

Can UUs Talk about Evil?

Bill Mahoney, Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Durham, NC

Background:

Paul Rasor, Director of the Center for the Study of Religious Freedom and Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Wesleyan College, has observed, “Unitarian Universalists and other religious liberals have always emphasized the positive aspects of the divine and human nature. As a result, critics sometimes charge that liberals don’t truly understand the reality of evil. Yet liberals are not naïve about evil; they just have a different framework for understanding it.”

Paul Rasor, Editor, *Unitarian Universalist Views of Evil*,
http://www.uuabookstore.org/client/client_pages/3043.pdf

One might argue that we UU’s are obligated to put a name to the evil we find in the world around us and, then, confront it – the acknowledged Sources of our UU faith include the: “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

Lighting of Chalice and Opening Words

May nothing evil cross this door,
and may ill fortune never pry
about these windows; may the roar
and rain go by.

- *Singing the Living Tradition, Hymn #1*

Check-In

Focus Reading: “After 9/11, can UUs talk about evil?”

A spiritual value closely related to open-mindedness, but deeper and harder to practice, is spiritual humility.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust and World War II, in response to liberal religion’s inflated estimation of human nature, Reinhold Niebuhr argued that the problem with people is the tension between our creaturely and divine sides. We are animals, but we are conscious and spiritual. The problem, he argued, is that we consistently overestimate ourselves. This leads us to harm one another and to create, support, or not resist systems of oppression.

If we are spiritually humble, we can call out evil without pretending we don’t have to be on guard for it within ourselves. Since 9/11, liberals and progressives, who often acknowledge that America’s accomplishments and values have often been tightly woven to racism, oppression, and empire-like tendencies, have been accused of showing a lack of patriotism. But really, I think it is patriotic humility, and not unrelated to spiritual humility.

This is where religious liberalism, even though it has underestimated humankind’s capacity for evil in the past, has something important to say about evil. We are called to balance the *naming of evil in the world* with the *need to be humble and on guard for it*—not as the dangerous ‘other’ that would try to trick us, but mingled right here with the best of ourselves.

And we must call it when we see it. If we are in touch with reality, we must be willing to use the word evil. We need the word evil to describe parts of the human experience—out of respect for

the people who are harmed, and also because only after we name it can we ask the theological question: Where is God or Grace in this?

And then, if we listen, we'll hear the answer—because it's implicit in the next question: What can we do?

By the Rev. Angela Herrera, *UU World magazine*, Winter 2011, excerpts
(<http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/187188.shtml>)

Evil – other (mostly) UU perspectives

(Selections can be put on small cards, and individually drawn and read by group members)

Rev. Douglas Morgan Strong, minister of the Community Unitarian Universalist Church in Plano, Texas, wrote to his colleagues about the [9/11] terrorist attacks: "How can we affirm and respect people whose self-selected goals are to destroy human life? From where do we garner the strength to search for the worth and dignity of those who committed such atrocities?"

Lois Fahs Timmins, daughter of the great Unitarian religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs, once criticized her own liberal religious education for failing to address the reality of evil. "We spent 95 percent of our time studying good people doing good things, and skipped very lightly over the bad parts of humanity," she said in 1996. "I was taught not to be judgmental, not to observe or report on the bad behavior of others. Consequently, because of my education, I grew up ignorant about bad human behavior, incompetent to observe it accurately, unskilled in how to respond to it, and ashamed of talking about evil."

The Rev. John Buehrens, past president of the UUA, says that the best statement he knows about the nature of evil is by the 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: "Evil is always the assertion of some self-interest without regard to the whole...The good is, on the other hand, always the harmony of the whole on various levels."

"Of course there is evil, and it is in us," says Rev. Dr. Davidson Loehr, minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin (but does not consider himself to be a Unitarian Universalist). Good, he says, has no meaning unless evil has meaning – and he defines evil as constricting life into too small a vision, of treating people like things.

The Rev. Dr. Thandeka, a theologian at Meadville Lombard Theological School, defines evil as "the failure to understand the inherent worth and dignity of every person as part of the interdependent web of all existence. When horrible things happen, human beings are responsible."

Rev. Bruce Southworth, minister of the Community Church of New York, cites the Islamic notion of sin – forgetfulness of our better selves, forgetfulness that we are part of a sacred creation, that we are tied to one another. "We have the ability to choose for the good or the bad, to choose our better or our worse selves. Part of the graciousness of creation is that there is so much beauty in the world, but we are not saved by the graciousness of creation. We are saved by our choices."

"We are defined by something more than our acts," says Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School for Ministry, which is why she refuses to say that people who do evil acts are evil people. "Ultimately everything in creation has intrinsic rather than utilitarian value," she says. "This faith statement gives us a center and perspective from which to judge our own actions, as well as the acts of others. You need such a center if you are to judge good and evil at

all." Otherwise, Parker warns, you are reduced to a relativism that says that different cultures have different values and that you cannot judge between conflicting claims of what is good.

The preceding quotes are from "Confronting Evil: Has Terrorism Shaken Our Religious Principles?" by Warren R. Ross, *UU World* Jan/Feb 2002
(<http://www.uuworld.org/2002/01/feature1.html>)

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.

Patrick O'Neill, extracted from UU Views of Evil, © 2007 Unitarian Universalist Association.

Questions for Reflection and Sharing:

1. How do you reconcile, in your mind and through your spiritual beliefs, evil acts that are committed in the world around you?
2. Why do people commit hurtful crimes and acts of terror? Are they evil?
3. How can we affirm our first UU Principle (the inherent worth and dignity of every person) as we honestly acknowledge the reality of evil in our world?
4. How do your ideas about evil affect how you respond to acts of evil you see in your daily life and in the world around you?

Likes and Wishes (*I like...about today's group, I wish ... in today's group*)

Closing Words:

From arrogance, pompousness, and from thinking ourselves more important than we are, may some saving sense of humor liberate us.

For allowing ourselves to ridicule the faith of others, may we be forgiven.

From making war and calling it peace, special privilege and calling it justice, indifference and calling it tolerance, pollution and calling it progress, may we be cured.

For telling ourselves and others that evil is inevitable while good is impossible, may we stand corrected.

God of our mixed up, tragic, aspiring, doubting, and insurgent lives, help us to be as good as in our hearts we have always wanted to be.

Amen

Harry Meserve, *Singing the Living Tradition* #496