

Shadow Living

The movie *Spotlight*, which appeared in 2015, follows *The Boston Globe's* "Spotlight" team, the oldest continuously operating newspaper investigative journalist unit in the United States, and its investigation into cases of widespread and systemic child sex abuse in the Boston area by numerous Roman Catholic priests. More than an indictment of the Catholic Church, the movie shows how systemic evil is insidious, goes largely undetected (processes usually do), distorts the thinking of all who are involved, and slowly corrupts our ability to think and see clearly.

Welcome to life in the shadows. It's what we tend not to realize or to see, that trips us up. But then, people will always have trouble seeing and understanding what is really there -- what the situation demands, who the persons of character are, why organizational systems develop the way they do, etc.

My main goal for this chapter is to have you doubt your perceived clear-thinking abilities. Most people do not doubt their thinking, and as a result, get themselves and others into a heap of trouble.

Our Mind in the Shadows

Most if not all people believe that they perceive reality rather well, that their thinking hums along gathering and processing data above the expected average (and also that I am well-defined as Jim said in chapter 1, thank you very much!). Unfortunately, this is just not true. To a greater or lesser degree, our minds are constantly tangled up. Let's take a look at some of the more prominent conundrums. And none of this has to do with overall intelligence. You can have an IQ off the charts, and I guarantee that your thinking is just as distorted as other people's, maybe more so.

The Individual is the Problem

Part of the problem is systemic, which principally has to do with context in which we live and move. Because we are products of the contexts where we were raised and where we now reside, we must take into account their constant influence in our lives. Systems bubble along in the processes, often largely unnoticed, exerting tremendous pressure on all of us. "The system is perfectly designed to give you the results you're getting" is one of my favorite quotes (attributed to any number of people). Western thinking has had difficulty understanding the influence that systems have on individual behavior. At the same time, we cannot understand ourselves as exonerated from the behaviors we exhibit. So let's take a look at how our distorted thinking plays out.

Distractions.

So yes, we all experience having our thoughts or attention drawn away. We all know what it's like not to be able to concentrate or give attention to something.

The 'main thing' no longer is the main thing, but many minor, insignificant things clutter up our lives, to which we give continuous partial attention. Given the hyper-connectivity that invades all of our lives, we are in a constant state of continuous partial attention, a state where people are giving partial attention to what they are doing – continuously. Relationships have become more superficial. Meeting attenders are also connected to social media and have to divert attention in that direction.

Neurologists tell us that the human brain can only attend to one thing at a time, unlike the computer that can hum along running multiple programs simultaneously. When it seems as though we're multi-tasking we aren't actually multi-tasking. Some people can task-switch quickly. Others have a little more difficulty. But in either case, multi-tasking is not occurring. Any yet, people still believe they can give adequate attention to multiple information feeds simultaneously – pure myth. In any event, our ability to focus and devote attention in those areas that are most important to our ministries is constantly being compromised.

Take Away

- ✓ Ministry is not about running all over the community attempting to cram dozens of tasks into a day (which invariably has to do with trying to *meet* everyone's expectations). Jesus' ministry was conducted at a slow walk, complete with numerous interruptions, and interruptions being interrupted (See Mark 5). Ruthlessly eliminate hurry!¹

Distortions.

Our minds are distracted. They also distort the reality that surrounds us. Let's note some common distortions that get all of us into trouble as we negotiate the landscape on our journey. These distortions in our thinking are spoken of in different ways, each way highlighting a slightly different way of understanding how shadow thinking actually works.

Defenses come into play as our thinking becomes more dissonant, the defense emerging to assist us in avoiding internal conflict and the anxiety generated by the conflict. I don't want to go into a big psychological discussion of all the defenses that have been identified over the years. But several are worth noting, because they have a way of tripping up our healthy functioning and leading.

- **Denial.** Reality isn't really reality. It's amazing to me how denial creeps into all of our lives, distorting how reality is perceived. Sometimes we deny big things, such as building

¹ Dallas Willard to John Ortberg. *Ruthlessly Eliminate Hurry*. CT Pastors. 2002.

all the medical facilities in the east bay of San Francisco along the Hayward fault line. Or smaller things, like deciding not to tell your church ruling board that you've decided to hire an associate, telling yourself that it's no big deal and they'll approve, once they meet this new person.

- **Rationalization.** This is an attempt to logically justify unacceptable behavior. A person might account for a bad mood or general rude behavior by explaining that bad traffic affected the morning commute. Someone else who is passed over for a promotion might rationalize the disappointment by claiming to not have wanted so much responsibility after all. Rationalization can be adaptive in that it protects people from unsafe emotions and motivations, but it can also contribute to maladaptive behavior and psychological concerns.
- **Projection.** We have the tendency to project our feelings, shortcomings or unacceptable impulses onto others. And the reason we do so is because to recognize that particular quality in ourselves would cause us pain and suffering. There are aspects of myself that I have difficulty owning and dealing with. These aspects cause me anxiety. To reduce the anxiety, my mind keeps these aspects out of my awareness. Our minds actually censor information that could be potentially troubling.

The buried unacceptable parts don't stay buried within us, they actually do two things: 1) they influence in covert ways our behavior; 2) we project them out into the world onto other people so that we can see them in action, thus distorting our perceptions of people and situations.

These disowned aspects of ourselves then become some of the raw material of our story-telling, giving shape and substance to what our minds will construct. In many ways we're back to boundary problems. Projection is a boundary problem – I'm unable to keep my own story within myself (see chapter 3 on boundaries). I project that story outward on to other people and act according to that story, not according to what that other person is currently doing.

Things that I disdain. There are things about us – personality traits, propensities, maybe even creative components – that were systematically covered up as we grew up. This took place because frankly, our parents, our families, our friends, and/or our society couldn't handle these things. It's not that these things were bad, they were just unacceptable for one reason or another. For this reason we came to be uncomfortable with, or even disdain these things.

Take for instance an athletic child growing up in a literary family. The athletic talents are often ignored or actively discouraged, and are driven from awareness in the growing child. He still has an athletic bent, but is unable to develop it

As an example, if I am angry about something and I don't want to feel and handle that feeling, then I can unconsciously dump (project) it onto you. If you buy it, also unconsciously, and act it out by expressing it for me to others and also back to me, then I won't have to own and deal with my own feelings of anger and resentment. If you express your now taken-on anger "too much" to others and to me, I will criticize and berate you.

A Quiz. Answers to this quiz will begin to give you insights into your own shadow aspects.

- What things really set me off and cause me to over-react?
- Do I think I read other people's minds? Who? When do I read them? What is occurring?
- What do I fear the most? Rejection? Loss of control? Incompetence? Abandonment?
- What people or things do I hate the most?
- What characteristics do I find myself disliking in others (especially those of the same sex)? Is there one person in my life that I really can't stand? What is it about him/her, what characteristics, that set me off?
- What things do I know about myself that I try hard to keep hidden, even from those closest to me?
- What things do I *never* do, even though doing them may benefit me?
- What "strengths" do I have that, being preoccupied with them, may prevent me from being real and having fulfilling relationships (eg. Always care-taking others prevents me caring for myself.)?
- What are the themes of my dreams? Who is doing what?
- What do others say about me, especially those closest to me (spouse, friends, parents)? How am I perceived in the organization?
- Think back on a recent hardship, a loss of something truly important to you (spouse, friendship, job, status). What issues emerged? What was said to you?

Groupthink. Groupthink occurs when a group values harmony and coherence over accurate analysis and critical evaluation. It causes individual members of the group to unquestioningly follow the word of the leader and it strongly discourages any disagreement with the consensus. It happens constantly on church boards and staffs, when there is almost universal agreement on issues that should require closure scrutiny.

Irving Janus documented eight symptoms of groupthink:²

1. Illusion of invulnerability –Creates excessive optimism that encourages taking extreme risks.
2. Collective rationalization – Members discount warnings and do not reconsider their assumptions.
3. Belief in inherent morality – Members believe in the rightness of their cause and therefore ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions.
4. Stereotyped views of out-groups – Negative views of “enemy” make effective responses to conflict seem unnecessary.
5. Direct pressure on dissenters – Members are under pressure not to express arguments against any of the group’s views.
6. Self-censorship – Doubts and deviations from the perceived group consensus are not expressed.
7. Illusion of unanimity – The majority view and judgments are assumed to be unanimous.
8. Self-appointed ‘mind guards’ – Members protect the group and the leader from information that is problematic or contradictory to the group’s cohesiveness, view, and/or decisions.

Take Away.

- ✓ Often groupthink masquerades as Spirit-induced unity. Church boards are highly susceptible to this. Beware!

Confirmation Bias. People see what they want to see and believe what they want to believe. We like to be proven right. To change our views is to admit we’re wrong. Our sense of self, our identities are tied up in our beliefs, which are held in place by our communities – our tribes. To change our beliefs is to change our identities, and risk expulsion from the tribe.

As a result, we don’t perceive circumstances objectively. Our tendency is to cherry pick all the data that confirms our beliefs and prejudices. We become prisoners of our assumptions. For example, a person is a devote Republican (or Democrat), believing that his/her party is on the correct side of every issue. When an elected Republican does something agreeable to our person, her mind tells her, “See, Republicans are always right.” When a Republican in office does something contrary to our person’s beliefs, that action is ignored or rationalized away.

People basically believe what they want to believe, then confirm their beliefs all the while ignoring evidence that contradicts our beliefs. This explains why opinions survive and spread.

² Irving Janis, Irving L. (1972). *Victims of Groupthink*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
Janis, Irving L. (1982). *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. Second Edition. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Disconfirmation requires looking for evidence to disprove it. A sign of maturity is the ability to establish an idea, then entertain supporting and contradicting data to arrive at the proper perspective on that idea.

Take Away

- ✓ Much of the distorted thinking in the church is cloaked in God language. Discernment has a lot to do with being able to recognize the leading of the Spirit and discriminate it from the distorted thinking that is often employed.

Cognitive dissonance

Our minds yearn for harmony, consistency and alignment – a steady state with low anxiety. And yet, as we have seen, distortions lurk within each of us, threatening to throw us into disharmony and cognitive chaos. In a sense, dissonance theory is a theory of blind spots – how people unintentionally blind themselves so that they fail to notice vital events and information that might make them question their behavior or convictions.

Think about dissonance as holding two contradictory ideas or values simultaneously – one idea implies the opposite of another. For example, a belief in animal rights could be interpreted as inconsistent with eating meat or wearing fur. Or a church's belief about reaching out to the nations while ignoring the changing ethnicity of the surrounding neighborhood. Noticing the contradiction leads to dissonance, which could be experienced as anxiety, guilt, shame, anger, embarrassment or stress.

When our thinking is dissonant, we can do two things to reduce dissonance:

1. Change their values, attitudes, beliefs, and behavior.
2. Justify or rationalize their values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

As we shall see later, changing values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors is not so easy. It's far easier to just rationalize away discrepancies. Our convictions about who we are carry us through the day, and we constantly interpret the things that happen to us through the filter of those core beliefs. When they are violated, even by a good experience, it causes anxiety that must be reduced.

Dissonance is most painful when an important element of our self-concept is threatened – typically when we do something that is inconsistent with our view of ourselves -- "I am a good person" or "I made the right decision." The anxiety that comes with the possibility of having made a bad decision can lead to rationalization, the tendency to create additional reasons or justifications to support one's choices. A person who just spent too much money on a new car might decide that the new vehicle is much less likely to break down than his or her old car. This belief may or may not be true, but it would likely reduce dissonance and make the person feel

better. Dissonance can also lead to confirmation bias, the denial of disconfirming evidence, and other ego defense mechanisms.

All of us strive to make sense out of contradictory ideas and lead lives that are, *at least in our own minds*, consistent and meaningful. In order to keep our self-esteem bubbling along in high gear, our minds are forced to clear up all the discrepancies. The operation is similar to a thermostat. The thermostat in your house kicks on when the thermometer reaches a certain point. The same with our minds. When the dissonance reaches a certain point, rationalization kicks in to regulate the 'temperature.'

Most kingdom individuals and congregations are committed to helping the poor. But we also have a blind spot: we are a very wealthy congregation and feel *it's our privilege* to have all of the benefits we enjoy (After all, we did it on our own, right?). Therefore, we can help the poor, as long as they stay 'out there' and away from our beautiful sanctuary. Having them actually mingle with us would be unacceptable.

Dissonance and Adaptive(transformational) Issues

We are obviously entering into the land of adaptive or transformational issues. An transformational issue (as we briefly discussed in chapter 2) is any issue in which the stakeholders have different and often highly conflicted perspectives on how to resolve the issue. And these perspectives are generated from deeply held, usually unconscious, values and attitudes. Making progress on these issues requires new learning on the part of the stakeholders. And the new learning will include changing attitudes beliefs and behavior in order to make progress on the initiative in question. This is the work of leadership--mobilizing the community to resolve it's most important questions.

Those people who are the most clearly defined as people are the ones who will be able to:

- ✓ Note the discrepancies between the competing values.
- ✓ Navigate through the discrepancies making determinations as to which of those competing values most aligns with who that person wants to be.
- ✓ Go about altering values which leads to altered behavior.

Transformational leaders become skilled practitioners of the art of raising competing values and navigating the change that can only come through the acute discomfort that the clash over values creates. Having competing values is a normal and necessary thing. That's true in church organizations. It's also true internally for each of us.

And how a church deals with competing values largely determines its health. The primary reason leadership fails is that no one leader can solve the problems raised by a clash of competing values. Remember, leadership as a noun relies on either authority (the meeting of expectations) or power (the exercise of will to coerce change). The pendulum swings back and forth from authority to power to authority to power. Often, this sets up a recursive pattern -

pleasing people gives way to coercing people gives way to pleasing people. In fact, leadership is defined neither by authority nor power.

Transformational leaders become skilled practitioners of the art of raising competing values and navigating the change that can only come through the acute discomfort that the clash over values creates. Having competing values is a good, even a necessary thing.

When transformational issues are on the table, no one ever wins by trying to create a win-win situation. Win-win, in the end, always ends up lose-lose. Transformational work is difficult on a number of levels for one primary reason: it involves closing the gap between present circumstances and competing values. Ron Heifetz nails it: "Leadership will consist not of answers or assured visions but of taking action to clarify values."

How do we 'cure' dissonance?

Self-justification! Most people, when directly confronted with proof that they are wrong, do not change their point of view or course of actions, but justify their position even more tenaciously, rationalizing their position, and employing confirmation bias to convince themselves that all evidence supports their position.

Self-justification is more powerful than lying (indeed, it is lying to myself). It allows people to convince themselves that what they did was the best they could have done.

Most human beings and institutions are going to do everything in their power to reduce dissonance in ways that are favorable *to them*, that allows them to justify their mistakes and maintain business as usual (groupthink). They will probably not be grateful for the evidence that their actions are inconsistent with their stated belief system – this will re-introduce anxiety to the system that will again need to be reduced.

Once we understand how and when we need to reduce dissonance, we can become more vigilant about the process and nip it in the bud.

On the other hand, once we begin down the path of dissonance reduction and self-justification, we will find it harder to turn back because we continue to weave a more complex web.

Becoming aware that we are in a state of dissonance can help us make sharper, smarter, conscious choices instead of letting automatic, self-protective mechanisms resolve our discomfort in our favor.

The goal is to become aware of two dissonant cognitions that are causing distress and find a way to resolve them constructively, or when we can't, learn to live with them.

The System is the Problem

So many of us were raised in church contexts where the spotlight was on the individual. Conversion was an individual matter. Discipleship again was individual. When we slipped up and sinned, the blame was all on us, individually. It's actually been hard for Western minds to focus away from the individual and see the broader context, the interlocking relationships that surround us and in which we participate.

As complex systems are observed and understood, it became impossible to find simple causes to problems, or just blame individuals. All of a sudden we are given a 'new pair of glasses' by which to see the world. This is a pair of glasses that looks not just at the *what* of things (the content if you will), but the *way* things unfold and relate to one another – the process (as we noted in chapter 3). So take a moment to consider this:

- All organizational processes are comparable – whether talking about a family, a government agency, a construction company, a medical practice, or a place of worship. Therefore, when considering an agency, a business, or what have you, the processes that are observed (leadership, change, communication, etc.) can be framed and dealt with in very similar ways.
- The parts of a system stand in some consistent relationship to one another.
- These parts interact with each other in a predictable, organized fashion.
- The elements, once combined, produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.
- No system can be fully understood or explained once it has been broken down into its component parts.
- No element within the system can ever be understood in isolation since it never functions independently.
- Living systems cannot be directed down a linear path. Unforeseen consequences are inevitable. The challenge is to learn how to disturb them toward the desired outcome and then course-correct as the outcome unfolds.
- Systems tend to be broken -- *The system is perfectly designed to give you the results that you're getting!* If you want to know what's going on, look at the pattern. In linear patterns, A's behavior causes B's behavior. In recursive patterns, A's behavior is in response to B's behavior, which in turn is in response to A's behavior. Punctuating whether A or B is responsible to the observed behavior is problematic and arbitrary.

In my counseling and now my coaching of people, I devote a great deal of attention to the entire relational network system, not just the individual components -- focusing on the connections and relationships between people rather than on isolated parts and problems within an organization. Again and again, we have seen that the health of an organization can only be assessed in the context of the whole. A change in one part affects every other part.

The organization regulates itself through feedback loops, in which information travels throughout the organization, giving it life, organic integrity, and stability. When that relational network malfunctions, the health of the entire organization is threatened.

You cannot sum up any organization by reciting the roster of its members. Every church organization, from Saddleback and Willow Creek and World Vision down to the 25 member

church meeting in someone's basement, are made up of patterns, traditions, attitudes, beliefs, and habits that – more than any *single* individual or *collection* of individuals – define and constitute that organization. Every organization has its own unique, collective personality, and that personality is always more than the sum of the individual personalities who inhabit that organization.

And yet, it is very difficult to step back (or get on the balcony, the preferred metaphor) to see the interaction of all the parts that together direct the behaviors of the individual components (the process, discussed in chapter 3). This is especially true as problems begin to develop within organizations. Seeing a chronic relational problem as residing in *only* one person or *only* one department almost *always* misses the point. Problems in organizations grow out of complex patterns of interactions that involve most, if not all, of the people within the organization.

The person who is identified as "the problem" is usually the one who expresses the symptoms of the deeper systemic problem – and is often the one attempting to call attention to the real problem so that it can be solved. Tragically, these people are often punished as "troublemakers" when they are actually trying to save the organization from its own dysfunction. Unfortunately, most of us have a hard time recognizing the hidden, distorted, dysfunctional patterns in our relationships. We are too close to the problem to see our own enmeshment in the overall problem. And our minds have a way of covering up our own culpability in those problems.

So people try to sort out the situation by separating people into categories, looking for perpetrators and victims, good guys and bad guys, high-functioning departments and troubled departments. When we frame things in such stark terms, everything *seems* so much clearer. But it is *not* clearer. We have simply reduced our perception of reality to high-contrast black-and-white. We are not *viewing* reality. We are *filtering* reality – *And we may be filtering out the very information our organization needs in order to survive and prosper!*

Additional Reading

- Dan Ariely. *The Honest Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone---Especially Ourselves* .
- Steven Sloman and Phillip Fernbach. *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*.
- Tavis & Aronson. *Mistakes were Made (but not by me)*.
- Ten Elshof. *I Told Me So*.