

“The Changing Reputation of Human Nature”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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It remains the most haunting book I've ever read.

Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men* gives an account of a group of very ordinary men living through extraordinary times.

The book tells the story of the 101st Reserve Police Battalion, a group of middle-aged, middle-class German men from Hamburg who worked as artisans and shop keepers.

Most were between 37 and 42 years old and married with children.

They were also police reservist who were found to be not quite fit enough or young enough for traditional military service during World War II.

As a unit, these men were shipped out to Nazi-occupied Poland and directed by Nazi authorities to clear ghettos and deport Jews to the concentration camp at Treblinka.

At the beginning, their job involved early morning raids of Jewish homes.

They would enter a village before dawn startling women, and children, and men from their beds—and the last most of them would ever know of home.

They would load the people on to trains, and if there wasn't sufficient room, were encouraged to shoot those who couldn't be squeezed in.

Over time the battalion's duties shifted to carrying out mass executions, onsite.

They would gather the Jews of a particular village in the square or a field at the edge of town, and then begin shooting.

At first, some of the men resisted, but eventually

there was an appalling and almost universal level of compliance, even though their superior officers would often give the men the option of not participating if they felt they simply couldn't.

For reasons that are difficult to understand, very few men took that opportunity.

The book describes how those who were reluctant would most often, eventually, get into the vicious swing of things—to the point that some would later have to be restrained in order to bring the carnage to an end.

By the completion of their tour of duty, this particular battalion had shot 38,000 people and deported another 45,200 to the death camps.

Beyond the obvious horror of such violence is Browning's point that these were, by and large, ordinary men, who when directed to kill generally complied, despite having the option of being excused from participation.

He found this counter to what one would expect.

He writes:

By virtue of their age, of course, all went through their formative period in the pre-Nazi era. These were men who had known political standards and moral norms other than those of the Nazis.

Most came from Hamburg, by reputation one of the least nazified cities in Germany, and the majority came from a social class that had been anti-Nazi in its political culture.

These men would not seem to have been a very promising group from which to recruit mass murderers on behalf of the Nazi vision of a racial utopia free of Jews.¹

¹ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, p. 48.

In his research, through military records and personal interviews, Browning discovered that only rarely were the men driven by ideology. Less than 25% were members of the Nazi Party.

And, yet, these same men carried out atrocious crimes against humanity.

I find that it is much more comforting to think of these men as monsters, rather than be forced to hold in terrible tension the fact that these men were also fathers who loved their wives and their kids, who celebrated birthdays and holidays, who grieved the loss of their loved ones, and who surely hungered for lives of meaning and purpose, much like us.

That sobering point echoes one made by the political theorist Hannah Arendt in her reporting on the post-war trials in Jerusalem of Otto Eichmann, one of the central architects of the Holocaust.

She coined the jarring phrase, “The Banality of Evil,” to describe the hard truth that more often than not, people simply went along with what was expected of them in the war, doing as they were told, without question or protest.

Most disturbing was her reminder that evil isn’t always found on a grand and dramatic scale, but so often, instead, in the tiny, singular acts which only in their totality do we tend to denounce.

Evil, Arendt noted, can easily be a thoughtless thing. Day to day decisions that barely register in our conscience. Unthinking acts of going along to get along.

Arendt’s claim is still controversial to this day because it challenges the more comforting notion that evil acts are somehow beyond our comprehension, beyond all understanding—out there, somewhere far, far away from us.

Susan Neiman, a modern day philosopher who studies evil, says that what Arendt was telling the world in the wake of the Holocaust

is that “evil [actually] is comprehensible.”²

And that when it can be grasped, it can be understood,
and when it is understood, it can be confronted.

If we think evil to be some unpredictable force at work out in the world,
it’s easy to discount our capacity to confront it and contain it—
or contend with the ways in which we, ourselves,
are sometimes complicit in systems and structures that perpetuate harm.

Neiman says that:

“If evil is something that we can understand,
then we are not fundamentally flawed beings.
We may be weak, but we are not living in Original Sin.
We don’t need a miracle to save us,
[what we see is that] we could just possibly save ourselves
if we worked at it hard enough.”

Now, I realise I have uttered the word ‘evil’
more times in the past few minutes
than many or any of you have ever likely heard from this pulpit.

It is a word that makes most religious liberals, at best, queasy.

It’s easily dismissed as a term that belongs in the theological dust-bin,
along with all of its wacky associations with devils and demons.

We, as UUs, are not often comfortable with talk of sin either,
so evil, for many of us, is just a bridge too far. I know that.

Frankly, we’d rather not talk about, or even think about it, for that matter.

But, interestingly enough, and ironically enough,
that penchant for avoidance was the very critique leveled at our faith
in the middle of the 20th century by other theologians who felt
that we, as religious liberals, were unprepared to talk about evil.

² Susan Neiman interview based on her book *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMWpFp7WYWs>.

In the wake of the two World Wars,
our tradition's overwhelming confidence
in "the progress of [hu]mankind, onward and upward forever"
was found severely wanting in theological circles.

Decades of atrocities, of violence on so vast a scale,
left our easy optimism looking both naïve and utterly incapable
of speaking to the reality of the times in which we live.

This was an argument that Unitarian James Luther Adams took head on,
in 1941, in an address delivered to his ministerial colleagues called:
"The Changing Reputation of Human Nature."

Adams, before teaching ethics at Harvard for several decades,
spent significant time in Germany in the 1930's.

He watched, up-close, as the Nazis came to power
and as their rhetoric filled the airwaves and newspapers.

What Adams also witnessed was that Germany's churches
were largely ineffective in resisting the rise of Nazism.

He felt them poorly prepared to challenge this movement
or equipped to provide their people with the resources to do so.

Being a minister, he questioned himself
and wondered what role he and his faith
could and should play in those unfolding circumstances.

"...in Nazi Germany," he wrote, "I soon came to the question,
'What is it in my preaching and my political action
that would stop this?' . . .

It is a liberal attitude[, he said,
"to say that we keep ourselves informed
and read the best papers on these matters,
and perhaps join a [discussion group] now and then.

But to be involved with other people so that it costs [me]
and so that one exposes the evils of society . . .
requires something like conversion [from me],

something more than an attitude.

It requires a sense that there's something wrong
and [the recognition that if things are to change]
I must be different from the way I have been.”³

When Adams returned home from Germany,
he was firmly convinced that faith requires conversion,
a ongoing renewal of commitment,
a dedication to making a dramatic, lasting change
in our lives and in the world.

He believed that radical transformation
was at the heart of religious experience
and he felt that for us, as religious liberals, it required
finding the courage to act, to decide, to commit to making a difference,
whenever and wherever we could.

To speak up and speak out, to summon a prophetic voice
and confront and condemn whatever would do damage to the fabric of life.

He felt there are times when we can't simply trust that things will work out;
sometimes we have to push, or push back.

There have been points in our history
when Unitarian Universalists have done this exceedingly well,
when we've acted boldly in the name of justice,
when we've witnessed to the faith within us
by putting our strongest convictions into action.

There is, as always, of course, still more to be done.

Which is why I think we need to grow more comfortable
with naming evil when we see it.

In saying that, I can only imagine what it's going to sound like when you tell
your friends and family what I said in the service this morning...!
*“... I don't know what got into our minister this morning,
but he preached about evil, of all things.”*

³ James Luther Adams, *An Examined Faith: Social Context and Religious Commitment*, p. 33.

It reminds me of the story of the two kids
walking home from church one day,
after hearing a fiery sermon about the devil.

One child said to the other,
“So, what did you think about all that Satan stuff?”

And the other replied, “Well, you know how Santa Claus turned out.
It’s probably just your Dad.”

To be clear, I’m not talking about anything resembling
the archaic tradition that surrounds the word evil with demonic beings.

I don’t believe evil to be some nefarious cosmic force at work in the world.

Too often, it’s all too human.
In fact, in my book, it’s always human.

An earthquake can exact a devastating toll, but I don’t think it evil.
Sadly, evil is what we humans do to each other and to the web of life.

(On that note, I should also say that I’m also not talking about any
individual’s actions that are best explained by mental illness.
Sometimes people do horrific things because they are not well,
not because they are evil.)

What I am trying to propose, here, is a Unitarian understanding
that sees evil as a profound and intentional breaking
of the covenant that we have with life itself.

As I’ve wrestled with my own definition of the word,
I keep returning to the idea that evil involves a theft of meaning—
or at least an attempted robbery.

I feel that meaning is what is so often at stake—
whenever power is profoundly misused
to perpetuate systems and structures
of injustice, of oppression, of violence and abuse.

It’s a theft of meaning I see in sweat shops,

modern slavery, and human trafficking.

I see it in industries that poison the earth for quick profit
and governments that defy the will of their people by deceit.

I see it in the legacy of the Residential Schools
and the indefensible protection of clergy
who've abused the children entrusted to their care.

I realise that evil is a strong and harsh word
and that it carries a note of clear and unequivocal judgment.

And I use it and commend its use to you
because there are situations around the globe so severe
that they warrant the use of a term with teeth.

Sometimes, it's not enough to say that something is unfortunate,
or disagreeable, or really, really, really bad.

For want of a better word, sometimes there are actions that are simply evil.

Like Hannah Arendt realised, there are times
when we need to be reminded that evil can be comprehensible,
that it can be understood.

That we can see exactly what is happening,
and that we can and must name it for what it is.

That may well be the first step to bringing it to an end,
the first step to restoring meaning and hope and healing.

And, yet, in all of this, my colleague and friend Angela Herrera
has reminded me of the need for humility.

She says that we religious liberals
make a spiritual practice out of open-mindedness, which is great, of course.

But she goes on to say that there's a deeper and harder and closely-related
practice of humility that we would do well to adopt, too.

“If we are spiritually humble, we can call out evil

without pretending we don't have to be on guard for it within ourselves.”⁴

In saying that, she reminds me that the banality of evil can exist in my life, too:
in the way my retirement is invested,
in the choices I make in buying food and clothes,
in the way I walk upon the earth,
and in the ways, large and small,
that I walk with my companions on this journey through life.

Human nature is complicated.

To be alive in our modern, interconnected world involves being caught up
in webs of injustice and oppression whether we want to be or not.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn put it so well:

“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?”

Friends, on this Palm Sunday, on this, the eve of Passover,
two of the world's great faiths are set to tell again two enduring stories
about overcoming evil—in the freedom of a people set free from slavery,
and in the resurrection of a prophet of peace
who was publicly executed for his subversive preaching.

May the spirit of those stories, if not their literal details,
be alive to us in the days ahead.

May we be awake to the nature of what it means to be human,
and yet humble as we strive to do no harm.

May we be aware of the hard realities of human behaviour
and willing to stand with courage
to confront that which threatens life and would rob the world of meaning.

⁴ Angela Herrera, “After 9/11, can Unitarian Universalists talk about evil?”, *UU World*, 5 September 2011.

And may we ever remember that in the face of horrific deeds,
people of faith, people of tremendous integrity,
have done countless, extraordinary things
to serve and uphold life, even at great risk and to themselves.

May we live to be counted among their number.

May we be so bold.

Amen.