

## Spiritual Self-Care

I was almost 40 before I figured out that the constantly critical voice in my head was not my own, but a script passed down and impressed upon me by my parents, my culture, and especially by the omnipresent Bible Belt culture I was born into. There was an internal accuser always present, scolding me about everything I did, how I did it, the things I didn't do, the thoughts I was thinking, the feelings I was feeling, and the feelings it told me I ought to feel. There was always an accuser present with me. Always. But there was never any kind of internal advocate. I was primed to respond to criticism, discounting encouragement from anywhere, especially from within. I did not know how to live life except in shame, the avoidance of shame, and the fear of shame.

What I did not and could not see was that, while I always endeavored to be good and kind and loving toward others publicly, I privately spoke and acted toward those closest to me in the same hyper-critical way I spoke to myself. So I (and the Bible-belt culture I still lived in), like untold generations before me, passed all that interior noise down to my own children, not even aware that I was doing it. I was not unique in this. My parents did it to me. Their parents did it to them. With very rare exceptions (and there are exceptions) we all do this. The world, in fact, expects it of us.

The roles of Accuser and Advocate are well known in scripture. In the Book of Job, the Accuser (Satan) is the one who brings all the misery into Job's life, costing him his family, his wealth, and even his health. Job's "friends" join in the accusations of, "You must be evil; you must have done something wrong." Even Job judges himself and his situation and even attempts to justify himself before God, because what is happening to him and around him seems so patently unfair and senseless. What was the Accuser's charge? Job wasn't really a good man. He only seemed good because God blessed him with things that made it easy to appear good. Inside, the Accuser bellowed, this guy is a fake. Paradoxically, the Accusation itself was the root of all the evil that befell Job.

Anyone recognize that voice in their own head? That dynamic in their own lives? A large part of the spiritual abuse that Bible-belters in particular suffer comes from versions of Christianity that cultivate and encourage the Accuser's spirit in place of God's Spirit. For many of us the Episcopal Church has become a refuge from religion that, in practice, demonstrates a great deal more faith in the power of evil than the power of love.

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit<sup>1</sup> is the Accuser's nemesis. It is, first and foremost "a Spirit of holiness." It is described as "a Comforter" and "the Spirit of truth". Paul says the fruit of this Spirit "is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." The Spirit brings a power to cast the Accuser out of the heaven he (sometimes, *she*) occupies in so many of our hearts and minds, and replace it with a peace that passes understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation issue: In the New Testament, what is customarily translated as "the Holy Spirit" overwhelmingly appears as "a Spirit of holiness" in the original Greek text.

I grew up thinking I needed the accusing voice to keep me on the straight and narrow. I also believed it was my own interior voice. It was, in fact, (and is for most everyone) a program inserted and running on a loop in my brain. By 40, it made a mess out of my life which, sadly, does and will have lingering effects in the lives of those closest and most dear to me that they will have to work out on their own. So has it always been.

It is hard to cast the Accuser out of heaven. It is life-giving and joyful to enthrone a Spirit of love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in its place. Last week I wrote briefly about the importance of applying the Golden Rule, not only in our dealings with others, but in the way we treat ourselves. Treat yourself with the same gentleness and tolerance that you share with others. Be Christ to others; be Christ to yourself as well. Unless you cultivate the Christ within, you will not have it to share with others when you need to call upon it.

It is often said that we evolved from apes into humans. From a spiritual vantage point, it is more accurate to say we are apes evolving into humans, among whom Jesus is the first fruit, the one who is what we are all called to become, the "Son of Man", a new kind of human being in the world, a human being who is "one with the Father", ie. one who lives in alignment with his/her Source.

Most of us fall somewhere on the spectrum between ape and human and we feel the pull of each. Paul described it as a struggle in our souls between the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit and noted that attending to the spirit brings life, while focussing on the world destroys life. Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you." In other words, ignore the worldly concerns and worldly accusations. Focus on aligning your spirit with the Spirit of your Source and everything else will take care of itself. That includes ignoring the Accuser and listening instead to the gentle voice of God's Spirit.

This new kind of human cultivates the habit of telling the Accuser to "Get out of my face!" (a modern rendition of "Get thee behind me, Satan!"), and to seek guidance instead from the Spirit of holiness, not only in our interactions with others, but of equal importance, in our interactions with ourselves, and not just occasionally, but as a matter of regular spiritual discipline. That discipline will change your life and bless the lives around you.

It continues to change and bless mine. The Accuser has not gone away. Sometimes, especially when I am tired or frustrated, he tries to sneak behind and climb back up on the throne. But Someone Else occupies the throne of my heart now, a King who graciously allows me to decide who will sit there. All I need to do is to know Who I want sitting on the throne and to make that choice, over and over and over again. I choose Jesus. Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.