

Embracing Our Demons

By

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Philip Pullman's award-winning book series, *His Dark Materials*, is about a parallel world that is strictly controlled by an authoritarian church called the Magisterium. In this alternate reality, everybody is born with and accompanied by an animal companion that reflects their innermost nature. These animals can speak and offer guidance to the individuals they are attached to. They are called dæmons, from the Latin and Greek words *daimon* and *daemon*, meaning "deity" or "genius," but are better translated to mean, "guiding spirit," or, "guardian angel." The Greeks did not think of demons as evil spirits, but as some sort of invisible guide each of us is born with, a lesser spirit, or smaller divinity to help us divine the right path. Nowadays we might just call it conscience, passion, or a sense of purpose.

In his book, *The Soul's Code*, Psychologist, James Hillman says the Greeks believed that "The soul of each of us is given a unique daimon before we are born, and it has selected an image or pattern that we live on earth."¹ In this sense, he says, "your daimon is the carrier of your destiny."² We won't go into the philosophical question of whether or not there is any such things as destiny to begin with. For the thought that each of us is accompanied or possessed by a demon need not sound any more magical that it should be frightening. The Greeks were merely giving a name to something humans commonly experience and that we are nowadays satisfied to give names like conscience, drive, passion, purpose, intuition, and instinct.

We might also call this demon distinction, originality, exceptionalism, or just plain, individuality. It is no wonder the ancient Greeks, who recognized this individual spark, the thing that makes each of us unique, are also those who gave us the principles of reason, freedom, and tolerance that would become the foundations of our modern democracy and belief that every individual counts and ought to be free to express themselves and pursue their own purposes. In fact, the Roman word for this same phenomenon is *genius*, referring to original thinking. It also shares the same root as the words, "gene" and "genetic." Genius, pronounced "genie" in Arabic, described as a guiding spirit among the ancients, is nowadays described as genetic code. And, thanks to sexual reproduction, the genetic code is slightly unique for each one of us. In this sense, the Greeks were right, each of us is born with our own genius, the thing that makes us unique and helps determine who we are to become.

Genius and genetics also shares the same root at *Genesis*, which refers to our origins and originality. By now you should be seeing the picture, that the original idea of demons and demon possession was not horrifying, as it is today, but something that referred to the originality, genius, and uniqueness of each person. This recognition is the origin of the Renaissance and Enlightenment principles that gave birth to our modern notion of the worth and dignity of every person.

So what the hell happened—pun intended—to make our demons the stuff of nightmares and horror stories? In Philip Pullman's alternate reality, this is the direct fault of the authoritarian church that seeks to restrain individual expression and divergence from its sanctioned norms. In

His Dark Materials, the Magisterium is behind the abduction of children whom it experiments on in an attempt to successfully separate them from their dæmons without killing them. This painful procedure, described as cutting and tearing them apart, is called “intercision.” The separation from one’s dæmon normally means the immediate death of both, but through these cruel experiments the Church found a means of allowing the individual to go on living, though without any reason or wish to go on living. They become solemn, sickly, and hollow inside. As Pullman writes, “A human being with no dæmon was like someone without a face, or with their ribs laid open and their heart torn out: something unnatural and uncanny that belonged to the world of night-ghasts, not the waking world of sense.”³

The metaphor is obvious here, the dæmon in Pullman’s story is analogous to the human soul, or, if that word is still too esoteric, let’s just use the Greek word for soul, *psyche*. These authoritarian forces, that seek to get us under control beginning in childhood, be they religious, governmental, or social, can have a devastating psychological impact, disconnecting us from our own authenticity, from others, and even from our own world in the process. In *His Dark Materials*, the force that connects us to others and to the world and to all that exists is a mysterious substance called Dust, the thing most dreaded by the authorities, the awareness that we are all connected. When Lyra, the story’s young protagonist, confronts a woman who works for the Magisterium about this cruelty, the woman tries to reassure her:

“Darling, no one would ever dream of performing an operation on a child without testing it first. And no one in a thousand years would take a child’s dæmon away altogether! All that happens is a little cut, and then everything’s peaceful. Forever! You see, your dæmon’s a wonderful friend and companion when you’re young, but at the age we call puberty, the age you’re coming to very soon, darling, dæmons bring all sort of troublesome thoughts and feelings, and that’s what lets Dust in. A quick little operation before that, and you’re never troubled again. And your dæmon stays with you, only...just not connected. Like a... like a wonderful pet, if you like. The best pet in the world! Wouldn’t you like that?”⁴

If there is truth to this metaphor, and I think there is, it also explains why one of the most terrifying horror films in history, *The Exorcist*, is also about a little girl accused of being possessed by an evil demon. She, like Jesus, was even accused of being possessed by Beelzebub, the Devil himself, “the ruler of demons.”⁵ And what evidence is there that 12-year-old Regan MacNeil, also on the cusp of adulthood, is possessed by the Devil? She urinates on the floor, throws tantrums, talks back to adults, doesn’t like going to church, and spits up her split-pea soup. In other words, she’s acting like a child, albeit in exaggerated ways to make the story all the more terrifying.

Yet it’s still something to ponder—that a child behaving like a child has become the most horrifying monster in Hollywood history. Talk about projecting the fears of the status quo, of the authorities in our lives who want to get us under control as early as possible before we can grow up and rebel, before the playful pup becomes a lone wolf. We have to be made afraid of disobeying before it becomes too late. That’s why *The Exorcist* is so terrifying, because as kids we were taught that being authentic, having our own authentic beliefs, questioning the authorities in our lives, talking back, means punishments like rejection, being left out, losing the approval and the love of others. And being alone and left out terrifies us most of all.

Freedom and belonging exist, at best, in constant tension and, being social animals dependent upon the companionship of others and the safety of community, most of us are willing to sacrifice freedom in order to belong. But, in so doing, we lose our own authenticity, the cutting away of our dæmon. As social psychologist Erich Fromm says, we choose to succumb to authoritarianism with one aim in mind, “to get rid of the individual self, to lose oneself; in other words, to get rid of the burden of freedom.”⁶ Children who disobey remind us of what might have happened if we had not allowed the authorities to guide and shape us, instead of trusting the daemon we were born with.

We might think the belief in evil demons and demon possession is a Medieval madness, but American’s found *The Exorcist* so terrifying that after its release in 1973, the number of exorcisms conducted in the U.S. rose 50 percent and today 70 percent of Americans believe in the Devil and demon possession.⁷ In 1975 psychiatrist James Bozzuto “published an article about several alleged cases of ‘cinematic neuroses,’ where after viewing [*The Exorcist*] people believed they were possessed by the devil.”⁸ These numbers indicate many in our society are terrified of demons and demon possession, which, as we have seen, etymologically means they are terrified of their own authenticity, of pursuing the meaning and purpose they were born to fulfill before the Magisterium intercized or exorcized their dæmons. In so doing, sadly, tragically, they are then doomed to fail at life, if, as Fromm says, the whole meaning of life is to “develop into the individual one potentially is,”⁹ and “The duty to be alive is the same as the duty to become oneself.”¹⁰

We have come to fear being possessed by demons rather than not being possessed by them. We’re not afraid, that is, of living as wasted or inauthentic life. Rather, we dread the possibility of reuniting with the guardian angel that accompanied us into this world, the genie who was present at our genesis, the genes that makes us uniquely individual, the unencumbered psyche, the free spirit, or what have you. We should fear failing in our duty to ourselves, to become authentic persons free to speak for ourselves, and think for ourselves, and act of our own volition.

Of course, doing so is easier said than done. We grow to fear freedom and authenticity more than almost anything else. Many would rather watch the entire world burn than to defy the status quo, which is literally happening today. They will deny the truth that is not only staring them in the face, but is punching them in face, if that’s what it takes to belong, to be included, to feel secure. We’ll accept almost anything short of becoming demonized by others, or, in modern parlance, canceled. We’re demonized when society sees that we are animated by our own volition, that there is no puppet master pulling our strings. Animate, comes from the Greek word meaning soul, just as spirit comes from the word meaning breath and wind, as in inspiration. These, like the demon, are invisible forces that move us and make us alive, not the external authorities that tell us what to do.

This, I would suggest is why so many found *The Exorcist* so horrifying, because, going along with the authorities, with the status quo, with a society that doesn’t tolerate differences, differentiation, or dissention, frightens us. As an audience, by and large, we took the side of the Magisterium—we demonized the child—and agreed she needed to undergo an exorcism, an intercision, a cutting and tearing away of her dæmon so that it will no longer possess her and she will be left empty, and shallow, and go on to live an inauthentic and unfulfilling life.

The belief in demons is but a projection of our own fears onto others. There may be no such thing as demon possession, not in the horrific Hollywood sense, but there are plenty of people who have been demonized by a society of emptied individuals who are terrified of being truly free because being truly free risks becoming truly alone: not only without companionship, but also without the security and opportunities society offers. To risk being free means risking one's wellbeing and livelihood. So we would rather join the demonizers than to be ranked among the demonized.

Yet our lives are never purely one way or the other. It's not as if there are some people who are entirely social and others, a few, who are entirely free. Finding the right balance, a healthy balance, between these most basic yet divergent of human needs, is the dance we do, the struggle we must or, at least, should be engaging in. If we aren't, then we are most likely to have given up on freedom and, thus, our own authenticity altogether. For freedom is always a struggle to achieve and can be only partially experienced and then for only short periods. If we choose not to engage in this struggle, then it is always easier to choose belonging by surrendering our ability to think, and speak, and act of our own volition. Those who fall into this class, and there are far more of them than not, have been tricked and trick themselves into thinking they authentically think, speak, and act, but they only parrot the party line of whatever group they have sacrificed so much to belong to. Nowadays, they only repeat what they hear on Faux News and BSNBC, or what they've read on social media, or have been steered toward by a computer algorithm designed to keep their attention, rather than the royal decrees and religious dogmas issued in the past.

But this has always been so. The idea that every individual has worth and dignity and, therefore, ought to be free and have a choice in how one is governed, is a relatively new idea that is far from dominant in the world. Only recently I was speaking with a man from India who argued that individuality is an illusion, that we are all one and exist only in relationship. As a student of both mysticism and Eastern philosophy, I understand where he is coming from, but, as product of Western society and a student of its philosophy, I do not wholly agree.

In our Western individualistic society, we are likely to introduce ourselves by talking about what we do for a living or what we like to do for fun. But in societies that are more collectivistic, individuals are more likely to introduce themselves by saying what group, or clan, or tribe they are part of. The idea that every individual counts (though pondered at times throughout human history) didn't begin to take root until the 19th century, toward the end of the Enlightenment, which led to concepts like the Rights of Man and Democracy. As political economist Francis Fukuyama says, this is when "societies that only recognized an elite few were replaced by ones that recognized everyone as inherently equal."¹¹

So the idea of individualism and free societies is still budding, and still resisted by our species of Ape that has long looked toward the authoritarian silverbacks to tell us what to do and how to think and what to say, in exchange for their protection and companionship of the group. This, to me, is what makes Western culture so unique: its struggle to fashion successful individualistic societies based on freedom and mutual respect and cooperation. So far, we have to give this endeavor mixed reviews. For some, freedom means being entirely self-centered, even at the expense of others, which manifests as not wanting to pay a fair share of taxes, or not having to

adhere to regulations requiring us to care for the wellbeing of others and the environment when pursuing our own interests, or not getting vaccinated in order to end a pandemic threatening us all. But this is a rather childish idea of freedom that comes from a narcissistic sense of privilege, not from the recognition of individual worth and dignity. Free people don't abuse their freedoms by doing things that disregard the rights and welfare of others, the freedoms of others. Free people desire to be free because they believe in individual worth and in the freedom for all above all else, theirs included, but not theirs alone.

And so this fledgling experiment still seeks for its roots to take firm hold and for it to truly grow and flourish upon the Earth. But for this to ever happen more of us must find the courage to be free and, from this, the desire for all persons to be genuinely free. Instead of demonizing those who speak, and think, and act freely, we must encourage and celebrate their uniqueness, their ingenuity, their genetics, and genies, and daemons. Instead of working on behalf of the Magisterium to perform intercessions and exorcisms, to cut and tear and separate our children from discovering and fulfilling their own purposes, we must encourage them and nourish them in the process of fully unfolding. We should teach them to respect their freedom and to respect the freedoms of others, but not to fear freedom or to fear the freedom for others. And, as adults who were once children ourselves and had our own demons exorcised to various degrees, we should ponder our relationship with freedom today as we continue to unfold as uniquely authentic individuals.

¹ Hillman, James, *The Soul's Code*, Random House, New York, NY, 1996, p. 8.

² Ibid.

³ Pullman, Philip. *His Dark Materials: The Golden Compass* (Book 1) (p. 214). Random House Children's Books. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Ibid. (pp. 283-284).

⁵ Matthew 12:24

⁶ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, (Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965), p. 173.

⁷ "American Exorcism," by Mike Mariani, *The Atlantic*, December 2018 Issue, Religion.

⁸ https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/nng45w/deliver-us-from-evil-the-history-behind-exorcism-ritual

⁹ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 1947, p. 20.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Fukuyama, Francis, *Identity*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY, 2018, p. 22.