Liberal Theology in the Real World: Evil
A sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Benner
At the Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church
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READING from "What Torture Has Taught Me" by William F. Schulz, published in the *UU World* magazine, Winter 2006

Who are the torturers? Are they madmen? Deviants? Hardened criminals? Sexual predators? Almost never. In fact, most police and military units weed out psychological misfits because they know such people have trouble taking orders. The horrible truth is that the vast majority of torturers are average Joes and, on rare occasions, Janes.

Turning Joe into what most of us would regard as a monster is remarkably easy. You put him in a restricted environment, such as a police or military training camp, under the command of a vaunted authority figure. You subject him to intense stress. Then, having created an angry, bitter, but obedient servant, you provide the sanction, the means, the opportunity, and the rationale for that servant to take his outrage out on a vulnerable but despised population. You tell him: "These are the people who are threatening our country. These are the people who are killing your comrades."

…

When I was seven or eight years old, I lived across the street from a little dog named Amy. Every afternoon after school let out, Amy and I would play together. One of Amy's favorite games was a dancing game in which I held her two forepaws in my hands and we would dance around the yard. Sometimes Amy even put her paws in my lap to signal that she wanted to dance. But I noticed that after a few minutes Amy's hind legs would get sore and she would pull her paws away. The first few times we played our dancing game, I dropped her paws the moment I sensed her discomfort.

But one day I decided to hold on. The more Amy tugged, the tighter I held on until finally, when she yelped in agony, I let her go. But the next day I repeated my demonic game. It was fascinating to feel this little creature, so much less powerful than I, entirely at my mercy.

I was lucky that Amy was such a gentle dog for she had every right to have bitten me. After two or three days I saw that my friend, who had previously scrambled eagerly toward me, now cowered at my approach. I realized with a start what I had done, and I was deeply frightened of myself and much ashamed. Whatever had come over me that I would treat someone I had loved that way?

What had come over me, I now know, was the displacement of anger onto one who held no threat to me. Bullies at school might pick on me. My parents might tell their only child what he could and could not do. My piano teacher might try to slam the keyboard cover on my fingers when I played off key. But in that yard I ruled supreme. Not only did I hold the power, but the one who was powerless for a change was Not Me. (p. 33-35)

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SERMON

The story Bill Schulz tells of his behavior with the neighborhood dog, Amy, makes me cringe. Not only because of the discomfort I feel thinking of the poor dog and both her physical and emotional pain, but also because I can too easily imagine myself in Bill's place. Not because I am cruel, or want to inflict pain, not because I wouldn't like or care about the dog, but because I was curious, or angry, or unhappy, or frustrated. I hope, of course, that I wouldn't actually do this, or anything like it, but I can't be sure.

I don't think any of us would listen to this story from his childhood and call Bill Schulz an evil person. After all, not only did he stop his behavior, but this incident was only a tiny part of his life, a life in which there doesn't seem to be any evidence of similar behavior. But an argument could certainly be made that this was an evil act. An act that, while small on the scale of possible evils, *was* an act that was cruel, that inflicted intentional pain, that involved a harmful use of power over another.

In truth, there are probably very few people we could call genuinely evil people. As the first part of Schulz's reading makes clear, much of the evil in the world is done by pretty ordinary people. This idea is reinforced by interviews and studies of many of the people responsible for the day to day horrors of the Holocaust. Though in many ways it would be much more comfortable to view evil as something "out there," something separate from us, something done by a particular class or group of people who are somehow different from the rest of us, the evidence we find in the world does not bear this out. Particularly if we hold to the Unitarian Universalist belief in the ultimate unity of all humanity, we cannot simply separate out those who do things we abhor. But if evil is not done by evil people, if we cannot simply identify and weed out those who are dangerous to the rest of us, how do we respond to the evil we see around us? How do we keep ourselves from becoming part of the problem?

This question of how to understand evil and the horror human beings can and do inflict on each other, is a very real challenge for Unitarian Universalists.

When Unitarianism and Universalism separated themselves from orthodox Christianity in this country, around the turn of the 19th century, the dominant Christian view of human nature centered on the doctrine of original sin and the idea of humanity as fallen. From this perspective, human beings were inherently sinful and could be saved only through an act of God. Certainly we could not reach salvation through our own will or choice. The depravity of human nature was a given and could not be changed.

In contrast, the Unitarians in particular argued that human beings had the potential, even the impulse to do good. William Ellery Channing, one of the early preachers of Unitarianism, wrote a sermon in 1828 titled "Likeness to God," in which he argued that we human beings contain us within the same qualities and virtues that belong to God and that it is possible for us to will our way to these qualities and virtues. In particular, our use of reason is the path to salvation and connection to God. Channing wrote:

To grow in the likeness of God, we need not cease to be men. This likeness does not consist in extraordinary or miraculous gifts, in supernatural additions to the soul, or in any thing foreign to our original constitution; but in our essential faculties, unfolded by vigorous and conscientious exertion in the ordinary circumstances assigned by God. To resemble our Creator, we need not fly from society, and entrance ourselves

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in lonely contemplation and prayer…Our proper work is to approach God by the free and natural unfolding of our highest powers, of understanding, conscience, love, and the moral will.

This sentiment, central to the formation of liberal theology, led, in the century to follow, to a faith in the perfectibility of humanity and the proclamation of forward progress, forever onward and upward.

History, of course, proved these ideas wrong, as, even in the midst of great scientific and intellectual advances, humanity found itself in the midst of two world wars and witnessed and participated in some of the worst cruelty the world has ever known. In the mid part of the 20th century, Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams challenged the liberal idea of the perfectibility of humanity and the triumph of reason over sin. In an essay written and delivered to a gathering of ministers in 1941, Adams called on religious liberals to *recognize that there is in human nature a deep-seated and universal tendency for both individuals and groups to ignore the demands of mutuality and thus to waste freedom or abuse it by devotion to the idols of the tribe, the theater, the cave, and the marketplace…It cannot be denied that religious liberalism has neglected these aspects of human nature in its zeal to proclaim the spark of divinity in humanity. We may call these tendencies by any name we wish, but we do not escape their destructive influence by a conspiracy of silence concerning them.* (from "The Changing Reputation of Human Nature")

Whether we Unitarian Universalists have ever really responded to Adams's challenge and confronted this reality remains an open question. After all, our belief in the power of our reason and will, and that spark of divinity within each one of us remain central elements of liberal religion and we are loathe to give them up.

In recent years, additional influences have gotten in the way of our ability to see clearly the potential for and the reality of evil. The world of self-improvement and pop psychology have focused on the idea of self-esteem and the importance of believing in ourselves, regardless of what and how we do in the world. Books on spirituality and mysticism, some of which I have found very valuable, seem to say that the deepest impulse within every human being is a good one and should be followed, sometimes without reference to the outer world. As we understand more about what makes human beings who we are, evil acts get attributed to genetic programming or abusive upbringings. As we have come to understand the complexity of the world and the limitedness of our own perspective, we have embraced relativism in many situations, and are deeply wary of making judgment that feel as absolute as judging something or someone to be evil.

It is not that there is nothing true or of value in all of this. Certainly the recognition of the value and potential of the human spirit is one of the greatest gifts liberal religion has given to the world. The call to listen to that which resides within rather than ignoring our own voice in order merely to meet the expectations of others can also be a valuable reminder. The insights we have gained about some of the reasons people turn to behavior we might consider evil have been very useful in our efforts to try to make changes in society that will make people's lives better and break cycles of violence, hatred, and ignorance.

All of this could be seen as progress. Certainly I believe it is an improvement over the message that human beings are basically depraved and there is nothing we can do about it but rely on God's grace to save us. And yet, there may be something valuable in a fuller recognition of humanity's less than virtuous impulses, *our* less than virtuous impulses, something that is worth looking at more carefully.

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Part of the problem is that way in which we have externalized the idea of evil, on just about every level. We see it nationally, as we do every time there is war. The enemies are evil and we are good. We are right and they are wrong. We are separate and distinct from one another; any relatedness, or even recognition of the humanity of the other is seen as dangerous to the cause.

On a smaller scale we try to do the same with individuals who exhibit evil behavior—murderers, rapists, child molesters, even white collar criminals who manipulate the system for their own gain. We could never do that, we tell ourselves, and perhaps it's true. But the idea that there is some intrinsic difference between us and those who do these things is a dangerous idea. It allows us to ignore not only the humanity of those who do terrible things, but it also means we overlook our own potential to participate in evil.

I believe the first important step in this process is acknowledging our own impulses toward cruel and destructive behavior, toward evil. (I am aware that the word "evil" stops a lot of us from owning this in ourselves, but I think that is part of the problem. As long as we see evil as an absolute, we will fail in our ability to address it effectively.)

I suspect all of us, or almost all of us, have had moments like the one Bill Schulz described from his childhood where we experimented with cruelty, with inflicting pain or abusing our power over another. In fact, as much as we like to think of children as exhibiting the best of human nature that exists before society and family come along to mess us up, it is often during childhood that we both inflict and experience the most cruelty.

Chuck Klosterman, in his book of reflections on pop culture titled *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs,* says this:

Why do we assume all children are inherently innocent? Innocent of what? I mean, any grammar school teacher will tell you that "kids can be cruel" on the playground; the average third-grader will gleefully walk up to a six-year-old with hydrocephalus and ask, "What wrong with you. Big Head?" And that third-grader knows what he's doing is evil. He knows it's hurtful. Little boys torture cats and cute little girls humiliate fat little girls, and they know it's wrong. They do it because *it's wrong. Sometimes I think children are the worst people alive.* (p.236)

This of course is a bit extreme, but there is truth in it as well. The impulse to be cruel, to see what happens when we push this button or that, to reach for power in whatever place in our life we can find it even if it comes at the expense of others—these are all aspects of human nature, of *our* nature, and we ignore them at our peril.

We started this discussion this morning with the issue of torture and the challenges it presents to our liberal religious theology. In recent years, we have been confronted by the reality of torture in the modern world, and torture done in the name of the United States, torture done in our name. The pictures and stories that came out of the Abu Ghraib prison were shocking, and undeniable. And, as much as those in power tried to convince us that this was just the work of, as they said, "a few bad apples," we know better. That's not to say that everyone would have acted in this same way, but rather that, given a set of circumstances like the ones Bill Schulz describes, none of us can know how we would respond. And none of us can look at those who participated in the torture and say that they are not people just like we are.

The question we are faced with is whether there is room in our liberal religious understanding of human nature for the reality of our own potential for evil? How do we understand this truth—

that we may not be fallen and inherently depraved, but neither are we only our potential for good and our likeness to God?

I believe that perhaps the most important thing we can do to move toward living well with this truth is finding a place in our religious life for confession and atonement. I realize that these are uncomfortable words for some, and I am certainly not suggesting that we practice these things in the ways they are practiced elsewhere. And yet, there is much wisdom in creating regular space, both formal and informal, for us to acknowledge the ways in which we have fallen short, to make amends as best we can, and to recommit ourselves to doing better next time.

Though none of these may work for us exactly as is, there are models for this many places—Catholic confession; the annual Jewish recognition of Yom Kippur, when Jews are called upon to examine their life from the previous year and apologize to those they have harmed; the important step in the recovery process outlined by Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs when the person makes amends to those they have hurt because of their addiction.

We Unitarian Universalists are generally uncomfortable with such calls to confession and atonement. We much prefer remaining focused on the positive within ourselves and our power to be virtuous, caring, reasonable people. But we are not always virtuous, caring, reasonable people. We treat those we love badly. We grasp for and take advantage of power. We give in to impulses that go against our better nature. We hurt ourselves and we hurt each other.

Given the right (or perhaps wrong) circumstances, we oppress others. We break our vows. We participate in evil.

We will never be the best people we can be unless we acknowledge the worst people we can be as well. Otherwise, we spend most of our energy pretending such impulses, such potential, such behavior does not exist. We spend most of our time hiding, rather than facing the truth and learning to live well in spite of it.

How much more powerful is our message that human beings can be agents of the good when we balance it with an acknowledgement that we can also be agents of evil and that none of us gets it right even close to all the time? How much more powerful, not to mention more authentic, will we feel is we realize that there is room for those parts of ourselves of which we are ashamed? How much stronger will our communities be if we create them so we need not keep such large parts of who we are hidden from ourselves and from one another, and where the call to be righteous people comes with an awareness of just how hard that is? How much more powerful will our work for justice be when we understand that truly we are all part of the same human struggle, that fundamentally there is no "other," that we cannot point fingers at each other without pointing fingers at ourselves as well?

May we find with each other the courage to see and acknowledge the truth of all of who we are, the good and the bad, the strong and the weak. May we find room in our common religious life to confess where we have gone wrong, to atone for the evil we have done, to promise again to do our best, knowing we will always fall short. May we offer forgiveness to ourselves and to others, knowing that none of us is free from needing this gift wherever we can find it. May we be gentle, and humble, and live with recognition of the common humanity that joins us one to another, with all who inhabit this earth.

May it be so. Amen.

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