The Asbury Journal 69/2:23-36

DOI: 10.7252/Journal.02.2014F.03

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Eden University—Nurturing Life for the Real World

Abstract

Teachers are responsible for equipping students with wisdom for survival in the "real world." One method for fulfilling this task is to transport three essential elements from the Garden of Eden into the classroom environment. This means: 1) exposing students to every "tree" in the garden, 2) inviting "the serpent" into the classroom in order to make every decision tempting, and 3) reflecting together on the benefits/consequences of every decision. Students and teachers who explore, wrestle with, and reflect on real world problems first in a nurturing community are better equipped to survive and even thrive in the "real world."

Key Words: Eden, transformation, teaching, education, growth

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Introduction

One of the primary roles of the teacher is to prepare students for the "real world." Society is a shrewd place with demanding occupations, complex dilemmas, and limited resources. Children are born naïve, so unless experienced guides train them for the task ahead, the chances of their success are minimal. In addition to the home, the classroom may function as a nurturing community in which teachers and students may be encouraged to experiment with "real world" decision-making without facing "real world" consequences. Students are free to consider competing choices, resulting outcomes, and behavior modification in order to determine the best philosophy, theology, and action-plan for their own lives. Such a simulation throughout the students' and teachers' educational careers cannot but facilitate holistic transformation. As a result, students and teachers can exit the classroom equipped not only to survive but also to thrive in the "real world."

The Garden of Eden—Humanity's First Dysfunctional Classroom

Using Genesis 2-3 as our compass, it is possible to gain some unique insights into the nature of theological education as preparation for the "real world."[1] At least since Irenaeus (2nd cent. B.C.), Christians have read the Garden of Eden narrative as a story about pre-mature human moral development (Barr 1992:1-73; Bechtel 1993:77-117; Brueggemann 1982:40-44). Although readers have always affirmed that Adam and Eve gravely sinned in transgressing the word of the Lord by claiming a knowledge for themselves that at the moment was prohibited, many have correctly focused their attention on the improper timing and means by which the first couple attained this knowledge, rather than the less certain improper content of the knowledge itself. In other words, many believe that God always intended for his humanity to receive discerning knowledge between good and evil (a preferred interpretation over against a "knowledge of everything")[2] to survive in the broader world; but the act of claiming this knowledge for themselves prematurely constituted an act of rebellion, which resulted in an early expulsion from the Garden (Goldingay 2003:132; Walton 2001:166-201). To Irenaeus, Adam and Eve were like naïve children who needed to experiment with natural knowledge and its consequences before they were able to appreciate divinely granted knowledge:

> For as it certainly is in the power of a mother to give strong food to her infant, [but she does not do so], as the child is not yet able to receive more substantial nourishment; so also it was possible for God Himself to have made man perfect from the first, but man could not receive this [perfection], being as yet an infant.... For it was necessary, at first, that nature should be exhibited; then, after that, that what was mortal should be conquered and swallowed up by immortality, and the corruptible by incorruptibility, and that man should be made after the image and likeness of God, having received the knowledge of good and evil. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies,* 4:38.1, 4; cf. 3:22.3; 4:38.2-3)

Irenaeus' understanding of Adam and Eve as "infants" who required guidance to reach spiritual maturation is further supported by the fact that God intentionally placed the original naïve humans into a sheltered community to learn how to exercise the divine image before advancing into the broader world. According to Genesis, God planted a Garden near his own dwelling place in Eden and "put" the first mortal in that Garden to "dress it and keep it" (2:8, 15). In addition to cultivating the earth, humanity also learned how to relate to animals, plants, and other humans, how to reason, struggle with desire, and reflect on previously made decisions. Those skills would prepare humanity for advancing God's rule in the larger world (Gen 1:26-28). The fact that "Adam" was created from the ground outside of the Garden (2:8, 15; 3:23), points to his future purpose and destiny beyond the Garden of Eden (Dumbrell 2002:20-22). For just as the river from God's dwelling place in Eden flowed into and nourished the Garden (2:10), even so the Garden's four rivers flowed out into and nourished the rest of the world (cf. 2:10-14). Thus, God's plan was to train his naïve humanity to exercise his image in the rest of the world by first having them practice diligent labor, relational care, and spiritual discernment in a safe, nurturing environment.

The modern classroom can similarly function as a nurturing community to train naïve children for divine mission in the "real world." Adam and Eve dropped out of Eden University, but the next generation of students can graduate magna cum laude. Graduation does not require passing every test but it does involve appreciating all that the Garden has to offer, discerning its most life-giving fruit, and reflecting on and growing from these experiences. These three learning outcomes are borrowed from the divine teacher manual in order that students and teachers alike might

experience holistic transformation. In order to reproduce this classroom, teachers should expose their students to every tree in the Garden, make every tree appealing by sending in the serpent, and facilitate a period of self-reflection and spiritual growth.

1. At Least Two Trees with Instructions, Please!

Could you imagine what would happen if a first-grade teacher was caught storing poisonous fruit in their classroom? Even if no child was exposed to the hazardous items, the mere potential for harm could be enough to warrant suspension, termination, or even prosecution. Yet God, according to Genesis 2-3, intentionally planted a poisonous tree smack-dab in the middle of his infant-inhabited paradise. What was God thinking?! I certainly failed to appreciate the Lord's strategy until I had children of my own. Friends shared horror stories about their infants eating soap, sticking fingers into electrical sockets, running into coffee tables, and accidentally slipping on bathroom floors. After hearing this, I told my wife that we were selling all of our furniture and raising our children in a wooden box. Taylor, however, had the wisdom to share with me a different perspective on danger from Michael and Debi Pearl's book *To Train Up a Child*. These wise parents offer a reasonable argument for why God, when he became a parent, insisted on planting a poisonous tree in his front yard. According to the Pearls, a parent has two choices: 1) shelter their children from danger forever, or 2) intentionally expose their children to danger in a nurturing environment. Of these options, God chose the latter. God lead his infants directly toward the forbidden tree, warned them of its fatal effects, and then allowed them to make their own decisions. After realizing the wisdom of this approach, my wife and I decided to test it out on our two-year old daughter, Abby-Brooke. We led her to every electrical socket in the house and warned her one-by-one, "Do not touch this! If you do, you will get hurt." To our surprise, by the third socket, she turned toward us and exclaimed, "Mommy and Daddy, do not touch these 'lexical' sockets! If you do, they will hurt you." I had never been so proud to hear my daughter tell me what to do; she was beginning to learn the difference between good and evil.

There is wisdom is exposing students to every tree in the Garden, even those that may appear unfruitful, unpleasant, or even poisonous. Proverbs 18:13 says, "If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly

and shame."[3] How can a student make an informed decision without all of the evidence? Therefore, at the proper time and in the proper way, students need to be exposed to the history of interpretation, controversial issues, unpopular positions, and even dangerous views. I audited several courses with a professor who never recounted the history of his discipline. To an untrained eye, it would appear as though he was uninformed, unprepared, or pedagogically misguided. However, after a little research, I discovered that he presupposed that students only needed to learn what was "correct" in order to avoid what was "incorrect." Aside from the fact that he was upholding a flawed positivism, the professor's arrogance stemmed from his under-appreciation of the larger guild. On a different occasion, I asked a seasoned professor if he had ever lowered a student's grade on a term paper for disagreeing with his own point of view. He replied with a grin, "I would never punish a student for disagreeing with me; however, I have often lowered students' grades for improperly following the evidence to its natural conclusion." This instructor never provided a bibliography in his syllabi, since, to him, no other trees but his own existed in the garden.

Practical Methods for Finding Good Fruit on Good Trees

In order for students to be fairly exposed to every tree in the Garden, the professors themselves must first appreciate its beautiful and vast landscape. A president from a successful university says he reads a new book every day, and once a week he reads one that he really does not want to read (Jones 2004). He goes on to say that the value of learning from his colleagues has transformed him into a better author, researcher, and teacher. What would it look like if every professor made it his or her mission to find and adopt at least one virtuous quality from every fellow guide? This might include observing and integrating a fellow scholar's unique insight, rhetorical style, benevolent attitude, or social grace. Students can do the same in emulating one noteworthy characteristic from every classmate and mentor. This practice facilitates transformation in students and teachers, as well as increases mutual respect among peers.

Raising a child takes a village. Similarly, educating a child takes an entire guild. The Divine Teacher may be able to work alone, but we are not God. Education requires a variety of instructors with unique passions, skill

sets, life experiences, and cultural backgrounds. The closest incarnation of the Divine Teacher in the world today is the union of parents, professors, preachers, mentors, and Sunday school teachers working together for the common purpose of educating humanity. When professors appreciate and introduce their students to every tree in the garden, they earn the respect of their students and colleagues, lay the foundation for critical thinking, and prepare their students for encountering unfamiliar trees in the "real world." If teachers have not explored the entire garden for themselves, they could be in danger of leading their students to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil while proclaiming, "Behold, the Tree of Life!"

2. Send in the Serpent to Make Every Tree Tempting!

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* has offered the world one of its most popular portraits of the Garden of Eden. For Milton, Eden was heaven on earth, humanity's intended permanent rest, without limitation or defect:

> Immortal amarant, a flower which once
> In paradise, fast by the tree of life,
> Began to bloom; but soon for man's offence
> To heaven removed, where first it grew, there grows,
> And flowers aloft, shading the fount of life,
> And where the river of bliss through midst of heaven
> Rolls o'er elysian flowers her amber stream:
> With these that never fade the spirits elect
> Bind their resplendent locks. (Milton 1867:129)

Although Milton correctly highlights the splendor, protection, and unique environment of Eden, his idyllic portrait fails to take into account the less than perfect elements of Eden that heaven itself will not contain, namely: the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, carnal desire, and the cunning serpent (Rev. 20-22). The first section of this essay offered a reasonable justification for the presence of the unique trees in the Garden, elsewhere it would be possible to argue that choice requires the presence of carnal desire, but, in the interest of time, let us now turn our attention to the purpose of inviting a serpent into paradise.

Remember the elementary school activity "show-and-tell"? Imagine if one of your friends had brought a poisonous snake to class! Okay, maybe one of your friends did; but what if that snake had gotten loose, or worse, was intentionally released into that classroom full of innocent children? That could have been a recipe for disaster. Nevertheless, this is precisely what God did in the Garden of Eden. Although God knew that his children were naïve and gullible, God allowed the most conniving creature of the field into his nurturing environment (Gen 3:1). God permitted the serpent to offer his children tempting alternatives, primarily to eat from the forbidden tree.

Although the serpent is identified as the Devil in Revelation 20:2, many generations of interpreters before John had to struggle with understanding the serpent's purpose in the Garden. Even with John's interpretation, Christians still have to justify why God would allow the adversary into paradise. One possible explanation is that God realized genuine temptation grants life-breath to free choice. For example, before the serpent arrived, the Tree of Knowledge was unappealing and thus not really an option to be considered. However, after the serpent uttered his persuasive speech, the forbidden tree came to life, as did Adam and Eve's first opportunity for genuine choice.

As teachers expose their students to every tree in the Garden, they must also make sure that every tree seems appealing (at least for a moment). This invites the serpent into the classroom and creates genuine choice. In some classrooms, adversarial positions are portrayed as irrational, unbelievable, and ultimately unconvincing (if they are mentioned at all). *Ad hominem* arguments are sometimes used to demonize alternative views (and their representatives) in order to reduce the potential that students will adopt these positions. Nevertheless, the serpent in the Garden of Eden is portrayed as very rational, believable, and ultimately convincing. God did not call his adversary names or short-circuit the struggling process. Instead, the Lord allowed his little ones to hear the serpent's best and complete argument, and even make up their mind concerning the validity of his words, before he condemned the lie and its perpetrator. Any serpent that will be encountered in the real world should first be encountered in a nurturing environment.

Practical and Safe Methods for Welcoming the Serpent into the Classroom

One way to invite the serpent into the classroom is to facilitate a passionate discussion among students concerning their diverse interpretations of a particular text or topic. Robert Oglesby offers a wonderful guide for facilitating this type of discussion in his book *Group Dynamics in the Bible Class*. The facilitator (Oglesby's preferred term for the "teacher") selects a pericope from the Bible, church fathers, a commentary, or another foundational text for the students to study and come prepared to discuss in class on the following day. At that time, the text is projected onto the wall for everyone to see. To begin the discussion, the facilitator calls on a less outspoken student to offer their interpretation first (realizing that more outspoken students will join in later). A second student is then asked to volunteer a dissenting or nuanced interpretation of the first position (thereby introducing a second tree and the serpent into the classroom). The facilitator should then return to the first student for a response to the second interpretation, followed by a rebuttal from the second student. At this point, the rest of the class should be invited to join the discussion by offering additional interpretations, nuances, or support for previously mentioned perspectives. Significant perspectives unmentioned by the class are added to the board by the facilitator. Finally, the facilitator guides the class to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of every "tree" and to select one interpretation as the most reasonable option.

This first exercise is perfect for discussing texts and topics about which students might naturally disagree. But how does a teacher invite the serpent into a classroom when students might share a common perspective on a given text or topic, such as the topic of hell? In this case, a good game to play is "devil's advocate." For this exercise, the facilitator divides the students into four equal groups, giving each group a sheet of paper with one popular perspective on the nature of hell. Each group has thirty minutes to research from selected resources and compose a convincing justification for their assigned interpretation of the nature of hell. When time is up, the groups take turns sharing their position and its justification. Students are not allowed at this time to respond to alternative views. After all the groups have presented their most persuasive appeals, the facilitator guides the students to discuss the weaknesses of each position. As homework,

each student should write a one-page summary of his or her view of the nature of hell in light of the day's discussion.

These two exercises successfully invite the serpent into the classroom by making every "tree," even those that were initially unknown or unconvincing, seem tempting. The key is incarnating adversarial perspectives in believable, reasonable, trustworthy, and friendly bodies. In the first exercise, students are compelled to listen to the serpent whose presence is incarnated in the views of their classmates. In the second exercise, students are encouraged to make the serpent's views their own (the fourfold division creates a 75% chance that students will be assigned a view other than their own). Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to be facilitators of self-discovery rather than mere transmitters of information. By asking pointed questions, redirecting the burden of proof to students, and fostering healthy conflict between peers, the facilitator invites the serpent into the classroom for God to accomplish God's formative work.

In order to produce spiritual maturation, the serpent is not only welcome in the classroom but also necessary. Discernment cannot be taught unless there are multiple choices; and choices are mere illusions without genuine temptation. As a caution, however, an unskilled or ungodly gardener could do more harm than good. Additionally, teachers who avoid inviting the serpent into their classrooms are merely delaying his inevitable approach and granting him the element of surprise. What students need are knowledgeable and godly gardeners who know when to introduce the serpent (e.g. not in the first class session) and *how* to illicit his productive effects while minimizing his harms (e.g. assisting them throughout the critical thinking process). As an apprentice to the gardener, students will learn how to see through the serpent's deception and choose divine wisdom in the "real world."

3. Let Failure Foster Self-reflection & Growth

In order to graduate, Bible majors at my *Alma Mater* were required to engage in a mock debate with one of our distinguished professors of theology. I am convinced that this requirement was a contributing factor to the decline in Bible major enrollment that year. Horrible rumors spread regarding the stress, amount of preparation, and feeling of inadequacy that resulted from this initiatory tradition. On the bright side, this experience

changed my life forever; especially in light of what transpired after I concluded the debate. My professor called me into his office for a "debriefing session." He asked me to reflect on my performance during the debate. I replied, "I performed horribly! It was a disaster!" (In hindsight, I may have been too honest). Realizing I had failed to appreciate the purpose of this exercise, my professor rephrased his question, "If given the chance, what would you do differently?" It was at that moment that I finally realized the purpose of this graduation requirement. We were not being graded on how many arguments we won, but how we adapted to arguments we were losing. Anyone can advance from victory, but only the wise know how to proceed from defeat.

Those expecting to find in Genesis three the origin of all cosmic evil have been sorely disappointed. Certainly some modern expressions of evil can be attributed to the first sin, including: subjugation of the serpent, increased pain in childbearing for women, and increased agricultural labors for humanity (Gen 3:14-19); nevertheless, other hardships, such as ecological disaster, premature death, and violent crime, are not given their origin in the "fall" of Genesis three. Walter Brueggemann correctly observes that the Bible is less concerned about explaining the origin of evil and more concerned about providing instructions for "faithful responses [to] and effective coping" with evil (Brueggemann 1982:41). In fact, Adam may be commended for his faithful response to the self-inflicted evil of God's judgment. Adam pronounced hope into the world rather than despair: "The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all *living*" (Gen 3:20). Furthermore, the Lord granted the couple an opportunity to confront their mistakes and grow from the experience:

> The Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (Gen 3:9-13).

What is quite interesting about this exchange is that God, an omniscient deity, is portrayed as having limited knowledge or at least using rhetorical flair—asking questions and waiting for answers—in order to prompt his children to take responsibility for their own actions and, through self-reflection, grow from their failures. However, like naïve children, Adam and Eve justify their evil behavior and fail, at least initially, to mature from their mistakes.

Practical Methods for Fostering Self-Reflection and Growth in the Classroom

In order to avoid future mistakes, one must be willing and able to reflect on their past and present actions. One exercise that fosters self-reflection is mapping out one's spiritual life journey. J. Robert Clinton offers helpful instructions for this exercise in his book *The Making of a Leader*. First, students and teachers should identify and list their mentors, gifts, spheres of influence, and significant life experiences. Second, each of these items should be located within the period of the spiritual life journey to which they correspond. Clinton suggests the following five periods: "sovereign foundations" (early years and calling), "inner-life growth" (a period of testing), "ministry-maturing" (a period of vocational training), "life-maturing" (full-time employment), and "convergence" (discovering the perfect match of gifting and vocation). Third, students and teachers should consider how these life experiences and their timings have uniquely shaped them for vocation. For example, Moses's departure from Egypt, occupation as a shepherd, and burning bush experience shaped him for leadership in the Exodus. The goal of this exercise is not to determine *the cause* of each life experience, but its *formative result;* that is who have you become because of your life experiences and *for what purpose?*

A second exercise that encourages self-reflection and growth is called "Note to Self." Students and teachers write letters to themselves in the name of someone else for the purpose of self-improvement. For example, a student may decide to write a letter to himself or herself in the name of a teacher with whom they struggle to understand. The letter might read, "Students, I am sorry you cannot understand me. I am a new teacher. Please sit close to the front, ask questions often, and talk with me afterward if you have trouble keeping up." By empathizing with the teacher and creating an

action plan for the student, the note could help improve the student's performance in class. Similarly, a new teacher might write a letter to himself or herself in the name of a struggling student. The applications are limitless—parents writing letters from the perspectives of their children, Christians writing letters to themselves from the Lord, and even individuals writing letters to themselves from their future selves. The process of self-reflection often ignites the creativity necessary to formulate solutions to life's problems and the discernment required never to make the same mistake twice.

Ultimately, self-reflection could transform a moment of crisis, judgment, and calamity into an opportunity for growth. All formation is a gift from God, who is uniquely shaping each human for a vocation uniquely their own. Processing life's experiences, whether they have resulted from mistakes or factors outside one's control, can reveal how and for what purpose God is shaping one for the future. The Lord ministers *through* individuals as he works in them; therefore, it matters who we become (Clinton: 1922:33).

Conclusion

The story of Adam and Eve does not conclude with death in the Garden, but with life in the real world (Gen 4:1). Furthermore, the real world closely resembles Eden—with ground to till, "trees" to discern, "serpents" to tame, desires to suppress, judgments to reflect upon, and God's image to expand (Gen-Rev). In fact, Adam and Eve's descendents are expected to engage in the same battles as their parents, yet without the benefits of the original sheltering community of Eden. Fortunately, God created additional nurturing communities, such as the home, the church, and the academy, to accomplish this same end. As long as teachers follow the divine teacher manual by: 1) exposing their students to every tree in the garden, even those that appear fruitless or poisonous, 2) inviting the serpent into the classroom at the proper time and in the proper manner to make every tree tempting, and 3) reflect together as a community on the benefits and consequences of every decision, both students and teachers will graduate from Eden University holistically transformed and prepared to thrive not only in the real world but also in *this* world.

End Notes

[1] Fewer texts have had more written about them with less consensus than Gen 2-3. The purpose of this paper is primarily pedagogical and philosophical, assessing theological teaching as Christian formation; therefore, the exegesis of the text is secondary and used primarily as an illustration of the philosophical and pedagogical principles herein. For an understanding of my more exhaustive exegesis of these texts, await future articles.

[2] The Hebrew הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע is considered by John Goldingay and John Walton to be a merism describing the knowledge to discern between good and bad choices as in 2 Sam 14:17 and Deut 1:39.

[3] All Translations of the Bible are from the English Standard Version.

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