

## READING FOR SESSION 5

Once upon a time, someone asked the Almighty, "Why did you put evil in the world?" The creator of heaven and earth, day and night, the constellations and humanity, answered, "to thicken the plot." Perhaps one of the understatements of eternity.

In the wake of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing "war on terrorism," our curiosity as to why evil exists in the world has become insatiable. Issues of good and evil, God and Satan, have been much debated in the religious world. Unitarian Universalists tend to reject this cosmic ruminating, this tendency to anthropomorphize God and efforts to guess at God's thinking. What went wrong? Why, with so marvelous a garden, have we managed to spoil so much fruit and to plant so many seeds that did not ripen? Why, when we are given so much, do we experience war and strife, hunger and hate? And what has happened to the human spirit?

A funny thing happened on the way to the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, Utopia, or whatever one may call it. Ogden Nash sums it up well, "Progress may have been all right once, but it went on too long." The escalator of progress seems to have gotten stuck in the twenty-first century. In the twentieth century two world wars, economic upheaval, Vietnam, Watergate, and the beginnings of our current socioeconomic and spiritual malaise gave the lie to the idea of perpetual progress. The deterioration of the environment, the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots, and the threat of nuclear annihilation challenged us at the very roots of our faith. We are not without resources to think through this dilemma. Peoples of the past grappled with similar issues. It is time to learn from the past, and formulate a faith that will enable us to live in the paradox of human history and the human condition.

*Eschatology* is the study of final or ultimate matters, our own ultimate destiny and the fate of humanity, the struggle of good and evil and the survival of our world and being. Most of us are so immersed in the present that such issues (death excepted, perhaps) are not high in our consciousness. Nevertheless, our views of the future of the human race, planet Earth, and of creation are important to us as we seek to discern our personal roles in the great scheme of things. Religion tries to

give us a handle on them. It seeks to reduce these unfathomable depths into terms we can handle.

Eschatology flies in the face of our liberal religious tradition. After all, James Freeman Clark summarizes his liberal faith in 1885 by affirming "the progress of mankind onward and upward forever." Liberals in those days and after undergirded this optimism with the philosophy that harmony is the law of life—in nature, in economics, and in religion. Our roots are in the rationalist's tradition, which regards progress as the very purpose of creation. Unitarian Universalists have historically been an optimistic people, affirming the final triumph of good over evil, the final harmony of all souls with God.

Universalists meeting in Washington, DC, in 1935, adopted an Avowal of Faith—not a creed but a statement of principles. One article of that faith is belief "in the power of men of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish The Kingdom of God." Such confidence in the aftermath of a savage war and in the midst of a stultifying depression only attests to the incredibly optimistic faith that marks our movement.

This faith in goodness, in progress, this denial of the demonic and the tragic, amazingly overlooked the reality of human history. The faithful believed one could translate the natural order, which science was discovering in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, into social language. Social reality could be grasped and changed if people only had the will to do so. What was overlooked in applying evolution to the social order was that we cannot become so enamored of the loveliness of nature as to be blind to its terrible aspects. And did not Tennyson write of nature as "red in tooth and claw"? We never listened. We didn't learn that in the wake of political revolution often comes brutal repression—that pride in nation goeth before the arrogance of power; freedom that constructs a new Bastille suggests the ambiguous nature of human existence and human history.

We had forgotten that nature and history exhibit both creative and destructive powers, both a will to harmony and a will to power. History simply does not follow logical progression in an ever more civilized evolutionary spiral. The same per-



verse tendencies that led primitive peoples to pummel each other permeate our well-dressed diplomats as they calmly calculate nuclear annihilation. Humanity is both fated and free. It cannot escape its creatureliness. After all, we are animals in a long evolutionary stream with the same drives toward self-interest and survival possessed by all living things; we are free to mold our own futures, but always within the limits of our animal nature.

Unitarian Universalists have over the years entertained too optimistic a view of human nature. We rightly rebelled against the doctrine of original sin, from which people had to be saved through the church; we rightly protested Jonathan Edwards' apocalyptic talk of "sinners in the hands of an angry god"; we rightly countered with a God of love who would save all people; but our historic protest was carried perhaps too far with the romantic notions of Rousseau, who sees humans as noble savages corrupted only by an evil society. We overlooked the very natural tendencies toward self-interest in all of us. We forgot that, as it has been graphically put by Isak Dinesen, "What is man when you come to think upon him, but a minutely set, ingenious machine for turning, with infinite artfulness, the red wine of shiraz into urine?"

In short, we have ignored evil, the tragic dimension in history and human existence. We have failed to recognize that progress has not stifled the demonic but given it new form. Atomic power may save or utterly destroy us. Technology brings us affluence and effluence. Symbolically Satan is the most persistent of all God's creations. We had two world wars and the Korean War and then Vietnam, a sobering reminder that the "best and the brightest" could be wrong; international economic disarray suggested that even with all our scientific genius and technological know-how we still haven't figured out how to establish a just social order. The environmental revolution reminded us that we live on a finite planet and ignore its ecological imperatives at our peril. It seems that perhaps philosopher Thomas Hobbes is right that the nature of human life is "nasty, brutish and short."

Unitarian Universalist poet e. e. cummings writes,

pity this poor monster, manunkind:  
We doctors know a hopeless case if—  
listen; there's a hell  
of a good universe next door; let's go

Liberal religion needs some theological posture in the face of this. While fundamentalists boldly proclaim the end of the world as a punishment for our sins of pride and progress, we are scoffingly silent; while the sophisticated orthodox speak of the end of human history and the beginning of the heavenly Kingdom, we are strangely silent. Most of us simply have never thought about such matters. Eschatology in a Unitarian Universalist Church? We might as well try to do away with coffee hour, the real eschaton. We often live in a state of individual and institutional denial.

Only yesterday it seemed our justified confidence in the scientifically guided human enterprise rendered supernatural religion theologically irrelevant. Now, even our liberal confidence in the success of the human adventure is in doubt. The old optimism is gone. We do not know what to make of a world in which the very powers we have celebrated are counterproductive at best and destructive at worst. This question is no mere luxury for intellectuals, like debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. How we view ourselves in the total picture of creation says much about our morale and our will to continue.

Henry Nelson Wieman says evil is that which obstructs Creativity. But evil seems to be a power in the biblical sense. For example, racism as an evil takes on a life of its own. It is structural, institutional, and spiritual. But why think about evil at all? Because it helps us face the seriousness of our problems. It is anthropocentric—that which threatens human fulfillment, destroys life, and keeps it from flourishing in us. It is a dehumanizing reality. It is a power not of our own making. We can't just reduce evil to that which prevents us from reaching our goal. Evil has structural and spiritual realities that have a life of their own. Whatever it is, combatting it requires soul work.

Human evil has done far more harm than natural catastrophe. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky puts into the mouth of the atheistic Ivan the final, irrefutable, and unanswerable objection to a personal or theistic conception of God. Ivan offers example after example of the cruelty of humanity, implicating God in that cruelty if God has the power to control it. He then demonstrates that the only possible religious answer is that human suffering will be justified in the final divine harmony at the end of history, but he rejects this suggestion saying, "I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not



worthy the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little finger and prayed . . . with its unexpected tears to 'dear god.'" Since any God who would tolerate the suffering of even one child is either infinitely cruel or hopelessly indifferent, our ancestors posited another world in which these cruelties would be rectified, a "fantasy of another world in which He would ultimately do a better job. . . . The traditional God who opposes human freedom is dead . . . human moral autonomy is incompatible with the traditional conception of a personal God."

The Yin-Yang symbol appeals to many Unitarian Universalists as a graphic illustration of the struggle between good and evil. Taoism and Confucianism, those ancient Chinese religions, hold reality to be a dynamic tension between polar opposites. The small white circle within the dark half of the larger circle suggests there may be good even in the midst of evil. For instance war brings out sacrificial courage. The small black circle within the white half of the larger circle indicates there may be evil lurking in the midst of good. Human achievement may be blighted by the sin of pride, as when we split the atom and developed a catastrophic weapon. Good and evil co-exist in the cosmos and in each of us. Good and evil are inherent in the nature of things.

Soviet dissident writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn writes,

Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts. Since then I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: they struggle with the evil inside a human being (inside every human being). It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.

The cosmos is more organism than machine. It is self-generating, not a static construction. It is a single process, a great living system with its own built-in laws. Reality is a great body in which we live, not a huge machine with which we tinker. There is a great difference between these two attitudes.

The contribution of the West to this line of thinking is that it understands human history as linear, not cyclical as it is thought of in so

much of the East. We hold a prophetic view of human history in which human beings shape their own destiny. Our problem has been excessive confidence, a kind of cosmic triumphalism in which we exaggerate what we might accomplish and forget the constraints of the life system. We have believed that we can bring in the Christian kingdom of God, the Marxist kingdom of the Right, or secular Utopia.

Somehow we need to combine reverence for the cosmic processes of Taoism with the Western prophetic understanding of history. Good and evil struggle within an objective reality. We must come to terms with it. For here we are, exiles from the Garden of Eden, people who have learned that the fruit of knowledge is often sour, if not toxic.

We religious liberals need to understand the tragic nature of history. That is, the very creative impulses that lead to amazing advances in our civilization often lead to the greatest demonic powers ever unleashed. At the center of our being is a paradox; at the heart of the creation are contending forces. Our love of country can be the trigger for war. Our technological breakthroughs in weaponry bring ever-greater insecurity as we take the power of life and death into our human hands.

Adam and Eve were told, "Your eyes shall be opened and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." The genius who wrote that mythology understood the radical nature of human freedom. The whole point of the narrative is to introduce humanity to the reality that we are on our own now. We are alone in creation, and no cosmic lifeguard is going to tell us what to do when times are tough.

Good will come from cooperation with the creative process; evil is a kind of feedback when the universal laws of nature or history are violated. When we resort to violence, destruction inevitably ensues. When we exploit the earth for selfish gain, we live in a desolate land. Historically or ecologically there are no free lunches. All learning is accompanied by pain.

It is admittedly difficult to really internalize the radically open-ended nature of creation. There are no cosmic guarantees. We may not survive in the end. No one, no thing knows or controls all or even a very large part of what is going on.



History is an unending process of trial and error. Humanity is a great cosmic experiment.

It would be nice if we could choose whether we wanted the mindless security of the Garden of Eden with its lush flora, fauna, and boredom or to bid farewell to Eden, dare our freedom, and risk uncertainty. Happily or not, the question is frivolous and we are fated to be free.

The Yin-Yang symbol is helpful in understanding the basic ambiguity of existence—the side-by-side presence of life and death, joy and pain, good and evil, and the interpenetration of each of them. And so our understanding of history is not some linear progress in which some human or divine purpose is ultimately realized but a vast dynamic of forces in tension. Our task is to serve, as best we can, those life-giving forces, the sustaining, transforming reality by whatever name we give it, and by implication to oppose those demonic forces that stifle the growth of good and creativity.

If we as citizens and as religious people do not raise these questions and get on with the humdrum work of democracy, it might be said that all the world's a stage and all the men and women merely drama critics. In a 1970 performance of Joseph Heller's play *We Bombed in New Haven*, actor Jason Robards, playing a bomber pilot disillusioned by the Vietnam War, asked rhetorically what could be done to stop the carnage. He was stunned one evening when members of the audience took his plea not rhetorically but seriously and gathered at the stage in the middle of the play. These audience members were not going to let the killing continue. Exasperated, Robards exploded. "What do you want me to do?" he cried. "I'm only an actor!"

Precisely the point. We are actors, historical actors, agents of change. If history is to veer off its suicidal course, it will be because of actors who take time seriously, who link learning and action because they are inseparable. But in actual warfare no one returns safely to the dressing room. Walter Kerr, a critic at that performance, concludes, "Our silence was to indict us, our refusal to act in the theater was to become our refusal to act in life."

While our lives are very concrete and very specific, they are set in a cosmic context. We are creatures bound by time, limited by death, finite specks of being between the stars. We hurt and heal, confront and comfort, laugh and cry. But

we go on; we must go on. There are slivers of hope, symbols of inspiration. For example, the United Nations building in New York City was built on the site of former slaughter houses.

During the Gulf War a woman gave her minister a most unusual vase, standing over a foot tall, with graceful, curving lines, and a very heavy base. She had purchased it at a rummage sale as a flower container. Later she had picked it up and read the inscription on its base: "105 millimeters, M 14, lot 12c B Company, 1944." It was an artillery shell casing beaten into the shape of a flower urn. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more." While Unitarian Universalists do not take the bible literally, in this case it might be well to make an exception.