

Shadow Dancing

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This past week saw not only the celebration of Halloween, a night of treats, but in the city of Detroit it was also the week of Devil's Night. Devil's Night is the night before Halloween. In many cultures and even in some other parts of America, the night before Halloween is a time to play tricks; toilet paper houses, throw eggs on cars, and that sort of thing. In Detroit this petty vandalism has escalated. For as long as I have been alive, Devil's Night has been the night when fires are started in the city. In 1983 450 cases of arson were reported on Devil's Night. In 1994 the number topped 800. I grew up in a small town about an hour away from Detroit, so I never saw any of this up close and personal. However we did get our TV stations out of Detroit, and we could follow the news very closely. A bad Devil's Night sometimes cost a mayor or a fire chief their job.

What I wondered then, and still wonder today, is why do people this? Why set your own city on fire? One of my uncles, in a moment of

dark humor, wryly observed that all one needs to do is cross a river and you are in another country – why not torch Windsor Ontario? Perhaps people were afraid that setting a Canadian city on fire might be an act of war. But I suspect something deeper going on.

Detroit, particularly in the 1980s, was in a pretty strong nose-dive economically. A nose-dive that would eventually lead to declaring bankruptcy last summer. Murder was on the rise in the city back then too. A series of corrupt mayors did Detroit no favors either. Detroit, which had once rivaled Chicago as the jewel of the Midwest, was becoming a depressing and dangerous place to live. Perhaps it is no wonder then that its residence wanted to burn the place.

It is tempting, I suppose to attribute political motivations to the arsons that plague Devil's Night in Detroit. Frankly though, I have never heard of that as an actual rationale for the arsons. Usually only B-movies use political motivation as a reason for Detroit's fires. Most of them are set by teenagers trying to get a thrill. Toilet papering a yard doesn't do it for them. Arson does, and it evolved into a perverse tradition. The youth that set these fires do so because they seek something new; they want to do something forbidden and illegal and there is a rush that comes with such behavior. There is an adrenaline hit of excitement that comes from breaking the law that can become

something like a drug. It was a moment of color in an otherwise bleak existence of urban life and decay.

That rush of energy in doing something you know you shouldn't is tempting to us, but often leads to something you regret. I am sure the people who lit fires and were arrested, look back at their action with regret. Hopefully some of the ones who didn't get caught regret it too. While most of us may not have lit fire to our neighborhoods this past week, I am confident in asserting that none of us, not one, can say that there isn't a moment, an action, a road taken that we do not regret. All of us have regrets; those moments, perhaps filled with the rush of the moment in doing something you know you shouldn't have, that makes us scratch our heads and wonder, "Was that really me who did that?"

The great psychologist Carl Jung noted this paradox of human living. Jung said that there are aspects of ourselves that we do not like, nor do we wish to see or be confronted with. It is if those aspects of ourselves are not really us. We can see them in other people, and usually respond with anger or revulsion when we do. But what we are really responding to is that part of us that we don't like and we wished were not there. In extreme cases people may actually live separate lives, fractured and split off from their everyday selves. The parts of ourselves that we wish weren't there, and that we don't want to see,

Jung dubbed “the Shadow.” This month our theme is “Brokenness.” Jung’s idea of the shadow and our often unhealthy attempts at repressing those ugly, unwanted aspects of ourselves, are good examples of brokenness in our everyday world.

In our story today Joseph was paralyzed into inaction by his fear. What he thought was an issue at work turned out to be something else entirely. We love to externalize our problems don’t we?! On the surface, what was happening for Joseph was an issue out there in his work place. Once the surface was scratched, however, it turns out that what was happening in his work place was reverberating something inside of Joseph. It hit one of his buttons. It stirred up a long forgotten memory of how his mother and father would interact with each other. Little had he realized that he had seen their relationship, and swallowed it whole. So that when confronted with the smallest obligations, Joseph was emotionally running away from fear just as his father had. The moral of the story is clear: the thing that you are running away from, finds you. Always does.

I recently caught up with a high school buddy of mine after losing touch for a couple of years. Thanks to the modern marvel of Facebook, I knew generally what was going on with him. He was married, three kids, descent job, and still lived in the same small town in Michigan

where we had grown up. From the outside, or at least from the vantage point that Facebook allows one to have, he seemed happy and content. Not the life I would have chosen, but then again, he didn't choose mine!

Anyway, last time we were home he shared what was really going on. Turns out he was in a "cyber-relationship" with another woman. I will admit that when he confessed this to me, I had no idea what he was talking about. But apparently my friend had been in an internet chat room, and as one does I suppose he was chatting with the people there. Just typing to a random bunch of strangers you can't see, but they can see what you type. A person, I assume they were female or portrayed themselves as such, was intrigued by something he had said in this chat room. Then the two of them started chatting privately with each other. They hit up something of a friendship, and started chatting more and more often. As time went by they emailed photos to each other, and my friend was in this chat room constantly. Like any other "affair" his relationship with his wife and family suffered as a result. He was somewhat obsessed with chatting with this person. Whenever she would email him he would get a rush – a shot of adrenaline probably similar to the feeling teenage arsonists get on Devil's Night. You know you are doing something wrong, but it feels so much fun in the moment.

I asked him why he kept this relationship going. He had not been particularly popular with the ladies back in school. The internet changed that. He was able to live the life he had denied himself when he was young. That part of himself that was sexually inexperienced or awkward around girls had been a part of himself that he had not liked and wished would go away. In a mistaken attempt at trying to heal his brokenness, my high school buddy thought he could rewrite the script of his youth with a new ending. He promised me that he would end the relationship with the woman online, but who knows. The lure of our unlived lives is a powerful force to resist. The life we wished we would have lead is a form of the shadow. And as I said before, the thing you are running away from, finds you. Always does.

The reason it always finds us is that the things we are afraid of, that we are running away from, are inside of us. We don't go anywhere without them. The only way out is through – to experience the feelings we don't want to feel.

One of my favorite comedians is Louis C.K. There is not much he does that one can repeat in church, but a recent interview he did on the late night talk show circuit recently made the rounds on Facebook. In the interview Louie starts out talking about why he won't give his daughters iPhones or smartphones. They are a distraction. People are

too much into their phone and not interacting with people face to face. Or if they are in line or have to wait, they get into their phone without just sitting there. You have to be able to just sit there and be a person without any distraction or avoidance.

C.K. goes on to describe an experience he had driving through Los Angeles. Everyone, he said, is texting while they drive. They would rather risk killing everyone and themselves in a car accident than to have to be alone with themselves for the length of a car ride. He recounts one day when he was in his car and heard a Bruce Springsteen song come over the radio. It was a song that Louie hadn't heard in many years, and as soon as he did it called up old memories. He remembered being a kid and starting back up to school and how depressed and scared he used to get. He felt those same feelings returning just by hearing Bruce Springsteen give this far away yell in one of his songs. Instead of grabbing the phone and texting everyone, Louie pulls over to the side and decides to feel the sadness that emerges. He feels sadness, the loneliness and futility of life, and he cries for a long time. Then he feels better, almost euphoric, as a result of the release of that energy. He says, "You know we are so afraid to feel that first bit of sadness that we do anything to avoid it – the phone, food, sex, alcohol – anything to distract us. But if you get past it, sad moment can be a beautiful thing."

When I was first learning to drive in the winter streets of Michigan, my Dad told me that if your car starts to skid or slide out of control to turn into the skid. He told me this when I was 17 or so; figured I could handle myself. One icy morning driving to school my senior year I felt my car go into a slide. Instinctively I turned into the skid, and the vehicle corrected itself. All was well, despite the drama of the moment.

I think when we are confronted with our shadow; those parts of ourselves we would rather not have to look at or deal with, it is best to turn into the skid. Stop running away from things if they are going to find us anyway. Turning into the skid, means to have that moment of courage, as Louie C.K. did at the side of the road in his car, to feel the feelings of pain, suffering, sadness or depression. To let them wash over us without trying to push them aside. Instead try asking them questions. What does this mean? Why am I feeling this? What part of my unlived life am I trying to manifest?

The great pastoral psychologist Wayne Oates used to teach seminary students about this stuff. He was extraordinarily sensitive and aware of his inner life. One morning he was in his bathroom shaving, and he found himself really looking forward to that first class of the day. Then he remembered why. "Wayne," he said to himself,

“Why are you thinking about the pretty girl who always sits in the front row?” Wayne Oates was so adept at knowing how the soul works, he knew that it wasn’t really about the girl. It was really about what the girl meant to him. What story or hidden desire she had inadvertently stirred up within him? Whereas most of us would probably need a session or two or three of heavy Jungian therapy, Wayne Oates could reflect that deeply upon himself while he was shaving in the morning!

Not all of us are that self-aware, but ultimately self-awareness is the key here. For you see the shadow is not all bad. In fact if we are willing to feel the feelings we want to avoid, to endure a bit of the suffering and pain that we usually anesthetize ourselves from, then we may just receive a gift from our shadow selves. We might discover that sad moments can be beautiful as Louie C.K. did. We might understand our old habits and fears in a new way. We might find the freedom to do that goal we have our hearts and heads set upon. The thing you are running away from finds you. Always does. The trick is to remember to turn into the skid, let it wash over you, and let yourself be transformed.

Brokenness is not always a bad thing. As the great Leonard Cohen once wrote in his song Anthem: “You can add up the parts but you won't have the sum. You can strike up the march, there is no drum. Every heart, every heart to love will come but like a refugee. Ring the

bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.”

A beautiful image I think for this month of November. The places in our lives where there are cracks are the very same places where light needs to shine in. Don't be too quick to curse those cracked places. They may become the source of your strength and new life.

May it be so for all of us. Amen Blessed Be.