

**Channing Memorial Church
Unitarian Universalist
Ellicott City, Maryland
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Move Over Cain – Abel’s Coming Back!

Last week, we got Adam and Eve out of the safe garden, into the world of confusion and knowing and consciousness. This week, we begin the next generation. What might be in store for us there?

Well, the earthling Adam – A-dam – he who is made from the earth -- mates with Eve – whose name is derived from the Hebrew word for “Living.” Two sons are brought forth. One is named Cain, actually the Hebrew “Kayin” which is a play on a word which means production or acquisition. He is a tradesman, a worker. In English his name might be Smith, as in blacksmith or goldsmith. Or “Wright” as in wheel-wright. Worker. The other is named Abel, or A-vel, which is a play on the word for emptiness, or sometimes vapor, or steam – something transitory. The opposite of production or acquisition. Earthling and Life come together and make a worker and a spaceshot. Material and spiritual.

The story as it is usually presented has Kayin the worker as the farmer, a tiller of the soil and worker of the land. It has A-vel as a shepherd . . . out in the fields with his sheep. The tension is set up between opposing uses of the land. (Sing: “Oh, the farmer and the cowman should be friends . . .”)

As we heard, they each bring an offering from their livelihood to God, Avel offering nicely marbled cuts of meat, from the firstborn. Kayin shows up with some crops. It feels to Kayin as though God likes Avel’s offering better. God “looked with favor on Avel and his offering, but on Kayin and his offering he did not look with favor.”

Now, let’s play this out, imaginatively. In the story, God is referred to as YHWH, which is the tradition in the Bible that does not have an anthropomorphic God – God is not imagined as a “being.” YHWH, rendered in most English translations as L-O-R-D, is the unknowable, unnamable mystery.

And let’s say there is some kind of a tradition where offerings are brought on some regular basis . . . as part of worship . . . before this God.

So let’s do it. Here they come. Avel carrying his meat, thankful for the miracle of life, offering the firstborn of his flock, in his tradition the best. And here comes Kayin, holding a few dried up ears of corn that he begrudgingly hands over.

And let’s say, for the sake of discussion, that they get there at the same time, so they happen to see each other’s offerings. Kayin sees not only the nice meat, but the (in his eyes) overly pretentious way that Avel presents it. But Kayin has brought some leftover crops that he doesn’t want, and just kind of flings them on the altar.

Who sees the difference, besides God? Kayin. That one little sentence, “Kayin was very angry, and his face was downcast” says it all. If you play that out, close in on yourself in anger, you can imagine what Kayin felt like. He was probably grumbling under his breath: “showoff.” And it probably wouldn’t help if Avel rolled his eyes and shook his head, even if he didn’t say anything.

And then a great discussion begins, between the LORD and Kayin. Now imagine for a moment, not a human-like God, a being, but rather one that works in mysterious ways. Like, say, through human conscience. Imagine that Kayin knows that the offerings brought to the LORD are used to feed the poor. So his God-conscience says to him “*What’s your problem?* If you do what is right, you’ll be accepted.” But Kayin doesn’t want to. He wants to keep the best stuff for himself, the stuff that shows, the stuff that tells his neighbors that he is a successful farmer, doing well for himself and his family.

And besides, Kayin is so ticked off, that he sees only one way out . . . whack Avel. So he does. But his God-conscience doesn’t go away. It keeps asking him what happened to his brother, and he keeps asking himself: Am I my brother’s keeper? That is one of the great theological questions of all time . . . with many levels of meaning.

This morning I want to take us on an *inward* journey with this story. I want to take us into reflection about how our own Kayins and Avels, those in our souls and our spirits, are in conflict with one another. I want to take us to that place where our lives are so closed in, our spirits so downcast with the busyness of our lives, the material world of everyday, that almost without our realizing it, our spirits are “killed.” We forget that we are the keepers of that spiritual dimension. We forget that having room for emptiness, where reflection on our deepest values can occur, is what allows us to bring our best selves to God and to the altar of humanity.

Imagine, if you will, your own life of busyness, production and acquisition. Your life of Kayin . . . Of work. Of commuting. Of cleaning and cooking and chauffeuring and all of the zillions of small tasks and demands that are placed on your life. Of filling up every minute of your life and the lives of your children with things to do that will lead, you think, to “success.” Making more money. Having a bigger house. Keeping a large house. Trying to save enough money to send your children to the “best” private colleges.

Imagine, if you will, for these few moments, that the land in question, the land to be tilled, and worked . . . or . . . wandered over with flocks, is your time. Imagine that the tilling of the soil of that land is all of the demands that are placed upon you. All of the “I have to’s.”

In *Gift From the Sea*, Anne Morrow Lindbergh writes of leaving behind the bustle and intensity of her family life for a few weeks in a cabin by the sea. At one point she picks up a shell, and reflects:

The Shell in my hand is deserted. It once housed a whelk, a snail-like creature, and then temporarily, after the death of the first occupant, a little hermit crab, who has run away, leaving his tracks behind him like a delicate vine on the sand. . . I too have run away, I realize, I have shed the shell of my life, for these few weeks of vacation. . . . I mean to live a simple life, to choose a simple shell I can carry easily – like a hermit crab. But I do not. I find that the frame of life does not foster simplicity. . . .

We live, she says (and this was 1955!) “not the life of simplicity but the life of multiplicity that the wise men warn us of. It leads . . . to fragmentation. It does not bring grace; it destroys the soul.”

And here in Howard County, fifty-two years later, the life of fragmentation rules. Perhaps it looks a little different: Anne Lindbergh had five children and did not work outside the home. But her list of demands rings true (her words again):

“food and shelter; meals, planning, marketing, bills, and making the ends meet in a thousand ways. It involves not only the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker but countless other experts to keep [the] modern

house with its modern 'simplifications' (electricity, plumbing, refrigerator, gas-stove, oil-burner, dish-washer, radios, car, and numerous other labor-saving devices) functioning properly. It involves health: doctors, dentists, appointments, medicine, cod liver oil, vitamins, trips to the drugstore; schools, school conferences, carpools, extra trips for basketball or orchestra practice, tutoring. It involves letters, invitations, telephone calls and transportation hither and yon. "

I cut the list down so it wouldn't take up my whole sermon. And I would add that today we would have to include all the sense of intensity and immediacy brought about by computers and pagers and cell phones and other technologies. *And* we have to include the challenge of figuring out how to do everything on the list with both parents holding jobs outside the home, or perhaps with only one parent in the picture.

It seems to me that it is a formula for spirit-killing. It seems to me that our Kayins, our material desires and the demands placed on us are being invited, even encouraged, to do away with our spirits.

The way I hear this in your lives is with a lot of "I have to's." I "have to" do this, and my children "have to" do that.

But you know what? Maybe you don't. What would happen if every time you heard yourself saying "I have to . . ." you stopped and evaluated whether you *really* had to. *Who* says you have to? *Who* made the choice for you that you "have to?" And if it is really a choice, then you don't "have to." You choose to. There is a difference. A big difference.

One is a Kayin life, and one is an Avel life.

Maybe what is needed is someone saying that you "have to" make room in your life for the spirit.

So I'll say it. You "have to" make room in your life for the spirit. You don't "have to" be like the moth in the story David told this morning and devote your entire life to the spirit. But you also don't "have to" get scorched by the streetlamps of your busyness. You "have to" find a balance.

One thing I admire about the Mormons, while disagreeing with them on just about everything else, is the value they place on family life. Every Monday night is family night . . . where families are strongly urged to be together in the home. It is kind of a "have to" in that religion. A second Sabbath, in a way.

I would never presume to call for a particular night to be devoted to family in exactly that way in Unitarian Universalism. I'd be tarred and feathered and driven out of town on a rail. But I think they are on to something. I think each family could find a time each week to devote to the spirit . . . to letting the busyness go. I think each of us here *could* find a way to spend more time focusing on the practices that open us to our deepest values, to our spirits.

So imagine . . . what if you let one thing go. One thing, in order to bring Avel back to life in your life. What would it be?

And I'm going to make the question a bit harder: If you are thinking, "I've already let one thing go, I have one time each week that is devoted to my spirit," I would challenge you . . . let one more thing go. In other words, wherever you are right now, let one more thing go. Make space for one more spiritual practice.

Your time as the "land" of your soul and spirit will look very different depending upon your stage of life. What I am describing today here is applicable to those of you who have young

families. At that time of life time is shaped by the day and the week and the month. What would a balanced life look like for you?

But those of you who are older have a different sense of time's shape. How do you want to make the best use of the time you have left in your life? What would a balance look like for you? What offerings do you bring, and what might you receive?

No one can answer these questions for you . . . only pose them.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh was able to devote a few weeks to being alone, bringing her Avel back to life. She found an island of time in the midst of the chaos and the bustle. Most of us cannot do that . . . although perhaps more of us could if we made that choice.

But on the other hand, it might in fact be possible to find little islands of time throughout the week or the year. I remember my father always saying that when budgeting your time, you must always budget in what he called "thinking and reflection time." . . . and *budget it in first!* He compared it to what you must do if you want to save money: you budget your savings first . . . off the top of your paycheck, *before* you budget or spend on anything else. If you decide to save what is left over at the end of the week or the month, then you will never save . . . because there will never be anything left over.

When people ask me how I do it, the answer is easy: My priorities are sleep first, meditation and prayer second, and everything else follows. If my day seems too busy to pray, I double the time I spend in prayer . . . and all else follows. And goes better. It is the tender offering that I give to that which I call God.

If you want to save your spirit, you have to budget your spiritual resources first, set them as a priority, and then let everything else fall into place behind it. You have to be the keeper of your spirit. The keeper of the divinity within.

You can do it. You *can* do it. You can do it.

May you *actually* do it.

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