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BOOK REVIEW

Walking shadows: Archetype and psyche in crisis and growth

by Tim Read

(2014; London: Muswell Hill Press)

Reviewed by

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After Dr. Tim Read retired from the British National Health Service, following twenty years of leading the mental health emergency and crisis intervention teams at the Royal London Hospital, he distilled his experiences as both a psychiatrist and transpersonal journeyman into a book bridging two worlds. Unlike most psychiatrists on either side of the pond, while immersed in the responsibilities of managing mental health services in a mainstream setting, Read followed his own personal call into the depths of the psyche, meeting a fair number of fellow travelers along the way. Through attending various workshops and retreats over a number of years, with a core discipline in the Grof Transpersonal Training Program, he found, in his words, “a particular intensity of experience, often with a spiritual component” (p. xix). From the dual perspectives of contemporary psychiatry and experiential pursuits emerges a book unusually grounded in both faith and suspicion with respect to adopting a psychospiritual paradigm for personal and professional work, offering a mature and realistic outlook that may help transpersonal psychology survive into the future.

Drawing on the insubstantial flickering images on the wall of Plato’s cave, the title *Walking Shadows* situates the book within the transpersonal project of waking up, where those in chains begin to differentiate projections, both cultural and personal, from reality. Like others in the transpersonal movement, Read offers insights and pathways assisting transition from a worldview in which scientific materialism is the only lens into a meaningless universe toward recognizing, and opening to guidance from, a meaningful unseen reality. What is unique about Read’s contribution is his sober

recognition that intrusion of the numinous into our lives is sometimes life-threatening, often enough dangerous, and not something everyone can easily process into a glorious transpersonal sunlight. Stanislav and Christina Grof (1989) contributed the *spiritual emergency* paradigm to transpersonal psychology twenty-five years ago. Read follows their lead but situates an understanding of the transpersonal within the realities of front line psychiatry, where people present for treatment—including by helicopter to the roof of the Royal London after suicide attempts—with crises looking very different from the awakenings, angst or urges for self-exploration bringing many people to workshops and seminars. Read finds ways to understand both sets of experiences as involving a similar mechanism, which he calls “archetypal penetrance.”

Walking Shadows includes numerous portraits of patients and transpersonal seekers, presented in composite with details disguised for reasons of confidentiality. In the opening chapter, titled “Visiting Heaven and Hell,” one meets Adam in the hospital and Martin at a meditation retreat. Adam, age 24, was a seemingly normal lad with no psychiatric history and no unusually pressing problems. Then he was found unconscious in a park, having “sliced into his arm as though he was trying to scrape the flesh off his bone” (p. 3). “He had also stabbed his leg repeatedly and there was a wound to his penis” (p. 3). At first Adam remembered very little of what occurred, but over time he managed to tell Dr. Read:

that a very bad feeling came over him very quickly and he felt compelled to destroy himself.

... He tried to explain to me how principles of good and evil, light and dark, had developed an extraordinary significance for him. He thought that his penis suddenly seemed like an evil thing to him. ... He thought that he was in Hell, the worst place imaginable and he had to get out of it even if it meant dying. He remembers climbing to a tree "to get higher"... for a "spiritual" reason but couldn't describe it, "maybe to get closer to God." This puzzled him as he wasn't in the slightest bit religious, but he felt he'd been totally taken over by something enormous and pregnant with meaning, which totally overwhelmed him. (pp. 5-6)

Juxtapose Martin, just turned 40, sharing his story with Read in a quiet moment at a meditation retreat. Three years prior, this self-described regular guy, the kind who works, watches sports, enjoys family and friends, drinks an occasional glass of wine, transformed into a different person with one fifteen minute transcendent experience. On "one of those perfect English late summer days with the blue sky and soft wind rustling the trees," Martin was walking in the countryside and sat on a bench near an old church. "The birds were singing, the sun was warm and it looked just perfect" (p. 7). Then something came over him: "The first thing he noticed was that the colours were becoming more intense. The blue sky was becoming even bluer and the grass and the leaves of the trees were the most intense green he had ever seen. The light was getting brighter and had a shimmering quality" (p. 8).

At that point, words failed Martin in telling Read his story: "His experience was entirely beyond description. He felt as though he was in another place, a place beyond time and a place that was not of the physical world. He felt as though he was merged with something that was so vast that it felt like the entire universe—and it was all made of love" (p. 8). Martin described tears falling down his face from the sheer intensity and beauty of the experience; his life was profoundly changed, including transition into a career that was more helpful and less exploitative.

To frame such dichotomous experiences as involving the same underlying process, Read expands the "bio-psycho-social" approach prevailing in British psychiatry into a "bio-psycho-social-archetypal" (BPSA) model of the psyche. He explains:

Although they cannot be known directly, archetypes penetrate our daily lives. They are the hidden forces that shape our conscious experience and patterns of thought; they leave traces and images in the fantasy material that flows through our dreams and our daydreams. But they cannot be separated from the physical world. Archetypes are inextricably linked with the bio-psycho-social unit that we usually consider constitutes yourself as an individual person. They are expressed through the hardware that is our body, our nervous system and our sense organs. (p. 47)

The bio-psycho-social model frames the flow of personal lives and presenting psychiatric issues as the product of genes (nature) blended with the influences described as nurture, including the psychological and social. Adding the archetypal influence includes a subtler layer less readily visible but sometimes having life-changing impact. Read refines the BPSA model with the understanding that some people are affected more by "archetypal penetrance" than others, and nearly everyone affected sometimes more than other times. The word "penetrance" is borrowed from genetics, where it is used "to describe the likelihood of an underlying genetic predisposition (genotype) being translated into a characteristic of the organism (phenotype)" (p. 47). Read explains:

Some genes have complete penetrance in that anyone with the gene will show the physical trait associated with it. Most physical traits are polygenic, associated with a variety of genes that are expressed in variable degrees and subject to environmental influences. I suggest that we can apply the concept of penetrance to describe a similar effect with archetypes. If we are indeed influenced by an archetypal ocean with tides, currents, waves and undertows, then this may be more active—or penetrant—in some people than others and each person may be more receptive to different archetypal flavors at different times. (pp. 47-48)

As Read describes, most people come to a certain homeostasis with respect to their level of archetypal penetrance, but "acute psychiatric disorders occur when there is a failure of the homeostatic mechanism" (p. 48). Those disorders can be understood as "archetypal crises" with particular orientations. Less crisis-producing but

still impactful states may be characterized as involving “high archetypal penetrance (HAP).” Using vignettes from life, Read describes particular psychiatric diagnoses and developmental-transformative challenges from an archetypal perspective, illustrating HAP states as sometimes life enhancing, sometimes unintegrated and problematic. In contrast to states of high archetypal penetrance, Read describes “low archetypal penetrance (LAP)” states, in which “the person endures a dull and grey world with a low intensity of meaning” (p. 48).

Although *Walking Shadows* is not overtly situated within the growing discipline of archetypal astrology, those familiar with that framework will readily understand Read’s model as consistent not only with the diagnostic categories of modern psychiatry but also with astrology’s understanding that certain planetary archetypes are more dominant in some lives than others through natal placement, and more dominant at some times than others through transits or progressions. Although not writing a book on astrology, Read discusses several planetary archetypes (including Venus, Mars, Saturn, and Neptune) through the course of the book, as relevant to particular transcendent experiences or psychological conditions. For instance, in passages exemplifying a charming Englishness surfacing now and then in the book, Read describes the Venus archetype as present in his own experience at garden shows, where he feels “a pleasant, mild non-ordinary state of consciousness as I become immersed in the displays of shrubs, flowers, ferns and heather.” Under the spell of Venus, nature becomes so “vibrant and sexy” that Read wonders whether “there should be conjugal tents for those who resonate with the fruitiness” (p. 81). This contrasts with the absence of Venus, as he later describes, in the eating disorders invading the psyche of females all too often, where the lushness of the life force withers on the feminine body, just as the lush landscape of nature withers in winter as the mythological Persephone is dragged into the underworld (the land of death) by Pluto. Throughout the book, particular archetypes that penetrate the human experience come alive through such descriptions, frequently illustrated by Read through reference to myth, poetry, historical events, or literature. Appropriately enough for an English author, the words and narratives of Shakespeare make a running appearance as illumination for Read’s understandings.

In a journey through *Walking Shadows*, one learns to understand both psychiatric presentations

and stages of the contemporary transpersonal journey within the bio-psycho-social-archetypal model. The first section of the book, titled *Intense States of Meaning*, introduces the guiding frameworks for Read’s archetypal perspective, including “the psyche as a sense organ”; Plato’s myth of the cave; “Jung’s archetypal voyage,” from a post-Red Book perspective; and the implicate order of the new physics, exemplified by David Bohm. Discussion of the entrenched denial of the reality of psi by the scientific community is used by Read to explain what may underlie resistance to the transpersonal among not only scientists but many in the educated public:

Perhaps we still have an anxiety about the bad old days when religion and spirits were thought to account for natural phenomena; we became ill because we had sinned or failed to propitiate the Gods. We feel that this nonsense has been swept away by the clear voice of reason and the march of science. Perhaps we feel as concerned as Freud did about the “black tide of mud of occultism.” Psi evokes primitive fears in us about unseen forces with the threat of erosion of the structures and values of modern life. Here lies madness we fear; better to stay with what we think we know. (pp. 76-77)

Among the attractive things for me about Read’s perspective is that it feels post-defensive, by which I mean not needing (as in my experience of some earlier transpersonal writing) to pretend that the numinous and the slippery slope into “meaning is everywhere” is not scary and potentially dangerous. I suspect some of us transpersonalists have maintained a pretense or bravado of “no danger here” in order to avoid looking worried to the mainstream or have our bellies vulnerable to attack. Yet, as the world moves well into the 21st century, I suspect really entering into mainstream discourse will require honesty about mental illness and its relationship to the transpersonal, such as Read provides. For one, I have lost patience with the well-meaning, but naïve, transpersonally-attracted folks who insist that mental illness is in the minds of the psychiatrists. After one such diatribe at a seminar where I was on staff, a man I hardly knew took me aside and said that was all well and good but he worked with people whose mental status made them a danger to themselves and others. He was an aide, not a psychiatrist. I am not sure he returned for another seminar.

I suspect most people deeply familiar with the HAP (high archetypal penetrance) states understand that in fact those unseen forces can bring earthquake-level erosion of the structures and values previously holding together one's life. That can be terrifying for some, at least in those moments when one is psycho-emotionally-spiritually sober enough for self-reflection. It is a great relief to me to read the voice of someone with a healthy level of suspicion about these numinous gods and their intentions—a welcome dose of reality for this Jupiterian-Neptunian soul, reminding me a great deal of what my daughter once told me about my attitude about aliens (“Dad, you’re going to be out there welcoming them like they’re angels and how do you know they are not going to shoot us dead with laser beams.”)

Drawing on the geography of ancient Rome, Read creates a metaphor allowing discussion of not only a potentially hazardous journeys into the transpersonal, but also the reality that sometimes a person may have remained closer to home than they thought. One of the most useful contributions of the book is Read's conception of the *cispersonal*. In ancient Rome, there was *Cisalpine* Gaul, a mountainous part of northern Italy closer to Rome, and *Transalpine* Gaul, a more foreign, more dangerous, land on the other side of the mountains. While *trans* means across or beyond, *cis* means on the near side of; hence the *cispersonal* lies on the near side of the personal. Read explains:

Using the ancient Roman world as a metaphor for the psyche, we can cast modern man as a Roman. Rome represents the personal psyche, our ego, our perception of our environment as mediated by our organs of perception, our cognitive apparatus and the prevailing ideas and paradigms. Most of us either stay entirely in Rome, or we leave Rome only for brief periods. The Romans were deeply suspicious of the Gauls and similarly most of us are naturally cautious about leaving our familiar psychological territory.

In Read's model, experiences of nonordinary states of consciousness take place outside “the safety of our Rome-like psyche, with its high walls and defences” (p. 261). With those experiences, “we immediately become much more vulnerable. Safety issues are paramount, so we need to have a mindset of curiosity balanced by some caution and the setting needs to be secure and carefully judged” (p. 261). When venturing into transpersonal realms, that is, when penetrated by the archetypes, it is

important to be in the company of someone who knows the territory “and most important of all, knows how to return to Rome” (p. 261). Some of the practicalities of safety in the archetypal realms are discussed explicitly in the latter parts of the book, with Read describing experiences of more versus less safety in experiential transpersonal explorations, stressing integration and the importance of skilled facilitators.

The *cispersonal* concept facilitates discussion of the possibility that much of what seems transpersonal lies very close to manifestations of one's personality. The *cispersonal* part of the psyche, Read writes, opens “to material from the deeper layers of the unconscious but this material is rooted predominantly in the personal or the psycho-social layer of the psyche. It is not obviously a transpersonal experience although there may be elements of the transpersonal” (p. 261).

This is where Read's comfort with suspicion becomes particularly useful. On the other side of more and more transpersonal decades of my life, with ever more workshops and teaching experiences behind me, I am increasingly inclined to suggest that one always consider whether (and more importantly *how*) transpersonal experiences are manifestations or enactments of one's personality. Most of my greatest personal insights from transpersonal journeys have involved becoming conscious of the deep *personal* structures of my ego and unconscious. Believe me, I am not doubting the reality of the unseen; I lost that doubt more than twenty years ago. But returning to the metaphor of Rome, adding my own twist, it is useful to remember that Rome was a colonizing force, always ready to bring foreign lands (in this metaphor, the transpersonal) into its own empire. Ego structures, like it or not, will colonize transpersonal experiences if given the chance. Transpersonal work at its best is probably ninety-five percent a matter of decolonization, with steady battle against the imperialist forces. Visits to Transalpine Gaul mostly light fires one can take back to illuminate the work in Rome, though some may find themselves with second homes in the Cisalpine region.

Even while suggesting that “most experiences with a transpersonal element are better conceptualized as *cispersonal*,” Read knows the Transalpine lands exist. He also knows they are hard to reach and best encountered with guidance. Travelers into “the truly transpersonal territories have a process of intensification of meaning as they cross the dividing range” (p. 262). Often this

involves “a numinous encounter of the challenging kind where ego is expunged, before emerging on the other side into the sunlit pastures” (p. 262). But even if many never actually leave the cispersonal, that mountainous land on the near side of Rome is, in Read’s words, “a deeply interesting place,” with the “borders between cispersonal and transpersonal ... fuzzy, forming a spectrum of consciousness” (p. 262).

The journeyman work of waking up is done in this fuzzy border land, where one encounters those shadowy parts of self and culture. In the middle section of the book, titled *Self, Shadow and Us*, Read explores working with the archetypes. He continues to share vignettes from psychiatric patients and spiritual seekers, juxtaposing mythology, diagnostic categories, and many of the most challenging conditions and behaviors of contemporary times. Among my favorite chapters is “The Numinous Feminine.” Read begins with the British experience of the death of Princess Diana, and then explores a mythological-practical-transpersonal perspective on the deadly modern disorders of bulimia and anorexia. The chapter concludes with a suggestion of the possibility of using MDMA, otherwise known as ecstasy, as a therapy enhancer in working with people suffering from these conditions. The possibility of adding transpersonal perspectives and tools to mainstream psychiatry runs through the book.

The final section is titled *Working with the Numinous*. Here one finds Read’s professional and personal observations on several important transpersonal experiential modalities. These include past-life regression, mindfulness, shamanic journeying, psychedelics, and Holotropic Breathwork. The latter, as practiced by the Grof Transpersonal Training Program, is described by Read as a possible model for responsible experiential work, an opinion this writer shares. Read encounters these modalities with faith grounded in knowledge of the world-changing power of the transpersonal, yet with enough suspicion to teach that one does not lose faith by questioning. I find this approach particularly useful for those who would like to broaden transpersonal work into a practical mainstream world—not so much by trying to prove to the mainstream that it exists, but by offering safe, reasonable, and mature settings in which people might discover for themselves the reality of the unseen if they are so inclined.

If the psychiatric and transpersonal vignettes bring the book into living reality, the solid backbone of

Walking Shadows is Read himself. I cannot help finding him the main character as he shares his personal story as a psychiatrist, spiritual seeker, and human, all happening in a chaotic and yet beautiful world. Read’s deep respect for his psychiatric colleagues is evident in the book, along with a hope that mainstream psychiatry might open to archetypal understandings. Given the Royal London’s role as trauma treatment center for suicide attempts, as well as psychiatric support for many people with limited resources, Read witnessed (and describes) a fair amount of suffering. But he also witnessed miracles not only in psychiatric treatment but in the sacred space created in transpersonal communities. In the end, perhaps the mainstream will find itself convinced, as Read has been convinced, of the exhilarating health-promoting potential of touch by the numinous, at least if one is graced with enough structure, external support, and favorable circumstances to hold the process.

Perhaps my favorite personal story from Read involves the pink spiders he found crawling on his arm as he sat in the garden of Croyden Hall in Somerset, England, just after an active imagination session at a Holotropic Breathwork retreat. They were not uncommon in those parts at that time of year, and yet strange and unusual, never before seen by Read. More importantly they were made miraculous by a synchronicity: just moments before, at the end of a visionary sequence with many disturbing images in the active imagination session, there appear to Read “a tiny pink spider that went in through my navel and emerged from my right side. That seemed quite strange and I didn’t know what to make of it, but it was a benign little creature that seemed friendly” (pp. 264-265). This little pink spider was in contrast to earlier difficult images in the active imagination, including “a huge spider, like the malign Shelob in *The Lord of the Rings*,” which Read associated with the cancer that had killed his sister (p. 264).

Read’s recollection of the event is emblematic of the dance between suspicion and faith underlying much of the book. After the exercise, participants were asked to spend time in the Croydon Hall gardens or woods to reflect on their experience. Read found a secluded area under a tree and began writing in his notebook. He recalls:

As is often the case in such exercises, I felt that the experience was understandable in terms of my own psyche. I had enjoyed floating along on my

imagination for a while, but it did feel like a product of my imagination and I could understand my daydream in terms of aspects of my thoughts and life experiences. Nothing of the transpersonal there, I thought—I was just making it up. I noted the mood of mild cynicism and disillusionment that seemed to be descending upon me. I wondered, not for the first time, if the entire transpersonal paradigm was a fantasy. I was falling asleep.

Then I noticed the tiny pink spiders. There were three or four of them scampering around my hands. There was no mistake about it: they were real and not in my imagination. But they had exactly the same shape, form and motion as the one that I had experienced in the active imagination. . . . I suddenly felt very awake and I could hear my heart beating. An image that seemed like a fantasy of my internal world was repeated immediately afterwards in the outside external world. (p. 265)

To believe or not to believe, perhaps the challenge of these times: and for those in the transpersonal trade, the question may be more how to guide people on this precipice without force or condescension. The question is more about *how* than *what* to believe, including what to do with doubts and with psychoemotional baggage or “stuff.” In the penultimate section of the book, Read addresses “Pitfalls and Side Effects” of the transpersonal path. He observes “an innate tension in any numinous encounter between regression and progression” (p. 306), explaining further:

Regression represents the gullible dissolution of ego structures, often to avoid some necessary developmental tasks. In psychiatric clinics I have sometimes found that, when people profess to be “spiritual,” it really meant that they are abdicating from the responsibility to work and function like an independent adult. . . . In retreat settings people are not infrequently encountered who have emotional and interpersonal problems that I believe would be better addressed by more traditional psychotherapy to help them to develop more coherent ego structures. Essentially, in seeking a retreat, they are having the wrong psychological treatment. (p. 306)

Though put very practically, this is the concept of *spiritual bypassing*, described by others in the field, including Robert Augustus Masters (2010) in *Spiritual*

Bypassing, When Spirituality Disconnects Us From What Really Matters: Learning to Recognize and Transform the Obstacles that Keep us From Living Life Fully. But Read’s bridge is built to a mainstream therapeutic world, where a person might continue their efforts to understand themselves and grow themselves up, in the weeks after the transpersonal workshop.

Read describes what he considers the primary side effects of the spiritual path: narcissism and failures of integration. Willing to name an elephant in the transpersonal room, Read writes:

While we may all be subject to these pitfalls occasionally and to some extent, any regular participant in retreats will be familiar with a minority of self-absorbed people who believe others will share their fascination with their own internal processes, those who believe they have a special spiritual purpose, those who have built rigid belief systems onto their transpersonal experiences and those who become over-identified with their experiences. (p. 306)

Read defines *spiritual narcissism* as “a condition in which spiritual energies, practices or experiences are misused to bolster self-centered ways of being” (p. 306). Note that Read is not doubting the reality of spiritual energies, but simply observing some of the side effects of these numinous gods: ego inflation (“the aggrandizement of ego fuelled by spiritual energies”); self-absorption (“over-preoccupation with one’s spiritual status and achievement”); and spiritual materialism (“the strengthening of egocentricity through spiritual techniques”; cf. Ferrer, 2002).

But even with all these hazards, there are those tiny pink spiders. “What seems to be transpersonal may in fact be more related to biographical material,” Read observes, “but what may appear to be predominantly personal may be more transpersonal than we think” (p. 262). His final allegory is Dorothy’s journey in *The Wizard of Oz*. After a strange trip, easily understood as encountering shadow, Dorothy returns home to where she began, now transformed, able to see the mundane black and white world of Kansas very differently. Thus one moves into that terrain experienced by some where outer world, inner world, and transpersonal reality seem to be all happening at once if only one can remain still enough to notice.

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About the Author

Tim Read, MD, is a psychiatrist who led the services for psychiatric emergencies at the Royal London Hospital, UK, for over 20 years. He holds degrees in neuroscience and in medicine, has completed trainings in psychoanalytical and transpersonal psychotherapy, and is a qualified Holotropic Breathwork facilitator. Tim is a founding director of Muswell Hill Press in London, publishing a range of books in transpersonal psychology.

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Jay Dufrechou, JD, PhD, graduated from the doctoral program in Transpersonal Psychology at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP), now Sofia University. Jay lives primarily in New York City, with frequent travel to Montana. He works as a mediator in legal disputes, and teaches as adjunct faculty for Sofia University.

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