

The Devil Made Me Do It

The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, Minister
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton
February 6, 2011

Back in the '70s, a comedian named Flip Wilson
used to tell this story about a woman named Geraldine.
Geraldine was out walking one day
when she walked by a store with the cutest little dresses,
and she walked right in and bought a new dress on impulse.
She didn't really mean to do it.
It was just a spur-of-the-moment thing.
When her minister asked her,
"Geraldine, why did you buy that dress?"
Geraldine answered, "The Devil made me do it!"

Dwane Milnes is a member of our congregation
who remembers Flip Wilson and Geraldine,
and he challenged me to preach a sermon on that famous line,
"The Devil made me do it!"
So, thank you, Dwane, for the inspiration!

It's not immediately obvious, I think,
what to say about the Devil to a group of Unitarian Universalists.
After all, the Universalist side of our tradition
has by and large rejected the idea that Hell or the Devil even exist.
Today, a lot of us are humanists
who may not believe in supernatural beings of any kind.
I'm pretty sure there aren't any satanic messages in our hymns
if you sing them backwards!
And we're not alone in our skepticism.
A national survey done in 2009 found that,
even among people who identify as Christians,
only about 30% believe that the Devil is real.

But there's no denying the *idea* of the Devil
is alive and well in our culture.
We can't seem to get enough of the Devil in movies and TV;
Anthony Hopkins' new movie about an exorcist
was number 1 at the box office last weekend.
On Halloween, Devil costumes are as popular as ever.
And in our everyday speech,
when we want to do something we know we shouldn't,
what do we say: "I am so tempted!"
As in, tempted by the Devil—that's where the phrase comes from,
and the idea is still there, percolating away in our subconscious
regardless of what we believe intellectually.
Perhaps even for rational, skeptical Unitarian Universalists
the *idea* of the Devil is alive and well,
if perhaps it tends to stay underground in our consciousness,
as indeed befits the dark lord of the underground realms of myth.

So, today, as we ponder this idea
of a devil who can make us do bad things,
I want to take you on a journey starting with the intellectual layers
of our tradition, the history of what Unitarian Universalists
and other religious liberals have believed about the devil,
and then dropping down deeper to ponder the big question
of why we do things our intellect tells us are wrong.
Because even if we sweep away the devil,
the darker impulses in our nature still remain.

But first some history.
Let me start with the days of the earliest Universalists in this country.
In the middle of the 18th century, the Universalists burst on the scene
saying, we don't believe in Hell. We don't believe the Devil is real.
We don't believe anybody is condemned to burn for all eternity.
They absolutely recognized that human beings do bad things.
We fall short in so many ways.

But the Universalists didn't think people did bad things
because they were tempted by the Devil.
They just said, we're not perfect,
but God loves us anyway.
They thought all the struggles we go through on earth
were God's way of teaching us, helping us become better people,
getting us ready for paradise.
I think of one early Universalist, a young woman named Lucy Barns.
She wrote poems and letters that have come down to us today
about how much comfort she got from her faith
that God was going to save everybody.
Lucy Barns says in her writings,
How could I hope to enjoy being in heaven
if millions of human souls were trapped in hell forever?
How could that be?
She rejected the idea of Hell and the Devil
because she just could not see how a God who loved everyone
could allow even a single person
to be condemned and tortured forever.¹

The early Unitarians who make up the other side of our family tree
were skeptical about Hell and the Devil too.
They didn't believe the Devil was a real being.²
Back in the 1840s, one Unitarian minister is said to have preached,
"I spell the devil without the d."
So already, over 150 years ago, the mainstream view
on both sides of our faith tradition
was that the Devil was just a myth,
maybe a symbol of human evil,
but not any kind of independent reality.

The Unitarians were huge fans
of the kind of comparative-mythology scholarship

¹ Lucy Barns, *The Female Christian* (Portland, ME: Francis Douglas, c. 1809), p. 10.

² See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Unitarianism," online at
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/unitarianism.html>.

that taught us the Devil was really a legend,
sort of a fusion of themes from, on the one hand,
ancient Persian religion, which taught there were two gods,
one good, one bad, perpetually fighting one another,
and, on the other hand,
Hades, the ancient Greek god of the underworld.
If you know this history
of how myths evolve and borrow from one another,
it gets harder to believe that there is any actual reality
behind the idea of the Devil.
So skepticism was in the air.

And throughout the 19th century, not only the Devil
but the entire range of supernatural beings
that earlier generations had believed in
were under suspicion.
Gradually more and more of our ancestors
came to doubt that the God of the Bible existed either.
People were saying,
science can't prove that God exists.
And why should we put so much faith in a book
written by fallible people just like us?
So many of the religious ideas
that had sustained generations of people
just didn't seem compelling any more.

Then came the horrors of the 20th century:
World War I, with its nightmarish trenches
and poison gas that killed by burning you from the inside out.
World War II: the Holocaust, the firebombing of Dresden,
the atomic bomb, 150,000 people killed outright in a moment,
and the haunting terror of the realization
that now human beings could literally destroy the earth.
The killing fields of Cambodia,
the savagery of the Vietnam War,

the Rwandan genocide, neighbors murdering neighbors—
the 20th century revealed to us
that hell on earth was no longer a metaphor.
For many of us, the cumulative weight of all these horrors
has dealt the death-blow
to our historic faith in an infinitely good and powerful God.
But neither do we find the idea of the Devil
a plausible explanation for all the evil and suffering in the world.

So where does that leave us?
For many of us,
the old beliefs in God and the Devil no longer make sense.
But we're left with a lingering and uncomfortable question:
if there's no such thing as a devil,
why do human beings do such terrible things?
Why do *we* do things
that we believe with our minds and hearts to be wrong?

Think back to the story of the apple seed.
A man is about to be executed for stealing food.
He tells the king, "Before you kill me,
I want to give you this very special apple seed in my pocket.
If you plant it,
it will grow into a beautiful, healthy apple tree overnight.
But the trick is, it will only work if the person who plants it
has never knowingly hurt anyone in any way.
Obviously I can't do it," he says, "because I'm a convicted thief.
But perhaps Your Majesty, in your great wisdom and righteousness,
would like to plant the seed."

The king reached for the seed but then drew back.
How many times had he ordered his troops into battle,
letting them risk injury or death while he stayed safely at home?
How many times had he said a harsh word to his family?
How many times had he driven through the streets

and seen people starving, yet given them nothing?

And how about us?

I doubt there is a single person here today
who has never done anything they regret,
never violated their own sense of what is right,
never done anything mean or petty or cruel.

Did the Devil make us do it?

No, I don't think so; at least, I find I can't believe it,
but *something* did, something in our nature,
and maybe we could stop there and say,
OK, it's just human nature to do bad things sometimes.
And maybe it's just part of life itself.

From the moment the first predator evolved
to live on eating other creatures,
violence and killing have been part of life on earth.
So maybe it's evolution's fault.

They say chimpanzees and a few other primate species
are just as prone to fighting with one another as we are.
We could say, human beings do bad things
because it's our nature; it's part of what life on earth is like.

But I don't think that's any more satisfying as an explanation,
because it completely begs the question,

Why is it our nature?

How did this happen?

Why is the world like this in the first place,
because sometimes it feels like one big setup!

If this is our nature, what does that say
about the nature of who or whatever it is
that brought us into existence?

I don't believe there is a devil out there tempting us,
but I am haunted by the words of UU minister Robbie Walsh:

[W]e are terrified that the Ground of Being might include both good and evil, both justice and injustice, destruction as well as creation, death as well as life. We have created such symbols as Satan, the lake of fire, and the subtle serpent to isolate and neutralize the threatening side of God.³

I hear those words, and to me what he's saying is this:
the faith we have inherited has always preached that God is love,
that whatever or whoever has created us
is infinitely good and caring—
whatever language we use, however we name that which is holy,
we've always held on to that faith
in the goodness of that which is ultimate.
Yet, if that is so, why is there evil? Why is there injustice?
Why is there suffering, and horror, and death?
If our faith is to have any integrity, there *has* to be some room
to wonder if maybe that infinitely good ultimate reality,
the source of all things,
is also the source of evil and injustice and suffering.

To me this is the biggest and scariest mystery there is.
And we have to live with it.
We may try to ignore it,
we may want and even need to push it away,
but we can't avoid this mystery in the depths of our soul:
here we are, capable of both good and evil,
unspeakable goodness and unfathomable cruelty,
and if that is so for us,
surely it must be so with that which brought us into being.

I can't solve this mystery for you.
I can't make it go away.
This is something every person has to wrestle with in their own spirit.
But I can give you a symbol that helps me understand,

³ Robbie Walsh, "No Hell."

at least I think it does.

Look at our chalice—

this beloved symbol of our faith,

burning brightly with that light which we hail each week,

the light of compassion,

the light of justice and wisdom,

the light of love which never fails.

That light is *fire*, dear friends,

and fire is *not safe*.

It warms us when we guard it carefully and keep it within its bounds.

But fire unleashed can destroy and kill.

Fire is our chosen symbol of the divine;

it speaks to us on a level which is very profound

and probably beyond words.

Can we look at this chalice flame

and comprehend how it is

that fire, the very emblem of the blazing pits of Hell,

is also our most precious sign of everything sacred?

Now notice: the fire of *our* faith is contained in a chalice.

Thus we keep it safe, we prevent it with our care

from spilling over and becoming destructive.

The fire in itself is *not safe*.

But we make it safe by holding it in this chalice,

this vessel that holds the flame and is not consumed by it.

Divine energy is not safe.

The stuff we are made of is not safe.

But somehow we have also received gifts of community,

gifts of wisdom and conscience

and the long tradition of ethical reflection,

that help us keep ourselves safe,

that strengthen our resolve to do what is right,

to use our powers to heal and not to harm.

Robbie Walsh tells us,

“we glimpse through the clearing smoke
a God who is too complicated for us.”
And my heart tells me that is true.
Yet somehow it is not the end of goodness, nor the end of hope.

Through the clearing smoke
we may glimpse a reality which is more than our hearts can hold,
which sings or whispers or shouts to us
that it is still all right, it has always been all right,
despite the tears and the anguish;
we with our need for certainty
and black and white
and safety
are not yet ready to understand,
but one day we will leap over all confusion
and we will discover with astonishment and joy and recognition
that it will be all right, as it always has been.

And in the meantime, what can we do but our best,
our human best,
our fallible best,
which sometimes, sometimes, sometimes
flares forth with beauty more splendid than the brightest flame?

May it be so.
Amen.