



TOUCHSTONES

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Good & Evil



so, we have created an imbalance in our estimation of good and evil. As we have increasingly celebrated human goodness, we have correspondingly discounted the presence and power of evil.

This tendency toward goodness was an appropriate response by our 19th century forebears to the overriding pessimism preached by the Calvinists. The 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr observed, "There have been times when Christian Orthodoxy was too dualistic and pessimistic to take the moral and social tasks of society seriously. Against its complete pessimism the thought of the eighteenth century and of modernity in general was a necessary correction."

This correction included identifying change with progress, a strong bias toward optimism, and a guarantee of meaningfulness in the universe.

At the forefront of this approach, were the Transcendentalists, those 19th century Unitarians who sought a romantic spirituality that was emotional and intuitive.

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Introduction to the Theme

Unitarian Universalist minister Earl Holt wrote, "Liberal theology, if it can be said to have an overriding weakness, tends toward a sometimes unrealistic optimism; hope is its central virtue. But essential as hope is, it is insufficient unless grounded in something deeper. A potent religion must address the darkness, inner and outer. That darkness is real. Moments of grace do come, but not easily or often, and it is most often those who acknowledge the darkness who recognize the grace."

His criticism of Unitarian Universalism is well grounded. Historically, we have tended toward optimism. In doing

Wisdom Story

The Old Man's Will

In a small American town, there once lived an old man. Generations of children grew up listening to his stories, and he was always first in line if anyone was in any kind of need. He taught the chil-



dren to hunt and fish, and everyone loved him. He lived alone in a little log cabin, and his door was always open to all comers.

Now it happened that a valuable seam of copper was discovered, which ran right through the plot of land where the old man had his cabin. Soon, the big businessmen in town approached him. They wanted to buy his land and knock down his cabin, so that they could begin mining the copper.

But the old man didn't understand about money, and their offer had no meaning for him. All he wanted was his own little cabin, right there in the woods, where he had always lived.

The businessmen grew frustrated. After all, a large operation was in jeopardy here, and they stood to make huge profits from the copper mine. When the

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Good, Evil & Building Beloved Community

Martin Luther King, Jr. didn't originate the term "Beloved Community," but he popularized it's use in his nonviolent theology. It is not a grand, utopian goal like the rapturous image of the Peaceable Kingdom where the lion and the lamb lie down together in harmony, but a realistic goal that can be achieved by a critical mass of people committed to the triumph of love and goodness. For him, the triple evils of poverty, racism, and militarism stand as barriers to life and our living together in Beloved Community. These evils are interlocking and powerful, but they are not invincible. Through non-violent social action and unconditional love, the moral arc of the universe can and will be bent toward goodness. For King, the Beloved Community was a global vision in which all of creation can and will share.

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Building Beloved Community

To Each His Own

(Continued from page 1) **The Old Man's Will**
old man refused to listen to their offers, they began to threaten him. The people who had always been his friends were turning into his enemies. Eventually, they told him in no uncertain terms, "Unless you are out of this place by sunset, we will come and kill you." The only person who cared about the old man any more was the town's preacher. He saw what was going on, and made up his mind to do something about it.

Well, sunset came, and the old man was still in his cabin. Meanwhile, however, the town's preacher had slipped off to the cabin, and when the lynch mob arrived to kill the old man, the preacher stepped out of the cabin door, and addressed them quietly.

"The old man realizes he is going to die," he told them, "and he has asked me to come out tonight on his behalf and read you his last will and testament."

The attackers fell silent, and waited impatiently as the preacher unfolded a piece of parchment and began to read:

"I leave my fishing rod to you, Pete, because I remember the first bass you ever caught with it when you were seven.

"I leave my rifle to you, James, because I remember how I taught you to shoot with it.

"I leave my tin whistle to you, Harry, so that you won't forget those tunes we used to play in the summer evenings.

"I leave my leather boots to you, Jake, because you used to play with the boot-

laces when we were getting ready to go for those long walks together."

One by one, the few items that the old man possessed were each bequeathed to the person to whom they would mean most.

And one by one, the would-be attackers—Pete, James, Harry, Jake and all the others—hung their heads and made their way home in the silence of the night.

Source: unknown, included in *One Hundred Wisdom Stories* by Margaret Silf

Which Seed?

Kindness and Meanness

Dean Koontz

Not one day in anyone's life is an uneventful day, no day without profound meaning, no matter how dull and boring it might seem.... Because in every day of your life, there are opportunities to perform little kindnesses for others, both by conscious acts of will and unconscious example.

Each smallest act of kindness—even just words of hope when they are needed, the remembrance of a birthday, a compliment that engenders a smile—reverberates across great distances and spans of time, affecting lives unknown to the one whose generous spirit was the source of this good echo, because kindness is passed on and [the seed] grows each time it's passed, until a simple courtesy becomes an act of selfless courage years later and far away.

Likewise, each small meanness, each thoughtless expression of hatred, each envious and bitter act, regardless of how petty, can inspire others, and is therefore the seed that ultimately produces evil fruit, poisoning people whom you have never met and never will.

All human lives are so profoundly and intricately entwined—those dead, those living, those generations yet to come—that the fate of all is the fate of each, and the hope of humanity rests in every heart and in every pair of hands. Therefore, after every failure, we are obliged to strive again for success, and when faced with the end of one thing, we must build something new and better in the ashes, just as from pain and grief, we must weave hope, for each of us is a thread critical to the strength—to the very survival of the human tapestry.

Every hour in every life contains such often-unrecognized potential to affect the world that the great days and thrilling possibilities are combined always in this momentous day.

Source: *From the Corner of His Eye*, Dean Koontz, 2000

Is Evil Inevitable?

The Mental Bargain We Make When We Use the Word "Evil"

Courtney E. Martin

Evil literally means "profoundly immoral and malevolent." ...It seems to carry a sort of metaphysical seriousness. When someone does something that we find truly inexplicable and horrible and that, importantly, we want to absolve ourselves of any responsibility for, we jump to call it evil. "Wrong-headed" is for a case where we might have been able to intercede and make a good argument for a different action. Even "mentally ill" suggests that a person is treatable, or at least that the harm his mental illness might inflict on others could have been contained. But evil—well, it's irreconcilable with humanity and unpredictable beyond any decent reason. It's unpreventable.

...We grab for the word "evil" when we feel overwhelmed with the human capacity for death and destruction. When we feel grief that doesn't know where to land. When we feel horrifically vulnerable.

...The irony is that our grab for the word "evil" seems all the more desperate when the suffering we're witnessing is random.

...If it was evil, then it was inevitable. You cannot reasonably expect to eradicate all evil from the world. At some point, it's going to flare up and you just have to hope that "your people" aren't unlucky enough to be ...[where a mass shooting occurs]. ...We would rather live with the belief that evil could kill us at any moment than with the belief that we could have prevented a murder....

... "Evil" is a cop-out [if]...it distances us from asking ...questions about ...what each of us can do to save lives...in the future. ...If there is evil here, it is as subtle as you or me, anyone with a beating heart, pointing a finger at one dead man [i.e., the shooter] as if the moral responsibility lay only with his cold corpse ...If there is evil here, it is complacency, and it is collective.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/courtney-martin-the-mental-bargain-we-make-when-we-use-the-word-evil/>



Readings from the Common Bowl

Day 1: “The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don’t do anything about it.” Albert Einstein



Day 2: “Evil is always possible. And goodness is eternally difficult.” Anne Rice

Day 3: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” Edmund Burke

Day 4: “Never open the door to a lesser evil, for other and greater ones invariably slink in after it.” Baltasar Gracián

Day 5: “Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Day 6: “I know there’s evil in the world, and there always has been. But you don’t need to believe in Satan or demons to explain it. Human beings are perfectly capable of evil all by themselves.” Tess Gerritsen

Day 7: “Most of the evil in this world is done by people with good intentions.” T.S. Eliot

Day 8: “In years to come, he would be a giver of bread, not a stealer—proof again of the contradictory human being. So much good, so much evil. Just add water.” Markus Zusak

Day 9: “Good and evil are a great deal more complex than a princess and a dragon, or a wolf and a scarlet-clad little girl. ...Is not the wolf simply acting as a wolf should act? Though perhaps it is a singular wolf who goes to such lengths as to dress as a grandmother to toy with its prey.” Erin Morgenstern

Day 10: “I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent.” Mahatma Gandhi

Day 11: “The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; men alone are quite capable of every wickedness.” Joseph Conrad

Day 12: “May the forces of evil become confused on the way to your house.” George Carlin

Day 13: “One should see the world, and see himself as a scale with an equal balance of good and evil. When he does one good deed, the scale is tipped to the good—...and the world is saved. When he does one evil deed, the scale is tipped to the bad—...and the world is destroyed.” Maimonides

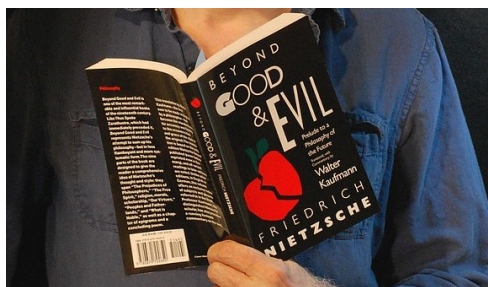
Day 14: “Science may have found a cure for most evils; but it has found no remedy for the worst of them all—the apathy of human beings.” Helen Keller

Day 15: “...Evil in the open is but evil from within that has been let out. The main battlefield for good is not the open ground of the public arena but the small clearing of each heart.” Yann Martel

Day 16: “Evil will never find peace. It may triumph, but it will never find peace.” L.J. Smith

Day 17: “As for monkeys, I would have five, and they would be named: See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil, Do Pretty Much Whatever the Hell You Want, and Expensive Attorney.” Tad Williams

Day 18: “Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer. And let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good.” Maya Angelou



Day 19: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Martin Luther King Jr.

Day 20: “I hope that real love and truth are stronger in the end than any evil or misfortune in the world.” Charles Dickens

Day 21: “Do not let us mistake necessary evils for good.” C.S. Lewis

Day 22: “Evil begins when you begin to treat people as things.” Terry Pratchett

Day 23: “I think our humanism is our best resource when it helps us understand that our freedom of choice means that all of us are capable of evil acts as well as wonderful acts. ...We need religion not to protect us from this world, but to enable us to engage in a way that repairs and restores life...” Rebecca Parker

Day 24: “The evil that is in the world almost always comes from ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence if they lack understanding.” Albert Camus

Day 25: “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.” Blaise Pascal

Day 26: “Real life’s nasty. It’s cruel. It doesn’t care about heroes and happy endings and the way things should be. In real life, bad things happen. People die. Fights are lost. Evil often wins.” Darren Shan

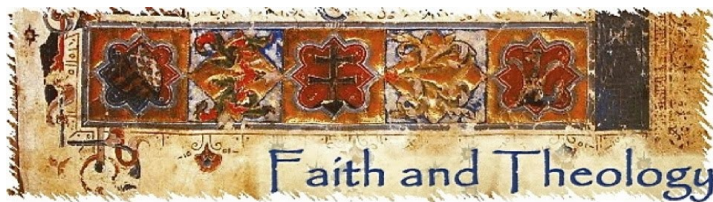
Day 27: “Evil is unspectacular and always human. And shares our bed and eats at our own table.” W.H. Auden

Day 28: “The reason evil exists is not solely because people plot evil. The reason evil exists is not because people are making pacts with the devil – horns, hoofs, and all. The reason evil exists and persists is, in part, because people are frightened and don’t know what to do with the spiritual hole in their lives.” David Owen

Day 29: ...All the religions of the world... 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 its within each person.” Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn

Day 30: “Why not think that sometimes—just sometimes—you can overcome evil with silence? And let people hear their hatefulness in their own ears, without distraction. Maybe goodness is enough to expose evil for what it really is, sometimes.” Sylvain Reynard

Day 31: “There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.” Martin Luther King Jr.



Faith and Theology

Wrestling with Good and Evil

"...Unitarian Universalists are fully aware of the profound evil we face today, including unnecessary human suffering, rampant environmental degradation, and destructive systemic structures such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence. Yet none of these are inevitable. Religious liberals live with hope grounded in the belief that the world can be nudged toward the good. Our choices matter: we can either enable (or ignore) the evil around us, or we can help overcome it." *Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor*

"Evil is the capacity, within us and among us, to break sacred bonds with our own souls, with one another, and with the holy. Further, it is the willingness to excuse or justify this damage, to deny it, or to call it virtue. The soil in which it flourishes is a rich compost of ignorance, arrogance, fear, and delusion—mostly self-delusion—all mingled with the sparkling dust of our original, human being." *Rev. Victoria Safford*

"People are almost equally capable of both good and evil, but most of the time—say, three times out of five—people choose the good. The seesaw tilts just a few degrees toward the good in this tentative world, but those few degrees are the difference between peace and Armageddon. The job of the church is to put the few stubborn ounces of our weight on the side of goodness, and press down for all we're worth." *Rev. Patrick O'Neill*

"The ancient Greeks viewed order and chaos as part of a series of opposites that balanced the world. Though their system is riddled with misunderstandings and prejudice by our modern standards, their alignment of chaos with evil, in opposition to order and good, reflects my own experience of terrible times and suffering. While some chaos is necessary to keep any system from stagnation, too much chaos keeps any system from

the ability to nurture, protect, or cherish. Chaos often ends up aligned with destruction and death."

Rev. Elizabeth Lerner

"As we make our choices within this world, with each of our actions that follows those choices, we open the gates of good and evil. So, of course, there is evil. Knowing and accepting this is very important. But, there is also something beyond. When we discover that profound unity which is true and the realm of discrimination which is true are actually not two—in that fraction of a second we open something incredible, healing, and compelling." *Rev. James Ishmael Ford*

"What is evil? An aspect of human nature. Apply enough pressure to any of us and something ugly will surface. Evil isn't some malevolent power floating around in the universe, waiting to pene-



trate some unsuspecting soul. We do it all by ourselves. ...Reckoning with evil is more than an internal struggle. Evil surfaces in the cycles of violence we perpetrate as a society, often out of a misguided sense of necessity. It is a studied ignorance that keeps us not only from examining ourselves but also from looking critically at the institutions we create." *Rev. Judith Meyer*

"The difference in degree between my actions and those of my favorite villain ...may mean almost everything, but it does not mean there is a difference in kind between us. Every single one of us [has] the devil inside. That truth is both sobering and liberating. If the human heart is where the battle between good and evil is joined, then there it must be won. And it can be won there. You and I

always have the freedom to think of others as companions rather than as villains, to speak with gentleness rather than contempt, to act with compassion rather than cruelty. We have that choice. And the decisions we make, gathered with those of others and writ cosmically large, will determine whether good prevails or evil triumphs. That's the nature of the game. Each moment, you and I are called upon to select another play. The contest is close; the stakes are high. The ball is in our hands."

Rev. Dr. Galen Guengerich

"A theology of evil will necessarily not define evil as something that we cannot be involved in. It will not label others as evil while denying that we are part of systems that perpetuate and cause evil. ...Reinhold Niebuhr made a very interesting comment: "Evil is always the assertion of some interest without regard to the whole, whether the whole be conceived as the immediate

community or the total community of humanity or the total order of the world. The good is, on the other hand, always the harmony of the whole on various levels." ...Evil is a force leading us to some interest that is self-centered and does not take into consideration the integrity of the whole. Evil then is the attempt to get something without regard

for the effect that that getting something has on others." *Rev. Thom Belote*

"I see evil as the willful separation from, and lack of concern for, the 'common good.' Evil occurs when the capacity for empathy exists and is ignored; when better alternatives for being in right relationship are ignored; when we fail to act on the imperative to correct the discrepancy between what is and what ought to be; and when we resist our powerful impulses to be, and do, good."

Rev. Abhi Janamanchi

Sources: *Unitarian Universalist Views of Evil*, Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor, Editor; *The Devil Inside* by Rev. Dr. Galen Guengerich; and *The Question of Evil for Religious Liberals* by Rev. Thom Belote

Say No to Bullying

Gabrielle Ricketts

Bullying is one of those cut and dried issues until it involves real people. ... In reality, bullying is one of the grayest of topics. In *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, Barbara Coloroso explains that there are many different kinds of bullies and different ways to be bullied. By her definition, bullying is a conscious, willful, and deliberate hostile activity intended to harm, induce fear through the threat of further aggression, and create terror.



The first challenge as a parent is identifying it. ... Are boys just roughhousing? Are they taking turns being the bad guy everyone clobbers or is one kid being targeted and receiving the brunt of it every day.

...The second challenge is helping children recognize bullying. The dynamics of bullying are incremental; every layer of abuse can be so subtle that it seems silly to intervene, and recognizing harmful relationships becomes more difficult as supervised play dates turn into less supervised social time. To further complicate the issue, the dynamics of bullying among girls is often psychological.

...Truth is, I don't know what to do about bullying. I don't want to solve my children's problems for them (as if I even could). I want to encourage my son and daughter to stand up for themselves and others, and I want them to know it's okay to ask for help.

...Always hopeful, I do have a plan against bullying:

- ◆ *Let's teach our children to be kind by showing kindness and respect to all people especially those in need.*
- ◆ *Let's teach our children empathy by cultivating friendships from diverse backgrounds and views.*
- ◆ *Let's teach our children to stand up for themselves and others by standing up ourselves for injustice.*
- ◆ *Let's teach our children not to judge by loving them unconditionally.*

Family Activity:

Seeking Goodness

For a week, try the following, and discuss the experience daily with your children.

Speak no evil. Avoid talking negatively about anyone whether you know them or not. Try not to criticize those challenging people in your life.

Hear no Evil. Avoid conversations with people who are critical. When gossip or criticizing starts, try to change the subject or politely excuse yourself.

See No Evil. Try to see the good in people. Look compassionately on friends and family and try to see the other side of conflicts. Filter the actions of strangers through a lens of empathy

Family Activity:

Engaging Bullying

Help children recognize bullying. Talk about the different ways kids bully other kids. Name tactics or ways bullying starts. Talk about the different roles of a bullying episode: the bully, the target, and the bystanders. Discuss the actions of each and their motivations. Plan ways to address bullying. What would you do if you were being bullied? What would you do if you saw someone being bullied?

Source for this Family Matters: *All Souls Parent Resource Network*, October 2010

What is Evil?

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker

What is evil? Evil is that which exploits the lives of some to benefit the lives of others. Evil congregates in transpersonal systems, in social structures that run on banal visions of the good life, lacking in wisdom or zest, and that are beneficial to some while leaving others bereft of life's necessities. Evil springs from ignorance and denial of the beauty and goodness of life. It chooses ways of living that destroy rather than sustain the delicate web of relationships that make life possible. Evil's accomplice is anesthetization. When the senses have been numbed, and feeling has been stifled, responsive reverence is dulled, and love has no air to breathe. Evil is manifest in sexism, racism, and militarism and in patterns of exploitation and abuse. Its harm touches our innermost being and our relationships with one another and the earth. Evil corrodes our inner lives, manifesting in self-hatred, powerlessness, and fragmentation of the soul. Its effects are present in hunger, homelessness, and refugee camps, in the suffering of soldiers experiencing post-traumatic stress, or the wrenching grief of families who have lost loved ones to war. The consequences of evil are displayed by trouble in earth's ecosystems — disappearing species, melting ice caps, the thinning ozone.

Liberal and progressive theologies emphasize that these are the great threats to our lives and to future generations. Life needs to be saved from the harm that sin and evil cause in this world. The tragic consequences of sin are of our making. ...[E]arth itself needs salvation from damage made by us humans; humanity needs healing and repair from legacies of injustice. We are the cause, and we can be the cure.

Source: *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-First Century* by Rebecca Parker and John Buehrens

Turning from Evil to Good

(Continued from page 1) **Introduction**

They were cosmic optimists. They envisioned an ongoing religious evolution in which religious history would lead to the perfection of human nature. Frederic Henry Hedge wrote, "Either there is no God, such as we figure Him, or there is no evil. ...Believing in a God on the strength of His idea in my mind, independent of the argument from nature, I say there is no evil." The Transcendentalists, including their leader, Ralph Waldo Emerson, were severely criticized because they failed to take evil seriously. Emerson, himself, wrote in his late fifties that he "could never give much reality to evil and pain."

Liberal theology's cosmic optimism of the 19th century was shattered in the 20th century by two world wars, the Holocaust, and the use of nuclear weapons. Unitarian Universalist minister Jacob Trapp respected "the dark abyss of the Ultimate into which we cannot see, and out of which come all contradictions and paradoxes and tragedies and glories of human existence." He wrote, "We are born into a century that requires us to look into two abysses. One is the abyss of ourselves. It's deeper than we had supposed. The depths to which human beings can sink are there, within; and in our century we have had an unparalleled demonstration. There is something hopeful about such demonic depths, however. It does away with easy optimism. But also it means we are not simple creatures, whose possibilities are easily or soon exhausted. There are corresponding possible heights. The other abyss we must look into is the abyss of infinite being. All the gods get swallowed up in that. That's a good, necessary, humbling experience. The divine possibilities are still here, not in some imaginary invisible captain, but in the visibly, fallibly human—and our direct responsibility. The people who refuse to look into these two abysses are not safe for our time. The true believers... are dangerous.... We need more true unbelievers, who cannot believe in an easy good, nor an easy God."

Still we struggle with the problem of evil. To affirm the "inherent worth and dignity of every person," is to place a unique burden on the development of a

deal with evil based on human nature as fundamentally flawed and depraved. Further, to the extent that we embrace situational ethics and moral relativism, we shy away from harsh judgments in which we might label an act or a person as evil. Yet caution and discernment are essential in dealing with evil. We would do well not to follow those in the religious landscape who trivialize the concept of evil by labeling everything with which they disagree as being evil.

None-the-less, we cannot deal credibly with the problem of evil until we realize our own capacity for evil. This is the point that the Russian writer Aleksander Solzhenitsyn made when he wrote, "If only it were so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the dividing line between good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy his [or her] own heart?"

Defining evil is not a simple exercise. Philosophers and theologians have done so in a variety of ways. Whatever else it is, evil is a function of human choice. This is to say that the demonic exists as an inherent capacity in human response. Unitarian Universalist minister William Houff approaches evil in terms of power. He writes that we often, "fall short of grasping the creative spiritual power that is already available within us. And in our egotistical yearning or existential despair, we abuse the finite power that is all around us. Power, like all creative qualities, is ambiguous; it easily turns destructive or evil. [And so it is helpful to think of] evil as an abuse of power growing out of a sense of powerlessness (which can involve alienation, separation, brokenness or good old-fashioned sin)."

We "choose" evil over good when, failing to recognize our own "creative spiritual power," we experience an unacceptable powerlessness that we temporarily relieve through the abuse of "finite power." The

great paradox of evil is that it arises out of powerlessness.

To say that evil is a function of human choice, is not to say that the choosing is simple or straightforward. It is a complicated intersection of choice mixed with personality, circumstance, and personal history. It is both nature and nurture, both individual and social. People, who cannot recognize their own creative spiritual power, cannot do so for significant reasons. Often they have been wounded in tragic ways.

Rather than suffer or heal their own pain, they end up inflicting it upon others. In this way, evil begets evil.

Perhaps "turning" is a better image than "choosing." If we have both the capacity for good and evil, which will be awakened in us, which will be nurtured in us? There can be a turning from evil toward good (or the reverse) when we least expect it. In speaking of turning from evil to

good, the Jewish theologian Martin Buber wrote, "The power of turning that radically changes the situation never reveals itself outside of crisis. This power begins to function when one, gripped by despair, instead of allowing himself [or herself] to be submerged, calls forth ...primal powers and accomplishes with them the turning of his [or her] very existence."

M. Scott Peck defined evil "as the exercise of political power—that is, the imposition of one's will upon others by overt or covert coercion—in order to avoid. . . spiritual growth." Elie Wiesel has written, "I have learned two lessons in my life: first, there are no sufficient literary, psychological or historical answers to human tragedy, only moral ones. Second, just as despair can come to one another only from other human beings, hope, too, can be given to one only by other human beings."

As hope can arise out of despair, so too, can good arise out of evil. While we must be discerning and judicious in naming evil, it is only by naming that the process of turning can begin for individuals and for entire societies.



Evil in Buddhism

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

This concept of evil, even the very word “evil,” can be problematic. ...It seems ...in the West ...there is a tendency to see things in absolute terms, to see things as black or white, all or nothing. On top of that, under the influence of mental states such as anger, this tendency becomes even stronger. A kind of distortion of one’s thinking, one’s perception, takes place. ...You immediately seek a target, looking for an individual or group to blame, something concrete that you can direct all your anger and outrage at. And in that state you see things in terms of all good or all bad, see people as good or evil. So from that perspective, you might view a person as purely evil.

But from a Buddhist perspective, we have no concept of *absolute* evil, in the sense of evil as something which exists independently — something that is not caused by other factors, that cannot be affected by other factors, and cannot be changed or modified by other conditions. “Absolute” evil has a sense of permanence. So, we do not accept the idea of evil people, in the sense that a particular person’s intrinsic nature is one hundred percent evil, and they will remain that way because it is their fundamental unchanging nature.

We do have the concept of a person acting in an evil way, doing evil things, under the influence of negative emotions and bad motivation and so on— but we see this evil behavior arising as a result of certain causes and conditions. We feel such events can be explainable without invoking a metaphysical force like evil.

...If a person commits a very destructive act, you can say that act is evil. ... And you should always oppose that act, as an evil act. You must take a very strong stand. And let’s say that the person’s motivation for the act was hatred. Then you can say that both the *motivation*, and the *action* that it leads to, are evil because of their destructive nature. But we still cannot view *that individual* as “an

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The Demonic

Rev. George Kimmich Beach

Evil distorts good, with tragic consequences. It twists what is intended for creative ends to destructive ends. It stands against the original created goodness of being—a goodness that is latent within and a potentiality of all actual beings. Evil often has a demonic, that is, a possessive and compulsive character. Demonic evil is more than a bad deed or singular sin. It is self-justifying, self-sustaining, and self-replicating. It is a perversity with a life of its own.



Discussions of evil readily provoke concern that a philosophical dualism is implied. We want to take evil seriously, but we are afraid that if we take it too seriously, we will fall into seeing life as a struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness. ...Both orientations are unstable and, in time, prove themselves untenable and unsustainable.

...James Luther Adams notes an old distinction between the satanic and the demonic: “...The distinction has been made since the seventeenth century between the demonic and the satanic. The satanic is that which is nonexistent because it has no relationship to the structures of being. The demonic is therefore defined as the perversion of these qualities, but perversions are able to maintain themselves for a time. So there is a sustaining quality present in whatever is.”

The distinction helps us recognize that, while we need to take evil seriously, we cannot give it ultimate ontological status.



[Note: ontology is the study of the nature of being.] Evil is always derivative or contingent in relation to the good. It is quite possible and not at all uncommon to take evil idolatrously, that is to be religiously devoted to it. White Supremacy and Nazism are examples. W.H. Auden defines idolatry as taking what is frivolous seriously.” Just so, we recognize that Satanism is a myth, a story that, taken literally, can lead to radical distortions of the truth, often with tragic consequences.

...Taking the demonic seriously does not mean that we are being asked to believe in the objective existence of mythic supernatural beings. ...The evils we wrestle with, always with uncertain outcome, are not simply the conscious decisions of moral agents—people making wrong choices, whether from ignorance or malice or some combination of the two. They are irrational, destructive, and often self-destructive forces. Evil has been described as a moral virus that invades its host; unopposed, it tends to become radical. Radical evil is evil that justifies itself, and even exalts itself, as do fascism, extreme nationalism, or religious fundamentalism. It becomes a possessive power with an insatiable, and finally a self-destructive, appetite. So Shakespeare’s Ulysses says, calling unbounded appetite the “universal wolf” that is so voracious, it must finally “eat up himself.”

...People do not simply do evil things; they do evil things that they could not do without believing them to be good and necessary. They dress their actions in moral justifications.

...If our theology does not take evil seriously, recognizing that evil is a universal element in human life, including our own lives and even the lives of our beloved communities, then our theology speaks neither from the heart of this age nor to it.

Source: *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams* by George Kimmich Beach

Small Group Discussion Guide

Theme for Discussion Good and Evil

Preparation prior to Gathering: (Read this issue of the journal and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: "I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one... Humans are caught—in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too—in a net of good and evil.... There is no other story. ...[We] have ...only the hard, clean questions: Was it good or was it evil? Have I done well—or ill?" *John Steinbeck*

Chalice Lighting (James Vila Blake) adapted (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Take turns reading aloud parts of the wisdom story on page 1.

Readings from the Common Bowl: Group members read selections from *Readings from the Common Bowl* (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

Sitting In Silence: Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

Reading: "A fight is going on inside me," said an old man to his son. "It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One wolf is evil. He is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment,

inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other wolf is good. He is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you." The son thought about it for a minute and then asked, "Which wolf will win?" The old man replied..., "The one you feed."

Various sources

Living the Questions: Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving on.

1. What do good and evil mean to you?
2. What do you believe are the causes of evil?
3. Are evil and good determined by intention, the end result or both?
4. What role does nature and nurture play to manifest evil or good?
5. Do you believe that each of us has within us both good and evil? If no, why not? If yes, how does one emerge at times, and not the other?
6. Have you experienced evil in your life? What were the circumstances? How did you react? Did good eventually triumph? If yes, how? If not, why?
7. Do religious liberals take evil seriously enough? Why or why not?
8. What is the relationship between evil and ignorance?

The facilitator or group members are invited to propose additional questions that they would like to explore.

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice

(Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison) *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.*

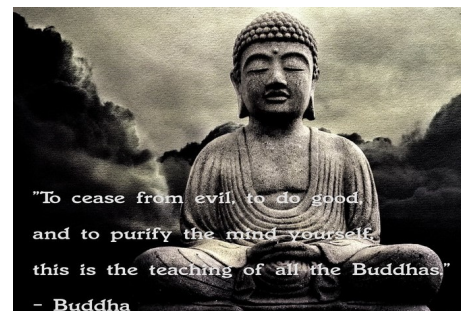
Closing Words

Rev. Philip R. Giles
(In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*



Intrinsic Evil?

(Continued from page 7) **Evil in Buddhism**



evil person," intrinsically and permanently evil, because there is always the potential or possibility that a new set of conditions will come into play and that very same person may no longer engage in the evil behavior.

...Saying that nobody is intrinsically evil, that evil is a relative state dependent on other factors, does not give someone an excuse to commit these evil acts. Just because you allow for the possibility of one's motivations and behaviors to change in the future, this does not mean that you somehow excuse or condone that act, or that you do not hold them responsible as if they had nothing to do with it.

Source: from *The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Howard Cutler

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