

Deconstructing Individualism

by Rev. Don Garrett

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Innocence, freedom, delight. I'd like to take you back to one of the very first stories from our Jewish heritage: the Garden of Eden.

It tells of two people, called Adam and Eve, but they really stand for every man and every woman. That's what their names actually mean. They are us. Somewhere deep down we share the memory of their paradise.

They lived in a beautiful world full of everything they could want or need. They were safe. They were happy. They were surrounded by plenty and abundance. They were carefree, living each day in unfettered delight.

Except there was this one thing; there was an authority figure with power over them. Even so, that authority gave them full freedom to do anything but the one thing that was forbidden. Well, they *were* humans and so the very first forbidden fruit was, of course, tasted and consumed.

A lot of folks get pretty excited about some of the details about that fruit and just how this disobedient act came about, but that's not interesting to me this morning. What's interesting to me is that they were innocent and free, they disobeyed, and they were punished.

And the punishment seems rather severe: expulsion from paradise, loss of all the wonderful safety, abundance, happiness, and delight which they had enjoyed. Theologically, this posits God as an overbearing, judgmental, even abusive, authority figure.

But it makes a different kind of sense when we see it as a metaphor for human development.

We start as innocent babies and children. If our parents are at all competent, we feel safe and loved. We have no need for a sense of right or wrong; we do what pleases us. Joy and sorrow are simple, direct, and immediate. And then, at some point, everyone has the shocking, bewildering, shattering experience of being hit by a load of bricks in the form of, "No! Don't do that!" And

although we're punished in some way for our disobedience, the most significant punishment is the loss of our parents' unconditional acceptance and love. We are no longer as safe as we were. We're not in paradise any more.

We learn to watch ourselves in ways we never needed to do before. We usually don't even completely understand what it is we did or why we were punished. We learn that, even in the presence of our loving protectors, we are not safe. We learn to watch our parents to anticipate and prevent their disapproval. No longer do we naively do whatever pleases us; we try to please our parents.

This leads to the creation of a defensive sense of self, of an "I" to whom things happen. When we are judged for breaking the rules we tend to internalize our parents' disapproval and feel shame. When we are punished for misbehavior we either did not commit or did not intend, the burning feelings of shame are sometimes transformed into anger and resentment at unfairness, at injustice.

These feelings then play out through other spheres of life as well. Children act out these experiences, judging and mocking each other at home and on neighborhood playgrounds. Na-na-na-na nah nah is one of the universal songs among children of all cultures.

And so children learn to defend themselves in a variety of ways, whether through aggression or withdrawal, humor or persuasion. But every step of the way strengthens and reinforces the defensive sense of self that emerged with their expulsion from paradise.

In his landmark work, *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B. DuBois identified what he called "double-consciousness" which African-Americans were forced to have. He described it as "a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

While the character of the African-American experience of double-consciousness is unique in that it involves a minority class of people in relation

to a dominant majority, its essence is the original sin of our entire culture: we consider the divided self to be normal, true, and good.

R.D. Laing pointed out in his book on the subject, *The Divided Self*, how oddly this manifests in our society. He said that, “a little girl of seventeen in a mental hospital told me she was terrified because the Atom Bomb was inside her. That is a delusion. The statesmen of the world who boast and threaten that they have Doomsday weapons are far more dangerous, and far more estranged from ‘reality’ than many of the people on whom the label ‘psychotic’ is affixed.”

Variouly called, “the divided self,” “double-consciousness,” or the “false self,” this reactive, defensive sense of self has somehow become the definition of normal self in our culture. One of its major preoccupations is its dedication to seeing non-self as “other.” When we take this divided, false self as a virtue rather than a delusion, the result is individualism.

Individualism is the persistent conviction that I am separate from you and that the foundation of a good society is that we honor that separation with a courteous and appropriate distance. It is grounded in the delusion that we are the creators of our own lives, that our thought processes are purely our own and that we have the right to think anything we like as long as it contributes to the defense of the castle self of our ego. We build moats of eccentricity. We train our tongues and wits to repel the advances of others’ opinions.

And we canonize thinkers whose words reinforce our delusional sense of ourselves as separate and independent beings. People like Ralph Waldo Emerson.

You see, individualism has no real meaning in and of itself. It is a defensive response to people and institutions which we experience as abusive to our tender, paradise-dwelling inner children. The Calvinist church of the 18th and 19th centuries certainly qualified as an abusive institution, and it was reasonable to assert the value of the individual in response, as Emerson did in his essay on “Self Reliance,” where he said, “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string,” and, “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature.”

These sentiments have their place in defending the self from oppression and abuse, but reinforce the separation of the true self from its defenses by denying that there is a difference between them. This leaves us trapped in a

paradise lost, seeking and longing for a wholeness that we can never achieve until we acknowledge that we have divided ourselves in two: the authentic and the false selves. The false self, believing itself to be our only guardian and protector, can end up protecting us from our authentic self as well.

But this is a fiction defending a delusion. The myth of the separate self has no basis in reality; there is no such thing as a self that is not socially constructed. We are who we are because of the connections in life that have formed us, shaped us, protected us, and defined us. If we find that we have been malformed and poorly protected, we need to find or create a better social environment of which to be a part rather than rejecting our essential interrelatedness.

This is why the ideal of the Beloved Community is so profoundly important today, especially for Unitarian Universalists. As the Rev. Fred Muir pointed out in his 2012 Berry Street lecture in Phoenix, Arizona, “We – as a nation and as a religious community – took the blessing and joy of individuality and made it an ideology, made it a theology, and we did a very bad job of making it polity. We went from individuality to individualism and ended up [with] the demise of institutional religion.”

Muir continued, “While individualism may have been a bold and appealing way to create and build a nation and its institutions, and to grow Unitarian Universalism – it might even have felt natural or ‘God-given’ – it is not sustaining: Individualism will not serve the greater good, a principle to which we have committed ourselves. There is little-to-nothing about the ideology and theology of individualism that encourages people to work and live together, to create and support institutions that serve common aspirations and beloved principles.”

And when we use our individualistic commitment to promote social activism, we tend to do so out of a closed fist rather than an open heart. And the closed fist is not warm; it is not welcoming; it does not replenish those who wield it.

Despite our delusions of individualism, deep in our hearts we crave deep, rewarding, compassionate relationships, we long to be part of a Beloved

Community that is both religious and spiritual, that seeks wholeness and kindness and love in the form of justice.

I believe that all anger, urgency, anxiety, competitiveness, resentment, shame, guilt, and hatred are the products of the divided, defended self, and to the degree to which they are present in our motivations, we are neither true to the ideals of our Beloved Community nor can we be truly effective in the transformation of the world into the kind of place we imagine when we sing *Spirit of Life*.

Over and over, the wisdom of the ages repeats that it is only in setting aside our defenses, stepping away from our false, divided, defensive self, that we can approach the divine. In fact, the false self cannot really conceive of the divine dimension of transcendent love because it cannot imagine anything larger than itself.

And this is why it is unfortunate that we Unitarian Universalists have enshrined respect for the individual as our first principle. Doing so recreates and reifies the modern error of our separateness, the belief that we are ultimately separate from each other and that the foundation of a good society is that we don't step on each others' toes. We need to start from something that is bigger than any of us. But we don't need to agree on the nature of divinity to agree on its essence. As Hosea Ballou said, "If we agree together in love, no disagreement can do us any harm. But if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good." This is the divine, healing essence of the Beloved Community.

As Fred Muir pointed out, "we need to shape an ecclesiology, a doctrine of what church is, that is religious and spiritual, covenantal and experiential, progressive and evangelical. . . Beloved Community is [such] an ecclesiology. It needs no redefining. It is a doctrine of church shaped by justice. Beloved Community holds at its core 'the promise to one another [of] our mutual trust and support,' without which it could not be beloved."

When we think of Beloved Community, we are really thinking of that paradise we lost so long ago, longing to restore the security, wholeness, and joy with which we were blessed. But it's hard to find our way back into that garden. Many, if not most, Western religions don't think it's possible, or even a good idea.

In her song, *Woodstock*, Joni Mitchell wrote, “We are stardust; we are golden. . . and we’ve got to find our way back to the garden.”

Sure it’s hard to do, but the true essence of the religious, spiritual path is to show us the way. Jesus said that we need to become like little children in order to enter the Kingdom. We can’t go back, so we need to find our way forward to the trusting innocence and unconflicted wholeness that characterizes childhood before receiving the wound of separation and the birth of the false, defensive self.

Even earlier, in the book of Exodus, we received perhaps the most important lesson of all. When Moses encountered God in the form of the burning bush, he was told to remove his shoes because he was standing on holy ground. What does this mean? The shoes represent our defenses, things that protect us from the dangers in the world. But they also separate us from the essential creative reality at the core of life, the “I am that I am,” pure consciousness, presence, and transcendent love. The religious secret is that the wondrous essence of bliss, unity, and joy is available to everyone in every moment if we can take off our shoes – cast aside our false, divided, defensive self. Our true self is waiting to shine; it is bold, radiant and connected with all that is.

This brings us back to the Beloved Community. How would we live together if we had no need for defenses? What if we had no fear, no sense of urgency, no anger? Could we feel completely safe with one another, totally committed to being together in trusting understanding and love?

This total commitment is what can be expressed as a covenant of Beloved Community. What do we promise each other? How do we commit ourselves to the hard work of setting aside our need for defenses? I invite you to walk with me on this exciting journey of justice as love in action – in every relationship, every communication, every plan, every meeting – we can celebrate our joyful commitment to embody within our walls the kind of world we want to build for everyone. It all starts with taking off the shoes of our individualism. I know we’ve worn them for a long time, but it’s OK. We’ve outgrown them.

May it be so.