

Teatime with my demons: Why I welcome them

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [September 6, 2011](#) issue



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My friend Brother Bede likes to tell a story about the Buddhist saint Milarepa. When demons came to his cave to torment him, Milarepa said to them, "How kind of you to come. You must come again tomorrow. And from time to time we must converse." And Milarepa invited the demons in for tea.

The story surprised me the first time I heard it. When I think of saint-plaguing demons, I picture Anthony the Great battling in conflicts so loud that passersby think he's being attacked by a band of robbers. Like everyone, I have enemies: people who wish me ill, or who have hurt me deeply whether they meant to or not. But my worst enemies dwell in the cave of my own heart. "Love your enemies," said Jesus, "and pray for those who persecute you." In addition to loving and praying for those who hurt me, might Jesus mean these inner enemies of the heart—my personal demons?

My demons manifest themselves in forms so familiar I don't even recognize them when they come to call until it's too late and I've lost my equilibrium: anxiety, perfectionism, the sweet savor of annoyance over another's bad habits, self-loathing, secret schadenfreude, guilty liberal acquiescence to the consumer culture. I wear my own unique and delicate scent of sloth—a mix of busyness, industry, accomplishment and avoidance. My subtle demons often mask as virtues in a

greedy society, blending with patterns in my holier-than-thou nonexploitative clothing, sitting in the backseat of my compact car and lurking behind my uneco-friendly plastic recycling bins.

There was a time when men and women left the cities to encounter God in the desert. But memories, experiences, habits, prejudices and irrational fears came with them, clashing with silence, starkness and solitude. Extracting themselves from the demons camouflaged within their culture, they found concentrated phantasms erupting from their own thoughts, unhealed personalities and broken selves. Seeking purity of heart, the desert mothers and fathers had to face the demons erupting from their own hearts.

Once, after a particularly exhausting confrontation, Anthony complains, "Where wast Thou? Why didst Thou not appear from the beginning to cease my pains?"

"Anthony," the Holy One replies, "I was here: but I was waiting to see thy contest."

This has never been a satisfying answer to me. It reminds me of a legend about St. Teresa of Ávila. When she was thrown off an oxcart into an icy arroyo during a rainstorm, she heard the voice of the Beloved: "Teresa, this is how I treat my friends." She didn't lose time in responding, "Surely this is why you have so few of them!" Besides throwing clumps of psalmage (as we say in our community) as a way to dissipate demonic presences, the Christian tradition recommends laughter. "The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to texts of scripture," said Martin Luther, "is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn." Similarly, Thomas More said, "The devil . . . that prowde spirit . . . cannot endure to be mocked."

I recently found a Japanese ink cartoon by 18th-century Zen master Hakuin Ekaku that shows a blind man and a giant one-eyed goblin. The text says, "Who's that gr-gr-growling over there? What? A one-eyed goblin? I'm not afraid of you—since I have no eyes at all, *you should be scared of me!*"

When I laugh at myself and my perfectionism, my sloth, my resentment, the devils deflate like old balloons. When Bede told me the story of Milarepa, I wondered whether I should begin to pray for these demons who dwell within my heart, as I do for my enemies. Perhaps I might invite them to tea?

Lately when my demons show up, I try to have the presence of mind to invite them into my consciousness. I call them by name. I welcome them like old friends. "Hello,

Sloth. Lovely scent you're wearing." Surprisingly, my bad spirits are less chaotic when I pay attention to them.

Rilke said, "Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love."

I have to befriend the demons dwelling in the cave of my heart if I want to arrive at the kind of psychological equilibrium admired by the disciples who broke down the barrier to Anthony's fortress. "And when they beheld him, they were amazed to see that his body had maintained its former condition, neither fat from lack of exercise, nor emaciated from fasting and combat with demons, but was just as they had known him prior to his withdrawal. The state of his soul was one of purity, for it was not constricted by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor affected by either laughter or dejection." Indeed, to his friends he seemed "led by divine mysteries and inspired by God."