

## **CALLING EVIL BY ITS NAME**

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### **READING AND REFLECTION – Lyn Pearson**

Evil often results from over-identification with popular causes of the day—especially ideological causes that treat people as specimens or lead to an “us v. them” mentality. When over-identification with a cause is coupled with elevated concern for personal goals over consequences to others, the chances for evil further increase. Another factor that increases the likelihood of evil is a person’s or government’s low level of empathy for the people adversely affected by his, her, or its decisions.

Circuit court judge Richard Posner said, “Evil results from indifference to human consequences.”

The summer of my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, I spent way too much time indoors fighting a bad case of mononucleosis. The only thing to do was read, so I read Edgar Allan Poe, *Gone With The Wind*, some Daphne du Maurier and Agatha Christi, and the *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William L. Shirer which is described as, “A monumental work, a grisly and thrilling story as well as a fine piece of academic writing and an accurate historical analysis.”

Whatever. . . Between mononucleosis, Poe and Shirer, it was a depressing summer and while I remember much of Poe, Mitchell, Christie and du Maurier, they didn’t really impact my life. The *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* did. It gave me nightmares and caused a good bit of general discomfort and anxiety but it also taught me a serious lesson in empathy because some of those who suffered the “final solution” were children like me. I was able to imagine how scared I would be if I were separated from my mother and father, how it would feel at the last moment to know I was going to die a horrible death. I imagined how they all felt; mothers and fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins -- all of them. To this day, I cannot comprehend how humans can treat other humans the way the men and women of the Reich treated their victims.

### **READING**

There is "a strange interdependence between thoughtlessness and evil."

--Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt wrote in her often-quoted account of the trial of Nazi Adolf Eichmann, entitled *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*:

"The deeds were monstrous, but the doer was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic or monstrous." Arendt concluded that Eichmann, far from having the desire to prove a villain, sent thousands to their deaths merely because of "a lack of imagination." His only motive was personal advancement: "he never realized what he was doing."

#### AND THIS ITEM:

After ordering the killing of 501 old men, women, and children in the village of My Lai, Lt. William Calley had lunch just yards from the ditch in which many of his victims lay. At his court-martial, Calley was asked by prosecutor Aubrey Daniel whether he took the time to let his superiors know of the massacre that he had just ordered. Calley replied, "No sir...It wasn't any big deal, sir."

#### SERMON – Reverend Nancy Anderson

We have heard the word evil bandied about quite a lot in recent years. Evil is a difficult concept for the likes of us Unitarian Universalists, after all, our first principle is to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Yet it seems to be the label used by people who want to distance themselves from the values of those with whom they disagree. Evil is a powerful word, a word that should not be used lightly. And yet it is a concept we cannot ignore. As TS Eliot observed in his poem "The Rock,"

The world turns and the world changes,  
But one thing does not change.  
In all my years, one thing does not change.  
However you disguise it, this thing does not change:  
The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil.

In our church we talk a lot about truth, peace and respect and love, but we cannot truly understand these ways of living unless we have confronted the reality of human evil in our world and in our lives. And so today I want to concentrate on human behavior,

- The need for us to recognize the presence of evil,
- To name it when we see it,
- To examine our own behaviors and misdeeds, and
- To engage evil only through love.

There are many different ways to study the concept of evil. I have read books on the Science of Good and Evil, the Psychology of Good and Evil, Theology of Good and Evil and the Politics of Good and Evil. Most agree with Eliot that the struggle between good and evil is

perpetual, and most agree that human beings possess the capability for both evil and good. This seems to be the consensus on the nature of evil among those whom I have studied.

Psychologist Michael Shermer, publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, believes that his research shows that human evolution has resulted in transcendent morality wherein the deepest moral thoughts, behaviors and sentiments belong not just to individuals or individual cultures, but to the entire species. He believes that we are born with the capacity for aggression, violence and war, and that we also harbor the seeds of peaceful coexistence. He also thinks that there is no such thing as pure evil, but that evil is a descriptive term for behavior.

Professor and Researcher Ervin Staub, in *The Psychology of Good and Evil*, defines evil as human destructiveness, and his focus is on evil actions not evil persons. He sees goodness as the opposite of evil; that is, actions that bring benefit to individuals or whole groups. Staub's research has led him to believe that both goodness and evil evolve step by step, through human experience and the influence of other people.

For Psychologist Scott Peck, evil is not only destructive behavior, but that which is life denying - "the imposition of one's will upon others by overt or covert coercion in order to avoid spiritual growth." Evil behavior is subtle, persistent and consistent. Peck *does* speak of evil persons or personalities, believing that evil persons attack others rather than acknowledge their own failures and imperfections. Evil originates not in the absence of guilt but in the effort to escape it. (p76)

And UU minister Bill Houff agrees with Peck, and further defines evil as an abuse of power growing out of a sense of powerlessness.

All of these thinkers and researchers agree that there is a cause for evil. It does not just happen. Because there is a cause, it can be prevented, at least to some degree. The very ordinariness of human evil often keeps it from being identified. Unchecked, evil grows and develops and spreads beyond the individual, causing destruction and mayhem. But because human beings also possess the capability for goodness, we can create goodness and minimize evil.

I'd like to share with you the story of Dr. Ervin Staub, author of *The Psychology of Good and Evil*. His story is a powerful one and his work toward understanding group violence leading to genocide shows us that each one of us can have a role in creating goodness and preventing evil.

*(Studying the Pivotal Role of By-Standers* by Daniel Goleman, p2 *The Psychology of Good and Evil*)

It was the summer of 1944, and 6-year-old Ervin Staub and his family, like other Jews in Budapest, were being set apart from their neighbors by the laws imposed by the Nazis. Food was

strictly rationed, and Ervin's 13-year-old cousin Eva, desperate to get a loaf of bread for her family, was waiting in a long bakery line after the curfew for Jews and without the yellow Star of David she was supposed to wear.

“Someone pointed her out as a Jew, and three young thugs tried to take her away. “Dr. Staub recalls, “But she ran to our house to hide, and my aunt yelled at the thugs with such defiance that she scared them away.”

That summer, the Staub family was given protective identity papers by Raul Wallenberg, the Swedish ambassador who used the documents to shelter tens of thousands of Jews from the Nazis.

“What happened to me as a child in Hungary has left me with a lifelong mission to get people to respond to those who need help,” said Dr. Staub.

After fleeing Hungary during the 1956 uprising he eventually came to the United States and completed studies in psychology.

Dr. Staub exemplifies a growing breed of activist research psychologists who are finding ways to apply the lessons of the laboratory in addressing social concerns. The list of his activities is long, but it includes

- training for police officers with the goal of stopping police brutality by teaching them to intervene if their fellows use too much force
- teacher training and the development of caring schools where children learn caring for others by doing
- organizing conferences on activating bystanders
- and intervention work to help heal and promote forgiveness and reconciliation on the part of victims and perpetrators in Rwanda

His activities are based on what he learned from his study of the origins of genocide. This horrific evil doesn't just spring full-blown out of nowhere. “A society,” he notes, “can move, with steps along a continuum of destruction, toward genocide” (p41). The steps often begin in groups of people impacted by difficult life conditions who scapegoat others and identify enemies who stand in the way of fulfilling their visions of a better life. As individuals and groups harm others, they change. Learning by doing occurs.

Discrimination and violence become easier and more likely. Eventually the enemy is completely dehumanized, and the original group of people feels no sense of wrongdoing in their annihilation of the other.

According to Staub, “Bystanders, tragically, are often passive, which has a crucial impact. Passivity by internal bystanders – members of a particular group who themselves are not

perpetrators – and by external bystanders – outside individuals, groups, nations – encourages perpetrators. As perpetrators move along the continuum of destruction, they frequently develop intense commitment to their ideology and to the destruction of their victims. Only actions by bystanders can halt their further evolution toward genocide. Bystanders have great potential power. Frequently, however, they are not only passive, but continuing with business as usual in their relationship to perpetrators or by actively supporting perpetrators, they encourage genocide.”

Staub shows us that bystanders are never innocent, and that we all have a role and responsibility in stopping evil.

Other psychologists and theologians insist that it is imperative that we recognize evil within our own selves as well as in others. Each of us must search our own heart; recognize our own capability for evil, and then, and only then, make judgment upon the behavior of others. None of us can, with any sense of integrity, turn away from evil. We are obliged to call evil by its name, to shout at it with defiance, to scare it away so that good may enter in.

A. Powell Davies wrote, “There is health in us. And our hope is not in a miracle from the skies, but in the health that is in us! We shall not be defeated by fate; no, if we are defeated, it will be only by letting the health that is in us decay and become a mortal sickness.”

Our first principle of affirming the inherent worth and dignity of each individual is the value that leads us to the loving response.

It does not mean that we condone or approve of all behavior, for it is not loving to ignore harmful actions of others. We have simply to think of our obligations in raising children. To reject all of the child’s misbehavior is unloving. To tolerate all of the child’s misbehavior is unloving. “We must somehow be tolerant and intolerant, accepting and demanding, strict and flexible.”

Jacob Needleman writes that “lack of attention may be the original sin.” There is a spiritual and ethical cost of not paying attention, and that cost is allowing evil to flourish in ourselves, in others, and in the world. Naming evil is the first step toward healing the sickness of evil. The rest is doing the hard work of love.

To teach love and to let love guide our actions in the face of evil IS A GREAT PARADOX. It is a difficult and precarious road to travel, but together, we can determine what is right.

Let us take a moment of silence to reflect on our role as victims, perpetrators and bystanders in the great struggle between good and evil.

Amen

