

“What About Hitler: The Conundrum of Inherent Worth and Dignity”
 Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
 March 11, 2012

“Call Me by My True Names” (adapted) By Thich Nhat Hanh

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow
 because even today I still arrive.

Look deeply: I arrive in every second
 ... in order to laugh and to cry,
 in order to fear and to hope.
 The rhythm of my heart is the birth and
 death of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly on the surface of the river,
 and I am the bird which, when spring comes,
 arrives in time to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,
 and I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence,
 feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
 my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
 and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
 who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate,
 and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

...
 My joy is like spring,
 so warm it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life.
 My pain is like a river of tears,
 so full it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
 so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,
 so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
 so I can wake up,
 and so the door of my heart can be left open,
 the door of compassion.

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It is inevitable. I am in the Emerson Room with the youth who make up the Coming of Age class. We are in a heated discussion about evil when I push back with our first principle. “How do you make sense of that?” I ask. They respond with a question of their own. “What about Hitler?”

Our first principle is one that we are proud of. We stick by it with a zealot’s tenacity. In fact, there you are at the family gathering and you’ve gotten up the courage to join in the conversation about religion. You’re clipping along telling everyone how happy you are to have found All Souls. You remember the seven principles and proudly hold up the first among them. “We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person” when someone at the table – your brother-in-law, your mother, your sister challenges you, “What about Hitler?”

For that matter, what about Stalin? Mao? Idi Amin? What about the people who are not known for inspiring mammoth atrocities but rather the private atrocities that effectively damage people’s lives – or cause certain death. Do they have inherent worth and dignity that we are compelled to honor as Unitarian Universalists?

Let’s back up a bit.

A cornerstone Universalist belief is and has always been the ultimate worth of every human being. It was the theology that made them staunch abolitionists in the 18th century, long before the movement to abolish slavery had traction. You’ll also remember that Universalist theology is one of universal salvation – that all are saved by a loving God. This particular theology took some bends and twists through the generations – some argued for future punishment, usually until the soul returned to a state of grace; others named two natures: carnal and spiritual and that with death, carnal nature was destroyed.

These are the type of controversies that are interesting to history geeks and theology students but make everybody else’s eye cross. In sum, Universalists believed – and Unitarian Universalists still hold - that all people are worthy and salvation is assured. Even though human nature may be a blend of the profane and transcendent, we are capable of choosing the way to go. And by our particular dispositions, we all go in *our own way*.

For, we are born who we are. Raising a child boils down to two tasks: as best as we are able, trying to keep our children safe and healthy and as best as we are able, trying to keep our children from becoming jerks. That means encouraging natural dispositions of goodness and kindness and discouraging natural dispositions that are neither good nor kind.

Here's to illustrate the point ...

Phoebe gives birth to her first child. Lisa is wonderful and lovable and even tempered. Phoebe believes Lisa is even tempered, Phoebe believes, because she is a good mother. Phoebe does not believe that there is more to this story. She's feeling pretty good about herself. She *is* a good mother, after all. And then Phoebe gives birth to her second child. Joshua is equally wonderful and lovable but ... even tempered? Not so much. Joshua is quick to anger and given to fits. Phoebe says to me, "As it turns out, Lisa could have been raised by a pack of wolves and it wouldn't have made a difference."

Which, of course, is an exaggeration but, we get the point.

And still and yet, no matter our natural dispositions, we are all born worthy. Inherent worth. Inherent blessing. We honor the spark of divinity that is within each child. That's what we say when we dedicate our children – and we mean it.

And there is – always – the truth of our duality. We are capable of great good just as we are capable of great evil. The choice is ours.

Sometimes our choices are influenced by circumstance. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, teacher, author, poet and peace activist. His community now presides in France where he would receive mail informing him of the issues affecting refugees fleeing his homeland, oftentimes describing atrocities that rained down on the most vulnerable. One of letters included the story of a twelve year-old Vietnamese girl – a refugee, a boat person, as refugees from that country have been named. As is described in the poem, the little girl was raped by a Thai pirate and was so devastated she jumped into the sea and drowned.

Our immediate response is to condemn the pirate – which is easily done by people of good will. But we are encouraged to look more deeply into this tragic state of affairs. Being the wise man that he is, Thich Nhat Hahn meditated on this story. In his meditation he imagined that if he had been born in that same fishing village under the same conditions, he would likely have become a pirate too. He considered that hundreds of babies were being born along the Gulf of Siam – more than could be cared for. He considered that in 25 years' time many of them would also become sea pirates.

Said the monk, "If you take a gun and shoot the pirate, all of us are to some extent responsible for this state of affairs."

"The rhythm of [our] heart[s] is the birth and death of all that are alive."

In other words, we espouse the principle that honors our interconnectedness – our being with all. Therefore, we are the pirate just as sure as we are the little girl. We are the arms dealer. We are the torturer.

Faced with certain circumstances and pressures, we are all capable of evil.

We may look at stories of those tempted by evil and distance ourselves.

We are inherently good!

We don't believe in Satan!

What's this evil malarkey?

To do so only makes us more vulnerable. Consider the soldiers who tortured Iraqi citizens at the prison at Abu Garib. Do you think that Lynndie English - who was photographed holding a human being by a leash as he lay writhing on the floor – do you think that she would have ever believed that she was susceptible to the ways of evil? But there she was, in the midst of brutal circumstances she herself became as brutal. She, and her fellow torturers, succumbed to evil.

All people are inherently worthy, yes. But some do succumb to evil. Maybe they were born with a particular nature that made them more susceptible. Maybe they didn't have family or community to consistently help direct them toward goodness and kindness. Maybe the place they called home was brutal, violent, poverty stricken, hopeless. Or maybe they had no place to call home. Or maybe they found themselves in the middle of a war zone, witnessing violence they could not have imagined. Or maybe the abuser was herself abused therefore sustaining the cycle of violence. Or maybe none of these things applied. Maybe they were well-off but their privilege blinded them.

We downplay the power of evil at our own peril for we are as vulnerable to its power as was the soldier, pirate, and arms dealer. Lynndie English and her fellow soldiers were regular people, just like you and me. Inherently worthy and inherently vulnerable to evil.

So, what keeps our feet firmly planted in the ways of goodness?

Our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

If that sounds like circular reasoning to you, allow me to push back. This commitment helps us to keep our own hearts open. It helps us to hold on to our own inherent worth and dignity as well as that of others. We are better prepared to choose good over evil.

What else keeps our feet firmly planted in the ways of goodness?

Our determined understanding that we have the freedom to do what we will. We are not helpless. We garner the courage to say, "no" in the face of evil. Dana McLean Greeley – who served as the first president of the merged Unitarian Universalist Association - he was a wise one. In part, he said:

We each have a measure of freedom
To do as we will.
We can debase our life or dignify it;

We can fill it with doubt or faith,
 And with hate or love.
 We can disavow our heritage or proclaim it. “Freedom to Do as We Will”

So, what about Hitler? Inherently worthy? That Hitler had a measure of freedom. He chose to debase life rather than to dignify it. He filled life with hate rather than with love. He had the freedom to choose otherwise and he chose evil. He created hell on earth for millions of his victims – and for himself.

He chose to desecrate life. That debased others’ inherent worth and dignity. He blew his inherent worth and dignity. And the likes of him would not be welcome here.

We’ll conclude with a story. Quite a few years ago, I led a mid-week service in what is now our chapel. One day a man arrived and sat at the back of the sanctuary. After the service was over and everyone else left, he approached me and introduced himself as Andrew. I later found out that he was part of a religious sect that was making the rounds at all of the churches in the neighborhood. He asked me about Unitarian Universalism and I shared our core values with him. And that’s when the conversation went off the beam. He told me that when Jesus returned, that CT would be the first place to burn and this congregation with it because of our acceptance of homosexuals.

Clearly, the conversation was at the point of no return. I stood up and said that the conversation was over. My polite self stepped aside and I said in a raised voice, “Get out.” Undeterred, he kept on with his virulent hogwash. I pushed back, grateful that I had our first principle to put between myself and his hatred.

We respect the inherent worth and dignity of all people at All Souls and we expect that anyone who crosses the threshold will do the same.

Said the wise man:
 Please call me by my true names,
 so I can wake up,
 and so the door of my heart can be left open,
 the door of compassion.

Like Thich Nhat Hanh, we need not look too deeply to recognize ourselves in both the hunter and the hunted. We wake up to this truth and the door of our hearts the doors of compassion are left open. Open and welcoming of each person’s inherent worth and dignity and encouraging the freedom to choose – always – the path of goodness over that of evil.

Amen.