

How Do You Understand Evil?
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At last November’s Services Auction, Johanna Leopold was the winning bidder of a Sunday sermon. She asked me to address questions of “evil.” I was happy to do so, not because I’m happy to be talking about evil, but because I think it’s an important question for UUs (and humans in general!) to be thoughtful about. I would remind you that although I speak as a Unitarian Universalist minister, there is no one UU position on these larger-than-life questions. I speak from my experience. I welcome you to hear through your experience, which may differ radically from mine.

No one can contest that humans do perfectly atrocious, horrific things to one another. Need I remind you? Some are done personally, like murdering a beloved daughter described in the last issue of the *UU World*. Some are done collectively, like the various genocides and ethnic cleansings that we humans organize against each other. Rev. William Schultz, past director of Amnesty International, and husband of our previous minister, Rev. Beth Graham (who will speak from this pulpit next Sunday) confronted the atrocities daily, and consequently posed the issue of the reality of evil.

The question is what motivates these atrocities? How do we think about such horrors? How do we understand evil? In keeping with the language of Sunday February 7th, what is our theology of evil?

I don’t believe that there’s a supernatural force that takes over human beings – a kind of satanic power that’s apart from the human; anymore than I believe there’s a supernatural force for good that somehow works miracles apart from human input and cooperation. It’s too easy to displace human responsibility for the cruelty that we do to one another to say, “The devil made me do it.” It’s too easy to point to another order of being to avoid being responsible for our actions. I don’t believe that an other-than-human dimension is called for. Yet, clearly sometimes a wave of hysteria moves through an otherwise caring group of people, as a national body. One of my hoped-for outcomes of this message is to inoculate ourselves so that we’re not susceptible to that kind of social movement.

Historically, I see two contrary explanations for “evil” that we humans do. On the one hand, many religions of the East, explain this as “ignorance.” There’s a wonderful mandala that tries to capture the Buddhist understanding of this worldly existence. At the center of the mandala are the images of three animals chasing each other: a rooster, a snake and a pig, representing anger, ignorance and greed, which drives the whole illusory world that we unrefined humans take as “real.” In other words, there is something endemic to the human condition that explains the basic motivation of the unenlightened.

On the other hand, many religions of the West explain the cruelty that we do not by ignorance but by willful disobedience. If you remember the scenario in the primordial Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were forbidden by God to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. They disobeyed God’s explicit instruction, and so were cast out of paradise, condemned to work and to die.

In contrast to an Eastern point of view of ignorance, they knowingly contravened God’s instruction. Consequently they were ashamed, and hid from God’s presence.

I find the Eastern point of view more consonant with my self understanding. Rather than flail at my rebelliousness, my disobedient spirit, my creativity, I must often reflect on my basic patterns: Are they wise? Are they compassionate? From an Eastern point of view, I don’t berate my inner spirit as shameful and willful, but as needing to learn a lot.

My childhood experiences shape my adult view. My parents, steeped in the Western view of evil, wanted more than anything to exact out of me disobedience. But something within me rebelled and prevailed. Hence I live with parts of me that heed their warnings and parts of me that rebel against them.

Having brushed too broadly the differences between East and West, I now want to turn to another consideration.

I wonder if something else, other than willfulness or ignorance, is at work, which explains our capacity to inflict cruelty. I’m wondering if the very capacity that expresses the brilliance of humanity also explains the depths of inhumanness. As marvelous as loving relationships are – and they are indeed spectacular and essential to human wellbeing – can they not also explain the cruelty? Who’s in and who’s out? Who’s thought of as family? Who is not? What are the obligations – the expectations – that come with family? What are the obligations that come with those we consider outsiders?

As I say, the very capacity that we are proudest of – and we rightly celebrate the profound love and even sacrifice that family members show each other – is the very capacity that can be perverted. Think of the political leaders who exploit deep-seated hatreds to fan xenophobia and ethnic cleansing. That’s but the flip side of traits that we rightly celebrate – the love that people feel for their own kin. (I could have said “their own kind.”)

Inclusive religions regularly expand the circle of who we consider to be family. “We are family!” the famous song from La Cage aux Follies asserts. I regularly preach that absolutely everyone is a child of God. I like to refer to the fact that Jesus didn’t shut out the ostracized of his day from his table. In other words, we’re all related. In the words of ancient, slave melody that we still sing, “We’re gonna sit at the welcome table.”

We’re more likely to perpetrate evil when we exclude some humans from our “family.” How tempting this is! Especially when we’re sure we’re right!

Can we talk here? Confession time: how many of you wish for the early death of the senators leading the opposition? A heart attack wouldn’t be too much to ask for.

Such passion is the very thing that we otherwise prize. But we have to guard against our passions becoming distorted into dehumanization and violence on either a verbal or, regrettably, a physical level.

We see clearly the dynamic in an adversary, like the murderer of Dr. Tillman, who provided late-term abortions in Kansas. What we see clearly in an adversary, we need to guard against in ourselves.

My position is as follows. While we need to assess behavior as cruel, barbaric, etc. we have to be very careful in our use of the label “evil.” We may even have to defend ourselves with the killing of others, but we must be very wary of ascribing evil to our enemies.

I’m going to make a well-worn distinction between the behavior and the person – a cliché of “hating the sin, but loving the sinner” if you will.

As tempted as we may be to label someone “evil” I would argue that we need to be strong in expressing how our values may feel threatened by another’s action, but I would be wary of labeling that individual “evil.” I fear that such labeling leads to violence, because what does one do with an evil person? Why one kills the evil-doer! One feels justified in eliminating that person’s life.

Let’s examine the most extreme case that give us pause. Extremists human beings who strap on suicide belts to kill Americans and supporters of Americans. What’s not to hate? What’s not to stop violence, war against them?

To the extent that we label persons so absorbed in ideology that they would harm us if they could, we justify using violence against them. We declare “war” on them, vowing to exterminate them. We set up a war of good against evil. And, of course, we think of ourselves on the good side. “Gott mit uns.”

I would suggest another way, ultimately a way of peace-making. I suggest that we honor the profound fear that we feel when confronted by someone who is out to get us; someone so angry that they would destroy us. It doesn’t help either ourselves or our enemy when we deny our fear with bravado and a machismo, “bring it on” attitude. I suggest that we honor the terror that gripes us. But that we do not react out of that terror, but out of compassion.

This person who wants to do me in must be in such a wounded place that places an apparently unbridgeable chasm separating the other from me. In compassion, I become curious about this other human being that expresses such a threat to me. Hopefully, I become curious about how it is that two human beings (one of them me) can see the world so differently that we would want to kill each other.

Confronting the reality of a human being who would take my life leads me to much internal (and I would say “spiritual”) work. How do I value what I hold dear? Would I give my life, and the lives of those I love, for these values? What shapes my assumptions of what is precious?

What I notice about myself and others is that the more afraid we are the more likely we are to lash out, labeling others as threats. When I feel grounded in myself, I become more able to embrace differences. As I overcome my anxiousness, I can become more curious. I can more nearly approximate the position of Self, that position that looks on all the ups and downs of life with equanimity and compassion.

Of course this is tricky because ultimately life is tenuous. We all die; we all get older, diseased and disabled. Somehow the promise of every religion is that in spite of this reality, it is possible to live with joy and gratitude, excited in every moment that we live. This is the liberating teaching of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and earth-based religions – we don’t have to be trapped in fear. Yes, death happens to each one of us. But that doesn’t have to define us while we have the gift of breath.

The more centered I am, the less tempted I am to label the people I fear. The more I’m able to cradle my fear, and to be curious with compassion about the other and about myself.

This is hard to do. It takes practice, starting out with small obstacles and gradually approaching the life-threatening ones. I don’t want to pretend that I am any more able to not react than anyone else. There are certainly things that push my buttons,

that get me enraged. But aspirationally, I want to be more like the person who meets the attacker with compassion than with anger.

The case that I have reflected on is the most extreme case, where a suicide bomber threatens our lives and the lives of those we love. In such an extreme case we must be wary of using the label “evil.” But there’s another sense of evil, which I believe we would do well to consider.

Few of us do evil in this most basic sense of taking another’s life, but I wonder if we are complicit in other, more seductive kind of evils – hurt caused to some by the very social institutions that we most identify with. I want to explore two examples: the evil consequences of war and historical privilege. While no one of us pulls a trigger or controls a drone with missiles, we are citizens of a country that is organized to kill. America is at war. By extension “we” are at war. Of course, we like everyone else justifies our killing of others by saying that we have been attacked first. We really want peace, and are only reluctant warriors. As I said earlier, who’s family? How do we understand terrorism and what motivates our enemy? Is it possible for us to really listen to the way America is perceived by others in the world? Is it possible to acknowledge the cruelty that others see perpetuated in the name of good? I would invite us to consider how complicit we are in benefiting from a system that exploits other human beings and ravages our shared planet?

Having raised some questions about being part of a country at war, I will now shift focus, briefly, to racism. (I could use any of the other ways we marginalize other human beings, but I will use the example of racism.) If you look at the sociological markers that set humans apart, we can read many ways in which many of us are privileged by the accidents of our birth. Being a white-skinned male of European ancestry, I can appreciate the many advantages I have over say, the dark-skinned female of Central American ancestry. How can we not be horrified by the statistics that define who’s in prison? Who’s most affected by the current unemployment? We who are privileged can respond in a variety of ways. We can pretend that nothing is to our advantage; that we’ve earned it all; why shouldn’t they! At the other extreme, we can be paralyzed by guilt and shame at the unfair advantages that we’ve lucked into. We can be so psychologically and sociologically scarred that we are immobilized. In contrast, I would advocate for a middle way: We can agitate to change the very systems that bestow advantage on some and disadvantage others. We can do all within our power to level the playing field. That requires an honest analysis – facing our history, our complete history, as folks reminded us last Sunday! And it requires strategizing about how to be effective in the changes we advocate. And it requires a long view. Society has concentrated privilege over centuries. It will take many decades to even things out. But we must be hopeful for we have witnessed progress in making real the proclamation of the Declaration of Independence, that “all men [and women] are created equal.”

Does evil exist? Certainly – in the sense that human beings treat others torturously! Does evil exist apart from the conditioning of human ignorance or folly? I believe not. I fear that we will behave in ways we will regret if we yield to the temptation to label some folks “evil.” And I fear that our institutions will perpetuate injury by favoring some and disfavoring many. That’s a kind of evil that we rightly challenge.

I love the simple poem titled “Outwitted” by Edwin Markham (1852-1940). (You’ve heard me use it before. It’s written in non-inclusive language. I trust you will translate the male imagery.)

*He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.*

*But love and I had the wit to win;
We drew a circle that took him in.*

May love and our own spiritual depth always have the wit to win!