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Paradise in this Life

Well, it has been an amazing couple of weeks, hasn't it? On election night, I went out to the kitchen to start dinner a little before 8 o'clock, thinking that it would be a while before they called the election. Karen yelled to me to hurry back, and I arrived to see the crowd in Grant Park in Chicago, cheering, waving signs, hugging. And my eyes immediately filled with tears, and I just started to sob. An African-American – a black man named Barack Hussein Obama – had been elected president of the United States. This was something I had certainly not expected to see in my lifetime. Whomever you favored in the election, this was a momentous event in our history – an event that carries the potential to be transformative; to change our course; to move us in a new direction. And, trite as it sounds, it is a moment filled with hope! In a few minutes, I'll come back to the election, and its transformative potential.

But first, I want to get all theological on you. I want to talk with you about a new book, which was co-authored by Rebecca Parker, president of the UU seminary in Berkeley, and Rita Nakashima Brock. It's called *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Some of you may remember having seen a short excerpt from it in a recent issue of *UU World*. Brock and Parker were traveling and doing research, when they visited the Italian city of Ravenna and some of its churches and monuments that were built there during very early Christian times – between the 5th and 8th centuries. Mosaics in Ravenna depicted a three-tiered paradise – a star-filled dome representing the sky, an earthly vision of Jesus as a shepherd in a bucolic natural setting, and the floor below, where worshippers were surrounded by this vision of an earthly paradise.

What visitors did not see was any depiction of Jesus' death. There were no crucifixion scenes in any of Ravenna's churches. Christians at this early time taught that paradise had always been here on earth. They believed that Jesus, through his life and teachings reopened for humans the way to experience this paradise on earth. Christians could taste, see, and feel glimpses of paradise in their ordinary lives. But they experienced paradise most fully in their worship together as a community. In these early images of Jesus, he appeared, not as the bleeding crucified corpse of later imagery, but the Jesus who had healed the sick, who had taught his followers, and who had transformed the world with the spirit of love. So the focus for these early Christians was on the possibility of paradise in this life, rather than the bloody death of Jesus to atone for the sins of humankind. Remember, for example, how Jesus taught that the "Kingdom of God" is among us, but "people don't see it." Jesus is thus quoted in the books of Luke and Acts, and in the Gospel of Thomas. He is clearly saying that the Kingdom of God is not something to come later, but something that is here right now if only people could perceive it. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God, but we could also refer to it as a kingdom of the spirit, of a Buddhist-like state of awareness, or as an earthly paradise.

So for Christians up until the 10th Century in Europe, Jesus' death was not a key to their understanding, not an image of devotion, not a ritual symbol of faith. In these churches, the Eucharist, or communion meal, was celebrated as a feast of life, not as a

reenactment of a death. Worshippers greeted each other in peace and reconciliation, they brought gifts to support the church, and food to share. After these offerings were blessed, the people were called to “lift up their hearts” in a prayer of thanksgiving. Even today, in Transylvania, our brothers and sisters in our Unitarian partner churches practice communion this way – as a joyful celebration of the world’s bounty and their shared community.

So where and when did the crucifixion begin to appear? Brock and Parker finally located the earliest known surviving crucifix in a gothic cathedral in Cologne, in Germany. Known as the Gero cross, it was sculpted from oak in Saxony in around 965. The life-sized work depicts a nearly-naked Christ hanging on the cross: his eyes are closed, his mouth gapes open, deep lines scar his face. Depictions of the crucified Jesus began to appear in Europe in the 10th and 11th Centuries, and they became increasingly grotesque and bloody. These gory images appeared because they reflected the increasingly brutal lives of the people. The Saxons of Germany were forcibly converted by the armies of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne. Thus, the brutal logic of empire began to twist the celebration of Jesus’ life into a perpetual reenactment of his death. Until this time, Christians had taught that shedding human blood was a sin, and that participation in war was evil. Soldiers were required to do penance. But now, the needs of empire dictated that there needed to be justification for violence.

The Eucharist was changed from a celebration of Jesus’ life into a ritual reenactment of his death – the consecrated elements became the material, historical body of Jesus; the bread and the wine became the crucified blood and flesh of Christ, who was said to be present in the ceremony. In 1095, Pope Urban the Second called for the first crusade. Across Europe, nobles, bishops, monks, and laity were urged to take up arms and journey to Jerusalem to attack and kill Muslims. The transformation of the Christian view of violence was now complete – not only was killing justified, but engaging in holy killing in Palestine would serve as penance for all the sins of one’s life. Engaging in warfare became a short cut to paradise.

And the theological underpinnings of all this were provided by Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury. Anselm transformed the message of Jesus from one of loving community in this life, to one of salvation through Jesus’ bloody death. Sinners, which meant all humans, would be punished unless they had done penance to fulfill their debt to God, who was like a kind of feudal lord. But humanity’s level of debt for its sin was so great that it was beyond human capacity to repay it. And so, according to Anselm, God himself paid humanity’s debt, by coming to earth as the incarnate Christ, and by dying on the cross to pay for humanity’s crimes. Thus, what had been seen as God’s gift of life was transformed into the gift of death, the greatest gift God could give.

Well, this leads to all kinds of ramifications, of course, ones that theologians, and priests, and ministers, have debated over ever since. But note its effect on the focus of religion for the worshipper, for the believer. According to one view, to be a good Christian, one would follow the life and teachings of Jesus. The goal would be to discover, to claim, paradise in this life. Through worshipping together, through love and compassion, followers would find earthly paradise in the form of loving community. By the other view, which came along with crucifixion, and the theology of substitutionary atonement, humanity was saved, and admitted to an otherworldly paradise, by the

bloody, agonizing death of Jesus on the cross. And so the focus shifted to an emphasis on death. To kill or be killed for God became the quickest route to paradise. The communion meal became a reenactment of Jesus' death. Jesus' death, not his life, became the passageway to salvation. Humanity was divided into the saved and the damned. And paradise was lost – it was changed from a spiritual realm to be entered into in this life. It was postponed to an afterlife, or it was secularized as a land to be conquered.

But it's important to note ideas about working to create paradise in this life have been kept alive throughout all this time. For example, our Universalist ancestors continued to challenge the theology of redemptive violence, and to preach salvation in this life through the redeeming power of love. In 17th Century England, Jane Leade, now largely forgotten, preached that people's senses could be opened to tasting, seeing, and hearing the beauty that is within, among, and all around us. Entering paradise meant being spiritually transformed into a person rooted in love. Paradise could be now, Leade taught, and our lives could be part of a renewal of paradise. Salvation would be the reopening of the Garden of Eden, and the restoration of humanity's dignity, creativity, and responsibility, in a world of splendid diversity. In 19th Century New England the Universalist preacher, Hosea Ballou argued that heaven and hell are not in some afterlife, but in the life we create here and now for one another. Ballou categorically rejected violent doctrines of atonement.

What this narrative illustrates, is that there are two ways that we might approach Christian teachings. We can see Jesus of Nazareth as a man – a man who led an exemplary life. A prophet, a teacher, a healer, a rabbi, a mystic, a radical social reformer. Love is the central message of his life and teachings. By building loving, caring relationships, we do the work of reclaiming, of re-discovering, paradise in this life. But the other message is one of salvation through redemptive violence – the idea that humanity was saved from its sinfulness by the bloody death of Jesus on the cross. Note how these lead us in two diametrically opposed directions. One says that we should take the message of Jesus – and of many other prophets, such as the Buddha – and try to follow their example by living lives of ethical relationship. Under this view, humans must take responsibility for their lives. Our work begins, not ends, with the example of life and teachings of great religious figures. Under the other view, the view came along with the crucifixion and the atonement, salvation comes through belief rather than through viewing the lives and teachings of great religious leaders as examples to follow.

And this brings me back around to the election, and its aftermath. Now you might think it a bit strange that I make this connection, but I see an important point to be made here. There has, of course, been a certain messianic quality to Senator Obama's candidacy. He has been called "the one," "the golden one," and so forth – often with a note of derision. And we want to be careful about that. It's not a good idea to turn public figures into "heroes," and it's certainly not a good idea to turn them into saviors. It is easy to see our politics as well as our religion in terms of being "saved" by some extraordinary figure. Ok, we elected him, our work is done, now it's up to him to "save" us. But what we know, I think, from both these examples, is that it's not so simple. No one person, elected or anointed, has this kind of salvatory power. Great leaders can point they way, they can persuade with their eloquence, but that leaves us to do the hard work.

Barack Obama's election holds the potential to be one of those moments in history that bring about transformation. One of those moments when the world shifts a bit on its axis; when we can see the arc of the universe bending just a little more toward justice. But Barack Obama can't do all this by himself. The country and the world are in a state of crisis, and the challenges are huge: a financial crisis that threatens jobs, savings, and homes; two foreign wars with no signs of ending; a serious health care crisis; chronic dependence on fossil fuels for energy; and the ever-greater challenge posed by global climate change, to name just a few. We will have play an active role for the new administration to be able to make progress on these difficult issues. A new President Obama is going to need us to provide cover for him; he will need us to watch his back. There will be times when we will have to show that he is under pressure from an active, caring constituency.

And of course, there will be the need to hold this new president accountable. He will never be able to please all the people; many will be angry. Sometimes we will be angry. But we also need to provide vocal support for crucial reforms that we know to be needed – serious economic reform that includes jobs, investment in infrastructure, relief for homeowners as well as bankers; serious progress on reducing carbon emissions and dependence on fossil fuels; a health care system that provides access for all our citizens. So, yes, we need to hold president Obama accountable, but first, could he just “hold him.” He has campaigned for two full years to reach this place, and he has done it of his conviction that he can – with our help and support – get us back on the right track.

But, as the story of paradise shows us, we can never just rely on one event, however momentous, or on one person, however gifted. With newly found hope, it is important that we arrive at this paradise that is present before us and respond to it with lives devoted to justice and caring for the world. We reenter this world as “sacred space,” when we love life fiercely, and when we work, with love, to preserve and protect the goodness of our intricate web of life. Living in paradise does not mean living without struggle and conflict. As Parker and Brock tell us:

What we need now is a religious perspective that does not locate salvation in a future end point, a transcendent realm, or a zone after death. Paradise is not withheld, closed or removed from us. Realizing this requires us to let go of the notion the paradise is life without struggle, life free from wrestling with legacies of injustice and current forces of evil. Assuredly, we are in a world in which the struggle continues. However, it is also true that we already life on holy ground, . . . Our spiritual challenge is to embrace this reality: histories of harm are all around us, forces of evil operate within and among us, and yet everywhere the bushes are on fire, . . . the Spirit rises in the wind, the rivers of paradise circle the earth, and the fountain of wisdom springs up from the earth we tread, from this holy ground.

But, as the story of paradise shows us, we can never just rely on one event, however momentous, or on one person, however gifted. With newly found hope, it is important that we arrive at this paradise that is present before us and respond to it with lives devoted to justice and caring for the world. We reenter this world as “sacred space,” when we love life fiercely, and when we work, with love, to preserve and protect the goodness of our intricate web of life. Living in paradise does not mean living without struggle and conflict. We can feast in paradise when we open our hearts to our sadness,

to our grief for all that has been lost and cannot be repaired. We recommit ourselves to finding paradise in this world when we remember the fullness of life that is possible when we open our hearts to love. We work at re-discovering paradise, when we encounter each other in our communities with compassion and love, when we celebrate our life-affirming rituals, when we open ourselves to beauty.