



**Story for all Ages:** The Long-Handled Spoons (source unknown)

A rabbi asked God to give him a glimpse of what heaven and hell would be like. God agreed to this request, and asked the prophet Elijah to be the rabbi's guide on this adventure.

Elijah first led the rabbi into a large room. In the middle of the room was a fire with a big cooking pot bubbling away on it. And in the pot was a delicious stew.

All around the cooking pot sat a crowd of people. They each had a long-handled spoon, which they were dipping into the delicious stew.

But the people looked pale and thin and wretched. There was an icy stillness in the room. The handles of the spoons were so long that no one was able to get the lovely food into their mouth.

When the two visitors were back outside again, the rabbi asked Elijah what strange place this was? 'That was hell,' Elijah explained.

The Elijah led the rabbi to a second room, which looked exactly like the first. In the middle, a fire was blazing and a cooking pot was bubbling away, full of the same delicious, aromatic stew. People sat around the fire, with the same long-handled spoons in their hands. But they were enjoying lively, animated conversations with each other.

And, the difference? Well, the people in the second room were not trying to feed themselves with the long-handled spoons. They were using the spoons to feed each other. 'Ah, heaven,' said the rabbi.

**Reading**

The reading this morning is from Rev. Taves sermon\*, "The Hanukah of Tradition and History" The point of the [Hanukah] story is this: justice and truth always win, even against unimaginable odds, so hold on to what is right and true. If you have faith, you have nothing to fear. So, don't let anyone tempt you into betraying your values and doing evil because good will always triumph.

But let me ask you this. Am I the only one here who hears this message and feels a little cynical? I would love for it to be true that if you have faith, what you desire will come to you but I see so many cases where that does not happen. At this time of the year, we say all kinds of beautiful things, and it's lovely, but does it change anything in the long run? We speak of peace, love and goodwill and sometimes a little voice inside me will say, 'Whatever! There's always been war. There always will be war. How is that goodwill?' We talk about the light of truth, and I think about last Tuesday's board meeting and how true it is that 7 Unitarians at a table means 8 views of the truth. Who among us has not doubted that good triumphs over evil?"

## Sermon

I have two confessions. The first is that when asked by many people this morning if I were nervous, I said, "No." The truth is that I'm nervous about stepping out of my shoes, literally. I wore heels for this morning, and I'm not used to them.

My second confession. ... I am the survivor of child abuse. I believe I have looked evil in the eye, and I think I know what it looks like. Was this person evil? Or, just a person doing something evil? Do I believe that what this person did was a sin? Will this person go to hell for all eternity?

The original title for this talk was "If UUs don't believe in sin, do we believe in virtue?" But, do some of those words have an emotional response within you, as they do for me? Is that because I, we UUs, do not believe that we must lead a virtuous life in order to enter the gates of Heaven, or conversely, if leading a life which is sin-filled, we would end up in Hell? And, that what we actually believe is that whether we live a life which is fraught with sin or bad deeds, or filled with joy and good deeds, a virtuous life, that deeds are rewarded here on earth?

Perhaps the problem for those of us left-brained people is that using "good and evil" in the context of a church or Bible is fraught with too much emotion. Perhaps it is because it is simply part of the Bible that we struggle. Perhaps, then if we can separate out for ourselves that it is not part of the Bible, then perhaps we can dissect it into its parts to examine it. Isn't that what a good UU does: if reason falters, assign it to a task force, or committee?

If we were a Christ-centered church, my inspiration would come from Biblical text. So, to begin my search for good and evil, I had to return to the original questions of sin vs. virtue. I began to seek the "seven deadly sins" in the first place I assumed they would be defined. After all, an evil person would be someone who commits these sins, yes? After doing an extensive search of the Bible, I was not able to find "the seven deadly sins" even mentioned. To insure that this was indeed true, and not just my inability to remember where in the Bible this occurred, I turned to the internet and BibleGateway (my favorite site for searching Biblical quotations and references, as though every UU would have a favorite website bookmarked for such an occasion!) However, I was unable to locate "seven deadly sins" or even "seven sins" or "deadly sins." As it turns out, according to Bibleinfo.com...

"The seven deadly sins in the Christian tradition were first compiled by Pope Gregory I around the year 600. They are pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. Gregory also compiled a list of the seven virtues: faith, hope, charity, justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude. The Scripture would validate all of these concepts, but nowhere are they recorded in a list like this and nowhere in the Bible are they specifically referred to as the seven deadly sins or seven virtues. They do not pre-date the Ten Commandments which were given at Mt. Sinai around 1450 B.C."\*\*\*

AH HA! They are NOT part of the Bible, but, provided to the world by a man! So, from our UU heritage which draws from the Bible and Torah, these constructs don't exist in our sources! But, then what does?

So, now, I'm wondering what about evil? To try this one, I gave up on a scripture search, and decided to go with the only repository of UU text, our hymnal. The first song, "May Nothing Evil Cross This Door" suggests we do believe in evil. So reading further about this thing perhaps to define it further, I find the last verse last few words..."though these sheltering walls are thin, may they be strong to keep hate out and hold love in." Hate is the evil we are striving to keep out. Love is what we hope to hold on to. Our good and evil, love vs. hate.

Just as I need to know the definition of "dark vs light," I've struggled with the issues around "good vs evil" "moral vs immoral" "just vs unjust". I argued recently with a humanist at work about her belief that there is good in the world, but the shades of becoming not good did not lead her to that of "evil," and now, as I might put it, "hate". My spectrum of "light" into "absence of light, or dark" did not work for her when it came to "good vs. absence of good or evil". And, as I think of it, detached from the back and forth of the debate, I can see her point. However, if I define something as the absence of "evil" have I defined "goodness"? No, I think not. So, now where does that leave me?

UUs strive to keep in right-relations, in a covenantal relationship. That is, working in a framework with others that is just, fair, with trust and respect, and with compassion. If we defined our seven "virtues" by looking at our seven principles, we don't exactly boil down into words. However, if we work within their framework, they might be something like..."Love and Compassion, Commitment, Justice, Encouragement and Support, Acceptance and Respect, Trust, and Responsibility." Oddly enough, if we do a Thesaurus search on these words and ideas, we get..."fortitude, justice, charity, faith and hope." What we miss from Pope Gregory I's list, but not for lack of trying, are "prudence, temperance, fortitude, and discretion" from that list of virtues. These boil down to "self-control and determination." That is not far from our call to "enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support." Our principles are arranged from personal and local to outward and global. The seven virtues are simply personal.

When we are out-of-covenant, or not in right-relation, with someone, we exhibit behaviors or acts which are: "unconscionable, prejudiced, apathetic, indifferent, distrustful, neglectful or violent." These bear no resemblance to the "Sins" defined by Pope Gregory I: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. As we do a Thesaurus search on the words, we can see why. The places where we, as UUs, actually feel called to hold up our end of the bargain: opposition, argumentative, differing of opinions. I don't know about you, but I love a good debate over ideas. And, as we look at our sources, rather than looking at the bad in people, we seek the best in them, and then ask them to be the best they can be.

I asked Susan Stafford to read a part of Rev. Taves' sermon from December 2009 that hit me over the head when Krista said it, she confirmed something for me. We do have something inherent in our belief system that perhaps we UUs recognize good and evil. Moreover, that for good people, good should triumph over evil. So, where does this leave me? Does this help me with the formation of the answer to my original question, "If UUs don't believe in sin, do we believe in virtue?"

Let me go back to the new words I found for our virtues, "Love and Compassion, Commitment, Justice, Encouragement and Support, Acceptance and Respect, Trust, and Responsibility." Perhaps we need to add a couple more to make it more UU. Things like ... attending meetings, being able to quote Roberts Rules, chairing Task Forces .... But, seriously, do we not think at least somewhere in our heart of hearts when we hear someone talk about saving fuel, conserving energy at home, saving water, volunteering for Habitat or Circle of Concern that that person is one we want to be like? Is that not what we might think of as virtuous?

What about sin? Does it not feel like fingernails on a chalk board when you see a car go by spewing foul obnoxious fumes from its tailpipe? How about when you drive past a neighbor's house and see their sprinkler running during a rain storm? Where do you stand on pollution? How about strip mining? How do you feel about global warming? Killing baby seals? Did I touch a nerve for almost everyone in at least one of those? If I did, I believe UUs do believe in sin. We may not all believe in the same ones...for example, we might all agree or come close on global warming. However, we may not all believe we should turn the facet off while brushing our teeth. We might come close to agreeing on pollution in general, but perhaps we might differ with how many cars it is appropriate for each family to drive to church on Sundays and still make all the activities we have to get to following Religious Education.

So, perhaps the issue that we don't not believe in sin and virtue, but rather we believe in the shades of righteousness that goes with virtue and the shades of wickedness that goes with sin, and can't agree on their end-points.

Unitarian Universalism is a faith community which cherishes deeds not creeds, or the Khasi prayer\*\* noted, "we redeem our failings by the good work that we do." We do not, as a faith movement ask our members to profess a specific belief. We do not require atonement of our sins or a public profession of our sins (like driving two cars to church on Sunday) in order to be forgiven.

Perhaps like our children's story, what we do here makes it heaven on earth. We redeem our own failings by the good work we do.

I am reminded now of the words of the Reverend Theodore Parker, Unitarian minister and Transcendentalist, who wrote, "Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere; its temple, all space; its shrine, the good heart; its creed, all truth; its ritual, works of love; its profession of faith, divine living."

And I cannot leave this topic without using one of my two favorite Biblical quotations...from 1 Corinthians 13: 6, 7, and 13 (New International Version):

6 "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

If we go back to our hymnal I might add one more to this list—faith, hope, love and *joy*. But perhaps the greatest is still love.

May it be so.

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\*Rev. Krista Taves, "The Hanukah of Tradition and History" December 13, 2009, Emerson UU Chapel. [http://www.emersonuuchapel.org/sermons/121309\\_Hanukah\\_Tradition\\_History\\_Taves.pdf](http://www.emersonuuchapel.org/sermons/121309_Hanukah_Tradition_History_Taves.pdf) last accessed 1/2/2011

\*\*Khasi Unitarian prayer (hymnal, #516) offered during Joys and Concerns: "O God [sic, of many names], root and source of body and soul, we ask for boldness in confronting evil. When you are within us, we have the power to countenance all that is untrue. O Father and Mother of all humankind, may we redeem our failings by the good work that we do."

\*\*\* <http://www.bibleinfo.com/en/content/what-are-seven-deadly-sins> last accessed 1/2/2011