

# *What in The World Is Going On?*

**Rev. David E. Bumbaugh**

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

**October 24, 1993**

Have you noticed, and how could you not, how difficult and unpredictable the world has become, of late? First the Berlin Wall came down; then the Soviet Union began to come apart at the seams; then Russia and the United States became partners on the international scene; then the two Germanies united; then Yugoslavia fell into civil war; then it became clear that there was no order to the New World Order. Where once there had been two super powers, dividing between them responsibility for policing the planet, now only one remains--a nation whose resources seem increasingly inadequate to sustain the obligations which have fallen upon it, a nation reduced to dodging and ducking and trying to pass on responsibility to various coalitions and to the United Nations, until it begins to be clear that in truth, there are no super-powers left on the globe. The world has fallen into an in between state in which leadership is lacking, in which vision beyond the immediate crisis is lacking, in which morality has become a matter of seizing the main chance. The world in which we find ourselves is not the world with which most of us have been familiar.

I am reminded of those words which Oscar Hammerstein put into the mouth of the King of Siam, in the musical, the *King and I*. Perhaps you remember the King, puzzling over a world which seemed increasingly beyond his control or understanding, lamenting:

When I was a lad,  
World was better spot:  
What was so was so;  
What was not was not.  
Now I am a man,  
World is different spot:  
Some things *nearly* so;  
Others, *nearly* not.

My earliest memory, to which I can attach a date, is of a Sunday afternoon, shortly after my fifth birthday. The family had returned from church, had finished Sunday dinner, and I was playing quietly while in the background the radio could be heard. My Uncle was reading the Sunday paper, and my Aunt was busy with some chore in the kitchen. Suddenly the radio program was interrupted with a news bulletin--a strained voice reported that aircraft from the Empire of Japan had attacked the United States Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii. It was, of course, December 7, 1941.

I was too young to know precisely what the news bulletin meant. I had no sense of where Pearl Harbor was, or even where Japan was, or what an attack on a military base implied. But I knew immediately, from the reactions of the adults around me, by the sound of the

announcer's voice, by an intuitive tightening in my own gut that something momentous had happened and that the world would never ever be the same again. From that moment on, my childhood was shaped by war. I spent my childhood learning about war--not at first hand, but via the propaganda media which included newspaper reports, news-reels, motion pictures, comic books, schools, churches and a host of other sources.

As children, we collected tin-cans, and aluminum foil and milkweed pods and even kitchen grease, "to help the war effort" though I never understood and no one ever explained what use those items were to the massive mobilization which was the response of the United States to the coming of war. In school I was given a small plastic tag with my name and address printed on it to wear around my neck, so my body could be identified in case I should be a casualty in an air-raid. From time to time our nights were interrupted by the air-raid siren, and we pulled all the blinds and curtains, and turned out all the lights and sat in the darkness until the drill was over, while men in the neighborhood patrolled the streets to make certain that no light showed from any window as a beacon to a potential enemy. And, of course, as children, our games and our fantasies revolved around the image of people at war.

It was not until later that I realized that one of the immediate and most lasting consequences of the attack on Pearl Harbor that Sunday afternoon was the magical way in which it clarified and simplified the moral universe in one stroke. Whatever ambiguities Americans might have felt about becoming embroiled in the conflicts of Europe and Asia--ambiguities rooted in ethnic identities, traditions of isolationism, uncertainty about the legacy of European colonialism, fear of Communism, and, to be honest, a good deal of anti-Semitism--those uncertainties were swept away by the attack on the Naval Base at Pearl Harbor. From that moment on, the world was divided into the good guys and the bad guys. From that moment on, the struggle was between righteousness and unmitigated evil, and we quickly came to believe that any act was justified if it served to defeat the satanic forces which, like a vast stain, were spreading across the globe. From that moment on, moral ambiguity was intolerable. And so, I grew up in a bipolar world, a world clearly and starkly divided between right and wrong, between good and evil, a world in which "what was so was so and what was not was not."

I was not quite nine when the Second World War came to an end. You will remember that the Japanese finally surrendered after two of their cities had been incinerated by nuclear weapons. A few voices were raised, questioning the morality of the decision to use that terrible new weapon on a civilian population, but those voices were too scattered and too few to shake the moral universe the war had allowed us to create for ourselves. We, after all, were on the side of right; we were the champions of the good; we were justified in any course which would seal the destruction of the forces of evil. This had not been just a war, this had been a crusade for the future, for the very soul of humanity. It was true, that we had been forced to do some horrible things in the pursuit of the war. We had fire-bombed Tokyo and Dresden and Hamburg; we had carried the war to civilian populations; we had made old men and children and women victims and driven the front lines through their homes and their lives, but we had had no choice in the matter. Confronting absolute evil, one could not quibble about the means needed to root

out that evil. Besides, the enemy had done the same kind of thing and worse. How could we doubt, given the outcome, that God was on our side and that our choices, however difficult and painful and horrible in consequences--up to and including the decision to drop atomic bombs--were justified and moral?

More than this, the cost of the war was so great, it was morally incumbent upon us to make certain that having won the war, we did not lose the peace. And so, the simplified moral view of the war was carried into the post-war world. To be sure, the cast of characters changed with time, but the basic plot outline was retained. Japan and Germany, purged of their evil elements, were redeemed and became part of the community of the righteous struggling for a moral and ethical world order. The Soviet Union, and in time, China fell away from the community of the righteous and became the new embodiment of evil. But the moral universe was still bipolar, easy to understand and without ambiguity. The forces of good were arrayed against the forces of evil all across the globe. Good guys and bad guys struggled for the soul of humanity in distant places and in every neighborhood. From the Korean Peninsula to the hearing rooms of congress and the class-rooms of every school in the nation the struggle was waged relentlessly.

For some people, this understanding of the world was shaken as a consequence of the War in Vietnam. Some of us began to see that the world was far more complex, that issues were far more ambiguous, that between black and white were an infinite number of shades of gray. But a great many people, accustomed to a world of moral simplicity, continued to see that world in terms of an epic struggle between good and evil. Indeed, as recently as the 1980's the President of the United States could refer to the Soviet Union as "the Evil Empire," suggesting that simplistic vision of the moral universe which was the legacy of the Second World War. And to this moment, many of us still try to fit the world into the mythic categories of good guys and bad guys.

The problem is, that the world, increasingly refuses to accommodate itself to that vision. We congratulated ourselves on our victory when the Red army began to pull out of Eastern Europe. Who could doubt that we had won another round in the eternal struggle between God and Satan, between good and evil? The Soviets who had boasted they would bury us were giving up their empire. By our steadfastness, we had forced them into bankruptcy.

Of course, in the midst of our rejoicing we failed to understand that the Soviet Union was not, had never been the single source of all evil. Indeed, for forty years the Red Army had functioned to keep in check the ethnic hatreds and the rivalries which were so much a part of that region which once was called "the cockpit of Europe." As the Soviets withdrew their totalitarian control, other ancient evils began to emerge. In Czechoslovakia, ethnic resentments split the state in two; in a newly united Germany, economic troubles fueled a vicious xenophobic racism; in the states emerging from the shattered Soviet Union murderous civil wars erupted. Worst of all, in what had been Yugoslavia, conflict between Moslem, Serb and Croat--peoples who had lived together for decades, sharing the same towns, the same schools, the same apartment buildings, working together and frequently intermarrying--fell to murdering each other over slights

and hurts and fears rooted in a history centuries old. And, there, in Yugoslavia, emerged concentration camps, and killing fields and campaigns of ethnic cleansing--all the old evils over which we had so decisively triumphed in an earlier time and in an earlier war.

Nor was the consequence of the end of the Cold War confined to the remnants of the Soviet Empire. On the one hand, no longer able to exploit the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, Israelis and Palestinians began to grope their way toward peace, and in South Africa apartheid began to be dismantled. But in Somalia, without the defining moral framework of the battle between good and evil, the weapons we and the Soviets had supplied so our surrogates could carry on that epic global struggle were suddenly turned on the people, bringing terror and famine and starvation and despair. And when we intervened, once more on the side of good, to end the tragedy, those weapons were turned on us. In Haiti, without the justification of a struggle against the evil empire, we find ourselves immobilized, unable to decide what we are called upon to do in the midst of that tragic turmoil. Without a clear face to the enemy, we are left with no clear path, no obvious policy, no mechanism by which to choose one course of action over another.

It is almost as if Satan had died unexpectedly, and leaving us with no moral compass, no clear understanding of what is at issue in the world, no clear sense of what we are called upon to be or to do, for if we cannot be clear about the nature and source of evil, how can we be clear about any moral question?

"Now I am a man," sang the King of Siam, "things have changed a lot: some things nearly so; others nearly not!" If you remember the rest of the King's soliloquy, perhaps you recall the conclusion Oscar Hammerstein reached when confronting the inescapable ambiguity of life. Through the character of the King of Siam, Hammerstein counseled, that our only recourse is to go on living life, meeting our responsibilities as best we can, judging each situation on the merits, being open to the lessons to be drawn from the consequences of our actions, and trusting that in the end, though we do not accomplish all we would, the good we do will outweigh the evil.

Is it possible that this is what it means to be adult in the world? Is it possible that this is what it means to live moral lives, to be a moral people? Is it possible that a truly moral existence only begins when we understand that the world is a place of many gray-tones, of persistent and inescapable ambiguity, that to be human is to struggle to understand the choices before us, to act on the basis of that understanding, knowing that we may be wrong but trusting that even our mistakes may show us a path to a future richer than anything we can now envision?

As I think aloud with you about recent history, I confess that I have no clear vision of what would constitute an appropriate response. We may have no choice but to learn to live in a world of moral ambiguity. In a world of "nearly so and nearly not" there may be no way to short-circuit the process of moral decision making. It is not at all clear how to respond to the political and above all the moral challenges we face. It is not clear to me what we should be doing in Somalia, or in Bosnia, or in Haiti. It is not at all clear who are

the villains and who are the heroes. It is clear to me that these and countless other situations in the world present us with moral challenges we cannot ignore.

This, however, I do believe and for the moment it provides what little moral certainty I can muster: In every time and in every place it is wrong to permit abstractions like race or ethnic loyalty or cultural identity to blind us to the concrete reality of individual human beings. In every time and in every place it is wrong to permit labels and statistics to blind us to the human reality behind those labels and numbers. And always and ever, it is wrong to attempt to pay yesterday's debts with the lives of today's children. And, in a world in which we are all neighbors, it is wrong to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the suffering and anguish of others, be then in Haiti or Somalia or Bosnia, or in our own great cities. No policy is moral, no action is moral which seeks as its major goal to insulate us from pain of others and from the consequences of human decisions as they play out in the lives of concrete individuals.

This summer I heard an interview from Sarajevo. A radio reporter was talking with a citizen of that tortured, tormented city. Food was scarce; water was scarce; to walk in the open was to risk drawing sniper fire. The reporter discovered that in the midst of the hell that city had become, this man, like some other citizens, was harboring a pet--in his case, a dog he had rescued from the ruins of that city. He was hoarding scraps from his own meager rations to share with the dog. He was risking his life to walk the dog. The reporter wanted to know how he could justify the costs and the risks involved in keeping a pet in a war-torn city. The man replied that he had stayed in the city because he felt he had an obligation to his city; that he adopted the dog because he had an obligation as a human being to this blameless victim of human violence; that to be human is to keep one's obligations. More than this, the dog was, for him, a symbol of a life that is more than just survival, of a world that is humane and caring. If he abandoned the dog, his physical survival might be easier, but what would survive would be less human.

As I listened, I heard a man struggling for a moral existence in a world in which ambiguity abounded. There, in the midst of hell, one man was struggling for a new moral order and in the process provided an example of how one seeks to be moral in a complex and ambiguous world.

"The world," said the King of Siam, "is different spot: Some things nearly so; others nearly not." It is precisely in that kind of world that moral issues present themselves and we are challenged to discover who we are and what we love and what we are called to do. It is precisely in that kind of world that we are granted the opportunity to become what we are called upon to be.