

3 Scheins Roundtable #8

Written by Bernie, Martha & Maggie Schein
Tuesday, 31 July 2012 12:54

What Can We Do?



Lately (or perhaps always?) the news has been filled with heinous people doing heinous things: Sandusky, Holmes, among others. The comments under the news feeds spew outrage, fear, horror and are riddled with terms like “evil,” “sick,” “madman,” and “crazy.” I have two questions: How DO we judge these shocking people? And how do we keep up with the reality of our world without becoming totally overwhelmed and embittered?

Jennifer, St. Helena Island, SC

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Again, we could each write dissertations on these questions and read every book that's ever been written and not come up with a good answer. But they are great questions, and ones I suspect we've all contemplated, so what follows is a very abbreviated sample of what happened when the three of us contemplated them:

Dr. Maggie: To me, there are some interesting, and no-less weighty, issues that lurk behind Jennifer's age-old questions. 1) What's the difference between labeling someone "sick" or "evil?" 2) Social media has changed the way we receive news both on TV and on the web (note the endless twitter scrolls and comment feeds even on live CNN shows—not to mention the commentary that accompanies news stories shared on Facebook and the like).

Philosophy gives us lots of tools to handle this question, as do certain religions. Both offer us evaluative criteria by which to make judgments, but unless you're a literalist or a dogmatic believer, in the real world, *really* bad people are, well, really problematic. How do we understand them? What, once we label them evil, do we do about them? Usually, our responses to how we label individuals who do heinous things is a reaction to what that label implies about how we should treat them, and often, I suspect, we label them as we do because we already have in mind how we want to treat them: For instance, if Sandusky is evil, then we get to be frightened, self-righteous, shun him and drive him out (of our lives or of the world altogether). If he is sick, we can still loathe and judge him, but sickness suggests he might be healed.

Bernie: But what *can* we do about them? Isn't that precisely the problem people like him bring up?

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Dr. Maggie: That is precisely the *fear* people like him bring up. Yes. I wonder if when we use the term “evil”— or even “sick” instead of evil (since even if he is sick it could be an irreversible disease) – it’s because these folks inspire a primal and terrifying panic that we can do NOTHING, or that we don’t know what to do (if he is evil, the devil or God will have to handle him). But, as is the fashion these days, let’s turn the question back on ourselves: if we are in a categorizing panic because we fear we can do nothing, what is it we can do nothing about, exactly?

Dr. Martha: Them. So, our reflex when we don’t know what to do is to label the problem as evil, mad—out of our control. The more our fear is activated, the more we want it to be someone else’s problem—god, karma, the devil, the judge, some expert doctor somewhere.

Dr. Maggie: Right. So, when we can’t do something about others, we are taught to examine ourselves.

Bernie: These people are monsters. Contemplating my navel, which I am now doing, doesn’t seem to be offering up any answers.

Dr. Martha: I think she’s asking us to rethink the problem. When we find ourselves at a conceptual/emotional impasse, sometimes the only way out is to reconfigure the path. If we can

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(or feel we can) do nothing about them, what can we do about us? I wonder what we can gain by looking at ourselves, our helplessness?

Dr. Maggie: What emotional response *are* we after when we label these people evil or sick. Evil comes up a lot in the world of animal rescue...and it allows us to express our energy—our passionate desire to DO SOMETHING—in indignant outrage. That at least bolsters our own sense of moral worth as well as allows us to vent the energy. But, I wonder, if that energy could be better channeled.

Bernie: Into doing nothing?

Dr. Maggie: There are some situations about which each of us can do something or connect with and inspire others to do something, but there are also some situations where, well, we can't—either because of who/where we are or because of who/where others involved are. For me to expend my energy raging at a machine I can't fix means I am wasting that energy, which could go to something I am actually relevant to, something I can affect and make a difference about in a positive way. I can't be, you can't be, no one can be relevant and able to impact all the bad that goes on in all the world.

Bernie: There's always *something* we can do. We can't just accept madness, evil, whatever you want to call it, as a way of life. Advocate, make people aware, legislate, prosecute, rehabilitate where possible. If you witness of an unspeakable act against a child, do

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something
to stop it.

Dr. Maggie: Absolutely. There is always something we can do, but we can't always do something about everything. "Where possible," and "If you witness...then do something," are the key phrases.

Dr. Martha: Let me put what Maggie's saying in psychological terms. When there's nothing you can do—whether you're dealing with a pedophile next door who's served his time, a cruel dog owner too sly to convict, the Neros who fiddle while Rome is burning, the Hitlers – not to admit to that is to live a lie, to live in Denial and to become, I would say, neurotic—machinating about that which is, in some sense, not part of a reality you can affect is not only (again in psychological terms) displacing your emotions, but also likely allowing you to indulge in unhelpful negativity.

This brings us to the second issue: Everyone knows the information we get on the web and the TV may not be neutral. We have each respectively chosen our preferred skews and channels and have prepared ourselves to filter the incoming news. What is new, and what we wonder if many of us have not fully prepared ourselves to filter and respond to is the way in which twitter updates, comment scrolls and feeds impact how we perceive and react to "the facts." The news has a way of flattening the world out—making it appear that every event is relevant to us and that we could or should affect (or at least respond emotionally to) every event. And social media has a way of inviting us all to scramble across its two-dimensional surface, like starving ants, able to "react" to this incomplete picture instantaneously, and then not only are we prompted to respond to the facts, but also to the reactions of the thousands of people also feeling the need to react—whether or not they are relevant to the facts in question. The question, Jennifer, we would ask ourselves when we feel overwhelmed, is: Is this event, is this person, is this comment (from say, Patriot22 or whomever) relevant to me? Is there an action I can take or a genuine

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conversation I can be part of to learn or effect positive change? If not, it is merely irrelevant noise. Go outside, walk and talk with your neighbors or family. Join Greenpeace, the board of education, or the Marines, if you want to and can. Be conscious of what you can do, with whom, and to what you are relevant and can either make positive change or be positively changed by. Ignore the rest.

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