

brother wolf

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Welcome to Gubbio

If you happen to come to the Italian town of Gubbio, make sure to visit the small church of Santa Maria della Pace. In its crypt you will find an impressive sarcophagus. The massive stone used to cover the tomb of the wolf that St Francis was said to have tamed.

But why did the citizens of Gubbio dedicate a graveside and a tombstone to a wolf? The answer takes us back to the year 1220, when Francis is said to have lived in Gubbio.





Everyone remembers the day that a ferocious wolf prowled through the countryside of Gubbio. He was preying on the town's livestock, chicken and sheep. But as he was old and becoming too frail to hunt, he began to gorge himself with humans. This was unheard of in Gubbio and instilled fear and trembling in the hearts of young and old.

The citizens of Gubbio were so terrified, that no one dared to venture beyond the city walls. And if they did, they

would go out only in large numbers, heavily armed, as if going to war. But still, the wolf, despite of his age, proved to be smarter and stronger than the bravest women and men. It was a desperate situation. Gubbio was under siege.

There was of course always the occasional fool, who did not believe the town's gossip and made fun of people's fears. But they usually never returned from their excursions.

If you seek happiness,
look for it where your fears are.
(German Proverb)

Eventually, Francis realized that he needed to take action. He decided to meet the wolf, face to face, all by himself. Irrespective of all the warnings, he stepped outside of the city gate and went deep into what was now considered the weary land.

The wolf was waiting for him.

Meanwhile the whole city made their way to the top of the city walls to watch how the two slowly approached each other.



Brother wolf,
what are you afraid of?



As Francis came closer to the wolf, he made the sign of the cross over him, and started to address him: 'Brother wolf, you have brought so much evil to this land, destroying and killing God's creatures without his permission. You dare to even devour human beings, created after the image of God. You would deserve to be hanged like a robber and murderer.

There is such an outcry against you. The dogs keep chasing you. The citizens of Gubbio have become your enemies. But I would like to make peace between you and them, brother wolf. Stop attacking them, and they will forgive your cruel acts.

To everyone's surprise the wolf seemed to agree. The movements of his body, his tail and eyes, the bowing of his head, they all signalled an acceptance of the peace offering. Francis promised the wolf, that he would never ever go hungry again. The people of Gubbio would feed him. In return, he would promise to never again attack neither them nor their livestock. Again the wolf showed his approval by bowing his head and then followed Francis into the city. It was an extraordinary spectacle.





The wolf spent the last two years of his life in the village. He lived and moved freely among the people in the town. The dogs stopped barking at him and he was regularly fed in people's homes. Everyone grew so fond of him that, when he died of old age, one could hear much crying and lamentation in the alleys of Gubbio. Everyone agreed that he should be buried in the local cemetery.

Postscript

What I didn't tell you at the beginning of the story is that the crypt does not only host the wolf's tombstone, but also the very cave he used to stay during the last two years of his life in Gubbio. In the far corner you see its entrance. It exhibits a strange and eery presence. Few dare to come close enough to look into the darkness long enough to make out the cave's breadth and depth. Maybe this is, after all, the crux of the story: Not that the wolf was tamed, but that the people of Gubbio were tamed. They had to make peace not only with the wolf among them, but also with the wolf within them.





Come, wolf of Gubbio, and lead us where we fear to go.

There is no short cut to peace. We have to do the hard, internal work of soul searching. Can we speak to the wolf within us with the same affection and compassion with which Francis addressed the wolf? Can we think of it as a brother or sister, who is very much at home in our psyche. Instead of projecting our wolfishness onto others, we could begin to acknowledge and accept those parts within us that make us feel anxious and afraid. But such acceptance cannot be achieved without a deeper knowing of a divine love that does not look for perfection, but compassion. For love to be transformative, it has to be unconditional. Otherwise we will never dare to approach the cave.

And in making ourselves more vulnerable, we would become a channel of peace for others.

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The story is based on *Fioretti di San Francesco di Assisi* (chapter 21).

The Little Flowers of St. Francis is a florilegium divided into 53 short chapters, on the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. It was composed by Ugolino Brunforte at the end of the 14th century.