

Abuse—the root of all evil?

Rev. Leland Bond-Upson, given at 1st Unitarian Honolulu, 16Jan11

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All your life you have heard it said, “money is the root of all evil.” The first thing wrong with that is that it’s a misquotation of scripture. If you will open your Bibles and go to 1st Timothy, chapter 6, verse 10, you will see that the actual verse is

“For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

(dryly) If this were a proper church, you’d all have brought your Bibles.

That’s the King James version, and the King James version is famous for being the best work of literature ever created by a committee. That committee had the advantage of being able to use the language of Shakespeare. But beautiful as it is, as you might expect it has many inaccuracies that Biblical scholars have since corrected. One of these corrections concerns 1st Timothy, 6:10, which these scholars say should be more like, “the love of money is at the root of all manner of evil.” I think we can all agree with that.

Why do we need to be warned away from an excessive fondness for money? Well, greed was known to the ancients as so dangerous to the soul that it was made one of the seven deadly sins. You know the seven deadly sins. There will be extra credit for remembering all seven. They are greed, lust, envy, covetousness, anger, pride, and sloth. For no extra charge I have created a nifty mnemonic device to help us remember them: GLECAPS. [do the cheer, then what does that spell?]

I have a theory. It’s just a theory. [pause] Y’know, those people, bless their hearts, who deny evolution like to say “it’s just a theory.” And so it is. But so is everything we say we “know.” For instance, I have a theory that I’m up here all alone, talking to you, and that it’s not a dream. Being a reasonable person who believes you are reasonable people, if I wanted support for my theory, I’d go up to as many of you as is reasonably necessary, and ask what you thought about this question. I could also wait a while to see if I wake up, and generally see what other evidence I can gather together.

So it is with the theory of evolution. It’s just a theory, but it’s a theory with a mountain of evidence behind it. So we talk amongst ourselves and come to a consensus. Evolution: tons of evidence. Other theories: virtually none.

I have a theory, or rather, a hypothesis. It's that the abuse that we experience in life—and abuse has a great many forms and has great range of severity—this abuse is responsible for most of the bad behavior that we see in human affairs. To rephrase it the way the Biblical scholars did with love of money, I posit that abuse is at the root of a manner of evil.

If we agree that we humans--the supposed crown of creation--have certain inalienable rights, then we have a right to ask why Creation is so unfair in distributing the good things in life.

We ask, with the poet William Blake, why are some to misery are born, while others are born to sweet delight? Why are some favored with intelligence, strength, athleticism, good looks, cleverness, charm, and inherited wealth, while so many others are not so fortunate?

Why are so many loved and cherished by their parents, and so many others denied of love, and safety, and hope?

We begin by asking, like Job, "why me, God?" And if we're good liberals, we look around and then also ask, "why *them*, God, why are *they* suffering?"

Kurt Vonnegut, a Unitarian who lived in Barnstable, Mass., had an answer. In one of his novels, *The Sirens of Titan*, he had the protagonist establish a new church, The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. I have a theory that that could be a true and useful church, or at least a true and useful way of looking at the problem of evil.

It's useful because it clearly takes the responsibilities we expect from a loving God, and expect them instead from loving people. William Blake again: "for Mercy has a human heart, and Pity a human face."

Shakespeare's Sonnet XXIX begins

*"When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate . . .*

Pray all you want, but heaven will be deaf. Your deliverance, if it comes, will be come from a human being, beginning first with yourself (for God resides within), and then with others (for God resides within them too). If your prayers are answered any other way it will be just dumb luck, and not from a God Up There who is taking a personal interest in you.

[disaster victims giving thanks while their neighbors are ruined]

Neither does evil reside outside ourselves. There is no Satan, no Evil One. There is just bad

luck, and the things we do that we as a people, have agreed, are evil.

I was bullied, I'm sorry to say, by my father, and also, later, by a handful of classmates. It had a bad effect on my self-esteem that took years to emerge from. I'm still not completely over it. A college psychology course helped me understand what had happened. More than once, my dad told me and my brothers the things that his mother had done to him. I think she was the kind of person we now call a sociopath—someone who is almost incapable of compassion for others. And she, Grandma Peg, had little patience with children. I experienced a milder version of her ways as her grandchild. We kids all much preferred the company of our maternal grandmother, Bertha, who was, if fact, maternal.

I think my father not only never got over how his mother treated him, but didn't have the ability to understand himself emotionally, and had no tools with which to interrupt a nasty family tradition.

As a kid at home I bullied my younger brothers. I didn't think about it. It seemed natural. I think maybe there's something in us that finds it easier to pass it on, than to figure it out.

It was well understood in ancient Greece and Rome that the cruelest masters were those who were former slaves.

The emotional reaction is more readily at hand than the intellectual one. Einstein mistreated the women in his life. Whenever someone does something horrific and "unnatural" to others, we almost always—I have a theory that it is *always*—we find that the evil-doer was abused in some particularly horrific way, including having mental illness take over, as what seems to have happened to the shooter in Tucson, who heard voices, some real, some imagined, urging him on.

When I became a man, I resolved to break that chain of my inheritance, and I succeeded--partially. I've been working all my adult life to not pass it on, but to act with emotional intelligence, as my father could not. He was a very smart guy in most respects, but a child in this way. I have been conscious of the need to protect my loved ones from the consequences of the damage done to my soul, but the hurt and anger are still in me, and try as I do, I too-often act out of that old hurt, and inflict hurt on others. To use 12-step language, in regard to my nearest and dearest I'm a recovering bully.

I just hope that I've done enough to allow my children to finish the job, and end the curse.

Perhaps writing poetry would help! You know, get it all out and onto the page. Curse an utterly indifferent God. Curse my father's willful dismissal of psychology. Curse my bad luck. Then give thanks for all the blessings, among the greatest of which is this opportunity, through

ministry, to serve. I believe it's true what they say, that serving others is the best therapy.

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Last October, Deborah and I were invited by Joan and David to go with them to the First Friday arts event downtown. Shortly after we arrived, we were joined by Ray and Julia Pace. Ray writes extensively about the Oahu art scene in his blog, Honolulu Art Beat, so Deborah and I were in good hands.

In addition to viewing the contents of the many galleries, we were treated to music and occasionally, free food. At one point our guides guided us to the Hawaii Theatre, which was hosting a poetry recital. We were all struck by the immediacy and skill of these young poets, and of the enthusiastic reception to it from the young audience. From that evening came the idea of sharing their gifts with this congregation.

We are blessed this morning by the presence of four poets from Youth Speaks Hawaii, each of whom will recite an original composition. Their coach/teacher/enabler is Darron Cambra, Director of Art and Entertainment for Youth Speaks.

- Noa Helela, "Lisa" (Noa goes first because he has to depart for another event)
- Serena Simmons, "Stars"
- Sterling Higa, "Haole"
- Darron Cambra, (as yet untitled)

Thank you. Now let us join in a moment of silent meditation.

[silent meditation, 1 minute]

In two of the last three years, our own Youth Speaks Hawaii has won the national championship at Brave New Voices Youth Poetry Slam Festival in San Francisco.

There's an Interscholastic Slam competition next Friday, at Farrington Auditorium. For more information about this and other such activities, see "Youth Speaks Hawaii" in your Announcements insert.

Now let us join together in singing Hymn #168, "One More Step"