



To Agnes, her daughter seemed possessed by a demon.

Tina, a 10-year old with no prior history of behavioral or emotional challenges, was, as her mother put it, “in the grip of an evil something.”

This mom, and her husband, were not kooks, acid heads or religious fanatics. Agnes taught biology at the college level. Dad directed a marketing department in the retail industry. Tina was an A student, well liked and, prior to her turn for the worse, even-tempered and mature for her age. That’s how it was until she developed symptoms no one could explain.

“The physicians and psychiatrists mostly claim it’s anxiety. One said hormones. They did blood work, neurological tests and brain scans. Nothing,” Agnes explained.

Tina’s symptoms included what her pediatrician called “night terrors,” a frightening sleep stage disturbance, mostly in children, where the person appears awake and reacting, usually with fear, to something only they can see. In fact, an individual so afflicted is not awake.

These characteristics were not present in Tina’s version of a night terror. Her emotional state was angry and menacing, and, even though the episodes emerged at night, she was not asleep.

“It was like she was a whole different person,” Agnes continued. “She didn’t look at you. She looked through you. And, in her eyes was pure hate.”

Soon, the episodes spilled into the day. Tina’s countenance changed to the point that Agnes thought it “contorted.” She grew increasingly hostile, non-compliant and volatile.

The well-meaning healers offered all manner of nostrums — talk therapy, medication, energy work, dietary regimens, all to no avail. Finally, in desperation,

she went to her parish priest. While sympathetic to the core, he felt Tina's condition would not meet the high standard imposed by the Catholic Church for conducting a formal exorcism.

By the time Agnes found her way to my door, Tina was hospitalized in a mental health unit and undergoing further evaluation. Her parents felt they had no other choice, for the safety of both Tina and the rest of the family.

The question of whether human beings can be possessed by and, therefore, under the control of a spiritual being or entity with malevolent intent, remains unsettled. Some may believe they've put the question to rest, but they have only their opinion to back them up. We just don't know.

On one side, you have the empiricists. In the psycho-neurological realm, they believe that human thoughts, emotions and behaviors arise from biology. To them, it is a mechanical process we can monitor and measure with brain scanning technologies, so, what you see is what you get, and there aren't any ghostly entities involved. As one would expect, such folks look askance or even scoff at the possibility that demonic possession occurs.

Flip the coin and you have the true believers. They subscribe to spirits, including devilish ones, and often believe in a central demonic figure, such as Satan. The classic film *The Exorcist* scared the hell out of them because, in their minds, it could happen to anyone. Rather than building their belief on neuroscience, like empiricists, they attribute it to their own direct experiences. Many have felt the presence of evil, or seen flashes of it in other people, or even sensed its invisible hand meddling in their lives. Some experienced visions of ghost-like, menacing presences, or felt responses ("my skin went cold") when in settings or circumstances that carried the feel of evil.

Like many, I'm somewhere in the middle. Over many years in this profession, I've seen a smattering of clients, like Tina, who were outside the lines of any available diagnosis in clinical psychology. And, in these cases, we did our homework, complete with medical tests, neuro-psychological exams, brain scans

and second opinions. Still, some of them left me scratching my head, and a couple had me outright rattled.

There is much we don't know about the forces in our midst. Astrophysicists indicate that only about 4 percent of the universe is directly detectable using our current technologies. Closing the book on anything, including demonic possession, when 96 percent of the data is missing seems an unwise choice.

I'm keeping an open mind.