

Embracing Your Inner Demon Possession is Nine-Tenths of the Soul

By

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I don't believe it's coincidental that what is considered one of the scariest movies of all time is about a little girl possessed by a demon. *The Exorcist*, based on William Peter Blatty's novel by the same name, is the story of a twelve-year-old child whose demonic possession is preceded by what might be considered regressive behavior for a girl her age—she urinates on the living room carpet, throws temper tantrums, talks back to adults, and throws up her split-pea soup. In other words, we are to presume there's something terribly wrong with this prepubescent girl because, on the very eve of womanhood, she's acting more like a toddler going through the terrible twos than what is expected of her as a budding adult.

So I've long wondered if the terror this film evokes reflects an unconscious fear that the repressed toddler in each of us might one day resurface and wreck havoc in our lives. John Bradshaw writes that, "Acting out, or reenacting, is one of the most devastating ways in which the wounded inner child sabotages our lives."¹ Some of the ways this "acting out" is demonstrated, he says, include, *reenactment of violence on others, spontaneous age regression, and being inappropriately rebellious*—in other words, acting just like little Linda Blair!

I've also wondered if this movie, which became the highest grossing horror film ever at the time of its release in 1973, also represents the enormously exaggerated or inflated sense of shame so many of us carry throughout our lives—the shame we began feeling the first time we were scolded for wetting our pants, or making a mess, or talking back, or becoming angry, or crying. Psychoanalyst, Alice Miller called one kind of patient she regularly dealt with, "The Poor Rich Child," referring to those who came from well-off families and supportive parents, yet, nonetheless, suffered 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."² Whether the connection here is one of correlation or cause, at the very least, it requires us to ask if being forced to act like little adults, coerced into controlling ourselves, including our instincts, desires, and even our bodily functions, especially too soon in life, damages us deep down?

And what if such damage, furthermore, isn't the result of our having to grow up, of our having to necessarily develop beyond infancy and childhood—for we all must—

¹ Bradshaw, John, *Homecoming*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1990, p. 14.

² Miller, Alice, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Basic Books, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1979, 1990. p. 5.

but due to the repression of something more essential to us, the repression of something that *is* us? What if the depression experienced by those Alice Miller describes occurs because they were forced to become someone other than their truest selves? What if it isn't the outgrown child who "acts out," as Bradshaw puts it, but the original and authentic self we were supposed to grow into, the person we were supposed to become? What if it isn't really "acting out" at all, but something trying to get out, to fulfill its calling, its destiny? What if we're not possessed by something external to us, but driven by something *essential* to us? And what if, the problem with problem children like Linda Blair is not that they are demon possessed, but that they have been demonized for being true to themselves?

Psychologist, James Hillman suggests exactly this in his book, *The Soul's Code*. "The soul of each of us," he writes, "is given a unique daimon before we are born, and it has selected an image or pattern that we live on earth."³ The word he uses here, "daimon," is from the ancient Greek word meaning, "guiding spirit," or, "guardian angel," and is similar to the Roman word, "genius," referring to the guiding spirit some still believe accompanies us throughout life from the time of our birth. "This soul-companion" Hillman continues, "the daimon, guides us here; in process of arrival, however, we forget all that took place and believe we come empty into this world. The daimon remembers what is in your image and belongs to your pattern, and therefore your daimon is the carrier of your destiny."⁴

Admittedly, all of this may sound a little too esoteric and deterministic for the likes of many, including myself to some extent; but the idea that the soul comes into this world with a code, a pattern to follow, something original, isn't anymore unreasonable than that thought that we are born purely as blank slates and that everything we are to become will be impressed upon from without. Surely both are true; we are influenced by external experiences and forces, but are also born with certain genetic (original) traits that will help determine who we are and what we'll become. This is why the word "genius" not only shares the root of spiritual words like *genie* and the Arabic, *jinn*, but also scientific words like, *genes* and *genesis*, which refer to the genetic code embedded in all life forms, and to the origins of the Universe itself. *Genius* has to do with our beginnings, with who we are at birth, with who we are originally meant to be, and with the patterns that will determine who and what we are to become.

You'll notice it also shares the same root as words like, *geniality*, *congenial*, and, *genially*. People originally thought of this original self, this guiding spirit, this inner pattern and destiny as something "friendly." It is only later, after Christian monotheism became the dominant religion by forbidding beliefs in other deities, that the *daimon* became something malevolent and foul. So today when we hear the word "demon" we think of an external evil, rather than of something inward and original, or, more to the point, we mistake originality and genius as an external evil. The word *angel*, that literally means "messenger," makes our guardian angel a guardian of our original message, our original pattern, our genetic code. Yet most of us have learned to treat this original self as

³ Hillman, James, *The Soul's Code*, Random House, New York, NY, 1996, p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*

a fallen angel, as a terrible demon that must be exorcised, cut out, removed from having any influence over us and over the course of our lives.

Can there be any wonder then that so many gifted children grow into depressed adults, or adults who sometimes “act out?” How can we sever ourselves from something so essential to our being without suffering repercussions? How can we live like shells of ourselves, as well-socialized automatons, without sometimes sensing the demon in us, still urging us to heed its call? We want to dismiss it as just that, as a demon, as something completely foreign to us, or as if it were a wound, or a sign of our own immaturity that must be quieted and dismissed. But, “The daimon does not want to be treated like a child,” Hillman warns us, “it is not a child, and not an inner child either—in fact, it may be intensely intolerant of this mixture, this incarceration inside the body of an unaccomplished child, this identification of its complete vision with an incomplete human being.”⁵

The only way, then, to prevent this angry spirit from acting out in our lives is not to exorcise it, but to give it full expression by letting it wholly possess us. For it represents neither our woundedness nor our immaturity, but our wholeness and fullness. And this means remembering who we are. It means becoming original and authentic. William James once complained of what he called, “second-hand religion,”⁶ which is made for us by others. He had no use for it and refused to say anything more about it. James valued religion only inasmuch as it expressed something original and authentic in the individual. It makes me question how many of us are living second-hand lives; lives not our own that have been made for us by others. Erich Fromm once noted that if you, “Ask an average newspaper reader what he thinks about a certain political question, he will give you as ‘his’ opinion a more or less exact account of what he has read, and yet—and this is the essential point—he believes that what he is saying is the result of his own thinking.”⁷

Just like the patient who became potty-trained at age one and had to help turn other children into little adults, each of us, even if we were slow learners, suffered the same fate, having had to substitute our own authentic thoughts for the thoughts the greater culture would impose upon us. When our own kids were young, for example, Peggy and I were careful not to use racial descriptors in our home when referring to others. This resulted in our son coming up with his own original language by which he sometimes referred to people as “plain” or “dark.” After just a few weeks in kindergarten, however, he came home speaking of people as “white” and “black.” Again, as Erich Fromm explained, “It is the aim of education to teach the individual not to assert [oneself].”⁸ The Nobel Prize winning Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire referred to this as, “Banking Education,” that is, making small *deposits* into children’s minds, teaching them *what* to

⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶ James, William, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., New York, NY, 1958, p. 24.

⁷ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965, p. 215.

⁸ Ibid., p. 258.

think, rather than *how* to think. He also referred to these “deposits” as *prescriptive* learning, explaining that, “Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber’s consciousness.”⁹

Perhaps this is why so many geniuses, that is, original thinkers, didn’t get along so well in school. Thomas Mann called it, “stagnating and unsatisfactory,” The Indian mystic, Rabindranath Tagore “quit school at age thirteen because he suffered so much there.” Gandhi said that, “he had no aptitude for lessons and rarely appreciated his teachers... and might have done better if he had never been in school.” The Nobel Prize winning physicist, Richard Feynman (Fine-man) called school “an intellectual desert.” Thomas Edison said, “I was always at the foot of the class.” Einstein, who was called “unclever” by his teachers, said, “I preferred to endure all sorts of punishments rather than to learn gabble by rote.” General Patton was held back in school. Winston Churchill refused to study. And Woody Allen said of his school days, “I paid attention to everything but the teachers.”¹⁰ On a personal note, I myself am a high school dropout, though I’m not sure that necessarily qualifies me to be included with such distinguished company.

This is not to say that children shouldn’t receive a good education and that our teachers, my spouse included, aren’t working their hardest help them develop the skills and minds they need to get along and survive in this world, especially nowadays when our teachers are so underpaid and our schools are so enormously underfunded. Most the prescriptive education Freire complained about takes place in the wider culture. But what it does suggest is that there may also already be something fully formed in us, something original that doesn’t need education or further development, and it’s all too easy for this part to get lost or buried as we become socialized.

As warm-blooded creatures, there is an innate drive in us for companionship, and that means some conformity and compromise. But there’s also a need in us to be authentically individual, and that means expressing our genius. Developmental psychologist, Robert Kegan says that, “The two greatest yearnings of human life... may be the yearning for inclusion (to be welcomed in, next to, held, connected with, a part of) and the yearning for distinctness (to be autonomous, independent, to experience my own agency, the self chosenness of my purposes).”¹¹ The question each one of us faces is how much of my authentic self am I willing to sacrifice just to fit in? And the moral imperative of any community is to encourage, as much as possible, the full potential in each individual. Yet, as Freud himself suggested, the self-interests and desires of the individual often stand in opposition to those of society, “Thus, civilization has to be defended against the individual,” he insisted, “and its regulations, institutions and

⁹ Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum, New York, NY, 1970, 1993, p. 29.

¹⁰ Hillman, *ibid.*, p. 104ff.

¹¹ Kegan, Robert, *The Evolving Self*, Harvard University Press, Boston, MA, 1982, p. 142.

commands are directed to that task.”¹² So, too often, out of our dread of being alone, or fear of being denied social benefits, rights, and equality, we strive to fit in, adopting the thoughts, feelings, and desires of the culture in place of our own original ones. “It is in keeping with the course of human development,” Freud continued, “that external coercion gradually becomes internalized.”¹³ When this happens, we end up demonizing, through fear and shame, that part of us that is most original, distinct, and authentic.

But here’s the good news, it doesn’t take a genius to be a genius! Becoming a genius, or, rather, being the genius you were meant to be, simply means having an original thought, or feeling, or desire that is truly your own. It doesn’t even mean thinking up of something that has never been thought before, but that we come to it on our own, or that we play with the ideas of others in a way that is uniquely ours. It means returning to our origins, to our demon, to our genesis, and creating something that comes from our own authenticity. Einstein’s demon gave us relativity, Darwin’s demon gave us evolution, and Edison’s demon gave us the light bulb. These are intellectual geniuses, but all geniuses, whether they are musicians like Mozart and Beethoven, are artists like Da Vinci and Picasso, or literary geniuses like Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf, are all creative. That’s what it means to be a genius, to give birth to something new and original. That’s why you’re a genius too, because you have it within you, through your inner demon, to have your own original ideas and authentic ways of expressing yourself. Whether you see it as your guiding spirit, your *jinn* or *genie*, or prefer to see it as something in your *genes*, your true genius is in your *genuineness* expressed through your *generosity*. In short, your genius is your gift, and, perhaps, the only genuine gift you have to give to the world. So don’t be afraid of your demon, and don’t hold back!

¹² Freud, Sigmund, *The Future of an Illusion*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 1961, 1989, p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.7f.