

Unitarian Universalist Views of Evil

Unitarian Universalists have had relatively little to say about the concept of evil over the generations. This is partly because we have spent our energy reassuring people that human beings are fundamentally good and that those good impulses will ultimately prevail. And it is partly because, having abandoned traditional Christian understandings of sin and salvation, we have had to develop new theological tools with which to meet evil, many of which are described in this pamphlet. As I learned only too poignantly during my years in human rights work, acts that deserve to be called “evil”—enlisting children as soldiers or sex slaves, for example—are only too common. Cruelty is real.

So how do we understand such cruel acts and what can we do about them? Ultimately our answers will need to be political and theological, personal and corporate.

Along with intimations of goodness, evil lies coiled in almost every human heart, latent in almost every human enterprise. The goal is not to vanquish it—that is too much to hope for—but to temper it; and naming a phenomenon, as our authors do right here, is always the first step toward its taming.

—Rev. William F. Schulz, Editor

Evil is an activity of humankind. Natural disasters are not evil, and attributing evil to the supernatural does not address the reality that we human beings, with our agency of choice and capacity for corruption, create evil every day by choosing action or inaction at odds with our better selves.

As individuals, we have access to our own consciences, the “still, small voice of God within.” As societies, we draw upon the collective wisdom and experience of our various peoples. When we hear that voice, find that wisdom, know what is right and good and yet choose to manifest its harmful antithesis, we actively bring evil into the world.

Evil is a strong word, but we should not shy away from using it. We should give it definition; doing so, we wrest power from it and enable ourselves to bring about good—our human agency to do so is our only certainty.

—Adrian L. H. Graham,
First Unitarian Church of
Baltimore, Maryland

Evil is not as complex as our explanations about it are. Whenever we try to explain it, we fall back on our own experiences: the deep betrayals, our bitter losses. We find ourselves speechless and ineffective in the face of larger structural evils revealed to us with chilling regularity: a law enforcement system that leads to unarmed black people being shot by police every day of the year and wars by remote control that are no less deadly for their distance.

However we describe the means by which we experience evil, its source remains the same: our capacity to turn in on ourselves so completely that we lose sight of both our connections to others and to that greater source that binds us together. Whenever we forget who we are, whose we are, and what our relationship to one another is—there lies the breeding ground for evil. It is that loss of essential memory which leads to individual actions and collective structures that reflect and even reinforce that terrible disconnect.

Evil has its origins in the abandonment of hope and meaning among those who have lost—or never known—their core identity: children of the Holy, siblings to all people on the earth.

—Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, President, Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, CA.

Evil is not a supernatural force born from cosmic dualism or spiritual warfare. Such a theological conjecture is dangerous because it transfers accountability away from evil’s prime mover—human

beings.

Simply put, evil is profoundly immoral behavior. An often overlooked source of evil is human suffering. Suffering creates the conditions by which we may justify harming another—intentionally or not. We manifest evil when we fail to reconcile ourselves to our suffering and restrain ourselves from causing harm. This malevolence stems from our pain—whether deep or shallow, whether experienced as grief, unhappiness, misery, torment, or distress.

Hence our challenge: If we hope to eliminate evil, or simply weaken its insidious presence, we must tend to our own suffering as well as that of others.

That is why we gather in religious community, week after week, to use stories and song to restore health to ourselves, our families, and our communities; to expand our capacity to empathize with those we were taught to oppose; and to mobilize our collective talents to care for others—thereby taking full responsibility for the evil that humans create.

—Rev. Nate Walker, Community Minister for Religion and Public Life,
Church of the Larger Fellowship

I adore the phrase, “The Devil is a liar,” though I have never believed in a red, grotesque faun-man from the underworld who taunts us mortals. The phrase is usually a response to hearing about someone’s wrongdoing, an attempt to explain away such “sins.” I reject any theology that disavows free will, yet I enjoy the melodrama with which some holler the accusation.

Though I do not believe in a demonic influence, I do believe in the existence of evil. I have seen it myself, unfortunately. Evil can be simply described as one of the opposites of love, alongside apathy and hatred, but it is much more complex a concept than that. We humans are all essentially good and have an understanding of ethical decision making, but all of us choose to ignore our consciences and behave poorly from time to time.

Regardless of the source of evil, it represents the loss of the ability or desire to discern between good and hurtful behavior, combined with large-scale patterns of hurting others for the mere pleasure of doing so—the absence of conscience. Though evil’s destruction is powerful, I honestly still believe in that (now) old cliché, “Love always wins.”

—Rev. Marisol Caballero,
Faith Innovation Specialist,
Unitarian Universalist Association

When unthinkable tragedy strikes by human hands, we are quick to think of it as evil. Too often such evil is imagined to have arisen, fully formed, out of nowhere. In truth, most acts have a context and our quick labeling of them as “evil” can dull us to the complexities of our world.

Individuals are formed by a web of social and personal relationships, as well as the larger cultural environment, all of which leads to either greater health or to brokenness. No matter how profound that brokenness, the way in which it will be expressed is greatly influenced by the amount of love and support we have experienced. An absence of such love creates fertile soil in which seeds of hate and anger can take root and grow into evil.

Humans, by their nature, are capable of those actions we label “good” and those we label “evil.” It is the role of our social institutions, including the family, religious organizations, and government, to inspire the good. Health breeds health and if we are to build the world of which we dream, we must take seriously the task of creating social structures that promote health at every level of human living.

—Rev. Kathy Schmitz, Minister,
First Unitarian Church, Orlando, Florida

We tend to associate the word *evil* with big events that make the headlines: war, genocide, and mass

shootings. But I will never forget a smaller moment when I felt I was in the presence of evil. It was during a conversation with someone who took pleasure in hurting others, who inflicted suffering, sat back, and smiled.

To feel remorse for our harmful actions is to reaffirm our humanity. To apologize and make amends is to restore connection. To take joy from another person's sorrow, on the other hand, is to lose a very important part of who we are—the part that makes us fully human. As Jesus said, "What does it profit us to gain the whole world and lose our own soul?"

—Rev. Chris Buice, Senior Minister, Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, Knoxville, Tennessee.

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Resources

These books and packs of this pamphlet are available from inSpirit: The UU Book and Gift Shop at uua.org/bookstore

Nathan C. Walker, *Cultivating Empathy: The Worth and Dignity of Every Person—Without Exception* (Skinner House)

Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar, *Fluent in Faith: A Unitarian Universalist Embrace of Religious Language* (Skinner House)

Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Beacon)

Laurel Hallman and Burton D. Carley, Eds., *Not for Ourselves Alone: Theological Essays on Relationship* (Skinner House)

William F. Schulz, *What Torture Taught Me and Other Reflections on Justice and Theology* (Skinner House)