

If you're thinking that this is one very strange story, I totally agree. Just the imagery of the demons or evil spirits is so bizarre, so foreign to present-day understanding of neuroses, psychoses and other impairment of human thought processes that it can be tempting to write off the whole anecdote.

Underneath though, that embellishing of the incident with categories of their own beliefs and superstitions, it's almost certainly a memorable encounter between Jesus and this person whose mental state had so impaired him.

The man was obviously antisocial, was mostly incoherent, was out-of-control and was thus very frightening. He had managed to get loose from every attempt to restrain him. His paranoia was as pronounced as was his masochism. It said that he gashed himself with sharp rocks.

In his occasional more rational moments, the man himself would have concurred with what people had decided was true of him: that he was possessed by demons. In their first century frame of reference, there was no other available explanation for the wild behavior, the irresistible impulses, the sick thoughts and the terrifying imaginings that haunted him. That only furnished a secondary terror: that if those townspeople really knew what all went on in his mind at times, there's no telling what they might decide needed to be done to him or with him.

That's why he lived among the tombs, in the burial area -- among the dead -- where God-fearing, Bible-believing Hebrews didn't go (other than long enough to do an actual burial).

So abused and tortured as he was by his own mind why would he expose himself to the additional humiliation of public persecution, disdain, loathing, and abhorrence.

That then, was the context for this encounter with Jesus: NOT an encounter that he was out looking for.

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Nevertheless, he ends up face-to-face with this Jesus. He knows just what to do though. Immediately he goes into his well-practiced gimmick or strategy of collapsing to the ground in a screaming frenzy of obscenities, sacrilegious utterances and threatening or not-very-nice gestures. In the past, that had been very effective in sending people scurrying for cover (including clergypersons, counselors and case managers). Jesus, though, is unfazed. He just stands there quietly and then after awhile he asks the man who he is.

The man's answer is quite good. He says, in effect, that he is no one at all. In fact, he no longer feels human because he has become this hopelessly chaotic collection of delusions and thought fragments: is a veritable "legion" of reprehensible dark, inner forces, beyond the reach of any inner peace or return to normalcy.

Interestingly, when I reached this point in preparing this sermon, trying, as I was, to understand how it would have felt to be this tortured person, I became aware that the ballad that was softly playing on my study radio was the one from the old Broadway play, "No Strings." The words in that ballad that caught my attention couldn't have been in more ironic contrast as the song crooned, "The sweetest sounds I'll ever hear are still inside my head. The kindest words I'll ever know are waiting to be said. The most entrancing sights of all are yet for me to see, And the dearest love in all the world is waiting out there for me."

This definitely wouldn't have been sung by that man in front of Jesus that day. Consumed, as he was with his self-loathing over not being able to think coherently, over not being able to keep the lid on his impulses and obsessions, and over having made himself such a pariah in his world, it would have been beyond his imagination that such inspiring certainties, beautiful thoughts, rich hopes and luscious feelings were humanly possible.

Yes, if you have ever been caught in that kind of downward inner spiral, you know something about the way it feeds on itself. You try not even to think about how it is with other people because it appears obvious that almost everyone is secure, mature, well-adjusted,

competent, stable and fully in control of himself or herself. That, then, is part of the legion of torturers that fill the mind.

There is the depressing conclusion that I am by nature, more inherently defective than almost anyone around.

There is the humiliation of having none of the stuff work for me that is said to work for everyone else; of having implied that I must not be really trying hard enough. Otherwise my problems would have been resolved by that hypnotist from Nepal or by positive thinking or by numerology or by the recommended daily dosage of lizard saliva.

There is the desolate loneliness of my dark, inner world so devoid of the closenesses and the at-homeness that seems to be there for everyone else.

There is the perpetual, nagging question, “Why me? No one else has this legion of dark presences and voices.”

“If I were a good person – a Christian person – I wouldn’t have the kind of thoughts I do.”

“I am a real ‘sickie’ or I wouldn’t have all of this resentment toward my own daughter the way I do.”

“Without doubt, the terrible anger I feel at my husband for his dying and leaving me so alone, points to a twisted mind, doesn’t it?”

“I know that I’ve committed the unforgivable sin since I actually hate God for what God has allowed to happen to me.”

“I’m plagued by this day-dream in which I just chuck everything, walk away from all responsibility and just disappear. How awful is that?”

“Any day now, I just know that all of the really shabby things that I did some years ago are going to surface and everyone will be even more appalled at me because of my blatant hypocrisy.”

Do you see? Obviously we could go on and on like that, since there are countless such supposedly unthinkable thoughts, assumed-to-be-pathological feelings, and lurking inner terrors.

Unfortunately we aren't told what made up the legion of tormentors that bedeviled this man. It isn't inconceivable, though, that a few might have been ones that some of us would have recognized.

All we know is that it had him believing that the only remotely safe alternative was that of withdrawal from life and behaving in ways that would insure that no one would choose to come near him. But that didn't work either. It only deepened his paranoia, further loosened his grip on reality, and strengthened his belief that he was indeed crazy or devil-possessed – probably both.

So yes, his case does sound extraordinary as the Bible tells it. The truth that underlies it, though, is that people do become disoriented, frightened, panicked and self-hating in reaction to their own dark, unsettling thoughts, or maybe because of a couple of scary, unprecedented impulses, or following some inexplicable avalanches of emotion or maybe because of the surfacing of episodes of childishness of which they would have thought they were incapable.

So what's the key to getting through it – to being restored in confidence, hope and spirit.

If I'm remembering it correctly, there was an image for it in the space-age fairy-tale film from 20-some years ago, "The Empire Strikes Back." At one point in that film story the hero, Luke Skywalker, crashes his space craft on a strange planet, a planet which is an ominous, evil-appearing, threatening swamp. There, though, he meets Yoda, that very strange-looking but wise being that he had been trying to find. Yoda then sets out to train him for battling with the evil, black-helmeted Darth Vader. Yoda tells Luke that he must enter an especially dark, dangerous-appearing, foreboding part of this ugly planet. Apprehensively Luke asks Yoda what he will be up against in there. And Yoda replies, "Only what you take with you."

So Luke enters this threatening thicket and there, seemingly contrary to what Yoda just assured him, he meets the arch-villain, Darth Vader. The two of them duel, and Luke knocks Darth Vader's black-helmeted head off. And then, to his shock, he sees that the head of this awful enemy is really his OWN head -- his own face in the helmet. That is who he has been up against in this fearsome, murky struggle -- a distorted and dark version of himself.

In other words, if I understood this correctly, the vital truth that Yoda was imparting to him was that Luke wasn't going to be ready or able to handle the external threat that was "out there" until he came fully to understand and to face the dark side of his own self (or selves).

Contrary, then, to the old truism (that has been around forever) that says: "What I don't know can't hurt me," the fact is that what you and I don't know, what we prefer to deny, or what about ourselves that we run from, is what is especially empowered to victimize us.

And that, then, brings us back to Jesus' encounter with this man who was so tyrannized by multiple demons.

Jesus doesn't recoil or react at all strongly to the man's strange, hostile, provocative behavior. He rather announces to the man that "it's over," that it is time to bring the reign of all of those dark, unspeakable forces to an end; time to break the power of that accumulation of torturers of his spirit.

At this point in the story the Bible gives us a strong dose of the superstition of the time. Demons, it was believed, had to go somewhere, so as told here, at the request of the demons themselves, Jesus commanded them to enter a herd of pigs. The demons obviously hadn't thought this through adequately, because when the demons did, the pigs ran over a cliff into a nearby body of water and all drowned. As primitive as that imagery, even that piece sort of fits the situation. For "over the edge" was exactly where that poor man had been headed for quite some time.

It really is difficult to tell from the story what all else was said by Jesus, what all else may have gone on. We only know that this fellow became free of the whole legion of things that he had bottled up within: old guilt's, maybe, unthinkable mistakes, unfaced fears, an appalling self-concept, deep suspicions (and God only knows what all else).

But as a result of this apparently brief encounter in that graveyard, this tortured, fragmented man, so depleted from trying but not succeeding in holding himself together, from making promises to himself that he couldn't keep, and from ricocheting through his days without hope, understood God in a wonderfully liberating and transforming way. It was the God who created these minds of ours and who knows then, how tough and troubling and scary it can be in the clinches and the traumas, the God who certainly is NOT appalled or enraged by the strange paths on which we end up and even become lost for awhile, the God who is with us in those dark paths and who loves us even when we can barely stand ourselves.

Oh, we can be certain that this fellow still had some rough days to get through. That's because, when a person has believed for quite some time that he or she is crazy or unforgivable or irreparable or, as in this man's case, that there is something diabolical about him, it turns into a crippling habit of thought.

But it was an is a habit from which one can become free once he trusts and believes that a bad habit is all it is; knows, that is, that it isn't a punishment for sin or some innate permanent perversity or a force of evil.

God knows, we all have our darker sides. They come with the territory of being human beings. They become a REALLY serious problem though, only when we empower them – empower them by refusing to acknowledge that they're a part of us, by running from them, by cloaking them as something other than what they are. That's how they're nourished and are allowed to become what this man called a “legion,” one that causes all manner of mischief.

**We don't have to allow that, though, so don't.**