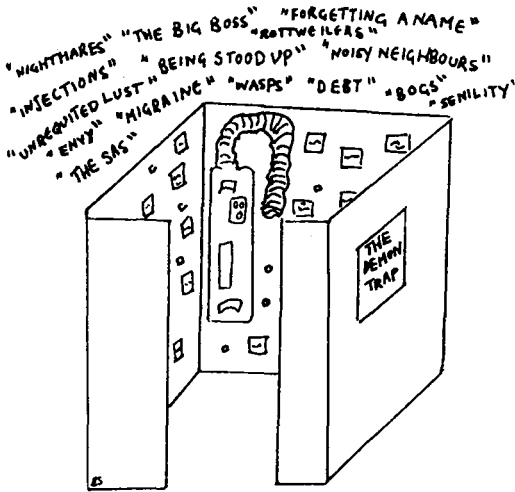


The Demon Trap

Beth Shaw



This summer I was helping on a stall selling plants from our allotments at a neighbouring street festival. It was a bright sunny afternoon and other stalls were offering cakes, ice-cream and bric-à-brac. There was music and families were strolling through, the children in fancy dress. Halfway down the road there was a cubicle made from purple office partitions with a notice on the outside saying 'The Demon Trap'. There was no admission charge and people were invited to go in, write their demons on Post-it notes and stick them up on bits of velcro on the inside of the cubicle. A voice-over listed suggestions. I was fascinated by the Post-its already on the walls, particularly 'Lifts' because I realised that this was one of my own demons but that I'd forgotten it because I've arranged my life

so that now I never go in one. There were even some names on the walls and I thought I'd be ashamed if I found that someone had put my own name up. After I'd written my demons on separate Post-its and put them up, I came out and the Demon Trap man on the door said, 'You may feel some effect in a couple of days.' All so simple, so everyday, but somehow very powerful. I thought about it a lot afterwards, told my friends about it and eventually went to find out more about it from Peter Bruggen. Peter had set up the Demon Trap at the street festival with his neighbour Tony Cline, and they both turned out to be fellow allotmenters.

Beth: When and where did you first hear of the Demon Trap?

Peter: It was almost by chance. I was in Swansea in the spring of '95 and I had a couple of hours before my train left, and I was left by my host near the Marina. She pointed out a building which used to be the Customs House and was now a Ty Llen theatre and cultural centre. I went in and looked around and there was the Demon Trap. It was in a small oblong-shaped gallery. Outside there was something giving the names of Mags Harries and Peter Finch, the people who created it, and

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something about their ideas and an invitation to take a card from by the door to write my demon on it and put it on the wall. Inside it was painted white. On the door where I entered there were some neatly fixed cards with neatly written words of demons on them and on the edges of that and on some other walls there were some put on haphazardly and less artistically written. There was nothing else in the room except for an oblong-shaped well exactly the same shape as the room. This well was filled with vacuum cleaners, all in rows. At one end there were modern vacuum cleaners and at the other end there were some very old vacuum cleaners. Suddenly there was a tremendous noise as they all went on together for about two minutes. The blurb outside explained that the vacuum cleaners sucked up the demons. I went away and had a cup of tea in the cafe upstairs, thought a bit more about it, went downstairs, took one of the cards and wrote a demon on it, fixed it on the wall and left it there.

And then the next thing was that Tony Cline and I and our wives went out to the pictures and to a meal together, as we do from time to time. We were talking about the street party, in which we all were going to be involved, and when I mentioned this, Tony and I made a commitment to run the Demon Trap together.

Beth: So the street festival was the first place you tried it out?

Peter: Yes, and as far as I know from the attention we got from Swansea and Cardiff, it was only the second time one's been done in this country.

Beth: And do you know where the people in Swansea got the idea?

Peter: Yes, it was put forward by this man Peter Finch who's an experimental poet who works and lives in Cardiff and an American environmental artist called Mags Harries and they'd done it together.

Beth: So they made it up themselves . . .

Peter: Yes, and they also had a voice-over, which wasn't going when I was there. Peter Finch told me that the people in the gallery in Swansea didn't seem to like the noise. That's what gave Tony and me the idea of making a voice-over of demons, which we created partly from ones I'd seen when I was there and partly from what the people in Swansea sent me from the pieces of paper left behind.

Beth: And were you surprised by what people had written on the papers?

Peter: No, I was impressed — but I think I was even more impressed by things in our street party than there in Swansea.

Beth: What was the difference?

Peter: They seemed to be more personal and emotional, while in Swansea they seemed to be rather more political or very predictable ones like illness and so on. You saw some . . .

Beth: Yes, I was astonished to see 'Gadaffi', 'Sex', 'Heartache' . . .

Peter: And 'Men'; and did you see someone put 'Bob Hoskins' advertisements for British Telecom'?

Beth: How did people react to the Demon Trap in the street?

Peter: They talked sometimes in a nicely curious and sometimes in a joking, patronising way, and we always responded seriously by saying 'Well, it's an idea, based on traditions, you may like to try it, and you may notice a difference.'

Beth: How did you make the silver vacuum cleaner?

Peter: Well, Tony's wife Sue runs a business producing exhibitions, so that was her skill, and it was very simple, it was our vacuum cleaner, wrapped with crinkly silver foil. I had no idea till one minute before it was done that it could ever be made to look like that.

Beth: And are you intending to do it again?

Peter: We'll see what happens. I think we'd both like to do it again or do some development of it. Another time we thought that we should try to get a more substantial cubicle, because if we had say twice as many office partitions, which wouldn't be too difficult, we could create a little bit more mystery, a little bit more theatre, so that you couldn't actually see into it; you'd have to go in to see what's inside.

Beth: When I was there, there were quite a few children

Peter: Yes, some of what the children did was a version of a childhood game of blaming each other, so that they would put each other's names up and then they would try to take their own names off. But that's all right.

Beth: Is there anything else you would like to say about the Demon Trap?

Peter: Yes, the serious side to it lies in control and self help, that if there's something which a person finds difficult, one of the ways of making it less difficult is to get more control or some sense of more control. Naming it is one thing, and having some sort of a ritual to do with it is another, and that we think is a serious contribution.

Beth: Would you compare it with the confessional?

Peter: The comparison with the confessional is a bit tenuous. There are said to be rituals in some communities of naming and then getting rid of demons, like the scapegoat story in the Old Testament. There are some connections with this, in that they put their demons (in the language and imagery of demons) on a goat and send the goat out into the wilderness. Here they're put on a board and the spirit of demons is sucked away by the vacuum cleaner.

Beth: I liked that it was a modern appliance.

Peter: We had a technical reference to the very first invention of the vacuum cleaner which we got from a book by Bill Bryson called *Made in America*. It was invented in New Berlin, Ohio by a man named J. Murray Spangler, in 1899. So if we do it again in three years' time it would be the centenary of the vacuum cleaner.

Beth: A few days after the street party, I thought of more demons, so I used it as a visualisation in meditation. I thought, having done it once, I could go back in my mind and put demons up, and since then I've done a sheet of ideas for helping people get to sleep in which I've suggested the Demon Trap.

Peter: Yes, I've used it in that way; I've told people about how it was a way of dealing with unwanted thoughts . . .

Beth: After the street festival I went off barn-dancing, but that night my head felt so light when I went to sleep, I felt it was from having left my demons in the Demon Trap.

Peter: I don't know who left what things, and anyway it wouldn't be proper to ask them, but I felt that what I did in Swansea

was helpful to me, the particular demon that I left. Nothing works perfectly, but it helps.

Beth: I liked at the Demon Trap that when I left, Tony said in a reassuring manner, 'You may feel some effect in a few days' — to have someone say that on the way out is part of the healing process.

Peter: So long as it's done in an unpatronising and permissive way — that it's not a certainty.

Beth: Did you notice how many demons people put up?

Peter: I thought most people put up a few. Some of the very interesting ones seemed to have been done very carefully indeed. I mean someone came up and he'd clearly taken away one of the pieces of paper and written it down very carefully and he put it up and went out straight away, and it was one of these most thoughtful and precise ones. People who'd done that must have been working on it for several minutes at least.

Beth: And did you get any reaction from the vicar?

Peter: There was a little bit in Swansea of people objecting on religious grounds; we were aware that this might just happen, and we would have played it straight and said, 'We are very sorry to have caused any offence, it was not our intention, and we're not at all trying to suggest that other people's faiths or methods shouldn't be used.'

Beth: I see this as on the borderline between ritual and performance art, because people are joining in and that's what

makes it important. And I did think it was essential that it was free.

Peter: We never discussed it; I'm sure we both thought right at the beginning that it should be free. The cost was very slight, Post-its, use of a computer, a few bits of adhesive, and luckily Sue Cline loaned us the six partitions.

Beth: I was very anxious about actually writing my demons on pieces of paper, so had it cost, I might not have got over that barrier. But I was so impressed that you had set this up as a free service for the passing public, and that not only were the Demon Trap men prepared to Hoover up the demons, but that they were able to do this for all comers, that I had to do it. Firstly, the being free, then it being made of ordinary office equipment and thirdly having someone friendly on the door — these were all such key factors.

Peter: Yes, I think someone on the door is very important. In Swansea, there wasn't anybody, and there wasn't a voice-over (at least when I went).

Beth: Also it's wonderful to have it on the street. I do go to art galleries, but there's something else about walking through a street party past a variety of stalls, and suddenly there's a Demon Trap. In Greece in the Peloponnese there's a cave in Mani which is supposed to be an entrance to the Underworld, where the three-headed dog Cerberus waits. That's what I thought the Demon Trap was like — that I was on a normal street, and then I sort of slipped into the Underworld and had this opportunity to deal with my demons.