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The work we deserve from political leaders

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By Chris Hoffman

Some friends asked me recently what I would look for in a candidate for our next governor or president. My response: I want someone who has done — and continues to do — their inner work. The lack of inner work, exemplified by our previous president among others, leads to very bad outcomes.

Being intelligent is necessary for a leader, of course, but not sufficient; as is skill in the political arts, such as building relationships, negotiating, and envisioning a positive future. But if someone is going to make consequential decisions on our behalf, I want that person also to have the courage to do inner work and the wisdom that comes from having done it.

What do I mean by inner work? Inner work has to do with acknowledging and coming to terms with those parts of ourselves that we have pushed out of conscious awareness because they are too painful or embarrassing to acknowledge. These are things like tendencies toward lust, laziness, wrath, selfishness, pride, unacknowledged woundedness, and greed. And the reason inner work is necessary work is that when we don't acknowledge these parts of ourselves, we start to see them in other people ... typically in people who are in some ways different from ourselves in terms of race, religion, national origin, gender orientation and so on. In psychological terms, this is called "projection of the shadow."

When this rejected "evil" shadow is projected onto others, we start to experience those people as our moral enemies, and we feel consciously justified in persecuting them. Ironically, this means that one of the *causes* of evil in the world is often the desire to *eradicate* evil. We try to do "out there" what we should be doing "in here."

As an eminent teacher once said: "This entire world is disturbed with insanity, due to the exertions of those who are confused about themselves."

As a counseling psychologist and organization development consultant, I have seen up close the consequences of a lack of inner work. I take as a given that none of us

is perfect, that we all are lopsided in one way or another. But someone who has had the courage to engage in inner work usually has gained some level of wisdom about their own lopsidedness as well as compassion for other humans of all persuasions, plus some humility and some deep respect for the natural world. I want those qualities in a leader.

When such a person speaks, their mouth does not spew forth bullets and cudgels and lynching nooses, nor sets neighbor against neighbor. When that person speaks, they build hope and understanding and a sense of community.

There are several paths to inner work. A person who is deeply and wholeheartedly committed to spiritual practice might be doing it. Someone who has undergone a major personal hardship or tragedy and has worked through it might be doing it. Someone who has engaged in deep psychotherapy or counseling might be doing it. Someone working a Twelve-Step program might be doing it.

I don't care which path has been followed, so long as the work has been done and is ongoing.

Some warning signs that someone has not done their inner work: blaming others for one's own mistakes, disparaging certain groups of people (often people of color, LGBTQ individuals, women, Native Americans, immigrants, "different" religions), depriving those people of their rights by gerrymandering or establishing restrictive laws and regulations, or attempting to enforce certain ways of thinking or belief.

In the United States, our history of structural racism and privileging of the white, the male, the straight, means that we have a cultural shadow in addition to our individual shadows. So we all have our inner work cut out for us. Inner work is especially incumbent on those who have been privileged. I include myself among those. Yet shadow projection seems to be part of human psychology, and one can find it in people all around the world.

Doing inner work, though difficult, has huge benefits for the individual and for the society in which they live. It means that a person begins to see things as they are rather than seeing only the walls of their own delusions. It leads to better decisions and a more just society. And it allows people to — in James Baldwin's words — "renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives."

We deserve this from our leaders.

Chris Hoffman is a retired management consultant and Licensed Professional Counselor, and the author of the ecopsychology/self-help book *The Hoop and the Tree: A Compass for Finding a Deeper Relationship with All Life*, recently re-issued in a 20th anniversary edition, revised and expanded with a whole new chapter for our times. www.hoopandtree.org