

**“Evil”**

**The Rev. Suzelle Lynch  
Unitarian Universalist Church West  
October 23, 2005**

**Readings**

***Why there is Evil in the World, by Leo Tolstoy (adapted)***

A hermit lived in the forest, and the wild animals were not afraid of him. He and the animals used to talk together and they understood one another. One day the hermit lay down under a tree, and a raven, a dove, a stag, and a snake came to the same place. The animals began to discuss why Evil should exist in the world.

The raven opened the discussion. "It is all because of hunger that there is Evil in the world. When we have as much food as we want to eat, we sit by ourselves on the bough and caw, and everything is fine. But some other days we are starving ... we feel full of unrest. We fly about from place to place,... Even if we see some meat afar off, it only makes the matter worse. For if we fly down to get it, either sticks and stones are thrown at us, or wolves and dogs chase us, and we are killed. How much trouble comes upon us from hunger! All evil is caused by it."

"In my opinion," the dove replied, "Evil does not arise from hunger, but it all comes from love. If only we lived alone, we should have little trouble. Wretchedness shared makes one doubly wretched. Even so, we always live in pairs, and if we love our mates there is no peace for us at all. We are always thinking, 'Does she have enough to eat? Is she warm: And when our mate is away from us anywhere,... We cannot help worrying all the time, ... And if our mate is lost, then there is no more comfort for us. ... How many of us have perished in this way! No. Evil does not come from hunger, but from love."

"No," retorted the snake. "Evil arises neither from hunger nor love, but from ill temper. If we lived peacefully, we should not do so much harm. Everything would be delightful for us. But now if anything is done to us, we fall into a rage, and then there is nothing gentle about us. We think only how we can avenge the wrong. We lose control of ourselves and hiss, and try to bite someone. We ... would bite our own father and mother! It seems as if we could eat our own selves. ... All the Evil in the world arises from ill

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temper."

"No," the stag responded, "not from love, and not from hunger or ill temper arises all the Evil that is in the world, but Evil arises from fear. If it were possible for us to live without fear, all would be well with us. We are swift footed and have great strength. With our antlers we can defend ourselves from little animals and we can run from the large ones. But it is impossible to escape fear. Even if it is only the twigs creaking in the forest, or the leaves rustling, we are all atremble with fear, our hearts beat, we instinctively start to run, and fly with all our might. Another time a hare runs by or a bird flutters or a dry twig crackles, and we think it is a wild beast, and in running away we really fall into danger. ... Sometimes we are frightened and start to flee,... and we roll over a precipice and perish. And we have to sleep with one eye open, with one ear alert, and we are always in alarm. There is no peace. All Evil comes from fear."

Then the hermit said, "Not from hunger, nor from love, nor from ill temper, nor from fear come all our troubles. But all the Evil that is in the world is due to our different natures. (From them) come hunger and love, ill temper and fear."

***From, "The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History" by Jeffrey Burton Russell (pp. 246-247)***

The good Lord and the Devil, Jung argued, are two sides to the fullness of a single reality. "The shadow belongs to the light as the evil belongs to the good and vice versa." Light needs darkness to define it; otherwise it could not appear as good. Evil is ontologically real; the Devil is morally and psychologically real. Lucifer's challenge to God produces a higher, deeper wisdom in creation and so is part of God's ultimate plan. The demonic energy is part of the natural order of the cosmos,...

***From "The Gulag Archipelago," by Alexander Solzhenitsyn***

"If only it were so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us, and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? During the life of

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any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish.”

## SERMON

Evil. The other day, my daughter and her school friends were discussing their Halloween costumes. One little girl was going to be a cat, another a witch, and a third was still deciding. The fourth little girl said, “My mommy won’t let me be a witch or anything like that. I’m going to be a Power Ranger.” The Power Rangers, for those of you who don’t have children, is one of those incredibly violent television shows that kids love to imitate. When asked why her mommy wouldn’t allow her to be a Halloween witch, the girl said, “Our church says witches are evil.”

Evil.

The face of Saddam Hussein back in the newspapers as his trial began brought evil back into my mind this week. He’s charged with the murder and torture of thousands – a reign of violence and terror that lasted for decades. Would we call him evil?

Think of Adolf Hitler, and the Holocaust in which millions of Jews, gypsies, and gay and lesbian people were tormented and slaughtered. History has not hesitated to name this the greatest evil of our time.

Consider Jeffrey Dahmer, the bizarre killer right here in Milwaukee who murdered more than a dozen men and did dreadful things with their bodies, in part for sexual pleasure. The label evil fits rather easily.

And do you remember Susan Smith? She’s the South Carolina woman who -- back in 1994 -- strapped her two toddler sons into their car seats, pushed the car into a lake to drown them, and then told the police that a black man had done it. I remember thinking at that time that evil doesn’t get more clear than that. Or does it?

What about current events like the recent city, state, and Federal governmental responses to Hurricane Katrina, and what might best be named the willful abuse and

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neglect of poor and vulnerable people in the wake of that disaster? It's a less clearly defined evil, but evil nonetheless.

I have never believed evil to be a sentient thing, a being, a person, or a force in the world that acts of its own accord. But evil is real, and thus is something every serious person, and particularly every moral person must grapple with.

So here we are, you and I, grappling. Grappling, because evil can be a particularly difficult concept for Unitarian Universalists. Our religious principles and ideas are so very positive – it would seem there is no room for evil. We long ago tossed out the idea of original sin, and of hell for the bad people and heaven for the good ones. Instead we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. And so on.

Our positive religious outlook has its roots deep in our history. Early in the 19th century, the great Universalist minister Hosea Ballou wrote “God has a good purpose in every [human] volition” and we came to understand God as pure goodness, a goodness with which all human beings would eventually be reconciled. We came to believe that bad behavior or sinfulness was its own punishment – when a person did something bad, they would feel terrible, and their conscience would push them toward the good.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and the other transcendentalist Unitarians of the 19th Century, like the Universalists, also refused to believe that people or the societies they lived in had evil inherent within them. In his famous Divinity School Address of 1841, Emerson wrote, “The world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, of one mind, and that one mind is everywhere active, in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool. . . Good is positive. Evil is merely privative, not absolute; it is like cold which is the privation of heat. All evil is so much death or nonentity. Benevolence is absolute and real. . . (For all things proceed out of this same spirit, which is differently named love, justice, [and] temperance). . . Whilst a man seeks good ends, he is strong by the whole strength of nature.” For Emerson and his colleagues, god – and thus goodness -- was fully present in all of creation, including each human soul.

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Emerson expressed these ideas again in a letter he wrote to an unknown correspondent (on July 3, 1841): "I am, like you, a seeker of the perfect and admirable Good," he wrote. "My creed is very simple, that Goodness is the only Reality, that to Goodness alone can we trust, to that we may trust all and always; beautiful and blessed and blessing it is, (even though it should seem to slay me)."

Both Ballou's and Emerson's theological ideas were radical in their time, when the doctrines of the inherent sinfulness of humanity ruled, and when the theological idea of evil as a distinct being often called "Satan" was common. And whether or not those of us today find the concept of any kind of God useful, these ideas underlie all of our contemporary Unitarian Universalist ways of thinking.

With such a positively focused religious heritage and identity, how do we define evil in ways that help us confront it?

A few years ago, the UU World magazine asked a number of prominent Unitarian Universalist clergy how they would define evil.

The Rev. Dr. William R. Jones, professor emeritus of religion and director of Black Studies at Florida State University, said that "evil is a label," a term for someone else's interests that conflict with one's own. "There is no intrinsic good or intrinsic evil," he says. There is always some perspective from which you can demonstrate the good of what we label 'evil.'"

The Rev. Dr. Thandeka, a theologian at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, defined evil as "the failure to understand the inherent worth and dignity of every person as part of the interdependent web of all existence. When horrible things happen," she wrote, "human beings are responsible."

The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, president of the Starr King School for Ministry, our seminary in California, said that "evil has to qualify acts, not human beings. We are all capable of doing either good or evil and everything in between, but our being itself is good, is worthy, is of value."

The Rev. Dr. Davidson Loehr, minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, Texas, wrote, "Of course there is evil, and it is in us."

These UU theologians are not far from Leo Tolstoy's hermit, who said, "all the Evil that is in the world is due to our different natures...." They all seemingly name evil as something common, something in which we participate because we are human – but they also point to the fact that naming the source of evil is less important than our moral response to it.

I believe human beings have inherent goodness, but that we all also have, inherently, the capacity for evil. I've often said it this way: I believe that each one of us comes into the world with the inner resources to be an axe murderer and a saint – and nearly anything on the full spectrum of moral possibility between them. I define evil as any willful act on the part of human beings – individually, or in groups, corporations, or communities – that destroys, denigrates, diminishes, dehumanizes or does other violence to human beings. I also believe that human violence and destruction toward animals or our environment is evil. And it is not only evil to commit these actions – we also participate in evil when we allow others to do them – when we look the other way or are in denial of what is happening in our wider society.

A moment ago I mentioned Satan – and you may have noticed the cute little devil on the cover of your order of service – complete with horns, tail and trident. He'd even be red if we had red ink to print him with! I've said that I don't believe that evil is a being like the mythological Satan – that it's not a force that operates independently of human volition. More on that in a moment. But first, a joke or two about the horned-and-hoofed guy.

Question: Did you hear about the dyslexic devil worshippers? Answer: They sold their souls to Santa.

The fence between Heaven and Hell fell down, and God asked the Devil to pay half the cost of repairing it. When the Devil refused, God said He would sue.

The Devil said " Oh yeah, and where will you find a lawyer?"

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Sunday morning's worship service was going very smoothly when suddenly a flash of light and smoke appeared in front of the pulpit followed by a large "BOOM".

When the smoke cleared, the astonished congregation saw a red figure complete with horns, pitchfork and tail.

Panic set in. People crowded through the doors, trampling each other in their rush to get away. Satan watched the retreat with great glee, but his mood was disturbed by the sight of one man still lounging comfortably in his pew.

"Do you not know who I am?" Satan thundered.

The man's reply was nonchalant, "Sure I do."

Satan was puzzled. "Why do you not fear me?"

The man snorted, "Why would I fear you? I've been married to your sister for 35 years!"

And finally, a priest was preparing a dying man for his voyage into the great beyond. Whispering firmly, the priest said, "Denounce the devil! Let him know how little you think of his evil!" The dying man said nothing. The priest repeated his order. Still the dying man said nothing. Finally the priest asked him, "Why do you refuse to denounce the devil and his evil?" And the dying man said, "Until I know where I'm heading, I don't think I ought to aggravate anybody."

Now – what do you notice about those four jokes? They aren't really about the devil, are they? They're not. I looked long and hard and couldn't find a single joke that actually poked fun at the devil. It's as though the joke-writers are all like the dying man – somehow it's just too scary to risk aggravating Satan!

Like evil, the images of Satan are scary: a man-beast, black as night or fiery red; death and torture flowing from his every pore. It's an ancient image -- the concept of an evildoer, a betrayer, a horned and winged image, has existed as far back as the Enuma Elish, the ancient Babylonian or Mesopotamian creation myth. But about a decade ago, scholar of religion Elaine Pagels wrote a fascinating book called "The Origin of Satan," in which she reminds us that the word "satan" originally was simply the Hebrew term for adversary. God's angels were messengers sent to humanity – and sometimes they came not with good news, but messages in a more adversarial vein, with admonitions to

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take a different path, or to stop doing something. Diabolos, the Greek term which became our word, “devil” literally meant “one who throws something across one’s path.” (Pagels, p.39) In later Hebrew history, during the final centuries before the common era a group of Jews called the Essenes charged that those who did not follow the law with as much attention and purity as they did were working counter to God’s purpose and thus were in league with a demonic power that was in eternal opposition to God: in a word, Satan. In the process the Essenes turned the satan – an angel of unpleasant news -- into a more evil figure. “Satan” with a small s became Satan with a capital S and became associated with all the “otherness” of surrounding cultures, which were polluting the Hebrew religion. Christianity picked up this thread and wove it further, for the early Christians saw themselves as the true children of God, and thus all who opposed them surely had to be agents of the forces of darkness – agents of Satan. This practice of demonizing one’s enemies continues in Western culture to this day.

I want to come back now, briefly, to the idea that even though evil is not an independent force or a being named Satan, that it is somehow alive in our world. In an interview, Episcopal priest John Shelby Spong, said something I found fascinating; he said, “I would suggest that what the church has called sin, is in fact the baggage of evolution. The only way we have survived this gigantic struggle in nature is to be radically self-centered, to put ourselves above everything else. And we carry this radical self-centeredness in us and it does enormous evil in this world.” It seems to me that in today’s times, when we daily hear news of war, of hurricanes, of the earthquake in Pakistan and India, that we are sitting in shock waiting for the next terrible story to hit, and in such a state it becomes especially easy to succumb to the drift of our natural radical self-centeredness. To pull into ourselves, look out for number one, to withhold our generosity, our compassion, to close ourselves off from others. When this happens, though, when we lose our sense of connection to our neighbors across the room, across the street and across the world, evil begins to gain strength. It does become independent, in a way, for it becomes part of the way things are, the way we live.

Of course John Shelby Spong did not stop there in the interview. Later on, he said, “The only way you can get rid of your self-centeredness is to understand that the ultimate message of Christian faith is that you are loved, and as you appropriate this love, you're able to escape that self-centredness and give your life away.”  
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/spirit/stories/s13559.htm>

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Now, we might phrase it differently, especially those of us who are not Christian. But Spong has a powerful point. For the most important question we can address concerning evil is what our response to it will be.

And the first place we have to go, I believe, is to our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every human being.

Some have questioned whether affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person means we affirm the Hitlers, Husseins, and Dahmers of the world. According to the Rev. Walter Royal Jones, who chaired the committee that drafted the principles and purposes (that the UUA adopted in 1985), the answer is no. "That wording," he says, "grew out of a 1935 Universalist affirmation that proclaimed 'the supreme worth of the individual.' This formulation was quite deliberately qualified by adding the term 'inherent,' to make it clear that worth and dignity are potentials that are part, but only part, of the human condition."

Affirming inherent worth and dignity "was never intended to be a blanket endorsement of everything that everybody does," Instead, Jones says, it "sets a standard by which our behavior can be judged."

How then, shall we respond to evil? First, we must do all we can to not dehumanize or demonize others. For when we do so, even when we know that someone has perpetuated great harm, we join them in evildoing. Our first call is always to compassion.

Our second call is to follow Spong's advice, and give our lives away.

Our third call is, I believe, to acknowledge that evil is not separate from us, not "out there" somewhere. It is to recognize the shadow in ourselves, the great self-centeredness in ourselves, in our government, in all the structures and communities under which we exist. And then, as we consciously hold this knowledge we are called to not give in to pessimism and despair.

One of the things that helps me with process of owning my own self-centeredness, my own participation in structures of evil is a story I heard told by the poet Maya Angelou. In a lecture she gave at a conference on human evil, she told the gathered group that she had been raped when she was seven and a half years old. She was badly hurt, and had to be hospitalized. The rapist was someone her family knew well.

When the man was released from jail, he was found that evening having been kicked to death. Little seven and a half year old Maya Angelou believed with a child's terrible logic that he had been killed because she had spoken his name, and so she simply stopped speaking. She did not utter a word for five and a half years.

During those years of silence, Angelou was not idle. She read all the books in her school's library, in her home, and then all the books she could obtain from the library of the white school. She memorized whole books of poetry, plays of Shakespeare, and more. She listened to the rhythms of the black preachers, and learned to hear even before the words were uttered the exaltations to heavenly bliss and the admonishments of hell. When she finally decided to speak, she had a lot to say, and many ways in which to say it. And our world has been greatly blessed by her words and her ways.

Angelou told that story at the conference on evil to illustrate what many of us discovered after September 11th, that acts of evil can evoke a world of life-affirming good. My faith, even as I struggle not to go into denial about the evil in our world and my complicity with it, is that the human potential for good is far more powerful than our potential for evil. And because of this, what we do makes a difference. My faith is that human goodness is far more deeply rooted in our being and in our government, and in all the structures and communities under which we exist, than evil possibly could be.

And so I would say to you, my companions on the path of liberal religion, is that there is always something that we Unitarian Universalists, as people of love and compassion and hope can do to work against evil in our world.

We can be conscious of our own potential for evil.

We can hold fast to our ideal of affirming inherent worth and dignity in all persons, knowing it not as a universal given, but as the standard we measure our lives by.

We can seek the tools of wisdom and beauty forged in the fires of our own personal experiences of evil, as Maya Angelou did.

Personally, and through group social action, we can shape a response to evil and galvanize ourselves to act against it and the conditions that support it, even as we focus our lives on that which is life-affirming and good.

And in doing any or all of these we can reach out to one another, building webs of connection and compassion that help call us all to the highest good we can achieve.

May we begin in any way we can today.

Amen.