

# Facing our existential demons

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Focusing from our safe place  
Claude Missiaen, Leuven (Belgium)

Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.

— Rainer Maria Rilke



# Overview

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- Intro
- Existential demons
- Safe place
- Dialogue with existential demon from safe place
- Micro processes
- Transformational processes

# Intro

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- Tasting session (of workshop of 2 days). Taste a few ingredients and get some information about procedure and process.
- In the late summer of my working life: combining existential and experiential.
- Starting point: psychotherapy students and lifeline exercise.
- Most existential therapists (like Yalom) learn us that we have to face our existential demons in order to achieve a richer and fuller life, more authentic.

# Existential demon

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- The ultimate concerns, givens (Yalom) as we experience and carry them in our body.
- Demon, experientially: fallen angel or tormentor that can leave us in desperation
- Socrates: demon (*daimon*) is originally a spiritual being. This 'genius' or spirit helps the person to look for the truth, and spread it. Daimon is in fact an internal ally.

# Existential demon

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- Examples:

- *the fear of being abandoned and being totally on my own in my life*
- *the undefined darkness that comes along sometimes (at night)*
- *the inevitable losses I had and that I will have*
- *an overwhelming feeling of shame that takes away my control and power*
- *the unbearable idea that I get sick and leave my children behind*
- *the fear that – at any moment in my life – I can fall in the profound*

# Existential demon

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- Examples:

- *the horrible awareness that my life will stop at some point*
- *the feeling of total senselessness that can overwhelm me*
- *the sense that the universe is watching indifferently when my life falls apart*
- *an inner witch who states that I am unable to have healthy relationships*
- *a dry desert with no plants or connections at all*
- ...

# Existential demon

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- Demon = part of me (not traumatic event or history), something in there
- I invite you to get a felt sense of your most prominent existential demon.
  
- Some evoking questions:
  - Which part of me could I call my *tormentor*?
  - Which part of me can bring me into *deep desperation*?

# Existential demon

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- If this part of me would take control over my life I would be in *deep chaos*.
- Which part of me can bring me into *deep desperation*? (maybe it already did.)
- Which part do I want to *amputate* (if I could) and *throw it away*?
- Which part of me *bothers me or even molests me* like a thief in the night?
- ...

# Safe place

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- Gendlin (1982): 'If you want to smell the soup, you don't stick your head in it'.
- Workable distance: zigzag between identification and disidentification
- In it  *workable distance*  away from it

# Safe place

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- Contact with *cleared space*
- Feeling at home (Madison at World Congress Existential Therapy 2015)
- Not just imagining a relaxing place but actually having a bodily feel of it!
  - *Everything is okay in my belly*
  - *Feel my heartbeat in my chest or my abdomen*
  - *Little sun under my ribs with a soft radiation towards my bones, very enjoyable*

# Safe place

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- *a white, silent space down there (while my head is always chirping or twittering)*
- *my hands and arms, I feel how they embrace me*
- *my feet, they bring me everywhere I want to go*
- *strong shoulders*
- *source of energy in my stomach*
- *warm glow in my back*
- *a compass that is always there in my sternum*
- ...

# Safe place

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- Ask your body: Where is my safe place in this very moment?
- ...

# Dialogue with existential demon from safe place

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- Starts with: give him/her a place in the room where we can both see him/her
- Like working with chairs (EFT), but mobile
- C can change distance and 'look and feel' of the demon, according to his (changing) felt sense of it
- Therapist/companion stimulates the dialogue between two defensive persons
- Looking in the eyes!

# Method: micro processes

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1. Contacting the body
2. Identifying demon
3. Contacting safe place
4. Dialogue with demon from safe place. Starts with: give him a place in the room where we can both see him/her
5. Receiving, completing and reflection

# Transformational processes

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- Agnes: *my demon is an overwhelming anxiety of being left behind and abandoned.*

This causes a lot of troubles in her relationships with men. She puts the dragon (as she calls it) in the middle of the room, an impressive black dragon... At first she is afraid of him, puts him further away, but she still feels frightened. Then I ask her to contact her safe place again, around her heart, with a warm glow towards her belly... After a while she is able to say hello to the dragon, who is also not at ease. It looks like a very uncomfortable meeting between two strangers.

# Transformational processes

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She dares to look into the eyes of the dragon. First big shift: the dragon reduces up to half of its length. Agnes can let him come a bit closer, he doesn't look so frightening any more. They begin to talk to each other in a respectful way. She can ask him why he is there, sometimes he reminds her of her father, he also has some aspects of an uncle. He asks her for more acknowledgement; it's hard for him to be fought all the time. At the end the dragon is transformed into a cute puppy who sits next to her. He tells her he is in her life to help her to set boundaries. She is very moved and thanks him for that.