

6. Why that Forbidden Tree?

a dialogue about sin
with Julian of Norwich

The story of Adam and Eve is a myth about being human. This fictitious couple represents all of us in story form. God, as a character in that myth, points to the Final Reality that we experience or can experience every day. Final Reality does indeed walk and talk with all of us in our own specific garden of living.

In biblical lore, the word “God” adds only this to our experience of Final Reality: that Final Reality “does all things well.” This phrase is important to Julian of Norwich as well as Martin Luther. In other words, Final Reality is trustworthy. Herein is a faith to live by: trusting Reality and thereby living realistically as the best-case scenario for our lives. Only in the light of such trust, does Final Reality become our God, our ultimate concern, the primal meaning for the specific living of our whole lives.

With this clarification of the word “God,” the key theological question becomes: “What is Final Reality?” In the Adam and Eve story we hear at least three basic answers to that question: (1) Final Reality is what has created Adam and Eve, as well as you and me and the whole cosmos. (2) Final Reality comes to us in very special and personal ways like “walking in our garden in the cool of the day and asking us questions.” (3) This creating us, walking in the garden with us, and questioning us is good – that is, Final Reality has done, is doing, and will do all things well.

So why did Final Reality put that seemingly dastardly tree (the knowledge of good and evil) in the garden, forbid us to eat from it, and prescribe such dire consequences if we did? First of all, let us notice that the previous sentence personifies Final Reality. But Final Reality, if that Reality is truly Final, is not literally a person in some humanoid sense. And Final Reality is not just one more reality alongside other realities. Final Reality is the depth dimension of each and every reality. Nevertheless, if we personify Final Reality, as we do in the Genesis myth, we presume that Final Reality “knows” how all things work. Thus, Final Reality is presumed to “know” that these un-rock like, un-tree like, profoundly conscious and freedom-gifted human animals that Final Reality has created were going to experience the temptation to believe the snake’s untrue story that eating from that tree was good for us. In other words, following the logic of the myth, Final Reality knew that we humans would be tempted to hope for something that would make us even more like our Creator than we already were. We could, so we hoped, be like God, KNOWING GOOD AND EVIL. In the myth, Final Reality warned us not to eat that lie.

Why was it a lie? Because all our decisions in life are ambiguous. Should I join that group? Should I marry that person. Should I take that job? If I have a grand purpose for my life, that purpose did not drop down from heaven. We choose our life purpose from among the many possible purposes for our lives. If we then say Final Reality has called me to this purpose, we lie. We have eaten the knowledge of good and evil from that tree.

So back to our basic question: “Why did Final Reality put such a serious temptation in our garden? Does Final Reality sadistically want to trick us and then punish us? These questions could be simply dismissed by noting that this is just a story, just a myth. Or we might say that to talk about the motives of Final Reality is a mind-game we don’t need. Indeed, we might insist that even to discuss the all-too-obvious corruption of humanity in relation to realistically living our lives should be dismissed as an enigma too deep for the human mind. So, why trouble ourselves with such matters? Nevertheless, let us assume for ourselves a level of curiosity about these profound matters, and let us assume that this ancient, long-treasured myth is saying something basic about your life and mine.

The Name of that Tree

Let us first examine carefully the name of that tree: not knowledge, not consciousness, but “the knowledge of good and evil.” Is it true that the knowledge of good and evil is forbidden to the human species? It is fine with me that such knowledge is forbidden to the cat species or the dog species, but my parents (and I imagine your parents) did not think that the knowledge of good and evil was forbidden to me. They laid out for my protection and their comfort (as well as for reasons taken from their culture that they were not clear about) an entire library of good-and-evil knowledge. “Don’t cross the street without holding my hand”—this teaching graduating to, “Don’t cross the street without looking both ways”—and moving on to “Take care of yourself and don’t do anything stupid.” And this was only the beginning. With lots of help from the churches and schools and radio and television, I became educated to a graduate-school level in the knowledge of good and evil.

So, what could it mean that the old myth tells me that the knowledge of good and evil is forbidden by Final Reality? It has become clear to me that I really don’t have a *final* knowledge of good and evil and never will (only Final Reality “knows” what is good and evil). I am indeed an ethics-creating being. I am a creature gifted with a finite freedom, created in me by that presumed Infinite Freedom of Final Reality. In that sense, I am created in the image of Final Reality. Like Final Reality, I can create out of nothing—that is, construct acts that are not caused by anything other than my essential freedom. And, let us notice that all my knowledge of good and evil was created by me or by humans just like me, all of whom do not actually have a final knowledge about good and evil. So my knowledge of good and evil is a creation of finite human freedom. I have no final knowledge of what Infinite Reality “knows” about what is good and what is evil. So it is clear that I, along with over seven billion other living human beings, have already eaten from that forbidden tree. That is, from time to time (if not always), we have assumed that our knowledge of good and evil is THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL.

Take for example, I work in the sun too long without sufficient water and I am laid up in bed for three days with severe heat exhaustion. “This should not be,” I say. But this is what IS, yet I am applying my “It should not be” “knowledge of good and evil” to a situation in which trusting God would mean holding that God does all things well—which means that the Good for me is to live openly and realistically the situation I have on my hands. Here is a historical example: Robert E. Lee had the opportunity to general for the North, rather than the South. That would have saved a lot of lives. Apparently, he let being a loyal member of Southern slave society be his “good” and fighting for the North be his “evil.” This same “good and evil” was held by about half the nation. They thought they knew what was good and evil. John Wilkes Booth thought he knew what was good and evil. We easily notice these cultural conditionings in other people; let us not fail to notice that whatever culture has been deposited in our brains tends to be a knowledge of good and evil that we think is true. Even if we have become a contrarian in our culture, these contrarian views are not the Final Truth.

So here we all are, standing with fig leaves over our ethical nakedness, hiding our various finite views of good and evil from the gaze of Final Reality. Then it happens to us, according to this myth, that Reality comes to us walking in our garden in the cool of some ordinary day inquiring where we have gone from the realistic living of our lives. We then make up all sorts of excuses, none of which undo the fact that we did indeed eat from that tree. We are a mess of shame and guilt, and there is no excuse for it. With our own gift of freedom, we have moved ourselves from a glorious state of primal ignorance about good and evil to a state of illusory knowledge about good and evil that we ourselves have made up as a substitute for not knowing THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL held in the “mind” of the Final Reality.

According to the Bible's broader wisdom, this act of Adam and Eve (and of you and me) led to all the despair, malice, tyranny, and slavery that comprises the tragic side of the human story. More on that later, but first, why did Final Reality (who is doing all things well) put that seemingly dastardly tree in our garden?

Why that Tree?

Here is a part of an answer to that question: I say "part" because I will not presume to know the "whole" truth about such primal matters. But here is a part of the truth that I hope will help us to trust that Reality does indeed do all things well. Are you ready? Here it is: That tree is the dark side of the glorious gift of human freedom. Our essential human freedom cannot be given to us without that tree also being given. Having our essential God-given freedom means having the freedom to rebel against freedom itself and the entire set up of finite existing in which that finite freedom constitutes our opportunity to be alive as a human, instead of alive as a tree, bird, or cat.

Birds and cats and even trees have a certain level of freedom. But the freedom given to the human is immense in comparison. Even though we humans have fled from our freedom into addictions and rigidities, we still, in our essence, share with God a freedom to co-create the history of the planet. In loving us with this immense gift of freedom, Reality has also loved us with the gift of being capable of unrealism including the unrealism of denying or twisting that freedom into a life-orientation of slavery to some set of rules or anti-rules or addictions, or just plain meanness rooted in a specific desperation about not willing to be the creature that we are. Birds are not tempted with such options. We humans have this tempting option because we have this immense gift of freedom. Our freedom is still finite in the sense that we cannot do everything, but we can clearly do many things that are not caused by anything other than our freedom. The existence of this finite freedom is denied by some deterministic, super-scientific ideologues who are blind to their own interior lives; nevertheless this freedom simply is our essential self, however hard we have worked to deny it or get rid of it. And this freedom can be viewed as both our immense glory as well as the root of our immense tragedy of so often becoming the most destructive species ever evolved on this planet. Such glory and such tragedy are two sides of the same gift of freedom.

God's Courtesy

Julian of Norwich, a very lucid 14th century English anchorite, put this freedom paradox in a most colorful way. She says that our freedom is God's courtesy toward humanity. Rather than determine all our actions as if we were a rock, God, (i.e. Final Reality) restrains God's all-powerful FREEDOM in "courtesy" of our finite freedom—thereby allowing us to be persons who can relate or misrelate to this courteous All-Powerful Reality. Using the old mythic vocabulary, God risks our tragic choices in order to have a personal relation with us. In spite of the risk of tragedy that such courtesy entails, Reality is doing all things well in giving us this freedom. Here is the analogy: just as we might be courteous rather than bossy in our love for a child who is new at exercising the gift of freedom, so Reality is courteous toward us. God is loving us with this courtesy, this freedom to make mistakes and to grow in our maturity toward realistically living our lives.

Julian goes on to explore the presumed foreknowledge that God (i.e. Final Reality) must have had about the tragic consequences that were going to transpire from giving humans freedom. So why did Reality set up the consequence that humans opting for unrealism would lead to such tragedy? Here again is my partial answer: Reality, who does all things well, must go on simply being Reality, and such consistent being of the

Reality that Reality IS results in painful consequences for humans who are committing unreality. Why is unreality painful for humans? It is painful because Final Reality loves us and is thus opposing our unreality. So Final Reality is chasing us down, exposing our hiding places, and calling us out from who we think we are to who we really are. Also, Reality is calling us out of what we think is going on into an ever wider and truer perspective on what is Real. This training in realism is love for us. But this entails that our human flight from realism is painful because we cannot get away from Reality. And our human fight with realism is going to be painful because we cannot win a fight with Reality. Our conscious experience of our resistance to Reality and the basic futility of this style of living is properly called “despair.”

The nineteenth-century religious genius named Søren Kierkegaard showed us how despair is the root result of fleeing from or fighting with Reality, and how despair is the root meaning of the biblical term “sin,” when God is understood to mean Reality. Despair is a far more tragic state than we might want to notice: despair is so painful that it becomes the motive power beneath the widespread “evil” that characterizes the human species. First of all, most suicides are conducted to escape from a despair over oneself or over the life circumstances one faces. Suicides most often occur in the lives of very careful, seemingly smart and well-adjusted people who have been so careful in their lives precisely because they are hiding in themselves a very great pain of conscious despair. Most people, however, have hidden the pain of despair from their consciousness. According to Kierkegaard these people are the most tragic figures of all, for they have no understanding of how sick they are. When despair leaks into their conscious life, they treat it like a smoking fireplace. They dampen the fire, open a few windows, take a walk around the block, and then come back into their house and carry on as before as if nothing important had taken place. Others who are highly conscious of their despair avoid suicide as a solution by plunging into debauchery or noble work. They get so absorbed in some absorbing addiction or passionate activity that they forget, temporarily, the unforgettable fact that their whole life is characterized by despair. Still other highly conscious despairers choose to be their falsifications of reality in defiance of Reality in spite of the pains involved. They resign themselves. These seemingly strong figures are satirized by Kierkegaard as fragile persons whose whole selfhood can be resolved into nothing by a single choice. Kierkegaard also paints the ridiculous spectacle of the passively defiant person who is making personal despair into an excuse for raging at the incompetence of the entire process of Reality.

Nevertheless, all despairers, however conscious or unconscious of their despair, are only a step away from healing their despair—namely making the 180 degree turn toward viewing how Reality is doing all things well, including their being in despair. This means seeing despair is a doorway that is being created by the all-loving Reality who is doing all things well—a doorway that opens into a life of despairless living, or at least living in a less despairing way through seeing how Reality welcomes us “home” to the realistic living of our lives in spite of all the despair-producing side-trips that we have made and are still tempted to make.

It is difficult to describe the deep joy of this discovery that Reality has been seeking us to be Reality’s friend, that our painful despairing and its malicious, dangerous, foolish consequences were but signs to us that we were on the wrong track for human fulfillment.

Perhaps a personal story is needed here: My first wife knew she wanted children, long before I did. In fact I was so absorbed in work and figuring out my life, that children were coming much too soon to suit me. When my wife’s fourth pregnancy became a fact in our family situation, I began to awaken to the fact that I had not yet decided to be a father to the three children we already had, much less to one more. I had also been rather sloppy about talking this through with my wife and taking better

care not to conceive the children I did not yet want. In fact, my absorption in work and status and my resistance to fatherhood became more conscious as I attempted to talk through with my wife about having or not having this baby. My first response was to abort this child, but as I got more clear about my despair over the responsibilities of fatherhood, I saw the situation more deeply. I finally got clear that I was the father of three children and would be so for all eternity. This was my incarnation, and there was no escape from it. As I chose to be the father I already was, I became more open to expanding the father role to child number four. I am now glad that I did. I deeply love the person this child became. But at the time of that transformation, I simply felt joy in being restored to my real life, experiencing deep release from the despairing refusal to have my situation. Having chosen to have that situation, I have operated somewhat better with the role of father.

While this story is less horrific than many healing stories, it pictures how we humans can move from despair-to-authenticity. Most of our movement from despair to authenticity is very complex and difficult to tell about without writing a whole autobiography or novel. Nevertheless, my simple story does illustrate the point that Reality chases us down until it catches us and if we are willing to be caught, restores us to Reality, receiving us without any reservations into the full community of realistic living. In fact having fallen into the ditch of unrealism, the return to realism can seem more fully blessed than the time before the fall into that particular ditch. Such healing experiences make more plausible our trust that God really does love us – loves you and loves me in giving us the freedom to fall in the first place, loves us in running us down, and loves us in restoring us to the fold of realism. It is we who, most of the time, are blind to the goodness of what is transpiring—that is, blind to the faith that God (Final Reality) can be judged by us as incompetent in “doing all things well.”

A Most Horrific Healing Story

One of the most horrific healing stories in our common memory is the one about Jesus being tortured to death by a community who were madly defensive toward his audit of their hypocritical lives. Christianity has remembered this story as Good Friday, even though the first impression of every disciple was that this was the very worst thing that had ever happened to them. Every expectation that they had for Jesus and for themselves was crushed, broken to pieces, and trampled into the ground. Among one-sentence descriptions of despair, I count the following sentence the all-time winner: “But we were hoping that he was the one who was to come and set Israel free.” (Luke 24:21)

This horrific Friday became “good” when some of these companions of Jesus saw that Israel had indeed (surprise of all surprises) been set free! It was not that Rome had been overthrown, or that the history of human evil had ended. Something even deeper had happened. Our humanity had been restored. We the disciples of Jesus found ourselves among the “first born” of a new humanity of ordinary women and men. This new humanity (manifest in both Jesus and the disciples) had triumphed over inhumanity. The death of Jesus was not defeat, but victory. Truth had not been abandoned. And forgiveness of the liars had been demonstrated. (This dynamic of Reality’s forgiveness is likewise being manifest in other arrogant and defensive persecutions and killing of “innocent” people.)

This emerging community of new humanity saw that Jesus had exposed the very deepest doorway of despair and had led a representative group through this doorway into the promised land of authenticity in relation to that Final Reality who does all things well. Jesus was victorious over our satanic rejections of Reality by exposing the very deepest rejections of the Truth of our real lives, namely the sufferings that realistic

living must face. The bliss of realistic living was made complete by following the essential being of Jesus along the path he took. In doing so, his followers became “Jesus” in a continuing community of living on this Earth. Whatever it was that Jesus was, this “was-ness” was “resurrected” in the continuing flesh and blood of the men and women who followed him through the hell and healing of this self discovery. Such was the beginning of the Christological thinking of these Christ-way Jews. However complex and confusing later Christological reflections became, these basic thoughts persisted: Jesus was the Christ, the long expected Redeemer, because he led us through the hell of our very deepest despair into an enduring heaven of trust in a Final Reality that does all things well.

Paul expanded Christological thinking with his story of Christ as the Second Adam. The first Adam was the story of humanity’s movement from freedom to bondage. The Second Adam was the story of humanity’s movement from bondage to freedom. We do not understand either of these stories unless we understand that both of them are about each of us at the most profound level of our living.

Paul refers to both of these stories in Galatians 5:1: “Plant your feet firmly, therefore, within the freedom that Christ has won for us, and do not let yourselves be caught again in the shackles of slavery.”

Sin is a trap in a lifetime of despair—a *bondage* because we have fallen into a ditch out of which we cannot climb. This “ditchness” is who we have become. We have used our freedom to escape our freedom; consequently we have no freedom with which to get our freedom back. We can only be healed of our bondage, our ditchness, when we are led by a ministry from those who are outside our fallen consciousness – a ministry that can awaken us to the truth of our despairing condition and then lead us through that doorway of despair to the freedom to cast off the despair and enjoy freedom. Our mother, our preacher, our friend, or Jesus himself does not cast off the despair for us. It is our own freedom that casts off despair and vows to enjoy freedom. But our outside redeemers are needed to bring to our consciousness that we are in despair, point us to the doorway of consciously experiencing that despair, and beckon us to walk through the pains of despair to the promised land of our essential freedom. This is the core meaning of the story of the Second Adam.

So what were those deepest pangs of despair that those first disciples felt in their loss of their mentor and their encounter with the frank horror of his torturous death? These disciples had already experienced redemption from the blandness or meaninglessness of their previous employments—like tax-office work, prostitution, or just fishing from their father’s boat. They had found joy in a nomadic life of healing people of their various modes of despair-sickness. But a deeper probe into their own despair was in store for them in this dreadful ending of their Jesus experience. They came to see how deeply the world was trapped in its flight from and hatred of authentic living. Humanity was and remains willing to torture to death the most authentic members of its species rather than give up its fundamental lies about the way life is. And yet Reality, who does all things well, was expressing love for all these liars by allowing this faithful one to suffer the malicious power of these liars. These liars were being loved through God’s courtesy with regard to their freedom. It was not Jesus who was discredited by his detested mode of death. It was the humans of his generation who were discredited. It was humanity as a whole who were audited. Jesus was the victor. He was not defeated by his dying. He won the fight with sin, with despair, with the entire Earth-wide kingdom of Satan’s power.

Jesus’ example includes persistence in trusting the understanding that Reality does all things well, even when the consequences of such realistic living led to suffering at the hands of the home culture that he was faithfully serving with an opportunity for authentic and blessed life. Death and suffering itself are conquered in this story. It is

not that inauthentic living conquered Jesus. Jesus had conquered on our behalf both death and suffering. “Oh Death, what has happened to your sting?” All our sufferings have ceased to be a curse; our sufferings can now be viewed as part of one glorious life lived in our essential freedom. And nothing, nothing whatsoever, can separate us from the astonishing “truth” that “Reality is doing all things well.”

Do we sinners still ask, “Why did God create that tree—create such a possibility for our entering into the hell of despair?” Let us notice that this question includes asking: “Why did God ennoble humanity with the gift of freedom rather than making us happy robots or happy trees, or happy rocks?” Having the gift of freedom includes having the option of using that freedom to rebel against freedom itself, and from all the structures of Reality in which this essential (God-given) type of freedom resides. To blame God for our fall into the temptation of unreality is to wish to be a rock or a tree or an animal that knows not the freedom to create out of nothing. The capacity to sin is our glory as well as our temptation to enter into a hell from which we need rescue. Julian of Norwich pointed out that our having fallen into sin and then been rescued has meant that we learned something that makes us a more happy and glorious being than we were before the fall.

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