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Turning Inner Chaos into a Peaceful Garden

Almost all spiritualities have a special place for deserts, wilderness, and other such places where we are unprotected and in danger from untamed nature, wild beasts, and threatening spirits. This concept has deep roots inside both ancient religions and the human psyche itself.

In ancient Babylon, for example, wild, uncultivated terrain was seen as something that was unfinished by God and which still participated in the formless chaos and godlessness of pre-creation. It was seen both as unfinished and as a place where dangerous forces lurked, beasts and devils. Thus when people took possession of wild, uncultivated land, it was understood that certain religious rites had to be performed which, in essence, claimed the land for God, for civilization, and for safety. For ancient Babylon, a cultivated garden was a safe and sacred place whereas an uncultivated desert was dangerous and in some dark way in opposition to God.

Similar ideas were present too in other cultures which saw wilderness as a place inhibited by satyrs, centaurs, trolls, and evil spirits. Myths and folklore abound with these images. Medieval Europe, as seen in our fairytales, added the idea of “deep and dark forests” to this concept. These too were seen as uncultivated, dangerous places, places where bad spirits or evil persons might capture you or as places within which you might hopelessly lose your way. Deep, dark forests were not places you were to venture into without proper guidance.

But it was also understood that these wild places were not meant to lie forever untouched by us and God. The idea was present inside of Christian spirituality that we, men and women of faith, were meant to help God finish creation by taming these wilds, exorcizing the bad spirits there, and turning the wilderness into a garden. And so Christianity developed the idea that men and women armed in a special way with divine light and protection, monks and nuns, could and should go into these uncultivated places and turn the unsafe wilderness into a safe garden. Among other reasons, this was why medieval monks and nuns often chose uncultivated places to start up their monasteries and convents.

This fear of wild, uncultivated regions was also partly behind the church’s fear of inquiry into and exploration of outer space. Galileo knew this first-hand. The church had been warning: Stay away from certain dark places.

In subtle ways both this concept and its concomitant fears are still with us. What frightens us today is not untamed geography (which we now see as inviting peace and quiet). Rather for many of us, the untamed, the wilderness, is now visualized more as a gang-infested area within a city, crack houses, singles’ bars. Strip-clubs, red-light areas. These are understood as lying outside our cultivated lives, split off from the safety of home and religion, godless places, dangerous, a wilderness.

But what frightens us still more, are the untamed and uncultivated deserts within our own hearts,

the unexplored and dark areas inside of us. Like the ancients, we are frightened of what might lie in hiding there, how vulnerable we might be if we entered there, what wild beasts and demons might prey on us there, and whether a chaotic vortex might not swallow us up should we ever venture there. We too fear unexplored places; except our fear is not for our physical safety, but for our sanity and our sanctity.

And this fear is not without its wisdom. It is wise to not be naïve. For centuries parents told their children frightening fairytales about evil things lurking in dark forests, looking to devour little children or bake them in ovens. These stories were not told to children to give them nightmares but rather warn them not to be naïve about whom or what they met. Not everyone can be trusted and it is wise, particularly when you are young, vulnerable, and unarmed, to stay together, to stay away from dark places, and to be safe.

Nonetheless our Christian faith invites us to go into those areas, face the wild beasts that dwell there, and turn those dangerous regions into cultivated land, into safe gardens. After all that is what Jesus did: He went into every dark place, from the singles' bars of his time into death and hell itself, and took God's light and grace there. But he wasn't naïve. He heeded the advice of the old fairytales and didn't venture there alone. He entered those underworlds with his hand safely inside his Father's, not walking alone.

Faith is meant rid us of fear, including fear of the wild beasts and demons that lurk inside the deserts of own minds, hearts, and energies. We are meant to turn those wild, dark areas into safe gardens. But we should heed both our own instincts and the instinct behind the old fairytales: Never venture into the dark woods naively and alone! Make sure you are armed with a sturdy creed and that you are walking hand-in-hand with your Father.

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