

The Henri Nouwen Society  
**From Fear to Love:**  
**Spiritual Grounding in Anxious Times**  
*Video Meditations featuring Marjorie J. Thompson*

**Episode Two: Holding the Shadow, Cultivating Compassion**

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Greetings again, and welcome to our second session, on Holding the Shadow and Cultivating Compassion. I'd like to begin with a wonderful poem by a Sufi poet named Jalaluddin Rumi, called *The Guest House*:

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
Some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be cleaning you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

And let's offer a word of prayer: God of life, may we come to see that every experience can be an occasion of grace, an opportunity for growth, provided we seek your Spirit in all. In the name of Him who shares the depths of human life with us, we pray. Amen.

Well, last week, speaking to the fearful challenges of this time and our emotional responses, I wondered aloud how often I obscure my own vision through false perceptions, projections, old stories, things I unconsciously drag with me into the future. And I suggested that the weighty, wearying matters of our world invite us to self-examination, because the state of the world mirrors that of our own souls. Today, I hope to gently guide us into some questions of self-examination, to see how they can help us explore what we call the “shadow side” of our psyche.

The shadow is where my projections and distorted perceptions and outdated stories all hide out, lurking below the surface of my waking consciousness. We hold many fears in our shadows. So, learning to explore this terrain gives us an important way to begin shifting our response in the direction of God’s love, moving from fear to love. Henri Nouwen once described what he learned from a Jungian analyst named James Hillman, who contributed to one of Henri’s seminars at Yale Divinity School. You’ll remember that last week we spoke of befriending our feelings, and Henri’s words here move that theme further:

He [speaking of Hillman] emphasized the importance of ‘befriending’: befriending your dreams, befriending your shadow, befriending your unconscious. He made it convincingly clear that in order to become full human beings, we have to claim the totality of our experience; we come to maturity by integrating not only the light but also the dark side of our story into our selfhood. That made a lot of sense to me, since I am quite familiar with my own inclination . . . to avoid, deny, or suppress the painful side of life, a tendency that always leads to physical, mental, or spiritual disaster.

Henri speaks those words in *A Letter of Consolation*. Henri’s long-time friend, Parker Palmer, puts the same idea this way. He says:

There are no shortcuts to wholeness. The only way to become whole is to put our arms lovingly around everything we’ve shown ourselves to be: self-serving and generous, spiteful and compassionate, cowardly and courageous, treacherous and trustworthy. We must be able to say to ourselves and the world, ‘I am all of the above.’ If we can’t embrace the whole of who we are – with transformative love, we’ll imprison the creative energies hidden in our own shadows and flee from the world’s complex mix of shadow and light.

I’d like to explore with you a little bit further this concept of shadow. Like the far greater portion of an iceberg under the water line, each of us has within a vast realm of unconsciousness. Within this realm, we may find beautiful treasures of intuitive knowing, untapped gifts of wisdom and creativity. We may also find long-buried inner wounds – unremembered, untended, unredeemed. Here, too, we may discover false assumptions about

life, world views never examined or questioned as we grew up that seemed as natural as the air we breathe. In these deeps, we may uncover illusions about who we are, unrealistic ways we have regarded ourselves that restrict our gifts and distort our relationships. Because we are unaware of its presence and how it operates in our psyche, what lies in shadow has power over us. The key dynamic of the unconscious mind is called projection. One writer puts it this way: "Whatever qualities we deny in ourselves, we see in others." Everything our conscious mind refuses to acknowledge within us – so, unacceptable motives or feelings, moral failings, felt inadequacies, parts of our history that we just can't bear to remember, fragments of character that don't square with our conscious sense of self – these are projected outward onto others in whom we see these qualities brightly lit. So much easier to see it in other people than in ourselves.

We project our shadows onto others so that we don't need to face them in ourselves. This is how the ego defends us from shame and embarrassment, from the appearance of weakness or foolishness or being wrong. And, dear Lord, the ego has a voracious thirst for being right, or at least appearing so. All of us are in this human soup together. None of us is exempt from possessing a dark side, and we all engage in projection without realizing it. It's so important to understand that we are not aware of our projections. Much of what drives us is unconscious. As a hidden defense mechanism, the shadow itself is not evil, but it can allow us to do great harm without fully knowing it.

And that is why it's so important to pay attention to aspects of ourselves we don't want to see. The shadow is adept at hiding, and seeing it requires persistent and patient self-examination. We can invite God to help us look at ourselves calmly and nonjudgmentally. For example, when we become aware that we're rationalizing our thoughts or behaviors – to rationalize means to find a good reason – that's not the real reason. I'm really good at that. I've been good at that for a long time. That's a clue to shadow. Attending to my shadow became part of my Lenten practice when the pandemic began a couple of years ago, and it remains a continuing challenge. I basically pray for the grace to see whatever I'm able and ready to see, that I have been blind to, either in my personal life or as a product of my culture.

And behold! Over time, the Spirit has revealed me to myself in many ways. (Rarely a comfortable thing.) At times, I can catch myself reacting to someone or something in ways that unveil my bias. Maybe a prejudice that's rooted in race or class or culture wars. It might be a snap judgment formed on the flimsy basis of a colloquial dialect or a religious catch phrase or some fragment of political rhetoric. My reactions are often so fleeting that I could easily dismiss them, since they don't fit with my conscious sense of values.

So, let's take an example. Maybe a casual dismissal of another human being is lit up in a flash of momentary awareness. I become aware that I just did that. Almost immediately, I notice my impulse to shut it down, to push it away, this unwelcome truth that doesn't match my desired

self-image. Denial is a huge part of the shadow. Denial is what allows the shadow to grow unchecked in us. But if we commit to noticing when and how our shadow surfaces, we may discover where it's rooted, perhaps in a long-forgotten experience or as an ingrained cultural habit.

So, I'm going to give you a personal example that came to me in a time of prayer last year. I've long been aware that I have a kind of powerful thirst to know things, to understand things. And as I meditated on this, a childhood memory resurfaced: I was six or seven years old, and my family was playing a game in which, by the end, everybody but me knew where something was hidden. And my parents and two older brothers were looking at the ceiling in what I later realized was a deliberate trick to fool me. They laughed at the fun of the game while I vainly searched the ceiling, becoming so frustrated that I began to cry.

Well, that memory helped me realize that as a young child, I often felt like the one left in the dark when it came to understanding things. As the youngest, I wasn't expected to know. My parents, I realized, were both the eldest of their siblings, and they must have felt that I didn't yet need to understand many things. Perhaps they were projecting onto me their longing for a protracted innocence that they had missed out on as the eldest. But it left me feeling perpetually naive. I was always the one who didn't get it, whether it was a joke or something like this game. And that experience was at times deeply painful to me.

As I prayerfully followed this thread of memory, I began to see how that pain contributed to a pattern I developed of pretending to know things I didn't, and being reasonably successful. The pretense grew with me into adulthood. No matter how much knowledge I accrued, I felt guarded and anxious in highly educated circles where people frequently assumed that I knew more than I did. And I was sure somebody would discover my ignorance and expose me as a fraud. I now know that that is a whole syndrome that lots and lots of people suffer from. It wasn't just me, even though it felt like it. It was only in the gracious space of quiet prayer that I found the courage to notice and acknowledge that deceptive habit and its root in my childhood feelings. I'm grateful to see that pattern more clearly. At this autumn stage of my life, I'm more at ease with my limitations and my weaknesses. Maybe my shadow and light are just a little bit more integrated, but I am better able to see both the light and the dark with less judgment and less elation. So, it's a more stable place to live your life.

One way to help us notice the shadow is to pay attention to the intensity with which we react to a situation or a person. I had noticed in the example I just gave you that I was experiencing and often expressing very strong reactivity in my thoughts when I needed to understand the why or how of something. I could feel the immaturity of my reaction, but I couldn't seem to help the intensity. And that was a big clue pointing to my shadow. When we react disproportionately, the shadow is showing. And I think that dynamic is especially visible in families and in churches and in politics. Our unconscious shadows are projected onto each

other, where they bounce all over the place, creating havoc. Deep down, we know this, don't we, that those who bother us most are holding up a mirror. The question is, "What is it in me that is so irritated by your ideas or words or behaviors?"

And that's a question for self-examination. So, I want to turn our attention to self-examination, which I think is one of the most important and least-practiced of the spiritual disciplines. Many of us engage in self-reflection, but not necessarily in healthy or fruitful ways. Often, what we're tangled up in really is an introspection that leads to self-rejecting criticism. This is something again, our friend Henri was deeply familiar with in his own life: self-rejecting criticism.

So, in my view, two affirmations are required for authentic self-examination. The first is God's infinite, eternal, all-pervading love for every person. And the second is human brokenness, weakness, and alienation from the truth of God's love for all. These two affirmations are equally true, but they are not of equal weight. Can anything match the weight of God's love? The vastness of divine love more than covers our alienated state in all its sorry forms. So, in authentic self-examination, the first step is to come into God's loving gaze. To open our awareness to the force field, the flow of divine love. And as we do this, a beautiful, mirroring process occurs. In the face of God's grace and mercy, we find the courage to face into ourselves with honesty. It is only as we become confident that God's love is trustworthy, that we can afford, emotionally speaking, to become more transparent to ourselves. Light shining into the dark corners of our psyche elicits uncomfortable feelings of guilt and shame and anxiety.

And that comfort naturally raises our inner walls of defense: resistance and denial and rationalization. But as we recognize those defenses, as they come into play, they, too, become part of the inner world that we can learn to examine with love, with compassion. You know, sometimes we think about self-examination as brutal honesty. And I want to ask you: Is deep honesty a form of brutality? Why do we think that? I think it can be. If we try to attack our weaknesses or tear away our defenses or conquer our facades by force, it can be brutal.

But those kinds of efforts are signs of clinging to an ego that is really bent on control. From an ego posture, we want to obliterate our fears and our failings and our inner contradictions, just as soon as we spy them. And in this way, the shadow can lead us to self-hatred. But then we are far, far away from the whole project of self-examination, whose purpose is diagnostic, not punitive. Self-examination, in the light of grace, frees us to see clearly. It allows for dispassionate observation of thoughts and feelings, behaviors.

It places us very naturally in a posture of humility, which I sometimes like to call even-keeled realism. Humility. The word humility comes from Latin *humus*, humus, meaning soil. Humility is like level ground, thinking neither too much nor too little of ourselves. We are not God. And yet we have that of God in us. We do not possess all truth, but we can speak our truth as best we understand it. We are not all-powerful, yet we have been given powers of thought and

choice and love. Humility is gentle yet strong, sober yet playful, cool with reason yet warm with heart. It is balanced. In the light of divine love, we learn to embrace honesty alongside self-acceptance.

We hold ourselves accountable in a spirit of love as God does, so to see ourselves as Christ sees us is to join utmost clarity with tender compassion. Karl Barth, who I think was one of the greatest theological minds of the 20th century, argues that God sees the very worst of sinners as those most profoundly wounded, and so in need of deepest healing. God is the Great Physician, not the Grand Inquisitor. Love alone has the power to transform our false persona, the wounded, defended, self-deceiving ego. I believe that divine love is not coercive. It's born in freedom and it gives birth to freedom.

So, in that freedom, we find compassion. When I accept the flow of divine love, I can allow my momentary glimpses of shadow to be what they are. I can choose to hold them gently in the light of awareness. As I look with clear eyes and a compassionate heart, my shadow becomes a gift, in at least three ways. The first is it allows me to acknowledge my own deeply broken humanity, to see that I hold within myself, the very weaknesses and prejudices I accuse others of holding. I can admit that I do not stand apart from or above others, but am complicit in the evils that I deplore. So that's number one.

The second gift of the shadow: Once exposed to the light of awareness, this part of me can't retreat back into the darkness where it fuels my projections onto others. And third: In the light of awareness, this particular illusion in my psyche can be disillusioned. I can work with it by God's grace, so that it might be healed and reintegrated into my greater wholeness. In other words, it can be redeemed and contribute to my salvation. *Salve*, the Latin root for salvation, means healing, and my healing in turn contributes to the healing of the human community. The great Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung, whose concept of shadow we've been exploring, wrote the following: "That I feed the hungry, that I forgive an insult, that I love my enemy in the name of Christ – all these are undoubtedly great virtues. What I do unto the least of my brethren, that I do unto Christ. But what if I should discover that the least among them all, the poorest of all the beggars, the most impudent of all the offenders, the very enemy himself – that these are within me and that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness, that I myself am the enemy who must be loved – what then?"

What indeed. Let me describe a practice that helps me to refrain from judging others, and also helps me deal with self-condemnation.

I have a habit of judging my enemies. There are always plenty of them around, it seems, abroad or in my own backyard. Jesus tells us not to judge, lest we be judged. And how much can we know of our neighbors' shadow when our own looms behind us unnoticed? "Do not

judge" is sound counsel. And yet we use the term "judgment" in two ways. One carries the positive sense of discernment or discretion. And the other comes as the bludgeon of condemnation. Jesus affirms discerning judgment. Remember he says, "Do not cast your pearls before swine," or "You know how to read the signs of the weather. Why not the signs of the times?"

He encourages discernment, but he does not affirm condemning judgment: "Let the one among you without sin throw the first stone," or "Why do you remove the speck from your sibling's eye when you have a log in your own?"

He's pointing out that we are not in a position to condemn. We're part of the mess. Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ. And it turns out that Christ says, "Neither do I condemn you."

I don't know about you, but my problem is that discerning judgment often leads me straight onto condemning judgment. So, if you suffer from this habit too, maybe both of us would benefit from Richard Rohr's teaching on the subject. And this is something that I picked up from Rohr when he addressed it at a global online gathering of Spiritual Directors International in April of 2021.

Step One, Rohr suggests, is to exercise discerning judgment. He calls it "dualistic clarity." In a physical world of contrast and polarity, this step is of necessity, dualistic. Distinguish between good and evil, sift what is life-giving from what is death-dealing. You know, the ancient practice of discernment in the church involved clarity about what is or is not of God. And Jesus was never afraid to call out the hypocrisy or the lack of humanity of many of the religious leaders of his day. When he says, "We can't serve both God and wealth (Mammon)," that's dualistic clarity. It gives us a moral compass.

Now, my ego likes to imagine that I do Step One pretty well. Where I get fouled up is Rohr's Step Two: not condemnation, but compassion. And this requires us to step back from the clarity of discernment to a higher level of awareness, to move from a dualistic to a non-dual or unitive perspective. At this higher level of consciousness, we don't choose sides, because it's not that simple. We live in paradox. We hold the tension of opposites, the ambiguity of our human situation, where everything we do is imperfect. In the heart space of non-dual consciousness, we can experience sympathy and empathy, both toward others and ourselves. Rohr points out that these two steps are embedded in Jesus' passion. On the cross, evil is revealed for exactly what it is. The death-dealing effects of unjust choices are clearly on display for all to see. And yet, Jesus neither condemns nor attacks. Richard Rohr points out that attacking evil doesn't work. It just keeps the oppositional energy of us versus them going

interminably. And Jesus knows this. God chooses to respond to our death-dealing impulses by showing us the possibilities of death-transforming love.

Jesus lives out this response all the way to the cross and beyond. The same quality of love is a plumb line for our own lives. It means holding together the gifts of dualistic clarity and non-dual compassion. A higher, unitive consciousness allows this compassion to flow. So, my question is, what enables us to shift from dualistic to unitive consciousness? And the answer is one our friend Henri understood at the very core of his being: anything, anything that helps us identify with the weaknesses of others, that allows us to recognize the dark side of our own personality, that gives us eyes to see our common humanity in all its light and shadow. The great Buddhist teacher, contemporary teacher, Pema Chodron, offers wisdom that I think Henri would be in profound agreement with. She says, "Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It is a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well, can we be present with the darkness of others."

When I can locate my heart in this greater unifying truth, it does become possible for me to let go of my condemnation, and experience compassion toward people who perhaps the very day before I may have been spitting fire at. It even helps me when I have been spitting fire at myself. Jesus lived in full consciousness of a higher unity; "The father and I are one," he says. And then he prays in John 17: "I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one."

And remember, I think Jesus is inviting us to that same awareness when he says, "Abide in me, as I abide in you." As we join Jesus in this unconditional spaciousness, this vast interior hospitality of heart, we discover what it means to love our neighbor as ourself, even to love our enemies, including that shadowed enemy in our own psyche. Compassion for others and compassion for self are just two sides of one coin. We cannot really know one without the other, when we settle into the soil of our common humanity, that soil in which our roots sink deep into the love of Christ for all people equally.

So, divine love shows us the pattern. God discerns, clearly, sees us in all of our life-giving and death-dealing choices. And yet God does not condemn, but rather extends compassion and healing and transformation. As we stay rooted and grounded in Christ, we receive that gift of healing, and can in turn extend compassion to a world consumed by painful polarities. It is not blind love, but clear-eyed compassion. When I can abide in this love and let it flow through me, I find I am at peace. So, I hope you can find some of that peace as well. And thanks be to God for the heart of divine compassion in which we are privileged to participate.

I'd like to close the reflections today by combining just a little bit of self-examination, just one question, and then letting that lead us into a guided meditation on self-compassion. So, let me invite you to become as comfortable as you can. And if you think you won't fall asleep



(although it's fine if you do), you might want to close your eyes, so you're not distracted by anything or anyone around you. And take a few deep breaths. Become aware of God's immense, boundless love, the love that holds all of us, each of us and all of creation, eternally. Allow yourself to come personally under the gaze of God's love, and picture the light of that love permeating your inner landscape. Invite the Spirit to help you search your heart honestly. What particular weakness or perceived fault rises to awareness that you need to attend to just now? Go ahead and write that down.

And now, I'd like to guide you through meditation for self-compassion. Remember that each of us has, deep inside, the capacity to see with eyes of compassion. The indwelling Spirit sees through the lens of love, and with a little intention and practice, we can access the heart-center within us in which the Spirit dwells, where Christ resides.

You have just gotten in touch with some part of yourself that you dislike and wish you could be rid of – a character weakness or bad habit. Become aware of your usual feelings about this, and just notice the feelings without sinking too deeply into them. And now, take a step back from your judging ego to a deeper center, a place of interior freedom from which you can observe your reactions and feelings without judgment. This is your inner sanctuary of love, where the compassionate Spirit abides like a little pilot light. It's always there. Relax into this heart-center and, just in the same way that oxygen feeds a physical flame, let your breath feed the Spirit flame within you. With each breath, visualize the compassion in your heart growing and growing, becoming brighter until it is very full, beautiful. Feel this compassion filling your heart. And from this deep center, look at the part of yourself that you dislike. What do you observe with the eyes of love? Where is the untended wound? Imagine that wound as a child whose cries are going unheard, and let the compassionate one in your heart give comfort to the wounded child in you. Comfort, perhaps with words or gestures or song. Listen to what the child wants to say as it feels safe to speak. And notice how your inner child responds to your compassion.

Can you accept this higher love for yourself, even in weakness, brokenness, incompleteness? You are a work in progress. The spirit bears with you patiently. So, take just a moment now to name any gift that has come to you in this meditation, and take time to absorb the gift with gratitude. Amen.

You have this guided meditation as one of the downloads you can use, along with a few others for this session. I hope you will take time to enjoy and practice these things, each of which has the capacity to help us in our journey from fear to love.

Blessings until next time.