



Evil People:

Inherent Worth and Dignity Reconsidered

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns #1000, #399, #108. Reading #440

Responsive Reading

"From the Fragmented World" by Phillip Hewett
(adapted for inclusivity; see blue type)

From the fragmented world of our everyday lives we
gather together in search of wholeness.

*By many cares and preoccupations, by diverse and
selfish aims are we separated from one another and
divided within ourselves.*

Yet we know that no branch is utterly severed from
the Tree of Life that sustains us all.

*We cherish our oneness with those around us and
the countless generations that have gone before us.*

We would hold fast to all of good we inherit even as
we would leave behind us the outworn and the false.

*We would escape from bondage to the ideas of our
own day and from the delusions of our own fancy.*

Let us labor in hope for the dawning of a new day
without hatred, violence, and injustice.

*Let us nurture the growth in our own lives of the
love that has shone in the lives of the greatest of **our
human kin**, the rays of whose lamps still illumine our
way.*

In this spirit we gather. In this spirit we pray.

Sermon

It is a chilly autumn Tuesday night. In the dark I'm walking home from the light rail train station. As I turn the corner and approach the house, I see the back porch light streaming through the open wooden gate. *I left it closed. It should be closed.* My heartbeat picks up as I walk through the gate. I step up on the deck and look at my back windows. There's a screen lying on the ground. A window is pried open, but only a few inches. Perhaps my wooden reinforcement has foiled an intruder's entrance, or a noise has scared them off. Nearly holding my breath, I go inside and look around—nothing is disturbed, nothing taken. (Not that I have anything worth taking, but it would be upsetting to have strangers snooping in my home.)

I call the non-emergency police number, but it's getting late, so I ask them to come in morning. I go to bed with most of the lights on. When a police officer comes to take the report in the daylight, he looks around. "They probably tried to break in during the afternoon," he says, "rather than at night. I don't think they'll come back, they just saw what looked like an opportunity. Probably some punks."

The first Principle¹ of our Unitarian Universalist faith is this: our congregations "affirm and promote respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person." This is an optimistic principle. Unitarian Universalists can be criticized for being TOO optimistic, being too naïve. We can be challenged to explain human evil and to account for evil people. Aren't we in denial? Isn't there more evidence that human beings are basically bad, instead of inherently good?

Since becoming a minister I've accompanied police officers in "ride-along" visits in their patrol cars. It struck me how clearly they would separate people between criminals and everyone else. "We go after the bad guys," they say. "Criminals." "Punks."

I want to *think well* of human beings. I try to affirm inherent worth and dignity. Yet I wonder, if I worked in the criminal justice system, just how many crimes I'd have to see before I would start separating humanity into the good guys and the bad guys.

It gets complicated. Recently cops were convicted of killing innocent people after Hurricane

Katrina in the city of New Orleans. In Chicago, news of police corruption and racist brutality has led to court action against the police, and growing demands for the mayor to step down. In the name of protecting people from evil, evil takes place.

Evil comes in many forms. Consider internet scams. Many of us have had a good laugh when reading the awkward English prose of emails coming supposedly from Nigerian royalty/ offering to reward us if we'll help them get their fortunes out of their home country. These are not the work of clumsy computer hackers, but of organized crime--gangster operations. They often are not located here, or even in the countries named in emails. Cyber criminals generate millions of emails, and it takes only a few people to fall for it, only a few to give up their personal information or credit card numbers. The stories in these emails are intentionally farfetched to make sure only the most gullible will follow through. Perhaps that is how the crooks justify it: anybody that foolish deserves to have their identity stolen and their life savings taken away.

I've gotten phone solicitations for so-called charities purporting to help military veterans or kids with cancer. The so-called Police Activities League used to ask for money in the fall, saying they will take holiday groceries to poor families. It doesn't take much research to find out that many groups like that provide very little service. They are mainly fundraising operations. They take millions from donors who were deceived into thinking they would be making a difference. Scammers like that make me furious. I hate them.

Often in discussions about inherent worth, people bring up Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany. Given his intentional murder of so many millions of Jews and other people, the hatred he unleashed, the violence he generated, how can we see any worth or dignity in that man? We could bring up other historical examples: Cambodia's Pol Pot, China's Chairman Mao, Chile's Pinochet, American slavery and segregation, and colonialism on every continent.

But why look at history when the headlines will do? Last week the State of Michigan's Attorney General announced criminal charges against three state and city officials for harming the residents of the city of Flint, Michigan. They violated the state's Clean Water Act by decisions that caused lead to

leach into the water supply. Lead is a neurotoxin, especially dangerous for children. Three men chose to put people at risk and then to lie about it. They covered up evidence of lead in the water system. They tampered with test results. And, the Attorney General said, "These charges are only the beginning."²

If poisoning children to save money is not bad enough, how about the Roman Catholic church's cover-up of the sexual abuse of children by clergy? The movie "Spotlight" shows a whole system corrupted by abuse, dishonesty and secrecy.³ When families came forward with accusations against one or more priests, Boston's Archdiocese reassigned them to other parishes, leading to more victims—thousands of them. How do we make sense of all this? Aren't some folks just born evil?

I don't think some people are born evil, even if their evil deeds make it hard to imagine otherwise. Our UU tradition teaches that all of us are born with the capacity both to do good *and* to be destructive. We have the potential to be creative, self-sacrificing, generous, forgiving and kind. We also have the potential to cause harm, to be selfish, greedy, power-hungry, violent and vindictive.

In religious history, the worst evils were done in the name of *eliminating* evil. Burning heretics at the stake, beheading Protestants or beheading Catholics, wiping out a whole village of one faith or another, forcing Jews and Muslims out of Spain in 1492.⁴ In politics as well as religion, so many wrongs are done in the service of a greater good. That's what Frank Underwood says/ about his malicious ways. He's the fictional South Carolina politician on the popular Netflix TV series, "House of Cards." As portrayed by actor Kevin Spacey, Underwood has killed people on his way to the top, sometimes with his bare hands. He justifies his lust for power as the way to achieve the "greater good."

Frank Underwood says: "For those of us climbing to the top of the food chain, there can be no mercy. There is but one rule: hunt or be hunted."⁵ This TV show is deliciously popular with many people. So are movies about organized crime. Why is that? Perhaps this is our way of wrestling with the contradictions of our nature as human beings. Maybe it's how we face the fact that we can mean things and we can justify them to ourselves.

I am aware of temptations that live in my soul, like the temptation to lash out. As the Sacramento Police officer stands in my home to take my report of that attempted break in, he explains the difference between a burglary and a home invasion. *This* was an attempted burglary. If they enter the house to steal things and you're home, it's a home invasion, which is a greater crime.

"Let me see if I understand," I say. "If I'm gone, it's a burglary. But if they break in to the house and I'm at home, then it's..."

"Then you can shoot them!" he says.

"Oh! Well, I wouldn't want to risk that, and I don't have a gun." His remark catches me off guard. Later, when the full weight of that attempted crime at my home sinks in, I realize: Yes, if they broke in on me, I'd want to shoot them. In my revenge fantasy, the idea feels appealing, exciting, justified, even healing. Wow!

It's good that I don't possess any firearms. It's too easy for me to imagine people suitable to use them on. It can be tempting to conclude that violence is the answer to troubling situations, to imagine that certain people deserve to be put out of the way so much that I can imagine taking care of it myself.

This morning I've reminded you of plenty of bad news and bad people. All of it can make it hard to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But rest assured, when you or I have a weak moment about that idealistic affirmation, we need only to look around us, and we'll find others nearby who can bolster our faith. They do it by the ways they practice compassion, generosity, and forgiveness, by the ways they show kindness and respect. Together, we help one another to renew our hope.

Human dignity and worth is an ideal. The philosopher Susan Neiman says: "The nature of the ideal is to be more and better, than everything that [already] is."⁶ The reason we have ideals is for our actions to be measured by them. Ideals/ challenge us. They inspire us and call us forward.

In his book *Radical: My Journey out of Islamic Extremism*, Maajid Nawaz talks about how he became a potential terrorist. When he was a boy, his family immigrated from Pakistan to southeastern England. Growing up there, he endured poverty, segregation, and racist bullying. This radicalized

him. When he heard news of the genocidal murder of Muslims in Bosnia, his grief and anger expanded. Nawaz joined an extremist group. At age 24 he was arrested for trying to recruit others into that group. Though not accused of hurting or planning to hurt anyone, he was put in prison for five years. While in prison "he began to question Muslim extremism, especially the brand practiced by the jihadists among his fellow inmates." Amnesty International, the human rights organization, named Nawaz a "prisoner of conscience." It "adopted" his case. Amnesty was, in other words, reminding the government of Nawaz's basic human rights. He says: "The unconditional nature of Amnesty's support ... humbled me." Though Nawaz had been indoctrinated by a militant movement that thrived on dehumanizing "the other," he saw that Amnesty, in taking on his case, "was refusing" to dehumanize him. He said Amnesty International "conveyed [this] message: 'You're a human being, so you deserve our support.'"⁷

The purpose of our First Principle is not to tie us up in debate about whether a tyrant or a torturer has inherent worth. Our First Principle reminds us to look out for the victims, to protect the vulnerable, to remember those too easily forgotten. Let's not spend more time wondering about the nature of the bad guys than we do in working for the survival and the safety of everyone else.

We need not have all the philosophical questions answered, we need only to desire to live by the values that call to us. We need only to choose, to act, in order to affirm and promote human worth and human dignity. How will you try to do that this afternoon, and the rest of the week? How will you respect and affirm human dignity this year?

When we can recount so much bad news about the so-called bad guys, it is crucial to remember the courage of those who protect and affirm human dignity when it would be easier to turn the other way. In writing after the Nazi holocaust, the late Hannah Arendt talked about those who complied with official orders to murder people and those who refused. When evil takes over a country, she said, there is no way to predict who will comply with evil and who will resist it. "Politically speaking," she wrote, "under conditions of terror most people will comply, but *some people will not*."⁸

As an example, Arendt wrote about Sgt. Anton Schmid. He was an electrician who owned a small radio shop in Vienna. Schmid was drafted by Hitler's army and assigned to Vilnius, Lithuania. Before the Nazi invasion, Lithuania was a center of Jewish culture and population. The Nazis exterminated 94 percent of the Jews in Lithuania. As this was taking place, Sgt. Schmid wrote home to his wife about the horrors he saw. In resistance to this cruelty, Sgt. Schmid sneaked food into the Jewish ghettos. He also provided false ID papers to help 250 people escape. Schmid was arrested in January of 1941, tried in February and executed in April of that year. In the last letter his wife received from him, he didn't consider his efforts to be heroic.⁹ Rather, Anton Schmid said: "I merely behaved as a human being." Hannah Arendt said we need to tell stories like this, remember them, and celebrate them. By doing so, we remind ourselves of the goodness that *is possible* in human life. By

¹ "Our Unitarian Universalist Principles," Unitarian Universalist Association website. Accessed April 22, 2016: <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>

² "AG Schuette: Flint Water Charges Only the Beginning." *Detroit Free Press*. April 21, 2016. Accessed on April 22, 2016: <http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/flint-water-crisis/2016/04/20/2-mdeq-employees-city-employee-charged-flint-water-crisis/83272760/>

³ "Spotlight (film)," Wikipedia. Accessed April 25, 2016: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spotlight_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spotlight_(film))

⁴ "Alhambra Decree," Wikipedia. Accessed April 25, 2016: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alhambra_Decree

doing so, we restore our faith in what we can choose. We can increase the odds on choosing to resist harm, to show courage, to bring help and healing to this world we share.

Human worth and dignity is a practice to aspire to. This principle guides us to treat people with kindness and patience, advocate for human rights, and work for justice, freedom and fairness for everyone. We affirm human dignity not in a debate but in the way we live our lives. We promote human worth by respecting human worth.

So much in human history or in this week's headlines can burden our spirits. Yet so many stories can give us hope and lift our spirits.

How can we keep from talking about those examples of courage and kindness? How can we keep from singing about generosity and sacrifice, singing about the human goodness and glory waiting to be called forth from us into this day and this world? So may it be.

⁵ Accessed on April 20, 2016: <http://www.nme.com/photos/frank-underwood-s-best-quotes-21-of-his-most-sinister-lines-from-house-of-cards/395679#/photo/2#2vryskyoSvuA950V.99>

⁶ Nieman, Susan. *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*. Princeton University Press, 2004, 307.

⁷ Quoted in "Beginning to See the Light." Book review by Gary Greenberg. *Harper's Magazine*, March 2016, 85.

⁸ Nieman, Susan. *Evil in Modern Thought* (etc.)

⁹ "Sgt. Anton Schmid." Website *The Holocaust: Crimes, Heroes and Villans*, accessed April 16, 2016: <http://auschwitz.dk/Schmid/Schmid.htm>