One not insubstantial problem we face from our vantage point when we encounter Jesus exorcising spirits in the New Testament is that we tend to read them either through the lens of paranormal things-that-go-bump-in-the-night, or through the lens of psychological and neurological categories. If we choose not to go the route of horror movies, we might try and diagnose: perhaps the man in the synagogue suffered with schizophrenia or dissociative identity disorder; in other places where Jesus stands down spirits, we might suggest it’s epilepsy or a substance abuse disorder. Mental illness can be an easy catch-all for us to make meaning when meaning is hard to make of human behaviors - we see it used a lot in our national discourse around mass shootings, for example. “Well, such-and-such was just crazy.”

But Mark’s understanding of the kind of spirit that we encounter in the synagogue today is quite different than a diagnosis: the unclean spirit is a primeval mythical category that addresses the kinds of external narratives that act upon us and co-opt us and can literally take us over, obscuring us from ourselves and driving us to fulfil their aims to our own, other’s and the earth’s detriment.¹

In my mid-twenties I applied for a job teaching Spanish at a local private Christian high school. All of the interviews with the high school staff went well and my excitement grew - a full-time job, in my major, teaching - I couldn’t wait! I was offered the job and began planning and orientation. A final formality was a meeting with an official from the denomination that ran the school - and that interview went well, too. Then, at the end of the interview the woman produced a document that she wanted me to sign affirming that my personal life accorded with the doctrinal principles of the denomination. I said, “I want to make sure you know that I’m gay.” After a pause she looked at me across the table and said, “I’m sorry, we can’t employ you.”

I should have known, right? At that point I had already suffered having family members refuse to come to gatherings because of me; I had suffered being told there wasn’t any place for me in the ordained ministry

¹ c.f. Nicholas A. Elder, “Of Porcine and Polluted Spirits: Reading the Gerasene Demoniac (Mark 5:1-20) with the Book of Watchers (1 Enoch 1-36)” in Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 78 (2016). Elder demonstrates that Mark’s references to “unclean spirits” rely upon the mythology laid out in the Book of Watchers (a.k.a. Enoch), which would have featured in Mark’s reader’s own worldview. Calling its origin from later mythological embellishments of the references to the “nephilim” of Genesis 6, these unclean spirits, in fact, were said to be the disembodied spirits of the half-human, half-angelic superhuman children of the “watchers” (fallen angels) with human women. They became disembodied when God sent the archangels to punish them. They were understood to be unclean (ritually impure) because they were “mixed” and they were condemned by God because they tried to destroy humans and the earth. Much like a virus, the disembodied unclean spirits sought to co-opt human bodies to use for their own consumptive, selfish, and destructive ends. I mean to argue here that there is a deeper anthropological truth in the mythos of these “unclean spirits” than pathology… that in fact, these unclean spirits are those “narratives” about ourselves which come from unholy and unhealthy [societal] expectations that get ahold of us and seek to usurp and destroy our truest, most free God-given selves and turn us into “users” of ourselves, others and the world.
in another denomination; I had heard my whole life the subtle messages that something was wrong with me.

But for some reason I was still shattered. I went to my car and cried. I’ll never forget going back to the school to meet with the principal who had hired me to return materials and keys. She said, with tears in her eyes, “you would have been such a great teacher. Why didn’t you just keep quiet and sign the paper?”

Little did she know that just a few years before I was beset by my own unclean spirits that would have kept me from myself and deluded me and imprisoned me; they were demons who presented as the Right and the True and the Light, as the God of my youth, as conformity with the church; the only way I thought I could be good and satisfy my parents’ expectations; but a real encounter with the Holy spoke the authoritative word of grace to me and set me free. I wasn’t about to sign my name to a lie.

The powers of evil, the spirits of this world that would have us live behind the mask, that would have us fall in line, or keep up, those spirits that fill our minds with the sound of the distracting chattering of images and mirages, and keep us from relaxing into the unshakable reality of who we are truly work heavy upon so many of us. They work... and they work and they are too often successful; they become part of us, it seems; and we are unawares, suffering silently, on the one hand oblivious, on the other, hoping somewhere deep for freedom, and in moments of clarity, when we look at ourselves, we wonder why we’re so unconsciously driven:

In our context they are the demons of white superiority and abusive masculinity; the demons of rampant egoistic individualism, the hero cult, and self-indulgent nationalism; the demons of fundamentalism, the demons of defensive fear and necessary violence; the demons of wealth accumulation, and the demons of pressure on our youth to become: and we’re all affected by all of these demons to some degree or another, but for some of us one or the other takes us over....

And some of us get caught up thinking that the way through it all is to exercise our own authority, to help free ourselves and others up by solving their problems and troubleshooting their psychology and wielding our power... but only one has the authority to speak the word of grace, only one has the teaching that stills the scribes and commands the unclean spirits and they obey. Love is his Name.

Love. And he stands among us here, today, saying to every myth that has gotten ahold of us: “be silent, and come out of them!”2

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2 Mark 1:25