

The Many Faces of Evil

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Phoebe was a beautiful girl from an exotic place. She moved to America with her sister and mother from Ireland. Soon after starting school, her classmates began to notice her. The boys were the first to take an interest in her, with her cute face and her unusual accent and an upbeat outlook on life. And as these things usually go in high school, when the boys notice a new pretty girl, the other girls get jealous. But despite this, Phoebe still made friends.

One day the captain of the football team asked her out. He dated Phoebe for a brief time, but never told her that he was still going out with another girl. The other girl felt betrayed, of course. Phoebe apologized to her, but hard feelings remained. Later, another boy did almost exactly the same thing: he dated Phoebe while still going out with another girl. Again Phoebe apologized for unintentionally cheating with this girl's boyfriend. And again hard feelings remained. In fact all four of these kids started to spread rumors about their new classmate and her supposed loose morals.

Sadly things did not end there. This is real life, and not a story line in a reality TV show. The taunts at school became worse. People would call Phoebe names from across the library in front of the entire class. Teachers and other witnesses did nothing in many cases, and in the few times they did intervene, it was so minor as to be ineffective. School became a living hell for Phoebe. She would get threats from her classmates, and would walk in between two of her friends so that she would not be attacked. People started harassing her on Facebook. Yet throughout even this she would still keep a stiff upper lip. Or at least she appeared to to her family and friends.

One day Phoebe was particularly happy; telling friends at school that she had figured a way out of her situation. That evening her younger sister found Phoebe dead having hung herself in their home. Some of her tormentors at school even continued to post nasty things about Phoebe on a website dedicated to her memory. But the death of Phoebe Prince last month has sparked a new debate about bullying in our society. Six of the students who were the ringleaders of her anguish and suffering are being brought up on felony charges. Yet it is impossible to walk away from Phoebe's story without asking ourselves the same questions we always ask ourselves when we hear tales of unspeakable cruelty and evil: How could this happen?

Sadly there are all too many faces of evil. There are the examples of the Nazis and their well documented policies of genocide and

extermination. There is the more recent example of terrorists and the attacks on September 11. More locally there was the shootings a couple of years ago of 13 children in an Amish school house just north of us in Lancaster. Yet even these do not exhaust the many faces of evil that haunt our world, especially if we consider the cruelty and violence done in the third world and our inner cities by unjust systems of oppression. Surely all of these examples are escapees from Pandora's infamous box.

What disturbs me the most about Phoebe's story of torment, suffering, and ultimately death is the sheer ordinariness of it. Excessive bullying is a situation that happens every day all throughout the country. In this case it had deadly results, but it feels like a story that could have happened anywhere to anyone. And that is why it is truly frightening.

One of the people who understood this the best was Alfred Hitchcock. His scariest films feature the most mundane villains. They don't wear black hats. They don't don goatees; a common convention in sci-fi movies. Why is it that when the crew in Star Trek goes to a parallel dimension or something like that, the "evil" Mr. Spock has a goatee? This is a convention I have resented ever since I grew one a few years ago. But in Hitchcock films, the perpetrators of evil are regular people doing regular things--running a hotel for instance. And yet it masks deeply evil intentions and action. Commenting on the trial in Israel of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, the journalist and philosopher Hannah Arendt coined the term, "The Banality of Evil."

Evil, she claimed, is not what the movies tell us it is. The bad guys don't look different from the rest of us. Indeed, she goes so far as to say that the bad guys could even be us given the right set of circumstances.

The bullying and suicide of Phoebe Prince is an example of the banality of evil. A sort of group-think developed among her tormentors. They created a kind of insular culture that had its own set of rules and dynamics. With these new behavioral norms in place it seemed acceptable, nay even laudable, to emotionally abuse this poor girl. No one questioned it for fear of becoming the next victim by the group. Philip Zimbardo, the creator of the infamous Stanford prison experiment, has dubbed this the "Lucifer Effect." It is that small cult-like group think that dehumanizes another person and still somehow justifies and rationalizes the behavior because the victim is no longer seen as human. Another famous example of the Lucifer Effect, Zimbardo points out, was the abuses at the Abu Graib prison in Iraq.

In our modern reading today, the Sociologist Peter Berger notes that in the 20th Century we began to stop asking, "How could God allow this to happen?" and shifted our question to "How could human beings be so evil?" It is an important distinction, and an astute observation I think. Berger argues that we all have a way of interpreting and understanding the world. For many, this includes some notion of the sacred or the holy. Berger's metaphor for this world view is "the Sacred Canopy." Whenever we encounter evil, or even hear about extreme

suffering, we question at a subconscious level our own sense of the meaning and order of the universe. There develops a little tear in our sacred canopy. And so we need a story, a way to contextualize evil and make sense of it, so that we can repair that tear in the sacred canopy.

These stories are attempts to explain, or in some cases explain away, evil. Some of you have heard some of these stories before, I am sure. "It is all part of God's plan." That is a famous one. When I worked as a hospital chaplain in Omaha, one of the first things they tell you is, "Never say it is part of God's plan." It makes God out to the bad guy, at precisely the moment when the patient may need to have faith that God is on their side. If you are battling a disease that has put you in the hospital, it is probably not good to think of God as being on the side of the disease!

But the Greeks had no such qualms. Indeed, they go beyond saying that evil is part of God's plan. They take it a step further and claim that evil is the revenge of the Gods taken upon humanity. Prometheus stole fire from the Gods. Zeus gets revenge by making a woman out of the ground. And yes ladies, I am afraid you should be offended by Greek misogyny in this case. Zeus believed that a woman would not be able to contain her curiosity, and out spills all of the evil in the world. I suppose that is one way of explaining how evil came to be. When faced with the dilemma of an all-powerful being who is good, and yet evil exists, the Greeks were willing to say: easy the Gods are not

good. They are jerks who fight amongst themselves and even with humans. They were willing to preserve their belief in a powerful God at the expense of having a moral one.

These days I doubt most people who believe in God would believe in that particular sort of God. Yet even if you don't believe in God, we all have a sense of order and meaning that we use to understand our world. Evil presents not only a problem for those whose sacred canopy includes God, but for all of us who act as if the world makes sense. Evil makes no sense. It is simply cruel for its own sake. It is incomprehensible. It is awesome, in the original meaning of that word. Religion is all about creating meaning and significance in life. It is our daily attempt to repair a torn sacred canopy when evil has rent it asunder.

I wept when I read about the torture and death of Phoebe Prince. I had been the victim of bullying before in my younger days, but never to that extent. When I thought about her plight my soul cried out to God, "How could you let this happen?" Why could this have not been stopped by someone? My own sacred canopy was torn. How do we make sense of this?

Well I have no definitive answer, only a provisional one. It is the response that works for me right now; maybe it will work for you too. I wouldn't normally put it in theistic terms, but for the sake comparing

apples to apple with the other things I have been talking about this morning, I will. I disagree with the Greeks that God is an all-powerful, yet morally suspect being. For me God would be the exact opposite: perfectly good, but with limited power. That limited power means that God suffers with us when times are hard, but may not be able to fix our life for us. Instead, God's power, if you want to call it that, is the power to persuade. God can move our hearts and souls and inspire us to do the right thing. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that he is always doing that. The problem is that too often we ignore that pull or are deaf to its pleadings. Our responsibility then, our spiritual duty if you will, is to become quieter and more discerning of the forces of beauty, truth, and goodness in the world that often have been called God in our culture. That is how I repair the sacred canopy.

The kids who tortured Phoebe Prince had lost the ability to hear the sacred within themselves, and certainly could not see it in her. Something was dead inside of the them at least while they were a part of their group. Somehow, somehow they convinced themselves that she was not human, not part of the same humanity that they were. How they came to this conclusion I do not know. However I do know that it is the same conclusion used by terrorists and murderers to justify their actions. This also explains why they are seen as "good kids" by other people in their life. Outside of their circle, they are good kids. It is only together

as a collective that the Lucifer Effect takes hold, and they are able to convince themselves that emotional abuse is OK.

Furthermore, there was a tremendous missed opportunity for the witnesses and teachers who saw these things happen to step in. Granted none of them knew the full story until afterwards, but they saw some of the abuse happen and could have gotten curious. Were there no moments that crosses their minds when they could imagine taking some heroic action? Was there no tug, no impulse to step in or check in with the poor girl? Perhaps there was, but obviously not enough.

And then there is the divine call to Phoebe herself. I have done too many funerals for people who have committed suicide to begin blaming the victim. Yet it is nothing short of tragic that Phoebe could think of no one to call, no friendly ear to call upon, no confidant to talk things through, short of taking her own life. For her the sacred canopy seemed irreparably torn. It appeared that there was no more meaning in this world, and so she left it. I am convinced that that is not true. Life is worth living, even under difficult circumstances. Was there no one to help her see this?

Thus this story seems to have a tragic ending for all concerned. That is everyone except one group of people: us, the hearers and witnesses to Phoebe Prince's life. Just as Pandora found hope at the bottom of her box, so too is there hope that remains for us. Let us be

inspired by her story to reach out to people in need, even if you don't know the whole story. Even a small gesture can transform someone else's inner life. Just as small acts of cruelty had a cumulative effect, so too can our small acts of kindness and love have a cumulative effect on both strangers and friends in our lives.

The first lesson is to listen to that still small voice within you. Some of you call it God or the spirit or soul. Some of you may call it simply regarding another human being as a gift from the universe. But whatever your beliefs are it is important that you remind yourself of them regularly. Nourish yourself spiritually through a regular practice that brings what is most important in your life to the forefront of your consciousness. The more you take what you believe for granted, the less power it will have in your life.

We call this spiritual practice for a good reason. It is practice for the performance known as the rest of your life. Should you ever find yourself in a group that has come under the influence of the Lucifer Effect, that degrades another person, who makes it seem OK to hurt or harm another just for being them, then in that case, act. It is important in that moment that we exhibit the moral fortitude and courage to speak out against evil. Evil that is not just the big stuff like terrorism or racism, but the banality of evil that masquerades as everyday life. That face of evil is hard to identify and easy to succumb to. But resist it we must, and that is why our spiritual practices of discernment are so crucial, not

only for ourselves, but for everyone we encounter in life. I truly believe that spiritual practice is the hope at the bottom of Pandora's box. But it is up to us to listen.

May we be ever vigilant in our spiritual practice and discernment. May we have the bravery to speak and act in ways that counter evil in whatever face we may meet it. And may the memory of Phoebe Prince and her family be blessed. Amen Blessed Be.