

*Sermon on Process Theology: An evolving sense of the holy
Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, March 2017, Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman
Rev. Fran reflects on the School of Process Theology, an understanding of ultimate reality
whereby all that ever was is folding into the unfolding of the world.*

What is Process Theology? “That’s hard to explain.”

Imagine a small brown cat, walking towards wisdom, taking with her all she has learned, growing into knowledge with each new experience, and leaving each individual she meets also changed by that meeting. At the end of each day the cat is still herself, and yet also something new, re-shaped by each event she has experienced into something unforeseen and unforeseeable. In the simplest terms possible, that’s Process Theology. Only you are the cat. And so is God.

Process Theology emerges from a series of early twentieth century events, academic in origin, and widely published. The individuals who propelled what we know as the School of Process Theology are named and known and lived very long lives. Generation succeeded generation. Initiator was succeeded by interpreter, who was in turn succeeded by wandering disciples, each with students of their own.

There is no church that preaches Process Theology specifically and exclusively; rather the ideas of this school of thought have permeated into the seminaries where theology is taught, and into the public realm where theology is lived. Many of us may well hold some ideas that have the shape of Process Theology without ever having heard them named as such.

First, the initiator: Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947): child of privilege, gifted academic, celebrated teacher. His family birthright was rooted in Anglicanism. His later preference leaned towards Roman Catholicism. He taught until the age of 76, first in England, then at Harvard. When he died at the age of 86, his remains were cremated and there no service was held.

Whitehead was born into a world where absolutes were crumbling. Darwin was overturning our sense of who we are in the world. Scholarship was shattering our understanding of scripture and revelation. No less challenging for Whitehead—scientist and mathematician—Einstein was

shattering the old certainties of Newton's physics. Like Newton before him, Whitehead was led from physics into metaphysics—the theoretical philosophy of being and knowing.

Now, I am a bear of very little brain. I hesitate to reduce a great mind like Whitehead to anything that I could understand. What I take away from what I have read is that Whitehead's foundational publication of 1929, entitled *Process and Reality*, defended God, but at the cost of radically altering the nature of God, a God no longer the God of Abraham—all seeing, all knowing, all powerful, active in time and beyond. In an age of science, of Darwin and Einstein, Whitehead gave us a god of limited power and knowledge, a god who evolves.

Whitehead was a great mind, and his prose could be impenetrable. And so emerged Whitehead's interpreter: Charles Hartshorne. Charles Hartshorne: child of privilege, gifted academic, celebrated teacher. His father was an Episcopal minister. Hartshorne emerged from a liberal Christian home, read Emerson's *Essays* as a youth, and in later life joined the Unitarian Church.

After two years as a hospital orderly in France during the First World War, Hartshorne returned home to America, entered Harvard, and did three degrees in four years—BA, MA, and PhD. Noteworthy, even for Harvard. Hartshorne's dissertation was a roughed-out cast of the philosophy and theology he would spend the rest of his life exploring.

Hartshorne had been Alfred North Whitehead's teaching assistant at Harvard. Later, Hartshorne went to the University of Chicago, taught philosophy there, and eventually branched sideways into theology. Generations of Unitarian ministers were taught by him.

I find myself much struck by the chain of generation in this School of Process Theology. Whitehead taught Hartshorne. Hartshorne taught many, over many decades—Hartshorne lived to be over a hundred, and taught well into late old age. He published at 96, delivered his last lecture aged 98, and gave a good interview at age one hundred. He died at 103.

Charles Eddis, emeritus minister of the UU church in Montreal, studied with Hartshorne and his successors—a living link to the original thinkers. And his colleagues, myself included, learn from Charles, and others. Process theology is a concept with which most UU ministers are likely to be somewhat familiar.

Hartshorne, like Whitehead, defended theism; however, Hartshorne's God differed in some ways. For Hartshorne, God exists with the world in a dynamic, changing relationship. Also, God has two polarities, being both abstract and concrete. In the abstract, there are elements to God that do not change, like self-identity. Otherwise, God does change, growing in knowledge of the world as the world itself changes and develops.

Also, Hartshorne promoted the idea of pan-en-theism, that the world exists within the holy, much as an unborn child exists within the body of its mother. God is beyond the world, but still intimately connected with and encompassing the world—both in material events and in how we feel about them, for there is always an affective element in our awareness. For Hartshorne, God was omnipresent, and therefore never absent from any event, even as events unfold. The question becomes, to what extent are we aware of this presence?

Perhaps Hartshorne's most accessible work, intentionally so, largely thanks to his wife and editor, Dorothy Hartshorne, is a small volume entitled *Omnipotence and other Theological Mistakes*. (I'm told that Hartshorne was, in person, a gentle soul, but in print perhaps at times a tad polemical or antagonistic.)

I turn to my colleague, Katie Stein Sather, who has graciously shared with me her summary of Hartshorne's main points.

First Mistake: that god is absolutely perfect and unchangeable. Not so. God is a process, always in the process of change, according to Hartshorne. No one conception of god applies all the time.

Second Mistake: God is omnipotent, or all powerful. Not so. This idea leads to questions like "Why would a loving God give me cancer? What am I supposed to learn from this?" Hartshorne would say that God is not in charge.

Third Mistake: Omniscience. Not so. If God is not perfect and not all powerful, then God cannot be all knowing.

Fourth Mistake: God's unsympathetic goodness—that is, that God does not suffer. Not so. If god is represented in each of us, then that sympathy—that shared feeling—is reflected in our care and concern for each other—so therefore God must share our pain.

Fifth Mistake: Immortality after death. Not so, says Hartshorne. There is no individual ongoing awareness after death, says Hartshorne, except for the memories we the living hold of those who have died.

Sixth Mistake: Revelation is Infallible. Not so. Process Theology rejoices that revelation is not sealed. Revelation continues. Katie reminds us that Hartshorne rejected the notion of God as an “unmoved-mover”; his God moves and is moved, feels our joys and our pain, loves and is loved.

We have heard a brief summation of Process Theology, its main arguments, and its history. Later I'll speak of how Process Theology might take shape in the pulpit and daily life. But first, let us consider the strongest arguments raised against this school of thought. These are two-fold: some theists find it too radical, some atheists find it not radical enough. Further, some are troubled that Hartshorne's God is imperfect. If God is imperfect, how is such a God worthy of our worship, some might ask? Some are troubled by the nature of this pan-en-theistic God; Hartshorne's re-interpretation of the holy takes us well beyond Biblical revelation and also beyond the Trinity. This new God lacks divine foreknowledge and pre-destination concerning salvation. This new sense of the holy appears to deny or de-value the miracles attributed to Christ and the divine nature attributed to Christ.

Hartshorne is seen to privilege an aesthetic admiration of the world in place of the holiness of God and the awe accorded to the holy one. Hartshorne makes little room for petitionary prayer or the survival of the individual into the afterlife.

Process Theology might also be found weak and wanting when confronting the problem of evil. In our post-holocaust world, an optimistic reluctance to wrestle with the sin and depravity of willful human malice may seem an inadequate response to the work of religion.

So what do we do with this? How do we take it into the pulpit? How do we take it into our daily lives?

For me, the most significant element of this process school of theology is that, however we feel about god, we are given an image of the universe in which nothing is ever lost. All that ever was goes to shape all that ever will be. It is as if we were remembered in the mind of the holy, our hopes and loves and struggles carried there forever. And so even when someone we love is adrift in dementia, they are held in the care we offer, in the gifts of care we remember. That mindfulness of care spills into the world and the future like a wave in the water from a pebble tossed into the sea. And so even the still-born child, lost before the light of day, leaves a legacy of hope and care.

Whitehead was blessed with two sons and a daughter. One of his sons son died in action during the first World War. Hartshorne served as a medical orderly in France during that same conflict. Millions of young men melted into the trenches in that mess. My personal belief is that this is the great gift of Process Theology—that all those lives had value and were not entirely lost, because our connection with the lost is folded into our caring for the future. All that ever was is folded into all that ever will be.

This belief might encourage us to walk lightly on the earth, to cease from attachment as the Buddhists might say, to let go of our desire for fixedness and idolatries that deny the flow of time, knowing that our contribution is never lost.

Several of my colleagues were kind enough to share sermons that were consciously shaped around elements of process theology, each very different. I was intrigued by their choices, and I share the essence of them with you, to illustrate how process theology might play a role in our present lives.

One wrote of death and loss and transition, of the temporary and the transcendent in our lives. Preparing to depart from one pulpit to serve another, my colleague reminded the people she had learned to love, that all they had shared together would be folded into all their futures, and would

never be truly lost. Therefore, said my colleague, let us take our losses seriously, and honour them.

Another colleague picked up on the more abstract concepts, how the evolving theoretical plays out against a frozen ideal, how the dance of cosmos and chaos makes room for creativity and demands the exercise of our free will.

Another colleague framed their sermon to remind us that Charles Hartshorne was also an eminent birder, an ornithologist who argued that sometimes birds sing their song just for the glory of it. Process theology glorifies nature as the body of god. Process theology invites the imagination of those who find worth in nature, paganism, and feminism.

Another colleague, preaching the final sermon of their life, used process theology to explore final things, final in the sense of being shaped towards purpose, towards the future. Here we see the two poles that Hartshorne spoke of: first the identity of the holy that is grounded in goodness; then the creative, evolving, unfolding potentiality, that we have free will and we choose to live in connection, aware of our responsibilities, and we commit ourselves to some finality, some purpose that relates us to the future and to the infinite.

I am most grateful to my colleagues for their generous sharing.

In conclusion, there is a school that teaches an understanding of the holy as creative and in motion, in which all experience, all affection, finds a home, folded into the ever-unfolding future. And so nothing is ever lost.

The first of those who taught this school of thought wished to preserve their faith in God and Christ through this re-framing, and to cease burdening the holy with illogical powers and responsibilities.

However we choose to name the universal integrity, the infinite reality that holds the universe together, god or not-god, the gift of process theologians to us is their belief that everything we do matters, that we are connected to all the universe and to the future. Our choices matter. Our lives

have meaning in the world we help to shape each day. And all that ever was is folding into the unfolding of the world.

May it be so.

Bibliography

John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: an Introductory Exposition*.

ed. Ewert H. Cousins, *Process Theology: Basic Writings*.

Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and other Theological Mistakes*.

Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (1929), foundational for process theology.

-----, *Adventures of Ideas* (1933), said to be his most accessible work.

Wikipedia article on Process Theology; (Charles Eddis gives it an “A”)

Harvard Square Library, online, articles Charles Hartshorne et al.

Harold Kushner, *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People*, models process theology, that our traditional arguments re theodicy merely attempt to preserve our description of God, whereas the explanation of illness lies in the fact that we live in the world in time, and are evolved beings.

A colleague recommends a lay expression much in the way of process thinking , found at the late African American science fiction writer Octavia Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower*. The pieces of poetry at the beginnings of chapters are described as gems of this thought.

Carol Christ, *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World*, draws heavily on the work of Whitehead and Hartshorne. The author describes the relationship between touch and change—everything we touch changes. As with McDaniel, well written, clear and concise in language that is not overly academic.

Jay McDaniel, *Living from the Center: Spirituality in an age of Consumerism*, a well-written book that uses process theology to address the addiction we have to new religion - consumerism. Written from a Christian-Buddhist background.

The introductory image of the questing cat, plus the phrase “That’s hard to explain” are taken from a children’s book, *Wabi Sabi*, by Mark Reibstein—“Wabi Sabi is a way of seeing the world that is at the heart of Japanese culture. It finds beauty and harmony in what is simple, imperfect, natural, modest, and mysterious. It can be a little dark, but it is also warm and comfortable. It may best be understood as a feeling, rather than as an idea.” In the story, the cat goes on a journey to ask after the meaning of this name—wabi sabi—that has been bestowed upon her.

Thanks to various colleagues including: Stephen Atkinson, Frances Leigh Deverell, Charles Eddis, Karen Frazer Gitlitz, Phillip Hewett, Christine Hillman, Linda Weaver Horton, Carole Martignacco, Samaya Oakley, Kathy Sage, Katie Stein Sather, Julie Steinberg