

Saving Paradise
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*“Seek not afar for beauty
Lo, it glows in dew-wet grasses
All about your feet...”*

These lines from our Unitarian Universalist hymnal speak of beauty that is here and now -- beauty before us, beauty above us, beauty within us -- beauty all around us.

The religious spirit at the heart of our Unitarian Universalist faith is a deep yes to the sacredness of this earth, this life, a heaven found -not somewhere else - but here. The 16th century Sufi mystical poet Hafiz says:

*“We have not come into this exquisite world
to hold ourselves hostage from love...
or to confine our wondrous spirits,
but to experience ever and ever more deeply
our divine courage, freedom and light.”*

Hafiz is kin to another mystic I have been studying recently: Ephrem of Syria, a 6th century, eastern Christian saint. Ephrem is part of a mystical tradition that says Paradise is not some lost, other world, or a place to be entered after death. Paradise is here and now and it is entered through a religious life that practices generosity and non-violence, that builds communities of mutual care in the face of injustice and brokenness, and that rejoices in life's exquisite goodness. Listen to these lines from Ephrem of Syria:

*“Paradise surrounds the limbs
with its many delights;
the eyes, with its handiwork,
the hearing, with its sounds,
the mouth and the nostrils,
with its tastes and scents
Paradise raised me up as I perceived it,
It enriched me as I meditated upon it . . .
It renewed me with all its varied nature
I swan around in its magnificent waves . . .
I became so inebriated
That I forgot all my sins there . . .”*

St. Ephrem wrote at a time when Christians believed that Jesus had opened paradise for all to enter. By his birth, teachings, healings, and his resurrection (notice what is missing from that list - his birth, teachings, healings and resurrection) he re-opened paradise whose gates had been closed when Adam and Eve sinned and were banished from the Garden in Eden. With the re-opening of paradise, humanity was restored to its original, created goodness. Through baptism -- a ritual of immersion into the river of life, flowing from the garden of paradise -- converts to Christianity began a spiritual journey deeper and deeper into paradise.

Central to the journey into paradise was practicing the spiritual disciplines and ethics of paradise. Through non-violence, sharing resources and providing mutual assistance, early Christians created communities that allowed life to flourish, even in the presence of persecution, violence, and death. For these early Christians, paradise was a realm that permeated this world - that could be tasted, seen, felt, here and now. And the purpose of life in religious community was to make paradise tangible.

Recently my friend and co-author, Rita Nakashima Brock, and I traveled to Italy and Turkey to study the art and architecture of early Christianity. We discovered that to enter an early Christian church was to walk into paradise.

In St. Apollinarie in Classe, outside of Ravenna, Italy, for example, the whole front of the 6th century church is a mosaic of a vast emerald green meadow, dotted with flowers and birds. Fluffy sheep graze safely. Everywhere in early Christian mosaics, we encountered the four rivers of paradise flowing from the Garden of Eden, filled with fish, ducks, cranes, turtles. We saw deer and doves drinking - images for the souls whose thirst is quenched in this world by God's presence. We saw blue twilight skies streaked with rainbow clouds, or night skies, glittering with silver and gold stars. We saw saints and apostles, virgins and martyrs circled in haloes of fire and everywhere we were surrounded by spiraling green vines of acanthus or grapes. Just to enter the church was to encounter abundant, vibrant life and to experience the communion of saints, across the boundary of death.

Ephrem writes:

*“The assembly of saints
Bears resemblance to Paradise
In [the church] each day is plucked
the fruit of the One who gives life to all,
In it . . . is trodden the cluster of grapes,
to be the Medicine of Life . . .
There manifest and lovely
To the eye of the mind
Are the coveted banquets of the just
Who summon us
To be their companions and..
Their fellow members...*

Let us be their kindred.”

Such a vision of church as paradise is largely lost to us now. It was eclipsed in the 11th century, when Western Christianity abandoned paradise in this world, and replaced it with the idea that paradise could only be entered after death – and violence could help get you there. The decisive turning point came in 1095 when Pope Urban the II called the first crusade. Up until Urban’s time, Christians regarded violence as a sin. War could be waged in self-defense or to right an injustice. But war was always a last resort. Even if the cause was just, those who participated in war committed a sin and were required to do penance to heal their souls. But with the call of the first crusade this changed. Urban declared that war was not only just, it was a form of serving God, an act of love for one’s blood kin. Through killing Jews and Muslims, crusaders would receive forgiveness for all their sins, and would be assured of a place in paradise. Paradise was no longer attainable in this life - it became a realm to be entered after death, and war could get you there.

Beginning with the first crusade, the crucifixion of Jesus became the central image for Christian worship. Before then Jesus had never been depicted dead, nor had his body been shown suffering in torment on the cross. The kinds of images so horrifically presented in Mel Gibson’s *Passion of Christ* that opened in theaters last spring (and now are available on DVD) did not exist for the first thousand years of Christian art. At the time of the 11th century crusade, images of crucifixion began to proliferate. Anselm of Canterbury, Pope Urban’s friend, formulated an explicit theology of atonement, proposing that God became human in Jesus in order to die on the cross and pay God back for humanity’s sins. He described Jesus death as a pleasing gift to God. This theology supported the crusades: soldiers imitated Christ by offering themselves to be sacrificed for the cause. Such theologies functioned as war propaganda. To kill or be killed for God became the fastest route to Paradise. The Communion meal became a reenactment of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. His death not his birth became the passageway into salvation. Enemies of God were categorized on the basis of racial and cultural otherness. Humanity was divided into the saved and the damned. Apocalyptic imagination intensified, leading to the notion that the redemption of this world could only be accomplished by destruction of this world.

With the advent of crucifixion-centered theologies, paradise was lost. It was no longer tasted and felt as a spiritual realm to be entered in this life. It was postponed to the hereafter, or secularized, as a land to be conquered. When Christopher Columbus set sail, he was looking for paradise for its fabled gold and jewels. Colonization, with its exploitation of peoples and lands - evolved from the loss of paradise. Materialism filled the spiritual void.

We live now --within the dominant culture of the west -- in the aftermath of the closing of paradise. We live with the legacy of militarism, racism and exploitation of the earth and its peoples that has put paradise at risk. The recent tsunami, for example, has been heartbreakingly tragic. But it would not have been so devastating had there not already been massive environmental damage to the coral reefs and the island forests, which used

to provide a barrier against the impact of tidal waves.

And yet, with all of this, there is some whiff of paradise that still reaches us. Walking through the woods in the early morning, we catch glimpses of it. Singing in church, we hear strains of its harmonies. Cooking supper for friends, garlic and basil simmering in olive oil, the fragrance of paradise touches our senses. We lift a child into our arms and dance. In our twirling we feel paradise in our limbs.

Re-discovering paradise and re-committing ourselves to the ethics of paradise is just what we need now. Western culture needs to stand again at the open doors of paradise and find its way to re-enter this world as a sacred site, as holy ground.

The Universalist part of our Unitarian Universalist heritage can help show the way. Jane Lead - a 17th century Universalist foremother is especially worth remembering today during this 100th anniversary celebration of Universalist women. In her diaries, published in 1697, she offers a spiritual vision of paradise not as an other-worldly, post-mortem realm, but as a place that can be entered in this life.

“Come, enter the garden” Jane Lead says to us in the words we heard read this morning. “You may think that the gate has been closed and locked, that a cherubim with a fiery sword guards the entrance but there is a way in.”

Lead saw the church as the renewed garden of paradise, and invited its members to become plantings of God, watered by the Spirit, springing up as flowers, vines, trees, and fruits. She said we could experience the presence of the divine in “the burning bush of our humanity.” She called humanity’s “beautiful diversity” a testimony to the fecundity of God’s generative presence. Jesus appeared to her in a vision and said, “I was particularly manifested to the world in the Singularity, but now henceforward expect me to appear in Plurality.” The world needs this Universalist affirmation of pluralism. The garden of paradise is not mono-cultural.

To Lead entering the garden meant being spiritually transformed into a person who was rooted in love, who was growing and unfolding as a plant in the Garden of God. Speaking in metaphors she told people they could become trees spring up from the rich loam of wisdom and goodness, drawing sustenance from the river of life, yielding fruits of compassion, generosity, and healing. She said that paradise could be now, and our own lives could be part of the renewal of paradise.

In the church she founded, she preached that people’s senses could be ecstatically opened to tasting, seeing, hearing, the beauty that is God, that is within, among, and all around us. She writes, “Wisdom’s Star with its Bright Glance, gave notice to us where we might come to ..behold ..a most sweet and pleasant existence growing from the Life-Tree which is rooted in the deep soil of the All-Eternity.”

In her journal entry of May 18th 1676 she went so far as to suggest that each one of us gives birth to God through our own bodies, counseling us to self-culture, self-care, and

self-respect: “Come, enter into your Self, view and see [what] the Life-Birth hath wrought out of itself. God-man fully. [divinity fully in humanity]. Great care and charge of this young plant you are to take, and to nurse it up with its own Virgin-Milk.”

Jane Lead’s Universalism re-imagined salvation. For her, salvation was not the gift of a crucified savior whose death pleased a wrathful God and freed people from punishment. For her, salvation was the restoration of paradise, was the re-opening of the Garden, was the restoration of humanity’s likeness to God, in splendid diversity.

Though Jane Lead remains virtually unknown (you can track her down on microfilm), later Universalists would carry forward her themes. In 1805, the Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou said heaven and hell are not to be found in the afterlife, but in the life we create here and now for one another, and he categorically rejected violent doctrines of the atonement. Jesus’ crucifixion did not save us. Jesus’ embodiment of creative love and justice did. The world needs this Universalist vision of salvation without violence.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Clarence Skinner emphasized the social ethics of Universalist theology. Listen to these words from 1915:

“We accept the world for the joyous place it was meant to be. We like it, despite the fact that belated theologians look upon it with inherited suspicion. It is no longer ‘the world, the flesh and the devil,’ but ‘the world, the flesh and God.’ [Skinner continues:] Modern religion must sanctify the world. . . The dominant motive is no longer to escape from earthly existence, but to make earthly existence as abundant and happy as it can be made. . . . Therefore let us . . . smash the injustices, the tyrannies, the sins which imprison us . . . [and] speed those readjustments which will make life here and now justify our hopes.”

The world needs this Universalist passion for counter-oppressive work and reverence for life in this world.

When I first came to Starr King School for the Ministry – our Unitarian Universalist school in Berkeley, California – in 1990, I was new to Universalism. I asked Gordon McKeeman, one of our great Universalist ministers and a former president of Starr King School, to explain Universalism to me. He said, “It’s simple: Universalists believe we are all going to end up together in heaven, so we might as well learn to get along with each other now.”

Being part of the Universalist heritage calls us to bring the gifts of this heritage into our lives and into our world. Universalism tells us we come to know the world as Paradise when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and the earth. Generosity and mutual care are the pathway into knowing that paradise is here and now. This way of living is not utopian. It does not spring from the imagination of a better world, but from a profound embrace of this world. It does not begin with knowledge. It begins with love, and it transforms what we know.

Concluding Story

Last summer Rita Nakashima Brock and I joined my brother's family for a week long backpacking trip into the Ansel Adams wilderness in California, on the eastern slope of the Sierra. To get to the trailhead, we took a forest service bus from Mammoth Lakes up to Agnew Meadows. Other climbers, hikers, and fisherfolk were on the bus with us. While the bus switchbacked up the narrow road through the pine forest up to the meadows, my seat mate and I began to talk. He'd overheard my brother talking to me and Rita about our theological work and wanted to know what we'd written. A question any author likes to hear, I told him about our book, *Proverbs of Ashes*, that exposes how Christian ideas that the death of Jesus saved humanity have sanctioned domestic violence, sexual abuse, racism, homophobia and war. He said he had been raised Catholic and that his wife was the daughter of a Methodist minister. Church was important to him.

"But I can't believe all those old doctrines," he said, "And I never was comfortable with the bloody crucifix hanging over the altar. I couldn't understand why we would be worshipping it. But I learned a way of life from the church that I have not rejected."

"What is that way of life?" I asked

"Oh, it's simple," he said. "Love your neighbor as yourself. Try to help, not harm. Do what you can to make a difference." He went on, "We do foster care for kids." He said it was heart breaking to see some of the violence, abuse, and deprivation the kids have experienced. But he and his wife welcomed them into their home and did what they could. "Not even love can repair the damage sometimes," he said. "I know," I replied.

"What is the book you are working on now about?" He asked.

"Paradise," I said.

"Paradise," he mused, and looked out the window of the bus for a few moments at the bright sky, the deep green pine forests, the alpine meadows coming into view. And rising above them the sharp peaks of the Minarets.

"Do you mean paradise like where we are right now?"

"Yes," I said. "Like where we are right now."

We both gazed out the window for a few moments, breathing the pungent, fresh air.

"This is enough," he said.

"You know that because you help kids," I said.

A cloud of thoughtfulness passed over his face.

“Yes,” he said, “that’s right.”

Benedictory

Denise Levertov wrote,

*“Don’t say, don’t say there is no water
to solace the dryness at our hearts
I have seen
The fountain springing out of the rock wall
And you drinking there...
That fountain is there
It is still there and always there
With its quiet song and strange power
To spring in us,
Up and out through the rock.”*

When we teach our children,
visit the sick,
care for those who are struggling with heavy burdens
–whatever they may be,
when we take the hand ready to help us
when we are in need,
when we gather together
for moments of celebration or mourning,
when we share our resources to
build a more lovely common good
than we could create alone –

We are the fountain springing up
to make a paradise of God.
We are reverencing life.
We are embracing life’s exquisite beauty.
We are experiencing ever more deeply
our divine courage, freedom and light.
We are manifesting divinity
in the burning bush of our humanity.
We are savoring
and we are saving paradise.
May it be so.
Amen.

First Reading

These words (slightly adapted) are from the Universalist mystic, preacher and church founder, Jane Lead, published in 1697.

Know then that there is a secret hidden Garden
Which the river Pishon doth water.
It is a temperate climate, neither too hot nor too cold,
And here do grow all sorts of healing herbs
That have such a vigorous seed of life in them
That their life never doth fade.
Here also grow every kind of spicy trees
Which through the exhaling Sun and the rest of the divine planets
Do produce a mighty strong fragrancancy.
Here are hid within this holy ground
The veins of pure gold, with all precious stones.

But thou wilt say,
“This is a sealed up Place;
none can come here;
it is a Garden so richly furnished
that who among mortals
may be entrusted with the key?”

True it is, that it hath been concealed
Because it was not proper for thee to come herein
Until thou hadst taken Wisdom’s degree of high philosophy.

Come, gird up thy spirit,
Put sandals upon thy feet
And follow me into this secret place.
The doorkeeper here doth well know my voice:
To the call of Wisdom he will open,
Thou shalt see.

Second Reading

From the contemporary poet, Denise Levertov:

Don't say, don't say there is no water
To solace the dryness of our hearts
I have seen

The fountain springing out of the rock wall
And you drinking there. And I too
Before your eyes

Found footholds and climbed
To drink the cool water.

The woman of that place, shading her eyes,
Frowned as she watched—
But not because
She grudged the water,

Only because she was waiting
To see we drank our fill and were
Refreshed.

Don't say, don't say there is no water.
That fountain is there among its scalloped
Green and gray stones,

It is still there and always there
With its quiet song and strong power
To spring in us,
Up and out through the rock.

Take good heed and gather thou there where I shall express to thee; for thou art come where the real and choice Simples do grow out of the All-Essential Good. All which plants here thou dost see, from one seed do after their kind thus multiply in this Variety.

She describes how virtues of hope, fortitude, insight can be mixed together as a healing

medicine

“Now for the Holy Ointment, which I would give thee skill to make,
Go first to that Bed where the precious Thyme is included, and take there seven handfuls thereof: then take the like quantity of the Baulm of Hope ; and of the Sweep Majoram of Patience...to these let there be also added the Spirit of Mind’s Power, the eye-bright of all-seeing, the Rue of Fortitude, and . . . extract the Juice out of them,
Hereupon a soft gentle Fire from the Altar is to be taken, and then diffuse in the Golden Vessel of the pure Humanity and thou shalt see what a fragrant restorative ointment this will come to be; where by all cures shall be wrought ... the knowledge of this art being engrafted in thee...co-inherent within thy inwards parts to transmute and make all that which was of a divided property to be of one pure and rarified sort and constitution; as relating to the healing part, which through the whole of humanity is to disperse itself.

Words of encouragement:

“Wax not faint, but persevere with all diligence and not be turned aside though you do meet sometime with the waters of strife; but hold out, or all is lost which already is wrought. For I would not that either of you who so voluntarily yourselves to me have bound, should grow weary, till I your work have crowned, having chosen you out of my olive-ground to sprout, that so ye may to each other empty forth what I your fountain has blessed you with as a fruitful womb to bring forth even that mighty Lordly Sprout which will make your Heavens and Earth t shout; and all the host of them to praise and celebrate the rising star from the east therefore with all fear and care go one and persevere till that all things shall be put under him who is born in you the [p King of Salem against whom great conspiracies will be, but as he in you shall grow up, he shall them all defeat, through the crown of this anointing oil, which I am to show thee how to make. First then come with me into my secret Lebanon [cedar foerst], where the beds of spices are ... drink of this liquor of life . . .prepared [by the great Artist] . . . and also give therof to the Thirsty

The Editor write:

May we perfectly love God,
Walking with God

“in this Paradisiacal Garden, the entrance where to, that has been shut up, is setting open To which burning sea of love these secret spicy walks will lead thee; while the holy angels and perfected saints will accompany thee all the way, reaching out to thee such fragrant Immortal Flowers and such refreshing, transforming, and transubstantiating fruits, as do spring forth from the very root of the deity. Here therefore I would gladly leave thee. If thou art not already entered, wisdom calls unto thee hereinto to enter, and to pass quickly the sword of the Cherub: which she (Wisdom? Jane Lead?) will assist thee to Break. But if thou art entered, then here abide, and walk, till thou art brought to the shore of that sea . . .which will waft thee over to the new Jerusalem. Where I with thee . . do long to sing, Glory to God in the Highest, flying in the midst of the Heavens upon the wings of the Dove-Spirit.”