

Paradise: The Practice of Imagination

I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library."

— Jorge Luis Borges

Is paradise a place or a promise? Or is it a state of mind? All these are definitions found in the dictionary. The word is a synonym for both the Garden of Eden and for Heaven. Another use is as a term for a place that strikes a person as especially or intensely beautiful. The final definition is a state of supreme happiness. It's interesting that it can mean both the starting point in many religious traditions and the hoped for end point for some of those same traditions. But what does it mean in our Unitarian Universalist tradition, where a belief in either Eden or Heaven is far from assumed, and where religion is intended for this world and this life (and not another world or another life). Perhaps the practice of imagination offers a suggestion. Perhaps it is up to us to imagine a world that is a paradise. We can, perhaps, look for a world of spiritual beauty inside ourselves or look for a world outside of ourselves that is a better place for all to live. Or, given the many-sided nature of our faith and our principles, perhaps we can aim for both.

Questions for Discussion and Discernment on Your Own or With Each Other:

1. Is Paradise real? Is it the same for everyone?
2. Where is Paradise?
3. What does "Paradise" evoke for you? What images?
4. How do you get to Paradise?
5. What is the opposite of Paradise?
6. How do you imagine Paradise?
7. Is there work in Paradise? Is there hardship?
8. What does it mean for us to say 'heaven is here on earth?' What responsibilities do we have to Make the world more 'heaven-like' not just for ourselves, but also for others?

Quotes and Short Readings

I wanted all things to seem to make some sense,
So we could all be happy, yes, instead of tense.
And I made up lies, so
they all fit nice,
and I made this sad world
a paradise"
— Kurt Vonnegut

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...
-- John Lennon

Or were I in the wildest waste,
Sae bleak and bare, sae bleak and bare,
The desert were a paradise
In thou wert there, if thou wert there.
-Robert Burns

In the nine heavens are eight Paradises;
Where is the ninth one? In the human
breast.
Only the blessed dwell in the th' Paradises,
But blessedness dwells in the human breast.
-William R. Alger

Paradise was always over there, a day's sail away. But it's a funny thing, escapism. You can go far and wide and you can keep moving on and on through places and years, but you never escape your own life.

- J. Maarten Troost

The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven..”

– John Milton

I also became a poet, and for one year lived in a Paradise of my own creation; I imagined that I also might obtain a niche in the temple where the names of Homer and Shakespeare are consecrated.

- Mary Shelly

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,

Or what's a heaven for?

-Robert Browning

A man and his dog were walking along a road. The man was enjoying the scenery, when it suddenly occurred to him that he was dead. He remembered dying, and that the dog walking beside him had been dead for years. He wondered where the road was leading them.

After awhile, they came to a high, white stone wall along one side of the road. It looked like fine marble...At the top of a long hill, it was broken by a tall arch that glowed in the sunlight.

When he was standing before it he saw a magnificent gate in the arch that looked like mother-of-pearl, and the street that led to the gate looked like pure gold. He and the dog walked toward the gate, and as he got closer, he saw a man at a desk to one side. When he was close enough, he called out, "Excuse me, where are we?"

"This is Heaven, sir," the man answered.

"Wow! Would you happen to have some water?" the man asked.

"Of course, sir. Come right in, and I'll have some ice water brought right up."

The man gestured, and the gate began to open.

"Can my friend," gesturing towards his dog, "come in, too?" the traveler asked.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we don't accept pets." The man thought a moment and then turned back toward the road and continued the way he had been going with his dog. After another long walk, and at the top of another long hill, he came to a dirt road leading through a farm gate that looked as if it had never been closed. There was no fence. As he approached the gate, he saw a man inside, leaning against a tree and reading a book.

"Excuse me!" he called to the man. "Do you have any water?"

"Yeah, sure, there's a pump over there, come on in."

"How about my friend here?" the traveler gestured to his dog.

"There should be a bowl by the pump." They went through the gate, and sure enough, there was an old-fashioned hand pump with a bowl beside it. The traveler filled the water bowl and took a long drink himself, then he gave some to the dog. When they were full, he and the dog walked back toward the man who was standing by the tree.

"What do you call this place?" the traveler asked.

"This is Heaven," he answered.

"Well, that's confusing," the traveler said. "The man down the road said that was Heaven, too."

"Oh, you mean the place with the gold street and pearly gates? Nope. That's hell."

"Doesn't it make you mad for them to use your name like that?"

"No, we're just happy that they screen out the folks who would leave their best friends behind."