Readings

(1) Unitarian Universalist theologian Henry Nelson Wieman offers a sturdy faith, which I share: “If my home is in creativity itself, I can undergo great changes without despair.” And he asserts, “We are made for creative transformation as a bird is made for song.”

(2) Howard Gardner, the pioneering psychologist regarding multiple intelligences, has been studying human behavior, leadership, and social change for many years now. I was struck that in one of his books, *Five Minds for the Future*, he writes, “as far back as a hundred thousand years..., predecessors of *homo sapiens* were already decorating themselves with colored beads.”

Scholars believe that these were efforts to define and differentiate one group from another, and whatever their precise unknown reason, Gardner concludes, “It does seem clear that the application of marks that differentiate groups from one another is an important, enduring characteristic of our species....” He goes on about these group-forming tendencies: “Think soccer teams! Think rivalry among Internet service providers!” and on and on (103-4).

We too know this tribalistic impulse and the more pernicious ugly false classifications, for example, around so-called race. But he also notes that “these proclivities” are not biologically fixed. He lifts up the term respect and states, “Respect for others should permeate one’s life.”

(3) Words from Pastor Martin Niemoller (1892-1984) who resisted the Nazi regime:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.

“A Piercing Evil’s New Disguises”
Rev. Bruce Southworth

A newspaper editorial this past week mentioned that in olden times of the Wild
West – what’s that 120, 130, 140, 150 years ago? In those days of the American
frontier, towns like Dodge City, Kansas enjoyed a certain amount of gun control. Local
laws “wisely prohibited hidden loaded firearms.”

That is a big deal these days… more and more of such “concealed carry”: outlawed in Dodge City.

Reversing that historical wisdom, in the last decade, hundreds of laws have been
enacted to permit so-called “concealed-carry’ in public spaces” – at times with laws at
the state level that then prevent the right of local communities from having their own gun
safety legislation.

Two weeks ago, the Ohio House passed a bill allowing “state residents with
concealed-carry permits… to pack their hidden loaded guns into day care centers when
they drop off the kids.” (NY Times, 11-30-15)

A majority of our fellow citizens are in favor of common sense gun safety
measures, and very few states allow concealed weapons to enter their legislative
assemblies, while at the same time expanding rights of weapons’ possession in more
and more venues.

Common sense measures include a universal background check for all
purchases, and not allowing gun purchase by those on terrorist watch lists; 2000
individuals on such lists purchased weapons in the past decade.

A majority of gun-owners are in favor of not selling handguns to those under 21
and favor a requirement to have lock boxes for guns at home.
Other regulations could include smart guns, only usable with the fingerprint of the owner, and personal registration of all bullets bought.

And, yes, to be sure, we also need increased mental health services, as well as gun safety measures, neither of which receives attention from our Republican-controlled Congress, notwithstanding popular support for increased action for both.

Also, as Nicholas Kristof wrote in the NY Times this week, “It’s not clear what policy, if any, could have prevented the killings in San Bernardino. Not every shooting is preventable. But we’re not even trying.”

He goes on to invoke President Reagan’s plea nearly 25 years ago, that “this level of violence must stop.” (12/3/15)

So, we are back to guns... wanton violence... tragedy... horror at home....and heartbreak..... And we still have suppression of gun safety efforts by the National Rifle Association whose dollars and activism stymie legislative action even though we are averaging one mass shooting per day... over 1200 persons so far this year.

After the elementary school shooting three years ago in Newtown, Connecticut with 26 killed, I tracked the weapon of choice – semi-automatic assault rifles. A USA Today reporter notes, “The gun... has a reputation for easy handling and deadly accuracy.” (Kevin Johnson, USA TODAY, 5:15 a.m. EST, December 17, 2012)

This kind of weapon was also used in the Washington, DC area in the 2002 sniper shootings that killed 10; the Aurora, Colorado movie theater shootings in 2012 that killed 12 and wounded 58; several of the shootings in Oregon; and now in California. The list goes on and on.

A police chief in Chaska, Minnesota adds, “There is an allure to this weapon that makes it unusually attractive. The way it looks, the way it handles – it screams assault weapon.” He “said the gun's practical application is little more than 'a combat weapon.'" The weapon... [according to one medical examiner] delivers bullets "designed in such a fashion (that) the energy is deposited in the tissue so the bullets stay in."

Bush Master, one of the rifle makers, in an advertisement offers a

Discreet Carrying Case for Carbines....
When low profile is needed, and personal protection has to be readily available... this … case does the job. Price: $89.00.
Guns, of all sizes, varieties, and deadliness, once a symbol of the Wild West, remain – now with much-enhanced kill-power – as a symbol of American violence in these wild days of the 21st century.

An Al-Qaeda, American-born spokesman in a recent video urges supporters in the West “to take advantage of the fact that ‘America is absolutely awash with easily obtainable firearms.’” *(NY Times, Collins, A23, 12-5-15)*

I just relearned that consumer assault weapons can be easily upgraded to illegal automatic weapons. Also, the initials – the weapons model number – of those used in San Bernardino have a new name.

It’s an MSR.

MSR used to stand for “Modular Sniper Rifle”; MSR is now marketed as “Modern Sporting Rifle”…. Sniper? Sporting? Do we feel better with the name change?

Isn’t it
- evil to undermine popular, democratic will?
- evil to fail to protect at least some lives with common sense gun safety?
- and evil to claim that individual freedom as a cherished value is fatally subverted by any measure toward collective safety?

Whatever else it may be in our country, there is
- idolatry in the national individualistic gun fetish;
- perversion of democratic process with political fear about the power of the NRA;
- and inhumane preference of gun rights over human lives.

A couple of weeks ago, my intent in thinking about evil and its seductions, came from the political climate of our times. Given the events of the week, I have strayed a little from that initial impetus, and I will return to matters of neo-fascist rumblings and assaults from the Republican field of Presidential candidates.

Before delving into all that – truthiness, big and little lies, integrity, and invitations to violence – a couple of definitions of evil.

As my colleague Reverend Virginia Safford notes,

> Evil is the capacity, within us and among us, to break sacred bonds with our own souls, with one another, and with the holy. Further, it is the willingness to excuse or justify this damage, to deny it, or to call it virtue. The soil in which it flourishes is a rich compost of ignorance, arrogance,
fear, and delusion – mostly self-delusion – all mingled with the sparkling dust of our original, human being.

I would add that these have both personal and systemic manifestations – the systemic ones being the structures of oppression of class, white supremacy, gender, sexuality, ableism and more.

Safford goes on to emphasize, “Sunlight beats it back. Truth-telling, truth seeking, truth speaking, secret-breaking, brave naming, bearing witness – all weaken” evil, and address “ignorance, arrogance, fear and delusion.” (In “Quest,” Church of the Larger Fellowship, March, 2012, p. 5)

Her definition focuses on violations of core values, deeds that break our human interconnections, whatever dishonors the worth and dignity of other persons, and actions that diminish verities of the spirit: sacred truths such as compassion, truth-telling, kindness, and human kinship.

So we confront, yea even do battle with, “ignorance, arrogance, [forgetfulness], fear, and delusion” to honor the Good of which we are capable, the sacred within….

I also return to elements of my core theology and faith. My theological mentor Henry Nelson Wieman helped introduce the remarkable 20th century “process” thought of Alfred North Whitehead – redefining our modern world-view with the interconnected web of existence and inter-relationships of all parts. As much as Wieman made Whitehead understandable, he himself moved away from that metaphysical speculation about these interconnections and looked at human behavior.

If God is real, Wieman would ask, how about approaching God in terms of trustworthy experiences? This was his starting point for an empirical explanation of God. Wieman turned to Creativity, more specifically creative experiences… things like connection, community, and creativity in everyday empirical terms.

The here and now… things like encounters of mutuality between and among persons – in love; and, encounters of justice where greater freedom arises; encounters of growth, change, even healing, where new possibilities can be illuminating; moments of awe and wonder where the ongoing reality of Creativity guides us. Trustworthy moments…

Wieman after a while quit talking much about God, except in those moments of creative communication. It makes profound, empirical, practical sense to me to see something sacred in this approach. He had enormous influence on liberal Christianity in the mid-20th century, and then he broadened his personal faith, became a Unitarian, and influenced a generation of liberal laity and clergy.
Quickly, for Wieman, whatever obstructs Creative communication ("creative interchange") is not sacred. It is sinful, is evil – language that is tough for some of us growing up scared and scarred by traditional doctrines. We just put our hands over our ears (if we hear the word "evil."). I understand that. I've been there.

Yet, I am persuaded, and Andrew Delbanco, who is a distinguished professor at Columbia University, observes that if we avoid naming what hurts others, hurts ourselves, oppresses others… if we give up any language of moral evaluation, we collude with oppression, those mistakes, the sins, the evils we inadvertently or sometimes intentionally do.

So, the opposite of Creative communication that brings us together, helps us grow personally and collectively … the antithesis of the sacred and the good… is poor communication…. And it is bad… Evil!

… bad and destructive. Jesus called it “missing the mark.”

The problems arise with anything that thwarts Creative communication, personal transformation, and deeper community… and what does that?

Wieman, the mystic, empirical theologian, and philosopher of religion, says there are several varieties of destructive communication, and we need to take responsibility in each area.

There is muddle-headed communication… lack of clarity.

There is deceptive communication… lack of honesty.

There is manipulative communication… need for power over someone rather than mutuality: propaganda, distortions of truth, gossip, divisive demagoguery, rumors, etc.

There is reiterative communication… simple greetings, pleasantries, social signals, or repetitive claims like Big Lies… but no new content, without sincerity, without heart at all.

Finally, there is “other-directed” communication (Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd): one refuses to or somehow cannot listen, hear, respond, and engage with the risk of honesty, clarity, and mutuality. There is a false front; efforts to please others; changing personality depending on who one is speaking to. (And that is why politicians are sometimes distrusted.) (Man’s Ultimate Commitment, Henry Nelson Wieman, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, IL, 1958, pp. 23-25.)

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Any of these interact and hamper our ability and that of others to live creatively and freely. They hinder appreciative awareness of the world, the self and others. It’s bad.

The Good?… That’s creative communication…. As Alice Walker puts it poetically, we share God with each other. Or, if you prefer, just call it Creativity or Creative communication; whatever promotes healthy communication and community.

And these apply to normal everyday interactions, not just politics.

The bad, reflections of evil, to repeat:

1. There is muddle-headed communication…
2. There is deceptive communication…
3. There is manipulative communication… need for power over someone rather than mutuality: propaganda, distortions of truth, gossip, divisiveness, rumors, etc.
4. There is reiterative communication…
5. Finally, there is “other-directed” communication.

All of which, with this angle of spiritual wisdom, helps pierce the disguises of evil in our midst in this political season.

I realize that up until now I have not being taking this year’s political debates very seriously…. Too early… too many candidates… too much egotism…, too much delusional thinking… too much denial of stupid things said; all the obfuscation, deceit, manipulation, meaningless repetition, and pandering to constituents, plus character attacks and character assassination… all rising to new levels.

Turns out that this is not just bad stuff, but really bad; yes evil, as it tears apart community and builds barriers among people.

So many of these politicians, like unfiltered, impetuous little children, are being what? Just being what politicians of our age appear to be.

Members of Congress are at the bottom of public rankings on ethics and honesty. They have an integrity rating at the bottom of the scale… only 7% of those surveyed rated them very high or high. (At the top of one survey were nurses, as they have been for many years… and clergy are somewhere in the middle.)

So what’s going on? Ben Carson seems to feature a great deal of muddle-headedness, whether it’s identifying China as a major player in the Middle East, denying
climate change and evolution, or seeming to know little about foreign policy matters. Then, he likens Syrian refugees to “rabid dogs.”

Ted Cruz seems especially other-directed, trying to please constituencies as he welcomes endorsement from a felon who has stalked abortion doctors, demonizes refugees, misrepresents the work of Planned Parenthood, focuses on self-aggrandizement, and attacks other candidates.

Apparently, his interpersonal skills are weak, with a college roommate declaring he would rather vote for someone randomly picked from the phone book than Cruz. Weirdly, Cruz’s campaign book is titled, “A Time for Truth.” His approach reflects a conviction that passion is more important than honesty.

Donald Trump is the master of meaningless, reiterative communication that presents his egomania, self-asserted infallibility, and disdain for policy, with a new macho, bad boy image. A registry for Muslims? Mocking women, the physically challenged, and “the Mexicans”? Mocking other candidates. Deceitful statistics on black/white crime patterns. Endorsing torture….

The “worth and dignity of all persons” is not one of his values.

The neo-Fascist tendency most troubling to me was his response to some protestors, a couple of weeks ago in Florida, where it seems he approved/invited, the crowd to beat up on at least one demonstrator.

PolitiFact is a Pulitzer Prize-winning publication of the Tampa Bay Times, and does fact-checking on various comments of candidates. Carson, Trump, and Cruz had the lowest ranking on truth telling; Trump had the highest “Liar, Liar, pants on fire” ratings (22% of statements).

So truthiness abounds, and for what it’s worth, for the Democratic Presidential candidates, truth telling is much more prevalent. And for me, that counts for a lot.

This preference for “a free and responsible search for truth” is a hallmark of Unitarian Universalists in our daily lives, as well as part of our theological journeys, in which second-hand dogma and doctrine are often no longer helpful.

I do believe there is truth in a New Yorker cartoon some years ago. It showed two individuals talking, and one declares, “Well, that’s where I part company from the Unitarians. They have too much trouble telling lies!”

Character, truth, integrity – they matter, especially in these times of truthiness and tribalism.

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And returning to the reading from Howard Gardner, if we are to have a wholesome future as a species, he counsels, “Respect for others should permeate one’s life.”

From Victoria Safford again:

The soil in which … [evil] flourishes is a rich compost of ignorance, arrogance, fear, and delusion – mostly self-delusion – all mingled with the sparkling dust of our original, human being.

… Sunlight beats it back. Truth-telling, truth seeking, truth speaking, secret-breaking, brave naming, bearing witness – all weaken” evil, and address “ignorance, arrogance, fear and delusion.”

What to do about truthiness, manipulation, deceit, muddle-headedness, mindless repetition, and pandering that can be seductive and damage integrity and sense of interconnection? And about the systems of oppression arising in their midst?

Hear something ugly and evil? Say something….

See something ugly and evil? Do something….

Move toward those who are different; welcome the stranger….

Pursue the truth, and you shall be not only odd, but also free….

Enter the struggle for justice and truth telling that gives meaning and delight….

Bear witness to the sparking radiance of our best selves….

With educator and philosopher Barrows Dunham, who suffered at the hands of the Joseph McCarthy hearings in 1953 and was blacklisted from academic employment for fourteen years, keep faith:

Now, therefore, since the struggle deepens,
Since evil abides, and good does not yet prosper,
Let us gather what strength we have, what confidence and valor,
That our small victories may end in triumph, and
the world awaited be a world attained.