

# **“Hungering for Innocence”**

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**Unity Church-Unitarian**

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## **SERMON:**

Most cultures have a story that describes the place from which we came, a place that represents all that is holy, a place of innocence. This is an other-worldly place embedded in the human consciousness. In the Judeo-Christian tradition that place is the Garden of Eden. And I think we all might know a little of what Adam and Eve felt when they were asked to leave that Garden. It's a powerful story because most of us have deep sense of what it feels like to have left our innocence behind and be looking longingly back at Paradise.

We hunger for innocence. We long to be without our cynicism, our bitterness, and our doubts. Can't you just imagine the Garden? I can see myself as Eve, wandering through Paradise. In my mind's eye it looks like a cross between a cozy alpine meadow I camped in once, a jumbled kitchen garden, AND, not coincidentally, my childhood backyard. It is a crazy tangle of growth and beauty and love. The love in paradise is especially important. Because of it, I stroll the paths full of trust and wonder, undistracted. I am not sucking in my stomach, looking over my shoulder or worried about stepping on a pop-top. I am vulnerable in that way we allow ourselves to be when we feel deeply loved. In this picture, I have terrific posture.

And then, suddenly, upon the advice of a serpent I exercise free-will, I find myself with knowledge of good and evil and my heart is broken and I feel shame and actually hide - hide from God, rejecting vulnerability as a way of life. And, I must leave this place of wonder and delight behind.

I have learned much of what has helped me so far in life on canoe trips. The story of how Adam and Eve had to leave the Garden of Eden always reminds me of my canoe trips through Camp Widjiwagan as an adolescent and the feeling of coming off trail and re-entering my “real” life. On the best of these trips, we vividly experienced interdependence despite our differences. We lived in relatively unspoiled beauty. We were cradled in singing, ritual and long stretches of quiet. We often experienced an unusual level of acceptance from our peers. Even our interactions with strangers were marked with good will. I'm sure that those trips weren't as perfect as the garden, but they certainly came closer than life in my suburban high school.

Re-entry was always bittersweet. I was glad to see my family, ecstatic to be able to eat fresh fruit and drink root beer, and eager to sleep in my own bed. But eventually I'd feel the openness that had grown in me begin to close. This phenomenon was so common amongst my friends and I, that on a couple of different trips we created rituals that attempted to preserve that feeling or made bracelets out of twist ties as reminders. They helped some, but inevitably, things would return to “normal” and I became slightly more inhibited, more quick to judge, and more argumentative. Innocence lost.

Innocence derives from the Latin, and means not harmed or injured. It's what we were before we had knowledge of the way our hearts can break, of horrible things that humans do to one another and the earth, of what it feels like to disappoint ourselves. These experiences plant fear, anger and sadness in our systems and can build walls that prevent us from being vulnerable and open in the way that characterizes innocence.

We experience that loss throughout our lives. You discover, for instance, through some indiscretion that you are not perfect, that in fact you can be quite inconsiderate and it breaks your heart. You watch those people, standing on rooftops waiting for rescue, by and large people of color waiting for rescue from a government

composed by and large of white people and it breaks your heart. You listen to people argue about your right to get married your heart is breaking. You love someone from the very wellspring of your being and they treat you with contempt, and it breaks your heart. Yet, it is not the heart-break that is stealing our innocence – this experience does need to be our enemy.

Our reading today says:

We are here to do  
And through doing to learn  
And through learning to know  
And through knowing to experience wonder

Here our DOINGS, our experiences, our knowledge can lead to simplicity – to innocence and on to wisdom.

A friend recently reminded me that sometimes when a heart breaks, it breaks open. In the midst of our deepest grief we are often as open as we will ever be. In the space between how things were before our heart broke and how things will eventually be, we may experience a vulnerability that can expand us and enable us to make deeper connections with others. “A deep distress hath humanized my soul,” says William Wordsworth. This is not to say that suffering is something welcome or good in and of itself, only that it IS and that its course indifference alters the terrain of our inner world.

Recall those first weeks after the attacks on September 11 when this country as a body FELT different. In this country’s grief, people found greater compassion. We reached out. It was synchronistic cultural experience of heart broken openness.

But soon we turned towards anger and fear, and what innocence we regained as a nation was lost again. In an effort to protect ourselves the nation’s heart hardened, and we began to act out of that place of protection. Some have noted this as a lost opportunity to collect us all in a net of neighborliness. This is sad but not all that uncommon – that when we have been badly wounded, we will often close our hearts and respond out of fear, sadness, anger.

It is that desire to avoid suffering, says the Dali Lama, that separates us from an open-hearted and connected life.<sup>1</sup> I know the symptoms in me: a little more sarcasm, a little less grace offered, a lot more worry.

Children it seems can bring us closer to our own innocence than almost anything else. This summer I took a few days to drive to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to visit one of my dearest friends. Her daughter had recently turned three and who I hadn’t seen her since she had been walking and talking.

On the drive up, I took the opportunity to marinate in my own demons and worried about some things: about little Ella not liking me, about not being as in touch with her mom as I always mean to be, about not knowing what to say. But over the course of the three days Ella worked on me, and soon my concerns fell into the background. She sucked me right out of that world of fear and inhibition and into her world of wonder. On my last morning there, while her mom and dad were fixing breakfast, Ella and I played some roll-around-on-the-floor games. There was lots of giggling, and I felt full of love for that child and for the sunbeam bathing our play and even for the rug. At some point there came a lull in our play during which we both lay on our backs looking at the ceiling. I was just going to ask Ella if she wanted to check on breakfast when she threw her tiny body on top of my chest and said, “Can you STAY here?”

Yikes. Her question struck me to my very core. COULD I stay there - stay there in that love, that sense of okay-ness, wonder and ease? At that moment I felt I could, and I did...for a little while. There are so many instances like this - when we randomly wander outside the walls of our own fear and dis-ease and into the

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<sup>1</sup> Cutler, Howard C. and H.H. the Dali Lama. *The Art of Happiness*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).

Garden. But can we STAY there and can we get back there intentionally? Our Unitarian and Universalist traditions let us know that Paradise or innocence is there for the taking in this life, that the Garden surrounds us and is in us everyday and we only need to step into it.

And when we are allowed to glimpse the Garden again, when we taste wonder or pure love, we are so soothed. In her story about the Dali Lama, Rachel Nemen says, "...a place in me that has felt alone and abandoned for all of my life felt deeply comforted." THIS is what I feel when I'm walking in the woods down by the Mississippi River and when the sun is low. THIS is what I feel sometimes when I make myself sit down and look around for the holy. This is what I felt on that rug with Ella.

I love that image of the Dali Lama holding open the sack without any pretense or guile. I can almost see his face. It's interesting that when you think about a figure like that who seems to act and speak with such love for the world and so little need for the protection his role could offer him, who seems so much nearer to his innocence at any given moment than most of us, and you think of his eyes, those eyes have softness that could be described as childlike. Yet, the Dali Lama is not a child. He, in fact, is quite grown up. He's seen a lot of suffering. It appears that, his experiences have not led him further from innocence, but towards it. Parker Palmer speaks to how we can journey outside our own gates more intentionally. He talks specifically about fear and how it strangles our ability to be vulnerable and makes it hard for us to engage with those around us more deeply:

*With different words, [the major religious traditions] all proclaim the same core message: 'Be not afraid.' Though the traditions vary widely in the ways they propose to take us beyond fear, all hold out the same hope: we can escape fear's paralysis and enter a state of grace where encounters with otherness will not threaten us but will enrich our work and our lives.<sup>2</sup>*

We can re-enter the garden.

He goes on to say that when that core teaching says 'Be not afraid', it isn't saying that we shouldn't feel fear, only that we need not BE our fears. The same could be said for our sadness, for our anger. We can, says Palmer, act and speak from some place else in our "inner landscape". It is unrealistic to think that this life will leave us unharmed, but we don't have to live only out of our injuries. "We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken." Emerson said. In my prayer life I like to think of that kindness, that compassion on my landscape surrounding and bathing my fear, keeping it company. Sometimes it works.

Denise Levertov writes:

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.

It's that whispering remembrance of innocence in us that can rescue us from cynicism and despair when those seem to be the sanest responses to our earthly lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Palmer, Parker. *Courage to Teach*. (San Francisco: Josey-Bass Publishers, 1998) p. 57.

I still gather with the people I took those canoe trips with in my youth. At least once a year we meet at some woodsy place and create a sanctuary that rebuilds some of that openness and trust. We walk and praise the autumn leaves, we eat, we make goofy art projects, we ask questions, we say the wrong thing to each other and apologize...Often it feels like our own little church.

Early churches were seen as portals to paradise and if you visit churches built prior to first Crusade, you see that in evidence just by the way they are decorated. The early Christian's believed that Jesus had re-opened the gates of paradise for all of us and that spiritual discipline and church could see our way through the gates in our day to day lives.<sup>3</sup>

This IS something church CAN do. In these rooms we can remind each other of the parts of our internal landscape we may not have visited in some time, ones that resemble that love-filled Garden. We can pause and rest in a place of surrender and safety, having let our experience and knowledge lead us back to someplace closer to the holy. We can let our hearts break open to each other's stories, to the wonder of the natural world, to the beauty we create. We can let ourselves be vulnerable - be innocent.

The Sufi mystic poet Hafiz wrote:

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.

Let this place be one where we come to know greater love, to rediscover our innocence, to find wisdom and through our wisdom know what needs to be done.

May it be so.

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<sup>3</sup> Parker, Rebecca. Sermon - "Saving Paradise". Delivered May 2005.