

## THE BEAST WITHIN

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Second Place, Creative Non-Fiction

I'll never forget the moment I realized that I hated my grandfather. I was only five years old, and my three-year-old brother and I were spending the day with my grandparents. It was one of the few times my parents weren't around to look after my brother. My brother is very seriously mentally retarded, and when you interact with him, you instantly recognize that something is quite wrong. He is not like any of the slow-but-lovable characters in movies and T. V. shows, who overcome their limitations to perform some heroic deed that saves the day. My brother is not capable of doing much of anything on his own. He cannot read or write. He has no comprehension of numbers. He has no understanding of basic logic. His speech is limited to occasional phrases that are virtually impossible to understand. He also has ataxic cerebral palsy, which greatly impairs his balance and motor control. His hands tremble and wander, and his feet turn outwards almost 90 degrees, causing him to walk with an unsteady, wide-based shuffle. In spite of all this, he is quite good looking. At three years of age, although his development was regressed, many of his limitations were masked by his baby-like appearance. He had thick, dark, wavy hair and a wide smile that would melt your heart. I thought he was adorable.

We had been quietly playing with my grandmother when my grandfather came home from wherever it was he went during the day. He plopped into a chair and directed my grandmother to get him something to eat. I tried to hide my discomfort when she left the room, because my grandfather always struck me as a personable-acting man with no real warmth. The incongruence between how he *acted* and how he *was* made me feel suspicious whenever I was around him. My brother crawled up to give him a warm greeting. I felt my guard go up, but I was not prepared for what happened next. My grandfather pulled back in his chair, and stared at my brother with demeaning scorn. "You're an animal," he muttered as he pushed my brother away with his foot. "Look at you, you're no better than an animal."

My cheeks flushed with anger and confusion, but I knew my place was to never, ever contradict my grandfather. My brother was blissfully ignorant of my grandfather's contempt, and laughed back as if he had just been complimented. This caused my grandfather to snicker with even greater disdain. He made mocking grunts at my brother, and poked him with his foot a few more times, the way you might push away someone else's pet you didn't want to touch. It was more than I could bear, and in that moment I felt my heart harden into a cold rock. I cautiously summoned my brother to my side of the room, and with a knot in my stomach, waited for my grandmother to return and save us. Worst of all, when I described what happened to my parents later on, they simply became very quiet and never mentioned it again.

How do you explain such nastiness towards a baby? We could allow that my grandfather was uncomfortable with or even fearful of my brother's handicaps, but why would this be manifested as overt contempt? And surely my grandfather understood that it would bother me to witness unkindness towards my brother. Why would a blood relative do this in my presence? Did my grandfather's cruelty have its origins in some experience that was unique to him? If it did, was he destined to repeat the pathology or was he capable of being otherwise? Or was his behavior indicative of

some darker force that exists deep inside all people? Why has it been that throughout all known history, the moral regulation of human behavior has been necessary for the well-being of the larger group or society? In the absence of such social controls, are human beings basically evil?

*Every man is presumed to seek what is good for himself naturally,  
and what is just, only for peace's sake, and accidentally.*

Thomas Hobbes, 1651

Throughout my childhood I witnessed many subsequent examples of cruelty toward my brother. Adult reactions towards him generally were one of two types. Occasionally people were warm and accepting. Usually, however, they pulled back in obvious discomfort. They often ignored him completely and spoke only to me, as if he really wasn't a sentient being. If they did orient towards him, their pity was so extreme that it was dehumanizing, as if to say, "Oh, the poor, poor *thing*." As if he didn't really exist.

But it was the reactions of other children that most revealed basic human nature. Children were almost universally mean and cruel. As my brother ventured out to play in our neighborhood, I regularly found him surrounded by boys who would mock him, physically hurt him, or worst of all, tell him to do some foolish action, and then laugh viciously when he unwittingly complied. Not comprehending, my brother would cry loud sobs of confusion. His tremor would become exaggerated and uncontrollable. Sometimes he'd wet his pants. The other children would take sadistic glee in his reactions, and escalate their humiliation. They would reduce him to a completely disoriented and helpless state, and then celebrate their victory. It didn't matter that his tormenters were other children. It was the most vile, egregious display of human loathsomeness you could ever witness.

*In every man, of course, a beast lies hidden - the beast of rage,  
the beast of lustful heat at the screams of the tortured victim,  
the beast of lawlessness let off the chain...*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 1879-1880

In spite of my childhood experiences, I've come to believe that "evil" is a relative moral term that is difficult to apply equally to all categories of undesirable behavior. My present-day adult perspective suggests that my brother's tormenters perhaps possessed a very deep mean streak, but no great physical harm ever came to him. How "evil" were his attacks compared to many current examples of sexual abuse and brutal violence of children? Compared to school shootings? Compared to terrorist atrocities committed against people innocently going about their daily lives? Clearly, not all bad behaviors are equally evil. But if we accept the premise that there is a continuum to the evilness of actions, then *evil nature* alone is insufficient as an explanation for the actions, because it doesn't account for the different "degrees" of evilness.

Of course, there are behavioral-learning theory explanations of evil that emphasize the role of the environment in shaping people's ethical behavior. But it is

difficult for me to reconcile environmental theories with what I witnessed as a child. I can accept that children learn bigotry on a general level from their environment. It seems obvious that parents play a key role in teaching attitudes and beliefs. However, my brother's particular assortment of handicaps is extremely rare. It seems unlikely that his unique problems would ever be a condition towards which reactions were role-modeled in the home. Furthermore, even if making fun of the handicapped as a general class of bigotry occurred, it seems equally unlikely that adults would role model the extremely immature forms of cruelty that I observed. Finally, the specific reactions of children towards my brother were so universal that they seemed more like collective "instincts" rather than learnings. No matter where we lived, the players would change but the tune was always the same.

My childhood memories have faded with time, but certain impressions remain etched into the substrate of my psyche, revealing their form during bad dreams...and living nightmares. Every time I pick up the newspaper or turn on the news, I brace myself for the latest appalling report of *man's inhumanity against man*. Our leaders have characterized recent terrorist events as a battle between good and evil, which reduces the situation to such an extent that all subtlety and complexity is gone. The public eats it up. The public likes things simple and clear-cut, and in this drama we are obviously the good guys. *They* are obviously the "evil force", the enemy with no humanity. *They* are the ones with savage motivation and extreme ideology that rationalizes the killing of others.

*Too often in modern history, the inhuman "enemy" has been deemed "evil" as a prelude to mass death.*

Joel Bleifuss, 2001

Through a child's eyes, the bullies who sought out and tormented my brother were an enemy with no humanity, too. I admit, I never handled these scenes very well. Finding my trusting and vulnerable little brother in these situations tapped into a dark and violent nature in me that might otherwise never have been exposed. I would become consumed with a pure homicidal rage that knew neither fear nor boundaries. I wanted nothing short of killing all my brother's tormenters, and I tried with all my strength to do it. But I wasn't physically capable of single-handedly taking on groups of boys, so I was never able to kill anyone. It wasn't for lack of trying. If nothing else, I'm pretty sure I at least scared them, because I would become quite literally insane with rage. The kids would back away and leave me to limp home with my brother, him sniffing and watching me with wide-eyed love, almost instantly forgetting about his previous terror, now just happy that I was there. Me consoling him while I silently spewed a child's version of frustration and anger and hatred.

While I privately ruminated on what could possibly make people so evil.

