

The Nature of Evil

by Rev. Lori Staubitz, UUC, 10/19/2008

Liars await around every corner
Coming in all shapes and sizes
Peddling deceit
Twisting truth
Dodging what truth demands

Rather than give in to reality they cling
to ego's shadows hiding under layer
upon layer of lies
Though they pray for light
only darkness comes

The liar jeopardizes our integrity
befalls our character
sucks out our dignity
rubs away our goodness,
and ultimately robs us of who we are

There is hope
You can fight back against the people of the lie
Not by changing them, but by honoring the truth inside yourself

Note: M. Scott Peck, M.D., a psychiatrist, Christian theologian and well-known author, wrote a disturbing, but tremendously insightful book called *People of the Lie: Hope for Healing Human Evil* in 1983. Peck is perhaps best known for his 1978 book *The Road Less Traveled*.

There is nothing like a horror film or the news broad cast of yet another sadistic, human event to bring up the question of evil in our lives.

It is October after-all. Halloween movies and costumes remind us that indeed we should not let our guard down for a moment...since evil lurks and can find its way into our lives at any moment.

The concept of evil has long been associated with the super-natural –beings such as The Devil, Evil Demons or Spirits." To assist with the casting out of evil, or protecting the believer from evil acts, sacred rites and rituals are performed by a Shamans or Priest.

In the past, the church's beliefs about the nature of women and of human sexuality led to the belief that every newborn was possessed by an indwelling demon because of its intimate contact with its mother's birth canal. The church routinely exorcised each newborn at the time of baptism with the following ritual: "Lesser" exorcisms at baptisms, at blessings of holy water, blessings of a home or other location etc. are still performed.

Throughout the church's history, it has identified evil spirits in demon-possessed individuals and treated them by full exorcisms. The practice has been strictly controlled in modern times.

On 1999-an updated exorcism ritual for the church was introduced. The previous major update had been issued in 1614."

The new Vatican guidelines stress that most behaviors that appear to be caused by demonic possession are actually triggered by psychic illness. The Vatican's chief exorcist, estimated

that only five or six out of every thousand people who seek help from an exorcist are really possessed by evil spirits. The remainder are "*in need of psychiatric help.*" "The new rules express a need for ...priests conducting exorcisms to deal with evil as a force 'lurking within all individuals' rather than as a force, traditionally embodied as Satan."

*-resource: **Belief.net; Possession & Oppression***

"Roman Catholic beliefs and practices about exorcism"

"The biblical Book of Job is often seen as an early response to the problem of evil. The Book of Job recounts the vindication of the innocence of a human sufferer by the very God who permits the infliction and the suffering. Despite Job's pleas and accusations—God never explains why. (Instead, Appearing in a whirlwind, God rails at Job for demanding to understand what was going on. (38: 4) But it is Job's friends, who interpreted Job's suffering as punishment from God."

The monotheistic problem of evil is cited in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (book 10): "Old questions are yet unanswered. Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Or is (God) impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent-(standing by while creation suffers) Is he both able and willing?" (Yet evil persists?)resource and link: "<http://science.jrank.org/pages/9267/Evil-Problem-Evil.html>"

As liberal religious people, we don't seem to focus much on evil. In fact, we sometimes seem to embrace down-right nasty behavior as a form of personal expression and choice and tend to turn a blind eye to destructive personalities. However, this comes from a gross miss-understanding of our theology. We do not prescribe to innate sin- so we do not do infant baptism. Rather we welcome new life into the embrace of a loving community in a ceremony of dedication. We do see value inherent in each life, so we may admonish the behavior but respect the individual.

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We combat evil in the ways we share responsibility to uphold personal, social, religious and economic environments that promote health, wholeness, freedom and creativity for all. We fight evil as we work to end racism and institutionalized oppression. We do battle with evil when we uphold fair labor and education practices and heal ourselves from the bondages of classism, sexism and homophobia.

Yet, for all our collective vision and mission, for all our efforts, our potential to usher in the good flies in the face of insurmountable obstacles of destructive forces at work in our world today.

Perhaps, as my Jewish friends might say, we have "missed the mark".

Our collective failure to address real evil in the world calls the faithful from all traditions to examine long held concepts of God and Human ability.

It has been here, in the 20th and 21st centuries, that the Orthodox Concept of God as Creator, Observer and Judge has been put on trial and found guilty of standing by while millions of innocents suffer needlessly.

Those of us who place our trust solely in human potential will need to re-examine concepts upheld by religious humanism as the cycles of human events continue to give rise to creative forms of evil in the world today.

Neither Theism or the Humanism of the 16th-20th c. have provided a solid foundation for addressing the challenges of evil for our times.

Goodness is not revealed in ongoing war, genocide, terrorism, torture, poaching and human trafficking. Evil cloaked in individual and corporate gain and national interests are a clear and present danger to life upon earth.

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But horror is not just "out there". It finds its way into our lives right here as we struggle to find meaning in the face of profound personal suffering.

Like Job, we cry out "Why me? Why my child Lord? Why this? Why now? What is the meaning of such suffering as this? We cry out and like Job, our questions go unanswered.

Rabbi Harold Kushner's book "When bad Things Happen to Good People" attempts to deal with the roots of our suffering....death of a child, critical illness, floods, earthquakes, epidemics, to answer the perennial question of why;

Why is profound loss and suffering so much a part of our human condition?

Non-dualistic religious teachings would ask that we not distinguish good from evil for they are indeed one in the same. They are partners to an ongoing process of creation and destruction; for life, there must be death, for growth, decay.

-Not an easy concept to embrace as we bear the pain of watching our children suffer or struggle with a life threatening illness at an early age.

Sally MacFague, Christian Eco-Feminist Theologian, author of "The Body of God": "If Christian discipleship is shaped by solidarity with the needy, including nature as the new poor, then natural evil is not limited to what happens to me and mine and sin becomes the limitation of one's horizon to the self.

We undergo an enlargement of vision and a realization that what happens in the natural world is part of the complex process that has (given rise to human life) and everything else on this planet." "Natural evil is not the principal kind of evil that endangers our planet." "It is not the Mount St Helen's eruptions or the Hurricane (Katrina's) that are threatening the planet and all its creatures but the depletion of the ozone layer and the desertification of Africa."(The Body Of God: An Ecological Theology by Sallie McFague; 1993.)

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An earlier Theist, Process Theologian Henry Nelson Weiman distinguishes these two distinct forms of evil; one natural and the other the result of human morality and devotion. This progressive religious thinker took issue with divine location and no longer subscribed to a

concept of God as a supernatural force.

Weiman explains God in terms of an innate, natural, process of change that gives rise to creativity, regeneration and new forms of beauty.

We are creatures who are bound to the earth and the cycles of life...With all the pleasures of the seasons, and all the suffering of change...we are creatures also bound to know that our life, all life is nurtured and sustained by death. When we come to know that our individual life is but a small portion of a much larger body of existence; that sure knowledge invites us to expand our theology and reframe our ultimate questions of good and evil.

If we are indeed bound together in a larger shared life, we can relieve personal suffering when we accompany one another through this portion of our journey in the eternal cosmic cycle of change as we give ourselves over to creative forces that will in the end give rise to new life, greater beauty ...If we know we do not exist in isolation, we need not come into this world, suffer or die alone.

It is important to know that much of our extreme human suffering comes not as a result of physical suffering but psychological fears, disconnection and isolation.

Our capacity to endure and find meaning even in the mist of crisis has much to do with our ability to be upheld by more enduring bonds of community and love that transcend our personal life times. As we are bound to one another, we are able to transcend personal circumstances and embrace that which is good, true and beautiful even amidst suffering. We can come to terms with our immediate personal losses knowing that ultimately, our sense of self is expanded to include the whole of life and its continued unfolding. The task of religious community is to keep this connection and strengthen our bonds of kinship.

But what of this secondary form of evil that originates in human behavior?

This form of Evil in Eastern Traditions is considered contextual. Buddhism is most concerned with whether an action is helpful, based on good intentions, and freedom from harm. Thus, a specific act can sometimes be either permissible or not permissible, depending upon its context. This differs from the positions taken by many Christian faith groups. They often evaluate a specific action itself, based on whether it is good or evil according to a system of morality derived from that group's interpretation of the Bible"-(For example the Roman Catholic Church's Traditional stance on Homosexuality as evil and a sin against nature)

-www.ReligiousTolerance.org

For Weiman, there is only the Creative Good-absolute under all circumstances and conditions, even though it often works against what we would desire, and destroys existing structuring in the self and society in order to bring about new good. (This notion of a single Unity of all existence underscores our understanding of Unitarianism.) This ultimate good is trustworthy, in that it always works to bring about the best result possible under the circumstances, even when that result is the radical realignment of our values and beliefs"

Evil, therefore is that which blocks, diminishes or obstructs the ongoing process of this absolute good"-Source of Human Good; H.N.Weiman

However, Weiman does not say everything e believe to be good is good.

The more receptive we become to creative interchange, the greater our need to check our motivations and ultimate commitments. The use of reason is essential in this process of discernment.

We are most at risk of becoming evil at the moment when we believe ourselves to be the most good. For it seems our human failing...our fear of loss once we have gained some ground that we secure ourselves against the forces of change.

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In its simplest form, we see goodness become evil in marriages as loving partners seek to hold onto opposing "old ways" rather than placing a higher value upon receptivity to the inherent creative process within their new relationship which can and will give rise to new forms.

We witness this in the world when the "great leader and stabilizer becomes the Sadistic Dictator".

Evil exists in a promise for economic prosperity that morphs into gross neglect , greed and oppression.

Perhaps, the Buddhist prohibition against attachment is an effort to avoid obstructing what liberal Process theologian Henry Nelson Weiman describes as God "The source of Creative Good" -

"The modern world displays many instances of good turned demonic. For example, the sense of nationality, a precious inheritance (that upholds cultural identity and diversity) has overplayed itself into the distortion of Nationalism (the global vying for power, control and superiority)" "All this carries a terrible warning to the modern world, for the danger today is greater than ever before because of our increased power to control the conditions and outcomes of life." "The moment of our greatest triumph can become the moment of our greatest defeat."

"The first aspect of the greatest evil of our time is not poverty, war or social revolution...it is our inability to distinguish ANYTHING as sovereign over all of human history by right of its absolute goodness; one that can be both empirically and rationally validated."

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The second half of this ultimate Evil is a result of unharnessed striving that leads to complacency: As we strive to control each aspect of life, we come up again and again

against the overwhelming obstacles before us....in our quest to manage so much, we become overwhelmed and lose our sense of discernment of what is good and what is not. (resource: Source of Human Good)

“So it is that great historic developments reach their height and begin to decline for lack of any sustained devotion beyond human endeavor.”

Weiman cautions us to protect ourselves from this greater Evil by alienating ourselves to the best of our human ability with the Absolute Good.

What is “Absolute Good”? It is good under all circumstances...It is the good that can be witnessed at play in the world and in us, we marvel at its inner workings in the intricate details of life - while its power cannot be fully harnessed it can be tapped. While it cannot be fully comprehended or understood, it can be known...While it cannot be wholly named, it is experienced as it reveals its beauty in many forms...When we subordinate all limited good (those things that are good for us alone) to the absolute good, we are better able to transcend the false choices that lead to evil acts...false choices between our personal desires and needs and the health of our community and planet.

“Nothing evil will cross this door if we refuse to let it ease its way into the threshold of our lives ...for from this day forward, let us be a people who are too busy with the important tasks of preparing ways for real goodness to flourish within us, through us and among us this day and all our days to come....amen.

-Sermon by Rev. Lori Staubitz, Minister UUCC, 10/19/0

Amen