

Learning from Evil
—What the “Great Serpent” Can Teach Us

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There is a pivotal moment in *Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg's morally riveting film about the Nazi Holocaust, in which Oskar Schindler, a successful businessman profiting from the war, suddenly understands what the Nazis are up to. You might say he has an epiphany of evil. The Nazi Devil reveals itself and Schindler is outraged.

Schindler sits on horseback on a hilly parkland overlooking the Jewish ghetto of Cracow, Poland, on a June morning in 1942. Schindler, it seems, has it all: he's young, fit, trim, handsome, wealthy, influential; his factory is prosperous with Nazi war contracts and he has a steady stream of winsome lovers, including today's companion, Ingrid, also on horseback. But down below in the disturbed ant heap of the ghetto, the Nazis and their fierce Doberman pinschers are forcibly evicting the 7000 Jews from their homes, throwing suitcases out the windows, shouting, firing machine guns, shooting people point blank. Earlier, the Nazis had corralled all of Cracow's Jews into this tiny ghetto; now they're systematically rounding some of them up for deportation to the concentration camps. The rest they're killing outright on the sidewalks as they emerge from the buildings or in their apartments or hallways. Wegierska and Krakusa Streets this morning are a chaos of murder, mayhem, and death. Mercy has been cancelled in the ghetto.

But there is a little girl no more than three years old walking along the street, dawdling, as little children do, behind the column of soldiers and retreating Jews. A Waffen SS man fraternally keeps her moving, correcting her wayward drift with his hand. She turns around and watches just as a Nazi soldier shoots a mother in the neck then jams his jack-boot against the face of her son lying on the sidewalk and shoots him in the head. This is only a half block away from the girl. Nobody tries to prevent her from seeing the summary executions; they don't wait until she is around the corner; they seem to have no shame at all about what they're doing. Why is this, Schindler wonders with alarm. Then it strikes him like a blow to the solar plexus.

The Nazis don't care if there are witnesses because as murdering Jews is now official state policy they have no need for shame. German culture itself was now sanctioning the bloodbath; you could no longer write this off as a local aberration, as the deadly initiative of individual SS officers. But it was even worse than this, Schindler realized later that day over a brandy. He understands the Nazi proposition in its clearest terms. As Thomas Keneally writes in the original novel version of the story, the Nazis permitted witnesses such as the little girl, "because they believed the witnesses all would perish too." It didn't matter if the little girl saw the murders because soon she, too, would be another corpse for the Auschwitz ovens. On the crest of this awful moment of insight, in which every thinking person could not fail to see what would happen next, Schindler resolves to do everything in his power to defeat the system.

And he's in the perfect position to do it. He will eventually save 1100 Jews from the gas chambers by personally paying for their lives, putting them on his special list of essential factory workers. Filled with revulsion for the Nazis—"a piquant kind, an ancient, exultant sense of abomination," Keneally writes—Schindler will exercise all his skill, persuasion, influence, and money to redeem this small fraction of Jewish humanity against the juggernaut of Nazi evil. It will cost him everything to seemingly collude with the Nazis on behalf of the Jews, but in the end he would show how much a single person—no saint, Schindler, but a worldly man struggling to do good—could accomplish in the face of monolithic, state-sanctioned evil.

Suffering a Fundamental Shock

Schindler saw the Nazi evil in full gear and in his sly and devious way he did everything he could to oppose it. His enemy? SS men, trained to absolute obedience, all sparks of individual conscience and openness for shame stamped out of them by a totalitarian state obsessed with its vision of racial apocalypse.

Schindler had witnessed the astounding thunder of their rifles, the screams and wailing of the victims, the heaps of corpses, so he knew “the rabid face behind the veil of bureaucratic decency,” Keneally says.

In the 1990s we are familiar with the catalogue of Nazi horrors, but for a European like Schindler having these facts break upon him on a placid June day in 1942 “was to suffer a fundamental shock, a derangement in that area of the brain in which stable ideas about humankind and its possibilities are kept,” Keneally writes. To make the necessary adjustment in the economy of your soul to encompass these facts was indeed tortuous, Schindler realized. He witnessed it from the hill, but could he explain it? Can we?

Surely no other basic question has so exercised the moral philosophers, so pained the hearts of saints, or so ravaged the lives of ordinary men and women of all cultures in the entire course of human residency on this planet. What is evil, why does it exist, and why does it seem there is so much of it now? What is the line that’s crossed that makes evil different than criminal behavior or routine violence? Our times vividly demonstrate what it means to say the gates of the Underworld have been opened, the Swiss depth psychologist C. G. Jung commented in 1964. “Things whose enormity nobody could have imagined in the idyllic harmlessness of the first decade of our century have happened and have turned our world upside down.” Jung was looking back in awed disgust at the Nazi Holocaust; but in the last thirty years, the Underworld has wreaked even worse, so that by the mid-1990s we have a global milieu of mini-Holocausts, a planetary enormity of evil, a world inundated by the unholy waters of the Underworld. We meet the awesomely shocking state-of-the-art and ground zero of organized evil in the Nazi war machine.

Auschwitz—for us today, its name is the epitome of unbelievable evil. The largest of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps, it was the “abyss of viciousness, a massive edifice of violence and menace,” the product of the “great insanity and uncontrolled madness” of the Third Reich, wrote Primo Levi years after surviving his internment. That began in 1943 when Levi was 25, an Italian Jew and research chemist from Turin, “with little wisdom, no experience, and a decided tendency to live in an unrealistic world of my own.” Then the Nazi evil woke him up.

That forgivable innocence ended drastically when he found himself peremptorily deported to Oswiecim (Auschwitz), an 18 square-mile hell of systematic cruelty, slave labor, torture, and death by cyanide gas in German-occupied Poland. Arriving at Auschwitz exhausted, nearly frozen, starving, deeply humiliated from the inhumane cattle car transport, virtually bereft of resistance, Levi saw that “at the crucial moment of stepping off the train, every new arrival truly felt on the threshold of the darkness and terror of an unearthly place,” he wrote in *The Drowned and the Saved*. Levi would spend the next ten months face-to-face with the unearthly Great Serpent—Satan, arch-enemy of humankind and prince of darkness, according to Judaeo-Christian belief—here brutally personified by the Nazis, their “faces of stone” belying a “millennial anger.” Levi had just entered hell on Earth and, given Auschwitz’ 90-98 percent mortality rate, his survival was highly unlikely. For nearly everyone, the only exit was by way of the Chimney at one of the camp’s twelve ovens—another handful of ashes and bone fragments for the infamous Pond of Ashes.

Life Inside the Abyss of Viciousness

An infernally efficient annihilation complex of barracks, gas chambers, slave-labor factories, and crematoria, accommodating 100,000 at a time, Auschwitz would eventually exterminate 1.6 million prisoners, 90% of whom were Jews. For Levi, who later became a preeminent European writer, it was a “diabolically clever and versatile system of collective death, so lucid a combination of technological ingenuity, fanaticism, and cruelty.” Regarded as the “ultimate drainage site of the German universe” for the execution of the Reich’s infamous “Final Solution to the Jewish question,” at its demoniacal height Auschwitz gassed and cremated 24,000 prisoners in a single day. Astonishingly, most Germans, Europeans, and Americans claimed not to know about this daily atrocity at the time; even the new arrivals—the “evil” enemies of Hitler’s newly regenerated Germany—were effectively misled as to the camp’s ultimate purpose, until the moment the cyanide gas was turned on and they dropped dead in the “hygienic showers.”

It was an unbelievable world of efficient, heartless indifference, a landscape of moral desolation and abject deprivation, a “gigantic death machine” characterized by “bestial insouciance, contempt, and detachment,” dedicated to the demolition of the humanity of its inmates, Levi said. Death at Auschwitz was a certainty, whether you went up the chimney, voluntarily electrocuted yourself by touching the 6000 volt fence around the camp, or succumbed to starvation, exhaustion, disease, infection, torture, beating, shooting, lethal injections, freezing, or despair. Most inmates were already dead, spiritually, before their bodies died: “non-men, who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer,” Levi wrote in his classic account *Survival in Auschwitz* (1958). “If I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen.”

It was Levi’s tenacious will to survive and bear public witness to the outrage of Auschwitz—to keep his thoughts alive—that enabled him to endure his ten month incarceration. When the Russians liberated Auschwitz in 1945, Levi felt he was irrecoverably fouled and scarred by the humiliation of his camp experience; Auschwitz had been an “infinite enormity of pain,” a desolation of body and soul, the end of personal history. Although he eventually committed suicide in 1987, Levi felt that documenting the ideology of the camps was for him at least “an interior liberation.” No one could “grasp the incurable nature of the offence” better than the survivors; no one could better know what it was like to be “atrociously naked and vulnerable.”

So we who have endured this ultimate evil, this Nazi assault on humanity, must warn the world about its possible future repetition, he said. When you start thinking that every stranger is an enemy, which is the unspoken dogma of many countries, then the death camp is the conclusion at the end of this logic chain, Levi said. As long as this conception exists, then the conclusion remains to threaten us as a “sinister alarm-signal.” We must be on our guard; we must know the facts of Auschwitz’ evil; we must reflect on the poisoned fruits of Nazism because conscience can be seduced and obscured again, Levi urged. We must *learn* from evil and study “certain aspects of the human mind” that its manifestations highlight—making enemies of strangers—or else it will devour us again.

For most of us, the Holocaust remains the exemplary standard of absolute evil, the worst case of deliberate degradation imaginable. As such, it is—potentially, if we can muster the considerable courage required—an invaluable resource for studying the nature of evil and the psychology of genocide, a bravura task psychiatrist and scholar Robert Jay Lifton set himself in *The Nazi Doctors*. In this decade-long project, Lifton interviewed 40 former Nazi doctors and administrators who had run the death camps and 80 prisoners who had survived them. It was a profoundly chastening experience, Lifton notes, exposing his imagination to the demonic interior of the Nazi killing machine of darkness and menace, “taking in forms of experience one would have preferred not to have known about.”

That such unmitigated evil can exist is shocking yet it is also instructive, however painful our recognition of this “extreme situation of massive violence to bodies and minds” might be. We must confront it, Lifton says. “To avoid probing the sources of that evil seemed to me a refusal to call forth our capacity to engage and combat it.” Not only does it speak of our fear of presumed contagion, but of the assumption that the Nazi or any other evidence of evil has no relationship to us or our human capacities—“a false and even dangerous” misjudgment. We are capable, however imperfectly, of “learning from carefully examined past evil,” Lifton insists, and through this courageous *empathy* with evil-doers—literally, “coming to know” their experience—we can bear a moral and psychological witness “strongly concerned with questions of the human future.” That means, perhaps we won’t repeat it. But don’t expect to emerge from a study of evil “spiritually unscathed,” Lifton cautions; to confront evil is nothing less than to “alter one’s relationship to the entire human project.”

Yet for each of us to undergo that dramatic alteration may be the most valuable contribution we can make to history, culture, and our future as a civilization. To unflinchingly study and confront evil, which as Lifton and Levi suggest, is our moral duty, is an obligation most people have strenuously denied since the 1940s. “From the beginning there has been enormous resistance on the part of virtually everyone

to knowledge of what the Nazis were doing,” Lifton notes, and that resistance has “hardly abated; one does not want to learn about such things.” A 1993 survey revealed that 62 percent of Americans did not believe that mass killings of Jews took place under the Nazis nor could they identify Dachau, Treblinka, and Auschwitz as concentration camps; meanwhile, revisionist historians increasingly deny that sufficient evidence exists to prove the reality of the Nazi Holocaust.

Paradoxically, Holocaust museums and memorials (now numbering over one hundred) dedicated specifically to the historical facts of mass murder are burgeoning around the world while smaller monuments number in the thousands. “Year in and year out, millions of Holocaust ‘pilgrims’ have stood in these sites to remember, [750,000 a year visit Auschwitz] each one taking away a different experience of that moment, a unique memory,” notes historian James Young, who profiles these memorials to evil in *The Texture of Memory*. Our own Holocaust Memorial Museum on the Mall in Washington D.C., which opened in 1993, now attracts enormous crowds of 4000 visitors a day. Perhaps the broad facts of the Holocaust will not be completely forgotten, but it is possible that this pervasive memorialization of its evil offences may render the horror too familiar, thereby robbing it of its power to shock and disrupt us while pushing it to the peripheries of consciousness, warned Leon Wieseltier in *The New Republic* in 1992. Too much memory can “banalize” the catastrophe.

I think not. One example of evil directly encountered and maturely contemplated whether in person, in print, or in a museum, can be cathartic. It can leave us deeply changed, our conscience, that precious human possession, more engaged. Evil of course has always been a fundamental fact of human existence, poised darkly against our impulse to do good. Ironically, the Nazi Holocaust harshly illuminated the awesome dynamics of evil when it is given full reign by a society, but this illumination can make edifying study, as Lifton’s “empathy” and Levi’s “interior liberation” suggest. I admit that, initially, reading about Auschwitz and more recent depravities is deeply unsettling and frequently depressing. How can we—human beings—be capable of such atrocious acts? Where on Earth did those Nazi monsters come from? How could a person ever do such things? This probably is a similar kind of naïvete to that with which the provincial Levi entered Auschwitz.

What we learn from studying evil is that, as the religious bromide counsels us, there but for the grace of God go we. Nobody is innocent or completely immune from the beguilings of evil nor can we guarantee that the tenuous whispers of our conscience might not be drowned out by other considerations. Our first moves towards evil are such hairthin deviations from the good. Our best safeguard, Lifton says, is “constant critical awareness of projects demanding allegiance and equally pervasive empathy, fellow feeling, toward all other human beings.”

I wanted to follow in the bold footsteps of Levi and Lifton and take a sobering look at evil in the world today. Consulting some of the world’s diverse religious and spiritual traditions (Judaeo-Christian, Tibetan, African), I try to address these vital questions: Is there still great evil in the world in the 1990s? Why does evil exist in the first place? Why does there seem to be so much nastiness around us now? Where does it come from—are the devils within us or out in the world, and what has evil do with those of us who consider ourselves good people? How can we effectively respond to it, even learn from it? And what is evil’s destiny—will it ever end? In a time of heightening violence, fundamentalist hatred, social chaos, political instability, and domestic fragmentation, we owe it to our future, to even our short-term survival, and certainly to our psychological wholeness, to enter the shadow side of life and stand face-to-face with the Great Serpent.

The Worst Evil Imaginable—or Only Evil’s Opening Shots?

“If nothing worse happens in the coming years,” Italian writer Primo Levi said of the Holocaust in his classic account, *Survival in Auschwitz*, “it will be remembered as the central event, the scourge of this century.” Alarming, Auschwitz may have been but the prologue to another half-century of mini-Holocausts, to a myriad of offences against humanity enacted globally.

What was originally a Germanic psychosis and presumably the worst crime of this century now seems to have been the overture to a planetary madness spawning evil worldwide. Enveloping us like fog, we behold evidences of evil: unfeeling, indifferent cruelty, heartless violence, coldly strategized murder and torture, awful, unconscionable behavior on a mass scale unique in human history and certainly inconceivable by our grandparents in their youth. Despite the advances of rationalism, science and technology, this century has seen “devastating eruptions of the unconscious, wholesale collective regressions into more infantile modes of behavior,” a “savage rebellion and the ultimate revenge” of an unconscious rife with “inordinate, crazily destructive impulses,” as cultural historian Lewis Mumford noted in *The New Yorker* in 1964.

While the Holocaust may be this century’s most egregiously vivid example of the destructive mobilization of evil, it is certainly not its only one. Since the mid-1960s of Jung and Mumford, things have only worsened. An estimated 100 million people have died violently at the hands of their fellow human beings in this century of “extraordinary evil and great horrors,” notes sociologist Fred Katz in *Ordinary People and Extraordinary Evil*. Katz’ shocking figure includes the dead of two world wars, the annihilation of 6 million Jews, 1 million Armenians by the Turks in 1915, 35 million Chinese and Russians during their revolutions, while another 20 million (some say 60 million) Russians either starved to death or were shot in Stalin’s “Great Purge” in the Gulag Archipelago between 1930-1950. Since 1945, millions have died in the “killing fields” of Cambodia, Biafra, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq, from at least “forty-four sustained episodes of mass murder against ethnic and political minorities,” Katz says.

The litany of evil acts is quickly compiled from a mass of examples. In 1981, U.S.-supported El Salvadoran troops viciously murdered one thousand noncombatant peasants in El Mozote then covered up all evidence and denied the atrocity for a decade. Since 1988, Iraq has pursued a campaign of terror and murderous liquidation against its 4 million Kurds; since the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq has killed over 50,000 Shiites, an ethnic group representing 60 percent of Iraq’s population. Tribal massacres among the Burundi of Africa since mid-1993 total 150,000. In 1992, feuding Somali warlords indifferently allowed thousands of their fellow Somalians to starve to death as international food relief rotted on the docks. Billionaire druglords in Colombia keep the country in thrall, liquidating all opposition. In the bloody “ethnic cleansing” of Bosnia, Muslim women are systematically raped and exploited in pornographic films while prisoners-of-war are interned in concentration camps. Since the fall of the Communist Bloc, European Gypsies have been increasingly subjected to persecution, ostracism, and marginalization, blamed for the ills of society. Examples of state-mandated flagrant human rights violations, torture, and unlawful incarceration abound. In the 1990s, at least 400 priests of the Catholic Church have been accused of sexual abuse (pedophilia) of children and flagrant abuse of their power, unChristian acts that have led many to lose their faith.

In fact, revelations about hidden, suppressed sexual abuse are increasingly prominent on the list of evil offences coming to light in the 1990s—most conspicuously a new phenomenon called recovered memory. Under deep hypnosis and coaxed by therapists, subjects are recalling deeply buried memories of childhood abuse by parents, priests, and neighbors. Most alarming among these recovered memories are bizarre claims of what’s now called Satanic ritual abuse—“nightmares on Main Street” as *Vanity Fair* calls them.

In the typical scenario, an adult, through hypnotically enhanced recollection, suddenly remembers witnessing as a child terrible abuses, even human sacrifices, involving black magic covens and Satanic rituals—performed by members of their own family and friends. Babies are abducted from day-care centers and ritually killed; teenagers are sexually abused and deliberately impregnated; and an estimated 50,000 people lose their lives annually to Satanic ritual sacrifices—such are the controversial claims substantiated mostly by recovered memories alone. Satanism in the form of an organized underground conspiracy is terrorizing our communities, inciting drug killings to heavy metal “music,” evidencing “a black plague of Satanic evil” and a “permanent terrorist subculture,” claims Carl Raschke, professor of religion at the

University of Denver and author of *Painted Black*. “America has not truly known evil until today,” Raschke writes. “Today it knows it, and the unnerving truth cannot be wished away.”

A Different Breed of Offence

How much truth there might be to the allegations of Satanic ritual abuse and how much is paranoid fantasy is exceedingly difficult to tell. But like the other evidences of evil it reveals the contours of a deeply troubled collective psyche as all sorts of aberrations ambush our better impulses from out of the dark corners of the human mind. More than acts of natural violence (earthquakes, floods, fires) and more than isolated acts of spontaneous, irrational anger (riots, homicides, rapes), both of which are sudden, life-destroying eruptions, acts of evil are a different breed of offence altogether. But what is an act of evil?

Watch any violent movie and study its “bad guys” for a profile of evil. They are vengeful, anarchic, sadistic, filled with cold hatred, capricious, merciless, evincing a brutal disregard for life. They don’t care if you suffer; often they’d prefer if you do. They dispense death to show their power over life; by becoming death, they kill death itself. Why worry about Hell when you’re already living in it? Theirs are deliberate, studied acts of abuse, manipulation, and power, marked by detached indifference, even contempt, for the autonomy, feelings, sufferings, and lives of others. They are always able to choose their actions and they choose to do harm.

Evil exhibits a kind of ruthless toughness in pursuit of its selfish goals (an ideology, profit, or power). In the evil mind lives no fellow feeling, no empathy, no felt sense of the other person; it is a *deadening* worldview in which everything is an inanimate, inconsequential object, subject to one’s manipulation. It is frightening to behold this vacuity, this absence of what we take to be base-line human behavioral parameters. The “bad guys” act without restraint; they have no concern for the moral consequences of their acts because evil works in a moral void. It disavows divine retribution. The bad guys lack something vital—*heart*, the possibility of empathy, the ability to sense the life of the other person, the spark of love and compassion.

But it’s not just the obvious monsters, like Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin, and the “bad guys” in the movies and on our streets who commit all the evil. Beware the common man, the ordinary person, the dutiful bureaucrat. There are too few real monsters in the world to be truly dangerous, Primo Levi reflected years after Auschwitz. “More dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions, like Eichmann.”

That was also Hannah Arendt’s controversial observation after covering the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961. Eichmann was a mid-level Nazi administrator charged with organizing the death of millions of Jews, yet as his prosecutors learned to their dismay he was in fact no monster but troublingly ordinary. He didn’t hate the Jews, he wasn’t cynical, feeble-minded, indoctrinated, deranged, or abnormal—he simply couldn’t tell right from wrong nor could he think from the standpoint of somebody else. He had no motives of his own at all; he exhibited no diabolical or demonic profundity; he was unthinkingly obedient. “He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing,” Arendt wrote in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Through his astonishing sheer thoughtlessness, he taught the jurors “the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil.” Eichmann showed the world how “such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together, which, perhaps, are inherent in man.”

So whether its perpetrators are thoughtful or thoughtless, evil acts to deny life, growth, consciousness, and individuality. It seeks to kill life and liveliness, to corrupt the soul and annihilate the spirit itself. Evil and conscience are mutually exclusive; one drives the other off the field. But at the core of evil lies a paradox. As humans we have the unique capacity to actually *choose* good or evil; yet that we have this choice as an ambivalent birthright may be through no fault of our own. So where does evil come from?

Saints and victims have perennially wrestled with the question of why God allowed evil in the world. Many spiritual traditions attribute its appearance in the human world as the result of a cosmic error

or transgression. To help us define and understand our current “enormity” of evil, we first turn to the insights of philosophers and religions, from Plato to Buddhism, Dante to Islam, as they’ve struggled with this root question during the last several millennia. Then to help us frame current conditions and show us new ways of responding to evil, we consult some current thinkers in the diverse fields of psychology, astrology, and spiritual practice. Truly, the problem of evil is a paramount fact of the world and always has been. As the British novelist C. S. Lewis once said, “There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.”

The Physical World Itself is the Pit of Evil

“This world of ours is a world of opposites,” of light and shade, heat and cold, God and the Devil, explained philosopher Paul Carus in his comprehensive study, *The History of the Devil and the Idea of Evil* in 1900. Although the idea of God has received voluminous attention from philosophers and religious thinkers, the nature of the Evil One has been largely neglected—though it shouldn’t be, Carus wrote. “And yet the Devil is, after all, a very interesting personality, grotesque, romantic, humorous, pathetic, nay, even grand and tragic.” If we admit that “God” is a symbol pointing to an actual presence in the world of facts, Carus asked, shouldn’t we similarly expect that the symbol of the “Devil” also represents a reality?

In the Vedantist view of Hinduism, evil categorically cannot exist except as an illusory aspect of the one true reality known as Brahma. As a phenomenon of our physical world, evil surely exists and is active, but we misunderstand its nature because we fail to see it as a transient conflict within the overarching unified reality. Thus Hindu literature describes the perennial conflict of the *devas* (or celestial gods) and the *asuras* (the demons), somewhat akin to the Olympians versus the Titans in Greek myths, but they both share the same parent, Prajapati, the primordial progenitor. From the time of the Vedas, the gods were constantly slaying demons: Krishna slays the demoness Putana; other gods kill the whirlwind, bull, and horse demons. Even so, all of this is an illusion; only Brahma is absolutely real.

In Buddhism, the Evil One is personified by Mara, the arch-enemy of Sakyamuni in his quest to attain Buddhahood. Mara (whose name means “to die”) is a manifestation of the Indian god of death, Yama, and his task is to tempt, disrupt, and oppose the Buddha. In other words, evil is generated in the world of humans by the lesser gods. As Sakyamuni sat under the Bodhi tree seeking enlightenment, Mara assailed him with his daughters (Desire, Unrest, and Pleasure) and his army, personifying the desires for existence, pleasure, power, and sensual delight. The wily Mara mounted on an elephant sought to undermine Sakyamuni’s resolve to awaken, either through allurements or force.

The Black One’s fighting army includes demons embodying the negative qualities of lust, discontent, hunger, thirst, desire, sloth, cowardice, hypocrisy, stupor, and doubt. Mara attacks Sakyamuni with a whirlwind, a shower of rocks, live coals, sand, mud, then an enveloping darkness; even the gods flee the ground before Mara’s mighty multitude. But not Sakyamuni: he has the Ten Perfections and with these positive aspects of mind he transmutes everything Mara throws at him and claims his rightful seat as a Buddha. In the life of the Awakened One, evil, or Mara, has no effects.

Plato, the master of Greek philosophy, held a dualistic view of good and evil rather similar to Buddhism, if more abstract. Evil pertains to the realm of finite, changeable, material things and represents a kind of blindness to the imperishable realm of Ideas; evil is ignorance about the source and nature of the Good. In this sense, the realm of Ideas and transient phenomena are constantly in conflict in the eye of the beholder; people succumb to evil when they take the sensory world of things to be a true vision of the whole when in fact this world is but the vague shadows cast on a wall inside a cave from an outside source.

In the Gnostic tradition in early Christianity, we find a bleak view of the doings of the gods. The Gnostics regarded the creator of the material world, or Demiurge, as a usurper of a divine prerogative. This Demiurge introduced evil into the world by generating the world of matter itself thereby imprisoning the divine spark of spiritual light. A lesser divinity is responsible for allowing evil to exist in the world on account of creating this world in the first place. In this view, the world and matter itself are inherently evil,

and their creator is equivalent to the Devil. The spiritual world is the source of Goodness but the physical world, in which men and women live enslaved to matter, is the pit of evil. According to the Gnostics, only hidden knowledge (*gnosis*) can free us from the illusory and fragmentary nature of the evil, material world of bodily existence.

In Islam, the arch devil is Iblis, which the *Quran* describes as “the adversary.” Iblis, a diabolic slanderer, was originally the only angel who refused to bow down before Adam when so commanded by God; for this disobedience, Iblis was cast out of Heaven. Afterwards, he tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to taste the fruit, or knowledge, from the Tree of Good and Evil. However, according to Islamic view, the Fall is not humanity’s fault, but Iblis.’ So-called Original Sin is the philosophical mistake of misconstruing the created world as separate from God, as a realm absolute unto itself.

Here again, it is the gods who introduced evil into our world as a kind of cognitive trap for an unprepared young humanity. The fundamental sin is the denial of the divine unity of creation; consciousness, encountering matter, mistakes the contingent for the Absolute. Iblis’ role, and thus the role of evil, is to continually tempt men and women to perpetuate this cognitive error and thereby strengthen the apparent division between Heaven and Earth. We are evil, it seems, when we act as if Heaven, the realm of Ideas, or Buddhahood, does not exist.

The Great Tester Poses a Question

In the Old Testament of the Hebrew tradition, evil is generated by two agencies: a God of Evil called Azazel and a consummate evil demon called Satan. Originally Azazel was an angel who wanted to leave Heaven and live in a human body on Earth. God warned Azazel that he was likely to be tempted by the evil ways prevalent on Earth and might forget his holy origin. Azazel arrived on Earth with great powers and a multitude of celestial secrets and led the life of a powerful sorcerer; when he married a mortal human woman, they produced the dreadful race of giants known as Nephillim who so filled the Earth with evil that God had to bring down the Flood to cleanse the planet.

In the Azazel account, evil is introduced into the world of humans by fallen angels—good spirits in the wrong place. But whether it’s the fault of Azazel or not, the act of doing evil or good is an inclination, or *yetzer*, implanted by God in all of us. Azazel or Satan may prompt us, but it’s we who act. In other words, we have an equally strong drive to be good as we have to do evil—which is how it must be in a world given to free will and spiritual freedom.

Satan originally was a ‘son of God’ in the heavenly court of Yahweh; he cannot act in the world of humans without Yahweh’s permission. In the core Judaeo-Christian myth, Satan tempts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to taste of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Allegorically decoded, this means that primordial humanity was given (or claimed by taking) the *awareness* of the choice between good and evil—free will, in other words, to choose one or the other.

We can hardly blame Satan for pointing the way to free will yet we can certainly condemn him for seducing us in a moment of primal innocence. Hence the dialectical tension (some would call it neurosis) of Christianity ever since. Satan’s nature is to act as tempter, torturer, and avenger, as humankind’s adversarial prosecutor; ironically, Satan is God’s faithful if malicious servant. Evil arises from the fall into matter of a rebellious angel named Satan, except the divine world in fact *commissioned* “Satan” (whose name means “Adversary” or “Tester”) to achieve a specific purpose in humanity.

We see this tension of choice dramatized in the *Book of Job*. Here God permits Satan to test the faith and fortitude of Job, a rich man customarily protected by God. Job was a “blameless and upright one who feared God and turned away from evil.” God wants to know how Job will respond under conditions of adversity, whether his spiritual integrity is intact. Satan, the master of field work, administers the test with no little delight, afflicting Job with “loathsome sores” from head to foot such that “his suffering was very great.”

The testing theme is repeated centuries later in Goethe's *Faust*. Here God allows Mephistopheles to expose Faust, the discontented scholar, to sin, destruction, denial, and evil, confident that this would be a prod to his greater human wakefulness and goodness. A human soon loves unhampered rest, so God decides that this preeminent spirit of negation, "who stirs and works and must, as devil, do," would make a good comrade for Faust. "That's what evil always does—it poses the question to humanity: is *this* the way you want to go in the battle between order and chaos?" That's the view according to Kabbalah, the mystical aspect of the Jewish tradition, says Z'ev Ben Shimon Halevi, a well-known Qabalist educator, based in London, and author of numerous books, including, most recently, *School of the Soul*.

Evil, as the Job and Faust stories suggest, is purposefully sewn into the fabric of creation itself, as an emanation of God, "Evil has a place in the Universe and is a necessary process," Halevi says. According to Kabbalah, existence is divided into four worlds. The divine world is perfect, but the three realms below it are increasingly imperfect, leading to distortion, contraction, the destructive process, and evil. Kabbalah conceptualizes a Tree of Life made of three pillars. One pillar represents the archetypal energies of expansion, force, mercy, and growth (good); another pillar represents the forces of form, contraction, rigidity, and decay (evil); while the middle pillar seeks to balance both (equilibrium) through the action of conscience. Kabbalah's insights of course are not this simplistic a duality. There are two kinds of evil, Halevi explains. "One is cosmic and serves the necessary mechanical function of the elimination of waste and disease; the other is *conscious* evil, and is seen as a testing phenomenon or an exercise in self will." It is conscious evil, the second kind, that is set into our world to vex us. This is the Great Tester's favorite.

To explain the origin of evil is to account for the creation of the world itself, Kabbalah teaches. The fall of the semi-angelic Satan (the Devil or Serpent) and his hosts and their entry into the human, physical world, put the possibility of committing conscious evil uniquely into our hands. The fallen angels dispersed "to the left and right of existence" and are today known as the demonic *Qlippoth*, or dark shells; they constantly assail humanity with evil impulses. "These are the extremes of excessive activity or excessive inactivity; both are unbalanced and therefore evil." Kabbalah teaches that in our sphere each human has a good and evil angel watching over them, presenting the opposing options for our choice. Our own "personal devil," says Halevi, represents the dark side of our personality, negatively inspired by the *Qlippoth*; it would have us commit one or all of the Seven Deadly Sins (the "demonic attributes" of pride, vanity, gluttony, sloth, lust, anger, envy), any of which inhibits spiritual progress. "Evil is basically anything that opposes development, the trial that individuals and nations have to overcome. It is an initiation to defeat the Devil, who through his envy is compulsively obliged to oppose human development."

We commit conscious evil when we "know what is being done and what Law is being transgressed," Halevi says—and that's why the Great Tester and his *Qlippothic* hosts are still among us. We're still gaining valuable experience on how to choose wisely, how to hone the cutting edge of conscience. Because we have this choice, our integrity, like Job's and Faust's, must constantly be tested and refined. Satan's task is to "act as the Tempter, to test Truth and try out Goodness at the level of the Spirit." His brief is wide, in that he may lie and distort the appearance of reality so as to examine the flaws for discipline, truth, and love. For example, the drug-dealing gangs are *Qlippoth* as well as criminals; their spiritual function is to act as a vivid warning to anyone attracted by extremes not to tread that *Qlippothic* path. Kabbalah also teaches that "even the most corrupt evil has within it a spark of Good that can be raised up and brought back into harmonious circulation." Kabbalist saints know that evil performs a painful cosmic task which is not separate from God's will, Halevi adds. "Ironically, evil performs a good deed for humanity in presenting us with these events; it shows us if we go the way of evil, it's the end of civilization."

Kabbalah's cosmic perspective helps lighten what is otherwise a deadweight of suffering and misery, the fruits of multiple evil choices in the world today. Fortunately, evil may threaten and intimidate, but it can never triumph; it literally trips over its own machinations. "Disorder can never organize itself to remain stable, but remains inherently unstable. They're always quarrelling in Hell as to who is the boss;

evil can never win because it is so self-destructive. They end up being destroyed by their own evil; this is how the universe controls its maverick elements.” That’s because evil is basically about power, Halevi comments, and its “psychopathic, moronic, regressive, or infantile” expression as vividly typified by so-called Satanic ritual abuse. “Our generation is much better informed and educated about this but so is the evil side; it’s become more sophisticated. There are historical periods when evil is either weaker or stronger, but it always oscillates at an optimal level. We’re going through a time now when evil happens to be out in the open.”

Making Our Descent into the Underworld

Halevi’s perspective on evil’s cosmic mandate led me directly to my next question. Why is there so much evil out in the open *these* days? For an interpretation I consulted Santa Fe astrologer Edith Hathaway, author of *Navigating by the Stars*, and a regular contributor to *The Mountain Astrologer* in whose pages she has been linking social trends with astronomical facts. Ever since 1984, certain planets and stars—specifically, Pluto and Scorpio—have been in an astronomical alignment that has definite psychological significance for our lives and the proliferation of visible evil.

Although rational astronomers have either mocked or ignored the interpretive science of astrology in recent centuries, for millennia its precise analyses of the experiential significance of astronomical alignments have occupied intellects, counseled heads of state, and guided the lives of many. Since late August 1984, the planet Pluto and the constellation Scorpio have been in a conjunctive twelve year relationship creating an intense energy field that has helped to generate social and psychological conditions akin to Persephone’s mythic descent into the Underworld, suggests Hathaway. In fact, this is the first time that Pluto has transited through Scorpio since the tiny planet was “discovered” in 1930, which is to say, brought into human cultural awareness. Pluto will remain in Scorpio until November 1995, although some astrologers argue its influence will be felt for another decade after that.

Even though Pluto is the smallest planet in our solar system, about the size of the Earth’s Moon, it exerts a powerful subterranean influence on our lives, Hathaway says. Like plutonium, the most poisonous, radioactive substance known to humanity, a little Pluto goes a very long way. Metaphorically, Plutonian energy represents hidden volcanic forces that suddenly erupt and affect masses of people, producing radical transformations through elimination and renewal, birth, sexuality, death, rebirth, and regeneration. Pluto deals with the “drastic and absolute effects of control and power and its abuses,” with deep psychological probing and analysis, financial resources and their management, pollution and dramatic purification. Pluto works from a great distance and from deep below the surface of conscious life.

If any planet deals with suppressed, unacknowledged issues of the human shadow, with the face of the Great Serpent lurking within, it is Pluto, says Hathaway. “Pluto is the deep-sea diver in everyone’s psyche, the force that strips us naked, identifies the wounds, and names the unnamed so that it no longer wields power over us.” Its tremendous revitalizing force “rips through us like a scourge,” exacting drastic overhauls, dissipating powers and privileges, revealing the *secrets* of the power abusers. Pluto asks each of us to be more responsible for our personal power “so that a blind and unconscious collective does not swallow it up.” Pluto signals the “acceleration and the magnitude of Earth’s pollution so that we can get on with the cleanup.” Pluto’s influence is maximally potent when it transits Scorpio because, in astrological terms, Pluto “rules” Scorpio—and that’s where it’s been since 1984. What are Scorpio’s preoccupations? Sex, secrets, the unconscious, death, rebirth, and lots of money—the scorpion sting of the Shadow.

Pluto in Scorpio means we *must* confront evil because it is surfacing everywhere we look from out of our personal, collective, and historical underside, Hathaway explains. “The astrological energies are putting this right in our face, forcing a hard-edged definition to circumstances that are difficult to look at.” Pluto is bringing to light all the abuses of the past, be they sexual, emotional, financial, industrial, political. Pluto literally forces us to recover the memory of past wounds buried so deeply in the psyche we forgot (or

officially denied) their existence. “This energy exacerbates whatever unredeemed elements we have in the Shadow, personally or culturally.” It’s telling us we can no longer project our rage and fury out onto others and get away with it. Under this prolonged psychic influence we’re seeing a “rash of unbelievable events, the real undercurrent, the deepest, darkest part of the Shadow coming out.” It’s always been there but it is finally hitting the news as Plutonian crimes and evil acts come to light.

Evil seems to be running absolutely rampant everywhere we look but this is actually the Plutonian scourging of the shadow side of contemporary life, Hathaway assures us. Since 1984, we’ve witnessed the fury and seeming irrationality of our Plutonian heritage becoming visible in industrial power abuses, terrorism, domestic violence, international drug cartels, random, drive-by shootings, ceaselessly televised violence and depravity, the devastation of AIDS, Wall Street scams and insider trading. That’s because Pluto in Scorpio unmasks the *source* of power, its secrets and suppressed abuses, its otherwise anonymous, unidentified wielders, bringing it all into public awareness, making us more conscious as a civilization of our potential for evil, our past commissions of evil, and the possibility of profound regeneration.

“These multiple expressions of evil and hideous rage are coming to the surface now affording us the fire test of fire tests, demanding extraordinary new qualities from us,” Hathaway says. You don’t get anywhere until you have the courage to go underground with Pluto, stripped of all your social facades. “You don’t face the possibility of maturity, of really knowing what it’s like to be a full-fledged whole human being without this experience.”

Recalling Our Demons from Our Neighbors

Does this mean all the evil in the world ultimately comes from within each of us? Are we each the mother of all devils? For the most part, yes. Our strongest defense against the insinuations of evil is the “utmost possible self-knowledge” of our own wholeness, the Swiss depth psychologist C. G. Jung remarked in 1961. We must learn to live without self-deception or self-delusion and know relentlessly how much good and evil we are capable of doing because both are bound to come to light in us. The trouble is, Jung added, “We have no imagination for evil but evil has us in its grip; evil today has become a visible Great Power.”

In the 20th century we started getting a more psychological theory of evil. For Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis, evil is the extreme product of “the psychopathology of everyday life.” Freud broke through the icy crust of Western rational behavior and exposed the turbid black water flowing unconscious to us underneath our daytime facades of culture and personality. He exposed the polymorphously perverse demons within the catacombs of the Western psyche; he showed how the normally repressed irrational spoke through our dreams, impulses, and neuroses, always only a hair’s width from disastrously overcoming our supposedly civilized (restrained) personalities. Evil, for Freud, was a product of unconscious repression emerging like an appalling psychic mutation of human goodness into daytime life.

C. G. Jung called this murky, dangerous terrain the Shadow and it is from within the unexplored, rejected muck of this Shadow that evil is born. Jung took great exception to St. Augustine’s *privatio boni* theory, calling it morally dangerous because it trivializes evil and thereby weakens the Good. The truth is, he claimed, that good and evil are not absolute opposites but equal poles of a human moral judgment; if we want to square things with observed reality, Jung argued, we have to say that if good has substance, so must evil. They are two “halves of a paradoxical whole” and both belong “to the chiaroscuro of life.”

With both Freud and Jung, evil is a human responsibility: we create it by not knowing ourselves profoundly enough, and we introduce it into the world by acting unconsciously, oblivious to the hidden sources of our behavior. Modern humanity has so exalted rationalism and has so lost touch with the power of numinous symbols and animistic beliefs as to call them superstition, that we are at the mercy of the psychic underworld to a positively dangerous degree, Jung said.

Once we experienced Nature as alive with spirits, Heaven as peopled with gods, and goddesses, and our own lives as guided or thwarted by invisible *daimons*, or guardian spirits. Then, culturally we declared them nonexistent, oblivious to the psychological fact that they are actually the products of certain factors in the human psyche, Jung said. “The daimonism of nature, which man had apparently triumphed over, he has unwittingly swallowed into himself and so become the devil’s marionette.” Now, “since nobody is capable of recognizing just where and how much he himself is possessed and unconscious” and “completely oblivious of the shadow lurking behind us,” we project our own condition onto our neighbors, spawning devils worldwide.

So, the world is rife with demons spawned by the human psyche; we have populated the world with our own projected devils. Or as Jungian analyst Alfred Ribi notes, author of *Demons of the Inner World* and faculty member of the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich, Switzerland, we must develop a psychological demonology, a theory of evil that understands that evil agents are primarily “projected complexes” from the human mind. “When man became the only psychic reality, the demons migrated into him;” they usurped consciousness and it “became demonified,” Ribi says.

These rejected demons now exist as unacknowledged psychological complexes and “neglected areas of the psyche.” The evil we perpetrate is unconscious and exceptionally cruel because of this nonrecognition of the source of our demonology, says Ribi, because “everything that is unconscious is also projected.” Most of the time, “we are fighting matters out with the alleged demons of our fellow men and do not recognize them as our own demons. Only when we begin to track them down will we have prospects of solving the grave problems of our time.” The integration of the demons within us, of that portion of the world evil we carry within us, is “an inalienable duty” and one crucial to avoiding world catastrophe, Ribi argues.

Consider the demonification process under the Nazis in which the Jews became the scapegoat for all the ills of Germanic society. Germany had lost the first world war, suffered a humiliating defeat to its national pride, and signed a demoralizing treaty. National leaders and intellectuals sensed the German ethnic identity—the *Volk*—was somehow degenerating, losing its vital force from a racial poisoning. Germany, fearing racial contamination and death, assigned blame for this cultural malaise primarily on its own Jewish population; culturally, however, Germany had evidenced anti-Semitism as early as the days of Martin Luther. Under this aberrated Nazi biomedical vision—a mixture of “fanatical genetics and biological evangelism,” says Robert Jay Lifton—the Jews became the source and agents of evil and as enemies of the *Volk*, who must be eliminated through the radical, “therapeutic” purge and “Final Solution” of genocide.

We witness the identical process of projection and demonification today in the rise of “Neo-Nazi skinhead” violence, both in Germany and America. American skinheads (an estimated 3500 spread over 160 “hate” groups in 40 states) are now among the most violent of all white supremacy groups in the U.S., targeting blacks, Jews, homosexuals, immigrants, and other minority groups. Young, gullible, and taught to hate, these Neo-Nazi skinheads are “violent, angry, deeply troubled young men and a growing number of young women, and are the most dangerous bigots in this country today,” observed Morris Dees, founder of Klanwatch, in *The New York Times* in August 1993. “Hate crimes are at an all-time high, and there is too much loose talk that blames immigrants and nonwhites for the economic difficulties our country faces.” As Primo Levi would say, when we make strangers into enemies, the atrocity of the camps is only a few steps away.

But there is a silver lining to this jet-black cloud. Reflecting on the atrocities of the Nazi era and the ways in which the German culture and psyche had been corrupted by the Nazi dementia, Jung acknowledged that the sight of evil and the knowledge of its abysmal darkness and poisonous air can indeed kindle evil and suffering in our soul. Yet there is something morally salutary in this exposure.

When we examine our own heart and conscience, we see that the whole world was guilty for the war because it failed to recognize the evil within and the shadow looming behind contemporary humanity, Jung said. The sooner we become conscious of this psychological responsibility, the sooner we can “at least

hope to change and improve ourselves.” Without this, there can be no psychic maturation or widening of our spiritual horizons. But surely we’ve known this at least since the time of Dante. Before he could reach the beatific vision of Heaven, he had to experience the miseries of Hell and the ambivalences of Purgatory, and through this come to recognize the true nature of “sin” or acts of evil.

Getting The Devils off My Back

But surely we’re not responsible for *all* the devils, all the acts of evil. Given a global milieu in which evil is literally exploding out of the collective unconscious, mightn’t there be actual devils in the “ethers” that, despite our inner vigilance and purification work, can still affect us on the sly? After all, as one of his miracles Jesus cast out the devils from the insane. And isn’t every religion and all of folklore and mythology rife with demonologies? In other words, is there evil loose in the world *apart* from our projections? Are there really devils and demons running around, jumping on our backs, making us commit evil?

I first turned to M. Scott Peck, M.D., bestselling author of *The People of the Lie*, a provocative study of the hope for healing human evil. Like the Jungians, Peck, who is a practicing psychiatrist, urges us to take responsibility for continual self-examination and to purge of the roots of evil within us, which he describes as our trenchant for gross intellectual laziness and pathological narcissism. It is crucial that the psychology profession acknowledge and name evil, identifying it as a legitimate factor in mental illness and human psychology, Peck argues. We must subject evil to “strenuous and coordinated scientific inquiry.”

We cannot begin to hope to heal human evil “until we are able to look at it directly, to recognize it in all its ghastly reality, and to transform our revulsion into careful compassion.” Until we can name something, give it a diagnostic category in a psychology of evil, we remain unknowingly afraid and try to avoid it, Peck says. He recounts several pivotal confrontations from his clinical practice in which he came face-to-face with the confusing *force* of evil within human beings. “The evil are ‘the people of the lie’ deceiving others as they also build layer upon layer of self-deception.” Peck understood that evil people actually live within a self-made living hell and are to be pitied. “Forever fleeing the light of self-exposure and the voice of their own conscience, they are the most frightened of human beings.”

Peck also found that in about 5 percent of cases, evil is imposed from outside the individual—from a “sub natural Presence” or Satanic possession. “I now know Satan is real because I have met it,” Peck forthrightly informed his readers in 1984. Demonic evil—“something absolutely alien and inhuman [possessing] an incredibly contemptuous grin of utter hostile malevolence,” says Peck—hides within and behind the person and must be uncovered and driven out by exorcism. This act is “potentially quite dangerous” and involves “very high [spiritual] voltages.” In the company of a professional exorcist, Peck witnessed several dramatic exorcisms of the Father of Lies (“nursing continual dreams of revenge against God”) and his demonic minions. “Toward the end of one exorcism, in response to a comment that the spirit must really hate Jesus, the patient, with a full-blown Satanic facial expression, said in a silky, oily voice, ‘We don’t hate Jesus; we just test him.’”

Traditionally, the Ritual of Exorcism to “drive out devils” was part of every priest’s training within the Roman Catholic Church until it was officially eliminated in 1964 by Papal decree. According to Catholic theologian Malachi Martin, author of the classic account of five Church-ordained exorcisms, *Hostage to the Devil* (1976), a combination of “ignorance, disinterest, disbelief, even adamant unwillingness” on the part of many Church officials to even discuss demonic possession and exorcism is the order of the day. Even so, in 1992 Martin estimated that 800-1300 major exorcisms of a “bodiless, genderless creature” named Satan are performed every year. In the 1990s, “Possession is real and real prices are paid,” Martin warns.

The Devil’s “ultimate camouflage” is to persuade us that he doesn’t exist, knowing that when we disbelieve, we are disarmed. “If your will does not accept the existence of evil, you are rendered incapable

of resisting evil.” Martin’s admonitions to believe in the Devil may be paying off as a 1978 Gallup Poll revealed that 32 percent of American Catholics believed the Devil was a personal being while 41 percent considered the Devil an impersonal force.

Releasing the Patient from a Noxious Possession

But there are other things besides Satan itself that can get noxiously tangled up in your aura, such as the lingering souls of the dead or what many in the field of “depossession” work call disincarnate human entities. Consider the views of Aloa Starr, daughter of missionaries, a former Rosicrucian, and author of *Prisoners of the Earth*, her startling account of twenty years of work with psychic possession and its release. Since 1972, Starr, who is based in Sedona, Arizona, has facilitated the “release” of about 5000 individuals from inimical possession and negative psychic influence, relying on a combination of prayer, otherworldly spiritual assistance, and her faith in the healing powers of Christ. Her methods work a lot faster than the standard Catholic rite of exorcism, she claims, and involve a lot less liturgy, requiring an average of 30-60 minutes of concentration per client. And they might even be more thorough because it’s not just the Devil Starr is trying to evict from a client’s energy field or body, but all manner of negative sentient influences, personified or otherwise, as the following case study reveals.

A mother brought her thirteen year old boy Gordon to Starr, recounting his sudden personality change and precipitate fall into bad behavior two years earlier. Once he had been “a joy and wonder, liked by everyone,” but now Gordon pulled weird tricks, insulted people, called them horrible names, fought constantly, was frequently angry, violent, and uncooperative, and would occasionally go out of control and start attacking his mother with a baseball bat. He was “uptight, like a bomb ready to go off,” his mother told Starr. Using a pendulum and a diagnostic method honed over twenty years of clinical work, Starr determined that 17 foreign, inimical entities resided in Gordon’s aura and that his personality was partially possessed by an entity that was “extremely evil and in full control.”

Working with an assistant, Starr called on spiritual guidance and various families of angels to literally remove the negativities from Gordon’s energy field. His aura was so damaged—like a multicolored silk that was ripped, shredded, and stained in many places—that Starr kept close watch on him during a 90 day “restoration” period until he was energetically restored to himself. However, the behavioral results were dramatic and immediate. His negativities disappeared, and Gordon became “sweet, considerate, polite, bright, and open-minded”—just as he had been before the possession.

As fantastic as Starr’s case study might seem to most of us and as hard as it is to scientifically validate, she assures me it is typical of the thousands of cases she has handled over the years. Many people *unknowingly* attract disincarnate entities who then exact debilitating effects, both energetic and psychological, on the individual until one becomes aware of it and seeks their expulsion. It’s quite likely that the growing incidence of sudden random and drive-by shootings are caused by strongly possessing negative entities commandeering individuals. Not only our auras but the etheric fields of our homes, public places, bars, hospitals, old battlegrounds, and of course cemeteries can be similarly infested with ill-meaning spirit beings, Starr explains.

Once the “healing ministry of release” work is completed, Starr instructs clients in a powerful visualization so they can seal and protect their aura with a “circle and tube of white Christ light from their feet to the Higher Self high above.” Release work is “extremely urgent because we are at the end of an age when spiritual powers are trying to clear as much of this negative debris off the Earth as they can and all these negative energies are still floating around.”

Cultivating the Fierce Deity of Self-Knowledge

But just because your aura is purified and its negative energies released, this doesn’t mean you are exempt from any intrusions of evil. From a Buddhist point of view, you have merely created the

preliminary conditions for an intense confrontation with evil, both inside you and in the world. The best way to respond to evil is to confront it fortified with self-knowledge, explains Robert A.F. Thurman, a prominent Buddhist scholar, professor of Indo-Tibetan Studies at Columbia University, and translator, with commentary, of a new edition of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Strictly speaking, confronting evil is—or ought to be—an aspect of spiritual practice.

Ultimately, there is no evil, only the triumph of enlightenment in which relative evil is overcome by every living being, Thurman says. Buddhism offers “elaborate methodologies to confront evil without flinching because it contends that good is achieved by facing the evil in yourself. After all, you have all the Buddhas and an infinite number of enlightened beings who will help you overcome evil; therefore you should deal with it.” One of the first things a Buddhist realizes in the work of confronting evil is that, given the belief in past lives and reincarnation, quite likely all of us have some time in the past committed our share of bad deeds, adding more evil to the world. “Everyone is constantly reminded they have probably committed murder before, have done every evil thing and could easily, once they make the basic error of thinking they are the center of the world, go to any extreme of evil again.”

That error of thinking is ignorance, misunderstanding yourself and the world. It is the “misknowledge” of thinking you are a separate being unconnected with others, Thurman explains. The fundamental error that leads to evil is our “exaggerated absoluteness about our own self; the error is self-alienation and self-absolutization, which can spread through a person, a religious faith, a racial identity, a nation. It’s an error that leads to the identity habit. The root of evil is the delusion that I am an absolutely separate entity from the life of the universe; therefore, I can kill those separate lives, whether they’re animal or human, because they are unconnected to me.” What fuels this pervasive identity habit—the chronic reflex of always thinking the world turns around *me*—are the five afflicted emotions, a key aspect of Buddhist psychology. These are the addictive mind states of ignorance, desire, envy, pride, and hate; all evil action and the abuse of others derive from this distorted perception.

The remedy here is the Buddhist practice of examining the dynamics of selfishness. Study your self-habit; see how you habitually maintain your identity, says Thurman. “This meditation focuses on confronting the intensity of your self-habit, identifying how big your ego is, how self-centered you are, how you regard yourself as the most important person in the world.” Study how egotistical you are then see how this selfishness is rooted in a misperception. That’s the attitude, but now try to pin yourself down, find that real self you assume yourself to be. You probably can’t. “The self is the one thing you can’t find because you’re looking for it *with* the self. When you realize that, it begins to erode your self-centeredness and you begin to realize selflessness and emptiness and you develop wisdom. This is the basis for compassion. You see, we get release from the identity-habit through the path of confronting error and negativity to the fullest.”

The good news is that in our confrontation with error, negativity, and the roots of evil we have the universe with us, we’re on the winning side. Buddhism teaches that as evil is based on misknowledge and error, it can be corrected by wisdom, or enlightenment, the awakened view that sees the world correctly. “Truth is wiser than error and the force of goodness, based on wisdom, is more powerful in the universe than the force of evil which fades away in the light of the power of goodness. Evil is serious and you have to worry about it, but in the long run, it loses out to goodness.”

Even the devils eventually learn this. Buddhism has many stories about Bodhisattvas encountering demons. “They almost never kill the demon but chain him down and bore him nearly to death with interminable lectures about the Dharma, forcing him to turn around and use his power for good ends,” Thurman notes. “That’s why you see all these fierce deities, or *Herukas*, in Tibetan iconography. Usually the legend says they were once demons who had been converted by a Bodhisattva. Evil is never killed or abandoned or erased; it’s converted.”

Consider *Chemchok Heruka*, a fierce deity and archetype prominent in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. “As a ‘Heruka,’ he is a Herculean, ‘blood-drinking’ male deity, symbolizing the adamant power of enlightenment to overwhelm all evil and negativity of the world,” Thurman explains. “The critical fire of

wisdom transmutes the ‘blood’—the essential constitutive energy of the suffering-permeated life cycle—into the elixir-fuel of the dynamism of liberation, the power of compassion.”

In fact, the leading fierce deities are actually the five primordial Buddhas appearing in their wrathful guise to engage the subconscious mind about to succumb to the drives of lust and aggression. The Heruka guides one through the deceptive terrors of the *Bardo* (technically, the “in between” state after death, but a vivid metaphor for our waking, embodied life, too). “In this strait, the Buddhas adopt a ferocious approach, forcefully breaking into the person’s awareness and offering him a powerful escort through a realm that has suddenly become frightening.” In this way, Thurman says, the self-investigator can identify with the fierce deity archetypes to develop the courage to confront the evil possibilities within themselves, to see it but not act on it, so they will not judge others wrongly. “This practice gives one a preparation so we can deal with these powerful shadow impulses so we don’t deny them or express them in an unconscious way.” And in the paradoxical spirit of Buddhism, I ask myself: is an *Heruka* a devil or an angel?

Chaining the Antichrist for the Next Thousand Years

After considering Thurman’s fierce deity teachings and Buddhism’s essentially cheerful outlook about the triumph of good over evil, I next wondered if there will ever be an end to evil. Does evil have a destiny, a final outcome in our world, a final day? When the Millennium dawns, will evil set in the west?

Long ago St. John of Patmos thought so, according to his visionary *Revelation*. He envisioned an angel coming down from Heaven holding the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. The angel seized Satan (“the dragon, that ancient serpent”) and threw him in the pit, bound him, and sealed the pit “that he should deceive the nations no more” for a thousand years. This is supposed to be our future. Another name for this apocalyptic confrontation with the Great Serpent at the end of historical time (on the eve of the Golden Age prophesied in *Revelation*) is the meeting with the Antichrist and it’s the crux of what philosopher, educator, and writer Michael Grosso calls the Millennium myth. Western history ever since John of Patmos has been obsessed with this millennial, if not apocalyptic, confrontation, as we see when we survey some of the main themes in its description of evil.

New Testament Christianity adopted a sterner, less optimistic view. Here Satan, the Prince of this world—also called the great dragon, the old serpent, prince of the devils—is the enemy of Christ and the opponent of goodness. The Christ will eventually conquer Satan although the Devil, master of cunning and subtlety, may try to seduce and corrupt him first. In this view, the human soul is the battleground for this perennial conflict. Christianity foresaw an eventual end to this struggle and to the existence of evil itself. Long ago St. John of Patmos, in his visionary *Revelation*, envisioned an angel coming down from Heaven holding the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. The angel seized Satan and threw him in the pit, bound him, and sealed the pit “that he should deceive the nations no more” for a thousand years. Evil in our world is Satan’s fault, so in this apocalyptic confrontation with the Great Serpent at the end of historical time, the Antichrist gets his cosmic due.

The Christian view of Satan as the implacable enemy of God reached its pinnacle of expression in the 13th century masterpiece of religious vision, *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri. In this sublime allegory, Dante first visits the nine circles of Hell, or the Inferno, guided by the noble spirit Vergil. “This is the place where you must arm yourself against all dread,” Vergil advised Dante. In Hell’s deepest pit, they encounter Satan, a foul, shaggy, winged creature with three heads—whom Dante calls “the Emperor of the Universe of Pain, the Great Worm of Evil, this gross fiend and Image of all Evil.” Here the worst sinners are confined in ice; Satan himself, the Father of all the world’s evil, is pinioned from the waist down in ice and the icy winds generated by the furious beating of his great wings only perpetuate the deep freeze of the souls interred.

The great medieval Catholic theologian St. Augustine set the tone for Catholic dogma on evil for centuries when he defined it as *privatio boni*, the absence or privation of good. He implied that the good

has a kind of positive substantiality, whereas evil is an absence of this quality, lacking real substance, and therefore relative, transient, and entirely dependent on the existence of the light of goodness. The 17th century German mystic Jakob Boehme argued that good and evil are equally possible choices for God who is perfectly free. Neither is superior or worse than the other. Evil is an intrinsically necessary and unavoidable aspect of God.

Immanuel Kant, the 18th century German philosopher of pure reason, talked of a “radical evil” that cannot ever be expunged from human existence. If we accept the idea that humans are free and therefore morally responsible, this has to mean that both are possible in any given moment, depending on our choice, and neither can be permanently eliminated. The 19th century British mystic poet William Blake echoed Boehme’s view with his own vision of a reality chronically rent by the irreconcilable opposites of good and evil. Later that century, Friedrich Nietzsche contended that good and evil are not so much realities of the world as creations of the individual human will trying to deny or camouflage its own freedom. Good and evil are not absolutes that impinge on our freedom but moral inventions by which we try to conceal it. A pure act of will, Nietzsche said, takes us “beyond good and evil.”

So for Grosso, professor of religion at Jersey City State College, and author of *Frontiers of the Soul*, *Soulmaker*, and *The Millennium Myth: Love and Death at the End of Time* (1994) the Antichrist is “the old absolute enemy of humankind, the serpent from *Genesis*, although its persona keeps changing through history, becoming whatever alien, stranger, or Other we as individuals or groups project it onto.” During the Nazi era, for the Germans the Antichrist was the Jews; during the Cold War, for capitalists it was the Communists; in the 1990s, for Americans, it’s the Muslim fundamentalist-terrorists; and for Islam Iran, this same Antichrist is the “blasphemous” writer Salman Rushdie, the “enemy” of Mohammed. The mask of the Antichrist is promiscuously passed around the world.

“The demonization process is this magic mirror world of mutual, literal projection and self-deception that makes up the nightmare of history,” Grosso says. “This deadly paranoid projection turns up over and over again in history. We are constantly dualizing, Satanizing the other person, the other group. We view Satan, or the Serpent, as totally alien; it becomes dogmatized into an object of immortal enmity.” The negative side of the Millennium myth is that this absolute enemy, in whatever guise any culture frames it, will be definitively vanguished and sealed in the pit. “This marks the complete control of the Serpent and the relative end of evil.” We will kill the devil and be troubled by it no more.

But is this really possible and would it represent the triumph of good over evil? Probably not, says Grosso. “To face the Millennium is to face the power of the Serpent, which can be both an intoxicating and a terrifying experience. We have to begin the hard work of looking in the mirror and summoning up the courage to deal with the ‘little Hitler’ that resides in each of us.” But it’s not only the dark, malign energies we project outwards to create demons; we also project our divine luminosity, our good energies, our bright creative potential, thereby generating angels. Maybe we need a new way of regarding the Serpent—can it somehow ambivalently embody our propensities for both good and evil?

It furthers our understanding to reconsider the Great Serpent as the awesome embodiment of primal life force, or what Tantra calls kundalini or the Goddess Shakti. In the Biblical myth, when Satan tempted primal humanity in the Garden of Eden, he offered them awareness, spiritual awakening to the *knowledge* of good and evil and the *vertigo* of choice. That free choice is probably the most frightening thing to appear in the universe and the root source of all subsequent evil.

Kundalini, the energy that generates knowledge, or higher consciousness, can be a destructive or creative force, depending on how we use it. “The Serpent is our evolutionary energy, the ambiguous power of life itself, a tremendous force we have to confront,” Grosso explains. “It is a dangerous, perhaps uncontrollable energy that must be tempered and dealt with prudently. John’s *Revelation* finds this power so overwhelming it makes it the enemy of humanity that must be controlled and repressed before we gain freedom from its disturbing influence.”

In other words, maybe the Devil is the negative, inimical “Satanic” face we’ve culturally assigned, out of our fear and error, to this awesomely *neutral* body of our own life force. Grosso’s insights made me

wonder: it may be terribly heretical, but what if in light of the Millennium Myth in some unexpected way the Christ and Antichrist are the same? I say this because according to Kabbalah, which assigns numbers to letters, the Hebrew word for “Serpent” (*Nahhash*) is numerically identical to “Messiah” (*Mashiach*). And the total of the digits comprising either word total 7, which is *Zayn*, Hebrew’s seventh letter, which means “sword.” The sword that “slays” (or activates) the dragon is the Messiah who is the risen serpent. Another way of saying this is that Shiva, the divine principle of consciousness, “marries” Shakti, the divine principle of energy.

Anyway, when we acknowledge the power of the unconscious, when we recognize that ultimately all the demons are within us, this generates humility and insight. “This could help us to *make friends* with the Serpent, to transmute evil; that we don’t is where I find the West’s Millennium myth seriously flawed. The ultimate aim in confronting evil is to make friends with ourselves. You don’t lock the Serpent in the pit; you befriend it.” Grosso likens this peace-making approach to the Great Serpent with the Ten Oxherding pictures of Zen Buddhism. The youth doesn’t slay the huge ox or run away from it, but learns how to ride it and becomes one with it. “To me, this is a more wholesome vision of our possible relationship with the Serpent. After all, the Serpent is central to the *healing* image of the caduceus. In thinking of the Great Serpent, I prefer images of dialogue and dance, stages we go through in negotiating our relationship with this basic energy.”

Dancing Between Good and Evil with the Great Mothers

It would finally take the refreshing insights of the Yoruban *Gelede* festival to help me see my way out of the quicksand of Western dualistic thinking. I turned at last to Jacqueline Carr-Hamilton, professor of Religion and Black Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute at Blacksburg. Carr-Hamilton has spent a lot of time among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria and finds the Africanist view more illuminating than her own Christian background when it comes to the ancient problem of evil.

The key to the Yoruban insight is the *Gelede* (gell-ah-day) festival of Great Mothers and Witches based on their basic Creation myth. Oroese was the first human to stand before the Great Mothers and Witches of the Universe at the beginning of time, chief among whom was Olodumare, who created the world. She has the power to perform good or evil, to create or destroy, to be a benevolent mother or a malign witch. For the Yoruba, witches aren’t evil; they just represent the destructive side of Olodumare. All deities, male and female, derive from her and similarly possess this ambivalent life force the Yoruba call *ase* (ahs-say). When Oroese courageously beholds Olodumare and her cohorts, they appear to him as birds because they can fly anywhere in the cosmos. He goes before them, certain he will die from the sheer potency of their energy, but miraculously he survives. He does this by dancing.

“Oroese was the first man to survive in the light of their power to kill him by dancing between their forces of good and evil,” Carr-Hamilton says. It’s as if Oroese charms the Great Mothers and Witches by his bravura equanimity in the face of their daunting bipolar powers. So the *Gelede* festival reënacts Oroese’s archetypal confrontation with the primordial but polarized life force on behalf of his community, past and present. During *Gelede*, Yoruban villagers dance through the night and into the next morning, reiterating Oroese’s cosmic aplomb, asking the Great Mothers and Witches for their divine forbearance for another year, that they not use their mighty powers destructively.

Gelede dramatically embodies the Yoruban attitude about good and evil, Carr-Hamilton says. There are no absolute definitions of evil here, no millennial Antichrists; the life force of the Great Mothers goes on eternally. “In the African sense, we’re talking about a confluence, a recognition that *both* forces operate together in the universe and that these can be manipulated either for good or destruction. *Gelede* tells us that everything continuously moves between these two forces, that it is vital to be able to dance between these opposing forces without missing the beat—which is the natural rhythm of these universal life forces. *Gelede* is about the ability to accept what is. I can’t stress enough the importance of ritual dancing

in light of these forces rather than judging or labelling them or falling by the wayside. *Ase* is not inherently good or evil; it's the way you use the life force that makes the difference."

There may come acts of natural destruction, tribal warfare, mass slaughter, or sorcery, but the Yoruba seem to take it in stride, toughening up in the face of the transiently destructive side of the Great Mothers. "The *Gelede* dance is cathartic; you recognize these forces and let them flow through your body, thereby healing yourself and restoring yourself to the community and universe." I thanked Carr-Hamilton for her insights, certain that Primo Levi would be pleased to know that at least among the Yoruba the stranger is not the enemy and although life has its violent episodes, Oroese would not resort to cyanide to get his way with the Great Witches.