

Evil

Address by Anne Barker

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Reflection: Evil

What do we ... as a liberal faith tradition ... have to say about evil?

What is it?

How do we understand it?

Is there anything we know for sure?

As a child, I was raised up in a Christian tradition where evil did not exist. God created the world, and it was good. Evil had no place in God's creation. What seemed to be evil was actually mortal error – misperception – thinking that needed to be corrected, to be realigned with God's truth. The universe is created in the image and likeness of God, and is therefore perfect.

It was a nice way to grow up. I felt safe and confident that my needs would ultimately be met ... that no obstacle was insurmountable ... that the world was a friendly and negotiable place. From this, I retain some important beliefs about life – that I have the power to influence my own experience ... that all life, actually all of existence, is sacred ... that it is my responsibility to correct what is misaligned.

What I have left behind is the deep division between mind and body ... the idea that the spiritual is real while the physical is unreal. It seems unreasonable to deny the evidence of the senses, to spend this life trying to overcome it. What I was left without – was a theology of evil. After years of believing that it was my job to correct evil, not to deny but to understand the nonexistence of it, now I had no way even to approach the subject. The world is good – what happens to that when I mix in evil?

There was also another problem in my way – the problem of compassion. The Bible tells us to love our neighbour ... to turn the other cheek ... to offer a hand of friendship and love. While I no longer consider myself a Christian, I will always be deeply influenced by these roots. How can I name something evil, and remain consistent to the loving approach that I value so much?

Now I recommend that whenever you need to wrap your head around a deep theological problem, you go to lunch with your most thoughtful atheist friend. My atheist friend is the most theologically sound lay person I know. She even has some of the religious professionals beat.

My friend's approach is to consider evil from the idea of intent – that which is evil is done for malicious purposes ... it is mean or violent or, in the very least, selfish. It is action taken with blatant disregard for the other – action designed to further the desires of the actor, with no care for anyone else who might be affected. This means that natural tragedies – hurricanes and earthquakes and the like – are not evil. They are terrible and devastating, but missing intent, they are not evil.

Still, I fought with her. Her stance sounded good – but couldn't it be said that there is some good in everyone? That something good arises out of every act? My very favourite fridge magnet says "Barn burnt down ... now I can see the moon." It might be a tragedy that the barn is gone ... but do we want to call it evil? Aren't we supposed to look for the moon?

After what seemed like hours, she finally figured out what was hanging me up – I was still too busy arguing to see it.

"What is it that you are worried about losing?" she asked me.

That was it. I was afraid that to name something evil, I was going to lose something far too precious to concede. I was going to lose my faith. I have faith in the goodness of humans – in life itself – that we lean toward goodness. I cannot prove it in a double-blind repeatable science experiment, but I believe it with my heart and mind. I have faith that while life is a glorious, messy, beautiful, terrible thing – we humans ultimately tend toward love.

I cannot speak to where we come from, or to where we go when that final breath leaves us, but I have experience with people and I have faith. Faith is not something that comes *from* somewhere – it is a choice we make. We place our faith on the notion most worthy to us and then we reinforce it with all the evidence that we can find.

Talking with my friend – trying to wrap my head around evil – I was afraid to lose that most tender kernel of faith that lives deepest within my heart. I believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person – of every being. If I were to call one of those beings evil – what would happen to my belief? How can I believe in the inherent worth and dignity of evil?

This is best illustrated by the conversation we sometimes have about Hitler. Well – what about Hitler's inherent worth and dignity? What about that? Are we supposed to treat him the same as his millions of victims? Certainly Hitler is evil.

The fact that we can even ask those questions tells me two things: that our Unitarian Universalist first principle is not a 'fact', but is instead a statement of faith ... and that we are not all going to agree. What about Hitler? *Is he evil?*

In my lunch conversation, I began to understand my problem with evil. My friend pointed out that I see almost everything else on a spectrum – a graduated scale – but I was seeing evil only as a strict polarity with good. If I was to call something evil, it could not be good. I do not do this with anything else ... why was I doing it with evil? Why did I feel so threatened?

The other thing I discovered is that evil, as a noun, is inconsistent with my faith – my understanding of the world. Although a number of you have offered to be used as examples of evil in this morning's service – I just cannot do it. You may choose evil – or evil may choose you – but I can not, will not, categorize a person as evil. I understand evil, instead, as a verb. It is not a being, but a doing. Hitler is responsible for horrific evil-doing, but I cannot call him evil. It is inconsistent with my

faith.

I cannot call you evil, because to call you evil is to forget that we are both members of this tiny interdependent universe – beings seeking a meaningful life, love, happiness, safety. I cannot call you evil, because to do so is to draw a line – to put you on the other side – to cast you out of the community of faith and of hope. I cannot call you evil, because tomorrow it might be me – turning away from someone in need, ignoring gross injustice, wielding the death blow. I cannot call you evil, because to do so is to forget that you are a person, challenged by the limits to your knowledge, the limits to your understanding, the limits to your ability and the limits to your imagination. I cannot call you evil, because to do so would be to let you off the hook. I cannot call you evil, because to do so would be to let me off the hook. I cannot call you evil, because to do so would be to call all of humanity evil – because deep in the heart of my very being, I know that you and I are one.

Think, for a moment, about how you understand evil. Is it on a spectrum, or is it a polarity? What is on the other end ... is it goodness? Is it love? If evil is an action taken with negative intent – is the other side an action taken with positive intent? Perhaps that is more than good – perhaps that positive intent means the other end is hope? Or justice?

Maybe you do not see evil this way at all. Some people see it as a force in the world – a competing energy, attempting to triumph over love. Others see it as a noun – something, or someone, spoiled or broken. Do you have a philosophy ... a theology ... a psychological understanding of evil? Have you considered this?

There are as many stories in the world that illustrate depravity as there are stories that illustrate love. In a life with so many options, what will we choose? We can understand people many different ways – but it is what we lift up, what we shine light on, what we choose to believe, that tips the balance. There are thousands of years filled with stories of war, hunger, oppression and hate. There are thousands of years filled with stories of peace, generosity, triumph and love.

The Other Side of War – the book that we read from earlier – is filled with examples of human failing, of the ways we brutalize and torture and decimate the bodies and spirits of our earthly companions. It is also filled with tender stories of the rise of the human spirit – like a phoenix from the ashes – to rebuild and reclaim a sense of self in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. What story *will* we lift up? Whose names *will* we remember? How *will* we make a difference?

We have taken the faith stance of recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of every person – and of asserting that every person should enjoy liberty and justice. Our liberal faith is inclusive and loving and generous and bold – but what does it have to help us in our encounters with evil?

We enjoy the luxury of being theologians in one of the safest and most satisfying places on earth. It is easy to be an optimist or a pacifist in Canada. To be a Unitarian Universalist comes with negligible risk – to be queer does not incur state sanctioned hanging – young people are not stolen into the army, or into the rebel forces, or into slavery. Not often. And yet – we will, each of us, encounter our share of evil. And how we respond will come out of how we have defined evil. This we know.

Coretta Scott King attended Unitarian churches for years. She and her husband, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., attended Unitarian churches together when they were in Boston. While he was in seminary, they considered this denomination for his future ministry.

"We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian."

They believed that they could not do what they needed to do, within this faith tradition. One of King's chief criticisms of liberal religion was that its theology of evil was too thin:
There is one phase of liberalism that I hope to cherish always: its devotion to the search for truth, its refusal to abandon the best light of reason. . . . It was . . . the liberal doctrine of man that I began to question. The more I observed the tragedies of history, and man's shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depths and strength of sin. . . . I came to feel that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism. I also came to see that liberalism's superficial optimism concerning human nature caused it to overlook the fact that reason is darkened by sin. . . . Liberalism failed to see that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man's defensive ways of thinking. Reason, devoid of purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations.

While we lift up the independent search for truth and meaning, what do we have to console victims of trauma ... to comfort people who had been oppressed for generations and saw no end in sight ... to inspire someone to challenge seemingly insurmountable odds? What do we have to meet the challenges of evil? Will believing in the goodness of people, and the right to freedom and justice, be enough? If we have no theology of evil ... no way to understand the terrible bad things that people do to one another ... how will we respond?

King had been known to quote Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, who first said, "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one... And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice." We are called, as people of faith, as citizens of the world, to see that arc – to celebrate the lean toward justice while witnessing the tragedies across the spectrum. We cannot afford the luxury of cherry-picking the happy stories and ignoring the suffering. To create an understanding of evil – to look at it and to approach it and to figure out how to ultimately wrestle with it – this is work we are called to do together. To turn away is to be victimized, to be blindsided. To hide is to live in fear. To work together, to take risks, to act, is to live out our faith with integrity.

Evil, in my understanding, is to damage or obscure a person's sense of self in such a way that they find themselves devoid of hope and love. The response, then, is many layered. We must find ways to reach toward, to lift up, and to help those who are damaged or threatened. We must find ways to reach toward, to lift up, and to help those who are doing the damage or the threatening. We must find ways to change the structures of power in the world and in our communities, which encourage,

provoke, and force people into states where evil-doing is an option.

We have, within our tradition, examples of success in this regard. We have, within this congregation, examples of success in this regard. Where the Canadian Census did not recognize the unpaid work of people in their homes, Carol Lees challenged them and changed the way we report. Where the Saskatchewan Government did not recognize the right of gay and lesbian couples to marry, Julie Richards and Nicole White were among those who challenged them and changed the law. Where school children were forced to either exclude themselves, or participate in Christian prayer in Saskatoon schools, the Lake/von Baeyer family was among those who challenged them and changed the system.

To be effective in the world, to offer more than sunny optimism and a liberal religious cheering squad, we need to engage in the full spectrum of human existence. Each of us has a part to play – facing what frightens and perplexes us – finding our stance – wrestling with evil. To avoid it, to look away – even if we are looking reverently heavenward – is to invite evil in to fill the space left vacant. Choosing to not do the work is choosing to let evil-doing have the run of the universal farm. Allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed, rather than taking one small bite at a time, is to yield the world. When it comes to evil, there are no clean hands. We must, at the very least, look at what we hold in our own.

The Rev. Rebecca Parker has this to say:

Love is the active, creative force that repairs life's injuries and brings new possibilities into being. Love speaks out in the face of injustice and oppression, calling leaders to account when policies and practices are injuring people. Love tends the wounds created by injustice and evil and offers compassion in the presence of life's suffering. Love builds communities of inclusion and friendship that break through the boundaries of prejudice and enmity. Love embraces the goodness of this world and seeks paradise on earth, a heaven of mutual respect. Love generates life — from the first moment of conception of a child, to the last moment when love creates a way for those who have died to be remembered with gratitude and tenderness. And in the deepest night, when our hearts are breaking, it is the discovery of a love that chooses unshakeable fidelity to our common humanity that renews us and redirects us to a life of generosity.

In this time of war, when violence is a rising tide, our calling is to love. Our calling is to witness to a deeper wisdom regarding how security can be created, and how the anguishing aftermath of human violence can be healed. We must speak as public theologians and religious critics who address the theology of war and offer an alternative.

Theodore Parker also insisted that individuals “never violate the sacredness of your individual self-respect.” King said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Together, this forms the groundwork for the work we must do. To understand evil, as a community, we must hold strong to our individual self-respect, while remembering our place within the justice of the world. Let us overcome the optical delusion of our consciousness, free ourselves from our prisons, and widen our circle of compassion to embrace not only the rest of life and nature, but to clearly, intentionally include ourselves.

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