

It's Her Fault
The Unitarian Church of Montreal
Rev. Diane Rollert, 10 May 2009

On Mother's Day, it is hard not to think of family stories. Surely we all have family stories that have been told so many times we no longer remember if they are fact or fiction. These are the childhood classics, the things that happened when we were too young to remember the real incident, yet we hold an image in our heads and it becomes part of our life's history.

Several years ago, a good friend of mine told me one of these stories from his life. He gave me permission to share it, but I've changed the names to protect the innocent.

My friend Charlie grew up back in the day when plenty of parents were disciplinarians. His mother ran a pretty tight ship: Shirts and shoes to dinner, elbows off the table, and absolutely no roughhousing in the living room. The living room was his mother's inner sanctum. The family didn't have a lot, but whatever treasures they did own were there on meticulous display. That was also where his mother kept the family's one record player and a fifteen-volume set of records called the American Treasury of Music. Charlie and his sister Ingrid were mostly banned from the living room, except for special occasions like holidays, visiting guests, and, quite miraculously, to listen to those records that spanned the history of American music.

One day, when Charlie was about four years old and Ingrid was two, their mother left them in the living room listening to music, most likely to Charlie's favourite recording, a rousing rendition of *The Yellow Rose of Texas*. Their mother must have been gone for a while, because the two children completely forgot about the rules and the required decorum. First, they began to dance. Then they started to laugh and giggle. Before they knew it, they were running circles around the room, reveling in the joy of the music and their newfound freedom. They ran faster and faster, laughing harder and harder, until Charlie picked up his mother's favourite treasure box that had been carefully displayed on the coffee table. He lifted it over his head, shaking it, and making mock growling sounds, pretending to threaten his sister. She was still twirling and giggling beside him, when the glass bottom of the box slipped out, crashed and broke on the table. Both children stopped dead in their tracks.

Their mother stormed into the room. "What was that?" and then, "Who did this?" To this day, Charlie doesn't know what possessed him. Without skipping a beat, he pointed to his little sister.

"I'll never forget the look on my sister's face," he told me. She was dumbfounded. She didn't look angry. She looked shocked and betrayed. The big, round eyes in her chubby toddler face just stared at him. She didn't even cry. Next thing he knew, his mother had scooped his sister up and spanked her. More than fifty years later, Charlie still remembers the shame he felt for having placed the blame on his sister.

Whenever I think of this story, I can't help thinking of the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis. Now I know that this is not one of the stories you often hear Unitarian Universalists tell. We're not big on this idea of the first woman being created from the rib of a man, and certainly not the

conception of original sin. I think that was made pretty clear in the reflections many of us shared when we considered the word “sin” in March.

We’re not so big on the idea of nudity being coupled with shame and embarrassment either. Here’s an example I can’t resist sharing with you. Several years ago I served in a congregation, where twelve beautiful calendar ladies, ranging in age from 66 to 85, proudly posed for a tasteful nude calendar. This was in a very uptight Puritan New England town, and these ladies were true pillars of the church. The calendar became all the rage in the town – and, I might add, was a very successful fundraiser for the church. No curse of Eve for these women. Their bravery and comfort in their own skin was quite an inspiration to us all.

I would say that we Unitarian Universalists would just as soon forget about the Adam and Eve story. Still, I can’t help but hear the voice of Adam in the Garden of Eden.

“Where are you?” God asks, as Adam and Eve hide behind the trees of the garden.

Adam answers, “I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid, because I am nude, and so I hid myself.”

“Who told you that you are nude?” asks God. “From the tree about which I command you not to eat, have you eaten?”

Adam, being a true leader, taking full responsibility for his actions, responds by saying, “The woman whom YOU gave to be beside me, SHE gave me from the tree, and I ate.”

That woman *you* gave me. *She* did it. It was her fault. “That sister you gave me,” Charlie’s pointing finger implicates, “she did it.” It was her fault. You shouldn’t have given me that woman. Then I wouldn’t have eaten that fruit. You shouldn’t have given me that sister. Then I wouldn’t have been dancing in the living room. It’s her fault. It’s your fault. It’s anybody’s fault but mine.

Years ago I saw this great T-shirt that said, “Eve Was Framed.” Now, I’m not saying Eve is completely off the hook here. Adam blames her, so she blames the snake. “The snake enticed me, tricked me, deceived me” (you choose your translation of the word) “and so I ate,” she says. But, what’s the original sin here?

I don’t believe that Bible stories are the word of God, but I do confess I find much humour and humanity in the Torah. Maybe you have to come from a Mediterranean family to get the jokes. These were oral stories passed from generation to generation, long before they were ever codified and written down. They were stories told to remind each generation to examine themselves now and then. What people did with what was written, well that’s another story.

The way I see it, the Adam and Eve story was never about Adam or Eve bringing the wrath of God down upon us all for eating a piece of fruit, nor was it about the supremacy of man over woman. Just read a few chapters earlier in Genesis and you’ll find a reference to man and woman being created equal, at the same time, and not from a rib. Remember that when you

encounter anyone claiming certain truths in the Bible. Like any collection of family histories, it is fraught with contradictions and inconsistencies. Throw in the difficulties of translations from language to language and you have a mess. Oh, yes, you can find justifications for anything there, all the more reason to never take it literally. But what a rich source of allegory.

To me, the Adam and Eve story is really about humans contemplating what it means to have to take responsibility for themselves. Everyone blames everyone else, so they are banished from the Garden of Eden to grow up.

In his book, *How Good Do We Have to Be*, Harold Kushner writes that the danger of the Adam and Eve story is the way in which the loss of the Garden of Eden has been misinterpreted for millennia. Too many Jews and Christians, in particular, he says, have taken the lesson from the story that one small mistake means the loss of paradise and severe punishment. Think about that. To err is human. Yet if you believe that being caught for your smallest mistakes will bring severe punishment, weakness becomes something that must be hidden. Consider it the birth of machismo. No matter what religious tradition we come from, even when we so clearly reject the premise of a punishing God who demands absolute perfection, this message has permeated much of the dominant culture that surrounds us. I wager that it is hard for any of us to escape.

When I first read Kushner's book several years ago, it was at the height of an intense period of political finger pointing, especially in the US, where I was living at the time. Everyone was playing the "blame game" and no one in government was taking responsibility for their actions. Kushner's words rang so true to me then. Think Hurricane Katrina, the invasion of Iraq, Guantanamo, Bush and his "Mission Accomplished" banner or Dick Cheney shooting a hunting companion – it was a culture that outright banned the admission of mistakes or weakness. Anything that went wrong was the fault of someone or something else.

I know you have your own examples here, perhaps not as extreme. I've been asking around all week, and the answers have been dangerously interesting. But I won't go there for now. The most significant example that comes to my mind is the current worldwide financial crisis. I once lived and worked among the "enemy" on Wall Street during a financial boom. There was a culture of machismo and of entitlement. "Hey, if God grants you all this money, you must deserve it, no matter how you gain it. Right? If you can scam the system, so what? It's good for everyone." You could see the self-delusional myths of invincibility walking down the street every day. Those on top could never show weakness for an instant. To admit a mistake was to risk losing everything, so when things went wrong, the buck got passed. It was someone else's fault.

Kushner would bring it down to a personal level. It's all about the pressure to be perfect, and the pressure for perfection takes a horrible toll. Writing long before the entire house of financial cards came crashing down, he spoke of the many professional men and women he had met who felt ashamed for not making more money no matter what their level of success. Was it greed or insecurity that built the beast? Kushner would say insecurity. He saw it in the same way that so many women hate their bodies because they do not match the physical perfection airbrushed in fashion magazines. He quipped that, "One could speculate that if all of the women [in North

American] were to wake up one morning feeling good about themselves, the ... economy would collapse.”

Collapse it did, but it wasn't Eve's fault.

Inside ourselves we may feel flawed, yet so often our public persona demands perfection. To admit mistakes is to admit weakness. We convince ourselves that our mistakes are emblems of our unworthiness. Yet, shouldn't religion teach us that being human is a wonderfully complicated challenge? For Kushner, the Adam and Eve story is not about banishment. It is about Eve bravely crossing into the unknown and giving us humanity.

As the snake explains it, “God knows, that on the day you eat [from the tree of knowledge], your eyes will be opened and you will become like gods, knowing good and evil.” On that day, Adam and Eve pass from childhood into adolescence, into an awareness of moral responsibility. Their recognition of their mortality, the responsibility of work and parenthood, the awareness of sexual intimacy, their knowledge of good and evil separate them from the rest of the animal kingdom. The lesson is not about being perfect. It is about being aware of our imperfection and trusting that even when we make mistakes, we will still be loved.

Central to our Unitarian Universalist tradition is a belief that although we are far from perfect we have the responsibility to rise above our meanest tendencies. We are here to remind each other to live up to being our better selves. It is not that we are smarter or superior, or that we've got it all figured out. We know that we can waver. We are just as likely as the next group to assign blame to others. But, frankly, blame is no more a useful emotion than guilt. When we blame, we lose energy. We lose precious time that could be used to carefully look at what has happened, and figure out what to do next. We let ourselves get tangled up in angry knots.

I've been seeing this all from a broad, political, worldwide perspective. We can't know how different things will be when we emerge from this moment of history. Yet, what a difference it would make, on a personal and a global level, if we could let go of our fear of being imperfect, if we could allow ourselves to show weakness, if we could stop blaming others for what is wrong in our lives and take responsibility for ourselves.

My hope, my prayer, is that we are moving into a new era of accountability. But we will have to wait and see what happens here in Canada, and whether the Obama administration to the south takes responsibility for its own mistakes. Or will it only be willing to apologize for the mistakes of the past administration? Let us hope that we are seeing the beginning of a worldwide culture change.

Leaving the Garden of Eden doesn't have to be a curse. It is the opportunity to be fully, complexly human. We can accept that we can never be perfect, but we can be good enough. So, on these days when we can't help but remember family stories, give yourselves a break. Hug the people around you and tell them that you and they are good enough. Give thanks that spring has come again and so much is in bud. With the beauty that humanity can be, may this garden bloom again.

Reading

This reading is from the book of Genesis, Chapter 3. It is taken from the Schocken Bible (*The Five Books of Moses*, Knop Publishing, 2000), a fairly recent translation that was done by Everett Fox to give a real feeling for the original Hebrew.

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Now the snake was more shrewd
than all the living things of the field that YHWH, God, had made.

It said to the woman:

Even though God said: You are not to eat
from any of the trees in the garden...!

The woman said to the snake:

From the fruit of the (other) trees in the garden we may eat,
but from the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, God has said:
You are not to eat from it and you are not to touch it,
lest you die.

The snake said to the woman:

Die, you will not die!

Rather, God knows that on the day that you eat from it,
your eyes will be opened
and you will become like gods, knowing good and evil.

The woman saw

that the tree was good for eating
and it was a delight to the eyes,
and the tree was desirable to contemplate.
She took from its fruit and ate,
and gave also to her husband beside her,
and he ate.

The eyes of the two of them were opened
and they knew then
that they were nude.

They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

Now they heard the sound of YHWH, God, (who was) walking
about in the garden at the breezy-time of the day.

And the human and his wife hid themselves from the face of
YHWH, God, amid the trees of the garden.

YHWH, God, called to the human and said to him:

Where are you?

He said:

I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid,
because I am nude,
and so I hid myself.

He said:

Who told you that you are nude?

From the tree about which I command you not to eat,
have you eaten?

The human said:

The woman whom you gave to be beside me,
she gave me from the tree,
and so I ate.

YHWH, God, said to the woman:

What is this that you have done?

The woman said:

The snake enticed me,
And so I ate.