

The Garden of Eden and The Fall of Man

by John Gallagher

Abstract

In this essay I present a symbolic interpretation of the story of the garden of Eden and the fall of man told in Genesis of The Old Testament in the Bible. Some of the themes which I have identified and discussed are the transition from childhood to adulthood, the development of consciousness, the drive for selfhood and the process of individuation.

Genesis 2

The Garden of Eden

8 And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

Interpretation

Eden is a state of childhood innocence and bliss. The garden represents Nature and the unconscious. The unconscious in man is one with Nature. In our childhood state of unconsciousness we have no ego to separate us from Nature. The trees in the middle of the garden represent the masculine and feminine principles: the left and right hemispheres of the brain. The tree of knowledge of good and evil is the left hemisphere which is thinking and sensorial. Logos is the masculine principle that characterizes the left brain. The qualities of the left brain include reflection and self-knowledge, rationality, objectivity and discernment. The left brain discriminates, separates and categorises the material world into subject and objects. The tree of life is the right hemisphere which is feeling and intuitive. Eros is the feminine principle that characterizes the right brain. The qualities of the right brain include insight and relatedness. The right brain is interconnective and holistic. The world is an interrelated system that is greater than the sum of its parts.

God who forbids Adam represents parental authority which forms and conditions Adam's superego. The superego is our internal parent and moralizer which inhibits us from behaving immorally. Adam is told he will die if he eats the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Death in this context is psychological death and a change in identity. This is the death of childhood and the birth of adulthood.

Genesis 2

The Garden of Eden

18 Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' ¹⁹ So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

20 The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

23 Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken."

Interpretation

Adam is forming concepts from his experience. He is differentiating and classifying the creatures of the Earth and his opposite sex.

Genesis 3

The Disobedience of Man

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?''

2 The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die." '

4 But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'

6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

8 They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'

10 He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.'

11 He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?'

12 The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.'

13 Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.'

Interpretation

The snake represents instinct, desire, self-will and transformation. Eve's drive for selfhood compels her to disobey her parental conditioning and satisfy her desire by eating the fruit. The fruit of the tree is awareness. When Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil their eyes are opened and they become self-aware. They are now self-conscious and aware of their nakedness which causes them to experience shame. Good and bad are subjective. As individuals they can now discern good and bad from their subjective experiences. This is ego-valuation. Good will be self-enhancing and bad will be harmful to the self.

Genesis 3

God Pronounces Judgement

14 The Lord God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. ¹⁵I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.'

16 To the woman he said, 'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.'

17 And to the man he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'

20 The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all who live. ²¹And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

Interpretation

Adam and Eve are being judged and punished for their defiance and disregard for parental authority. Eve's curse of enmity with the snake may be a projection of her own cunning and deceptiveness. Adam and Eve are now entering into the adult world of toil, responsibility and worry. They are no longer carefree children who are protected and provided for by their parents. They will realize that life is harsh. However, God has not completely abandoned them for He supports them by making them clothes.

Genesis 3

Adam and Eve Are Sent Out of the Garden

22 Then the Lord God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever'— ²³therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Interpretation

Adam and Eve have become self-aware, intelligent and discerning individuals separated from God. Now having an ego they are split from their unconscious and no longer one with Nature. They have left their childhood state of unconsciousness and are living in a world of duality: I and other. A person within their skin is a subject. Everything outside of their skin is other. This is the perspective from the creature ego. Opposites are formed from subjective experience: I and other, good and bad, light and dark, hot and cold etc. We develop our intelligence and form our ideas by comparing and contrasting the qualities of things we experience.

The left hemisphere of the brain, represented by the tree of knowledge, perceives the material world and physical objects. The right hemisphere of the brain, represented by the tree of life, has spiritual awareness and insight. If Adam and Eve eat from the tree of life they will realize their immortal spirit which is part of the One transcendent God. Without a mature ego and developed persona they will become psychologically inflated by the knowledge of their divinity and believe themselves to be God. This would put them in a state of psychosis.

In this context the cherubim represent ego as they are blocking entrance to Eden. The flaming sword guarding the way to the tree of life represents anger and the intellect. This protects man from realizing his divinity until he reaches maturity. Paradoxically we have to

develop our ego and intelligence to achieve adaptation in a dog-eat-dog world and then it is our ego, anger and intelligence which separate us from God.

Return to Eden

Man can return to Eden and be one with Nature again when he can control his anger and see through the illusion of duality created by his conceptualization of the phenomenal world in which physical objects are separated by space and time. Moreover, entry into the kingdom of God is gained through self-sacrifice. When man overcomes his ego he will realize his greater Self and the true nature of reality. We are all One and everything is connected.

Individuation

We are born without an ego and as a baby we are unconscious. In our infancy we gradually develop a sense of self and as childhood progresses we become self-aware. In adolescence we strive to find our identity and belong to a peer group. We rebel against parental authority in order to assert ourselves and become an adult in the world. As we develop our conscious thinking mind in adulthood we become more alienated from our unconscious mind which is our intuition.

In the first half of life our ego emerges, develops and separates from our unconscious mind. The ego reaches its zenith at midlife. By this stage we should have formed a strong persona which we developed to achieve adaptation in the world. Many people who reached this stage may experience some kind of existential or midlife crisis. Life may seem meaningless or a person becomes depressed or anxious. This is the dissolution of the persona and a call to reconnect with their unconscious and begin the process known as individuation.

Individuation is a process of bringing the unconscious into consciousness with the goal of becoming a whole, integrated and authentic person who is directed from within. A person may also change career and or embark on a creative or spiritual path. Dreams are used by the unconscious to bring itself into consciousness. A person who takes this inner journey will confront their shadow which contains repressed and unknown aspects of their personality which they need to integrate to achieve wholeness and balance.

References

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