

Regaining the Paradise Lost

Jack is 42, a literature professor, a friend of mine, and three months ago his wife bore his first child, a son, Tommy.

“How’s the little person?” I asked him.

“Well, he howls loud enough if he needs something, but mostly he just kind of grins all day, like his world is all in one piece.” Jack smiled with that blend of doting and glow that comes easily to most new parents. “You know, it’s like he already is where most of the rest of us are trying to get.”

Could be.

As a literature student, Jack was familiar with T.S. Eliot’s final words on the spiritual quest:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

So perhaps Tommy had something to teach his dad and the rest of us about reaching paradise.

Students of literature, mythology and comparative religion have noted that we usually conceive of paradise in one of four ways. Two of these have become firmly entrenched in the Judeo-Christian world view: a paradise lost existing back in the origins of time itself, and a paradise after our earthly life in which the virtuous dead spend eternity. In each of these paradises, we are united with God.

Cultures all over the globe share these two conceptions in their mythologies. The first paradise, the Judeo-Christian Eden, occurs in other times and places as the Greek Golden Age, the Chinese days of the legendary emperors, the Mayan *Paxil*, the Sumerian *Dilmun*, the Egyptian *Tep zepi*, or the Iranian Reign of Yima; the second paradise, the Judeo-Christian Heaven, is another form of the Greek Elysian Fields, the Norse Valhalla, the Chinese heaven of the ancestors, the Persian *Vara*, the Egyptian Field of Offerings, and the Union with Brahman of the *Chandogya Upanishad*.

Hebraic theology seems to begin addressing questions of an afterlife after the time of the Babylonian Exile. We hear in late Old Testament writing of the wicked suffering “shame and everlasting contempt” while the righteous experience “everlasting life” (Daniel 12.2), these words probably written in the 2nd century B.C.E. during the Jews’ darkest hour, at a time when apocalyptic writing was widespread, and certainly after the Jews had been exposed to Zoroastrian eschatology as well as the concept of individual

salvation current in the Greek Eleusinian, Orphic, and Dionysian mystery cults which assured followers that the individual could conquer death if he knew the key. Those in the Orphic tradition, according to Plato's *Cratylus*, believed the soul, as punishment for some long-ago crime, was shut up in the body until the crime was atoned for and the soul freed by death.

Neither the Edenic nor Heavenly paradise occurs in the here and now, however, so we will leave them for a moment to note the other two types of paradise.

A third paradise is a paradise on Earth, sometimes taking the form of a social utopia, like Sir Thomas More's or like Plato's *Republic*, Campanella's *City of the Sun*, Voltaire's *Eldorado*, or the Pantisocracy that Coleridge and Southey hoped to create on the banks of the Susquehanna. In a more subtle, certainly less popular way, the conception of paradise existing right now on Earth is also contained in the Judeo-Christian tradition, usually voiced in acknowledgement that the Earth is itself heavenly, as in Ecclesiastes: "He hath made everything beautiful." Jesus speaks of exactly this in Luke 17:21 which, in the Revised Standard Version, reads:

Being asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed: nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you".

Jesus insists on the heavenly quality of the here and now even more emphatically in the version of this passage occurring in the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*. *Thomas* provides an extremely important text, for although our oldest extant Coptic and Greek copies date only from the end of the second century, biblical scholars are increasingly persuaded that *Thomas* is as old or older than the synoptic gospels and has been associated with the Synoptic Sayings Source, the lost *Q* document which Matthew and Luke draw from. In the *Thomas* version, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven:

will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying "Here it is" or "There it is." Rather, the Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the Earth, and men do not see it.

Clearly, in *Thomas*, Jesus tells us heaven is not later, it is now. It is not difficult because of the life we have to live to get there; it is difficult because we have not learned how to see. When Jesus tells those standing before him in Mark 9:1 that some of them will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come, he must mean either a kingdom people can experience in this life or he becomes an erring prophet.

The fourth conception of paradise is the one we find in the teaching of all the major religious traditions: the paradise within. This is the paradise we hear of as the goal of the Hindu yogas of knowledge, love, works, and spiritual exercises; it is the one that the Buddha and Lao-tzu and the zen masters teach. So, too, do the Western religions despite their surface dualism, their apparent separation of God as wholly other from His creation. The paradise within, the union with God, is spoken of by the Jewish Kabbalists, the Islamic Sufis, and the great Christian mystics. In *The Cloud of Unknowing* it is called

the “blind stirring of love.” John of the Cross calls it the “living flame of love.”

Significantly, in the King James, Confraternity-Rheims, and Living Bible versions of the Luke passage quoted above, Jesus appears to be referring specifically to the paradise within when he answers the Pharisees, “The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.” And here the King James is closer to the Greek codices than is the Revised Standard. It would appear that the Revised Standard translators felt Jesus couldn’t possibly have suggested to the Pharisees that the kingdom could be within their faithless beings. Yet, that’s what the Greek appears to say.

Nevertheless, before we see the kingdom of heaven, whatever its nature, we must undergo a kind of rebirth. On this point the orthodox, the Gnostics, and most of the great mystics of all traditions agree.

And here, perhaps, three-month-old Tommy can help us. Here, too, the world’s myths of a Paradise Lost become relevant to our purposes again, for we are at the point where the connection between our personal subconscious memory and our deeper racial or collective unconscious may form a vital link.

It may be that in entering the realm of myth we see truth in deeper and finer tones. Since Nagarjuna says that ultimate truth cannot be expressed in language, a statement which contemporary physicists would heavily underscore, perhaps Dr. Coomaraswamy is right when he tells us, “Myth embodies the nearest approach to absolute truth that can be stated in words.” The Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* tells us, “Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images. One will not receive truth in any other way.”

Obstetricians and biologists have long been struck by the parallels between the development of a single-celled zygote into a human infant and the evolution of single-celled animal life from the sea into *homo sapiens*, man the wise. Among other parallels, they have noted the common origin in water—in either case, our first home—which may account for the *deja-vu*-like peace many people find in flotation tanks or why many like to meditate by the seashore. Nor should it then be odd that most creation myths around the globe, those that are not egg myths, are water myths. Even in Genesis, as creation is about to begin “the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.”

What does Tommy retain that we have lost? Is he trailing clouds of glory, coming, in Wordsworth’s words, from God, who is our home?

Again, it may be that Jesus finds a way in both Luke and *Thomas* to tell us. In each of the synoptic gospels, mothers bring their children to Jesus hoping he will touch them. Matthew (19:13-14) and Mark (10:13-14) say no more, merely “children.” Luke (18:15-17), however, is more explicit:

Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them: and when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But

Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them: for to such belongs the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom to God like a child shall not enter it."

Infants. Luke is quite clear, not only in the English translations but in the codices and the Latin Vulgate as well. Not merely children. *Infants*.

Oddly, biblical commentators, who usually pass over this passage saying that they have already referred to it at Matthew 19:13-14, are virtually unanimous in agreeing that Jesus means we should be like a child of roughly seven years old, having the traits of childlike trust, dependency, docility, humility, simplicity, purity, candor, and obedience—which proves, among other things, that biblical commentators do not necessarily know much about children.

But, then, why in Luke is Jesus clearly speaking about infants? Is it because they are already in the paradise the rest of us have lost?

Rollo May seems to think so. In *Love and Will* (pp. 281-282), May points out that in early infancy we internalize a memory of a time of "union with being" in the experience of nursing at our mother's breast, a time when our deepest needs are met with no intended effort on our part, a time of self-acceptance and elation, of a "blissful feeling that I am completely accepted by the universe." May tells us, "This is the back-drop of human existence implied in every myth of the Garden of Eden, every story of paradise." But, he adds, this unity of ourselves and our universe always breaks down; we discover a difference between us and the rest of the world, between subject and object. At that point, May says, we experience the expulsion from paradise, the fall of Adam and Eve that keeps paradise a dim memory veiled beneath many months of the misty period when the subject-object distinction has been achieved but language has not, the period that drives that primal paradisiacal image below consciousness to the realm of dreams, myth, and, May says, "the perpetual feelings that there ought to be a paradise someplace."

May's comments add new dimensions to Faulkner's, "Memory believes before knowing remembers." Could Jesus have meant something similar to this in Luke? He certainly seems to in the *Gospel of Thomas*:

Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to His disciples, "These infants being suckled are like those who enter the Kingdom."

They said to him, "Shall we then, as children, enter the Kingdom?"

Jesus said to them, "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same. . . then you will enter [the kingdom]."

The statement is startlingly like one made in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and in Confucius' *Analects*. Jesus is never more clear: the kingdom, heaven, is not a place

but a condition of being, a condition like the consciousness of the newborn.

In that consciousness, there is no differentiation between objects, no I-and-you or I-and-it. All is one.

Selma Fraiberg, former professor of child psychoanalysis at the University of Michigan Medical School, in her delightful study of the mind of the child from birth to age five, *The Magic Years* (p.42), says, “During the early months the infant doesn’t differentiate between his body and other bodies, or between mental images and perceptions, between inner and outer. Everything is undifferentiated oneness, the oneness being centered in the baby himself.” A cogent comparison could be made to Jean Houston, in *Life Force* (p. 42), citing evidence suggesting that “early forms of man, man in his pre-Neanderthal form, existed as a being continuous with the order of nature. . . His awareness had not risen to a consciousness of himself as distinct or discontinuous from the world around him,” a period, she notes, which was looked back upon as a golden age.

Child psychologist Lee Salk and many others report that neonatal infants have no concept of linear time nor of space; all is now and all is here. Abraham Maslow has observed a similar eradication of time and space limitations among peak experiencers; he notes further that the peak experiencer grows more accepting and loving and thus more spontaneous, honest, and innocent, in a sense, more infant-like. We read in the *Tao Te Ching* that “one who possesses virtue in abundance is comparable to a new-born babe,” and the ancient Chinese Confucian philosopher Mencius says the “morally great man” is one who has kept through later years his “infant heart.”

It may be, then, that when Jesus tries to show us how to find the kingdom of heaven he-like the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, the *Upanishads*, the Buddha, the *Analects*, Mencius, the *Tao Te Ching*, the zen masters, the poets Wordsworth and Whitman, Jean Houston in her description of “ecological man,” and even the physicists Bohr and Heisenberg in their Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory-means a state of consciousness grounded completely in a sense of absolute unity and interpenetration, a state existing not in a long ago past nor a future for the virtuous dead, but entirely in the present moment, the only moment that is real. Tommy’s moment. In such a moment we reach the end of all our exploring, the subject-object distinction is gone, and the Father and I have become one.

Furthermore, since in our first personal paradise it is more likely the mother and I who have become one, and our consciousness of separation arrives painfully near the arrival of teeth, which may cause this paradise figure to push us away, it seems almost inevitable that our Western mythology associates expulsion from Paradise with an act of biting into a fruit.

Yet, it is easy to see why the Church as a governing institution never emphasized such a teaching, why the Gnostics were condemned as heretical and their writings buried not to be unearthed until forty years ago. Those who reach a state of enlightenment like

that Jesus speaks of in *Thomas* are not governable, their number are not organizable, they have become Buddhas. Or Christs. They have heard a truth in Psalms 82.6: "I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High." Paul, the first great Christian church organizer, left us a risen Christ to worship, but one he almost never quotes. The early Church, particularly that in Rome, heir to Rome's genius for organization and government, knew that Jesus would be easier to worship than to emulate, and so the world may have been left with the religion about, rather than the religion of, Jesus.

Thomas Jefferson thought so. In a letter written in 1820 Jefferson observed, "The genuine and simple religion of Jesus will one day be restored such as it was preached and practiced by himself. Very soon after his death it became muffled up in mysteries, and has been ever since kept in concealment from the vulgar eye." George Bernard Shaw in his introduction to *Androcles and the Lion* goes even so far as to say that there was no more monstrous imposition in history than the imposition of a soul the size of Paul's upon a soul like that of Jesus. For the last 1950 years, if we except the Gnostics, Jesus was to be worshiped; to be just like him was beyond our hopes, a possibility open only to the few Francis of Assisis among us.

Jesus, in the *Gospel of Thomas* tells us differently:

*Jesus said, "He who will drink from My mouth will become like Me.
I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be
revealed to him."*

Jesus tells us he is, as one of the modern liberal churches calls him, the man we all might be; heaven lies within our grasp, and now. We become like Tommy, but, unlike Tommy, our adult understanding has shown us the nature and meaning of the unity we experience. We are home, and we know the place for the first time.