

Dreaming with Devils

By

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I'm sure one of the reasons I eventually became a Universalist is because I saw *The Exorcist* when I was 9-years-old and it scared the hell out of me! So, thank you Linda Blair for setting me upon my spiritual path at such an early age. My parents didn't pay for sitters, so if they wanted to see a movie they loaded us all into the station-wagon and took us with them to the Drive In. It may not have been child abuse, but taking four kids, ages 4 through 11, with them to see what many still consider the scariest movie ever was pretty irresponsible. I joke about it now, but the experience terrified and traumatized me. I spent most the time with my hands over my eyes, my younger brother and I slept together for months afterward, and I couldn't force myself to watch the film again until I was in my mid-thirties.

Not long after seeing *The Exorcist*, my father thought it a good idea to have my brother and I attend the neighborhood Baptist church to "represent the family," as he put it. During our first visit we were sent to Sunday School where the teacher presented a timeline of the future according to the Book of Revelation. While explaining the graphic timeline, which spanned an entire wall, he told us there would come a time during the "Millennium" in which God would release Satan from his chains in Hell to roam and rule the Earth while torturing and tormenting his subjects. There was even a picture of the Devil inflicting his anguished victims with painful wounds and sores.

I now know this was all pure fantasy, recent elections notwithstanding, but back then, being a kid, hearing an adult explain the teachings of a book said to be infallible, I believed it as true as it was terrifying. "You mean, even if we do what God wants," I asked, "the Devil can still torture us?"

"Yes," the Sunday School teacher explained, "to test our faith." It hardly seemed fair, and, like most tests I took in those days, it's one I was sure I'd fail. Between being chained to a dungeon wall and tortured by a demon, or stroking Satan's ego a little, I think I'd choose the latter. "Sure, Satan, you're the best. So what if the Bible says Yahweh is the real winner? The Bible is fake news."

As one who went on to become a Southern Baptist and to prepare for the Baptist ministry, I continued to believe in a personal Devil, and the power of his legion of demons to tempt, possess, and torment people, well into my youth and young adulthood. As I look back on all of it, the ability of our society to perpetuate such nonsense by twisting the tender minds of children in ways that may traumatize and shape them for a lifetime, is truly diabolical. Fortunately, I outgrew such insanity during my college education, but, the wounded child in me remained paralyzed with such fear for a lot longer.

Part of my recovery from Christian Fundamentalism involved my delving into Jungian psychology and a lot of other interpersonal work during my twenties and thirties, which taught me the importance of facing my fears, and that the source of those fears and anxieties

are often misunderstood, suppressed, yet important parts of myself. This point was brought home for me when I saw yet another psychological horror film about demons, *Jacob's Ladder*, released in 1990, when I was only 26. Peggy and I had gone to theater to see it with another couple, and I remember all of us being completely confused by it, and not liking it at all, right up until the final two minutes when the entire thing is suddenly transformed from a tale of darkness, demons, and torment, into what had been a story of angels and light all along. Today, *Jacob's Ladder* remains one of my top ten favorite films.

Spoiler alert for those who haven't seen it. The movie is about a Vietnam Veteran with PTSD, Jacob Singer, who is trying to reestablish a normal life after the war. Before long, Jacob begins seeing demons and finds himself living in two different realities, not knowing which one is real. Were in not for Louis, his kindhearted chiropractor, Jacob would have no solace from the horror of his hellish hallucinations. After Louis rescues him from a hospital where he's being restrained and tormented, Jacob tells the cherubic chiropractor that he feels like he's in hell.

"You ever hear of Meister Eckart?"¹ Louis asks, "...Eckart saw hell too."² After positioning Jacob for another spine adjustment, he continues. "You know what he said? The only thing that burns in Hell is the part of you that won't let go of your life; your memories, your attachments. They burn 'em all away. But they're not punishing, he said. They're freeing your soul. Other side okay." He helps Jacob turn, then *crack*, another adjustment. "Wonderful," Louis continues, "The way he sees it, if you're frightened of dying and holding on, you'll see devils tearing your life away. But if you've made peace then the devils are really angels freeing you from the earth. It's just a matter of how you look at it, that's all. So don't worry, okay? Relax. Wiggle your toes."³

In the end, Jacob is in his ex-wife's apartment, looking at the old photos of their life together, including a picture of their deceased son, Gabe, who'd been killed by a car before the war. He hears the familiar tinkling of a music box coming from the hallway and steps into the corridor, where the music abruptly stops. He see's someone standing beneath the stairwell down the hallway. "Who is it? Whose there?"⁴

As he hesitantly steps toward the figure, he realizes it's Gabe, that the demon he'd been so afraid to face, was his precious child, holding the music box that had appeared in some of his nightmares. "Come on Dad..." Gabe says, taking Jacob by the hand and leading him up the stairs. "You know what we've got? a sandbox just like the Willinston's, only it's bigger and the sand's all white... and my parakeet. Remember, the one grandma let out of the cage? He's okay. And he's talking now. He knows my name."⁵

¹ Rubin, Bruce Joel, *Jacob's Ladder*, Applause Theatre Book Publications, New York, NY, 1990, p. 74.

² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111f.

Gabe's voice trails off as they're both embraced in a blinding light. After a moment the light flashes off to reveal an army doctor removing his surgical mask with a somber expression. "He's gone." We suddenly see Jacob Singer deceased on the operating table. He'd never left Vietnam. He's been on that operating table the entire time, struggling to live, struggling to let go. "An orderly wheel's Jacob's body past rows of other doctors and nurses fighting to save lives. A young Vietnamese boy pulls back a screen door to let them out of the tent. It is a bright, fresh morning. The sun is rising."⁶

Bruce Joel Rubin, the screenwriter of *Jacob's Ladder*, says, "It began as a dream: A subway late at night; I'm traveling through the bowels of New York City."⁷ There are only a few people on the train, and he's seized by a terrible loneliness. Moments later, he gets off the train and finds himself on the subway platform. All the exits are locked, and he feels he'll never see daylight again. "My only hope is to jump onto the tracks and enter the tunnel, the darkness. The only direction from there is down. I know the next stop of my journey is hell."⁸ Rubin woke up in a sweat, panting, with the singular thought, "What a great idea for the opening of a movie."⁹

I don't recall if I had any dreams after watching *Jacob's Ladder*, but I was so moved by its message, that *demons are what angels look like through the eyes of fear*, that I decided it was time for me to face the demon that had frightened me so long ago. I decided to get my feet wet first, however, by renting the newly released, *Exorcist III*, on VHS, starring George C. Scott, which had also come out in 1990. It'd been seventeen years since the original exorcist, a catholic priest, invited the demon possessing a little girl into himself, then leaped out an upper story window to free her, plummeting to his own death, or, so we thought. In the sequel, however, he's survived, and has been in a coma in a cell at a psychiatric hospital, until he awakens, still possessed. It wasn't a very good movie, and I fell asleep watching it, during which I had an amazing dream;

I find myself descending a stairwell into a dungeon where a demon possessed child has been locked away in a cold dank cell. I enter the room, and a moment later become paralyzed as the boy tries to take over my body. I struggle to regain control and start to wrestle with him. To my surprise, he doesn't have supernatural strength. Our wrestling turns into an embrace, and I invite him to leave with me. As we start up the stairwell, two police officers try to stop us, but I use a few aikido moves against them, and the boy and I go up into the light. We soon encounter a family walking toward us, an African family who I recognize as my own. They're all happy because they haven't seen me for a while. Our mother, a beautiful round-faced woman embraces me. I tell them I have a surprise, step aside, and reveal my brother, her long lost son, standing behind me. She weeps as the entire family surrounds him with love. I awake.

⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

⁷ Ibid., p. 150.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

As I reflected on this dream, I felt the possessed boy represented the part of me that had been traumatized all those years ago by my fear of demons and devils. But upon facing this fear, by descending into the unconscious dungeon where I grapple with the suppressed a part of myself, and realized there's nothing supernatural, or unnatural, about him at all, that he is only human. By wrestling with him, I'm able to embrace this lost part of myself, of my own humanity.

That's when I realized the *Exorcist* wasn't a movie about a possessed child, but about a little girl oppressed by her culture. In the movie, the only signs proving she's possessed are just normal childhood behaviors, exaggerated as they are. She dislikes the man her newly divorced mother is dating. She urinates when she feels like it, she spits up her split pea soup, and doesn't like religion being shoved down her throat. Isn't this way of blowing things out of proportion what many of us experienced from adults during our own childhood and adolescence? When we resisted potty training, being told when and when not to let go? When we were called terrible for throwing tantrums, for saying, "No," or being angry, when we were barely two? When we were told to eat what's in front of us and to like it? To take it all in without question, without talking back? And when all this happens, we are forced to conform, afraid of being punished, or of losing the love of those we depend upon, a part of us gets locked away, the spontaneous authentic part, the original us, and we learn, instead, to be the person we are expected to be, rather than the person we are deep down inside.

Psychologist Alice Miller once spoke of, "The Poor Rich Child," referring to those who often come from well-off families and supportive parents, yet, nonetheless, suffer severe depression. "Quite often," she explained, "we are faced here with gifted patients who have been praised and admired for their talents and their achievements. Almost all of these analysands were toilet-trained in the first year of their infancy, and many of them, at the age of one and a half to five, had helped capably to take care of their younger siblings."¹⁰ This doesn't mean we don't have to learn when to hang on and when to let go, a lifelong learning that begins with potty training, and may not end, as *Jacob's Ladder* suggests, until our final moments. Yet, as Alice Miller discovered, if we're forced to start holding on too early, to grow up and get control of ourselves, the oppression becomes suppression, and can even turn into depression. That's why so many of us search for something more, so we can find what's been there all along, the part of us we've repressed that belongs in the light, our humanness embraced by humanity. We say we're trying to find or discover ourselves, and when we do, we call it an awakening, because, like the little boy in my dream, the part that has been paralyzed and asleep emerges from the unconscious to be embraced in the light.

Society, represented by the law enforcers in my dream, my internalized censors, may try to keep us down, but true humanity, represented by the African family, by the first peoples, the original people, our genesis, the Great Mother of us all, embraces all that makes us human. She accepts those things we learned to be ashamed of when we were young, the thoughts and feelings and desires we're supposed to control and suppress. Such suppression, however, is hard to overcome, because it's reinforced by our shame-based culture, especially

¹⁰ Miller, Alice, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Basic Books, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1979, 1990. p. 5.

by its fall/redemption theology that insists we're born in sin, fallen, children of the devil, and need its rules and commands to help us control ourselves.

To indicate just how turned around our culture has become, the Greek word from which "demon" comes, *daimon*, simply means, "guiding spirit," or "guardian angel." So Jacob Singer's chiropractor has it right, demons and angels are the same thing, "It's just a matter of how you look at it." This is also the use of the word in Phillip Pullman's award-winning children's novel, *The Northern Lights*, in which everyone is born with a daemon, in the form of an animal spirit, that accompanies them through life. In the book, however, the Church, which enforces a theocratic society, has invented a technology called, "intercision," to sever the bond between children and their daemons, their very souls, so that, ostensibly, they can lead happier lives, though they really become morose, depressed shells of who they once were and who they are meant to be.

It's the same with *The Exorcist* movie, in which the church and its priests rush in to save a little girl from acting childishly. "Grow up, *Attende Dominee*." "Accept what you're told, *Attende Dominee*." "Don't talk back, *Attende Dominee*." "Don't question the authorities, *Attende Dominee*." "Don't let loose and let go, *Attende Dominee*." Above all, "don't express who you really are, *Attende Dominee*." There, you've just been exorcised. That's why the word *demon* and *demonstrate* share the same root, because expressing who we are, our originality, our authenticity, threatens our established ways and institutions. Yet, in protecting the status quo, we must demonize our very souls, turning the very word that means, *soul*, "demon," into something horrifying. "The soul of each of us," psychologist James Hillman writes, "is given a unique daimon before we are born, and it has selected an image or pattern that we live on earth."¹¹ Yet, as Erich Fromm once said, "It is the aim of education to teach the individual not to assert [oneself]."¹² Our inculturation is often an intercision.

This is what the dream I had was getting at too, that a part of me had leaped out the window with that priest during the trauma of watching, *The Exorcist*, 17 years earlier, and had also been locked up in a cell, unconscious, all those years. But it wasn't something to fear, or something unnatural, it was my very soul who had been locked away, and I had to embrace it, and to let it out in order to become fully human and fully myself.

Several years later, in 1999, *The Exorcist* was re-released in theatres for its 25th anniversary. I decided it was time to take the plunge. I took an afternoon off work and found it showing in the biggest theatre in town. I entered, and to my chagrin, was the only person in the entire room. Nevertheless, I decided to go for the gusto and went down to the middle row, into the center seat. There I sat, the entire time, all by myself. I watched the movie, but this time wasn't afraid. All I felt was compassion for the little girl who had been misunderstood and demonized by her parents, society, and the church authorities.

¹¹ Hillman, James, *The Soul's Code*, Random House, New York, NY, 1996, p. 8.

¹² Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965, p. 258.

That night I had another dream. This time I entered a school cafeteria where everyone was being terrified by the possessed girl from the film. She was inside, in a rage, throwing things around and hurling obscenities. Rather than being afraid, I approached, hugged her, and asked her to sit with me during lunch, which she did. Even though she kept the same demonic face as in the movie, we enjoyed each other's company and all I felt was love and compassion for her. I think my response in this dream demonstrates the awareness I'd gained that those we've been taught to fear because they are different, different than what the status quo expects them to be, are not demons, but people who have been demonized. Just as we must become whole as individuals by reconnecting with our own severed souls, our own daemons, we cannot be truly whole, unless, like our Great Mother, we embrace the souls of all folk, especially those who have been demonized. As in my dream, like Jesus, we must invite the outcasts, the sinners, the unclean, the demon possessed to sit at our welcome table and eat together.

Today, as I look back on all this, I'm astounded and moved by this paradox, that the stuff of our nightmares can become the seeds of our dreams for a better world—a more whole, and inclusive, and compassionate world; and the thing we're taught to fear possessing us, is but the fear of fully possessing ourselves, of fully inhabiting our lives, of having our own authentic beliefs and ways; and that our demons in the dark are really our angels of light, "It's just a matter of how you look at. That's all. So relax. Wiggle your toes."