

No-Face (from the film "Spirited Away")

By Terri Ann Guingab



"Spirited Away" is Hayao Miyazaki's tale of a young girl named Chihiro who is thrown into an "Alice in Wonderland"-like spirit world. She faces a number of difficult challenges to rescue her parents and return to her own world. One of my favorite characters in the movie is No-Face. Of all the characters in "Spirited Away", I think No-Face most vividly demonstrates both the struggle we face against unhealthy attachment and how we can overcome that struggle.

No-Face is a spirit who haunts the outskirts of a bath house in which Chihiro works. We see him a few times at the beginning of the movie staring at Chihiro, fascinated with her. We later come to learn that he is lonely and believes Chihiro has something that can fill that loneliness.

One night, Chihiro notices No-Face standing outside the bath house. It's raining heavily and he's drenched. Chihiro takes pity on No-Face and lets him into the bath house. For No-Face, this is an act of kindness he's never experienced before. He repays the favor by getting a bath token for Chihiro, an item she needs so she can do her work. Chihiro thanks him and moves on. No-Face then brings Chihiro a handful of bath tokens. He thinks that if one token can make Chihiro happy, twenty could make her feel overjoyed. Chihiro has all she needs and declines his gifts. No-Face is upset by this and wanders off.



No-Face demonstrates two unhealthy attachments here. He's attached to the idea that the only way to fill the loneliness inside of him is to please Chihiro and gain her friendship. No-face is also attached to the idea that the only way to gain Chihiro's friendship is through material gifts. This sets up an unrealistic expectation that can easily lead to a negative pattern -- that of selfishly giving only for what one can get in return.

Such behavior is common in people who develop unhealthy attachments to other people. It's dangerous to define our personal happiness solely through the actions or perceived thoughts of others. The feelings we gain from this type of attachment are quite often false and misleading. It's not the type of connection we really need, even though we may think it is. It has the potential for opening us up to an emotional roller coaster ride that is harmful to both ourselves and the object of our attention.



Later in the movie, No-Face learns that the other workers in the bath house crave gold. He lures a frog worker to him with a handful of gold nuggets. No-Face then swallows the worker before he can escape. The act of swallowing the frog changes No-Face's personality and voice. The frog craves food, so now No-Face craves food...and lots of it.

This is another example of No-Face demonstrating unhealthy attachments, this time to fear of abandonment. He won't let the frog worker leave him the way he feels Chihiro left him. I find it interesting that No-Face takes on the frog's personality after consuming him. It's as if No-Face loses himself so much to his

attachments that he becomes the things he's attached to. Though it may not be to the extent that No-Face has experienced, how often have we changed ourselves or our beliefs to please others? In some cases, such a change can be beneficial. A good example of this would be friends inspiring you towards personal growth to a degree you may not have been motivated to do on your own. But in many cases, making these changes for the sole purpose of pleasing others only pulls us further away from our true selves.



No-Face produces a massive quantity of gold and initially, the other bath house workers pretend to adore him for it. They give him as much food as he wants, and he gives them as much gold as they want. No-Face's emptiness isn't satisfied with all the food he's eating or the workers' false friendship. But he's also attached to the illusion of being "cared for" by the bath house workers, so he continues to consume more and more.

Many people fall into this trap when they become emotional eaters. There's a perceived emptiness inside, whether it be a lack of love or comfort or satisfaction with one's life. When we feel we can't get or aren't receiving enough of those basic human needs, we use comfort foods as a substitute. This type of unhealthy attachment isn't restricted to just food. It's easy to become attached to shopping, gambling, work, alcohol, drugs, people, or any of the other addictions for the very same reasons.

The next time Chihiro sees No-Face, he's morphed into a force of insatiable hunger that threatens to destroy the bath house. He produces an overflowing pile of gold, begging Chihiro to take it from him so he can experience her kindness again. When she refuses, he threatens to eat her. His desire for Chihiro's affections is now so unhealthy he's blinded to the fact that swallowing Chihiro would mean destroying the source of that which he desires.

It's at this most desperate moment that Chihiro finally shows him the kindness he's craved for so long. Chihiro offers No-Face a magic herbal cake. The cake has the power to transform Chihiro's parents back to human form. Without it, they could be trapped as pigs forever. As much as Chihiro would love to go back home, she sacrifices the opportunity to save her parents in order to save No-Face, as well as the entire bath house.



At first, No-Face is angry and he chases her through the bath house. As the herbal cake takes effect, he purges all the things he consumed. The frog worker is also purged from No-Face's system, along with the voice and the greed that came with him. It's a painful and somewhat grotesque process, but it's what No-Face's body needs to become healthy again.

I think it's important to emphasize that No-Face is not a monster in all this. Rather, he's someone who wants friendship, but doesn't know how to cultivate a healthy connection to people. Because he isn't clear on what he really needs, he clings to other attachments as a substitute. His true needs aren't satisfied, so his unhealthy attachments grow stronger and more dangerous as he seeks out additional substitutes for that need.

This is similar to the idea of our karma pulling us away from acting from our True Hearts, moving us towards indulging in the negative patterns we've developed. By cultivating a connection with Tao, we can see unhealthy attachments for what they really are. It gives us the clarity to let go of the unhealthy aspects of our attachments and build healthier relationships with every aspect of our lives: our friends, our homes, our jobs, our food, etc.

Receiving the herbal cake for No-Face is much like receiving Tao. The cake gives No-Face's body the energy it needs so he can let go of his attachments, his loneliness, and his anger. He leaves the bath house returned to his original form. It's from this point that No-Face can now learn a new, healthier way of existing. But this is only the beginning.

After escaping from the bath house, Chihiro wants to help her friend Haku, another spirit trapped in the bath house. To do that, she needs to travel to the sorceress Zenibaba's house. The only way to reach Zenibaba's house is by train. No-Face follows Chihiro all the way to the train station, but is hesitant to board the train. Chihiro invites No-Face onto the train, demonstrating the same openness and innocence with which she invited him into the bath house. Coincidentally, the name of this train is "Middle Way", which also describes the Buddhist concept of living a life of balance, avoiding extremes.



For No-Face, this is an important moment. If he didn't get on the train, the cycle of unhealthy attachment could have happened all over again. Receiving Tao gives us an opportunity to reach a point from where we can find our True Path. But if we don't get on that path, the same cycles can re-occur.

This is also my favorite Chihiro scene in the movie. Despite all the trials she faced in the bath house, and despite all the destruction No-Face caused to her and her friends, Chihiro still maintains an open and nonjudgmental heart. She holds no grudges, understanding that No-Face is not the monster who tried to eat her, but a soul who needs her help. There's no doubt in her mind when she invites No-Face to join her on the train -- this is where they both need to be.



No-Face and Chihiro's other companions, with Zenibaba's help, weave a magic hair band for Chihiro. No-Face begins to demonstrate an understanding of true friendship, where kindness is given without strings and without attachments. He genuinely wants to help Chihiro, and he doesn't expect anything in return. In the process, he discovers he has a talent for spinning thread. He also finds a new home with Zenibaba as her helper.

These ending scenes remind me of the importance of connectedness, to Tao and to the Tao family. Chihiro and No-Face, acting from their True Hearts, affect each others' lives in a significant and positive way. Although I've only been cultivating Tao for a few months, there have already been numerous occasions where my friends in the Tao family have helped me see my own negative attachments with more clarity. It's through their support that I can begin to break negative patterns in my life, let go of unhealthy attachments, and build a stronger connection with Tao. It hasn't been an easy process by any stretch of the imagination. But the lessons I've learned and the changes I've invited into my life would never have happened had I not been introduced to Tao. The journey has been, and still is, a worthwhile adventure.
