



# EXPLORATION

## Good & Evil

### Readings



#### 1. *The Degree of Heartbreak* by Rev. Victoria Safford

Sometimes I think I use a very subjective, subconscious barometer in reading the paper or receiving the news of the day and deciding whether some event, some action, bears the weight of that word, evil. It's not the size of the event, nor the cruelty or self-interest of those involved, or even historical impact. I find more and more that it's the degree of heartbreak that I feel: beyond horror or shock or sorrow, that sense of something in me has been blasted apart, a shattering of hope, a collapse (and not for the first time) of what I thought I wished was true about the construction of the world and about human nature, the eclipse of optimism by a creeping cynicism, that I begin to call 'realism.' Some truths there are, some news there is, that breaks the heart not permanently, but utterly for a while. The wind's knocked out of you, the light goes out, or flickers, as the realization forms perhaps for the hundredth time: this too is part of our humanity. Evil is the only word for this. And human is the only other for this.

Source: *Unitarian Universalist Views of Evil*, Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor, Editor

#### 2. *Evil and Spiritual Growth* by Jonathan H. Ellerby

I've explored the concept of evil with Christian priests, rabbis, Hindu yogis, Native American elders, spiritual healers, energy healers, and spiritual teachers

everywhere I've gone; and I've asked them all the same thing: 'Do you believe evil exists?'

...The most common response is that evil is a dangerous concept because the boundaries of good and bad can become so easily blurred. We'll never be able to exactly prove or disprove it, and the identification of it is tricky. How do we know the difference, for example, between an evil act and an evil person? Who decides? If the criteria are written in a sacred text, who interprets it? How do we separate crimes of need from crimes of passion, or crimes of defense from crimes of political greed? The most spiritually experienced and mature teachers agree that the very idea of evil can be used to perpetuate and justify evil (violence, persecution, and power over others).

The preoccupation with evil is itself a problem and detrimental to the spiritual path. The fear of evil evokes feelings of defense and judgment and causes people to focus on what they're afraid of and what they believe they must avoid, instead of focusing on love and what they hope to become. Placing attention on evil causes us to discriminate and feed the ego's desire to be 'right,' rather than feeding the soul's desire to be free. We look for sources of problems and blame others when we should be investing in solutions and being a part of change.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/19712>

#### 3. *Liberate the Oppressed and the Oppressor* by Nelson Mandela

I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its

opposite. Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished.

It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness

...When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both. ...We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.

Source: *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela

#### 4. *Good and Evil* by Ervin Staub

To me, evil means great human destructiveness. Evil can come in an obvious form, such as a genocide. Or it can come in smaller acts of persistent harm doing, the effects of which accumulate, like parents being hostile and punitive, or a child being picked on by peers day after day for a long time. Goodness means bringing about great benefit to individuals or whole groups. It too can come in an obvious form, like a heroic effort to save someone's life, or great effort in pursuit of significant social change, or in smaller, persistent acts.

Nations often act in selfish and destructive ways. But goodness by groups, small and large, does exist. In the case of nations, goodness often comes from mixed motives, as in the case of the

Marshall Plan that rebuilt Europe, but also was aimed at preventing the spread of Communism. At other times, as in Somalia—where intervention to help reduce starvation ended in violence and confusion—seemingly altruistic motives come to bad ends. The work of the Quakers in the abolition of slavery, and the village of LaChambon in France saving thousands of Jews during the Holocaust, illustrate goodness born of humane values and altruism.

Source: <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/good-and-evil-and-psychological-science>

## 5. *I Have No Need of an Enemy* by Troy Chapman

In passing my sentence, the judge said, “There’s no hope that you can ever be rehabilitated.” My sentence of 60-90 years was a tragic and too predictable end of the road I’d been traveling

...I became obsessed with the question of what went wrong and how to set it right. I wanted to know where my brokenness started. ...As I began to wake up, I found myself concerned for other individuals and for us as a whole. I was developing social consciousness, which soon turned into social activism.

This view served me for a while, giving me a sense of moral order. But I soon realized that my activism wasn’t very different from my earlier anger. In fact, my anger had crept back in, only now it was wrapped up in the sense that I was doing good and fighting evil. ...My activism, like my previous thinking, was dualistic.

Over time this dualism gave way to my hunger for simple goodness. The catalyst for this change was nothing more noble than exhaustion.

...The poet Rumi pointed to something beyond ...when he said, “Out beyond ideas of wrong doing and right doing there is a field. I’ll meet you there.”

When I began to see myself in others—even in my enemies—I found myself heading for Rumi’s field ...that little-represented side of healing. ...It wants something much larger than winning and losing.

...I realized that enemies always serve a purpose. ...I realized I do have a choice. ...I have no need for an enemy.

Source: <https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/love-save-world/2018/08/02/i-have-no-need-of-an-enemy/>

## 6. *The Difficult Task of Virtue* by Iris Murdoch

The concept of Good... is a concept which is not easy to understand partly because it has so many false doubles, jumped-up intermediaries invented by human selfishness to make the difficult task of virtue look easier and more attractive: History, God, Lucifer, Ideas of power, freedom, purpose, reward, even judgment are irrelevant. Mystics of all kinds have usually known this and have attempted by extremities of language to portray the nakedness and aloneness of Good, its absolute for-nothingness. One might say that true morality is a sort of unesoteric mysticism, having its source in an austere and unconsolated love of the Good. When Plato wants to explain Good, he uses the image of the sun. The moral pilgrim emerges from the cave and begins to see the real world in the light of the sun, and last of all is able to look at the sun itself. [...]

We may also speak seriously of ordinary things, people, works of art, as being good, although we are also well aware of their imperfections. Good lives as it were on both sides of the barrier and we can combine the aspiration to complete goodness with a realistic sense of achievement within our limitations.

Source: *The Sovereignty of Good* by Iris Murdoch

## 7. *Wounded, Disconnected Hearts* by John Welwood

And what drives people to seek power over others? Why would anyone want to spend this short, precious life pursuing the chimera of empire building or world domination? What’s the thrill in that? Power over others is a way of trying to prove that I am somebody, to force others to look up to me: ‘I’ll get you to respect me one way or another, even if it means torturing or killing you.’ If I can show you, I’m really somebody—the chief honcho, the dictator, the world conqueror, the filthy-rich magnate—then you will have to look up to me, and then maybe I can feel good about myself. But if I felt held in love, there would be no reason to try to set myself above you.

Behind all the evils of the world is the pain of a wounded,

disconnected heart. We behave badly because we hurt inside. And we hurt because our basic nature is wide open and tender to begin with. Thus, all the ugliness in the world can be traced back to turning away from our raw and beautiful heart.

When we recognize this — that the sins of the world are but symptoms of the universal wound — we can understand the words of the French spiritual teacher Arnaud Desjardins when he writes: “There are no bad people (including Stalin and Hitler, who were responsible for the deaths of millions) — only badly loved people.” Here the root of all evil is laid bare....

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/15376>

# Wisdom Story

## *Two Wolves*

An elder was teaching their grandchildren about life. The elder said to them, “A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves.

“One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, evil, and ego.

“The other wolf stands for joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, goodness and faith.

“This same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too.”

The children thought about it for a minute and then one child asked, “Which wolf will win?”

The elder simply replied, “The one you feed.”

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/grace/session13/two-wolves>



Heart turns, mind turns, by Benjamin Balázs, April 17, 2015, (CC0 1.0), <https://www.flickr.com/photos/brenkee/17155208656>



## Snippets

“It has always been much easier (because it has always seemed much safer) to give a name to the evil without than to locate the terror within. And yet, the terror within is far truer and far more powerful than any of our labels: the labels change, the terror is constant. And this terror has something to do with that irreducible gap between the self one invents — the self one takes oneself as being, which is, however, and by definition, a provisional self — and the undiscoverable self which always has the power to blow the provisional self to bits.” *James Baldwin*

“Throughout our nervous history, we have constructed pyramidal towers of evil, oftentimes in the name of good. ... The lists of our subversions of the good stretch from before recorded history to this moment. We drop our eyes at the mention of the bloody, torturous Inquisition. Our shoulders sag at the thoughts of African slaves lying spoon-fashion in the filthy hatches of slave-ships, and the subsequent auction blocks upon which were built great fortunes in our country. We turn our heads in bitter shame at the remembrance of Dachau and the other gas ovens, where millions of ourselves were murdered by millions of ourselves. As soon as we are reminded of our actions, more often than not we spend incredible energy trying to forget what we’ve just been reminded of.” *Maya Angelou*

“No matter how daring or cautious you may choose to be ... you are bound to come into direct physical contact with what’s known as Evil. I mean here not a property of the gothic novel but ... a palpable social reality that you in no way can control. No amount of good nature or cunning calculations will prevent this

encounter. In fact, the more calculating, the more cautious you are, the greater is the likelihood of this rendezvous, the harder its impact. Such is the structure of life that what we regard as Evil is capable of a fairly ubiquitous presence if only because it tends to appear in the guise of good.” *Joseph Brodsky*

“I think self-righteousness is the bane of human relations, of all of them — interpersonal, international, and interfaith. I’m sure it was self-righteousness that prompted Pascal to say, ‘Human beings never do evil so cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.’ Self-righteousness blocks our capacity for self-criticism, destroys humility, and undermines the sense of oneness that should bind us all.”

*William Sloane Coffin*

“My liberal religious tradition would say that ... people who are one bad turn of events away from sheer desperation, may do bad or criminal things because of that desperation. I agree. They certainly might. I certainly might do that if I was in their position. What my liberal religious tradition does not acknowledge is that on top of this level of human misery, fear, need and desperation is a pre-existing human condition called evil.” *Rev. Dr. Victoria Weinstein*

“Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an un-uprooted small corner of evil. Since then I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the *evil inside a human being* (inside every human being). It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.”

*Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*

“In a universe of electrons and selfish

genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.” *Richard Dawkins*

“Imagine that the world is made out of love. Now imagine that it isn’t. Imagine a story where everything goes wrong, where everyone has their back against the wall, where everyone is in pain and acting selfishly because if they don’t, they’ll die. Imagine a story, not of good against evil, but of need against need against need, where everyone is at cross-purposes and everyone is to blame.”

*Richard Siken*

“Hate can be a deeply stimulating emotion. The world becomes easier to understand and much less terrifying if you divide everything and everyone into friends and enemies, we and they, good and evil. The easiest way to unite a group isn’t through love, because love is hard. It makes demands. Hate is simple. So, the first thing that happens in a conflict is that we choose a side, because that’s easier than trying to hold two thoughts in our heads at the same time. The second thing that happens is that we seek out facts that confirm what we want to believe—comforting facts, ones that permit life to go on as normal. The third is that we dehumanize our enemy.” *Fredrik Backman*

“I admire Tolkien greatly. His books had enormous influence on me. And the trope that he ... established—the idea of the Dark Lord and his Evil Minions—in the hands of lesser writers over the years and decades has not served the genre well. It has been beaten to death. The battle of good and evil is a great subject for any book and certainly for a fantasy book, but I think ultimately the battle between good and evil is weighed within the individual human heart and not necessarily between an army of people dressed in white and an army of people dressed in black. When I look at



the world, I see that most real living breathing human beings are grey.”  
George R.R. Martin

## Questions

**The following questions are for your consideration.**

1. In reading #1, Victoria Safford states that she judges things as evil by the amount of heartbreak that she feels in response to them, those things that break the heart utterly, though not necessarily permanently. As you consider her emotional barometer, can you share some things or events that have broken your heart utterly?
2. Jonathan Ellerby, in reading #2 writes, “Placing attention on evil cause us to discriminate and feed the ego’s desire to be ‘right,’ rather than feeding the soul’s desire to be free. We look for sources of problems and blame others when we should be investing in solutions and being a part of the change.” Does labeling something as evil relieve us of the responsibility for actually working to confront it? Our Universalist forebears asked, “Would you rather be right or good?” They choose being good over being right? Which one would you choose? Why? Earlier in the reading he writes “that the very idea of evil can be used to perpetuate and justify evil (violence, persecution, and power over others).” Can labeling something or someone as evil actually hide evil acts by whoever is doing the labeling? He also asks, “How do we know the difference, for example, between an evil act and an evil person? Who decides? If the criteria are written in a sacred text, who interprets it? How do we separate crimes of need from crimes of passion, or crimes of defense from crimes of political greed?” How would you respond to these questions?
3. In reading #3, Nelson Mandela writes about the importance of liberating both the oppressed and the oppressor. How does refusing to liberate the oppressor magnify and perpetuate evil? If evil is a disease borne of hate, how can we treat it?
4. In reading #4, Ervin Staub writes about evil and goodness existing in acts both large and small. How can small acts of evil accumulate to cause significant damage? How can small acts of goodness “bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice?” Does evil beget more evil? Does goodness lead to more goodness? How? Why? Staub also raises the problem of good intentions going horribly wrong, like the effort to address starvation in Somalia. Can you share an example of good intentions producing a negative or evil result?
5. In reading #5, Troy Chapman, who was convicted in 1985 on a charge of second-degree murder, has worked to transform himself over many years. He traces his “evil” actions to his brokenness and his resulting anger. Part of his breakthrough occurred when he realized the consequences of his dualistic thinking. Based on his insight, why do we create enemies? What purposes do enemies serve? How can such dualistic thinking create problems? How can we discriminate between real enemies and convenient scapegoats? How can we overcome the need for enemies? Chapman’s experience was for his social consciousness and social activism to have a hidden, negative underbelly. This was the outcome, in part, of self-righteousness, which was a concern for William Sloan Coffin as well (See question #12). Have you witnessed social activism gone wrong? Chapman’s story raises the issue of whether or not evil is a result of nature, nurture, or both. What do you think are the causes of evil? What interventions should we

consider to decrease the incidence of evil? Finally, have you ever found yourself longing for Rumi’s field that lies beyond “ideas of wrong doing and right doing?” Why? What would it mean for you to stand in that place? Would that be an act of avoidance or an act of engaging the world in a very different way? Why?

6. In reading #6, Iris Murdoch writes that goodness can be difficult to understand because it has so many false doubles or jumped-up intermediaries. What are some examples of something appearing to be good, when it was not? She also writes that there are limits to goodness because of the reality of human imperfection. Does awareness of our imperfections and shadow-side support our actions on behalf of goodness? Why? How?
7. The story of two wolves is well known: the wolf that triumphs depends on which one we feed. What factors lead to which wolf people choose to feed?
8. In reading #7, John Welwood suggests that the problem of evil can be traced to “the pain of a wounded, disconnected heart.” Do you agree or disagree? Why? Is there a naïveté in what he argues?

**The following questions are related to the Snippets.**

9. James Baldwin makes a distinction between the evil without and the fear within. How does fear affect our perception? How does the fear within lead to labeling things without as evil? Fear often leads to distancing from and magnifying the “other” as negative. How can we overcome this tendency?
10. As Maya Angelou recounts, there have been unspeakable evil acts, many on a scale that defy imagination. One response has been the denial of historical events, like the Holocaust. How does such denial strengthen evil? Why do we find it so hard as a society to confront evil when it reaches such a magnitude? In addition to denial, there is also the issue of compassion fatigue in which people are so overwhelmed by these events that they choose



not to respond. How can we address compassion fatigue so that we can continue to care and act in effective ways?

11. Joseph Brodsky writes that it is difficult in the course of life to avoid coming into contact with evil. Do you agree? Why or why not? Have you come into contact with evil? If yes, what were the circumstances? Did you confront or disengage from the situation? How? Why?
12. William Sloan Coffin suggested that self-righteousness can lead a person to commit to evil unaware that they are doing so. What are the causes of self-righteousness? What are the problems with self-righteousness? The cure for it? What examples can you share of self-righteousness leading to evil?
13. The Rev. Dr. Victoria Weinstein suggests that Unitarian Universalism understands that desperate people can do bad things. She laments, however, that we do not adequately acknowledge the existence of evil. Why do you think this is the case? Is this failure a blind spot? How might our congregations address the reality of evil?
14. Russia novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was arrested in 1945 for writing a letter in which he criticized Joseph Stalin. He spent eight years in prisons and labor camps, followed by three more years in enforced exile. This led to his three-volume work, *The Gulag Archipelago*, from which this quote is taken. Since the line between good and evil passes right through the human heart, how can we reduce evil in our self? In others?
15. Richard Dawkins suggests that, given the pitiless indifference of the universe, there is no evil and no good. Do you agree? Why or why not?

16. Richard Siken seeks to move outside the good-evil construct, replacing it with “need against need against need, where everyone is at cross-purposes and everyone is to blame.” Is this helpful or does it further muddy the problem of evil? Why or why not?
17. Fredrik Backman writes that hate is easy and love is challenging? Do you agree? Why or why not? In a conflict he says that, (1) we choose a side, (2) seek out facts that support our side, and (3) dehumanize our enemy. Why is this default to tribalism the preferred choice? How can we do the hard work of finding the middle ground by holding two, sometimes, opposing thoughts, in our minds at the same time? Finally, how can hate and anger metastasize into evil?
18. Like Solzhenitsyn, George R.R. Martin suggests that “the battle between good and evil is weighed within the individual human heart and not necessarily between an army of people dressed in white and an army of people dressed in black.” Do you agree? If yes, how do we account for movements like the KKK, white nationalism, and other hate groups? He goes on to write, “When I look at the world, I see that most real living breathing human beings are grey.” Of course, there are many shades of grey. Can you give examples of people that you have met who were a darker shade of grey? Why do you think this was the case for them?
19. How have you worked to lessen evil in the world and increase the amount of good?
20. What is the role of our congregation in increasing the amount of goodness in the world and combating evil in effective ways?

