

May Nothing Evil Cross this Door
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
February 4, 2024

Reflection on the Theme by Emily Layfield

This month's theme, evil, was a particularly tricky one for me to reflect on. I associate the word Evil with extremes and binaries and absolutes, and my comfort zone is always the gray areas in between. I have a lot of trouble labeling anything or anyone as evil, in part because so often when I've really dug into a given act of evil, even when the act itself is unfathomable, I've often empathized with the desperation or the alienation or the pressures or the systems that might have led to it happening. And although there are exceptions, often the same risk factors for people being more likely to engage in actions I could call evil are the same risk factors for having evil actions done to them, or villains turn out to have been victims themselves, or enacting historical cycles of violence.

Evil as an idea strikes me as othering and dehumanizing, which seem to be at odds with what seems like it could prevent evil - finding common humanity. Once we've applied a label of evil, we've written someone off as irredeemable, and they can only be dealt with by separation or overpowering or suppression or violence. As far as I know, nobody seems to think that any of those methods lead to the cure or prevention of evil, just the protection from evil, and short term protection at that.

Being so unwilling to engage with the idea of evil, I so rarely know for sure when it's time to draw a hard line and bar the door. Something in me is always wondering if what's really needed is to invite in, to draw closer. I'd probably be one of the first to die in a zombie apocalypse. It's a lot easier when we're talking about extremes, and especially when looking backwards on extreme events that have already occurred. However, most of the time the potential harm we're making decisions about is not extreme, and even the extremes often spend a really long time not being extreme but only existing as a simmering potential that may never come to fruition.

I'm still left reflecting on the questions, rather than arriving at answers. What or who is evil or irredeemable, and how and when do we decide to label them that way? When do we need to write off and fight or protect, and when is there still a chance for redemption or prevention? Since I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to confidently answer those questions, I usually choose to focus on another question entirely - what would it take to create enough safety, belonging, and interdependence in the world so that evil is no longer an idea we need?

***May Nothing Evil Cross this Door*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

[Following the performance of *Turn Back, O Man* by Stephen Schwartz by our Music Director, Allison King]

Thank you, Allison. You did a much finer job of that song than I did back in college when we put on a production of *Godspell* at the First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City! It was sure fun to sing, though... I searched for my pink feather boa this week, but alas I must have given it away. It's sung at the beginning of the second act. The show features the parables of Jesus, mostly taken from the Gospel of Matthew. Though the reference for this song is probably in the book of Ezekiel where God calls on the

people to “repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin” or later, “As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways...”

The English poet and playwright Clifford Bax wrote the words in 1916 from which the song is taken. It’s #120 in our hymnal, set to the Old 124th tune.

*Turn back, O man, forswear thy foolish ways.
Old now is earth, and none may count her days,
Yet thou, its child, whose head is crowned with flame,
Still wilt not hear thine inner God proclaim,
“Turn back, O man, forswear thy foolish ways.”*

But it’s much more fun with those ‘*da da da da da*’s Stephen Schwartz put in there.

It was written in the middle of World War I, and I can only imagine that the poet was thinking of the foolishness of war and his hope we would forswear it. A humbling thought this week following the airstrikes on Iran-linked targets in Iraq in retaliation for the drone attack killing three US soldiers...

Evil is our theme this month and so we’ll be talking about war and extinction and oppression because in order to counter these forces of evil, we must first understand them.

It is hard to understand evil, if you reject, like Solzhenitsyn and Emily this morning, the binary of good and evil. It is hard to understand evil if we understand that the dividing line cuts through the heart of every human being, and that it is counterproductive to label someone as evil and write them off or destroy them.

This is why I don’t think of evil as existing in an object or being or person, but rather as process – the cycle of violence or process of addiction, for example, which can afflict any of us.

I boldly stated in the description for this service that the first hymn in our hymnal – the *Singing the Living Tradition* – was selected because it was the most popular hymn at the time of printing. #1 May Nothing Evil Cross this Door. I thought I had learned that from Mark Belletini who worked on that hymnal, but I couldn’t get verification of that fact online this week. What I do know is that we sang it quite often at the First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City when I was there from 1979-1987, and that I’ve not heard it as often in UU churches since. I think Erik Walker Wikstrom is correct when he says that UU’s don’t talk about evil very much. Not only do we have our own Universalist heritage that believed God is too loving to condemn us to hell, but many UU’s came from – many of you in this room – came from other traditions in which evil was used to describe such things as women in the pulpit or card playing or dancing, things I am proudly guilty of and do not consider the least bit evil.

But there are things I do consider evil, like war and oppression. Wikstrom wrote those lines about UU’s not talking about evil just after the coordinated suicide terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001. He was struggling to help a congregation understand the events. I was just starting my last year of seminary in Chicago that year, and boy was I relieved to not have the responsibility of a congregation during that time. Many of my friends were in their first year of ministry when that happened. I did not envy them that fall. Making sense of evil or trying to make meaning out of tragedy is one of the things we are called to do in religious communities, because bad things happen and if we

are to survive, we must grapple with it. But those particular events brought evil home on a large scale and many Americans – not all – but many, were not prepared for it. They didn't have a context for it or an understanding of how such a thing might have happened.

I had come face to face with evil as a young adult when I was assaulted and my life threatened. I'm not calling the man who assaulted me evil, but the assault itself evil as were whatever events that led him to do what he did, to hurt me the way he hurt me, the cycle of violence of which I'm sure he was caught up in, and in times in my life nearly took me down with it. When the attacks of 9/11 took place, I was already grappling with evil and was not surprised that such horror could ensue, even on such a grand scale – in fact, I believed it to be a more common experience in most of the world and that many in this country were simply isolated from such violence. Sometimes, I have to admit, their shock and horror struck me as naïve – and well, let's just say it was a good thing that I wasn't ministering to a congregation at that time. As judgmental as I was of how others tried to minister during that time, I know in my heart I would have fumbled it as well. It was an impossibly difficult situation.

As I get older, life just seems to up offer a series of impossibly difficult situations.... That's why I love the Lemony Snicket children's books, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. It says on the lemonsnicket website, "If you have not read anything about the Baudelaire orphans, then before you read even one more sentence, you should know this: Violet, Klaus, and Sunny are kindhearted and quick-witted, but their lives are filled with bad luck and misery. All of the stories about these three children are unhappy and wretched and will most likely fill you with deep despair." Wikipedia tells me that "As the series progresses, the Baudelaires must face the reality that their actions have become morally ambiguous, blurring the lines between which characters should be read as 'good' or 'evil.'"

I've gotten ahead of myself really. I wanted to talk about the story Elise read this morning – *the Dark* because it works on so many levels. It was written by Lemony Snicket, the pen name of Daniel Handler, and author of *the Series of Unfortunate Events*. The first thing I thought of when I read it was the basement metaphor from last week, from Isabel Wilkerson's book, *Caste*. Remember how Laszlo didn't want to go into the basement because that's where the dark was? Isabel Wilkerson wrote that "when you live in an old house, you may not want to go into the basement after a storm to see what the rains have wrought. Choose not to look, however, at your own peril. The owner of an old house knows that whatever you are ignoring will never go away. Whatever is lurking will fester whether you choose to look or not. Ignorance is no protection from the consequences of inaction."

She compares America to an old house, and it is the caste system in America that we don't wish to look at – the racism at the core of America's founding.

"The owner of an old house knows that whatever you are ignoring will never go away." And that's what Laszlo seems to learn in our story about the dark – that by facing it, some of the power is lost.

The other thing that came to mind with this story that Elise told this morning is the shadow self – the parts of ourselves that don't correspond with our ideal self, which we resist, suppress and hide even from our own consciousness, sometimes projecting it onto others. "Choose not to look, however, at your own peril...whatever you are ignoring will never go away. Whatever is lurking will fester whether you choose to look or not. Ignorance is no protection from the consequences of inaction."

Whether it's past trauma you're ignoring, or intense anger about that trauma – it will either surface and heal because we've done important intentional work, or surface in a harmful way, threatening ourselves and others, because we haven't done the work to restore health.

I don't remember what evil I thought of when singing our opening hymn back in the 1980's in Salt Lake City, but I will tell you that ever since the 2008 shooting in a UU church in Knoxville, Tennessee, a church my friend Gordon Gibson was a member of, "may nothing evil cross this door" has a concrete image for me – I pray that a gunman will not enter this sanctuary and kill here. I don't even like saying that aloud, for fear that speaking my fear could summon it, even though I know that's just me being like Laszlo and not wanting to look at the dark basement. The fact that our local rabbi has a button in her pulpit to summon help directly from the sheriff's office is a reality for us in this world. That we received an email this summer with violent threats is a fact. Our children have experience with active shooter drills in public schools. For us to not prepare and think about it would be negligent and naïve, but for us not to gather because of these realities would be to submit to the tyranny of evil.

"If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them," said Solzhenitsyn. "But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

As the *Series of Unfortunate Events* progresses, the orphans must face the reality that their actions have become morally ambiguous, blurring the lines between which characters should be read as 'good' or 'evil.' Emily, I sure hope you are not the first to die in a zombie apocalypse! Please take care, pay attention and draw that line and bar that door.

Last week I mentioned that Isabel Wilkerson's book, *Caste*, helped many in America see the disconnect between their belief that racism was "over" in America – that it had been a Southern problem and something overcome in the last century – and the reality that the American house was built on structures of racism which hadn't been gutted or repaired. Jeanne Theoharis in her introductions to *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* likewise pointed out that the public tribute following the death of Rosa Parks obscured the truth and packaged her story up in a narrative that made the country feel good – that we had overcome racism in this country – and that it was done easily by a quiet seamstress who simply remained seated on a bus. These narratives, I submit, are evil. They tell stories that aren't true and stories that don't help us grapple with evil or heal. I don't know about the usefulness of calling laws in Florida that ban the teaching of American history – evil, though I think they contribute to evil. And if you choose to never use the word Evil to describe any of these malevolent forces at work, that's fine with me – as long as we face those forces, as long as we look in the basement, as long as we don't pretend its not there. Because "ignorance is no protection from the consequences of inaction."

I think one of the resistances to naming 'white supremacy culture' as a force among us is that we want to see racism as out and over there and not in here. We don't want to know that our unconscious biases contribute to racism in the world, because we don't wish to label ourselves as evil. We have a history of being labeled as evil – as a heretical branch of the Christian church, we got used to being told that a belief in a unity rather than a trinity, or a belief that all are salvageable and none dispensable – these beliefs, to the orthodoxy, were evil. Being told that hurt us, and from our woundedness, we would do just about anything to consider ourselves good, even deny our part in supremacy thinking.

All this leads me to make a plug for a new group starting this afternoon – from 3-4:30 will be the first meeting of a group focused on exiting high demand religion. This term “high demand religion” was new to me, but I think I understand the concept especially when the facilitators name their experience of exiting the LDS/Mormon faith and Evangelical/Pentecostal congregations. If you have such an experience, you are invited into a conversation with others who have journeyed out of a high demand religious group, experienced the identity crisis which can ensue, and have come to a healthy spirituality on the other side of it all, and others who are in various stages of the process. Hosts have experience exiting the LDS/Mormon faith, Evangelical/Pentecostal congregations, and more. Those on the journey out, contemplating leaving, or able to support those who are leaving are welcome. Both today and February 18th meetings will happen at 3pm on Zoom. Please email deconstructing@uucvan.org to get the link to the meeting. The email address was in both Tuesday and Friday’s bulletins. If you’re not getting the bulletin, you can sign up for it at the bottom of our church website.

I dated a Mormon in high school – I was in Utah, after all. And before his mission, he had a missionary farewell – a Sunday service and reception to follow. I remember how very shocked I was when his mother spoke at the service – probably one of the only church services I went to with them, but she talked about evil. I don’t remember exactly her words, but all I can tell you is that I was convinced she was speaking of me and the evil I represented to her son’s faith. I know that many religious groups have a very different understanding of good and evil, and that many of us in this room would be labelled by them as evil... for our religious beliefs, or our feminism, or our sexuality, or etc. etc. If those beliefs are in your background, I do urge you to join the conversation this afternoon, because it is in community that we find healing.

It was a little strange to be raised Unitarian Universalist in the very Mormon state of Utah. I remember when we staged Godspell in college at the UU church, I actually thought it might bring me closer to some of my LDS friends, given the parables of Jesus are so featured. (and we didn’t do a lot of Jesus in my home church.) But I remember friends whose parents prohibited their attending the show – I don’t really know why – it’s probably those “da da da da da’s” that Stephen Shwartz added to the old 124th.