

THE NATURE OF EVIL—Part Two
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Very Bad Things

What follows is an inventory of people doing very bad things. The following is not for the faint of heart, or any kids who may remain, but I think helpful.

Under the Banner of Heaven

In the late 90s, fundamentalist Mormon Dan Lafferty felt that he had received as a message from God and, with his equally committed brother, walked coolly into their youngest brother's house and proceed to beat, strangle, and slit the throat of his wife and two year old baby. A remorseless Dan Lafferty, serving two consecutive life sentences, retains to this day that he did the right thing. That he was following God's command.

Charles Manson

During the late 60s a small time criminal, and essentially failed musician in the LA scene, began to form a small murderous cult of loyal dropouts. He believed and talked his group of dropout disciples into believing that the Beatle song *Helter Skelter* was the foreshadowing of an apocalyptic race war, and that their killings were going to precipitate the start of it. It is thought that this gang carried out some thirty-five killings, most of which they were never tried for. The most famous of those was the slaying of actress Sharon Tate. Those killings, and his "mad eyes," as Wikipedia describes it, immortalized Charles Manson as a living embodiment of evil, and an icon of insanity, violence, and the macabre.

Kim Jong Il

In what was already thought to be the most brutal dictatorship left in the world, the leader of the nation of North Korea upped the level of oppression on during Kim's reign between 1994 and 2011. In the early part of his leadership, because of his reluctance to expose the truth to a world ready to help, an estimated two million North Koreans starved to death. While millions of his own people were starving, those invited to travel with him on his army trains could order any one of four kinds of international cuisine or fresh lobster. The Kim regime was one of the alcohol brand "Hennessey's" best customers, reportedly spending more than \$800,000 on the cognac per year.

Adolph Hitler

75 years ago a young German man with smarts, big aspirations, and burning pride for the rise of "his" people began his own rise to national power. This young man's quest would culminate in the spiritual takeover of his nation, the conquest of a handful of neighboring nations, and initiate the largest conflict the world had ever known. Hitler drew up and out the hatred of his own people, crushed dissent, and cultivated an eerie acquiescence to the systematic murder of millions.

9-11

Nearly two decades ago a dozen cleanly dressed men, convinced that the downfall of the West was an essential part of Allah's broad plan to cleanse the world of sin, boarded planes. In their minds was a well-crafted but simple plan that turned passenger-filled aircraft into weapons that would destroy some of the most important of American symbols.

Sin, Evil, and Satan

People who fit the definition of evil, certainly do exist. We hear about these dictators, serial killers, hit men, & psychopaths on the nightly news every day. Still the news shocks us. As if on repeat, we ask ourselves. Why?

I wish the list of shocking stories that begged us to ask "just how and why do we do such things" were this short. The only reason I read through the above list is to try to leave the taste in our mouths that there really is evil. Evil. It is not enough to not answer this question as we might wish to as clean-handed modern folks. There is a poignancy a power, a transformation that seem necessary to feel in

coming to some understanding if we are going to talk not just about bad behavior, but evil. We need to bloody our hands with the truth that there really are people and actions pushed by motivations that clearly are malevolent. There is a reason we have created a word a grade nastier and more ominous than bad. Evil is bad with a little more power and intention. Evil is a simple clean word for capturing the depth and sickness of humankind's potential badness. But it is also a word that lacks real specificity.

Do you know that the most common answer as to why evil exists, and horrible things happen? Yup, well, it is the Devil. A terrible but not surprising answer.

A recent study by the Pew Institute showed that people with higher education degrees were less likely to believe in "the Devil" than people who had not gone past high school. That is not surprising to me. Neither is it that Northerners slightly less than Southerners, urbanites less than country folk, younger people slightly less than older ones, and Democrats slightly less than Republicans reported believing in the Devil.

That data plays out about as I had expected, but the fact that more than fifty percent of every significant demographic slice of Americans, except for those that claim "Religion is not a powerful force in their lives," report believing in the Devil. More amazingly, more than one third of Americans feel like they have been tempted by him. Seriously, more than one-third. Overall, in this Pew Study fifty-eight percent of people said they believed in the Devil, thirty percent said they didn't, and twelve percent said they weren't sure. There is no specific data on what percentage of Unitarian Universalists believe in Satan in this study, but I know from other surveys that most do not.

I don't need to tell you that over the centuries, science has been able to explain that many phenomena like bad weather, ill health, and heretical opinions that once seemed of supernatural origins are not the work of some infernal personality. I don't need to tell you that since the advent of modern psychology we are more likely to think that people who do terrible things do so because they have made that choice, and or make that choice because they have been emotionally traumatized, or chemically and/or neurologically imbalanced. Not because that they are agents of the netherworld. Since religion has ceded its civil authority to science in American society, we might expect belief in the Devil or Satan to have more strongly evaporated. Interestingly, it mostly hasn't. Again, regardless of political belief, education, or region, most Americans believe that the Devil exists. This is amazing to me.

Nearly twenty years ago (1994), a depressed young mother named Susan Smith, trying to hold onto a boyfriend who did not want kids, early one morning drove her Mazda down to a nearby South Carolina lake, strapped her three-year-old son Michael and her fourteen-month-old Alex into their car seats, put the car in neutral, and proceeded to push it into the water, blaming the loss of her kids on a black man. Like the rest of the nation, I was struck by this story. I was moved because of the ploddingly numb, cold tone of Susan Smith's actions, yet one more bit of evidence of racism, but back then when I was a divinity school student also in part because Susan Smith's family pastor described the incident with the kids and the car this way. He said, God made "a presentation" to her, and Satan made her "a beautiful presentation" too. I've never forgotten that.

"Really?" I might wish to say to Susan Smith's Pastor, "Satan made her a beautiful presentation that coaxed her to drown the kids? Really?"

I am not exactly sure what "presentation" means, but for this Methodist pastor it is clear that some version of "the Devil made her do it" helps answer the question.

Or likewise, say to Jerry Fallwell on a macro level when he said that the "indulgent" nature of New Orleans and the U.S. caused God to punish that city with a hurricane named Katrina—"Really?" God used a hurricane to punish a city Sodom and Gomorrah style.

Perhaps, Jerry Fallwell and Susan Smith's pastor are correct. Perhaps Satan, or the Devil, really does exist.

Maybe the Essenes and early Christians discovered something true about this great question. We have to at least consider that is true, but I don't think so.

Much of the way we humans discuss evil and sin, especially the way we discuss it religiously, is just backward, and where not backward, then worse, its own version of sinister. Something smarter and more reasoned, more psychological seems required.

That's the challenge. In a country with an obvious remarkable commitment to bad ideas, it is our job as modern religious people to have a cogent understandable answer to how such bad, or evil, things can happen, and what we should do about it. This the great critique of our faith, of course is that we don't have an answer for this. It's true. We don't have a satisfactory answer

The world sees the liberal religious response that evil really doesn't exist as an external force, but is a manifestation of our worst and weird capacities, as unsatisfactory. Equally unpoetic and impotent.

Anyone observing humans, and that malleable thing we call human nature, naturally can't help but ask why? Why are there people who commit atrocities, who kill and rape and harm others? Immediately following that question is this one—if there is a God, why does he or she allow such evil to exist?

Said more concisely, if God exists, and is all-knowing, all-powerful, all good, then how could God have created evil or so failed to defeat evil?

Certainly a lot of the energy behind the continued employment of "the Devil made us do it" comes directly from a Judeo-Christian story that has been locked into the idea that God is all powerful, and all good, and thus some other power is necessary to be employed to answer the question of why the world and our behavior is not perfect.

We stand in this church, religious liberals actively struggling for an answer that is poignant enough to carry our astonishment at the things people can do.

And I don't propose that the answer that we will come to will be as sexy, or as comprehensive, as the cosmic nearly eternal challenger to God that Satan is. Satan and his demons are pretty comic book cool. However, maybe we can come up with a half-decent memorable answer.

I want you to stand if you are able with me to say, "We are going to come up with some short, memorable way to understand how people do such evil things, and maybe what evil is."

Within the Western (Judeo-Christian) tradition the question of why there is evil or sin, or even more mildly, the want and need, the limitations and pain and imperfection come from, is known as the question of theodicy. Understanding evil and sin in the context of a good and powerful God is the great philosophical weakness of the West.

In Christianity the most dramatic explanation or source evil has been the existence of Satan. It is the first and most dynamic answer. The other side is that there really is not bad, only a deprivation of the good.

Because we are religiously inclined, and taught to blur religious history into one overarching story-line, it is hard for most of us in the West realize that Satan is only a bit player in the Hebrew tradition.

But, even if that is how Satan's bio. gets rolling, so to speak, the source of the myth has deeper more psychological roots.

Part of it is this idea of a battle between a force of good and evil, in addition to being good storytelling, is also deeply compelling to humans' seemingly innate sense of in-group or out-group drama,

Humans have a difficult time not seeing our time or even our souls as one of great cosmic significance. Add a cosmic conspiratorial Satan to this perpetual habit of humans othering one another, Red and Blue being the most poignant recent example of this natural division of otherness, as Pagels suggests and you fuel a different kind of conflict. A key feature socially for Pagels is how easily Satan falls into the idea of "other"

Answers, like the myth of Satan, can also legitimate and animate the hooligan latent in all of us.

Even if we do not believe in Satan, the personification of evil in a character like him does help—if not exactly explaining the source and nature of evil accurately, it does at least capture the supernatural power that "evil" can seem to have.

Let's admit it, believing in a Satan-like creature who is at work in the World does serve the purpose of capturing and rallying our attention in a way that a more complex understanding of human behavior does not.

The trouble is, when the behavior and intentions we call evil are given the palpable, and poignant, cosmic source, that "answer" in the minds of those imbalanced and irrational can also give the likes of fundamentalist Mormon Dan Lafferty see his struggle as part of a cosmic drama that helps fuel his willingness to kill his sister-in-law.

I believe that, although it is hardly the intention, cultivating a very palpable image of evil or Satan or the Devil as alive in the world helps in its own unconscious way to keep evil alive.

From our lucky wide perch of the Twenty-first Century, we can see, we now know, that rather than define the fixed way things are, it might be more accurate to say that the notion of Satan does not so much accurately describe evil, as much as it establishes how we think about it.

Apologies for Satan over, we need to do better.

One of the great lessons that modern Biblical scholarship and skepticism have provided is this.

And, until we understand that this is always how religion works, always borrowing and re-interpreting from itself, most often blindly, we as moderns, when it comes to nearly everything moral, including the nature of evil and suffering, will suffer for it.

I don't believe in the Devil. Moreover, I do not believe that there is an active force of evil that with intention and skill enters our consciousness and affects our will.

As Joseph Conrad suggested, we are capable of all the evil we do. As Gandhi said, the only devils running around our heads are the ones in our head

I think that we might struggle to come to terms with the force we call evil, precisely because we are reluctant to accept that we have the kind of moral range that we do.

Perhaps we should stop ourselves for a moment to think about evil, in terms of the bell curve. I like to think about it this way. If there are people who can jump from the foul line of a basketball court, put a ball between their legs and shove it in the rim, if there are people who seemingly miraculously to me like Severin, who can look at the squiggles that make up an extensive math problem or Bach Composition and translate it back into meaning or even more dramatically music.

Again, if there are people who can get spiritual, willful, or even just numb enough to walk on fire; if there are people who have their memories trained well enough to meet five hundred people entering a room and remember their names and where they are from, and people who can slip their whole body through a tennis racket.

If people who from the comforts of their upper-middle-class lives can chose to spend their lives serving the poorest of the poor; and there are those among us who run into burning buildings to save others when others are running away . . .

Then do we really need an external force to explain how a selfish, perhaps psychopathic, distraught woman straps her kids into a car and pushes it into a lake? Or how with a few historical twists, a hateful person can play on the silent brooding resentment of a nation, and twist relatively new information about genetic differences and a new paradigm of the survival of the fittest into a holocaust?

Sadly no. I don't think we do. Joseph Conrad is right. We have all the potentiality we need.

When I was a kid, probably twelve, I among other stupid, small crimes of youth grabbed my middle brother's hair, put my knee behind his head, and over a misunderstanding on the basketball court proceeded to shove his face into the pavement in my backyard.

In the inverse, I hid in the bathroom, pushing as hard as I could behind a hollow core door, to hold back my same brother who had my mother's kitchen carving knife on the other side of it.

On a number of occasions, potentially in our rage, we could have killed each other.

We both eventually grew out of that, and grew peaceful enough that I cannot now even imagine myself wanting to do that to my brother, but there it is, exposed as plain as day, within the range of what "we" are capable of.

We have to remember that, in exactly the same way, there are more inclined to call the sky "blue" than to describe it by its barometric pressure, or humidity. We are, by our love of story and desire to be significant, more instinctively inclined to see into the darkest of human behaviors the power of "other" outside influences.

It is this reason why the idea of Satan and demons persist. We need to remember that!

As odd as it is, that we are a religion, we UUs are here to powerfully attest to the truth that the world is not most accurately understood from metaphors, and ideas, born in the ancient world. Even if our answers are less clear, the lines blurred.

I do not believe that there is a magical devil who sneaks in when we are weak to harvest the weeds that lay dormant in our hearts, or the hearts of others.

But that doesn't mean that that language and imagery does not in any way describe how that evil sometimes looks or feels. The unique combination of the way we can get obsessed with any idea, vile or wonderful, is the answer to why the experience can feel motivated by an external force.

Satan is an answer that will return, again and again, in response to the question of evil because such a force helps explain the potent nastiness we can see in people in a way clean clinical language does not.

Carefully managed and understood, the idea of Satan can actually be useful in reminding us of the twisting, transformative way anger, trauma, mental imbalance, and power urges can grow in us.

Looking at two images, one of a crescent moon, the other of a flower that resembles a death's head we see that they are images that capture an almost ominous sense of foreboding. A secret message from beyond. Yet, what they really are, are rare physical/biological products of a natural randomness that we interpret into the most foreboding images we could imagine. This crescent moon and flower could easily be seen as signs.

As Erica Brenes said on our patio not long ago, "When you know better, you do better."

We just have to be very, very, very careful to constantly remind ourselves of a few important things—that Satan, is a metaphor not a personality, and that we are inclined to personify everything.

I would like to close with words from Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. However, the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who is willing to destroy his own heart?

AMEN