

# Muse

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## Demonization

By Cindy Trevitt, Registered Professional Counsellor

This year I'm starting off with a look at the many ways we can find relaxation, tranquility and peace. One such way is to look at how we demonize people making them appear bigger and uglier than they truly are. We need to find accepting, holistic, and reality-based views instead.

In therapy, we often find that one parent is over-protected, put on a pedestal or seen as a saint while the other is severely persecuted. This is an indication of a kind of "angel-devil" scenario as if one must be completely good and the other completely bad. The same sometimes goes for the children in the family – one must be "the good one" while another is "the black sheep". We sometimes see people in this light - as if they are completely good or completely bad. The truth is that they are a combination of both. "Good" and "bad" are merely evaluations – a measurement we feel we must make to find out if someone is better or worse than us. In fact, all people are alike – with different manifestations of different ideals.

People are not intrinsically bad – they're just doing the best they can with what they've learned. At worst, maybe they are misled, misinformed or misguided. Most people aren't getting up in the morning plotting how to make our life miserable. Deepak Chopra observed that George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden defined each other – one did not exist without the other. It is our world that cultivated both them and us. As horrific as it may be, how could I be anything different if I had been born in a terrorist's shoes? All of us have pretty much the same biological makeup – bones, hair, organs, skull, brain, and tissue. Theoretically, we all have the same potential to be a terrorist, saint, politician, rescuer, prostitute, accountant, gardener, or TV host. The list is exhaustive of course. The point is to understand that if you were born, raised and conditioned in the same way as another – you'd be exactly the same as them. Think about this before you demonize someone. There is a saying that describes this sentiment, "There, but for the grace of god, go I."

It is our own negative feelings and thought processes that cause us to demonize others. And if others don't feel the same way, we are outraged at their perceived ignorance or apathy. When, in fact, not everyone sees things the same way. And do you really want to adopt the stance of, "You're either with me or against me"? Release any chokeholds you have on your ideals and leave room for diversity.

Emotionally developed individuals are able to care about the world around them but not be consumed by its tribulations. They possess empathy and acceptance of others. They can see that sadly, the drug dealer is perhaps misled and most likely the result of impoverished thinking. They can see that the destructive neighbour is in pain and hopefully finds a path to wellness some day. They leave room for deviations and they neither elevate nor deflate someone to the status of Satan's subordinates.

When we see others as the oppressor we become victims. By casting a bloody, red light on others we elevate

them to an unreal position of power over us. We render ourselves defenseless or infuriated and cast ourselves into a feeble and impotent role. Sadly, it is our own victim stance that is the true issue. Demonization is intended to provoke anger and to rationalize our powerlessness. It reduces us to a 'blaming' status rather than that of an equal with different views. To make us equals, we must raise our personal standards and challenge ourselves to increased assertiveness, better communication and a knack for re-framing things into ideas that are more constructive, accepting and palatable.

Demonization has some religious roots in its reference to "a devil" and in this context it is used to represent evil. With the exception of a rare few individuals (and even that I could contest) I don't believe there are truly evil people. I know this is a bold statement but given my comprehension of people, I understand that most individuals truly do what they think is best – to survive, to gain power, to maintain their sense of self – even some of the most heinous



acts are performed because of an individual's belief about what is necessary for them to survive. At its worst, maybe the *act itself* looks evil, but the person is merely human.

The Dalai Lama pointed out that separation from others only creates suspicion and misunderstanding. In order for us not to demonize one another, we need to stay connected in some way. Of course, in some extreme cases, it is necessary to our very lives to remove ourselves or even fight back but I'm talking about general, every day people here. In staying connected we are able to see people in a more balanced perspective – as just people.

In order to stop demonizing we need to truly hear, with unadulterated ears, what the other is trying to express. Especially in intimate relationships, we need to put our own ideas, biases, perceptions, and projections on the back burner and actively seek to hear the other with no opinions of our own – simply finding comprehension. Try to find out what that person is feeling, needing and requesting.

Ideally, we want to find tolerance for others and not be consumed by our attachments to how we think people *should* be. They are who they are and they have reasons for doing the things they do. It is only our business to take care of our needs in terms of personal boundaries. Other than that, we don't need to concern ourselves with the behaviours of another.

See yourself and the other person holistically. Stop generalizing: "all men"; "those people"; or "everyone". Truly see the individual standing before you. Know that people who are troubled live a problematic life – not a happy one. Remember they too have suffered and probably hurt inside. They too carry burdens and perhaps little horrible memories that they

wish they could be rid of. Nothing is for free and there are natural consequences for everything.

Abolish your hate speech. How often do you abhor demonization when it's about someone you agree with or like but then sanction it when it's about someone you disagree with and dislike?

Remember that it is quite possible you have been demonized too.

To inspire your faith in humanity, try expressing yourself in a more gentle, compassionate and forgiving fashion. Try to understand that the fast driver might have an emergency. Open the door for someone else in a busy store when you're in a rush. Leave a tiny little present on a sometimes-annoying coworker's desk for no reason. Remember all the times you have been absent minded, cranky, or sick and done less than stellar things. Forgive two percent more minor infractions this year.

Recently I found out that someone who had a particularly hard-shelled reputation was the one who had been secretly leaving me fancy-baked cookies on special occasions – Valentine's hearts with sugar coating, little yellow chicks at Easter – an assortment of sweet treats in attractive colours. I was deeply moved and touched by this simple yet caring gesture. I felt cared-for and treasured. Most people have this kindheartedness in them. You can count on it. To this day, when I'm faced with a challenging personality, I try to see the secret cookie inside them.

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