

# **The Dark Knight of the Soul**

**By**

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Most stories need a hero and a villain, a good guy and a bad guy, a protagonist and an antagonist. But if we observe their behaviors alone, it's often difficult to distinguish the difference between the two. Take the almost archetypal images of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader from *Star Wars*: were it not that one wears white and the other black, typical Hollywood indicators of their rolls, their actions are a lot alike. Darth Vader uses the Force and a light saber against his enemies. Luke Skywalker uses the Force and a light saber against his enemies. The only difference is the side they're on. From the storyteller's perspective, Luke is considered the hero because he's fighting for the Rebellion, and Vader is the villain because he's fighting for the Empire. But, again, both sides use the same weapons, blasters and starfighters to kill each other. The ways they behave, the ways they treat each other, the ways they achieve their goals are the same. No wonder Luke Skywalker sees his own face beneath Vader's mask.

But if the story were told from the Empire's perspective, their rolls would be flipped. Vader would be the hero because he's reestablishing order by destroying terrorist rebels. This is true of most the stories we tell ourselves, be they fictional stories, real stories, or the stories of our own lives. Those who are on our side of the issues are its heroes and those who aren't are its villains. The only difference is which side we think we're on, and most of us consider ourselves the heroes of our stories because we're sure we have the right ideas and values, even though our tactics aren't altogether different from those whose ideas and values we oppose.

We saw this enacted this past week during the Congressional impeachment trial, throughout which those opposing the President insisted the indisputable facts are on their side, while those supporting him insisted there are no facts incriminating him. I'm not saying their respective arguments have equal weight. From my perspective, biased by my ideologies and values as I am, there is ample evidence the President used his office for political gain, and his defenders' arguments are usually illogical and baseless. But it's also obvious the facts aren't important to them, whether they exist or not. The only qualification necessary for his defenders is the fact that he's on their side. That's what makes him one of the good guys in their story.

I don't enjoy watching sports, but on the unusual occasion I attend a football game, I more enjoy watching the bewildering antics of the fans. When a referee throws a flag on a play in favor of their team, the crowd cheers uproariously. But when the same referee throws a flag against their team, they shout *ad hominem* attacks and outrageous conspiracy theories at him. "Are you blind!" "Whose side are you on!" "How much did your integrity cost!"

Unfortunately, such incongruent thinking and open hostility isn't limited to films and games, nor to one side or the other. Some of you may have read David Brooks column in *The New York Times* this week, "The Politics of Exhaustion." He distinguishes between two political blocs in our nation, the *proletariat* and the *precariat*. The proletariat are the working-class voters who support Donald Trump because they "see their best world receding and they want a tough guy to bring it back."<sup>1</sup> The precariat, he says, are "the young and educated voters caught in the gig economy, who see no career or security ahead."<sup>2</sup> Although there are some significant differences between them, Brook says they also share much in common, especially an indifference about whether or not their side plays by the rules. Any flags thrown against their leaders are dismissed as forms of oppression and privilege by the precariat, and with impossible conspiracy theories by the proletariat. "Haunted by economic insecurity," Brooks writes, "they will tolerate any sin in their leader—racism, anti-Semitism, dishonesty—so long as that person is willing to fight and be on their side."<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, these aren't the only two sides. Brooks estimates 75 percent of us are among a third camp he calls the politically *exhausted*. "they are simply worn out by the endless war between these two armies," Brooks says. "Exhaustion has become an independent force in modern politics. Many people are voting for whatever candidate will exhaust them less."<sup>4</sup> This may be why the term *oligarchy* is increasingly used to describe our nation, because it has become possible for a few people, about 25 percent, to rule over everyone else, be they in our government, on our college campuses, on social media, and even in our churches and other social circles. "the chief feature of the voters in the exhausted group is timidity," Brooks says. "Their instinct is to keep their heads down and just get through this craziness. On campuses 10 percent of students are able to intimidate the other 90 percent, who don't want to say the wrong thing and get canceled." *Canceled* means being digitally mobbed on social media, and having your reputation and career ruined, sometimes in seconds. Still, the divided oligarchs—the proletariat and precariat—aren't so good at defeating each other, he says, but, "they are really good at intimidating the moderates on their own side."<sup>5</sup> Except for a few foolhardy individuals who refuse to let our society and its institutions go down this path without speaking up, the exhausted 75-percenters have learned it's best to just keep quiet.

In feeling so certain they are on the right side, whichever side it is, far-left or far-right, and, therefore, don't have to obey the rules because the rules only apply to those on the wrong side, they feel perfectly justified in destroying their perceived enemies, which they accomplish by dehumanizing them. This is the point of my title, "The Dark Knight of the Soul." Some of you may recall a movie in the Batman franchise entitled *The Dark Knight*. Like most

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<sup>1</sup> Brooks, David, "The Politics of Exhaustion," *The New York Times*, Dec. 12, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

superheroes, Batman almost always fights masked villains. By hiding their faces from us, we can't see their humanity. They are dehumanized. They become Jokers, Riddlers, Penguins. It's the same in *Star Wars*: the human faces of its villains, Darth Vader and his stormtroopers are hidden from our view. In Marvel's *Captain America*, the main villain has the face of a skeleton and the faces of his army are always obscured by masks and helmets. Captain America's team, by contrast, all have their human faces exposed. Like all the stories we tell ourselves, the heroes are human, the villains are not. This little Hollywood trick allows us to watch our heroes kill their enemies by the hundreds without eliciting much empathy from us. If they're inhuman, why should we care? Other movies, like *James Bond*, *Rambo*, and the *Taken* films, make their villains so inhuman in their behavior, so unimaginably heartless, so sadistic, that we likewise can't wait for them to get what coming to them, no matter how violent and retributive it is.

But, again, this isn't about what happens in action movies and ballgames, but about how we treat each other in real life. Too many of us think nothing of dehumanizing those we disagree with because we think having the right opinions and values makes us the real humans. Whether we're fighting to overthrow a tyrannical government or part of a government fighting to protect our freedoms against terrorists is inconsequential to how we see ourselves. Whichever side we're on, we're the human heroes of our story, fighting against the inhumanity of our adversaries.

That's what I like about *Batman: The Dark Knight*: it exposes this deception by making it clear there's no difference between Batman and his adversaries. He too wears a mask that hides his humanity. His heart has been darkened by hatred for his enemies. His mind had gone insane with vengeance. And his idea of justice is to inflict violence and suffering on others. Batman and his enemies are the same. The only difference is the side they're on, the rightness and wrongness of which is determined by which side is telling the story.

In real life, whether it's those on the right dehumanizing their adversaries by labeling them liberals, radical leftists, communists, and so on, or those on the left using social media to dismiss their adversaries as racists, homophobic, transphobic, and the like, the behavior is much the same. In her new book, *Don't Label Me*, Irshad Manji writes of the "penance for going rogue in the social justice movements: 'shaming,' 'scolding,' 'isolating,' and 'eviscerating someone's social standing.'"<sup>6</sup> Manji, who is herself nonwhite, Muslim, and gay, is quoting a blogger named Frances Lee who wrote of their willingness to be "excommunicated" from the "church of social justice."<sup>7</sup> Lee, who identifies as a "Queer Trans Person of color," and already left fundamentalist Christianity, "couldn't abide the equally 'disturbing' dogma that has polluted justice movements."<sup>8</sup> "Punishment has been used for all

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<sup>6</sup> Manji, Irshad, *Don't Label Me*, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY, 2019, p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

of history to control and destroy people,” they say. “Why is it being used in movements meant to liberate all of us?”<sup>9</sup>

I know the feeling. Just a couple days after I gave away my controversial book and was banned from General Assembly last June, the Spokesman Review wrote an article about the event, mentioning a letter written by more than 300 of my ministerial colleagues accusing me of being racist, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist, without having had time to read my book. As unjust and unfounded as these labels are, I’ve been defending myself against them ever since, against members of my own liberal community, some of whom have known me for years. But, as Manji explains, nowadays “imperious individuals, pretending to speak for all liberals, intimidate decent people into clamming up.”<sup>10</sup> There’s that word again: *intimidation*. Yet, for better or for worse, I’m not one among the 75 percent willing to clam up under pressure.

Only a short time later, at the Freedom in the Arboretum annual 4<sup>th</sup> of July event (in Spokane, WA), our conservative republican Sheriff Ozzie Knezovich began addressing the crowd. “Be careful not to demonize people,” he said, “because once you demonize someone, you can easily dehumanize them. And once you dehumanize someone, you feel justified in doing whatever you want to them.” After talking a bit more about how easy it is to dehumanize people on social media these days, precisely because we don’t have to see their faces, like the villains in *Batman* and *Captain America*, he said, “When I saw the name of a friend of mine mentioned in the paper last week, I thought, ‘Man, if he’s a racist, what hope is there for the rest of us?’” He then looked directly at me and said, “You know who you are. You know what you’re about. I know it hurts. But don’t let them get you down. Just keep being who you are and doing what you do.”

I have to admit, I was deeply touched to have a man who I’ve been publicly at odds with on some issues extend a level of support even some of my friends haven’t. Afterward, I went to thank him, and he hugged me. “I know how it is Todd. Sometimes it feels like they’re ripping the heart right out of your chest. But you just keep doing what you believe is right. You know who you are. Hold on to that.”

Sheriff Ozzie and I may not agree on some things, but we both value the humanity of others, including those who think differently than we do. Ozzie embraces my humanity even though we have differences, even as many of my liberal colleagues immediately began dehumanizing me for a book they had not read. I also embrace and recognize Ozzie’s humanity and am glad we can disagree and still be friends. That’s the way it should be. That’s what Unitarian Universalism is supposed to be about, not thinking alike to love alike.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

But, like I said, every story needs a protagonist and an antagonist, and it always feels better if we're on the hero's side. Being charitable to those we disagree with, loving our perceived enemies, humanizing them, relating to them is hard work. Reducing them to a label is so much easier and makes us feel better about ourselves in the process. But, as the *Tao te Ching* says, "When people see some things as good, other things become bad." When we see ourselves as good, other people become bad, and the more we convince ourselves of our righteousness, the worse they become and the worse they deserve.

Today those of us on the left often stake our claim to the righteous side beneath the banner of diversity, which is a good banner, so long as our actions don't make us indistinguishable from our adversaries in its name. Certainly, some people disagree with our progressive camp because of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and so forth, but labeling everyone in this way just because they disagree with us is cruel and cowardly. As Manji puts it, "Some people oppose diversity because they *are* bigots. Others, though, are skeptical of diversity because of how we, its champions, practice it. We're fixated on labeling. And labeling drains diversity of its unifying potential."<sup>11</sup>

But these days it's become easier than ever to label and dehumanize others by using social media. As Guy Harrison says in his book, *Think Before You Like*, "Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter users know that great power is always at their fingertips and the fingertips of others. With a simple click they can banish or be banished from a community forever."<sup>12</sup> No wonder the politically exhausted are so easily intimidated into keeping their mouths shut or coerced into joining the digital mobs so they don't themselves become suspect. "Exiling was a common practice in some ancient societies," Harrison says. "Some viewed it as a fate worse than death. And here we are again. Today, people are exiled from social media tribes every moment."<sup>13</sup>

Not long after the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush said, "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror."<sup>14</sup> That's often the sentiment of the Dark Knight, that you're either for or against us, and if you're against us, you're a faceless, inhuman villain who deserves what's coming. It's a sentiment, oddly enough, originally attributed to Jesus in the *Gospel of Matthew*. But it simply doesn't jive with the rest of his message and is corrected in the Gospels of *Mark* and *Luke*. What he really said, according to their accounts, is "Whoever is not against us, is for us."<sup>15</sup> That's almost the opposite of the misquote, and, like much of what Jesus said, goes against the status quo. Simply disagreeing with us doesn't make others our enemies. Just because they fail to join our cause, or because they think differently, or speak differently, or act differently than we do, doesn't make us adversaries. If they aren't

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Harrison, Guy P., *Think Before You Like*, Prometheus Book, New York, NY, 2017, p. 187.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/gen.attack.on.terror/>

<sup>15</sup> Mark 9:40, Luke 9:50

actively working to do us harm, people aren't our enemies. It's okay to have differences. It's okay to think differently. We can still be on each other's side even if we disagree, because agreement isn't what binds human relationships, it's respecting each other enough to embrace our differences that defines what it means to love one another.