

THE SIN OF OTHERNESS

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, preaching
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
Sunday, November 27, 2011

How was it...that Adolph Hitler and his National Socialist Party were able (in the dark days of the 1930s to persuade the people of Germany – a by-and-large highly educated and civilized population – to turn on their Jewish neighbors...first depriving them of their basic civil, human and economic rights, and then methodically exterminating some 6 million of them in the concentration camps? Surely one contributor was the long-standing anti-Semitism that was perniciously imbedded both in German culture in particular and European culture (in general. But Hitler built hate on top of this shameful cultural foundation by employing widespread and ugly propaganda – propaganda which portrayed the Jews as a despicable subhuman species that deserved no sympathy or quarter. Look at these images of how Jews were portrayed by the Nazis, in the run up to the Holocaust – from the historical archive:

[THESE FIVE ANTI-JEWISH PROPAGANDA POSTERS ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS.]



Hitler and his henchmen worked hard (in Germany) to create a clear sense of “the Jew” as “the despicable other.”

And lest you think that Nazi Germany was the only nation during World War II that employed propaganda to establish the “radical and ugly otherness” of people in considered “the enemy,” look at these images of German and Japanese people from propaganda generated by the government of the United States:



This propaganda worked its way into countless American hearts. When I was a young boy in the early 1950s, my family had a babysitter by the name of “Mrs. G.” “Mrs. G.,” whose last name was Glidden, had a son who had been in the Navy in the Pacific theatre during World War II, and had survived a Kamikaze attack which sank his ship. Almost every time she cared for me

and my brothers, she would manage to tell us how much she hated “the dirty little Japs,” who had tried to kill her son. Even though the war had been over for nearly a decade – and the Japanese were, by then, among our closest allies in the world, the hateful image of the Japanese people’s absolute “otherness” continued to live in Mrs. G’s heart.

Now, please fast forward to our own time, in our own country. While this example is surely nowhere as heinous (or dangerous) as what happened during World War II, it nonetheless points to the easy sin of otherness. On Saturday, October 15th, while at a campaign stop in Cookeville, Tennessee, presidential candidate Herman Cain suggested that – as a solution to the complicated problem of unauthorized immigration – America put up an electrified fence along its southern border, with enough current running through it to kill anyone who comes into contact with it. Now...I am going to show you the video of Mr. Cain offhandedly making this violent suggestion, and I expect more than a few of you will be shocked by both his flippant words and tone. But what I want you to notice even more than the candidate’s remarks, is the gleeful, enthusiastic reaction of the American crowd, that seems delighted by the suggestion that we electrocute people from south of our border who want to enter the United States to work.

[THE YOUTUBE VIDEO <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0-q5117618> OF THE CAIN SPEECH IS PROJECTED ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS.]

Now...let me be very clear about this. I have absolutely no interest in particularly picking on Mr. Cain. I think the American people are perfectly capable of judging whether or not he as a candidate has the maturity, experience and temperament to be our next President. But what I do want you to focus on is the fact that someone running for the highest office in this land can – in these anxious and fearful times – stand before a crowd of ordinary American citizens and get a rousing roar of approval for suggesting that we should electrocute Spanish-speaking “foreigners” trying to come to our country to better their lives. This too is the sin of otherness raising its ugly head.

Now...let me bring all this even closer to home...as close to home, in fact, as I am capable of getting...by telling a confessional story about myself. As a Unitarian Universalist, I like to think of myself as spiritually too enlightened to fall victim to the sin of otherness. But the truth is, like all human beings I too am vulnerable to this natural and pernicious predilection of the heart. Let me tell you the true story about a transforming moment in my life (which I shall never forget) when I became aware of how easy it is to fall victim to the sin of otherness. I want to tell you the true story about the day I, Scott W. Alexander, first began to get a glimmer of what it might really mean to actually become a Universalist.

It was in the Spring of the year 1973. I was in my last year in seminary out in California, and because I understood myself as a third generation Universalist Unitarian – having grown up in an historically Universalist church in Racine, Wisconsin – I had decided to preach a sermon at the weekly chapel service held for faculty and students, about this often forgotten and neglected half of our faith tradition. I was sure, that morning, that I could preach a powerful and poetic sermon about the pure living essence of Universalism – that saving gospel of our radical human oneness and belonging – from which I theologically came.

As I walked my way up to the school from my apartment, my head was down as I silently went over and over in my head how I was going to eloquently inspire everyone with my understanding of and commitment to the Universalist ethic of human inclusion, connection and kinship. But as I approached Shattuck Street, the main drag that runs through Berkeley, I happened to glance up...and there, sitting on a bench waiting for a bus was a very, very obese

woman – who almost occupied the entire bench by herself. Now, I have always had a kind of obsessive thing about watching my own weight...anyway...before I could censor the unkind thought, I said to myself there on the street, falling sudden victim to the sin of otherness, “Oh, dear God, look at that grotesque woman, she must be 400 pounds...how could she ever let herself get like that...and who could ever be attracted to that?” And at that moment – as if it were a message sent straight out of the heavens for me – the skinny little guy sitting next to her on that bench leaned over, and bestowed upon her cheek the gentlest, most loving kiss I have ever seen a human being bestow upon another. And right then...right there...in the middle of the chaos and noise of Shattuck Street...I heard a loud and holy voice that was as clear and compelling to me as any voice I have ever heard...and the voice said to me:

“HELLOOO...SCOTT...DON'T YOU GET IT? Here you are, on your petty little way, up to your petty little school, to preach your clever little sermon about the holy, inclusive, loving gospel of Universalism (which refuses all distinctions of human otherness and separateness) and all you can do is sneer at another human being who you imagine somehow less worthy and lovely than yourself! Don't you understand that she is as precious and beautiful and worthy as human beings get? Don't you understand that the love and grace and dignity which creation holds for you is held – in the same sacred vessel of essential human worth and beauty of being – in her? Don't you see that you and she are equally holy children of God, who belongs to you in radical and indissoluble kinship...and you call yourself a Universalist!”

Let me assure you, I am not in the habit of regularly hearing voices on busy city streets. But on that clear California day, I heard a Universalist voice (so clear and commanding...and holy and haunting) that it still rings in my heart's ear to challenge and chide me toward a better, more loving and inclusive human place. It was as swift a kick in my spiritual butt as I have ever received in my life! And that day, when I did finally get up to school and did my chapel, I fully confessed this epiphonal event to my seminary colleagues, and expressed my heartfelt dream that now I might actually begin to become, incrementally in my daily living, a true Universalist...slowly...steadily...as I work on growing a more inclusive, compassionate and generous heart...truly able to see and defend the irreducible worth and wonder of every person I encounter...and working to prevent the sin of otherness from rearing its ugly head in my life, and in the life of others.

Before I say more about the role our Unitarian Universalist faith can play in combatting the sin of otherness in human affairs -- which is really where I want to spiritually take you this morning – I feel I need to go back and take a few moments to explore what leading evolutionary psychologists – and others who study the primordial predilections of the human brain – are saying about how we human beings are “hardwired” for our encounters with one another. As I understand it, from rather extensive reading on this subject which fascinates me, is that what the current science about how human brains react when they bump up against people who are in any way “unlike” them is both cause for optimism and despair. There have been a number of recent studies by leading neurological scientists which indicate that human beings – when it comes to responding to people who are not members of their “tribe,” who are different from themselves, are “hardwired” for both xenophobia and inclusion...for both tribalism and universalism...for both altruism and indifferencefor both compassion and cruelty.

On the one side of the neurological equation – as Dr. Paul MacLean suggested in his classic study of human neurology – human beings all come “hardwired” with reptilian brains. The so-called “*R-Complex*” is located in the most recently developed, evolutionarily speaking, sphere of the brain, which is responsible for “rage, xenophobia, basic survival, fight-or-flight responses, territoriality, [tribalism], social hierarchy, along with the desire to submit to stronger Alpha-type

members of one's own species." [Wikipedia, August 2007].

And on the other side of the neurological equation, it seems we human beings are also wired for generosity, compassion, and altruism! In a recent *Washington Post* article entitled "New Findings Suggest that Good Impulses Are Basic to the Brain," Drs. Jorge Moll and Jordan Grafman report that acts of human generosity "activate a primitive part of the brain that usually lights up in response to food and sex. Altruism and compassionate concern for others, the study suggests, was not a superior moral faculty that suppresses basic selfish urges, but rather was basic to the brain... hardwired and pleasurable." And then the article goes even further, and reports that several similar neurological and behavioral studies "are showing, unexpectedly, that many aspects of morality [and altruism] appear to be hardwired in the [human] brain, most likely the result of evolutionary processes that began in other species."

And, if we look just at recent African history, we can see how this stark "hard-wiring" dualism plays itself out. In Rwanda, in 1994, Hutu extremists within Rwanda's political and economic elite persuaded the Hutu majority of that country to blame the entire Tutsi minority – who lived intimately amongst the Hutu majority in nearly every city and village – for all of that country's increasing social and economic problems. As a result of an active propaganda campaign to blame the Tutsis for all of Rwanda's problems, in the matter of a few horrific weeks, more than 800,000 Tutsi men, women and children were slaughtered by their Hutu neighbors, wiping out more than 75% of the Tutsi population. The sad history of Rwanda will always be stained by the knowledge that in its darkest days, one tribal group successfully demonized and then nearly destroyed the other. But then, mercifully and on the other hand, there is also the contemporary and equally compelling example of South Africa, where – after generations of distrust, violence and oppression between the races – millions of Black and White citizens somehow managed to move past their history of deep and profound "otherness" from one another, to forge (through a complex process of reconciliation, communication and trust-building) a new democracy and civil order which allowed their nation to move forward in profoundly greater equality, prosperity and peace. I believe both history and science indicate that we human beings – again, when we bump up against our deep human differences and conflicts – are "hard-wired" from both genocide and gentleness... kindness and cruelty... nobility and depravity... tribalism and inclusion – and there we homo sapiens frequently teeter on the abyss between human good and evil.

So...if I am right that our neurological "hardware" can lead us in either direction toward either hateful depravity or noble decency, where does the ultimate hope for humanity lie? Said differently, what might tip the balance in the favor of the good, given our divided, primordial selves?

Well, I think, blessedly – and now I am going to use an analogy from the everyday world of our computers. Given the dualistic nature of our neurological human hardware – I think the answer lies on the software side of the human equation. And the "software" that can potentially lead humanity to a new age of compassion, decency and oneness – a future of "radical and transforming belonging" to one another – are things like:

Humane cultural values...

Compassionate ethical precepts...

Clear moral codes of decency and respect...

And (and this is terribly important) inclusive and loving theological affirmations about humanity and persons.

If humanity can come to agree upon certain software coding, if you will, coding we purposefully write on our hearts and minds about the nature of human beings and how they are to be treated,

then together humanity will perhaps evermore be able to tip the balance – created by our ambivalent neurology – in the favor of “the good.”

And here is the good news for us, my dear Unitarian Universalist friends. I believe -- with all my heart and soul – that our faith tradition is a part of this software solution for such human goodness and nobility. We are not the only religious tradition, of course, with the inclusive moral and ethical teachings that lead to radical human inclusion, belonging and care...many are the religions of the world which teach similar nobility. But the core affirmation of our particular faith – from both the Unitarian and Universalist sides of our tradition – the core affirmation of our faith is an irreducible commitment to the dream of human oneness, kinship and belonging.

For more than the 500 years we have been an organized religious faith, we Unitarian Universalists have been teaching and striving to live the ethical and theological assertion that humanity is one, and that therefore it is incumbent upon us to evermore treat one another with generosity, gentleness, compassion and respect. And we have consistently affirmed this in the face of other, divisive religions which have tried to divide humanity between the saved and the damned.

As my colleague, the Rev. Rob Hardies of All Souls Church in Washington, DC wrote in the most recent issues of our denominational magazine the *UU World*: *“One of our greatest assets is our gospel – the gospel of Universalism, of God’s love for all people. I serve a church called All Souls, which kind of says it all. Those two words sum up all that is good and holy and true about religion. Can you imagine a church that called itself “Some Souls Church”? But isn’t that the de facto name of the dominant religious culture in America? The religious right worships a God of some souls, a God who plays favorites, a God who picks and chooses.*

“The good news that we Unitarian Universalists have to share is that a God who picks and chooses is no God at all. It is an idol. Against this spurious faith we must preach the old Universalist gospel of a love that invites all souls to the welcome table, not some. A love that can take hold of our hearts and lead us to lives of meaning and purpose. Our gospel of Universalism is big enough and generous enough and loving enough to capture the hearts and minds of the people.

“Sometimes folks say to me, ‘Rob, this gospel of Universalism almost sounds too good to be true.’ When they do, I always remind them of something that Mae West once said. She warned, ‘Too much of a good thing . . . is wonderful!’” And then Rev. Hardies concluded, “Other folks worship a God of some souls, and they have the audacity to call that the ‘good news.’ We stand for a commanding and transforming love that embraces all souls, and I dare say that is the even better news.”

This, my dear friends, is the timeless “good news” of our Unitarian Universalist “software.” I take it on faith that humanity – even though its ambivalent neurological “hardware” places it on a dangerous teeter-totter between good and evil – can over time “download” the right “software” into the human mind and heart to enable us together to create a world evermore dominated by goodness, inclusion and care. No...the software of human inclusion and nobility cannot completely control “the reptilian brain” and its primitive predilections and destructive behaviors. But the right moral values, compassionate ethical constructs, and the right cultural values and theological affirmations can give humanity the edge it needs to build a future of ever-greater dignity and hope.

And because we are the inheritors of a noble faith tradition that has always affirmed the reality

and power of human oneness and belonging, we have a special responsibility (in this terribly volatile and troubled world of ours) to share our inclusive values and principles...and our vision of humanity becoming one “kinship web” of protection, respect and care for every person on the planet. I, for one, do not believe that this is to dream for too much. I believe humanity – again, if exposed to the right “software of the heart”...the right universal human values – can make steady progress...away from “the terrible sin of otherness”...and toward the holiness that will yet make humanity one.

Amen.