

The Intolerable Fact

Jung's shadow, the science of what we cannot bear to know, and the case for looking anyway

Aaron Long · 27 August 2026 · *Draft v4 (full edition)*

In 1951 Carl Jung compressed his life's work into one sentence: *projections change the world into the replica of one's own unknown face*. This paper takes that sentence seriously and asks what it explains. A man who has lost an election says, for years, that he won it. A man builds an income teaching other men that women are the problem. And for at least a century, in a pattern old enough that England wrote a law about it in 1922, a rare and terrible kind of case recurs — a mother, a postpartum illness the textbooks barely teach, and a public that responds with a fury so intense it splits courtrooms and newspapers in half. Underneath each of these, this paper argues, is the same thing: a fact that could not be held in mind. *I lost. I am weak and frightened. I am failing at the thing I most need to be*. A fact like that does not disappear when it cannot be known. It gets disposed of — and Jung drew the best map we have of where it goes.

The argument is that the disposal is the problem, not the fact. Almost every fact a person cannot bear about themselves is, in the end, ordinary — that they were frightened, that they were cruel, that they are not coping, that they resent someone they love. Held, these are survivable and often nothing worse than human. Unheld, they take one of three roads Jung's map predicts: pushed outside onto other people, where the shadow is condemned at a safe distance; refused outright, so the persona — the mask — stays intact; or turned against the self, which is the shadow's quietest and most dangerous victory. The paper sets out the modern evidence for each route, grades that evidence honestly — including what a century of research killed in Jung's own system — and then asks the practical question: what makes a fact bearable? The short answer is that it has to be witnessed by someone who does not flinch. Jung's name for the long form of that work was individuation. We have almost no institutions for it, and building them would be cheaper than what we are paying now.

If you are in crisis, or frightened by your own thoughts.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline — call or text **988**, or chat at chat.988lifeline.org. Free, confidential, 24/7.

National Maternal Mental Health Hotline — **1-833-TLC-MAMA (1-833-852-6262)**. Call, text or chat; free, confidential, 24/7, English and Spanish.

Postpartum Support International — **1-800-944-4773**, or text 'Help' to the same number (English) / 971-203-7773 (Español). *PSI's own note: the HelpLine is not a crisis hotline and does not handle emergencies.*

If someone is in immediate danger, or has lost touch with reality — call 911 or go to an emergency department. The lines above are for support and referral, not for emergencies.

Frightening thoughts about harming someone you love are, as §6 shows, extraordinarily common and are not a sign that you will act. Telling someone is safe. Verified 21 August 2026.

What this is, and what it is not. A position paper — declared advocacy, argued from evidence. It is not a diagnosis of anyone. Where public figures appear, the paper discusses documented public conduct and never private mental states, and it deliberately runs the same lens across political lines, because its own claim is that everybody does this. The one criminal case discussed at length was finally adjudicated in 2006, and the paper takes no position beyond the verdict its courts reached. AI-assisted throughout — research sweeps, source verification, drafting, figures, build scripts; the human author owns every claim. Every number in the text and figures lives in `data.py` with a named source and a verification status, and the claims that did not survive checking are listed in §9 rather than quietly dropped.

1. The fact you cannot afford to know

Start with something small. Think of a criticism that lands wrong — not the unfair kind you can shrug off, but the kind that makes your face hot. Notice that the heat arrives before any argument does. Something in you has already recognised the charge as true, or true enough, and is mobilising against knowing it. Whatever happens in the next few seconds — the counterattack, the excuse, the sudden conviction that the other person is a hypocrite — is not reasoning. It is disposal.

That small event is the whole subject of this paper, scaled up. There is a class of fact about oneself that a person cannot hold in consciousness, because holding it would cost more than they have. Not facts that are hidden — facts that are *refused*. The refusal is not a decision; nobody chooses it, and you cannot usually catch yourself doing it. What you can catch is the aftermath: the sudden certainty about someone else's motives, the argument you keep re-winning in the shower, the person you find unaccountably intolerable.

The reason this matters beyond private life is that the refusal does not end the fact. A fact that cannot be thought still has energy, and the energy goes somewhere. The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion had the most useful image for it: the mind normally digests raw experience into something thinkable, and when that digestion fails, the undigested material is not stored — it is evacuated. Bion was theorising, and this paper is careful about the difference between a good image and evidence. But the evacuation he described has since been measured, in pieces, by researchers who had never heard of him and would not have cared.

It is worth asking why this is not already common knowledge, because the answer is not that the research is missing. Over the twentieth century, academic psychology largely evacuated the inner life — for reasons that were partly excellent. Psychoanalysis had made grand unfalsifiable claims and resisted measurement; behaviourism and then cognitive science offered rigour, and rigour won, deservedly. But something went out with it. The discipline that could measure reaction times to four decimal places became noticeably worse at saying anything about why a man cannot admit he was wrong. Meanwhile the demand for that never went anywhere, so it was met by whoever would meet it — self-help, wellness, podcasts, archetype merchants — with quality uncontrolled. The kitsch is the bill for the amputation. This paper's position is that the remedy for bad depth psychology is not less attention to the inner life but better: measured where it can be measured, honest where it cannot, and willing to say what follows.

2. The mapmaker: Jung, before the mysticism

The best map of this territory was drawn by a man now mostly remembered for the wrong things. Carl Jung entered psychology through the laboratory: at Zurich's Burghölzli hospital, between roughly 1904 and 1907, he ran the word-association experiments — read a stimulus word, ask for the first word that comes back, measure the delay. Certain words produced lengthened reaction times, stumbles, misfires, and the disturbances clustered by theme. Jung called each cluster a *complex*: a feeling-toned knot of associations operating outside awareness and interfering, measurably, with conscious performance. The founding observation of his psychology was not a vision. It was an empirical anomaly — the mind demonstrably interrupted by contents its owner could not report.

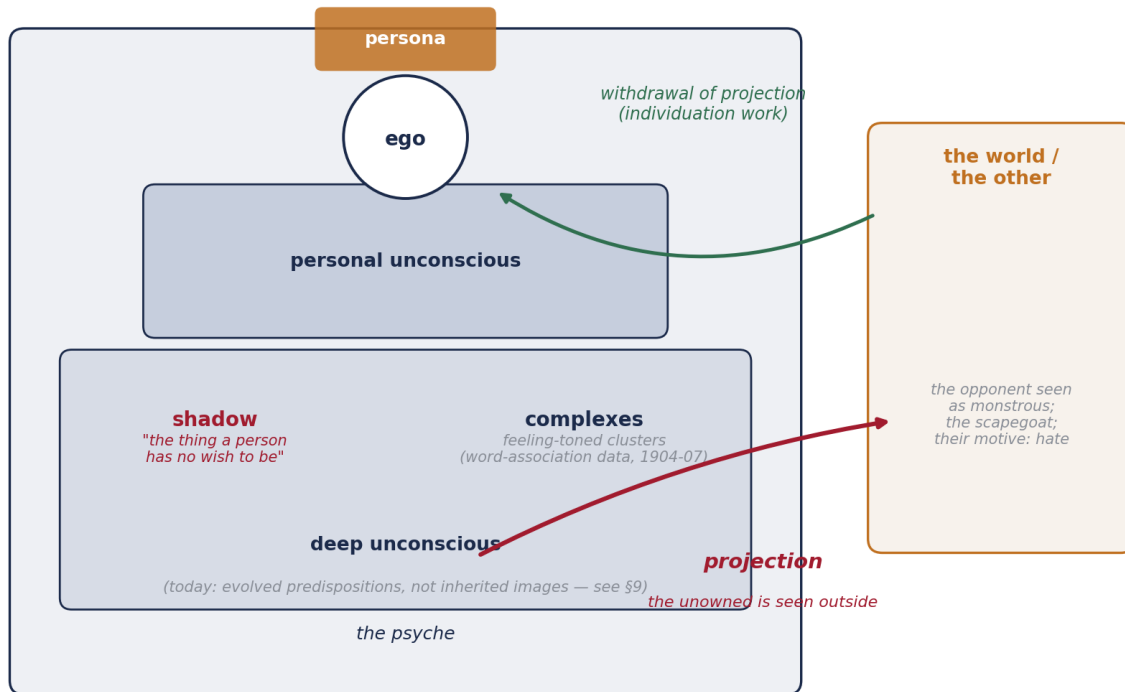


Figure 1. Jung's map of the psyche, drawn as this paper uses it. The persona faces the world; the shadow — 'the thing a person has no wish to be' (CW 16, par. 470) — is disposed of by projection onto the world and the other; the green return path, the withdrawal of projection, is the work this paper argues for. Schematic; the deep layer is relabeled per the audit in §9.

The mature map, in one paragraph. Consciousness is a lit clearing in a large forest. The **ego** is the clearing's center. The **persona** is the mask the ego wears outward — in Jung's words, designed 'to make a definite impression upon others' and 'to conceal the true nature of the individual' (CW 7, par. 305). Beneath the clearing lies the **personal unconscious**, organized into complexes. And within it lives the **shadow**: everything the conscious personality refused — 'the thing a person has no wish to be.' Jung was careful to say the shadow is not simply evil; it also holds 'normal instincts, appropriate reactions, realistic insights, creative impulses' (CW 9ii, par. 423) — everything exiled to keep the mask clean, including strengths. The shadow, unattended, does not sit still. It is disposed of by **projection**: seen, with full perceptual conviction, in other people. 'We always see our own unavowed mistakes in our opponent' (CW 8, par. 507). And **individuation** is his name for the repair — the long, unglamorous work of withdrawing projections and taking the exiled material back. Not self-improvement: Jung thought the first station of the work was looking at precisely what one least wants to see, which is why most people, most of the time, decline.

An honesty note before the map is put to work, expanded in §9. A century of research has been hard on Jung's system, and this paper concedes the casualties without a fight: the collective unconscious as inherited images is dead, the personality types built into the MBTI industry are dead, synchronicity is quarantined. What survived is the part this paper needs, and it survived in laboratories that owed Jung nothing: the architecture — a small conscious tenant in a vast active house — is now a measurement, not a metaphor; and the disposal mechanism has an experimental literature that the next section walks through. The map is used here the way one uses any old map whose coastlines were drawn by intuition: checked against the modern surveys, kept where it matches, marked where it does not.

One more reason to keep the mapmaker in the paper rather than footnoting him: he paid for the map's central claim in public. In 1934, in a journal he edited under German coordination, Jung wrote sentences about an 'Aryan' versus a Jewish unconscious that this paper quotes in §9 as evidence against him. The man who described the shadow performed the projection he had named, at the exact moment in history when seeing clearly mattered most. That fact confers no points on the theory — a theory may not score its inventor's failure as confirmation — but it sets the paper's tone toward its own subject: knowing this material intellectually protects no one, including the person who mapped it. Whatever follows, the recommendation cannot be 'read Jung.'

3. Where it goes

An unbearable fact takes one of three roads out of consciousness, and all three are on Jung's map. The fact can be refused at the door, which is the persona holding its shape. It can be relocated into someone else, which is the shadow projected. Or it can be accepted whole while the self is punished for it, which is the shadow turned on the ego. Most people use all three, on different subjects, in the same week.

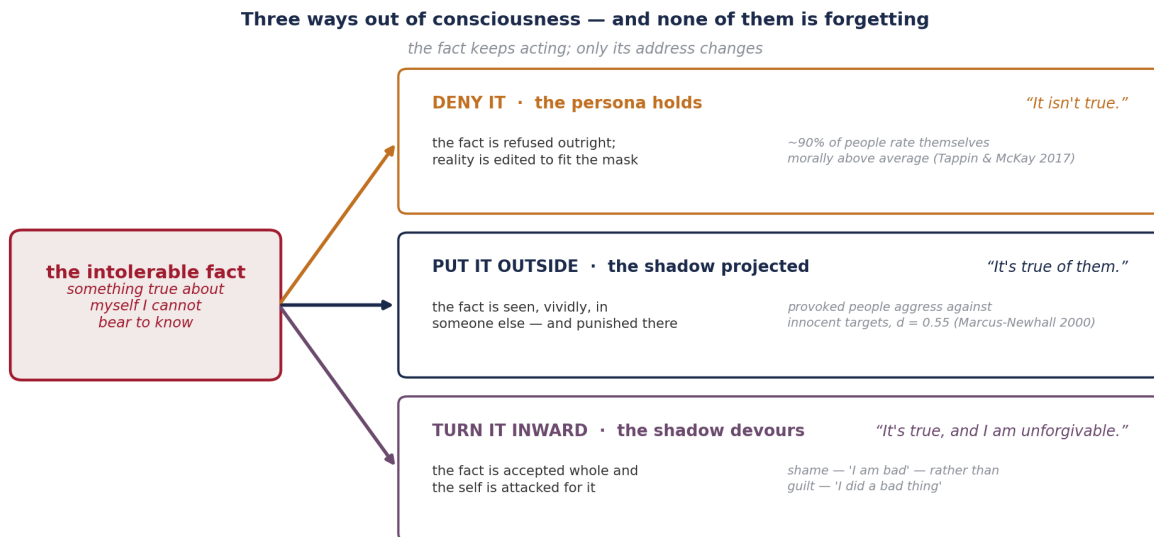


Figure 2. The three disposal routes. The distinction that matters is not which is worst — it is that all three leave the fact in play. Evidence for each is graded in Figure 6; sources in data.py.

Denial: it isn't true. The fact is refused at the door. This is the least dramatic route and by far the most common, because there is a specific belief almost nobody can afford to give up — the belief that they are, on the whole, one of the good ones. When Tappin and McKay measured this properly in 2017 — comparing how people rate themselves against a rational benchmark for how much self-flattery the evidence permits — they found that self-enhancement was strongest in the *moral* domain, and that about 90 percent of people were morally self-enhancing beyond anything the evidence could justify ($d = 1.11$). Not smarter, not more capable — *better*. It is a single study and it needs replication, and it sits on top of thirty years of similar findings going back to the 'Muhammad Ali effect' of 1989: people concede they are not the smartest in the room far more readily than they concede they are not the kindest.

Projection: it's true of them. The fact is not refused but relocated. It is seen — vividly, with total perceptual conviction — in somebody else, where it can be condemned safely. The laboratory version of this is among the better-established findings in social psychology. Suppressing an unwanted trait in yourself makes that trait chronically accessible, and chronically accessible traits become the lens through which other people get read (Newman, Duff and Baumeister, 1997). Displacement has a meta-analysis behind it: across 49 articles and 82 independent comparisons, people provoked by someone they cannot retaliate against aggress instead against an innocent target, at $d = 0.55$ (Marcus-Newhall and colleagues, 2000). Everyone knows this one from the inside. It is the bad day at work that arrives home and lands on a child. This is the route Jung mapped most carefully, and the one his sentence describes: the world remade into the replica of one's own unknown face.

Inward: it's true, and I am unforgivable. The fact is accepted whole — and the self is attacked for it. This is the route that gets least public attention and does the most private damage, and the difference that governs it is the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt says *I did a bad thing* and points at repair. Shame says *I am a bad thing* and points nowhere, because there is no repair available for being what you are. In Tangney and Dearing's research programme, shame-proneness tracks with anger, hostility, and blaming others — and the crucial finding is the mediation: externalising blame is the *mechanism* by which shame turns into aggression (Stuewig and colleagues, 2010). Which means routes two and three are not really separate roads. Shame that cannot be borne becomes somebody else's fault. The person who cannot survive knowing they failed will find someone to blame for the failure, and will believe it. And when no one can be found — when the person is too decent, or too alone, or the fact concerns the one relationship they cannot afford to damage — the shadow has a third address, and it is the owner's own chest.

It is worth saying what this paper is *not* claiming, because the classical version of this idea overreached badly and deserved its critics. It is not claiming a hydraulic system in which a fixed quantity of psychic pressure must escape somewhere — that model, in its Freudian form, is not supported and this paper drops it (§9). It is not claiming that people are unaware of everything important about themselves. And it is not claiming that every disagreement is really projection, which would be unfalsifiable and obnoxious. The claim is narrower and better evidenced: that a specific class of self-knowledge — the kind that threatens a person's standing as a decent human being — reliably produces one of three predictable, measurable behaviours, and that we mostly mistake all three for something else.

4. The reason it keeps working

Here is the finding that turns this from a curiosity into a problem. In 1997 Fein and Spencer ran the experiment that anyone arguing about human nature should have to reckon with. They threatened people's self-image, gave them an opportunity to disparage a member of a stereotyped group, and then measured self-esteem. Two results. Threatened people disparaged more — which is the expected half. And the disparagement *restored their self-esteem*, with the effect running through the derogation itself (mediation $\beta = 0.37$). Putting the fact outside works. It genuinely makes you feel better.

That is why appeals to reason bounce off. Contempt is not a failure of information; it is a functioning painkiller. Anyone who has watched a person become slightly more themselves after a good session of running someone else down has watched the mechanism operate. The relief is real, it arrives fast, and it costs nothing up front — which are the three properties that make anything addictive. The bill comes later,

and it comes as isolation.

It also explains the escalation everyone has watched and few can account for. If contempt is analgesic, then tolerance develops. The dose that settled you last year does not settle you now; the enemy has to be a little worse than they were, the language a little stronger, the circle of the contemptible a little wider. This is visible in individuals over a decade and in political movements over an election cycle, and it is why the reasonable objection — *surely you can see they are not actually demons* — has no purchase. The person is not making a factual error you can correct. They are medicating something, and you are proposing to take away the medication without offering anything for the pain underneath. Of course they refuse. Anyone would.

This also explains why the disposal is so hard to see from inside. Nobody experiences it as disposal. From inside it feels like moral clarity — a sudden, energising perception of what is wrong with someone else. Jung put the whole mechanism in a sentence in 1951, and it is the sentence this paper opened with, now with its first half restored:

“The effect of projection is to isolate the subject from his environment, since instead of a real relation to it there is now only an illusory one. Projections change the world into the replica of one's own unknown face.”

— Aion, CW 9ii, par. 17

The last clause is the one that earns its keep. Not *a distorted world* — a world made into a replica of the part of yourself you do not know about. If that is even partly right, then a person's description of their enemies is data about the describer, and a culture's description of its enemies is data about the culture.

5. What it looks like in public

Scale the mechanism up and it stops being a private matter. Three research programmes, using different instruments, have measured the same distortion in American political life: partisans imagine roughly twice as many extremists on the other side as actually exist; they estimate the other side's hostility at more than double its real level; and each side reports that its own people act out of love while the other side's act out of hate.

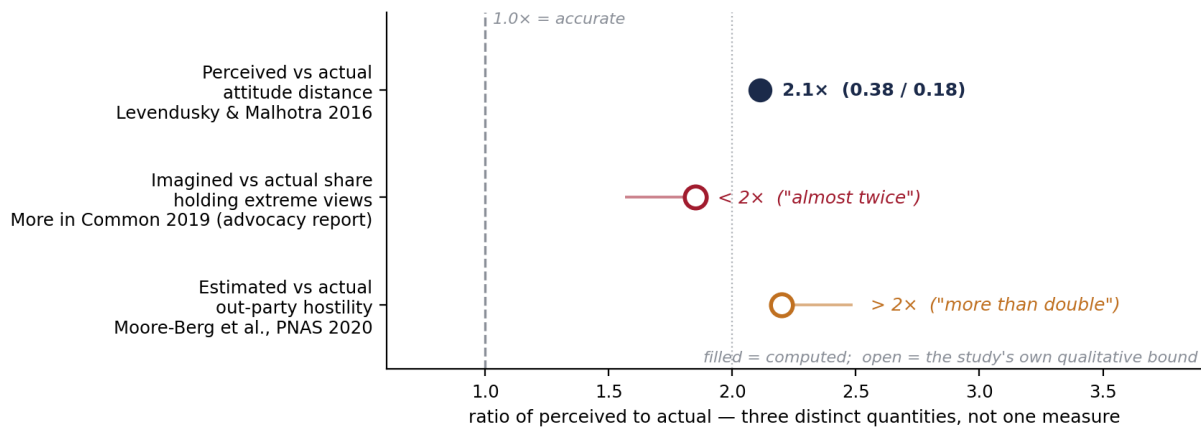


Figure 3. Errors clustering near a factor of two. Levendusky–Malhotra is computed from published values; the other two are the studies' own qualitative bounds, drawn as open markers. The figure shows misperception; §9 is candid about how much of it this paper's mechanism can claim.

Two details are worth holding onto. The distortion is *worst among the most engaged and best educated* — reading more political news makes people less accurate about their opponents, not more. And it is symmetrical: both sides do it, at similar magnitude, and both sides are certain they are the ones seeing clearly. That symmetry is not a diplomatic gesture in this paper. It is the finding.

Now the uncomfortable part, which is the part the author has been asked about and should answer straight. Take the most-discussed case in American life: a man loses an election and says for years that he won it, against the courts, against the counts, and against his own attorney general. Read psychologically rather than politically, that is not primarily a lie told to others — a lie requires knowing the truth and is exhausting to maintain for years. It is more economically read as route one. The fact — *I lost* — is not available, so reality is edited around it, and the edit recruits millions of people who also cannot bear the fact, because for them the intolerable version is *my country is not what I thought it was*.

Now run the identical lens the other way, which the paper's own thesis obliges it to do — and note that this is not a rhetorical courtesy, because the measurements in Figure 3 are symmetrical. Both sides overestimate the other's hostility by roughly the same factor. Both sides report that their own people act from love and the other side's from hate. Both sides get less accurate as they get more engaged. Whatever is happening, it is not happening to one party. The everyday version of route two on the political left is as recognisable as the election case on the right: the collective certainty that a designated person is not merely wrong but contemptible, the speed with which condemnation gathers around them, and — the tell — the *relief* in it. Fein and Spencer's finding does not check anyone's voter registration. A movement organised around not being one of the bad people has an unusually intolerable fact at its centre: *I am also capable of cruelty, and I have been cruel in the name of being good*.

A necessary caution about naming people at all. Nothing above is a diagnosis; no one in this paper has been examined, and the reader should be suspicious of anyone who claims otherwise about a public figure they have never met. What is being read is *conduct on the public record* — what was said, repeatedly, in front of everyone — against mechanisms established in laboratories with ordinary volunteers. The reason to use recognisable examples is not to diagnose them but to make the mechanism visible at a scale where readers can already see the behaviour clearly, before turning the same lens on themselves, which is the only turn that matters. A reader who finishes this section with a sharpened case against their opponents has read it

exactly backwards.

Symmetry of mechanism is not symmetry of consequence, and the paper will not pretend otherwise. That the same psychological route runs on all sides says nothing about whether two things do equal damage. Institutional position, power, and scale determine consequences, and those are political questions this paper has no special standing to settle. What it claims is narrower: the *machinery* is common property, nobody is exempt by virtue of being right, and a person who believes their own side is exempt has just demonstrated route one.

Jung watched this happen to a whole civilisation once, and wrote down what he saw. The sentence after the one this paper is named for reads: *when an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside, as fate... the world must perforce act out the conflict and be torn into opposing halves* (Aion, CW 9ii, par. 126). Torn into opposing halves reads like a caption for Figure 3. His student Erich Neumann, writing in 1949 in the immediate wreckage of Europe, made the social version explicit: a group maintains its self-image the same way a person does — by splitting off what it cannot bear about itself and discharging it onto a scapegoat — and no political arrangement holds until individuals learn to carry their own shadow. That is theory, not data, and it is graded as theory here. But it is the theory the measured symmetry above keeps agreeing with. (The popular version of par. 126 that circulates online — 'until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate' — is a modern paraphrase with no citation. The real sentence is better.)

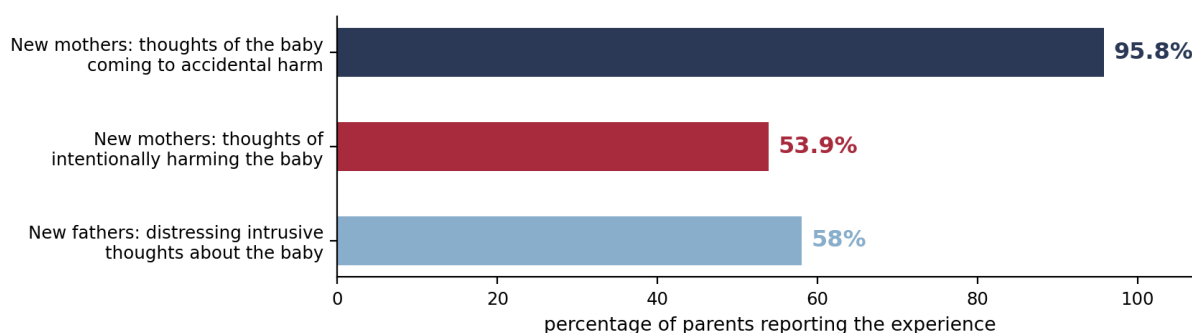
The third case is the one where the mechanism is sold commercially. A large online industry now teaches young men that their pain is women's fault. Its psychological structure is exact: the intolerable fact for a lonely, humiliated young man is *I am frightened, I am not wanted, and I do not know how to be a man in a way anyone respects*. That is unbearable, so it is converted into contempt for the group that is supposed to have withheld what he needed. The conversion has been produced in laboratory studies and does not require anybody's ideology: threaten a man's sense of masculinity experimentally and his derogation of women and of gay men measurably rises (Vandello and Bosson, 2008; Willer and colleagues, 2013 — standard citations, flagged in §9 as not independently re-verified in this paper's sweep). What the industry adds is not the mechanism but the delivery — it takes shame that arrives in private and returns it as a doctrine, at scale, with a payment processor. And it works, in Fein and Spencer's sense: the young man feels better. Then he feels worse, and needs more.

It is worth being precise about why the technology matters without overclaiming that it caused any of this. Affective polarisation rose most in the United States while *falling* in Germany and several other equally wired democracies, and when Meta ran genuine experiments during the 2020 election — switching tens of thousands of users to a chronological feed for three months — polarisation did not detectably move. The platforms did not invent the mechanism. What they did was discover its price. Each out-group word in a social media post raises the odds of it being shared by roughly 67 percent — the strongest engagement fuel yet measured. That is a market paying, continuously, for route two. It does not create the disposal; it subsidises it.

6. When there is nowhere to put it

The third route is the one this paper most wants to change, because it is the one where people die and where the remedy is least expensive. When a fact cannot be put outside — because the person is too decent, or too alone, or because the fact is about the one relationship they cannot afford to damage — it turns inward. And the culture supplies almost no help, because we have collectively agreed that certain facts are unspeakable.

Here is the clearest example in medicine, and the numbers are genuinely startling. In a 2024 study using structured clinical interviews rather than questionnaires, 95.8 percent of new mothers reported unwanted intrusive thoughts of their baby coming to accidental harm — and 53.9 percent reported unwanted intrusive thoughts of *intentionally* harming their baby. Not mothers who were ill. Mothers. More than half. Fathers have them too — around 58 percent of new fathers report distressing intrusive thoughts about the infant.



Unwanted intrusive thoughts of harm are not a warning sign of harm. In a 2026 study they showed no association with any harmful behaviour toward the infant.

Figure 4. Unwanted intrusive thoughts of infant harm among new parents. Sources: Collardeau et al., *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* (2024), structured interviews; Fairbrother & Abramowitz (2007). The prevalence is the point: this is a near-universal experience that almost nobody discloses.

Now the fact that ought to be on the wall of every maternity ward. These thoughts are **not** a warning sign. A 2026 study looked specifically at whether such thoughts predicted harmful behaviour toward the infant and found no association whatsoever. The feature that distinguishes them from anything dangerous is precisely the distress they cause — they are experienced as alien, repugnant, the opposite of what the person wants. The horror is the reassurance. And clinicians have known for years that asking about them does not plant them or increase risk: as the guidance puts it, there is no evidence that enquiring increases the likelihood of a parent acting on such thoughts.

So we have a near-universal experience, harmless in itself, that almost nobody will say out loud — because saying it out loud sounds like a confession of monstrosity, and because mothers reasonably fear that disclosure could cost them their children. The silence is not irrational. It is a correct reading of the social risk. And it means that the ordinary, benign version and the medically urgent version are hidden in the same place.

If you are a new parent having these thoughts. They are common, they are not a sign of what you will do, and telling someone does not create danger — asking about them is standard clinical practice precisely because it is safe. The distress you feel is the evidence that they are anxiety, not intention.

If you are close to a new parent. You can ask directly: *are you having any thoughts that frighten you?* The evidence says this does not increase risk, and it gives the ordinary version somewhere to go. If the answer includes losing touch with reality, not sleeping for days, or believing something is commanding them, that is a medical emergency — **call 911 or go to an emergency department tonight**, not tomorrow, and not to a support line.

The silence has a history, and naming it helps explain why it is so total. Rozsika Parker's work on maternal ambivalence makes the argument that matters here: ambivalence — the simultaneous love and hatred that virtually every mother feels toward a child who has consumed her sleep, her body and her autonomy — is not pathology but ordinary, and can even sharpen a mother's attention to what is actually happening between her and her child. On Parker's account the danger is not ambivalence; it is ambivalence that cannot be tolerated or thought about. Barbara Almond, writing as a psychiatrist, put the social fact bluntly: negative feelings about one's own children are not merely awkward to discuss, they are a powerful taboo. And Sharon Hays's account of intensive mothering supplies the standard against which every mother is measuring herself — child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, effectively unlimited in what it demands. Put those three together and you get the trap precisely: a normal experience, measured against an impossible ideal, producing a conclusion — *I am a monster* — that is both false and unspeakable. That is the intolerable fact in its purest form, and the culture manufactures it.

Because the medically urgent version is real, and it is where the argument stops being about culture and becomes about a hole in a system. Postpartum psychosis affects roughly 1-2 women per thousand births — more common than sudden infant death syndrome, at about 0.4 per thousand — and far less known to parents or to physicians. It does not require hallucinations. Its symptoms wax and wane, so a mother can be lucid and future-oriented at an appointment and acutely ill days later. It is a psychiatric emergency. And it is *highly treatable*: with lithium, antipsychotics, or ECT, recovery is the norm.

It is also not a distinct diagnosis in the DSM. Which sounds bureaucratic until you follow what it causes: no diagnostic entry means limited clinician training, limited public education, and limited research funding. Dr Veerle Bergink, who directs the women's mental health centre at Mount Sinai, states the consequence plainly: *we know that we don't train our doctors in it, that it's massively missed*. Psychiatry residents receive no training in it.

The consequences of that hole are not hypothetical, and they are not new. The pattern this section describes recurs across centuries, and the clearest fully-adjudicated modern case is a quarter-century old. In June 2001, Andrea Yates, a Houston mother of five, drowned her children during an illness her own record had announced in advance: postpartum depression after her fourth child, two suicide attempts, two psychiatric hospitalizations, a diagnosis of postpartum psychosis — and a psychiatrist who warned the family, on the record, that another pregnancy would risk certain psychotic relapse. A fifth child was conceived weeks after that warning. In 2002 a Texas jury convicted her of capital murder while the state sought her execution; the conviction was reversed on appeal in 2005 after the state's expert was found to have given false testimony; and in 2006 a second jury found her not guilty by reason of insanity. She has lived in a state psychiatric hospital ever since — and has routinely declined her own release hearings.

One thing must be said immediately, because the sequence of this section could otherwise plant exactly the fear it exists to remove. A parent who has frightening thoughts is not a parent on the way to harming anyone — the evidence above is unambiguous, such thoughts are near-universal and do not predict harm. What the Yates record describes is a severe, rare, and announced *illness*, which is a different thing entirely, and which almost never occurs and almost never ends that way. If you have read this far as a frightened new parent, the relevant number is the one in Figure 4, not the one in the archives.

Now watch what the public did with the case, because this is where the paper's two halves meet. The response was not mere attention; it was a storm of feeling that split cleanly in two. Scholars who analysed the press coverage found it organised into a pair of irreconcilable characters — the good mother destroyed by illness, and the monster (Barnett 2005; the 'mad versus bad' dichotomy that runs through this whole literature). The state sought death; the national press reframed the story around maternal mental health within days; medical associations welcomed the eventual verdict; and one of the country's senior forensic psychiatrists later remarked that it is rare for public opinion to shape a criminal trial's outcome, and that this was such a case. In this paper's terms, that storm is not noise around the event. It *is* the mechanism, operating at collective scale. More than half of mothers carry intrusive thoughts they believe are unspeakable; a mother who enacts the unspeakable becomes, in Gordon Allport's phrase, a living inkblot — a screen onto which an entire public's disowned material can be projected and punished, or defended with an intensity that is equally personal. Few of us have an interest in seeing such a case clearly, because seeing it clearly means locating the thoughts on a continuum that includes our own.

And here is the institutional proof that this storm is centuries old: England legislated about it a hundred years ago. By the early twentieth century, juries simply refused to convict mothers of murdering their infants, and the mandatory death sentence was commuted so routinely that judges called the ritual of pronouncing it the 'black-cap farce' — no woman had been executed in England for the murder of her own infant since 1849. The Infanticide Act of 1922, extended in 1938, resolved the farce by writing the psychology into law: a mother who killed her child within its first year, 'the balance of her mind disturbed' by childbirth's effects, would be treated as for manslaughter, not murder. Roughly two dozen countries now have such laws. The United States has none — a gap the legal literature has documented for twenty years. The Act's reach is narrow: it covers only a child in its first year, so it would have spoken to one count among five in the Yates case, not to the whole of it. But the principle it wrote into law in 1922 is the one an American courtroom in 2002 still lacked — that this class of killing is, at its root, an illness.

A firewall this paper will not cross. Naming an ordinary intrusive thought helps with ordinary intrusive thoughts. It is *not* a treatment for psychosis, where the required response is emergency psychiatric care. Both claims here are supported; they are separate claims, and blurring them would be clinically wrong and, in cases like these, cruel. Nor is talking a substitute for medicine, or a leaflet a substitute for talking: in one small trial, a 2.5-minute psychoeducational video produced no improvement in reported thoughts or in help-seeking attitudes, and the control group was actually *more* willing to raise the subject with a doctor. A brochure is not a cure. The argument here is about relationships and institutions, not pamphlets.

7. What makes a fact bearable

If the disposal is caused by the fact being unbearable, then the intervention is not to argue people out of the disposal. It is to make the fact bearable. That reframing is the practical heart of this paper, and it changes what you would build.

Naming it lowers the temperature. When people put a feeling into words, activity in the amygdala goes down and prefrontal regulatory activity goes up — the effect that gave Lieberman's 2007 paper its title, *Putting Feelings Into Words*. It is a small original study and one experiment found it worked on anger but not on shame, which matters given how much of this paper is about shame. Still, the direction is consistent across self-report, physiology and behaviour: the unnamed thing runs you; the named thing is something you have.

Being witnessed is the active ingredient. Writing privately helps — 146 randomised trials of expressive writing put the effect at about $r = 0.075$, which is real and small. Telling a person who does not flinch does considerably more, and it is the thing every therapeutic tradition has independently converged on. This is Bion's containment, and its operationalised descendant — mentalization-based treatment — has a randomised-trial base that Bion's own writing never had. The mechanism is not advice. It is that a fact which another person can hold without recoiling turns out to be a fact you can hold too.

It is worth being exact about what 'without recoiling' means, because it is the part people get wrong when they try to help. It does not mean approving. It does not mean reassuring quickly — rushing to *you'd never do that* is usually the listener managing their own discomfort, and it reliably ends the disclosure early. It does not mean advice, which converts the speaker's problem into the listener's competence. What it means is staying in the room, at ordinary volume, while something shameful is said, and continuing to treat the person as a person afterwards. That is the entire technology. Its scarcity is not a failure of compassion; most people flinch because they were never shown what not flinching looks like, and because they are afraid of doing it wrong — which is itself worth saying out loud, since a listener who knows they are allowed to be clumsy is far more use than one who avoids the conversation altogether.

Confronting your own inconsistency travels furthest. This is the most important experimental result in the paper, and it is hopeful. Bruneau, Kteily and Urbiola built an intervention that led people to notice their own hypocrisy — that they collectively blamed Muslims for acts they would never accept being blamed for themselves. Hostility fell ($d \approx 0.19$ – 0.29 , which is modest), and here is the part that matters: **the effect was still measurable a year later**. Set that against the polarisation literature's standing embarrassment — in a megastudy of 25 treatments across 32,059 people, effects decayed within two weeks to between 7 and 53 percent of their original size.

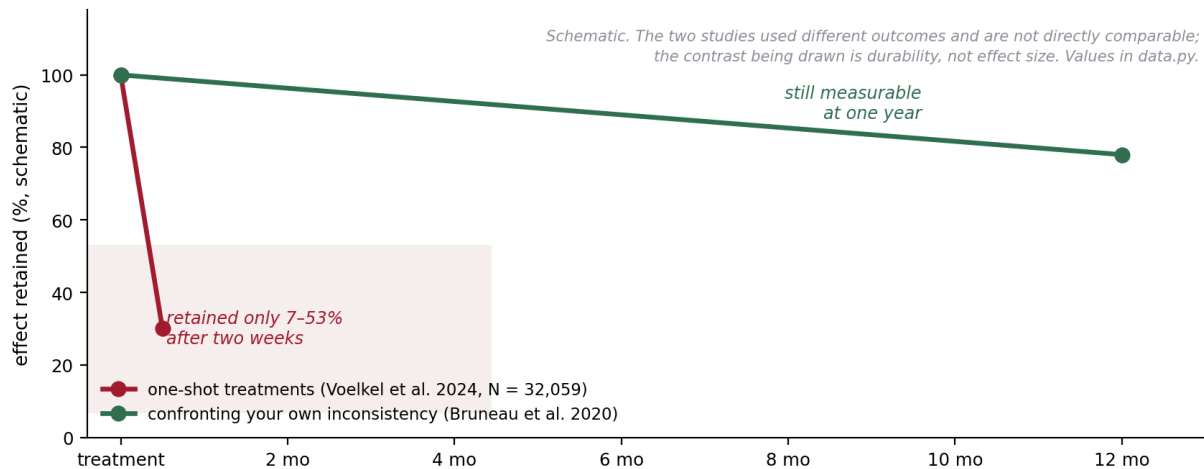


Figure 5. Durability, not effect size, is the frontier. Schematic: the two studies used different outcomes and are not directly comparable, and the Bruneau effects are small. What the contrast shows is that being handed a correction wears off, and noticing something about yourself does not — the difference this paper is built on.

Read those two results together and they say something specific. Being *told* your opponents are not what you think wears off in a fortnight. Catching *yourself* in an inconsistency lasts a year. Information delivered from outside is disposable. A fact you discovered about yourself is not, because it has already survived the only test that matters — you looked at it and did not die.

Jung had a name for the sustained form of this: the practice of catching your own projections, calling them home, and getting acquainted with what comes back. He called it individuation, thought it the work of a lifetime, and insisted its effect was the opposite of self-absorption — the person who takes their projections back is the one who can finally see other people as they are, rather than as screens. The modern findings above are, in effect, individuation caught on camera in fragments: a named feeling, a noticed inconsistency, a witnessed disclosure at a time.

Two more items belong in the toolkit with their honest gradings attached. Self-compassion — treating your own failure with the tone you would use on a friend — correlates strongly with lower psychopathology ($r = -0.54$ across 4,007 people), though a 2024 critique argues much of that association is driven by the reverse-scored self-criticism items in the scale, which would make it partly circular. The intervention trials fare better than the correlational literature. And emotional granularity — being able to tell irritation from humiliation from grief — buffers the path from anger to aggression, in a large study, though granularity was measured rather than manipulated, so causality is not established. None of this is a cure. All of it is cheap, and none of it is taught.

8. What to actually do

A paper that argues this and then recommends nothing has failed. Here is what follows, at three scales, with no claim that any of it is easy.

For a person

Treat strong reactions as information about yourself. The rule is not that your judgements are wrong. It is that disproportionate heat is a flag — the person who irritates you beyond what their behaviour warrants is worth ten minutes of curiosity. The useful question is not *am I right about them?* but *what would I have to admit about myself if I were wrong?* If that question produces a flinch, you have found something.

Name the feeling before you argue the case. Say what it is, in a word, to yourself or to someone. Naming reliably lowers the intensity, and intensity is what makes disposal feel like clarity.

Look for your own inconsistency, not your opponent's. It is the only intervention in this literature whose effects lasted a year.

Tell one person the thing you would least like known. Not publicly, and not to someone who will flinch. The evidence for being witnessed is stronger than the evidence for insight alone.

For anyone close to someone struggling

Ask directly, and do not flinch at the answer. The single most useful finding in this paper for ordinary people is that asking someone about frightening thoughts does not increase the risk of their acting on them. Your visible calm when they answer is the intervention.

Do not reassure too fast. Rushing to *you'd never do that* can end the conversation before the real thing gets said. Stay in it long enough for them to finish.

Know the line. Ordinary distressing thoughts, however horrifying, are common and not predictive. Losing touch with reality, going days without sleep, or believing something is commanding them is a medical emergency — not a conversation.

For institutions

The specific repairs this paper would pay for, in order of how cheap they are relative to what they prevent: **(1)** teach the prevalence of intrusive thoughts as standard antenatal and paediatric information, so the ordinary version stops hiding in the same place as the dangerous one; **(2)** give postpartum psychosis a diagnostic entry and a place in residency training, since a condition more common than SIDS should not be one that treating clinicians have never seen; **(3)** build the disclosure route so that saying the frightening thing does not credibly risk losing your children, because as long as it does, people will keep not saying it; and **(4)** in schools and civic programmes, teach the inconsistency-noticing skill directly, since it is the one with durable evidence behind it.

None of this requires anybody to become introspective by temperament, and the paper is not recommending that everyone enter therapy — most people will not, and the arithmetic of long-term individual treatment could never cover a population. What it recommends is closer to what public health did with physical exercise in the twentieth century: take a practice that was the eccentric discipline of enthusiasts, identify the transferable core, and install it as ordinary maintenance that people do without a special name for it. There is one existence proof that this can be done for inner work without credentialed gatekeepers, and it is hiding in plain sight: the twelve-step movement has run peer-carried and free for ninety years at the scale of millions, built around a searching moral inventory — an explicit ritual for saying the unbearable thing out loud to another person. Its clinical outcome literature is contested and this paper makes no treatment claim for it. What it demonstrates is narrower and sufficient: that ordinary people will do extraordinarily uncomfortable self-examination, for decades, if the container is voluntary, communal, free, and unshockable.

On cost, briefly, because it is the argument that persuades people who are unmoved by everything else here. The four repairs above are, in public-spending terms, close to free: a paragraph in antenatal material, a diagnostic entry, a change to a training curriculum, a unit in a school programme. Set that against what the present arrangement spends — on emergency admissions that a conversation eighteen months earlier would have prevented, on the criminal-justice handling of catastrophes at the end of long untreated illnesses, and on populations measurably lonelier and more distressed than they were a generation ago. This paper has no costed model for that and will not pretend to one. It notes only that the intervention side of the ledger is unusually cheap, and that the other side is being paid regardless — in a currency nobody has to sign for.

9. What I cannot prove

Everything above is argued with conviction because the author holds it. This section is where the conviction stops and the ledger opens. It is deliberately concentrated here rather than sprinkled through the argument, so that neither the argument nor the honesty gets diluted.

Shame drives blame outward	STRONG	Stuewig et al. 2010: externalization mediates shame -> aggression
Provocation displaces onto innocents	STRONG	Marcus-Newhall 2000 meta-analysis: d = 0.55, 82 effects
Threat -> derogation, and it works	MODERATE	Fein & Spencer 1997: mediation beta = .37; no multilab replication
Almost everyone thinks they are morally above average	MODERATE	Tappin & McKay 2017: d = 1.11, ~90% of people; single study N=270
Naming an emotion turns it down	MODERATE	Lieberman 2007 (N=30); reduced anger but not shame in one study
Confronting your own inconsistency reduces hostility for a year	MODERATE	Bruneau et al. 2020: d = .19-.29 at 12 months; Spain only
Writing it down helps	WEAK BUT REAL	Frattaroli 2006: 146 RCTs, r = .075 (d approx 0.15)
Naming a disowned trait reduces projecting it onto others	NO DIRECT EVIDENCE	the experiment this paper's thesis implies has not been run
Jung: a vast, active unconscious	KEPT (architecture)	10 bits/s conscious vs ~10^9 sensory intake (Zheng & Meister 2024)
Jung: collective unconscious as inherited images; types; synchronicity	REJECTED	no mechanism; MBTI ~50% retest flips; apophenia - conceded in text

The red 'no direct evidence' row is the honest one: the experiment this paper's central claim implies has not been run.

Figure 6. The paper's own load-bearing claims, graded. Sources and full status flags in data.py.

The central gap. The experiment this paper's thesis most directly implies — that naming a disowned trait in yourself reduces how much you attribute it to other people — **has not been run**. The research sweep looked for it specifically and did not find it. The nearest neighbours are real but adjacent: Bruneau's hypocrisy intervention (your own inconsistency, durable to a year) and Fein and Spencer (the reverse direction: threat increases derogation). Everything in §3 and §4 stands on that adjacent evidence. If someone runs the direct experiment and it comes back null, the argument of this paper is substantially wrong and I would want to know.

Claims that did not survive checking, and are therefore absent from this paper. Three, and they are all ones an earlier draft would happily have used. The terror-management finding that reminding people of death increases hostility to outsiders is not used, because a 1,550-participant multi-lab replication failed to reproduce it. The Freudian model of depression as anger turned against the self is not used as a mechanism, because even sympathetic psychodynamic reviewers do not sustain it — §3's inward route is described phenomenologically, not hydraulically. And the widely circulated figure that four percent of postpartum psychosis cases end in infanticide is not used, because the primary literature traces it to a misreading; the actual rate is far lower and concentrates in psychoses with prominent depressive features. That last one would have made §6 more dramatic. It would also have fed exactly the image of the dangerous mother the section exists to complicate.

Where the evidence is thin. Bion is theory, not data — cited for the concept, with mentalization-based treatment supplying the trials. The moral-superiority finding is one study of 270 people. Affect labeling's origin study had thirty participants and one follow-up found it did not work on shame. Bruneau's durable result is from Spain and its effects are small. Expressive writing is real but weak, and this paper has tried not to oversell it. The self-compassion correlation is contested on measurement grounds. The masculinity-threat studies in §5 — and, in the full edition, the maternal-ambivalence authorities of §6 — are standard citations that this paper's own sweep did not independently re-verify — the ideas are attributed and paraphrased, never quoted, and a reader who wants to lean on them should go to the books.

Where the argument could be wrong in kind. The strongest objection is that misperception at population scale may not be projection at all — that people may simply be reasoning sensibly from a media diet that oversamples the extremes, with no disowned material involved anywhere. That account explains the $\times 2$ pattern, and it explains why the most engaged are the most distorted, and this paper cannot rule it out. Two things keep projection on the table: the valence asymmetry — a skewed sample explains overestimating the other side's extremity but not the consistent finding that *my* side acts from love while *theirs* acts from hate — and Fein and Spencer's demonstration that derogation restores self-esteem, which no purely informational account predicts. Both are suggestive, not decisive.

On the case in §6. The Yates case is discussed because it is fully adjudicated — a 2006 verdict, two decades of settled record, and a scholarly literature about its press coverage — and because its outcome was decided by courts, not by this paper. Earlier drafts discussed a then-ongoing trial; the author removed it, correctly, on the grounds that a live case supplies drama a paper like this should not borrow and risks prejudging what a jury has not decided. The claims here about the public response rest on the cited press-analysis scholarship, not on this paper's own reading of the coverage; and the collective-shadow interpretation of that response is exactly that — an interpretation, offered as the paper's reading and consistent with, but not established by, the projection evidence of §3.

And a caution about the man whose vocabulary this paper borrows. Jung supplied the best available map of this territory and then failed his own test in the most public way possible: in 1934, in a journal he edited, he wrote that the 'Aryan' unconscious had a higher potential than the Jewish. That is a fact about the man and a warning about the practice — not, this paper insists, a data point in the theory's favour. A theory does not get to score its inventor's failure as evidence for itself. What it does establish is that intellectual mastery of this material confers no protection whatsoever, which is why §8 recommends practices and institutions rather than reading.

10. The ask

The reason to care about any of this is not theoretical elegance. It is that the disposal of unbearable facts is expensive, and we pay for it in a currency we do not track. We pay in people who cannot be told anything. We pay in the specific loneliness of having something true about yourself that you believe would end your standing if anyone knew. We pay in politics conducted between two groups who have each made the other into a replica of their own unknown face. And occasionally, rarely, catastrophically, we pay in the recurring case — a mother, an illness the textbooks barely teach, a century of juries and journalists torn in half by their own reflection — that whole countries have legislated about and ours has not.

The thing being asked for is smaller than it sounds. Not enlightenment, not a nation in analysis, not everybody becoming introspective. Just the working assumption that the fact you cannot bear to know about yourself is almost certainly ordinary — that it is the kind of thing that, said aloud to one steady person, turns out to be survivable and often unremarkable. Nearly everything people cannot say is something that half the room has also felt. More than half of new mothers have thought about harming their child, and virtually none of them ever will, and almost none of them know that about each other.

That is the whole argument. What cannot be borne gets disposed of, and the disposal is what does the damage — to the person, to whoever is nearby, and eventually to everyone. Facts become bearable when they are witnessed without recoil. Jung's name for the lifetime version of that work was individuation, and he was clear that it points outward, not in: *individuation does not shut one out from the world, but gathers the world to one's self* (CW 8, par. 432). We are not short of the knowledge. We are short of the places to do it.

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