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“Sin, Evil, and Other Unpleasant Topics”

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You're a sight for sore eyes. It's great to see you. It's wonderful to be back after several weeks away for my study leave, which was very productive. I wish that the topic this morning were a little bit more of an upper, but this is what I've been thinking about. The world is still going to hell in yet another hand basket and to be serious religious people, we in this community need to reflect on the plight of this human race and our planet. I think it's an urgent task.

Last June, William F. Shultz, who is a former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and for the last twelve years has been president of Amnesty International USA, the recipient of our Generosity Offering today, delivered an essay to his fellow ministers. He titled the essay, “What Torture's Taught Me.” I'm quoting him here: “Of all the things I've seen, nothing has had a deeper impact on me than my exposure to torture, both victims and perpetrators of it, and not incidentally, to all of us in between.” He went on to inform us that two-thirds of the nations in the world in the twenty-first century use torture. The favorite methods of torture are beating, most painfully in the feet, and electro-shock. But these are only amateur devices for the true torturers. In Pinochet's Chile, for example, women were raped by men with visibly open syphilitic sores and then feed the putrefied remains of other prisoners. “Practices such as these,” says Shultz, “have no rational purpose at all. They're designed solely to strip another of his or her dignity, of his or her humanity. If anything deserves to be called unadulterated evil, this does.

“I tell you about it not to shock you, but to ask you to consider a question that has haunted me for the last twelve years: ‘Is what I say from the pulpit about the world around us, about the nature of God and humanity, about the dynamics of human relationships, is what I preach to the people sufficient to encompass a world in which such coarseness and brutality exist?’ Or, to put it another way, ‘If a member of my congregation, or my listening audience, had herself been a victim of such terror would she find my words, my faith, my theology naïve and pallid or authentic and satisfying?’” Shultz concluded his essay that much of what is current Unitarian Universalist theology is unsatisfying in the face of what he has learned about the reality of torture. “God,” he says, “is not in the torture chamber.” It caused him to question some bedrock Unitarian Universalist assumptions and affirm others. The existence of a mysterious force of grace in the world that allows torture victims and sometimes even torturers to break through to humanity and the indomitability of the human spirit.

That is quite a challenge that he gave to his fellow ministers and I thought it was important in this world, at this time, right now, as our religious community seeks to respond, respond not to the world we wish it was, but to the world as it is. I thought it was important to take Shultz up on the challenge and to think about what evil is and what our response to it might be. Why is evil built into the nature of things? I don't have a good explanation, but that doesn't mean that there isn't profit in looking at this

phenomenon, because I really don't think that any of the world's religions have a comprehensive explanation, a completely satisfying explanation of why there is evil in the world.

No religion has a completely comprehensive explanation of the nature of God or ultimate reality either. Could it be that evil is as profound a mystery as God? Well, that reminds me of the Buddha's response to someone who asked him a lot of metaphysical questions and where evil is in the scheme of the universe is a metaphysical question. He asked the Buddha something about whether the world is unitary or dualistic. He asked the Buddha whether time existed or whether there were other worlds. The Buddha said, Sir, imagine that you were shot by a poisoned arrow and the doctor rushed to you about to administer the antidote and would it not be foolish for you to say no, I'm not going to deliver the antidote until you tell me what kind of feather the arrow had, until you told me who shot the arrow and who the shooter's father was and what clan he came from. These are the kinds of unimportant questions, the Buddha said, that are profitless to look at. What is the end of suffering? That is the question we should ask. That's something to think about.

So when we look at evil I think it's important for us to look at how it works in the human mind and spirit, in each of our minds and spirits, and in our relationships as human beings. It's hard not to speculate as to why there is suffering, however. I feel that of all the world's religions the most adequate, not the complete one but the most adequate, comes from Buddhism.

In our culture so much of our common sense view of evil comes from the idea of original sin from the western Christian tradition and I think there are a lot of problems with that. The idea of original sin, which by the way is not part of Judaism, is not part of eastern Christianity, and did not enter into western theology until the fifth century, (there's nothing in the Bible about it,) this idea of original sin posits that we are rotten to the core, that human beings at their very inception are just plain bad. There's no way that we can do anything good without the interference of a supernatural agency. That idea created and continues to create a lot of problems for a lot of people. So what original sin and the notion of human depravity tells us is that evil is caused by the sins of people. Well it's hard to argue with that, but are we indeed helpless against that sin without some divine intervention. Buddhism says, no, we are not. The idea of sin originally was a technical archery term. It means to miss. So you shoot an arrow and it misses the target, that's a sin so then the next arrow you shoot you adjust so you sin a little less the next time. That metaphor was used in early Judaism and Christianity as a way to describe our learning process as moral human beings.

In Buddhism the word sin is seldom used. Words like skillful and unskillful actions are used. In Buddhism it's not so much that we are punished *for* our sins but that we are punished *by* our sins. If we do something unskillful negative consequences will come to us. Sometimes we can see it immediately. You yell at your spouse and you have three days of very unpleasant existence. Sometimes the punishment by our sins is a little more subtle. A lifelong habit of blaming others for one's problems and soon you

don't have any friends. Buddhism says that there are three poisons of the mind. These poisons are part of the delusions that most humans have. The poisons are craving, (not being willing to give up a pleasure when the time for it has passed); aversion, which includes anger and fear; and delusion, which is at the root of both, that we don't clearly see what we do and who we are. There is a way out. The human will, the human spirit, and very importantly human religious communities help us to purify our consciousness so that we can create less and less suffering.

One of the ways that this delusion works the most perniciously is in projection. It's a fancy Jungian psychological term but Jesus really made it very simple. He said if you see a splinter in your neighbor's eye being a fault, (he's using a metaphor of course) don't take it out until you take the two-by-four out of your own eye and then you can see clearly to remove the splinter from your neighbor's eye. In other words, if you see something you don't like in someone else, most likely (there is a great deal of unanimity about this in the world's spiritual traditions) it's something about yourself that you don't want to face. That's projection. To save you from reading a lot of Jung, I'm going to give you just a little motto. Consider the fact that if you spot it, you've got it. There is a lot of spiritual growth in meditating on that.

This is a serious problem because in his book, *The Faces of the Enemies*, Sam Keene shows how war is only possible because of mass projection. He has some interesting pictures, cartoons, portraits of enemies of different wars from different sides and the enemies in these propaganda, pictures, portraits, movies even, are never depicted as full human beings. They're always depicted as some sort of animals or monsters, never as human beings. I think it's hopeful for us as a species that in order for us to kill another human being, we need to first dehumanize them. I'm not saying that it's good that we do that, but the fact is that if we are able to see the humanity of our opponents, it makes it very difficult for us to kill them. If we understand our opponents as people with the same feelings, thoughts, and most importantly longings, that we do, it's very difficult to harm them. Every single one of the founders of the world's great religions, every one, says that the center of their faith is do not do to others what you would not want to be done to yourself. Jesus put it differently than everyone else, he said, do unto others as you would have them do unto yourself.

We like to talk about the fact that "we are one, we are one," "hold hands... daisies." The fact is that we are projecting our faults as individuals on other individuals, as a nation on other nations, as a religion on other religions, and then we are dehumanizing them. You know people who are evil, like Hitler for example, do not wake up in the morning and say, "Aha! Another day to do evil!" It's not like the cartoons we watched when we were kids. The people who commit the most monstrous evil are the ones who are 100% sure that they are right, who are 100% sure that they are doing good. What delusion. And none of us are free from it. I wouldn't personally fly a plane into a building and kill thousands of people, but I have been overcome by ideological zeal which has led me to demonize and dehumanize political figures I don't agree with and I have been tempted to believe conspiracy theories on very flimsy evidence if it will reinforce my delusion that these people are somehow beyond the human pale.

There is a lot as a U.S. citizen and as a world citizen that we need to do, but what I think is the most important thing to do is to hate hatred within ourselves. I don't mean to push it out of our hearts, that's hatred against hatred. I mean to see, to hold it, and to understand the suffering that it causes us because the good news in Buddhism and in other versions in most world religions is that human consciousness, human love, and human community can help us purify our hatred, lead us from delusion to truth, help us understand that you and I and people in Lebanon, and people in Israel, and people in Iraq, and people in Washington are one. We are one. Innocent lives are being taken right now in both Lebanon and Israel. Both sides claim that they are acting for the good, that their cause is absolutely righteous. And yet how can you define as anything but evil a war that kills more children than soldiers. Hezbollah claims that their religion makes it okay to send rockets on top of innocent civilians and to hide in an innocent civilian population, when the founder of their religion said that the core of Islam is the golden rule. And Israel claims national security and I think it's overacting on a massive scale with very little thought for the innocent victims. Neither of the people on either side could do this if they could imagine the terror in three year old child when a rocket or a bomb is about to hit.

We need to do something about this world. For me, I'll do what I can. The most important thing is to look at my own hatred, my own egotism, and my own delusion and to seek always to see in the eyes of my fellow human beings the same longing for safety for happiness, for health, and for love that motivates my days. This community can help us do that for each other. I am hopeful because more and more human beings are seeing the interconnectedness of everything to all and these world crises are bringing that much more clearly to everyone's attention. I don't think that we really need a majority of people to really understand the golden rule. I think that enough people committed to living lives of love and integrity, enough people, not a majority, will change this planet. We have an important task here to help each other do this. I'm honored to be a partner with you in this great task.

So be it.