

“I Want You to Hit Me As Hard As You Can”:

Pain As Mystical and Ascetic Experience in *Fight Club*

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At night, in the parking lot of a bar, a man in a business suit throws a punch at his friend, another man who looks like he gets his clothes out of the lost and found. They are not fighting over an unpaid bill, or a woman who snubbed one of them earlier in the evening. Tyler Durden has just told his respectable-looking companion, “I want you to hit me as hard as you can.”<sup>1</sup> There is no enmity between the men, just a request to get into a fight. A punch in the ear, a fist in the stomach; suddenly they are engaged in a brawl. A few moments later, they are sharing a beer, thinking it might be a good idea to do it again sometime.

Throughout *Fight Club*, the Narrator<sup>2</sup> tells the story of his life, how he meets Tyler Durden and how the two of them started a group for men disenchanted by the world, disappointed in their lives. In order to feel alive and change their outlooks on life, they fight each other, following a set of rules. But why would anyone want to do this? I think it becomes clear that fight club takes on a mystical quality through an extreme ascetic experience, an experience that embraces physical pain in return for spiritual well-being. So, what is the role of pain as a mystical and ascetic experience in *Fight Club*? As a society, we are conditioned to the idea that pain is to be ignored, blocked. How can it be a part of a spiritual encounter?

Evelyn Underhill understands the mystic’s goal as “the art of establishing his conscious relation with the absolute.”<sup>3</sup> The “primordial longing” for union becomes the goal of the mystic, and to reach that point structure and training are a near universal aspect of the mystical training.<sup>4</sup>

From the Zen *koan* to the Jesus Prayer of Eastern Christianity to the flagellation of medieval

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<sup>1</sup> Unless noted, all quotes from *Fight Club* are taken from the 1999 film directed by David Fincher. Any quotes taken from the book by Chuck Palahniuk differ in content from the film.

<sup>2</sup> In neither the book nor movie is the protagonist named. Popular usage has named the narrator of the story “Jack” or “Joe.” To maintain a sense of accuracy, I am rendering the narrator of *Fight Club* as “the Narrator.” Capitalized, this distinction refers to the character (just as a name would).

<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, (Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com Publishing, 2005), 61. Referenced by Newburg, D’Aquili and Rause, *Why God Won’t Go Away*, 101.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Newberg, Eugene D’Aquili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), 103.

Catholics, this training is designed to “quiet the conscious mind” and go beyond the self.<sup>5</sup> Max Weber differentiates between a mystic and an ascetic, the difference being “rejection” and “flight.” While the mystic will flee, the ascetic will openly oppose. The ascetic becomes “a warrior on behalf of god,” fighting against whatever temptations appear.<sup>6</sup> The key players in *Fight Club* are mystics, but they are working through the ascetic experience. This asceticism is their method of renouncing a culture driven by consumerism; they are escaping the society they denounce, but they are doing this through ascetic activities that confront society and do not allow others to hide the pain they may feel as well. Through the experience of pain, the men of fight club learn who they are underneath the clothes, the jobs and the material possessions that define them to the rest of the world. However, beyond finding out who they are, there is also the expectation of a mystical experience, an encounter with the Real, the Absolute, God. The process of fully understanding that relationship will not be a painless one; in fact, it will be pain that draws them into the presence of God.

Rudolf Otto’s concept of *mysterium tremendum* can assist us with the mystical concepts of *Fight Club*. Otto’s own description does the most justice:

It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious.<sup>7</sup>

The *tremendum* has three elements, a sense of fear, being overpowered and energy. All three of these elements speak to the very core of humanity, to the most basic concerns we have. Most

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1930), 169.

<sup>7</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, A Galaxy Book, 1958), 12-13.

important to this discussion is energy, which Otto also calls “urgency.” This energy expresses itself in many ways, as “vitality, passion, emotional temper, will force, movement, excitement, activity, impetus.”<sup>8</sup> Otto places the wrath of God in the category of energy; this energy is part of the “daemoniac experience,” the most basic and primitive supernatural reception humans have.<sup>9</sup> In this daemoniac experience is an understanding that something else is present in the world with us, forces that we normally cannot see or comprehend.

Using the language of Otto, fight club is a “daemoniac” experience that is grounded in the “cruder phases” of the mystical and religious experience.<sup>10</sup> It is in an “uncontrolled, enthusiastic form, making for wild fanaticism, in which the numinous feeling storms the savage mind, appearing as religious mania, possession by the numen [holy], intoxication, and frenzy.”<sup>11</sup> This stage of religious experience is not the goal, but a first step in the larger process of discovering the Holy. The primitive nature of the daemoniac corresponds with Tyler’s philosophy of self-destruction and the regression of society. The “frenzy” of the fight club atmosphere is obvious; the Narrator says, “The hysterical shouting was in tongues, like at a Pentecostal church.” The transformative power of fight club is not limited to the experiences during the hours fight club exists. The Narrator says, “After fighting, everything else in your life got the volume turned down. You could deal with anything.” Fight club is intended to provoke a full conversion in those who participate.

Ascetic practices assist with the direction of the energies of the *mysterium tremendum* and provide a framework that will help us understand how the mystical encounter fits in the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 15-16, 132.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 133-4.

world of *Fight Club*. The root of “asceticism” is in the Greek word *askesis*, meaning “practice.”<sup>12</sup> The word also implies athletic training and discipline, and was used by early Christians in the context of spiritual training. Through this training, the ascetics attempt to control their relationship with the “world” and cultivate a deeper spiritual experience.

Kallistos Ware understands the distinction between “divine,” or “natural,” and “demonic” asceticism through the understanding of asceticism in moderation.<sup>13</sup> Moderation, in turn, is an understanding of how the ascetic views the body. There is no intentional harm of the body in natural asceticism. Demonic, unnatural asceticism embraces and encourages flagellation and intentional suffering. Ware illustrates the difference when he writes, “Thus it is a form of natural asceticism to wear cheap and plain clothing, whereas it is unnatural to wear fetters with iron spikes piercing the flesh.”<sup>14</sup> Unnatural asceticism, therefore, shows a “distinct hatred for God’s creation, and particularly for the body.”<sup>15</sup> Ware concedes that natural asceticism may lead to the same attitude towards the body, but generally it will not. In practice, natural asceticism will bring the body to its natural balanced state, as it did for the desert hermit Antony, who according to Christian legend, appeared as he did the day he cloistered himself twenty years earlier.<sup>16</sup>

Tyler and the Narrator’s asceticism initially operates in a dualistic tension of natural and unnatural asceticism. The luxuries of life, the designer clothes, trendy furniture, professional condos, are to be eschewed. Tyler’s home on Paper Street is evident of this; the house leaks when it rains, has electrical problems and is next to a paper mill, complete with the odor of pulp.

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Ronald Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study in Intellectual Origins*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, 16 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1974), 36.

<sup>13</sup> Kallistos Ware, “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

The bedrooms are little more than a mattress on the floor, the bathrooms are stained with filth, the water is the color of rust. There is nothing appealing about the house. However, the squalid conditions are attractive to the Narrator and Tyler, because they represent a simplicity and honesty that is missing from the rest of their lives as lived out in the consumer culture. However, the asceticism as practiced in *Fight Club* is clearly unnatural in Ware's terminology. *Fight Club* is not sanitized; it clearly shows the physical decay of the Narrator as his teeth fall out, his gums bleed and eyes sink. Fighting has its consequences; part of Tyler's asceticism of self-destruction means one has to embrace the fact that "even the Mona Lisa is falling apart."

Margaret Miles believes that if asceticism is to function in the modern world, "old asceticism" must be replaced by a new understanding of the concept. Old asceticism involves practices that deny the essential goodness of the created body; in this view, the body must be subjugated for the soul to flourish. In addition, old asceticism focuses on the punitive nature of the ascetic practice and the attempt at personal judgment, which is to be reserved for God.<sup>17</sup> Miles is also concerned that the self-indulgent practices of modern life show up in the guise of asceticism. The abuse of alcohol, drugs and even working too much harms the body and potentially lead to death.<sup>18</sup> That we do not recognize the old asceticism in destructive behaviors makes it even more problematic; it is vital that we see the "old asceticism" in *Fight Club* in order to properly critique it.

Miles's goals for asceticism are "self-understanding, overcoming of habituation and addiction, gathering and focusing of energy, ability to change our cultural conditioning, and

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<sup>17</sup> Margaret R. Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 156.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

intensification or expansion of consciousness.”<sup>19</sup> In some form, involvement in fight club corresponds to each of these goals. The men in fight club participate for self-knowledge. Tyler says to the Narrator early on, “How much can you really know about yourself if you've never been in a fight?” Tyler may be remarking on the sterilization of our culture and the tendency to ignore the pain we live with on a daily basis. Being slaves to culture, to possessions, to jobs that are unfulfilling, there is pain in those ways of life. Is participation in fight club a way of working these out? Tyler remarks that the smartest and strongest people he knows are in fight club, but they are living empty and meaningless lives. To push their limits in a fight, to become warriors for a brief moment, may be enough to live for. In addition, by developing self-knowledge, the men may be finding mystical union with their own self, their real self, which has been pushed to the background by a consumer-driven culture.

Habituation and addition are obstacles in Tyler’s philosophy as well. Miles understands habituation as the soul longing for the things of the body, “so that, objects which once gave pleasure do not continue to do so.”<sup>20</sup> There is a race to accumulate things which ultimately do not lead to fulfillment. The Narrator says, “I would flip through catalogs and wonder, ‘What kind of dining set defines me as a person?’ We used to read pornography. Now it was the Horchow Collection.” Identification with material goods enforces identity with particular brands “as a way of forging identity, of making a statement about who they are through their relationship to consumer goods.”<sup>21</sup> When the Narrator is flipping through the furniture catalogs, he is trying to find something that he can connect with on a deeper level. After the Narrator’s apartment is destroyed in an explosion (later revealed to be initiated by Tyler), Tyler chastises the Narrator for

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth R. Himes, “Consumerism and Christian Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (March 2007), 141.

his plan to use his insurance settlement to replace his possessions. Tyler tells the Narrator, “The things you own, end up owning you.” The Narrator is accustomed to his previous life, to his possessions and the desire to return his life to its previous state. Tyler hopes to break the cycle of branding, and knows that if the Narrator attempts to rebuild his previous life, the shock of losing everything will wear off, and he will continue to exist as a slave to the whims of corporations.

Tied closely to the idea of habituation is the desire to change our cultural conditioning. Again, we see the ideas of material wealth and pain. Tyler believes society focuses the emphasis in the wrong places. Society plants the image of the perfect body and the complete life in our minds. Tyler’s apophatic mantra dictates there is something beyond what we are conditioned to believe we are:

You're not your job. You're not how much money you have in the bank. You're not the car you drive. You're not the contents of your wallet. You're not your ... khakis. You're the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world.

The obsession with identifying the self with material goods, the consumer culture, is dehumanizing. Even the Narrator’s job plants him firmly in a culture of numbing personal connection. He says, “I’m a recall coordinator. My job is to apply the formula.” In short, if his car company will lose less money by settling post-incident lawsuits than by issuing a safety recall, dangerous cars will remain on the road. Not only is the Narrator’s lifestyle dehumanizing, he actively participates in the dehumanization of others by relegating them to numbers on a profit and loss statement. However, for Tyler, realizing that society does see him and others as consumers is freeing, because it allows him to see past the labels imposed on (and accepted by) the targets of advertising. In protest to the attitudes of society’s insistence that buying more things is self-improvement, Tyler and fight club endorse the mantra, “Self destruction is the answer.” Part of Tyler’s concern is how society treats those around him, how a consumerist

culture has driven people to not only buy things they do not need but to remake themselves in the image of societal norms. The self-destruction is a method of both tearing down the conditioning and building up the person previously lost to consumerism.

As a solution to the problems of integrating with culture, Miles suggests that the monastery was the early Christian counter-cultural answer. The structure of society was based around managing power and possessions, and therefore to break away from society was to reject the hold of these forces. Miles writes, "... instead of the pursuit of power, he vows obedience; instead of seeking possessions, he vows poverty. With these vows he rejects the deadening agenda of secular culture ..."<sup>22</sup> When fight club moves from the basements of bars and becomes Project Mayhem, there is the development of a secular monastic order. Novices are tested, forced to stand three days and nights at the doorstep of the Paper Street house, suffering verbal and physical abuse from the Narrator and Tyler. If they are still on the doorstep after three days, they are accepted into the order. The adherents of Tyler also lose their names; Tyler refers to them as "Space Monkeys," in reference to the early space flight experiments involving monkeys and other animals. The ironic tone is evident, as Tyler views the monkeys as a sacrifice, dying at the altar of progress so humanity can push forward. However, Tyler's Space Monkeys become his agents of societal regression.

The last rule of Project Mayhem, "You have to trust Tyler," indicates the obedience required of those in the order.<sup>23</sup> Giving up power is part of how Miles understands the monastic life, and it reflects asceticism as well. The natural instinct for power is pushed aside. Miles, however, rightfully brings up the problem of the abuse of power in such a situation. She references the Rule of St. Benedict, which indicates that a monk must follow the commands of

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<sup>22</sup> Miles, *Fullness of Life*, 143.

<sup>23</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 125.

his abbot, even if the task is impossible.<sup>24</sup> While there are provisions in St. Benedict's order for questioning this, Tyler will not tolerate the questioning of orders. The first two rules of Project Mayhem are, "You do not ask questions"; the third and fourth are "No excuses" and "No lies."<sup>25</sup> Rules in this case provide a "new understanding of the failure of the secular world to orient human beings to 'life' and provide an alternative community."<sup>26</sup> Tyler is working to create an alternative community, and in his own way trying to spur his followers to taking life seriously. Rules are not new to the members of fight club; the fight club specific rules, however, were meant simply to provide order during a chaotic fight. However, the rules for Project Mayhem move beyond fight club by focusing on Tyler and his message, not the ascetic practice of fighting. In this sense, Project Mayhem becomes less of a communal exercise in mutual obedience and support and more of a fascist regime.

When Tyler sends the fight club men for their first "homework assignment," he directs them to start a fight with someone and lose. The Narrator comments on this, saying that it is difficult to do this, because most people will avoid any sort of conflict. What is important about this assignment is the movement of fight club from a private, cloistered community to engagement with the greater world. Fight club taken to the outside world becomes Project Mayhem. Through Project Mayhem, Tyler is continuing the natural develop of fight club as he envisions it. Concerning the movement of the ascetic from hermitage into the world, Max Weber writes in *The Sociology of Religion*:

For the ascetic, moreover, the divine imperative may require of human creatures an unconditional subjection to the norms of religious virtue, and indeed a revolutionary reformation of the world for this purpose. In that event, the ascetic will emerge from his remote and cloistered cell to take his place in the world as a prophet in opposition to the

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<sup>24</sup> Miles, *Fullness of Life*, 144.

<sup>25</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 122, 125.

<sup>26</sup> Miles, *Fullness of Life*, 145.

world. But he will always demand of the world an ethically rational order and discipline, corresponding to his own methodical self-discipline.<sup>27</sup>

The rubric of fight club was a private, personal affair. Project Mayhem is the acting out of fight club in the world because Tyler feels it is necessary; it is a “divine imperative.” The asceticism and mystical values of fight club are being brought to the masses, by the laity to the laity, for the purpose of reshaping society to Tyler’s ideal state.

For a historical perspective on lay ascetic movements, we can observe the example of Thomas Müntzer, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptist reformer, as a mystic who believed in the active overthrow of both religious and civic authorities. His work was specifically done to “create a space” for the apocalypse of God and the forthcoming kingdom.<sup>28</sup> The enrichment of the life of the laity would naturally lead to the “reshaping of the whole world.”<sup>29</sup> Müntzer “had a truly ascetic vision, according to which people would serve God by breaking their ties to a wickedly materialistic worldly social order.”<sup>30</sup> This in turn meant active participation in the remaking of society. Still, Müntzer never advocated violence as a primal force; violence was a reaction to the situation already at hand.<sup>31</sup> The social structure of a world was a sin in Müntzer’s eyes, and any kind of sin is violence against God.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the first blow had already been thrown; Müntzer and his followers had their justification to fight back. A more cynical view would criticize Müntzer for attempting to rationalize his revolution. But the fight, for Müntzer, was to establish

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<sup>27</sup> Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, 175.

<sup>28</sup> Hans Jürgen Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer: Apocalyptic Mystic and Revolutionary*, trans. Jocelyn Jaquier, ed. Peter Matheson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 198.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>30</sup> James M. Stayer, *The German Peasants’ War and Anabaptist Community of Goods*, McGill-Queen’s Studies in the History of Religion, 6 (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), 111.

<sup>31</sup> Hans Jürgen Goertz, “Mystic with the Hammer : Thomas Müntzer's Theological Basis for Revolution,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 50, no. 2 (April 1976), 106.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

the kingdom of God on earth. The mystical and the apocalyptic were to be merged, and the inner realm of God was to be thrust onto the outer world.

Tyler is using his followers in the same apocalyptic mode as they attempt to remake history. After they took control of the city of Muenster, Germany, 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptists destroyed “IOUs, account books and contracts” found in the homes of the city leaders who fled.<sup>33</sup> In addition, all books except for the Bible were burned, symbolizing “a complete break from the past.”<sup>34</sup> In turn, Tyler’s goal for Project Mayhem is to bomb the headquarters of credit card companies. In this action, the world is to be brought “one step closer to economic equilibrium.” By destroying the records and erasing the debt history, everyone gets a chance to start over. This is what the men in fight club and Project Mayhem are driven to do; it does not seem improbable that Tyler would view his reign of violence against society as a response to consumer culture.

What does the Anabaptist lay ascetic movement have to say to a modern audience? Paula Cooley believes that the Anabaptists helped develop a model for “the secular right to dissent.”<sup>35</sup> The Anabaptists represent to Cooley “ordinary lay people driven by extraordinary vision and commitment.”<sup>36</sup> Tyler sees this in the men he leads, saying,

I see in fight club the strongest and smartest men who’ve ever lived, I see all this potential, and I see squandering ... an entire generation pumping gas and waiting tables, slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We are the middle children of history, man, with no purpose or place. We have no great war, no great depression. Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression is our lives.

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<sup>33</sup> Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium; Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 264.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>35</sup> Paula M. Cooley, “Lay Asceticism as Social Critique: The Sixteenth-Century Anabaptists and Twenty-first Century Dissent,” in *The Subjective Eye: Essays in Culture, Religion, and Gender in Honor of Margaret R. Miles*, ed. Richard Valantasis, Princeton Theological Monograph Series, 59 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 92.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

While a cursory glance may seem to indict fight club on the count of throwing the first punch and not being a reaction, this is not the case. Society has already inflicted violence on the men of fight club, reducing them to victims of advertising, not fulfilling the promises made concerning their futures. In response, Tyler and the Narrator internalize the violence, now allowing the consumerist culture to dictate their lives. The response of fight club is self-inflicted pain. This violence is not being perpetrated on the society Tyler is trying to escape, but on the internal community. It is only when Lou, the owner of the bar where fight club meets, intrudes on a meeting that the violence begins to be returned on society, in the form of the homework assignment mentioned previously. After an attempt to keep fight club a secret society, it becomes clear to Tyler that the reaction against consumerism cannot remain in the basements. The genesis of Project Mayhem and counter-violence on society is reactionary, just as Müntzer allowed. The laity become the reformers of society, a divine movement to uproot the civilization that has failed them.

There is another danger inherent in being a community that recognizes itself as separated from the status quo. Cooley writes, “To recognize one’s own community as a besieged minority, a remnant set aside as a people to exemplify and to carry on a holy cause, however just, carries certain inherent totalitarian tendencies.”<sup>37</sup> This is certainly true with how Tyler runs fight club and Project Mayhem. Tyler becomes so paranoid that he issues a standing order that anyone, including himself, who interferes with Project Mayhem will be castrated. Tyler may have fallen into his own trap; the conformist attitude he has actively worked against is built into his own organization. However, Tyler’s actions are consistent with Max Weber’s understanding of the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 101.

transformative power of asceticism. For innovation to take place, Weber relies on “empowered actors whose strength is rooted in an ascetic character, and whose spirit is capable of overcoming resistance and commanding obedience.”<sup>38</sup> The men of fight club were, as Tyler says, “raised by television to believe that we’d be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars, but we won’t. And we’re learning that fact. And we’re very, very pissed off.” They are looking for a way out of their current existence, just as the Narrator is. Tyler provides a way out, a chance to find a “moment of perfection.” By renouncing all the things that do not provide real meaning in life, the Narrator is free to search for the mystical union. Within the ascetic framework, the method is pain.

Ariel Glucklich’s book *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* is a fascinating work that explores the connection between religious experience and pain. While the author does not explicitly develop any themes related to the idea of “fighting,” several connections can be drawn from her conclusions. In the beginning of the book, Glucklich makes the distinction between pain and suffering. Pain is “a type of sensation usually ... associated with tissue damage. ... pain is a sensation that is tangled with mental and even cultural experiences. As such, it has been pursued and glorified throughout history.”<sup>39</sup> Suffering is a reaction, and not always tied to pain. Because of this relationship, Glucklich suggests that pain is a “solution” for certain types of suffering. Tyler would certainly agree, as the pain of fight club becomes a means of psychological support for the men who hurt each other. In the beginning of the film, the Narrator visits a series of support groups for the sick and dying, such as cancer or tuberculosis. The Narrator is suffering from insomnia and wants his doctor to give him something to ease his “pain.” His doctor directs him to a testicular cancer support group, so he can see what pain really

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<sup>38</sup> Harvey S. Goldman, “Weber’s Ascetic Practices of the Self,” in *Weber’s Protestant Ethic: Origins, Evidence, Contexts*, eds. Hartmut Lehmann and Guenther Roth (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1993), 169.

<sup>39</sup> Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11.

looks like. The Narrator starts participating in the group (as well as visiting other support groups), and as he begins to be treated like he is dying, finds that he can sleep. The support meetings are designed to bring anesthesia to the dying. Their pain was part of their suffering, and the pain was ignored, pushed to the center. What the Narrator needed was to confront his pain.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James writes,

A strange moral transformation has within the past century swept over our Western world. We no longer think that we are called on to face physical pain with equanimity. It is not expected of a man that he should either endure it or inflict much of it, and to listen to the recital of cases of it makes our flesh creep morally as well as physically.<sup>40</sup>

Not much seems to have changed in the century between James's words and today. Glucklich writes, "With the invention of anesthetics pain became strictly a medical problem and a matter that pertains to the body rather than the entire person."<sup>41</sup> One can walk down the aisles of the local big box retailer and find rows and rows of merchandise related to the dulling of pain. "HeadOn," a topical analgesic, became a short-lived pop culture phenomenon through incessant late night commercials. The message, in short, is that pain is the enemy, pain is to be eliminated. Even the Narrator simply wants drugs to end his insomnia. Pre-fight club, the Narrator acts like many people; there is no embracing of the pain, just a clinical understanding that the pain needs to end. The Narrator's relationship to pain changes as he realizes he does not need an anesthetic, but a religious experience that will "transform the pain that causes suffering into a pain that leads to insight, meaning, and even salvation."<sup>42</sup> The pain of fight club is intentional, to be embraced as the transformational experience.

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<sup>40</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Martin E. Marty (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 297.

<sup>41</sup> Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 179.

<sup>42</sup> Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 40.

If we understand the pain inflicted during fight club as intentional, then we can go a step further and bring in the idea of ritual. Ritual becomes most effective when it combines “behaviors with ideas; it’s this synthesis of rhythm and meaning that makes a ritual powerful.”<sup>43</sup> Two men beating each other up on the street is not very meaningful. Fight club is ritual; it has rules, a fixed time and place and engages the body and mind together. The pain experienced in fight club is ritualistic; it achieves the goal of becoming transcendent and unifying.<sup>44</sup> This forces the initiate to leave behind the old world and become fully immersed in the new. There is also the understanding that the pain is shared; the ones involved are being connected to a line of shared pain that all have socially experienced.<sup>45</sup> This has to be a voluntary action, otherwise there is no transformation. The last rule of fight club is, “If this is your first night at fight club, you have to fight.” While the fight itself is not voluntary, the will to be at fight club is. If fight club was simply a roving band of thugs, beating people up without purpose, there would be no transformation in either the members or those being assaulted. Even as fight club transforms into Project Mayhem, the “fight club” element is still there; the ritual of the fight is still vital to the method. While Project Mayhem can bring transformation to the world, the men still need the sacred space of the fight in order to experience the mystical power of fight club.

In the sharing of pain, the pain itself is a method of communication; it is a common factor that allows people to create a “bridge” with each other.<sup>46</sup> But for fight club members, the experience even transcends the vocalization of the pain. This is shared pain, a common experience. In a sense, it becomes a shared mystical experience. William James speaks of the

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<sup>43</sup> Newburg, D’Aquili and Rause, *Why God Won’t Go Away*, 90.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>45</sup> Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 29.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

“incommunicableness” of the mystical experience.<sup>47</sup> To an extent I would agree; after all, the first two rules of fight club are “You do not talk about fight club.” I would posit that the two men in the fight are sharing in the same experience. There may be individual experiences within the shared experience; each man may be fighting something different. But there is intimacy that comes with the fight; if Tyler is right and you really cannot know anything about yourself until you have been in a fight, there is a level of knowledge of the other that comes in sparring with a partner, even as both deepen their self-knowledge.

The central scene in *Fight Club* comes as Tyler and the Narrator are in their kitchen, making soap.<sup>48</sup> Tyler kisses the back of the Narrator’s hand and proceeds to pour powdered lye over the kiss, resulting in a severe chemical burn. The Narrator struggles to push the pain away, but Tyler refuses to let him. Unlike the support group leaders, Tyler is telling the Narrator to focus on the pain, on the feeling of “searing flesh” that is consuming his entire person. By pushing the pain away, to make it “a healing ball of white light,” in the parlance of the support groups, the Narrator is denying the reality of the experience. Tyler wants the Narrator to embrace mortality and tells him, “First you have to know, not fear, know, that someday you are going to die.” When the Narrator tells Tyler that he does not know how it feels, Tyler shows the Narrator his own scar. Tyler says just before the first fight with the Narrator, “I don’t want to die without any scars.” Tyler and the Narrator now share the same pain, and they both have the scar to prove it.

In scarring the Narrator, Tyler is not acting as a sadist, but trying to get the Narrator to “hit bottom.” Glücklich writes, “Metaphorically, pain creates an embodied ‘absence’ and makes

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<sup>47</sup> James, *Varieties*, 405.

<sup>48</sup> Tyler makes soap for a living. He also uses the glycerin gleaned from the soap to make dynamite, which becomes important to achieve the goals of Project Mayhem.

way for a new and greater ‘presence.’”<sup>49</sup> Pain is *kenosis*, an emptying process that allows for a new identity to emerge. But for Tyler, hitting bottom does not mean staying there. It is a radical reinventing and re-understanding of the self in relation to the world. Tyler says to the Narrator, “It’s only after we’ve lost everything that we’re free to do anything.” Using the example of the Spanish mystics, we should understand when “John of the Cross and Teresa speak of the mystical process as a desire for death,” it is along the lines of the “annihilation of the self,” not a physical end of existence.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, when pain is used in a religious context, it is an attempt to modify and transform the spiritual person. Glucklich hypothesizes that “an overload of incoming sensory signals—say, in the form of ongoing self-inflicted pain—would progressively weaken the body-self template, resulting in the diffusion of the self or its complete disappearance.”<sup>51</sup> The sensory overload of pain results in a diminishing relationship between the body and the self. Glucklich writes that pain “does not eradicate experience, it makes the experiencer transparent.”<sup>52</sup> Pain intensifies the experience in this manner; she mentions that a hospital patient may become overwhelmed with thoughts of death, or a monk may find the “gateway to transcendence.”<sup>53</sup> The barriers erected in everyday life have been torn down. Suddenly, mortality is confronted and a sense of either fear or transcendence overpowers the individual.

At the end of *Fight Club*, we discover that Tyler and the Narrator are indeed the same person, two personalities sharing the same body. While being a plot twist, it is also a crucial point where we understand the dualism and conflict within the Narrator himself. He is “possessed,” and for Glucklich, this means a deeper pain needs to be exhumed. Glucklich defines

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<sup>49</sup> Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 207.

<sup>50</sup> Maureen Flynn, “The Spiritual Uses of Pain in Spanish Mysticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 2 (Summer 1996), 271.

<sup>51</sup> Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 59.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

“possession” as “cohabitation in one organism of plural agencies.”<sup>54</sup> The act of possession may involve total loss of the individual’s identity, or there is also the possibility of the individual and the possessing personality acting at the same time.<sup>55</sup> In any case, pain plays a factor in the process of possession; pain may be a remote cause, such as the desire to replicate the suffering of another or a particular theological view of the body. Physical pain itself can also be a trigger for an episode of possession.<sup>56</sup> Pain may be caused by violence suffered during the possession itself. For cases of “strong possession,” the violence during the encounter may result in high levels of pain for the duration of the possession.

The challenge for the mystic, and indeed anyone, is attempting to understand when the possession is by a “good” force, such as God, or the Holy Spirit, and when it is demonic and dangerous.<sup>57</sup> Mystics such as Theresa of Avila shared this concern, and it is a legitimate problem, since the alien personality is “rarely indifferent.”<sup>58</sup> Glucklich says that “‘fictitious’ creations of the psyche, molded within given cultural parameters, can become a vivid ‘person,’ who takes up residence in one’s body.”<sup>59</sup> This is normally due to trauma, but there is also the possibility these “ghosts,” as Glucklich refers to them, can take up residence in a person because of factors such as problems with relationships or social problems, such as bias or conflict.<sup>60</sup> In order to understand the relationship between the ghost and the individual, it is necessary to identify the original trauma that caused the emergence of the other personality.<sup>61</sup> Writing about the Spanish mystics, Flynn writes, “It was this uncertainty over whether one's experiences derived from God

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>57</sup> Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 121.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 126.

or from the devil that led some mystics to call for the total abolition of self-consciousness in their theology. The only secure approach to spiritual perfection is to see, feel, and understand nothing.”<sup>62</sup> Anything else was from the devil. But what is the devil, the *satan*, the adversary that drives Tyler to take up residence in the Narrator?

In order to understand the demon that drives the Narrator, I believe we need to examine the Narrator’s understanding of God and his father. The Narrator’s father left him at a young age, starting up new families around the country, “franchises,” as Tyler puts it. The Narrator is another product of his father’s consumerist, fast-food attitude concerning family life. Fatherly advice is dispensed long distance in the form of sound bites—exhortations to go to college and get married. There is not a sense of love or hate, but indifference, apathy. To be loved or hated by his father would at least imply some sense of relational connection.

Both damnation and redemption imply a relationship with God, either in fullness of communion or the understanding that the relationship was in direct opposition to what God wants. Howard Thurman writes, “We cannot finally abide being ignored,” and speaks of a time when his daughter intentionally started a fight with Thurman’s sister, who in turn ignored the daughter. His daughter’s response was to ask the sister why she would not fight back.<sup>63</sup> By being acknowledged, there is at least the hope of a relationship, even if it is a dim hope. The Narrator comments,

How Tyler saw it was that getting God’s attention for being bad was better than getting no attention at all. Maybe because God’s hate is better than His indifference. If you could be either God’s worst enemy or nothing, which would you choose? We are God’s middle children, according to Tyler Durden, with no special place in history and no special

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<sup>62</sup> Flynn, “Spiritual,” 271.

<sup>63</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness*, (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1954), 31.

attention. Unless we get God's attention, we have no hope of damnation or redemption. Which is worse, hell or nothing? Only if we're caught and punished can we be saved.<sup>64</sup>

If Tyler thinks the best he can hope for is to be recognized by God, then that in of itself may be the mystical union he and others who are in fight club are seeking. They are seeking for a connection to something, at any rate, that is beyond the world. Consumerism and absentee fathers have left Tyler and others stuck in a society that gives them no direction and no defining moments. Throughout mystical and ascetic literature, there is a common theme of desiring union with God. In Tyler's eyes, this does not seem to be a realistic goal. If Tyler and his followers are the "middle children of history," forgotten by God, then it appears that the deep, personal connection will never be realized. To be in a perpetual state of quasi-communion with God is certainly a painful notion, and a difficult life.

Otto's "daemonic" encounter may be the most primitive, but it remains incomplete. In *Fight Club*, there is a stripping away of the religious experience, a desire to have this very basic encounter. Even if Tyler and the other men of fight club are unable to know the God who abandoned them, there is still the religious impulse that exists at a "preliminary" level in their lives.<sup>65</sup> Otto quotes an unnamed mystic, "Love ... is nothing else than quenched wrath."<sup>66</sup> For Tyler and the other men who participate in fight club, there is a desire for wrath. If love is present in the concept of the wrath of God, then at least they will be noticed by God at that point, and they will be embraced in God's love, even if it is a dysfunctional love. The hope should be, however, that from hitting bottom, the only way to go is back up, into a fullness of communion with God, or a renewed relationship with a father figure.

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<sup>64</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 141.

<sup>65</sup> Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 117.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

William James writes, “A believer who flagellates or ‘macerates’ himself to-day arouses more wonder and fear than emulation.”<sup>67</sup> In the case of the Narrator, it draws people to him. After a crowd of men see the Narrator beating himself up, we subsequently see larger crowds in the parking lot where the first fight takes place. Not only are others observing the fights, but they are participating in them as well. As the crowd grows, the Narrator observes, “We were finding out we were not alone.” In the same way, many people who watch or read *Fight Club* are drawn into its world. I have found myself mesmerized by the words of Tyler Durden, agreeing with his social commentary on the state of a society built on materialism and commercialism. I, like many others, have worked jobs that are unfulfilling, spending hours a day doing something I do not particularly enjoy, just to pay the bills so I can come home at night and begin the cycle anew the next morning. In this life of monotony, I have often desired to test myself, to see what my limits are. Instead of suffering physical violence or inflicting it on others, I have chosen to test myself through the means of higher education. But the draw of fight club is still present.

Despite a sanitized understanding of pain in our culture, *Fight Club* remains an attractive film and book. *Fight Club* author Chuck Palahniuk himself has received free meals from adoring fans, and has had magazines ask him where the local fight club is so they can write a story about it.<sup>68</sup> Beyond being the final product of a good writer and good director, the book and movie have resonated with people deeper than just a narrative. Is it because they do not feel welcome at church? Is it because so many fathers leave their children, or simply provide a poor role model? In attempting to answer these questions, people are searching for something: a father, a god, a way to cover up the pain, or a way to feel something, anything.

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<sup>67</sup> James, *Varieties*, 300.

<sup>68</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories*, (New York: Anchor House, 2005), 228.

The search for God can take many forms, such as private contemplation, a pilgrimage to a holy place, or adherence to religious practices that are part of a spiritual tradition. In this search, often we know where God is, but the journey must be made on either an interior or exterior level. In *Fight Club*, however, I believe we see a generation of young people who do not know where to start. They are abandoned and disoriented, lost in an alien culture among strangers. The search then becomes an attempt to call God down, to scream, “Where the hell is God?” God can either embrace them or “hit them as hard as he can,” but at least they will know where God is and how God feels about them.

From the perspective of a Christian, if there is indeed a generation of men (and women, for that matter) that feels so alienated from God that they resort to destruction of self and society just to get God’s attention, then Christianity has failed them. It has failed to share in their pain, to understand that for some people, the relationship with God is non-existent, and it is not as if they are not trying. There is no atheistic mysticism in *Fight Club*; instead, there is an attempt to understand the relationship between the Narrator and God. The desire for the mystical encounter is so strong that Tyler, the Narrator and others like them are willing to subject themselves to levels of pain that most people have never felt. Phyllis Tickle argues in *The Great Emergence* that the ascetic, monastic movement preserved Christianity through the Dark Ages.<sup>69</sup> Using the idea that every 500 years the Church experiences a “rummage sale” that results in a new conception of the Christian faith, the monasteries remained faithful repositories of Christian teachings in a faith system that was regressing back into a stage we could associate with Otto’s “daemonic.” On the edge of another 500 year cycle, postmodern Christianity is in the process of rediscovering its ascetic and monastic foundations; in the last several years we have seen the

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<sup>69</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 25-6.

renewal of monasticism and structured life in places such as Taize, Iona and The Simple Way. Perhaps through the new interest of these paths, people will be able to discover a relationship with God that is not pain free, but full of relational depth that transcends simply getting God's attention and becomes communion with the divine.

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