

Occasional Note #5

Spiritual Allies and Adversaries

Dear Gang,

I want to write about a topic that I have been thinking about for some time – the presence of spiritual allies and adversaries in our lives. I have been intrigued with how both allies and adversaries can best be used to foster psycho-spiritual development and the realization of the soul on earth in ourselves, in others, and in the species as a whole. And then recently Anne and I and Peter, our son, visited the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

This was a profound experience for me, and the questions of allies and adversaries – inner and outer – of spiritual strength and courage, of evil and complete loss of soul, pressed on me deeply. I am still integrating this experience, and hope that my writing here will help with this process. It was overwhelming to behold so much horror, to witness the deep beauty of the lives of the victims that were crushed, and to experience such sorrow for Jews and Germans alike that this happened. I am so grateful for the presence of this museum of remembrance and for its reminder that this mayhem of destruction happened in, and between, human beings in the recent past. And it is sadly clear that it can happen – and, indeed, has already happened – again, as we have seen in the last decades in the genocides of Cambodia, the Balkans, and Rwanda.

There is much that I do not understand about all this, but one thing is clear to me – that any spiritual psychology must include and embrace explicitly what happened in the Holocaust, and what continues to happen on the planet among the peoples of the world, in its consideration of human existence and psycho-spiritual development. Otherwise, it is in danger of a drift to the superconscious, to the "love and light" schools, as has been the fate of much transpersonal and "new age" work. And, ironically, when this happens, it can, in some cases, come to support the very conditions, as we have seen to a lesser degree in spiritual cults in the last thirty years, that flourished to an extreme degree in Germany in the 30's and early 40's. It is also clear to me that this kind of human behavior is still very much with us. We have not learned from history, and these continuing situations demand that we look at this behavior directly, and ask how exactly is it that humans come to treat each other in this way? We also need to ask what can we do to help so that it does not happen in the future? Spiritual Psychology can contribute to this understanding.

"In Each and Every One"

My core thesis is that the capacity for such destructive behavior is potentially in each and every one of us, and that this potential takes the form of what I call "the

spiritual adversary". In most cases, this adversary is repressed, or projected, and remains unconscious, and held at bay by other identifications in the personality, and by the soul. It is, however, always present in our psychological system and can become a powerful influence on our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. It can also be contained and atrophied, so that it has little, or no, unconscious influence on thought and behavior. I believe that spiritual work is, in part, learning how to do just this. But the first step is to realize, and accept, that this malevolent force is never not there in the make-up of every human being, no matter how psychologically healthy and spiritually mature the person is.

If we accept this premise, we can then ask how is this capacity for malevolence fed and strengthened in a human being, so that it comes to shape more and more of the thought and behavior of a person? What contributes to its development, both within the person and around him/her? What is the process by which a person becomes separated from his/her humanity and becomes increasingly soulless and virulent? How is it that this destructive force in us gets the upper hand? Conversely, how can this force be contained and atrophied within a person? What kind of psycho-spiritual work can contribute to this containment and what is the process by which a person comes to terms with that force within him/herself and nullifies it? And outwardly, what is the context – political, social, psychological, spiritual – that is capable of holding and containing this force and working with it directly, so that its power lessens and the human soul and person are empowered to choose other ways of being? Conversely, what political, economic, social and psychological circumstances feed its power and influence within the person?

Specifically, in terms of the Holocaust, what was it in some Germans, or in the resistance fighters, or in the countless Jews who opposed this soulless genocide, even as its victims, that sustained them? How did a particular person stay connected to his/her own soul, sometimes at the cost of his/her life and always in the face of losing it? Why would one person come to commit atrocities and another not? What choices did each make along the way and how can we describe this process of choosing? What were they in touch with in themselves that sustained them in the face of such horror and enabled them to keep acting for Life? How did they manage the fear they must have felt, the pain, and the despair? And what, on the other hand, was the process by which many Germans, some Jews, and many collaborators, lost their connection and souls and became the killers, or accomplices, they did?

And, in all this, where, and how, do we find the allies, inner and outer, who can stand with us as we confront such conditions in ourselves and in the world and so grow in strength and connection to who we most are? What are the inner and outer resources that we can draw on to stay connected to our souls in the face of evil, and to contain it? And, as part of this work, how do we skillfully identify the adversaries, inner and outer, who oppose this spiritual strength in us? How do we

engage with them so that we do not polarize with, or project, them, but rather encounter and contain their force, both in ourselves and in the world?

These are the questions I would like to explore here. I plan to treat them more fully in the book Soul Hunger and the Human Spirit that I am in the midst of writing, but here I want to outline my thinking as a way of understanding it more fully and asking for feedback from you.

Spiritual Allies

Inner Allies

Most familiar in psycho-spiritual work is the presence of spiritual allies who guide and protect a person and who can be called upon, when needed, for support. Within the shamanic tradition it is the power animal and other allies and helpers; within the Christian tradition it is a saint, or Jesus, or Mary. Within psycho-spiritual work the most familiar spiritual ally is the Wise Being, which can be evoked through imagery and engaged in an inner dialogue about a particular question, or issue, on which a wisdom perspective is needed. Technically, what happens here is that the energies of the soul are stepped down and particularized to the situation through a superconscious image which is rooted in the archetype of Wisdom and which channels the soul's guidance. This being is sometimes male, sometimes female, sometimes changing as circumstances change, sometimes consistent over a long period of time for the person. However it happens, through the image a relationship is established to the soul and its guidance, and a person can then draw on this resource in conducting daily life. Whoever the ally, this is a tremendous asset for a person and empowers him/her spiritually. Through this connection, he/she can discern more exactly and truly the directions of his/her life and its deepest meanings, and can experience support for living this life, even in the face of obstacles, within and without.

Further, there can be very particular and unique spiritual allies in a person's life that may not at first glance fit the picture of a wise being, or power animal, or saint. Again and again, in my work with people on spiritual issues, I have found that a grandmother, or grandfather, was, and is still, a spiritual ally to the person, or a teacher, or neighbor, or family friend. The common link was that this person saw and appreciated and welcomed the person as a soul. I have also found that a particular tree in a person's childhood, or a pet, or a piece of land, function as allies in that they affirm and strengthen the soul connection – both in the past and now when they are evoked again. I have found that they can be called upon in just the same way as a power animal, or saint, or wise being, for guidance and support, and that this dialogue and relationship opens and strengthens the connection to the soul. It also empowers the person to act more in concert with his/her deepest convictions and directions for this life. I have also found that allies can be people from other times whose lives have exemplified spiritual and moral qualities/values which the person is seeking to express as a soul. Joan of Arc, Gandhi, Martin

Luther King, writers, artists, scientists, musicians, can all serve as allies to the soul, and their presence can be invoked to support and guide the person on his/her particular path. Each person knows who is such an ally, and it is important to help each person discern who are the particular allies for them, even if they are not for any other person on earth. This is a very particular relationship, and the closer the fit and resonance, the better and more steady the connection to the soul.

Outer Allies

There can also be outer spiritual allies – land, plants, animals, people, who are present and alive today in the person's life. These allies also can be called upon to support and guide the person, and to stand with him/her in the face of difficulty. One client I worked with recently had a favorite place to sit on a piece of land that he loved, and he would go there to reflect on the issues of his life and get clear in the presence of that place about what he should do. Another client discovered that, when she was riding her horse, a particular strength and clarity came to her, and another said the same when he was playing music. The range of spiritual allies is very wide, and the task is to discover who they are and how best to be in touch with them. To return to the Holocaust for a moment, I remember Victor Frankl writing about visualizing the face of his wife and connecting with her, and saying "no one can take from me the face of my beloved". She was his spiritual ally at those times, and helped him stay connected to his soul and his humanity in the concentration camp.

Most important in finding spiritual allies is to look for the unique relationship that the person has to this source of spiritual power within him/herself. There are no general spiritual allies, but rather very particular presences that, for this person, can be evoked to sustain and strengthen the connection to the soul. Everyone has one, and sometimes several, and are using them, often without knowing it. The task is to help a person study their experience closely and discover who their allies are and how to evoke and use them. This is true of both inner and outer allies, and over time, a person can call on quite a range of spiritual resources to sustain their soul and to act in accordance to the deepest directions of his/her life. Choice is very important here, and I will speak of this below, but first I want to say a bit about spiritual adversaries.

Spiritual Adversaries

The Soul's Noble Adversary

There is a story that Thich Nhat Hanh tells about the Buddha and the spiritual adversary. In Buddhism the devil is called Mara. One day Mara is seen approaching the hut in which the Buddha is living. Ananda, the Buddha's chief disciple, is the first to spot Mara approaching and he runs into the meditation hall very upset and calls out to the Buddha "Mara is coming, Mara is coming! What

shall we do?". The Buddha calms Ananda and answers, "Why, invite him in for tea. He is our honored guest, for without Mara, no Buddha."

This story captures the nonduality, or unity, of the relationship between the soul and the spiritual adversary. The Buddha is very clear about this, but we-- Ananda-- are not. We panic and become afraid of Mara, which feeds our fear, increases his power, and loosens our connection to our souls and spiritual will. We want to keep this seemingly malevolent force out of our lives and so imagine that it is not in us. This means we repress and/or project it, which then not only keeps it in our lives unconsciously, but feeds it psychic energy and encourages it to have more control. Spiritual connectedness and power reside in our capacity to keep Mara close at hand and under a watchful eye, and even welcome him, as the Buddha did. At the same time we need to choose again and again to give our energy to that which gives Life and strengthens our connection to our soul. And we need to do this in the face of that very opposition which the adversary provides. We can call on our allies to help us with this, but key here is the acceptance that Mara, the spiritual adversary, is part of who we are and that the safest place to keep him is in our awareness and close at hand.

Work with the Adversary

I want to expand here a little on how to work with this inner spiritual adversary, once it has become conscious. Basically, it can be conceived as a psychic force that is buried deeply in the unconscious, usually at the level of the fear of death and the fear of full life. It holds, therefore, the sum total of our ignorance, fear, and potential for disconnection from Life. The spiritual adversary uses the fear of death and of full life to keep a person reactive and to a greater, or lesser degree, disconnected from soul and will. Often it feeds the personality's needs for safety, security, power, affection, etc., or energizes complexes in the psyche to keep us distracted from our deeper spiritual needs for true purpose, meaning, vocation. The spiritual adversary does not mind if a person is successful and functional, or dysfunctional, in the world, as long as he/she remains disconnected from the soul and its will. Its purpose is to keep us from a full spiritual expression and soul-realization. Often, the spiritual adversary emerges in our experience when we are making a choice to move closer to the soul at some personal sacrifice, and tries to persuade us that, for whatever reasons, we cannot "afford" to do that. Generally, its intent is on undermining confidence in the soul and the possibility of our really living on earth fully as a soul. It can even use our spiritual yearning to its ends by keeping us moving from one practice to the next, one teacher to the next, without letting any teaching really sink in and therefore radically transforming our daily lives. It holds the negative potential for spiritual disconnection for the whole personal system. And it challenges and seeks to undermine, again and again, the spiritual intention of the soul, the spiritual will, to fully incarnate and express its force on earth.

The spiritual adversary is not a subpersonality and should not be treated as one. It does not ask to be integrated into the personality structure the way a subpersonality does. Rather, it needs to be seen for what it is and then contained and atrophied through "benign non-attention". This work has several aspects. The first is to realize that it is there, and accept this, rather than repressing, or projecting, this energy, or fearing it in ourselves. We all have this malevolent force within us. The second is to begin to study it and examine how it operates – when it tries to influence you, and how. I call this "tracking the adversary". You are not trying to get rid of it, but rather to get to know its ways. This is inviting Mara in to tea. This does several things. One, you discover, once you are willing to look at it directly, that you are more aware than it, and that it only has so many moves. Two, you learn to choose just the opposite of what it is trying to get you to do, thus strengthening your personal will and aligning it more closely to the spiritual will. Three, you begin to lose your fear of it, in yourself and others. Consequently, your fear of death and full life, which it manipulates in you, diminishes. You can look it in the eye rather than avert your gaze out of fear, and then you begin to see what is really there – simply ignorance and fear. This enables you to live more passionately and fully your given life on earth as a soul and, as we shall see, also to confront and help contain this adversarial aspect of other people's individual and collective experience.

There is a degree of liberation in containing the spiritual adversary which is far greater than that achieved through disidentification, for example, from a subpersonality, or the healing of an childhood trauma. But extensive work with personality and psyche is necessary preparation for this experience of liberation. **It is essential to respect the timing of the soul in this regard, and to not "go for" the spiritual adversary before the personality and psyche are coherent and strong enough as systems to deal with it consciously. All the work in the personal and psychical systems is important and prerequisite to a responsible handing of this level of our experience. It is good to know that the adversary is there, but important also to wait until it emerges of its own accord. The soul will know when the time is right.**

Frustration, Humor, and Outrage

Once you are tracking it and know it quite well, then you just keep your eye on it and frustrate it again and again until it become disempowered, atrophied, and vestigial. Every time you choose otherwise than what it suggests, it weakens. It never goes away, you cannot get rid of it, but you can learn to live with it in ways that release spiritual force in you and enable you to express in action the will of the soul. There is a good instance of this at the end of the movie "Gandhi" where someone asks him how he could understand so well how the British were operating in controlling India and foil them again and again. Gandhi answered "because I am such a scoundrel". What he meant was that he had that part in him

that the British were acting from, and so he could outwit it and use it to strengthen his spiritual will and expression.

Humor also is a great way of dealing with the spiritual adversary, as C.S. Lewis's book, the Screwtape Letters, shows. Humor restores perspective and humility and reduces fear. The adversary takes itself very seriously and tries to get us to do so also, which leads to ego inflation, or its opposite, ego deflation, when we cannot achieve the importance we think we need. Humor brings us back to life, to the unknown, and the mystery, and restores the connection to the soul. It restores a sense of perspective and proportion. As an old man Assagioli laughed a great deal, and he once handed me a little scrap of paper in which he had written "Joy makes war impossible". So it is not just issues of staying connected to meaning and value and purpose that are at stake here, but also enjoyment of life, and appreciation and gratitude for what we are given, day by day.

Outrage and indignation also are antidotes to the adversary when they come from the soul and its experience of life on earth. There will be particular experiences that the soul of a person responds to and is most troubled by, and the spiritual will will be focused on confronting those particular situations. This is manifested in outrage and indignation and the desire to act to change these conditions. The adversary will try to keep that from happening, as it is directly opposing the realization of the spiritual will. But the outrage and indignation will fuel the personal will to align with the spiritual will and to take on those conditions and change them. Outrage is as much a spiritual quality as lovingkindness, and is rooted deeply in the soul and its will.

Whetstone of the Soul

A way to conceive this work so that it does not become polarized and the adversary given independent, and inflated, power is to think of the spiritual adversary as the whetstone on which the blade of the spiritual will is sharpened. "Without Mara, no Buddha". When we learn to use it rather than it us, we gain a powerful tool for soul-realization and are able to embrace the full range of our experience without projecting, or repressing, this aspect. What is important here, as with the ally, is to come to know the particular attributes of the adversary, This helps you recognize what exactly yours is and to think through how best to thwart it. It may be a figure, it may be an idea, it may be a belief, and usually it is a combination of these. On the other hand, what all adversaries have in common is that they feed our fear of death and full life and so oppose the alignment of personality and soul, of personal and spiritual will. In all this they serve as a whetstone, as I said, to sharpen our intention and power to express and act as who we most are in the world, and are, in this sense, a "noble adversary". They hold the individual and collective ignorance that separates us from ourselves and each other. They are functional in their capacity to awaken us to our souls and are an aspect of our spiritual legacy. They are the ignorance and fear we need to overcome in order to realize who we most are in the world.

The soul is fully aware of its adversary, as in the story of the Buddha and Mara, and welcomes the opposition. It is only the personality, as represented by Ananda, who wants to be good, who fears it and wants to keep it out. The soul welcomes evil as part of life and establishes a particular relationship to it, as I have described above. And, once this force is embraced, our fear of Life greatly diminishes, which allows the soul to express much more fully and freely and with more power and beauty than ever.

Outer Adversaries

Adversaries exist in the outer world also, and each of us will have very particular ones who cross our path to challenge us spiritually. These may take the form of a person, or current event in the culture, or a dominant idea, but they all serve the same purpose of challenging our personal will to stay aligned with the soul and to choose against whatever they are prompting us to think, feel, or do. They thus also serve as whetstones to the soul and spiritual will, and we can practice with them as much as with the inner adversary. The question is always what the learning from this difficult person, or situation, or cultural trait, is, and how can I grow and develop further through dealing with it creatively? A situation which is avoided will return in some other form, and usually more intensely, until the spiritual learning from it is complete. I remember seeing a quotation on the wall of a retreat center which said "Welcome all obstacles as if you had prayed for them". And I am fond of quoting Zorba the Greek in the same spirit who once said "Life is trouble; only death is not. To be alive is to undo your belt and look for trouble". Both are saying that the adversaries, the obstacles in our lives, can be turned to good use by the soul and that we can learn and grow stronger psychologically and spiritually from encountering and containing their energies. In this work it helps immensely to be aware of the inner adversary, so that it is not projected on the person, or situation (witness Gandhi). But even without this specific awareness, the challenge of outer adversaries is invaluable to our psycho-spiritual development and maturity.

Spiritual Calling and The Collective Adversary

Once you are clearer about your own inner and outer adversaries, and engaged with them as I have described, you can also begin to engage with the collective fear and ignorance in the world and sharpen your soul further by opposing them also. The soul usually has a particular aspect of this collective force which it is focused on dealing with, both because it troubles the soul deeply, and because the soul yearns to express its love and power there. The particular calling to address a specific suffering in the world is often rooted in one's own suffering, or it can be a response to deeply held spiritual values that the soul is seeking to express in particular work to change the world for the better. The calling will focus a person's energy and intent on a particular issue, and he/she will feel the fit of this and leave other issues to other souls. Collective evil, which is basically collective ignorance and fear, and the consequent desire for power and security as forms of protection,

will always be there as a collective whetstone for this spiritual work. And we, as a species, need to take this on as a whole, with each soul playing its particular part. The adversary exists at all levels, person to planet, and our task is to confront and contain and atrophy it at all these levels. We cannot eradicate evil from the face of the planet, but we can reduce its power through our choices and actions, and we can render it powerless and vestigial on earth.

To return to the Holocaust again for a minute, it is striking that the Allies were slow to realize what was happening in Germany – like Ananda, not wanting to look evil in the face – but, as they did, they were able to draw on the strength they needed to contain, outsmart, and neutralize this force and so liberate Europe and the Jews from Nazi domination. Collective political, economic, and social factors can contribute to a culture of spiritual connection, or disconnection, as well as the acts of individuals. It is striking that, along with the courageous individuals, there were instances of whole villages, particularly in France, that harbored Jewish children throughout the war and expressed a collective soul connection in doing this in the face of the Holocaust. There were also communities who did not make this choice, and became collaborators with the Nazis and so lost their own collective soul connection. In both instances, the groups were continually making individual and collective choices as to how to respond to the malevolent force of the Nazi regime.

Choice

Micro-choices

The personal will is the centerpiece in this work with both allies and adversaries, for we are offered again and again micro-choices about how to think, feel, and behave. As we free our will, and see more clearly the nature of the adversary and learn to call upon the allies we have for support, then we begin to make choices that align our energies and life with the spiritual will of the soul. There are countless choices, and, as we make those that are aligned with our spiritual will, we become stronger spiritually. Conversely, as we make choices that side with the adversary and lead toward disconnection, harmless as they may seem at first, in time they can amount to a chronic disconnection and to malevolent thought and behavior. In most cases, this dynamic can be turned around through conscious work and maturation, and there is a huge range of experience that lies on this path, but certainly the Nazis passed that point of no return, and others have also. Through personal choices we build what Thomas Merton called the "habits of holiness", and these become the way we are in the world. But we can also build the habits of evil. Each choice feeds one, or the other, in tiny ways. We are tested in these micro-choices again and again, both inwardly and outwardly, and such choosing is a life long process. There is no point when we are without the influence of the spiritual adversary, inner and outer, but we can change our relationship to it in ways that foster spiritual strength and soul realization. There is also no point when we are totally out of the influence of the soul, but again the choices we make greatly enhance, or diminish, that influence.

There is a story that illustrates this centrality and process of choice. A visitor to the Sioux Reservation in South Dakota met an elderly woman who had a necklace with a double-headed wolf on it. The visitor noticed about it and asked, "was one good and one evil?" The woman indicated that would be a way to see them, and the visitor then asked, "which one will win?" She looked at him steadily and replied, "the one I feed." Always we have a choice as to how we act in our power and are responsible for that choice and its consequences.

The greatest leaders we have had on the planet have been able to do this. The most destructive leaders we have had have done just the opposite and have become evil and a force against life on earth. And in-between are all the leaders, and people, who struggle with these various aspects of themselves, and whose leadership and spiritual power is flawed and limited accordingly. We have also seen leaders who have started out connected to a vision and their own souls, and, as the work progressed, become increasingly disconnected, due to ego inflation, and elements in their personality and psyche, driven by the adversary, which became dominant as they amassed more power and visibility. We have also seen occasionally a leader who is initially quite disconnected have a conversion experience and become deeply spiritually connected and lead in a very different way from that point on. What this points to is a process and an interplay between all the aspects of the person. When the personal will is free enough and aligned with the spiritual will, and the personality and psyche are healed enough so that the soul force can flow through them without major distortion, then you have a leader who will stay connected and lead in ways that will build up life on earth. When you have a leader who is deeply wounded in personality and psyche and soul, and who has fed the adversary in himself for protection and security, and whose personal will is now bound in this relationship, then you have a leader who will begin to destroy life on earth, and who eventually can be called evil. These are the extremes, and what is more important is the vast range of experience that links these two, for it is here that most of us live and work and make choices. Here, again, is where the work with personality and psyche is so important to provide a ground for soul force and to contain and atrophy the energies of the adversary within each of us.

Summary

I am saying, in sum, that both spiritual allies and adversaries exist within and around us and that we need to become aware of them and to choose to work with them in certain ways in order to mature spiritually as souls on earth. We have seen that we can identify and call upon a range of spiritual allies to support and guide us in our journey toward soul realization and the full expression of our spiritual power. We have also seen that the inclusion and confrontation of the spiritual adversary can serve as a whetstone to the sharpness of the soul and to spiritual

power, and it can strengthen us spiritually and give our souls ground to stand on. This strength can further grow through confrontation with the collective adversaries that keep us separated and "at war" with each other on the planet.

This confrontation begins with the spiritual adversary within ourselves, within each person, and with calling upon inner allies to help with this work. It continues with learning to make choice after choice that eventually contain and atrophy this potentially malevolent force within us and strengthen the connection between the personal and spiritual will. In this way both allies and adversaries are involved in a creative process that both strengthens the soul and its expression and transforms the world. This spiritual work is the responsibility of every individual, and what a person does, or does not do, springs from these many choices in relationship to adversaries and allies. Sometimes the action taken is invisible to others, and remains psychological. Sometimes the action may be collective and the soul expression political, economic, social, and/or ecological. Ultimately, it does not make any difference in what arena the soul expresses; what is important is that the soul force is expressed and not blocked. The adversarial forces exist on all levels, as do the allies, and at some points we may work on one, and at another on others. The skill is in knowing how to work at the appropriate level, given the spiritual will of a person, and to be able to engage with both adversaries and allies in ways that support the spiritual development of ourselves, others, and the species.

I am interested to hear your response to these ideas and send you every good wish for your life and work, wherever you are on the face of this troubled and beautiful earth.

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