

"Devils and Daemons" - Reverend Alison Hyder
October 30, 2005 The Universalist Meeting House of Provincetown

Opening Words: "Masks" by Lynn Ungar

What will you wear for Halloween?

The trees are changing faces,
and the rough chins of chestnut burrs
grimace and break to show their
sleek brown centers.

The hills have lost their mask of green and rain,
settled into firmer geometry
of uncolored line and curve.

Which face will you say is true -
the luminous trees or the branches underneath?

The green husks of walnuts, the shells within,
or the nut curled intimately inside,
sheltered like a brain within its casing?

Be careful with what you know,
with what you think and see.

Moment by moment faces shift,
masks lift and fall again, repainted
to a different scene.

It means
the cynics say, there is no truth,
no constant to give order to the great equation.

Meanwhile, the trees, leaf by leaf
are telling stories inevitably true:
Green. Gold. Vermillion. Brown
The lace of veins remaining
as each cell returns to soil.

MEDITATION: ("The Angels and the Furies") by May Sarton

Have you not wounded yourself
And battered those you love
By sudden motions of evil,
Black rage in the blood
When the soul, *premier danseur*,
Springs toward a murderous fall?
The furies possess you.

Have you not surprised yourself
Sometimes by sudden motions
Or intimations of goodness,
When the soul, *premier danseur*,
Perfectly poised,
Could shower blessings

With a graceful turn on the head?
The angles are there.

The angels, the furies
Are never far away.
While we dance, we dance,
Trying to keep a balance,
To be perfectly human

(not perfect, never perfect,
never an end to growth and peril),
able to bless and forgive
Ourselves.
This is what is asked of us.

It is this light that matters.
The light of understanding.
Who has ever reached it?
Who has not met the furies again and again?
Who has reached it without
These sudden acts of grace?

Let us consider our own moments of fury and meanness, compassion and grace, as we seek a greater understanding of our purpose in this life.

READING: "Clouds of Witnesses" by Robert U. Massey, from *UConn Physician magazine*

Modern medical ethics represents an intellectual description of behavior that appears to be acceptable in a pluralistic society for a profession that possesses great power for doing good or evil.... These concepts of patient autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and truth-telling are the sine qua non of medical practice, but they hardly represent the good life. We really knew about them 40 or 400 years ago. We recognized that the competent patient could always refuse treatment, that our efforts must all be directed to our patient's good, and that we must never intend harm to our patient ... And because of our simpler technology and fewer choices, decisions were easier. Probably, and most significantly of all, we really believed that we were a virtuous crowd, motivated by a content-rich morality, following the precepts of a noble profession ...and surrounded by a cloud of witnesses.

It was the witnesses who made the difference... the heroes we had known in real life and those we had read about in books, in the heroic literature that was more common in those days. But also, perhaps more importantly, the cloud of witnesses were our parents, our wives and children, our friends, our respected colleagues, and maybe those who had finished the race and were looking down to see how well we were playing the game. Mostly, our private cloud of witnesses were unknown to others... my professor of medicine, ... my service chief during my residency... [the great 19th century physician] Dr. William Osler. Sometimes she was my high school English and Journalism teacher, Eva Marie van Houten.... Sometimes a nurse whose devotion and concern for her patients once recalled me to what it is that we are all about.

Mostly we don't talk about these things. I suspect that my experiences with my personal cloud of witnesses are by no means unique. I only know that they are closely associated with making the right choices, even when those choices are concerned with small, apparently unimportant matters, like warming my stethoscope before placing it on someone's back, or pulling up the bedclothes too tightly

pressed against a patient's feet, or opening the drapes on a sunny day, or getting a book for a patient that I know she would like. Sometimes doing battle against the cold, unfeeling bureaucracy on behalf of a patient, being the patient's advocate, rescuing a patient from the terrible machinery of what we are pleased to call our "health care system," helping a dying patient to slip quietly out of life without interference from busy-body technician-physicians.

Of course, I'm talking about our conscience, or, if you like, our superego. For me the ethical spirit must be personified, incarnated, in order to work; the cool, intellectual, secular virtues have no power to hold me enthralled. The great advantage of my cloud of witnesses is that they are there whether I like it or not. They are always buzzing around in my head; they refuse to be locked up.

SERMON: "Devils and Daemons" - Rev. Alison Hyder

I went to college in the Midwest. All my life to that point had been on the east coast, between Maryland, New York and Massachusetts, and I wanted to experience a different region and culture. Earlham, in Richmond, Indiana, is a Quaker College, with an emphasis on creating a supportive academic life. It is not a party school. Nonetheless, I managed, while there, to learn to drink coffee and alcohol, have sex, and throw some pretty good parties. My junior year I shared a house off-campus, and we had several theme affairs. For one I covered a poster board with nouns beginning with the letter P: poet, policeman, pickle, planet, Pope Paul, phony. There are hundreds. Everyone had to come to the party as something that starts with that letter. I was a punk rocker. Then we had a "Come as You Aren't" party, another costume affair. I think I went as a Renaissance man - tights, a sashed tunic and a blue velvet jacket with puffy wide sleeves. And I've always had a penchant for vintage clothes.

But for some reason, Halloween just doesn't excite me. I like to perform in character, but I now leave all the pumpkins and parades to other people. God knows, I have nothing against silliness or self-expression. But I don't like to be scared. I am not drawn to vampires or ghost stories, or acting out the seamy underbelly of my personality. I like my boundaries.

Maybe I just don't have any hair to let down any more. But for a lot of people, and gay men in particular, Halloween is a freeing experience, a holiday that gives us permission to express our deepest secrets and wildest fantasies - or simply to try to recapture a feeling of innocent wonder. Under masks and makeup, one can take risks that would be unthinkable in the daytime sun. On Halloween, nothing is tawdry, nothing is fake. Nuns and pirates tango, and angels bum cigarettes from any passing fireman. For a while, darkness and light coexist, and the world is whole. Spirits fly free from earthbound convention. Black cats roam the streets.

In some cultures, they have believed that spirits inhabit air and fire, trees and animals. Called daemons/daimons, or devas, they are the supernatural agents that exist in the plane between gods and humans. These spirits can act as go-betweens to help humans communicate with other worlds. In Greek religion, daemons were sometimes the souls of dead people and could be destructive when riled, but generally were protective and helpful. Some took the form of animal companions, like the witches' familiars.

The church denounced any powers that rivaled God. But humans have always been drawn to magic to help explain and control the infinite cosmos. Adults, no less than children, want to feel mighty and fierce and brave, to fly through the air and vanquish their enemies with spells and potions. It's hardly any wonder that the Harry Potter books have such huge popularity. Nobody wants to be an ordinary, ignorant Muggle. We long to be wizards.

But I prefer another series, a trilogy by Philip Pullman. He is also writing children's fantasy, but he aims for an older audience. In *The Golden Compass*, Pullman creates an alternate Earth, whose history diverged from ours to create a world run by the church. In this plane, in this Oxford, lives a girl named Lyra, who was raised by the monks of the college.

We learn that in this reality, all the people have a daemon, an animal who is an extension of their soul. Daemons talk and act independently, but they are psychically connected to their person, and act as advisors, conscience, and friend. In children, the daemon can take on many shapes and forms according to the child's mood or situation, helping a part of the child experience the freedom of a falcon, manifesting fear as a chipmunk or rabbit, and providing advice and comfort. As the child hits puberty, though, their daemon will change less and gradually settle into one animal, that is part of their adult persona.

To us, the animals would seem like pets, but in Pullman's series, the daemon is a manifestation of the soul, and essential to life. There is a deep love and communication between daemons and their humans, an energy bond. They cannot separate without deep pain and psychic death. It is a soulless existence. Lyra learns that there are other worlds where daemons don't manifest themselves in physical shapes. But everyone has one inside. It is our conscience, and it keeps us whole.

Like every heroine, Lyra has to overcome a lot of problems and mysterious conflicts to prevail over evil forces and save the people she loves. Pullman includes a lot of interesting religious allusions that enrich the story without burdening it. But what really grabbed me was the wonderful relationship between Lyra and Pantalaimon, her daemon. It just appealed to my deepest childhood fantasies of communion with animals. I used to daydream about having an animal refuge where wild creatures were safe from humans. I was their champion and protector, and shared their lives. I longed to be one with nature.

But now I think that Pullman has it right. I think that animals are our souls, our conscience. We cannot harm them without damaging ourselves, for they are a part of us. How can we respect ourselves if we don't protect the vulnerable? The more we destroy the environment and disrupt the balance of nature, the more wounded and depressed we become.

Animals have always been at the mercy of humans who considered nature to be primitive, dangerous and evil. We have demonized bats and cougars and slaughtered wolves to the edge of extinction. During the Inquisition, the church encouraged the killing of cats, who were thought to aid witches in their magic.

But fear is always a two-edged sword. It destroys more than it protects. We cannot harm other beings without damaging ourselves. Many historians believe that the mass slaughter of cats by the Inquisition led to the bubonic plague, as rats proliferated and spread it unchecked throughout Europe.

It took generations before the plague died out. Human agency caused the suffering, but some people still believe in Satan's power. Some churches condemn books like Harry Potter and *The Golden Compass*, along with Halloween, which they believe encourage children to play at being witches and evil spirits. And that, they say, promotes demon worship. For Satan is waiting for the unwary souls of our children, so we must be vigilant and fight the Devil on all fronts, lest the powers of evil take possession of the world.

In 2001, the mayor of Ingles, Florida made a proclamation officially banning Satan from the town. But, as Ingles resident Floyd Craig commented, "Our drunks still drink, our hookers still hook, and truckers still ride like the devil up and down the highway. People are going to sin, plain and simple. No proclamation is going to stop that." [Quoted by Associated Press, March 31, 2004]

So what do we do? "There are two ways of renouncing the devil," writes GK Chesterton's detective Father Brown, "and the difference is perhaps the deepest chasm in modern religion. One is to have a horror of him because he is so far off; and the other is to have it because he is so near.... You may think a crime horrible because you could never commit it. I think it is horrible because I could commit it."

But why are we so drawn to violence and hatred? What is it inside us that makes us mean? Why do we lose our sense of unity and oneness with our cosmic soul? Gary Zukov gives his explanation of our destructive tendencies in *The Seat of the Soul*:

A soul can find it difficult to walk the way of Light through an incarnation. It can find that learning to live in light is a difficult sojourn.... How we understand evil, therefore, is very significant. Evil needs to be understood for what it is: the dynamic absence of Light. It is not something that one should prepare to battle, to run from or outlaw. Understanding evil as the absence of Light automatically requires that we reach for this thing called Light.

Conscious Light is equal to Divinity, to Divine Intelligence... It is simply that there is darkness, and we stumble in the darkness. The existence of darkness is not permanent... {And} understanding that evil is the absence of light does not mean that it is inappropriate to respond to evil. The remedy for an absence is a presence. Evil is an absence, and therefore, it cannot be healed with an absence. By hating evil, or one who is engaged in evil, you contribute to the absence of Light and not to its presence. Hatred of evil does not diminish evil, it increases it.... If you see a child being abused, or a people being oppressed, for example, it is appropriate that you do what you can do to protect the child, or to aid the people, but if there is not compassion in your heart also for those who abuse and oppress - for those who have no compassion - do you not become like them? Compassion is being moved to and by acts of the heart, to and by the energy of love.

The Dalai Lama teaches the same lesson in a different way. He never says that a person is evil. He may call them mischievous or ignorant, or lacking in wisdom. But to call someone evil is to congeal them in that state, and imply that they can't change. But hatred and anger can be healed and transformed into love and compassion. The people of Tibet are not bent on revenge against their Chinese invaders, but want to help them achieve wisdom and compassion.

Destructive, selfish people are not in touch with their hearts' true longings. Their souls are damaged by fear and shame. And yet they, too, need healing and protection until they can feel the light of compassion. Imagine if you could see their daemons peeking out through their eyes, like a wet, shivering dog, or a cornered bear, or a small child beaten into silence. Somewhere, inside, there is affection and joy. But it has been hidden for a very long time.

I believe that everyone on earth has evil as well as good within their souls. Each one of us has the potential for cruelty, indifference, greed, and violence. Weakness makes us irritable. And success can make us possessive and smug. It is not easy to be good. We each have to struggle to be virtuous and learn to use the elusive power of love that fuels our journey. How do we accept all of our aspects without manifesting our iniquity? How can we be whole and yet holy?

Physician Robert Masey carries with him the example of great teachers and colleagues, and the people he loves, to guide him in his decisions. It is not just their advice he treasures, but their good opinion of him and his actions that give him something to live up to. Masey remarks,

"Of course, I'm talking about our conscience, or, if you like, our superego. For me the ethical spirit must be personified, incarnated, in order to work; the cool, intellectual, secular virtues have no power

to hold me enthralled. The great advantage of my cloud of witnesses is that they are there whether I like it or not. They are always buzzing around in my head; they refuse to be locked up."

Do you have something that guides your actions? It need not be a person. It could be an animal, or even an ideal. Or it could be a moment of perfect beauty and wholeness. George Fowler writes of one experience in his memoir, *Dance of a Fallen Monk*:

Jesus and other masters said that every "other" is my Self, and that we are one with each other. All of us are facets of a single gem... I am not safe or adequate because of how I feel or what I possess, but because of what I Am. Emotional states and passing troubles are but weather passing over the landscape of my Mind.

Fowler studied this mystery. He prayed and meditated, and thought. *And then one afternoon in 1986 in Gig Harbor, Washington, an experience showed me what lay within all metaphor and myth and beneath the stories and theologies of God. It is a day I remember as the day the Universe gently unrolled in front of me. I was playing with a friend's Doberman named Heidi, and as we wrestled, growled, and teased, she suddenly stopped, released my hand that she was gently holding in her teeth, and raised her head just long enough to lick my face, as if in gratitude for so much fun or to reassure me that she would never bite too hard. In that instant I saw colors I'd not seen and heard music I'd not heard. Unscheduled, uninvited, not preapproved, and certainly without the fanfare I'd have planned for it, I felt the touch of God. The scene that opened before my eyes reached from ants crawling at our feet into the farthest galaxies, and yet everything was familiar, somehow one with both Heidi and me. What had still until that moment seemed theoretical knowledge of the mystics was suddenly now experienced. Existence-here-as-Dog had just touched the face of Existence-here-as-Me. In that moment I met a Oneness that would no longer play roles theology had assigned to it: Creator, Father, Mother, and offended, condescending King. It would be instead, now and forever, the simple Whole of everything.*

Each of us contains the whole universe, noble and foolish, creative and mean. All of those aspects, those qualities are within us, waiting to be released and manifested. We can choose, and we can change. George Fowler experienced epiphany through a dog, who will evermore be to him a symbol of God's unity. Dr. Massey carries colleagues and friends in his head as he works. Some ask what Jesus would do, or Gandhi. For others, it is the ocean's mysterious power or the symbol of a rainbow's promise that help them to live with compassion and gratitude.

I believe that this community is both conscience and guide. This is where we seek our highest ideals and best selves, because here find people to share our dreams and aspirations. The light of our chalice is a reminder that we shelter each other from loneliness with common warmth and encouragement. We are all aspects of one, sacred whole, the spirit of life that unites us all.

Let us bring light to these rooms, and keep alive the dreams of all who enter. Hallow this place with a wise caring. Bless these walls, and the spirit they protect.

CLOSING WORDS: by Macrina Weiderkehr

"O God,
help me
to believe
the truth about myself
no matter
how beautiful it is!"