

What Evil Depends On

A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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Earlier this year while serving and living in the Palm Beaches an incident happened in a department store that I haven't been able to shake. I shopped for a few items and found the shortest line and waited for my turn to cash out. I noticed man standing at the opening to the line signaling to his wife that the line I was in was short. His wife was several aisles away and moving slowly. In the meantime, a young woman was ready to cash out and took her place in line behind me. Mind you the man's wife was still far away. The man became angry, grabbed the woman's arm and tried physically pulling her out of the line. The white man started slapping the black woman calling her, I quote, "trash, a darkie, the N word, and told her she should go in a line with her own kind." Yes in 2017 a white man was verbally, physically, and publicly abusive toward a black woman. The woman did respond by telling the man he needed to be very sure he wanted to fight because she was having none of it. This incident has stuck with me and haunts me because I was right there witnessing the violence and I said nothing. I didn't step in, I didn't help, and I didn't name the injustice. Nothing. I remember feeling like I needed to bear witness to the incident, but didn't. I wish I had. I could have helped the woman. I could have used my voice to stand up to the racist and violent man and call him out. What haunts me is that a mother, a daughter, a sister, a wife was physically and verbally abused that day and I can't help but wonder if this human being is accustomed to this. What did she feel like when she sat in her car? What did she tell her family? Did she know that I was a witness and failed to help? You see, what evil depended on that day was my lack of courage. What evil depended on was my silence.

Evil depends on good people to be quiet. Let me tell you another story, that of William Lynn Weaver. He was one of the first black football players on the team at his Knoxville, Tenn., high school when it integrated in 1964. The mascot for the West High School Rebels back then was a Confederate colonel. Weaver says, "At football games, when you came out on the field, the crowd would be hollering, and the 'Dixie' would be playing and they'd hold the paper flag up and the team would burst out through the Confederate flag. The black players made a decision to run around the flag. Weaver remembers there were teams that refused to play the Rebels because it had been integrated. There were always racial comments, banners with the n-word, and, at one point in time, there was even a dummy with a noose around its neck hanging from the goal posts.

He remembers an incident playing an all-white school. He says, "The game was maybe only in the second quarter. My brother tackled their tight end and broke his collarbone, and when they had to take him off the field with his arm in a sling, that's when the crowd really got ugly." His team was on the visitors' sideline and the opposing team came toward them from across the field. "So we backed up against the fence. I remember the coach saying, 'Keep your helmet on.' So I was pretty afraid," he says. "And then a hand reaches through the fence and grabs my shoulder pads. I look around and it's my father. And I turned to my brother, I said, 'It's OK; Dad's here.' "

The state police came and escorted the team to its buses, he remembers, as the crowd chanted and threw things at the bus.

"As the bus drives off, I look back, and I see my father standing there and all these angry white people and I said to my brother, 'How's Daddy going to get out of here? They might kill him.' " Weaver got back to the high school, and then his father walked through the locker room door and said, " 'Are you ready to go?' – as if nothing had happened," he says. "And I wanted to tell him, 'Dad, don't come to any more games,' but selfishly I couldn't. I needed him there for me to feel safe. "Normally when you're with a team, you feel like everybody's going to stand together, and I never got that feeling that the team would stand with me if things got bad," Weaver says. "I think a number of the white students who were there with me would say now, If I could have did something different, I would've said something. But that's what evil depends on, good people to be quiet."

We Unitarian Universalists don't talk about evil very much. Maybe that's because our Universalist ancestors believed so strongly in the doctrine of Universal Salvation—that all souls would be reunited with an ultimately loving God and that none are destined for an eternity in hell. If you take away hell, perhaps, the idea of "evil" doesn't make quite so much sense because there's nowhere to "put" it. Or maybe it's because our Unitarian ancestors were so convinced of humanity's ability to climb onward and upward, to rise above our basest instincts. (An old joke has it that Universalists believed God is too loving to damn humanity and that Unitarians believed humanity is too good to be damned.) Perhaps it's that our Unitarian Universalist rationalism has been so infused with the psychological mythologies of our day that turn "demons" into "conditions," that "evil" has become "maladjustment" and "bad choices."

The problem of evil. Not so much that it exists — in that it's really just a fact of life, or a force of nature. The problem of evil, as I see it, is that we are so readily tempted to imagine that it's out there, separated from us over here; that it belongs to them and not us . And that, I believe, is ultimately the root and the design of evil — to make us categorize the world into us and them rather than recognizing our common kinship. The Rev. Erik Wickstrom tells us, “For if they are evil and we are not, if that's how we see things, then we are committing the same kind of error which led to the incidents in the department store and on the football field . Let’s say that you believe that evil people are doing evil things, now I am not saying demon-possessed people, but perhaps you believe that there are certain people who lack empathy, lack compassion, or are only interested in making money or gaining power. Perhaps leaders in government, leaders in corporations, people in certain neighborhoods, people with certain spiritual beliefs. Now, how does your personal understanding of evil affect how you perceive these people? Do you perceive them as “other”, as objects, things that have nothing in common with you? After all, objects can’t be hurt, objects can’t be wounded—things don’t have feelings. It becomes easy to harm them without guilt; speak ill of them without regret; ignore their needs, feelings, opinions without a second thought. I like to believe most of us get angry or feel sad when we hear people say that all Muslims are terrorists, that Gays and Lesbians have an agenda to convert my children, or that Blacks are abusing the social security system. We can hear the harm and irrationality—the evil--of these statements. In the words we heard from Reverend Stafford earlier, “beyond sorrow or horror, a sense that something has been blasted apart, a shattering of hope, the collapse of what I thought or wished were true about the world and human nature. There are some truths ... that break the heart—not permanently, but utterly, for a while, as the realization forms perhaps for the thousandth time: this, too, is part of our humanity.”

By whatever route, it seems that our nation's religious traditions has largely lost the language to deal with something like racism: because someone decided that people who are black are people that are expendable. Someone decided that their lives, not black lives, are the only lives that matter. Someone decided that allies to the black community deserve to be run down by a car and killed. Someone decided that whiteness reigns supreme. Someone decide that all of this is ok and supports it from the highest office in the land. How are we to make sense of that? This is the religious response to evil, not setting it apart and intensifying the illusion of separation but recognizing, as Jung said, both how much good we, ourselves, can do and what crimes we, ourselves, are capable of; recognizing that both are part of each of us, that both are found in me.

Evil depends on our silence, our lack of compassion. Evil depends on the willful separation from, and lack of concern for, the "common good." Evil occurs when the capacity for empathy exists and is ignored; when better alternatives for being in right relationship are ignored; when we fail to act on the imperative to correct the discrepancy between what is and what ought to be; and when we resist our powerful impulses to be, and do, good. ... We are products of our evolutionary heritage and our cultural history. We might transform evil if we recognize our own complicity in the processes which engender and sustain it. We will overcome evil when we refuse to play the game or to be silent, when we make a determined effort to understand evil as a possibility that awaits transformation. Then we might inhabit a safer, more peaceful, and more just world." Let us live the words of the Chinese philosopher Lao Tse "For there to be peace in the world . . . there must be peace in the heart."

May it be so.