

## **Dangerous Innocence**

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We long for mythic times of innocence, the times before we knew we were naked. There is some past Golden Age from which we are forever banished. We lived in Eden where there was no sickness, hunger, and pain, and no concern about good and evil. Those were the "Good Old Days" and we will always remember them.

Each civilization, each tribe, has a myth of a long ago "Golden Age." In Christianity and Judaism it was the myth of Eden. And, deep within us, there is some sort of longing to return to the Golden Age. We cannot believe we have left the Garden forever. Psychologists would suggest to us that part of that longing is not merely cultural but also psychological. We dream of the womb where we were absolutely taken care of, where we were warm, enfolded, fed, floating in the unseeing darkness, surrounded by the all embracing Mother. We dream of infancy when each demanding cry brought powerful people to feed us, to hold us, to comfort us. We dream of early childhood when choices were simple. The only decision was obedience or disobedience, reward and punishment, gaining love or losing it. We dream of the time before we could see good and evil, when we were young and innocent animals at play in the world. We long for those times before we had to toil in the world by the sweat of our brow.

It is not only religions nor individuals who remember Eden, but nations also. Britain had her Golden Age and France hers. We all heard stories of the young America, the idealistic country that had not lost her innocence--virginal territory not yet soiled by the touch of civilization, the pastoral ideal, called by many of its early colonists the New Eden. For others, perhaps our

American Golden Age was Concord--with Emerson, Parker, Fuller, and Alcott carrying on sophisticated dialogues on transcendental topics while Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman invented a pastoral American literature nearby. There are those today who believe there was an America, sometime not so very long ago, when families were close-knit, happy, and harmonious, when parents didn't need to worry about drugs and internet predators, when we all held values in common and had a sense we were part of a community, a Norman Rockwell print come to life.

And some of us have Personal Golden Ages, our personal "Good Old Days"--when we were younger, happier, or more carefree. My father, for example, remembers a ten week camping trip our family took together in Europe 40 years ago as a time of harmony when each one of us pulled together and worked to make things go smoothly.

There is something in us that wishes to deny a world where evil and suffering exist. We want to remain like Adam and Eve in the Garden before they had knowledge of good and evil--forever innocent, like the other animals there.

It may be a trivial forgetting, as with my father who seemed to have forgotten the many discomforts of our trip: how crowded it was trying to sleep six people in a VW Microbus, how much he complained about the small quantity and low quality of the food my sister and I bought with the \$5 daily food allowance. He forgot the fights in the back seat of the car, the crazy Italian drivers, the Parisians who refused to give us the money our bank had wired us, and the boat crew who dropped the box with all our souvenirs into the Atlantic Ocean. We do that. A "good time" or a "good person" becomes an exaggeration of itself and we remember Golden Ages and Saints.

But often that forgetting is not trivial, as when we forget that our American "New Eden" was inhabited when Europeans arrived there and was attained by the slaughter and genocide of thousands of Native Americans. Or when we forget that 19th century Boston had a prosperity based in large part on the benefits our nation gained from Black slave labor. Or when we forget that our idyllic past was not merely family dinners and Norman Rockwell, but also contained two World Wars, the Korean and the Vietnam Wars, and a Great Depression where millions were hungry and even the wealthy jumped out of windows.

These are themes I thought about and wrote about in 1984, when Ronald Reagan was president. I often thought that his appeal was to the element in the nation wishing for a handsome, cowboy, in a white hat, riding out against evil empires and the forces of doom.

The events on September 11, 2001 made me think of those themes again. I remember the shock, the fear, and the horror, of that day. I also remember widely varying secondary reactions, even in my congregation. Most of them I understood. Some were angry and wanted to bomb someone. Some were afraid of the war and violence they were sure would follow. I remember one person quoting Malcolm X saying that this was the chickens coming home to roost. The reaction that did surprise me was one not voiced to me in church, but one I heard over and over in the media from people on the street, asking who could possibly hate us that much? It surprised me because I knew of lots of peoples who might hate us--some with very good reasons, some for not so good reason, but I wondered how anyone could have come to adulthood in America with such a profound lack of knowledge of our country's role in the world and others reaction to it. How could anyone think our nation too innocent and kind to provoke ire? I had had a very different

reaction. When I first heard about the attacks I asked myself, “Who of the many people who have reasons good or bad for hating us has planned and carried out this terrible massacre?”

For example, when we say September 11 in our country, we think of the Twin Towers. When you say September 11 in Chile, they think of the overthrow of their democratically elected government on September 11th, 1973, a coup partially engineered and definitely backed by the CIA and secretary of state Henry Kissinger, a coup that brought about the brutal dictatorship of Augustus Pinochet who killed thousands and imprisoned and tortured thousands more. I thought of the CIA overthrow of democracy in Iran and in Guatemala in the 1950's, both countries ruled by repressive and murderous governments in subsequent years. I thought of our support of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, a group some have argued surpassed the Nazis in genocidal brutality. My list was long of peoples whose countries who had lived in terror and oppression because of our policies and of brutal dictators we have supported. So I could imagine millions who could hate us. Hatred, both deserved and undeserved. So it seems to me a kind of dangerous innocence to say, as did the man or woman on the street: Who could hate us that much?

It is not to say that hatred justifies murder. If it did, there would be a lot more justifiable homicide, and I, myself, would pick a very low profile profession.

But to put it another way, if a person jumps into a river full of crocodiles he doesn't deserve to get eaten, but to jump into that river is dangerously innocent. As a nation, our actions and our role in the world have consequences, and the more we know about our role and our actions and their possible consequences, the better choices we can make, and the more likely we are to avoid

some of the adverse consequences. I admit that I had little awareness of the terrorist group called Al Qaeda, before 9-11. And I doubt that anyone could have predicted precisely what bizarre and terrible thing they might do. But it was foreseeable that abolishing democracy and installing the Shah in one of the largest nations in the Middle East would not make us friends there and would not help it become a democratic area of the world as we now claim our aim is. It was foreseeable that training and importing fighters into Afghanistan to fight the Soviets and then leaving that devastated country to its own devices would foster chaos and conflict and even something like the Taliban. It was foreseeable that our support for dictatorships and authoritarian governments in the region would not win us friends. It was foreseeable that our policy in Israel and Palestine would not create friends in the Arab world. And on and on. We jumped in the river of crocodiles. Adverse consequences were predictable. Our deliberate blindness, our feigned innocence made us vulnerable.

At a national level, innocence comes in different forms. There is the Religious and Political Right whose appeal is its promise that we can return to a Golden Age, a time of innocence when there was no family strife, no social upheaval, and everyone thought and acted morally--just like all the rest of us. The reason we are not there now is that gay people are destroying our marriages and public employees are so well paid that the nation is broke. The fault is not in them but completely other. "They hate us for our freedoms." Not for our faults. Not even for our fortune. And so they war on the evils outside themselves, never fixing the flaws inside.

Many on the Left, who see more clearly the complicity of our nation in the sins of the world, both historically and currently, have to tried to maintain our innocence by disassociating

ourselves from the nation. Again, projecting the evils of the world onto others. Both sides tend to blame government, never admitting that we have a hand in creating government.

We admit the sins of the nation, but maintain our own innocence, refusing to see within ourselves the ways in which our own lives partake of the ills we complain of--the global warming crusader who drives 40 miles to work in an SUV, the racial justice advocate whose lifestyle removes him from daily contact with those he advocates for, the peace advocate who always seems to be in conflict with other people, the prophets who love humanity but don't much care for people, or the majority of us in America, who live in wasteful plenty while millions starve. Now it is not that any of us could be a perfect exemplar of our principles, what is dangerous is when we demonize others and fail to recognize the many ways that we too participate in and may even benefit from the evils we decry. We Left and Right war on the evils outside us without working on the flaws within. What is really dangerous is when we fall in love with our image of ourselves as crusaders for some great good to such an extent that we excuse bad behavior in ourselves in pursuit of our good cause. Suicide bombers in Israel or the Israeli soldiers who bulldoze homes. Ecoterrorists and those who kill workers at abortion clinics. Even the best of us can make that mistake.

I remember a few years before she died, my mother and I were watching a TV program about Lyndon Baines Johnson and all the wonderful things he had done for civil rights and the great work he began for the poor and how so much of it was derailed by his commitment to the war in Vietnam. And my mother, a gentle, thoughtful, woman, who was a strong opponent of that war, said to me that she felt some dismay now at the way she had thought and felt about Johnson at

the time, the way she had vilified him in her mind. She had failed to see him whole, as a man who carried forward one of the most progressive visions of the 20th century only to see that vision derailed by his unwise commitment to an ever escalating war--a profoundly flawed human being who did both some magnificent and some terrible things. Getting caught up in her crusade against the war, something she still believed was the right thing to do, had caused her to also get caught up in a way of viewing others that violated her own values of seeing others complete, and not as monsters or angels.

Another manifestation of a kind of dangerous innocence more exclusively characteristic of liberals, is the strong conviction that some of us have that there is no human conflict that cannot be solved through sitting down and talking because, at heart, we are all, profoundly friends. That is what most of us would like to believe and it is what most of us hope for. But sometimes it leads to great disasters. Everyone sites Munich and the appeasement of Hitler as one such. Rwanda is another. Anne Frank believed that people are all good at heart, but look what happened to her. I believe many of the advocates for peace have not been as effective as we might because we are only anti-war, without putting forth credible alternatives. We don't put forward structures, institutions, and processes that will curtail war and warmakers. We have seen some remarkable revolutions that happened without all out war--from the fall of the Soviet empire to Egypt and Tunisia. But then there is Libya. At the more everyday level, the belief that all conflicts can be solved through talking it out, sometimes leads us to put up with behavior that is unacceptable or holds us hostage to the members of the group who will continue to require more and more of us for peace or friendship. Some liberals mistake giving in to a bully for turning the other cheek.

The danger of innocence is that it relieves us of the responsibility for the way the world is--and if we have no responsibility for, or power over, its flaws, how can we do good? If we feel we must continually maintain, "It was not my fault. The woman made me do it. The serpent beguiled me," we are saying to ourselves and to others that we have no power and thus no responsibility. We buy into a model of good that is passive and powerless--an absence of active evil--rather than a passionate, powerful, quest for good. The "good person" is some wimpy goody two-shoes who never angers, offends, or hurts, rather than a Susan B. Anthony, a Martin Luther King, or a Gandhi who each were sinners as well as saints and hated by many.

A man I knew once was a professional innocent. He was also one of the most damaging persons I have known, for he never admitted responsibility for the consequences of his action. As long as he did not "intend" to hurt you, he felt innocent of the damage his thoughtless, selfishness, did to other people. A few years ago he ran off with his best friend's wife--not "intending," I'm sure, to hurt anyone. He was raised in the belief that one sin could send you to Hell. Thus, Innocence was imperative. He never could look at his flaws. He had a willful blindness. And in that blindness he could hurt those who loved him without compunction.

The myth of Eden is about the transition from innocence to responsibility. It is also about the transition from ignorance to wisdom and from powerlessness to freedom. It tells us that once we were like animals with no knowledge of good or evil and thus no values or meaning. But with the knowledge of Good and Evil gained from the tree of wisdom we now have the freedom to make choices, we now have the power of the Gods and could do good and evil.



We have a hard time with paradox. It is difficult for us to understand that everyone is some combination of good and bad deeds--part saint and part sinner--to understand that we hold both good and evil within us, inescapably.

The myth of Eden is a myth of the beginning of knowledge and the end of the Golden Age, but the protagonists never take responsibility for their choice: "She made me do it! It made me do it!" They are still like children.

Arthur Miller, in his play, "After The Fall" writes of a woman, Maggie, who plays life's victim. All that goes wrong in her life she sees as the fault of some other person. She opens herself to the world only to be hurt and abused. She plays at being a goddess of love and innocence unable to defend herself from the world. Suicide seems the only way out. Finally, her husband, Quentin, begs her to see her own culpability and live. "We all," he says, "have complicity in life and to deny that leads to death."

Later in the play, a German woman, Holga, struggles with her responsibility for the sins of her country and tells her friend, Quentin:

*"It was the middle of the war. I had just come out of a class and there were British leaflets on the sidewalk. And photographs of a concentration camp. And emaciated people. One tended to believe the British. I'd had no idea. Truly. It isn't easy to turn against your country; not in war. Do Americans turn against America because of Hiroshima? There are reasons always. And I took the leaflet to my godfather-he was commanding our Intelligence. And I asked if it were true.*

*'Of course,' he said, 'Why does it excite you?' And I said, 'You are a swine. You are all swine.'*  
*I threw my briefcase at him. And he opened it and put some papers in it and asked me to deliver it to a certain address. And I became a courier for the officers who were planning to assassinate Hitler...They were all hanged."*

*Asks Quentin, "Why not you?"*

*"They didn't betray me."*

*"Then why do you say good faith is never sure?"*

*"It was my country-longer, perhaps, than it should have been. But I didn't know. And now I don't know how I could not have known."*

*"Holga, I bless your uncertainty. You don't seem to be looking for some goddamned ...moral victory."*

*"I tried to die near the end of the war. The same dream returned each night until I dared not go to sleep and grew quite ill. I dreamed I had a child, and even in the dream I saw it was my life, and it was an idiot, and I ran away. But it always crept onto my lap again, clutched at my clothes. Until I thought if I could kiss it, whatever in it was my own, perhaps I could sleep. And I bent down to its broken face, and it was horrible...but I kissed it. I think one must finally take one's life in one's arms, Quentin."*

Maggie dies rather than accept her responsibility and forgo her innocence. Holga takes her life, all of it, in her arms and lives, and hopes, and loves. After we leave Eden to be human and alive and live in a beautiful, yet profoundly flawed, world we can no longer be innocent. Innocence is dangerous, after the fall. After the Fall, we must take our life, all of it, and embrace it.

## STORY: ADAM AND EVE

And God saw everything he had made, and behold it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day. Then God put the human beings in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And God spoke to them, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said we may not eat from the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall we touch it lest we die." But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you, like God, will know of Good and Evil."

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

And then they heard the sound of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and woman hid themselves from the presence of God among the trees of the garden. God called out to the man, "Where are you?" And the man said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." God asked, "Who told you you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" Replied the woman, "The serpent beguiled me and I ate."

Then God said, "Behold you have become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest you put forth your hand and take also from the tree of eternal life.

"And he sent them forth from the garden of Eden, the peaceful land of bounty and innocence, and at the east of the Garden, God placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword to guard the tree of life."