



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## The Walking Dead: Are we all infected?

Clay Nelson © 28 March 2021

I have a bone to pick with my daughter. In a recent FaceTime call she was appalled to learn I wasn't familiar with a TV series called *The Walking Dead*. I reminded her that I do dragons and wizards — and werewolves if Michael J Fox is one. I don't do horror films or at least not since I was 14, when I "watched" Hitchcock's *The Birds* with my jacket over my head. A book about vampires is okay, but I don't want to read about or watch zombies.

Then while looking for a new series to watch I saw that Neon had just made *The Walking Dead* available — all ten seasons. Just to be more up-to-date with cultural references I decided to watch just one episode and then tell my daughter it was a waste of time. I've just about completed season four.... I am thoroughly hooked.

It took two seasons for me not to be repelled by the make-up and special effects. It is disturbing how quickly one can normalise the horrific. For those of you who have better taste in your TV viewing, here is the basic story line. A virus has caused a worldwide pandemic; implausible I know. At least it was a decade ago when the first episode was released. The virus kills 100% of its victims. Then the patient resurrects but not as themselves. Most of their brain is no longer functioning, making them interested only in finding food. Any protein will do, but they prefer humans. They pass the virus to anyone they bite or scratch. They can be put down for good only by destroying their brain. It is soon revealed that anyone who dies for reasons other than the virus will also resurrect as a walker (the word "zombie" is never used). No bite or scratch is required because everyone is infected. This is the premise as the series follows those who have so far survived. While the walkers are dangerous, they are not fleet of foot and they give a whole new level of meaning to stupid. No, humans are much more dangerous.

It turns out the series isn't about zombies at all. Each episode is a case study about the problems of evil.

It isn't easy to be a heretic in Unitarian Universalism, but I'm verging on it this morning by talking about evil. My excuse? "The Devil made me do it."

Unitarian Universalists are way too optimistic to focus on evil. The song we just sang, Hymn 1 in the UU hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, is the first and last time the word is used in the entire book. I think this is a

weakness in our faith tradition, because evil exists. No amount of denial will protect us from it.

Our Universalist ancestors believed strongly in the doctrine of Universal Salvation — that all souls would be reunited with an ultimately loving God and that no soul is destined for an eternity in hell. If you take away hell, perhaps, the idea of “evil” doesn’t make quite so much sense, because there’s nowhere to “put” it. Or maybe we ignore evil because our Unitarian ancestors were so convinced of humanity’s ability to climb onward and upward, to rise above our basest instincts. Or perhaps — because our Unitarian Universalist rationalism has been so infused with the psychological mythologies of our day — “demons” have turned into “conditions” and “evil” has become “maladjustment” and “bad choices”.

By whatever route, it seems that our religious tradition has largely lost the language to deal with terrorism in Christchurch, oppression in Hong Kong, mass murder in Denver and Atlanta, and recent genocides in Myanmar, Syria, Iraq, and Nigeria. The list of evils is much longer than ten seasons of *The Walking Dead* can address, and the atrocities are not computer generated. They are all too real. All too common. All too easy to normalise.

How are we to make sense of that?

First, recognise evil’s existence. As the story of Cain killing Abel suggests, it has always been around. Hebrew scriptures saw an all-powerful Yahweh in his righteous wrath committing some evils that would make zombies blush. Christian writings saw a more loving and forgiving yet all powerful god. But that gave Christian theologians a headache trying to justify an all-powerful and loving god who permitted evil. If a loving god permitted its existence, what is the source of evil?

It turns out I’m not the only UU willing to risk heresy. The Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, president of Starr King School for the Ministry, had this to say about evil:

Evil is not as complex as our explanations about it are. Whenever we try to explain it, we fall back on our own experiences: the deep betrayals, our bitter losses. We find ourselves speechless and ineffective in the face of larger structural evils revealed to us with chilling regularity: a law enforcement system that leads to unarmed black people being shot by police every day of the year and wars by remote control that are no less deadly for their distance.

However we describe the means by which we experience evil, its source remains the same: our capacity to turn in on ourselves so completely that we lose sight of both our connections to others and to that greater source that binds us together. Whenever we forget who we are, whose we are, and what our relationship to one another

is—there lies the breeding ground for evil. It is that loss of essential memory which leads to individual actions and collective structures that reflect and even reinforce that terrible disconnect.

Evil has its origins in the abandonment of hope and meaning among those who have lost — or never known — their core identity.

She sounds like she could be speaking of zombies, but in truth she is acknowledging we are all infected with evil.

If there is a vaccine, the Reverend D. William F. Schulz, a former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and executive director of Amnesty International offers this possible one:

Ultimately our answers will need to be political and theological, personal and corporate.

Along with intimations of goodness, evil lies coiled in every human heart, latent in almost every human enterprise. The goal is not to vanquish it — that is too much to hope for — but to temper it; and naming a phenomenon is always the first step toward its taming.

He does not expect we can eliminate evil. He just hopes we can flatten the curve.

Evil will always be with us, but we may not find it where we are looking. Carl Jung once wrote:

The individual who wishes to have an answer to the problem of evil has need, first and foremost, of self-knowledge, that is, in the utmost possible knowledge of [their] own wholeness. [They] must know relentlessly how much good [they] can do, and what crimes [they are] capable of, and must beware of regarding the one as real and the other as illusion. Both are elements within [their] nature, and both are bound to come to light in [them], should [they] wish — as [they] ought — to live without self-deception or self-delusion.

This is the religious response to evil, not setting it apart and intensifying the illusion of separation but recognising how much good we can do and what crimes we are capable of; recognizing that both are part of each of us, that both are found in me.

We have moved on from our ancestors' denial of evil. We now know where it has been put — not in hell, but in our human nature. If I'm going to confront evil with courage and resolve, that is where I have to begin, but I cannot do that unless I'm also grounded in the certainty that goodness is embedded in our humanity as well. Should I forget that, I become the walking dead. My faith keeps me alive and human.

Adrienne Rich sums it up this way:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
So much has been destroyed  
I have cast my lot with those who, age after age,  
perversely, with no extraordinary power  
reconstitute the world.

**Meditation / Conversation starter:**

Being capable of doing both good and evil, how do you decide if your actions are one or the other?