

Ordinary People
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I am told that as a young child I had a fascination with evil. It puzzled me and confused me. "What," I would ask mother, "What made the wicked queen evil?" I liked the dramatic tales that pitted the wicked against the good and always ended with goodness triumphant. I didn't much care for the less clearly defined stories or the ones in which bad things happened to good people.

As I grew up I began to realize that the cowboys in the white hats didn't always win and that bad things did happen to good people, but I still wondered why. I especially wondered how people could harm others --- especially at no particular gain for themselves. I heard about the Holocaust and Hitler and in fourth grade for the first time. I asked for a non-fiction book, a book about the Nazis written for children. Perhaps it might give me some answers. It told me about the terrible things the Germans did, but it didn't help me understand why. It was still a mystery.

Later I would learn I was not alone. Philosophers, social scientists, writers, filmmakers, theologians, and every day, ordinary people were trying to fit the Holocaust into their view of the world. The Western World had learned something about human beings that was terrible and hard to fathom. It is not that terrible massacres and genocides had not occurred before. Children had been tortured, villages massacred. Still the kind of scale, planning, cold calculation, cruelty, and deliberation it took to kill so many millions of one's own and to do so even when it not only brought no profit but caused harm to the German efforts to win the war, no one still can completely comprehend. This Sunday marks Yom HaShoah, the holiday of remembrance for the victims.

Only a small number of you are actually old enough to remember. It is a time in History for most of us. Yet every year there are new things written, new films made, new stories told reflecting on the events of that time.

My interest in understanding the roots of evil persisted through time. It brought me to an interest in politics and an activism to try to stop evils being perpetrated at home and abroad. It brought me to an interest in ethics and religion. It brought me to an interest in people and what makes us do what we do.

I have been close up with people who have done evil things. I had a job in which I worked with adults who had abused children --- sometimes in quite awful ways. I volunteered in a prison where I befriended men who had been robbers, committed assault, hurt children. I travelled to Central America where I met men who had ordered massacres and death squads, ordinary soldiers who carried out those orders, victims, human rights activists, and heroes. In my entire life I have met only two or three people who seemed to be purely evil people, beyond redemption, like the bad Nazis in the movies. Both of them were officers in the US backed Salvadoran army in the late 1980's,

men who took satisfaction in the suffering of others and power to harm. But I have met many, many, people who have done evil -- and many, many more who, like the silent Germans, did not do even the easy things we might have done to stop evil from happening.

One of the things that social scientists have discovered is that evil is not generally done by people with a lifelong habit of evildoing; it is most often done by ordinary people in places and situations where they give in to the pressure --- often very slight --- to hurt or even kill another person. Most of you are, no doubt familiar with Stanley Milgram's experiments on obedience in which subjects were asked by an experimenter to teach an experimental subject certain groups of words and to administer increasing levels of shocks if they got it wrong. Even though the subjects were distressed and worried about administering the shocks, two thirds continued to do so to the end, even when the experimental subject screamed and then stopped responding altogether. I guy in a white coat told people, calmly, to do something dangerous and potentially lethal to someone else, and even though it caused them distress, they did it. Most did it even when someone else seemingly in the same experiment refused to do so. The Milgram study was recently replicated with similar results by a researcher in California. We haven't changed in the last 50 years. The study was originally conceived with the idea that there was something unusual in German culture, that led to the massive collusion with evil that made the Holocaust possible. The results in America dashed Milgram's assumption that excessive obedience was a peculiarly German trait that such a thing would not have occurred elsewhere.

The Holocaust could not have happened without the broad cooperation of millions of people. Those who made the yellow stars. Built the ghettos and the concentration camps. Turned in their neighbors. Were ordinary soldiers. Sent Jews back to Germany because they didn't want them here. Interestingly, in an instance in which Aryan spouses as a group protested the imprisonment of their Jewish husbands, many were released. When occupied and even allied countries resisted the Final Solution very few of the resisters paid a price.

When I first heard about the Holocaust, I wondered what I would have done if I had lived in Germany. Later when I heard about the persecution of black citizens in our country, I wondered what I would have done if I had been an adult during the Civil Rights Movement. When I read about Stanley Milgram's experiment I hoped I would have said no. Everyone who read about it thought they would have said no, but most were wrong. Many of the things I have been involved in my life --- work in Civil Rights, protest of the War in Vietnam, Protest of support of dictatorships and death squads, the sanctuary movement, have been attempts to be disobedient to evils for which I felt responsibility as an American. I took investments out of South Africa when apartheid ruled. In my youth I was unusually diligent about challenging someone who assumed I share their racist or homophobic attitudes. I raised uncomfortable questions. But as life has gone on, I have how hard it is to know how much how far we must go not to be implicated in evil. Was every German guilty? How much do we have to do to retain our

innocence? Yet I feel shame for every great evil that my government does. I feel shame to live in a country that uses torture and even one that would think that torture is a subject for debate. I feel shame that I haven't done more than a few sermons, some letters, some contributions, tried to vote for someone who would eschew torture, but is that enough?

Most of us benefit from some terrible injustices: child labor, inhumane working conditions, starvation wages which make some of the things we buy a little less expensive. All white men of a certain age have benefitted from the educational, job, and wage discrimination suffered by women and people of color for most of our history.

Yet the evidence is far worse. The evidence is that most of us will not just passively benefit from the evils of the world, nor fail to act against far off problems. The evidence is that most of us, with just a little encouragement will do something terribly wrong. It was not just the famous Milgram experiment that suggested this. Look at Zimbardo's prison experiment in which young healthy students randomly assigned as guards in a mock prison experiment began treating their prisoners so badly that the experiment had to be stopped. Not only had that, but the researchers themselves failed to stop the actions of the students until challenged to do so by someone outside the prison simulation. In just five days, ordinary young men given authority as guards in a fake prison were subjecting prisoners to solitary confinement, berating them, and depriving them of sleep. As the week went on behavior by the guards deteriorated as did the condition of the prisoners --- three of whom had to be released from the experiment for their own well being. Guards hooded prisoners --- as would happen later in Abu Ghraib. They were subjected to degradation and even, at the end, told by their fellow-students-turned-guards to simulate sex acts on each other. This happened in 1971 and the experimenter has spent much of his career trying to understand what happened and why.

Recent years in our country has shown us the real world applications of these experiments. Remember Enron where young men laughed as they knowingly destroyed the lives of ordinary people, bilking them of the pensions and life savings? More thousands on Wall Street whose greed crashed the lives of millions? Ordinary soldiers turned into torturers by real world Zimbardo experiments? Think of the Catholic Church where many, many, clergy no doubt went into the priesthood to do good and ended up facilitating pedophiles in their abuse of children. You certainly could make a list of your own.

Liberal Religion in general and UUism in particular has been weak when it comes to confronting human evil. We don't like the word sin or sinners. As Marcus Borg puts it, our objection to traditional religion is that it tells us that although we just got up we have already been bad today! So the Holocaust was a great challenge, especially to Humanists, whose unbounded hopes for humanity seemed crushed by this terrible demonstration of the worst within us. We seemed to many to have been in denial about human frailties and failings. They said that liberal religion was not muscular enough to deal with the evils of the world. It was a critique worth hearing with more than some truth. Any adequate theology has to take into account the truly evil people as well as the near universal frailties of the rest of us when we are challenged by circumstances that

bring out our dark side. Still, there is no evidence that the stricter, more orthodox, faiths stood up any better. Although individuals of various faiths strengthened by their religion to resist evil, there is no evidence that any particular faith group was more faithful in its resistance to evil. It seems that we may just use different kinds of excuses for doing the wrong thing.

Conservative religion may be more conversant with the problem of evil, but it is more likely to encourage obedience to authority. Liberal religion may teach us that we have the right to resist authority, but it may tempt us to do the wrong thing through a lack of moral clarity which sometimes prizes going along with others when we ought not as kindly rather than cowardly. The tools that our liberal faith gives us are several: it teaches us that we are individually responsible for our moral actions, it teaches us that it is right to question authority when it is in the wrong, it teaches us that sometimes an individual can be more ethically aware than a group, that it is OK to march to a different drummer, it lifts up people in its history who have shown moral and intellectual courage.

Of course there is a danger on the other side. We have known those who were so morally pure that it paralyzed their ability to be effective in doing good. We have all heard Voltaire's phrase, "the better is the enemy of the good." The Puritanical streak in some of us can make us believe that we are in moral hazard for improving on a bad situation if in so doing we compromise our wish for the best situation. Schindler cooperated with Nazis to rescue some Jews who would otherwise have died. We rightly hail him not as a collaborator but as a hero. Doing the right thing is often ambiguous enough that it requires thought. Doing the right thing is sometimes fruitless, but why not think how to make it fruitful?

This day of remembrance is not just a time to remember the women, men, and children murdered, it is also a time to remember how easily we humans can collude in the unspeakable. It is a time to hone our inner steel to a fine point so that we can learn to resist being one of the ordinary people so ready to compromise with the wrongs we are pressured to overlook.

In my youth I was fascinated by evil, it seemed so unfathomable. In its most extreme states, it fortunately still is. Still, as I have come to see how easy it is to cooperate, how it can be, as Hannah Arendt put it, "banal," how it is done by ordinary people who are kind to their families, I have become more and more curious about the resisters, about what it takes to speak up, to resist the crowd, to see oneself in the victims and want to be in solidarity with them rather than those who harm them. Who were the whites who resisted apartheid, and why were they different than their countrymen? What made some people willing to risk their lives to save Anne Frank? Who are the whistleblowers who uncover torture, fraud, thievery, endangering the public? Who are the soldiers who disobey illegal orders and risk court marshal? Resistance to Evil: this is what I would like every religion to help ordinary people like ourselves do and help us to teach our children.