

## *An Eye for an Eye Leaves the Whole World Blind*

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Tri-County Unitarian Universalists

An eye for an eye may leave the whole world blind, but an eye for an eye is the American way, or, at least, the middle class white American way. Our heroes are called “The Avengers” or “The Justice League.” There are good guys and bad guys. Good guys win with guns or brawn or both. This comes to us with our mother’s milk. : “Around Dodge City and in the territory out West, there’s just one way to handle the killers and the spoilers, and that’s with a U.S. marshal and the smell of ‘Gunsmoke,’” [George Walsh, 88; Voice of "Gunsmoke," KNX Newsmen - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](#). “Yes, it’s Superman, strange visitor from another planet who came to earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Superman, who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel in his bare hands. And who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never ending battle for truth, justice and the American way,” [The Adventures of Superman - Wikiquote](#). I may show my age with those examples, but things have not changed. My grandsons’ heroes still fight. They may fight with Pokémon or be Power Rangers rather than the Lone Ranger, but the epic fight scene is still de rigueur. There are good guys and bad guys, and the good guys must **fight** the bad guys and if not destroy them, then at least claim an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

In the year I decided to move from United Methodist ministry to the Unitarian Universalist Association a number of things happened to prompt me to make that move, but one of them was my interactions with a young man who volunteered with the youth group. He was enthralled with a series of Christian apocalypse novels. He was sure the end of time was coming, and as a good Christian man he should be preparing to have to fight in the coming end time battles. This was in the late 80s, but I can picture this man being willing to storm the Capitol building if he believed Trump was a messiah figure. It struck me as dangerous theology then, and it still does.

Reciprocity, our theme for this month. There is a good God and an evil Satan. There is a heaven where followers of the good God will go after death. There is a hell where followers of the evil Satan will go. Life on this earth doesn’t seem fair and just for the good, but all things will be evened out after death or when Christ returns. The evil will be punished and the good rewarded. This dualistic theology means that there will always be an us and a them, and the them will be the enemy, the bad guys. People to be destroyed or at least damaged as much as we think they have damaged us or ours.

The title of today’s sermon, “An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind” reference verses in the books of Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Exodus in the Hebrew/Christian Bible. “Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury. Whoever kills an animal must make restitution, but whoever kills a human being is to be put to death. You are to have the same law for the foreigner and the native-born. I am the LORD your God,” Leviticus 24:19-22. As the theme for this month is reciprocity the Leviticus verses seems fitting.

The earliest refence to such words that we know of are not in the Bible but in the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi. Back in my Christian seminary days I was taught that this kind of law was to put a limit on vengeance. Vengeance was not to be enacted beyond the extent of the original injury. This was

a civilizing code, but, obviously, not civilizing enough to those who note that, “an eye for an eye leaves to whole world blind.”

Of this play on the biblical quote the Quotes Investigator website says this in part. “One of the world’s top quotation experts (is) Fred R. Shapiro editor of the Yale Book of Quotations (YBQ)... the YBQ says [YQG]:

“An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind” is frequently attributed to M. K. Gandhi. The Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence states that the Gandhi family believes it is an authentic Gandhi quotation, but no example of its use by the Indian leader has ever been discovered.

“In 1914 politician and journalist George Perry Graham argued against the death penalty in the Canadian House of Parliament. He mentioned the well-known verse of Exodus and then employed it in a trope about the members of the Parliament [CHP]:

“Mr. GRAHAM: We can argue all we like, but if capital punishment is being inflicted on some man, we are inclined to say: ‘It serves him right.’ That is not the spirit, I believe, in which legislation is enacted. If in this present age we were to go back to the old time of ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ there would be very few hon. gentlemen in this House who would not, metaphorically speaking, be blind and toothless.” [An Eye for an Eye Will Make the Whole World Blind – Quote Investigator](#).

There is an alternative to an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Gandhi promoted that alternative. Even if he never literally said, “An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind” it is a saying consistent with his beliefs. Gandhi did say, “I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent,” [Remarks on the International Day of Non-Violence | United Nations Secretary-General](#).

Gandhi promoted a way of nonviolence or ahimsa. This was not a passive philosophy, not a live and let live philosophy. He used his philosophy of nonviolence to change the world.

According to Wikipedia, “Nonviolence has "active" or "activist" elements, in that believers generally accept the need for nonviolence as a means to achieve political and social change. Thus, for example, Tolstoyan and Gandhism non violence is both a philosophy and strategy for social change that rejects the use of violence, but at the same time it sees nonviolent action (also called civil resistance) as an alternative to passive acceptance of oppression or armed struggle against it,” [Nonviolence - Wikipedia](#).

“An alternative to passive acceptance of oppression or armed struggle against it.” Just because we choose not to pull out the guns or learn hand to hand combat does not mean that we are going to passively accept injustice. But, if one believes that non-violent action or civil resistance can change the world then one must believe that ones’ oppressors can be persuaded to change. It may mean making one’s oppression unprofitable. It may mean visibly showing ones’ oppression to the wider world and gaining allies. But it cannot mean declaring ones’ oppressors evil and destroying them. The philosophy and strategy of non-violence rejects a dualistic theology. No one is declared irredeemably evil.

Rev. Fulghum in his essay on the man who lay down on the burning bed, saying “It was on fire when I lay down on it,” reminds us of our own foibles and asks us to not be overly quick to judge others. To practice non-violence against oppression, we must judge that there is oppression and target those

inflicting it or supporting it with civil resistance and actions, but we need not judge that the oppressors and those supporting or ignoring the oppression are evil people who can never change. Indeed, if we believe non-violence is an effective philosophy and strategy we cannot believe that anyone is so evil that they cannot change. The whole purpose of non-violent action is to move people to change.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was influenced by Gandhi's teachings on non-violence, begins his Letter from Birmingham Jail this way, "While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms." King addresses the religious leaders of the area who spoke against his work with respect. He is going to call them out but honorably. He believes they can be persuaded.

As I was writing this sermon last week's Braver/Wiser mailing came to my inbox. For those of you who do not know, every Wednesday an original written reflection by a contemporary religious leader, and brief prayer, grounded in Unitarian Universalism is sent out to those who sign up for it under the heading Braver/Wiser. Rev. Sean Parker Denniston wrote last week's column. It began as all Braver/Wiser mailings do with a quote. The quote was, "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. [If we are] devoid of the power to forgive [we are] devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies."—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Rev. Parker Dennison wrote, "I've been doing a lot of guest preaching lately and it's always a little awkward. I often don't know how the congregation is used to doing things. Recently I've tripped on my robe, forgotten to extinguish the chalice, called someone by the wrong name, and gave the wrong musician the head nod to cue the anthem. Oops. Sometimes I feel embarrassed by my mistakes, but all-in-all they are relatively small things. Except one.

"I preached recently in a building that was a beautiful old chapel in the country. Because it was old, it was one of those buildings where accessibility was a challenge. The congregation had just finished (I think the paint was still wet!) installing an accessible entrance and bathroom. They'd installed a small elevator before that. They were understandably and appropriately proud and I was enthusiastic in my gratitude as they showed me the improvements.

"Then they took me upstairs to the worship space and showed me the pulpit, which was up four steps on the chancel. Those steps are not a barrier for me, but they would be for others. And we'd just been celebrating their good work in making the rest of the building accessible. And I choked. I stammered out something like "too bad those stairs are there...," which was neither very polite nor very helpful in reminding them there was still work to be done. And then I preached from their pulpit, even though it was inaccessible and even though I have a commitment to preach only from an accessible place in the room. (In this case, that just would have meant preaching from the floor rather than going up the steps to the pulpit.)

"The hardest times to hold ourselves and each other accountable compassionately is when the work has

begun but there's more to be done. We want to acknowledge the effort, and it feels a little awkward to say, "What a great start! You did something great, but you're not quite there." And sometimes, when we're the ones who have begun to change, it's hard to hear, "I'm still going to preach from the floor since not everyone can access your pulpit."

"And yet, as Dr. King says, we have to grapple with our incompleteness. We have to understand that we, like everyone else, are always going to be a mix of good intentions and incomplete effort; good results and some things that don't turn out that well; and yes, even good and evil. We are sometimes selfish, sometimes complicit with systems that do harm, sometimes the cause of pain and injustice. Until we can hold compassion for ourselves and others—until we can be forgiving when we fall short—our love is incomplete."

This view that Rev. Parker Dennison shares is a very different world view than "I'm with the good guys, and we will destroy all the bad guys."

In an early edition of our adult religious education curriculum *Building Your Own Theology* by Richard Gilbert in the section looking at what we think about human nature there were a series of quotes that included this one, "In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death." One might say that the writer was too optimistic since she died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, but what would her life have been like if she had given in to bitterness and hate? The words of Anne Frank are read by children and adults around the world today because in a situation where it would have been very easy and even understandable to give in to bitterness and hate she did not.

In the face of oppression and violence it would be easy to understand if Mahatma Gandhi or Dr. King had acted from bitterness and hatred. It would have been very easy for them to name bad guys and to encourage their/our destruction. . But they didn't. An eye for an eye just leaves the whole world blind. They believed people working together could change the world without firing a gun, exploding a bomb, landing a blow, or utterly destroying "the enemy."

And I have just prepared a whole sermon based on the quote, "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind," without a thought until the very end of how that quote might be taken by the blind. I confess I need educating. Please don't destroy me as the enemy. It was on fire when I lay down on it. Help me to grow.

Let us pray using the words of Rev. Parker Denniston: "Dear Spirit of Love, help us understand that to be human is to be always learning, always growing, always incomplete. Let this knowing enlarge our compassion for ourselves and for others. Help us grow in our capacity to forgive and to accept forgiveness when we make mistakes and in this way, become more capable of loving ourselves and each other. Amen."