

## Thank Eve

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

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I begin most days the same way...with some sort of contemplative or meditation practice. Often, I get up and either head across the hall to my study or downstairs to my family room and spend some time sitting in silence. I gaze out the window at the pond that stretches out beyond my back yard and observe the activities of the various birds on the water...ducks, geese, swans and my favorite, the blue heron. I watch other animals on land too, mostly squirrels, going about their routine. Frequently, my thoughts eventually turn inward and from deep within comes the question in one form or another,

“Where are you?”

At first it seems a silly question. “Where am I? I’m right here!” But as I sit with it, it shifts from silly to essential. In the craziness of modern life I don’t think we ask or are willing to ask, “Where are you?” of ourselves often enough. I believe the state of our world bolsters this assertion. Take our nation for instance.

Despite an overall decline in religious affiliation and church membership, the United States remains one the most religious, and religiously diverse, nations on the planet.

This is a source of pride for many Americans, particularly faith and political leaders. It distinguishes us from the more secular nations of Europe, sometimes fueling a national sense of moral superiority. Yet, something is amiss.

Yes, we fancy ourselves a religious society, we know right from wrong, we’re pretty sure of that. And despite our religious and cultural diversity, we even seem to have a national theology. I hear it expressed over and over from people of all walks of life. It can be summed up in one sentence, “I believe in being a good person.” Now, this is not a bad thing. Believe it or not, the vast majority of us are “good” people.

But what exactly does “being good” mean? It seems to me when people say or talk about being a good person, they usually mean, being someone who, “follows the rules.” In a highly structured society like ours rules, formal and informal, are a fact of life and again, not necessarily a bad thing.

One of the first rules we learn is to obey authority, usually our parents. Parents are charged with our safety and welfare and if we are fortunate they do a pretty good

job. Over time we become aware of society's rules: go to school; get and keep a job; marry; raise children; pay your bills; stay healthy...be good.

If we abide by these rules we are promised a reward: a life of social and material contentment, maybe even a McMansion in the suburbs, America's Eden. Sounds good, right?

But if we break any of these rules, watch out! Get in trouble with the law, fall behind in school, lose your job or get sick and you risk getting trapped in a downward spiral leading to social stigmatization, material poverty, and other hardships. Deviate from the perceived norm, sometimes politely described as "traditional", "patriotic", even "biblical", and you're no longer counted among the "good."

Adam and Eve didn't follow the rules and look what happened to them, America's self appointed religious and political moralizers warn us wagging their finger... God cast them out of Paradise. Perhaps this is why we fanatically defend our miserable education, health, welfare, and economic systems that seem to increasingly benefit the few at the expense of many. Perhaps this is why we tolerate gross injustice towards LGBTQ+ people here and around the globe whitewashed as the preservation of "family values" or a defense of religious liberty, or why grasp for excuses to cover for the racism that infects our criminal justice system. Perhaps this is why we can remain a nation of executioners and bearers of assault rifles who drive cars adorned with "Pro-Life" and "What Would Jesus Do?" bumper stickers.

Now, I'm not suggesting we all become anarchists. Rules serve a necessary purpose in a civilized society. But just as the absence of rules threatens to thrust us into barbaric chaos; so too does the deification of rules threaten us by encouraging a cold, detached, and spiritually impoverished public morality. If religion is simply about being good and following the rules we not only end up with a sleepy moral conscience, we become vested in maintaining an inhumane status quo. The question, "Where are you?" then becomes all the more relevant.

But where does this question come from?

In the Book of Genesis, we're told God calls out to Adam, "Where are you?" when God cannot find Adam during a stroll through the Garden. It turns out Adam is hiding. He is afraid, the myth tells us, for he knows for the first time that he is naked and he is ashamed. Adam and his mate have eaten the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which God had told Adam not to do. God questions them and a blame game ensues. Adam blames the woman who then blames the serpent. No one is willing to take responsibility. God gets pretty ticked and ultimately sends Adam and his mate out of the Garden.

Christianity orthodoxy interprets this story as the Fall, an act of rebellion against God which marks humanity's descent into a state of sin.

It forms the basis for what would become known as the doctrine of Original Sin. But is this the only way to understand the myth? The late Jewish teacher and author, Rabbi Harold Kushner says no. Kushner sees this story not as the fall of humankind, but a kind of birth; the birth of moral consciousness.

Recall for a moment today's first reading, an alternate version of Genesis chapter 3 as imagined by Kushner. "You will never have to work again...spend all your days in idle contentment...you will bear children without pain...they will need nothing from you." Sounds pretty nice, doesn't it? He continues, "You will never cry and you will never laugh...you will never long for something you do not have, and you will never receive something you always wanted." Now it's starting to sound like something out of the Twilight Zone. He concludes by noting, "And the grass grew high around the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil until it disappeared from view."

It is interesting to note that "the woman", Adam's mate, is not given a name until the expulsion from the Garden. The name she is given is Eve, meaning, "Source of life." Thus Eve's act of partaking of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and sharing it with Adam could be said to mark the birth of human moral consciousness, our evolutionary break from most other animals who, Kushner notes, are largely deaf to the cries of conscience. Kushner's alternate ending to Genesis 3 depicts a seeming paradise that upon closer examination reveals a dystopian world in which humans lack humanity; they are human in form only, otherwise indistinguishable from the other animals.

The disappearance from view of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in Kushner's alternate ending says to me that it is the wisdom, the moral consciousness that the tree represents, that is the key to our humanity. We may have been created in God's image according to the myth, but it was Eve who held up the mirror that we might see God's reflection in ourselves. When God calls them on this, they deny responsibility and for this they are sent out of the Garden. Sent out to learn what it means to be made in the image of God, to wrestle, if you will, with the experience of being God-like.

For animals, Kushner says, life may be difficult, but it is also simple...animals are by and large driven by instinct. Human life is infinitely more complicated because we are alert to the moral dimensions of the choices we make, and the more authentically human we are, the more complicated our lives become.

Perhaps this is why, "Where are you?" is so difficult a question for us to hear. To be asked, "Where are you?" is to be called before our Source, the Ground of our

being, naked and unadorned refusing to hide, unashamed and willing to take responsibility for the uniquely human experience of life we have been given.

“Where are you?” is a question that leads us to consider the state of our relationship with others, ourselves, and our concepts of God. It is also a question we might invite as we pass the threshold into a new year.

The ability to self-reflect... to be receptive to the question, “Where are you?” is perhaps the most bittersweet gift entrusted to human beings, for it brings us into direct contact with, what Rabbi Howard Cooper describes as, “our confusion of creative and destructive energies.”

In this tense space, we are called to wrestle with questions of conscience honestly, fully aware of our humanity, both its awesome power and humbling limitations. Yet, too often religion has taught us to push away, deny, or repress the tension and energies that cause us unease. Much of western religion has told us, if you want to go back to Paradise, you simply have to be good.

But because these seemingly opposing forces are part of who we are, we cannot not really expel them... we can only face or hide from them. The myth in Genesis tells us Adam was so ashamed of his nakedness after eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, that, in a panic, he tried to hide himself from God. Then when that didn't work, he tried to deflect attention from himself by blaming someone else.

Likewise, when we feel exposed or that we have fallen short of what we or others expect of us, we often attempt to hide by stressing our righteousness or deflect attention by projecting the intolerable aspects of ourselves out into the world where it manifests itself in various ways including hypocritical expressions of public morality, denial of responsibility, and scapegoating.

But in hiding from our more troublesome aspects we become hidden from ourselves, losing sight of the totality of our being in the process. Over time we develop a perpetual hunger for what we too eagerly gave away, but in our denial, refuse to own. As Howard Cooper writes, “Humanity didn't have to leave the Garden because of their appetites and desires, but because we failed to speak about them with integrity.” “Where are you”? then, is the question which Cooper suggests, “summons us to find a way of being in paradise now. This means calling ourselves to account, refusing to hide who we are, refusing to hide from ourselves.” In the most basic sense, it means accepting and learning how to live with our “confusion of creative and destructive energies.”

The biblical myth of creation provides an illustration of this as the very nature of a God in whose image we're alleged to be made. Recall in our second reading Cooper speaks of two names for God found in the creation stories in Genesis, Elohim and

Adonai. Without wading into the development of Jewish monotheism, suffice it to say that the word Elohim represents the various elements or manifestations, creative and destructive, contained within a single God, Adonai. Multiplicity within unity, if you will.

Holding loosely, the idea that a mirror held to a god described as both Elohim and Adonai, that is, the many in the One, returns our own reflection, we can come out of hiding, for as Rabbi Cooper notes, “the biblical story of a God wrestling with multiplicity and unity allows our own spirituality room to breath.” We are no longer compelled to deny the frightening or objectionable parts of ourselves, but rather, we are invited to be honest and loving towards the whole of our being.

When we are asked, “Where are you?” we are invited to embark on a quest to understand our story, “How did I get here?.....why am I here?”....where am I going? If we have spent our lives pushing against or hiding from ourselves, we can lack both clarity of conscience and an appreciation for mystery. Unable to bear the fullness of our humanity, we run the risk of denying or delighting in denigrating the humanity of others.

Engaging the question...”Where are you?”...honestly is a means of checking in, of getting a sense of where we’re at where we need to go, to assess the state of our current reality and the possibility to transform that reality into something deeply meaningful. “Because we have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge [of Good and Evil]” writes, Harold Kushner, “we can feel loss, dread, frustration, jealousy, betrayal, at levels animals will never know. It is part of the price we pay for our humanity, for our being able to also feel love, joy, hope, achievement, faithfulness, and creativity.”

In the weeks and months ahead, take time to listen. Listen for the question, “Where are you”? Allow yourself to embrace your full humanity, greet the tension of confusion of creative and destructive energies within that is you... learn to dwell Paradise now. And don’t forget to thank Eve.

Happy New Year.

Amen and Blessed Be