

These reflections are inspired and draw upon the 20,000 word essay *I, Coronavirus. Mother, Monster, Activist* by Bayo Akomolafe

Part 2

In my earlier reflections I explored Bayo's challenge that sanctuary is the in the disturbance, is actually the disturbance itself.

He goes further:

"Revisiting the now defunct practices of claiming sanctuary might gently urge us to consider the centrality of the monster to the work of transformation. Why does the monster guard the sacred?"



In most religious traditions monsters appear in front of temples, churches, places of worship, sanctuaries. They represent dharma protectors, wrathful deities that protect the precious teachings; they ward off evil spirits. My former Buddhist teacher even suggested that the closer we get to Source the louder the lions roar. In the Middle Ages fugitives who 'had committed a the great offense,' of murder in self-defense or breaking out of prison, could rap the knocker, and would be given 37 days of sanctuary to reconcile with their enemies or plan their escape.

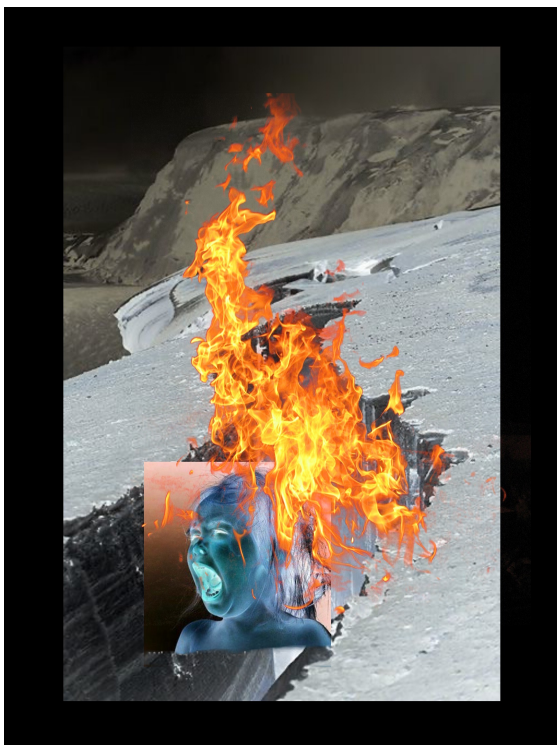
Asking for sanctuary required serious commitment, a threat to life and limb, and a willingness to encounter the monster protecting the sanctuary, both inner and outer. Imagine entering a medieval cathedral, especially at night. There is no light except candles, nothing but darkness and deep shadows, tombs, crypts, no pews, deep silence and the murmuring prayers of shrouded monks. These are not tourist attractions. As the psalmists tell us, "blessed is the man who fears the Lord". Entering sanctuary without trepidation, is the way of the spiritual tourist.

Perhaps sanctuaries in the cracks are like that. Frightening places of dissolution, where unknown archetypal forces, buried wounds, primal forces of hatred, terror arise demanding the light of our consciousness. In the so called sophistication of modernity we don't speak of

demons or evil spirits. We prefer the light side like compassion and goodness. These faces of the sacred are precious, but without their opposites we escape, into what is called spiritual bypass. Much of contemporary establishment religion has become saccharine, escapist, imbedded in comfort and privilege.

Five dear friends and I have been inquiring into this mysterious essay by Bayo Akomolafe I quote above. What is the Monster? What is my Monster? What is our Monster?

Out of nowhere it came to me that our monster is freedom. What!!? I hesitated saying this into our shared inquiry. This seemed blasphemous! How could freedom be a monster. Freedom is in the bedrock values of our democracy.



But what if freedom has become possessed by archetypal forces that cannot be integrated within us. Freedom is my right to say or do anything. Freedom does not ask me to restrain myself for the commons or to sacrifice for something greater than me. Freedom allows me to become self absorbed in self improvement. Freedom means I can be as narcissistic as I please; as rigid as I please, as dominating as I please, as pleasure seeking as I please. "Don't tell me what I can't do!" This is the language of the terrible twos who have just discovered their fiery sense of agency. Me, mine, 'you can't make me', these are expressions of agency and freedom in the toddler who has mastered standing up, and loves the delight of 'no'! It is unruly and it is natural in two year olds.

In adults this is monstrous! We see it everywhere especially in the highest levels of power.

Perhaps it is at the spiritual level that our notions of freedom are the most deeply challenged. All our cherished ideals, all our conditioned ideas of freedom are lost in the surrender of our desires, our instinctual patterning, and ultimately our self centeredness. This is an almost monstrous level of fiery dismantling.

Now freedom at the spiritual level is a surrender into something larger, mysterious and blessedly loving. We surrender our ego based desires, our instinctive conditioning, not by banishing them but by imbibing our shadow strands into our consciousness and enduring the discomfort of what is called integration.

Anything rejected lives deep in the cracks of breakdown. And this rejected, abandoned, enraged, terrified, sensuous, hungry, erotic, fractured self will rise up with monstrous force. The monster it turns out is not only us but also the rejected archetypal forces of the collective unconscious. The monster demands that we reclaim ourselves. But first we have to be emptied out or as Bayo Akomolafe says we have to be “decolonized”. This is the road to mature integration and the doorway to wisdom. Alone in the cracks we will lose faith and courage. Sanctuary attracts the fugitives from the cultural matrix to hold this fire of breakdown for each other. It is a place of non violence, non judgement, of celebration, and a searing commitment to the wholeness that we are. Sanctuary in the cracks of breakdown, is like the hive: a community generating heat to withstand cold, a place in which honey is concentrated from the nectars that each of us offer; a crucible of birth, death and transformation and at the threshold the monsters stand guard.



Only rare humans undertake this road alone.

We seem to be living in times when the escape into the tantrum of freedom, or the escapist freedom, is less and less an option. As contemplatives, as humans, we are being called to encounter the monster that guards the sanctuary which invites, drags us willingly or not, deeper into the goodness and awesome wholeness of being. At the threshold of sanctuary are we prepared to offer ourselves to the monsters of freedom? The only way into what we long for is through the doorway of the threshold.

Afterthought.

I wonder if instead of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness” we said “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Wisdom”. Freedom rooted in wisdom is a far cry from freedom rooted in the tantrum of a two year old. Would we be different?

