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## What It Takes to Embrace Our Highest Potential

BY ANNE E. COLLIER ON JANUARY 15, 2021 ·



If you're living in the United States you've been touched by the unrest of 2020. You may be struggling with the feelings of separation as you wonder how to create unity. Most are struggling to figure out how to move closer to our Founding Fathers' aspirational statement that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Actualizing this aspiration requires us to deepen our capacity for self-discovery and self-understanding. This isn't a skill that is taught and tested as we journey from kindergarten through college. It's not even a skill learned from the so-called "school of hard knocks." It's a skill developed as a result of the deliberate examination of yourself, and your thinking, feelings, and behavior. This examination isn't easy. As Carl Jung counsels, it is necessary if we are to be truly enlightened in our thinking, feelings, and actions. He elucidates that:

"Filling the conscious mind with ideal conceptions is a characteristic of Western theosophy, but not the confrontation with the shadow and the world of darkness. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious."



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The “darkness” or “shadow” is the instinctive and irrational side of our personality. It is fear-based and reactive. The good news is that we have a choice in the matter: we can either process and manage our shadow, or let it process and manage us. Embracing the shadow is difficult, but necessary to reach our highest potential—to be “self-actualized” according to Abraham Maslow. Avoiding the shadow is easier because we don’t face ourselves, our mistakes, and our regrets. We rob ourselves of actualizing our highest potential so that we’re living a life we love.

What is required by us to live to our full potential profoundly challenges us. We must be able to able to deeply examine our “darkness.” Examining our darkness means confronting and metacognitively assessing our thinking. Is our thinking fear-based or courageously and starkly objective? We then can understand how our thinking informs what we feel. And then how our feeling, in turn, shapes our behavior. Through this examination, we are able to choose how we deal with challenges. The alternative is reacting out of fear; fight or flight. The rub is that to make choices based on objectivity and strength, we have to fight our “shadow” side, which is screaming at us to do exactly the opposite. Left unexamined, we react instinctively to the effect of circumstances. We don’t choose differently because we can’t see that we have a choice.

This deep personal examination is far from easy. In fact, it can be downright unnerving. Personal examination requires us to be more than vulnerable. It requires us to dive headlong into and embrace the aspects of our own personality that we find embarrassing and compelled to conceal. We need to be tender and caring with ourselves as well as others as we engage in this ontological inquiry. We also need to accept a certain amount of flailing about while we are not fully equipped for the arduous inquiry. Remember starting your first job as a lawyer? You made mistakes, felt uncertain, looked to others for guidance. You may have been nervous or ashamed of mistakes and lack of competence and skill. Expect some of the same and be kind to yourselves. You’ve got this.

I am inspired by Jung’s statement that “Your visions will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.” What inspires me is the possibility that we can actualize our dreams of equality by embracing our shadows. We awaken ourselves to what is so, our role in it, and what we need to do. We get to choose who we are in the matter.

## About the Author

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