Interview with Martin Lassoff

November 2006, by Alyce Barry

Martin Lassoff is a Shadow Work mentor and certified group facilitator, and certified ManKind Project Leader. Martin lives in Houston with his wife, Kathryn Urbanek, and has two grown sons.

- Yogic mind no more
- "Be here now"
- Diversity training in Houston
- "Emotional commitment to ignorance"
- Becoming a Shadow Work mentor

AB: How did you get started in this experiential work?

Martin: It was around 1993. I had recently been divorced, and I had made a decision to move on from my twenty-five-year spiritual practice of teaching kundalini yoga and meditation and running a series of yoga ashrams in the southern part of the United States.

As a result of those things, I started to go see a therapist, who directed me to a weekend seminar in Austin, Texas, run by a woman named Mary Elizabeth Marlow. She handed me a packet of clay and a poster board, told me to go sit down by the lake, make a model of my family of origin and then come back up and talk about it to the group.

When I got back up to the group with my model and started to explain it, I started weeping and crying. The group held me, cradled me and loved me, and that was my first encounter with experiential process facilitation.

From there, I was directed to the ManKind Project’s New Warrior Training Adventure (NWTA) in May of 1993, where I did my initiatory weekend. I enjoyed my weekend so much that I applied to staff and took my older son to the initiation with me.

As I began staffing more, I ran into Cliff, who at that time was a fully certified ManKind Project (MKP) leader. I was really impressed with his non-shaming facilitation skills and his use of kind language. Back in the 90s, the facilitation on a NWTA weekend was often shame-based in motivating resistant parts of participants. Cliff just seemed so much more generous. I remember following Cliff around the carpet and watching him do a metaphorical pull-out on a resistant initiate and saying to myself, Wow, I want to learn to facilitate like that.
So I signed up for a Basic Facilitator Training (BFT) in Wisconsin, attended it, and got very enthused. I began arranging with Evan Daily for Cliff to come to Houston to teach Shadow Carpet trainings, where we got to teach with him. This turned out to be an excellent venue to practice my newly learned carpet skills from the BFT and the Advanced Facilitation Training (AFT) and to have time to watch, learn and listen from Cliff.

**AB:** So you became a certified MKP leader and a certified Shadow Work facilitator in tandem.

**Martin:** I initially took the BFT to learn to be the best facilitator I could be. I had studied some action-method guts and found it lacking in any kind of formula or recipe that would allow my analytical mind to make choices. The action method is pretty much based on following your intuition, and my intuition at the time was very biased with my own biases and shadows.

I found that Shadow Work’s method of study, facilitation and practice taught me all the four-quadrant circuitry in myself. Learning the inner experience in the resonance of the four archetypes advanced me to a very empathetic aware state when facilitating others. It gave me a common language to discuss and explain what I was feeling. Probably most important, working in tandem with another facilitator also helped tame my narcissist and taught me to listen and observe.

All this was in tandem to becoming a certified trainer for the MKP. I actually went to take my MKP co-leader certification the day after I completed my AFT at your brother Tim’s house in Wisconsin. I got certified in Shadow Work in 1996.

Of course, back then, the use of Shadow Work in MKP carpet work was almost bipolar. They would use Cliff’s techniques for LT3, but there were so many leaders who were shadowed and envious about it that they would make snide remarks.

“Shadow Work takes too long, we’re not going to do that here, Lassoff,” they would say. “The initiates can’t understand those splits, so don’t even try to do it. This is just an initiatory weekend. Shadow Work is only good in integration groups where you have more time.” It was a very uphill struggle in the beginning.

**AB:** Did you come along after Ron Hering’s time?

**Martin:** Ron had helped develop the NWTA as well as another training called Accelerated Behavior Change (ABC). He was murdered right before he was scheduled to come lead the ABC weekend that I took in Houston.

**AB:** How would you say that your view of life has changed in these years of working with the MKP and Shadow Work?

**Martin:** When I began staffing NWTA weekends and attending ABC, I got to see the results of group containers and process facilitation and concluded that they were a great complement to my years of meditation and yoga. My inward experience of the yoga and meditation all those years had been incredible. But I subsequently felt that many emotional events in my life were being repressed and not dealt with, and I believed the same was true of the people I’d taught yoga and
In yoga, you’re often taught to close your eyes, and whatever you feel or think, let it pass. You’re a boat floating on the sea, and you let all these things pass through you. Unfortunately, I don’t believe any more that that’s what occurs. I don’t think that things just pass through you unless you are an extremely enlightened individual with an incredible sense of detachment. The things get stuck. [Laughs.] And often repressed.

The feelings weren’t passing, so I decided I had better experience them. That’s what I found incredible about process facilitation in Shadow Work: the ability to deal with those repressed feelings in a safe and healthy way.

Ultimately, combining the two with my yogic and meditation practice was really the missing link for me. It had to evolve into everything I do being a meditation. How I sleep, how I eat, how I talk, how I walk, how I process, how I listen. That was the real teaching of Shadow Work to me: to be attentive, to pay attention to the real things that are occurring inside of myself and others around me. Versus this external concept of yogic mind or big mind.

**AB:** I don’t think I’ve heard the expression ‘big mind’ before.

**Martin:** It’s like the universal concept of inner peace: you tap into it, kind of like morphic resonance, and when many people think the same thought, at some point it reaches critical mass or a tipping point.

**AB:** So your goals in doing yoga and meditation today would be quite different from the goals you had before.

**Martin:** Oh, it totally changed. I no longer choose to practice yoga and meditation for hours and hours. My whole life is a meditation in many ways.

**AB:** That’s what you were saying about it evolving into everything you do. You’re saying it’s integrated—meditating isn’t a separate activity, it’s something you’re’ doing while you’re doing other things.

**Martin:** Exactly.

**AB:** Do you ever advise people you’ve facilitated to try meditation?

**Martin:** I do in subtle ways, and often without using the word meditation. For example, I find that young people don’t take the time to enjoy where they are. They wind up breezing through every chapter of their life and never stop to appreciate the moment of time they’re living in. That’s a very subtle type of meditation. It’s what Baba Ram Dass used to talk about: “Be here now.” Be present. Enjoy where you are in this moment. Don’t always dream and long for the next thing.

I do the same with people who can’t be still. I recommend to them, Don’t talk so much, just go inside and be with yourself for a while. Go sit outside by a tree and find yourself.
I don’t teach meditation much any more. But I’ve been invited to Shambhala Mountain Center in northern Colorado in October to lead a course called *Men at the Threshold* with Jun Po Denis Kelly Roshi and Luke Entrup. It’s going to combine the many aspects of meditation that I studied for many years with process facilitation. I’m very excited about it.

**AB:** It’s a course just for men?

**Martin:** The first wave of this course is for men, yes. For men who are in transition: in transition in their lives, men who are dying or have lost someone who’s died, who have had a divorce, who are in a new job or profession. We’re going to start it off with a multi-media event, with people coming into the lodge from a Buddhist fire ceremony. They’ll circumnavigate the slide shows that will be about life or about death, and they’ll have the experience of both sets of slides while music’s being played. That will be the basis for our beginning circle.

**AB:** What else are you excited about right now?

**Martin:** What I’m most excited about right now is how Shadow Work has grown here in Houston as a result of diversifying our community. They’re so interrelated that it’s hard to separate them now. The Houston community never really seemed to blossom until we added the diversity element to it.

**AB:** I’ve heard you mention this. How did it get started?

**Martin:** I was taking a diversity training in Houston in 2002, and at the end of the training, an African-American man, Judge Mattocks, asked if I would mentor him. I met him for lunch and heard him out. He wanted to be a New Warrior leader, and I agreed to mentor him if he would agree to mentor me in diversity.

We began meeting, the two of us, every Tuesday night at his home. I told him I needed to get out of my little white neighborhood and come to his neighborhood and learn from him, meet his family. The group eventually grew to include Eric Mallory, Ernest Patterson, Russell Rashard, Rhonda Gaughan, and Sally Bartolameolli, all of whom are certified Shadow Work group leaders now. Also John Gaughan, some priests, and others. It was this beautiful group of men and women, with different ethnicities.

Now, so many people want to be in it that we have to create different groups because we can’t accommodate everyone. These groups have become a venue to get people prepared to take a Shadow Work facilitation training. We’ve already run two certification weekends in Texas in the last year and certified four different people. It’s a continual pipeline.

**AB:** How striking, and how cool, that diversity would blossom in a city in the South. Houston seems to be such a big, thriving community for both Shadow Work and MKP now. Why Houston?

**Martin:** Actually, I think it’s not about how or why Houston. It would happen anywhere where you were willing to open your door and accept different people. Diversity includes diversity in sexist behavior where people use their European-blooded male superiority to exclude women or hold women back. When I speak of diversity, I actually speak of all the ‘isms:’ not just racism
but sexism, heterosexism. Any type of emotional commitment to ignorance. [Laughs.]

**AB:** An emotional commitment to ignorance—what a great definition for ‘isms’!

**Martin:** That kind of takes away the specialness of Houston because that commitment to ignorance exists everywhere. I’ve found that combining Shadow Work tools with any type of dialogue on any kind of ‘isms’ is an excellent combination because of the generosity of Shadow Work to be polite and respectful.

**AB:** You’re referring to the Clean Talk model, for those who aren’t aware of it.

**Martin:** Clean Talk is so polite and respectful, yet it gives a person an opportunity to express anything that’s been repressed in them for a long time, especially the effects of being targeted by racism or sexism or heterosexism. It gives a venue for those repressed feelings in a container that’s safe.

**AB:** A few months ago you became a Shadow Work Mentor. For those who don’t know about the Mentors, it means you’re one of five senior facilitators who mentor new facilitators toward certification and help hold the container for our annual Certified Facilitators Gathering (CFG). Anything to say about becoming a Mentor?

**Martin:** Sure. I’ve done a lot of things in my life, in many different venues and places with masters of different religions and spiritual paths. And becoming a Shadow Work Mentor is what I am most proud of. Even on the most basic level, to experience this remarkable group of people for an extended period of time is in itself just a unique, fun, profound experience for me. The CFG is unlike any place I have spent time. So much of my inner growth has occurred there over the years.

Second, being a mentor for me now is a wonderful way to pay back all the wonderful gifts that have been bestowed on me through the embracing of Shadow Work in my life.

*See also* Martin’s facilitator page. You can reach Martin by email at Martinplas@aol.com.

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