



Reading

Eve’s Muse – by Kaaren Solveig Anderson from her meditation book “So Glad To be Human” – adapted by K. Taves for the purposes of this service

Eve: Describe Adam, you say. Well, he’s kind of a wuss. Don’t get me wrong, though, Adam’s a nice guy. He just adheres to rules a little too strictly. Take his conversation with God before I was created.

God: Adam, you are not to eat fruit from the tree in the center of the garden.

Adam: Sure, God, I won’t ever, ever touch that tree’s fruit, cross my heart, hope to die.

Eve: That’s Adam, unquestioningly going along with the deal, just hanging out and enjoying this “paradise” as he calls it. Well, let me tell you, paradise wasn’t nirvana. It was beautiful: luscious lakes, meandering rivers, verdant trees, prolific flowers, stunning mountains, but Boring. ... It was nice not to have to work. It was nice ... to have God wait on you hand and foot. Food was abundant, scenery ever wonderful, seventy degree days, light showers in the afternoon, and then Back to perfect.

But, have you ever longed for something because life felt like a matzah cracker – dry and thin? Have you ever wanted something because you knew it would add spontaneity, diversity, and just plain change to your life? I did. Life sat pathetically before me on a silver platter. I didn’t have to work, struggle, worry, engage, or contemplate... and I was bored. Personally, I think God was bored too. Why else set up something to tempt so blatantly?

God also knew me. He knew I couldn’t be stopped. He saw me bored out of my mind in that garden. Adam and I used to sit idly around, waiting for something to happen, anything to happen! I fell to twiddling my thumbs. (physically twiddle thumbs) Adam used to ask,

Adam: (very irritated!) Is that all you know how to do?

Eve: I’d tell him, “No, I can go this way too!” (change direction of thumbs) and change the direction of my thumb twiddling. It got to the point where death didn’t seem like such a bad alternative to boredom. At least monotony would get a run for its money.

And then, one day, a snake visited me! That snake had a beautiful sleek body, a smooth voice, luminous eyes, and such a pleasant serpent smile! At last, something new and exciting! The snake sidled up to me so sweetly and said words I’d been dying to hear!

Snake: Eve, do I have to remind you that God only told *Adam* not to eat the apple?

Eve: Really!

Snake: That’s right! You weren’t even created yet either! So everything you’re getting from Adam is second hand information. And remember, Adam would rather stay in this so-called paradise than to risk,



or challenge, or imagine, or venture anything!
God’s rule works for him, but what about you?

Eve: It was then that I looked into those snake’s eyes and I saw my life. In great big capital letters, the irises of that snake read, BORING! I saw myself and myself saw me. It was then that I knew I had to taste that apple. So, I took that apple, and bit deeply into its tart crispness. (pause.....) And all felt different. My body changed. I felt the sores on my feet. I felt a surge of life in my belly, my mind expand, my vision clear. For the first time, I felt whole. The spirit of love had consumed me. I felt wholly alive. Full of the spirit of God. (turn to Adam)

“Adam!” I said. “Something wonderful happened! A snake visited me, and I ate the apple, and I feel so alive! So in touch with everything, with my body, with my life, with my whole being!”

Adam: What? How could you do this???? This is terrible! We are not supposed to do that. God told us not to!

Eve: Oh Adam, I’m truly human. I feel more ME than ever before! Adam, don’t you want more? Don’t you want to feel fully and totally alive? (offer him the apple)

Adam: Well... (look tempted... then shake head!) No! ... we’re not supposed to!

Eve: I kept telling Adam and Adam kept not getting it. And finally, I gave up. I shoved that apple into his mouth. He reluctantly took a bite. It was later he told God it was all my fault.

Now here is the part of the story that I must confess needs correcting. When God discovered what we had done, I did not blame the snake for my transgressions. I fessed up and admitted I had eaten the apple. I said in a proud unwavering voice to God, “I am glad to be human! I can spurtle with rage, shake with despair, and bubble in ecstasy. Everything is not perfect, but it is real, alive! I feel sorry for you, God. For you everything is perfect, always going your way. Do you ever get bored? Don’t you want to be alive like me?”

Oh... and then God got mad!

God: How dare you! I curse you both. You, Eve, will scream out in pain during childbirth! You will regret the day you were born!

Eve: Well, well, well, I must say, I never expected anything different after watching the animals in the garden give birth. They too suffered pain, but what a wonderful outcome.

God kept yelling, and we listened to the end of his tirade.

God: Adam, you will forever toil in the dust of the earth. Now both of you, out! I banish you from the Garden of Eden!



Eve: The Gates of Eden closed behind us. Adam plopped down right there, looking back through the gate at everything he felt he had lost.

Adam: Our Garden. Our Bliss. We have been cast from our home! This is terrible!

Eve: I picked up the apple and went to the gate. I stood there for a while, leaning against that cold wrought iron, throwing the apple up and down. ... Up and down... I ... thought about a song I had heard, “You can make the world your apple, take a bite before it sours, you can make the world your charm or your chain.” I knew it lay before me, my life, my opportunity, my humanness. And I said out loud, in a clear voice, “I’m so glad to be human!”

Sermon

The years 1825 to 1861 were pretty intense years in American history. You think things are changing fast today! There were huge social and economic changes rearranging the face of American society. Technological advancements were making massive inroads into people’s daily lives. The growth of cities and factories was changing where many people lived and what they did for a living. A country that once felt raw and new was now wearing a little bit older and wiser, and a little bit less idealistic. There were the dreams of the Revolution in 1776, and now there was the reality of a country that was figuring out, sometimes painfully, who it was.

There had been high hopes when this country was founded that it would be the greatest democracy in the world, rooted in the moral value of human equality. This is where the idea of American exceptionalism emerged, the idea that America would be unique among countries. But, it seemed that many things threatened this lofty goal. An elite class of businessmen pretty much controlled the country and their power grew as the frontier pushed further and further west. Growing cities were developing slums with all their social problems, and class divisions were getting larger. There weren’t supposed to be class divisions in the United States. That’s what happened in Europe, not here. This country was supposed to be the great leveler, where anybody could be president (that is if you were white), and yet it was becoming clear that there were going to be the very powerful and the very weak.

To top it off, many churches had become comfortable reinforcers of the status quo, not unlike Europe. Upper class people went to upper class churches. Lower class people went to lower class churches, and the two didn’t mix. Many complained that the only thing that meant anything anymore was money and



power. There was this sense that the high ideals so alive at the time of the revolution had grown tired. The good old days had come to an end.

Some Unitarians took the turn of things very personally. Many had joined the Unitarian church because it was the church of dissent and challenge. But even these churches had become sleepy. The early Unitarians came from power and money and many lived their values when it suited them and merely talked about them when it didn't. Some accused the church of becoming a social club. A few Unitarians became pretty frustrated and began looking for something else. They found what they were looking for in Transcendentalism.

The Transcendentalist movement drew many disaffected Unitarians. It was an idealistic system of thought that emphasized strength, courage, self-confidence, and independence of mind. It was a highly emotional movement and it encouraged people to leave behind all the things that confined them so they could have a pure unadulterated experience of the divine. The Transcendentalists believed in mind over matter; you had to open your mind to change the world, so they focused on things like truth, beauty, and absolute good. The reason the country was becoming selfish and greedy, they said, is that people had not brought the highest spiritual values into their whole beings. Change your values and the world would change. One of the more dramatic ways they sought to create change was to form utopian communities.

George Shipley founded Brook Farm near Roxbridge Massachusetts in 1841. Shipley was disturbed by the social inequality in American society. It frustrated him that the work of laborers was valued less than the work of professionals. It angered him that artists were seen as less valuable than so-called “real” workers. Shipley hoped to serve truth, beauty and the absolute good by bringing laborers and artists together. The laborers would learn to appreciate the artists, and the artists would learn to appreciate the value of physical work. He hoped this utopian community would increase understanding and begin the healing of society.

Since the dawn of humanity, when we crept through evolution into the beings we are now, humankind has been drawn to the image of utopia, that perfect society that is harmonious and just. Everyone is happy



and fulfilled and living in unity. Since the dawn of humanity, there have been attempts to create these utopias. And most of them fail.

About 80 people bought into Shipley’s vision, literally buying into it because they had to buy shares in the commune. Many of them were Unitarians, like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Not surprisingly, all 80 were artists who came from families of means and could afford to buy into the commune. Not one was a laborer. This meant the artists were responsible for all the physical labor needed to run the farm. As you can imagine, it didn’t take long for the artists to grow disillusioned. Many felt the labor was beneath them. They complained that they didn’t have time for their art. The community gradually splintered into factions and dissolved in 1847. The largest utopian experiment in Unitarian and Transcendentalist history had failed.

Our reading this morning puts a delightful twist on another failed utopia - The Garden of Eden. Usually, this story is a tragedy. Adam and Eve are created by God and placed in this wonderful garden. The only condition is that they NOT eat from the tree of life. But, Eve cannot resist. She eats from the tree, and convinces Adam to do the same. When God learns of their disobedience, they are banished from Eden, and since then, humanity has lived with the burden of their fall.

Kaaren Anderson’s retelling of the story is quite different. Anderson has turned a tragedy into an adventure. Eve is no criminal here. She is a woman hungry for a life in which she has a part in creation, rather than simply being handed everything she needs. Instead of seeing Eve’s choice as disobedience, Anderson sees it as courageous and inspired, fuelled by curiosity and a deep desire for a fuller experience of life. When Eve eats of the apple, she feels alive in a whole new way. She feels joy and pain. She sees with clear eyes. She is consumed with the spirit of love. What values are at play in Anderson’s revision? She is not valuing perfection and obedience. She is valuing experience, risk, curiosity, and the act of questioning.

We have two stories here of utopias that didn’t quite hit the mark – the Garden of Eden and Brook Farm. Eden may have been Adam’s utopia but it was not Eve’s. And what Shipley did may have been his utopia but it crumbled when faced with the reality of those who joined him. In both cases, the creator of that



utopia depended on others fitting into roles created for them. And in both cases, this did not happen. God needed an obedient Adam and Eve. He didn't get it. Shipley needed laborers and artists who bought into his vision. Instead, he got artists who could not quite step out of their own reality. Both God and Shipley tried to manufacture a utopia. In both cases, the free will of the people in these utopias brought them down.

Or did they? What creator would put in the middle of their creation something that could ruin it all? Perhaps it is the very nature of humanity and its constant dance with the divine to place in all our grand schemes the very things that will undo them. The fickle God of the Hebrew Bible created a human being with curiosity and strong will and then demanded obedience. What did he think was going to happen?

So, Eve wanted excitement and got her wish and the Garden of Eden was locked behind her and Adam as they left. But I wonder what happened after that? It seems like she had created another utopia in her mind of what lay beyond those gates. I wonder how the utopia in her mind held up when met with the reality of life outside of Eden. A reality where she had a spouse who grieved the paradise he would not have chosen to leave, a reality where she gave birth to two sons who turned against each other, one killing the other. I wonder what she made of that reality? Was she able to hold on to her curiosity and her hunger to feel all there was to feel?

There was no Garden of Eden to protect her from the pain that followed. But now she had the ability to make choices for herself. Some of them were likely mistakes, but she got to make them. We're going to make mistakes. We're going to hurt each other and ourselves. We are going to get cut and bruised on the way, but we can always hold before us a vision of a world that is better than the one we know. And we can make choices that we hope will take us to that vision.

That is what Shipley tried to do. He tried to make choices that would take a whole society closer to that dream of true equality. He understood this to be a profoundly spiritual journey, requiring considerable sacrifice. And he was willing to do it, even if it meant failing. And did Brook Farm really fail? Brook Farm may have dissolved but the Transcendentalists and Unitarians then went on to serve society in any number of ways. They became anti-poverty and anti-slavery activists, they built schools and hospitals



and libraries and worked for women’s right to vote. Rather than withdrawing from the world into a private utopia, they took their dream of a healed world out into society, determined to make a difference. We still benefit from their vision.

And mistakes were made along the way. Plenty of mistakes. Despite the good intentions of so many people, the divisions in America were too deep to be bridged. Tensions between the industrializing north and the agricultural south could not be resolved, and the Civil War erupted in 1861. It was a terrible bloody drawn out war with repercussions that no one anticipated. A country that had hidden behind an innocence that never existed had to face up to the evil within itself. There was no paradise at the end of that war. The South was left in chaos. The North was broken. The slaves were now free but had no political or civil rights, nor the means to provide for themselves. It was a time ripe for disillusionment and despair as well as hope and vision. And.... People like the Transcendentalists and Unitarians looked at the mess, and went to work, for they had a vision of what could be, and worked with what there was to come closer to what they believed was right and true.

This is Eve’s utopia, with all its flaws and ups and downs and good and evil and stress and birthing babies and losing people we love. This is our world. From the birth of a tiny child, to the dandelion that creeps through the cement in an inner city ghetto, from the death row inmate ordering his last meal, to the parent determined to accept their child’s choices, from the pansies that bloom in a frost, to the raging fires in Southern California fed by the Sante Anna winds, from the sun glinting off rush hour traffic to the glow of a full moon. This is Eve’s utopia.

What is utopia for you? When you allow your mind to soar, how do you envision your perfect world? Perhaps you have found utopia in the small and large details of your life. Perhaps your utopia is always beckoning in the distance, and no matter what you attain or how many chains you break from your arms, it’s still far away. Utopia is what you make of it. Utopia is what you do with your free will and your choices. There are people who seem to have everything, and their souls are troubled. There are people who live in utter poverty and greet every day with joy.



“Out of Eden”
Rev. Krista Taves
November 25, 2007

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

It all depends on your bigger picture. Eve had a bigger picture and I tend to think she had the inner flexibility to make the most of whatever came to her. I tend to think that even though Brook Farm failed, there must have been some who learned so much from the failure that they could never be the same again. The thing about utopia is that you have to work with what you have. It will never be perfect. Even things that look perfect are not. There are always those breaches, those places of restlessness, that will pull you to a different place. We have the free will to make choices about what we do with our restlessness. What we do with our disappointments. What we do with our successes. We can continuously spend our energy looking for perfection, or we can work with what we have. We have been given free will for a reason, to do right, to take risks and to learn from our mistakes and keep going.

In the months to come, we are going to be talking about Emerson Chapel’s bigger picture. What is our vision of what we could be? How are we going to work with what we have to make that vision as true as we can? We have the free will to make choices about where we are going, who we are serving, and what we stand for. This may not be 1841, but it is 2007 and we have work to do.

In this beautiful and hurting world, let’s rejoice that we have, indeed, been thrown from Eden into a utopia that allows us to be cocreators of the world we live in.

Amen and blessed be.