

“Living with the Monsters”

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Story for All Ages

Today’s story is true and it happened a long time ago.

I was an odd child. Sure, many of us would say that, but at a particular point in time, I was very odd. Sometime during the year I was in fourth grade, so 8 or 9 years old, I developed an elaborate ritual which baffled and frustrated my poor parents.

I would go to bed when I was told but I would keep myself awake— reading if I could get away with it— until after my parents had gone to bed. Once they were quiet, I would get up and take my blankets and pillows and a stack of books to the master bathroom. Calling it the master bathroom makes it seem grand but it was actually tiny, tucked under the eaves with one door and no windows. Once there, I locked the door and made a nest of blankets and pillows in the tub.

The plan, every night, was to stay awake reading and watching the door until morning.

Needless to say, this caused problems. Apparently, I was very cranky during the school day.

When asked why I was doing this, I lied. And the lie made no sense. I told them I was afraid of fire. Why would you go to a room with only one egress, if you were afraid of fire?

They bought me a fire escape ladder that I could roll down from my bedroom window.

This did not help. I still went to the tub to keep vigil.

The thing is, I was afraid of monsters. And this made no sense to me because I— being a highly rational child— knew monsters did not exist.

Nevertheless, I was afraid of monsters. And so embarrassed about being afraid of monsters— which did not exist. I just knew I needed to have my back to the wall and my face to the door, so I could see them coming if they came. I did not know why there were monsters but I needed to see them coming.

The thing is, I know now what I doubted then: there really was a monster in my house when I was a child. It had something to do with grownups— with people— but it wasn't a person and I didn't know what it was. Lacking information, I gave it Lon Cheney's Dracula face and I was afraid of it because my parents were somehow afraid of it. When I was a kid, no one ever said its name but my mom had cancer, it was a monster, and we were all afraid.

I am not sure my parents ever knew why I did what I did. I certainly didn't understand. Eventually, they figured out how to lock me out of that bathroom. I suffered through gales of tears and frightened sleepless nights and then... we all moved on. I guess I learned how to sleep in spite of the possibility of monsters.

Sermon

The last several years have been anxiety provoking for many of us. The global pandemic that scientists warned us about actually happened and has affected all of us in ways we could never have guessed at. The belief many of us clung to in 2016, that our system of government was strong enough to curb flagrant anti-democratic abuses— well, that belief is shaken for most of us. The hopefulness that arose from progress toward LGBTQ equality and beginning to name violence toward women and people of color is mired in the amplification of voices openly advocating hate and inequality in the public square and on school boards. And then there are the floods, heat domes and fires that tell us how bad climate change may be. These are only a few of the monsters that stalk the public landscape. At the same time, personal monsters bump along beside us— some of them related to the ones we share and some quite private. It has been a hard couple of years.

All of our congregations speak and act in response to many of these monsters. But before we act, we react. We feel. I bet, when I recited that list of horrors you had a visceral response. That is why I say we live in anxious times. Anxiety mediates our relationship with all the monsters to one degree or another. The closer the monster gets to us, the more anxiety can shape our reactions.

As a therapist, I often need to explain anxiety to anxious people. I might say "If we meet a monster while on a walk in the woods, our bodies are biologically programmed for fight, flight or freeze. We perceive danger and our whole body responds— heart rate increases, muscles tense, breathing

becomes shallow and fast, and our brain function shifts away from complex intellectual thought to survival instincts.”

Those symptoms sound a lot like a panic attack, don't they?

They also sound like the physical feelings of being angry.

Most of our modern day monsters are not like the mountain lions our ancestors encountered. That burst of energy and instinct is still highly adaptive if you are, for instance, a transgender teen who runs into people who do not see them as truly human. We may find, however, that that physical reaction is not as useful in situations at work or school when we feel, rightly or wrongly, that we are in danger. It is a problem if you fight with your boss or run away from your teachers.

Thankfully, most of us rarely experience anxiety at panic attack levels.

And mild anxiety can help us. It gives us a little jolt of adrenaline to prime us for running races, taking tests, or public speaking. The visceral anxiety response is like an alarm system: we need to do something.

There is another way I explain anxiety to anxious people— this one I usually pull out with children but adults may hear it too. I tell them that anxiety is a little monster that sits on your shoulder and lies to you.

It's a tricky monster because when it lies, it sounds to you like it's just your voice telling yourself horrible, true things.

But anxiety is a liar. I know it lies because it says the same things to lots of different people. Stuff like you're not good enough or terrible things are going to happen or a mistake you made will make other people hate you.

Anxiety is its own self, telling you to do things and think things that will make it a bigger, stronger, meaner monster.

Anxiety lies, but we are going to learn to talk back and be louder and stronger than that monster.

In this scenario, anxiety itself is the monster. It whispers in our thoughts and it feeds on our thoughts.

So both of these ways of thinking about anxiety are true. Anxiety is a feedback loop between physical response and thought. The physical sensation leads to thought which leads to physical sensation and so on. You can enter the process at any point.

Sometimes, the physical sensations associated with anxiety come before the perception of what the anxiety is about. Human beings seem to need to tell stories to understand what is happening to them.

That's what I was doing when I was a little kid.

I absorbed the anxiety around me, I was anxious, and came up with a reason: monsters. Something I could try to control.

I could then close the door and watch to be sure it never opened.

I actually think that this is how some of the monsters in our world were born: people feel threatened or anxious or vulnerable without understanding why, so they search for something or someone to blame. Racism, homophobia, transphobia, and nationalism are a few of the monsters that grow this way.

Remember that panic and anger feel physically similar.

Morphing anxiety into anger helps some folks feel more in control and naming some other group monsters gives folks something to fight.

So, now, according to me, we get anxious because we perceive monsters and we create monsters because we are anxious.

The snake is eating its own tail here.

What do we do?

I propose that we start by talking to the anxiety.

I will try to explain by telling you about my own monster. The anxiety about my mother's cancer monster has been my companion through most of my life. It was mostly only really troubling when mammograms went wrong and needed redoing.

A bit over four years ago, I was diagnosed with a cancer that had metastasized and suddenly, I had my own cancer monster and the anxiety to go with it.

The thing about anxiety is that it is all about the future and control.

What is going to happen and how do I control it?

When you are diagnosed with a monster illness, the tendency is to tell stories about what will be in the future. What are the survival statistics? What are my chances? How will I look bald? Will I survive surgery? Will I leave my children as young as my mom left me? Will I live to see grandchildren?

So many questions about what will be. Sometimes the anxiety nags me— go look at the web sites, look at the survival statistics, figure out how long you have left.

I remain so grateful that my care team never gave me a guesstimate of how many years I have left. They don't actually know.

The truth is that any story I tell about what will be is just a story. No one knows. We know treatments are changing all the time, so we know it is likely that the survival statistics compiled last year are already out of date. We know that whatever the percentages are, it doesn't really matter because know one knows which end of the statistic I will end up on.

I am here now and, in this moment, today, I am definitely not dying. I can— and have to— tolerate not knowing what will happen.

So that last bit— that was me talking back to the anxiety. Using logic and what is real now. I need to refuse to speculate about what might be. Deal with what is. That, for me, is battling the thinking part of the anxiety. Most of the time, I can shout it down if I need to.

The very physical aspect of anxiety needs more than words. To ward off anxiety, I need movement and sunlight, friends and good sleep. When the anxiety is in my body, what I need most is to breathe deeply and begin to relax. It also needs the shelter of a good hug.

One thing my husband and I have noticed is that learning to live with cancer was really good training for the pandemic. We have learned some discipline in tolerating not knowing what will happen next.

All of us here live in some kind of relationship to the monster which is Covid-19.

Like cancer, Covid is an illness, so many of the same questions arise about vulnerability, survival and aftermath. There is more though. The anxiety asks questions about how our lives, our country and the world may change forever because of this monster. Anxiety tells stories about failures of containment, more virulent mutations, and how dangerous unknown, possibly unvaccinated others might be to us.

The anxious mind wants to jump to the end of the book, even if it makes up that it all ends badly. Perversely, a lot of people find a weird sort of comfort and sense of control in believing that they know that the worst will happen.

Think about doomsday preppers for a moment.

Most folks are not that extreme, but surely you know someone who has told you they choose to believe the outcome of something will be bad, so if they are right they are not disappointed and if they are wrong they are pleasantly surprised.

What they are saying is that they will choose unhappiness over the uncertainty of just not knowing.

So— what are your words to combat Covid anxiety?

For me, I start with reminding myself that the people I love are vaccinated and that is the best protection. There are people all over the world, who are smart and capable, working toward solutions, treatments, and cures. There are people all over the world working to help heal those made vulnerable by this illness, and I can be one of them.

I am here now, in this place, and only know what I know now and can only feel the pain or the hope of this moment.

I do not know how the story will go.

I am not saying that we should not contemplate the future and ask questions. Ideally, we ask the questions and make plans when the anxiety is held at bay, when we are thinking clearly, anchored in what we know in the here and now and cognizant of what we do not yet know. We fight monsters best when we know the future is not written yet.

A little anxiety gives us a bump of energy, to wrestle with the monster. Too much anxiety leads to confusion, stress, maybe burnout or even despair.

Whether I am anxious or not, the cancer will still be there. Covid will still be there. Climate change, racism, and all the other monsters stick around regardless of how we feel about them.

But it seems to me that a monster without anxiety is just a problem. But anxiety never goes away completely and we wouldn't want it to. Monsters still have teeth. But we can help each other with the anxiety. We can help each other stay rooted in the present. We can help each other be happier and more effective as we battle— or just live with— the monsters.

And when the anxiety is too much and the monster is at the door, we can also take a break, line a great big tub with pillows and blankets, and crawl in with people we love to sit together and keep watch until morning.

Prayer and Meditation

In a time when we walk among monsters,
Let us walk together.
Breathe deeply and allow yourself to really know
that you do not face the monsters alone.
Together, we can help one another
To stay present in this beloved community.
When we walk together,
We can always call for help and be heard
When we need more strength,
We can always call for help and be touched
When we need comfort.
We can always call for help and be held,
When we are running short of hope.
Let us walk together among the monsters,
Sharing our vulnerability, our determination, and our faith.
There are monsters
but we know we are not alone.

Benediction

In the words of CB Beal:

Breathe again, good people. It is in our breath that our bodies can be still.

Breathe deeply ten times to reflect on your innate goodness, on the best you are capable of, on being your most powerfully resilient. As you breathe, reflect on this – you do not have to hold up the universe solely; you only have to do your part.

Your right-sized part.

Blessed Be and Amen

Go in peace knowing that you are loved.