

The Devil among Us

Fright, Fun, Foreboding

Frightening people makes for good—or, at least, profitable—entertainment. The devil and his cohorts scare people in movies about possession or mysterious forces that can annihilate humanity. Our most primitive fears—being taken over by an alien force, facing our imminent destruction, struggling mightily with negative forces and impulses that well up within us—find expression in evil personified.

Strangely, the very image of the demonic that can be such an effective vehicle for frightening us can also assume a comic form. You can be sure that among the costumed revelers at a Mardi Gras celebration or a Halloween party there will be plenty of “devils” fully vested with horns, tails, and pitchforks.

Fright and fun, however, sometimes give way to a more menacing and truly sad “use” of the devil in our world. Satanist cults and the invocation of dark powers among some, often young, people provide a launching pad for rebellion and mayhem. I do not know if anyone has a clear sense of where this odd and sometimes tragically destructive behavior comes from. Think Charles Manson. Think Columbine. Is it rooted in deep anger and resentment that can be expressed only in negative and destructive energy? Is it connected with a sense of powerlessness that struggles to acquire some control and even mastery in this world? Whatever their psychological or sociological origins, the foreboding Satanist cults use a set of inherited images and symbols to claim power and leave a mark in this world, often a blemish but sometimes a very deep scar. In this sense, so-called Satanist groups use the devil to further their particular cause, not necessarily the devil’s.

Whether the devil is employed to entertain us by fright or by clownishness or, more menacingly, to threaten us by his self-designated emissaries, the common thread is drama. The spectacle of diabolical presence and action fascinates us, draws us in, and makes us want to look. That is the dramatic hook of all this devil stuff. It is not, however, the whole story, nor is it the most important part of the story.

There is the ordinary work of the devil and the ordinary presence of the devil. On a daily basis, whether we are conscious or not, we face a formidable adversary who rarely claims a dramatic role in our lives but who, nevertheless, intrudes regularly in ways that are harmful or even destructive. It is worth our while to pay attention.

A Sense of Struggle

We all struggle. I may have a difficult time in getting going on a project or bringing it to completion. I may find a co-worker difficult to work with. Perhaps, a long-time friend becomes tiresome for whatever reason, and it is difficult just to pay attention to ordinary conversation. At times, I feel that I must fight to make myself clear. I strain to get at some elusive truth. I exert every bit of energy within me to calm a troubled situation. I shock myself when I discover inclinations within me toward hostility or even violence, or some form of lust and maybe even a ripe desire to exploit someone for my own satisfaction.

There are a thousand manifestations of struggle, and we know so many of them on a daily basis. Some of these struggles are “local,” that is, they belong to me and represent a struggle with myself. The moral dilemma that Saint Paul describes in his letter to the Romans (7:14–21) is a good example: “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:18b–19).

Struggles, however, are not limited to struggles with myself. Outside forces or agents can conspire to thwart me. The economic system may seem to work against my financial well-being. A mischievous colleague puts out a false report about my job performance. I can be

acutely aware that my struggle is with something or someone outside of myself.

More complicated than struggles internal or external are the struggles that lead us to wrestle with what seems to be a mixture of interior and exterior tensions. It is, for example, painfully difficult to know high ideals and great aspirations and, at the same time, to be jarringly aware of the miserable underside of life. To glimpse the true, the beautiful, and the good and then to juxtapose it with the false, the discordant, and the venal—that is a painful struggle to bear, especially for a sensitive heart. No doubt, that is a special struggle for noble souls who have a grand vision for humanity and have daily contact with profound human suffering. I think of people like Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King Jr. and many others like them, although less well-known.

Now, one of the most curious elements of human struggle is how surprising it is. Oddly, although struggle in its various forms belongs to such a wide swath of human experience, its presence still surprises us. Why, we think, do I have to go through this, when I am battling illness or negative impulses or nasty neighbors or oppressive and repressive measures of government? It would seem self-evident that we have to “go through this” just because it is a part of life to struggle, to fight against whatever, and to wrestle with forces within us or outside of us. In other words, we experience what seems to be a natural part of life, struggle, as something that is quite out of place. The fact and experience of struggle jolts us.

At some level of awareness, the adversarial or struggle dimension of life does not make sense. It does not fit our understanding of how life ought to be. The variance between what we experience and what we expect provides a clue for our understanding. We feel that something is amiss. And that feeling finds its roots in a deeper intuition that, indeed, something is wrong. This universal human experience receives a name and some explanation in Christian faith.

What is wrong and should not be wrong, what is wrong and needs to be righted is, in the Christian vision, a good world and a good humanity

that early on was marked by sin, a move away from God's original design and destiny for the world and humanity. That is the doctrine of original sin. The original protagonists of original sin are, as the Book of Genesis portrays them, the parents of the human family, Adam and Eve. Their free decision to move away from God's plan for humanity had many consequences. Most notably, it landed us in a state of fractured or split existence. *Homo in seipso divisus est*, says the Second Vatican Council: human beings are divided within themselves.¹ So, the struggle and the roots of the struggle are within us and within the human story.

Now, an important qualification is in order. It might seem that the Christian vision lays all the blame for what went wrong or what is wrong on human beings. If there is evil, it is all our doing. Interestingly, two of the major modern interpretative frameworks for human life and society—Freudian and Marxist theory—do seem to lay all that is bad on the back of either the psyche's self-assertive and self-centered *id* (Freud) or the inevitable social conflicts and inequities of economic systems that set people against each other (Marx). The Christian vision, however, does not see the origin of all evil in humanity.

Certainly, for Christians as for others, human malice is quite capable of extraordinary results that we can categorize as evil. Still, evil—again in a context of faith—antedates the beginnings of humanity. Clearly, this evil is not a contrapuntal force equal to the good God. That is the position of metaphysical dualism that pits a power of good against a power of evil. The evil that antedates humanity belongs to an evil one who most assuredly is not God but was created by God and endowed with intelligence and will. In his (if we can use personification and the masculine gender to speak of this non-human but spiritual being of intelligence and will) rebellion against God, he wants to subvert the whole of creation and drag humanity into this same negative vortex. This is the devil. God permits his acts of subversion, especially by way of temptation but by other means as well, just as God permits you and me to subvert and rebel against God's plan by our sinful behavior. Faith affirms that the last word is God's triumph. Before that, however,

there is temptation and sin and evil—all of which must be faced and addressed by people of faith.

Sin, Guilt, and Identity

When the Greeks spoke of sinning, they used the word *hamartein*, which means “to miss the mark.” We know that with or without the devil’s help, we are quite capable of missing the mark. Our sin has to do with bad behaviors—lying, stealing, hurting, using others, betraying love and friendship, making unjust and unwarranted judgments of others, advancing ourselves at a cost of others’ well-being. The list of bad behaviors can go on and on. Sometimes, our sin involves neglecting to do what we ought to do—feeding the hungry from our abundance; stopping to help a hurt person; taking time to support a troubled friend or colleague; taking responsibility for our civic life together so that justice, peace, and harmony might be promoted. Again, the list of possible omissions can stretch quite far.

Sins, as we know them, are acts that we commit or omit. In a sense, these behaviors of commission or omission come from us. They belong to us. And we must assume responsibility for them. At the same time, we do not identify ourselves with our sins. They are like naughty children who belong to us and whom we have generated and for whom we have responsibility. Still, they are not exactly us. They are somehow separate from us. When I confess my sins and seek forgiveness, I say that I have murdered but not that I am murder, that I have lied but not that I am untruth, that I have fornicated but not that I am lust, that I failed to speak up for someone wrongly accused but not that I am injustice or indifference. We are responsible for the sins we commit and the good actions that we ought to do, but we do not define ourselves by them.

There is another level of self-awareness that is not so universally shared, and this self-awareness does have to do with identity. Some of us come to realize not only that we commit sins and omit the good we ought to do, but that we *are sinners*. To say that I am a sinner is to stake