

March 27, 2022

**“Reflection: Foundations of Our Faith:
Theology of Evil”**

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I want to start by thanking you all for last Sunday, especially those who shared their anxieties with the rest of us. But not only those who shared. Everyone who was here held the space. You all made it safe enough to be vulnerable. And to those who shared, thank you for being vulnerable enough to call that field into being.

It was good to hear from you in front of each other. It felt like another step back into congregationality after too long a time of congregational interruption. And it underscored the power of a congregation. It demonstrated what we do and who we are. Both here on Sundays and throughout the week. It felt good.

Maybe that good feeling was why no one mentioned congregational change among the anxieties identified. I was sort of surprised it wasn't mentioned. We have been in a state of near constant change ever since I got here. Some of it has been on purpose. Some of it has been in reaction to the pandemic or other circumstances. But all of it has been... well... a lot. And that is bound to create some angst.

And like any anxiety, sometimes that comes out sideways. I've seen it. I've done it. So I just want to name that in addition to those beautiful vulnerabilities you all named last week. Change in a beloved community, institution, and tradition can make for heartache as well as heartfulness.

Yet it was only one of the two elephants that snuck through the room unmentioned. No one said covid, nor even anything really covid related like mask policies, opening up, vaccine stuff, locking down, compromised information systems and the like. That was a glaring omission. I don't know what to make of it.

Have we become so well adapted that the social and medical gymnastics brought about by the

pandemic no longer cause us anxiety? Or have we simply gotten used to sweeping that anxiety under the rug of our day to day?

Is it that covid just feels managed by now, however uncomfortable it still might be? Is that it? Well, anyway, I'm naming it. I'm naming it for the decisions it asks us to make on our own behalf and on behalf of others. I'm naming it for fear that it is but a peek at the future as the earth tries to defend herself against us.

So... there.

Like last week, I hope that naming stuff shines a light and keeps it from festering in the dark. Naming invites us to keep an eye on how my anxieties are moving in me. But as we noted last week, if we linger in their expression too long it will become an identity more than something identified. And so, like last week, we do well to cultivate practices of anxiety reduction.

We share. We join communities of care. We listen to music. We distract ourselves until we are well enough to face our fear. We enter into service. We disarm urgency by doing nothing. We disarm hopelessness by doing something. We sing. We sit. We think, feel, sense, and reach out. We get curious.

I find that when I get curious about my anxieties, I am finally led, by ways direct or winding, to face my own extinction. And that is a wondrous place to be driven. For, treated properly, it is here where anxiety at last rebounds into beauty. In a way, reconciling the experience of delight with the fact of death is the foundation of our faith, of all faiths really. For it is here that both spirituality and theology are born.

Spirituality is the sensational response to delight and death. Theology is the intellectual response. Theology is spirituality as a vocabulary. Spirituality is theology as a sensation.

That is, spirituality is theology derived from and tested by direct experience, which, lo and behold, is one of our sources. Our sources are those

foundational tributaries we use to support and sometimes challenge our principles. And we may find in their theological breadth one or more guides to help our spirits be less beholden to our anxieties.

In light of the wisdom of our sources, this may be a good time to raise one more anxiety I am seeing and feeling. For, such is the state of the world that the question of evil has been on the minds of many recently. You hear it in the question, "How could so-and-so do such a thing," when we encounter the limits of our capacity to account for a motivation.

When a person robs a store, you can imagine many reasons why they might do that. You can see the circumstances, trace the traumas that led to the act. Not to excuse, but to account.

But then you learn about some of the things we humans have done to one another and... it feels beyond account, beyond accountability. And so we psychologically outsource the cause to something more than biographical. We call it evil, as though it were an entity unto itself or a feature of the universe that exists beyond circumstance.

And of course, some of our sources, namely Western Christianity, have gone so far as to give it a character and a name in their story. And it is from that story that we UU's are sometimes critiqued. And since that story is one of the framing stories of our culture and the one from which we grew, it is a critique we hear quite loudly. The critique is this: liberal religion has a weak theology of evil.

And that is both true, and wrong. I think we likely do have a less robust theology of evil than our cultural ancestors, and those stuck in their rut. But I also think it is the wrong question. I don't think evil exists theologically.

Naming something evil is to make a claim about the existence of a fundamental status of being that I just don't think holds water. It's certainly not universal across cultures. Furthermore, I think identifying evil as a concept serves that which it mistakenly names. It is a theological ad hominem - a kind of name calling and scapegoating. It dehumanizes and delegitimizes.

I think what is commonly thought of as evil, might be more accurately called cruelty or malevolence or narcissistic ambivalence. I know it may seem like I'm parsing words. But I think it's important.

Where evil is identified, I believe mistakenly, as a force of its own, cruelty and malevolence have causes. Diagnosing them puts the burden back where it should be, on us, on humans and specifically on the way that we think things are, which means our sense of relationship, our sense of connection.

This points to the fundamental problem; our frame is whack. Our paradigm is destructive. Or at least prominent, normative features of it are. Cruelty and malevolence are inevitable in a reality constructed on the precepts of disconnection. The question isn't so much, "how could they?" but, "when will they?"

Our behaviors belie our assumption that disconnection is fundamental, that I am NOT of thee, even when I want to be. We strive for connection in a world built on separation.

And this too is testified to in our sources; in those traditions that understand that misfortune is inevitable for those who fall out of connection, out of identifying "with" and into identifying "other than." Disconnection leads to domination and domination breeds suffering, cruelty, malevolence, and ambivalence. That observation undergirds Buddhism, many indigenous traditions, reason and even certain aspects of Abrahamic traditions.

Disconnection is our shadow. Separation, hunger, and fear are its experience. It looks evil. But naming it evil means it is outside of us and not our responsibility.

Whatever you call it, I believe its roots are ours to tend. Not to rip out, but to return to health. We UU's affirm that we are all sacred and interdependent. This is a very Unitarianly longwinded way of saying that love is the default mode of the universe. Which, I acknowledge, was still long winded.

We affirm that we partake in and are shares of one another. We partake and share in one another, and

we do so whether we know it or not. But here, we say - we Unitarian Universalists say - let's know it. Love is the way whether we know it or not. We say let's know it. We say let's know it.

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Let's proclaim our mutually sacred being. Proclaim it because we observe it. And maybe if we keep proclaiming it, and proclaiming it, and proclaiming it, we will someday even and actually sense it. A-freaking-men!

And when we do, when enough of us do... I don't know... the fantasy, the hope, the faith - *the faith* - is that peace will be founded on appreciation rather than force, on relationship rather than ownership, on help rather than time. And this, one prays, would drastically reduce our anxieties, the circumstances that cause them, and the weird solutions we sometimes apply to alleviate them.

So a prayer. Our being together is a prayer. Every Sunday. Let's know it.