



### *Life After the Garden of Eden*

*An inspiring conversation over a cup of coffee*

The Garden of Eden or, in other words, the earthly paradise, was a place where Adam and Eve lived without guilt or shame. They, however, weren't allowed to stay in their Garden. Adam and Eve lost their innocence because they succumbed to the temptation to eat from the tree with the forbidden fruit. After that lapse in judgment, they were required to immediately leave the Garden. Was their dream obliterated or did life actually begin at that particular moment?

The Garden of Eden has inspired many artists over the past centuries, resulting in differing visualizations of a sumptuous garden. When we view these renderings, a number of more practical questions might come to mind. Who maintained the Garden? Like many of us, who have our own gardens, we know that maintenance is always needed to sustain the beauty of our "garden". And, who cut the trees and bushes to ensure spring blossoms and the harvest of ripe apples? Who mowed the grass? In short, there are serious doubts whether Adam and Eve were really the only residents of the Garden of Eden? Or might they have employed workmen who also lived in this paradise? Perhaps there were also visitors who frequented the Garden and paid an entrance fee? Well, that does not seem so realistic, does it? We can actually look at the Garden of Eden as an archetypal and inspiring metaphor for our daily business life.

While drinking a cup of coffee with a colleague, we talked about our business activities. The idea of the Garden of Eden flowed naturally into the conversation and it felt so familiar to us while thinking of our own daily business experiences. These similarities inspired one of us to tell his "Garden" story:

"At the start, I had a dream that I would become quite successful with my company." Being so capable in providing services that would provide solutions for personal and

organizational challenges, I thought success would come easily, all by itself." He continued his story, "But soon, I realized that my "Garden" would not flourish without costly maintenance and that there wasn't always a satisfactory return on that effort. In fact, the "harvest" results might end up being disappointing. I might even be thrown out of my own "Garden," overwhelmed by earthly financial obligations. It's possible that even my own fruit could be stolen!" The comparisons to our day-to-day experiences continued and we drew some conclusions. We learned that very few ventures become successful all by themselves. Being successful requires finding the right fit with personal talents, working hard and recognizing, as well as acting on, the right chances and opportunities.

To further illustrate, a colleague and I accepted an offer to conduct a multi-day training for employees of a healthcare institution. For me it felt like a great honour to do this work. Professional medical people who followed the training were enthusiastic about what they gained from our training. Additionally, I was convinced that in this specific health care sector, there would be a large appetite for this kind of training. The reality turned out to be completely different than I had assumed. I informed a lot of people about the benefits of the training, but received hardly any response at all. To my surprise, people seemed to show no interest. This experience was a reality check for me. It turned out that I was far too naïve and I discovered that my dream did not match the expectations of the sector. To realize success, I will have to find other aspects of what I can offer to appeal to potential clients, especially those clients, who have limited resources for training.

The Garden of Eden is an inspirational image, but it makes more sense to see my garden like a commercial garden centre. Being receptive to the changes the seasons bring and being aware of my customers' requirements while delivering quality, as well as investing, maintaining and being selective. And, that has to be done every day. I didn't expect this truth to feel so uncomfortable for me but it seemed to highlight some painful failures. Nevertheless, it's a reality that I have to and will deal with.

As I discussed further with this colleague who partnered with me in the healthcare training, she told me about her dream. "*The House* was my dream! I wanted to create a home where people would feel connected in their growth to personal and professional leadership. I wanted to create a place where people would nourish themselves and support each other. By accident, near the village where I live, I saw a beautiful detached coach house, surrounded by large trees and it was available for rent. This coach house was part of a historic estate where the owner lived in the main building. I finally found just what I was looking for!" She continued enthusiastically, "This could be the place where I would realize my dream! My ideas of realizing my dream inspired many others and they all wanted to contribute. I got into a positive flow. In a short while, I had my dream up and running. With an entourage of nice and inspiring people, I worked hard to make my dream come true-- the coach house actually became a meeting place where a lot of people would come and go. Full of enthusiasm, with energy and entrepreneurship, I created a place where people liked to come together. It developed into a place for meeting others in mutual respect, where like-minded people worked together side by side. But... it's not there anymore..." she added.

"I'm so capable of initiating and connecting people with full confidence and enthusiasm but, without even noticing, sometimes those people have different ideas, and priorities than I do. In reality, everyone didn't pursue the same dream that I had and they had other motives for joining my initiative ... This became clear to me when I discovered how things were actually going in *the House*. There were growing disputes regarding inviting interesting visitors, being hostess or host, marketing efforts, taking initiatives for new programs that could take place and even domestic tasks such as filling the coffee beans, grocery shopping, opening and closing of the door, weeding the garden ... et cetera, et cetera."

Maintaining *the House* itself did not turn out as natural and organic as expected either. "Initially, I was externally focused on the big picture of what *the House* would offer the world: a beautiful place filled with excellent professionals-- a highly valued meeting place for leaders, that would be inviting and welcoming with a good cup of coffee and a warm atmosphere. All the preconditions seemed to be met. My Garden of Eden! The estate with its beautiful natural surrounding was inviting for quiet walks accompanied by some self-contemplation or a good conversation with others. However, this benefit turned out to be impossible because the owner of the property saw our idea of enriching walks through the property as disturbances to his tranquillity. The professional colleagues who were connected to *the House* were abundant with good intentions, but ultimately, they were actually more interested in materialistic and financial benefits than really following their heart. "

"Our intention was to move forward, organically as a team and explore before we had the details clear and without guilt or blame for each other. However, earthly seductions came our way like customers who could provide work for their own company instead of for *the House*. or considering going out more important than doing our communal domestic tasks. These inducements drove us apart. Despite sincere efforts, I could not turn it around and we had to leave *the House*. A dream came to an end-- no Garden of Eden anymore..."

Our shared conversation as well as our shared experiences made it abundantly clear to us that we should not slow ourselves down by our dreams, or lose ourselves in those dreams. Indeed, in the light of day, the reality is that everyday life is also about living and surviving and that is not something to be taken for granted.

Joop Teunissen van Manen & Lieke Thijssen, April 2017