

GARDEN OF GOD
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One summer day in 1963 I visited the infamous Berlin Wall. Standing on a platform just behind the wall, I gazed past the Brandenburg Gate into the Eastern Zone. In the distance I could see a group of people behind some barricades, waving frantically. My imagination brushed in the details of the lives and emotions of those distant individuals. The following day I crossed into the Eastern Zone and happened to pass the spot I had seen the day before. To my surprise there was a group of tourists like myself happily waving to our comrades in the West.

What we see and how we interpret what we see depends on the place from which we look. Two and a half years ago the Mennonite Central Committee invited me to assume the responsibilities of Director for their program in Bangladesh. For two years I looked at myself, my neighbour, my world, and my God from a different perspective. To gain that perspective I travelled through 12 time zones and precisely 180 degrees longitude, from a cold climate to a tropical one, from a Christian country to a non-Christian one, from the wealthiest of civilizations to the very poorest, from a land of open spaces to the most crowded spot on earth, from a white society to a non-white society, from a place of hope to a place without hope.

From that vantage point my neighbour, my world, my God and in fact myself looked different, devastatingly different! I could tell you heart-rendering stories about Bangladesh. You would feel uncomfortable for a few minutes, but that would pass. I don't intend to let you get off that easily! With one foot firmly fixed in the filth of the world's worst refugee camps and the other in the depleted soil of a community which is firmly descending the final curves of the limits of the environment which we have inherited, let me tell you what my God, my world, my neighbour, and I looked like.

I am not a theologian. Theology is the filter we put between man's soul and God's revelations. Since there are many filters, each labelled and well-described, each represented by its own scholars, books and institutions, we can even choose in advance which filter we will insert between ourselves and God. My two years in Bangladesh shattered the filter that had developed within me over the previous 29 years. Many comfortable assumptions lay in shreds. When I picked up my Bible, the words took on such strange meanings that it seemed like a different book about a different God.

Where does a man position himself when he looks at the universe and his place in it? At the centre of course! We begin with the implicit assumption that man is the purpose and end-product of creation, and therefore all other factors are subordinate. Interestingly, whether we are Christians or not, we still end up with man in the same place - the centre. If there is any one thing that looked different from that other vantage point, it is the place of man in the whole scheme of things. I intend to test our historical perspective by beginning with the premise that man is somewhere else than at the centre.

The Bible begins with the marvellous story of God taking a "shapeless chaotic mass" and creating an order of things, culminating in the highest order of creation - man.

Then God said, Let us make a man - someone like ourselves, to be master of all life upon the earth and in the skies and in the seas; so God made man like his maker....

Genesis 1 deals with creation in hierarchical fashion, and without a doubt man represents the peak of the creation process. Does this mean, however, that man is the purpose of creation and can use the awesome powers granted to him as the highest order of creation only to serve his own ends? Is being at the top of the

creation process a right or a responsibility?

Genesis 2 deals with the creation process again, but in a more subtle qualitative manner.

The time came when the Lord God formed a man's body from the dust of the ground and breathed into it the breath of life. And man became a living person. Then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, to the East, and placed in the garden the man he had formed. The Lord God planted all sorts of beautiful trees there in the garden, trees producing the choicest of fruit. At the centre of the garden he placed the Tree of Life, and also the Tree of Conscience, giving knowledge of Good and Evil.

It is noteworthy that man was created from the same building blocks as the rest of creation - the dust of the ground, and God added the "breath of life." Then God placed man in the garden. He didn't give man the garden, or place him in the centre of the garden; he simply placed man in the garden just as the trees and the rest of the components were placed in the garden. What was at the centre of the garden? Two trees, representing two choices, choices to which we will come back later.

A garden - has it ever occurred to you (or me) why God chose this particular image? A garden is a combination of soil, water, and plants which produces useful things. However, a garden is not a closed system or an ecologically balanced system like a patch of jungle or a swamp. It requires one extra dimension to become a closed system - the knowledge and care of the gardener. Given this combination, a garden can truly become an ecologically balanced system which can permit its constituent parts to function at their full potential. Such a system, a garden, has no life span; it can continue forever.

Continuing with the creation story"The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden as its gardener, to tend and care for it. But the Lord God gave the man this warning: 'You may eat any fruit in the garden except fruit from the Tree of Conscience - for its fruit will open your eyes to make you aware of right and wrong, good and bad. If you eat its fruit, you will be doomed to die.'"

Man was placed in the garden to be "its gardener, to tend and care for it." He was to be that critical extra dimension which permits the other elements of nature to operate at their fullest potential. You will note that man is the only element with the capacity to choose whether or not it will make its best contribution. The soil, the water, the sun and the seed do not choose whether or not to play their appointed roles. Kahlil Gibran says this better than I can, "You often say, I would give, but only to the deserving. The trees in your orchard say not so, nor the flocks in your pasture. They give that they may live, for to withhold is to perish."

"To withhold is to perish" - what does that mean? The orchard that doesn't produce fruit will be chopped down in the short run and will not even be able to reproduce itself in the longer run. To withhold its fruit dooms its continued existence. If the gardener eats from the Tree of Conscience, he will be "doomed to die." On the other hand if he leaves the Tree of Conscience alone and eats from the Tree of Life located at the centre of the garden, a tree from which he was permitted to eat, there is presumably no necessary end. In other words, the gardener must choose to play his role as gardener to ensure continued existence, since he dies along with the garden if it fails to produce.

What then is the Tree of Life? Surely this is the care and gardening necessary to keep the garden producing. This implies that man recognizes the contributions and limitations of the soil, the other resources and each plant and other living thing. Man submits himself to the natural laws and to the order of creation, recognizing that he is not Lord of creation, but a part of creation. If man accepts his place within the created order of things, he is eating of the Tree of Life, since God's creation will remain in balance and can continue forever.

What if man does not accept his role in creation? What happens if man demands more fruit than the garden

can produce, and uses more wood than can be replaced, and requires more water than can be replenished? This can happen for a while - new seedlings aren't planted, the water table runs down, we use up the tolerance of nature for chemicals, and then the productive capacity is permanently impaired. This is not gardening. This is exploitation and it is a one-way street.

Man has been doing this for thousands of years and I don't have to quote any doomsday predictions to tell you what stage we have now reached. Man chose to eat of the Tree of Conscience when he decided that he would be master of the garden rather than gardener. He placed himself at the centre of creation rather than accept the balance which God had designed to sustain a perfect order of creation.

Man rejected God when he rejected the role that God had designed for man within creation. Man's acceptance of the role would have made creation perfect. Man sinned and creation is not perfect; it is out of balance and in accordance with the writer of Genesis is "doomed to die." The metaphor continues in Genesis chapter 3, "Then the Lord said, 'Now that the man has become as we are, knowing good from bad, what if he eats of the Tree of Life and lives forever?' So the Lord God banished him forever from the Garden of Eden, and sent him out to farm the ground from which he had been taken." God metaphorically expels them, since the Garden really doesn't exist anymore, because the Tree of Life has been rejected.

The perspective from Bangladesh convinced me that we are indeed living in a garden, one which we are systematically exploiting for the benefit of ourselves. We have the tendency to project the present, and our generation lives on a continent which is in the process of being raped. Therefore we assume that we can exploit forever, but the water table in West Texas has fallen from 50 feet to several hundred, the Imperial Valley is becoming saline, the lush farmlands are being paved. Bangladesh has also been exploited for centuries, but now the appetite of the population exceeds the natural fertility of the soil, the denuding of the Himalayas has increased the ferocity of the flooding rivers, the demand for land has pushed settlers into the tidal flats of the Bay of Bengal and into the path of the terrible cyclones. Man has not gardened, and now the garden cannot sustain him. The most terrifying aspect of our North American perspective is that we have yet to realize that our point of view represents a rapidly diminishing minority.

If man has indeed usurped centre stage in the creation drama and rejected the role assigned to him, how will God respond? Remember the promise God made - if you eat of this fruit you are "doomed to die." It will not kill man on the spot, but that choice makes man's end inevitable. God put the possibility of eternal existence into his order of creation, but man rejected that alternative. As the natural system becomes increasingly imbalanced, its collapse becomes ever more a certainty.

Returning again to the poetry of Gibran:

As I sat deep in thought, I felt a breeze passing through the branches of the trees, and I heard a sighing like that of a strayed orphan.

"Why do you sigh, gentle breeze," I asked, and the breeze replied, "Because I have come from the city that is aglow with the heat of the sun, and the seeds of plague and contaminations cling to my pure garments. Can you blame me for grieving?"

Then I looked at the tear-stained faces of the flowers, and heard their soft lament, And I asked, "Why to you weep, my lovely flowers?"

One of the flowers raised her head gently and whispered, "We weep because Man will come and cut us down, and offer us for sale in the markets of the city."

And another flower added. "In the evening, when we are wilted, he will throw us on the heap. We

weep because the cruel hand of Man snatches us from our native haunts.”

Gibran records the lament of the brook and the birds, then closes as follows:

Now the sun rose from behind the mountain peaks, and gilded the treetops with coronals. I looked upon this beauty and asked myself, “Why must Man destroy what Nature has built?”

The Scriptures are filled with continuing references to man’s obedience or disobedience to God and the result in terms of natural phenomena. Hosea tells his people:

The Lord has filed a lawsuit against you listing the following charges. There is no faithfulness, no kindness, no knowledge of God in your land. You swear and lie and kill and steal and commit adultery. There is violence everywhere, with one murder after another. That is why your land is not producing; it is filled with sadness, and all living things grow sick and die; the animals, the birds, and even the fish begin to disappear (Hosea 4:1 -3).

Man sins and his natural surroundings deteriorate. What happens when Israel returns to God? Lets return again to the words of Hosea.

O Israel, return to the Lord, your God....Then I will cure you of idolatry and faithlessness, and my love will know no bounds, for my anger will be forever gone! I will refresh Israel like the dew from heaven; she will blossom as the lily and root deeply in the soil like the cedars in Lebanon.... her people will return from exile far away and rest beneath my shadow. They will be a watered garden and blossom like grapes and be fragrant as the wines of Lebanon....Whoever is wise let him understand these things (Hosea 14).

Time and again the authors of the Bible use the image of harmoniousness with nature to portray harmoniousness with God. Possibly the relationship is something more than convenient imagery. Jesus himself uses this imagery constantly, with references like this: “Yes, the way to identify a tree or a person is by the kind of fruit produced.” After relating the parables of the sower and the rocky soil, the thistles among the wheat, and the tiny mustard seeds, Matthew tells us:

Jesus constantly used these illustrations when speaking to the crowds.... For it had been prophesied, “I will speak in parables; I will explain mysteries hidden since the beginning of time.”

When I look at our history since Jesus gave us those parables, I have to conclude that those mysteries have remained mysteries. If we really understood Jesus our world would be different! Jesus reached the point of crisis in his own life - and withdrew to a garden to get it all together. Possibly we could also get it together for ourselves if we returned to the garden. We won’t - and where will that lead us?

As North Americans we view the relationship between man and nature as follows: man plants, irrigates, fertilizes, sprays for pests and weeds, and in the event there is an Act of God to destroy his crop, he insures! The Bengali farmer doesn’t share that perspective. He moves entirely with the rhythms of nature - the bounty or failure of the monsoon, the fury or beneficence of the rivers. He feels he is part of his surroundings and sees God in that pattern. A Bengali friend, viewing the wreckage of his society, said sadly, “God is not happy with Bangladesh.”

Is God happy with the rest of us? “With us, yes - but it’s the rest of ‘those sinners’ out there! After two years in Bangladesh I have much more trouble telling the “good guys” and the “bad guys” apart.

If God wants to reveal himself to his creation today how can He do it? The last time He sent his Son to his vineyard he was rejected by those who had been prepared to receive him. They rejected him because **He**

failed to meet their expectations. If God is at the centre, who then decides how God should reveal himself? Have any of you ever heard any predictions about how and when Christ will come again? Have you ever noticed that some of these predictions are at variance with each other? Christ tells us that we do not know - only God knows. It's strange, isn't it, that man determines that God cannot add another verse to His written record, that He can come only at a certain time and in a certain form, and, of course, that His whole coming is designed to save the "good guys" from the approaching catastrophe? If God's chosen people were wrong the last time, how are we so sure they won't be wrong again? Two years of viewing the Christian community from that other perspective suggested that we may not be part of the solution but part of the problem.

I suggested earlier that my perspective from that other place did strange things to many previous assumptions. Several months ago I studied a very difficult passage, the seven judgments of Revelation Chapter 8, and it seemed strange how obvious their meaning was. I suddenly realized that these judgments were part of our daily life, and a direct product of our own action, yet we are blind to them. Let's take a quick look at this passage.

The first angel blew his trumpet, and hail and fire mixed with blood were thrown down upon the earth. One third of the earth was set on fire so that one third of the trees were burned, and all the green grass.

Anyone with any sense of geography knows what man has done to the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East, the eroded hills of Crete and Lebanon. Overgrazing is sucking the Sahara southward. The Imperial Valley is growing more saline. Many, many more examples could be given. The judgment of the first angel is well underway.

Then the second angel blew his trumpet, and what appeared to be a huge burning mountain was thrown into the sea, destroying a third of all the ships; and a third of the sea turned red as blood, and a third of the fish were killed.

Lake Erie is dead, the Mediterranean is dying, the Sargasso Sea of the North Atlantic is filled with garbage, the Baltic is unsafe for swimming, and every day we hear of oil spills or other disasters. The anchovies have disappeared off Peru again, the catch on the Grand Banks is declining, and experts forecast that the total catch from the sea is probably at its peak and will decline from now on. The second angel is also on the scene.

The third angel blew, and a great flaming star fell from heaven upon a third of the rivers and springs. The star was called 'Bitterness' because it had poisoned a third of all the water on earth and many people died.

We all remember when the Calumet River went up in flames, but most of our major rivers can no longer support much animal life. At this time tests are being done on Indians in Eastern Manitoba to test the impact of the high mercury levels in the Winnipeg River system. My guess would be that this angel is close to his target of damaging one third of the world's fresh water.

The fourth angel blew his trumpet and immediately a third of the sun was blighted and darkened, and a third of the moon and the stars, so that the daylight was dimmed by a third and the night-time darkness deepened. As I watched, I saw a solitary eagle flying through the heavens...

Do you remember the London smogs which have killed hundreds? New York is now experiencing acid rain, and in Calcutta you need headlights by four in the afternoon. Ecologists have pointed out that the family of birds represented by the hawk and the eagle are affected first by pollution, since they are at the top of the food pyramid. All these birds are now becoming extinct since they can no longer reproduce because of the high levels of DDT. Isn't it strange that John uses the image of the solitary eagle to bring attention to this

judgment?

Man exploits the earth by destroying the life-giving potential of the soil, the oceans, the fresh water and the atmosphere. How far can this potential be reduced before there is a backlash?

Then the fifth angel blew his trumpet.... Smoke poured out as though from some huge furnace, and the sun and air were darkened by the smoke. Then locusts came from the smoke and descended onto the earth and were given power to sting like scorpions. They were told not to hurt the grass or plants or trees, but to attack those people who did not have the mark of God on their foreheads.

Is it surprising that the exploited eventually turns on their exploiter? Many insects have developed resistance to man's chemical attacks - and are more dangerous than before. At this moment there are huge swarms of red locusts swarming in their breeding grounds in Tanzania and Uganda. The failure to supply the necessary chemicals and the lack of equipment aborted efforts to control them this year. It is expected that in the next months swarms of unprecedented magnitude will devastate parts of Rhodesia and Mozambique.

After man has reduced the capability of the earth to support him, then men begin to fight among themselves for what is left. Although we use five times as much grain and ten times as much energy per person as other nations, we still justify embargoes on food exports and fight for available fuel supplies. At this point one must ask the crucial question: are Christians a part of this problem or a part of the solution? If our pattern of living reflects the society around us, then how can we pretend that the laws of God will spare us?

The sixth angel blew his trumpet... "Release the four mighty demons held bound at the great River Euphrates." They had been kept in readiness for that year and month and day and hour, and now they were turned loose to kill a third of all mankind. They led an army of 200,000,000 warriors....

If man is capable of destroying his natural surroundings, he is also capable of destroying his fellow man. But what if we don't change our basic attitudes? The writer tells us that after this sixth judgment, "the men left alive after these plagues still refused to worship God." Where does this lead to - what is the ultimate judgment - or rather, what is the ultimate capacity of man for selfishness? He will use the ultimate means to protect his own interests, and he already has the means at his disposal to render the earth totally uninhabitable!

Then the seventh angel poured out his flask into the air; and a mighty shout came from the throne of the temple in heaven, saying, "It is finished!" Then the thunder crashed and rolled, and lightning flashed; and there was a great earthquake of a magnitude unprecedented in human history...

When the dust settles God will re-establish His perfect order and He returns to the place from where He started at Creation:

And he pointed out to me a river of pure Water of Life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb, coursing down the centre of the main street. On each side of the river grew Trees of Life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month; the leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations....

From the perspective of North America I had seen man with his scientific knowledge, his technology, his learning, standing on centre stage and all Creation bowing to him. When I made that long step to the other side and looked back, I realized how foolish man really looks. Suddenly God and the unity of His creation moved back into the Centre, and man stood there, naked, as a fragile part of the whole scheme of things. Man stood there, naked, making a pitiful effort to cover his shame with his titles, degrees, and possessions.

Is there an alternative for twentieth-century man which is consistent with the plan of God? Yes, I believe there is. We must collectively become the gardeners we were meant to be. **This means that our combined actions and demands on our surroundings and each other must be such that they could be continued permanently.** Man has chosen to eat of the Tree of Conscience and is doomed to die. To be Christian means to make a choice - to eat of the Tree of Life. Christ tells us that His followers are already living in the kingdom of God, but what do we do with that?

God's History will show that He was revealing himself to our generation but we passed him by **because He did not meet our expectations.** If there is a current parallel to the Pharisees of Jesus' time, it will be the modern Church and its institutions. I sincerely believe that there are many people who live in harmony with God and His creation, but I further believe that the correlation between this group and those who cry "Father, Father" is only incidental. If there is any one challenge I leave to those who call themselves followers of Christ, it is to become gardeners in the Garden of God.