

The Myth We're In : Part One
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It's the middle of December 2017. We've had almost a year of this administration, and many of us feel that the imperfect, yearning fabric of our culture and the very earth we stand upon are under assault. We're facing a generational challenge to preserve what we hold dear about how we treat each other, and to steady a world that sometimes seems to be shaking itself apart. Our traditions ask us how we'll respond to such a time, and our traumatized hearts ask how we'll cope.

Fortunately we're surrounded by millions of resisters, and we're also accompanied by generations of ancestors who navigated their own perilous times. These days I've been keeping company with Yelu Chucai, a thirteenth century government official from one of Northern China's minority peoples. He decided to stay when the Mongol armies swept in, hoping to persuade Genghis Khan that keeping people alive to pay taxes was better than massacring them. He sent urgently to his Chan teacher in the south for help, and eventually a collection of koans came back. Emergency koans! He and his companions, who were out on the steppe with the Khan, sat up all night around the fire, reading and discussing the koans, planning their course of action.

The ancestors invite us to sit for a moment in the old tales of our tradition, the kind you'd tell around the fire when you're contemplating how to confront the impossible. There's a powerful spell being cast, and we need to break it. And we have the opportunity to become the protectors that many in power refuse to be. Lucky for us, in our tradition every protector was once a bumbling, stumbling, angry, frightened creature. In other words, our people : friends from the beginning, as Hakuin said.

So. For starters, it helps to know what myth we're in. *Oh, these days I'm Psyche on an underworld journey. Or, That thing that just happened, that was Coyote dropping by, to eat the pantry bare and leave a mess for us to clean up.* Or, I don't know, we find ourselves living in a land where a family of grifters, under the leadership of a belligerent patriarch, has unexpectedly squatted in the palace.

According to buddhist tradition, there are six different paths that sentient beings walk; life after life we're born into one or another of them. If you're reading this you're probably a human, and you've also probably been an animal, a hungry ghost, a hell-dweller, a contented god, and an angry anti-god. In some traditions like the koans, we'd say that you're cycling through all these states in this lifetime, sometimes in a single day. There's a famous story about a samurai who comes to a zen teacher because he's suddenly worried, given his profession, about where he's going to end up in the afterlife, and he wants to know about heaven and hell. "Get out of here!" the teacher shouts. "You're too stupid to understand anything I could teach

you!” Apoplectic with rage, the samurai reaches for his sword. “That’s hell,” says the teacher mildly. “Come have tea with me and we’ll begin.” The samurai instantly relaxes. “And that’s heaven,” the teacher says.

Our current grifter-in-chief seems like the embodiment of one of the six states : an asura, an angry anti-god in a perpetual fight with, well, pretty much everything. Asuras are awash in rage, megalomania, and dishonesty. They’re addicted to their passions, claw for dominance, and casually abuse others. Their lives are full of indulgences and pleasures, but they’re consumed with envy and resentment. (I’m quoting from traditional buddhist literature, not from contemporary media coverage.)

We all have some asura in us, just as we all have some contented god and some hungry ghost, too. We can understand asura consciousness because it’s not entirely foreign to us; it’s just unusual to find, as we do with our asura president, such a concentrated version of it, undiluted by empathy or curiosity or self-awareness.

Beings who are partial in this way can only see the world in their own narrow bandwidth. To hungry ghosts, everything looks like food they’re desperate to consume. The particular danger with asuras is their relentless energy for remaking the world to fit how they see things. Think of a moment you were undone by fury, when maybe you literally saw red, and then imagine feeling that way pretty much all the time. And then imagine that the only relief you experience is when you can make the outer world match that inner state. And the relief is fleeting, so you have to keep whipping up new chaos to find relief again. And finally, imagine that your capacity to care about the consequences of the chaos for anyone else is a small and sporadic thing.

A mind like that can cast a powerful spell. We need to develop antidotes, so that our own more variegated psyches can survive the spreading red, and we can defend the whole, complex, many-pathed world against the terrible purity of the asura president.



How is it that we can feel sympathy for some monsters, like John Gardner’s Grendel or Anne Carson’s Geryon? Why do we ache for the pain of their monstrosity, identify with their clumsiness and incomprehension? It’s easy to make up a sympathetic story about the Minotaur, for example : poor misshapen beast through no fault of his own, an embarrassment to guilty people who stick him in the basement. Who could he be if he weren’t so miserably confined? What does he dream of? There is a place inside imagination where he and I can look into each other’s eyes.

There is no tragic nobility, not even a proper monstrousness, in the asura president. Some ancients thought that asuras are spirits of the dead, but our asura president seems more like someone not yet born into the grace of the world, a thick rock or lump of clay, in a state of

perpetual fury at the fact of living but not really being alive. The asura president is exiled from our pity : His story doesn't move us; we just want him to stop. I cannot imagine what he dreams of, or if he dreams at all.

In buddhist terms, if this asura were a proper monster he could be transformed into a protector, putting his ferocity at the service of others. The problem is that he'd have to *want* to be transformed, and this asura seems to have no such wish, though he's been given a position that would make him one of the most powerful protectors on the planet.

But we can do what he refuses to : We can become protectors. We can do our best to contain the damage that he and his grifter family and his hangers-on are doing. This time will end — there has never yet been a time that didn't end — and in the meantime we can keep alive the arts of devotion and courage, honesty and kindness.

In the old mythologies, asuras lived with the contented gods on top of Sumeru, the mountain at the center of the world. But they were so troublesome that Indra, the god of gods, threw them off the peak one night as they slept. They woke in the morning and saw that the great tree outside their windows was the tree of earth, not the tree of heaven anymore. Furious, the asuras strapped on their armor and charged back up the mountain. Indra led his heavenly army down the slopes to meet them, but he thought the armies were doing too much damage to plants and wildlife, so he withdrew his forces to the summit. The asuras couldn't imagine such an altruistic motivation, and they assumed he'd gone to rally an unbeatable force. They retreated, never to threaten again.

Indra set four Guardians of the World on the lower slopes of Mount Sumeru to contain the asuras, protecting the gods on the summit and the inhabitants of the earth from them.

That's the original, grand story of how protectors came into being to take care of the asuras among us. Later, Chan and Zen include stories of humbler beings — ogres, demons, foxes, head monks — becoming humbler protectors. In these stories, the only qualification for the job is a sincere desire to turn your energy from causing harm toward taking care. Whatever made you a good ogre or fox — strength, tenacity, cunning — now makes you a good protector. There's a sense of a vast network of protectors, not always obvious but tangible, hanging out in the marketplace, standing guard at doorways, walking pilgrim paths, living ordinary lives. There's comfort in that, and an invitation.

Before the rise of the protectors, asuras were forever going to war against their neighbors, the contented gods who live lives of happiness and peace. I'm not saying that we're in some archetypal battle between good and evil where we get to be the bright angels, but it does seem true that when asuras attack, some part of people that is fundamentally decent rises to resist. I should say some *parts*, plural, because one of the differences between asuras and asura-resisters is how variegated the resisters are : marching women, immigration lawyers, social justice organizers, investigative journalists, scientists preserving data, judges issuing stays, career civil servants with consciences, implacable investigators, sick people coming out to

protest, new candidates for office, and all the people you know who are talking and organizing amongst themselves. Maybe we should wear badges that say The True Deep State.

Even so, this is a brutal time, and protecting is going to be hard work. Take as one example the Reckoning on the abuse of women in this culture. It broke open in trauma and continues in courage. Courage in the face of assault and its longterm effects, the re-traumatization of the election, the loss of privacy and humiliation of speaking publicly, the burden of being asked to come up with remedies, the dread of backlash. It is a bravery willing to be wounded further so that real and lasting change might happen. Because of this bravery, when we've found our way through this valley shadowed by raptor wings, it might be better for our daughters.



To become protectors, we have to get out from under the spell of chaos, menace, and despair that's being cast. It's helpful to remember the true purpose of the spell : As individuals we feel vulnerable, afraid for our safety and for the safety of others. We become fixated on the drama or go numb. The spell wants to colonize our natural feeling life and monopolize our attention. On the collective level, the spell aims to divide us from each other. It stokes fear and grievance, encouraging us to mistrust and lash out at one another. The spell is trying to turn us all into asuras.

Spells can be cast, and spells can be broken. We see them for what they are, decline to take them on, stay alert to how they're affecting us anyway, and create the circumstances in which everyone can feel safe enough to turn their backs on them. The spell is trying to make us all the same, and not in a good way. So let us now particularly celebrate variegation, multiplicity, distinctiveness, eccentricity, collages, quilts, and gumbos.

The antidotes to this spell are its opposites : companionship, warmth and curiosity, poems, laughter that doubles you over, a certain cussedness about decency and respect, mountains and rivers, irony, attending to the joys of non-asura life, taking risks on behalf of others, slow food, slow love, slow time, silence. We can walk what buddhists call the middle way, which stretches from deep in the past to deep in the future, and is wide enough to include what is actually happening without being taken over by it. Here are a few preliminary notes on walking a wide road through a valley of shadows.

Things that might help : Noticing when the asura-spell reaches in to grab you by the rage, trying to determine your feeling life for you. The catharsis of anger can be medicine from time to time, but when it becomes habitual, it's like drinking twelve Diet Cokes a day. Every time a story appears of some new and ingenious way to cause harm, is there a love in you that just wants to stop and weep? Refusing to deny that pain is refusing to be made complicit. It is remaining faithful to your companions on this earth. Staying open to the sorrow and grief that

are part of this time can drop us into the deep heart, where there are cracks and scar tissue, but there is a pulse too that connects us to the beating heart of the world — the world that will persist if we persist.

Figuring out how much to engage with the news, how much actually helps you be a protector, and when enough is enough. Pulling your gaze away from time to time, and lowering it to the place you are as wide as the vastness, and the vastness is holding you up. This is not an escape; it is a way of staying realistic in a situation engineered to upend reality.

If you are protecting others, let others protect you. If you are protecting mountains and rivers, let rivers and mountains protect you. Think of yourself not as saving, but as being saved, every day, by the things that matter.

Questions to keep asking : What do I love? To what do I remain faithful? What are my mad skills? Imagine the power of everyone withdrawing just some of the energy lost to drama or numbness, and redirecting it to those things. How do we spend that energy? Organizing, demonstrating, communicating, supporting with time and money? Making sanctuary, making art, making trouble?

What are the everyday revolutionary acts? In such a time, simple human kindness is a revolutionary act. Not staying silent in the face of bullying is a revolutionary act. So is listening even when what you hear is devastating.

We are likely to learn a lot more about loss before we're done. We won't escape raptor shadows like the nuclear escalation with North Korea and disastrous environmental policies. Even success carries some danger : I am deeply worried about what a cornered asura might do when he realizes that he cannot win this fight, that all the tools and tricks he relies on have failed him.

And yet, and yet. We can make a difference. We can stream azure and cerulean, burnt umber and malachite and chartreuse into the spreading red. We can meet one immensely powerful person who refuses to protect, and the few dozen people enabling him, with thousands, millions, of people of ordinary power who will protect. I'll take those odds.



Next : How do we acknowledge receipt of this devastating gift? There's something we haven't attended to, and it's bellowing for our attention.