

# ***SOMETHING EVIL THIS WAY COMES***

**Rev. David E. Bumbaugh**

**[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)**

**April 28, 1996**

It has been a strange year. The winter came early and lingered late. Snows fell in November and continued at frequent intervals until early April. In March, bedraggled robins, listening for worms in the still-frozen ground, shuffled disconsolately beneath the barren branches of reluctant trees and under the forsythia which stubbornly refused to bloom. Foolhardy crocus was buried in late snow or encased in sudden ice. When blossoms did burst upon the scene, it was almost as if they came as the result of some determined force of will, with March, April and May blossoms appearing simultaneously. Even my friends who insist that winter is their favorite season, and who think a snow-covered landscape one of the great beauties and blessings of life, could be heard, at odd moments, whistling "It Might As Well Be Spring."

In an earlier age, an age of enchantment, religious leaders would have been trying to read the portents, the message written in these signs from the non-human world, seeking to decipher the meaning behind the events and to uncover the relationships between disparate circumstances. But we live in a disenchanted world--a world in which there is no dimension other than the obvious, the surface reality. For us, a long, lingering winter is explained by the track of the jet streams and the presence or the absence of el nino and the meaningless juxtaposition of multiple, mindless forces. In our world there is no interior message to be read--only a chronicle of statistics comparing this year to other years and awarding prizes for earliest and latest and most. For us, a winter is a winter is a winter, and this one is over and gone and there is no arcane message for us to read.

Why, then, do I find it so difficult this year to move from winter to spring? Why do I awake in the still night with an ominous sense that something is trying to whisper a message too subtle for my ears to comprehend? Why is there this icy construction about my soul? Why do I lie awake, this early spring, gripped by a sense that something powerful and important is slowly slipping away from us, eluding our comprehension? Why, in the midst of the hope and promise that is spring, do I find unbidden tears gathering? Somewhere, deep inside me is a voice which will not be denied warning me--of what?

In a recent book entitled *THE DEATH OF SATAN*, Andrew Delbanco, who teaches at Columbia, discusses the process by which our culture over the past two centuries or more has become disenchanted. He chronicles the gradual process by which God and the sacred has withdrawn from our consciousness and our awareness until the only remnant is a symbolic idiom which the cynical manipulate for political purposes. He suggests that the same process has removed from us a vivid sense of the reality of evil. Just as God is dead in our culture, so, too, is Satan, and with the loss of the realm of enchantment has

gone our ability to confront the full reality of evil.

After reading his argument, it occurred to me that Delbanco has missed an important aspect of what has happened to the concept of evil in our culture. It is not so much that evil has disappeared, or that we can no longer recognize it. Rather, in our age, evil has been disenchanting, has been privatized and personalized. One need only visit the news broadcasts and the newspapers and now the internet to be oppressed by the sense of evil everywhere. Children abused and murdered by those whose responsibility it is to protect them; terrorists murdering the innocent; muggings and shootings and rapes and mindless violence in the centers of our cities and family violence in quiet suburbs; serial killers engaged in random mayhem. The evidence of evil is everywhere, but like the long winter passed, it has no interior meaning. It is the consequence of the meaningless juxtaposition of multiple, mindless forces. It is a chronicle of statistics, comparing rates, comparing place to place, event to event, circumstance to circumstance--safest and most dangerous, best and worst. And, as a consequence, we deal with evil in a privatized and personalized way--offer the victim restitution or vengeance, imprison or execute the offender. An eye for an eye and evil is wiped out in blood.

I would not want to belittle the evil which we do each other on a personal and individual level. Every story of an infant murdered by parents; of a child abducted and abused and murdered; of a woman raped and beaten; of violence within the sanctity of the home; of serial murders and terrorist attacks and mindless shootings and senseless beatings shakes me to my core. For nearly forty years I have preached the Universalist gospel that love is stronger than hate; that no one is beyond the reach of compassion and concern; that every human personality is of worth. And daily, the news media challenge that fundamental faith to which I have given my life.

But it is not this evil which wakes me in the dark night. For all of written history, there have been those among us who inflict needless pain and death; for as long as we have walked the earth, we have known that risk and danger are our daily companions. There is nothing new about the evil which occupies so much of our field of vision. Rather, what wakes me in the night is a sense I cannot shake that by focusing on the evil that individual people do to one another and by failing to see any connection between those isolated and disparate events, we are blinding ourselves to a greater evil which is destroying our common world. That is one of the consequences of living in a disenchanting world--we tend to see the immediate, the obvious, the surface realities and are strangely blinded to the underlying structures in which they are rooted.

Over the past few weeks I have heard reports of a debate within the New York state over what to do with an anticipated surplus of funds which are largely the result of major cuts in the state programs which support the poor, and particularly poor children. The governor would like to see those funds used for further tax cuts. While the news media focus our attention on the deaths of children who have been abused by those who should have protected them, no one seems able to call proposals to fund middle and upper class tax cuts by reducing state support for the poor and especially poor children, proposals which would increase the case-loads of those who work with the poor and seek to protect

children what they truly are--evil.

In state after state, one of the major growth industries in recent years has been the building and running of prisons. Economically distressed communities now compete with one another for the privilege of having a prison located near by. Somewhere I have read a report that we spend more on prisons than on schools. We lock up a larger percentage of our people for a longer period of time than any other major developed country, and we are one of the last to use the death penalty. Much of the crime rate seems to be related to pockets of poverty and despair. Poor people, uneducated people, marginalized people fill our jails in disproportionate numbers and are executed in disproportionate numbers. The news media terrorize us with stories of paroled killers and robbers but have not the courage or the insight to name a policy which builds prisons rather than housing and schools for what it is--evil.

In corporation after corporation in recent years, decisions affecting the lives of unnumbered human beings have been made on the basis improving the company's bottom line--not of saving the company but of increasing the profits of already profitable concerns. Those decisions have included mergers, acquisitions, the moving of facilities to cheap labor states or even out of the country, the "down-sizing" of the labor force and deliberate attempts to break unions. Those decisions have often resulted in the payment of millions of dollars to CEO's and other officers as reward for having wrecked havoc with the livelihoods of thousands of nameless, faceless individuals. The media focus our attention upon rapes and muggings of individuals here or there, but no one seems willing to name these corporate muggings and rapes for what they are--evil.

In Washington, both of the major political parties are committed to a program of deregulation. They disagree with each other on the details, but both, in recent years, have been committed to getting the government off the back of business. In an effort to free the business community from government regulations they have contributed to an anti-government paranoia which has left employees, customers, and the environment with less and less protection in the face of the economically powerful. The news media regale us with tales of redundant regulation and inept bureaucrats and fail to remind us that a legitimate function of democratic government is to protect the people against the consequences of unhampered greed. No one seems willing to name unregulated greed for what it is--evil.

What is at the root of this corporate evil in which we are all involved and which no one will name? Somewhere along the way, we have lost a vital sense of being part of a larger community, we have lost our willing assumption of mutual responsibility and obligation and duty beyond the boundaries of our own immediate, personal interests. Increasingly we live in virtual community while we actively associate with people primarily for negative reasons--to keep watch on strangers in the neighborhood, to enforce strict zoning regulations, to protect our interests. But the sense of a common interest uniting us with people who are not in our neighborhood, in our ethnic community, in our faith tradition grows weaker with every passing day. Perhaps that is the ultimate definition of a disenchanting world--a world in which we live without any firm sense of the ties which

bind us to the larger human community, a world in which we are no longer able to feel the invisible roots of our humanity, a world in which we no longer understand ourselves as embedded in and responsible to a larger reality than this moment, this time, this place, this urge.

In a book entitled *JIHAD AND MCWORLD*, Benjamin Barber, Whitman Professor of Political Science at Rutgers, suggests that this disenchantment of the world is an inevitable consequence of the triumph of the free market in a world which is becoming a single culture. He suggests that free market forces have no loyalty beyond the maximizing of profit. Free market forces are not loyal to place or to people or to system. They respond to one major imperative--to create a context in which they can function and compete unfettered. All the propaganda to the contrary notwithstanding, the triumph of the free market is not the same as the triumph of the people or of democracy. Indeed, the author suggests that while democracy cannot function without citizens, the free market cannot function without consumers and these two quite different needs are often in conflict.

The ideal consumer is an isolate, an individual who lives in a world shaped by private urges and wants. The consumer is never satisfied, can never be satisfied. Always there is an unmet desire which is experienced as a need and which is both created and supplied by the market. Delayed gratification or any sense of sufficiency are enemies of the free market and of the consuming spirit. Long term consequences to the individual, to the group, to the environment are off the radar scope of the free market and of the consumer who fuels the free market. Others exist for the consumer primarily as competition in a game in which the person who dies with the greatest pile of things is the winner.

Democracies, on the other hand, depend upon citizens--people who understand and accept responsibility for the continuation of a community through time. The citizen understands that the individual's life is enriched and enhanced and given meaning by being part of the on-going community. A citizen must be ever mindful of long-term consequences, responsible for all other members of the community, willing to subordinate personal interests when vital community interests are at stake. A citizen understands the importance of advocacy and of being able to compromise without being compromised. A citizen understands that members of the community exist for each other and that life is defined by cooperation and common effort. A citizen lives with a vital sense of being part of something more than this moment, this place, this urge. Almost by definition, democracy cannot exist in a disenchanting world. Democracy is rooted in a world in which meanings beyond the obvious and the immediate are sensed and honored--a world which is richly enchanted.

If this hunch is right, then the world of the free market, of the isolated consumer will inevitably destroy the democratic vision unless we can recreate a sense of citizenship, unless we can renew and revitalize our understanding democracy. We are called to understand ourselves not as consumers, as users, as hoarders and accumulators, but as partners in a global venture seeking the common good not for one community, one people, one generation but now and always. We are called to reaffirm that government,

especially democratic government is an undertaking in which, for the common good we regulate the market forces, allowing them sufficient freedom to function, but protecting our brothers and sisters here and across the globe from the greed which would turn most people of the world into serfs in a neo-feudal economic system, protecting the earth from the short-sighted lust for profit which will make of this oasis in space a fetid wasteland. The market focuses on profits now. Democracy focuses on creating a sustaining and sustainable community. Democratic government seeks to maximize freedom within the context of that sustainable and sustaining community.

Increasingly, I am convinced that the privatized evils which absorb so much of our attention will never be transformed until we begin to understand them as localized expressions of a larger reality. The rapes and the murders and the mindless, unnecessary violence are all real and terrible. But they are also reflections of a larger, more pervasive evil from which our attention is being diverted, which we are encouraged not even to name. Evil, at every level, flourishes in the disenchantment of the world. It can be confronted and transformed only when we enter again into the enchantment of a world in which we understand ourselves as part of a larger reality existing through time, in which we see ourselves as embedded in a web of enduring relationships, in which we know ourselves as part of a reflexive universe in which each is part of all and responsible to and for all.

These are the thoughts which drift through my mind as I lie awake in the soft darkness of the spring night. Most of the time I am oppressed by the sense that we fail to give attention to the fact that something evil this way comes, some terrible loss which will leave us isolated and powerless before forces which can only be controlled by the enchanted power of a vibrant and vital community.

After a while, I drift toward uneasy sleep, only to be wakened by the song of a bird. Looking out the window, I see no sign of the morning, but somewhere out in that darkness broken only by the feeble street lamp, a bird has begun to sing. And soon, that solitary voice is joined by other birds who sing of a morning for which I can find no evidence. And in time, as if called by the faithfulness of the birds, the sun begins to rise over the hills. I lie still, holding my breath, trying to believe the enchantment I feel, trying to be one with the birds and with the hills and with the sun, trying to be one with neighbors who lie immured behind walls I have never entered, trying to feel and retain the sense of a larger community to which I am responsible, a community which gives my own life resonance and power and meaning.

I do not know how we came to lose the sense of enchantment, the sense of being tied together, partners in a venture the beginning of which is lost in the mists of long ages and whose destination is hidden in times yet to be. I do not know what it will take to re-enchant the world. But I suspect that it begins by naming the evil and by refusing to be distracted from great evil by its daily, banal expressions and, like the bird, by singing in the dark an unshaken, if unproved, faith that there is more here than meets the eye, that we are more than consumers of the world, that we are citizens of a glorious golden city, that we are the inheritors of the an age old dream in which each is responsible for all, that

the common good is served through individual fulfillment and individual fulfillment is achieved only in the context of community. It begins by seeing in this broken and bleeding world a vision of a blessed community and trusting that vision as more real and more important than any other reality.