

“Are People Really All That Good?”

by Rev. Martin Woulfe
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I'd like to conduct a quick survey. This is a participatory democracy. How many of you believe that human nature is good? Raise your hand. How many believe that human nature is predominantly bad? How many of you believe that it's a mixture, pretty fairly balanced? OK. Well, that changes my sermon! (*Laughter.*)

As I mentioned the other day, I was attending a UU minister's conference recently. One of the stories shared by a colleague told how, years ago, a freshly-minted minister by the name of John Wolf -- no relation -- was a candidate at a large church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. At the time, most congregations were embroiled in a battle between theists and humanists. So, the search committee asked him, "Well, are you a theist or a humanist?" His response was, "Well, it depends on you. What are you?" Naturally, the committee was shocked by this seemingly Machievellian answer -- they expected something less political, shall we say, of a minister. Jon Wolf sensed their discomfort and offered some clarification: "Well, if you're a theist, I want you to think I'm a humanist. If you're a humanist, I want you to think I'm a theist." Along those same lines, for all those who raised their hands and said that you believe human nature is good, I'd like you to believe that I believe differently. If you believe that it's a mixture, I'd also like you to believe that I subscribe to a different notion.

Having said that, I think it a fair to say that most UUs and religious liberals of various denominations have a peculiar reputation when it comes to how we generally regard human nature. Ours is a reputation which has been forged through several centuries. That reputation suggests that we are unabashedly optimistic about human nature. We tend to believe that people are better than they probably deserve to be considered.

A classic example happened about 175 years ago. One quintessential Unitarian, Ralph Waldo Emerson, was giving a lecture in Boston. He had a large audience; people were spellbound. There was a newspaper reporter in the back of the room recording his remarks. He noticed this peasant woman in the back of the room, a recent immigrant from Ireland, beaming and nodding her head as Mr. Emerson spoke.

Immediately after the lecture, the reporter approached this woman. He was surprised to see this illiterate woman enjoying Mr. Emerson's lecture. So he asked her: "Did you understand a word he had to say?" Her response was, "Ah! Not a word! But I just loved to see him up there, thinking that everyone's as good as he is!" (*Laughter.*)

That pretty much sums up the reputation most Unitarian ministers have. When we stand up here, we tend to think that most people are better than they probably are. Now, from time to time when we read the news, when we turn on our television sets, when we reflect on what has happened in history, it gives us pause. This past week I participated in a service at the Old State Capitol on the Holocaust. Much of the history

that I have read impresses upon me that people can act demonically, that they can do treacherous, horrid things to one another, often in the name of God or whatever they deem holy. In my own life, a week ago, I received my first hate letter, something of a milestone for me. (*Laughter.*) A rather long hate letter. This was in response to an article that had been published in the State Journal-Register where I promoted the idea that we should be behind the notion of marriage equality or, in the common language, gay and lesbian marriage.

I have a very simple philosophy: Gosh! Wouldn't it be nice if people treated each other the same way they wanted to be treated themselves? A variation of the Golden Rule, something you will find in all the world's major traditions. Of course, the Golden Rule is not new with me. I can't take credit for it. I will not receive any royalties for it. It's a basic philosophy that you will find in almost every single religious tradition. And yet, when you propose it, and you put a specific agenda item attached to that philosophy, you are surely going to push someone's button. They will respond and they may become hostile and arrogant, sometimes even threatening. Certainly, always, they will challenge you and then you are given pause to think on how to respond.

My recent correspondent is in prison in Ina; he did not mention why he was incarcerated. I read his letter, digested his anger and then I chose to respond. I wrote him a letter, longhand, as he had written me. I'll tell you a bit about the letter and his response, which I just received yesterday, at the conclusion of this sermon.

As I mentioned before, I was recently at a UU District Assembly. I saw a lot of old friends, a lot of former congregants. One friend that I saw is Buddhist and she's also Unitarian. She had been raised Jewish. She laughingly describes herself as a 'UU-Jew-Bu". (*Laughter.*) Delightful person. One year ago, I needed to rely on her strength and her wisdom. This country had gone to war. We had watched the president deliver his address. I must confess that as I listened to the President announce that we were now at war, I felt a rush of anger ... and also anguish. I was disgusted that all of us were being dragged into this conflict and I shuddered to think of the things that were being done in our name. I felt much anger and much frustration, some of it directed towards Saddam Hussein, but probably more of it directed towards George Bush. I struggled with my anger. My friend suggested that we needed to continue the vigils that we had been holding prior to the advent of the war, but we needed to shift the emphasis. War had started. We could no longer say that we were hoping to avert war. In those vigils that we continued to conduct in the weeks and months following the opening salvos of this war, she led us in meditation to deal with our anger. She taught me and the other attendees how to rise above that anger, how to channel it, how to change it, how to wrestle with our frustration. One of the key aspects of her teaching was learning how to bless those that you are angry with, learning how to bless those with whom you are angry.

As I have to continued to digest that event and other events in my life, I reflect upon some things I've encountered in scripture, some things in my history readings, some things in my development as a family teacher from Maryville Academy. Social workers are taught, for example: love the person, hate the behavior. In the Christian

scriptures, it is taught: love your enemies. Abraham Lincoln taught, or at least he recalled, that the most effective way to destroy an enemy is to make that person your friend. As a young child, I remember running home from school, having just fought with another classmate. This is someone I fought with on a recurring, almost daily, basis. On this one day, I ran home with blood spattered all over my white shirt, my tie probably tattered, mud all over my pants. I ran up and my dad saw me and he wanted to know what had happened. So I told him about this most recent fight and I blurted out how much I hated this other kid. My dad's response was, "You can't say that. You can't say that you hate him. You can say that you don't like him, but you can't take that hatred and you can't make it your own."

The more and more I think about it, that lesson is a recurring theme through all the great traditions of the world. There is certainly hatred. There is certainly goodness. Every person, from the youngest child to oldest adult can probably recall things that they are proud of, and – if they're honest – equally recall things that they are not so proud of ... things that we have done for good and things that we have done for ill. My life is certainly no exception. It occurs to me, even from listening to some of the youth today, what a mechanical universe we seem to live in, at least we think we live in – in terms of ethics. If somebody does something good to you or for you, the natural response is to do something kind in return. If somebody does something to hurt you, the natural response, of course, is to do something to repay that act, more often, with unkindness. It's human nature. It's probably always been that way. I fancy it will always be that way, no matter how educated or how evolved we as a species are or will become.

There are some who will say this is the result of genetics. There are some who will say that every action exists within a determinist universe and that we really do not have free choice. We're programmed that way, the script of all existence was written at the beginning of all eternity and no one can challenge it. There are other people who say that we do have choice. I happen to fall on this latter side of the argument. I believe that we do have genuine choices that we can and must make every single day. Yes, there is much cultural conditioning at work. No person exists independent of others. We are members of a particular family, a particular community, a particular civilization, where certain values are lifted up and we are expected to measure ourselves in relationship with those values. I also believe that in certain civilizations there are differences in terms of what is considered good and what is considered evil. I think that these differences have intrigued the great philosophers of different civilizations: Plato and Sir Thomas More come immediately to mind. Both of these men wrote works describing how a society can (and should!) be arranged so that people can be nurtured to develop certain attributes, certain values. I look at some of the movies which are out. I listen to some of the music, which I find reprehensible. Certainly when I was in charge of a group home filled with teenage boys and there was a lot of gangsta music, I would listen and I would be appalled. I would make suggestions and be laughed at. I do believe that much of what we indulge in terms of our choices, in terms of movies, music, and so forth and so on, do in essence exert an influence on who we are and who we are to become. If nothing else, they reinforce the values to which they subscribe.

You will find further reinforcement in some of the choices such as what type of work you engage in, where you have chosen to work, what type of family you have, who will be your partner for life, who will be your friends. If you are in a work situation and you are surrounded by people who make your life miserable, it has to have an influence. The longer you stay there, the more it's likely to drag you down. If you find it unfulfilling, the same thing will doubtless occur. Or, if you're in an unhappy marriage or love relationship, odds are, it's going to impact your decisions as well. As an aside, let me mention that it's uncanny, how when I talk with people, whether in passing or in social situations, so many people ask permission to do bad things, either to the people they work with, or to their spouses or to their friends. Once they find out I'm clergy and they divulge how miserable and unhappy they are, they essentially ask permission to go and do something they themselves believe is wrong. Of course, I listen. Of course, I encourage them not to do something that I consider unethical. But it surprises me nonetheless how often people will choose to stay in a situation that is harmful to themselves, harmful to others, and where, again, people's ethics are mechanical .. which, again, is to say that they receive a certain reaction from someone and so they will naturally respond in kind.

Sometimes in life, societies will structure themselves to be a little bit more deliberate and not so haphazard. One of the examples which was brought to my attention that I thought about this past week when talking about the Holocaust, is how candidates for the SS, when they were in training, were initially given a dog to raise. They were given a dog. They named the dog. They fed the dog. They took care of the dog. The dog was their constant companion. Then as the dog grew, they were required to kill it. Training. Training to be detached emotionally from things that you love, whether it's an animal, a human being, or something that you were raised to believe was good and true. Groups sometimes do that. You see that also – or at least I wonder about it sometimes as I read the papers – about suicide bombers. I think these are people with families, with friends and yet they make a choice. I wonder what conditioned their response? Genetics? Culture? I tend to think it's more the latter.

I think that the programming that we offer begins at the earliest age, our youngest children. The other day, someone brought to my attention a song attributed to Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers, a program I avoided as often as possible. But I'm told there is some wisdom there. He has a song, the poetry of which is:

Sometimes people are good
and they do just what they should.
But the very same people who are bad sometimes
are the very same people who are bad sometimes.
It's funny, but it's true.
It's the same, isn't it,
for me and for you.

You can see this played out in our individual lives. You can see it played out on a global scale, whether we're talking about the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing, terrorism. We see that normal people, people of flesh and blood, people with hopes and aspirations,

people who dream, who have nightmares, who have aches and pains, are capable of participating in extraordinary evil just as they are capable of participating in extraordinary good sometimes.

A week ago, we showed the film *Schindler's List* here. One of the scenes is when Oscar Schindler is talking with a Nazi commandant. He tells the commandant the story of the emperor, a very great man, an exalted human being, powerful beyond measure, who took pity on what Schindler described as 'a worthless peasant' who deserved justice but no mercy. Schindler taught the commandant the words, "I pardon you." It's a very momentary scene in that movie. I don't know how much of it is Hollywood and how much of it is authentic. But it's a subtle, powerful moment. Schindler has been changing and he offers this man who, by every definition that I think we would subscribe to, is an evil person, the opportunity to change by a simple act of pardoning another person. We can debate whether or not one human being has the authority to pardon another, but we cannot, I don't think, disagree that the fact that in several instances that the commandant chose not to murder another human being was, in essence, a good thing. Unfortunately, the lesson didn't last very long. People without the proper reinforcement tend to revert to their natural self, at least the self that has been built up over years, if not decades.

But let me return to an earlier thread. Sometimes there are surprises. I mentioned that I received my first hate letter from a gentleman who describes himself as a shaman of a particular church which I'd never heard of. In his first letter, he is very accusatory. He is very bitter. He is very angry with me because I dared to come out and suggest that gays and lesbians are human beings who deserve the basic decencies and the basic protections of society and of religion. I wrote back to this man. He wrote back, and his opening remarks were about how shock he was to have received a reply to his letter. He still insists that his god condemns what I subscribe to, but he's open to begin talking about our views and he's actually hoping that I will continue to correspond, perhaps come and see him.

People change. If people did not change, if everything that we did existed in a mechanistic universe, we could throw up our hands and walk away and say, "I can't change myself. I cannot change other people. It's over. It was over before it began." But that's not what we believe. That's certainly not what I believe. I do believe that the choices that we make do count. As in the reading, it matters what we believe. It matters how we conduct ourselves.

In terms of ethics and choices of whether or not we are all good, all evil, a mixture and if so, what is the balance? It's one of the classic eternal questions that people have been asking for eons. Many people have offered different solutions to that question. We are people who like to ask questions. Sometimes we are people who become bogged down in trying to come up with the exactly correct answer. I think that what is most important for us is how we choose to navigate our lives, knowing that many people in the world do evil things, knowing that we ourselves have done wicked things, and we are capable of doing evil things. But also knowing that we are capable of doing some good things. It's asking ourselves when people talk about, let's say when

Christians talk about the kingdom of God, or when Unitarians talk about progress, onward and upward forever, what are we talking about? We're talking about where do we identify our chief value? My answer to that question is we find it in other people. That's why I describe myself as a humanist, because my principle orientation is my relationship and our relationship is with other people. I'm not so much concerned with treasures that might await us after death. I'm not concerned with treasures that might be buried deep in the earth. I think the goal of being religious is to regard each and every other person as a treasure unto themselves. We talk about the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. I think that, in essence, is describing each person as a treasure.

I heard a story – apocryphal. There was a monastery, a group of men who had devoted themselves in the service of God and the service of humanity. But like all human institutions, it had fallen onto hard times. There was a lot of bickering, a lot of jealousy. Grievances were carried. So this community which was devoted towards the highest ideals that this group held began to experience all kinds of tensions and to unravel at the seams. The person in charge wrote and invited a visitor to come, a wise person. The visitor came, talked with all the monks, heard the grievances and then, after a week or so, he had to leave. So he called all the monks together and he said, “I have seen, amongst this group, the Messiah. One among you is the Chosen One, but I've been instructed that I may not identify Him. I can only share with you that He is here amongst you.” And then the visitor left.

Well, this was certainly news to the monks in this monastery! They were shocked by that information. Of course, they all wondered, “Who is the Messiah amongst us? Could it be Brother John? I don't think so. Could it be brother Mark?” They all asked themselves, “Who could this person be?” No one volunteered that he himself was the Messiah, so they were left guessing. But there was a change amongst them. Because they did not know who exactly this Messiah was, they began to treat each other as if each other might just happen to be that Messiah and was keeping it cloistered. And, of course, when you have a group of people who have been angry with one another, begin treating each with that level of dignity, with respect and kindness, of course you're going to have a change.

It's a fanciful story. One wishes that life always worked out so well, even the children who were here. I asked if someone has done something bad to you, did you try responding with goodness? Several said yes. The follow-up question is natural: “Well, did it make a change?” And they said, “Well, no, not really.” That's often the way it seems to be. But I think that we have a very small vision at times and we can't always see all the interconnectedness of all the relationships that we have. Therefore, even though it may not be immediately event, sometimes, perhaps, some good will come by returning a good deed for an evil one.

I caution you: not all people are reasonable. Not all people are motivated by selfless altruism. Not all people will appreciate goodness. There's an old saying: no good deed goes unpunished. You've heard that, I'm sure. Often, I have lived it. So, as a final word of caution, I cite you these words from the Christian scriptures, attributed to

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Paul: "Wise as a serpent," he said, "but also as gentle as a dove." People will disappoint. If you look for the bad in people, you will surely find it. If you look for the good, you may or you may not. But I think we have to act as though people were better than they deserved to be considered and that is really our only hope for this universe.

Let me conclude with some of the words that we used for the opening lighting of the chalice:

May the light we now kindle inspire us to use our powers
To heal and not to harm,
To help and not to hinder,
To bless and not to curse,
To serve you, Spirit of Freedom.
May it be so.