

EVIL IS REAL AND LOVE IS POSSIBLE: A LIBERAL RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE ON THE HUMAN CAPACITY FOR EVIL

By Amanda Udis-Kessler

*Universalist Herald, March/April 1998
Vol. 150, No. 2*

Liberal religion has rightly been criticized by orthodox Christianity for presenting a theology that celebrated human potential but that was silent in the face of our capacity for evil and willingness to inflict suffering. Perhaps it is not surprising that our perspective has tended toward the sunny, optimistic and progress-oriented, given its history as a response to the hell-oriented, gloom-and-doom theologies of the Reformation, but clearly any theological position that cannot account for the pain humanity causes is missing an important truth about who we are and an important opportunity to respond to that pain. Moreover, we need not fear that squarely facing human evil will rob liberal religion of its *raison d'etre*, or that we must relinquish our belief in human potential if we acknowledge its shadow side. On the contrary, once we acknowledge our capacity for evil we need liberal religion more than ever to help us resist evil and to remind us of our capacity for good.

I understand evil as that which brings harm or unnecessary suffering to oneself or other beings, as that which breaks people physically, emotionally, mentally and/or spiritually. It is a platitude but also a fact that evil spelled backward is "live." Evil thoughts, inclinations and behaviors are those opposed to life, to abundance, to joy, and to truth. Our capacity for evil is part of human imperfection, another reality about which liberal religion

has too often been silent. The word "sin," from which we liberal religious folks so often recoil, merely means "imperfection." It derives from an archery term meaning "to miss the mark." It need not be shameful to be imperfect, and we need not despair when we consider that our struggles for perfection will necessarily fall short. We are able to create good in the world even as we acknowledge and learn to live with our failings.

One advantage we have as liberal religious people is that we may draw upon many resources in understanding and responding to our capacity for evil. We are not limited merely to traditional theologies or to Biblical era understandings. We can interweave findings from psychology, sociology and other social sciences into our theologies, so that when we describe evil as a matter of broken connections (which I believe it to be), we can consider the many facets of ourselves and our world where connections are broken and determine what kinds of repair are possible. To the extent that evil is in part about broken connections within ourselves (so that doing evil requires less spiritual or emotional work than doing good), therapy and self-help groups as well as spiritual practice may provide resources to heal those breaks, so that we no longer do evil simply because it is easier than the alternative. Where evil is about broken connections between ourselves and others, social analysis may help us see how that brokenness has been institutionalized - how it is easier to

do evil in a society that is structured to facilitate it -, so that we can attempt to revamp the problematic social structures.

On a personal level, our capacity to do evil (and perhaps the likelihood that we will do evil) is enhanced by damage to our self-esteem, by mistrustfulness and by addictive behaviors; for example: the use of substances or processes to numb out and get through the day. In our escapism, our mistrust and our self-hatred, it is easier to be selfish and not mindful of others, and it is easier to treat ourselves evilly by making self-destructive decisions and sabotaging our own best efforts. Liberal religion can help us here in its focus on the individual's quest for spiritual growth and its reminder that we are not merely our imperfections but ultimately part of a beloved and loving creation. The more we grow in our spirituality, however we may individually express it, the more we will be able to see our capacity for evil without flinching and make choices that reject its use. On a daily basis we can choose not to lie, steal, hurt other people or animals, or otherwise bring pain into the world. A song I know includes the line, "I'm building faith with each choice that I make." Liberal religion approves of such a sentiment and provides opportunities for us to learn to choose well.

(continued on page 12)

EVIL IS REAL AND LOVE IS POSSIBLE: A LIBERAL RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE ON THE HUMAN CAPACITY FOR EVIL

(continued from page 11)

On a social level we live in a time of what philosopher Hannah Arendt called "the banality of evil." We watch as multinational corporations put profits before human well-being and as politicians respond to crime with vengefulness to gain re-election, and we wonder why we should personally resist our own temptations to look out for Number One. Evil in America is not merely about individual selfishness. It has been corporatized, bureaucratized, and sanitized. If it is easy to be greedy because our society facilitates greed, we can predict that greed and its evil effects will flourish. The same is true of prejudice, fear and any other value or feeling that may lead to individual or institutional evil. Liberal religion can respond to evil at this level by speaking truth to power at individual, congregational and denominational levels and by directly challenging any institution that fails to respect the basic worth and dignity of all people - which in our society is virtually every institution in some way or another. There is a powerful liberal religious tradition of social justice work, which we and our churches need to continue to the best of our abilities.

Ultimately, then, liberal religion can proclaim that evil and love are both inherent parts of us - that evil is real AND love is possible, and liberal religion can encourage us to take advantage of the hundred daily opportunities

we all face to challenge evil and act with love, to respond to doubt with trust and to fear with courage, to tell the truth and heal the brokenness within and around us. We all, individually and collectively, have a choice to resist evil in ourselves and in others. We surrender that choice as long as we give in to denial about what we and our society are capable of being and doing, but having turned from that denial we can come to a comprehension of evil that will allow us to respond with love and compassion. This confrontation, if it does not itself break us, deepens us profoundly, forces us to wrestle with some of the hardest aspects of human existence, and shows us a level of the spirit (and the Spirit) not always visible in the day-to-day. The existence of evil is not under our control, but what we make of it is at least partially under our control. May we always strive to acknowledge evil where we find it and, having acknowledged it, choose to resist it with all our might, that we might make of our world what our liberal religious tradition has always envisioned.

(Amanda Udis-Kessler worships at the Arlington Street Church in Boston, where she teaches adult religious education, provides musical services for the church, and is helping to establish a UU Christian Fellowship. She hopes to attend seminary within a few years.)

The Universalist Herald

c/o Lewis Graphics
Route 4, Box 16
Elkton, Virginia 22827

PERIODICALS PAID
US POSTAGE
Permit No. 2
Elkton, VA 22827

EXPIRES 08/01/1998
AMANDA UDIS-KESSLER
PO BOX 1814
CAMBRIDGE, MA 02238

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to the UNIVERSALIST HERALD, Lewis Graphics, Route 4, Box 16, Elkton, Virginia 22827