
where the true way
was wholly lost.

Okay waking, but that's only a beginning and maybe uncomfortable.

So opening the bag is a stage I think of as—from all the poetic imagery—going into the lake or going to the bottom of the well. And that's where the monster lies. That pissed off person in the black bag that Bly was talking about. And it's also in the

stories where we can find the weapon to kill the monster, *if* we can screw up the courage to go into the lake. And in some version, it's not defeating the monster, but embracing it. Reuniting bringing the two halves of the split coin together again.

So the image I'd like to close with is the image of coming home. The image of coming home to yourself has been a recurring theme for a long time. Sometimes it's more or less the same part of the story as the lake, but I find it useful to separate the two.

39:00 You're walking along. Here you are, strolling along with your open bag or without your bag, and you see a house in the distance. You get closer and you realize it's *your* house, the same house you left when you set out on the journey. Sometimes it's not a house but a mirror. You come home to your own reflection.

It takes a while to get used to just being who you are. All of you. It takes a while to learn to love yourself. At least it did me. And given the amount of poetry and literature on the topic, I think I'm not alone. I think this is part of the mythic journey.

So I'll let two poems do the work here. I'll read them both back to back.

First is Rumi, who says,

Doing as others told me
I was blind.
Coming when others called me,
I was lost.
Then I left everyone,
myself as well.
Then I found everyone,
Myself as well.

That's worth a second read.

Doing as others told me
I was blind.
Coming when others called me,
I was lost.
Then I left everyone,
myself as well.
Then I found everyone,
Myself as well.

Then from the American poet Derek Walcott, a poem called love after love. I think it's a good one. So I'll read it, and then we'll end with a reading of the same poem by Helena Bonham Carter.

The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,
and say, sit here. Eat.

42:00 You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread, Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf
the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

[A second reading by Helena Bonham Carter]

Closing

All of this. All of this is part of deepening and ensouling our creativity.
Thanks for listening.

Sources

Robert Bly, *A little book on the human shadow*

Francis Weller, *The wild edge of sorrow*

Jack Gilbert, *The collected poems of Jack Gilbert*

Hanna du Plessis' essay can be found among her writings at okaythen.net/hanna

Marc Rettig, "Sometimes when I have no words," unpublished

David Whyte on *The Kasich and Klepper Podcast*, Episode 10
podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/david-whyte/id1606026612?i=1000555797108

Helena Bonham Carter reads Derek Walcott's "Love after love"
www.youtube.com/watch?v=TH2qhah44es

Contact Marc Rettig

This mixtape and its transcript were produced by Marc Rettig for the January 2024 conduct of *Creativity Practice x6*, a learning group for people who seek to kindle and deepen their creative practice.

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