

What is the Nature of Evil - David Madden

“High Noon” at the United Theatre February 8, 2024

On Sunday, February 4, Peter Laffin came to the meetinghouse to tell us about the film series at the United Theatre, “Movies with Meaning.” He told us there would be a discussion prior to a viewing of the next movie in the series, “High Noon” and asked us if any of us would like to participate in the discussion by giving a Quaker perspective to the movie. I took him up on the offer and participated last evening on Thursday, February 8. These are the three questions Peter asked me and Reverend Tony Dinoto from Christ Church in Westerly and the notes I referred to when responding.

What is the nature of evil?

1. There is that of God in everyone, peel away all the complexity of a human being, you would eventually come to the “Inner Light.”
2. We are not that Light itself, but the Light is contained in us as the basis of our nature
3. Therefore, Quakers don’t label human beings as evil.
4. People do terrible things, but evil is what people do, not what people are.
5. What’s difficult about this is it applies to all human beings, even those who do the most atrocious acts imaginable.
6. In my understanding, “darkness” is the word to use rather than evil.
7. Cruelty is committed because people are “in the dark.”
8. We don’t know or we fail to remember who we really are at the core of our being.
9. Each one of us is a vessel containing the Inner Light, each one of us is a temple housing the spirit of God.
10. It’s when we don’t know, or forget, our ultimate identity, that we find the horror that afflicts the world.

Is violence ever justified in defeating evil and in protecting loved ones?

1. It seems there are times, in the short run, when a person or society has no choice but to act violently in order to protect themselves, their immediate loved ones or their society
2. But in the long run, violence perpetuates further violence.
3. We can look at any situation where an individual or a society has acted in what we call an evil way and realize that at given points the evil act could have been prevented if he or she or they had been treated with love rather than hatred.

What can be done in a society to prevent evil from festering both in our community and in our world?

1. Martin Luther King: “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”
2. "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence", at the Riverside Church on April 4, 1967 exactly one year before he was assassinated.
3. “When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I’m not speaking of that force which is just emotional bosh. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality.”
4. As a Quaker, I believe the ultimate reality is what we call the Inner Light. The only way to prevent evil is to love one another. It’s as remarkably simple and immensely difficult as that.