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Meeting the Shadow

A Short Practical Manual on Shadow Work

Through the Lens of Bill Plotkin · Using Non-Formal Education Methods

A facilitator's guide for youth workers, educators and group leaders

Dissemination product of the Youth Exchange

“MEDUSA”

Held at Hopeland, Greece · 4–14 June 2026

In collaboration with



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1. Introduction: What Is the Shadow?

Every person carries an inner landscape far wider than the self they show to the world. From childhood we learn which parts of ourselves earn love, praise or safety — and which parts provoke rejection, shame or punishment. To survive and belong, we push the unwelcome parts out of sight. They do not disappear. They gather in a hidden region of the psyche that the psychologist Carl Jung named the shadow.

The shadow is not evil. It is simply everything about ourselves that we have disowned: anger we were told was ugly, tenderness we were told was weak, ambition, grief, playfulness, sexuality, need. Because these energies are exiled rather than integrated, they leak out sideways — through sudden reactions, projections onto others, self-sabotage, and the qualities in other people that irritate or fascinate us most.

■ *"Whatever is rejected from the self appears in the world as an event."* — Carl Jung

Shadow work is the deliberate, compassionate practice of turning toward these disowned parts, getting to know them, and slowly welcoming them back into a fuller sense of who we are. It is not about fixing what is broken. It is about becoming whole.

Why this manual

This booklet is a dissemination product of the Erasmus+ Youth Exchange “MEDUSA”, held at Hopeland in Greece from 4 to 14 June 2026. During the exchange, young participants from several countries explored inner growth, self-awareness and emotional resilience through non-formal education. This manual gathers and shares the shadow-work approach used there so that other youth workers, educators and group leaders can apply it in their own contexts.

It adapts shadow work for group and community settings using non-formal education (NFE) — a learner-centred, experiential approach widely used in European youth work. It is written for facilitators rather than therapists. The aim is personal growth, self-awareness and healthier relationships, not clinical treatment. Read the safety section carefully before facilitating.

2. Bill Plotkin's Map of the Psyche

Bill Plotkin, an American depth psychologist and wilderness guide, extends Jung's idea into a nature-based model of human wholeness. In his books *Soulcraft* and *Wild Mind*, Plotkin describes the healthy psyche as a community of inner figures — what he calls a 'family of sub-personalities'. Wholeness, for Plotkin, is not the elimination of any part but the cultivation of a balanced inner ecosystem.

The four facets of the Self

Plotkin maps four resources of the whole psyche, using the four cardinal directions as a compass for inner work:

- **North — the Nurturing Generative Adult:** the visionary who sees possibility and meaning.
- **South — the Wild Indigenous One:** the sensuous, wild, instinctive self connected to body and earth.
- **East — the Innocent / Sage:** the imaginative, playful, magical self of the child and artist.
- **West — the Muse / Guide to the dark:** the part that faces darkness, loss and the underworld of the soul.

Where the shadow lives

For Plotkin, the shadow is one of several sub-personalities that form when a facet of the whole self is wounded or suppressed early in life. He distinguishes several types of shadow figure that facilitators find useful to recognise:

- **Loyal Soldiers:** harsh inner voices formed to keep us safe by keeping us small — the inner critic, the perfectionist, the pleaser.
- **Wounded Children:** wounded child parts frozen at the age a hurt occurred, carrying unmet needs.
- **Exiled potentials:** cut-off gifts and vitality — the 'golden shadow' of positive qualities we dare not own.

Plotkin's key insight is that these figures are not enemies. Each once served a purpose. Shadow work honours their original protective intention while gently updating their role, so their energy becomes available to the whole person rather than working against it.

3. Non-Formal Education as the Method

Non-formal education is structured, intentional learning that happens outside formal curricula. It is voluntary, learner-centred and rooted in experience. These qualities make NFE an ideal container for shadow work, which cannot be taught by lecture — it must be felt, explored and reflected upon by each participant at their own depth.

Core NFE principles applied to shadow work

- **Learner-centred:** participants are the experts on their own inner life; the facilitator guides process, not content.
- **Experiential:** insight arises from doing and feeling, then making meaning — not from being told.
- **Voluntary & self-directed:** nobody is pushed to share more than they choose. The right to pass is sacred.
- **Collaborative:** learning deepens through pairs, small groups and circles that build safety and mirroring.
- **Reflective:** every activity closes with structured reflection to turn experience into lasting learning.

Kolb's experiential learning cycle

Most activities in this manual follow the four-stage cycle that underpins NFE. Keep it in mind as your facilitation backbone:

1. Experience — the participant does an activity (a visualisation, a drawing, a role-play).
2. Reflect — they observe what came up: sensations, emotions, resistance, surprise.
3. Conceptualise — they connect the experience to ideas about their own patterns and shadow.
4. Apply — they decide one small way to carry the insight into daily life.

4. Creating a Safe Container

Shadow work touches vulnerable material. Safety is the facilitator's first responsibility. A strong container makes depth possible; without it, exposure can re-wound. Establish the following before any deep activity.

Group agreements

- **Confidentiality:** what is shared in the circle stays in the circle.
- **Right to pass:** everyone may skip any activity or question, no explanation needed.
- **Speak from 'I':** speak from personal experience, not advice or diagnosis of others.
- **No judgement:** meet each other's disclosures with respect and without fixing.
- **Honour resistance:** what a person feels is valid, even when it is uncomfortable.

The facilitator's stance

Hold a calm, warm, non-anxious presence. You are not there to analyse, interpret or heal anyone. Your role is to open a door, hold the space steady, and trust each participant's own process. Know your limits: shadow work is not therapy. If a participant is in acute distress or discloses trauma beyond the group's scope, pause, offer one-to-one grounding, and signpost professional support. Always close sessions gently and leave time to return to the present.

5. Practical Activities

The following non-formal activities move from lighter awareness-building to deeper integration. Choose according to your group's readiness and always run them inside the safe container from Section 4. Each activity notes its purpose, timing and reflection questions.

Activity 1 — The Projection Mirror

Purpose: to notice the shadow through what irritates or fascinates us in others. Time: 40 minutes. Materials: paper, pens.

1. Individually, each person writes the name of someone who strongly annoys them, and lists three adjectives describing what bothers them.
2. Then they write someone they deeply admire, and three adjectives for that person.
3. In pairs, invite the reframe: 'Where might a version of this quality live, disowned, in me?'
4. Return to circle for voluntary sharing of insights, not stories.

Reflection: What was easier to own — the negative or the golden shadow? What surprised you?

Activity 2 — Meeting the Loyal Soldier

Purpose: to recognise and thank an inner protective voice (Plotkin's Loyal Soldier). Time: 45 minutes. Materials: cushions or chairs, journal.

1. Guide a short grounding and body scan so participants settle into the present.
2. Invite them to recall a familiar self-critical phrase they hear inside ('you're not good enough', 'don't take up space').
3. On paper, they write a letter from that voice, beginning: 'I say this because I am trying to protect you from...'.
4. They write a reply, thanking the voice for its past service and letting it know they are safer now.
5. Close with quiet journaling and optional sharing of one sentence.

Reflection: What was this part originally protecting? How does it feel to thank rather than fight it?

Activity 3 — The Empty Chair Dialogue

Purpose: to give voice to a disowned part and build relationship with it. Time: 30–40 minutes. Materials: two chairs facing each other. Best in trusted pairs or as a facilitator-guided demonstration.

- One chair is the everyday self; the empty chair holds a shadow part (e.g. anger, the wounded child, ambition).
- The participant speaks to the part, then physically moves to the other chair and answers as the part.
- The facilitator gently prompts: 'What do you want me to know? What do you need?'
- End by having the everyday self acknowledge and welcome the part before standing up.

Reflection: What did the part say that you had not let yourself hear? What is one need it named?

Activity 4 — Wholeness Compass (creative integration)

Purpose: a closing activity drawing on Plotkin's four directions to picture a more whole self. Time: 50 minutes.

Materials: large paper, colours, magazines for collage.

- Draw a circle divided into four directions: North (vision), South (wildness/body), East (play/imagination), West (facing the dark).
- In each quadrant, participants place words, colours or images of qualities — both owned and newly welcomed shadow gifts.
- Invite one small commitment for each direction: a way to let that facet breathe in daily life.
- Gallery walk in silence, then a closing circle where each person names one reclaimed quality.

Reflection: Which direction felt fullest? Which felt empty, and what might nourish it?

6. Closing and Integration

Insight fades without integration. Always end a shadow-work session by returning participants gently to the present and to community. A reliable closing sequence:

5. Grounding — a few slow breaths, feeling feet on the floor, naming three things they can see.
6. Harvest — each person names one word for what they take away.
7. One small step — a concrete, gentle action to practise before the next meeting.
8. Appreciation — a round of thanks that rebuilds the group's warmth and safety.

Encourage ongoing personal practice between sessions: a shadow journal, noticing projections in daily life, and self-compassion when old patterns surface. Integration is slow and non-linear. Progress looks like more choice, more self-kindness, and less energy spent hiding from oneself.

Further reading

- **Bill Plotkin** — Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche (2003).
- **Bill Plotkin** — Wild Mind: A Field Guide to the Human Psyche (2013).
- **Robert A. Johnson** — Owning Your Own Shadow — a short, accessible introduction to Jung's concept.
- **Council of Europe / SALTO-YOUTH** — compendiums and toolkits on non-formal education and experiential learning.

Turning toward the shadow is not a descent into darkness — it is how we recover the light we left behind.

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