

# **The Orgy that Was Eden: How Far We Have Fallen Or “You Can’t Have an Orgy with Your Clothes On”**

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## **Introducing the Problem**

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the leading “movers and shakers” for the rights of women at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century once wrote these words;

*“Take the snake, the fruit tree and the woman from the tableau, and we have no fall, no frowning judge, no everlasting inferno, no everlasting punishment---hence no need of a Savior. Thus, the bottom falls out of the whole Christian theology. Here is why in all the biblical researches and higher criticisms, the scholars never touch the position of women.”*

*(quoted by theologian Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, in Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation, p 148)*

So as we celebrate “Women’s History or Herstory month” it is significant that we focus on The Garden of Eden. In fact, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was so incensed about the justification of sexism in the church that she published *The Woman’s Bible* in 1895 in which she had the audacity to remove those passages that were offensive to women as she argued for political changes. (Thanks to the women’s movement it has now been republished and is available.) This Garden story is so important for us today for it is still the breeding ground for sexism as Christians continue to argue about whether women are subordinate to men. Just this week I read of one Anglican priest who is shifting to the Catholic Church because he says his former church is a “maverick Church.” It keeps “changing the rules to appease the common culture.” That is, that common non-Christian sinners understand women are people with gifts and skills, to be a bishop for example, but Christians know better. And another Anglican parishioner, this time a woman, is leaving the church because the Bible teaches that the gospel “comes through Jesus, through the male line.” (1) Hence we can’t possibly have women as Bishops. I trust this congregation can hear the incredible bigotry in those statements. My how we twist and turn the Garden of Eden story to fit our prejudices.

The Adam and Eve story has been used to keep women in their place, to justify subordination of women. It has been used to justify some kind of “natural order” in a hierarchical, authoritarian and male dominated family system. And of course, the Church blamed the sin of the world on women and particularly, even making Eve the sexual seductress. Oh yes, Eve’s female body and her use of her feminine sexual wiles is what has led the world down the path of sin, at least according to some readings of this story.

So I happen to agree with Elizabeth Cady Stanton that the Adam and Eve story is a pivotal story that undergirds much of the sexist assumptions that prevail in Western Christianity. And while sexism is alive and well in the church, let us not forget that those who would keep women in their place also want to keep the sexual minority communities in theirs as well, as abominations before God with no access to church leadership positions or civil rights in their intimate relationships.

But gender and orientation are but two tips of the iceberg that is leading us to the coming split in Christendom. It will be along the lines of sexuality. The huge iceberg, as it were, that divides us is the entire spectrum of sexuality.

Eg. What is the place of sexuality? What do we do with pleasure? Isn’t the body inferior to the spiritual life? Shouldn’t sexuality be controlled? Isn’t it dangerous? This is the focus of my life’s work now and the topic we shall turn to today. So to address these issues we must turn

to the Garden of Eden story as well. I have deliberately chosen a racy title to attract your attention. I can assure you that this is not an “X” rated sermon but let us remember the amount of sexuality that is on our tv sets before we criticize the preacher for talking about it.

Congregations like this one who embrace liberation, who see the salvation that Jesus promised very much tied in with the liberation, both spiritual and physical, on earth as it is in heaven, even *here* we tend not get too close to this topic. It is too fearful.

But I believe that “Perfect love casts out fear.” and I am not afraid. So let us ask ourselves what the Garden of Eden story teaches us about our body selves.

## **BIBLICAL REVIEW**

First, let us note that the Genesis stories come from a people with an oral tradition. Special story tellers memorized these stories and passed them down at formal and informal times and places to teach a people who they are, why they are living, why there is pain and suffering, and whether or not there is any meaning or hope. As we read the Hebrew texts we should always ask ourselves what are the questions that people would have, the deep, philosophical, spiritual questions that the story tellers are trying to answer. For example, the Creation question is NOT to answer “how did human life emerge as atoms and molecules and evolve into life forms?” The question is “how did we begin?” And the answer is “In the beginning God...” The how of dirt and clay forming a human body is shorthand for saying “We began because God made us.”

Note that there are two creation stories in Genesis. In chapter one the human beings, male and female, are the culmination of 6 days of work by the Creator. All the firmament, the skies, the universe, the sun and moon and finally living beings, the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and four legged animals come first. Finally humans make an appearance and it is all good. That ends this particular creation story. It is all good. It is VERY good as a matter of fact. Now, note that it does not say these are sinful creatures with an inherent tendency to sin. It does not say their minds and their spirits were good but their bodies were shameful or that the sexual body parts were a regrettable fact needed for procreation. It says that there is something about the human creature that resembles God the Creator and so this makes them and all of creation VERY good.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> story of Genesis is completely different and it contradicts the first story...so much for inerrancy of scripture. In this story the human creature is created first, not last. This earth creature, ha’adam (from which we get the word Adam is a play on the word for dirt/earth and means dust of the earth.) (2) But this genderless creature is not happy and is lonely. So the Creator makes all the animals as companions but *still* this does not alleviate the loneliness. So God makes a second creature from the essence of the first and now there are both male and female. And presumably now that there were two, who happen to be of two genders, life was going to be good in the Garden.

The story tellers say that life in the Garden of Eden can now begin in earnest. The Hebrew word for Eden by the way means “the garden of earthly delights.” Life in the garden is depicted as idyllic but it is not a place for being lazy or idle. Humans are given the responsibility of caring for this lush garden. They tend all the varieties of plants which they eat and presumably the animals which they do not eat. If they are anything like present day so-called primitive foragers and gatherers, this “work” took about 4 hours a day. The Hebrew story tellers might

well have known this fact. I leave it to your discretion to decide what humans would do with all that time on their hands with all their needs met...

So the story teller hears the *Question: What was it like to be the earliest people?*

*The Answer: Humans are made for a leisurely existence, living on a healthy diet and with no need for clothes. (We'll return to this idea.) And then in the evenings, in the cool of the day, we walk with God. Let's pause to consider this:*

### **The Creator as Passionate Love (Eros)**

The story implies the first humans were not separated in some estranged arrangement from the Creator. Instead, the Creator was easily accessible in the cool of the day. These earth creatures walk without clothes with the Creator, knowing no shame, knowing only the love that has created them, the passion of the Creator.

When we passionately love someone we move toward the loved one. We seek connection. We seek intimacy. This is a good description of the Creator. And God said, (in chapter 1 after all the creation had been made) "Let us create an earth creature in our own image and likeness." Perhaps this sounds to you like a desire for a relationship, a desire for companionship? A move toward intimacy?

In chapter 2 when the earth creature had all the animals it still was lonely and the Creator's passion rushes in to try to alleviate the suffering and creates a companion. The word for passionate love is Eros. Now it is true we have sullied the word "erotic" so that sometimes it is synonymous with perversion. But let's bracket the way we have dirtied it and explore it differently.

Can we envision God as Eros, the Passionate One who will stop at nothing to love us, openly, abundantly? And perhaps even indiscriminately and ill-advisedly!? This Divine Love walks arm in arm with these earth creatures in the cool of the day to review the events of the day or perhaps deeper topics.

*The storytellers' question is: Why are we made?*

*Answer: To walk in harmony, with no need for clothes, and unseparated from God.*

### **INTRODUCING ORGY**

One definition of the word Orgy is **abundance of a sensual or sexual kind, to revel in unrestrained indulgence.** (Although we tend to add the definition indulgence in sexual activity, but this was not the meaning of the word in English until the middle 1500's when the Church was engaged in all manner of sexual abuses.)

### **Reveling in Unrestrained Indulgence;**

This is the picture of this Creator God down throughout the Hebrew scripture, a parent who loves the offspring indulgently, being rebuffed and forgotten and then forgiving, over and over, punishing them and then rewarding them, always welcoming them back home. Reminds me of a parent who has a hard time saying 'no' sometimes. God says 'no' to certain things and yet, over and over pardons them and makes exceptions.

This idea of unrestrained indulgence gets shifted into the idea of the vast universalism of God's love. The evangelical world is being shaken by a new book written by one of their darlings, Rob Bell, the pastor of a huge mega church. The name of his book is a title I have talked about for

years, “Love wins.” But the reason there will soon be rumors of Bell’s need to resign and his ouster from evangelical circles is that he has the audacity to talk about the universality of God’s love, God’s abundant love. In other words, for Bell, Hell is frozen over. But he is on to something in this book.

*The biblical story teller’s question is: What is God like?*

*The answer: God passionately longs for us, the creation, to be in relationship, to walk in the cool of the day, without being clothed in our defenses or excuses.*

It is interesting that the first encyclical written by Pope Benedict was on the topic of Eros. He became almost poetic as he describes this kind of love, this kind of passion and yet he confines it, as one might expect to only heterosexuals and only within marriage. I found it quite hilarious that he thought we can actually hold back the ocean waves of passion with our two hands, with church dogma in one and heterosexism in the other.

We all know, I hope, that when we feel passion it flows over us and out toward one another. Yes, we can hold back on how or whether we act on it, but the feelings of passionate love are part of what it is to be human, what it is that calls us toward community, toward relationship. It is hearts touching hearts first and foremost. And, just as surely our story is that God’s heart reaches toward the Creation in community, in relationship to touch our own heart.

Another meaning of the word Orgy is **Excessive indulgence** (Mirriam Webster dictionary) and this is exactly the kind of Creator God we find in Hebrew scriptures. It must have been *sensually excessive* there. The smells of fresh turned dirt and the scent of flowers in bloom, the sounds of the evening birds cooing and the early morning sounds of animals stretching and awakening for a new day, the taste of fresh picked fruit of the vine that is splashed in the cool streams and which crunch when bitten. The Garden is where we feel the touch of the warm body of a loved one, one who is your equal next to you, one who was given you by God, the one who reflects back to you a mirror of who you are and perhaps, to feel the touch of God in that experience.

Then of course, Christians have the audacity to believe that Jesus was, in human form, God-in-the-flesh. Jesus had a good time in his short time on this earth. And, according to the writer of Matthew, this is what got him in trouble with the religious professionals. He was running with the wrong crowd, those who were unclean. He told the lepers they were beautiful. He said to the despised tax collector “let’s go to your house and have a party.” And, he was a party goer and imbibed in too much drinking to their way of thinking. Perhaps he was someone not clothed in his defenses but easily accessible to children and adults alike. And this is who Christians say is God-in-human form, Love-in-human form.

Ah, Christians how far we have fallen. The Christian story is one of an orgy of love, an orgy of delight, an orgy of abundance, or sensual excess. There is no need to be clothed and defensive in the eyes of God, nor with one another. God has got our backs. We are already covered. We have simply forgotten we have been set free to live abundant lives as the beautiful people made in God’s image. We have forgotten the word for us is “yes!”

**A retelling of the ending of the Garden of Eden story,**

*At some point we grow restless with an idyllic lifestyle. Beauty can become boring if you don't see ugliness as well. Safety can feel confining if you have never known danger. At some point the earth creatures decide to leave the warm and safe companionship of evening walks with the Creator. At some point they decide to think for themselves, to go their own way. It meant the loss of innocence, the loss of what they had. They listened to their egos. When we rely on ourselves and give up the wondrous relationship of our Lover God, then we lose our connection to our body selves. And when we lose the experience of the orgy of the Garden we cover ourselves and live in shame and fear and guilt. The farther away we are from Passion and its excessive indulgence, the more we dry up and become brittle and hardened.*

(Doesn't this sound like the screaming voices in our culture today shouting; "No premarital sex, No emergency contraception, No abortion, No homosexuality, No civil rights for gays, God-hates-fags!")

Brittle and dried up. Empty of erotic passion but filled with self-righteousness and ego.)

Egos are those voices in our heads that say, "I know what is best. I can do this by myself. I can do it better. I don't you. I don't need anybody. I can take care of myself." Listening to our ego it will move us away from enjoying our sensuality and an authentic sexuality in our bodies because the self-sufficient and independent ego resides in our heads. Passion does not reside there. The ego may use other people but the heart will embrace their presence in our lives.

And every time we listen to this inner voice of ego we clothe ourselves in more defenses just like Adam and Eve put on the fig leaves.

The story of the Garden of Eden is not unlike the story of Joshua who, when standing on the mountain top overlooking the Promised Land, (also a similar view of Eden) Joshua heard a voice of God say, "I have set before you life and death. Choose life."

The Creator gave abundantly in the Garden of Earthly delights, excessively, indulgently throughout history even, and yet sets before us a choice. We can choose life or we can choose death. It is up to us.

How far we have fallen. For over and over we choose death; We remain guarded, insular, isolated from one another, fully clothed and garbed in our defenses. And of *course* we can't get along. And of *course* we abuse our bodies or the bodies of others. And we hurt one another because we are hurting ourselves.

We are not meant to live like this. This is not the vision. The vision of Eden is to walk naked and unashamed, vulnerably, appreciating and caring for this creation, being in relationship to one another openly and in relationship with The Creator as we walk in the cool of the evening.

We have a pleasure loving Jesus if the gospel stories are to be believed.

We have a pleasure loving God if the Garden of Eden is to be believed.

When the first earth creatures chose death, the first thing they did was to hide from God in their guilt. When they left the garden of earthly delights, they put on their clothes.

Now here is a true story I have never told. I have been to a nudist beach. I thought I needed to see what it was like. With great trepidation my friend and I went there and the only

way we could do it was to pretend nobody was looking. So we looked at everyone else but no one of course was looking at us! And we saw all kinds of bodies, all sizes, all shapes, all kinds of scars from a variety of surgeries. And yet we saw that all bodies are pretty much the same. After about 30 minutes I began to be really bored. I realized if you wanted to know about someone you had to talk to them because there was no outward clues, no designer bags, rolex watches, no accoutrements of wealth or status. The professionals moved on the beach with the blue collar workers and no one knew the difference. The straights, gays and bisexuals walked on the beach and no one could tell them apart. Being nude is the great equalizer. Clothes are defenses and symbols that keep us from being known.

I am not being an advocate for nudism here but we too keep ourselves hidden, ashamed of our bodies perhaps, ashamed of our vulnerability, ashamed of our sexuality, convinced we are not allowed to experience life in all its abundance or love in all its divine excessive indulgence. *And it is these thoughts that keep us separated from God, that keep us out of the Garden.* How far we have fallen.

Christians of all people, who follow Jesus, a party kinda guy, should be fully living their lives. Christians who believe in God-in-the-flesh, should be leading the parade about the abundant life in these bodies, fully loved, protected and cared for by the Creator, just as we are. No rigid rules to keep some people in their place. No rules that judge and condemn. No 'us versus them.' No pleasure police.

But our Creator God is never coercive. This erotic power that moves toward us in intimacy and with creativity always honors when we say 'no.' Even when the 'no' path we have chosen leads to clothing ourselves and leaving behind the abundant life. Love waits, hoping that we will change our minds, hoping we will turn around, hoping that we will start over in humility and repenting of our foolishness, casting off our defenses and being willing to live vulnerability to a "love that will not let us go."

Yes, we have fallen so far from the Garden.

We only teach against the original sin of the Fall instead of teaching for life of the original Blessing. (3)

We teach the dangers of the body instead of the delights of the body.

We are all too busy covering ourselves with defensive paraphernalia trying to hide our nakedness so that we fail to celebrate the body in all its beauty.

And mostly we do this because we have forgotten the orgy of our beginnings and we have forgotten our own beauty.

But there is one woman in the Scriptures who remembers however. Her name is unknown but she says in the Song of Solomon, "I am black and I am beautiful." She is naked in her vulnerability, in her embrace of the love she has for her beloved, in the sensuality and sexuality that they share. She knows she is loved. I believe that she would remind us that this passionate love of the Creator of the universe resides in us, loving us just as we are, calling us to be more, do more than we ever thought possible, calling us to dance, calling us to life, to choose life. Choose life. Choose life.

Now where do we start? How do we return to the Garden where God waits for us with open arms. This is how we do it:

**Song:**

This is the song of songs, comes from deep inside of me  
This is the song of love, my beloved sings to me.  
This is the song of songs  
My beloved sings to me.

When I believe that I am beautiful

Then I know that love is possible.

Our hearts will open for love comes from within.

*Chorus:*

When we believe that we are beautiful

Then we will know that love is possible

Our hearts will open for love comes from within

2) This is my song of songs

I give it to each one of you

This my song of songs

I know that you believe it's true.

When you believe that you are beautiful

Then you'll know that love is possible.

Your heart will open for love comes from within

*Bridge:*

This song of songs. This song of love

See it in you. Feel it from me

Beloved, embrace this

Love timeless.

It all begins within....you. It all begins within. (4)

- 1) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12685062>
- 2) See the Rhetoric of Sexuality by Phyllis Trible
- 3) See Original Blessing by Matthew Fox
- 4) Composed by Beverly Dale and Dan Paul