

The theme for the month of May is Good and Evil. Good and Evil are things we don't tend to give much thought to. In fact, evil is a term we seldom hear. Good, it seems, is something we tend to take for granted. Out of curiosity, how many of you spent time this month thinking about the words, the concepts of good and evil? {ok, so how many of you got my monthly letter asking you to do so?}

As good, upstanding citizens, as people of faith, as people of good intention, we can't afford to treat the subject of Good and Evil lightly. They're too closely related to morality, the nature of humanity and our Unitarian Universalist principles for us not to engage these terms with some amount of depth and seriousness.

As I've talked with friends and colleagues about good and evil over the past few weeks, I've paid attention to some of the language we, as UUs use. For example, in our hymnal, on pages just before the first hymn we sang this morning are words that express what's foundational to our denominational beliefs. It says that our faith draws from many sources:

- \* Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder, which moves us to a renewal of the Spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.
- \* Words and deeds of prophetic women and men that challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.
- \* Wisdom from the world's religions that inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.
- \* Jewish and Christian teachings that call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- \* Humanist teachings that counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and Spirit.

\* Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions that celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Pretty heady stuff, good stuff, good counsel; all the better still when practiced. In short: openness to the forces that create and uphold life; religious wisdom that inspires us; loving our neighbor as ourselves; heeding the guidance of reason, the results of science; celebrate the sacred circle of life. And the one perhaps most applicable to us today, confront the powers and structures of evil.

I hold up this last one: “confront the powers and structures of evil”, because it may say the most about how we see ourselves, believe ourselves to be. It paints a picture of evil residing in “powers and structures”; powers and structures that are not identified in our sources, they’re untethered, they exist “out there” separate from us. And like Batman or superman, we are challenged to confront them!!!

Don’t get me wrong, *it is* good work. Someone needs to do it, especially given the world we live in today. What I want to bring to our attention is the mental framing that places evil out there, separate from ourselves.

That’s a very different conception of sin or evil than what we find in some other religious belief systems. It’s very different from the notion “the devil made me do it”, or the concept of original sin. These ideas place the existence of evil inside us. We become the agents of evil.

There’s an old saying about the difference between Universalists and Unitarians. It’s said, the Universalists thought that God was too good to condemn so many to damn nation. The Unitarians thought they were too good to be damned.

A focus on the goodness of human beings has got to be a good thing. But it is also valuable for us to consider the relationship between human beings and the existence of evil. We UUs tend to keep the notion of evil at arms length from ourselves while at the same time embracing a sense of ourselves as thoughtful, rational, well intended people.

As I thought about good and evil this month, I wondered not only what was evil but where do we find it? It occurred to me that we do not find evil in the natural world. Very often when we think about the natural world, we think in terms of beauty and awe. But the natural world is so much more than that.

The natural world is a place that requires strong survival skills and strategies. Animals kill but we seldom if ever think of it as an evil act. We understand that animals kill out of hunger, a basic need to sustain life. Or they kill in accord with what seems to be nature's law of survival of the fittest; another way life is sustained. We don't view these things as examples of evil behavior.

Volcanoes erupt causing untold damage, earthquakes destroy lives, homes, entire communities, without concern for the innocents. Yet we don't think of it as evil. Some plants put out chemicals that inhibit the growth or kill other plants without being seen as evil doers.

I don't see examples of evil as a driving force in the natural world. I don't believe evil exists in the natural world.

I don't believe evil is a stand-alone force in the universe. I believe evil is man made. Every example of evil I can think of comes at the hands of people, not evil people but people with inherent worth and dignity committing evil acts. The Nazis, slave owners, sexual predators, have not been swept up by evil winds. Each and every one made decisions to behave as they have.

Evil comes out of debased thinking. It's created in the mind that views itself as separate and superior; deserving of power over someone or something else. Evil is not a biological imperative, it's not a stand-alone energy that drives behavior. Evil is an action that is the by-product of particular thought processes.

People can kill driven by rage. While such behavior can be reprehensible or immoral, I don't believe it is evil. Rage is an emotional reaction layered on top of thought or beliefs of having been wronged in some way. It is not behavior, an action, based in a sense of superiority. Evil exists in a territory unto itself.

The antidote to evil is connection. Connection makes space for empathy, a particular kind of connection that I associate with the heart. When we are connected there is no sense of superior and inferior, no in and no out. Connection is like a circle where there is no beginning and no end.

Our society has come to place a great deal of value and importance on Eastern thought and beliefs. That life is about balancing positive and negative forces, yin and yang. We accept Buddhist teachings of the Buddha mind, of no-thing, that it's all an illusion, not to take things personally, that all is one. These are not rational thoughts, although they are beliefs. We meditate to quiet the mind, not to make the mind work better or faster but to make space for the numinous to touch us.

There's a phrase that's become very popular these days: "I'm spiritual not religious". At some point that phrase seems to mean I recognize and connect to something ethereal, separate from myself, and I've concluded that established religion is phony, if not outright dangerous.

I think we know Spirit, not by our conscious thought but by experience. While we can not touch it, we know it has the ability to touch us! We know we experience something when we interact with nature, a sunset, rainbow or a flower in bloom.

We have an ahhh, or ooh, moment. Our bodies react. Our senses are aroused. We are moved. We didn't decide to react. We didn't make a conscious choice to have such an experience, even if we hoped for it. If we are honest, we know full well whatever we experienced happened to us.

Nature is a wonderful metaphor for The All, the mystery, essence, God, creation itself. We can have an experience of nature, yet it is sufficiently "other" that we don't seem to have a need to describe it, to circumscribe it into what it is and what it is not. We don't need to box it into a simple definition our minds can recite. Ditto love, by the way, but that is a subject for another time.

I believe the source and definition of good comes from the outside and enters us. We do not make it up, create it or determine it. It, that which is good, is manifested and comes through us. We can have thoughts about what is good, we can do good, but we are not the source of that which we call or experience as good.

I think it comes from the life force. Some call it Chi, some call it God, others experience it as nature. It's that sacred circle of life that our sources mention, that invites us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature. It's that direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder, which moves us to a renewal of the Spirit.

It's the words and deeds of prophetic women and men that challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. The wisdom from the world's religions that inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life. And through our Jewish and Christian teachings we are called to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

These things, combined, come through our religious faith community. A community that teaches us, challenges us, supports us, guides us and walks our journey with us, encouraging us along our path. And that's the advantage of being both religious and spiritual.