The Roots of Human Destructiveness

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June 6, 2021

In October of last year Janet and I presented together about evil from a UU perspective. We shared a definition of evil as a phenomenon applying to human behavior exclusively: “Tornadoes, floods, and earthquakes, although devastating, are not evil.” Evil is what we humans do to each other. As UU Rev. Judith Meyer puts it, “Evil is not in the universe but in human nature.”

We shared this also from UU Rev. Abhi Janamanchi:

I see evil as the willful separation from, and lack of concern for, the “common good.” Evil occurs when the capacity for empathy exists and is ignored; when better alternatives for being in right relationship are ignored; when we fail to act on the imperative to correct the discrepancy between what is and what ought to be; and when we resist our powerful impulses to be, and do, good.

We don’t have to think very hard to come up with examples of leaders and their followers who have engaged in evilness and destruction. Paul Pot and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, Stalin, Hitler, and the Hutus of the Rwandan Genocide are examples from our past. Unfortunately there are those in leadership today in our country who promote bigotry, hatred, divisiveness and violence, and millions of Americans who endorse this. Mass shootings seem to occur on a daily basis in our country.

What I want to explore with you this morning is the question of what is it in our human nature that moves us in the direction of evil including acts of unprovoked violence on innocent people? Is the inclination towards evil in our genetic make-up or in in our character and personality? Are we born evil, or do we become evil?

In his book, The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness psychoanalyst Erich Fromm explores these questions in depth. He states that humans are the only animals who can be driven by the impulse to kill and even “feel lust” in doing so. Humans kill even when there is no economic or biological gain to be derived. Fromm distinguishes between two types of aggression, one which is biologically adaptive, “benign aggression,” from non-adaptive or “malignant aggression.” Benign aggression is done in response to a threat or to meet a survival need and it is common among all animal species. However malignant aggression is unique to humans. Here is Fromm:

Biologically nonadaptive, malignant aggression, that is, destructiveness and cruelty, is not a defense against a threat; it is not phylogenetically programmed; it is characteristic only of [people]; it is harmful because it is socially disruptive; its main manifestations—killing and cruelty—are pleasurable without meeting any other purpose; it is harmful not only to the person who is attacked but also the attacker. Malignant aggression, although not an instinct, is a human potential rooted in the very conditions of human existence.

If I am interpreting Fromm correctly here he is saying that the potential for cruelty and malignant aggression exists in everyone. I have worked with combat veterans who in my estimation were basically good people but who confessed to deriving pleasure in the act of killing while in combat. On the more hopeful side, Fromm says that since malignant aggression in not instinctual it can be rooted out of society. Some societies and cultures have little malignant aggression while others such as our own have quite a lot.

If humans are distinctly different from other animals because we harm and kill when it serves no rational purpose what is it that accounts for this? Fromm says there are two things: First humans are among the species that are the least controlled by instincts and from the standpoint of evolution, the older more primitive part of the brain. Humans have three times more neocortex than our hominoid ancestors. There is little except the reaction to danger that we can say is instinctual for humans. Besides having more neocortex than other creatures, few species besides humans have the capacity of self-awareness and objectivity. Fromm believes that we are the only species that does not feel at home in nature because of having more neocortex which allows for self-awareness. He believed the capacity for self-awareness is what separates us from the natural world. Our existential challenge as human beings is to restore connection with nature. Because humans do not automatically feel at home in the natural world we have to take some type of action to do so. We can choose to do this in a positive or a destructive way.

The highest needs listed on psychologist Abraham Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs,” are “belonging,” “self-esteem,” and “self-actualization.” Ants in a colony, whales in the ocean, elephants in a herd, don’t worry about whether they fit in to their societies nor do they fear rejection. Humans are the only species we know of that can feel alienated and detached. Fromm believes humans feel detached from the natural world as much as from other people. He called this an “existential crisis.” He interpreted the expulsion from the Garden of Eden in the Biblical story as an allegory of this detachment. If you remember, it was eating the fruit from the “tree of knowledge” that resulted in the punishment of being exiled from the Garden. Here is Fromm again:

Self-awareness, reason, and imagination have disrupted the “harmony” that characterizes animal existence. Their emergence has made [us] into an anomaly, a freak in the universe. [We are] a part of nature, subject to her physical laws and unable to change them, yet [we] transcend nature.... [We are] homeless and yet chained to the home [we] shares with all creatures. Cast into this world at an accidental place and time [we are] forced out of it accidently and against [our] will. Being aware of [ourselves we realize our] powerlessness and the limitations of [our] existence…. [The human being] is the only animal for whom [our] own existence is a problem that one has to solve and from which one cannot escape.

How we as people strive to overcome this existential crisis of separation from nature is determined by our character and personality. Fromm asks, what is the essence of our human nature; is it basically good or evil? He says the potential for good and evil exist in all of us. The good and evil choices we make determine the direction our character and personality will take. He defines character as “the relatively permanent system of all noninstinctual strivings through which [we relate ourselves] to the human and natural world.”

Unlike other creatures we require what Fromm calls “a frame of orientation,” a map to help us make sense of the world and guide our actions. Some of us, because of our character or personality, are attracted to a strong leader who helps to simplify life and reduce anxiety. The leader provides the frame of orientation for those who feel unable to do so by themselves. We humans also need goals. Other animals at least for the most part don’t choose goals but instead are guided by the survival instinct. We on the other hand, seem to be guided by an “ultimate concern” of our own making. Having an ultimate concern gives our lives meaning and direction. It is an expression of our beliefs, values and choices. What each of us chooses as our ultimate concern can vary. It can be amassing money, obtaining power and domination, seeking physical attractiveness, or on the other hand, ones that benefit others. We can solve the problem of alienation from nature by succumbing to authoritarianism or fundamentalism. Or we can be working for social justice, or a sustainable planet, or to improve the welfare of children, etc. Are we motivated only by selfish self-interest or the fear of independence, or by a desire to inflict harm, or alternatively by a desire to make the world better? We make the choice. Most other animals are not capable of this kind of thinking.

In the first years of life infants form a symbiotic or dependent relationship with their parenting figures. If we are to develop in emotionally heathy ways, we become progressively more independent and capable of loving others and of productivity that helps the world. If emotional development does not occur optimally the outcome as an adult can be dependency, narcissism, sadism, self-hate or hate of others. Parenting figures can either be positive or negative role models to children in this regard. Children who are the victims of violence or who witness it in their home are more likely to behave aggressively as adults than others. The religions of the world exist to help foster and sustain a positive emotional development and a constructive life. As an example of healthy psychological development think of embracing the “Golden Rule.” “Salvation” in the best sense of the word fosters healthy emotional development. Emotionally healthy people “save” themselves by working to save the world.

Fromm labeled people whose primary orientation is to engage is evil as “necrophilic” characters. He was not referring to a sexual preference but instead to an orientation towards one’s whole life.

[The necrophiliac] loves destruction and death. [People] who belong to this type find their most intense satisfaction when they can kill or torture; all of their energies are directed to the aim of destruction--although they often don’t permit themselves to be aware of the nature of this passion.

Fromm taught that the most basic distinction one could make about people in these different character orientations was that between those who love death and evil, and those who love life and what is good. On the opposite pole from the necrophilic personalities are the life loving personalities or the “biophilic.” Fromm believed that no one could save another person by making the choice for them.

All that one can do is to show the alternatives truthfully and lovingly, yet without any sentimentality or illusion. Confrontation with the true alternatives may awaken all the hidden energies in a person and enable [them] to choose life. No one else can breathe life into [us].

Fromm constructs a clear message in order to stir people out of any illusion that life can be lived well with any degree of passive submission. Life must be lived actively with the knowledge that we are constantly confronted with alternatives, and that making choices is important. Fromm has a defined sense of right and wrong. He regards the hope for humanity in making the right choices. Such choices stem from, as well as reinforce, our character and personality.

On the wrong side of character development are three orientations that he writes about extensively. These are necrophilia that I mentioned before but also sadism and narcissism. I can add one more personality type to this list, the psychopath.

A sadist is a person with “an intense desire to control, hurt or humiliate another person.” Sadistic behavior includes, “inflicting physical pain up to and including death,” and, “has as its object a powerless being.” One cannot avoid thinking of recent examples of police brutality in this frame. Prisoners of war, children and animals are commonly victims of sadistic individuals. Generally, victims of sadists are weak or compromised. You may recall stories of children and women held captive in the homes of sadistic people. Fromm says mental cruelty and humiliation are much more common than physical abuse by such people. As a prime example of the sadistic personality Fromm provides Joseph Stalin who ruled the Soviet Union for decades in the last century. Among other things, Stalin enjoyed torturing his political enemies by first telling them they were safe and then arresting and torturing them. Sometimes he would arrest the wives of his political adversaries.

Sadism is one of the answers to the problem of being born human when better ones are not available. The experience of absolute control over another being, of omnipotence as far as he she or it is concerned, creates the illusion of transcending the limitations of human existence, particularly for one whose real life is deprived of productivity and joy. Sadism is the transformation of impotence into the experience of omnipotence.

Fromm believed that societal conditions that encourage inequality and division between, classes and races, are those in which sadism can flourish. I can think of no better example of this than the cases of police brutality that we have seen recently but have existed since the birth of our country.

Traditionally necrophilia means the desire to have sex with a corpse. However, Fromm discusses necrophilia as a personality or character style:

The passionate attraction to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, sickly. It is the passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction. It is the exclusive interest in all that is mechanical. It is the passion to tear apart living structures.

Fromm contrast necrophilia and the other destructive character orientations to “biophilia” or the love of life:

Destructiveness is not parallel to, but the alternative to biophilia. Love of life or love of the dead is the fundamental alternative that confronts every human being. Necrophilia grows as the development of biophilia is stunted. [One] is biologically endowed with the capacity for biophilia but psychologically [one] has the potential for necrophilia as an alternative solution [to life’s challenges].

According to Fromm people with a severe necrophilous character are dangerous. They thrive on hatred, are racist, war seeking, and desire bloodshed and destruction. Hitler is an example of a leader with a necrophilial character. Others with a necrophilous character structure will follow such a leader. Followers become the basis of a terror network. Those with a less severe form of necrophilia will be supporters of such leaders and groups. The “Proud Boys” might be a good example of this.

Narcissistic personalities are individuals who perceive only their own selves, including their bodies, needs, feelings, ideas, property etc. as real. Everyone else and everything else are unimportant, not fully real or of significance. Narcissistic characters are convinced of their own perfection and superiority above others. They exaggerate their accomplishments and their relationships are superficial. When challenged, criticized, or shown to come up short such people often respond aggressively. They never seem to forget what another person may have done to them and they seek revenge. Followers of narcissistic leaders can also be narcissistic. And may share a common grandiose goal such as regarding their country as the greatest, most wonderful, etc. Think of the “MAGA” movement or the Aryan race concept of Nazi Germany. Followers of a narcissistic leader are compensating for feelings of low self-esteem or low status by becoming part of something “great.”

Much in the way that sadistic, necrophilic and narcissistic character styles lead to evil acts, the opposite, psychologically healthier character styles, are associated with more behavior directed at improving the lives of others.

The opposite of the necrophilous orientation is the biophilous; its essence is love of life in contrast to love of death. Like necrophilia, biophilia is not constituted by a single trait, but represents a total orientation, an entire way of being. It is manifested in a person’s bodily processes, in their emotions, in thoughts, in gestures. The biophilous orientation expresses itself in the whole [person]. The most elementary form of this orientation is expressed in the tendency of all living organisms to live.

Fromm says such people have a “productive orientation.” Biophillics are attracted to life and growth. Biophillics are less concerned with having things be predictable and are instead adventurous. They tend towards cooperation rather then domination. They make decisions based on reason, and logic and the best interest of others. They manifest a love for other people and they prefer living things to objects. They are not thrill seekers but rather they appreciate life in all its forms. They don’t have a need to acquire things. Biophilic characters are productive people. They are attracted to growth in all positive forms. They are more content with creating than owning. They are practical but not rigid. They are guided by love and reason. They don’t impose things on other people but rather seek to help. They don’t need to be entertained but instead are fascinated by nature in all her forms.

Fromm says in the end we must be responsible for our actions. Evil choices are as much a possibility as good choices for any of us. It is up to each of us to choose what we do and how we go about what we do. We will not make the right choices if we are not moved by the sorrow of another, a warm smile, the beauty of a songbird, or the beauty of a lush garden. Fromm says if we are indifferent to these things we are unlikely to choose the good.

I want to close by offering some reasons for hope. In the past twenty years psychotherapy work has been done with violent criminals using a variety of techniques including training in empathy. The results have been modestly positive. Rates of recidivism of violent crimes have come down among those receiving therapy. This is encouraging news. Additional hope comes from organizations devoted to reducing conflict and promoting greater understanding such as Braver Angels. Our government can invest in promoting healthy families by raising the minimum wage, universal health care, preschool, for all, etc. This creates opportunities for children to develop in a biophilic direction. Also as we work to reduce stress and fear in society less people will be drawn to radical groups with aggressive messages. We as UUs can and do help by aligning with groups that seek to increase truth and foster understanding. We can also support the development of healthy families that raise biophilic children.

On a personal level the more we can encourage ourselves to be attentive to the beauty of the world and to the feelings and needs of others the more likely our individual and collective maps of the world will orient towards biophilia. I think positive faith institutions promote similar values. If we think about it, our 7 Principles are biophilic aren’t they? The more we follow them the better people we become and the more we can advance to the vision of a “Beloved Community” that Dr. King spoke of. If Fromm was correct that evil and destructiveness are rooted in character and personality, we can work for the positive side of them. The more we and others make choices for “good” the more we reinforce that in our biophilic character structure.