


# Is the Threshold of American Serenity Made of Kryptonite?

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 Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister to North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) here in Woodstock, Vermont.

Today is Sunday, February 21st and the title of this morning's reflection is a question this morning: Is the Threshold of American Serenity Made of Kryptonite?

If it were actually possible, I would never leave the garden. I would never leave serenity. I just live forever among the growing vegetables...even now, with all the snow outside. I'd live in the garden—with the kale, the squash, the sunflowers. I know I'd look funny out there—especially at this time of year—but I'd still do it, even though some might laugh at me. I would live in the garden year-round.

Most of my dear friends—most of my soul friends, my friends of spirit—they'd be there with me. They would understand right from the start. They would join me in my garden—almost every last one of them. In fact, the only ones who wouldn't join me in my garden are the ones who are already living in their own. My teachers. Oh, my guides... I love them. They would understand. They would know what I was doing. It wouldn't be new to them. They would be showing me the way. They would be wise enough. They'd be living in the garden themselves but, you know, not everyone has that inclination.

Some of us don't live in gardens but they make fun of those who do. Those are ones who think I'm crazy for bunking with the broccoli and the brussel sprouts. Any time that you do what you love, you risk being laughed at by those who don't get it. I still love those people, even though they don't understand where I'm at. They worry. They're concerned about me. Some of my friends and neighbors are concerned—especially the chatty ones, the ones who like to gossip. They're some of my favorite people. Those folks just love a good story and mine would be a juicy one. I'd be like low-hanging fruit for them, impossible to resist. So, they would talk and chat and gossip, I know—and God love them for it. Judging other people is what they do best and for them, there is great joy in it. I would be that way more

myself but I have learned to enjoy all of the silence around me...when I am not choosing to break that silence myself, rudely, by playing electric guitar.

I love doing that. I love playing guitar but my cat does not. She hates it. It just goes to show. We find serenity in our own ways. My cat runs away as soon as I pick up the instrument and turn on the amp. I felt bad about that at first. I mean, I know she doesn't like it. Then, I felt insulted—as if the cat's behavior were the judgment and measure of my self-esteem. I know she's just taking care of herself...and she comes back when I stop playing. When the coast is clear, she climbs back into my lap and claws my to death. Then, I know I'm loved and I tell her so. I love my cat...Dusty, the cat that I renamed John Lewis after John Lewis died last year in July. It seems fitting, now that it's February because February is Black History Month. In a bit, I'll say more about that.

But right now, it's enough to just love on my cat,  
the one who I've renamed John Lewis.

She lives in the garden. She knows where it's at.

She thinks that the chatty are clueless...

...except when it's snowy, rainy or cold at which times, she  
thinks that they are right.

Dusty John Lewis. She's a really good cat. Bad weather is like kryptonite to her. She loses all of her superpowers. She leaves the garden and she stays inside. She won't go out. She climbs under the couch as if licking her wounds. Bad weather is her hidden vulnerability. We all have them. Each of us has an Achilles Heal that we don't really talk much about, not comfortably. Collectively, we have one as well.

The point is all of us are all vulnerable in one way or another and sometimes, in several different ways. We all have weaknesses that are scary-hard to reveal. So, we hide them and we deny them and we wander from the garden. We wander from serenity somehow.

How does that happen? I think it happens when we lose our sense of meaning.

So, I don't get it. What is the true nature of this garden we're talking about? What is the value of serenity? I think this has a two-part answer. The first part is theology and the second part is music. The first part of that answer about the nature of the garden and the value of serenity comes to us from a book called Saving Paradise, a book that was written by Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock. They believe that it's possible for all of us to live in the garden, in serenity, right now. They believe that this garden

of serenity is paradise. In Saving Paradise, they explain that as far back as the 4<sup>th</sup> century,

Christians believed that paradise was not only created on earth once long ago but also that it is still here. [They say that it's right here with us. They say that a Christian saint named Ephram] affirmed that paradise is this earth here and now, even in the midst of injustice, violence and suffering.

Learning to see with those eyes is difficult. It's really, really hard. It's hard to dare to look—in the midst of injustice, violence and suffering—for paradise. It's hard but we can do it. We can do it if we try. We can know, based on what our own bodies have already experienced, based on what our own hearts are already longing for, based on what our souls already know.

Look at it this way. Clearly, this has been a long, long winter. One can argue easily that this year's winter began in the middle of last March, when the global pandemic changed all of our lives. But even now, we know the warmth of spring will return again. We know deeply somehow that the coming of spring is a symbol...of new life, of rebirth, of growth and health and prosperity. Springtime is both the symbol and the true experience of new life. It is the return of paradise, the miracle of life that's never left us. It is the sacredness of life that never leaves and does not end, not even at the end of life, not if we are opened up to that which is best within us...the best of life becoming possible. This best in us, this perpetual possibility is the breath of life. They call it Ruach in the Old Testament. They call it Eden and paradise.

Parker and Brock remind us that, "Christians in Ephram's time," 4<sup>th</sup>-century Christians, they believed "that Jesus had reopened paradise." He broke through the threshold. You see, paradise was closed. Its boundaries could not be crossed, not after the snake and the apple lead Eve and Adam astray. According to Scripture,

Genesis said that the gates were closed when Adam and Eve sinned and were banished from the Garden of Eden. Christian testament writings said that Mary was the new Eve and her son, Jesus, was the new Adam. By his birth, teachings, healing and resurrection...

...Jesus returned to the garden. He reopened the gate and invited us back...according to Scripture. Parker reminds us to look deeply at all of this, to think not magically about it but critically. She asks us to take note of what is missing from the list. She said, "By his birth, teachings, healing and resurrection, Jesus opened the gates of paradise to all who wanted to enter

it.” [end quote] She did not say, “By his death...” The way she tells this story removes the kryptonite for me...removes the violence that scares my soul to death.

I appreciate the absence of kryptonite...the downplay of the fear factor, as it were. As I shared two weeks ago, I grew up being really quite fearful of death. And I am not unique, of course, but there was an added dimension of fear for me...because I was raised in a black family living in a predominantly white environment. I wasn't afraid of my neighbors. They were basically lovely people. I was afraid of kryptonite—vulnerability and weakness that might lead to death. I remember learning about Dr. King. I remember learning about Malcolm X. I remember learning about Medgar Evers and Jimmie Lee Jackson and Viola Luisa, learning about Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney. I remember learning about Emmitt Till.

Emmitt Till was the 14-year-old city boy who grew up in the city of Chicago and who went to Mississippi in 1955 to visit family. Before daybreak in the morning of August the 28<sup>th</sup>, Emmitt Till was stolen away from his family. He was mocked and beaten and killed...and his young body was disposed of in the Tallahatchie River, dropped into its waters from the Black Bayou Bridge in the town of Glendora. And he did not float. The killers saw to that. They weighted him. They weighed him down. Emmitt Till was made to sink—his body, having been tied to a heavy fan that the killers had lifted from a nearby cotton gin.

I was seven years old or so when I first heard about Emmitt Till. By the time I was 14 years old myself, the age that Emmitt was when he died, I could not yet fathom the tragedy. I am 55 years old today. I will be 56 in May and I promise you, I still don't understand. I never will. I remember first learning about Dr. King and first learning about Malcolm X and about Medgar and Jimmie Lee and Judas and Jesus and I remember first learning about Mary's broken, broken heart. None of this kindled in me a desire to search for paradise. I and my kind were expelled from the garden completely. There could be no doubt. Or so I thought until I realized that Ephram was right. The threshold of serenity, the garden gate of paradise is not composed of violence but of love. Just ask Mary's broken, broken heart and she will tell you. The threshold of serenity is made of love.

So, that's the first part of the answer to the questions that we raised about the nature and the value of the garden. The second part of the answer comes from the music of David Wilcox—a good guitarist, a good-hearted minster and a friend I've never met. In a song called Love Will Show the Way, he writes,

You say you see no hope

You say you see no reason we should dream  
That the world would ever change  
And you're saying love is foolish to believe

'Cause there'll always be some crazy  
With an army or a knife  
To wake you from your day dream  
Put the fear back in your life

Here, the nature of the garden is all a dream we have awake—a dream that only looks like it can be shattered by wayward armies and scary weapons, a dream that only looks like it can be shattered by fear. As it turns out, this is not the case. The dream is not so fragile after all. It can be strengthened by love—fearless love, tough love, real love. David Wilcox continues plainly. He says,

Look, if someone wrote a play just to glorify  
What's stronger than hate  
Would they not arrange the stage  
To look as if the hero came too late?

He's almost in defeat  
And it's looking like the evil side will win  
So on the edge of every seat  
From the moment that the whole thing begins

It is love who makes the mortar and it's love who stacked these stones  
And it's love who made the stage here, although it looks like we're  
alone

In this scene set in shadows like the night is here to stay  
There is evil cast around us but it's love that wrote the play  
And in this darkness, love will show the way

Fearlessly, we can love the garden into being. That part is easy. The hard part is weeding out the kryptonite. Violence is, to the garden...to the dream of paradise, just like a kind of kryptonite. Violence is, to the gate...to the threshold of serenity, a sign that reads, “No Trespassing” or “You Don’t Count” or “You Don’t Matter.”

In a PBS documentary called *American Reckoning*, host Judy Woodruff interviewed a journalist named George Packer. He writes for *The*

*Atlantic*. Over the last ten years or so, he's been writing about a collapse in the heartland of our country, the collapse of "the traditional sources of authority and of meaning," as he says. The American church is in crisis. The unions are falling down. Local newspapers are owned and operated by corporate moguls who don't live nearby...and the hardest thing about this is that there's no one there to tell the tale. No one is writing the beautiful story about what's been going on...and by the word beautiful, I mean the kind of story that speaks gently to the better angels of our nature, that speaks boldly to the braver angels of the world.

We have to find a way to steel our spine...because something has been breaking in heartland. That's kryptonite. Something is threatening the garden and we must pay attention to it. Something is breaking in what we once thought of as the heart and backbone of the country. George Packer says that around ten years ago in his reporting, he began to notice...

....that in these small towns in rural areas that were sort of overlooked by the media, [there was a] collapse of traditional sources of authority and of meaning—the church, the union, the company, the newspaper, the political party... Those were gone. People were looking for an identity, a narrative...and [they were looking for] villains.

In the heartland of the country, we are desperate and we are hungry—hungry for power and hungry for meaning—and opportunistic leaders who are willing to exploit the moment are having a field day. We are a target-rich environment but only when we wander from the garden, only when we stand apart from ourselves and one another, only when we imagine ourselves as separate and alone. This is so easy to do in our world today. To be honest, I was worried about it. I was worried until I came across a prayer. It was this:

If in your soul you are worrying about something, something that you cannot change, then stop worrying and find your peace with it. And if, in your soul, you are worrying about something, something you can change, then stop worrying and change it. Be the change you want to see in the world...and substitute not beauty but balance where worrisome anxiety had been. Please no one but yourself for a few moments. Love and pray with deep humility.

That prayer sounds like the garden of serenity to me. I want to live in that garden but that's complicated—especially when we are so estranged. That's the kryptonite again. It keeps hurting us. It doesn't only weaken Superman. It weakens heroic energy in all of us. It seals off the beloved community,

the Garden of Eden, paradise. It dulls the beauty of the earth, the spirit of life...no matter how many years old or young at heart we are.

When I was seven, I had a heroic dream within me. I dreamed of being the hero, Superman. I'd been dreaming that all my life. My parents bought me a Superman costume when we were still living in Queens. That costume made me believe that I could fly. Why else would it come with a cape? I thought I could fly. In fact, I believe I injured myself leaping from the furniture and testing myself. I leapt into the air and I fell down to the earth and, of course, I quickly abandoned my theory...but I never gave up hope, even when I learned about the racial kryptonite.

Back in the early 1970s, there was an organization in Manhattan called BOCA. BOCA was the Black Owned Communications Alliance. They created a newspaper and magazine advertisement that blew my mind. The ad featured a powerful picture above a banner headline that raised a question. It asked, "What's wrong with this picture?" Let's look at the ad.

[pause a long five seconds]

Beneath the banner headline, there was some text. It read:

A child dreams of being the latest superhero. What could be wrong with that? Plenty, if the child is black and can't even imagine a hero the same color as he or she is. It's like this: children learn by what they see. And if it weren't for Black media, a Black child wouldn't see the world as it really is...

I was that little boy, looking into the mirror and dreaming, wearing my Superman costume until I wore that costume out and tucking a towel under my collar as a make-shift cape when I couldn't wear the costume anymore. I looked into the mirror and thought myself the Man of Steel. I pretended I could fly (of course, by then, I'd learned my lesson). I didn't pretend that I was white but I believed that superheroes were. The 1970s. It was a time when there was such black pride in the being the first—the first black gunner of World War II, the first black baseball player, the first black opera singer, tennis star, golfer, mayor or member of



**What's wrong with this picture?**

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with Black men and women doing positive things besides playing basketball and singing songs. What can you do to make sure our kids have self pride? Decide which media shows them Blacks as Blacks really are. And that's where BOCA comes in. BOCA, the Black Owned Communications Alliance is an organization of Blacks working for Blacks. We don't want your money. We want you to use the power you have to get what you deserve—a real picture of you. Your hopes. Your problems. Your needs. We also want your opinion. So write us. We want to hear from you so we can set the picture straight.

**BOCA The Black Owned Communications Alliance**  
P.O. Box 2757 Grand Central Station, New York, New York 10017

congress, the first black president, or vice president, the first black superhero... What can I say? Kids of all ages, we learn by what we see.

Racism is kryptonite. Separation is kryptonite. Fearful estrangement from ourselves, from one another is kryptonite. And it weakens the heroic energy in all of us. It keeps us from believing we can fly. It killed the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in Memphis, Malcolm X in New York City, Medgar Evers in Jackson, TN and Bob Dylan wrote a whole song about it. In more recent times and just as sadly, it killed George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Nina Pop and Tony McDade, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown just as it had Jimmie Lee Jackson and Emmitt Till in 1955. But the question is this: Will we allow this madness to close the gates of serenity. Will violence mark the threshold of the Garden of Eden? Or will we embrace new daybreak in the soul? Because the morning star still rises...whether or not we hold it in our arms, whether or not we've had our morning coffee. The evolution of culture is happening. The revolution of the soul goes on within us. The spirit is ever unfolding. It's an ongoing process and we are its flowers. The sun keeps rising...in the east and within each of us.

Bright morning stars are rising,  
Bright morning stars are rising,  
Bright morning stars are rising,  
Day is a-breaking in my soul.

Spirit that is ever unfolding in a thousand different ways and all of these are like sunrisings within us...ever possible, life affirming, love sustaining and true.

May we reach for the better angels and for the braver angels of our nature. May we nurture to lovely hero that lay within.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.