Exile, Home
The Myth We're In, Part Three

Joan Sutherland, Roshi

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In this second year of the reign of the asuras, I notice the stirrings of a shift of attention, as though we're shaking off some of the shock and feeling a weariness we've come by honestly. Enough already, no? But many people can't turn away, because of the stakes for our own lives and the lives of those we care about, human and otherwise. And many people are just not willing to yield the field to the fire-setters and the shoulder-shruggers. It's our field, too, after all. If we're going to stay in, we'll be staying in not only on the levels of politics and culture : For many of us, this time puts us right up against some of the most ancient and intimate struggles about what it means to have a human life.

I'm wondering if, beneath the surface disturbance, exile is what this time of the asuras is about : the primordial sense of banishment that comes with embodiment, that sense of expulsion from the original garden, or fall from the heavens onto the hard and ungiving earth. Not just once a long time ago, but again and again, in a life full of losses and leave-takings, disappointments, bewilderments, and terrors. And exile not only in relation to the cosmos, but inside ourselves as well : Are there parts of ourselves that seem irredeemable, forever separated from the love of others, even from our own companionship?

And I'm wondering if one of the shadowed gifts of this time — a gift dropped, thank you very much, from the talons of raptors into our wary palms — might be the necessity, if we want to stay in, of engaging in a new way with the ancient questions of embodiment and exile.

The asura president is so impermeable and invariable, so outside our experience of the complicated ways people usually behave, that he seems more like a symbol than a

person. As a person he is a failure of breathtaking thoroughness, and yet he has an enormous impact in the world and on our psyches. It's as though something transpersonal is happening here, as though an archetype of exile has appeared among us. The asura president has always been intent on banishing people and dividing our country from the rest of the world, but what glinting knife out of a Philip Pullman novel so severed his soul that he could separate parents and children who seek asylum at our gates? In that moment, he became the asura of exile.

Because we're dealing with an archetype, its qualities and characteristics are exaggerated to get our attention. The job of an archetype is to pursue us until we acknowledge the small, candlelit truths hidden inside its strobing neon package. Earlier I explored what some of those truths might mean for us as a country. Now we're turning to what they could mean for our own heart-minds. In everything that follows, the question is whether we recognize for ourselves any truths hidden behind the archetypal display. If we rescue them, is it possible that they could rescue us from the archetype's pursuit?

We spoke before of the old stories, when gods and asuras lived together on the peaks of Mount Sumeru, and the gods grew tired of the asuras' constant belligerence. So the asuras were cast from the heavens, landing at the foot of the mountain, in our world. That sense of a fall from paradise into a world of sharp elbows and gutting limitations is a pretty common one among the great human stories, a way of explaining what Buddhists call *dukkha*, the unsatisfactoriness of this dream of a life. Some at least of our yearning for enlightenment, heaven, nirvana, utopia, and the lost city of Atlantis

comes from a desire to wake up in a different dream, the paradise we hope is our true home.

The asura of exile looks upon the world into which he's fallen and sees only wasteland, because there is only wasteland within him. From the self-banishment he renews every day, he turns a face towards us made of the pains of embodied life : its cruelty and indifference, the relentlessness and capriciousness of the many ways there are to hurt each other. He confronts us with what we sometimes fear about the world, and other people, and ourselves.

But we who do not see only wasteland, are we too in exile? Is the world a fundamentally dangerous place, as the asura needs us to believe? If it is only dangerous, we must fight to protect ourselves from it. If it is something more complicated than that, other ways of spending our time open up, other configurations of heart and mind. What if the world is, instead, incomplete, even wounded? What if, rather than our adversary, the world is something in need of our care? The archetype's grip loosens, and we trade the idea of a dangerous world for the risks of love. We begin the journey home, and the wounded world becomes something our lives might help to complete.

The asura of exile has decided to fight with everything all the time, which would be comical and then tedious if it weren't so damaging. I wonder if this is a cartoon version of some of our own fights, which up 'til now have seemed more nuanced and compelling than this. I'm not talking about the genuine struggles that bring dignity and depth, warrior marks and cracked open hearts, but the lesser fights — the knee-jerk reactions, unexamined prejudices, killing certainties, poisonous suspicions, defenses against no known enemy — that distract us from the struggles that matter.

If we're willing to concede a little something about the nobility of our lesser fights, we might gain something worth the loss : The asura of exile shows no signs of

exhausting his own fight with life, but maybe he'll exhaust ours. Can we take the epic chronicles of our conflicts quite as seriously once we've lived so long with the cartoon version? Might we, in some worn down, holy moment of homecoming, say *Enough already, no?* This is too much to ask the bruised world to bear, and I just can't keep it up anymore.

The asura of exile has an inward-gazing face, too, and it unerringly finds the part of ourselves we fear will bind us to our suffering : the monster within that will never transform, never become a protector of others, or even of ourselves. Is there a part of ourselves we've tried to banish, unable to offer it a home, even on the outskirts of our hearts? This is the old wound around which new wounds gather, the original sin, the hard mass that stops us from breathing deeply, what's behind the uneasily closed door or the elaborate battlement. It's what outlives therapy and meditation and new diets, what we believe is in the way of happiness. Are we destined to carry this unborn thing around with us forever?

The asura of exile pushes on these ancient bruises until they throb. We too are wounded, we too are incomplete. We too are in need of our care. But we have one thing the asura of exile lacks, and it is the one thing that makes all the difference : We can be rescued and mended by love. The love that comes to get us — all the ways we're welcomed, cared for, consoled, and inspired by people, nature, art, the vastness. The love we pour out to others, the warmth we let seep into the discontented places inside us. The mending will likely be incomplete : We will bear scars. But we'll have refused self-banishment and chosen the risks of love, chosen this wounded world as home.

The asura of exile is full only of exile, but we are not. We also carry home inside us— not just as a memory of paradise lost, but as a felt experience of what any moment might open into. We know what it's like when the habits of exile drop away, leaving us, simply, returned — to ourselves, to others, to a world that goes on forgiving us for finding it unforgivable.

Perhaps we're all survivors of a shipwreck, but it is possible to save what we can from the waves to furnish the huts we build together on the beach. Perhaps it is enough to say : I don't know why the boat sank. But I am home here, on the beach, with the silver spoons and tattered sails and casks of hardtack we salvaged from the wreck. We build our huts, hang the majestic, useless ship's wheel on the wall, sit out under a sky filled with stars. It is a beginning, and the stars are beautiful.

Shipwrecked Odysseus washed up on a beach and prayed for mercy, which found him there. Rilke said we should repay that mercy by praising this world to a blind angel, spirit of that place we were never actually expelled from, who walks among us but needs to be reminded, because her eyes are filled with interstellar night, of the small wonders of our beach. Take the angel by the hand and show her, take yourself by the hand and remember : "Perhaps we are *here* in order to say : house, / bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit tree, window …"[1] How poignant — and how essential — the simple recitation of the facts of the gate and the fruit tree are, in this time of so much lying. And they, in turn, will recite *us :* The merciful facts of this dream of a world whisper *our* names, anchoring us here, against the winds of exile.

A man I knew a long time ago was co-owner of a boat. He was out of the country once when he received a rather startling telegram from the other owner : "DON'T WORRY | STOP | SALVAGE OPERATIONS UNDERWAY." Don't we sometimes feel as he did, in this

[1] from *The Ninth Duino Elegy*, translated by Stephen Mitchell

dream of a world, on this shipwreck beach, that a previous, essential message must have gone astray? Isn't that ghostly message from a lost world, the one that contains the most important information, what we spend so much of our lives yearning for?

And yet here we are in a world made of second telegrams and salvage operations. To salvage means to save. Who is saving whom? As much as we might feel, in a time like ours, that we move from one salvage mission to the next, are we not also touched by the world's own saving operations? We sing small songs of mercy and praise, and hear them sung back to us; we make home and welcome others to it, mend what can be mended and find new uses for the broken. From time to time, we put aside worry : Salvage operations underway.

A world in which the first telegram has gone astray is by its nature incomplete, and the ways we keep bumping into that incompleteness can give rise to sorrow. The asura of exile cannot bear that sorrow and so remains marooned on the other side of salvage operations, paralyzed by an immature rage. One of the most powerful antidotes for whatever rage, disappointment, or sense of betrayal we too carry within us is to let that sorrow ripen.

Years ago I worked with someone who was a forceful personality, not necessarily given to detail. She was very depressed. One night she came to me and said she'd become aware of a miraculous thing : Sitting in a group of people, she'd suddenly noticed that everybody's chest rises and falls as they breathe, just as hers did. When she said that, I knew she was going to be okay, not because she was suddenly un-depressed, but because her sorrow was becoming tenderness.

That tenderness knows the world is incomplete, but not in the sense of lacking something : The world is not-yet-completed, a work in progress, full of the moving persistence of things in the face of struggle and setback. It's so hard, being alive, and we go on doing it. Every day sunlight sweeps across the planet, and in a wave

following the sun, people and animals and plants get up and say, *One more time*. Our mature sorrow can feel and bear that, wants to feel and bear that, because it's the truest thing, and we are part of it — this stubborn, shining belief that this is our home.

Every day the animals and plants of our own hearts also get up and say, *One more time*. Should we abandon any of them as beyond our redemption? Should we drive the small goats of our misery out into the desert, and has doing so ever actually relieved us of our sins? Can we instead call them back home, whisper even *their* names to the blind angel?

Can you love a broken world? Can you love your own broken heart? Do you see how these are deeply moral questions?