



LOVE SHADOWS

*Discover your relationship
Shadow and break free*

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ANNAESTHER

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“Discover your shadow, and break free”



ANNAESTHER



My Personal Story

Love is one of the most intense feelings I've ever experienced. Humans live for love. Humans die for love. Humans continue to exist because of love. While love is an amazing aphrodisiac, it also stimulates a fearful climax because it woos us onto a plane of vulnerability that defies gravity as a law of nature. At the distinct moment we realize we're in love, we float upward into the light of another person's world of magic. A world colored by exotic shades of experience each lover carelessly totes from the party of their past. Too often, dusk arrives, and we stumble around drunk-like in the shadows of uncertainty. We lose sight of why we fell in love. Our partner starts to look like an imagined monster in the dark of night.

I grew up with a Christian-based life view. A “fallen nature” was the only explanation for behaviors we labeled as “sin.” Psychology—the scientific study of human behavior was a threat to our belief that Satan was out to destroy us. Our power was not in understanding ourselves better, but in solely submitting our will to God. I carried this belief pattern into every single relationship, whether love or not. I never sought to understand myself and my partner better. I only hung onto relationships for dear life by submitting to my partner's will. I'd learned that submission was the mark of a Christian woman in the center of God's will. Perhaps a course in psychology might have saved me from years of judging myself and other sinners still at the mercy of a misery against which we had no defense. Instead, I wasted my sanity on superstition--ignoring logical and intuitive constructs that might have explained my dysfunction so I could finally be free.

I think most everyone wants to have a happy relationship. Many start out with fairytale ideas about how they'll be swept off their feet by a soulmate who is perfect in every way. Slowly, or sometimes abruptly, our fantasies change according to circumstances we're convinced are beyond our control. Because love is such an emotional experience, we refuse to evaluate our relationships outside of what we feel at surface level. We get stuck in patterns where each partner reads their line on queue but has no idea what the other person really intends to communicate.

At the extreme, relationships can become lethal and even abusive to the point where we must run for our life. Hopefully, you've never experienced the type of fear that brainwashes you to believe you're damned to hell with no options of escape. I'd venture to say that every single person on this earth has experienced some version of prison in their love life yet lacked the tools and willpower to chip their way out of a dark, damp cell of chained torture. But within us all, is a spark of hope that can be ignited as a blaze of passion if we only have the proper lens through which to imagine ourselves free.

I've lived the extremes in relationships and witnessed the result of what my religion might explain as demonic forces, ignoring I had a choice to modify behaviors that could be traced back to my childhood. I've found myself as a part of an uncomfortable scene, making a case for my sanity versus the insanity of someone I once loved. I've sat still, unassumingly with childlike wonder, building a sandcastle between my legs, when it suddenly became urgent that I draw a line in the sand between normal and abnormal. I've battled complex questions like, "When does healthy inter-dependence suddenly become toxic co-dependence?" I've had to learn the difference between passion and obsession, compassion and martyrdom. I've neutralized the ground between victim and victimizer. There are multiple layers of awareness when it comes to relationships and the brave at heart dare to discover what is inside the hidden shed of our darkest fears. This ***hidden shed of fears*** is what I'll refer to throughout the book as, ***The Shadow***. Late psychologist Carl Jung developed the shadow concept and stated that our shadow is the unknown dark side of our personality. Throughout this book, I'll use the concept of Shadow to take a critical look at how deep-seated fears manifest, for better or worse, in our love relationships.

Once, I was in the middle of a courtroom amongst actors who played their part so well. The prisoner on trial was covered in tattoos from eye to toe, in an orange jumpsuit -- chains around his feet. His role was husband rapist. He sat with eyes wildly racing as if he'd jump out of his chair at any moment and attack the victim on autopilot like a ravenous wolf. Just nights before, according to his wife who testified on the witness stand, he'd repeatedly punched her in the face. Then he held a kitchen knife to her throat and dared her to move while he proceeded to rape her, believing and proudly stating that she enjoyed this. The wife, who'd fallen victim to fear, testified dramatically. Her face still black and blue, she described how he held her down against her will. She claimed that if she had not struggled to take the knife from him, she "wouldn't be here to testify today." He would have killed her. I refer to these real-life figures as actors because we all play a part in the dysfunction that defines our relationships. It is so easy to look at someone else's relationship and see clearly how each partner could adjust their behavior to improve their satisfaction with the other. But when it comes to our own relationships, we're so caught up in the drama, our script is inseparable from our core. We've internalized what should come next and only an act of sheer will and determination along with a miraculous glimmer of hope can pull us out of the horror film of our making.

It all seemed so surreal. I knew my relationship wasn't as bad as theirs. But my emotional health had been held at gunpoint, many times. I wanted to scream to the woman and tell her to get it together and stand up for herself. In the hallway, I heard another woman describe how it was impossible to escape her abusive partner because she couldn't get a restraining order. She had no

visible bruises to prove their relationship was toxic. She had no financial resources and the court system all but laughed in her face at the irony of her imprisonment that I believe, started in her mind. That day was a part of my journey toward greater self-awareness, but I made a promise to myself that I'd tell their story one day. Something became very clear to me in that courtroom. I needed to break free from my own relationship dysfunction that wrapped around me like a boa constrictor. I was going to have to face each of my fears one by one and accept the part I played in designing my own prison. These women lived on their own plane of misery and all they needed was a lifeline. But their eyes needed to be ready to see. Their hearts needed to implode before the raw reality of their pain could move them to action.

Our fears at the most extreme level of dysfunction are murderous. That man in the courtroom was foaming at the mouth with unfounded fears, irrational thoughts, and limiting beliefs. His default setting was that of the untamed mind. He'd fallen victim to his biggest fear. Perhaps he feared betrayal. There's a chance his wife feared rejection. Maybe you can't identify with the tragedy of domestic abuse. But I'd dare say, we can all identify with the feeling of hopelessness that results from being in a relationship with someone who jumps to conclusions, overreacts to situations, and self-sabotages moments that are meant to be happy and fulfilling. While this book won't deal with the extremes of human behavior, where dysfunction is completely off the charts—it's important for you to realize the slippery slope of nursing your fears and living in complacency. Not only do you lose the opportunity to live a truly joyful life with your partner, but you also miss out on the chance to pull others out of the quicksand by demonstrating to them it's completely possible to stand on firm ground in love. Furthermore, you risk drowning in the rapids of bizarre behaviors personified by fear.

My passion to share the power of facing your Shadow and understanding your fears originates with my desire to help you reclaim your life and exercise your fullest potential to live happily ever after. I'm aware of my fears, now more than ever, so I know that a message of hope is more important than the perfect formation of a sentence. Having faced my fears head-on, I've learned to filter the actions and insecurities of others through what I now recognize as fear motivators. I now understand why some will find me intolerant and cut me off with a manipulative argument to prove they should be in charge. I no longer put my guard up when I'm afraid of failing or becoming a victim again. I own my personal fears. I speak up when it matters and even when I'm not sure others are listening. I relax, knowing that I can learn something from the whispers of fearful premonition.

I would not trade my personal journey for anything, but I'd never put you on a bus with a one-way ticket to my past. There's no need to take the long road of suffering to enlightenment, when someone has already discovered a path that's full of light. My hope is that this book will teach you how to clear the brush and eliminate the thorns that made you forget the roses. We all have a beautiful opportunity to live in love at our highest potential as a partner who is committed to joy—ready to break free from every fear that binds us.

➤ If you've ever felt like you're losing your mind in a relationship, this book is for you.

- If you've ever questioned your sanity, because you're certain your words are being twisted, this book is for you.
- If you've tried and failed to live in love on multiple occasions but habitually hit a brick wall of indifference, this book is for you.
- If your friends got tired of you crying the same tears and repeating the same sad stories about your love life, this book is for you.
- If your mom has told you more than once that you have bad taste in partners, this book is for you.

It's an awful travesty to lose years of your life spinning the wheel of fortune on love. A happy and successful relationship is more than a coin toss. It's true that not every day will be perfect, but it's truer that every day with your partner should not make you question your sanity.

Sanity is loosely defined as "soundness of judgment." The problem is that when it comes to love, most of us have varying definitions of rational behavior. This creates the most difficulty, when we're faced with the paradoxical equation of surviving with a partner who dictates his or her own set of rules regarding what is sane and what is not. What is appropriate and what is not.

Unfortunately, fear keeps us in the obscure shadows of denial or co-dependency that choke authenticity, creativity and productivity. Facing our fears isn't about proving our partner is responsible for our insecurities. Facing our fears is about taking personal responsibility for how our fears impact our relationship and responding courageously by being honest with ourselves and others about what scares us most.

If you're not ready to look in the mirror and take responsibility for the part you play in your relationship dysfunction, this book is not for you. The outcome of reading this book will not be a definitive recommendation to stay with your current partner, file for divorce, or let nature take its course. But I promise you, if you take the time to look inside and face your fears, you'll see the next step clearly. Your path toward joy will open infinitely with each step you take toward greater transparency. Maintaining a candid posture in life will reward you with the courage for facing even deeper truths that lead to a universal love not limited by human cynicism, the hallmark of fear.

In this primer, I'll look closer at fear identification and explore some of the relationship hurdles that arise simply because we each follow unique timelines of self-discovery. I'll also explain the difference between running from our fears compared to accepting fears as an integral part of our best self. Additionally, I'll spend a considerable portion of this book describing why it's so easy to fall into the victim mindset in relationships. I'll provide tools to start transforming your status from victim to victor. Lastly, I'll provide you and your partner with the opportunity to identify your personal shadow. Then I'll outline examples of fear dynamics in relationships.

My hope is that you read this book and share it with your sister, brother, friend, mother, grandfather, spouse – anyone who has written off love as a fairy tale reserved for Disney. It pains me to see couples suffering. It rips my heart out to know that careers are distracted, passions are muted, and ambitions are crushed – just because things aren't good at home. We're supposed to be stronger together. Relationships are intended to provide support, perspective, and passion.

There's a special way with which you relate to the world around you. No matter what your fears are, you possess the power to transform your relationship with others. This book will guide you through a focused approach to improving the relationship with your significant other. We don't want you circling the block anymore, buying time before you head home to the same drudgery that's mocked you for years.

What you'll find in the upcoming pages is an opportunity for you to take the reins in your relationship by eliminating all self-deception and accepting your Shadow for exactly what it is. Only then, can you understand what really motivates you and your partner. Your collective fears will no longer steer the ship. Hopefully, if you have a partner, your partner will take this journey with you. But this journey is worth taking alone. It is your sole responsibility to make the best of your life. Your partner is not on the hook for reading your mind, meeting your deepest needs, or putting out the fire of fear that burns deep in your psyche.

For those who think their status quo relationship is a sign of health—don't fall prey to a rude awakening. It's true that greater self-awareness will initially cause discomfort. It's also true that working on yourself will disrupt a mediocre relationship. Remember though, that this disturbance is the way we're awakened to new possibilities and unlimited potential. Don't live wondering if things could have been better. Don't wake up one day to the regret that you lived life on the sidelines because of your greatest fear. Reawaken your core motivation and learn how to integrate your fears so that you harvest a handsome crop, not a field of weeds.

I am with you every step of this journey. My hope is that you lean into the discomfort and step into the character of each relationship dynamic I describe. Try to see yourself through the eyes of your partner. Don't shut out the possibility that you could be wrong. Accept that you may be right. But optimally, try to view everyone through the eyes of grace, understanding that we each have a special fear with which we must contend every day. Most of the time, your relationship struggles are based on internal fears that have nothing to do with the other person. It's essential to treat your fear as an object over which you have dynamic control. Just as important, it's impossible to fix someone else's fear. There's no amount of partner coddling, controlling, or planning that will assuage another person's fears.

You're only responsible for you and we all grow at a different pace. Let this book guide you through a new process of self-discovery and don't lose your curiosity in the process. Relationships are a collective conscience of individual choices and outcomes. Approached with commitment and the intent to succeed, your relationship can become a conduit through which you're able to inspire and sustain a childlike fascination with life. I'm so honored you've decided to take this journey alongside me.

Identifying Your Shadow

Fear discovery is a private process of self-care that may make you feel uncomfortable

As I described in the introduction, our deepest fear is the part of being that exists outside our awareness. My aim in this primer is to help you step outside your conscious awareness and think about how you got to where you are today. We live such busy lives. Rare is the opportunity for us to dig deep within and tap into our sub-consciousness. It's difficult to go to our kid's soccer match and block out the cheers to get in touch with the true discomfort we feel inside. Usually, we just keep going to the games and suppress what our sub-consciousness is trying to tell us until we make a sudden life move that not only surprises everyone else, but also surprises us. It's just as difficult to sit around the conference table at work strategizing with co-workers while simultaneously cracking the code inside our heads on our home life outside of work. In fact, identifying our fears is not possible when multi-tasking.

Fear discovery is a private process of self-care that may make you feel uncomfortable. It's likely you'll have a feeling of missing the party when isolating from the action around you, to go within. You could feel pangs of guilt as a mother for stepping outside the zone of motherhood polluted by constant noise. You might feel selfish. But once you've decided enough is enough and you're ready to quiet down and hear what's really going on inside, the self-care will be well worth the investment not only for your own health and well-being but for the long-term health and well-being of your entire family. You might feel like a bad employee for pausing tangible productivity to invest in understanding yourself and others. But you won't be an effective employee if your relationships are a wreck and you have no idea why. No matter how much you try to ignore the cobwebs, eventually someone will notice the condition of your home and it will reflect on your priorities.

Living in the sludge of a cluttered mind is a miserable existence compared to the clear light and clean air we can experience by identifying our unfounded fears. Cobwebs don't happen overnight. How many times have you walked by a cobweb in the corner of your home and ignored it? I can assure you that you're not the only one. In fact, I'm certain the cobwebs of our mind are just as disturbing but even easier to ignore. Everyone has their own tolerance level for what they'll allow to linger, especially if they see no harm in an innocent cobweb hanging around for a little longer. But mental and emotional cobwebs aren't so innocent.

We start life out with a blank slate. Our first words are "dada" or "mama" and that's the extent of the vocabulary we know for communicating our needs. Beyond that, we cry for what we want. As young children we have a handful of words and tears in our arsenal to get our way. We're free of cobwebs as children and our brains are not developed to the point of being able to intentionally articulate the feelings that lay beneath the surface. As adults, while crying can be quite cathartic, it's not a viable way to cope with life. Something happens when we take our first steps as children. We start choosing where we go. Initially within certain limits, our innocence is eventually lost to

where we end up. As we grow older, our choice of direction is informed by all the steps we've taken up to this point.

But it's hard to tell at exactly which step we lost our innocence and started filing away the missteps as bad memories. Those bad memories become fossilized and that process of fossilization is the making of our *Shadow*.

Losing innocence is the making of our Shadow

Here, we don't refer to the loss of innocence as a tragic event or a clear line that in one action was crossed. Innocence is the state of being where we can exist pleurably without the need or ability to understand our environment, ourselves, or the people around us. Eventually, humans grieve their loss of innocence, but losing our innocence isn't just a loss—it's a graduation—an opportunity to feel the depth of a before and after. As young children we process our experiences sub-consciously without enough life with which to compare the "good" and "bad."

If you'll take notice, most of what we experience as adults, we compare to some point in our past. It's almost impossible to fall in love with someone without questioning how our new relationship compares to our past love experience. But when you had your first kiss, you had nothing to look back on as an example of how it might have been. Some of us have a very good first experience when it comes to relationships. Others have a jarring first experience. It is debatable which experience is most favorable. If you start out on the mountaintop, you may never experience the pleasure of having scaled the heights of love. If you start out at base camp with an encounter that guts your confidence, you may never think that making it to the top is possible.

The reason it's important that you're aware of the difference between the past and now, is so that you can become aware of how your innocence continues to evolve with time. You've likely heard that older adults enter a second childhood. This can be a welcome change of scenery that allows the elderly to have a sense of being carefree, even against the backdrop of physical aging. But the optimum "innocence" is when we choose to discover a pure existence which has nothing to do with a stage of life imposed on us related to our age. Naming our fear allows us to reclaim our innocence—a state of living in the moment while proactively processing what's happening around us. The great thing about this reborn round of innocence is that we become more aware of our choices. We can steer our ship. We are empowered to direct our actions and thoughts with a higher awareness that impacts our relationships and elevates our sense of well-being.

How does our sense of innocence relate to our success in relationships? When we are children, we have little choice as to who is in our life. If we're lucky, we have parents who care for us. In some cases, we have siblings. In other families, there is an only child. No matter what, as a child, we progressively become more aware of the fact that our maturing sense of loneliness has nothing to do with the number of people around us, but everything to do with our ability to connect with those in our life. So, at some point, at varying ages for different people, we begin to look for love, for companionship, for a relationship that will satisfy our desire for connection.

Our sense of innocence shapes our love relationships

The innocence with which we embark on this search for love and connection will impact our success in relationships. Of course, we cannot look for a partner with the innocence of emotional virginity we once had. No, at this juncture in our lives, we must approach relationships as “shrewd serpents and innocent doves,” like the Bible suggests in Matthew 10:16. Our task at hand is to regain innocence while sharpening our sense of relating to others around us, especially when it comes to choosing a mate.

We need to see our current partner through the eyes of a child while handling them with the wisdom afforded by knowing ourselves better. Meaning, we no longer judge ourselves or our partner, we only “deal [with them] according to knowledge.” I Peter 3:7 We’re sure you’ve heard the phrase “What you don’t know, can’t hurt you.” This speaks of the innocence part of the equation. But the formula for a successful relationship requires balance. While we approach our search for love with innocence, we must be well equipped with enough knowledge about human behavior to understand what we’re getting ourselves into.

We’ve all met those people who live at either extreme. They innocently fall in love head over hills for another person with complete disregard for their lover’s lack of self-awareness because they only seek to fill their own void. We’ve all observed grown men and women who still believe infatuation is enough to make a successful lifetime partnership. But at the other extreme are those who never give themselves a chance to feel anything because upon meeting a new potential mate, they immediately begin to calculate what the future might look like together. They stifle pleasure by obsessing over how this person will fit into their world that has little to no built-in flexibility for childlike enjoyment of the moment.

We look for love because we long for connection, but connection is short-lived if we don’t come to grips with the difference between nonfiction and fiction. Nonfiction love is the love story we tell that has everything to do with how we will operate in relationship to someone else once the narrative arc has peaked and we start to live the falling action. Fictional love stories are those that read with orgasmic intensity but leave out important details like who will take the trash to the road. I’m a big proponent of both fiction and nonfiction. I believe that shadow discovery is a process by which we can integrate the elements of both genres and experience a loving relationship that affords both the ecstasy yet practicality of innocence and understanding.

There’s a good chance that someone reading this is thinking, “Yeah, but I’ve already jumped in with both feet. What now?” Or it’s possible that some readers are on the verge of asking someone to commit, but their rigidity is a barrier to convincing a potential partner they’re sincere. Either scenario is what we refer to as “relationship prison” and we can assure you there’s no breakout of jail free card.

Freedom is not Free

I remember one moment of reckoning with my own freedom. On a sunny day, that didn’t feel so sunny, a lifetime ago, I sat on the uncovered top level of a parking deck at the university where I attended. I felt like my insides were being ripped out by the fact that I’d soon walk to class, down the flower lined sidewalks, clear blue skies above, pass all the other students with barely a nod, and

enter a dark building, then down a narrow hallway, and sit in a windowless room filled with an overwhelming group of clones all competing for the same credential—a college degree. As I sat in my car, in absolute misery, wishing to be anywhere but there, I longed for freedom more than anything else. In that moment, I penned the words of this song:

I wanna be free
from this world of expectation
be happy, be me
be filled with elation.
wait for somethin'
new don't settle for today
when everything is boring
and nothing goes your way...

One of the verses began:

I'm done with school
I've got a degree
of goin' to work
and barkin' up a tree...

This longing for freedom isn't isolated to stages of life from which we wish to escape. It's a longing common to relationships where we feel trapped in the darkness of our circumstances that dictate rigid expectations while still observing the sun shining, the birds chirping, and the flowers blooming from a tiny basement window. All good things seem to be taking place outside the prison of our making.

Everyone longs for some type of freedom: financial freedom, creative freedom, political freedom, freedom from the kids, freedom from a partner, freedom from emotional dependencies, freedom from addiction, freedom of expression – in some way we all desire to be free from this world of expectation that defines our every move. Many of us are perpetually bored and rather than work toward freedom, we become increasingly indebted, burdened down with even more chains. Freedom is quite good at making a mockery of our dreams, especially when it comes to the paradox of living “in love” while at the same time loving the everyday life a relationship affords.

Just exactly what will it cost for us to break free in our relationships and stop processing our dysfunction through the eyes of a prisoner who has no options except to live in misery for a lifetime? In our quest for freedom, remember, there will be times when the budget will not balance. We will pay a lot toward this ideal of freedom, while the outside world still treats us like we're chained and foolishly paying a price too great to justify the means. You question your sanity for courting inflated liberty when it seems to defeat the purpose, given no one is promised tomorrow. The truth is, freedom is not free. It's up to you to decide which freedom you value most. Financial freedom may cost you a valued relationship. Free love may cost you a committed relationship. Freedom of expression may cost you your friends.

The most beautiful people on earth are those who knowingly pay a high price for freedom, refusing to live what to them would otherwise be a mediocre life. They carry the proud scars of freedom, as years of loneliness, time on the streets, decades in the cube, divorce, isolation, rejection, failure, marriage, entrepreneurship. But for a moment, no matter how brief, they've experienced the liberating belief that life presents us with choices and we're absolutely free to decide which chains to wear, knowing that freedom always comes at a cost.

It takes work to identify our fears. I understand the excruciating process required to confront the truth first-hand. I also know that facing The Truth sets me free. This is why I've taken the time to write this book as a guide to help you through the process of naming your fears and discovering your Shadow.

Why can't religion rescue my love life?

There are several major world religions. Often, our religion serves as our source of Truth. We let scriptures, tenants and traditions guide our relationships. While this book uses scriptures and ancient quotes to drive a point home, I believe that self-actualization isn't tied to a particular belief or creed. No matter what your religion, you'll find that the truths explained in the following chapters have a universal application.

Your religious affiliation isn't an obstacle to self-actualization, however. In fact, it may have afforded you the familiarity with what it means to reflect, meditate, and listen for the purpose of learning a deeper truth about yourself. Note though, that religion can sometimes be a deterrent to shadow-discovery, when we use Holy scriptures and ancient texts as excuses for our habitual way of being that is limited and destructive.

For those who've spent their lives culturally steeped in a religion, you may be wondering why that's not enough for fixing your relationship problems. Why can't I pray harder to get my relationship to a happy place? Why doesn't God just send me the perfect mate? Why can't I meditate my way to a solution? I'm not claiming that prayer, meditation, and divine intervention don't have their place in the grand scheme of our lives. But often, the practice of religion causes us to repeat the same thought patterns and traditions to the point that we become blind to the personal power we each hold to transform our relationships. This book intends to help you think outside of religious tradition.

This book is not about how religion, gender, sexual orientation, or age impacts relationships. This book is about discovering how someone's personal shadow affects their relationship outside of some of the common factors that are at first glance easier to blame.

Falling in Love is Transitory

Around two decades ago, I was obsessed with researching the notion of "falling in" love. It was mostly motivated by a personal mission to discover why so many people reportedly "fall in" love and then end up "falling out" of love. While I was very keen on the notion of falling in love with someone, I experienced much dread over the idea that the love wouldn't last. My intent was to

discover if falling in love was a worthy aim. The research wasn't particularly scientific but included a set of questions that inquired about how people fell in love, what they considered love to be, at what precise moment they fell out of love and whether the subjects believed love is a choice.

The qualitative research eventually got lost in the land of AOL message boards and an expired email account, but I've never forgotten what I discovered.

Longevity is a choice. If two people mutually decide to stick it out once they've fallen out of love, there's a good chance their "love" can last a lifetime. So, I decided that since love eventually turns into a choice anyway, I'd choose my partner based on logic upfront, not as a result of falling into some deep abyss of unpredictable emotions. Indeed, I chose a partner based on logic with the hopes of streamlining the process of courtship. I sought to eliminate any sad surprises that may have come because of being "high" on love only to eventually come crashing down with disillusionment. "Choosing" to love would put me in a position of controlling the outcome of my relationship long-term, I thought.

Maybe you magically fell in love with someone but have recently fallen out of love with the idea of "till death do us part." Perhaps you approach relationships like I did, with a logical mindset wherein your potential mate must fit certain criteria before you'll even open your heart to the idea of love. Whether your relationship begins as a Shakespearean drama or a research project, it's inevitable that you'll eventually need a tool to help you face not only your own shadow but the shadow of your partner.

Falling in love and **choosing** to love are both transitory states that don't promise a fairy tale ending. Sometimes we need an extra boost to help us take our next step until we can demystify our dysfunction. It's incredibly freeing to accept the part of ourselves that scares us the most in our relationships. You'll never forget that defining moment when you look in the mirror and see yourself for who you really are, not based on the condition of your relationship, but based on the condition of your heart—the core of who you're meant to become as the best possible version of you. Discovering your Shadow is more than a wing and a prayer. It's the opportunity to take that long hard look at yourself under the florescent lighting you might typically avoid.

Life should not be a series of first-dates

There are two facts that can bring us comfort as we go through this process of self-actualization and shadow discovery. Number one. It's perfectly normal that you want to be in a happy and healthy relationship. Number Two. We are all human. Despite our fascination with super action figures, we're all an emotionally vulnerable person beneath the costume. No matter how many best feet we put forward, there is a raw aspect of our being that longs for acceptance. We enjoy when others see us as heroes. But there's so much more joy when we own our Shadow and accept that part of ourselves we tend to hide on the first date. Life should not be a series of first dates. Life should be an exciting journey of authenticity that doesn't begin and end with "I do."

Authenticity requires a degree of vulnerability that is uncomfortable for most. The work that I'm asking you to do in the following chapters isn't a walk in the park. But if you're able to let your

guard down, you'll discover the freedom of realizing "the guard" was simply a false sense of security. It can be scary to lose something we believe protects us. It can be even scarier to realize we don't wear the chains we once believed held us back. Freedom is a responsibility all on its own. Whether you're at the beginning of your journey and still hope for love as a part of stable relationship or you're in a long-term relationship that has gone stale, there's hope for you to use Shadow Discovery as a means to approach relationships with both passion and practicality.

In this chapter we've talked about why it can be so hard to prioritize self-actualization, how our loss of innocence affects our success in relationships, why and how we begin to look for love, breaking out of relationship prison, and why religion can be an obstacle to discovering our Shadow. Finally, I provided a reminder that we must open our heart to love, while approaching relationships pragmatically, with the goal of continuing to live in love. Not in contrast to what you already know – love is complicated.

As a wrap-up, I want to remind you that timing is everything and nothing at all. You can probably look back on your past and recall moments when "the stars didn't align" for a relationship. If you've read up to this point and feel a bit frustrated because you know your partner or partner-to-be isn't interested in going deeper, it's o.k. There is nothing that should ever stop you from realizing your fullest potential. Not an unwilling spouse. Not a rebellious child. Not a domineering boss. Not a passive partner. You and only you are responsible for your timeline of self-actualization. There will always be plenty of excuses to start living healthy another day. There will always be friends and family who tell us we're barking up the wrong tree or that it's not a good time to rock the boat. There's never a better time to rock the boat than now. In the next chapter I'll explain some of the reasons we choose to put self-actualization on hold for a better time. I'll explain the irony of choosing illusions of safety in the context of waiting for the "perfect moment" to improve our relationships. Remember, no matter what, you're a hero for taking the costume off. It's time to learn our real power within so we can rescue our relationships and live at the height of our potential for love.

Timing isn't Everything

Timing not only affects the possibilities of who we're with, but it also influences who we stay with.

If we had to choose any one laughable factor when it comes to building and sustaining successful relationships, it's that unruly concept of "timing." Nothing can bring about a deep hearty belly laugh more than looking back and realizing that despite our best efforts to plan, a big chunk of our life was eaten up by the cookie monster of "fate." There's a good chance you can reflect on your past and think of at least one potential mate who would have been perfect for you had the timing been right. So, then timing is the elephant in the room that can't be ignored. We can plan all we want and execute on the most disciplined of timelines. But when it comes to involving another person, there's little we can do to control their cooperation with our suggested deadline.

So, it is with love and relationships. Maybe you started out early on in life with a slated date for construction on your picket fence to be complete but ended up with an uptown apartment working overtime, only to head home alone. It's possible you created your list of ideal character traits for a potential mate and regret you didn't write the list in pencil. Time has a way of convincing us to adjust our expectations. There's nothing more powerful than the force of time to make us reconsider our approach to partnering up.

Timing not only affects the possibilities of who we're with, but it also affects who we decide to stay with. Once we've been with someone for a while, time starts to take on a new shape and form. Suddenly, we not only have our logical explanation for where we are in a relationship based on our personalities and related dysfunctions. We also have a history together that distorts our logic in the funny mirror of love. It's like we've stepped out of high school algebra class into a university physics course.

If you've ever found yourself trying to explain why you are where you are in your current relationship and felt like a bumbling idiot, "time" could be the joker. A plus B no longer equals C. Our sense of reasoning is lost on unspeakable forces that hold us in place or abruptly eject us from reality, having lost our relationship to the fifth dimension of time and space. Recognizing "timing" as a law of nature regarding how our relationships take shape and form is a part of the maturation process that affects our sense of innocence, I referred to in the previous chapter.

While it's necessary we take a proactive approach to our relationships, we must be ready to recognize the factor of time as an impending force and abstract concept over which we do not have complete control. Fighting with time is like swimming against the current. We get tired fast. We make no progress. And eventually we realize, it's best to let the current take us back to shore. Often, we offload our disappointment in relationships onto a higher power by saying, "In God's time." In this chapter, I'll explore the paradox of making our best plans for a successful relationship and then seeing those plans fail or stall because unexpected circumstances emerge in conflict with our own timetable.

Love will never cooperate with a strict deadline.

Hallmark movies are the embodiment of this comedy of errors related to time. When you're sitting down with popcorn and soda to indulge in a romcom, it's clear to see where, when, and how each character should adjust their actions so that they don't miss out on the opportunity for love. Some of us like to watch these movies because they're a tease. We know in the end, that despite all the obstacles, each of the missed encounters, and innocent wastes of time—fate will ensure that everything works out for the best in the end. Something feels good about the tension of time fighting hard against our destiny when in the end we know for sure love will win. The problem is that outside of these Hallmark adventures, we have no way to predict our own future. We can't know for sure when the timing will work out in our favor. We can't be certain that we'll fall in love before our biological clock slows to a halt. We don't have the assurance that we'll get the opportunity to passionately enter a lifelong romance with the perfect partner.

In fact, we might be lucky if our paths cross with someone who simultaneously wants the same things we want, enough so, that we both decide it's logically worth it to get hitched. The process of self-actualization when it comes to the subject of "falling in love" is important for two reasons. First, self-actualization teaches us to be flexible and forgiving. Second, self-actualization teaches us to be vulnerable yet reasonable. Flexibility is essential when it comes to falling in love because we may go to sleep in one time zone and wake up in another. Forgiveness of ourselves and others is the gateway to peace regardless of our belief that we've missed the boat, either due to our negligence or someone's aloof reception of our advances. Vulnerability helps us get up again, dust ourselves off, and look our relationship disappointment straight in the face for another round. Our ability to remain reasonable simply means we're shooting for the moon but accept that our destiny may be a falling star.

It's o.k. to imagine ourselves as a character in the storyline of a Nicholas Sparks love story but it's even better to write our own storyline that forgives the humanity we each face, that appreciates not only the climax but also the antagonist, the inner part of ourselves that wars with the protagonist to self-sabotage our story of love. Love will not lend itself to cooperate with a strict deadline. Thus, there's nothing wrong with approaching our relationships with a plan. Namely, a plan to improve ourselves so that we're ready to accept and nurture love or a pragmatic partner when they appear.

Some have the misfortune of an introduction to love when they're on a drunken binge, out of work, fighting an addiction, or helplessly tied to a relationship on the rocks. What can you do to prepare yourself so that you're not just a stagehand in the drama of love? You can take it upon yourself to plan despite your knowledge that "timing" when it comes to falling in love is a factor over which you have little control.

Self-actualization has no finish line

Planning for future relationships involves getting to know yourself before you get to know someone else. When we approach relationships without first understanding the core of who we are, our tendency is to bend our personality to fit with someone else's. The only problem with bending steel, is that as soon as the honeymoon phase is over, and the heat is gone – we're suddenly less malleable, less willing to fit into the construct of another person's world. When we know who we are, how we react under pressure, and what our expectations are from life, we can start a relationship from a place of authenticity. Additionally, the more self-aware we are, the more likely we are to attract those who are on the same path of self-awareness.

One might think that self-awareness is a default state of being. After all, we look in the mirror every day. We hear ourselves think and know what we feel. But true self-awareness isn't observing yourself from within. Self-awareness is stepping outside yourself and viewing your thoughts, feelings, and actions as if you're your own guru, positioned to be brutally honest with yourself about what you observe. This type of self-awareness isn't accomplished by taking note of your shower thoughts or driving down the highway singing "I want to ride it, all night long." Listening closer to our thoughts and singing at the top of our lungs can be quite therapeutic, but we need an actual plan to help us to move toward optimal self-actualization.

Plans are timebound. Plans give us a set of directions and serve as mile markers for us to measure our progress. When we have a plan, we can clearly identify and avoid costly interruptions. When there is no plan, a sudden introduction of someone else into our life may seem harmless and inviting, but if we're not focused on a goal for self-improvement, we're at the mercy of another person's whims. Many people make plans to earn a greater amount of money, purchase a larger home, start a family, or travel the world. But far fewer create a plan for self-actualization. I encourage you to use the perspectives in this book to shape your foundation for moving toward greater self-actualization as you craft your individual plan. While it's true that there's no finish line when it comes to improving ourselves, we can always have a plan in place to ensure a lifetime of becoming the best that we can be. The first step in your plan of self-actualization should be learning how to articulate your core. This requires putting words to our deepest fears and being able to draw correlations between our fears and limiting behaviors.

Having a plan holds us accountable for doing what it takes to change our behavior toward desirable outcomes. But despite our best efforts to deliberately improve ourselves so that we're prepared to enter a healthy relationship, it's important to recognize that self-actualization is a very intimate journey on which travelers take their own unique path. Some take a very direct path and dive right into the deep end of self-awareness. Others take the winding road. And of course, many are given to the temptation of detours because the process of self-awareness can become so intense it's at times unbearable. So, remember that we won't all attain a healthy sense of well-being at the same time.

Everyone is on a different timetable of self-actualization

We are all on different timetables of self-actualization. It's highly unlikely that I'll pull up next to someone at the make-believe finish line of self-actualization, and suddenly realize I've just met my perfect mate. In fact, it's much more likely that two wounded individuals, one just starting their journey of self-actualization, and the other completely oblivious to their shadow—will decide to enter a relationship based on a mutual state of loneliness.

Even within an existing relationship, the chance is slim that you'll both awaken to the need for self-actualization at the same time. There's a better chance that time has had the effect of numbing you both to just how dull and miserable things have gotten. To simultaneously awaken both partners from their mediocrity-induced coma is rare.

You may remember the fable about the frog who slowly boiled alive because the water was tepid at first. The frog was unable to perceive danger because the temperature increased gradually over time. This happens in relationships. We either live at the extreme of sudden reflexes to pain, that have us jumping from boiling pot to boiling pot or we die a slow death of undetectable spikes in heat that kill our core and eventually threaten the life of our relationship.

It makes sense that if we see someone else in the pot, naively unaware of the soon-to-be last breath, we'd grab some tongs, pull them out and tell them to "Jump along my little friend. Be free." But when we are the ones in need of rescue—we don't realize the threat of our lukewarm

existence just before reaching the boiling point. We're painfully ignorant to the fact that we're dying a gradual death in frog like misery.

Self-actualization allows us to explore questions like, "Who is turning up the heat?" "Why am I staying in the pot?" "Am I responsible for rescuing myself or others?" Looking at ourselves from outside the pot, it's truly obvious just how dumb we look, bathing in a sea of eventual demise. Identifying our fears provides us a starting point for assessing what we instinctively sense isn't right. It teaches us how to detect the slow burn as a threat to living life to the fullest.

Our hope is that you don't settle for second best just because you're used to the "safe" confines of the pot, the comfort of knowing you don't have to fight for a lily pad to call your own. It's completely possible to break the habit of jumping back into a bad situation. It's entirely within our ability to improve our reflexes and avoid a toxic environment. No one wants to swim in boiling water until the intentional kick to stay alive, becomes an overnight tread of water, an eventual gurgle and last gulp that reveals our entire commonplace life in one final breath. Don't let time numb you to the possibilities of self-actualization. Don't let your partner's oblivion slow you down. Don't let your sense of loneliness force you into a relationship before you've taken the time to become acquainted with your own Shadow.

Distractions can be divine intervention

So, you've come to understand the mystical nature of "timing," you realize that falling in love won't necessarily cooperate with our plan for self-actualization, but you also know it's still important to be intentional about the time we dedicate to our individual growth. I've explained how our awakening and resulting self-actualization isn't likely to occur at the precise moment of our significant other's due to the gradual nature with which we each acclimate slowly to relationship dysfunction. Now, I'll discuss what happens when you're well on your journey of self-actualization and a dart of distraction is thrown so precisely your way, it stops you right in your tracks while you temporarily lose all sense of time.

The question is whether this dart of distraction is a magical part of your actualization journey or whether you risk trading your royalty for a role as court jester—entertaining others at the cost of losing your own crown. When we start our journey of self-actualization, positive things begin to happen. Our vibe suddenly changes, and we begin to attract similar vibes into our life. You might be shocked by the speed at which you attract others into your life once they take note of your progress toward greater self-awareness. This is good, right? What we're looking for is a fulfilling relationship, after all.

Let's look closer.

Distractions are often necessary when it comes to taking a difficult journey that's wrought with obstacles we've historically chosen to ignore. There's a spiritual concept that when we're ready to learn, a teacher will appear. It's very possible that as soon as we open ourselves to self-reflection, someone special will appear in our life as a mirror of ourselves.

Remember that true teachers won't distract us from our original intent of self-actualization. Teachers appear for a specific purpose in time. Teachers point us toward our destiny and have the same vulnerabilities as students, so it's essential we respect their divine investment in our lives and willingly say friendly goodbyes on the day of graduation. If we're to reach our full potential, we must set our eyes at the height of our own self-actualization, not the idolization of a teacher who appears but for a select time. This doesn't look like using and abusing the spiritual goodwill of someone in tune to our needs at the precise moment we need them. This looks like living in the moment and accepting some relationships as temporary intervention, not a permanent detour or distraction from our ultimate purpose.

So yes, it's highly likely that once you aim toward your fullest potential, distractions will come out of the woodwork to make us forget where we're headed. But it's also true, that some of these "distractions" are a necessary part of our growth and maturation. While we risk the chance of mistaking our teacher as the cap on our potential, there's so much to be gained from a divine appointment with someone who takes a genuine interest in our success and well-being.

Of course, there are always those hecklers we can spot from a distance who we know to immediately shut up and out of our lives as we seek greater self-actualization. Those are obvious distractions that don't threaten to lull us back into complacency. Don't lose too much time enjoying the bliss of comfort that comes from being understood, encouraged, and inspired by your spiritual teacher. Look for signs that it's time for the next leg of your journey. Gracefully enroll in a new life lesson and never lose appreciation for those healthy distractions that give us just what we need to write the following chapter.

Life stages should not be an excuse for lousy relationships

There's nothing that can disrupt and enhance our process of self-discovery like our family and friends. Depending on what life stage you find yourself in, you're more or less likely to identify with how children, relationships, and family affect your ability to follow a plan for self-actualization. Our lives can be so busy with developing a career, building a family, and taking care of aging parents, that we feel like the walls are closing in on us. We know that we're unhappy and barely surviving but our stage of life dictates that our optimal existence is one of surviving not thriving.

Our relationships tend to go into auto pilot when life circumstances won't allow us to take a good long hard look at what's really going on. In fact, many people stay in bad relationships because they don't have the time to deal with the dysfunction. They may have plans to take time for separation and reflection, but a life crisis, like the death of a parent, or the illness of a child causes them to cling to what is working in the relationship and ignore everything that's wrong.

The thought of facing a family loss or a career promotion seems daunting, at the realization you might face it alone if you decide to pause and dig the skeletons out of the relationship closet. If you're a new mother, adjusting to motherhood isn't easy. In fact, the thought of breast-feeding and self-actualization seem like a silly combination—especially if you're one prone to postpartum depression. Many times, the gurus who are peddling self-awareness appear oblivious to the

everyday struggles that keep us so buried, and the concept of “self” anything sounds like a big joke to those of us who have a “life.” In fact, many motivational leaders of our day have paid a great price, including loss of family and friends, in order to attain a greater degree of self-awareness. A paradox of sorts exists in the price we must pay for the freedom we gain through self-actualization.

There’s certainly the consideration of risk versus reward when we weigh what we’ll gain from self-actualization versus what we may potentially lose. When we come face to face with our Shadow and understand what it will take to integrate what we’ve learned about ourselves with how we interact with others in relationships—we first question whether there might be a better time. Is it worth it to chance losing the little bit of what we have to the possibilities of what could become? From experience, I can attest to the fact that Shadow exploration is one of the most vulnerable states of being which opens you to face your biggest fears, but also opens you to losing someone who may not be at the same stage of Shadow exploration as you. The disconnect can be so obvious, that others may look at you as the enemy, even though you’re simply trying to live your life to the fullest. You only want to understand yourself and others better so that your relationships become more of a blessing than a curse.

Yes, depending on what stage of life you’re in, self-actualization may seem like a distant dream. But I’m here to remind you that every single one of us is in the middle of a life stage. There is never a good time to reset the clock, to spring forward or fall back. But it’s essential not to use your life stage as an excuse for the dysfunction you experience in your relationships, or a reason to avoid relationships altogether. I’ve known individuals who have lived with their Shadow for years. They weep over loneliness and complain that they have no one. From the outside, everyone can see how their Shadow keeps them from trusting others and exercising vulnerability, as they continue to hold on tightly to an illusion of control.

But they’re never able to personally understand why they are so alone. They blame their loneliness on each of the life stages they’ve experienced: the loss of a brother, a parent, having a disease, past betrayals, or a focus on career development. But, if you try to get close to that person and become a friend, it will become your fulltime job to assuage their Shadow fears. They are so afraid of losing someone, they push everyone away before they even have a chance to be betrayed. Again, they look back on their life and reason that the time was never right, that each stage of life kept them from being happy, from loving someone else, from accepting a special person into their lives. Fact is, they were never willing to go through the vulnerable process of self-actualization to attain the relationship they desired.

Vulnerability is a timeless state of being that flowers in its own season.

This brings me to my last point about the effect of “timing” on our quest to understand ourselves and in turn approach relationships positively with the lasting impact of peace and joy. I hope it’s clear that “vulnerability” is the number one ingredient of self-actualization. Vulnerability is the activator when it comes to enjoying a life that has the pop and fizz of our favorite champagne. Without vulnerability, it’s impossible to take the journey of self-awareness. Without vulnerability, there’s no way to improve your relationship or approach new relationships successfully. Exercising

vulnerability, however, is not a linear process. In terms of a plan, with timebound goals—vulnerability is the factor that can make us feel like we’ve taken twenty steps forward and fifty steps back.

Vulnerability can punch us in the gut and set us back temporarily. We must realize that exercising vulnerability is like planting a seed. We won’t be sure that it will grow. The temptation is to lose unmentionable chunks of time obsessing over whether our vulnerability was a mistake or not. In this way, we lose time. So, we take what to us feels like a huge risk by being vulnerable. We don’t see results, we don’t get an immediate emotional reaction from someone else, our vulnerability seems to fall on deaf ears, our business plan is put in what feels like an eternal queue, we get the opposite reaction of what we expected. This makes us question our direction altogether.

Maybe we’re crazy. Maybe we were manic at the time we chose to be vulnerable. Maybe our vulnerability was perceived as a weakness. These thoughts distract us from where we’re trying to go and we lose hours, days, weeks, maybe even months or years, waiting for our vulnerability to pay off before we continue with our plan for self-actualization. We shut ourselves off from the outside world altogether and assume we’re destined to live alone, or that we’ll never experience true intimacy with our partner. We can assure you that the seeds of vulnerability you plant will bring forth fruit. You may not reap what you hope to reap in the time that you hope to reap it, but each time you exercise vulnerability, personal transformation takes place.

Don’t lose time to your insecurities. Be aware that vulnerability will become easier once you understand its power. Communicate authentically, share your fears, announce your dreams, explain your challenges, but don’t rely on others to receive your vulnerability on a rigid timetable. The universe will repay you infinitely for taking the risk of self-discovery and true connection. Don’t be discouraged when it seems you lose time each moment you “go out on a limb.” Vulnerability is a timeless state of being that flowers in its own season.

In this chapter, I’ve emphasized the concept of “timing” because I understand it’s how so many of us define success. If things don’t happen within the timeframe of our expectation, we drop the process or decide to never begin. Time is a concrete means by which we comfortably measure our progress, but it can become an obstacle to inspiration. We should neither use time as a reason to prematurely accelerate self-actualization or an excuse to live a life of sub-par relationships and unmet passions. Time is only one lens through which we evaluate our progress and it most always never accounts for “the moment.” The time is always now when it comes to self-actualization. The time is always now for improving our relationships and opening ourselves to a deep connection of love and companionship. My hope is that this book will give you a starting point for embarking on self-actualization and that I’ve provided you with a strong argument for not letting time stall the journey.

Shadow Stalking

Holding your shadow tight is the only way to dance with, rather than against the force of its power.

In the last chapter, I discussed the dynamic of time and its effect on our journey of self-actualization. In this chapter, I want to explore our human tendency to run from The Shadow. As a reminder, The Shadow is that unconscious part of ourselves that contains all our unfounded fears, irrational thoughts, and limiting beliefs. It's a pretty silly thought that we'd ever be able to separate ourselves from The Shadow, but in fact it's our default behavior—to run from those less than desirable aspects of our inner being that will always be with us. Running from our shadow is exhausting and if we're not in tune with the position of The Light, shadows play tricks with our mind. Just when we think the Shadow is behind us, it shows up right there by our side, reminding us that where there's light or the hope of a happy relationship, a shadow always appears. Hopefully, you've never been the victim of stalking. But when we run from our shadow, that's exactly what we experience—the feeling we're being stalked by an unimaginable force of darkness that appears at the most inopportune time to expose our vulnerabilities.

My son recently called to me from outside while he was playing and said excitedly, “Look mom, I'm dancing with my shadow!” What we refer to as “Shadow Integration” is perfectly described in the innocence of my little boy's intent and observation—the possibility of dancing with one's own shadow. As long as you continue to run from those dark places in your relationships, you'll feel like the universe is against you, like you're being stalked by the grim reaper of love. But when you begin to see your shadow differently, as a willing dance partner, you'll understand that accepting and integrating your Shadow can improve and enhance your approach to relationships. You may even feel giddy as you glide across the dance floor with utmost confidence that you've fully embraced every part of yourself. Holding your shadow tight is the only way to dance with, rather than against the force of its power.

Why do we then continue to resist the acceptance of who we are? What is the effect of running away from our darkness? We run from our shadow because we fear that if we recognize our shadow and acknowledge its presence in our lives, it will overcome us and become the core of who we are. But when we run away in order to become free, our state of existence becomes captivity to fear. Our peace is lost to constant transit and we're never able to let someone else get close to us, because we can't get close to the deepest part of ourselves that longs for connection the most. How can we expect someone to embrace us fully, if we're still running from ourselves? We can't expect our loved one to stop seeing us as the enemy if deep down, we're in war with our own shadow. It's important to recognize our shadow, accept our shadow, and integrate our shadow as we enter different stages of life. In order to integrate our shadow, we must understand how our Shadow changes with time.

As our light grows, our Shadow grows

As I discussed in the previous chapter, we can plan as much as we want to, but we can't control time. Neither can we control our Shadow. We can, however, get to know our shadow and understand how it changes with time. If the light is very far from you, your shadow is small, if the light is very close to you, the shadow is very big. Your shadow changes directions every hour. Wherever the light faces, that is where your shadow faces. Your shadow is small at noon, because the sun is directly above you. Your shadow is tall in the morning and night. When you find your shadow in front of you, you know the sun will be behind you. If you find your shadow behind you, you know the sun will be in front of you. So, you see, you do not control The Shadow, The Light determines the nature of your shadow, and your shadow is predictable. It is through the natural progression of your day, your life, that The Shadow changes. If you can get into the habit of understanding the rhythm of when and how your shadow appears, at lesser or greater degrees of intensity, you'll discover timeless truths of how your shadow affects both entering and sustaining relationships. While at times, our Shadow may seem unpredictable, with careful observation, we can get to know our shadow and integrate that knowledge with how we move through life.

The first relationship between shadow and light we'd like to explore, is the fact that your shadow is smaller the further away the light is from you. In our minds, it seems the opposite would be true. For we think, often in religious terms, the better we do, the closer we are to the light of God in our lives, the smaller our shadow will become. But in fact, this isn't true at all. Moving toward the light brings us face to face with that darkest part of ourselves. Playing with our shadow can be fun, but it's when we get serious about our Shadow that we make the most progress toward integrating our dark side. Often, when we're in periods of great stress, we are suddenly overwhelmed by shadow behaviors out of what seems like nowhere. Everything gets dark instantly and the stress of current events causes us to start acting out in our relationships, feeling like we are losing control – like we're in this helpless spiral of self-destructive behavior. It's striking how as children we tend to vacillate between making fun puppet shadow figures on our wall at night to imagining the worst monsters of darkness when we're not in control of the images projected as shadows.

As adults, Shadow integration is about our ability to take an imagined figure of darkness that gives us that pit in the stomach feeling and transform it into the light-hearted finger puppets on the ceiling of our childhood bedroom. What happens in between those two realities is other-worldly. It's as if the origin of The Shadow is a result of hand to hand combat that takes place between angels of light and angels of darkness. Our perception of The Shadow at any given time is dependent upon which angel is holding the other in an arm lock. We can't escape the struggle. We can't run from the dissonance that resides within each of us. We can't hide from the reality that everything good about us is intertwined with the bad, the corridors of our mind that reflect memories either accurate or skewed by our temperamental mood. Imagine that where you've been and where you want to go are harmonized by accepting who you are and how that affects where you're going.

You can run, but you can't hide from your shadow

So, knowing we can't hide, what does shadow integration look like in terms of having quality relationships? First, we must acknowledge our Shadow. Second, we must learn the nature of our

Shadow. Third, we must stop denying the power of our Shadow. To first acknowledge your shadow, imagine your shadow as a person all on its own. Sit down with that part of yourself you hate the most and talk to it. Acknowledge its presence in the room. Don't treat your shadow like a distant relative who only stops by on their way through town. Your shadow is not a house guest. Your Shadow is more like a sister wife. Whether you like it or not, your Shadow is intimately involved with everything you do and holds the key to your brightest potential while also fighting for the kind of attention that makes you feel jealous and on the defensive.

You will begin to notice miraculous changes in your life when you commune with this part of yourself that you'd previously tried to bury with the hatchet. There are multiple ways that you can embody your shadow to see it as a tangible being in your life worthy of embrace. One way to bring your Shadow to the surface, is to type out the thoughts that are happening in your head while making an effort not to clean the thoughts up, put them in order, or have them make sense. By doing this, you'll understand that part of yourself you've been trying to suppress. You'll unearth fresh ground where you realize the fertile soil of youth still exists. Another way to embrace your Shadow is to close your eyes and visualize it in the room with you, as another person that steps outside of yourself. You can pick any relationship topic that perplexes you and see your shadow sitting there talking back to you in its own words. When you go through this exercise, don't force the shadow to say what you want to hear. Let it speak its mind. Let your Shadow be honest with you about everything.

Only after an official introduction to our Shadow, can we begin to understand how our shadow thinks and behaves. Many of us grow up with parents who we admire or despise, but we never take the time to get to know these strong influences in our lives. Why did our parents raise us with little to no affection? Why did they rule with an iron fist? Why did our mom stay in an oppressive relationship? We carry all this baggage but never actually take the time to discover our parents as human beings courting their own shadow. In the same way we ignore our parents despite their strong influence on our lives, we ignore the indomitable influence of our own shadow. The Shadow influences our life, it impacts our relationships, it drags us through the mud and weighs down our ability to reason—but we never stop long enough to introduce ourselves, share our perspective, and have a conversation about where the relationship with our Shadow is going. It may seem for some, a strange concept to think of something so abstract as a person with whom we should spend our time getting to know. What's even stranger though, is that others often notice our Shadow before we recognize it ourselves.

When everyone else can see our shadow, except us

This is most evident in relationships where we feel like we're living with two different people. My colleague in a fifty-year marriage would often joke, "Who is this man I married?" We go to bed with one person and wake up with another. The darkness is suddenly unveiled, and it potentially swallows any goodness we'd previously experienced. This unpredictability in relationships happens because it's so much easier to see someone else's shadow rather than our own. We operate under the conclusion that our unhappiness, our distractions, our dysfunction is entirely the responsibility

of our spouse's ignorance to their own Shadow. When in reality, we are completely unacquainted with our own Shadow because of the hyper-focus on getting to know the Shadow of our spouse.

If we overheard a conversation between our significant other and their friends, we might be surprised that our partner knows our Shadow so well. Perhaps they'll utter words like "jealous, possessive, overbearing, passive, manipulative, obsessive." Our ears are shocked at the fact that we're seen in such a negative light, especially when some of the same words used to describe us, are the exact same words we'd use to describe our spouse. It's not uncommon that we begin to see the shadow of our partner as its own person who we despise and even hate, and perhaps wish dead. It is, however, less common, for us to recognize our own Shadow as a part of the dysfunctional foursome.

It is one thing to become an expert on someone else's shadow, but what's most instrumental in our journey toward self-actualization and improving our relationships, is to be able to recognize our own Shadow and its effect on our ability to live a life of peace, joy, and love. Anytime, you find yourself obsessing over your partner's faults, ask yourself what part you play in the misery you blame on their shadow. If your partner is controlling, consider how you are enabling their shadow tendency to control. If your partner is passive, consider how you're enabling their shadow tendency toward passivity by never taking their opinion seriously.

Yes, it is empowering to realize that many of your relationship problems are due to your partner's shadow, but it's even more liberating to realize that YOU have the power to change the dynamic in your relationship by solely taking responsibility to get to know YOUR shadow and learning to dance with your own shadow swiftly against the fear of rejection, failure, or betrayal. When you ignore your own shadow, to focus on someone else's, you give them power over your life. You make the assumption that until they change, you are powerless to be happy in the relationship. You sign a pact that puts all the responsibility on their reaction to you, rather than your actions toward yourself. It's extremely unfulfilling to live a life trying to understand why someone is mistreating you, why your spouse doesn't understand you, why you're alone in your ambitions. It's absolutely empowering to accept the responsibility for your own role in the discontented state with which you manage your relationship. Hiding from your shadow will not make it go away. In fact, the more we ignore the truth about ourselves, the more dangerous we become to others around us.

From danger, to diligence

Denial is the root of all dysfunction. In order for us to escape the danger zone of shadow denial, we first acknowledged our Shadow's existence. We took the focus off trying to understand everyone else's dysfunction and started to look within, so that we could then get to know the nature of our own shadow. We've been aware all along that something isn't right in our search for our love, that there are always knots in our stomach at the thoughts of tying the knot. We've admitted that letting our shadow off the hook as an integral part of our well-being, is a sure disaster when it comes to physical and mental health. It's a well-known fact in the medical community, that we can experience devastating physical symptoms as a result of psychological problems rooted in

our unwillingness to accept the Truth about ourselves. We'd like to point out that, the Truth that we bury, will never die on its own. It will always take our souls and eventually our health with it.

Shadow integration is quite literally about saving our lives. You know the idiom about saving yourself first before you can save others. When you fly in a plane, you're instructed to give yourself oxygen first. Shadow integration is about putting on your own life mask before attempting to save someone else from their darkness. This process, moving from personal danger into a safe place where you're free to experience fulfilling relationships and exciting possibilities for your future, isn't a haphazard process of self-discovery on a weekend ecstasy retreat. It's a process that requires utmost diligence, a commitment to living life rather than letting life happen to you. What often happens upon someone's introduction to Shadow Discovery is that they get excited because it's easy to recognize how their relationship problems align to specific shadow dynamics. This is their first formal introduction to their own Shadow. It's the first realization that their partner or future mate has a shadow of their own that might stand between the ultimate development of a happy and healthy relationship.

The problem is that Shadow introduction isn't enough. Just like with any introduction to a potential mate, we must make a commitment to understanding the nature of our Shadow. If we're serious about living life to the fullest, we must be wholeheartedly committed to the truth about the nature of our shadow. We must stand vigil day in and day out, observing the patterns of our relationship and the effect of our Shadow on our love life. We can't pop open the knowledge of our Shadow like a Lays bag of potato chips and sit lazily on the couch focused solely on our favorite Netflix series while we blindly reach into our inner self and let the crumbs fall where they may. Nor should we concentrate so much on our own Shadow that we're unable to acknowledge the effect of someone else's darkness in our own lives. So, while it's important to deliberately get to know the nature of our own shadow so that we can move out of the danger zone, it's also important that we formally introduce our Shadow to the shadow of our mate or potential mate, in order to move toward a greater level of intimacy and shadow integration as a couple.

Meeting your partner's shadow

I discussed a few exercises to get to know your own shadow. Now, let's take a few moments to explore how you can move from a position of constantly being caught off guard by the shadow of others, to a place of familiarization and predictability. While it's essential that you first get to know your own Shadow, it's also important that you introduce your Shadow to the Shadow of your partner or partner to be. For this introduction, you can follow exercises similar to the ones mentioned previously. Except this time, you'll offer a chair to your shadow, your partner's shadow, and then you'll take a seat as an observer of how both Shadows interact. This exercise doesn't require the cooperation of your spouse. Close your eyes and try to imagine how each shadow treats the other, things they may want to say to each other as if there is no worry of retribution or negative impact to the relationship. Perhaps your Shadow may tell your spouse's Shadow that they're only concerned about their own best interest and maintaining control at all costs. It could be that your spouse's Shadow despises the way your shadow micromanages their life, down the

point of explicitly requiring a specific brand of brandy or wine. It could be that your shadow will beg your partner's shadow to release you from their jealous grip of paranoia.

You should remember that Shadow introductions are a mutual admittance of the dysfunction we each bring to our relationship, without the need for our partner's participation in the exercise. It is completely possible for you to formally meet your partner's shadow without your partner's permission. After all, you've been living under the same roof with your Partner's Shadow as the unwelcome third wheel for long enough to nurture a resentment that keeps you from seeing your spouse as separate from their shadow. You've long forgotten the reason you chose your partner and are quite vigilant about keeping a tally of the "third party" shadow offenses.

As difficult as it is to acknowledge our own Shadow, it's even more difficult to understand the nature of our partner's shadow, because in some way, this acknowledgement certifies our partner's humanity rather than insanity. This tends to make us feel like we're letting them off the hook. Instead, what happens when we have a deliberate conversation with our partner's shadow, is that we're taking responsibility for releasing our pent-up fears and emotions out into the open. We're taking the first step toward habitually living the truth rather than a lie that clouds our existence. We're accepting the complexity of living in love by watching the drama of our Shadows unfold.

What happens when we fail to get to know and understand our Shadow and the Shadow of our partner, is that we experience an overall feeling that we'll soon betray ourselves or be betrayed. When we don't embrace our humanity and instead suppress any evidence of who we may become given a full-fledged ballroom dance with our Shadow, our days are marked with guilt—not necessarily guilt for what we've already done, but guilt for everything we fear we may become.

When we release the guilt of bad things to come, we can accept the possibility of all good things coming our way.

As if guilt for our past "sins" is not enough, shadow guilt is a complete and utter waste of time, because it serves no purpose other than to infuse fear for what may happen given our eventual tumble into the abyss of darkness. Shadow guilt creates a thin layer of dust that dulls the luster of how our lives might shine, if we'd only fully accept the reality that our feelings don't make us bad, nor do our steps toward living a fuller life. As long as we're mesmerized by the lure of a guilt-ridden conscience, we'll never reach our full potential—whether as an individual or in the actualization of our most important relationships.

There's no way to live authentically if we pretend our Shadow doesn't exist, lock it in the closet, and throw away the lock and key. In fact, the key to living authentically, is to introduce our Shadow as a part of ourselves that we've accepted, rather than treating it as a skeleton in our closet destined to destroy any relationship with loving potential. What if, in fact, our shadow has the potential to lead the way into our most meaningful relationship yet. What if, our final decision to accept ourselves completely as who we are, opens the door to a love that is capable of accepting the entirety of who we are—simply because we were willing to expose what we've always hidden until now.

When we release the guilt of bad things to come, we can accept the possibility of all good things coming our way. There is tremendous potential in identifying our Shadow, getting to know the nature of our Shadow, but finally, in realizing the power of accepting our shadow. Accepting our shadow begins with the process of visualizing its effect on our lives, making conversation about its reason for being uncooperative when it comes to our goals and ambitions, and then releasing our shadow from the shroud of secrecy we've carefully built over the years. Not only should we accept our shadow, but we should wear it with pride.

Unrealized shame is a sure ticket to a disappointing show that depicts our life as miserable

Wearing our shadow with pride is not the same as wearing our scars with pride. Scars are evidence of what has already gone wrong in our lives. Wearing our scars with pride says, "Look at what I've survived." Wearing our shadows with pride says, "I accept what I'm capable of becoming." There's a saying, "It's better to ask for forgiveness, rather than permission." When it comes to our Shadow, it's better to ***enter the cave of our darkest fears and come out with the treasure that we seek*** ~ ***J. Campbell***, rather than constantly ask for permission to be ourselves. No one can forgive us for our shortcomings, if we don't own our potential to make mistakes along the journey of becoming the best that we can be. Unrealized shame is a sure ticket to a disappointing show that depicts our life as miserable, not because of the mistakes we made, but because of the mistakes we ran from making.

In this chapter, I provided a reminder of what our shadow is, how it changes with time, and what it means to acknowledge our shadow, get to know our shadow's nature, and realize the full power of our shadow. I admit that the process of Shadow Discovery isn't linear. There will be some days when we are buried deep in shadow guilt, ignoring our partner's shadow, and too tired to step into the light by accepting the totality of who we are. There will be other days when we feel like we're walking the mountaintop because we've had an epiphany of understanding about why we are the way we are, and why our partner's shadow shows up when it does. And every day in-between will be some variation of the elation we feel when we're closest to love and the deflation we feel when our shadow attempts to steal love away.

Sometimes the journey of self-actualization can make us a victim of trying too hard, forgetting to enjoy the small victories, and simply falling prey to analysis paralysis. But, while it's common to feel like a victim at times along the journey of self-discovery, it's possible to break out of the victim mindset that is the default of never getting to know our shadow at all. The next chapter explores the victim mentality. I'll look at practical ways to recognize this toxic mindset and help you discover ways to transition from feeling like a victim to living as a victor.

We're All Victims

Self-pity is the fuel that keeps us driving down memory lane with a broken air conditioner and windows rolled up.

At the core of a victim mindset is self-pity. What one of us hasn't spent a considerable amount of time in self-pity? What one of us doesn't have a very good reason to feel sorry for ourselves? There's not a single person on this planet who doesn't have a heartbreaking story to tell about how someone did them wrong, how they were abused, neglected, or abandoned. Of course, some of us have experienced more "defining" life moments than others, but no one is absent the scars that living brings. Self-pity is the fuel that keeps us driving down memory lane with a broken air conditioner and windows rolled up. It's a stifling existence to stubbornly ignore what's broken and refuse to roll down the windows for fresh air. Those with a victim mindset would rather die than get the immediate relief that's available to them, should they accept that there are intermediary steps between their broken state and an ideal destination.

A friend who'd experienced an excruciating divorce due to his wife's infidelity, explained how he had to hit rock bottom before he finally realized he wasn't a victim. The feeling that his wife did this to him--left him for another man, caused him to lose a significant amount of time wallowing in self-pity. Not only was his mental health affected, but his physical health deteriorated to the point of a burst appendix. Most of us have experienced the phenomenon of psychosomatic illness where whatever we're suffering on an emotional level starts to express itself by wreaking havoc on our health. There is nothing more detrimental to our mental and physical health than having a victim mindset. Victimization is no respecter of persons. Anyone can come down with a victim mindset that breeds in the gunk of self-pity.

No one is immune to falling into this deep hole of what seems like no return. It's likely that at least one point in your life, you've spent a good portion of your time pointing your finger at someone else as the source of all your problems. Hopefully, you've grown to understand that it doesn't matter who is righteous and who is not. Living life as a victim is like living at the bottom of the food chain. If you choose to remain in victim status, the most that will come of your life is graduating a level or two in the food chain to victimize someone else. You'll continue feeling sorry for yourself. Once you realize the person who hurt you will never pay you back for how they've hurt you, you'll consciously or sub-consciously turn around and hurt someone else. The sad reality is that you'll still feel like the victim. Yet you will have created another victim. This happens frequently in relationships. We convince ourselves that our partner cheated because they are simply a bad person. We are the "good guy." We are the victim, and they are the villain. There's a good chance we'll move on to another relationship where we'll punish our new partner by controlling them, being suspicious, and second guessing their every move. Yet what often happens at this juncture, is that the original "victim" ends up cheating on their new partner. Their revenge is a result of a victim mindset gone wild.

Breaking out of the victim mindset is essential to survival and foundational to thriving

The victim mindset is perfect for living a status quo life. Believing we are right and everyone else is wrong comes easy. We don't have to work to cultivate a victim mindset. It's right there for the taking. Because like we mentioned, everyone has something to look back on and regret as a result of someone else's actions toward them. While we are all prone to living with a victim mindset, there are some of us who've been subjected to very difficult situations that include abuse and

outright evil, perhaps at an age where we weren't even fully mentally developed. In these cases, overcoming the victim mentality may prove a bigger challenge. But I'd like to point out that this isn't necessarily the case. Often, the harder our trial, the greater degree to which we're victimized, the harder we'll push to survive. And for anyone who's ever been the victim of abuse, they'll agree that breaking out of the victim mindset is essential to survival and foundational to thriving.

In relationships, the victim mindset significantly narrows down our pool of potential partners, because we begin to see others as victimizers rather than loving partners-to-be. Lack of trust is an unfortunate result of being victimized and it's an uphill battle to realize that broken trust was never our fault. Broken trust doesn't mean that we can no longer trust ourselves to trust someone else. Broken trust is simply a reality of living. Someone breaks our trust when they don't meet up to either a spoken or an unspoken agreement. The worst internalization of this broken trust is to believe that we were stupid to put our faith in someone else. Not only do we place the blame on someone who victimizes us, but we place the blame on ourselves for being blind to our victimizer's intent, whether pre-meditated or not.

There are a few different options for how we can approach relationships. One, we can trust others by default. Two, we can distrust others by default. Or, we can trust that human nature by default, will disappoint us, either by our own actions or the actions of someone else. The third option involves a broader view of humanity that approaches relationships, not with outright trust or distrust, but with the wisdom that what we gain from a relationship is not another person's perfection but their imperfect companionship. The victim mindset whispers to us that we are being taken advantage of, that our partner is planning things behind our back, that our spouse isn't considering us in the grand scheme of things, that we're not the center of our significant other's world.

Breaking out of the victim mindset does not mean ignoring how someone's hurt you or accepting wrong actions as right. But breaking out of the victim mindset maintains a position of taking responsibility for your own happiness not dependent on the choices someone else makes. As long as you see yourself as a victim because your relationship isn't going like you want it to go, you'll forever be in a downward spiral that's only reversible by completely accepting that what you've gained in a partner is not an emotionless robot who follows your commands, but a human who has their own definition of happiness privately contained within the halls of their heart that is just as fragile as yours.

The thin line between victim and victor

So, how do we walk this thin line between victim and victor? No one is evolved to the point of being able to turn off the faucet of self-pity once and for all. At times, it can feel like we're constantly on the tightrope of second-guessing our partner's motives, over-planning to protect ourselves from getting hurt, and hurting others before they hurt us first. Some days we go to bed victorious but wake up feeling like a victim all over again. It is extremely difficult for our body to forget the emotional response to the first moment we learn a loved one can't be trusted. Our mind might be telling us that we need to move on in order to accomplish the goals we've set for our life

and to live in peace, but one memory of a betrayal can bring back the nauseating moment of realization that someone who was supposed to protect us, decided to get what they wanted regardless of how it might hurt us.

The peculiar nature of the victim mindset is that both victim and victimizer see themselves as a victim. Even the most just of judges in court will have a difficult time deciding who in a relationship is the perpetrator of “abuse.” The sad fact is, that until one person is ready to take responsibility for their victim status, no one will emerge the victor. Can you think of times in your life where you felt like the victim? What happened? What were the circumstances leading up to the moment you felt betrayed by the way someone treated you? Whether you could have prevented the situation or not, it’s time to fight hard for your new and improved status as victor. Unfortunately, what happens often, is that a victim will put all their energy into revenge rather than recovery. Seeking revenge doesn’t necessarily mean that you want to be the one to personally hurt your victimizer, but you spend a lot of time fantasizing about your victimizer’s demise. You imagine them hurting like they hurt you. You think the scales will finally be balanced if they could just understand how miserable you felt when you were in pain because of the action they took toward you.

This visualization causes your wounds to fester. Your mind is not a pretty sight, when the thoughts of revenge consume your days and cause sleepless nights. It’s difficult to let go of your obsession with setting the record straight, because you view forgiveness as weakness. You believe that letting go of your fear that it might happen again is a foolish step toward walking into the exact same trap as before. But what will be different next time, as the victor, is not that no one will ever try to take advantage of you again, but that you’re ready to recognize and admit to yourself, at the first sign something is wrong. You will stand up for yourself when another person crosses a boundary you’ve put in place. You will be clear about what is and is not acceptable to you in a potential partner. You will clearly communicate your feelings of disappointment and disillusionment with a spouse who is less than truthful, rather than sugar-coating your response.

Religion is no excuse for a victim mindset

While personality differences are ripe with potential for cultivating a victim mindset, I’d like to remind you that there are other reasons we are more comfortable as victims rather than victors. Sometimes our religion fosters a victim mindset. Many religions teach principles such as humility, sacrifice, heroism, and deprivation. We often translate these principles into an umbrella victim status. We exchange our backbone for a golden crown, enlightenment, or a higher caste. Something about “turning the other cheek” is easier than discovering what’s really happening in our relationships.

Our excuse for not improving our relationships is that we’re making a sacrifice for the greater good of longevity. But we’re really using our religion as a disguise for our inability to face the truth. We also accept our victim status based on our upbringing. We compare our current relationship dysfunction to the relationships we witnessed growing up and determine that it’s too painful to face our relationship shadows because it not only causes us to admit we personally have much to

transform, but it also forces us to reconcile what we intuitively knew was wrong with the relationships of our parents.

As emphasized earlier, religion and spirituality can be powerful forces in helping us improve our relationships, but we also run the risk of using scriptures and familiar maxims to excuse the relationship dysfunctions that leave us stuck in victim purgatory.

Be ready to follow through with actions that show your partner you're ready to stop playing the role of victim.

The responsibility of a victim is to admit their feelings and report their victim status. There is no way to move from victim to victor if you are afraid to admit that you've been living as a victim. Not only must you admit what you feel and why you feel that way, but you must confess this to someone else. It's not so important that you confront the person who you feel is victimizing you, until you understand the steps you must take away from this role you play as victim. In this context of victimization, we are referring to adults who are caught up in the victim cycle.

You will never stop feeling like a victim, if you can't clearly express what is making you feel that way. Further, you cannot hold a partner responsible for the way they treat you, if you have not clearly expressed the way their actions make you feel. As I illustrated earlier, it's quite possible that your partner feels like a victim too. So, without your proactive approach to getting your feelings out in the open, it's likely you'll both continue to grow bitter roots of dissension until one of you secretly plans your exit. Don't be surprised if the initial airing of your concerns is met with spite because you dared to bring up how you feel first. Do not dismiss your partner's feelings, but don't let their defensiveness derail you from speaking what's on your mind.

It's only by having this difficult conversation that you'll be able to move past your victim mindset. Don't think that if your partner is unable to "hear you out" that your efforts have failed. Be ready to follow through with actions that show your partner you're ready to stop playing the role of victim. It's one thing to tell them how you feel, it's another thing to demonstrate how you're ready to take responsibility for your own happiness and well-being. Once you convince your partner you're serious about living like a victor, one of two things will happen. They will decide to stay and adjust their shadow behavior accordingly, or they will decide your relationship isn't worth the effort and leave for greener pastures. Either outcome is your opportunity to live a life that isn't built on flimsy excuses for enabling dysfunctional behavior.

As a recap, I've discussed how we're all victims. I've explained the victim mindset and explored the possibility of moving from victim to victor. Now I'd like to share a personal story about how I discovered the concept of Shadow and explain why I decided to write this primer for you. Finally, I'll introduce a personality framework designed by Dr. Will Sparks, a leadership personality expert, that provides specific insights about how to identify your personal shadow. The final chapter will draw correlations between personality types and relationship dynamics. My hope is that you'll identify with the relationship dynamics I describe and discover how to move forward with a new awareness that empowers you to face your shadow, rather than run from it.

Meeting My Shadow

I was introduced to Dr. Sparks from a distance at Queens University during an orientation program for newly enrolled MBA students. As a part of our enrollment in the program, each student took the Actualized Leadership Assessment beforehand and opened our sealed results as a cohort on the day of our induction. Dr. Sparks then walked us through our leadership personality profile. He explained the concepts of self-actualization, personal shadows, victim mindset, and shadow integration—each elements of psychological research.

It was love at first sight. My long-buried passion had finally awakened. I had no idea the full impact Dr. Sparks' framework, two decades in the making, would have on my future. Upon meeting him, my mind was taken back to a high school love I lost because my mother insisted I enroll in typing instead of psychology as my elective. Mysteries of the heart were put on hold and I learned how to type one hundred words-per-minute rather than groom an innocent infatuation with Freud and Jung. The typing class turned out to be helpful in my writing endeavors. I learned to key at least half the speed my mind could fly. Meanwhile, I temporarily lost what may have been my first true love—study of human motivation.

Fast-forward twenty years, one tragic love story behind me, smack dab in the center of a perfect storm. My marriage suffered because of festering insecurities we each held as a part of our unreconciled shadow behaviors. The culmination of this recipe for disaster was my insistence on enrolling in a master's degree program. As I sat in the MBA orientation, feeling a bit sick about whether I'd get the cold shoulder when I got back home, Dr. Sparks stood in the front of the room and explained his own experience of losing a past relationship to his shadow. The demise of his relationship had not been a result of temptation or spiritual forces beyond his control. Instead, he showed us how his shadow negatively impacted his marriage and demonstrated how we each have unique leadership shadows that provide us an unequalled opportunity to actualize our fullest potential.

Reading between the lines of Dr. Spark's relationship lost to the phenomenon of co-dependency, I picked up on remnants of a love story I recognized as my own. In contrast to Dr. Spark's ability to own his story and craft it in a way that captured the attention of his audience, I had buried my broken love story as if hiding a dead body in the deep Colorado woods. I didn't even realize I was the one in the coffin, six feet under layers of jealousy, misunderstanding, imbalance, power struggles, victim tendencies, and blame. My relationship shadows still stalked me, even though I was a grown woman who should know better. The Actualized Leadership Profile provided an artful explanation as to why I continued to run rather than face my darkness. I was afraid more pain awaited me on the other side of discovery.

But what really grabbed my attention about Dr. Spark's love story, and the Actualized Leadership Framework, was that it didn't reject or sidestep Christianity, the religion with which I identified the most. As an educated man with an intellectual gait, Dr. Sparks paced the conference room hands together, index fingers pointing upward. I tried to discreetly gauge the reaction of others out of my

peripheral view, when he openly admitted his upbringing as a southern Baptist. Admittedly, at that time, I'd already spent a few years in Corporate America, the breeding ground for political correctness, so religious references made me nervous. He even included some Biblical scriptures in the PowerPoint presentation on actualized leadership. "Wait a minute," I sarcastically mused. "How could someone simultaneously believe in God and Freud?"

I've always been attracted to the concept of an integrated approach to self-actualization, one that considers science and spirituality. But before this fateful day, naively, I'd never personally met a Christian who quoted Jung and Jesus in the same breath. I'd only encountered Christian counselors who tread very lightly on the waters of analyzing human behavior outside the context of scripture alone.

While it's true I once lived a somewhat sheltered life as a pastor's daughter, I was no stranger to the pain of relationship struggles that made me want to give up on life rather than face my own demons. I've prayed myself out of some suicidal strongholds in relationships. But I knew deep down that prayer wasn't enough. I was tired of being unhappy. I was sick of feeling like a victim hoodwinked into relationships with people who seemed to charade as angels. Halos by day, and pitchforks by night, there had to be a deeper reason for this toxic relationship pattern I experienced as a helpless actor who had no say in the final screenplay. There had to be something I could do, short of completely switching out partners, to assume control of my life and relationships.

The first course of the MBA program was a class that Dr. Sparks taught on Leadership Development. This class was an opportunity for us to explore our leadership personality. Every week, we dug a bit deeper and our goal was to spend time reflecting on our shadow while identifying ways we could improve our leadership through the process of self-actualization. Since then, I've excelled professionally and expanded my entrepreneurial reach by applying much of what I learned in that class. I learned how to step outside my ego so that I could process negative leadership behaviors as the individual responsibility of each leader who was operating in a place of stress. I stopped feeling like a victim of antagonistic relationships in the workplace. I no longer felt responsible for everyone else's reaction to life. This was a welcome reprieve from the way I'd been operating among colleagues who seemed just as oblivious to their shadow as I had been.

It was easier to methodically approach upgrades to my career by exercising more vulnerability in the workplace, being aware of my shadow, and more clearly communicating according to my newfound knowledge about what motivated me. It was not, however, as easy to apply what I'd learned where it was needed most—in my personal life where I still suffered debilitating fear and anxiety because of relationship shadows. Perhaps I felt there was more at stake when it came to facing relationship fears, given the potential outcome of ending up alone. Losing a paycheck is one thing. Living alone is quite another. I'd tackle one territory at a time, I rationalized. Let's not upset the applecart at both work and home. Fortunately, fate taught me that self-actualization isn't an exercise of compartmentalization. My spiritual side intuitively knows that if I seek, I'll find. You can't look for ways to become a better leader without finding the root of your deficiencies which span not just your career relationships but also your personal relationships. It wouldn't be enough

or entirely possible for me to reach my full potential at work without entering the cave of my fears at home.

Thankfully, Dr. Sparks introduction of the Shadow concept, and his related personality framework, provided me with a tool for exploring a new level of honesty with myself and others. I didn't just want success in my career and business. I prayed for love, joy and peace to emanate from within my family. I wanted my marriage relationship to be a fortress, not a landmine. I dreamed of harmonious interactions between two grown adults who authentically communicate from a place of self-awareness with the utmost mutual respect. Now, it finally seemed possible. So, I started walking toward the darkness in hopes of emerging on the other side enlightened.

Something miraculous happens when we take the first step. Exploring my Shadow didn't require that I abandon my faith, in fact, it expanded my faith and tested my religious beliefs. I thank God for introducing me to Dr. Sparks and his research through the MBA program at Queens University. I knew that it was now up to me to put in the work of facing my fears to cultivate a heart fertile for love in its due season. I'd have to stop being the victim of my Shadow if I wanted to improve my relationships. I'd have to face the dark corners of my mind and soul. This book is a result of the journey I took to face my Shadow head-on. Truth is, I'm still on that journey and this book is an invitation for you to accompany me on the lifelong pursuit of greater love, joy, and peace.

Victim Behaviors

Now, let's revisit the victim mindset and explore how each personality type behaves as the victim. You can take a short-version personality test at <http://alpfree.com> as a reference point for identifying your shadow. This will be the first step for putting into practice everything the book has covered up to this point.

Have you ever felt like the victim of love? Each personality type feels like a victim for different reasons. Each relationship pairing experiences the dynamic of victimization differently. Therefore, different methods for overcoming the victim mindset apply depending on your personality style.

As a reminder, the three personality styles are: Affirmer, Achiever, and Asserter. Affirmers have a high need for affiliation, which means they are naturally driven to do whatever it takes to maintain harmony in relationships. For this reason, affirmers frequently feel like the doormat in their relationships. They truly believe deep down that if it weren't for all the sacrifices they made to keep their partner happy, their partner would have already abandoned the relationship. They often have thoughts like, "Doesn't she know what I've done for her?" "Why can't he understand how tired I am of bending over backward to make him happy?"

An achiever has a high need for, you guessed it, achievement. They often feel like a victim because they believe they're the only one bringing order to the relationship. They become resentful of the fact that their partner isn't paying attention to the details and have thoughts like, "He's taking me

for granted.” “If I just stopped doing everything and planning our life to the T, maybe she’d miss me then.” Achievers believe the family unit would fail if they let go of the daily details of living.

An asserter is motivated by power. It’s easy to view power hungry individuals as natural victimizers. But believe it or not, asserters also fall prey to feeling like victims themselves. They can grow tired of being the one “in charge” in relationships and see their partners as obstacles who stand in the way of reaching their vision because of their partner’s indecisiveness or need for perfection. Asserters frequently have thoughts like, “If my partner was capable of making a decision, I wouldn’t have the weight of the world on my shoulders.” “If I had a stronger partner who shared my vision, I could have reached success much quicker.”

As you can see, each person in the relationship has their own valid reasons for feeling like a victim of their partner’s shadow. In most cases, it’s much easier to see ourselves as the victim of our spouse’s shadow rather than remembering how we benefit from the flip side of their personality coin. It’s so easy to operate in our default posture as an affirmer, achiever, or asserter and get along perfectly with our mate until we’re suddenly in the middle of a stressful storm. Our partner quickly becomes the villain who is out to get us with their darker habits of emotional neediness, micromanagement, or manipulation.

The problem is that as long as we view ourselves as the victim, we’re unable to see how we’re enabling our partner to “victimize” us. When things get tough, both partners easily return to patterns of co-dependence that create the perfect storm of victimization. The good news is that only one partner need realize what’s taking place and adjust their behavior to put a halt to the unending cycle of enablement. Yes, it’s best if both partners are working toward the awareness of how fixing their own dysfunction can improve the relationship ten-fold. But, it’s a great start for one partner to realize where they go under moments of stress to counteract the undertow of self-pity.

How each personality enables a victim mindset

Here are a few examples of how each personality style can stop enabling the shadow of their partner. For an affirmer, they need to be clear with an achiever that while they enjoy “helping” out, they are not a slave to the achiever’s to-do list. While it’s easy for an affirmer to initially agree to everything that the achiever has set out to accomplish, they can quickly devolve to feeling like the achiever is only concerned with what the affirmer can do for them toward their latest goal rather than appreciating the affirmer’s companionship. In this case, for the affirmer to resist falling into the victim mindset, they must be clear with the achiever about their own ambitions, which may involve spending quality time together on the weekend rather than chasing a to-do list. In the case of an affirmer who is paired with an asserter, the possibility for an affirmer to feel like a victim is high. For the affirmer to avoid feeling like a victim of the asserter’s vision, he or she must clearly communicate their need for time together that isn’t focused on brainstorming or strategic ideating. Otherwise, the affirmer will begin to feel like they are simply a disposable cheerleader for the asserter who is only concerned with reaching their own goals.

For an achiever who is paired with an affirmer, they can explain that their extra attention to performance at work has nothing to do with an office romance, but everything to do with their need to achieve. They can be candid about their intention to gain a career promotion while also reassuring the affirmer that they value their support, rather than becoming critical with the affirmer about their own lack of ambition. An achiever/asserter pair often experiences the “victim” mindset because they always feel they’re competing rather than partnering with their spouse. In this case, both achiever and asserter must set clear boundaries around their personal and professional goals, else each person will end up feeling like they helped their partner win without their partner’s acknowledgement of mutual contribution. In this case, it’s best to get it in writing so that neither partner falls victim to hoping “love” will win in the end. For an asserter who is paired with an affirmer, it’s essential to give their partner the time and space to express their desires without prematurely interfering because the affirmer isn’t quick enough to make decisions. Often, the asserter feels like they must rescue the affirmer from their indecisiveness because they believe the affirmer can’t handle disappointment. In turn, the asserter ends up feeling like the victim because they’re always there to take the blame for a decision gone wrong.

As we’ve illustrated, no one personality is immune to adopting a victim mindset. We each have our own reason for feeling like a victim in our relationships. We each play a part in enabling our partner’s dysfunction as a “victim,” and we all hold the power to stop acting like a victim and start approaching our relationships as a victor. Even in relationships where each person has the same dominant personality type, it’s typical that one partner will adjust their behavior according to their partner’s dominant style. Even when we’re a lot like our partner, there’s the risk of feeling like a victim, because we’ll feel forced to “change” in effort to maintain balance. Both partners will believe they’re individually making sacrifices to keep this equilibrium, but neither partner will recognize the effort of the other. To avoid this dynamic, communication is key. The affirmer might say to their affirmer partner, “I know that we both thrive on being the better person, but I feel like I’m the only one who is willing to take the risk on being candid. I think it’s fair we both learn to speak up.”

Getting help when you need it

We know that the thoughts of losing your companion simply because you’re tired of living as the victim, can be a scary prospect. So, we encourage you to seek help and support as you navigate this new road toward taking responsibility in your relationship. It isn’t always easy to see ourselves clearly when we’re blinded by the fear of being alone. Often our thoughts run turkey wild with negative scenarios all based on our belief that we’ll never be strong enough to break out of our status as victim in our relationships. Having a counselor or life coach beside you, can help to assuage your fears as you take one step at a time toward the freedom that comes from living life as a victor rather than a victim.

It’s o.k. to be transparent with family and friends about the bad habits you’re committed to breaking. Be clear with others about your newfound awareness of how you’ve cheated yourself all these years by living as a victim. Practice candidness and vulnerability by admitting that this process of moving from victim to victor has you on a seesaw of emotions in your relationship. Let

your partner know that you're actively fighting your addiction to victim status. Forgive yourself for the times you lay awake with night sweats and ugly withdrawal symptoms. Believe that you're on a journey toward experiencing the best relationship possible. Hope that your partner will respond positively to the changes. Be confident that no matter what, your life is best lived on top of the mountain, not at the bottom regretting you didn't scale the summit.

Don't punish yourself for time you've lost as a victim. The idea that "opposites attract," often sets up the perfect breeding ground for victimization. What starts out as a positive, complementary relationship turns into an exploitive drain. You've learned how to recognize the victim in yourself and others. I've detailed common pitfalls according to each relationship dynamic. Now that you're equipped with the knowledge that you don't have to be the victim in your relationship, you're ready to accept your partner for who they are and what attracted you to them in the first place.

Now that you're a victor, you can fully appreciate your partner's differences and embrace the totality of their personality without seeing them as the enemy.