

There Be Dragons!

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This morning I would like to begin with a story.

They were like stair-steps, that merry young band of cousins, in height and in age. We, the tired old ones, were sooo glad when one of the uncles put out the call to those, the never still ones, “Let’s go out for an adventure.”

Our family was celebrating Thanksgiving in unfamiliar turf. The relatives who lived there had only recently moved. There was indeed much unexplored territory on the blocks near their house. So . . . off they went, an uncle, like Robin Hood with 7 or 8 enthusiastic followers.

And then for the rest of us there was quiet, blissful quiet. Adults stretched out and dozed or sat by the fire, reading.

A little while later, we could hear them returning. Voices, feet swishing through piles of leaves. And I heard one coming at a much faster pace. The door swung open and in bounced my youngest, Ethan, age 3 ½. He ran to me in great and serious excitement. Mommy, guess what we found? I could not guess, he could not wait to tell me.

“We found the place where the monsters live!” The words exploded out of his small mouth. I didn’t understand but I could feel the tension in him, the wonder of being out on an adventure with all his cousins, yet a part of him that wanted to cuddle and feel safe.

Before long the rest returned and I learned that they had been in the woods and had discovered a shack. The outer boards had been plastered with racial epithets; the inside full of hate literature.

Of course, the younger ones of the stair-step gang were at the stage of needing to sound out words and in this way my youngest, a child of color, heard perhaps for the first time, words that he would likely hear again. From the sound of them he drew the logical conclusion that, indeed, this was where the monsters lived.

It was a Thanksgiving to remember—the ways of a hard world, the warmth of a nurturing fire in the arms of those who love you—a tension to live with.

For my son, evil had been personified. Those who think evil thoughts and might do evil things were “monsters.” Bruno Bettelheim explains this thinking in children. In his book, *The Uses of Enchantment* he discusses why children are drawn to fairy tales and other mythic scenarios:

“Since [the child] cannot comprehend intermediate stages of degree and intensity, things are either all light or all darkness. One is either all courage or all fear; the happiest or the most miserable; one either loves or hates, never anything in between . . . Every figure is essentially one-dimensional, enabling the child to comprehend its actions and reactions easily . . . the fairy story helps the child sort out complex and ambivalent feelings, so that these begin to fall each one into a separate place, rather than being all one big muddle.” (*The Uses of Enchantment*, Vintage books edition, 1977, p. 74)

And, of course, it is not always only children who try to avoid “the muddle,” who have a need to use simplistic notions in a world of chaos. At one time sailors and other sojourners were warned not to go too far into unknown territories because “Thar be dragons!” Monsters, evil creatures of unimaginable proportions, would be there to meet and to overpower. As far back as Ulysses we see the classic battles between good and evil. At this Halloween time of hobgoblins and monsters, as well as a world that we are told contains “evil doers,” we will consider the presence of evil in this world, how Unitarian Universalists consider it, and what we might do about it.

Somewhat like children on Halloween, many of us have a wish to simplify bad things in life – to roll them up into dragons or monsters, ghosts or Satan. I will bet that later today, as we open our doors to trick-or-treaters, that most of us will see at least one Satan, one devil with horns and a tail. In the Bible we find those mythic images that help us overcome the confusion of an unordered, chaotic world. “God divided the light from darkness.” But friends, most of us here I am guessing, would admit that very few things in life are that simple. There is not one explanation about why bad things happen.

In the face of this we UUs find ourselves in a theological dilemma.

Over the past few decades there has been debate in UU circles over the question of whether our theology has the capacity to deal with the notion of “evil.” Unitarians and Universalists have been such persistent optimists. Every day in every way we are getting better! In the 19th century we chimed “Onward and upward forever!”. We were the children of the Enlightenment. We were the children of the promise of democracy, of the enticement toward new frontiers of land and of science and of societal advancements. But then came unimaginable horror and crimes on a monumental scale. Wars and the Holocaust shook our optimistic roots. Then there came the very hard events of the 21st century. So now where does the notion of “evil” fit in for us?

Scott Alexander, one of our ministerial colleagues over at River Road, wrote about this back in 1981:

“After our theologically shattering encounter with the radical evil of Auschwitz and other 20th century places of absolute human horror, our religious hopes must become tough, suspicious, realistic, aware, and open to the limits of human potential . . . We must begin again, and look for our affirmative ground of being—somewhere in between the utopianism of our past, and the cynicism which eagerly awaits our fall from faith.”

The question is left for us: How can our faith then deal with the notion of evil? Where is that middle ground between utopianism and cynicism?

To get another angle on our perspective on the nature of evil, let’s take a few minutes to look a bit more closely at our theological history, to listen to a few voices from our past.

Unitarianism in Europe in part grew out of Enlightenment in England. It was John Locke and others in the late 1600s who began to look at the possibility that people were not fundamentally bad and that people acting collectively could correct the more dysfunctional few; of course, it was this kind of thinking that led to democracy. It was also one of the foundations of humanism.

Unitarianism in America developed in the 19th century in part as a reaction to Calvinism which continued to preach that we humans are all sinners, and there is no good in us.

Good old William Ellery Channing and others told us that humans indeed do have the capacity for good. We also have the capacity to do bad things. We have free will, and therefore have the power to choose, and our choices then influence our lives and the lives of others.

In essence, our Unitarian forebears believed that humans had the capacity for good and only needed to use it!

Now, from Universalism we hear from people who were on fire with God’s love for them which led them to love, like God . . . a love which extended to all people:

Benjamin Rush, a Universalist signer of the *Declaration of Independence*, founder of the first anti-slavery society:

“A belief in God’s universal love to all his creature . . . will lead to truths upon all subjects, more especially upon the subject of government. It establishes the equality of mankind – it abolishes the punishment of death for any crime – and converts jails into houses of repentance and reformation.”

For our Universalist forebears goodness came in response to God’s love. They had no illusion that people would not always act according to God’s goodness. But for them evil was not the mythic force as we hear about from some segments of Christianity. Evil was rather the result of what happens when humans try to separate others from themselves and from that which cannot be separated, from the profound and all-encompassing love of God.

Hosea Ballou, an early 19th century Universalist, declared that no divine force would ever divide human beings. What a powerful notion! No divine force would ever divide us! He told us that we, ourselves, create hell. Evil comes when we separate people into categories of “other” —apart from ourselves.

“If we agree in brotherly love, there is not [any] disagreement that can do us injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good.”

For Universalists all that divides is contrary to our natural state of being. Salvation comes when all division ends. It is up to us to save the world by overcoming the artificial divisions among us. Humans have the ability, the power, and the choice to do so.

Early in our faith tradition our optimism was untamed!

The 20th century moderated that 19th century sense that we were always heading towards what would be better. Such thinking unfortunately just didn’t seem to hold up in the face of 20th century atrocities.

And then comes the 21st century which we are also struggling to understand.

The question remains, where does evil fit in today’s thinking about the world? Let us listen to a couple of voices from the present.

One of these voices draws heavily on our Universalist heritage.

This from Forrest Church, minister at All Souls Church in New York City:

“Ever since Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent, we humans have avoided taking responsibility for our actions (and therefore accountability for their consequences) by proclaiming that the buck stops elsewhere. That, in a nutshell, is original sin.

Liberal theology doesn’t take sin and evil seriously enough. American fundamentalism takes evil seriously, and would certainly seem to have a doctrine of sin. But by trivializing sin into a moralistic catalogue of personal foibles, American fundamentalists reserve the badge of evil for others. With sin, however, there are no others. The world is not divided into sheep and goats. Each of us is both sheep and goat, making original sin a corrective to any theology based on an “us-versus-them” model, and conducive as well to the development of a clear-eyed, unsentimental universalism.”

He continues:

“Abu Musab al-Zarquawi and his henchmen beheaded Nick Berg, recording it on videotape in retaliation for the brutal, humiliating treatment of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison, itself captured on video. Events in Iraq tragically prove the first law of history. Choose your enemies carefully, for you will become like them.

We have so much more in common than could ever possibly divide us. We are all alike, all mysteriously born, fated to die, the mortar of mortality binding us fast to one another, the same sun setting on each of our horizons. What we all want and need are love and security and freedom and acceptance. We need others’ forgiveness and understanding. All of us do. We ache in the same way. We bleed in the same way. At times, we all feel awkward and unworthy and inadequate. And we all fail at times to hearken to the better angels of our nature.”

Church continues: “This is the centerpiece of theological universalism. To whatever extent we place our primary identification with creed or nation, with race or gender, with school or party, we betray our common humanity. Party to faction, we are prey to the beguiling logic of division, the logic of retribution and judgment, the logic of hate.”

Forrest is still preaching from our Universalist roots that abhor division.

Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School for the Ministry also builds on our early Universalism when she says

“Humanity must enlarge the borders of consciousness to include the entire human race. High civilization is not the prerogative of any one race, . . . The hope for peace on earth depends upon our outgrowing of smaller attachments; our religion must take the form of a larger loyalty.”

She here stands easily with our Universalist forbears.

And what about beliefs from our Unitarian roots, the belief that human beings can step up to our innate capacities for good?

Some UU humanists today would posit that evil is a potential in all people, but given the right conditions, we are more naturally good than bad. In fact, many human developmentalists say that the idea of trust in the universe starts extremely early in life. There may even be a genetic component to this. As an educator I know that there are indeed lots of ways to encourage the natural good in children! So perhaps the keywords here are “given the right conditions” . . . we are more naturally good than bad. We need, however, to figure out what are the right conditions and work to make them the norm of what all human beings have access to.

For my own part, I think about a seminar I took with a specialist in conflict mediation (Jay Rothman). His specialty was “identity based conflict.” He had worked with African tribes, with middle eastern leaders, even with leaders of faith communities, with some success. The one piece of the process that I remember most was when he got two adversaries into the same room and then into a structured conversation. I especially was impressed by one of his ground rules: While one person talks the only interruption can be for a question, and not any question, but only this one: “Why do you care about that so much?” It seemed to work. Over and over that same question until what was of ultimate importance, on a most basic human level, could be deeply understood by the other, at the basic human level, as in our own Universalism, where there is no division. We care deeply about much the same things.

So, how do we Unitarian Universalists handle the notion of evil and what we do about it? Here are a few suggestions. I am sure you could add more.

First, let us name that we must recognize the capacity for evil in ALL of us and then let us nurture capacities for goodness. On 9/11 we saw evil actions; we also saw tremendous acts of goodness and of heroism. Human beings have the capacity for good. We must nurture that.

Second, let us deconstruct the notion of dragons. We need not be fooled into simplistic explanations: It is not useful to place blame in one place, label it as Evil personified, as monster or dragon. Let us be adults, and instead jump into “the muddle” (as Bettelheim named it) where answers are not brightly clear and much is required of both our intellect and love.

Third, let us let go of hubris in world affairs. The world belongs not to us, not even to all of us, but to itself. We need to share it and acknowledge the human dignity of all. And let us listen well and hard when we sincerely ask another, “Why do you care so much?”

Let us work hard to remove the language of division, of “us-them,” from our vocabularies and help our children do the same.

For GOODNESS sake, let’s VOTE!! Check in with your neighbors. Help others to the polling places. The Cedar Lane staff has been wearing the buttons that say, “Use your vote or lose your voice.” Such is the bottom line in a democracy.

Yes, in this world “thar be dragons,” there are things to be feared which we, like my young Ethan, may call monsters. But we also have power :

To build a more inclusive world,

To educate our children,

To challenge oppressive institutions and economies which leave many in the world living in poverty and without a voice

. . .

Let us be re-energized by a vision of a better world, by setting our direction towards getting to good, perhaps a vision something like Judy Chicago described in these words from “The Dinner Party” (and her words are very Universalist!):

“And then all that has divided us will merge

And then compassion will be wedded to power

And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind

And then both men and women will be gentle

And then both women and me will be strong

And then no person will be subject to another's will
And then all will be rich and free and varied
And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many
And then all will share equally in the Earth's abundance
And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old
And then all will nourish the young
And then all will live in harmony with each other and the earth
And then everywhere will be called Eden once again."