

[Season 2 Episode 2]

Going Hand in Hand Out of Paradise, Part 2

With Shannon Murray and Jessica Riddell

Shannon Murray: With *Paradise Lost*, I mean, this is so lovely. We get the sense that we can fall apart and then we can fall back together again.

Jessica Riddell: It's more urgent now than ever for us to make a case for compelling, ethical, courageous stories to be there and to circulate and to be in those public spaces

Lisa Dickson: You're listening to W.Y.R.D. radio free Elsinore. I'm Lisa Dickson and this is Wyrd Words, a conversation about literature and learning in higher education.

Welcome to part two of "Going Hand and Hand Out of Paradise," my conversation with Shannon Murray, full professor of English at the University of Prince Edward Island, and Jessica Riddell a full professor of English at Bishop's University, where she holds the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Chair in Undergraduate Teaching Excellence. In this episode, we ask what it means to go hand in hand into the world of our own making, how we put the fortunate in the Fortunate Fall and how storytelling can help us to shape and to negotiate the discomforts of change and transformation.

Jessica Riddell: Milton writes, "some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon; the world was all before them, where to choose their place of rest, and Providence their guide: they hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, through Eden took their solitary way."

Shannon Murray: And it's wonderful what Milton does there, because it's exactly what you say, it's that combination of misery and hope or sorrow and, and, and the potential for joy at the same time. He also manages to say essentially that they're alone and together, which is, I think, the other thing that's really struck me in the literature we've been working with, well, I've been working with this term, and in what I've been thinking about, what I miss in the pandemic experience, generally in the pandemic experience of teaching in particular, "with wandering steps and slow, through Eden took their solitary way," but they're hand in hand. They're solitary and they're hand in hand.

Lisa Dickson: What does it mean, or what does it give us to go hand in hand? I'm thinking back, you know, compared to Hamlet, for example, who is deeply isolated, or King Lear, who, you know, runs out into the storm with a whole train of people chasing after him trying to be with him in that space, or I'm also thinking about Redcrosse Knight or the Knights in *The Faerie Queene*, which was another major text that I teach, you know, that none of them goes alone into the world. They all have companions, Redcrosse has Una, and Britomart has Glauce. And so there's all of these companions, and when people are alone, that's really when they get into, into trouble. So what is happening in that idea of partnerships, or going out into this world with someone?

Shannon Murray: It's really nice because one of the things I wanted to do with my survey course this year was to try to help students adjust to, well first year, first of all, but adjust to this experience of distanced or remote learning. And so every time we read something, I did this very Aesop's Fables sort of, "so what can we learn from Beowulf? About pandemic..."

about remote learning in a pandemic?" And boy, they were good at it! Beowulf, when does he fail? When he doesn't allow anybody to help him! So they were right on this, "Ah! We gotta ask for help, we gotta, we gotta be together." But it also, especially when we get to, get to Milton with *Paradise Lost*, I mean, this is so lovely. We get the sense that we can fall apart and then we can fall back together again.

But, and I guess this is my takeaway from this term: right now, it has to be intentional. When it's really hard, that's when we have to intentionally connect with other people. And one of the things my more senior students really talked about was how much they had taken for granted. Just being able to see people in the hallways or to chat with people for the five minutes before class. So what we used to take for granted in these sort of accidental ways that we take this journey of life together, we now have to do intentionally.

Lisa Dickson: Hmm. Yes, Jessica?

Jessica Riddell: I love that, and I think that, you know, Lisa, when you said that when everybody sets off on their own and they think they can do it on their own, that's when we see some of our wonderful literary protagonists fail the most spectacularly. With Redcrosse Knight going into the Cave of Error, or forsaking Una and running off with Duessa, and ending up having to go into spiritual rehab to sort of get himself back together.

It speaks to this notion of resilience, and it's a conversation that the three of us have had over the last nine months, is what happens when we take the pressure of resilience off the individual and put it onto a system or an organization or an institution. And so when we ask Hamlet to be resilient in the midst of a really imbalanced and imperfect world, literally something is rotten in the state of Denmark, right? But we ask him to take on more and to deal with more stress and more pressure without giving him his wayfinders, without giving him his ecosystem of support or his truth tellers, he is bound to fail. And it's the same with our students or our colleagues, when we say, you know, "Dr. Dickson, lean in! Get gritty! Bounce back! Stop whining! Do more with less in impossible circumstances, and if you fail you own that as an individual," rather than looking at the system that is making this untenable, imbalanced, and making us individually unwell.

And so I think it's a really important conversation for us to have, and it is a lesson... I love Shannon that you think, what are we learning from each one of these texts? We're learning that resilience is not sustainable at the individual level. We see that with Redcrosse Knight, we see that with Hamlet, we see that with King Lear, we see that with Adam and Eve, that you cannot go alone in a world that is not in balance. And so I think it's imperative for us all to think collectively about how to move that pressure away from the individual and to dismantle the systems that are exerting pressure upon us. And I think that that is one of my biggest takeaways, going into 2021, is to understand the systems within which we're operating and to tackle those rather than to ask us as individuals to cope in deteriorating conditions.

Lisa Dickson: So that's another way of thinking about the "Tis common, Madam" versus particular, right? In that idea that our responses are always framed. And that's what the Black Lives Matter movement is attempting to show. That's what the #metoo movement is attempting to show, that there's a context around each individual response that illuminates that response for us in a really valuable kind of way, and that this kind of downloading onto an

individual can be really problematic because you know, this... we are the system, but the system is also more than just us. So that's another way, too, of thinking about sort of going hand in hand into the world.

So where do we find our own empowerment or our own voice or pathways to change those kinds of things, I think, become really interesting. And when I was talking about *Paradise Lost*, we focused on Book Nine, which is where Eve is seduced by Satan in the body of the serpent. It's very interesting because they start by blaming Eve, that she's, she was just kind of dumb. Like, "why did she do this? She just had to follow the rules." But they move through that experience into being outraged on the behalf of Eve. It's like, "well she was completely set up! This is total entrapment! Like, how was she supposed to know what evil is if she's never had evil and now she gets kicked out of Eden?" And so then there's this outrage, and then we sort of round that out with a discussion of the idea of choice and responsibility and *Felix culpa*, right? The fortunate fall that Adam and Eve leave paradise, but what they bring with them is reason and each other. So that they have this idea that we have this capacity to make choices that are meaningful choices. That choices are meaningful when they're framed by experience.

And so that idea of balancing that overarching set of authorities or rules or understandings of ideals, and balancing those with how do we actually live that in the world in a meaningful kind of way, which is exactly Spenser's central question in *The Faerie Queene*, which is, sure it's fine to be called the Redcrosse Knight, but how do you actually live as the Redcrosse Knight? And so that kind of grappling with what comes from that fall from innocence, I think, is also kind of interesting.

Shannon Murray: I had a really interesting experience this term though, because my students do Book Nine in their first year in our survey class, and then the third year in the Milton class they read the whole thing. And I have a little exercise that... when we're face-to-face I bring apples to class, give each student an apple, and tell them that I'm God. And I've told them not to eat the apple, but if they eat it, they'll have certain kinds of knowledge, and then I leave the room and they have to decide whether they're going to take a bite or not. And then I come back after a little while. And normally, you know, most of my nice 18, 19-year-olds, they bite the apple, right? They eat the apple, they decide they want the experience of the world. This paradise, it just doesn't look very interesting to them. It's clearly very dull. It's going to be just, you know, gardening and sex and talking with angels, why wouldn't... it seems really attractive to me right now, but... and normally the third year is about the same. I might have, you know, half and half, but most of my students would still go for experience over innocence, except this year.

And what was really interesting in this year was that both when they... We had that moment and when they wrote about it in their portfolios afterwards, they talked about the difference between them, but this is two years difference for many of them, the difference between their first-year selves thinking that, how bad can the world be if you just eat the apple? And their experience on a really privileged little safe island, on Prince Edward Island, during the pandemic, and they can see the misery in the world, and more of them said, "nope, I'm staying in paradise." And it was a real... having them think about why they thought that now, why they changed, was I thought really fascinating.

It's as if for some of my students, this is... I mean, I know this is a sweeping generalization, this is the first time they'd had a sense that, you know, what the world could actually be better than it is if we didn't eat the apple, if we just stayed in paradise and sort of slowly incrementally got better, which is what Milton offers as a possibility. Anyway, so that was my, it was my fun experience with my students this year.

Lisa Dickson: That's interesting.

Shannon Murray: They wanted to stay in paradise and not go out where there were, you know, American elections and pandemics and things.

Lisa Dickson: That's interesting too, because that's the two things that you said, which seems so incompatible in a weird way, I'm going to come to you in just a second Jessica, which is the world could be better than it is if we stayed in paradise, which seems almost antithetical in my mind, because how do you make the world better than it is without going into it? So you're suggesting that there's another way of doing it, right? By staying in paradise and following the laws, and just getting better a little bit. That's like a really interesting tension. We can't think our way back into paradise, which I think is part of the difficulty of engaging with that text, because we're already out of it. There's a threshold that has been crossed.

So how do we even imagine a world better than it is from the perspective of withdrawal from that, that world? So, and maybe that's sort of Milton's kind of Protestant underpinnings there, that suspicion of cloistered virtue. Jessica, I wanted to come to you, what do you think about this development?

Jessica Riddell: I love, you know, this notion of "don't eat the apple because we're super safe and lovely in our little bubble" and how that has shifted over time and in our own context. But, you know, it's back to that, that notion of, Lisa, you just used the word imagination, but I see our journey as that combination of knowledge, experience, and imagination. So if you think about Redcrosse Knight in his borrowed armor, he doesn't have any experience setting out in Book One, right? He goes off and he's like, "this is great, everyone's great, this is going to be so much fun! I'm going to prove myself and fulfill my quest!" And he lacks imagination and experience, he might've read a couple books. He might've, like, sort of known something intellectually, but he hasn't combined that with his own experience and failure and then imagination to move into that next space.

And, you know, I was thinking, when I do that critical reflective piece at the end of a year, at the end of a project, I try to go back to some of my fundamentals. Like, what is the foundation of what I believe is my pedagogical philosophy or my philosophy of the world, and I keep coming back to one of our favorites., we haven't really talked about today, which is Phillip Sidney, and Sidney being that kind of Redcrosse Knight in many ways, that, you know, chivalric man writing books for us to harness our imagination and combine experience and knowledge. And he says that fundamentally, we must have delight in order to transform. We must be moved in order to move into new spaces and new ways of knowing. And, I think that he encaptures, I think, what we try to do as teachers and guides, which is he says, the teachers "giveth so sweet a prospect into the way," right? So we, we walk with our students, but also try to make this prospect sweet that we share our passion and our love, and we love hard, around the literature and the experience of encountering that literature.

And so I do think that literature for us, in the context of higher education in these communal spaces, creates context for individuals to be in solitude and together. We read in solitude, we read just by ourselves, but coming together in those communal spaces of classrooms to explore those intersections of knowledge, experience and imagination, allows us to kind of ask one another and ourselves how we can know the world and how we might live with delight and courage and responsibility within it. And I think that that's just maybe how we're wired, but, but literature gives us some of those roadmaps to do, both on our own and together hand in hand, that kind of thinking and creating.

Lisa Dickson: I wanted to pick up on that idea of narrative frameworks or vocabulary or the kinds of stories, because that's what Sidney's talking about, right? He's talking about the, the capacity of stories to connect our real world to the world of our ideals. And one of the things that I've noticed very much over the past nine months is something that makes the case for the humanities in a way that I've never seen so starkly represented, which is the role that stories are going to play in our ability to come out of this pandemic. And you only have to look at the way that the narratives around the masks in particular, and the vaccine more newly. We're going to tackle that with science and that's very, very important, but I've never before seen in such a public, general kind of way the crucial nature of the stories that we tell around those things, because the science can't function if we don't have the right narratives or appropriate narratives or functional narratives around that.

And so storytelling, for me, has really risen to the fore about how do we wrap our minds around this experience. And so I wanted to maybe take us into the end of our conversation by thinking or asking you about how are stories, do you think, working for us? And how can we think about the literature that we bring forward to our students and to ourselves, how are stories working, do you think, in your mind? Or have you seen a similar trend?

Jessica Riddell: I, I love this and I, I think about the ways in which we tell stories matter and we see some of our, you know, most famous Shakespeare characters asking others to tell their stories in one way or another. And to go back to Michelle Obama, the unlikely bedfellow of John Milton, she says, "even when it's not pretty or perfect. Even when it's more real than you want it to be, your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own." And I thought that that was a beautiful... she's not literary theorist, she's not, she's not an English prof but she understands that stories matter because they help shape our path forward. And the kinds of stories we choose to tell and what part of this story we choose to tell, I think, is really important.

And so we see perhaps most explicitly in art and literature, the state of unknowing or the loss of meaning, when it becomes an object of representation, when it becomes a story, can dramatize the anxiety and make it visible to us so that we can see its contours, so that incoherence or confusion or disorientation is mastered by making it into a story, by making it into something. And I think for me, that is one of the most hopeful, critically hopeful, engagements with the world.

And so I have been really attuned to who is telling stories, and what kinds of stories are they telling, and who is listening? So, are people telling stories of critical hope and making visible our acts of transformation? Or are they telling stories of toxic positivity and erasing our acts of becoming? Who is telling the stories, who's listening and who's shaping those narratives? And I think, Lisa, you're absolutely right, It's more urgent now than ever for us to make a case

for compelling, ethical, courageous stories to be there and to circulate and to be in those public spaces of discourse as we imagine what a post-COVID world looks like. I think we're still in the process of designing what that looks like, but as we pause and reflect and replenish, I think we need to figure out what our stories are and how they interconnect with others in hopeful ways.

Lisa Dickson: Hmm. Yes. Shannon, do you want to weigh in on this one?

Shannon Murray: You will have figured this out, Lisa, already, because you got us to think about *Hamlet* and *Paradise Lost*, which are both about storytelling, right? Not only you have, I mean, repeated storytelling and doubt about storytelling and questioning about the tellers and then the ending that has Horatio go off and tell Hamlet's story and start *Hamlet* all over again, but *Paradise Lost*, twelve books, more than six of them are somebody telling a story to somebody else. And then all of the questions that get asked about whether this is a true story or not, how it's being told... so Raphael telling, you know, essentially almost four books worth of stories and saying, "yeah, but this isn't how it really happened, this is just how you will be able to understand it best, so I'm going to accommodate the story to your understanding, and then the last two books, which are so wonderful, "I'm going to tell you a story that's going to give you hope." So Michael tells the story, in Books Eleven and Twelve, of the whole of the rest of human history, which is supposed to give Adam and Eve the hope to carry on when really all they want to do is kill themselves at the end of *Paradise Lost*.

So yeah, both of the ones that you cleverly suggested, when you think about it, they're both about telling those stories and telling the right stories. One of the things that struck me, and I know I don't remember having this deep feeling about this when I taught *Paradise Lost* before, I've never been so aware of the fact that when Milton was writing it, he was blind. He had been blind for about 10 years. He was disappointed because the revolution that he'd supported failed, and he was in prison because of it. And he was essentially in lockdown because of the plague of 1664, so he had to leave London, he was elsewhere when he wrote most of *Paradise Lost*. That's a miserable position to be in, and what he chose to do was to tell a story. To tell a really, really big story with a lot of stories in it. So that one has kept coming back to me.

Now, I don't want to suggest that in any way we should all be Miltons or Shakespeares and, you know, write *King Lear* or... there's the toxic positivity or the excessive productivity that's supposed to come from lockdown. But it's the idea of deciding, out of all of this misery, I'm going to tell a story of hope and that's what I'm hoping we'll be able to do. I'm eager to see what movies and television and novels are going to come out of this pandemic. And I suspect, well, maybe this is just too hopeful, I suspect they're going to be hopeful ones. They're going to be ones that give us that light at the end of the tunnel, and show us the better world that Adam and Eve think that they're going to walk off into.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah, but Adam and Eve kind of go out into the better world knowing that it's up to them to make it, which I think is, is really, for me, that's the Felix part of the Felix culpa, is that they walk out of paradise knowing that the world that gets made is the world that they make.

Shannon Murray: Because we still have the potential to tell the wrong stories, right? Because we've got that in *Paradise Lost* too, we've got that in *Hamlet*, people who tell stories

for the wrong reasons. And, you know, Satan has made up stories about himself, for example, that could lead people in the wrong directions. So yeah, that's also the potential, that we could make the wrong stories, and the wrong world. Better work!

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. So we have to work at it and we have to be, you know, media literate and, you know, and that sort of came up in conversations with students too. It's like, well, if Eve kind of knew how to parse the logical flaws in the serpent's narrative, maybe she wouldn't have made those choices. How do we tell if something's reasonable or reasoned, you know, and making those kinds of distinctions.

I did a PowerPoint for my students and the last slide was decision-making, and I just love that idea of the way that our language encodes the idea of making, that we have the capacity to make something. When we're at those crossroads, we create a universe out of those moments, if we want to get into, into the multi-verse philosophy, which we don't have to, but, you know, but that idea that, that we're making that, that world for better or for worse, which I think can be very daunting. But also for me, that's where the hope of the story is, it's that we can write it, and if we can bring enough with us out of paradise, or if we can bring enough with us from what we've learned on that journey, we kind of can see where those paths go. We're not moving just into darkness of nothing, we're moving into territory that Shakespeare or Milton or Margery Kemp or Michelle Obama have traversed in some ways so that when we make that universe, we're bringing that knowledge with us. So, Jessica, what do you think? Do we have a Felix culpa? Do we have a hopeful narrative? Where do you find your hope at this point?

Jessica Riddell: For me, it's the only option. It's that critically hopeful path forward. I think that we've seen so many complexities and heartbreak and despair commingled with joy and delight and surprise over the last six months. It has intensified my belief and reliance on the framework of critical hope that we have been working on for five years, that it is the only way forward and the only path I can choose because the rest is darkness.

Lisa Dickson: Silence!

Jessica Riddell: Yeah! So I don't have a choice. I have to double down on those theoretical frameworks and move into a future. And I have two tiny humans who don't let me go very far into that darkness, and sort of force me to be hopeful, not just for myself but hand-in-hand with, with these little sticky hands. And I think that that, for me, is hopeful because I'm trying to build something with them, alongside them and with, and alongside our students and colleagues. And I think that that collaboration piece is, for me, even more visible and more important, in terms of our resilience, in terms of our groundswell, in terms of our community organizing. And for me, if we're telling our own stories but those stories have a hopeful trajectory, I think that we have a really good opportunity to remake this world and to come into a post-COVID world or come through the portal... cross the threshold! Or however many mixed metaphors as you want to use, into a space that's better and more just, and more equitable, and more humane than it was before March of 2020.

Lisa Dickson: Fingers crossed on that one. So this idea of being able to hear those stories, I think, gives us different ways of coming into the world, so hopefully we can build tools for that reflection, and I'm starting to see some, some interest in reflection in places that I wouldn't normally have expected it.

So, with this idea of reflecting to move forward, I'm just going to ask this final question to round out our conversation and over the summer, when we were moving into emergency pandemic teaching, Shannon, you started by listing your core words that were going to guide you for this semester. As you're moving into the next semester, as we're moving through this next phase of our experience, this global, common and particular experience, have those words for learning evolved or changed, or are you living those in a different kind of way? are you seeing them anew?

Shannon Murray: My four were: stay connected, be flexible, keep it simple and be kind. And yeah, I mean, I'll just help contextualize this by telling you I'm exhausted. And there are lots of people who have better reasons to be exhausted than I do. And then I've got to do it again in January with two other classes. So I'm really exhausted. And so, when I look back at those four, I think, stay connected, okay: stay even more connected. Be flexible: be even more flexible. Keep it simple: I thought it was simple, it was not simple, I have to be more simple! And then, be kind: Oh my gosh, I have to. So it's the same four, they have to be, you know, huge and expansive and exploded in ways that they seem so simple and so neat, and I have them as well on my post-it notes here. So yeah, those four, but I have other post-it notes too, and never before have I relied on a series of post-it notes that surround me to keep me buoyed in really bad moments.

So, you know, we've talked about this idea before that you should remember that there are... some of the... you're juggling balls and some of them are glass and some of them are rubber and you have to decide which you can drop because they're rubber and they'll bounce back, and which ones are glass and you can't. And I've got another one that says, are you wicked, and are you hopeful, and I have to be both of those things at all times. But the other one is "these are the waters," and I don't even remember who said that or tweeted it or whatever, somewhere in September. And it just hit me because, whenever I start to feel sorry for myself or exhausted. I just have to realize these are the waters I'm swimming in. I can't decide that I want other waters. It doesn't matter that the waters last year were better. These are the waters I'm swimming in and that's, that's where I have to be. And I find something weirdly hopeful about that. It buoys me up, to use the metaphor. So that's where I am right now. And yeah, I'll just, I'm going to redo them all and make them bigger and prettier.

Lisa Dickson: Good! We need an art project. Just trace them over and emboss them into our, into our hearts in some kind of way. Neil Gaiman talks about having a mountain, you know, somebody was asking him how do you make choices in your professional career, what to do and what not to do, and he said, "well, I have a mountain and I just ask myself, does this get me closer to the mountain or farther away?" So to take your swimming metaphor, right? Am I swimming to the mountain, to the island, or am I swimming in the wrong direction? And I think, I think that can be really helpful in having those kinds of keywords that you can kind of put at the top of your document and then check your syllabus or your email or your assignment, against those, can be a really helpful tool. So Jessica, do you have some words for learning, going into your next year?

Jessica Riddell: I do. I work very closely with a number of students as partners and fellows and interns, and they developed a "Jessica COVID Bingo". So anytime that I use a word, they either take a drink of their coffee or they check off their little bingo card, and the five that continue to get them the most points are: resilience, collaboration, delight, messiness and complexity. And so it is, it's very entertaining for me when they all, in a Zoom call, the 12 of

them, all start to take a drink of their coffee as I'm talking! And it is delightful, right? That is play, that's playful, that's funny, But it also is reinforcing, as a group, what are some of our fundamental values. And I love that group space, of identifying those concepts when they appear and marking them, and making just even a pause or a beat to do that COVID bingo.

So I kind of love that, and think about those concepts as guiding principles to get us all closer to a mountain, to scale to the next plateau where we look and think, okay, we've got... we're here, we're never going to get to the top and be smug and be enlightened, but we're constantly going to sort of challenge with ourselves to get to a higher plane of knowledge and reason, and, to go back to Shannon's phrase at the beginning, of radical empathy. And I love that concept, I think that that maybe is my mountain.

Lisa Dickson: That idea of messiness, I think, goes back to what Shannon was saying about, you know, these are your waters, right? But that once you sort of accept that messiness is not necessarily a sign that something's broken ; what's broken might be our desire to pretend it's not messy. And that's where the delight comes in, right? Once you kind of recognize that discomfort as growth, or as moving forward or swimming towards your mountain, however, whatever metaphor we want to use, it can help us to rethink the anxiety that those kinds of moments of uncertainty or messiness or complexity can raise in us.

And I think about my dance teacher, who once went through all of the symptoms of nervousness before a performance that you feel when you're standing backstage, and she said, "this is not you not being able to cope, this is you preparing to be amazing." So that's another example of how just having the right story can change the way that we see that. And so every time I'm getting ready to give a lecture or a talk or get on stage, that's what I think about. This is anxiety but it's not only anxiety, it's also this kind of innate response to possibility.

This brings us to the end of our chat today and I want to thank you so much, my lovely wyrd sisters, Shannon Murray and Jessica Riddell, for coming and sharing your thoughts, so thank you thank you! And I want to thank everybody who's listening, I hope there are some people listening out there in the podosphere, and to remind you to visit our website, thewyrdhouse.com, we're very excited about that! And we will have Wyrd Words with you again soon.

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