

*When pummeled by too many thoughts a long walk would cure me of the punch-drunk feeling of lifelessness*, says Martin Laird. On his normal route he would occasionally encounter a man walking his four Kerry blue terriers. These were amazing dogs. Bounding energy, elastic grace, and electric speed, they coursed and leapt through open fields.

Three of the four dogs raced along freely, the fourth stayed near the owner, running in tight circles. One day Martin asked the owner why the dog behaved this way. He explained that before he acquired the dog, it had lived practically all its life in a cage and could only exercise by running in circles.

Laird sees this as a powerful metaphor of the human condition. We are free, but our minds obsessively run in tight circles generating and sustaining anguish that forms a mental cage in which we live much of our lives—or what we take to be our lives. This cage can be comfortable enough; that dog wagged its tail all day long. But the long term effects on humans can be quite damaging.

The woman could flow like silk across the stage or drive like a storm through the corps de ballet. To watch this world-class ballerina was to behold light and grace in human form. But if you would ask her about her own experience as source of beauty and inspiration you would only see a vacant stare of shocked disbelief.

She would speak instead of an obsessive and torturously perfectionist mind that left her grinding her teeth. She described her inner state as a series of internal videos that constantly played and that she constantly watched. Her attention was routinely stolen by them.

The videos pictured her as somehow not quite up to standard—not just regarding ballet but any aspect of her life. There were videos of intense anger registering as a clenched jaw, but deeper than the anger was the fear: fear of what the critics might say of her dancing.

There were also videos about pain, the most debilitating dating back to childhood. One day her mother walked into her bedroom as she was looking at herself in the mirror. The mother said, “I hope you don’t think you’re beautiful.” She was indeed beautiful, but she believed she was ugly.

When as a teenager she won a highly prized scholarship to study ballet, her mother said, “Why would they give you that? Everybody knows you have two left feet.” All of this played in her head forming the cage that kept her running in tight circles.

She did find solace in long walks out on the Yorkshire moors. If she walked long enough, her roiling mind would begin to settle. The expanse of heather was scented balm that soothed her throbbing anger, fear, and pain. She described how on one

occasion her anxiety began to drop like layers of scarves. Suddenly she was aware of being immersed in a sacred presence that upheld her and everything.

While this experience out on the moors happened only once, it proved a real turning point in her life. She knew from her own experience that there was something in her that was deeper than her pain and anxiety and that when the chaos of the mind was quieted, the sense of anguish gave way to a sense of divine presence.

Many are the voices clamoring for our attention, voices from the past, voices of family and friends, prominent voices of the culture we inhabit. Some of these are the voices of thieves and bandits who foment chaos, inflame anger, and stoke fear. These grifters thrive on lies, enriching themselves at the expense of the sheep who follow them.

The voices of the prophets, the voice of the good shepherd, the voices of the apostles, the voices of the communion of the saints, speak as one: What is required to know abundant life is do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

You are the only gatekeeper of your mind. Which influencers you listen to, which videos you pay attention to, which voices you obey, makes the difference between life in a cage and freedom!