

Seeing the Sacred in Violence and Destruction  
UU Congregation of Lake County  
Eustis, FL  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
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Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly

Of reading her religious poems at the Unitarian church in Brattleboro, Vermont May Sarton said, “I suppose it went all right, but I felt...that the kind, intelligent people gathered in a big room looking out over pine trees did not really want to think about God. (God’s) absence... or (God’s) presence. Both are too frightening.” [Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biographies](#).

Sarton begins her poem, “Invocation to Kali” with a quote from Joseph Campbell, “The Black Goddess Kali, the terrible one of many names, ‘difficult to approach, whose stomach is a void and so can never be filled, and whose womb is giving birth forever to all things.’”

“.....It is time for the invocation, to atone For what we fear most and have not dared to face: Kali, the destroyer, cannot be overthrown; We must stay, open-eyed, in the terrible place. Every creation is born out of the dark. Every birth is bloody. Something gets torn. Kali is there to do her sovereign work Or else the living child will be stillborn. She cannot be cast out (she is here for good) Nor battled to the end. Who wins the war? She cannot be forgotten, jailed, or killed. Heaven must still be balanced against her. Out of destruction she comes to wrest The juice from the cactus, its harsh spine, And until she, the destroyer, has been blest, There will be no child, no flower, and no wine....It is time for the invocation: Kali, be with us. Violence, destruction, receive our homage. Help us to bring darkness into the light, To lift out the pain, the anger, Where it can be seen for what it is— The balance-wheel for our vulnerable, aching love. Put the wild hunger where it belongs, Within the act of creation, Crude power that forges a balance Between hate and love. Help us to be the always hopeful Gardeners of the spirit Who know that without darkness Nothing comes to birth As without light Nothing flowers. Bear the roots in mind, You, the dark one, Kali, Awesome Power.”

I have said more than once that my concept of God is not a person, but in moments when I need some personal representation or symbol for God Kali would now be my choice, Creator and Destroyer.

My concept of God and C.S. Lewis’s are nowhere near the same. Nevertheless, I share this from Lewis. “In the first book in The Chronicles of Narnia, “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe”, before the four Pevensie children have met Aslan they talk with Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about him. In the conversation Susan and Lucy find out that Aslan is a Lion.

“Ooh,” said Susan, “I thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and make no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver; “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver; “don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the king I tell you.”

Personally, I do not believe in a God who is a person or who can be described as a king, but I do believe in something holy and sacred and not safe. I could call that God. I could call it the Tao. I could call it Life with a capital L.

I do not believe that Life is safe. I do believe that we human beings can choose to make it good. And in that we can find the sacred in the midst of the violence and the destruction that are part of life. In that, I believe, there is blessing.

Where is the holy, the sacred in war? Where is the holy in a disease epidemic or an earthquake? Where is the sacred in an act of terrorism? Where is the holy, the sacred in an act of police violence?

Rabbi Harold Kushner, writer of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, says, “We could bear nearly any pain or disappointment if we thought there was a reason behind it, a purpose, to it. But even a lesser burden becomes too much for us if we feel it makes no sense.... The question we should be asking is not, “Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?” That is really an unanswerable, pointless question. A better question would be “Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?”

[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Theology/Suffering\\_and\\_Evil/Responses/Modern\\_Solutions/When\\_Bad\\_Things\\_Happen.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Theology/Suffering_and_Evil/Responses/Modern_Solutions/When_Bad_Things_Happen.shtml).

What am I going to do about it? In the answer to that question can be found the sacred.

The sacred in a war can be seen in those who risk their lives to get the wounded to a hospital and in those who keep that hospital open even with few supplies and under threat of bombardment. It is in those who welcome in the refugees and help them to begin again. And it is in the refugees who find enough hope and strength to make a new beginning.

The holy in a disease epidemic is found in policy makers who seek to find ways to control it and to prevent it happening again. The sacred in a disease epidemic is found in the doctors, the nurses, and the family members who care for the afflicted.

The holy in an earthquake is seen in those who dig through the rubble hoping to rescue one more person or at least allow a family to bury their dead.

The sacred in an act of terrorism is found in the people who come together to say, “This is too much.” It is in those who seek to find ways to stop our own senseless violence and in those who care for those who have lost loved ones and those who have been injured.

The sacredness in police violence is in a community coming together in protest. It is in police themselves committing to a community to serve them and not to fear or condemn them.

Sarton in her long poem, "The Invocation to Kali" notes that Kali lives within us, "Anguish is always there, lurking at night, Wakes us like a scourge, the creeping sweat As rage is remembered, self-inflicted blight. What is it in us we have not mastered yet? What Hell have we made of the subtle weaving Of nerve with brain, that all centers tear? We live in a dark complex of rage and grieving. The machine grates, grates, whatever we are. The kingdom of Kali is within us deep. The built-in destroyer, the savage goddess, Wakes in the dark and takes away our sleep. She moves through the blood to poison gentleness." Sometimes we don't even realize she is there.

Back in February of 2016 someone sent me a link to an article by Tom Jacobs in Pacific Standard magazine.

"In a series of studies, a University of Iowa research team led by [Andrew Todd](#) finds images of the faces of five-year-old black boys are sufficient to trigger whites into heightened-threat mode. "Implicit biases commonly observed for black men appear to generalize even to young black boys," the researchers write in the journal Psychological Science.

"The first of their experiments featured 63 college undergraduates, who 'completed a categorization task in which two images flashed on the monitor in quick succession. Participants were instructed to ignore the first time, which was always a face; it merely signaled that the second image was about to appear. Their task was to quickly and accurately categorize the second image (the target object) as a gun or a toy, by pressing one of two response keys.'

"In fact, the faces — all of five-year-old boys with neutral facial expressions — were a key component of the experiment. Six of them featured black children, and six white. Researchers wanted to know whether the race of the child would affect the speed and accuracy of the white participants' responses.

"It did. 'Participants identified guns more quickly after black-child primes than after white-child primes,' the researchers report, 'whereas they identified toys more quickly after the white-child primes than after black-child primes.'

"Subsequent experiments found black five-year-old faces produced just as strong an effect as photographs of adult black males. This held true when white participants were labeling images as guns or tools, and when they were shown a list of words (including 'criminal' and 'peaceful') and asked to categorize each as 'safe' or 'threatening.'

"In that last experiment, participants misidentified safe words as threatening more often after seeing a black face, and misidentified threatening words as safe more often after seeing a white one — child or adult.

"These racial biases were driven entirely by differences in automatic processing,' Todd and his colleagues write. In other words, no conscious thought was involved; whites simply saw a black male face and reacted in ways that indicated a heightened level of perceived threat.

"Even when the face was that of a five-year-old." <https://psmag.com/racism-in-the-kindergarten-classroom-6d6ab68ebc9c#.9ldvqx9ji>

Sarton writes, "Kali, the destroyer, cannot be overthrown; we must stay open-eyed, in the terrible place. Every creation is born out of the dark. Every birth is bloody. Something gets torn. Kali is there to do her sovereign work. Or else the living child will be stillborn."

So, are we to just let things be? This is just how the world is?

But to paraphrase Rabbi Kushner, "Now that this has happened? Now that this is the way things are, what can I do about it?" When we see violence, when we see something, someone, or some community being harmed or destroyed what we do can make a difference?

Knowing our own unconscious biases, we may think twice and address them. We may send aid to help victims of natural disasters. When the destruction of natural disasters are aggravated by human choices we can advocate for changes. We can make changes in our own lives and on our own property.

Rabbi Kushner says, "We could bear nearly any pain or disappointment if we thought there was a reason behind it, a purpose, to it. But even a lesser burden becomes too much for us if we feel it makes no sense.... The question we should be asking is not, "Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?" That is really an unanswerable, pointless question. A better question would be "Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?"

I think of the nonprofit MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving. It was founded by a mother whose daughter was killed by a drunk driver.

MADD is one example of someone turning their personal tragedy into a blessing for others, and, I might hope, some healing also for herself.

In December of 2014 mothers who said their unarmed sons were killed by police came together and met with officials from the United States Department of Justice <http://wjla.com/news/local/mothers-of-unarmed-young-black-men-killed-by-police-rally-in-d-c--109678>. I am sure no one wants to become part of that group but that these women have found one another and are seeking change together can help them bring meaning to the violence that has disrupted their lives.

Growing up Christian I was taught that God was all powerful and all good. How then does one explain war, deaths of children, tsunamis, earthquakes, killings by those society looks to to protect life? Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* concludes that God is not all powerful. He writes, "I believe in God. But I do not believe the same things about (God) that I did years ago, when I was growing up or when I was a theological student. I recognize (God's) limitations. (God) is limited in what (God) can do by laws of nature and by the evolution of human nature and human moral freedom.

He says, "I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason"

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That is Kushner's solution. I have gone a different route. I no longer believe in a God who is all powerful or good or even some kind of being with volition and will. There is no Aslan god-king in my theology.

For me, the something holy and sacred is more like the Tao than a personal god, more life with a capital L than a being who creates and controls life, more, as the Christian theologian, Paul Tillich describes it, not Being but the Ground of All Being.

Because it is the common word in my society I will still use the word God to describe that sacred and holy something that connects us to one another.

This Life capital L is not safe. It is up to us to make it good.

I believe that sometimes what is necessary in order to do that is for us to get angry about the destruction and violence in the world. Kali is the destroyer of evil. She wears a necklace of the skulls of demons she has destroyed. When I was a child I was taught that anger was a sin. I do not believe that now. There are some things we should be angry about.

Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were angry people. They turned that anger to righting wrongs and bringing more good to the world. Dr. King said, "... I say to you, my friends... there are certain things in our nation and in the world (about) which I am proud to be maladjusted and which I hope all (people) of good-will will be maladjusted until the good society is realized. I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self-defeating effects of physical violence...."

Now that this has happened to me or to my community, what am I going to do about it? That question can lead us to find the sacred in destruction and violence.

Neurologist, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl in his book, Man's Search for Meaning says, "(A) (hu)Man could be defined as the being who invented the gas chambers for human extermination. But (the) (hu)man can also be defined as the being who entered the gas chambers upright with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on (the) lips.'" Did the people who entered the gas chambers like that change anything? We might say they didn't, but is that so? Perhaps each act of defiance, each act of strength or hope does make a difference.

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