

**“The Evil Within” a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely
Unitarian Church of Edmonton, November 23, 2008**

In the early 1980's as our North American church was debating the adoption of our Statement of Principles and Sources, one of the significant points of tension was over the proposed use of the word 'evil'. The passage is found in one of our Sources, those theological roots to which we turn as we struggle with working out our beliefs. The Source in question cites, "Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which call us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love." The debate surfaced again as the Canadian Unitarian Council reconsidered the Principles and Sources a few years ago.

As close as I can tell, some Unitarian Universalists just don't like admitting that there might be a concept so focused as 'evil', even when the source names that power or structure as something external to us. As I understand the argument, and I do not claim to grasp it perfectly, the sense was that there is no such thing as identifiable evil, but only a failure of society, chemistry, biology or psychology.

To expand, these disquieted folks put forward a solid and rational argument that evil is not an entity unto itself. Instead, we observe events perpetrated by human beings on one another that are hateful, objectionable and beyond the behavioural bounds of society. They are horrific acts. They repel and frighten us.

The problem, as the 'anti-evil' folks see it, is that too many people are too quick to blame the devil or some other supernatural force. This simplistic and thoughtless response conveniently allows some to overlook the deeper and possibly fixable causes. We blame the people who do these acts without looking at how circumstances led them to a place where those actions seemed reasonable. Furthermore it frees people from having to consider their own culpability for creating the social context in which these hateful actions are born.

The argument continues: Everything we fail to do to eradicate poverty and injustice creates a possibility for crime; every disturbed patient we fail to treat, every child we fail to educate and protect creates the possibility for evil actions. Some crime is the result of desperate social circumstance. Some crime is the product of minds suffering chemical deficiencies or imbalances. Some crime is the result of psychological damage at the hands of childhood abusers or other negative aspects of environment. Some crimes, such as war, are even the product of social conditioning - political or religious brainwashing.

By simply naming these things as evil and calling for stiffer jail sentences or worse, we can avoid looking at what we do to create or sustain these unequal social conditions.

It's a good, solid argument. Perhaps it limits the role of personal choice too much, but it is fundamentally sound. We do have a responsibility to look for and root out the causes of harmful action where we can. Because of their knowledge of the overuse and misuse of the word evil, the 'anti-evil' faction would banish the word from our lexicon. Or if it was to be kept, it must be contained, used only to describe particular acts, rather than people.

These are noble sentiments, and the product of great leaps forward in our rational, analytical and social scientific capabilities. There is a lot of wisdom in those ideas.

Within, or perhaps just standing beside the folks who challenge the concept of evil is another group. It is a group I often choose to join, selectively, as I read the newspaper. They, we, prefer to avoid the darkness that sometimes touches our world and our communities. In my case, I find I can no longer read stories that touch on child abuse, especially the heartrending stories about individual cases. As a parent of young children, I simply can't stomach it. Others more sensitive than I am choose to avoid a broader range of stories. Some avoid the news altogether. I can respect that. Life can be a tough enough journey without embracing all the bad events that the media lifts up sometimes out of proportion.

But if we never stop to ponder the bad things and their causes, we'll never fix them. To put it in religious terms, a church without a doctrine of evil is shallow. Without a doctrine of evil we can have no doctrine of redemption or salvation – I don't mean in another life, but here, in this one, every day. Redemption is not just an afterlife concept. It can mean the recovery of inner and external peace, social justice and environmental balance here in this world. A religion that pretends there is no darkness has nothing to offer its people when the darkness descends. Saying it isn't there does not make it go away. A colleague of mine, the late Dr. Peter Raible of Seattle often accused Unitarian Universalists of being 'bluebirds of happiness'.

I think he had a point. We have a fundamentally optimistic view of human nature. We always have had that optimistic view. In the 1830's, William Ellery Channing wrote on human nature, "Let us not disparage the nature which is common to all humans, for no thought can measure its grandeur. One who possesses the divine powers of the soul is a great being...a clear thought, a pure affection, and the resolute act of a virtuous will, will have dignity..."

"I believe this greatness to be most common among the multitude, whose names are never heard."

It is a noble sentiment, but it is hard to find similar words in our Unitarian history describing the ignoble side of the human experience

It is one thing to believe that evil is an overused and often misused word. It is another to try to pretend it does not touch us in some way. It is an error to get so lost in our appreciation of positive human capabilities that we ignore the capacity for human depravity in the world, and perhaps in ourselves. I believe our religion is reluctant to speak of this subject.

Take a look at the back of your hymnbook one day where the hymns and readings are in categorized listings. None of those categories are negative. There is no category for 'evil' or 'sin'. The most you will find is a category called 'sorrow' that contains readings about grief and loss.

Perhaps the pinnacle of our bluebirdyness is in Hymn # 205, "Amazing Grace how sweet thou art, that saved a wretch like me." There is an asterisk on 'wretch'...at the bottom of the page, they offer an alternative choice of 'soul' if one does not want to contemplate the wretched.

As you pretty much all know, I grew up Roman Catholic. I kind of like contemplating the wretched, now and again. I grew up pondering my sins as preparation for confession. In fact, I find I have to contemplate the wretched now and again. This may well not be true for you, but for me, not owning my own capacity for evil renders me curiously powerless.

Let me tell you a story:

In High School, I played football. I was a defensive lineman, and a reasonably good one especially in my senior year. One day our Catholic boys school was playing the wealthier and Protestant boys school across town. They were our natural enemies. No matter where we were in the standings, the LCC game was the biggest of the year. I was matched against a much smaller offensive guard that day, someone I should have been able to handle easily. The ball would be snapped, I would rush and time after time, he would dive at my knees and cut me down. I grew more and more frustrated. My coach grew more and more frustrated.

Now I had always been a pretty peaceful kid. I wasn't the most aggressive player on the team or the most ferocious, but I was big and strong. I didn't get moved off my assignment very often.

On the sidelines my coach gave me a well-deserved dressing down. "He's half your size!" he thundered. "He's diving at my ankles," I responded. Pat looked me right in the eye. "Show him that's a bad idea." Something broke in me. For one of the few times in my life I was enraged.

Next series I got in my stance. The ball was snapped. This time I faked my rush. I took one step and stopped. He dove. I dropped my knees squarely onto his back. They had to stop play and escort him off the field. It was the first time I had ever deliberately set out to hurt someone. For the rest of the game I knocked around his replacement and made plays. I was elated.

It was only later that I began to wonder at my actions. I never did hear if he was hurt badly or not, I don't think so. I continued to play aggressively and successfully for those last few games of my playing career.

Somewhere in the off season I realized that I was afraid of that thing that I had discovered inside of me. I didn't know what to do with it. I suppose I was ashamed of the loss of control, of emotional control. I never played football again. I had lost the desire and probably wasn't good enough for college ball anyway. But I went through the next decade of my life cautiously. I became a master at conflict avoidance. I never fought and hardly even argued with strangers, family or girlfriends. I never laid a finger on anyone. I do recall becoming so angry one day in my first marriage that I punched a wall. It scared me more than it hurt me.

It wasn't until 15 years after that football game that I actually visited that scary place inside again, this time in a drawing exercise on a several day retreat. I drew a picture of that monster that lived inside of me. I propped it on my dresser. I talked to it. I befriended it.

You see I know, I KNOW that I have a capacity for evil. Evil. I choose to call it that. I want to call it the worst possible thing I can. I spent too long denying it in myself and throwing my life off balance as a result. I don't run around doing evil acts, at least I hope I don't, but I do embrace that capacity as being part of my wholeness just as is my capacity to give or withhold love, to experience joy and sorrow, to feel elation and some degree of despair.

In order to be whole, I have had to learn how to let 'him' out in controlled and measured ways – safe ways, because he needs to play. Just ask the Keelers or the Buskis about the passion of my cheering at football games. Ask the attendant at the driving range about those days when I just pound out balls without regard to swing style

or grace. Ask my children about the times when, in frustration, I have left them unharmed only to go jump up and down in the kitchen or garage. My friend needs his outlets.

If you look at the tales of creation from around the world, first there was the darkness, then was the light created. The light only makes sense if we admit that there is darkness. Goodness, beauty, right relationship, faith, love, compassion, these, too, only make sense if we first acknowledge that there is badness, ugliness, faithlessness, hate and injustice. Without recognizing the shadow, there can be no sunlight. Therefore, we must acknowledge the capacity for evil acts.

In his book The Drowned and the Saved about surviving Auschwitz, Primo Levi wrote about human nature in a most horrific setting. While he saw many moments of great integrity, he found equally significant examples of human moral depravity. He observed that the selfless and the noble were usually the first to die, and that the selfish and the morally compromised lasted longer. For him the exemplar of his new understanding of human nature was not a hero, but Chaim Rumkowski, the Jewish collaborator and dictator in the Jewish ghetto in Lodz. He sold out his fellow Jews for privilege and power, although he too was finally consumed by the Holocaust. "We are all mirrored in Rumkowski," Levi wrote. "His ambiguity is ours, it is our second nature, we hybrids molded from clay and spirit. His fever is ours, the fever of Western civilization, that 'descends into hell with trumpets and drums,' and its miserable adornments are the distorting image of our symbols of social prestige." We, like Rumkowski, ". . . are so dazzled by power and prestige as to forget our essential fragility. Willingly or not we come to terms with power, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reign the lords of death, and that close by the train is waiting."ⁱⁱ

Chris Hedges, the enemy of atheists everywhere, quotes Sigmund Freud in a recent article:

"(Human beings) ...are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and kill him."ⁱⁱⁱ

Phew! Those are some pretty cynical and depressing points of view, but maybe they are views with which we Unitarian 'bluebirds' need to wrestle.

Those of you who have been listening to me over the years know that I usually have difficulty with any extreme point of view. And yet, I think they have to be taken seriously. People come to hold extremist opinions for a reason, and usually there is some truth behind what they say. We ignore those truths at our peril.

I look at the people who avoid the news with diligence and see the value of choosing to live your life first hand and not filtered through the mostly fearful experiences of others. But of course, if someone isn't keeping watch, we can come to harm at the hands of 'powers and structures of evil' to which our Source refers. He honour those prophetic women and men who help protect us from those who would

exploit our ignorance.

On the other hand, to adopt the logical extensions of the views outlined in those quotes of Levi and Freud is to harden your heart against your neighbour. It is to choose a life that is built on mistrust and selfish action. It is as much of a denial of the power good has to change the world for the better as it is a depressing surrendering of our present and future of humanity to our depraved capacities.

Never seeing the good in people or the potential for good in people is just as harmful as never seeing their potential for evil.

I believe we must celebrate the good we do and can do, but we forget our own capacity for evil at our peril. As with most things in life, there is a balance to be had, a balance where we acknowledge and even befriend the evil we can do even as we choose to do good.

-
- i. Quoted in "In Review: Required Reading, A Hollow Agnosticism" by Chris Hedges, Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Vol 32, #2 Spring, 2008
 - ii. Ibid.