

“Love Wins”

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Does love win? Always? Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill evangelical church and author of *Love Wins*, believes in the generosity of a God that makes this so, a love that wins because of the universality of God's love through Jesus. In his Universalism, no one is excluded from this possibility.

As Unitarian Universalist, we tend to break that down a little bit, and ask more questions. In what conditions does love win? How do we help it win, what does winning love look like?

I was at the UU General Assembly session last June where four young new ministers were discussing evil ten years after 9/11. One minister from Livermore California told us what Reverend Beth Miller told her congregation that day in the midst of their horror “The thing I am really burning to tell you, she said is “I love you. These are the only words I can find. Love is the only word in my heart right now, and it is the right word. The only thing I am absolutely sure right now is love.”

Do we need to experience evil for love to win? When I saw the ministerial fellowship committee, the very first question they asked me, is how do you define evil? After years of trying to create programs that work in favor of the oppressed, high school drop outs, children who are wards of the states, welfare mothers, I know evil isn't what one person does, evil is a collection of small sins that add up and perpetuate evil.

During the question and answer period that day at the GA workshop, one colleague of mine asked with an edge, “we as Unitarian Universalists have no need for forgiveness because we don’t have sin right?” He went on to talk about Scott Peck who was a chaplain in Vietnam who said evil arises when we insulate ourselves from the consequences of our own actions. When we fail to recognize our own sins we become evil. This reminds of the advertisement for car insurance where man, with a slightly bandaged face rides around hanging on to the outside of a car right behind the driver looking outwards he introduces himself to us the viewer as our blind spot, warning us if we are not careful, he will be our ruin.

If we believe, as Scott suggests that love wins only when we face our own propensity for evil, then how are we honest with ourselves and with each other? If we truly are to stand on the side of love as we are so fond of saying, we need to be willing to accompany each other to the destruction sites of our souls.

Where has evil been at work in your life, how has it impacted you, and how do you heal yourself? How do you keep from perpetuating the cycle?

Evil is in my life currently as I raise three daughters in our culture where media objectifies their bodies, their minds, and their very presence with sexual overlays that assault and leaves broken their very understanding of self. Two have found the inner resources to counter point the assault and one is struggling as are her friends, being “hot” they say is fun. I wince every time I hear anyone denounce the prevalence of sexism, for it is present in the sexualized air our young girls breathe.

Evil most clearly has been in my life as I have grappled with the destructive force of alcoholism in my family and the many ways my siblings learned to negate each other just as we have been negated; The recycling of shame done nearly with out thinking first to each other, and then to our spouses. My ministry supervisor for three years traveled with me to that dark hole, and held up a mirror of light, one in which I discovered the delightful being of me, a blessing that I can give easily to my husband, who too fights the debilitating impact of growing up in an alcoholic family.

Does love win in the face of this evil? Only by reconstructing the narrative of who one is, slowly through grace and strength of spirit can we reconstruct real stories in which promise of love returns unexpected. As my husband I continue to struggle with the impact of alcoholism in our lives, one of us sometimes can become the older brother of the prodigal son. You know the one who complains about is father never giving him a goat, and that his father has dealt with his brother according to totally different set of standards? As we both help each other to untangle ourselves from the behavior of our alcoholic birth families, we are becoming for each other the father in the story who doesn't react and say, "You are always with me, and everything I have is yours." Love wins.

Forgiveness is not an act of God, but an act we enable as we accompany each other into the dark and too long silent places of our soul; A place of forgiveness and promise that restores our ability to receive and give love.

Philosopher Hannah Ardent writes that these moral precepts, forgiveness and promise arise, directly out of the will to live to get-her with others in the mode of acting and speaking...without which we would doomed to swing forever in the ever-recurring cycle of becoming...without the faculty to undo what we have

done and to control at least partially the processes we, as humans, have let loose.

Consider Simon Wiesenthal, a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp who was taken one day from his work detail to the bedside of Karl, a dying member of the SS. Haunted by crimes in which he participated, the soldier wanted to confess.

Karl, bandaged around the head in a dimly lit hospital room, grasps for Simon's hand, barely audible, he says, "I must tell you something dreadful, something that is torturing me, or else I cannot die in peace. A year already since I committed the horrible deed...I must tell you because you are a Jew."

Simon remembers sitting on the bed like a cat on hot bricks, trying to release his hand, wanting to go away but Karl seemed to be communicating with his hands as well as with his voice, his grip grew tighter as if pleading not to desert him.

This goes on for days, the man telling him of his childhood, the days he was known as a good boy, his mother's love for him, his joking and positive nature, "he was not born a murderer" he says.

Finally the details of his horrific deed unfold, Jewish families being forced into a building that was then set on fire by Karl and his comrades. One family in particular haunts him, and as the realization of what he has done takes hold over the course of a year, he finally imagines this family coming towards him while he is in battle and as he lowers his gun determined not to kill them a second time, he is wounded.

Simon remembers asking himself, why must he as a Jew listen? Why not call a priest and let the man die in peace? His fellow prisoners urge him not to forgive him, for he would be doing so in the name of all Jews.

Simon doesn't forgive Karl and the decision haunts him for years. So much so he goes to the town of Karl's childhood and finds his mother living in a partial shell of a house. She shares with him a picture of Karl and talks about what a good son he was. Simon considers telling her the acts he had done in the name of his leaders, and wonders what links him, he who could have been one of her son's victims, and her, a lonely woman grieving for the ruin of her family, the ruin of her people? Was sorrow their common link, could grief be an affinity?

Simon doesn't tell Karl's mom the truth about her son. In fact, with the picture of Karl's life complete, Simon's obsession with him fades.

Does love win in this story? I suggest to you it does. Simon stays with his pain long enough for his heart to change, to feel Karl's mother's sorrow as his own. He reached across the divide of his fear, sadness and doubt long enough for his soul to be renewed and restored. He reconstructs the story of who he is in the world and the promise of life returns unexpected.

Robert MacAfee Brown, professor emeritus of the Pacific School of Theology mindful of the question so many ask in times of great evil, "where is god in all this" calls us to ask a different question and make it our own. Ask he says, "What can I do?" And then he says, listen for the answers that come not from our minds but from the precincts of our hearts.¹

Listen to your heart, what can you do in response to evil in your life? How can we have the courage to be honest with ourselves and each other to meet our blind spot before it is our ruin? How can we accompany each other to these dark places in our soul?

¹ Simon Wiesenthal from his book The Sunflower

Several years ago, the Middleborough congregation responded to the need of a recently released sex offender. He was desperate for community. He met with the minister and his parole officer and they developed a way in which he could attend church and keep the children safe. Eventually the whole congregation was supporting him and it took awhile. He told the minister later that he would never had made it without the congregation.

Our Universalist heritage embraces the messiness of our human capacity for both evil and good, and calls us in all our actions with a direct encounter with the transforming power of love and justice to restore lives shaken by evil.

It is the power of love that is within us that comes to the forefront of our heart and minds when we need it most that reaches out across incredible barriers to touch others. Love, the only force that can take its place amongst the silence of evil emerges from the place of pain and fear, over spilling our boundaries of individual worlds into the worlds of others. It tells us to reach out when we rather be alone and pushes us to accept the care of others when we are in pain.

(Reverend Lucas Hergert, GA 2011)

There in that place we discover a truth that we are beautiful, valued, forgiven, beautiful and whole. Do you believe you are beautiful?

May you bring all you are to worship, to this community, to the world and may love wins.

Let us make it so.

