



## **Reading**

Excerpts from "Saving Paradise" by Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashimi Brock:

We can 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...Knowing that paradise is here and now is a gift that comes to those who practice the ethics of paradise. This way of living is not Utopian. It does not spring simply from the imagination of a better world but from a profound embrace of this world. It does not begin with knowledge or hope. It begins with love.

To know paradise in this life is to enter a multidimensional spiritual-material reality...Paradise is simultaneously this earth, a beautiful, luminous creation, and the realm of the dead, which is connected to the living but is separated by a thin veil through which the dead can pass to accompany, bless, or guide the living. Paradise is human life restored to its divinely infused dignity and capacity, and it is a place of struggle with evil and injustice, requiring the development of wisdom, love, nonviolence, and responsible uses of power. Paradise can be experienced as spiritual illumination of the heart, mind, and senses felt in moments of religious ecstasy, and it can be known in ordinary life lived with reverence and responsibility. Paradise is not a place free from suffering or conflict, but it is a place in which Spirit is present and love is possible.

Entering paradise in this life is not an individual achievement but is the gift of communities that train perception and teach ethical grace. Paradise provides deep reservoirs for resistance and joy. It calls us to embrace life's aching tragedies and persistent beauties, to labor for justice and peace, to honor one another's dignity, and to root our lives in the soil of this good and difficult earth.

## **Sermon**

Depending on your political leanings, Blanca Alvarez is either an illegal alien or an undocumented worker. And if you're unsure about the difference, bear with me. It will become clear.

Like so many Mexicans, Blanca saw no chance for a decent life where she lived. She wanted more than the cycle of poverty that her family was stuck in. She wanted to work and have something to show for it. She wanted an education. Most of all, she wanted that for the family she planned on having. She was determined to leave Mexico. But, like most poor people, she wasn't educated, didn't have a trade, and didn't have the money. The only way she saw to escape was to enter the U.S. illegally. So, this young woman scrounged together all the money she had and found a coyote, someone who makes their lives smuggling people across the border. When they got close to the border, the coyote told her and the others to take off their shoes so that the dogs had less of a chance of hearing them. He had one whistle for ducking and one for running. When he used the duck whistle, Blanca huddled close to the ground. When he used the run whistle, she ran across the stones in her bare feet. By the time she made it across the border, her skin had been bitten raw by insects and her feet were bleeding profusely, but she was there, or should I say, here, and ready to start her new life.

Regardless of your view of illegal immigration, it is hard not to see the human reality behind what has fuelled it for so long: the universal need for a meaningful life, a life with hope and possibility, where your children might have the luxury to ask the question, "What do I want for my life?" because they can actually look farther than the next meal. Those universal needs are what brought every one of our ancestors, with the exception of those who are Native American, to this continent.



Some would say that this sense of meaningfulness and hope is what this country is all about. It is part of the American dream, the hope of a perfected union. But truth be told, even the concept of the American dream is based on a story that is much bigger and much older than this particular nation. The foundation of western culture is based on the mythical concept of the promised land – a land flowing with milk and honey, where the pastures are green, peace is at hand, and justice and mercy reign. In the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures Adam and Eve get thrown out of that Garden of Eden into a life of hardship. The rest of history is about getting back to Eden. From the Jews fleeing Egypt to find their promised land, to the teaching of Jesus that the promised land was at hand by living out his message, to the creation of the American dream of a perfect union, all that has been about getting back into that Garden, of finding our way back into paradise, into a perfect union with god or humanity or all that is. Back into that state of perfection where there is no pain and suffering, no loss, no hardship. Instead, we live primarily in joy, love, and possibility because all has been reconciled.

Every religion, including this one, plays with the concept of utopia, of what a perfect world would look like and how that might happen. That is eschatology - a theology of a better time that involves bringing together all that has been torn apart, all that has caused suffering in the world. Every religion has sought to make sense of the fact that the world is a difficult place to live. There is evil. There is loss. Bad things happen, often in ways that don't make sense. We seem to need reassurance that somewhere, somehow, some time, the pain and unfairness that is so often part of living comes to an end.

Let's take Buddhism for example. The Buddha dedicated his life to finding the way to end suffering. His answer was to relinquish all desire. To be attached to this world and anything in it, is to suffer. In Buddhism, the human soul reincarnates over and over again, each time perfecting a little bit more the discipline of non-attachment. When a human being has finally reached that state of complete and perfect detachment, they will no longer have to come back here. Their spirit will be completely absorbed into that great eternal oneness called Nirvana. That is Buddhism's paradise. To use Christian terminology, that is Buddhism's Eden.

Many of you may have grown up with a very different eschatology. Life is a test and you only get to do it once. You have to believe the right things and do the right things. At the end of all time, those who are saved will be taken into a reconstructed Garden of Eden, the Kingdom of Heaven, and those who are not will descend into hell. This eschatology or some version of it is most common in conservative forms of Christianity in both Catholicism and Protestantism. If you grew up in one of these denominations you were probably exposed to it in some form.

Liberal Christianity has quite a different eschatology. The God of liberal Christianity is less about judgment and more about benevolent and forgiving love. This God is rooting for you and doing its best to walk with you on your journey. Getting back to the Garden is less about punishment and exclusion for those who don't get there, and more about reconciliation with all of life. When liberal Christianity talks about an end time, and truth be told, it's not a major focus, the general assumption is that you and everyone else is taken home into the arms of God because God could not, in all her loving nature, let anyone slip away. There is no true Garden of Eden unless everyone is in it.

There are two big questions in eschatology. Where are we going? And, who is going with us? How a person answers those questions is going to say a lot about how they view themselves, other people, and their world.

Let me give you an example. There are strong connections between an exclusive eschatology and a hard position on illegal immigration. From what I've seen, those more likely to demonize Blanca Alvarez are those who have an eschatology that says it is perfectly alright for people to be left out of the Garden of Eden. It is perfectly alright to dehumanize them, see them as unworthy, and see them as less than us.



Those with a liberal inclusive eschatology are likely to have a different approach. We are all children of God, with inherent worth and dignity, even undocumented workers like Blanca Alvarez. Yes, she may have broken the law, but she is still a human being with hopes and desires deserving of basic respect. Who can be defined only by the boundaries they have crossed? If we judge someone's worth only by the law they have broken, we have made ourselves into gods of judgment, the kind of god that would keep some out of the promised land and call that justice.

There is a saying that we become like the gods we worship. How significant that many of those with a restrictive eschatology advocate simply rounding up the perceived danger and shipping it off. How equally significant that those with an inclusive no one left behind eschatology are more likely to advocate immigration reform.

How often do we think that theology is only something done by distant professors in their ivy-league towers? That it's mostly about words and abstract concepts? Theology is flesh and blood with real life consequences. Our eschatologies influence everything we do – how we raise our children, how we understand the differing roles of men and women, how we view marriage and family, how we are employers and employees, who we go to war with and who gets invited to the negotiation table, and who we support in our bailout packages. Our eschatologies will tell us who counts and who doesn't, who is considered in and who is considered out.

Unitarian Universalism has a very unique way of engaging the whole concept of eschatology. The root of our eschatology is in that liberal Christian version I've already told you about, the no-one-left-behind eschatology. That is our heritage. But we're no longer just a Christian church, we are a church of diverse theologies and so our eschatology has evolved and become something that is uniquely ours, that distinguishes us from other religions.

Truth be told, most of us could care less about the end times! We have no idea when that's going to be and what it's going to mean. There is nothing useful about focusing on something we can't know and can't control. But we still have the universal human need for some reassurance, some hope, that all the evils we see and experience in the world and in ourselves have some way of being reconciled. So we have our own answers for how that might happen.

We look at paradise less as a reward that waits for us in some future time, and more as a vision of how things should be on this earth. The promise of paradise is here. The Garden of Eden is not an escape from a troubled world, it is a radical engagement with the world because for all we know, this may be it. We may be going into an afterlife, and many Unitarian Universalists believe in an afterlife, me included, but you really can't know for sure. Our eschatology mirrors those famous lyrics by Crosby, Stills and Nash, "If you can't love the one you want, love the one you're with." Well, this world is what we're with and this is the location of our paradise. Our eschatology is profoundly intertwined with social justice. Where is the brokenness in our world now? Who is hurting now? How are we separating ourselves from the cycle of life? How can we be participants and agents in reconciliation? We're not worried about who's going to be left behind in some mythical end time. That just distracts us from the really important question: Who's getting left behind now?

Unitarian Universalism's eschatology proclaims that we are all in this together, one human family and there is no Garden of Eden if some are excluded. Poverty, war, discrimination, environmental destruction – these are the enemies of the Garden of Eden. Our sacred work is to make the oneness we believe in as real as possible. We have to make sure we're not just saying it, but that we're doing it, that we actually treat the people in our lives as if we are one human family. That we actually make lifestyle choices that affirm and promote that oneness and teach this to our children. This is why Unitarian Universalism is really big on building self-awareness so that we can make more responsible choices, thus doing our part in reclaiming paradise. One of the reasons Unitarian Universalism offers programs like Our Whole Lives, which teaches kids comprehensive sex education, Welcoming Congregation, which is a consciousness raising program focusing on sexual minorities, and Journey to Wholeness



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which builds awareness of how racism works, is because we know that it is so easy to fall into old patterns, where we act as if paradise is only for us, or that we have responsibility only for getting ourselves and people like us into it. To use the words of Rebecca Parker and Rita Brock, our call is to ordinary life lived with reverence and responsibility.

Our eschatology asks of us to live as if paradise were now and that tells us that we are the tools of the spirit who constantly bring it into being. It is the warming of our hearts, of our forgiveness and grace, and the opening of our hands that is the sacred key to opening the gates of Eden.

Today, this church is beginning a very important process. We are kindling our flame, asking the questions, who are we, where are we going, and who are we here for. These are eschatological questions asking for eschatological answers. We are engaging our theology, asking ourselves what we're going to do with our little piece of the Garden of Eden. I welcome all of you, no matter how long you've been with us, to be a part of this process. Eden isn't created only by a select few. It is created by all and for all.

May it be so.