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DUELING WITH MARA

Right now I am in the middle of an on-line class, the subject being "how to deal with our inner critic." Our homework is to recognize him/her/it (the "voice" that criticizes and shames us, which comes from ourselves)- and to realize (AHA!) that She (in my case She) is not myself- but a demon in the Buddhist pantheon. Her name is Mara.

As I was mopping up the hot oatmeal that had boiled over onto the stove who should make a first appearance, "Jeez. Pay attention! You are so spacey." Well, that didn't take long..."Good morning Mara." Just as I was finishing the messy job of cleaning the stove I remembered a bunch of bananas I had left in the back seat of the car. I ran out to get them. Frozen, hard as a rock and dark brown. After I made a good toss, aiming for behind the wood pile so they wouldn't be visible from the road, I walked back carefully on the icy driveway. There She was."That was really stupid. What a waste."

Back in the kitchen, when I sat down to the rest of my coffee, I suddenly remembered the email from the Spencertown Academy- an invitation to enter a writing contest. "Oh, that would be kind of fun- I should do it."

"Who do you think you are? Anyways you haven't had any good ideas in a long time..." At least, I thought to myself, I am doing my homework. It's not even 7:30 in the morning and I have successfully recognized Mara three times.

"Just carry on-" I said to myself. As I began to write my "To Do" list for the day I felt a twinge in my right wrist. Oh yes... that must be from yesterday. Reliving the moment, I remembered flying forward- breaking my fall with the palms of my two hands- trying to stop myself while ice skating. All this in front of a rather large crowd of people. "Dang! You silly old lady. What were you doing ice skating anyways? Trying to recapture your youth? And tell your siblings about it?"

I put my pen down- now 8 a.m.- and tried to remember what our teacher told us to DO after recognizing Mara. Oh yes- "forgive Her". Release Her. Know that She comes from a place of suffering." At this point it is almost comical to me... For God's sake, I sure give Her lots of opportunity to show up... I do see, however, that the hurtful snickering and nasty pointing finger is losing its power through this process of awareness. Our teacher did tell us, however, that Mara is going to probably be with us our entire lives. The more we accomplish the louder and more present She will be (oh- great). Ah well, recognizing the humor of it all has been helpful.

At this point in the morning, after seeing Mara so often, I looked her right in the eye and began to write an essay for the contest ANYWAY. After recording the morning's events I counted up my words- hoping to make it close to the required 1,500. Hmmm, oh dear. 800. "See! You're just a light weight and this is a frivolous idea." But I knew, I was dead sure, that there would be plenty more visits from Mara. Plenty more to write about...

So here's what happened next:

A dear friend who plays the mandolin, and I, a violinist, always have to struggle to find the time to play together (it's just hard!). We had both committed to 4:30, Tuesday at my house. This would be after her workday, and before making dinner and her Book Club. "Isn't that too much for you?" I asked. "No- I want to keep our momentum going" she assured me. Alright! I planned to have two music stands at the ready, salted nuts, cheese, and maybe we would split a beer (we always laugh a lot when we share a beer!)

After lunch, I went to visit another friend who needed moral support with moving from her house of 40 years. At precisely 5:17 I glanced at the clock in my car as I pulled out of her driveway. Sitting in the cold and dark in an instant- my mind flashed red- "Oh My God." I was supposed to... be ready to play- 4:30! She's coming 20 minutes out of her way... two music stands! I fumbled for my phone on the empty country road and made a frantic call. I screamed into the phone, "Where are you? Will you ever forgive me?" Bad connection, silence. Guess who was sitting in the passenger seat shaking her head, with a critical stare, snickering. Finally, my friend's voice, "yes! I forgive you!" But it was of little comfort, drowned out by the wicked laughter. Slumped over the steering wheel, I gave in. "Damn! HOW could I have DONE that?" (Now was that me or Mara? At this point we were one and the same...) Never mind that I was helping my friend say goodbye to her home and land of four decades, tossing rose petals on her favorite cherry tree and dancing a goodbye jig around the house.

I guess I lost all sense of time and space. "WHO cares! You could have done that AND made it back by 4:30! You're losing it!" yelled Mara. "Yeah, I know- I know...I agree..."

We had learned in our class that five minutes of anger at oneself has a negative effect on the body for five hours, and five minutes of self compassion boosts the immune system for one hour. Besides all that... I was miserable- succumbing to Mara's slings and arrows. I was a wounded soldier. My friend couldn't have been kinder, saying later on the phone, "It was probably really important for you to be there and help her say goodbye!"

So now it is early the next morning- and I can see that embracing ones' imperfections, as our teacher advised -indeed, saying "Ah yes I am imperfect," helped me accept and forgive Mara for her attack yesterday. (She is sleeping now after her last night's rant- but I know that it

won't be for long. We really *have to* become friends, I say to myself. "Have compassion- forgive the OLD GIRL! And maybe SHE will have mercy on me too."

I'm trying... There are two more classes to go. Well, at least now I am pretty sure I have enough words to enter the contest.