Pilot Demons

By Rod Machado

On the day of my first flying lesson, a tiny voice spoke to me in a Sicilian-like accent. It pleaded, “Rodney, donta goh, donta goh. I cook you pasta, I cook you pizza. Just donta goh flying today,” I’ll never forget that voice—it came from my grandmother, standing in the kitchen. I replied, “Granny, why are you speaking like that? We’re not even from Italy.”

Yes, I still flew that day. Yes, I still had Italian food that night. And yes, I’m still not Italian.

Many of us, even those without grandmothers, hear voices. They may be the ones speaking to us when laying our eyes on the printed word or those associated with our conscience and its splintered kin, each with personalities all their own. Most of the time, these voices are supportive. Punctuating our waking moments with helpful suggestions and prodding us to behave in sensible ways, they act as wise overseers.

Occasionally, while aloft, we encounter voices that go bad. These are the ones that attempt to sabotage the means by which we find satisfaction in airplanes. I’m speaking of those voices emanating from the darker corners of our mind. The ancient Greeks knew of these voices, often referring to them as *dysdaimon* or *bad demons*.

Bad demons compel us to doubt ourselves, to worry unnecessarily, to be fearful and anxious when those responses aren’t justified. For most of us, these demons remain confined to the dusty dungeons of the unconscious mind. But for reasons that are both known and unknown, they occasionally slither onto the bedrock of consciousness and lay siege to our intellect and emotions. Here, they deplete us of the joys and pleasures we find in flying airplanes. Once these demons assume custody of our mental machinery, we’re forced to make a simple choice. Either we learn to control them, or submit to being controlled by them.

Before Ted wrote me several months ago, he had been flying for many years, accumulating several thousand accident-free, fun flying hours in the process. Then, on one cross country trip, everything changed. Ted heard an alien voice, a nagging voice, that prodded him to worry about his safety. As a result, he made an unscheduled landing to collect his wits (and offload that voice).

Ted said he’d never experienced anything like that before. Before long, Ted would only fly when accompanied by another pilot. Yet, it wasn’t Ted’s ability to control the airplane that troubled him. It was the general feeling of uneasiness that plagued him on subsequent flights. Just for the record, Ted didn’t experience heart palpitations, dizziness,

sweating, trembling, chest pain, choking, chills. Nor did he experience panting or rapid breathing, as if he had just eaten a dog biscuit. These symptoms are typically associated with panic disorders and anxiety attacks (or the oral portion of a private pilot checkride). Instead, Ted had come face to face with a bad demon.

As Ted explained it, his sudden onset of discomfort was inexplicable. While we might associate similar events with the trauma of an aviation accident or even a close call, Ted had encountered neither. Experience tells me that there's almost always a reason behind the sudden appearance of a bad demon, despite the difficulty in identifying the means by which we unknowingly summoned it.

Much of the time, these demons are kept in check because we pay selective attention to the world around us. It's simply human nature not to dwell on our mortality. We seldom think about how easily frightened we might be by the most banal and common things in our lives (e.g., a seemingly friendly dog that attacks us, perhaps because we at its biscuit) or even how vulnerable our body is to being punctured, squished or bent. That's why we have little reason to feel anxious about these issues. While we may tacitly acknowledge our vulnerability at times, we certainly don't dwell on it.

Now consider what happens when a solo pilot, cruising at several thousand feet, stumbles onto the perfect combination of time, opportunity and circumstance to muse about his vulnerability. Suppose, for example, he begins to nibble on the idea of losing consciousness. As he chews on the thought, the devastating and ultimate finality of blacking out might easily lead to feel ill at ease. Now a very bad demon (i.e., a voice) might rise from its slumber and gain access to the waking mind. Never mind that this fellow is in perfect health and has never lost consciousness a day in his life. All that matters to him now is his newly revealed vulnerability (albeit a statistically insignificant one), and the lack of protection against it.

Sure, this fellow might find comfort in wiring the parachute system of his Cirrus SR-22 to an onboard EEG monitor so that it automatically deploys at the first sign of diminished mental activity. The problem is that some pilots with dimly lit stars might find their chute deploying regardless of whether or not anyone actually fainted. Fortunately, there's a more practical solution to the problem. In situations like these, pilots must intervene on their own behalf to stay their runaway emotions. Here is where we can take a lesson from the past.

Goethe, the German poet, once suggested that he never shunned any of his personal thoughts, no matter how disgusting, grotesque or disturbing they were. To him, these thoughts—representing his bad demons—were part of him and part of the human condition. Instead, he acknowledged these demons, listened to them, and allowed them

conditional access to his psyche for one very important reason: *so as not to empower the bad ones by ignoring or dismissing them*.

Goethe knew that great peril existed when attempting to banish by force of will those parts of his psychic self that he didn't like. Great mind that he was, he recognized these bad demons as errant or spurious thoughts that didn't reflect his true values or beliefs. The lesson Goethe and other wise men of antiquity learned was to acknowledge their disturbing thoughts (their demons), listen to their message, then begin talking to them.

Talking to them? That's right!

Does that sound like crazy talk to you? Are you thinking I'm possessed and need immediate debriefing by a priest? Perhaps FAA psychologists are kooky, too. After all, the recommended strategy for countering irresponsible behavior requires that you to talk to yourself in applying their recommended hazardous thought antidotes. If you still believe talking to yourself is crazy, then you've certainly riled the ghost of Goethe and probably vexed the spirits of Montaigne, Shakespeare, Ruskin, Socrates, Thomas Jefferson and many others, as well. These were men who, to different degrees, learned to cope with their personal demons by holding conversations with them.

For instance, in the book *Jefferson's Demons*, Michael Beran details Thomas Jefferson's battle with the many different and sometimes disturbing voices and personas with which our third president struggled. Like most intellectuals of his time, Jefferson was skilled in the classic literature of the Greeks and the Romans. He knew that the ancients perceived these demons and their accompanying voices, as instructional forces that could either hobble a man's creativity or help him marshal it effectively. Socrates, for instance, was known to chat with his demons, which the great Greek sage recognized as nothing more than the whispers of his conscience.

Like many great men of the Renaissance, Jefferson learned to carry on conversations or dialogues with these internal voices, his demons. In the process, he and others like him, found a way to *talk to themselves*, letting their wiser parts offer counsel and guidance to their more troublesome personas. This is the means by which Ted and pilots with similar afflictions might come to terms with their demons and the uneasiness and discomfort they produce.

Here's an example of how this process might play out from beginning to end. Pilots who suddenly find themselves chilled by a disturbing and unreasonable thought (fainting, acrophobia, etc.) should acknowledge this demon and its accompanying voice. They shouldn't ignore or dismiss it. Then they should listen to it, giving it the benefit of the doubt by assuming its message might contain advice from a part their psyche that's concerned for their safety. After all, there's no reason to automatically assume that these demons are against you. The animating force behind all life is the preservation of life. We

have every reason to assume that in strange and indecipherable ways our demons might actually be trying to assist us in much the same manner of an admonishing and overcontrolling mother. This is the part of the process that opens the doors of communication between one's consciousness and the mental machinations that lie beneath it.

The next step is to talk to the demon (if you have passengers, do it subaudibly lest you give them a good reason to start cranking out their own supply of demons).

For instance, you might begin by saying, "OK, thanks for the warning and the information. That's interesting. I'll consider your point, but I believe I'll be fine for now." Then go about your business.

If you've listened to your demon's message (be it one of anxiety, acrophobia, competence, etc.) you'll know what to say in return. While I can't possibly tell you how to talk with your demon in all instances, I can suggest that you treat it as you would a concerned neighbor who is respectfully but stubbornly trying to butt his nose into your business. Reasonable people will listen politely to that neighbor, but then establish a limit line beyond which his nosiness should not cross. Trust your instincts here. Remember, talking to your demon allows you to influence your behavior in much the same way your behavior is influenced when someone talks to you.

Ultimately, your objective is to find a way to make your demon work as an ally for you. Jefferson managed to do just that, using his many voices to turn anxiety into action and chaos into order. Perhaps Beran said it best about Jefferson when he wrote, "He learned better than most people do [about] how to talk to himself—how to cherish the stray pieces of consciousness he found within him. The Renaissance masters taught him to treat his various voices [good and bad alike] like bright playful children, little prodigies who must be given scope for the expression of their elegant (demonic) energies."

Finally, let's be clear about one thing. Mentally healthy people *hear* voices. That's a fact. They don't, however, dress them up, drive them places and introduce them to their friends. That's goofy and a sure sign that someone needs a shrink to help shrink his new friends away. As long as an individual doesn't have too many bats in his belfry, he can probably deal with most forms of cockpit unease or discomfort by treating it as the ancients did—recognize it as a personal demon, listen to it, talk with it.