

1988

THE EQUAL AND OPPOSITE PARTNER OF GOOD
by Donna Morrison-Reed

Last year at this time I was living in Switzerland. We were there for 4 1/2 months on a sabbatical. For much of our stay we were living in a tiny village, way up in the mountains. A friend of ours who lives there all the time refers to the area we were in as the Appalachia of Switzerland. There was a feeling in our village, that some aspects of life had not changed for 300 years.

In our little village in Switzerland, I heard the bell procession twice. A bell procession sounds rather pleasant, doesn't it? Both times it began at dusk. The first time, I was sitting in my room reading and a strange rhythmic ringing began to pulse, far away. It was like thunder in the distance, except it had a beat to it. It was like a thousand men marching, except it had a ring to it. I happened to be alone at the school with my 4-year-old son at the time. And I didn't know what was happening. We went outside, and we saw the men way down the road, swaying back and forth in an eerie way. They had huge bells in their hands. They were coming four across and about 15 or 20 deep in a phalanx, swaying back and forth, ringing their bells. Have you ever seen the movie "Night of the Living Dead"? In the fading light, they looked like the corpses that come out of the graves to invade the village in the movie. With each sway a foot would slide forward about 5". Then the other foot would slide, coming up the street toward us. With each step the bells would thunder in unison. They came closer and closer. The ringing grew louder and louder. They marched right past Elliot and me down the school driveway, and then turned off at a villager's house, two doors from our own.

It was only the next day that I discovered what had happened the night before. They had gone to the house of a man who was about to get married. They had gone slowly around his house ringing their bells, and then back down the road the way they had come. They were driving out the evil spirits, before the wedding.

Evil spirits. You cannot imagine the feeling of evil that pervaded the ceremony. These people were fighting evil spirits. I had no doubt about it. The quality of the evil and mystery was palpable. The bell ringers acted as though they did not even know we existed, even though we stood within a few feet of them as they moved past. No one talked; no one looked at us; they only moved stiffly back and forth in rhythm, with the bells thundering through the valley.

Evil spirits. Do you believe in evil spirits? I don't take

them very seriously myself. We don't tend to take evil spirits into our calculations much any more, do we? But when we don't believe in evil spirits, when there is no longer such a thing as the devil, when we don't have demons and curses, what do we do with evil? What do we do with those old-time words like sin, vice, wickedness?

In a way, evil spirits are comforting. "The devil made me do it." There is comfort in knowing that we are not 100% responsible for the mistakes: the cruelty, the thoughtlessness, the laziness that we perpetuate. The Catholic Church has a whole ritualistic process for dealing with the devil and with our own evil and sinful acts. Exorcism, confession, indulgences, communion, sacraments: all of these shield the individual. They provide a mechanism by which we can live with ourselves and forgive ourselves for being less than perfect.

But what do we do today? Do we have evil spirits, communion, indulgences, forgiveness? Carl Jung wrote: "The Protestant is left to God alone. There is no confession, no absolution, no possibility of any kind of an atoning opus divinum. [We have] to digest [our] sins alone and [we are] not too sure of divine grace, which has become unattainable through lack of a suitable ritual."

Is there such a thing as evil? And does it have anything at all to do with us? What do we do when faced with this impossible situation: to be less than perfect people, and to have no means of forgiveness in the face of it? What do we do? We have to do something.

Some of us deny the very existence of evil. We answer, 'No, there is no such thing as evil.' We become behaviorists. There are no bad people; only bad environments. Change the environment, and you will change the person. The word evil is simply no longer a part of our vocabulary. It is an irrelevant concept. It no longer exists.

Many of us try for perfection. We refuse to accept mistakes in ourselves or in others. Mistakes are outlawed. As a society we are not good at forgiveness. Ask any doctor in the United States why it is impossible to practice medicine today without charging exorbitant fees. Ask why almost all of the candidates running for primaries in the United States are so colorless, afraid of even breathing anything controversial. But what happens when our efforts fail, as they must, and we do do something that is incorrect, or mean, or thoughtless, or inflicts pain? What then?

Well, we have another response to the existence of evil. Guilt. We live with guilt. We didn't do it right. Our ancestors

didn't do it right. Our country is not doing it right. And we search desperately for relief from that guilt. We turn to religion, to therapy, to meditation, to alcohol, to drugs, to wild and pointless consumption or partying, to self-help books. The search for relief is in evidence everywhere in our society.

Another way we live with our own evil actions is to try and make amends. How many of us are involved in projects designed to confront evil and to make some aspect of the world a better place? When we are involved in great humanitarian projects though, it is always important and insightful to ask ourselves what we, personally, are getting out of our efforts. One answer can be that it helps us to feel better about ourselves.

Still another method we all use when confronting our own evil is to deny what we have done. "I didn't do it." "It wasn't really that bad." "He didn't feel hurt when I said those words, and if he did, he's just overly sensitive." In other words I didn't do anything wrong. If he's hurting, it's his own fault. Or we deal with it by simply not thinking about it any more. How long can you tolerate thinking about something that you have done that has hurt someone else?

We also deny our own evil side by placing the evil out there: by saying, there may be evil in the world, but it has nothing at all to do with me. How many of us know where the problem lies? It's those people, not me. It's the Right Wing conservatives. It's all the drug addicts. It's those people on welfare. How many Black people believe it's the White people who are evil? How many Canadians pin it on Quebec? How many women believe the problem to be men? How many working people blame it on the unemployed? How many Canadians believe it is the United States? How many US citizens think it's Reagan? How many of us see evil out there: in the Nazis? The Fascists? The Communists? The Capitalists? The Fundamentalists? The Right to Lifers?

How many methods have I just mentioned that allow us to avoid looking at our imperfect selves, allow us to deal with this thing that, for lack of a better word, we might call evil? I've just mentioned six methods in 2 minutes. And I happen to be adept at all of them. I project and deny and excuse and feel guilty and fool myself into believing that I can be perfect countless times, everyday, without even noticing.

But the problem is that, whatever we want to call it, there is evil. There is laziness and thoughtlessness and mean-mindedness and envy and vindictiveness and cruelty. And it is not simply out there. It is inside us as well. And that's why it bothers us so much. That's why we have all these methods for managing it.

While we were in Switzerland, one of my projects was to study the philosophy of Carl Jung. I was struck by three ideas that Jung emphasises, because they are all things that our Judeo-Christian heritage has led us to separate from our concept of what it means to be a human being: the feminine, the earth, and evil. These three have been either overlooked or devalued by our culture. We have become alienated from them. Carl Jung worked at reintegration. Jung attempted to reconnect the human spirit to the spirit of the feminine. He attempted to make the human creature a part of the earthly kingdom, not separate from it. And he sought to include within our concept of self the idea of evil, to include it without the need for immobilizing guilt, without the need for denial or projection.

In recent years, much has been done to redress the imbalance we have felt in two of these areas. We are slowly coming to appreciate the gifts of the feminine that have been so long given second-class status in our patriarchal society. We are on our way toward seeing ourselves as "of" this world, as a part of nature rather than outside it. But evil, that has been harder to tackle. And I do not see Unitarian Universalists on the forefront in efforts to come to terms with our denial of evil, to look at it clearly and to reintegrate the idea of evil within our conception of self.

Carl Jung called this side of ourselves that we reject "the shadow." According to Jung, "we are in a split condition." Evil "is lodged in human nature itself." Lodged in human nature itself. Think about those words. This propensity we have to be thoughtless, to be cruel and lazy at times, is a part of our nature as human beings. He even went so far as to call this shadow "the equal and opposite partner of good."

According to Jung, human beings are balances of opposites. For example, he claimed that within each of us there is an introvert and an extrovert, a male side and a female side, a thinker and a feeler. There is also a good side and a bad side. And our job as human beings is not to become one or the other of these, but to try to keep these sides in balance, and to allow them to interact with one another. He did not believe either introversion or extroversion was bad. But to become too much of either to the exclusion of the other he did believe was unproductive. The same with thinking and feeling, masculinity and femininity. We all know people who have fallen too far to one side or the other of these polarities, people who have lost the ability, say, to feel; they can only analyse situations. Introverts who have lost any balance and have no ability to relate to others; extroverts who have lost touch with themselves: to lose the balance of our opposites is where the problem for the individual lies.

But Jung contends that it is just as dangerous, if not more so, to lose touch with our evil side, our shadow. We need to keep good and evil in balance, because they are partners in our lives. The most hazardous person is the one who has lost touch with his or her shadow, who sees him or herself as only good, and puts all the evil out there, and assumes none of it within. Those who have trouble including their evil side within, are exactly those who must spend all their extra energy hiding their evil from themselves by denial and guilt and projection. Those who have lost this balance will, if anything, be more of a menace to society than the person who has lost some of the other balances in his or her life. And we see the consequences of this loss everywhere. Tammy and Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart lost touch with their evil side, and what happened? I think one of the origins of the sadness in Israel today is that the Israelies have projected all the evil away from themselves. And we too are those people who cannot bear to look at our own shadow, when we feel consumed with guilt, when we honestly try never to admit to a single mistake, when we claim that the evil of this world is in those people over there, whoever they may be. That is what we are doing when we deny our own personal shadow side.

Robertson Davies wrote these words in World of Wonders:

In the study of hagiography we have legends and all those splendid pictures of saints who killed dragons, and it doesn't take much penetration to know that the dragons represent not simply evil in the world but their personal evil, as well. Of course, being saints, they are said to have killed their dragons, but we know that dragons are not killed; at best they are tamed, and kept on the chain. In the pictures we see St. George, and my special favourite, St. Catherine, triumphing over the horrid beast, who lies with his tongue out, looking as if he thoroughly regretted his mistaken course in life. But I am strongly of the opinion that St. George and St. Catherine did not kill those dragons, for then they would have been wholly good, and inhuman, and useless and probably great sources of mischief, as one-sided people always are. No, they kept the dragons as pets. Because they were Christians, and because Christianity enjoins us to seek only the good and to have nothing whatever to do with evil, they doubtless rubbed it into the dragons that it was uncommonly broadminded and decent of them to let the dragons live at all. They may even have given the dragon occasional treats: you may breathe a little fire, they might say, or you may leer desirously at that virgin yonder, but if you make one false move you'll wish you hadn't. You must be a thoroughly submissive dragon, and remember who's boss.

You can't be a saint, unless you have a dragon: a dragon that does not represent "simply evil in the world but [your] personal evil, as well. . . .I am strongly of the opinion," Davies writes, "that St. George and St. Catherine did not kill those dragons, for then they would have been wholly good, and inhuman, and useless and probably great sources of mischief, as one-sided people always are."

What vast amounts of energy do we consume trying to be wholly good? And how one-sided and inhuman and useless do we become in the process? And what great sources of mischief do we get into as a result? The most dangerous people are those who spend all their energy denying their own evil side. It gets projected onto others. It leads to a holier than thou attitude. It separates them from humanity.

Jung writes: "Unfortunately there is no doubt about the fact that [we are], as a whole, less good than [we] imagine [ourselves] to be. Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. If [this shadow] is conscious, one always has a chance to correct it. Furthermore, it is constantly in contact with other interests, so that it is steadily subjected to modifications. But if it is repressed and isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected. It is, moreover, liable to burst forth in a moment of unawareness. At all events, it forms an unconscious snag, blocking the most well-meant attempts."

Do you have a shadow? Do you have your own personal dragon? Do you have some way of living with the evil spirits that the bell ringers and the Catholic Church have always taken for granted?

I believe there is a special reason for us, as Unitarian Universalists, to get to know our dragons, to work toward making our evil side an equal partner with the good. I believe that it is only in recognizing our "equal and opposite partner" within, that we can truly come to live by the Unitarian principle of tolerance. Tolerance. What is tolerance? The dictionary defines it as the "ability to recognize and respect, without necessarily agreeing or sympathizing." It seems to me that we can't have real tolerance until we stop separating good and evil, until we stop seeing the world in terms of good guys and bad guys, until we stop putting the evil as far away from ourselves as possible. And I don't think we can truly practice tolerance until we stop seeing ourselves as either wholly good or wholly bad. When we see the world and ourselves in terms of either/or, this person is good and that one is not, then how do we practice toleration? There is nothing, of course, to tolerate with those on the good

side, on "our" side, but with those on the "not-so-good" side, the "other" side, our toleration becomes sanctimonious. "I am right and you are wrong, but I will tolerate you. I will put up with you. I will respect your right to be wrong." That is not what is meant by the Unitarian principle of tolerance. Toleration can only exist in an atmosphere in which we are not 100% sure that "we" are right and "they" are wrong; in an atmosphere in which we are not 100% sure of how the world ought to turn out; in an atmosphere that recognizes that our actions, good though we think they may be at this moment, may actually bring the greatest of harm to the world, and when we recognize that our neighbour, who seems to us the worst of devils, may in fact through the very actions we most deplore be bringing about the greatest good.

Toleration, when we can see it this way, has a new meaning. It has a redemptive meaning. Tolerance becomes a principle that allows us to become more a part of the world, less separated from it. It is a principle not concerned with how we ought to behave toward others, but a principle that actually allows us to grow. When tolerance is just something you practice "out there" on the other guy ("I will tolerate those mistaken fools over there"), there is never any chance that we might actually change, that we may even learn something from those guys who seem so strange to us now.

But true tolerance, based upon a self-understanding that embraces our own human limitations, makes us whole. We can admit our imperfect and ignorant and, at times, thoughtless and lazy side into our personhood. We come to know our whole nature.

With this wholeness comes a new attitude of openness toward other people and the world. But with this wholeness and openness also comes ambiguity. It is painful to recognize and respect our own shadow. It is much more threatening to live with ambiguity, to see ourselves as "of" this world, as a part of the goodness of this earth, but also a part of the evil. It is more difficult to see the world as a mixture, than simply a star wars conception of a battle between good and evil. It is uncomfortable not to be sure where right is located, and who the wrong ones are. Ambiguity is uncomfortable, and many have sought to avoid it by imposing certainty, with special places called heaven and hell, with a division between the saved and the unsaved, with devils and angels, evil spirits and hell processions, saints and dragons.

Tolerance is a principle of Unitarianism, not because it necessitates our being polite to fools, but because it is only through the openness that real tolerance necessitates, that we can come to grow ourselves. It is for ourselves that we need to practice toleration; not for those guys over there. Tolerance is

the path to new truth. It is the path by which that which we cannot even conceive of now may be brought into our awareness. Tolerance must come, not because we are great and others are small, but because we recognize that our measure of the world is not the final distillation of all truth. Truth is greater than our opinion of it at this particular moment in time.

This has interesting implications for ministry. Do we expect our ministers to be whole people, or do we expect them to be saints without dragons? Do we who are ministers perhaps not have a harder time tolerating our own wholeness and including our evil sides along with the good within? Do we who are ministers have a greater urge than others to always have the right answer, always do the honorable thing, always think the right thoughts and live the right way? What does this one-sidedness do to us? Does it not stunt our own growth? Does it not keep us from the truth? Does it not lock us into rigid, intolerant ways of looking at the world? Are we in the Unitarian Universalist ministry, not in the greatest danger of becoming Robertson Davies' one-sided people, "wholly good, and inhuman, and useless and probably great sources of mischief"?

Think of the people you have known who are most certain? The fundamentalists, the dictators, the autocrats, even Unitarian Universalists. Hitler was dead certain he knew right from wrong. What issue is it that you are most certain about? My husband ought to do it this way. The world ought to be that way. It is at these moments that we have stopped growing. It is we who are losing sight of our own balance, not our husbands, not the world.

In our society, we have separated ourselves from evil. We have driven it underground. We refuse to see it. And if we see it, it is always over there, somewhere else. We are deeply afraid of allowing it within our own souls. But it is those of us who refuse to see the evil side of our nature who end up giving that evil side free reign, unfettered by our conscious scrutiny and control. It is a frightening position that we have put ourselves in.

Is there such a thing as evil? And does it have anything at all to do with us? When we are brave enough to answer 'yes' to both of those questions, then we will be able to face ourselves and the world. Only then is it possible for us to become authentic saints. Jung writes: "The Protestant conscience has become wakeful, and this bad conscience has acquired a disagreeable tendency to linger and to make people uncomfortable. But through this the Protestant has a unique chance to realize sin to a degree hardly attainable by Catholic mentality, for confession and absolution are always ready to relieve too much tension. But the Protestant is left to his

tension, which can continue to sharpen his conscience. Conscience and particularly bad conscience, can be a gift from heaven; a genuine grace, if used as a superior self-understanding."

Call it the shadow. Call it a dragon. Call it an evil spirit. Call it whatever you wish. But know this, that when we have come to see evil as the equal and opposite partner of good within our own being, then we will be ready to grow in self-understanding. And only then are we truly ready to live as a fully participating and contributing member of the world.