

**Paradise Here and Now:
Gotta Love It!**

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Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
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*Who has not found the Heaven — below —
Will fail of it above —
For Angels rent the House next ours
Wherever we remove —
— Emily Dickinson*

Opening Words²
Gisela Roethke

Today Germans commemorate the reunification of East and West Germany in 1990. East Germans overthrew their tyrannical government in a peaceful revolution that had its roots in peace movements of the early 1980s and in prayer services organized in Leipzig. Despite the State's efforts to suppress the activism, the peaceful revolution prevailed.

On November 9th, 1989, the regime collapsed with the Fall of the Wall. Unification in less than one year later was celebrated with fireworks, speeches, and a televised



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concert that included Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the one that ends with the chorus of Schiller's "Ode to Joy".

For my family, the Day of German Unification came two months earlier, on August 3rd, 1990. It was the day when my father turned 75. We celebrated his birthday by going for a first visit to his home village north-east of Berlin which he had not been able to travel since the end of WWII.

There our grandfather had raised his family of five boys while being the village's one-room-school-house teacher, and the church's organist, choir director, and cantor. Village teachers—or rather their wives—had to run a subsistence farm to make ends meet. We adult children all held vivid images about the school house where our grandfather had taught, where his family lived under the same roof, images about the yard, the garden, the orchard, and the cowshed, which were our grandmother's domaine, about the beehives that our grandfather tended. The church still stood there, where the boys had taken turns working the bellows for the ancient organ which my grandfather played. Those were some of the images that our father had planted in our imaginations as children. Now we were finally finding our roots: the school-house, the garden and the orchard, and the church-yard where the grandparents were buried.

There it was, the low brick building with the red tile roof having since been converted to housing only. An anxious-looking old woman appeared from the old school house. When my father explained that he was here with his family only to show them where he had grown up, she visibly relaxed. On his question whether the old apple trees in his parents' orchard were still standing and bearing fruit, she disappeared and came back with a bunch of still quite green little apples cradled in her apron. My father stuffed his pockets

with them and—contrary to his usual generous ways—these remained HIS, since for him, they symbolized the story of his life, his childhood and youth, and the forty five years that he had not been able to come home.

And herein—for me—lies one story of Paradise lost and Paradise regained.

Come, Let us worship together!

Reflection³
Clara Cozort

First thing in the morning, I wake up, and hear silence, and I walk into my bathroom to brush my teeth, but I stop, and see a beautiful moon, sinking, saying goodbye, or avoir. I guess I was too tired to really notice the real beauty of it, seeing that I had just woken up just a minute before. But the color of it looked amazing, just stunning, a pinkish orange. It was huge! Walking that school that morning, I looked for my new “friend” but he or she must have been tired so went to bed, lucky. The air that morning smelt, I’m not sure how to describe the exact smell, but it was fresh. I enjoyed it while it last, because a truck came past and ruined it. That’s the part that is horrible; truck companies are ruining our fresh air! I enjoy smelling the nice freshness when I wake up. But trucks come by and ruin it. We have everything we could possible want in our lives, but some greedy people enjoy ruining it for money. Well, you can’t buy fresh air! We have paradise right here, in our own hands, but we don’t notice it. Embrace the natural beauty around us, and enjoy it while you can, because it might not be here when we open our eyes the next morning.

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Sermon⁴

Duane Fickeisen

There are many people who believe that something better awaits after our death — a better place in heaven — provided we have been saved from our inherent sinful nature. You know the story: God created a paradise, called the Garden of Eden. He put the first people there, Adam and Eve. When they disobeyed God's order not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, God punished them by throwing them out of the garden. There are many who believe that everyone since has inherited their original sin, and as punishment, we all suffer by living in a world filled with troubles and tribulations. But for those who have repented and been found worthy, a better future awaits in heaven.

Many, but certainly not all, Christians believe this story to be literally true. Many others believe it to be an accurate allegory if not absolutely true in the details. In fact, if you don't accept and believe it, many would not consider you to be a true Christian. And some even believe that it is their duty to help bring about an apocalyptic ending of civilization in order to actualize their dream of a better future — of a paradise awaiting after their death. They are cheering on the struggles and violence in the Middle East with that hope that it will result in the end times as they interpret the book of Revelations to foretell.

But imagine a different story. One that says we are living in paradise now, that the gates of the garden have always been open, and that "this is it!" I've talked before about the research Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker did on the art

⁴ ©2010 Duane H. Fickeisen, Boiling Springs, PA

found in Christian sanctuaries for their book *Saving Paradise*.⁵ For the first millennium — a thousand years — the emphasis in Christian art was on paradise. Jesus was shown as a benevolent and welcoming figure in a pastoral setting. Most of the depictions showed plants, animals, and water flowing from springs. This was not in a heaven we might reach after we die, but right here.

Paradise for the first half of Christianity was very present, here on earth, and not some distant future place.

There were no depictions of Jesus on the cross until the tenth century — the earliest known crucifix is from the year 965. That's about when the emphasis shifted from paradise here and now, and a call to recognize it, embrace it, and celebrate this life and the beauty and riches around us to a theology of the need for atonement in order to escape from a troubled world and enjoy a future paradise.

In the new book she cowrote with John Buehrens, *A House for Hope*,⁶ Rebecca Parker identifies three different progressive eschatologies — the theological understandings of our purpose and the direction in which we are headed. The three are the Social Gospel, Universalist, and Radically Realized. All three focus on the hope and expectation that we might find, recognize, and realize paradise here on earth in our own lifetimes, but they differ in significant ways.

The Social Gospel calls us to work toward creating the kingdom of God here among us. Its underlying story is that

⁵ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of the World for Crucifixion and Empire*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008)

⁶ John A. Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker. *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).

we are engaged in a battle between good and evil. Proponents of the Social Gospel claim that by standing on the side of love, we can help bring about justice, make peace a reality, and experience abundance of blessings. Consider Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

The Social Gospel has propelled the quest for justice and equality through the civil rights movement, protests against the Vietnam War, the women's movement, work toward a freeze on nuclear weapons, and for gay rights. But it is still focused on an imagined better future with the implication that the conditions now are never enough — the forces of evil will always produce more troubles to contend with, more problems to solve. And whatever we do will never be enough. It is an exhausting recipe for burnout. But make no mistake — it has produced remarkable changes in society that have bent the arc of the universe toward justice over a relatively short time.

The second progressive eschatology is the Universalist one, which rejects the division of people into the saved and the damned, and claims that God will save all souls. Hell is not to be found after death, but results from humanity's striving to control other people and resources through violence and greed. Heaven is to be found wherever love prevails and effective stewardship is practiced.

I've talked before about Hosea Ballou's universalist theology. His early 19th century book, *A Treatise on the Atonement*, laid out a strong argument that was well grounded in Biblical scripture for universal salvation. Ballou argued that if we imagine God to demand the death of his own son by crucifixion, we will be tempted to model our own behavior on God's cruelty.

Liberal branches of Islam also emphasize God's universal love. Consider this story about the 8th century Sufi saint,

Rābi 'ah, which is told by my friend Ibrahim Farajajé:

“Rābi 'ah lived in the city of Basra in Iraq and was said to be consumed with the fire of love and longing for the Beloved. ... One day she was seen running back and forth across the city carrying a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When asked what she was doing, she answered that she was going to light a fire in Paradise and pour water on Hell. Why? She said that she was fed up with people basing their relationship with the Divine Beloved on fear of hell or hope of heaven. She wanted to remove both fear of hell and hope for Paradise, for in her perception, both were hindrances to being merged into the Divine Essence.”⁷

Isn't that an interesting idea — that both fear of hell and hope for heaven prevent us from experiencing the Divine? It is the whole point this morning — we can experience our own participation in the Divine when we realize that Paradise is here today. That's why we gotta love it!

Rebecca Parker's third progressive eschatology is just that — one she calls “radically realized eschatology.” It starts with recognizing that we are already standing on holy ground — that this *is* paradise. Of course we recognize that it isn't perfect — that there are problems for us to address. But it does represent a significant shift if our hope is not for something we don't have — for an imagined better future — but rather for effective stewardship of what we do have and repair of what has been harmed and damaged.

The shift from seeing the world as deeply flawed, but anticipating a better possible future if we work hard enough for it to appreciating the world as paradise, and recognizing that

⁷ Buehrens and Parker, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

we are called to be stewards of it, to care for it, and to repair harms may seem subtle, but it is, I submit, a profound paradigm shift.

The charge I gave Clara in preparation for the service today was to choose one day and start it by noticing beauty around her and what gave her joy, and to try to stay in that frame of mind for a whole day. I suggested that she might awaken to appreciate a bird song, notice some artwork, a tree, or someone doing something nice for her. She responded with the expectation that it would not be easy — indeed it isn't easy for most of us to focus on the positive, the joyful, and the beautiful in our lives. But that just might shift your mood and inspire a different approach to life.

The Regional Middle School event this afternoon will involve a field trip to the Dickinson College Farm and an exploration of ethical eating. If you are participating in that, I encourage you to pay attention to the abundance the plant world offers us, to the joy of eating well, and to the beauty of fall on the farm. Notice the signs that paradise is indeed here and now, that it is accessible to you, and that appreciation of it just might inspire taking good care of your body, of your friends, and of the earth.

Of course we notice things that are not right. Clara's awareness of the impact of trucks on air quality, for example. But if we approach that as a harm to paradise that merits our attention and repair rather than evidence that the world is deeply flawed, it might shift our response to one that is grounded in gratitude rather than despair.

There is hope for restoration. The reunification of Germany by a grassroots movement, the return of an elder to his childhood home, people working together to clean up the air, for example. All of these start with a vision of paradise here and

now, of what might be realized not in some distant future time, but in the present time when we are inspired to act out of appreciation for the paradise we already recognize to be here.

Rebecca Parker writes:

“From the perspective of radically realized eschatology, the problem for Western culture is that we have become disoriented and think we are outside the garden when we are not. We are treating life here and now as if we were on a barren wasteland, but we have profoundly misjudged our location. It is possible to reorient our imagination,” she writes, “and to see that the garden is neither closed nor lost, but rather is open and present. ...”⁸

The problem is that we are disoriented and have misjudged our location. So my charge to you is the same as I gave Clara: notice what gives you joy and the beauty around you. Look for acts of kindness and compassion. Look for examples of caring stewardship. Like Mary Oliver said in her poem, every day seek the thing that more or less kills you with delight in the untrimmable light of the world. Imagine that you are already in paradise, here on this earth, now in this life. Because you are.

Yes, indeed, we have repair work to do. Damage to the environment, broken relationships, the effects of violence, and so much more. Dirty trucks, wet basements, uneven distribution of resources, homophobia, illness and injuries, and so much more. But might we approach them with more sustainable energy and creativity if we started with an appreciation of what is good and right rather than with the assumption that we live in a broken world and that the paradise we seek is not yet to

⁸ Buehrens and Parker, op. cit., p. 13.

be found, but at some far-off distant future?

This is Paradise. Gotta love it!

I have just touched on one section out of six in John Buerhens and Rebecca Parker's book, *A House for Hope*. I will be leading a seven-session class based on the book on Tuesday evenings, starting October 19. If you want to get in on a group order for the book, today is the deadline — at the Sign Up table in the Social Hall.

Let our prayer be one of gratitude and thanksgiving for the blessings that have been bestowed on us. For friends and community. For this present paradise. For the beauty of the earth.

Amen.