

“THE HAPPY ERROR”
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Years ago, someone told me that when Charles De Gaulle was asked what he thought of the indomitable Americans, he said, “Optimism is very attractive in those who can afford it.”

Today’s reading from the Hebrew Scripture is taken from the beginning of Genesis. It is part of the second creation story told in that book and, in my Bible, it is in a section headed “The Expulsion from the Garden.” The reading begins with the man and his wife who are both naked—but unashamed. They are a pair of innocents, totally dependent on God and totally OK with that (though not particularly grateful for it).

Enter the snake...This serpent speaks to the woman and tells her that she can improve herself; that is, she can see good and evil, if only she disobeys God and eats the fruit from the forbidden tree. Now the woman listens to this rebel snake, eats the fruit, and shares it with the man. Then, just as the snake predicted, their eyes are opened. They see things differently alright, but the first thing they see is themselves naked and this perception bothers them. Somehow, now being naked falls short of their idealized vision of themselves and they experience shame.

The fruit has (as promised) changed their view of the world. They are no longer innocents and on one level it really doesn’t matter whether God expels them from paradise or not, because whether they stay or whether they go, paradise is forever changed in their eyes.

Theologically, this fall from grace is called the *felix culpa* or “happy error.” But why should a story of separation from God be called a “happy error”? Maybe because it is also a tale of developing maturity. In her book, *Awakening the Heroes Within*, Carol Pearson unpacks the levels of soul development which she finds in the work of Carl Jung. She names these levels by archetype: The Innocent, the Orphan, the Warrior, the Caregiver, the Seeker, the Lover, the Destroyer, the Creator, the Ruler, the Magician, the Sage, and the Fool. None of us is dominant in all these levels and they are not necessarily sequential but there is in them an emerging pattern of increasing awareness as one moves from archetype to archetype.

And Adam and Eve (as they later came to be called) are the archetypal image of innocents—that is, when they are living in God’s garden. Beyond anything, innocents are trusting. They are able to believe that “anything is possible with faith, imagination, and hard work.” In their lack of maturity and experience, they believe that they are not lucky but in control. They may be dependent but they are due support. They put their trust in authority and institutions and conform to social norms. The gifts of the innocent are trust, optimism, and loyalty.

The shadow side of this state is denial that things may be going wrong, the blaming of others for one’s own faults (remember Adam’s response when God asked him if he ate the fruit), irrational optimism, and unnecessary risk taking. Often the innocent “graduates” from this state of being by “banding together with a rebel” like the snake and thereby having his eyes opened to the wider world.

Sometimes, this “graduation” leads the innocent into another state, which Carol Pearson calls the Orphan. Now the Orphan is more realistic, having experienced disillusionment (and perhaps even abandonment). The Orphan is realistic, empathic, and sometimes open to interdependence. Orphans can become “workers for justice, living in solidarity with those who are oppressed.” This call to solidarity and action does not come from an institutional call but rather from an inner command born of their own orphan experience.

The shadow side of this state is cynicism, callousness, and perhaps a sense of victimhood. So...returning to our story of the Fall, I would guess that the term *felix culpa* or “happy error” points to the fact that, when the man and the woman ate the fruit, they became more self-aware and took their first step into maturity and community life. Does that mean that existence in the Garden was not good? Oh no...actually existence in the Garden was ideal and Pearson says this about it: “If we are fortunate, each experience leads back to innocence.” But I would say that coming back to innocence is much sweeter than living there forever because one who returns to innocence is much more aware of the blessings of the Garden and of the gifts and talents of their fellows. A person who has moved from innocence to orphanhood and back does not forget that the world is wider than her own needs and pleasures.

In 1962, James Baldwin published a book that was written partly in the form of a letter to his nephew. In this letter, as a black American, he acknowledged what racism had done to his brother. “No one can wipe away those tears he sheds visibly today,” Baldwin says. “I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it. And I know (which is much worse and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen and for which neither time nor history will ever forgive them) that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it...and do not want to know it...But it is not permissible,” he says, “that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.”

Innocence is sweet but ignorant innocence is dangerous. Optimism can be empowering but isolated and protected optimism can also be careless.

God’s Creation is a process of evolution: evolving stuff...evolving life...evolving awareness. And Creation will not be finished until we re-gather together in the Garden. The *felix culpa* was just a step in this process but it is recorded to teach us that we have been chosen to be partners with God in the development of a just and enlightened world. We have been chosen to be partners with God in the unlocking of the Gates of the Garden. We have been chosen to be partners with God in the completion of salvation history.

And so, may God open our eyes and give us strength.

Amen.