

## WISDOM CIRCLES

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### What Does It Mean To Be Confronted By Evil In The World?

The lyrics of the Rolling Stones song "Sympathy For The Devil" go like this:

*I stuck around St. Petersburg  
When I saw it was a time for a change  
Killed the czar and his ministers  
Anastasia screamed in vain  
I rode a tank  
Held a generals rank  
When the blitzkrieg raged  
And the bodies stank  
Pleased to meet you  
Hope you guess my name ...*

(The Rolling Stones performing "Sympathy For The Devil", live at the Trans World Dome, St Louis, Missouri, December 12 1997. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L18WGX3afDs> The above excerpt is at 3:00 min.)

These lyrics are based on the Western idea of an active, intelligent, malicious force working to cause destruction, decay and suffering. So much evil has been thrust before our eyes—the Oklahoma City bombing, the 9-11 attacks, the genocides in Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur. In Christian religion and Western myth, the devil or Satan has been identified as an intelligent, organized source of evil.

It is interesting for us to examine how the idea of Satan evolved in the first place. In Elaine Pagel's book, *The Origin of Satan* (<http://www.pinterest.com/pin/327707310357470026>), we are informed that Satan first appears as not necessarily evil or opposed to God. In the book of Job, Satan is the angel who had the "devil's advocate" role. Satan was an angel sent by God to block or thwart human activity. So if the path is bad, then obstruction is good.

Satan gradually came to be identified by the Jewish people with foreign oppressors. During the Babylonian Captivity the Jewish people became acquainted with the Persian idea of a cosmic battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, between God and the Devil. During Jesus' time the Jewish sect called the Essenes named those they considered impure Jews as followers of the Devil. Early Jewish followers of Jesus did the same with Jews who rejected Jesus. The same happened with early gentile Christians and pagans. Our image of the devil with horns and a tail comes from identifying positive European pagan gods with evil. Satan personified the human tendency to demonize those who disagree with us or who obstruct our path. Calling other humans devils has caused more harm than the devil ever did.

Do I believe that there is an organized intelligent force for evil, an evil being? Do I believe in Satan? Absolutely not. Evil exists, but I don't believe it is organized or intelligent. And one of the main reasons it exists is that we identify others as servants of the devil, representatives of evil. In order to destroy others we have to dehumanize them. The dividing line between good and evil is not between us and them. It runs thru the middle of our own hearts and our own communities. The philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote of the banality of evil. Evil is not fascinating as in the movie villains but ordinary and depressing.

UU's don't believe in original sin. In general, we believe that our natural potential is good, even if that goodness does not always manifest. Saying that does not mean that all of us are not capable of inflicting evil. But that does not mean that we are evil. The word "sin" comes from an archery term for missing the mark. We are not punished for our sins. We are punished by our sins. Much evil comes from denying our fallible, imperfect humanity. All suffering is not evil. Suffering is redeemable. Human evil is caused by ignorance and unhealed wounds and is not conquered but healed.

The Buddha taught that the three poisons of the mind that cause our own and others' suffering are rooted in our tendencies of craving, aversion and delusion. We all have these and we need to catch earlier and earlier. That's how we stop evil in the world, and in our own hearts.

In her book, *The Sociopath Next Door*, psychologist Martha Stout (<http://www.pinterest.com/pin/327707310357470081>) writes that 1 in 25 people do not have a conscience and will act for their own short term benefit without any regard for the suffering they cause others. They are adept at acting, lying and sexual manipulation. Surprisingly, the majority of prison populations are not sociopaths. Research shows that sociopaths are over-represented in politics and in the corporate world. We don't know why sociopaths exist. Some of the explanation must be genetic. For whatever reason, there may have been an evolutionary advantage to have some sociopaths among us. And some of it must be cultural. In Japan, Korea and China, where the good of family and community are much more emphasized, less than one half of one percent is fully sociopathic. The existence of these unfortunates does not take away from the fact that 96 people out of 100 are able to have compassion, to sacrifice their own self-interest for others, to love, and to connect. Sociopaths live in a loveless world and their actions almost always come back to destroy them.

So let's stop blaming the devil. That is a huge cop out. It helps us as a human family to refuse to take responsibility for our individual and collective choices that are destroying the world. It helps us avoid dealing with the real work of becoming human, of healing our own craving, hatred, and delusion. The devil didn't make us doing. We're doing it. We're responsible. And we've got to stop.

## **Spiritual Exercise**

In Latin American Liberation Theology, there is concept of systemic sin, the idea that mostly good, well-meaning people are caught up in systems that produce evil consequences. That is all of us.

For this month's spiritual exercise, think about one situation or system in the world that you think is evil in some way, and do just one small thing to work against, protest, opt out or try to change that evil. Use your imagination. Some thoughts are a donation to Amnesty International or the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee; a letter to a legislator or policy maker protesting an unjust law or decision; buying humanely raised meat, or foregoing meat all together. Think about it for a while and then do the thing that makes sense to you. Reflect on how that experience affected you and come prepared to share your experience with the group.

## **Questions for Reflection**

What is evil? Is it an active force in the world or not? Is anyone completely evil? Have you ever been the victim of someone or some system you consider evil? How did that experience affect you?

How have you dealt with or healed the craving, hatred or delusion in your own heart?

## **Words of Wisdom**

Good and evil are asymmetrical; there are more ways to harm people than to help them, and harmful acts can hurt them to a greater degree than virtuous acts can make them better off.

~ Steven Pinker

The worst evil of all is to leave the ranks of the living before one dies.

~ Seneca

What would our world be like if we ceased to worry about 'right' and 'wrong,' or 'good' and 'evil,' and simply acted so as to maximize well-being, our own and that of others? Would we lose anything important?

~ Sam Harris

Even in evil, that dark cloud which hangs over the creation, we discern rays of light and hope, and gradually come to see in suffering and temptation proofs and instruments of the sublimest purposes of wisdom and love.

~ William Ellery Channing

He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.

~ Martin Luther King, Jr

It may be necessary temporarily to accept a lesser evil, but one must never label a necessary evil as good.

~ Margaret Mead

We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.

~ Martin Luther King, Jr

At least two thirds of our miseries spring from human stupidity, human malice and those great motivators and justifiers of malice and stupidity, idealism, dogmatism and proselytizing zeal on behalf of religious or political idols.

~ Aldous Huxley

Nobody is more dangerous than he who imagines himself pure in heart, for his purity, by definition, is unassailable.

~ James Baldwin

What makes it so plausible to assume that hypocrisy is the vice of vices is that integrity can indeed exist under the cover of all other vices except this one. Only crime and the criminal, it is true, confront us with the perplexity of radical evil; but only the hypocrite is really rotten to the core.

~ Hannah Arendt

It is a sin to believe evil of others, but it is seldom a mistake.

~ H. L. Mencken

I believe that ignorance is the root of all evil. And that no one knows the truth.

~ Molly Ivins