



## SPIRITUAL INSIGHTS for Therapists and Other Healers

### DEALING WITH DARKNESS by the Rev. N. Graham Standish, PhD, MSW, MDiv, MA

*One in a series of monthly reflections to help therapists and other healers integrate spirituality into their practice by introducing them to foundational spiritual themes and topics that aren't commonly taught in psychotherapy. These are rooted in Graham's 30+ years of advanced spiritual study, teaching, pastoring, and serving as a spiritual director.*

#### Reflection

I was planning to write about this topic, ... *never*. But since I was asked by one of our therapists about it, and realized that this was a topic many therapists come across and aren't sure how to respond. She asked about resources for a client struggling with issues of spiritual warfare. If we are practicing spiritually-integrated psychotherapy, how do we deal with this issue? If we don't believe in the demonic, we're likely to dismiss it, but what if we do believe or don't know what to believe?

Confronting these questions was part of what led me to enter a joint Master of Social Work/Master of Divinity program in the 1980s. As a therapist in a psychiatric hospital, we had a number of teenage male patients who were dabbling in Satanic worship, listening to heavy doses of heavy metal, and wearing clothing and jewelry with demonic emblems. One patient actually took a red-hot bobby pin and seared a pentagram in his arm. I remember asking him why he worshipped Satan. He said, "I've prayed to God to change my situation, but God doesn't care. I know Satan hates me, but at least he'll give me what I want."

How do we respond to someone grappling with a darker spirituality? Unfortunately, neither my social work nor seminary educations addressed it. At the time, both considered belief in the demonic to be mere superstition and ignorance. I was aware that the Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Roman Catholic traditions dealt some with the demonic, but I wasn't any of those. I was Presbyterian. We dismiss the demonic. Here's the problem from a therapeutic perspective: many of our clients don't dismiss it. They may believe in it to one degree or another.

It wasn't until my doctoral studies that I learned more about dealing with the demonic. The founder of the doctoral program, Fr. Adrian van Kaam, gave a series of lectures about the demonic that I found enlightening and really helpful as a pastor and therapist.

Grounded in his personal experiences and Catholic tradition, he taught that there is a darkness that stalks people and tries to keep them from becoming healthy, loving, and whole. The darkness' doesn't really have its own power to harm. Instead its power is in fanning the embers of our own brokenness—heightening our anger, lusts, cravings, jealousy, envy, confusion, loneliness, lostness, pride, paranoia, and more. It wants us to drive us to behave in ways that are both self- and other-destructive. It seeks to divide us against ourselves, others, and God.

According to van Kaam, the demonic works through two means: *possession* and *mini-obsession*. Demonic *possession* is extremely rare and was sensationalized in the 1972 film *The Exorcist*. When a person is possessed, her mind is either partially or totally overwhelmed and invaded. I've never witnessed a possession myself and hope I never will, although I have met and discussed them with people who have. Possessions occur *only* in rare circumstances. They are not simply misdiagnosed psychiatric or neurological disorders, and the Catholic Church is careful to screen those out.

Demonic *mini-obsessions* are more common. They occur when a seemingly minor psychological obsession becomes so strong in an otherwise healthy person or group that it creates oversized fear,

anger, and anxiety. It is important not to confuse a mini-obsession with obsessive compulsive disorder or personality disorder. A mini-obsession does not interfere with that person's ability to function in life. Instead, it causes the person to become obsessed with a particular issue, event, ideal, or ideology to such an extent that all who do not agree with her or him become the enemy.

A mini-obsession can be about anything—a political ideology, whether a church should play organ or contemporary music, the media, kids today, homosexuality, wedding styles, sports teams, and so much more. The issue itself can be insignificant or significant. What distinguishes it is that our obsession creates personal, relational, and spiritual toxicity and division.

So, how does the demonic gain entry into our lives? The Christian spiritual tradition says that it gains entry mostly through pride and ego. The demonic uses human pride in our selves and our beliefs to fan our own frustration, anger, jealousy, envy, lust, need for control, ambition, and more. It can also gain entry by hooking into existing conditions, such as negativity, cynicism, envy, hunger for power, problems with authority, and the reactivation of earlier trauma that lead us to distrust others and act out in divisive ways.

Van Kaam taught that we overcome mini-obsessions and the demonic by becoming aware of their power and increasing our faith and openness to God or the Divine, while adopting a more positive, hopeful, and compassionate perspective. In other words, we overcome it through faith, hope, and love. We cannot overcome the demonic purely by human powers, because the demonic revels in human power and works. So, if we try to fight the demonic with outward, human power, the demonic twists the efforts and causes the fighter to become just as obsessed as his or her enemy, thus consuming him or her in a corresponding mini-obsession. While I have no real opinion on the reality of spiritual warfare, this does suggest that a concern over spiritual warfare itself can become a mini-obsession that brings about toxic division, thus turning the fight against the demonic into a tool for the demonic.

One other aspect of the darkness that others and I have noticed is that the darkness infects us *especially* when things are going well. I call this the “crows circling.” When we start making positive steps in life—as individuals, families, or organizations—something darker seems to step in to tempt us to give up on all the strides we've made. This darkness can be someone angrily attacking us just as we've started to build more confidence in ourselves. It can be an unexpected text from an old flame sabotaging our improving marriage. It can be a sudden existential threat just as our organization is getting into a good place financially and organizationally. The crows circle, causing us to flirt with going back to the ways we were before. We overcome it by seeing it as like the cawing of circling crows—noise to be ignored and that will eventually fly away.

Whether or not we believe in the demonic will determine how we respond to someone saying she or he is struggling with the demonic. Ultimately, if we do accept the possibility of it, then the key to helping our clients is helping them diminish their fears about the demonic and to trust that there is something light in their lives that can lead them in a better direction. Spiritually it means instilling the idea that there is nothing so dark out there that the light cannot overcome it.

## **Ideas for Intervention**

How do we help clients deal with issues about the demonic?

- *Don't dismiss their belief in the demonic, yet don't embrace it either. Encourage them to accept that the demonic may exist, but that its power is only what they give it.*
- *Explore with them how their own situation and response to it (i.e. cynicism, despair, anger, obsessiveness, trauma, lust, ambition, loneliness) might make them more available to darkness.*
- *Help them explore ways to adopt a more positive, appreciative, hopeful approach to life that staves off the darkness.*

**Prayer** (take a moment of quite centering, then read the prayer)

*Gracious God, there is so much more to life than we understand, and dealing with darkness—whether it be the demonic or something else—is part of that. Help us to cultivate a positive, hopeful, possibility approach to life that leads us and our clients away from darkness and towards your light. Amen.*

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