

“Beyond Good and Evil”

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, August 28, 2011
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

When Susanna Merwin approached me a few months ago about doing a service on the topic of evil, I will be the first to admit, I was not too keen on the idea. *Evil*, it has long been said, is the Achilles heel of Unitarian Universalism. Let's be honest – we just don't handle the topic very well at all. Perhaps that's because we don't tend to see the world in dualities, in terms of black-and-white. We're the people, who are more comfortable than most other folks, living in the “gray areas.” And evil – well, that's an awfully black-and-white subject.

But when Susanna placed the winning bid in our annual church auction for the item known as “Sermon for Sale by Rev. Bill” – I literally *couldn't* say no to her request. Perhaps sensing my reluctance, she gave me a book – Nietzsche's “Beyond Good and Evil” – to serve as a starting point, in our preparations for this morning's service. And so, here I am, to reflect for a few moments on the topic of evil, from a Unitarian Universalist perspective.

But first, let me address Nietzsche. You have already heard, from Susanna, about the troubled life of the brilliant German philosopher. Now as someone who has only a passing knowledge of philosophy – having taken the requisite Philosophy 101 course in college, having read and enjoyed the delightful philosophy primer “Sophie's World,” by Jostein Gaardner, having dabbled in a bit of Spinoza here and a little Hegel there – I had only the most rudimentary knowledge about Nietzsche: I knew that it was he who had famously made the often-misinterpreted assertion that “God is dead,” and I was aware that he had written something called “Thus Spoke Zarathustra ” – though quite frankly, I was more familiar with the musical piece of the same name, from its association with the movie “2001: A Space Odyssey,” not to mention the late-great Elvis Presley.

Suffice it to say, then, that working my way through “Beyond Good and Evil” this month proved to be an exercise in mental dexterity of the kind that I haven't had in years. So thank you, Susanna, for that – and for the affirmation that Nietzsche gave me (and, I might go so far as to say, many of us) about those

aforementioned “gray areas” in life. Because Nietzsche’s main premise, if I understand it correctly, is that the time has come for humanity to *move beyond* the black-and-white, good-vs.-evil kind of thinking that, for millennia now, has caused so much pain and suffering – I’m tempted to say, “caused so much evil” – in our world.

Yet here at the start of the 21st century, more than a hundred years after Nietzsche – when we should have, as a species, *matured* to the point where we could live together in the kind of mutuality Martin Luther King envisioned – far too many people have allowed themselves to be baited, by extremists and terrorists and politicians and capitalists – baited into believing in a overly simplified worldview that is precipitously, *dangerously* dualistic. We’ve regressed even further, if that’s possible, into “us against them,” the good guys versus the bad guys – a wild-west, frontier mentality of cowboys and Indians, only now we’re armed with chemical and nuclear weapons.

Good, versus evil. I assure you, you can hear *that very sermon* – “good versus evil” – preached at any number of churches and temples and synagogues and mosques, all around Cincinnati, all around America, all around the world – on any given weekend. Boiled down to their essence – as one might boil away water in a Bunsen burner during a high school chemistry experiment, leaving only the most basic elements – at their essence, most human religions are about some kind of *struggle* between good and evil – and about framing, and understanding, that struggle.

Good and evil are *givens*, in most religions. And not only do good and evil *exist* – they are perhaps the only and ultimate reality, on a grand, cosmic scale – and they are at war with one another.

But to quote the very first Unitarian Universalist minister I ever had deep, difficult, theological conversations with – “We simply don’t accept that premise.”

Yes, ours is a long – and, to my mind, very rich – religious tradition, of *not* accepting various religious traditions. We are the ones who didn’t accept the premise of the Trinity. We are the ones who didn’t accept the premise of Hell. We didn’t accept the premise that everything depicted in the Bible was literal history, either, or that human beings are innately sinful, or that women should not be ministers. There are *a lot* of religious doctrines and premises, that we simply don’t accept.

But are we also the ones who don’t accept what I’m claiming is the most basic of all human religious and ethical premises – the idea that there is both good, and evil, in the world? Here, our Unitarian Universalist tradition is not nearly as clear.

In fact, the further back you go into our history as separate religious traditions, you find that, while we were definitely iconoclasts in almost every other

sense – often downright religious *revolutionaries*, who were way ahead of our time – when it came to the question of evil, we never questioned the conventional wisdom very much, at all. That old joke about the Universalist who believed God was too good to damn him to Hell, and the Unitarian who believed he was *too good* to be damned to Hell ... well, like most jokes, there's a grain of truth hidden in the humor. Both religious propositions quite naturally presupposed the existence of good and evil.

Listen, if you will, to this excerpt from a sermon by the Rev. William Henry Ryder – one of my predecessors in this pulpit – well, not *this* pulpit, but the one we used more than a hundred years ago... – whose tenure as the minister of our congregation concluded in 1883, three autumns before the publication of Nietzsche's "Beyond Good and Evil":

"Universalism," said Ryder, "is not simply the dogma of the final salvation of all, but a system of doctrines of which *this* happy consummation is the result. If God is absolutely good, and absolutely sovereign [over] the universe as well as good – and if Christ did die, thus to pledge the Divine mercy – then it seems to us that *evil*, as a fixed result, is an *impossibility* in the [final] government of God – and that, consequently, some day in what we call the fullness of time, the mystery ... will be fully explained by the ingathering of *all things* in [God]. In a word, ... evil is *temporary*."

This was the classic Universalist explanation of evil. Notice the rhetorical argumentation Ryder used – if this, then *that*, and therefore by logical conclusion, this. I can almost *see* Nietzsche throwing up his hands in frustration – and then launching into a spirited dissection of Ryder's basic argument – in no small part because the latter's position rests upon our willingness to accept as truth, as givens, a whole bunch of "*ifs*" that neither Nietzsche, nor most modern Unitarian Universalists, would be willing to accept.

No we, as post-modern religious liberals, face a much more fundamental question than whether or not there is a God, or Divine mercy, or universal salvation. Our question today is whether or not we can, with intellectual integrity, continue to adhere to the conventional wisdom that our world – much less, the universe – consists of good, and evil. This is the very question posed, all those years ago, by our friend, Mr. Nietzsche.

As I consider this question, I am acutely aware that my own examination of evil splits existence into two categories – what I like to call the "micro" and the "macro." Already, you will see, I have created a potential duality in my thinking – something Nietzsche strongly cautions us against. But to me, these two categories make an important distinction between what I *might* – if I am lucky – be able to know about the world, and what I cannot, no matter how I might try, know about the world. On the one hand, there is that realm of speculation that includes things

like God, a realm which is, by definition, just that – *speculation* – and there’s another realm of speculation that is based on my individual, human experience – and therefore, though still contingent and limited, is nonetheless at least potentially verifiable.

Put another way, I do not choose to spend much of my time or energy pondering the *macro* level of religious questions – that cosmic perspective which one might call the “God’s eye view” of things. To me, it is the epitome of hubris to assert that one can know the cosmic meaning or significance of, say, a hurricane. Maybe there’s a God that looks at least something like we posit God to be – and that’s a *huge* maybe – but to ascribe motivations and feelings to that great Mystery – whether they be motivations like wrath, or feelings like compassion – is, to my mind, utter folly. As a single, self-aware, thinking creature of one single species, whose brief lifespan on this one tiny planet in one corner of the Milky Way galaxy is only one among billions, just of my own kind – I refuse to put the question of good and evil onto a cosmic, universal, God-canvas.

Again, as my early mentor John Wolf would have said, “I simply don’t accept the premise.”

But things change, dramatically, when I look at them from the micro level. When I look around me, on this tiny planet, and see human beings torturing other human beings – when I see Nazi gas chambers, and modern-day dictators turning chemical weapons on their own people – when I see 9/11 terrorists killing thousands in the name of their God – when I see millions of people starving to death while millions more are dying of obesity – when I look at *this* world, as opposed to some projected cosmic drama – I do believe in evil. And like Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart – a Cincinnati, by the way – though I may not be able to give an easy *definition* of it, I “know it when I see it.”

But if I am to be true to what I know about not only my world, but about myself as well – I have to admit that Nietzsche was right: The way I see evil, is necessarily colored by my own life experiences. It is shaped by my own prejudices, my own paradigms and perspectives, both conscious and unconscious. In short, evil – and good, for that matter – is a *human* construct, not a Divine one. Now in making that argument, I in no way mean to diminish the importance of what you and I do, in response to both the evil, and the good, that we perceive in the world. Quite the opposite. We are *responsible* for the good, and the evil, we create in this world.

When we are in touch with our higher nature (and here, I offer another, unapologetic, value judgment) – when we act from a place of compassion and empathy – what the Dalai Lama calls our “potential for mercy, forgiveness and tolerance” – then we will create healing and wholeness, where evil has been. When, on the other hand, we act from a place of fear or self-interest, we have in us

an equal potential for evil. Thus, it *matters*, what we choose to cultivate, in our own hearts.

Which brings me face to face, with each of you – and the idea of *religious community*. No other ongoing human institution, outside the family, serves to remind us of the network of mutuality in which we exist, serves to recall us to our better selves – than does the religious community. *Here*, we find what is beautiful and good, in one another. *Here*, we hold one another accountable, when we miss the mark. Here, we forgive ourselves, and each other – and begin again in love.

May ours be that kind of religious community. May we nurture and support, comfort and encourage, inspire and motivate one another. May we work for justice, and stand in solidarity against that which we know to be evil. And may all that we do, bring light and love, to this world.

So may we be. Amen!