

FEBRUARY II: Shadowboxing and Care for the Soul

(pre-Groundhog's Day)

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Mythology, the fine arts, religions of the world, and dreams provide the priceless imagery by which the soul's mysteries are simultaneously revealed and contained.

--*Care of the Soul* by Thomas Moore

Gollum was lurking in the shadows, waiting to enter my family's Christmas crèche when the opportunity arrived...

On a night between the solstice and Christmas holiday (after standing in moon-lit shadows of white pines), I walked out to our shed through the knee-deep snow and retrieved a cardboard box filled with figures from our old family Christmas nativity scene collection. Balanced on top was the wooden stable, installed with a small light to illuminate the characters once they were all in place. Trudging back from the shed, I entered the unlit fireplace room of our home and began setting up the crèche in the dark. As I knelt down before my old desk, which I inherited from my Mom, the near full moonlight provided just enough luminosity for my task.

I can't claim that I was in any acceptable holiday spirit. Frustrated with the politics of our time, and saddened by the simple losses that come with living, I felt empty in the fullness of the moon's radiance. But I had been inspired by one of our congregation's elder members (who had recently shown me her rather creative crèche rendition, which included two gay wise men) to embrace tradition with a sense of adventure. As I began to set up the ceramic, olive-skinned figures, I added some characters from our present day mythology. Next to one of the shepherds, I placed Spock from the Starship Enterprise to lend a spirit of reason and logic to the scene.

And next to the manger, opposite Mary, I placed Gollum from Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Lastly, I positioned an English Bulldog next to Mary to guard, well, the feminine archetype of this scene.

“Who is Gollum?” some of you may ask. Gollum, once a fairly good-natured Hobbit named Smeagol, succumbed to a powerful craving to possess the One Ring of Power. Once he seized the ring, he became a shadow creature of his former self, “. . . thin wispy hair. He had large pale green eyes, which shone like lamps in the dark and apparently aided him in keen night vision. He was withered down to a lean frame of skin and bones, but very strong (Tolkien, JRR, *The Hobbit*)” He was greedy. Deceptive. Sneaky. Violent. He was willing to murder in order to retain possession of power. And there in our home, he leaned over the baby Jesus, the symbolic Prince of Peace, and said, “My precious.”

There they all were, clear characters of good and evil cleverly displayed in one holiday scenario by yours truly.

I plugged in the small, old light in the apex of the stable's roof, stood back and admired my creation, but the revealed lit-scene gave me pause . . . and invited me into another layer of interpretation. You see, of course, each character had its own shadow lengthened beside it. The logical Spock, and his perhaps illogical shadow. The innocent shepherd, and his possibly not so innocent shadow. The evil Gollum, and maybe his kind, hobbit-like Smeagol shadow.

As I mentioned last week, according to Jungian theory, the personal shadow refers to the unconscious influences in our psyche, which weave in and out of our conscious understanding of our overall self. The personal shadow is our unrecognized desires and demands, our repressed portions of ourselves. In terms of acceptance, the shadow contains those aspects of ourselves we do not and may not even acknowledge. According to Thomas Moore, author of The New York Times Best Seller *Care Of the Soul*, part of our spiritual journey is growing downward

into the mysteries and shadows of our inner life. Increasing our self-knowledge and self-awareness through such gentle attending is known as *shadow work*. This work can help create greater authenticity and compassion in our lives, deepen awareness of our projections on others, allow us to be more centered so we can “act instead of react” in our relationships. Simply, *shadow work* can cultivate a depth and sacredness in everyday living.

This morning I would like to delve deeper into the Jung’s theory of the shadow (a theory which you may dispute or accept, of course) and Moore’s care of the soul. “All work of the soul takes the form of a circle. The life of the soul as the structure of dreams reveal, is a continual going over and over of material.” Listen further to these words from Thomas Moore, author of *Care of the Soul*

For Jung, there are two kinds of shadow: one consists of the possibilities in life that we reject because of certain choices we have made. The person we choose to be, for example creates a shadow double—we choose not to be. This compensatory shadow varies from one person to the next. For some people sex and money are looming shadows, while for others they are simply part of life. Moral purity and responsible living can be shadow aspects to some.

Jung also believes there is an absolute shadow, not relative to our life choices and habits. In other words, there is an evil in the world and in the human heart. If we don’t recognize this we have a naïve attitude that can get us into trouble. Jung thought the soul could benefit by coming to terms with both kinds of shadow, losing some of its naïve innocence in the process (HarperCollins, New York, NY, 1992, pg 16).

As liberal religious thinkers, how do we engage the topic of evil? We Unitarian Universalists are said to sometimes err on having a too optimistic view of humanity. Are we willing to explore our personal theologies of evil? The religious teacher Krishnamurti stated, “The evil of our time is the loss of consciousness about evil.”

(Following comments on Dr King from “To Pray Without Apology, *UU World*, by Reverend Rosemary Bray McNatt, November/December 2002, www.uuworld.org/2002)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., along with his wife Coretta Scott King, at one time considered becoming Unitarians, but chose not to, it seems for several reasons. One, they felt that they could not create a mass movement of black Americans if they were Unitarian. Also, Dr. King had his critiques of liberal religion. While he cherished liberal religion’s “devotion to the search for truth, its refusal to abandon the best light of reason... (King, Martin Luther, *Pilgrimage to Non-Violence*, Christian Century 1960),” Dr. King, after observing the tragedies of history noted, “I came to feel that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism... Liberalism failed to see that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify ... [humanity’s] defensive ways of thinking.” In other words, the light of liberalism failed to see Spock’s shadow.

Evil is not an easy topic, because dealing with evil forces us to define our theology of humanity, our individual selves and the unexpected shadow tendencies of the soul. It is not easy, because evil is not a simplistic notion. Alexander Solzhenitsyn remarks:

If only it were so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?

Last Thursday marked the anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz. Such tragedies as the holocaust, the pogroms of Stalin, the genocide of Native Americans in our country’s early history, beg us to strengthen our understanding of humanity. Jung warned, “We have in our naivete forgotten that

beneath our world of reason another lies buried. I do not know what humanity will still have to undergo before it dares to admit this (Zweig, pg XXIII).”

And we can probe questions such as whether there is an archetypal evil housed in the collective shadow of humanity. In the book *Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature*, authors Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams state that “the shadow is not only an individual problem. Groups and nations have a collective shadow, which can lead to dangerous actions such as racial discrimination, ...scapegoating ...enemy-making...and war.”

When I first heard our country’s leadership pronounce the “existence of an axis of evil” and make the declaration that people “are either with us or against us,” this simplistic diagnosis of good and evil sent a shiver down my spine. The collective shadow represents fear-filled aspects of our selves, and in its extreme it can become very self-righteous. I believe the tragic events of 9/11 sent shock waves through the collective shadow of our country, and the fear generated from this wave was manipulated to justify over-reaching behavior and policies. Part of Carl Jung’s depth psychology theory offers that “Nothing has such a convincing effect as a lie one invents one’s self and believes one’s self, or an evil deed or intention whose righteousness one regards as self evident...this individual phenomenon becomes more dangerous when the lie is taken seriously by the larger public.” The theory of the collective shadow warns against projecting one’s hidden fears and anxieties onto a created enemy, which is made to appear as inferior. Scapegoating, so to speak.

Let’s go back to the crèche scene in the fireplace room of my home. There we are in the nation of Creche with Mary, baby Jesus, wisemen, shepherds, Spock, Gollum, and a watchful bulldog. Suppose a new character arrives on the scene. Suppose, mmm, someone like Spongebob Squarepants. Now, what if Gollum thinks that Spongebob is trying to take away his ring of power. Fearful, Gollum

may try to transpose the collective shadow of the group against Spongebob. He may try to make Spongebob appear inferior and menacing, perhaps even deceiving the group that Spongebob is threatening the baby Jesus. If the watchful bulldog is doing its part, it will try to alert the group to the deceptions being brought forth. It will help the nation of Crèche to see its own shadows and become more self aware, so the nation does not attack a false enemy.

According to Sam Keen, author of *Faces of the Enemy*, “The only safe nations are those who systematically inoculate themselves by a free press and a vocal prophetic minority against the intoxication of ‘divine destinies’ and ‘sanctified paranoia (Zweig, pg XXIV).” Of note, I don’t think the notion of free press includes syndicated columnist on the federal payroll.

So where does all this leave us Unitarian Universalists here living in a nation which has engaged in pre-emptive war making, which apparently now tolerates methods of torture, which is undermining our very own environmental policies, which is thwarting many of our deeply held principles?

We take care of our souls.

First, as liberal religious thinkers I think we have to be careful not to fall into patterns of fear-based reactions. As a recent article in the Baltimore *Chronicle* states, “If we solidify a particular leader as being evil and react with righteous indignation, we are guilty of the very same thing we are accusing that leader of (projecting one’s shadow onto a enemy).” To quote Jung, “The wickedness of others becomes our own wickedness because it kindles something (evil) in our own hearts... (Levy, Paul, Baltimore *Chronicle*, 2005).” So what do we do? We care for the soul. As spiritual warriors, we practice a deep sense of discernment. Instead of blaming others, we focus on our personal awareness, and discern where we each need to take a stand.

We find communities and friends who will support our process. Secondly, as the Buddhist monk Pema Chodron would say, we need to soften into those parts of ourselves, which we too often reject. Be patient with ourselves with one another. Have a joyful curiosity about those aspects of ourselves we find frustrating. Thirdly, if the free press and vocal minority is the inoculation against “sanctified paranoia” for a nation, then I believe, on an individual level, that an ongoing practice of gratitude is the inoculation against individual despair. Gratitude as a spiritual discipline. Getting support as a spiritual discipline. So we can say “Help me” and “Thank you” in the same breath.

Lastly, as I always like to suggest, turn to the language and imagery of the mystics and poets. Engage your imagination. Allow the inner spiritual journey. Allow me to close with an excerpt from someone I consider to be a modern day mystic, Annie Dillard, and then a poem from Anne Hillman:

In the deep are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world’s rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether that buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned (Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*).

And from Anne Hillman:

We are all on a journey together... To the center of the universe...
Look deep
Into yourself, into one another.
It is to a center which is everywhere
That is the holy journey...
First you need only look:
Notice and honor the radiance of
Everything about you...
Play in this universe. Tend

All these shining things about you:
The smallest plant, the creatures and
Objects in your care.
Be gentle and nurture. Listen
As we experience and accept
All that we really are...
We grow in care.
We begin to embrace others
As ourselves, and learn to live
As one among many....

May we claim for ourselves awareness and gratitude.

Shalom
Amen
So may it be.