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Oh happy fault!

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Essay/Personal Reflection

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Many interpretations of the Judeo-Christian Adam and Eve story represent the couple, at the moment of their banishment from Eden, sorrowful amid their transgression. However, Russian-French painter Marc Chagall's "Expulsion from the Garden of Eden" begs a different interpretation. In it, painted with childlike primary colors and broad, loose strokes, is an angel dismissing the disobedient couple from a garden of lush green. They rush to the right of the painting and offstage into mortality, on to create the rest of us "poor banished children of Eve." Oddly, the couple appears stoic despite apparent damnation. Their eyes are open to the brightness of the surrounding colors and alert to the vigor with which the world seems to move, and tell more about the vibrancy of life in this postlapsarian world rather than the bodily death to which they (and we) have been apparently assigned. In the painting, they are almost smiling.

Growing up, I thought of the allegory of Adam and Eve as one emphasizing the cost of disobedience. The pair collectively decides to partake of something they were told not to, in response to temptation by a symbol of sin. And for that act, we pay a dear price.

As a physician at a cancer hospital, the price of their disobedience is oftentimes clear. It is made manifest in injury and death due to human-inflicted violence, in grave internal suffering from mental illness, and in seemingly random scourges brought upon by congenital illness and cancer. The ways in which humans can suffer seem boundless and exceedingly intricate, much removed from the innocence of Eden. One could be led to conjecture, then, that if we only stay obedient and learn from Adam and Eve's mistake, we could live the rest of life unscathed. But we know empirically that the equations rarely balance. When "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen 1:31), did a high-grade glioma in a teenager come to mind? Might we not grumble and grind our teeth at our metaphorical first parents?

I do not feel equipped to tackle the philosophical problem of evil and will not do so here. Perhaps a more manageable question: given we are living through the repercussions of the metaphor, can it nuance how we understand our shared condition?

When introducing Adam and Eve to the rules of the game, God tells them that they are allowed to make use of anything in the Garden, but "you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die" (Gen 2:17). I have always found it curious that "knowledge" seems to be ill-advised.

When the couple partakes of the apple, in the serpent's words, they have their eyes "opened" (Gen 3:5). Chagall seems to paint the couple's eyes to reflect this. Curiously, the word used for "open" is derived from the Latin "aperiō"; their eyes are "uncovered." The couple is made immediately aware of their nakedness, like children becoming aware of social norms, and they hide themselves in shame. When they are banished, they are forced to work the land; they come to know suffering and sin, as we know suffering and sin. And they certainly die, as we die. *Et in pulverem reverteris*.

This expulsion is reminiscent of the act of growing up, in any context. As a child, I can recall the first time I felt guilt, that gut-wrenching ache … probably due to having been called out for purposefully stepping on one of my sister's dolls. As a believer I have come to know the pangs of doubt that accompany the expulsion from childlike blind faith; it is tempting to question especially when taking care of someone my age with terminal cancer. As I grow up in my professional life, I have come to know instances in which failure happens, when hard work is not always rewarded. I would bet that most of you have your own examples. These growing pains of coming to know the world are akin to the experience of having our eyes forcefully opened, expulsions each time from our own Edens. We exit the garden each time we gain, with excruciating clarity, knowledge of good from evil.

Adam and Eve's lives are most familiar to us outside of Eden.

Perhaps the story of Adam and Eve is not one of causation but of description: we could not and would not remain children, innocent and well fed in Paradise, because our nature demonstrates that the apple is already bitten. Not due to disobedience, but due to the necessary act of growing up in a world that existed well before us. Perhaps it is an allegory for what the story's writers recognized millennia ago in the human condition: we have free will, whether we like it or not.

The biologist and writer E. O. Wilson, in his book *The Meaning of Human Existence*, attempts to summarize our current understanding of the neuroscience of free will. Without teasing apart too discreetly the self from free will, he argues that "because the individual

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mind cannot be fully described by itself or by any separate researcher, the self – celebrated star player in the scenarios of consciousness – can go on passionately believing in its independence and free will" (Wilson, 2014, p. 170). He argues that regardless of whether or not free will exists "in ultimate reality," it exists "in the operational sense necessary for sanity." The theist believer and the atheist biologist seem to agree at least on this point: the choices we make, at least as we empirically experience them, are our own.

Tying these ideas together, the story of Adam and Eve can be viewed as a commentary on the cost of the ability to choose. As we mature in age and experience, we come to know both good and evil, regardless of our beliefs in where or whom they come from. *O felix culpa*, oh happy fault of Adam, say Catholics during Easter Vigil mass. Like Chagall's Adam and Eve, we can, at the least, smile because we are less and less "troubled guests on this dark earth" ("ein trüber Gast/Auf der dunklen Erde" from *The Holy Longing*, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe). In knowing its darkness, we also come to know its light.

Perhaps the metaphor of Adam and Eve can be viewed as each of our own stories, as we come to know the world through experience. Through this lens, it is less a story of blame and human fallibility, and more an exaltation of our freedom and our ability to know good from evil. Despite our finite world and our finite lives, the story serves as a reminder of the awesomeness of our power to choose, and the dignity it affords us. Oh happy fault of you and me!

As we get to know life for its beauty and for its loss, it becomes brutally clear to us that Eden is nowhere to be found. Perhaps the choices we are able to make do not lie in whether we listen to God or to the serpent; we have collectively bitten the apple, indeed we have already swallowed it whole. Like Chagall's Adam and Eve, we rush to create life outside of Eden, increasingly aware of its pains but also of its joys. Out here, the colors outshine Chagall's Eden, and we can choose to take them in, eyes wide open. Our charge consists in this—forcibly burdened by the knowledge of good and evil, how then do we choose to use it?

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Reference

Wilson E (2014) *The Meaning of Human Existence*, 1st ed. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.

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