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The Ramp and the Pit:

The Ecstatic Darkness in our Midst

(Excerpt from an edited
conversation of
Arthur Colman with
Alan Briskin)

"One does not become
enlightened by imagining
figures of light, but by
making the darkness
conscious."

—Carl Jung

"I insist not on the events,
but on their effect on the
persons of the tale."

—Joseph Conrad

Arthur Colman: I think this interview comes from, or comes at, a time of a very deep pessimism, which I hope isn't cynicism. I think a lot of it has to do with being in the very disturbed world of South Africa and seeing how processes of individual escape and denial and group genocide and horror can continue. Erik Erikson has this term, "pseudospeciation,"—really making the blacks and the coloreds and the Indians a different species, a lower species—which is what apartheid did, legally.

The issue that I'm working with now is [a belief] that in order for groups to work differently, they have to work in public. They can't resolve their issues behind a boundary. I'm saying that sort of categorically, but using this example [of apartheid], there's no way that people can engage in a negative group process and ask for forgiveness, without asking for it from the larger collective. I don't see people able to do that, individuals able to do that. There's such cost in doing that—to their individual identities. It happens with an occasional great person. And often they are slaughtered or scapegoated themselves for doing that.

I think that what I do is a kind of secret way of opening a door into a different group consciousness. But what I've found is that most of us are pretty much incapable of staying with that different consciousness very long. In order to do that, one has to gently or traumatically give up some of one's attachment to the individual ego in the context of a group.

[In groups] the hypnotic ways, the inductions, are endlessly varied and wonderful, and I think they have a lot to do with the spiritual practices of all human beings. But in my work, that's not the goal. You could take a bunch of the Afrikaners who engineered apartheid (along with the rest of the world) or a group who [planned something] very destructive, consciously. And you sit with them and meditate with them and listen to wonderful music with them, or talk with them about their personal lives. And they will become human beings in a nice way, in a gentle way, in the way we love humans—positive human beings. It will feel good and you will feel connected. They may even say some things about themselves—their painful childhoods. But as a group, they are still capable of perpetrating the worst horrors within and without.

There is something that happens in the group where you hit a boundary of darkness, of an ecstatic darkness that they've created together, either in the here and now, or in a political or work situation. And they have to face that and look at that. And it's often around a painful scapegoating or a painful stopping of consciousness of some kind.

It seems to me to relate to the great danger of accepting that one is in negative, shadowy, scapegoating processes. A great danger to the person. The collective rule will have its way with you, and your life will be changed. You may be put in prison. You may have to deal with public guilt. And people don't want to do that.

There are innumerable [stories] where one individual or a group cabal of individuals will, to protect a secret, devastate thousands or millions of people. It's understandable, again, because you're not going to want your children to know what you've done. You don't want to even think about what you've done yourself as an individual. So that sort of fact of dual consciousness, the development of ourselves as individual and as a collective—the protection of ourselves as an individual, combined with what seems a larger,

much more enduring consciousness—our connections to subgroups, to whatever the larger group of our life is, to our species—the collective consciousness that is really running our fates. That duplicity that is part of our human character and potential....

I think that connecting with South Africa briefly, seeing the immense horror of what happened there and the tiny impact of a creative and caring attempt to change it—has shocked me. So, you're getting me, as you know, at a time of relooking at what I've been doing. Is my kind of work with consciousness in groups play and curiosity for some randomly interested people? Or is it a beginning of something more, part of a movement, people who will change themselves and whoever they touch?

Alan Briskin: Tell me about the ecstatic darkness.

Arthur Colman: Groups that I can characterize, in a positive way, as New Age groups or groups that are about improving group or individual consciousness can be very wonderful—they're lovely to be in and that lasts for a finite amount of time. If they want to go deeper, they have to get into personal stories of some kind. And that's done, and groups have learned that. For example, AA has learned that. [Groups learn also] to cut off the group consciousness of the negativity through things like talking sticks. Talk and you can't be interrupted or no cross-talking—multiple ways to keep the group voices at bay.

That also works up to a point. That works very well, actually. But what it can do is shut off the scapegoating issues in a group, but not the actual scapegoating. People drop out and people keep quiet. Or they'll gossip and talk after the meeting. But in the group it feels warm and good—controlled and powerful. And it's valuable.

But if you challenge that system what you get is all the cross-talk, all the cross-angers, all the cross-love, all the danger, the jealousy, and all the dark ecstatic. You get conflict. The group reengages with reality and power. But even beyond that, there is a place where the group does its natural thing which is, I think, to exclude the dissident, dissident defined any way you want to. But it's to exclude the other.

That's called scapegoating, the way I think about it, projecting what one believes is negative into one person or into a subgroup, and getting rid of them. Killing them, ejecting them. Or just keeping them around and conflating oneself, in the mind, by having them there. That process is very unconscious. No one wants to feel they're part of that. Unconscious in the sense that some people know they're doing it, but as a whole, it's pretty below the surface for any number, for the majority of the group at any given time.

To open the specifics of that up in a group is to really hit that ecstatic darkness of the group. Very much, because you're getting into an underlying collective species process that's really like a drug. It gets beyond the ego and suddenly there's a new reality, a new matrix.... You see that humans are a group phenomenon, a multi-phenomenon. And that some of it is gorgeous, and some of it is just dark night.

It's a beautiful horror. And looking into the face of that is the spiritual, the ecstatic. It often feels like a deep spiritual darkness, because we identify the light with the individual in us. I don't know what words to use for it. It's the root of so much of the creativity of great music and great art. You have to know about that part to be creative for the us. It's not just your own personal pain or abuse or evil. It's being part of a group pain, darkness, evil, love—of a species. It's who I am, we are. Us.

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"There're always secrets at the heart of this dark ecstasy. Otherwise it wouldn't be a mystery. And it's very rare for organizations to take on its important individuals, its important subgroups, and try to work with them. Too much risk."

So we're looking, really, at this incredible mirror of something that we're a small part of, but definitely a part of. And once we get there and know more fully who we are, we can transform consciously as a group.... Keep it awake. It's paired with the positive ecstatic. So it makes the whole thing work better. That's my hope.

Alan Briskin: And as you're talking, I'm reminded of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, repeating to myself "The horror, the horror!"

Arthur Colman: Brando did that so well.

Alan Briskin: But what does it mean? To stay for the moment with the horror. What is it?

Arthur Colman: The times in my life, personally, when I've tried to do that, I've gotten terribly, terribly hurt. I've been terribly scapegoated. And even when I was absolutely clear that that was going to happen, it hurt—a lot.

We all have examples of groups that are just impossible, or corrupt, too scapegoating, too boring. And we're going to take off and leave it. We do it. You don't have to stew in this horror that's not truly of your own making. We have in this culture individual responsibility but....

Suppose you're in an institution that you love, as I've been a couple of times. Each time—because I get to be a leader—I get to a point where I just see stuff. It may be my particular vision of that, but I see stuff from this group perspective. And that's really dangerous to myself and others. And saying something about it may disrupt what's seen as creativity or flow, or is going to disrupt individuals in power who have a lot at stake.

Because it always relates to secrets. There're always secrets at the heart of this dark ecstasy. Otherwise it wouldn't be a mystery. It's very rare for organizations to take on its important individuals, its important subgroups, and try to work with them. Too much risk. So I exclude myself or I get excluded. It's very easy to stay in and just go along, which I've done also. But given my interest in this, after a while it just becomes.... I feel like a hypocrite, and I think a lot of other people do too.

Alan Briskin: We've talked in the past about your dream of seeing all these groups you've been part of and of your dream voice saying: "You don't have to do this anymore." [You can stand back and reflect.] So I think that we're at the beginning of exploration. And when one starts an exploration, one can't run away from the disturbing elements.

I've heard Tutu speak about his work with reconciliation. When he talks of his learning, there is a dynamic movement from opposition to paradox. That he learned how humans can be so systematic in their evil toward each other. What disturbed him more than any of the individual horror stories was the systematic planning to sterilize black men. He said that emerged for him as another level of darkness, to collaborate strategically for that purpose. But then he learned this other piece—about this glorious element of the human.

Arthur Colman: What's wonderful, and the reason I went to South Africa, was the amazing concept he made happen—that of the public world being involved. He's not fooling around with redemption, by going off and confessing to a priest alone, or meditating in a cave alone, or even doing service, or penance when you don't know what it's about. That's not enough. It just isn't enough.

I think generations of people have fallen into that, trying to figure out ways to help people feel better about themselves, to get rid of some of this

conflict in group. To sort of paper it over, which is a very understandable thing—out of a holocaust or apartheid.... Dark ecstasy has a lot to do with sacrifice—of others. A moral genius like Tutu creates a form. Fifty years ago we created Nuremberg, but that—

Alan Briskin: That's different.

Arthur Colman: Different, very different.

Alan Briskin: There was an exquisite clarity about Tutu's premise when he was asked by Mandela to do this. It was the premise that, just as torture and murder were problematic, denial was problematic, at a social collective level. I suspect it wasn't simply that this would all go well. How could it? Would it be argued about what was really being accomplished? Of course. But he was able to demonstrate... truth and reconciliation.

[SILENCE]

Arthur Colman: So where does that lead? It's like, these great institutions, Catholic confession has this. Yom Kippur has it.

Alan Briskin: That's right.

Arthur Colman: It's interesting, my own part of that Yom Kippur business is, as a child, speaking a largely foreign tongue. All these sins, all these remarkable sins. Everybody's supposed to be responsible for all of the sins. So we're collectively responsible. That's the place I first learned about collective responsibility on that level.

But, of course, the prayers were in Hebrew and said at lightening speed, too fast to understand them. But there's something powerful about it anyway because it's public, because it's in community. And if you're in a Catholic church community, you see a priest. It's private within an institution—it's private but it isn't private. It's a very interesting mystery.

In my own life, I took the service out of the temple and made it for my family. Every year we would all go up Mt. Tamalpais and fast, and we would recite the sins described in the prayer book and talk about each of them. Confess to each of them as part of the human race. And talk about collective as well as personal responsibility. It was fascinating. Because all of us would have secrets. And you could share most of them. One of the kids had taken 25 cents out of my pocket and had been worrying about that for six months and now he could say it, and there was absolution. And could one say one had an affair? Well, yeah, you could possibly even do that. Very interesting possibility. The rule was no recriminations afterwards. Yeah. It pretty much worked.

I think there's something so real about reconciliation gotten in exchange for the public confession, and even humiliation.... We all have those things that, if we spoke aloud, cause a breakdown in our minds, and possibly reality. Deal with your secret in public, voluntarily, and you don't have to go to jail, you receive amnesty, which is what South Africa's program was about.

Alan Briskin: I'm seeing that without any equal understanding of reconciliation, there can't be a deepening of truth...meaning the revealing of the secrets. That there is almost always a relationship between the two. That if you can't go that deep in the reconciliation arena, you should not expect to go too deep into the secret areas.

Arthur Colman: I think that's really the thing.... Then you get to what we call the pit, the place of this ecstatic darkness, which is where transformation could occur. And it is a mystical journey. Absolutely mystical journey. It's the

Principle

Element of the Experience

Facing the Darkness

People are unafraid to go deeper together, to turn around and face the darkness in themselves, in each other, and in humanity as a whole. They are able to do this because of the safety and connection they experience in the group setting, and they do it without judgment or recrimination. They draw on the strength of the collective to acknowledge and face that which would surely overcome them if they were to each look upon it alone. Together, there is a willingness to look fully and fearlessly at the inexcusable insults, atrocities, and pain people regularly inflict on each other and on themselves, in moments of fear and weakness. In the looking—directly, without flinching, and with compassion—the pain begins to dissipate, giving way to the impulse then to move through and beyond the fear and separation, into forgiveness and collective healing.



"There is something that happens in the group where they hit a boundary of darkness, of an ecstatic darkness that they've created together, either in the here and now, or in a political or work situation. And they have to face that and look at it.... It's a beautiful horror, that deep spiritual darkness. It's being part of a group pain, the darkness, the evil of a species. It's who we are. It's part of us."

—Arthur Colman

"If we're willing to sit in the discomfort and work through the discomfort, until there's a clearing, and we can see the other side...it's amazing what happens!"

—Pat Harbour

labyrinth that you mentioned in the beginning. A journey into the center of your collective self.

But it's more, the image I have is really walking down the ramp, and it's darker and darker and scarier.... Finding that place, the amazement and horror and joy being inside that world of truth where all the collective secrets are revealed. Darkness yes, but also freedom. Freedom without a consciousness of personal recriminations and punishment...because it's no longer personal. It's when you come up for air that all the recriminations are right there again. It's not a legal agreement to give up vengeance. Aggrieved people can't agree to that. They must no longer want that.... It would be borne out over time.

Alan Briskin: It may be that the group has to be informed increasingly by the individual, to take this next leap, but that the individual also has to be reconnected with his or her existence as member. That there's a greater unity.

Arthur Colman: And that may be painful. But it often feels hard to be limited by being an individual when you see beyond it. You know I have this construct that the individual's consciousness is a brilliant creation of the collective, that gives it consciousness. The individual is the spokesperson for consciousness, the voice for the collective consciousness.

So I see myself as sort of chipping away at these collective mysteries. How do you get at the collective consciousness? How do you help transform it? There are a lot of other people asking these questions. It seems to me that the more people who do it, the closer we'll...maybe this is the goal of the 21st Century. All our depth knowledge about the individual isn't enough.

I do my work...and hope that it's part of a critical mass of enough people to change things. So I actually see myself part of a movement, which is the first time I've seen that so clearly. I've always felt more occult and more [on the edge of things], a curiosity for others, and something of a researcher. I trust now there are a lot of people that are interested in this. And they're going to do it in much more creative ways than I do.

But I do know that the heart of it is going to be that look into the pit. Not papering it over with any induction techniques. There has to be a way to sit there a while. If I had to do it over, I would start with just beginning to teach this in elementary school, to the kids at the place where it begins.

Alan Briskin: What do you think this movement is? How would you give it initial language?

Arthur Colman: It comes as a sort of primacy of truth...some spiritual notion of social reality. The individual joined in collective consciousness, our species journey.

Commentary on The Ramp and the Pit:

"Every so often I feel as birds must before their first migration—a gut instinct that something is wrong where they are, a strong sense that they must now go where they have never been before."

—Andy Goldsworthy

How might we engage these reflections? What are the feelings and ideas surfaced by a discussion of the ecstatic darkness and the metaphors of the ramp and the pit? During a conference in Vancouver on collective intelligence and new terms of engagement, I had the opportunity to listen to the renowned violinist, Miha Pogacnik, play Bartok's third movement of the solo sonata

*"The capacity to love,
teach, heal, and build
coexists with our
capacity to hate,
repress, wound, and
destroy. How do
we take responsibility
for that?"*

Principle

Significance of Gathering

Witnessing

It is in the group setting that we are called to stand witness for each other—to notice, to acknowledge, to name and to give meaning to what is unfolding for us, what we are learning, what we are remembering, and what we are becoming. One aspect of witnessing is simply the creation of shared understanding and experience, through deep listening and understanding of each other's perspectives. A second aspect of witnessing lies in being a mirror for each other's learning. People release a kind of collective sigh as they relax into knowing that they have revealed themselves, and have been validated; even as they stand in validation of others. This aspect of witnessing takes on critical importance in the collective healing of humankind. Where atrocities have been perpetrated against whole communities, whole countries, and whole peoples..., public witnessing has a critical role to play. To publicly acknowledge (to stand collective witness) to the horror and the darkness of what has happened, enables people to participate in reconciliation and forgiveness.



"They have gained new insights into each other's perspectives. They have shared the knowledge of each other's perspective.

"I know that you know that this is my perspective."

—Finn Voldtofte

"My mental understanding alone is no comfort to me. What I've been learning recently is that I can't grow without witnesses. I need witnesses for my personal transformation."

—Joan Lederman

"Truly serving as sacred mirrors to each other, of witnessing each other's journey, of deeply listening to each other."

—Marilyn Veltrop

Melodious. Miha's art is to create an integration of feeling, impression, and rationality in the service of the whole. Closing my eyes, I sensed something of the ecstatic, a soaring feeling but also a screeching, a high scream. Arthur's words emerged in my thoughts and in the moment, I experienced something of the awe in mystery, a total freedom and also a disturbance which I felt in my heart. This mix of emotion moved through me and I imagined descending into darkness.

What are the forms and rhythms of this place? What is it personally and collectively we must face? Music touches the soul and creates a sensory field that allows us to hold the sphere of emotional life. Internal to each of us is a cauldron of colliding elements, our personal biography and the archetypes of our species' consciousness. Arthur's inquiry into the collective takes us to places we have not been before or simply places we would not want to go. Yet, here in the darker chambers are critical elements to mapping a field of collective wisdom.

In many of our dozens of discussions we have come across overlapping references to collective intelligence, collective wisdom, collective insight, collective consciousness, and the collective unconscious. Arthur adds to this the idea of collective responsibility, bringing to bear moral and ethical dimensions of group life. What exists in the whole exists in each of us. The individual is a small mirror of the whole, linked in a myriad of ways with his or her immediate group associations—family, work settings, community, society—but also with an underlying species identification. The capacity to love, teach, heal, and build coexists with our capacity to hate, repress, wound, and destroy. How do we take responsibility for that? How do we recognize these polarities in ourselves and still protect our fragile personal identities? The archetypal theme of inclusion and exclusion plays itself out in the scapegoating process, where the instinct is to exclude the dissident, the "other."

For Arthur, collective consciousness has two aspects. First, within each of us, there are expressions of the psyche that are collective in nature. Lauren, Angeles, and others have described these archetypal elements that exists within each of us in numberless interconnections. In 1949, Jung and the Hungarian classicist C. Kerenyi jointly identified this "mythological heritage" and wrote that these mythic elements are "collective (and not personal) structural elements of the human psyche in general, and, like the morphological elements of the human body, are inherited." We sense these elements in dreams, in literature, in meditations, and in groups.

The second aspect of collective consciousness is more here and now, tied to our being members of groups. When Tom Callanan and Finn talk about becoming aware of group mind and the collective intelligence of the whole, they are describing a shift that takes place from being inside our own individual skins to a sensing of how we are members of a larger whole. We see that thought (including emotion) has a certain movement, wholeness, and coherence that is not perceivable from within one's own opinion, perspective, or wishes. Physically, one relaxes and becomes more alert as the "group as a whole" becomes more apparent. Patterns become discernible and the degree of fragmentation or coherence surfaces in how members interact with each other.

This second aspect is at the core of Arthur's startling hypothesis that the individual is a brilliant creation of the collective. We act out of this group consciousness but we are unaware of it. "To the individual," Arthur reflected, "the collective is unconscious." We are not so separate as we think. This is unsettling to the modern mind, which understandably prides itself on its capacity for differentiation from the group. Yet something is unfinished. The achievement of the individual to differentiate him or her self denies the linkage with others and the archetypal patterns that play out in group life. "What's running us is our nature, the collective, the species collective," Arthur noted—"humans are a group phenomenon, a multi phenomenon. And some of that is gorgeous and some of it is just dark night." There in the dark night of the soul lies the history of human atrocities, the ancient stories of swords so thick with blood of the enemy that it

Metaphor Cluster

Light and Dark

like watching a city at night • collective reflection • our hearts of darkness • big blind spot flashing • ecstatic darkness • becoming translucent to basic nature • courses in dark arts • shadow costs • igniting separation or breakdown • hitting a flash point • burning questions • brilliant compromise • static darkness • shedding light • reflect into memory • internal knowing lighting us up • sun dance • shining light on the invisible field of imagination • shadow dragging people down to be recycled • dancing with the shadow • avoid, kill, convert, or offer hospitality to the stranger • ignited memories • shimmering space • an aureole, a halo of rainbowed light • enlightenment kingdom • an aha! in zero time • thunderbolts of insights • flame of understanding • clarity like a pearl • insight at the core • being within an exploding star and realizing it hit like a ton of bricks • energy field bursting into bloom • seed crystal of intentionality • magnetized in a field of allurements • co-incarnational universe of light and air • connecting sparks of magic • broadening horizons • dark moving silences •

stays glued to the hand. Stories of barbarism, of slave trade, of women burned to death for refusing men of the same caste, of concentration camps and of horrors that still haunt us because they are happening today, not in some distant past. Colman's work asks [that] we account for the darkness without minimizing or spiritualizing it away as old behavior that simply exhausts itself and disappears.

He also outlines its dynamics in groups as day to day occurrences. We see evidence of scapegoating in all institutions—religious, business, therapeutic, government—even in intentional groups that seek to be inclusive and aligned with higher values. Just as there is a blind spot in the physiology of the eye, there is a blind spot in how we see ourselves in groups.

The thread that leads us deeper into the collective mind also leads us into a new awareness of ourselves as members of groups. In whom have I consciously or unconsciously placed evil? What emotions or reactions in others do I ignore or remain disconnected with? What assumptions allow me to place a boundary between myself and the behavior of the group? Do I even step outside myself to become aware of the group as a whole?

In the metaphors of the ramp and the pit, we have visual icons reminding us that there is both fear and promise in making the darkness conscious. Fear that a secret revealed or an ill feeling expressed will destroy the group or lead to personal ostracism or even danger. But promise that a deeper connection among members is possible and that more of who we are can be expressed. Beyond the benefit of "good feeling" there is also the possibility that collective awareness will help avert harm—to someone inside or outside the group. The choice to risk new behaviors grows with the belief that new terms of engagement are necessary to genuinely move forward as part of a larger collective—whether a business, a community, or a society.

Arthur's evocation of a spiritual notion of reality opens a door to healing. He suggests that collective issues cannot be resolved behind a boundary of private interactions or even legislative efforts. The healing takes place in some kind of public forum, where secrets can be revealed and witnessed. Forgiveness becomes a possibility in the context of both truth and reconciliation. We can participate in healing past atrocities and misunderstandings that as group members we have inherited and are still subject to. Similarly, the silencing of conflict within groups and the witnessing of gossip outside the group become more familiar phenomenon that we can interpret. The roots of scapegoating are deep within us and the shame of becoming aware of our participation in scapegoating is deeply disturbing. We may even blame the "collective" for the ills that trouble us. Yet, there is a certain kind of liberation in knowing that we are capable of scapegoating and can examine it together. There is a deep humility associated with this process and a greater knowing on the part of the individual that he or she can be a voice of the collective. The illusion of separateness is revealed and a spiritual notion of social reality indeed becomes possible.

The idea of collective responsibility adds a critical dimension, a necessary doubt, that provokes deeper inquiry. And paradoxically it suggests that even within the most morally compromised situations lies the potential of other choices. Nelson Mandela's actions echo from the heart of collective responsibility when he noted that "to the extent that I have been able to achieve anything, I know it is because I am a product of the people of South Africa."

Is there any data or pattern story that suggests the pairing of the ecstatic darkness and the transpersonal dimension to group life that we are exploring? This is where we next turn our attention. ■