

Wise and Foolish, Broken and Blessed
Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist
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Story - The Tree of Knowledge, adapted by Gretchen Haley from Genesis 2 and 3

Some say, that long ago, people had the chance to live in a perfect land.

What would a perfect world look like? What would it be filled with?

(Answers)

Yes, the world was filled with all these things, and more. Everyone had plenty of food, and plenty of time, and plenty of love.

And what about things that wouldn't be in a perfect world?

(Answers)

....Would there be sadness - in a perfect world?

(Answers)

No one had ever heard of things like homelessness, or hunger, racism, or loneliness or heartbreak. No one knew about loss, or grief, or any kinds of pain, or suffering.

Now, it's important that I tell you, that in this world, it's not that these things didn't exist. It's just that no one in this land knew about them. Or at least, none of the humans did.

But in the land, there was a tree. A tree that knew about all of these things. The gods called it the Tree of Knowledge, and they told the humans to stay far away from it or else they'd no longer be able to live in this perfect land. This Tree was big, and actually quite beautiful, and filled with fruit.

What kind of fruit do you think the Tree of Knowledge grew? Well, we don't know. But lots of people have guessed an apple. But actually the story doesn't say.

Well anyway, as long as the people didn't eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, then they would continue to feel their land was indeed perfect. And actually, what they had been told by the gods - was that if they ate that fruit, they'd die. It was poison fruit. And so the humans agreed, best to leave that fruit alone.

However, there was this one human, who was especially curious, and particularly brave. Who wondered often about this Tree, and what she was missing by not tasting its fruits. And she

wondered if there were things that she could do, things she should do differently - see she had the sense that her life could mean more if she just tasted the fruits of the Tree.

One day, this woman - let's call her Eve - she was staring at the Tree, thinking about all this, and this snake came by. Did I mention that in a perfect land, animals and humans talk to each other? Of course they can. Well the snake saw Eve staring at the Tree and he said, sure looks like you'd like to eat one of those fruits Ms. Eve. And she said, go away snake, don't bother me. But the snake was persistent and somewhat irritating - like the ancient form of a little brother - or sister - right? And the snake would not go away. He said, you know, it's a lie what the gods told you about that fruit. It's not poison. You won't die. You'll just know more - you'll know things that only the gods know. And you know how the gods can be kind of insecure?

Eve nodded. Totally, they could be so insecure. And so in that moment, Eve decided, she'd eat that fruit, and she'd give some to her partner, who she always secretly thought was a little lacking in the knowledge department anyway.

And so Eve and her partner Adam ate, and tasted, and suddenly, they looked around, and saw their world completely differently. They saw that their world was not actually perfect. It was scary. And it was dangerous.

Eve knew then that she had not died, but actually she was more alive than she ever had been. For she knew then that she had a purpose, a calling - a mission. And it was to help others to taste that fruit, and to know the truth of the world they were living in - because only then could it grow to be a really perfect world, a world where life was more complicated - yes - but also more meaningful; a world where humans knew that there was brokenness, the kind of brokenness that leads to a deeper beauty.

Friends - of all ages, let us taste always the fruits of knowledge, let us not turn away from knowing what is around us, even when it is difficult, for here is the tree of life.

Reading - "The Human Condition," By Kenneth Collier, Read by Nicolette

It seems to me that the human condition is one of brokenness. I am not suggesting that we human beings are inherently sinful (though it may be that the idea of original sin can be thought of in this way). What I am suggesting is something about the relationship between the ego and the spirit.

The ego is that part of the human personality concerned with one's individuality, one's separateness and autonomy. It begins to grow when we are born and the umbilical chord is severed. We are no longer part of our mother. Now we must stand alone, for ourselves. We stop at our skin, so to speak, and we have to understand that we are different. We are who we are; we are our self. This is the ego. But there is a catch to it.

All of a sudden, this wonderful ego discovers that it's unbearably lonely. The great triumph of the ego is the realization that I stop at my skin, and the great tragedy of the ego is the realization that I stop at my skin. There are all those other people out there, and they are doing the same thing. Therefore they cannot feel what I feel; they cannot know what I know or think what I think, or even perceive what I perceive. It is a marvel I can even communicate with them. And what about death? If I stop at my skin, then I must live irreducibly alone for my whole life, and then die alone, forever. This is existential loneliness.

Enter the spirit. If the ego is about how we are separate, then the spirit is about how we are connected. It answers the question, "Who am I that is related to all those others out there?"

When we dwell in the ego we know that we are different; when we dwell in the spirit, we know that we are related, that we dance with each other and that the dance creates us, together, a unity. We live alone, to be sure, but not irreducibly alone, for we are also tied together as one whole being. We will indeed die alone, but if we can understand the spiritual truth that we are all one beneath the skin, then we die into love.

Notice that I am not suggesting that either the ego or the spirit is in any way a disembodied being temporarily trapped in our flesh. They are but ways of conceiving of ourselves and of relating both to ourselves and to the world. They are both essential to our understanding of how it is that we exist: We are separate and we are connected.

What I am suggesting is that human brokenness happens when the ego suppresses the spirit. When the ego takes over, it is triumphant, but ultimately it becomes terribly and tragically alone. Then there is brokenness, and that is the human condition.

Sermon - Wise and Foolish, Broken and Blessed, by Rev. Gretchen Haley

When all has been stripped away, do you trust me?

And - do I trust you?

I mean - before we know each other. Before we tell each other our stories, before we trace our histories and our heroes, when we are strangers.

When we see each other walking across the street, looking a little out of place, talking strangely, in another language, or just something that sounds like it might be. Wearing, say, a hoodie¹, or a tie - in places where these things are not common. Wearing jeans, or stockings. Work boots, or bikers leather.

When we see each other, in our guts, who do we believe the other to be?

¹ We acknowledged together here, this reference to Trayvon Martin.

When I see you, across the room, what do I believe about you, and your nature?

Do I believe, if given the chance - you are likely to do me injury, do this world injury?

Or do I believe, just as likely, you might give of yourself, give of your heart, arms wide open?

After all these centuries of debate, about the human condition - about our brokenness, and our blessing, our worthiness or our hopelessness, the way it plays out, in real life, today, is a matter of trust.

How much you trust me, how much I trust you, how much we trust this universe and all the goodness we say is at its center.

We are a people who have longed claimed a great optimism about human nature, afterall, a people who stake the counter-cultural claim that within each person, there is a a great possibility for goodness.

One of the first things Unitarians and Universalists held in common was a rejection of the low view of human nature preached by orthodox Christians in the 18th century. By 1828, in fact, the minister many consider the founder of American Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing, declared that humans had within them a "Likeness to God," and through a path of lifelong learning, and nurturing, we all have the capacity to approximate divinity.

We, inheritors of this faithful vision of humanity, believe that people are good, inherently. We believe we are born not with original sin, but with an original blessing, and original capacity for caring, for compassion, for justice, for shared life.

And yet - when we see each other across the room, across the street, across the country, the world - even we cannot escape the cultural impact of orthodox Christianity - those claims made most deliberately and impactfully by one monk in the 4th century, Augustine of Hippo.

Even we find within ourselves, this skepticism, this doubt about our potential for goodness. Even we often concede to the default view that people are, must be, truly terrible. That's what we've inherited from Augustine. He looked closely at his world, he looked closely at himself, he looked closely at a couple of pieces of the Hebrew scriptures, and came to the conclusion that people were just plain awful. That if given the chance (and we are, he believed, given lots and lots of chances), we will choose selfishness, we will choose to serve our egos, and we will choose to ignore our connectedness, our common humanity, our spirit.

Augustine was not, it turns out, a very trusting guy.

Now, before you get to thinking that I re-interpreted these chapters that tell about Adam and Eve to suit our liberal purposes, let me clarify that my re-telling is completely within accepted scholarship.

It was Augustine who interpreted the scriptures to suit his purposes. It was Augustine who interpreted this whole story as a “fall” of humanity, who imagined Eve’s act and Adam’s complicity as indicative of human nature’s inescapable brokenness - sinfulness.

But in the text itself, there is no such language. Nothing that says “sin,” nothing that says “fall.”

And nothing that says that Eve - or Adam - regretted their choice to gain knowledge, and to lose the experience of so-called paradise that had been their reality before they ate from that tree.

It doesn’t say one way or another, if they regretted their choice. It only says, they suddenly realized they were vulnerable, afraid, and alone. As Unitarian Universalist minister Kenneth Collier puts it - they realized they were “unbearably lonely.” Not that they weren’t any of these things before. Not that they weren’t broken before, not that their world wasn’t broken before they tasted that fruit. They just didn’t know it.

They were foolish, naive, and unaware. Which as they say, can be a kind of bliss. A kind of paradise.

And on days like today, many of us remember the joys of such foolishness, the pleasure of giving into our ignorance, our confusion, our misinterpretations and our naiveté.

I know for many, this day is a great excuse to finally help their friends and loved ones feel like a fool - to draw attention to their unknowing. This is fun - right?

I don't know, I don't really get it. The closest I come to appreciating April Fool’s Day is the annual NPR attempt at sneaking in a “joke” news story. But even that I often feel is just a little cruel.

I know, I'm taking it all way too seriously. But, go with me for a moment. Even if we don't all share my overly-serious take on April Fool's day, I think it's safe to say we all share a common desire to transform foolishness to wisdom - ignorance to knowledge. We place a high value on what Albert Einstein called a “holy curiosity.”

Which is why I’ve long believed Eve should be considered one of our patron saints.

Far from considering Eve the source of human pain, the source of being cast out from some supposed paradise, it seems more fitting we Unitarian Universalists should celebrate her as one who was willing to cast aside illusions, and walk into the danger, the risk, the real possibility for healing the rifts at the heart of life once and for all. As James Baldwin would say, "not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Augustine had lots of reasons for reading the story of Eve and the serpent as he did.

For one, people of his time were really invested in the idea that in order for God to be God, God had to be all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. But if God is all-knowing, all-powerful, all good - then, where did the brokenness, the heartbreak of the world - come from?

If not God, it had to come from humans. God - being all good - gave humans free will. And in response to this free will humans compulsively acted in ways that were against goodness, against God.

This compulsion, Augustine decided, had to be the result of this one moment, this one original moment where the first humans acted against God.

We were blessed with free choice, and doomed by the fact that we'd over and over choose to feed our ego rather than embrace the spirit, over and over fail to recognize, fail to act in a way that serves our connectedness.

To paraphrase Calvin who picked up on these themes and really ran with them - human beings are no more than worms.

Except, I don't feel like a worm. Do you?

This is pretty much what our religious ancestors decided in the 18th century.

We don't *feel* like worms. We don't *feel* impossibly doomed.

And they looked around and saw goodness, they saw the many ways people give of themselves, and they could not, *we* cannot agree that humans are born irredeemably broken.

As William Ellery Channing put it: "I understand the proofs, by which despotism demonstrates, that man is a wild beast, in want of a master, and only safe in chains. But, injured, trampled on, and scorned as our nature is, I still turn to it with intense sympathy and strong hope. I bless it for its kind affections, for its strong and tender love. I honor it for its struggles against oppression, for its growth and progress under the weight of so many chains and prejudices, for its achievements in science and art, and still more for its examples of heroic and saintly virtue. These are marks of a divine origin and the pledges of a celestial inheritance; and I thank God that my own lot is bound up with that of the human race."²

William Ellery Channing had big faith, big trust in humanity. The kind of faith that makes the more skeptical among us wonder if he had failed to fully taste from the tree of knowledge - that is, if his faith was built on that kind of foolishness and naiveté Eve had before she went seeking the larger truth.

² <http://www.americanunitarian.org/likeness.htm>

The world we arrive in - it is filled with violence, and loneliness, hungry bodies and hungry spirits, filled with humans feeding our separateness, rather than our connectedness. Where ever it came from, whatever its source, this is our inheritance, and the only choice we face is how often we feed on the fruits of this awareness.

Or rather, depending on our social location - our race, our class, our gender, our sexual orientation - the place and time we are born into - we have various degrees of choice about this awareness.

For some of us, this reality - it's life, every day. The fruit of this tree is our daily bread, and our struggles are a feast, our vulnerabilities are the air we breathe. No one has to teach us that life is dangerous, and a struggle.

For others of us, it takes more intention. The Tree is as if in another country, and we must seek it out to come to consciousness.

Most of us live somewhere in between, teeter back and forth depending on the day, the hour.

I'm not a Channing scholar. I can't say for sure how well he reckoned with life's shadow and human participation in brokenness. I do know that some of his peers worried that his faith in individual action, individual self-improvement made him blind to just how big the brokenness was, just how necessary community-based change and whole systems transformation would be to create a world of justice, and goodness - as one of his peers said of his approach: "Self-culture is a good thing, but it cannot abolish inequality, nor restore men to their rights. As a means it is well, as an end it is nothing."³

Which is another way to say, regardless of the source of injustice - the source of living outside our connectedness - what really matters, is its future. Our future.

Regardless of how brokenness began, what really matters is our future wholeness. Not, why we have been who we have been, done what we have done, but who are we called to become - and how we might turn the tides and welcome a new day.

Maybe you know this old Cherokee tale, about an old chief who is teaching his granddaughter about life.⁴

"A fight is going on inside me," he said to the girl. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt, and ego.

³ <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/williamellerychanning.html>

⁴ <http://www.firstpeople.us/FP-HTML-Legends/TwoWolves-Cherokee.html>

The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

This same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too."

The granddaughter thought about it for a minute and then asked her grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old chief simply replied, "The one you feed."

Sometimes I think William Ellery Channing's emphasis on the good was strategic. It's not that he didn't acknowledge our capacity for evil. He just chose to feed the good.

One of my professors in seminary - Native American scholar and theologian Tink Tinker - likes to say that guilt does no one any good. It's paralyzing. What's more, it can end up giving us the feeling that we're "doing" something, keep us stewing and repentant, and as he said, I don't need your repentance, I need your help.

And so sometimes I think Channing and his contemporaries realized that both of these possibilities were within us - brokenness, and blessing - and they made a strategic choice to feed the good. They decided to skip the guilt, skip the sense that we were doomed as worms, and instead feed our sense that we could choose well. We could make a difference, we could create a better world.

For me, two centuries later, feeding the good need not start with guilt, but it does require we share responsibility. It requires we claim our participation in brokenness, our potential for perpetuating separation - what some call sin.

As Maya Angelou said, "History, despite it's wrenching pain, cannot be unlived; however, if faced with courage, need not be lived again."⁵

Feeding the good scraps Augustine's reading of Eve, and that eating of the fruit as the problem - as if the sin were in the knowing and paradise could be found through foolish ignorance, and instead takes Eve as an example, and learns our history, and stakes a personal claim to it. Knowing any of us are capable of such beauty. Any of us are capable of such brokenness.

There are no villains, there are no saints. There are only each of us, here for this brief time, inheriting the limited visions of those who came before, doing our best to repair what we can.

Feeding the good in human life means rather than attempting to distance ourselves from the brokenness we see in the world, we trust each other, trust ourselves enough to acknowledge -

⁵ The brilliant Jean Miller Schmidt gave me this quote.

we're a part of it. It has a hold on us too. We are not the happy, shiny people some of our liberal theology might have us be.

We're not.

And acknowledging this together means we might have a chance not just for self-improvement, but for world-improvement.

Trust doesn't come because we believe people will be perfect, but rather because we know we all won't be, and so we need each other's help.

Trust comes when we drop our defensiveness, our illusions of self-sufficiency - when we say, we are afraid, we are wounded, and we can't live this life on our own. We weren't meant to live this life on our own.

And this trust grows, and feeds the good in each of us, the goodness we claim is inherent in all of us, the goodness of this universe - and allows us to receive each other, just as we truly are.

One definition of faith is to act - as if something is true - as a way of making it so.

Though we have been born into brokenness, we were meant for blessing. And so let us bless the world.

Though we have played the fools, we seek the wholeness of wisdom. And so let us taste the fruits of knowledge, wherever we can find them.

Though we forget ourselves, and feed our egos, we know we were created for relationship, and for love. And so let us feed our connections, and dwell in the spirit of love.

All of these reside in us. Wisdom, and foolishness. Brokenness, and Blessing.

Let us trust one another well enough to acknowledge them all - so that together, we may live into our shared destiny.

Namaste - and amen.