

# THE CARE AND FEEDING OF DEMONS

by Bonnie Phinney

## OPENING WORDS

Where did the idea of hell come from? It's not in the bible. No, it originated in the minds and imaginations of men at a time much different from ours when less was known about the natural world. And yet it persists, like its inhabitants, the demons.

"Would you not think," says the late Universalist minister Clinton Lee Scott, in a book entitled *Religion Can Make Sense*, "that there is sufficient suffering in this world without anybody thinking up a post-mortem punishment for us? Most of us manage to create hell enough for ourselves. By the formation of bad habits of thinking we get ourselves into all sorts of mental tangles. Through the surrender of the better qualities of our nature to the impulses of baser desires, we fashion characters which inevitably lead to suffering and disaster. We build ourselves little hells on earth. And together, through ignorance, selfishness, and fear we create the larger hells of political corruption, poverty, and war. These hells are real and they are the hells about which the organized forces of religion should be concerned."

## SERMON

I hope you all came today because you were intrigued by the title of my sermon this morning, "*The Care and Feeding of Demons*." First, let me give credit where credit is due - I did not write this sermon. I crafted it around an

essay of the same title by the late F. Forrester Church in a book entitled *The Devil and Dr Church*. I am greatly indebted to this amazing UU minister and his witty & provocative writings from which I have adapted several sermons!

Now, let's admit that talking about demons may seem out of place in a Unitarian-Universalist fellowship, but, the truth is, like Dr Church, I BELIEVE in demons. I really do. Too often, I have done battle with them to discount their existence.

When I say the word DEMON, what do you see? Did the visual images we projected on the screen behind me resonate with you? If *you* were asked to draw a demon, what would it look like? We humans, young and old, have amazing imaginations.

Truthfully, if I were asked to draw a demon, I doubt I could...for the simple fact of the matter is that MY demons don't have horns or pitch forks. They are not snakes or fallen angels. They have not been sent by some hostile power to storm my tender human battlements and claim me for the devil's own. They don't live and breathe in a fiery pit. NEVERTHELESS, they are still capable of inflicting serious damage. When they are in charge, my demons are just as tough and mean as the devil himself is reputed to be.... And just as CLEVER.

If I had done a story for the children this morning, I might have asked them - Are demons real? Sure, they don't exist like they do in picture books, but surely our minds play tricks on us and sometimes we can't explain our behaviors. We get upset at people or situations and don't know why. We do or say irrational things. The demons in my sermon are in large measure, if

not entirely, creatures of our own devising. Yet, as you know, that makes them no less real!

These demons, yours and mine, scheme with us whenever we search for a rationalization to justify doing what we know is wrong. They worm into our happiness, beseeching us to throw off contentment and beg for something more. They befriend us in our moments of disenchantment, flattering us with the bitter-sweet notion that we are victims who cannot escape from the traps that life has laid for us.

More powerful even than Milton's Satan as depicted in *Paradise Lost*, the demons to which I refer are **demons of the mind**. I suspect that the reason his Satan, even today, remains so convincing, is that Milton knew this too. Elsewhere, he wrote, "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell and a hell of heaven."

But To make a heaven of our minds' little hells, we need to have a hell to work with. This hell is a hell of our own devising, the one that Clinton Lee Scott referred to in the opening words. It is with this in mind, then, that I offer the following assortment of some tried and true prescriptions for the care and feeding of demons.

First, you must understand that demons are relatively easy to please. Their appetites are insatiable, but their tastes vary widely. That is to say - they are not at all picky. Deny them one thing, and they will simply ask for something else.

Let me give you a somewhat trivial example. A person may try to deny his demons nicotine - so they beg for alcohol. Refused a drink, they want a smoke, but will settle for seven cups of coffee! Demons enjoy the anxiety brought on by too much caffeine. As long as these demons can get your attention, in some way, they will be satisfied. **Thus we have LESSON NUMBER ONE: To nurture a demon, give it lots of attention!**

Well, I don't smoke, I don't drink much coffee, and I can get along without any alcohol, so I've been spared the ravages of these particular demons. I do, however, have some very nasty ones of my own. One is first cousin to those just mentioned - this demon loves to see me overeat. He calls to me from the pantry, from the refrigerator, from the grocery shelf. I can be minding my own business, and the next thing I know I'm getting myself a snack. I may or may not be hungry, but I guiltily gobble it down. This demon loves to see me wallow in self-hate. The more I eat, the more I hate myself. Demons love this. **And so we have LESSON NUMBER TWO: low self-esteem is a wonderful way to nurture a demon.**

I have another demon, which, on occasion drags me down into the depths of depression. I like to see myself as a relatively happy person - and most of the time I am - but there are moments, moments when my demon grabs hold and won't let go. You see, I take things way too seriously. Years ago, when we lived in Alaska, I had a skiing accident and wound up with a cast on my right hand and arm. My demon took over my life - for months. I hated life. I hated Alaska. I hated myself. My family hated me. I made myself and everyone around me miserable and still I let that demon hang on. Demons love to see a person overcome with self-pity; it provides such a rich

environment for them in which to grow and prosper. These depressive moments don't happen frequently anymore, but one did occur briefly while we were building the addition on our house in Anacortes 3 years ago: I was sick of all the dust and dirt, missed my friends in Colorado, and was mad at Lew for not paying more attention to me. I need to be constantly on guard because I know this demon is always lurking in the background. **Lesson number three: the more you beat a demon the stronger it gets. It gives them a sense of importance.**

Demons appear to have clear preferences when it comes to personality types. They adore religious fanatics because fanatics are so full of fear and self-righteousness. The funny thing is, they constantly do battle with their demons only to discover, as we have, that demons thrive on such thrashings. Of course, demons also have a hey-day with pleasure seekers, those who try to drown out the echoing emptiness around them by turning up the volume of the material world. They attach themselves to people who insist on doing only what pleases them. Demons lap this up because they know that less and less will please them.

At the same time, demons' fortunes also rest upon pleasure deniers. These people know that life is hell because they remind themselves so often. They know that life is terrifying because they are afraid. They know that life is filled with conspiracy and peopled with conspirators, because they are suspicious of everything and everyone. They are victims. They wallow in self-pity. Their hearts are bitten with envy and bitterness. In the end, only their demons love them. And it is only their demons that they love. We all know people like this.

Let's reiterate. Here are three ways to nurture your demons:

1. Give them lots of attention.
2. Have a low opinion of yourself. Tell yourself often that you are too fat, or too short, or too dumb, or too something.
3. Beat them - dwell on those demons. They will feel all the more important.

And once you've loved and nurtured them, those demons will respond by taking over your life....

And then we find ourselves - in HELL. A hell of our own making. We have nurtured and cared for our demons and they are in charge of our lives. Now what? What do we need to do to make a heaven of our hell? Well, first, recall the nature of the enemy: Walt Kelly's Pogo summed it up like this: "There is no need to sally forth, for it remains true that those things which make us human are, curiously enough, always close at hand. Resolve then, that on this very ground, with small flags waving and tiny blasts on tiny trumpets, we shall meet the enemy, and not only may he be ours, be MAY be US!!

Are you your own worst enemy? Take heart - this could be a blessing in disguise. Think about it. It means we have a chance. The enemy is an "US" , not a "THEM"! Of course, we can try in vain to flee the field like the pleasure seekers, or wound ourselves like the pleasure deniers, or we can seek a third way - **We can begin to accept ourselves, as we are, which is the first step to heaven**, the next being when we set our course anew and begin to change.

SELF ACCEPTANCE. It breaks a demon's heart. Demons feed on conflict and denial. Conflict ensues when we realize that we are our own worst enemy and hate ourselves for it. Denial is when we do not even realize or refuse to accept the reality of the enemy within.

So what's the key to self-acceptance? **First** - we need to take ourselves, and our problems, a little less seriously. For me, that is one of the very hardest lessons to learn. I mean, when I get worried and anxious, I am a basket case. I don't sleep, I can't have fun, I dwell on the negative. *I feed my demons*. It is then that I must force myself to ask, "What is the worst thing that can happen? Is it really so bad?" **I need perspective**. We all need perspective. We need laughter - it really is the best medicine! There is nothing demons hate more than being scorned. So **laugh** at your silly little demon. It will crouch in the corner and weep!

I was reminded some time ago of this wonderful technique while reading a book about the pitfalls of aging - you know, the gray hairs, the failing eyesight and sagging body, the memory loss, the feeling of panic, depression and anxiety. A number of comedians, Bill Cosby, Erma Bombeck, Dave Barry, to name a few, in their writings "stare down the aging monster and mock him right back"! Laughing at ourselves is never easy and aging, like many other subjects, is no joke, but the alternative is worse. The negative aspects of whatever problem you may be facing need to be placed in perspective.

One final thing: remember Milton's words, "The mind is its own place and in itself can make a heaven of hell, and a hell of heaven." While there are no doubt thousands of ways to effect the latter, to make a heaven of hell there is only one. Through SELF-ACCEPTANCE that leads to the reconciliation of oneself to life and living, a self-acceptance that can only be born of love.

*"You are unhappy," William Ellery Channing once wrote, "and you ascribe to outward circumstances the misery within...(you blame) ill health, the loss of property, bereavement, the perplexed state of your affairs, the east wind, government, the offensive neighbor. Yet I have read of those, yea, I have seen those who with all those misfortunes I have enumerated, are yet at peace."*

What is Channing telling us? Simply this. While we have no control over so many of those things ranging from petty to tragic in our lives, *we do have much to say concerning the nature of our response to them.* Here's a personal example. Lew and I were fortunate to live in Germany for three years - EUROPE: WHAT COULD BE MORE EXCITING? But we knew many Americans who hated living there. It just wasn't home! Naturally, they, and their demons, made themselves (and their neighbors, I might add) miserable. What a shame. They missed so much. We knew people in Alaska, when we lived there, who did the same thing. We didn't always love where the Air Force stationed us through the years (I, for instance, cried for three days when Lew told me we were moving to Panama City, Florida from Germany), but we always made the most of it, did as much as we could while we were living there, and had a positive attitude. Otherwise we would

have lost the experiences, experiences that have made us who we are today. I'm sure there are people unhappy about living in the Pacific northwest - what with all the rain we are purported to have. Unfortunately, for them, their demons blind them to all that is good here. If you don't accept yourself, and your circumstances, you close yourself off to all the wondrous experiences life may offer. You allow the demons of your mind to control you. You never really live. There is only one power on earth that is equal to self-pity, disaffection, bitterness, envy, suspicion, fear and despair - these, the food of demons. That power is LOVE.

One of the most important Christian teachings is to "LOVE THY ENEMY". It's also one of the most difficult. But who is the enemy, anyway. The enemy is us, says Pogo. LOVE YOURSELF. This is not selfish, self-indulgent love - demons will thrive and get fat under that kind of love. No, where there is true love, demons cannot live. With love, the mind itself can make a heaven of hell, and heaven is the one place where demons are not invited!

This love that leads to self-acceptance is one that grows and grows, its circle expanding until it encompasses all. Like the song says, "If we cease to give, we cease to have - such is the law of love". This is love that reminds us that life is precious and to be revered: that demands much of us: that reminds us of our obligations to one another. It is a difficult love, but a love which graces the lives of all who know it with the deepest of meanings.

Religious evangelists love to tell us that to find salvation, avoid hell and look forward to a heavenly afterlife all we have to do is accept Jesus. But I say to you - ACCEPT YOURSELF, LOVE YOURSELF AND LOVE LIFE -

rid your mind of those self-created demons forever. The choice is yours. In your own life, you have the power to make a heaven of hell, or a hell of heaven.