

REDEFINING SIN

By Janelle Gray

There's a sign on the bulletin board at Big Horn High School. It says: "Want to Feel Good? Then Do Good." Maya had walked passed it for days—it was just part of the background noise of High School—until I pointed out that the school was clearly Unitarian! Wasn't this the exact observation Harriet had made during discussion the Sunday before? We'd been talking about the classic complaint made about Unitarians (one of them, at least!): if you don't believe in God, heaven or hell, why are you good? Harriet said, "I'm good because it makes me feel good."

In earlier presentations I've talked about why we believe and why we're cooperative from an evolutionary standpoint. For me, science inspires spirituality. Ronn expressed a similar idea in his talk: the Religious Naturalist's view of the universe finds plenty to feel wonder and awe about without the need for a God.

It seems obvious to me, from a scientific standpoint, that we've evolved to do good because that greases the wheels of a cooperative society. Being good *works*. Actually, I think it's our *definition* of good that has evolved to fit behaviors that work. That is, I don't believe "good" is a concept bestowed on us from on high, but rather something used to define behaviors that have come to be appreciated because they work. Sometimes I think this is a sort of cosmic peer pressure, except that, like Harriet said, we really do feel something when we do good. A harmony.

Of course, sometimes we behave correctly not because it feels good, but because it is expected by society. I submit that in this case, we are still getting a reward—just not that "wow, this feels good" one. It might be social acceptance, money, power—the list is endless. Either way, I see the forces of evolution at work in our tendency to "be good".

Today, however, I'm mostly going to talk about the opposite of good: sin! Should be fun . . . Because it's me and this is what I do, I'll talk about an evolutionary view of sin, particularly original sin, and how Religious Naturalists might redefine sin. I'll also consider how our UU principles shed light on the subject and ask if we need a way to confess our sins. I want to thank Victor for providing the basic idea for this topic when I was really stuck. Thank you!

First up: Original Sin. Seems like an appropriate place to start! For those of you who don't know—the few of you who were raised Unitarian, maybe—Original Sin is defined as humanity's state of sin resulting from the Fall in the garden of

Eden. Views on Original Sin range from thinking it a mild tendency of humans to sin to a belief in the automatic guilt and utter depravity of us all.

A couple summers ago, Kris, Skye, Maya and I went car camping. Around the campfire, we read aloud a Baptist teen religious tract called Venti Jesus that Maya had been given for her birthday. This is a story about 3 teens who have a conversation about Christianity at Starbucks, thus the title. In a lengthy section, the characters talk about sin. Here are some excerpts.

“Have you ever wondered where evil came from? How did it get into the world and into the human heart?...The Bible’s answer is that there are no good people.” ...“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ we have all lost that relationship with God that deep down we want and were created to have.” One of the characters tries to defend his good, kind Aunt Sarah. She’s “Good compared to what?” asks the young Christian teen. “Your Aunt Sarah may be good when compared to everyone else you know, but compared to God, we all fall short.” ...“The Bible says you can’t make it [to heaven], that you are not good enough, that you are hopeless.” ...“We’re designed to have a relationship with God and when Adam and Eve messed up way back, they messed that up for all of us.” ...“We were poisoned by sin from the time we were conceived...” And so on, you get the idea.

Whew! Where do I begin? I wouldn’t even bother to quote this extreme book except that it is out there, in the hands of children, and was put in the hands of mine. When we read it, I realized that my kids don’t have a concept of original sin. This is a little bizarre to me since I was raised Lutheran, who, as Garrison Keillor says, are big on guilt, with original sin arguably the source of that! But even though I was raised with this idea, I thought it odd to hurry up and baptize babies because they might die and end up in hell because of original sin. Even then there was controversy about whether stillborn babies would go to hell. It seemed strange to think that the most obviously innocent among us were nonetheless destined for hell without that touch of water on their heads.

Our Universalist heritage takes issue with Original Sin. Universalists believed a loving God could not condemn anyone to hell. Victor clarified this belief for me when he said “as finite creatures, human beings are incapable of offending an infinite God.” That is, God, if there is a God, is so radically different from humans that human notions of sin and punishment simply don’t apply.

Now, just an aside: I’m going to be generous and say that Venti Jesus, if read between the lines, does make some points I can agree with. “We have all lost that relationship with God that deep down we want and were created to have” could be taken evolutionarily to mean that we all crave that harmony that comes

when we behave in cooperative ways. “Compared to God, we all fall short” fits with the excellent points Victor made about god, force, ultimate concern, whatever-it-is being so much greater than we as individuals. But I still take issue: the language, the theology, is deeply disturbing.

For a saner, more scientific view of Original Sin, I turned to Michael Dowd, who wrote “Thank GOD for Evolution.”

Dowd calls Original Sin our “Unchosen Nature,” or our “Heirloom Instincts”. He posits that certain drives—namely, Safety, Sustenance and Sex—evolved originally and are still with us in the older parts of our brains.

Thus, our ancient drive for safety could cause us to be territorial which could in turn lead to war. Our drive for sustenance, we know, tells us to eat when there’s food but in modern society, this has led to an epidemic of obesity. And I don’t have to remind any of you about the trouble our sex drives can get us into!

Dowd says, “Virtually every aspect of our species-wide psychological inheritance that seems troublesome today is part of a package that evolved to serve individual and collective well-being in ancestral environments.” He continues, “the deepest and most difficult to control urges are those...” which reside in “the fortress of our ancient reptilian brain. When those drives take over, “we” are no longer in control.” This phenomenon is then mythically explained by religion as Satan or the Devil, and by psychology as the Id.

The Religious Naturalist explanation might be that Original Sin—our unwanted, unchosen nature—is actually literally true and based on scientific evidence. For the Religious Naturalist, Original Sin becomes a mythic way of explaining our brain and evolutionary urges, and actually becomes a helpful and powerful story.

Here’s how Dowd puts it: “Understanding the unwanted drives within us as having served our ancestors for millions of years is far more empowering than imagining that we are the way we are because of inner demons or because the world’s first woman and man ate a forbidden apple a few thousand years ago. The path to freedom lies in appreciating one’s instincts, while taking steps to channel these powerful energies in ways that will serve our higher purpose...Appreciating that unwanted inclinations are part of our heritage doesn’t mean we must do their bidding. But it does help us accept that the yearnings themselves need not be judged as shameful.”

That seemed to take care of Original Sin. But what about plain, ordinary, everyday sin? Webster’s defines it as: an action contrary to the law of God or an

offense against any widely accepted standard. I prefer to call sin disharmony, that which harms or hinders cooperation. I love Dowd's definition: "that which separates or violates the integrity of the whole" – those attitudes and actions that alienate us from life, from one another, and from ourselves."

Just as Webster's indicates, sin seems to fall into two categories. One is cultural. These are taboos, prohibitions that serve a specific purpose in the time and society where they originate. For example, when I considered what was a sin when I was a teenager, premarital sex, pregnancy outside of marriage and drinking were the first things to pop into my mind. Hey, I was a teenager! Anyway, those were clearly the taboo types of sin, and today might be considered merely regrettable or unwise. But at the time, society said not to do these things, for reasons specific to the society at the time. In the case of premarital sex and pregnancy, society was trying to assure that all children were cared for in the context of marriage.

Interestingly, Fundamentalist religions have elevated a mere taboo – that of not believing in their dogma – to the level of sin. Which is why we're all here instead of there!

When I was a teenager, murder, theft and lying – which are, of course, three of the 10 Commandments – were also considered sins, as they are today. In fact, these fall into the category Webster's terms "actions contrary to the laws of God", behaviors that are considered wrong across religions, cultures and even time. For these types of sins, society doles out serious consequences.

The 10 Commandments also say 'thou shalt not commit adultery' or covet anything that is your neighbor's. [The actual commandment said "thou shalt not covet your neighbor's wife". Maybe the Lutherans added "and anything that is thy neighbor's" because that's the way I learned it. At any rate, it's pretty offensive!]. These are both widely held to be transgressions today, although the edge may have worn off. We don't shun people who commit adultery or exhibit envy.

The Seven Deadly Sins of Wrath, Greed, Sloth, Pride, Envy, Lust and Gluttony are still things to be avoided. And many of the sins somewhat endlessly illuminated in Dante's *Inferno* [Ben was reading it for High School English] are also not acceptable today: Hording, Pimping, Whoring, Murder, Theft, Deception, Rape, Lying, Fraud, Child Abuse, Slavery, Purposely Ruining Other's Lives. However, Dante also lists Suicide and Homosexuality as sins. Today, with our insights into psychology, we would say that hording and whoring as well as suicide are not so much sins deserving of punishment, but behaviors that need to be addressed because they hurt the individual. While Homosexuality is

still condemned by too many religions, there's hopeful evidence that the younger generation considers it a natural expression of sexuality, as do Religious Naturalists and Unitarians.

Growing up, I said the Lord's Prayer many, many times without giving it a second thought. But the part that deals with sin, which says "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" is actually pretty interesting. It links absolution or forgiveness for our sins to how we forgive others. This implies that we all make mistakes, we're all human, and if we'll just admit it, we'll be okay. "Lead us not into temptation" hints, I think, at our Unchosen Nature – may we be able to resist those impulsive behaviors that we know lead to disharmony. And "deliver us from evil" acknowledges that bad things exist in this world that are beyond mere error and unconscious behavior.

But there is still something about the word "sin" that bothers me. I decided to look at our principles to see if they were more palatable.

First of all, our principles are not a list of "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots". They enumerate no consequences for failure to follow them. Instead, they are a set of guidelines. To find out what they say about sin, you have to turn them on their head. Reverse them, so to speak. And here's what I got when I did:

The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person and Justice, Equity and Compassion in Human Relations seemed similar. These seem to condemn slavery, hate, murder, rape, abuse and bullying. They also suggest that a lack of humility or overweening pride are not good things, either

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations can be read as condemnation of intolerance, faith-based wars and discrimination.

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning seems to condemn a lack of conscience, the establishment of state religion and non-reason.

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large condemns social oppression of all kinds.

The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all speaks again against war, slavery and discrimination.

Respect for the Interdependent Web of all existence of which we are a part. Wow, when I got to this one, the sins flowed forth: environmental damage,

extinction caused by humans, making our environment toxic to ourselves, neglecting our personal health, Global Warming, overpopulation, greed, and so on.

I did this exercise quickly, and I'm sure there are other behaviors our principles would condemn. But even at a quick glance, these "sins" seem much more relevant to our problems today. The big difference from other religions, though, is that rather than threatening hell as an eternal punishment, our principles try to steer us clear of creating hell here on earth. Rather than promising eternal reward, our principles tell us how to get that "feel good" feeling here and now.

Now I'm going to shift gears a little. The question is, do UU's sin? Do we have bad thoughts, dark moments of the soul? Do we lie or cheat or cause harm to others? Do we think unkind thoughts? Fail to recycle? Install Garbage Disposals? Humor aside, of course we "sin", but would you know it from our services?

As I was preparing this talk, it occurred to me that there might actually be a point to the "confessing of sins" that is common in other churches.

To get at what I mean, I need to tell you about my own Dark Night of the Soul as it pertains to this Fellowship.

The time right after the 2nd cancer diagnosis was difficult in ways that I still can't fully express. There was the physical assault of treatment, but there was something deeper and more disturbing going on. I felt that I'd run out of time to become "good". Until this happened, I actually had no idea that "becoming good" – more kind, less angry, more generous, less anxious, more loving, less critical, more spiritual and so on – was so important to me. And now, I would never get there. Our services made me feel profoundly hypocritical. I couldn't have cared less about the worth and dignity of every person or a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. No time; gotta get those baby pictures in the albums, files cleaned out, lists made of how to do my job, and so on. There was no way I could attain spirituality – I was a lost cause – the game was over – couldn't we stop talking about it? I kept coming because I was just so bewildered. But sitting here, I felt like a fraud. I would tell myself well, at least I don't believe in hell. But this was clearly a kind of hell of its own.

Thinking of it now, maybe it was a case of Maslow's Hierarchy: there were basic needs I had to meet and I couldn't worry about spirituality at that moment. Luckily, it passed. But I still occasionally feel a twinge of this same alienation. Am I good enough to be here? Am I the only one who constantly falls short?

When do we talk about personal disharmony? I remember that Roger did, a couple of years ago in “The Answer I Wish I Would Have Given.” The author, a UU minister, is caught off-guard and gives an incoherent answer when asked why we should continue to help victims of Katrina. The “This I Believe Services” also come close. But admitting our failings is not usual procedure for us.

This year, the Worship Committee insisted on adding the word “personal” to our theme, which I confess I had doubts about. But now, I think it was brilliant. It counters our tendency to be overly intellectual. We should keep it up.

Because I think they might be onto something in the fire-and-brimstone types of churches. In the sermons, sins are paraded out – sometimes, unfortunately, hammered on – but spoken of openly, and thereby confessed. When our human foibles, failures and frailties are acknowledged, we get permission to join what Dowd calls the club of “the less-than-perfect.” We don’t feel so alone. It isn’t even necessary to make a personal confession, or speak aloud our dark thoughts: self-forgiveness and understanding can come through identification.

There’s a final aspect of “sin” that I haven’t talked about, and that is the notion that sin can be a catalyst for growth. We can learn from our unkindnesses, our mistakes. Dowd says that in the Universe, the negative never claims the final word. “Bad news, chaos, and break downs regularly catalyze creativity and transformation.” In this sense, maybe sin is a mere stepping stone to heaven.

So, I won’t tell you to go forth today and sin no more, but rather to do your best. Maybe you’ll get lucky and sin just a little. Then you’ll know what it takes to be good. And like Big Horn High School says, if you do good, you’ll feel good!