



LUKENOTES

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The Agon of Dualism

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In Olympic years, we are often reminded during the games of "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat," where victory and defeat are clearly placed in opposition, one being good and the other bad. It is interesting to note, however, that AGON, the ancient Greek conception of contest, was not about winning and losing. Rather, it had much to do with the union of opposites and was rooted in a spirit of sacrifice, of service to something higher than the self (H. Muschamp, NY Times, July 18, 2004.) The original spirit of the Olympic Games seems to invite us to understand that to be human, is to be about the struggle to bring together opposites, both within ourselves and among us. And, this not so easy task of uniting, of communion, is often agonizing as we strive to go back and forth to embrace what we try to maintain as polar opposites. For many, the root of this struggle is dualistic thinking.

The goal of human and spiritual development is wholeness and an enemy of wholeness is dualism. Dualism is an opposition between two things so that one is subordinated to the other, if not rejected all together. One element is considered good or more desirable and the other is rejected or considered bad or undesirable, resulting in a split in one's self. Some examples of common dualisms are: mind/body, thinking/feeling, work/leisure, and strength/sensitivity. The mind/body dualism not only makes the mind better than the body or matter, but also the "superior" mind is to keep control of that which is inferior or evil, the body. And, because men have traditionally been associated with the mind and women with the body, it is not surprising that women, at times, have been considered inferior. Living in a logical way is better than trusting one's feelings (thinking/feeling) is a common dualism adopted by many. This results in a one dimensional person with a limited capacity to know oneself and others. A work/leisure dichotomy, where work is exalted and leisure is demeaned, is one of the factors that heavily impacts a person's ability to relax and enjoy life, often playing a critical role in a healthy retirement. Finally, for many strength is often considered more valuable than sensitivity. It is not surprising then to find that people in leadership positions sometimes suppress the softer, more tender side of self to reinforce a sense of personal strength.

It is interesting to note that in addition to these typical polarities, there seem to be a number of **Christian polarities** as well: love/hate, courage/fear, peace/conflict, sexual abstinence/sexual desire and selflessness/selfishness. Because **love** is so central to the Gospel, there is a temptation to say that **hate** is bad, when in reality we need to be able to have powerfully negative feelings about some things such as violence, terrorism, injustice and oppression. **Courage** is desirable and good; **fear** can be good as well. Fear tells us that we are not safe.

When people feel fearful they need to check out if indeed they are in an unsafe situation. Feelings are neutral, not positive or negative. It is important to realize that **conflict** is inevitable, a vital part of living a healthy life and that it is not in opposition to **peace**. Managing conflict is a necessary skill that is increasingly needed at this time as a means to promote true and lasting peace. There seems to be an ongoing struggle with **sexual desire** especially in religious traditions, often leading to feelings of shame and guilt and some sense that **abstinence** is better. This is in contrast to our current culture's overemphasis on desire. Discerning and befriending our desires are clearly skills that need to be developed to live a healthy integrated sexual life. Finally, an understanding of **selflessness**, where caring for oneself is seen as **selfishness** and choosing to put one's self first is *always* unacceptable is a distortion. We are called to be a self-in-representation, someone who cares for neighbor and self.

Shadow and the Second Half of Life

The unwanted, rejected part of any dualism makes up a person's shadow, the reverse of what is valued, or who people think they should be. The shadow develops gradually as individuals learn to hide or repress the "bad" aspects of themselves. And, it is not uncommon that dealing with one's shadow becomes more of a task in the second half of one's life. Having addressed to some degree the tasks of identity and finding one's place personally and professionally, for many the major tasks of the 20's and 30's, it is quite common then to feel a need for wholeness in mid-life.

Although it requires courage to discover what is in our shadow, William Miller, in **Make Friends With Your Shadow**, points out that the benefits far outweigh the risks. In coming to terms with our shadow, we **grow in self-awareness** and discover what we need to rethink and review in "who we have learned to be." Often, we are invited to begin a **tempering of dualism** in order to arrive at wholeness; "we learn to disidentify with our virtues as well as our vices because we see that neither is purely one or the other." Also, the better we know and understand ourselves, the more we can **make good decisions and not be controlled by our unconscious**. A third outcome of embracing our shadow is that we become better able to **accept our humanity and live with more reasonable and realistic expectations**. When we accept ourselves and our imperfections, we are better able to feel secure with ourselves and others and to accept others and their imperfections.

The process of moving toward wholeness and completeness is the transformative process that all persons are called to embrace. Awareness and embracing of the dualisms prevalent in our lives is one way to shake our complacency and to set out on the sometimes agonizing journey toward wholeness.

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