

## Against Innocence

Readings: 'Psalm to Be Read with Closed Eyes' by D. Nurkse  
'blessing the boats' by Lucille Clifton  
Parts by Tedd Arnold

This story reminds me why we teach comprehensive sexuality education here, the reason we have opened up our church this weekend to host dozens of people as they are trained to teach the Our Whole Lives Comprehensive Sexuality Education in this and other congregations and communities. We dream of a world where all children and all people understand their bodies, a world where snort or shedding hair, or peeling toes, or belly button lint or any other natural process is not met with fear or panic or wrapping ourselves up in masking tape. We dream of a world where we understand our bodies.

I've read *Parts* so many times I can probably recite it from memory. When I read it to my almost 4-year-old, we have started talking about the parents, about how they didn't tell their kid important things they needed to know to grow up in this world. I name that this isn't right and that I will always try to tell him the important things he needs to know to grow up in this world.

For me, so much of the task of parenting is first, teaching my children that they are safe in the world – and then teaching them that the world is not safe. I work to make sure that they have a secure attachment with me, my spouse, the other people who care for them regularly, and their communities. And as that is established, I also need to teach them that the world is also dangerous and unfair and unjust, that not everyone will act in their best interest, that this world will be disappointing and will break their heart. This is a delicate dance, constantly working on two contradictory projects, knowing that the balance between security and awareness is vital for a meaningful life.

This isn't easy. Over the last year, teaching my older child that the world isn't safe, has moved from the theoretical to the real – and I recognize the privilege in all this, the privilege that I have some control over how he learns that this world is unfair and unsafe. So many children have this lesson thrust upon them. We've been having a lot of conversations... about death, about gender identity, about different family structures, about guns, about racism, about consent. Just this week, my kid encountered his first confederate flag, hanging in our neighborhood. My child asked questions. My spouse explained that the confederate flag is something that makes our friends and neighbors who have darker skin or who were born in other countries feel less safe. It is a way to tell them that the person with the flag doesn't think they belong in our neighborhood. And then that brought other questions, of course...

If you are a parent feeling overwhelmed by this task, know that you are not alone. It's really hard. Probably the hardest thing in my life. And I'm in the process of planning a group for parents and

others to get better at talking about race with kids. Look for it in the fall – and please come. I want to learn from all of you. I want us all to learn together.

In all this, I think of another parent, one who refused to teach his child about the world. According to tradition, Siddhartha Gautama was a prince born in present day Nepal in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century before the common era. His father, the King, wanted to shield him from human suffering, and the young prince was raised with no knowledge of aging, illness, or death. One day, when he was 29, married, and the parent of a child himself, he left his palace and saw the first old person he had ever seen in his life. He asked his charioteer what had happened to that person – and the charioteer, surely confused by the question, explained aging to the young prince. A short time after, Siddhartha left the palace and saw someone who was sick. Again, he was confused and asked questions. This episode happened again when the prince saw his first corpse. Siddhartha was so haunted by all of this, he decided to leave his family and focus all his energies on making sense of suffering. After several years, he had an awakening, understanding the cause of suffering and how to escape it. His followers started calling him 'awakened one' which, in their language, is *Buddha*. The Buddha, this prince who had been isolated from suffering, now taught anyone who would listen that suffering is part of life, suffering is caused by craving or attachment, suffering can be overcome by overcoming this craving or attachment, and there are practices that will help us overcome craving and attachment.

So much of the religious life is about doing that dance between safety and awareness, protecting ourselves from pain and suffering and facing it head on. It isn't just children that we lead in the dance of safety and awareness, innocence and ignorance, seeing the world as it is and opening ourselves up to heartbreak. Those of us with some amount of privilege can often insulate ourselves from the pain of the world. We can dwell in innocence and ignorance, in our own version of Siddhartha's palace, or in the gentle arms of a parent, as described in the poem Andrea read earlier. We can sometimes even tell ourselves it's a virtue to be so insulated and isolated. I don't think it is. Knowing about the world, seeing and naming things clearly is important for all of us and questions about how to do this dance rise often. After we receive a bad diagnosis. How much do we tell people in our life? Is it better to protect them from hard news for a while or share it right away? It happens as we wake up to various injustices in the world – How informed do I have to be to be an informed citizen? How much pain can I take in to be spurred to action? How much pain can I take in before it paralyzes me? If we are lucky, we get to take the lead in this dance, giving ourselves awareness at a pace we can handle. Many are not so lucky and know first-hand the pain that is part of the world. They are not in charge of the dance, but being put through the steps by an unfeeling world.

One of our culture's foundational stories about innocence and awareness is at the very beginning of the Bible. It involves Adam, Eve, a snake, God, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Most of us know this story. According to the story, Adam and Eve, the first people, are living in Paradise. The only rule is that they can't eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

The snake convinces Eve to eat the fruit anyway, she does – and then gets Adam to join in. Then God throws Adam and Eve out of paradise to suffer.

Many of you who have been told this story were told that it's about original sin. That Eve and Adam's mistakes have been passed down to all of humanity and that explains the human capacity for evil. That is one interpretation, but it wasn't the first understanding of the story. This story, like everything in the Hebrew scriptures, was a Jewish story before it was a Christian story. Original sin isn't a Jewish idea. It isn't part of the Jewish understanding of the world in general or this story in particular. Original sin, as a concept, was invented in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century by Ireneaus, an early Christian bishop and church leader and other leaders expanded on it and it became a common Christian understanding of the world—and this story.

I suggest a different way to understand this story. It is a Jewish feminist interpretation. It is a version of the story that gives Adam and Eve agency and awareness. In this version, Eve chooses to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil on purpose. She isn't tricked into it. She wants to be wise. When Adam and Eve eat the fruit, their eyes are opened, they become wise, they become aware of all that is good and evil in the world... and that, in itself, brings the suffering. God doesn't create the suffering as punishment, the wisdom Adam and Eve gain creates the suffering in itself, no divine intervention needed. This is how wisdom works, often. Being aware of all that is happening and thinking deeply about it, can be a source of pain.

Then, God knows Eve and Adam are not innocents any longer. They do not need God as they once did, before they had wisdom, so they must make their own way in the world. As any of you who have tried to establish yourself as a young adult – or watched young adults in your life make this sometimes hard transition— know, moving toward independence will include suffering – in work, in childbirth, and the suffering that is part of wisdom, part of being aware of this world and all of its beauty and all of its heartbreak. In this feminist Jewish interpretation, the expulsion from Eden isn't a punishment, but God's understanding that a newly wise humanity would not be content with the idyllic garden anymore. With wisdom, Adam and Eve are off to make their way in a complicated, beautiful and heartbreaking world.

That's a really different story than the one most of us have been told about Adam, Eve, a snake, a tree, and God, right? It's just as biblically based. If you look at Genesis 3, there's just as much reason—if not more – to tell this story than there is to tell a story about original sin. Sometimes, I imagine how different our culture might be if this story, the story about choosing to be aware, awake, and alive – and the suffering that can come from that—was the one we told about Adam, Eve, a snake, a tree, and God, not the one about how we are all born sinful because of someone else's mistakes.

I have another story for you now, a more modern story about how innocence and ignorance can harm us. This is from Rebecca Parker, a white Unitarian Universalist and Methodist minister who was president of one of our UU seminaries. She writes,

In 1976 I began a cross-country road trip, on my way to seminary. I traveled with a friend. We had time, so we decided to take back roads. One afternoon, the road passed through rural western Pennsylvania. Late in the day, we came down through hill country into a valley. It had been raining hard, and as we neared a small town, we noticed blinking yellow lights warning off danger. We saw fields covered in standing water and passed several side roads blocked off with signs saying: Road Closed.

"Looks like they've had a flood here," we said.

Coming into town, we crossed a bridge over a wide river. The water was high, muddy, flowing fast. Sandbags lined the roadway.

"Gosh," we said, "They must have had quite a bit of high water to contend with here. Looks like it was a major flood!"

We headed out of town, following a winding country road, captivated by the evidence all around us that there had been a dramatic flood. Then we rounded a bend, and in front of us, a sheet of water covered the roadway. The water was rising fast, like a huge silver balloon being inflated before our eyes.

We stopped and started to turn the car around. The water was rising behind us as well. Suddenly we realized the flood hadn't happened yesterday or last week. It was happening *here and now*. Dry ground was disappearing fast. We hurriedly clambered out of the car and scrambled to higher ground. Soaked to the bone, we huddled under a fir tree. No longer were we lodged in our familiar vehicle; the cold water of the storm poured down on us, baptizing us into the present—a present from which we had been insulated by both our car and our misjudgments about the country we were traveling through.'

Parker continues, 'This is what it is like to be white in America. It is to travel well ensconced in a secure vehicle; to see signs of what is happening in the world outside the compartment one is traveling in and not realize that these signs have any contemporary meaning. It is to be dislocated—to misjudge your location and to believe you are uninvolved and unaffected by what is happening in the world...

To come of age in America as a white person is to be educated into ignorance. It is to be culturally shaped to not know and not want to know the actual context in which you live.'<sup>1</sup>

I can tell you the exact place I was when I read this passage – and the powerful essay it is part of – a decade ago. The metaphor of being white in America as being in the midst of flood and not understanding what is happening is such a powerful one for me, is such a true one for parts of my story. I have been dislocated and have been working hard to remember that I am not uninvolved and unaffected. This work is a struggle for many of us who have been socialized as white in this country – and many of us who are white, here at People's, are doing the hard and important work to set aside our own ignorance and move into awareness and understanding. Many of you are my teachers in this work. This work is about race, but of course we know so many of us have been educated into ignorance about so many things – climate change and class and ageism to name only a few. Those of us with privilege, those of us with the resources to keep

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<sup>1</sup> 'Not Somewhere Else, But Here: The Struggle for Racial Justice as a Struggle to Inhabit My Country' by Rebecca Parker in *Soul Work: Antiracist Theologies in Dialogue*. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones, eds. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003. Pages 171-172.

ourselves ensconced in the protective arms of ignorance, who can sail in our innocence through the world, have to choose another way. I would assert that our faith calls us to another way, calls us to wake up to the world as it is in all isn't pain and beauty and to do the work that is ours to do to make the beauty outweigh the pain.

So, I invite you all to be like Eve, the Eve who chooses wisdom and the suffering that it brings.

One of my favorite facts about her story is that the Bible never specifies what kind of fruit she eats. We think it's an apple because of a misunderstanding of a Latin translation of the story. In Latin, *malum* means both evil and apple. Bible translation can be like a giant game of telephone and that's why we think she ate an apple. The ancient rabbis debated what kind of fruit it was; leading contenders include grapes, figs, and wheat.<sup>2</sup>

The next time you eat fruit – or wheat – I invite you to take a moment and think about choosing wisdom, taking a bite as an act of choosing to better understand good and evil, knowing that that choice might bring suffering, but that moving from ignorance and innocence to wisdom and awareness is important.

May we all open our eyes.

May we all seek the truth.

May we all work for a world free from suffering, a world where all are safe.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup>Dolansky, Shawna. 'The Immortal Myth of Adam and Eve.' *TheTorah.com*. Retrieved from <https://thetorah.com/the-immortal-myth-of-adam-and-eve/>