

## FACING OUR DEMONS IN THE DESERT

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We live lives of tortured complexity. Inside each of us there is both a saint and a sinner and enough complexity to write our own book on abnormal psychology. Our hearts are a murky caldron of grace and sin, angels and demons. Always, it seems, we are torn in a way that leaves us feeling unsure, guilty, and tense. It is no simple task being a human being.

Henri Nouwen, in commenting on this, once described himself this way: "My fears and resulting fatigue over the last three years might well be diagnosed as a lack of single-mindedness, as a lack of simplicity. Indeed, how divided my heart has been and still is! I want to love God, but also to make a career. I want to be a good Christian, but also have my successes as a teacher, preacher, or speaker. I want to be a saint, but also enjoy the sensations of the sinner. I want to be close to Christ but also popular and liked by people. No wonder that living becomes a tiring enterprise." (The Genesee Diary). This could be a description of any soul, yours, mine. Jung was right, energy is not always friendly. It brings with it a host of demons.

Demons, Jesus tells us, are to be confronted in the desert. The desert is that place where one does battle with satan. What exactly does that mean? Is satan, the devil, to be conceived of as a personified force, a fallen archangel, Lucifer? Or is satan a code name for that vast range of inner disturbances (addictions, scars, paranoia, fear, bitterness, and sexual wounds) that habitually torment us? What exactly are the principalities and powers that are beyond us? That question is not so important here. Whether the devil is a person, an addiction, or a paranoia, in the end we still need to do battle at exactly the same place. Most of us are not called upon to confront the satan of classical exorcisms. Rather we meet satan in the same way that the prodigal son and his older brother met him, in weakness and bitterness. Ultimately these are the demons that must be met. The venue for that meeting, scripture tells us, is the desert.

To go into the desert means to stare our inner chaos in the face. What demons live inside this chaos? The demons of the prodigal son and his older brother – the demons of

grandiosity, loneliness, and unbridled sexuality and the demons of paranoia, woundedness, and joylessness. What faces do these take?

Grandiosity is the demon that tells us that we are the centre of the universe, that our lives are more important than those of others. This is a demon manifest in our daydreams, in those inner cassette tapes we play where we are always the special one, the superstar, the one singled out for greatness. This is the demon of self-preoccupation and self-centredness, forever urging us to stand out, to be special. Loneliness is the demon of unhealthy restlessness. This is a demon of fear which torments us by telling us constantly that, at the end of the day, we will be alone, unloved, excluded, outside the circle. It makes us pathologically restless and desperate, looking always for someone or something that can take our loneliness away. Unbridled sexuality is the demon of obsession, addiction, lust. It makes us believe that sex (or some such pleasure) is a panacea, the final salvation, or, if not that, at least the best this world can offer. Its urges is to bracket everything else – sacred commitment, moral ideal, and consequences for ourselves and others – for a single, furtive pleasure. It is a demon with ten thousand faces obsessing us all, whether we admit it or not.

Paranoia is the demon of bitterness, anger, and jealousy. It makes us believe that life has cheated us, that we have not been given our just place, that the celebration is always about others and never about us. This demon fills us with the urge to be cynical, cold, distrustful, and cursing. Woundedness is the demon that tells us that our innocence and wholeness is irretrievably broken and that, for us, it is too late. The best we can do now is to take consolation in comfort, food, drink, pornography, drugs, or some such thing. Finally, the last demon in this family is that of joylessness, the demon of self-pity which tells us that joylessness is maturity, that cynicism is wisdom, and that bitterness is justice. This is the demon that keeps us from entering the room of celebration and joining the dance.

All of these demons are inside every one of us. To stare them in the face is to enter the desert. A scary thing? Yes, but the scriptures assure us that, if we do muster the courage to face them, God sends angels to minister to us and these angels bring along calm, restfulness, patience, empathy, humility, solicitude, joy, playfulness, and humour.