

IN THE CELL THERE MAY BE MONSTERS (Catherine Askew)

Hello again and I greet you from Northumberland in front of a long dark wood.

I've been thinking about that phrase lockdown that we're all in.
And, of course, what it reminds me of is prison - as does the word cell.

When I was back living in the States, and part of the new monasticism network there, I met an amazing woman, a courageous woman, who was part of the Plowshares Movement. (If you don't know what that is, I suggest you look it up.)

She did a non-violent action against nuclear war and as a result of it – and ahead of time she knew this – she ended up in prison for a period of time.

And I was amazed by her courage and her conviction to take this action knowing it would land her in prison. She told us an amazing story about what it was like for her in the prisons and the creative ways she found to keep herself well, to connect with other people and to pray in that space.

I was thinking about how different it is to be locked in when you've chosen it versus when it's thrust upon you. Also not long ago it was St Julian of Norwich's Feast Day and I've been thinking about *her* and her confined space in that cell, and again how she chose that – along with other Anchorites of that time period who chose that.

Now I can be claustrophobic and I can panic when I'm in small spaces.
This isn't a time in the cell which we have chosen
and when I feel that I can panic, and I want to push against it.
But I've been trying to channel Julian as well as this friend in the States, Liz,
who chose to enter their cell, who welcomed it.
And I've been trying to see what gifts it has to give there.

Now I know for me the only thing worse for me than being in a confined space when I don't want to be, is being in a confined space with a monster!
I don't know about you but that is how some of us may have been feeling.
That as we've gone into lockdown and confronted ourselves we've found it's not just us in the space, and not even joyfully just God or others of our household, but it's our own inner stuff, it's our own monsters, the stuff that we would like to keep locked in the basement of our interior castles, thank you very much . And yet in these times we've heard them at least banging on the door or shaking the doorknob a bit.

Usually these struggles we have are something about proportion – something about too much or too little. Be it sex, food, stuff, work, rest, affirmation. We struggle to get the proportion right in our head – and un-tended these negative intrusive thoughts can become monsters that trip us even just in our ability to be comfortable *with* ourselves, *by* ourselves.

The desert teaches us the way through is exposure by disclosure.

If we keep these things repressed or suppressed or denied they go deeper and deeper into our hearts. The best way out is not to keep them hidden and not to keep them secret. But because they're scary – I mean to say if you see a wolf in the woods you say "aargh! ...go away, go away, go away." You push it back. Then next time you want to go for a lovely stroll in the woods you think - gosh that wolf is out there, it could jump out at me from behind any tree. He's probably stalking me right now!

And so the woods which might otherwise be an inviting place, a place of discovery, become a fearful place, and maybe you stop going into the woods altogether because in spite of all the wonderful things that might be there you know that there's this wolf lurking around.

Friends, distractions are few these days, and fears are high.
I think it's time for us to get to know our wolves,
to get to know the beasts, the monsters that are lurking in our shadows.
This is a golden opportunity in a way to have a look,
because I think once we face these monsters, we learn about their appetites, learn their names,
learn the gifts actually they have to bring us,
the more we can live in freedom and in joy.

So the first thing I would say the desert teaches is just simply to have the courage to look at them.
Stop screaming, stop running. Let them come.

Like with any wild thing, though, that might take a bit of time.
So you could just open the door and peek and say yes you're there – day one.
Gather your courage, day two, maybe a little bit longer, and so forth.
So just have the willingness inside to have a look at these things.

I think the second thing is when you're going to any dark wood take a candle or a lantern,
whatever works for you – you'll know - but take a little bit of that with you.

And finally – well second to finally – take a friend
because often when you're doing this work you need another to bear witness, to support,
to encourage, to soothe you.
So, again from the desert tradition, maybe this would be an anamchara, maybe it's a soul friend,
maybe it's a spiritual director, perhaps it's your therapist, your pastor, your priest, just a friend,
a spouse (not *just* a spouse!) a friend – somebody you trust.
You have to trust them and you have to know that your soul will likely be safe with them.
Call the Samaritans if nothing else.
But just find some way to name that thing, to let that thing be seen, with another,
so it doesn't hold such power over you.

And then finally, I would just say know your way out of the forest when you go in.
When you go into the deep space leave a trail of breadcrumbs or mark the trees
because you will need to get out again.
It's not a place to live forever and I certainly wouldn't be advocating you do this all day every day.
But peek in, go in with some light, go with a friend and know your way out.

I think one of the real gifts of the desert tradition, and of our own Northumbrian way,
is not to be surprised that you have monsters, that you're struggling with these things.
Following Jesus does not mean that you don't have these things,
actually it's saying all the while, all the while if we're growing, there's going to be new things to confront,
new ways to deepen, new things to learn.
You're not doing anything wrong if it's hard.
You're not doing anything wrong if you're tempted, if you're surprised.
We just continue to grow in awareness and to do what we can.

There's a lovely quote by CS Lewis and it says this, "we were talking of dragons, Tolkien and I, in a Berkshire bar. The big workman, who had sat silent and sucked his pipe all evening, from his empty mug with gleaming eye looked towards us "I seen 'em meself" he says fiercely."

So friends I've seen a dragon.
I suspect if you've been on the journey you have.
And this is a time to be wrestling with those.

Blessings to you all as you confront your own dragons,
spend time in your own cells
and seek hope as only you can.