

The Sources of Evil in Our World

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February 20, 2011

*Evil is unspectacular and always human,
and shares our bed and eats at our own table.*

W. H. Auden

Opening Words² Nathan MacDicken

Why do bad things happen to good people?

I've thought about this a lot. I've decided that I don't believe in "Evil." I believe there's an "Ebb and Flow" to Universal Energy that might Create in one moment and Destroy in the next... But I don't think that's proof of "Good vs. Evil."

An Earthquake doesn't kill people because it hates them and wants them to suffer.

I think the Universe is more like a giant "Scale" that needs to be kept in balance.

What about Murder, Nathan?
Or Genocide? What about Rape? Is there Justice to "balance" these?

I don't know... I hope so.

Maybe I'd see it all differently if



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I'd survived a prison camp. Or if I'd ever seen a man lynched.

I've been mugged... twice. Each time I looked into the eyes of my assailants, but I didn't see hate or malice. I saw... numbness. The kind that leaves one callused after prolonged pain. They weren't after *me*, they just wanted to matter.

I think evil comes from "self-center". Excessive, Acute selfishness. Acting on a belief that you are the only one who matters. Your hunger, your pain, your vengeance, your nation, your race... your life.

It might feel like that mugger, or that disease, or that market crash, or that tsunami was crafted for the singular purpose of making your life worse...

But then *we* are getting sucked into Selfish Thought.

I hope that doesn't sound "fatalistic." Maybe we can't eliminate pain, but we can lessen suffering. We can lessen the reward for dictators, bullies and brutality... We can make a "blow" for Goodness!

By stepping out of our own bubble to see the world through someone else's eyes. By showing someone how much they matter.

After 9/11, I decided to leave the "cubical farm" and attack hate, any way I could. But I'm not a soldier, or a doctor... I'm an artist. So my strategy was to make people feel better about themselves and maybe make them less... angry.

UU's are great about this! We're known for our compassion and willingness to "empower" others. By being here this morning, you are diminishing "evil" in a small way...

Let us stand on the side of love. Come, let us worship together.

First Reading

from *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*
Reinhold Niebuhr

Evil is always the assertion of some self-interest without regard for the whole, whether the whole be conceived as the immediate community, or the total community of [hu]mankind, or the total order of the world.

The good is, on the other hand, always the harmony of the whole on various levels. Devotion to a subordinate and premature 'whole' such as the nation, may of course become evil, viewed from the perspective of the larger whole, such as the community of [hu]mankind.

The 'children of light' may thus be defined as those who seek to bring self-interest under the discipline of a more universal law and in harmony with a more universal good.

Second Reading

from *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956*
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

If only it were all so simple! 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. 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?" ...

Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either — but right through every human heart — and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is re-

tained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an unuprooted small corner of evil.

Since then I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the *evil inside a human being* (inside every human being). It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.

Sermon³

Duane Fickeisen

The problem of evil has been an interesting, troubling, and persistent concern for human beings, probably from the earliest awareness of conscious thinking as our ancestors asked why bad things happened to them. In many ways the nature and sources of evil remain something many of us wonder about. It was the first theme the authors of the Bible tackled after describing the creation. Eve was lured by the serpent to disobey God's command not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. That knowledge doesn't seem to have helped humankind much in terms of understanding how to prevent evil, based on experience in the many millennia since.

Theologians and lay people still struggle with questions of why bad things happen, the nature of evil, whether or not there is an evil entity active in opposition to the good, and if so how it might be exorcised or its powers overcome, and how we might find relief from its effects.

The evils I'm considering this morning are the ones that result from human agency. I'm not including natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods, or storms.

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But that distinction is blurred in at least two ways: our consumption of fossil fuels and the consequent release of sequestered carbon into the atmosphere has demonstrably altered the global climate and will continue to do so. The impacts of melting icecaps, rising sea levels, increased severity of storms, and changes in precipitation and temperature patterns will very likely bring about disasters and unrest that dwarf what we have known until now. This evil is clearly the result of human activity and we seem unable even to take in the magnitude of the problem, let alone begin even to slow the growth of our profligate use of fossil energy sources or mitigate the impacts.

And second, the effects of floods, earthquakes, storms, and other natural occurrences are often magnified by factors such as where and how we have built and how we have maintained structures. Take the Johnstown Flood of 1889, for example. Maintenance on the South Fork Dam had been largely ignored, and the spillway had been compromised by installation of screens to keep fish in the reservoir and by lowering the dam to permit a wider carriage path, both for the benefit of wealthy owners of the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club that surrounded the reservoir. Signs of potential dam failure were ignored, and when the dam was clearly in danger of bursting, warning communications to downstream communities were delayed. The resulting flood killed 2,209 people, including 396 children. 99 entire families were killed. 750 of the bodies were never identified. The 61 members of the Hunting and Fishing Club, owners of the dam, were never held accountable. They were captains of industry — railroad men, bankers, steel magnates, and others involved in minerals extraction and manufacturing. They included Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, and Andrew Mellon.

Shoddy construction, most often by design to save costs,

continues. We're still building in flood plains, even though we know that future floods will exceed the prior records used to define the extent of flood-prone lands. Forest management practices and land use decisions in drylands increase the danger and the effects of wildfires. Highly flammable non-native plants have invaded vast areas of the desert west after being introduced by human activity. These represent evils that could have been avoided had we made different decisions and better managed land use, building codes, inspections and maintenance of infrastructure; and if we had taken greater care to prevent intentional and accidental introductions of plants, insects, and animals to non-native environments.

What I am talking about this morning is evil that results from human agency, including the avoidable magnification of effects of natural disasters that result from human activity.

What makes bad things happen to good people, as Rabbi Kushner asked in the title of a popular book? In classical theology, the problem of how or why God would permit bad things to happen is called theodicy.

And oh my, how theologians have struggled with the question and crafted implausible explanations. If God is omnipotent and omniscient (all powerful and all knowing) then God would know when bad things were about to happen and would have the power to halt them. If God doesn't prevent evil when God could, it must mean either that God is not caring or that God has some purpose for allowing evil or making us suffer.

Many theologians reject the idea that God is not caring. That must mean that there is some benevolent divine purpose in suffering if we accept that God could prevent it.

That leads either to the conclusion that we are being punished or tested. The punishment is for our sins and serves ei-

ther to bring us to atonement or to warn others to behave differently. If you accept the idea of original sin — that we have inherited the sins of our ancestors and have an underlying essentially sinful nature — then perhaps you would conclude that all of us deserve punishment. But I don't agree.

The testing is to try our faith — will we still trust God, even when we are suffering? In this approach, our suffering is asserted to somehow be good for us and it serves the purpose of bringing us closer to God.

Both of these are deeply flawed formulations in my opinion. Punishment by permitting evil is nearly always way out of proportion to the offense, and it leaves open the question of why some are punished while others are spared. The assertion that suffering is good suggests that we should stay in abusive relationships and it supports repressive governments, slavery, and other forms of institutionalized evil. From my perspective that does not serve to bring us closer to God, but distances us from the divine. I believe we come closer to God through true love and enjoyment, not through suffering.

It was the theology that somehow evil is good that drove me away from conventional Christianity as a youth. A God who is omniscient and omnipotent and still permits evil and suffering surely cannot be benevolent and thus is not worthy of my allegiance.

My friend and collaborator in working to create a public park in our small town was killed by a drunk driver some 35 years ago in a head-on collision. The other driver had been stopped by the police 20 minutes earlier, ticketed for DUI, and permitted to continue driving. Glen left a wife and two young daughters to grieve his sudden and horrible death. How could their suffering possibly be imagined as punishment? How could this possibly bring any of us closer to a God who would

permit Glen's death when it could have been prevented? The answer for me then was that it affirmed my atheistic humanism, although I lacked the language to describe it as such.

It was only much later that I learned about process theology and a different approach to thinking about God. It's one I have come to fully embrace. Charles Hartshorne was a key figure in the development of process theology, building on Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy and metaphysics. Hartshorne was a Unitarian Universalist theologian and metaphysician who lived through all but about three months of the 20th Century. He was still publishing at his 100th birthday.

Process metaphysics understands the cosmos as a series of events. Each entity is a momentary expression of energy with agency to participate in creating the next moment of existence. Entities have free will and are constantly in the process of making choices. The range of choices is constrained by the past and the opportunities ahead. Every choice effects all of the entities. We are deeply interconnected. This theory is consistent with what we have learned from quantum physics and systems theory.

Into this process metaphysics Hartshorne posited a force that encourages and lures us to make choices that enhance what he called "enjoyment" but we might understand broadly as bringing more love into the world. Hartshorne named that force God, but it is a very different understanding of God than the classic theologians held.

Hartshorne's God is deeply relational. How else would God work with us to lure us to make good choices? God is in mutual, intimate relationship with every entity. That means you and me. And it means that God is at once immanent — present within us; relational — present among us; and tran-

scendent — present beyond us.

To be in any meaningful mutual relationship means that both parties are changed by the relationship. Hartshorne's God is not immutable, but is ever changing and evolving, growing and responding.

In order for the entities to have meaningful agency — to have free will — God cannot be omnipotent. If God were all powerful, our choices could be overruled and free will would be diminished. Hartshorne's God is not conceived as all powerful. The entities, including human beings, are partners with God, serving as creative agents necessary for the evolution — the unfolding — of the next moment and the next and the next in the ever ongoing process of becoming and choosing.

As we exercise our free will and agency we sometimes make bad decisions — ones that decrease enjoyment, result in harm and suffering for others, and fall in the realm of evil. God doesn't want that, and lures us to choose love, but can't force us to do so. And since God is in deep relationship with us, God suffers along with us when bad things happen and enjoyment in the world is diminished.

Another UU theologian, though he would likely have preferred a label without the "theo" part, was our late member Alan Franklin. Alan embraced process metaphysics, but didn't think there was a need to put God into it. Keep it simple, he advocated, adopting the scientific method of seeking the most efficient and least complicated explanation for observed phenomena and demanding disconfirmable evidence.

Last summer, shortly before he died, Alan was working on revisions to an essay about the Spirit of Love. He asserted that we carry both a Spirit of Love and a Spirit of Me-First and that these are often in conflict within us. Both are elements of our humanity that have evolved because they have survival value.

For Alan, both were transcendent, too. He conceived of them as forces that are an intimate and integral part of humanity, not just a quality that resides in the individual.

The Spirit of Love encourages us to choose love out of compassion and care for the larger community. (Community means something big and encompassing and is not limited to a small gathering of human beings.) The Spirit of Me-First encourages us to self-preservation and looking out for our own individual interests. These often seem to be in conflict, but it was Alan's contention that ultimately our individual wellbeing and preservation is dependent on that of the whole community and thus he expressed the hope and expectation that we would learn to attune our decision making to the admonitions of the Spirit of Love.

While I argued that our positions were not that different — that it was more a matter of language than deep philosophical difference, Alan maintained that the difference is significant — that you don't need God to be good. I cannot disagree on that last point. Ethics is a matter of how we make decisions and exercise our free will. Whether the lure to choose love comes from what I call God or Alan's Spirit of Love or simply from life experience that suggests things turn out better when we seek to create more love and enjoyment than when we do the opposite, may we choose the path of love, not evil.

Which brings us around to understanding evil as the result of intentional choices each of us makes all too often that diminish love and enjoyment in the community that is our world. As Solzhenitsyn wrote, the line that divides good and evil goes through every human heart. Our struggle, as it has always been for humanity, is with the capacity for evil that resides within you and me.

We have free agency, as entities in process, we choose the

future and create it. May we choose well and strive to follow the call of the Spirit of Love or God's allurements toward enjoyment rather than the Spirit of Me-First.

That's what our mission calls us to — transforming lives and caring for the world are powerful ways to overcome evil.

Amen.

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