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Research that matters.

TITLE: Society poorer when it's sneers all round

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In using ridicule as defence, critics can hurt more than their intended target, writes Clive Hamilton.

It is risky talking publicly about our deeper personal experiences, but when we do we usually find an eager audience among those who have had similar experiences and been reluctant to share them.

Nearly 20 years ago I went through a process that is sometimes referred to as "the dark night of the soul". It is a phase of spiritual life that many people experience. The phenomenon is well known in the Catholic Church in all traditions.

For example, in letters published after her death, Mother Teresa described her own dark night in which she was tormented by doubts about God. The dark night has often been explored in literature, by Tolstoy and Hermann Hesse, for example, and in art by painters such as Brett Whiteley.

For many the process is frightening because it means letting go of the ego's control over one's life, including opening oneself up to dark forces. The latter is sometimes known in depth psychology as the "confrontation with the shadow". In my own case, the confrontation came to a head in a waking dream or visualisation that took the form of an unpleasant character who announced himself as Jacob.

To make progress on the journey it is crucial to embrace rather than repudiate these dark forces that are in all of us, and to do so by entering into a dialogue with them.

In 1994 I was asked to speak on Caroline Jones's long-running ABC radio program *The Search for Meaning*. I agreed, although with some trepidation. In the conversation with Jones I spoke about some of the things that had happened to me, including the confrontation with the shadow.

My doubts about appearing on the program were assuaged by the warm response I received from the public when it went to air. Many people contacted me to say what a relief it was to hear someone talking about these things in public as they themselves had struggled alone.

Nevertheless, one day several years later I received a couple of phone calls from people in Federal Parliament urging me to turn on the radio and listen to question time in the Senate. I was dismayed to hear the Liberal senator Warwick Parer in the midst of a nasty personal attack in which he ridiculed my revelations on radio. He had great sport with my mention of the figure of Jacob.

It was a premeditated attempt at character assassination in response to a Dorothy Dixier asked by the Liberal senator Eric Abetz. The Government was upset at my criticisms of its abysmal failure to take global warming seriously. Parer, often referred to at the time as the minister for coal, had no defence. So in a tactic that has become all too common, he tried to trash the critic under cover of parliamentary privilege.

At the urging of other members of Parliament I wrote to the Privileges Committee, which has members from all sides. Recognising the smears for what they were, the committee agreed to incorporate my reply into *Hansard*, the official record of Parliament.

Last year, the Privileges Committee agreed again to incorporate a reply into *Hansard* when Abetz used the same material to attempt to discredit me, this time in response to a Dorothy Dixier from Senator Bill Heffernan. The dirt file was dusted off after I argued that continuing drought assistance to some farmers is counterproductive and it would be better to help them off the land.

Two weeks ago the Government conceded the point by offering "exit grants" for just that purpose. I'm not holding my breath for an apology from Abetz or Heffernan. Head-kickers rarely say sorry.

In these pages last Saturday Gerard Henderson deployed the same grubby tactics used by the senators from the Liberal Party, with which he is so closely associated. Henderson's attack was ostensibly in response to my claims that Australia is in the grip of an overconsumption epidemic.

After criticising my jocular call for a new organisation called Overconsumers Anonymous (Henderson is notoriously humourless) he went on to ridicule my "dark night" comments of 1994.

Henderson is entitled to disagree with the overconsumption argument, although if he were serious about debating it he would need to explain why the Reserve Bank governor has issued increasingly strong warnings about growing consumer debt, and how it is that the Federal Government itself has acknowledged that record house prices are due to inflated aspirations. But his sneering attacks do nothing to advance the debate. They do, however, serve as a salutary warning to anyone thinking of discussing their personal experiences in public.

For example, the shift in attitudes to mental illness in recent years has in large part been due to the courageous decisions of people such as the actor Garry McDonald and the football commentator Craig Hamilton (no relation) to talk openly about their personal struggles.

Henderson's sneers a week ago are equivalent to ridiculing the deeply personal revelations of McDonald and Hamilton.

Openness is a virtue in public life. What an impoverished world it would be if everyone remained silent for fear of attempts to turn their honesty against them by people such as Henderson.

Clive Hamilton is the executive director of the Australia Institute.