

# “Renovating Paradise”

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## Reading

“Genesis Strain” by Virginia Hamilton Adair,  
from *Ants on the Melon: A Collection of Poems*

Not sure how I got there,  
But a perfect location: smog less,  
Free food & 4 unpolluted rivers.

The man I took to at once—  
Our bare bodies made us forget  
Our parents (if we ever had any).

Adam was given a desk job, naming  
Species; I typed the name tags,  
Kept the files, fixed coffee, dusted,

Found the best plants for food, picked  
Perma-press leaves for rainshaws  
& little aprons to keep off gnats.

One super-tree I couldn't believe.  
Too good to be true! But try it,  
Our friendly next-door serpent said.

That night I served Adam Wisdom  
Thermidor, made from the super-fruit,  
& we smoked the leaves, & WOW!

Adam agreed that was a great  
Day in the garden. We felt young  
& wise—really on top of it all.

What happened next is beyond me:  
Our landlord beating on the door,  
Asking these weird questions,

Pointing out clauses in the lease:

No picking fruit from THAT tree;  
No getting smart ideas.

He began to issue us clothing  
(Dead skins) from the company store.  
We were already in debt, he told us.

Nothing we'd done was right,  
In HIS eyes. Adam chickened, whined,  
“Get off my back. It was all Eve.”

After that, hell broke loose.  
You should have heard the curses.  
Not even Adam had executive clemency.

The snake was sure I'd ratted on him  
& bit me. Adam stomped him. Now his kids  
Can't play with our kids anymore.

We were evicted from Eden Gardens.  
Those goons with the flamethrower!  
You better believe we went quietly.

Adam found ranching a real drag  
Before slaves or tractors; got his kicks  
Gunning down animals and neighbours.

Our boys are just like him, itching  
To kill each other, & the girls like me  
—brainwashed pushovers & finks.

How did I get here? Via millennia,  
Freezing my brains with our meatballs;  
Vacuuming my soul with the wall-to-wall.

Tomorrow we run out of air and water.  
Holy earth, you need the Maytag  
More than our towels do & A NEW MYTH.

**Reading**                    “How the Story Might Have Ended” – Rabbi Harold Kushner

So the woman saw that the tree was good to eat

and a delight to the eye, and the serpent said to her,  
“Eat of it, for when you eat of it, you will be as wise as God.”

But the woman said,  
“No, God has commanded us not to eat of it,  
and I will not disobey God.”

And God called to the man and the woman and said to them,  
“Because you have hearkened to My word  
and not disobeyed My command,  
I shall reward you greatly.”

To the man, He said, “You will never have to work again.  
You will spend all your days in idle contentment,  
with food growing all around you.”

To the woman, He said,  
“You will bear children without pain  
and you will raise them without pain.  
They will need nothing from you.  
Your children will not cry when their parents die.”

To both of them, He said, “For the rest of your lives,  
you will have full bellies and contented smiles.  
You will never cry and you will never laugh.  
You will never long for something you don’t have,  
and you will never receive something you always wanted.”

And the man and the woman grew old together in the garden,  
eating daily from the Tree of Life and having many children.

And the grass grew high around  
the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil  
until it disappeared from view,  
for there was no one to tend it.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Harold Kushner, *How Good Do We Have to Be? A New Understanding of Guilt and Forgiveness*, New York City: Little, Brown and Company, 1996, 32-33.

## Sermon: “Renovating Paradise”

Adam and Eve. A garden and a tree. A serpent and an apple.

A story of paradise found and later lost.

It is a story I suspect most of us could tell with some ease.

In fact, so familiar is this foundational myth,  
that I’ve already shared two readings with you  
that refer back to this ancient story from Genesis,  
without my needing to mention the original source at all.

Whatever our religious background,  
this story has impacted so much of our thinking in the Western world.

Its images adorn great works of art  
and show up in advertisements on television.

For those of us who came from certain religious backgrounds,  
this story was sold as a commentary on human nature—  
an explanation for the belief that humans are born broken,  
that we come into this world under a cloud of original sin,  
all because of something that our great-great-great-great . . .  
grandparents did at the very dawn of time.

But to know this story is to know  
the consequences that came with eating that apple,  
with disobeying God’s command to steer clear of a certain tree,  
a tree that promised to give an irreversible knowledge of good and evil—  
concepts Adam and Eve had never had to contend with  
in their cushy life back in the Garden of Eden.

But the apple was eaten, and the damage was done.

For acting on the advice of Satan-the-talking-snake,  
God kicked the happy couple out of Paradise forever.

It hardly seems fair.

Beyond being banished,  
they were told they would never again have it quite so easy—  
that Adam would have to work hard for every morsel of food to come,  
and that Eve—and every mother to follow—

would labour in the pains of childbirth.

With one bitter bite, paradise was lost.

But as Rabbi Kushner says,

“...the story of the Garden of Eden is a tale,  
not [so much] of Paradise Lost but of Paradise Outgrown,  
not of Original Sin but of the Birth of Conscience.”

“... Adam and Eve eating the fruit  
of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. . .  
is a mythical description of how the first human beings  
left [behind their primitive] existence  
and entered the [very] problematic world of being human.”<sup>2</sup>

And, that, of course, is the one and only world  
we humans have ever known—  
the persistent power of some mythic Eden notwithstanding.

And, in this world, we must often wrestle  
with what is right and what is wrong,  
and struggle with the consequences  
of bad choices, and wrong-headed decisions,  
and words we wish we could somehow take back.

And maybe that’s why this story endures as it does—  
because it speaks to our human capacity  
to sometimes squander the gifts of life—  
be it by accident or by design.

But this ancient story speaks, too,  
of picking up the pieces when our paradise falls apart  
and moving on in the best ways we know how.

What we make of our time on this good green earth  
depends—to a great degree—on how we look at it,  
on the frame we construct around the experience of our lives.

Now, this isn’t a call to deny anything,  
but to put it all in perspective—  
to accept the fact that little in life is all good or all bad—  
even though it can be so tempting at times to see it just that way.

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<sup>2</sup> Kushner, 22.

And it can be so easy to let a mistake—  
like, say, eating a forbidden fruit—define everything,  
to colour our view of others, or even ourselves.

In some respects, that's what's happened  
with this ancient story of Adam and Eve.

As, Rabbi Kushner points out,  
Jews have always regarded “sin as a deed,”  
—as something one sometimes does—  
and seen human beings “as capable  
of atoning for their sins through repentance...”  
—by expressing true sorrow and a willingness to turn to better ways.

But for Christians, sin, somewhere along the way,  
became “not a deed but a condition,  
an ineradicable stain on the human soul.”<sup>3</sup>

Now I suspect that idea rubs many of us the wrong way, theologically.

Indeed, much of our history as Unitarian Universalists has involved  
rejecting and overcoming this very doctrine of original sin,  
affirming, instead, the Jewish notion that regards humans,  
not as fundamentally flawed,  
but as ultimately good, even if prone  
to mistakes and very bad behaviour from time to time.

You may well have heard the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century quip  
that Universalists thought God was too good to damn them,  
and Unitarians thought themselves too good to be damned.

Our Universalist ancestors couldn't imagine that a loving creator  
could or would despise or discard anything made in God's own image.

And, our Unitarian forebears,  
who did, indeed, sometimes had a very high opinion of themselves,  
simply couldn't entertain the thought that they might,  
in any way, be damaged goods that could be so easily discarded.

So, in many respects, we, in our tradition,  
have been renovating the notion of paradise for a very long time.

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<sup>3</sup> Kushner, 20.

Over 400 years ago, John Milton,  
the poet and prototypical Unitarian wrote *Paradise Lost*,  
the epic retelling of the story of Adam and Eve—  
a version of the story that, for better and for worse,  
has significantly shaped Protestantism  
and the Western world for centuries now.

My favourite example of this point relates to the infamous apple itself.

No matter how close one's reading of *The Book of Genesis*,  
no matter how strong one's command of the original Hebrew,  
the word 'apple' never actually appears in the biblical text.

It was, instead, an image largely popularized by Milton himself.

In shaping the ancient Hebrew story into an epic, Christian narrative,  
he built on Saint Augustine's notion of "The Fall"  
as the defining, sinful act that cast humanity out of paradise,  
never again to return, but through the saving sacrifice of the Christ figure.

It's quite a story.  
But it's not the story that was originally told.

What I most hope you will remember out of all of this  
is that the story, and the meaning of this story, has changed over time—  
and that it can be changed, even still.

As the poet said at the end of the reading I shared earlier,  
we do, indeed, desperately need a new myth.

But I've come not to preach to you so much about sin—original or otherwise—  
but to speak of paradise,  
of paradise lost and paradise found,  
of paradise not as myth,  
but as the very ground on which we live and move and have our being.

It's an admittedly weird word, paradise.

It conjures images of a fantastical place of rest and relaxation,  
perhaps with Hawaiian shirts, grass skirts, and fussy beverages  
served in pineapples with tiny umbrellas tucked in for good measure.

A quick Google search for images of paradise

turns up millions of photos of places that, well,  
pretty much look nothing like where we live. . .

Instead, there are lots of palm trees, sandy beaches, and endless blue skies.

There's no snow and no subway stalled for track repairs,  
no shaky stock market, no convergence of nasty viruses,  
and, certainly, no impending labour strikes.

But there are usually in these photos, I might add, no humans to be found—  
no people, with all our problems and our pains,  
our scruples and our short-comings.

In other words, there's little about these images that seems very real.

In much the same way  
that Kushner's version of the Garden of Eden  
turned out to be pretty boring in the absence of both pain and pleasure,  
these sunny photos of sandy, sunny beaches  
don't seem much like paradise to me.

Now, it's not that I don't long to be  
in such a balmy, beautiful place come mid-February;  
it's just that I don't want to have to leave my life behind to find paradise.

I want to find my paradise—  
and I want you to find yours—  
in the here and now.

The fun and fabulous writer Annie Lamott tells the story  
of going to the beach and building a sandcastle with her son, Sam,  
to celebrate his eighth birthday.

They had spent a wonderful afternoon together  
building a giant altar of sand, and, then, later in the day,  
Annie told Sam, "We have to go.  
[The] party is going to start in an hour."

"No" he wailed. "We can't. What about our creation?  
We can't just leave it here. We have to stay and protect it.  
We've worked so hard on it. The waves will come and wash it away."

"Honey," she said, "It was never meant to be permanent.  
You must have known the tide would come back in."

He thought about this for a minute, and then said:  
“I’m going to kick it all over then.”

“And I hate you,” he said for spite.  
“And I hate everything,” as he stormed off.

Annie goes on with the story:

“I didn’t say anything. He walked away from me and the altar,  
world weary, shuffling with dejection, head down.

“Sam,” I wanted to explain,  
“making the altar was a way to celebrate, to honour you[r birthday].  
The fact that it is going to wash away  
[only] heightens how wonderful our making it was [in the first place].

“The altar did not hold as much spirit as our making it did. . .  
It’s like we made it, we love it—oops, and [then] it’s gone.  
But the best part is still here.”<sup>4</sup>

The best part still remains.

I suspect, in our own way, and in our own time, we’ve all been Sam.  
We’ve all built sandcastles we hoped would last forever.

We have carved out a bit of paradise for ourselves,  
only to see the tides of life crash in on the shore,  
and wash away bits of our hopes and dreams.

But paradise is about perspective.

It’s about the frame we put around the story,  
and how we choose to see the life we are living.

It’s like the wise man, who was once asked by a student from the village,  
“Master, where is our paradise?”

And the old man raised his arms, gesturing to the sky and said:  
“This. This is our paradise.”

Not at all sure of what the wise man meant,

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<sup>4</sup> Annie Lamott, *Travelling Mercies*, 266.

the student asked again, saying:  
“Master, where is our paradise?”

This time the sage took the student’s hand in his and said: “This.”

Still confused, the student asked once more, “Where is our paradise?”

And the wise old man stooped down to scoop up a handful of sand.  
Letting it sift through his fingers, he simply said: “This.”

It is the life lesson that little Sam needed to learn,  
standing there on the shore,  
as the waves threatened to wash away his bit of paradise.

That his happiness was not to be found in the sand—  
or even in what he had built with it—  
but rather in paying attention to the joy of the present moment  
surrounded, there on the shore,  
by the pounding surf and his mother’s love.

It may be a lesson we all need to learn, and relearn from time to time.

That this is our paradise—this precious, present moment—  
and we are called to make of it what we will,  
for it will not last forever.

I leave you with one last reflection, and that is this:  
the word Adam, in Hebrew, is not merely a proper name.

It is also the word for the ground, for the soil, for dirt,  
and it can be translated to mean everyone, every being,  
or, quite literally, earthling.

There is a similar etymology in English:  
of human, humanitarian, humility, humble, humus.<sup>5</sup>

When Adam and Eve are sent out of the Garden of Eden,  
when God tells Adam that he will eat only by the sweat of his brow  
until he returns to the earth, from which he was made,  
he adds those famous words:  
“for thou art dust, and unto dust shalt thou return.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Forrest Church for pointing this out so often.

<sup>6</sup> *The Book of Genesis*, 3:19.

Dust to dust. Ashes to ashes.  
Human to humus.  
And sandcastles to sand.

Dearly Beloved, we are of this earth, not apart from it.

We are of stardust made;  
the atoms that give glorious shape to our bodies  
give shape to every other thing.

So we need not go off searching for some distant paradise,  
when it is all around us, and within us, too.

Let us behold the miracle of our own being,  
and let us live to call it good.

Amen.