



Prison
Contemplative
Fellowship

Notes on the False Self

Adapted from Richard Rohr's *Healing Our Violence Through the Journey of Centering Prayer*
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I do not think that violence and negativity are natural to us. I believe you are made for love, that your natural abiding place is love, and that you in fact *are* love. Your absolute foundation is communion with God and others. This is the "deepest me" to which you must return before you act. From this foundation, you know you *must* act and you *will* act, but now from a place of positive, loving energy. You must start from a deep place of "yes."

The first step to moving beyond our temptation to negativity, which is really a death wish, is to recognize it is there. Julian of Norwich called this inner constriction "contrariness"; Freud called it the ego; Paul called it the "flesh" or the old Adam; Merton called it the false self. They were all describing this petty thing that tries to define itself not by what it is *for*, but by what it is *against*. Before conversion, we are all like this--we don't know who we are or what we are for. This small self cannot radically connect with Being because it's always defining itself in terms of comparing, competing, analyzing, critiquing, judging, labeling, and positioning, which are all basically "mind games." They are "no" instead of "yes."

The next time you are offended, consider it a "teachable moment" and ask yourself what part of you is actually upset. It's normally your false self. If you can move back to the big picture of who you are in God, your True Self, you'll find what upset you usually doesn't amount to a hill of beans! But you can waste a whole day (or longer) feeding that hurt until it eventually seems to have a life of its own and, in fact, "possesses" you. At that point, it becomes what Eckhart Tolle rightly calls your "pain-body." We all have one. The pain body is probably what Christians meant by "original sin." The only problem is your degree of identification with it.

Tolle defines this "accumulated pain" as "a negative energy field that occupies your body and mind." In your mind, it makes you judgmental and negative. In your body, it makes you fearful and angry. You can observe this energy in yourself as a knee-jerk, self-protective reaction to everything around you. I emphasize the word *reaction* here because there's no clear, conscious decision to think or act in this way. Tolle says, "If you look on [the pain body] as an invisible entity in its own right, you are getting quite close to the truth." Tolle never uses the word "demon," but perhaps his term "emotional pain-

body" is a good description of what Scripture often means by a demon. Tolle says, "The pain-body wants to survive, just like every other entity in existence, and it can only survive if it gets you to unconsciously identify with it," [1] which is what most people do. Then you are indeed "possessed"! In healing work and in meditation, you learn to stop *identifying with* the pain and instead *calmly relate to it* in a compassionate way. Some call this "taming your dragon." Ironically, your demon now becomes a friend and educator.

For example, in centering prayer, you observe the hurt as it arises in your stream of consciousness, but you don't jump on this boat and give it energy. Instead, you name it ("resentment toward my spouse"), then you let go of it, leave it on the boat, and let it float down the river. You say, "That's not me. I don't need that today. I have no need to feed this resentment. I know who I am without it." This is the beginning of emotional sobriety. [2] Many are converted to Christ, but without this emotional conversion their behavioral reactions remain much like everyone else's. Thus the importance of contemplative prayer.

If you've been eating that resentment toward your spouse as a regular meal, the boat's going to come back around in the next minute because it's accustomed to you filling your plate with such fast, cheap food. When you still don't give it any energy, it'll probably try a third time, too. Devils are persistent! "You've always identified with me before," it says. But then you must know, "Who was I before I resented my spouse? And even before that?" This is the primary way you learn to live in your True Self, where you are led by a foundational "yes," not by the petty push backs of "no."

Richard Rohr,
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