

The Opening of Paradise

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Introduction

Last Thursday, when the Starr King faculty gathered for a retreat, Ibrahim Farajajé [Starr King Vice President of Academic Affairs] told us that in the Muslim calendar we have just entered the month when the doors of paradise stand open. Islamic tradition imagines two angels who sit on our shoulders, one on our right recording our good deeds, and one on our left recording our bad deeds. But during this month, when the doors of paradise stand open, only the angel recording our good deeds is at work. The bad-deeds angel has the month off.

A season when paradise is open sounds to me like a fine time to begin the school year. It reminds me of a teacher I know who begins every course by saying, "As of this moment everyone in this class has an A. All you have to do is keep it." It also reminds me that for many of us, learning is paradise. To have time to read, to think, to engage in significant conversation with others, to practice, to write – is a privilege and a joy. In his *Hymns on Paradise*, St. Ephrem of Syria, a 4th century eastern Christian, describes his experience of reading a sacred text:

"I read the opening of this book
And was filled with joy.
For its verses and lines spread out their arms to welcome me;
The first rushed out and kissed me,
And led me on to its companion;
And when I reached that verse
Wherein is written
The story of Paradise,
It lifted me up and transported me
From the bosom of the book

To the very bosom of Paradise.”

I hope you have some paradisiacal moments of this kind in your studies – moments when you are ecstatic about the ideas you are encountering, the thoughts you are thinking, the possibilities you find opening up.

St. Ephrem wrote at a time when it wasn't only books that lifted the soul to the bosom of paradise. Early Christianities regarded paradise as having been re-opened by Jesus. By his birth, incarnation, healings, teachings and his 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 a ritual of new birth — baptism in the waters of life — converts to Christianity began a spiritual journey deeper and deeper into paradise. Central to the journey into paradise was the development of moral capacities. Through the ethics of paradise — non-violence and 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 not imagined as a realm beyond this world – entered after death or through death — but a realm that permeated this world – that could be tasted, seen, felt, here and now.

The summer before last, Rita Nakashima Brock — my friend and co-author – and I traveled to Italy and Turkey to study the art and architecture of early Christianities. We discovered that to enter an early Christian church was to walk into paradise.

In St. Apollinarie in Classe, the apse image is a vast emerald green meadow, dotted with flowers and birds. Fluffy sheep graze safely. Everywhere in early Christian mosaics, we encountered the four rivers 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 in glory 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.

Such a vision of church as paradise is largely lost to us now. It was eclipsed in the 11th century, when Western Christianity turned towards a form of Christianity which no longer confidently believed that the doors of paradise were open. The decisive turning point came in 1095 when Pope Urban 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 violence was always a last resort, and even when the cause was just, those who participated in war 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. Those who served would receive remission for all their sins. To kill or be killed for Christ became the route

to paradise. Paradise was no longer a realm attainable in this life – it became a realm to be entered after death, and violence could get you there.

Beginning with the first crusade, the crucifixion of Jesus became the central image for Christian worship. Explicit theologies saying his death was pleasing to God and was a gift that redeemed humanity from its debt of sin were formulated and functioned as war propaganda. The Eucharistic meal became a reenactment of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. His death, not his birth, became the threshold of salvation. Enemies of God were categorized on the basis of racial and cultural otherness. Humanity was divided into the saved and the damned. And 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 to reap its fabled gold and jewels. Colonization, with its exploitation of peoples and lands, evolved from the loss paradise. Materialism filled the spiritual void.

We live now —within the dominant culture of the west — in the aftermath of the closing of paradise, with the legacy of militarism, racism and the exploitation of the earth and its peoples.

And yet, with all of this, there is some whiff of paradise that still reaches us. We catch glimpses of it. We hear strains of its harmonies. Its fragrance touches our senses. We dance and, in our twirling, feel its movement. Re-discovering 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.

Our Universalist heritage can help show the way.

The 17th century Universalist Jane Lead used images of paradise to express her theology and to guide the church she founded in England. She 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. "I was particularly manifested to the world in the Singularity," Jesus says to her, "but now henceforward expect me to appear in Plurality." We need this Universalist affirmation of plurality. The garden of paradise is not monocultural.

In 1805, Hosea Ballou said heaven and hell were 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. His embodiment of creative love did. We need this Universalist vision of salvation without violence. The garden of paradise is gained by birth and rebirth— not by the sacrifice of life.

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.’ The dominant motive, therefore, is no longer to escape from earthly existence, but to make earthly existence as abundant and happy as it can be made. Modern religion... must sanctify the world. It must speed those readjustments which will make life here and now justify our hopes. . . . Therefore let us... smash the injustices, the tyrannies, the sins which imprison us Salvation comes in, by and through a saved world.”

We need this Universalist passion for counter-oppressive work and reverence for life in this world. When I first came to Starr King 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, “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 a way of living and a way of learning. 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. Ethical practice is the pedagogy, the epistemology and the liturgy of paradise. 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, but with love, and it creates knowledge.

Concluding Story

A few weeks ago, Rita and I joined my brother’s family for a week-long backpacking trip into the Ansel Adams wilderness, 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 negotiated the narrow road, switch-backing 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. 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 heartbreaking 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 your new book 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, "I suppose so."

Benedictory

This academic year, in our study and work together,

May there be books that embrace and kiss us, and lift us to paradise.

May we know ourselves to be made from this earth, and encounter the holy in one another, and may our living and learning

contribute to savoring and saving paradise.