

**Original Blessing:**  
**A Sin by Any Other Name – Might be a Blessing**  
**Sermon by Marjorie Loring**

One of the challenges I often face, as one who has abandoned the traditional scripture of my Christian upbringing, is being asked to write a sermon about a topic that I had long ago left behind - especially one that I had wrestled with throughout my youth and young adult life. Just when I think I have put down the spiritual boxing gloves for good, I find myself facing another round in the ring - a rematch with those opponents I thought I had finally knocked out. Today's topic is like that. You would think that I would have learned not to offer a "sermon on the topic of your choice" at the annual auction, but I love a good challenge and it does stretch me - and stretching is good for us, right? So I hope this one stretches you a bit too! Think of it as another round of what I call spiritual calisthenics. Thanks to Kip Barkley for giving me such a thought provoking sermon challenge!

It all started with a story about rebellion. The players - Adam and Eve, and the place - the Garden of Eden. The plot - a simple act of eating an apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, after being told not to. It was Eve's "fall from grace" as the story goes - and not just going down alone, but taking Adam and all of humanity with her. The scene is familiar: bad female - foolish male. From this one act of disobedience, humanity will forever carry their share of Eve and Adam's sin of being driven to disobedience by selfish human desire.

The story has left its mark in history and continues to frame our world with what is known as original sin. As the Christian tradition goes, we are born with it and we carry it throughout life. It is inherent in our humanity, with redemption possible only for those who embrace the sacrifice of Jesus who gave his life on the cross so that our sins would be forgiven.

Now even if we don't take the story of Adam and Eve literally, we are still left with an underlying message that we are born imperfect and that it is in our nature to be disobedient. Oh, and that this is seen as a bad thing.

I don't know about you, but not doing what I was told while growing up and facing the world were in many cases the best decisions I have ever made. It was my disobedience that helped me become true to myself and open to new possibilities, possibilities that were a blessing, not a sin, and that thread continues even today in my adulthood. How many of you here have done something that you were told not to? How often did it turn out to be a blessing in disguise? Maybe not every time, but if even one time, wouldn't you agree that it was worth it?

Today we embrace thinking outside the box and pushing the lines. We honor those who move society forward by participating in civil disobedience for the greater good. In 240 BCE, ancient Greek **astronomer** Era-tos-thenes of Cyrene, used a camel, a stadium, and direct observation to reshape our planet from a flat disc to a round globe, becoming the world's first geographer, inventing the concepts of latitude and longitude that we still use today, and constructing the first models and maps based on a spherical Earth. In Galileo's search for truth, he repositioned the center of the universe, even after being told not to pursue his line of thinking. Rosa Parks didn't do what she was told when she sat in the front of the bus, Susan B. Anthony didn't do what she was told when she walked into the voting booth, Peter Morales, the president of our Unitarian Universalist Association, didn't do what he was told when he stood on the side of love during the Arizona immigration protest – saying “no” with a moral outrage toward injustice to a world that violates our principles. Their disobedience was driven by a desire to create a world that works for everyone. We constantly challenge ourselves, and see the value of stepping outside of our comfort zones. We try new things in an effort to expand our understanding of the world around us and what lies beyond our current realm of understanding. We crave new experiences that add spice to our lives, those that expand us intellectually, those that deepen our compassion, and those that push our physical limitations and make us stronger. It is simply not in our nature to be stuck or held back; we were meant to move forward. Moving forward takes courage, and without courage, there is no spirit.

And here is the best part: it is the embracing of new possibilities that supports our forward movement from creation, however that creation came to be, and is necessary for ongoing scientific adaptation and evolution; in fact, in our ever-changing world, it is critical in both spirituality and science.

Something happened long ago that began the process of our existence, and what we do know is that we have been evolving ever since. If we go back to that cosmic explosion and look to the skies, we learn that there was a lot going on for a very, very long time before we finally emerged to, as the story goes, eat from an apple tree. Adam and Eve were sent out into the world as punishment for their disobedience, and they evolved from the moment that they took that first bite out of nature by exploring our world and continuing to try new things. The food of survival was knowledge, acquiring that knowledge against all odds, and leading the way for the next adaptation with original sin firmly strapped to their backs.

If we accept this original sin and the fall from grace, we accept that we have fallen down from a higher place. We are ashamed of our imperfections and apologize for them as though they were a flaw, with the only course of action to ask for forgiveness and to strive to be more perfect. Look at who we are today. We beat up on ourselves from every angle of perceived imperfection, and we set unrealistic expectations in our quest to be better, to get closer to perfect, and we focus on the flaws of others, expecting perfection from them as well. By doing this, we are both accepting and continuing Eve's punishment.

This is where I think we get it wrong. What if we turned it on its head and looked at Eve's disobedience as a falling up? What if we look at our imperfections as an intentional adaptive design, or adaptive phenomena if you prefer, that helps us get through the long journey of evolution? What if every time we think outside of the box, break the routine, challenge the status quo, and try a new path we contribute to the successful evolution of the human race? That would mean that Eve's disobedience was not original sin at all, but instead was an original blessing, making Eve a hero, a leader, and a visionary. Eve would be the icon of courage, assuring the survival of future generations by passing on the qualities that we would need to adapt and thrive in an ever-changing world. We would have inherited not the sin of Eve, but her courage – and with it - the spirit that emerges from courageous action.

Original Blessing. A term coined by Catholic-turned-Episcopal priest and creation spiritualist, Matthew Fox. Like Fox, I like to think that original blessing is what we are made of and what we

pass on from generation to generation. That it is our innermost seed – one that we nurture with curiosity, courage, kindness, and love – one that is a falling toward grace, not a fall from it. It is the seed of the first principle of our faith tradition - the inherent worth and dignity of every person. With the help of Fox's creation spirituality, we can redefine our origins and rediscover who we really are at our naked core.

So, what then becomes of sin? We can't erase or ignore the fact that as we navigate this world, we are confronted by evil in the form of hate, violence, oppression, and, let's face it, some not-so-nice people who want to take advantage of us. If we place sin within this perspective, it is not "original" at all, but "self-created" – not a chronic (or genetic) condition, but an acute one. And we find it where any act of **either** obedience **or** disobedience causes harm. We don't have to embrace original sin, but we do have to recognize the influence it continues to have on our world and on a population of people who believe that they are flawed from their very first breath.

As UUs we draw from many sources to help us understand life's debates and challenges. We use direct experience; we look to the words and deeds of prophetic women and men; we draw wisdom from the world's religions; we look to humanist teachings for guidance on using reason and the results of science, and we include the spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions that remind us of how we are ever-connected with the rhythms of our natural world. We also look within. These are the tools that help us claim our own wisdom – the tools of our spiritual practice.

According to Buddhism, there is no such thing as sin as explained by Christianity. To the Buddhists, sin is simply defined as harmful action. We do something harmful and it ultimately adds to our own suffering. So disobedience only qualifies as sin if it is harmful to someone or something.

"The Jewish view of sin differs from the Christian concept of original sin as well. While Christian doctrine teaches that every person is born with the taint of original sin upon them, Judaism believes that each person is born innocent. Jews believe that individuals are responsible for their own actions and that "sinning" occurs when someone does something wrong (not

disobedient – wrong).” So how do we define wrong? “The Hebrew word for sin is "chet," which literally means "missing the mark." A person sins when he or she goes astray with acts such as stealing, or it could be *not* doing something, such as walking by a person in need. There are three kinds of sin in Judaism: sins against God, sins against another person, and sins against yourself. Sins against God could include making a promise you don't keep. Sins against another person could include saying hurtful things, physically harming someone, or lying. Sins against yourself could be a harmful addiction, or something that prevents you from living fully or being the best person you can be.” Now, for those of you who don't believe in God, you are not off the hook – two out of the three still apply! “The forgiveness of sins for Jews happens during the ten days leading up to Yom Kippur - called the "Ten Days of Repentance" and during this time Jews are encouraged to seek out anyone they might have offended and to sincerely request forgiveness.”<sup>1</sup>

This fits with a falling up, or adaptive design, because in this paradigm we both cause and resolve our own sins (harmful action). Nobody else can save us from them, instead, we save ourselves by stepping up and owning up in order to gain a better understanding of ourselves and others, ever-adapting through the trial and error of being imperfectly human.

So drawing from the Buddhist and Jewish perspectives, a sin might be defined in the Unitarian Universalist tradition as when our words and our actions contradict our seven principles and our covenant of right relations. For us, a sin can be when we “miss the mark” of right relations, with others, with ourselves, and with our planet. Our accountability in response to missing the mark is opening our hearts, discovering and accepting the lesson, and falling up to a new place where consciousness is raised, hearts are mended, and we adapt back into a stronger state of right relations. It is not an easy path, but it is our path. It is our covenant to one another and to our world. Equally important is to recognize how we can also miss the mark when we allow ourselves to be hurt or taken advantage of by anyone who attempts to wield power, hurt us, or oppress us - for evil does exist in this world and it is our responsibility to prevent it from destroying our lives, our families, our faith community, or the future of our interdependent web

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<sup>1</sup> <http://judaism.about.com/od/judaismbasics/a/Do-Jews-Believe-In-Sin.htm>

of existence. We can face the evil in our world head on, but non-violent action requires the courage of spiritual practice and is grounded in original blessing and right relations.

So if you choose disobedience, if you break the rules or push the line, make sure that you do no harm – to yourself, to others, to the community, or to the earth. If you do, refocus your energy on seeking forgiveness rather than affirming justification.

And when you look in the mirror, and you see those imperfections, accept your life and all that you are as original blessing. Open your mind to the lessons that being imperfectly human bring, for they are there to help keep you “falling up into grace”. And as you heard earlier in our Opening Video, don’t ever forget that: You is Kind --- You is Smart --- and You is Important.

And finally: own the courage of Eve. Don’t wait to be fed and don’t allow yourself to be poisoned by those who seek to do harm. Never hesitate to take a big bite out of life and adapt – the future of who we will be and the difference we will make in our “one wild and precious life” depends on it.

Amen, and may you live from this day forward in original blessing.