

“Pancakes and Process Theology”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
March 2, 2008
Guest Minister: Rev. Liz Stevens

Opening Words/Call to Worship

by the Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

We are called

to gather in worship as a beloved community.

We are called

to set aside distractions and anxieties that we might touch
deeper springs and be renewed.

We are called

to seek and to share comfort for the hurts that afflict.

We are called

to desire more; more love, more justice, and life more abundant.

We are called

to truth, to mercy, to humility and to courage.

Let us answer the call with the yes of our lives.

Responsive Reading #437

Let us worship with our eyes and ears and fingertips;

Let us love the world through heart and mind and body.

We feed our eyes upon the mystery and revelation in the faces of our brothers and sisters.

*We seek to know the wistfulness of the very young and the very old, the wistfulness of
people in all times of life.*

We seek to understand the shyness behind arrogance, the fear behind pride, the tenderness
behind clumsy strength, the anguish behind cruelty.

All life flows into a great common life, if we will only open our eyes to our companions.

Let us worship, not in bowing down, not with closed eyes and stopped ears.

*Let us worship with the opening of all the windows of our beings, with the full
outstretching of our spirits.*

Life comes with singing and laughter, with tears and confiding, with a rising wave too great to be
held in the mind and heart and body, to those who have fallen in love with life.

Let us worship, and let us learn to love.

Reading

from The Practice of Process Meditation by Ira Progoff.

Fundamentally *process* is the principle of continuity in the universe. In recent generations it has developed into one of the most important concepts available to modern persons for understanding the world in which we live. In one framework of thought, the idea of process gives a means of conceiving what takes place in the cosmic world, the physics and chemistry of natural evolution. On another level it gives us a means of approaching the history of civilizations and the changes that take place within societies.

It helps us see the relatedness and the ongoing connection between phenomena that look dissimilar when they are viewed externally. When we see them from within a conception of process, we are able to understand that their differences reflect their position at changing points along the path of the process, and that a connective unity underlies apparent disparity.

from Process and Reality by Alfred North Whitehead.

The notion of God as the “unmoved mover” is derived from Aristotle, at least so far as Western thought is concerned. The notion of God as “eminently real” is a favorite doctrine of Christian theology. The combination of the two into the doctrine of an aboriginal, eminently real, transcendent creator, at whose fiat the world came into being, and whose imposed will it obeys, is the fallacy which has infused tragedy into the histories of Christianity and {Islam.}

When the Western world received Christianity, Caesar conquered, and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers...The brief Galilean vision of humility flickered throughout the ages, uncertainly...but the deeper idolatry, the fashioning of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial rulers, was retained. The church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar.

There is...in the Galilean origin of Christianity {a} suggestion which does not fit very well with any of the...main strands of thought. It dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world. Love neither rules, nor is it unmoved; also it is a little oblivious as to morals. (Process and Reality, pp. 342-3)

“Everything is Waiting for You” by David Whyte

Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. As if life
were a progressive and cunning crime
with no witness to the tiny hidden
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding
out your solo voice. You must note
the way the soap dish enables you,
or the window latch grants you freedom.
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.
The stairs are your mentor of things
to come, the doors have always been there
to frighten you and invite you,
and the tiny speaker in the phone

is your dream-ladder to divinity.

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

“Pancakes and Process Theology”

Have you ever had to wake somebody up in the morning?

There are lots of ways to do it. In our house, where simply saying “Time to get up!” is never enough, we’ve developed...alternative...strategies.

My favorite is singing camp songs...“Rise and Shine and give God your glory, glory...”

However, my humanist roots sometimes kick in unexpectedly and theological discussions with one’s internal voices are inadvisable before coffee...even for ministers.

So I’ve also used, “Good morning to you! Good morning to you! You look rather drowsy. In fact you look lousy. Is this any way to start a new day?”

Post coffee, I’ve even been known to launch into songs from musicals (Good Morning!, O, What a Beautiful Morning). Sometimes I even play reveille.

If singing doesn’t work, it’s time for plan B, which involves stealing the covers off the bed. Although this usually results in the famous hiding-under-the-pillow counter strategy, pillows, too, can be snatched, leaving the sleeper exposed to the light and cold of day.

If THAT doesn’t work, I usually resort to physically removing the sleeping person physically from the bed. Small people you can lift up and place on their feet. Larger ones, well, the only option is to drag. I’ve learned that it’s better to drag on the top part because if you grab hold of the feet, not only are they stinky, but sometimes the head winds up bouncing on the floor.

All of this is great fun.

But it’s not the BEST way to wake people up. If you really want somebody to get up and get moving, do you know what you should do?

Go downstairs and make pancakes.

As the scent of breakfast wafts into the bedroom, noses start to twitch and eyes open of their own accord! People not only make their way out of bed happily, but if you establish rules like “no

breakfast until you're dressed, including shoes and socks" the whole morning routine unfolds effortlessly and culminates in shiny, happy faces willing to set the table and put out the syrup.

In process theology, God (or the spirit of life, or the creative spirit, or goodness, or love...insert whatever word works for you) God works like the scent of pancakes in the morning, awakening longings deep in the heart, luring not just people but all of creation toward a process of growing and becoming.

The father of Process Theology is Alfred North Whitehead. Trained in Britain in mathematics and science, he had a spiritual bent, as well as interests in educational philosophy and epistemology (which is the philosophy of knowledge and belief).

In the early 20th century, the laws of Newtonian physics were revealed to be insufficient for understanding the universe. New scientific knowledge and advanced paths of inquiry revealed complexity and contradictions. As quantum mechanics emerged, the image of God as divine watch-maker, who set the world in motion and then let it do its thing no longer worked.

First of all, in observing experiments, it became clear that things were not as predictable as they should be. On a molecular, atomic, and subatomic level, it seemed almost as if these particles were choosing whether to follow the rules or not. It also became clear that the act of observing had an effect...changed the results of any experiment.

Coming at things from an epistemological standpoint, Whitehead struggled with the notion that reality is subjective. Descartes' "I think, therefore I am..." doubts the existence of an objective reality outside of our perception of it.

At a cocktail party, someone offered Descartes a drink, and he answered, "I think not." He disappeared.

Taking all of this and quite a lot more besides, Whitehead formulated a metaphysic that more accurately reflected what he saw in the natural world, and what he understood about human nature and the creative spirit.

Process Theology begins with the assertion that the world exists. The universe really is the universe. There's no possibility that it's all some elaborate delusion. Now, notice, there's no way to actually prove conclusively that the universe exists...it's theoretically possible that everything you are experiencing is only a figment of your imagination...but where does that get you? Plus it just doesn't feel right. Whitehead didn't see the point of even trying. So begin with this assertion: the universe exists.

Then ask yourself, what is the universe made of? Well, Whitehead proposes a universe made up of something called "actual entities." We know that organisms and matter are made up of molecules, and molecules are made up of atoms, and atoms are made up of protons, neutrons, and electrons as well whatever holds them together. Protons and neutrons are made up of quarks...and something that holds them together. We have no way of knowing what quarks are made up of...yet.

So to define actual entities, first you have to break matter up into the smallest possible particle. We don't know yet where or even if there is an end...a fundamental building block which isn't made up of smaller somethings...but we don't really need to. Just imagine the smallest particles there are.

Now, these theoretical tiny somethings exist in space but they also exist in time. They are fundamentally temporal somethings. Just as matter can be broken down into infinitely small pieces, so can time...

Take an infinitely small particle in an infinitely brief moment of time, and you have an actual entity. Everything that exists is made up of these actual entities, which organize themselves into quarks, atoms, molecules, cells, plants, animals...larger, similarly temporal bodies Whitehead names systems or organisms or societies. The actual entities that make up the systems or societies or organisms choose to work together in a specific way and in choosing, create the universe as it is.

All of the actual entities and systems are in relationship. Everything has an effect on everything else. That effect might be negligible, or it might be profound. But we are all connected...and so we respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

And no, Whitehead wasn't a Unitarian Universalist.

Perhaps the simplest way to access process theology is to embrace the notion that we are a part of universe of free choosers, a universe that is in the process of becoming what the participants in the universe are choosing to become.

In a very fundamental way, we are our choices.

Our choices define us, and they also define and determine what the universe becomes. We are co-creators of the universe.

Where does God fit in?

For Whitehead, God is a word for the actual entity...in relationship with all other actual entities...that is supreme in seeing and comprehending the complexity of all that is, and supreme in imagining outcomes. God, then, is what keeps pulling the universe forward, pulling it toward life and love and peace and connection, keeping it from descending into entropy, stagnation, and collapse.

God is like the smell of pancakes, luring you downstairs to where you'll be nourished.

The God of process theology isn't in charge. In a universe of free choosers, God can't make anyone or anything do anything...but God pulls on the heartstrings, and activates deeper, life- and love- giving longings.

The God of process theology doesn't make rules. People make rules for a variety of reasons...to get along, to exert power and control, or to provide safety in which the majority can grow. God is morally somewhat ambiguous.

As for the end of the process, God doesn't know how it's all going to turn out. God is not all-knowing. God hopes and lures and loves, but God is in the thick of it, just like the rest of us.

God is powerful and essential to the continuance of life, and God is helpless to actually concretely do much of anything beyond luring the universe toward wholeness, toward ultimate goodness, toward unconditional love.

So if God is an actual entity, what are human beings?

We are made up of societies of actual entities, organized into a society we call the individual self. Individuals are organized into societies of people...which are integrated into the society which is the biosphere, which is integrated into the society of the universe...you get the idea... Everything is connected all the way down to the infinitely small and all the way up to the infinitely large.

The matter is not eternal...just the choices.

Did you know that our bodies are completely reconstituted every seven years? All of the atoms and molecules in our body are changed out. So what gives us continuity? Literally, who we are has no physical link with who we were seven years ago. But the choices we make, the understanding we glean, the experiences and the narrative that we claim as our own, they define the individual.

What are the implications that grow out of understanding the universe this way?

Because our choices are so important, process theology calls us to be very careful in making them.

In making choices, we need to be aware that our actions have an impact on the world around us. We know this is true because the world has an impact on us.

How much of an impact depends on two variables: proximity and intensity. If you imagine an event which takes place very far away, but that is extremely intense...say the tsunami of 2004...we are impacted to approximately the same degree as we are by something which is less intense...say losing a job. In the first case, proximity is low, but intensity is higher. In the second, you have close proximity, but the intensity of the experience is lower. Of course, events which are both proximal and intense, such as losing a loved one, have the largest impact.

Similarly, our choices impact most the people who are closest to us, but the impact ripples out, and the strength of the ripples depends on the intensity of the original experience. In this way, if I tell you about a friend who has been diagnosed with cancer, you feel the impact even though you have never met the person personally.

And so, to varying degrees, the consequences of our choices ripple out in all directions, as do the consequences of the choices everyone and everything else makes. In the interdependent web, touch one part, and the whole web shimmers.

Understanding, in your bones, that everything you do affects everything that is can be almost paralyzing.

The limitations of reason become pronounced. After all, no one can possibly understand fully all of the ramifications of our actions, of our choices. At some point, you have to trust your heart.

If you believe that God is active in the universe, working like the smell of pancakes, instilling longings in our hearts to lure us to the places we need to go, it becomes a little easier.

All you have to do is lean into the longing.

You listen to your heart for the direction life is luring you, for the choices you can make that help in the creation of a world that is more just, more beautiful, and more loving.

Sometimes you'll experience multiple longings. Sometimes they'll even seem in tension with one another. For example, you might feel a longing to tend to the home fires, to spend time with friends and family, to love more deeply the people you are with.

And you might also feel a longing to reach out to people in need, to do your part to help "bend the world toward justice." I'm reminded of the Christmas story in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women, which is such a tender blend of family love and togetherness, with handmade gifts and deep affection and appreciation for one another, and an act of startling generosity, when the girls and their mother agree to give away their Christmas breakfast to a poor family nearby.

I doubt I am the only one in this room who sometimes feels torn between cooking pancakes for my own family and distributing them in the wider world...focusing my acts of kindness and love in where they will be most effective, and broadening my awareness to include larger and larger circles of caring.

But remember that process theology also calls us to find the unity that connects two seemingly disparate events or longings. When we engage the tension, we discover that the dualism is an illusion. What matters isn't where or how we follow our longings for love...but that we follow at all. It's all connected, and we are given the choice to find our own path for a reason.

Each of us is the only person who can be that particular person, the only person who can do the particular tasks we are called to do, become who we are meant to become. We need to trust the process.

Sometimes trusting is hard.

Sometimes the world seems to let us down. People make choices that cause harm. In Whitehead's cosmology, people aren't the only ones...cells make choices that cause harm. A cancer cell chooses to reproduce itself because that's what cancer does...and it causes harm in an intersection of free choosers. Another example: a boy chooses to skateboard into an intersection while a woman chooses to look left for a moment at a dress in a store window, and then cannot brake in time. The boy hasn't chosen anything that is inherently evil. The woman hasn't chosen anything that is inherently evil. And yet the consequences are undeniably tragic.

While it's lovely to be co-creators of the universe, we also have to accept the limits of our own freedom. We can make choices for our selves. We can only influence other people's choices by being in relationship.

And so another task that process puts before us is to articulate and share our stories, the fabric that connects our choices into a coherent whole. To understand our role in the creation, we need to engage in our own search for meaning.

What are the guiding principles of the society of actual identities that we consider Self?

What are the ways we want to act in the world?

What is the legacy we want to leave?

We know that the matter eventually breaks down and is reconstituted into new organisms. We can't know what happens to the particular society of choices that is our identity, but we do know that the choices we make live on. The part we play in the process of becoming that encompasses all that touches everything, changes everything, matters to everything.

As co-creators of the universe, the choices we make become a part of the whole. The legacy we leave lives on, one way or the other.

In this way we are eternal, just like God.

At our ministers' retreats, the elder colleagues take turns sharing their "Odyssey." They tell their whole story, from childhood through retirement. It's an amazing gift, every time. As you hear people articulate their own particular legacy of love, as you hear them share the challenges and frustrations, the losses and the pain, but also the gifts and the learning, the successes and the moments of transcendent joy, you feel yourself a part of their story, their process, and feel them become a part of yours.

As Annie Dillard said, "We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house."

We are the creators. We need one another to abet us in our becoming, and to bear witness to our story.

This world we live in is so rich and complex and beautiful and temporary. If you don't notice what's here, now, in front of you, because you're focused on what was or on what might be, you'll miss the show.

If you don't learn from the people who are with you, you'll miss that part of the story, and you won't be able to retrieve it because the show goes on, and we never come to the same place twice.

If you don't share what is rich and complex and beautiful and temporary about you, if you don't let people know who and why you are and who and why you are becoming, you will be missed on that infinitely large stage.

So rise and Shine and give God your glory!

Your light is needed! Yes, yours! Specifically! No matter where you are in your own process of becoming, you have an essential part to play.

“All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves.”

We're all in this show together, touching and moving apart, leaping ahead, digging in, resting when we need to, changing, becoming, every moment.

The going can feel scary, but remember, becoming isn't about losing yourself. It's about finding who you really are.

“Everything is waiting for you.” All you have to do is wake up.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Liz Stevens at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on March 2, 2008. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)