The reading Quinn just shared by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, is one that I thought about sharing the first week in February when we began this theme of Spiritual Practices. I almost shared it last week, and finally squeezed it in this morning. I think it’s a good frame for our theme, and in it, you can hear reference to what Andrew Harvey might call Shadow Work. Just a reminder, we’ve been exploring these categories of spiritual practices laid out by Andrew Harvey: cooling practices, heating practices, last week we explored physical practices, and this morning I’ll address Shadow Work. The reading approaches the point of Shadow work when the authors quote Avram Davis who says that if we become angry a lot, we are essentially practicing anger…. The Brussats remind us that we are practicing all kinds of things all of the time, but that the decision to do spiritual practice is intentional.

Rumi says that this being human is a guest house – that every day we encounter a new arrival in that guest house: a joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness – he instructs us to welcome and entertain them all. “Even if they are a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice. Meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.”

Shadow work can be understood as those practices which teach us to welcome the dark thought, the shame, the malice, the crowd of sorrows. We have to teach ourselves to welcome those thoughts and feelings because most of us have learned over the years, from our families, from our societies, to shun those thoughts and feelings, to hide them and not acknowledge them. We hide them, even from ourselves. And as we’ve learned from psychology, when we cut ourselves off from, or suppress or deny a part of ourselves – that part can rise up in unexpected moments and take over.

Shame researcher, Brené Brown, has captivated so many of us with her public exposure of this phenomenon, her personal revelations of vulnerability, and her admissions of thoughts and feelings that she denied, prior to looking at the research she had gathered on whole-hearted living and learning that vulnerability was an essential quality. She admitted in her first TED talk that she had become a researcher in order to avoid feelings of vulnerability, and then vulnerability became the quality she discovered in her research which distinguished the individuals she had admired and identified as whole-hearted, those people who consistently practiced courage, compassion and connection. So, she becomes a researcher so she can be sure of the facts, understand the world, embrace the certainty of science, only to discover that those people she most admired, those who practiced the qualities of courage, compassion and connection, had a trait in common: vulnerability. That very thing she had sought to avoid with her life’s work. She called a Breakdown at first, but now refers to it as her 2007 Spiritual Awakening. And her TED talk went, as they say, viral. It spoke to something deep within people, a mostly shame filled people, who didn’t know how to grapple with their shadow sides.
Spiritual practices which can help us do that important shadow work can include, as Brown discovered, research. However, in the wake of that research, she sought a therapist – a trusted other where she could share those feelings of vulnerability in a non-judgmental place. Psychotherapy focuses on changing problematic behaviors, feelings and thoughts by discovering their unconscious meanings and motivations.

Meditation is another spiritual practice that can help us explore the shadow side – scientists have found evidence that people who practice mindful meditation are more aware of their unconscious brain activity, leading to a feeling of conscious control over their bodies. I had dabbled in meditation over the years, but didn’t start a consistent daily practice until April of 2018 – that’s only almost 2 years, but only two years in, I can attest to the power of daily meditation in helping me explore aspects of myself that I had submerged deeply, largely out of shame.

My therapist and I had a good laugh in fact this week. I told her that last week leading up to the service on physical practice, I was consistent in all my physical practices – made it to my Nia dance class, my Zumba class, Orange theory and yoga. This week, however, I decided to go out to breakfast with my husband on Tuesday, instead of Zumba. We laughed because I’m exploring the shadow side this week and decided to eat out instead of exercise on Tuesday, which is definitely a shadow habit of mine.

Humor, I notice, in Brown’s TED talks and writings and my own therapy and growth, is essential to being able to tolerate the pain of exploring our shadow sides.

In some ways, I think our society – our nation and world – has also been exploring of late, the shadow side. I think some of us are clearer than ever before that this nation was founded on some pretty ugly principals – the domination and genocide of those native to this land, and the capture, enslavement, and import of those from Africa. I think the rise of fascism again in our politics is that principle writ large that I mentioned from psychology - when we cut ourselves off from, or suppress or deny a part of ourselves – that part can rise up in unexpected moments and take over.

I know I’ve told you this story before – but this is how consciousness works – there was a memorable moment for me in 2016 – early in the year, January, perhaps, months before the election when I still thought Donald Trump an unlikely candidate. The membership coordinator from the church I served in Lansing and I were meeting with the Imam of the local Islamic Center to discuss the possibility of our worshipping in their building while we were renovating our new space but had to be out of our old building. Candidate Trump was making all kinds of Islamophobic remarks which were hitting the headlines and the membership coordinator and I, both cisgender white women, were feeling shame about how our country appeared to this Pakistani-born imam and we apologized to him, or expressed our embarrassment to him that this was not how our country was or should be, and his reply – which caused a shift in my own consciousness, was that he was glad it was out in the open. He knew there were racists and xenophobic forces in this country – he was the target of such hate speech on a regular basis, and he was glad it was out in the open, because then we could deal with it.

Because I am white, appear to be the gender I identify as, am married to a man, I am not, on a regular basis, on the receiving end of such hate speech. I knew – intellectually – that racism, xenophobia, homophobia, all kinds of phobias and isms exist – but I am not generally the target of such hate. So when Imam Sohail Chaudhry expressed his gratitude that the hate he knew was out there had become
public, something for me clicked and I became conscious in a way I had previously tried to deny. For it’s painful to admit the shortcomings of this country I love.

I believe a similar consciousness raising occurred in the UUA in March of 2017 when the UUA hired another white male minister to a regional leadership position (he never took that office) and a controversy was sparked over whether the UUA is living its stated racial justice values, leading to the white supremacy teach-ins and a lot of hard work, messy work, in our association and our congregations. This, you must understand, was 4 years after the BlackLivesMatter movement had begun in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin.

The #metoo movement had begun in 2006 but didn’t capture the national spotlight until October of 2017 when Harvey Weinstein faced allegations of sexual-abuse and rape. And there’s a racial component to this as well, the 2006 movement was to empower women of color who have been sexually abused, and it wasn’t until white women with considerable power (Hollywood celebrities) went public that the movement hit the headlines.

This is our shadow work. We are exploring the unconscious forces that work upon us and we perpetuate, collectively and individually. And I believe it begins with our individual awareness, our own willingness to explore that which we’d prefer to deny.

Last summer at GA there was controversy and attention around issues of language and inclusion and I had one memorable conversation with a white colleague who told me about being in a small group where a person of color had interpreted something he said as racist and his impulse to defend himself and then his decision to instead listen. Why do I need to prove to others that I am a good person? That I am not “racist”? What purpose does defending my ego in public serve? I am in need of learning not teaching. It was another aha moment for me, for I recognize in myself the strong need to project an image of antiracist, anti-oppressive, multicultural awareness – but what I really want is the actual awareness, not the appearance of it.

I’ve served in a public capacity long enough to know that I can’t control what you will think of me, but it is my shadow side to want you all to like me.... shadow, because I might not be true to myself in any one moment, if I let my decisions be swayed by your opinion of me. This is that tricky spiritual work of self-differentiating while staying connected. We risk connection when we state difference, and so the trick is to work on both in equal measure.

If this is shadow work you’d like to do, I invite you to save the date of Saturday, October 10th. One of the instructors from the clergy clinic on family systems that I took last year, will be here to offer all of us a systems approach to healthy congregational life. This is that spiritual work of learning to stay connected while embracing our difference – a human task that takes considerable consciousness. Though focused on congregational life, this workshop will help you in your family and any other group setting that involves those very tricky, hard-to-understand human beings. As I like to joke, church would be so great, if it weren’t for all those people!

No truly, I love my species. I find human beings fascinating. Sometimes aggravating, but truly fascinating. I had a rather rough fall this year – well, the church had a rough fall, given staff departures and new hires, and there were tricky human relationship issues. I think I was processing all of this – and my own history - when I made the poor choice of reading three books I don’t recommend reading at the
same time, *The Gift of Fear*, *The Indigenous People’s History of the United States* and *Talking to Strangers*. They all deal with the shadow side of being human. Gavin De Beckers is a leading expert on predicting violent behavior and in *The Gift of Fear* shows that, like every creature on earth, we have within us the ability to predict the harm others might do to us and get out of its way. Malcolm Gladwell’s book, *Talking to Strangers*, suggests rather the opposite – that we don’t understand strangers and don’t know how to understand them – he starts with the historical encounter between Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and the Aztec ruler Montezuma II – and how they each understood the other to be surrendering and what dire consequences resulted from that colossal misunderstanding…. Which leads me to *the Indigenous People’s History of the United States*, a history of the United States told from the perspective of Indigenous peoples, challenging the founding myth of the United States and shows how policy against Indigenous peoples was colonialist and destined to seize the territories of the original inhabitants, displacing or eliminating them.

What each book has in common is bringing to consciousness things about our human condition that we, as a species, like to deny but that in not bringing it to our awareness continues the ongoing legacy of harm. The only way out of our tragic, violent existence is to uncover the largely unconscious motivations, and welcome the dark thought, the shame, the malice, the crowd of sorrows so that they can teach us to do better.

We have to do it carefully, thoughtfully, mindfully. We are weary of the national news, the international news, the shocking divide and competing frames of understanding of our politics at this point in history – it seems we are either ‘all in’ and overwrought and distressed and discouraged, or ‘all out’ and clueless and in denial, when what we need is to be intentional.

OK, maybe that’s a projection on my part – I tend to be all in or all out – hence the reading all three books at once that I recommend not be done. Obsession is a shadow side of my personality, and I now wish I had read one book, and then some fun fiction, and then another separated by a fun fiction.

“Spiritual practices are specific activities you do to deepen your relationships with the sacred and the world around you. They encourage you to relate in a particular way to other people and the whole creation.” “We are what we practice” reminds Avram Davis. So let’s be careful what it is we practice. What is your shadow work to be done?