

Return to Big Eden
What if the World Were as it Should Be?

By
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When I lived in Louisville, Kentucky I'd get up early on Sunday mornings and head to the church office by 5:00 AM to finish working on my sermon and prepare for the service. I most always stopped at a convenient store along the way to get a fresh cup of coffee and would sometimes chat a bit with its cashiers. Shortly before the 2008 election, one of them, an African American woman, insisted Barack Obama would never get elected. "They'll never let a black man be President," she said. I disagreed but understood her strong reservations.

Nevertheless, on election night, as the polls began to close and the votes were calculated, like millions of people around the world, not just voters here in the U.S., I sat anxiously awaiting the final results and wept tears of joy when it was eventually announced that Obama had won. The next day, as Peggy and I took our usual morning stroll through the neighborhood, we passed two African American women across the street, one of whom was the person from the convenient store. We didn't speak, other than a cursory nod and friendly smile, but the look on her face was one of bliss, as if something big had changed for her, as if the whole world had finally been righted and things were as they should be at last... free at last.

It truly was a great day in U.S. history, and people around the world were so excited they soon gave President Obama the Nobel Peace Prize, seemingly for nothing more than having been elected. And why not? A Black man born in 1961 being elected the American President was an enormous accomplishment that gave his audacity to hope to millions of disempowered people around the world. Tragically, as it turned out, the woman at the convenient store was, for many practical purposes, correct; the Republican controlled Houses never did let Obama be President and today the white supremacist who took his place is doing all he can to undo everything Obama did manage to accomplish. If this weren't so, we'd have quite a different healthcare system, environmental policy, and Supreme Court than we do today.

But today I want to focus on the kind of hope so many of us felt prior to Obama's historic election and the bliss we experienced afterward. It reminds me of the 1984 Best Picture, *Places in the Heart*, starring Sally Field and Danny Glover. It takes place in a 1935 rural, racially segregated Texas town still suffering in the aftermath of the Great Depression. At the start of the film, Edna Spalding, Sally Field's character, is widowed after her husband, Royce, the town sheriff is accidentally shot and killed by young African American resident named Wylie. Terrible things follow. Wylie is immediately lynched by the white men of the town, openly and without trial. After her husband's funeral, Edna perfectly characterizes the situation for most women of the era, when saying to her sister, "What's going to happen to

us. I can't support this family. I haven't the least idea how to go about it. It seems like I have never done anything all my life but raise kids and take care of this house. Royce paid all the bills. I never even knew how much salary he made. What's going to happen to us?"

Would she and her two children end up like the woman we briefly see at the start of the movie, living in a car on side of road with a sign, "I've been thrown out of my home where I lived 17 years. This is WRONG. I will stay right here until they let me go back into my HOME. P.S. I am Not Crazy." This seems likely when the banker shows up to her home the next day, says, "Ms. Spalding, I just wanted you to know on behalf of everyone down at the First Farmers Bank, if there's anything we can do in this hour of need all you have to do is ask," then proceeds to tell her if she can't pay the mortgage she'll have to sell her home, separate her kids and send them to live with distant relatives, and likely become homeless herself.

Instead, with the help of an itinerant beggar named Moses, played by Danny Glover, a grumpy blind border named Will, played by John Malkovich, and her two kids, Frank and Possum, she decides to grow cotton, but, against all odds, also has to be the first to harvest her crop in order to win an extra hundred dollar prize if she's going to have enough to make her full payment. Together they face many obstacles, including a devastating tornado and area Klansmen eager to kill Moses for helping her.

I was twenty when *Places in the Heart* debuted, a sophomore in a small Southern Baptist college in rural Texas. My philosophy professor, Dr. Wallace Roark, who I idolize to this day, came to class one day announcing it his favorite film ever. I recently noticed on his Facebook page, at 85 years old, he still considers *Places in the Heart* his favorite film. I'm guessing it's because of the movie's ending. Edna, with the help of her motley crew, wins the prize money and is able to stay on the farm, even though the man who has become her best friend, Moses, after a brutal beating, decides he must leave town in fear for his life. But the very last scene occurs in the town's small Southern Baptist Church. The old country preacher begins by reading from I Corinthians, Chapter 13, "Though I speak in the tongues of men or of angels and have not love, I am become as a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy and all knowledge, and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and have not have love, it profit me nothing. Love is patient, kind. Love is not jealous or boastful. Love never ends."

The choir then begins singing my favorite of all the old Christian hymns, "I Come to the Garden Alone," while communion is being served. The camera slowly follows the communion tray as it's passed from one person to the next. At first, we see it passed to those we'd expect to see there, Edna's sister and her husband Wayne, the Banker, the Klan members, but wait, there's that couple we just watched leaving town? Why are they back? Isn't that the homeless woman we saw living in her car at the start of the movie? Wait a minute, what's Moses doing there, in a white Southern church? We're left bewildered as he passes the tray on to his friend Will, then to Frank and Possum, who take a cup of grape juice, then give it to Edna. Edna then

passes the tray to Royce, her deceased husband, and he, in turn, gives it to Wylie, the young man who accidentally shot him at the start of the story and was lynched for it. The camera holds on the two of them, both alive and well, communing together, then fades to black.

Knowing Dr. Roark's theology, I suspect it was this final scene that has remained so meaningful for him to this day, depicting a kind of Heaven on Earth created when people, all people, are able to commune together in love. My *Places in the Heart*, however, is a lesser known 2000 movie called, *Big Eden*. It stars Arye Gross as Henry Hart, a gay artist living in New York City, who is just about to open a new show when he receives a call letting him know his grandfather in Big Eden, Montana has suffered a serious stroke. Although he hadn't been back to the small town in which his grandparents raised him since leaving, he knows he must do so now.

Big Eden looks much the same as you'd expect a rural Montana mountain town to look, with the usual cast of characters. There's a town church to which most its residents belong, a small country store run by a local Indian man named Pike, where many of old men hang out all day drinking coffee, gossiping, and solving the world's problems. The Widow Thayer is the local busybody, determined to help Henry find the right woman, not realizing he's gay. And there's Henry's best friend from high school, Dean Stewart, who has recently returned to Big Eden to raise his kids following his wife's death. Henry has never told anyone from his hometown that he's gay, though he's had a secret crush on Dean most his life.

You might think, given my description of it, Henry had good reason not to talk about his sexuality while growing up in Big Eden, Montana. But the entire film, it turns out, is kind of like the weird ending in *Places in the Heart*. Everyone in Big Eden behaves the way people should behave toward each other, lovingly, without judgement, always looking out for each other's welfare. Widow Thayer has promised to make dinner for Sam Hart, Henry's grandfather, while he convalesces at home, but her rich, often fried, food isn't exactly what the doctor has ordered. So, Pike, a tall, overly shy man, who has always had a secret crush of his own on Henry, buys a few healthy gourmet cookbooks, teaches himself to cook, and begins covertly switching out the meals. Meanwhile, when the Widow Thayer finally realizes what most everyone else in town seems to already know, she starts trying to set Henry up with the right man.

Dean, who is straight as an arrow, loves his best friend like a brother. Nevertheless, when he senses the torment Henry is in because of his presence, and not wishing to lose him as a friend, Dean tries his best to be gay. But Henry realizes it's pointless the moment Dean tries to kiss him. Meanwhile, all those rough old mountain men who hang out at Pike's place, recognize the pain their friend Pike is in every time he sees Dean and Henry together, so they begin conspiring to help bring him and Henry together.

It would seem about the only person in the entire film uncomfortable with his sexuality is the one person who shouldn't be, Henry Hart himself. In one of its most moving scenes, after another medical scare, while alone at their family cabin, Sam begins talking to Henry about his own inevitable death, saying that he doesn't want to leave this world thinking he failed. "Why can't you see how much love there is that people just want to pour on top of you? I can't help but thinkin' your grandma and I just didn't do right by you somehow... I feel like maybe that we taught you something wrong because you won't tell me who you are. Did we teach you shame? Did I teach you that? Cause it would break my heart if I had. Can't you see what a good job God did here. Can't you see how beautiful he made you?"

When I saw this scene, heard these words, saw Henry nestle into his grandfather's welcome embrace and weep, I thought about all the children of the world, gay or straight, or anything else, who longed to hear such words from a parent or caregiver. "It would break my heart to think I made you feel ashamed of yourself. Can't you see how perfect you are? Can't you see how much love there is in the world that everyone wants to pour onto you?" And I thought, *Yes, that's what the world is supposed to be like. That's how we're supposed to treat each other.* We all know it's how we should behave, and it seems so much easier than shaming each other, blaming each other, hating each other. So why can't we move into the places in our hearts? Why can't we make a home for ourselves in Big Eden?

I'm not going to try to answer these questions because I don't know the answer. I'd rather follow the examples of these films by imagining what our communities could be like when we're at our best. Since this is Pride Weekend, let's start with that. Just as Sam Hart's heart would break if he thought he'd taught his grandson shame, let's teach pride instead. This doesn't mean everything goes. It doesn't mean we don't think critically. It doesn't mean truth is relative. It only means when we engage with others that we don't shame them if they're different than us, especially if they look different, behave different, or think different than us. It means never treating a person as if there's something fundamentally wrong with them because of any of these differences. It means treating everyone as worthy of respect, meaning they are worthy of being recognized, seen, and appreciated for who they are. It means helping them be who they are and become who they are meant to be.

That's why the residents of Big Eden also take responsibility for each other's welfare. They offer companionship to those who are alone, food to those who are hungry, and care to those who are infirmed. They want everyone who needs love to be loved, even if it sometimes requires stepping outside their own paradigms and comfort zones.

This is probably why *Big Eden* has made more of an impression on me than *Places in the Heart*, because the final scene in the latter was very different than the misery and depression depicted throughout most the film. It was more like a dream of what things could be like if more people risked a little discomfort to create more loving and inclusive societies. But that's not what really happened. In *Big Eden*, on the other hand, the entire story is about some

alternate reality in which everyone is eager to stretch themselves if it means being more loving and inclusive; if it means helping others succeed and find love.

Both films, however, are the same in their emphasis upon the need for our communities to be radically inclusive. In *Places in the Heart*, Edna Spalding must welcome a rude border into her home who hates children, and an itinerant stranger she knows little about. And the last thing Moses, who enjoys his freedom, wants is to get attached to anyone. But he does become attached to the Spalding family, and to Will, who, though blind, saves his life because he recognizes the voices of the townsmen hiding spinelessly beneath their pointed hoods. And Will comes to love the children. Somehow, amidst great adversity, they became a family, all different and unique, but one human family, nonetheless. As for *Big Eden*, how refreshing it is to see old Montana mountain men work to help their friend Pike find the courage to let Henry know how he feels, and for the Widow Thayer to as easily attempt to set him up with a man as she had been with a woman once she realizes he's gay. There are no outcasts in Big Eden.

Nor is there any segregation in Big Eden or other places in the heart. Today we must be especially careful of this, not to create segregation in the name multiculturalism, or division in the name of diversity. Equality doesn't mean "sameness," it means oneness. It means old mountain men, busybody widows, shy Native Americans, and gay artists all living and loving together as part of one community. It means brown people and white people, gay people and straight people, poor people and bankers, homeless folk, friend, and foe coming to the garden alone and leaving it together, part of one community, one people, one human family.

Finally, creating Big Eden means not saying one thing and doing another. It means not just singing praises together on Sunday, then treating each other like hell during the week. It means not saying, "If there's anything we can do in this hour of need all you have to do is ask," in one breath, an offering a cold shoulder in the next. It means not saying you want to make America Great again then complimenting tyrants and insulting our friends. It means not saying you're going to make the best healthcare system ever, the dismantling the best one we've ever had so far. It means not belittling women and diminishing their freedoms. It means never heartlessly separating children from their parents to begin with, let alone with no means or intention of ever reuniting them again. It means not reigniting a failing drug war as an excuse to disenfranchise your political adversaries. It means giving more access to the polling machines, not less. It means everyone is accountable to our laws, especially the most powerful among us. It means facing the facts and caring for our planet. It means not summarizing the facts for us but letting us read them for ourselves. It means embracing refugees, honoring everyone who wants to serve; funding, not fearing, education; creating, not cutting, welfare for all.

We know all of this is so, so why can't we make these places in the heart real? I don't get it. The world often seems upside down to me. I hope on this Pride Sunday we can further commit to turning it right-side up.

“Though I speak in the tongues of men or of angels and have not love, I am become as a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy and all knowledge, and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and have not have love, it profit me nothing. Love is patient, kind. Love is not jealous or boastful. Love never ends.”