

“Butterfly Wings and Burning Children”

Sermon by the Rev. Kathy Riegelman

**All Souls
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1st Reading:

The butterfly effect, first described by Edward Lorenz at the December 1972 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, D.C., vividly illustrates the essential ideas of chaos theory. In a 1963 paper for the New York Academy of Sciences, Lorenz had quoted an unnamed meteorologist's assertion that, if chaos theory were true, a single flap of a single seagull's wings would be enough to change the course of all future weather systems on the earth. By the time of the 1972 meeting, he had examined and refined that idea for his talk, "Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil set off a Tornado in Texas?" The example of such a small system as a butterfly being responsible for creating such a large and distant system as a tornado in Texas illustrates the impossibility of making predictions for complex systems; despite the fact that these are determined by underlying conditions, precisely what those conditions are can never be sufficiently articulated to allow long-range predictions.

Although chaos is often thought to refer to randomness and lack of order, it is more accurate to think of it as an apparent randomness that results from complex systems and interactions among systems.

From “Chaos Theory,” WhatIs?com

2nd Reading:

The witness testifies: Women carrying children were always sent with them to the crematorium. Children were of no labor value so they were killed. The mothers were sent along, too, because separation might lead to panic and hysteria, which might slow up the destruction process, and this could not be afforded. It was simpler to condemn the mothers too and keep things quiet and smooth. The children were then torn from their parents outside the crematorium and sent to the gas chambers separately. At that point, crowding more people into the gas chambers became the most urgent consideration. Separating meant that more children could be packed in separately, or they could be thrown in over the heads of adults once the chambers were packed. When the extermination of the Jews in the gas

chambers was at its height, orders were issued that children were to be thrown straight into the crematorium furnaces, or into a pit near the crematorium, without being gassed first.

The prosecutor asks: How am I to understand this? Did they throw them into the fire alive, or did they kill them first?

The witness replies: They threw them in alive. Their screams could be heard at the camp. It is difficult to say how many children were killed in this way.

The prosecutor then asks: Why did they do this?

The witness replies: It's very difficult to say. We don't know whether they wanted to economize on gas, or if it was because there was not enough room in the gas chambers.

from "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire" by Rabbi
Irving Greenburg

Sermon

Butterfly Wings and Burning Children

My first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education, or CPE, which is training for being a hospital chaplain, took place the summer after my first year of seminary. With so little theological education, I wasn't sure what to expect, or how to deal with the

difficult situations I knew I would encounter. Little did I know that the strongest challenge to my budding theology would come from a member of my peer group. James was a Catholic seminarian. And believe me, we did not see eye to eye about anything, especially theology. I remember the first few weeks of CPE being exhausting as James and I engaged in an ongoing theological tennis match. He would lob something at me and I'd fire right back, and he'd then return the volley, and I'd smash it back at him. I remember one heated exchange in which James claimed that as a Unitarian Universalist, I didn't have any religious beliefs; I could believe anything I wanted. And I retorted that he didn't believe anything the church fathers hadn't figured out 2,000 years ago, and that he couldn't think for himself. Well, this was the tone of our exchanges early on. One day the subject of original sin came up. James told me that, yes, we are born in a state of sin. To explain the human condition in simple terms he said, "Original sin is like a dented bread pan. The bread pan has this defect, this dent, and every loaf that's made after the bread pan was dented will have this flaw. And we are born with this flaw-that's original sin." Well, besides the fact that being compared to a loaf of bread didn't sit well with me,

the theology made me furious! I fired back, “I don't know how you can look into the face of a newborn baby and believe in original sin!” James simply replied, “If you can believe in the resurrection, you can believe anything, to which I replied, “That's the problem.”

This story of my own grappling with original sin and human nature is consistent with Unitarian Universalism's rejection of original sin, which means that historically, we have had little to say about evil. We have always put our theological and moral stock in the goodness of humanity. Both Unitarianism's and Universalism's historical roots in this country are strongly influenced by a “common theological enemy: Calvinism.”

Calvinism, like Catholicism, says that we are born into original sin. In other words, we are born with an inherently depraved nature. We are born corrupt, wicked, and degenerate.

Unitarianism rejected this theological claim and instead asserted that we are born with inherent goodness, emphasizing humanity's free will and dignity. Universalism also rejected Calvinism, in particular Calvinism's doctrine of “ 'election' to grace.” This doctrine asserts that God determined, at the time of creation, who was saved and who was damned, and that nothing

a human being can do in their lifetime would change this.

Universalism instead said that all human beings are worthy of salvation; all are saved.

I offer this very brief history as context for liberal religion's rejection of evil. It makes sense to me that Calvinism needed to be balanced with a religious perspective of hope and goodness. However, I also believe that this swing of the pendulum does not mean that evil does not exist. I echo Mitra's finding that when asked, most people say they have either experienced or witnessed evil. And so, what is evil? Well, for starters, Mitra and I agree that evil is unanswerable. Too narrow of a definition could in itself be evil-limiting our understanding and perhaps even dismissing evil as experienced by others. And while there are many distinctions offered between natural and moral evil, I have chosen to focus on moral evil for today's sermon. I offer you the following definition of evil that I find the most adequate for the broad spectrum that evil encompasses. In the words of historian Jeffrey Russell:

Evil is meaningless, senseless destruction. Evil destroys and does not build up; it rips and it does not mend; it cuts and it does not bind. It strives always and everywhere to

annihilate, to turn to nothing. To take all being and render it nothing is the heart of evil.

In addition, when we talk about moral evil, there is the reality that evil is acted on someone by someone. In other words, evil is concrete. Russell says,

Evil is not an abstraction. You know, and understand by analogy from your own suffering, the pain of Anne Frank in the concentration camp, of the napalmed child in Vietnam.

Though the pain is 10,000 miles or 5,000 years away, the distance does not matter. The voice cries out, and it is heard. The Jew in the gas chamber; the heretic at the stake; the woman raped; that one of these, just one, should suffer is intolerable. That one should suffer imposes the absolute obligation of trying to understand and so grapple with the problem of evil.

The evil described in the reading about burning children is the rawest, most horrific example of the concrete nature of evil I have encountered. There is speculation that the Nazis may have burned children to save money. In the summer of 1944 it cost about 2/5 of a cent to gas a child. The worth and dignity of a

child's life was not even considered. And all of our abstract thinking and talking about these horrific acts will not alleviate evil. And yet, I know it is important to reflect on evil so that we will have a basis for recognizing and responding to evil, so that these acts of evil will not be repeated.

The problem of evil has brought forth copious volumes of theological responses. Many of these responses fall in the theological category of theodicy. Theodicy literally means God and justice. In other words, theodicy is the theological attempt to “reconcile belief in the goodness and power of God with the fact of evil in the world.” Humanist philosopher David Hume developed a construct for theodicy that goes like this:

1. God is omnipotent (all-powerful)
2. God is omniscient and benevolent (all-knowing and all-good)
3. Evil exists

Therefore, Hume concludes, God does not exist.

I'm not offering this construct to try to convince you one way or another about God's existence. That's not what this sermon is about. I offer Hume's construct so that we can look at a liberal religious modification of theodicy. A liberal religious humanist

theodicy leaves God out of the picture and asks this: How do we reconcile the inherent goodness and worth of humanity with the existence of evil? We can reject either the existence of evil or the inherent goodness of humanity. I am not willing to reject the existence of evil-the evidence is too compelling, too real. And so, that leaves the other alternative: to reject the goodness of humanity. Preparing for this sermon has caused me to question our first principle, which calls us to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Truly, inherent worth does not sit well when talking about people who would throw children into the flames of a crematorium.

The Rev. William Schulz, former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and former Executive Director of Amnesty International, also wrestles with the goodness of humanity. In his essay titled “What Torture's Taught Me,” Schulz talks about his encounters with both the victims and perpetrators of torture. These gut-wrenching accounts of torture call Schulz to ask this question, “So is the worth and dignity of every person inherent?” “No,” he answers. “Each of us has to be assigned worth-it does not come automatically-and taught to behave with dignity because, as Sartre once said, 'If it were not

for the petty rules of bourgeois society, we humans would destroy each other in an instant.'”

Even though I wrestle the inherent goodness of humanity, throwing out human goodness is a step I'm not willing to take-at least, not completely. That would mean returning to the total depravity of original sin. Well, that's not somewhere I'm willing to go either-at least, not completely. However, I do think there is a middle ground that makes sense in this exploration of human nature. One of my professors in seminary, Dr. Young Ho Chun, was adamant about his belief that experience is neutral. He said, “Experience itself is neither good nor bad. We evaluate the experience and it becomes good or bad.” I remember how hearing Dr. Chun say this made me crazy-especially in relation to evil. And yet, maybe in relation to human nature, he is on to something.

I've thought more about the story I opened with, the “Dented Bread Pan Story.” My response to my Catholic seminarian peer was quick, rather defensive, and to the point: How can you look at a newborn baby's face and believe humanity is inherently corrupt and sinful? Well, a few years have passed since that heated exchange, and as a hospital chaplain I have had the

opportunity to look into the faces of many newborn babies. The face of a newborn draws me to look at it. There is an otherworldly wisdom in babies' faces that is not present in the faces of adults. I often tell parents of newborns that babies come into the world knowing everything, even the meaning of life. And then we grow up and get distracted and forget. Now I know that what I have been trying to communicate is that babies come into the world with pure, absolute potential.

The Rev. Walter Royal Jones helped me find the language to think about potential as inherent to human nature. Rev. Jones uses the phrase “sacred potential” as another way to name the inherent worth of every person. Jones' phrase, sacred potential, makes so much more sense to me-to affirm that every human being has sacred potential makes me understand why I cannot take my eyes off of the face of a newborn baby. I am gazing into eternity, the eternity of potential. When we consider the nature of humanity, I understand potential as a neutral state of being. And so, maybe Dr. Chun is right, maybe we are born not into a state of original sin or inherent goodness, but into a state of neutrality-a state of sacred potential.

And so, with Jones interpretation of inherent worth, I am able

to cautiously affirm our first principle. We do have infinite potential, which means there is a catch. As religious liberals, we cannot continue to deny the full spectrum of human potential. The hard reality is that human beings have both the capacity for immense good and for crushing evil. We must recognize, as Aleksander Solzhenitsyn reminds us, that “[T]he line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. . . . At times [one human being] is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood.” This is, I believe, a more realistic understanding of human nature.

The nature of humanity is in some ways a reflection of the nature of the universe. Today's reading on Chaos Theory is science's way of explaining the infinite potential of the universe and the inadequacy of linear thinking. Logic and reason have their place, but, according to Chaos Theory, they do not have the last word. Chaos Theory stresses over and over again that the universe is not random. Instead, everything that happens is intimately related to other events. And this non-linear model has the potential to unfold in ways we cannot even fathom. For our conversation about evil, Chaos Theory helps us understand that we can neither know nor control the future. Each small event,

each decision we make, even the flap of a butterfly's wings, has infinite potential for the future.

As an example of the non-linear nature of the universe, here is a chain of events from my life that has meant ending up somewhere I never expected to be. From the time I was little, I've been interested in a lot of career options, and I would always say, "But I'll *never* work in a hospital." Fast forward to making my living as a musician. I met and married a musician-Larry Beekman, our guitarist for today. In about 1990 we were invited by one of Larry's students to play at a coffee house here at All Souls. Several years later, after our daughter was born, we came back to All Souls. We started coming to the Friday evening Service for the Soul. One evening I offered a chalice lighting that engaged our small group. After the service, John Weston, who was minister at that time, made a seemingly off-hand remark. He said, "If you ever think about studying theology, come talk to me." I laughed, thinking he was crazy, and forgot about his remark. Before long, however, I *was* thinking about ministry as a possible change of careers. I did go to seminary, and as related in my opening story, took a unit of chaplaincy training early on. That summer in the hospital was

transforming. And to set the record straight, James and I actually ended up working very well together. And here I am-I've been a hospital chaplain for about seven years and I love my job. So, where was the flap of the butterfly's wings? Was it the invitation to play at that coffee house? Was it John Weston's remark? Was it a summer unit of CPE? Was it eating a grilled cheese sandwich for lunch some forgotten day? Or was it all and so much more than all of this?

Rev. Albert Keller begins with the Butterfly Effect and then applies it to suffering. Keller writes this about the Butterfly Effect:

People have the view that big events have big consequences and insignificant events have insignificant consequences. But you get to chaos theory, and you see *the infinite sensitivity of the future to the present*. You begin to appreciate the fact that there's no threshold of consequences to events, in terms of no limit to the influence they can have.”

The infinite sensitivity of the future to the present . . . what a lovely, descriptive, and cautionary phrase. This acknowledgment that the future is so utterly and infinitely

dependent on the present means that everything we do has an influence on the future-and in ways we cannot imagine or control. The problem of evil becomes more sobering when we consider both our human capacity for good and evil and the butterfly effect's stark implication that even small acts can easily and unknowingly contribute to evil.

And now that I've painted a pretty bleak picture of human nature and the uncertainty of the future, I want to give you the good news. The good news is this: Liberal religion is not helpless! We do not have to sit on the sidelines and wring our hands in despair! We have a great deal to offer in response to evil. The most important theological asset we bring to the conversation about evil is our strong tradition of humanism. Humanism, which emphasizes human responsibility, provides a foundation for a liberal religious response to evil that is congruent with the optimism of liberal religion. Our humanist heritage says while we do not rely on God for explanations or solutions, we *do* have the ability to work for good. Anthony Pinn is an African American humanist whose theology grows out of evil, out of the oppression and suffering of slavery. He describes humanism as an optimistic perspective, insisting,

“human destiny is in the hands of humans.” In other words, it is our responsibility as human beings to discern and act with all the tools we have as we stand up and speak out against evil.

Now, there are people who do not think we should speak out. In response to the very popular “No Complaints” bracelets, the Rev. Vern Barnet claims that speaking out against evil is a “religious obligation.” In his article, “On Complaining,” Barnet writes, “What kind of person would I be if I failed to complain about George Bush's disastrous presidency? . . . [I]f I substituted a cocoon of selfish comfort in place of compassion for those suffering under this arrogant, never-wrong pharaoh, what kind of spiritual leadership would I be offering?” Barnet's strong stand on speaking and acting in the face of evil speaks to another strength of our humanist heritage: We know that human beings *can* make a difference in the world and we are willing to work for the greater good.

In addition to human responsibility, our religious heritage of social activism is another asset we bring to the liberal religious response to evil. We must understand that the power of our work in social activism is more than fighting injustice; it is moral agency. Now, contrary to popular (conservative) belief, liberal

religion *does* have moral values. A completely non-exhaustive list of values I find integral to Unitarian Universalism include integrity, stewardship, reason, democracy, gratitude, freedom, equality, compassion, community, and individuality. And in addition to these values and our absolute dedication to social activism, we have the tremendous advantage of privilege. By privilege I mean that most Unitarian Universalists are well educated, financially stable, and socially aware. We must understand that as privileged people we have both the opportunities and the resources to alleviate much injustice, suffering, and evil. Our values and privilege do bring one caution to the conversation: Liberal religion's enormous emphasis on individualism, while very empowering, can also result in losing sight of the greater good. Morality is only valid when viewed with a wide lens, with a vision of "how the whole is faring." Our agency can be effective and valid only if we keep sight of the greater good, otherwise our efforts will be narrow, shallow and self-serving.

Another resource that liberal religion can offer in response to evil is a value I have already named: the importance of community. From the first time I stepped foot inside this church

I have found strength and comfort in knowing that this community of All Souls will support me in the development of my theology. Encouragement of our spiritual growth in the context of our congregations is a basic tenet of our faith. I have also learned that I am accountable to this community. I am *not* free to believe anything I want, as so accused by my Catholic seminarian peer. As Unitarian Universalists, authority lies not in the individual, but in the community. James Luther Adams, Unitarian social ethicist, talks about the religious community in terms of a voluntary association. Adams says:

The voluntary association at its best offers an institutional framework within which the give and take of discussion may be promoted, an institutional framework within which a given consensus of practice may be brought under criticism and subjected to change. It offers a means of bringing a variety of perspectives into interplay. . . . It is a means of dispersing power, in the sense that power is the capacity for making social decisions. It is the training ground of the skills that are required for viable social existence in a democracy.

Adams was writing with the context of pre-Nazi Germany in

mind. He visited Nuremburg in 1927 and witnessed the silencing of resistance to the totalitarian process that was taking shape. It is our responsibility to hold each other mutually accountable, to know that community is a place where we help each other grow in ways that will contribute to the goodness and healing of the world's hurts.

And so, we have explored the problem of evil, considered the nature of humanity and the universe, and named human responsibility, moral agency, and community as components of a liberal religious response to evil. And through all of this runs the image of the burning children, an image that keeps me awake at night. Fortunately, putting my remarks together for this sermon has reinforced my faith-and by this I mean my faith and confidence in liberal religion to act morally and effectively in the face of evil. So, here is the challenge: To be able to respond to evil, we must first claim evil as part of our reality. We need to pull our moral and theological heads out of the sand of blind optimism and face two realities that will help us recognize and respond to evil.

First, we must understand the gravity of our role as responsible human beings, informed by Chaos Theory's

“Butterfly Effect.” The Butterfly Effect names the reality that the universe is neither random nor linear. Rather, we are intimately connected in a complex universe in which the future is always undetermined. We live in a reality where the future is “infinitely sensitive” to the present. For our conversation about evil, the Butterfly Effect can be used as a metaphor to inform how we think and act in the world, calling us to consider that even our small, unintentional acts have the capacity to contribute to evil.

And second, as we face the aching reality of evil, we must always remember humanity's capacity for evil, the capacity to engage in an act as heinous as the burning of children. Rabbi Irving Greenburg uses the memory of the burning children as a “litmus-test” to be applied to any theological statement. Greenburg struggled with finding any category of thinking that provided an adequate, consistent response that encompassed both “resistance [to] and horror at the Holocaust.” Through his struggles, Greenburg found an answer. He writes, “Let us offer, then, as a working principle [for responding to evil] the following: No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that is not credible in the presence of the burning

children.” As religious liberals, our response to evil must include these two elements: thoughtful theological reflection under girded by the words and memories of suffering, and a sensible and perceptive recognition of the possible consequences of our actions. In the face of evil, our responsibility to each other and the world needs to be held with respect and integrity in the tension between these very disparate images: butterfly wings and burning children.