Bringing Order to Chaotic Emotions

✤ by TODD STRYD ──────────────────────

Who would have thought that in today's world, with its computer games and travel sports, a childhood just isn't complete without a fantasy world of knights, castles, princesses, and, of course, a dragon with its hoard of golden treasure? Whether it's an animated movie, a medieval-themed Lego set, or Tolkien's timeless classic, *The Hobbit*, this archetypal storytelling remains deeply meaningful even after a thousand years.

One of the most prominent features of the medieval world is the quintessential contest between knight and dragon. This battle is seared into the imagination of children and adults alike. One of the main reasons for this timeless fascination is that dragons and knights are just one example in a long line of ways to capture the battle of good versus evil. In medieval Europe, the dragon was a common symbol of chaos and evil, as well as a proxy for the devil, while the gallant and noble knight, like the legendary Saint George, was seen as the idealized embodiment of God's order and goodness. Therefore, as a type of Christ-figure, knights like Saint George conquering the dragon were seen as symbolically conquering evil.

The iconic rivalry between knight and dragon reminds us that chaos and order are threads that run through all of history and through each

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of our lives. Moreover, this theme is based on a biblical one. The theme of chaos versus order, good versus evil, is at the very center of the biblical story of redemption. The chaos-order motif not only bookends the biblical story but also applies to everything in between. Chaos intrudes everywhere and threatens everything. It permeates both everyday lives and inner worlds. It is responsible for the conflicts between nation-states and is to blame for the discord and distress of our emotional life. Ultimately, this threat is inevitable, and so is the necessity of confronting it.

The biblical framework also describes a third component in the chaos and order motif: rest. No, not the taking-a-nap type of rest! This rest is not about a reprieve or a vacation per se. It is the rest that God participates in on the seventh day of creation. This version of rest concludes the creation story and is the same type of rest that happens after a dragon is slain. It is the product of order being brought to bear upon chaos and the establishment of stability and functionality. It's a settling into the way things around us are supposed to be. Our God is a God of rest, and this is the type of rest that he accomplishes for our cosmos, our communities, and our inner lives.

This article focuses on this last category: chaos in our inner life. We will explore how to bring order and find rest in the chaos of emotional dysregulation. Even though we could use this premise of chaos, order, and rest to talk about many experiences, I will use it to help us understand and care for people who experience emotions so intensely that they disrupt daily living. Emotional dysregulation is an ever-present reminder that the threat of chaos is not just outside of us but inside of us as well, and for some, it is quite pronounced. Just as Saint George (the ordering agent of God) does battle with the dragon (the agent of chaos), we'll look at how God's people can bring order to bear upon the chaos of their emotional dysregulation. In so doing, we open for them the possibility of rest.

Before we look at the particular chaos of emotional dysregulation and how to bring order to it, we will first consider how the broader pattern of chaos, order, and rest is woven throughout both the biblical narrative and our everyday life. As the centerpiece of this article, we'll narrow down everyday life to the example of a woman named Patricia who seeks help for her emotional dysregulation. Last, we'll end by

reflecting on how this pattern of chaos, order, and rest finally ends, as chaos is done away with and only rest remains.

Chaos, Order, and Rest

We are introduced to the original pattern of chaos, order, and rest in the first two chapters of the Bible. The beginning of all things is framed in the language of God imposing order upon the formlessness, empti-

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ness, and darkness of the earth, and then resting when his ordering work is done. By beginning in this fashion, the creation story is signaling that order versus chaos is, in fact, a paradigmatic conflict of the biblical story, with rest being the central goal. Let's look at this original pattern.

Chaos is first introduced as the initial state of the cosmos in the first chapter of Genesis: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep" (Gen 1:2). By virtue of its placement at the very beginning of the Bible, chaos is positioned as *the* consummate biblical threat pitted against God's cosmic project of creation. Chaos is creation's enemy. Thematically then, whether it's the serpent of Genesis 3, Job's Leviathan, Revelation's dragon, giants, barren deserts, raging seas, or floods that populate Scripture, they all constitute the Bible's preferred way of talking about the ever-present threat to God's good creation and his chosen people.[1]

Order is the opposite of chaos, and thus we can say that order is good and chaos is bad. Genesis 1 and 2 highlight this conflict beginning with light (order) and darkness (chaos).

> And God said, "Let there be light," and there was
> light. And God saw that the light was good. And God

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1. While no dragon is named in these early chapters of Genesis, the Bible has its fair share of serpent and dragon-like characters. The lineage of chaos scattered through the biblical text of serpents, leviathans, and giants continually threatens to wreak havoc on creation and awaits a champion powerful enough to bring about a final defeat. For example, consider Isaiah 27:1: "In that day the Lᴏʀᴅ with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea."

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