

## Claiming the Dark Side

*Accepting the shadow side of ourselves and our businesses*

By Marjorie Kelly

*"The only devils in the world are those running around in our own hearts. That is where the battle should be fought."*  
Gandhi

I had occasion, not long ago, to bump into a work acquaintance with whom I hadn't spoken in years—a person who in our last phone conversation had been quite unpleasant to me. I'll call him "David." Running into each other now at a seminar, two years later, we chatted only briefly before he brought up that phone conversation. "I seem to remember that I was rude to you on the phone once," David said. "I don't recall what we were talking about, but I'm sorry I treated you badly." I murmured something to the effect of "no harm done," and we soon moved off to mingle with others. I didn't reveal it then, but I was deeply moved by David's gesture, by his willingness to acknowledge his own unpleasantness and try to make up for it. For in fact, his remarks in that long-ago conversation had stung me, had stayed with me more than I realized—and his apology did in truth make up for them.

I'm reminded, as I write this, of the movie "Flatliners," with its focus on claiming past misdeeds. In the film, medical students simulate death by stopping their hearts, and then bring themselves back with electrical jolts. In their brief sojourn into "death," the students find their lives flashing before them, and they come back haunted by their own past offenses—which the wisest among them set out to make right. One, for instance, searches for a woman he taunted as a child on a school playground, and visits her to make an apology.

I'm reminded, too, as I write these words, of the difficult tasks called for in twelve-step programs: making "a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves," creating a list of all persons harmed, and wherever possible making direct amends.

It's something of a theme in my own life right now, this effort to claim the dark side. It's what impressed me in David's gesture. According to psychologist Daniel Levinson, claiming the shadow is the central task of mid-life, a time of learning to acknowledge the destructive side both of ourselves, and of life in general. "We often learn," Levinson wrote, "by going through intense periods of suffering, confusion, rage against others and ourselves, grief over lost opportunities and lost parts of the self." At mid-life, he says, a person "must come to terms with his grievances and guilts—his view of himself as victim and as villain in the continuing tale of man's inhumanity to man."

Levinson is only one of many theorists to have

written about claiming the dark side. Carl Jung called it "the moral problem par excellence." Robert Bly spoke of it as a process of "eating the shadow." Thoughts on the shadow from these and other writers are excerpted in a new book from Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., *Meeting the Shadow*. As editors Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams wrote, our encounter with the dark side "may be initiated by a betrayal by a loved one; a lie by a trusted friend; a deceit by an honored teacher." But then the mirror turns about, "and we see these behaviors in ourselves, recognizing the deeper truth that the lover and the liar, the saint and the sinner live in every one of us." If we are to complete the passage to full maturity, we are called upon to fully embrace those things we despise in ourselves or others, and in so doing to become whole.

Psychotherapist Barbara Hannah wrote, for example, of coming to terms with a difficult dream about her own shadow, after which Jung said to her, "Now your consciousness is less bright but much wider. You know that as an indisputably honest woman, you can also be dishonest. It may be disagreeable, but it is really a great gain."

Claiming the dark side does not mean we must henceforth see all of life through dark lenses, with undiluted cynicism. Nor does it mean abandoning ourselves to our evil impulses. We seem to have a collective fear that bringing evil into our consciousness will strengthen it, but in fact the reverse is true. Acknowledging the dark side is the most effective way to hold it at bay. Understanding it as it exists *within ourselves* is the best way to deal with it intelligently.

Learning to accept the dark side of life—both personally and collectively—has something to do with letting go of the need for perfection. It has something to do with accepting pain and setbacks as an inescapable part of being human. Something to do with becoming comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction.

These lessons are inherently difficult to integrate into business, which is predicated on endless upward growth and continuous elimination of error. When we experience a recession, for example, our tendency is to find someone to blame it on, rather than accepting it as a part of the same cycle that makes growth possible.

In the socially responsible business commu-

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nity, we face our own unique challenges in integrating the dark side of business. I find myself thinking, for example, of social investing—particularly the practice of using “multiple social screens,” so that a company failing even one screen is weeded out of an investment portfolio. This struck me as particularly ironic in 1989, when we gave a Business Ethics Award to Johnson & Johnson for its legendary ethics credo and its responsible handling of the Tylenol incident, at the same time that social investors were rejecting the company because of its presence in South Africa.

The premise underlying the social-screen approach is that purity is possible, that there are good companies and bad companies, and that even the slightest misstep makes a company bad. That premise is false. It’s more accurate to say there are good and bad *aspects* of companies, and our task is to support those aspects we admire, and to work to change those we don’t. If an investor feels justice in South Africa is his or her primary concern, for example, it would make sense to avoid J&J. But if an investor is most concerned about community responsibility, it would be entirely reasonable to invest in J&J. I don’t think the lines are as firmly or clearly drawn as we might want to believe (and I am aware that this makes the job of the social portfolio manager difficult in the extreme).

**T**hese distinctions are on my mind this issue as we announce our third annual Business Ethics Awards, one of which this year goes to a company many would consider a quintessential bad guy: Monsanto, one of the largest toxic chemical polluters in the nation. Yet this same company has taken the extraordinary Monsanto Pledge, which aims, among other things, to reduce air pollution 90 percent by 1992, to eliminate waste wherever possible, to work for sustainable agriculture and groundwater safety, and to manage all corporate grounds for the benefit of wildlife. In giving an award to Monsanto, we fully acknowledge its dark side, and we heartily applaud its new commitment to environmentalism. The company was, at last count, about two-thirds of the way to its goal of 90 percent reduction in air emissions—and its total toxic emissions were cut 53 percent in one year alone.

We made a deliberate decision this year to open the awards to companies that are *not* the traditional good-guy companies, but that have taken tangible steps forward. We decided not to let a company’s “shadow” scare us off from giving it an award—for our intent is to encourage and acknowledge good works, even if the companies doing those works are visibly flawed in other ways.



But we also in this issue turn the mirror around on the socially responsible business community itself—looking at those small, vision-driven companies so often held up as the ideal, examining the inevitable disappointments they face in trying to turn vision into reality. For example, we spoke with Gary Hirshberg, co-founder of Stonyfield Farm—which won a Business Ethics Award in 1990—about the compromises he’s faced in building one of the premier socially responsible firms. “One of our visions is to be a completely organic company,” he told us. “But we’ve been in business eight years, and the only thing organic in our operation is our wild blueberries from Maine.” And while the company uses its yogurt containers to educate the public about the environment, those same yogurt cups end up in landfills, because no one has yet figured out how to recycle them.

None of us are pure: That’s the point from which we must begin. But rather than bemoaning the flaws in ourselves or others—be they multinational companies, or individuals—we might do well to focus on accepting ourselves and setting right our misdeeds, as David did, in his matter-of-fact and healing way. ✎

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