

Buffoon on a tricycle

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Some children's greatest fears live underneath their beds, and their parents have gotten up many a weary night and gone to their child's bedroom, flashlight in hand, lifted the covers, shone the light on the dusty floor, and proved, once again, that there is no monster.

When I was a boy, I had a recurring dream about a giant, scowling, and mean-eyed lumberjack, who wore a bright red flannel shirt, blood stained jeans, and muddy boots, and who carried an enormous gleaming axe in his right hand. Not only did I dream about that lumberjack; I was sure he lived in my bedroom closet. Whenever I dreamed about the lumberjack, I would wake up frightened, short-of-breath, and sweaty; and I knew what I had to do: turn on the lamp beside my bed, find some courage, tiptoe to the closet, and throw open the door, either to be axed by my fear or to be relieved that, once again, it was only a nightmare.

As fearsome as that lumberjack in my dreams was, there was one thing odd and buffoonish about him. Instead of a horse or a pickup truck, he rode, I kid you not, a tricycle—his knees up around his ears and his enormous feet slipping off the pedals. When I was a child, the dream struck me with terror; years later, though, I laughed at myself and at the dream: my Goliath-sized fear looked like a monster, but he was nothing more than an overgrown child who wanted nothing more than to get to play.

These days, the memory of that dream reminds me of something the poet Rilke said: "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 that wants our love."

I think that, day by day, our fears of rejection and failure most diminish us.

There's a tug of war in us between our fear of rejection and our yearning to be clearly seen, fully known, and deeply loved. Too often, fear wins; the result is that we won't risk saying what we think, doing what we believe, and becoming who we truly are, because we are afraid that "they" will not accept us.

There's also a conflict in us between our desire to flourish and to succeed, on the one hand, and our fear of change and failure on the other. We shrink back from the call to transformation which comes to us in our challenges and opportunities. We conspire in our own diminishment by refusing to risk newness.

Life has me in a place which is forcing me to face off with some of my most intimidating fears. I am trying to remember that the monsters I most fear are actually buffoons on a tricycle, to laugh at them rather than to be held down and held back by them, and to love them into beauty.

Most of all, I am trying to remember that the real God is like Jesus. God knows everything about us: our limits and our possibilities, our weaknesses and our strengths, what hides in the shadows of our shame and what shines in the glory of our best selves. God knows it all, never rejects us, always welcomes us, and unfailingly loves us.

And, God has mercy for our failures, grace for our wrongs, and forgiveness for our sins. With our God, failure is not final and it is not fatal. God stands us back on our feet when we fall, restores us when we are broken, and gives us hope when we have given up. That means we can take, without fear, the risks of learning, growth, and change.

With a God like that, we are freer than we know, as free as we dare to be.

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