

## Out From the Garden

a sermon preached by Becky Brooks,  
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to the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore  
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There was no struggle in the garden.

A perpetual womb, a kind of dream space, the Hebrew Bible's Garden of Eden is characterized in our culture and the dominant religions of the world as the perfect paradise, from which humans fell, or emerged, howling, into our imperfect and ever changing world. We know the story: the apple, the serpent, the blaming, the fig leaves, the roar of the Lord. And then the expulsion:

"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread  
until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken;  
you are dust and to dust you shall return." (Gen 3:19)

There was no struggle in the garden.

A good friend sent me a video of her three-month-old nephew having tummy time. He doesn't have the strength or coordination in his arms yet to roll over or to push himself up enough to be in a position to crawl. He struggles to push himself up at all, wiggling and crying in frustration, screwing up the muscles in his face into a formidable mask of effort. Adults watch with a mix of pity and humor and joy and sympathetic frustration. None of us can do this for him. He will push and rest and push and rest and learn until he conjures something entirely new: movement, mobility. No one in the history of all humanity has ever learned to walk the earth without struggle. Struggle is the very soul of life.

Hindu Swami Vivekananda writes "Life is a state of continuous struggle between ourselves and everything outside. ...It is, for instance, a continuous struggle for food and air. If food or air fails, we die. Life is not a simple and smoothly flowing thing, but it is a compound effect. This complex struggle between something inside and the external world is *what we call life*."

Religious texts from all around the world explore the idea of personal struggle. Jacob wrestles with an angel. Jesus cries out to God from another garden. Mohammed calls upon all people to struggle to live in the path of God. Brigid pushes winter back and pulls Spring out into the world every year. Gods tempt and are tempted.

All struggle, even in the broadest sociological cases—the struggle for suffrage, for civil rights, for world peace—these struggles too are personal. Deeply personal, individual struggles. No

social change is possible without personal struggle. The risks we take, the work we do, the words we create, these are *personal* struggles, whatever their ultimate purpose.

I think it's important at this point to differentiate between struggle and suffering. In our impatient and pain-avoident culture, struggle is often lumped in with the concept of suffering and the words may even be used interchangeably. To struggle *is* to suffer, in other words. But this is not at all the case. In fact, I would suggest that struggle is a near opposite of suffering. If struggle is the soul of life, perhaps suffering is the soul of death. Suffering is a kind of quivering stillness that locks us out of life. While I am arguing today that one may find meaning in struggle, I cannot say the same for suffering.

I was sixteen years old when I sat one afternoon waiting for the bus out in back of school, staring into space. It must have been cold because it was January, but I don't remember feeling anything at all. It had been a bad day, but the emotions I so often felt rising and falling inside like waves were gone. I wasn't sad. I was simply suffering. The depression had settled in and everything slowed to a crawl. Between the end of school and going to bed I spoke to no one. My words couldn't get out and no one else's words could get in. I took a bath and methodically swallowed seventy sleeping pills. I wrote a short note and tucked myself in for the night. There is not one moment of that experience that I would look to for meaning or redemption or learning.

To lose your home or your way of life to a flood, to an earthquake, to an illness, this is suffering. To lose a relationship, to break a vow, to live in the shadow of injustice, this is suffering. I believe that to suggest that the people of Haiti find meaning in their suffering today is to add atrocity to tragedy. To look into the eyes of a young girl locked in a cycle of depression and suggest that her suffering is valuable is an act of violence.

Struggle is not suffering.

Struggle is action, struggle is work and creation and life itself. And struggle is completely incompatible with the easy confidence of who we are so often told we ought to be. We are supposed to have quiet children, happy marriages, clean houses, good, well-paying jobs, passionate categorizable politics, trim, fit bodies, hidden talents and lovely singing voices. But if you ask a room full of parents: who argued with your kids this week about food or clothing, most of them will raise their hands. And if there's one thing I am certain of in this moment it's that my bed isn't made and laundry to be done. Life itself is a struggle to keep the dishes clean, the bills paid, the loved ones loving, the tasks in hand, all while staying as sober as it is your goal to be. Those things are hard. And there's not a single person in this room for whom that is a comprehensive list. Some of us are unemployed. Some of us are sick. Some of us are hurting. Some of us don't know how we are going to do the thing we know we have to do.

It may be enough to say we struggle because we have to, because there is a life to be lived and the price of living it is struggle. But when it feels like the chemo is killing more than curing and

when you run out of resume paper again and when the truth-telling our heads want feels like more than our hearts can bear, we may want more. Sometimes the question of personal struggle becomes a theological question.

There is a popular theology that suggests that God does not struggle. That God is all-powerful and all-knowing and that our struggles of this life are the struggles of imperfect human beings who have fallen from grace. I find this theology problematic. Maybe it's self-serving (perhaps all theology is self-serving on some level) but it seems as if to create this distance between myself and God—I one who struggles, God one who does not—severs something I am unwilling to imagine is severed. For how can there be creation without struggle?

Hasidic Rabbi, Reb Nachman of Bratslav says this about God's creation of the world:

*God created the world out of love—in order to reveal God's love—for without creation, to whom would God show love?<sup>1</sup> ...When Hashem wanted to create the world, there was no place to create it because everything was Ain Sof (infinite God) Therefore Hashem contracted the light to the sides. And through this contraction, the Void was made. And within this Empty Space are all the days and measures which are the created world.<sup>2</sup>*

In other words, in order to make room for love, God's struggle was to leave a space where God was not so that *we could be*. This was God's struggle, but it is ours as well, to navigate this world where God isn't, but where Love *is*, where we must serve as our own creators. This is the world with birth pangs and sweat and toil, out from the garden.

I would describe God quite differently than Reb Nachman, though I'm not sure that our *understandings* of God are as different as they might sound. I have never felt more sure that God exists than in the moments when I have been certain that God has abandoned me. For me, God is just one of many words for the connections between ourselves and each other, the world and the universe. When those connections feel severed in my suffering, I am lost. The struggle to repair those connections requires me to play both God and Becky, it requires me to be whole and alive. It requires me to be present to myself.

Rebecca Parker tells a story in her book of essays, *Blessing the World*, of traveling with a friend in Pennsylvania and noticing evidence of a flood in the town they are driving through. "Looks like they've had a flood here," she says, looking out at sandbags along the roadway "Gosh, they must have had quite a bit of high water to contend with. Looks like it was a major flood!" But after rounding a bend and encountering rising water, they tried to turn the car around and saw that the water was rising behind them too. They climbed out of the car and ran to higher ground. Parker writes:

*[T]he moment my friend and I had to scramble to safety was a blessed moment—not because there is any virtue in danger but because it was a moment when consciousness was restored.*

*We became present to our environment. We became more than passive observers. Our whole bodies, minds and senses became involved with the requirements of the situation. We arrived. We entered. We left our compartment and inhabited the world. No longer tourists passing through the country, we became part of the place along with everyone else that day, in that corner of western Pennsylvania, in that storm.*<sup>3</sup>

I think this is a birth story. The struggle of the moment brings us to life.

It would be simplistic to assert that this is a simple blessing or that life is an absolute good. As Process Theologian, John Cobb writes, "[if] God's only concern should be to minimize or eliminate all discord, ... God would have had to [abstain] from creating a world altogether"<sup>4</sup> Being awake to life means being aware of pain and sorrow. Therefore let us not confuse the value or meaning of struggle with a type of righteousness. It's easy enough to say "struggle is noble or moral" But to see personal struggle as simply a badge of honor is to devalue the marrow of it. Struggle does not make one a moral person. Struggle makes one a *living* person, a growing person, a creating person. What we struggle for, we create. Life, justice, peace, art, another day.

But what if we fall down? The job never appears. The chemo doesn't work. We break our promise. We take a drink. Where is the meaning in the struggle then?

Maybe it's in the pieces of good we fashion with our hearts and our hands in the midst of those hardest moments. In trying again, in renewing our vow, reaching out for help, in leaning on each other, of coming to know we are not alone. In leaving an afternoon behind that would never have been without the struggle.

That January night when I was sixteen I had fallen down hard. All there was was pain and it filled every crevice.

Until I began to cry. I hadn't cried in months, until that moment when something broke open inside me. My brain, suddenly awake, was screaming at me. I needed to get up from the bed. But I couldn't move my arms. I remember thinking they had died first. Never before or since have I encountered a physical ordeal like the one in getting my body from the bed to the bathroom to save myself.

Suffering almost killed me. Struggling saved me.

"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return." (Gen 3:19)

"And at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim,

and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life." (Gen 3:24)

With that we have become our own creators, with Love as our guide, that which remains of God.

There was no struggle in the garden.

There were no symphonies in the garden. No poetry.

There was no prayer in the garden. No love.

There were no children in the garden. No fire.

The easy beauty of the garden may lull us into a gentle sleep. But in our journey out from the garden, let us awaken. Let us open our whole selves to our own lives. May each one of us live this life as if it is the only one we will get, in the only time we will know, and love our way through every struggle as if it is the very source of our own creation.

Blessed be.

1. Translation Rabbi Avraham Greenbaum (<http://www.azamra.org/Essential/thought.htm>)
2. Translation Uri Nodelman
3. *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*, ed. Robert Hardies. Rebecca Parker, "Not Someplace Else, But Here," p. 30
4. *Process Theology: an introductory exposition*, John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, p. 70