

Evil—UUFVB Covenant Groups— March 2020

Chalice Lighting

May we know once again that we are not isolated beings,
but connected, in mystery and miracle,
to the universe, to this community and to each other.

Check-in: What is most on your mind today?

Opening Reading

"I believe in evil. I believe it is real, powerful, and built right into the structure of this universe and the human heart. I believe there is evil in individual persons. I believe there is evil in communities and societies and institutional structures, and I believe there is evil in governments and nations. I believe in evil -- and it is *not* (as Emerson and so many other UU transcendentalists thought), simply '*the absence of light.*' It is rather (I believe) its own ugly thing, rooted deep down in the heart of human things. **My definition of evil:** any volitional, willful act of human violence or disregard which persons (either individually or corporately in groups, communities or governments) commit, or allow, that leads to the unnecessary destruction (or substantive denigration, diminishment, or dehumanization) of human persons or society. (*April 7, 2019, sermon by the Rev. Scott W. Alexander, senior minister, UU Fellowship of Vero Beach Fl.*) All expository text in this paper is derived from that source.

Topic Exploration

In his famous Harvard Divinity School address in 1841, Ralph Waldo Emerson asserted that **only good** is endemically present within us, and that evil (instead of being a concrete force and reality within us) is merely the ABSENCE of good. This idea, I believe, creates incredible theological problems for modern Unitarian Universalists when they (with the rest of humanity) have to face evil in acts of genocide...in spasms of ethnic cleansing...in vicious warfare and terrorism...in human rights abuses and injustice of all sorts...and in the evil acts of heinous individuals which regularly occur in this world of ours. We must honestly acknowledge that evil isn't just something that is "out there," but it is in our natures...in our instincts and actions...in our culture and institutions...in things we perpetrate and allow in our lives and in our society. Evil is right here in us in ways that we must honestly and fearlessly acknowledge if we are ever to prevent it from expressing itself.

Some faith traditions--especially the more conservative Christian ones--have no trouble talking theologically about human depravity and sin and its wages in the hereafter. But we Unitarian Universalists have always been theologically hesitant to give the notion of evil too permanent or prevalent a place in human nature.

The question becomes, is humanity forever doomed to its evil instincts? On the one hand, humanity will never be able to rid itself entirely of evil; on the other hand, there is hope for human nature. Two neuroscientists at The National Institutes of Health have discovered that human brains, in addition to being hardwired for selfishness, territoriality, and xenophobia, are ALSO hard-wired for generosity, compassion, and altruism. In a 2019 *Washington Post* article entitled, "New Findings Suggest that Good Impulses Are Basic to the Brain," Drs. Jorge Moll and Jordan Grafman report that the brain is hardwired to receive pleasure from acts of generosity, compassion and altruism. They contend that altruism is not a superior moral faculty that suppresses basic selfish urges, but is rather basically hardwired in the brain. Other studies have replicated that finding.

Questions / Sharing

1. Do you believe that you, and/or members of your family, have the capacity for evil acts, as defined by Rev. Scott Alexander in the opening reading?
2. If brains are hardwired not only for selfish and potentially destructive behavior, but also for compassionate and altruistic behavior, as the NIH doctors contend, what factors do you think govern what choices you as an individual might make in any given circumstance? Do those same factors apply to all individuals?
3. How often do you think about the existence of evil, and how (if at all) does its existence affect your sense of contentment and security?
4. Do you think a sense of morality affects an individual's ability to suppress urges towards evil acts? If so, are those who commit evil acts necessarily immoral? What is the source of that sense of morality?
5. What do you think accounts for the spread of evil behavior from a small group of people to an entire community, or an entire nation?
6. Would any kind of education in public schools equip individuals to better deal with evil urges? If so, what kind of education and at what level?
7. Is there a link between mental health and evil?
8. As Unitarian Universalists, we traditionally do not believe that persons will suffer in hell for evil acts. But what is appropriate judgment against those proven to have committed heinous acts? As a denomination, what could we do to understand and address more directly the problem of evil?

Closing Reading

As human beings, we are always free to live lives of gentleness and decency from that natural core of goodness that lives within. Be realistic and tough-minded about human evil and its persistent manifestations. But also, never doubt the presence and persistence of the powerful goodness within you and all those around you. Let us always strive to live from that natural place of strength, hope and decency...and thereby bless (and heal) the world.

Check-out and reflections on today's session: Please express any thoughts on the content or process of today's session.

Extinguish the Chalice

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth,
the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Housekeeping