

Catching the Devil by his Tale

Whether we call ourselves secular, spiritual or religious, we all have an operating system of 'background beliefs' that inform our attitudes and reactions. We're often unaware of them, and that, it turns out, is a very dangerous thing.

I'm particularly convinced that our concept of good and evil – ancient, embedded and mostly unconscious – needs an update in order for our future to be brighter than our past.

Years ago, hearing an American President refer to Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the "axis of evil", I tried to understand why I found this statement so disturbing.

We're all capable of demonizing others: individuals, ideologies, groups, countries. How is this helpful, to categorize others as evil? No further thinking is required. The "other" is consigned to a nether world. Metaphors of violence and war predominate in dealing with the world and its problems, rather than calm, constructive responses.

Myths of heroes and supervillains may be instructive and possibly even hard-wired in the human psyche. We need stories, symbols, art, the metaphorical language of poetry and religion. But we also need the anchor of science, a dose of integrity and a dollop of common sense.

What is evil but our own failings? When we walk into a room, we turn on the light, we don't switch off the darkness. In the same way, evil doesn't have a separate existence. As Abdu'l-Bahá said, *"ignorance is the want of knowledge; error is the want of guidance; forgetfulness is the want of memory; stupidity is the want of good sense."* Evil is the want of goodness, although the consequences of that lack can be very real.

The corruption and systemic wrongdoing at every level of our society is generally perpetrated by very normal people. Whistleblowers daily uncover tales of politicians, pedophiles, or oil company executives who knew for decades about the science of climate change, but deliberately obscured the truth.

There has to be constant vigilance, impartial judgement, fair and just consequences. But going beyond that to openly demonize the culprits – oil executives, tobacco lobbyists, or bankers selling sub-prime mortgages – is counter-productive. It creates monsters who allow us to feel smugly self-righteous. Worse, it works against the kind of critical thinking that allows us to build checks and balances to prevent future bad behaviour.

If our goal is to figure out how to make the world a better place, it seems far more useful to feel profoundly shaken by the realization that those "monsters" are just like us, separated only by circumstance and a few critical decisions. That would be closer to the truth.

To encourage a love of truth and create safe environments for its expression requires a society that's realistic enough to be thoughtful and tolerant. Empathy, humility and dispassionate reasoning are essential ingredients of civil discourse. Monsters belong in myths, legends and fairy tales.

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