

Hope in Process
prepared for and presented to
The Ohio River Group,
November 2015,
by the Rev. Yvonne Schumacher Strejcek,
for O.R.G.'s program on "UU Theologies of Sin and Hope"

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*Introduction: "God Weeps"*¹

<https://youtu.be/Zu2ypy609cE>

TRIGGER WARNING: Various forms of abuse and violence are referred to in this song.

Lyrics:

God weeps at love withheld,
At strength misused,
At children's innocence abused.
And 'til we change the way we love,
God weeps.

God bleeds at anger's fist,
At trust betrayed,
At women battered and afraid.
And 'til we change the way we win,
God bleeds.

God cries at hungry mouths,
At running sores,
At creatures dying without cause.
And 'til we change the way we are,
God cries.

God waits for stones to melt,
For peace to seed,
For hearts to hold each other's need.
And 'til we understand the Christ,
God waits.

¹Lyrics by Shirley Erena Murray; Music by Carlton R. Young, © 1996 Hope Publishing Co.; published in *The Faith We Sing*, supplement to *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 1989, hymn #2048. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1990.

In a world filled with beauty and ugliness, truth and lies, integrity and brokenness, suffering, illness, and injustice as well as healing, growth, and thriving, sin and evil as well as goodness, I was asked to explore for our gathering what hope process theology offers us. For me, the core idea in process theology around which everything else turns, including the notion of hope, is God. So let's begin there, with God. "In the beginning," the Hebrew Bible asserts in Genesis, "God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."² In the beginning, and still, the source of all was and is God. God and hope have been in process ever since the beginning. Now if you are one of those UUs who squirms hearing this mention of the G word, respectfully please just wait and hear me out. That God you don't believe in, I don't either, and that's not the God of process theology, which is, rather, the God that weeps, the God that hopes, the God that holds it all, and the God that "brings us hope when hope is hard to find."³

"I find you, Lord," writes Rainer Maria Rilke, "in all things and in all my fellow creatures, pulsing with your life; as a tiny seed you sleep in what is small and in the vast you vastly yield yourself. The wondrous game that power plays with things is to move in such submission through the world: groping in roots and growing thick in trunks and in treetops like a rising from the dead."⁴

God

God is a word, a metaphor, with so much baggage that it is never *ever* heard in some of our Unitarian Universalist congregations, or when it is, in others, it is met with astonished gasps. I myself have been met with gasps from the pews when speaking that word in certain UU pulpits. And in other UU congregations, a growing number I suspect, prayers regularly evoke the tender goodness and healing power of The One, source and destiny of us all, lover of the color purple, to borrow freely from novelist Alice Walker.⁵

The word "God," as our colleague Dick Gilbert has written⁶, is just a three-letter word. "Partner in profanity, companion of the sublime... mystery beyond all knowing or wanting to know, justifier of a thousand horrible deeds and the why of a million-billion acts of love." "The theist's joy, the atheist's foil, the agnostic's doubt." "A simple, deep, dark, light, bright, uptight, three letter word."

² Genesis 1.1-2. The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version, Third Edition. Oxford University Press, Inc., 2001, p.9 of the Hebrew Bible.

³ McDade, Carolyn. "Come, Sing a Song with Me," #346 in *Singing the Living Tradition*. Boston: Beacon Press, UUA, 1993.

⁴ Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*. New York: Modern Library, 1995.

⁵ Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

⁶ Gilbert, Richard. *In the Holy Quiet of This Hour: A Meditation Manual*. Boston: Skinner House, UUA, 1995, p. 25.



Magritte's famous painting of a pipe (the kind you smoke with), the painting that's actually entitled "The Treachery of Images," has embedded in it, right under the image of the pipe, these words: "this is not a pipe."⁷ (It actually says "Ceci n'est pas une pipe.", French for "This is not a pipe.").

Like Magritte's *painting* of a pipe that is not itself a pipe, the *word* God is not God either, and is another great illustration of the treachery of images because of the various ways that God is imagined by we human creatures, some helpful, some hurtful. It is a word that carries a variety of meanings and as a result its use can easily be misunderstood. People make assumptions when they hear that word, sometimes in error. Since God is, among other characteristics, ineffable, then by definition, a word will never be adequate.

In our culture, the word God is used often; we say OMG for OhMyGod dismay in online postings; we say "God bless you" in response to sneezes; our currency officially proclaims "in God we trust"; God's will is invoked by some with too much certainty that God's will mirrors their own. That idea of God can be a source of huge misunderstanding among people as they talk past each other. But I believe the concept of God is foundational in process thinking for other theological ideas that matter, and that there is a way of understanding it that I believe can lead to more – not less – hope, understanding, and peace in our world.

Here's a short poem from the 13th and 14th century German philosopher and mystic Meister Eckhart. He wrote:

Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things.
Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God.
Every creature is a word of God.
If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature – even a caterpillar –
I would never have to prepare a sermon.
So full of God is every creature.⁸

My Own Theological Evolution in Brief, a Journey in Process

In her womanist masterpiece, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, author Monica A. Coleman asserts that "theology is autobiography... intensely personal [yet] cannot be private."⁹ As she suggests, my own theology is autobiographical.

When I was young, growing up UU, my parents (fallen-away Lutherans) told me that there is no such thing as God. I remember feeling seriously deprived because all my friends were taught to believe in God, similar to my belief, when I was a young person, in Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, and the Easter Bunny, all of which my family did embrace – but not God. So as a kid I thought I

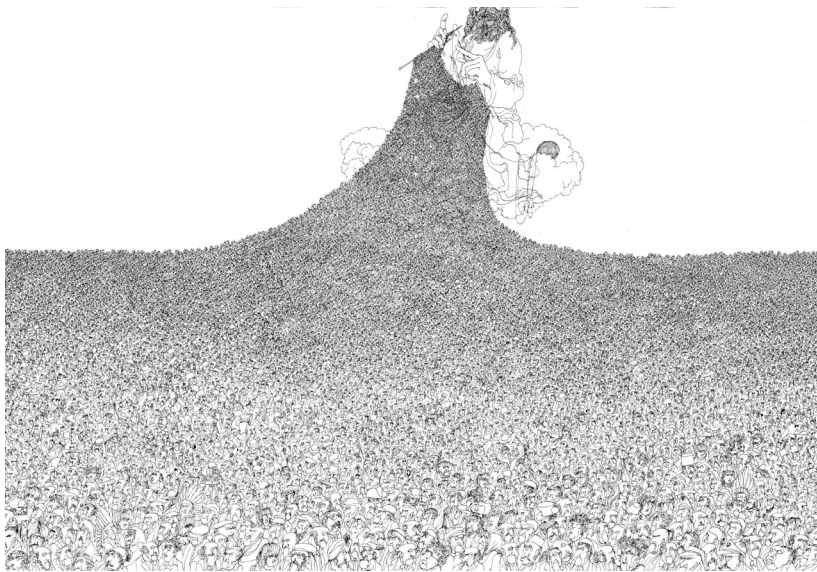
⁷ The source of the image shown is Wikipedia's page entitled "The Treachery of Images," en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Treachery_of_Images, regarding Magritte's painting, *La trahison des images*, currently on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

⁸ Widely quoted in many books; check Google Books.

⁹ Coleman, Monica A. *Making a Way Out of No Way*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2008. From Preface, p. ix.

was missing out on something fun, interesting, maybe even important. But we were atheists, I was taught. So, for example when we said the pledge to the flag at school, my practice was simply not to speak the words “under God.” As a child, I tried my best to follow my parents’ instructions. If they were atheists, then I guess so was I, even if I didn’t understand what it all meant, really. That was my childish faith.

Even without God in my childhood home, of course I became aware of how pervasive ideas about God are in our world, so I continued to think about this God I was forbidden to believe in (even though we were freethinking UUs; do you see the paradox?). After I learned about death, that of those I love as well as my own mortality, “no fair!” I thought (and felt great pain about this) – my friends got to believe in something that felt like it might be comforting, a source of hope, in the face of the frightening oblivion, the nothingness, that death promised me. Somewhere along the way I learned the words to “now I lay me down to sleep,” even though we



God the Knitter

never prayed in my childhood home, and sometimes I’d whisper it to myself in bed in the dark, just in case. But here’s the thing. What my friends were taught, what I thought they believed, actually did not make any sense to me. Some guy in the clouds?!? Manipulating things like a puppet master?¹⁰ No, I don’t think so! My thoughts as a young person, stymied about the meaning of God, were definitely in process.

So I was a curious agnostic for years, a seeker as so many are, open to considering. Now let’s fast forward... to the time when I had become an active lay leader in the Pacific Central District of the UUA in the 1990s, when I learned that UU ministers I admired very much spent their sabbaticals studying process theology. What is that, I wondered.

Considering seminary around 2002 or 2003, I visited a class at Starr King School in Berkeley, California – and what, out of all possible theological subjects, was Professor Rebecca Parker’s lecture focus that day? Process theology and the primacy of joy in our lives – the coincidence of

¹⁰ The embedded drawing, “God the Knitter,” is from Rauch, Hans-Georg, *En Masse*. New York: Macmillan, 1974. Also note, from Psalm 139: 13-14: “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

which, looking back now, is more than a little astounding to me. It was one of many messages I realized the cosmos sent me about the direction of my life, including one memorably delivered to me personally by a Chicago billboard. (Ask me about that billboard later; I'm happy to tell that story again!)

Later, as a seminarian, I learned I was “prehending”¹¹ these messages, using the vocabulary of the granddaddy of process theology, mathematician Alfred North Whitehead. That’s exactly the image of God offered to us by process theology: a power that is the source of messages we perceive as coming from the cosmos, the burning bushes of our lives, luring us towards the good, the beautiful, the new and different, the adventurous and satisfying, the true and the just, a power that in a certain sense *hopes* we will co-create a world in keeping with that vision. These messages are Whiteheadian “propositions”¹² that have luring power for us because of the feelings they evoke in us, motivational as they well up within us. A power bigger than our limited, creaturely selves suggests to us this joy, love, beauty, justice, aesthetics, hope, and that which brings profound satisfaction. Absence of that fulfillment creates yearnings in us, to be resolved in future thoughts and actions just as we long to resolve a seventh chord [play it] into a solid tonic [play it]... just as we long to eat when hungry... just as anger and other intense feelings compel our attention... just as birds must sing ... *Oh my god*, I began to grasp glimmerings of an idea that finally, after all those years of bafflement, began to make sense, unlike the myth of the Big Guy in the Sky on a throne in heaven, wherever that is, like Santa at the North Pole. What’s better, realizing this new idea of God made my heart sing.



Hands from "The Creation of Adam," by Michelangelo

The God of Process Theology
Octavia Butler wrote in her wonderful science fiction novel, *Parable of the Sower*:

*As wind, as water, as fire, as life,
God is both creative and destructive,
demanding and yielding,
sculptor and clay.
God is Infinite Potential:
God is Change.*¹³

Another quotation from Butler:

¹¹ Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition*. Edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: The Free Press, 1978. pp. 18-19 and many other places in this tome.

¹² *ibid*, p. 214 and more.

¹³ Butler, Octavia. *Parable of the Sower*. Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993. Quotation is found at beginning of chapter 22, p.242 in mass market paperback edition.

*Create no images of God.
Accept the images
that God has provided.
They are everywhere,
in everything.*

*God is change –
Seed to tree,
tree to forest;
Rain to river,
river to sea;
Grubs to bees,
bees to swarm.*

*From one, many;
from many, one;
Forever uniting, growing, dissolving –
forever changing.
The universe
is God's self-portrait.¹⁴*

Studying process theology gave me an idea of God expressed very well by those passages. As Dr. Glen Thomas Rideout, music director of First UU Ann Arbor expressed so eloquently in an original poem he shared with that congregation's choir, the Chalice Singers, recently, God is not just in the fingers in "The Creation of Adam" image above, God is also in the space between the fingers.

Process thinking provides a profoundly powerful way to look not just at the idea of God, but also who we really are and why we are here, to redefine all theological concepts, from sin, salvation, and redemption, to the life of Jesus and other prophets, and the trinity, and the point of the religious community. Compelling for me is that this way of thinking about God is consistent (as of course it must be) with scientific discoveries about quantum physics and human perception, and also with the point of artistic expression, which takes on heightened consequence. In process thought, the arts are as essential to life as food and water. Novelty, creativity, justice, and joy are all part of the essential point of life, part of what lures and satisfies us. I found in process theology a source of hope, even elation, no matter what is true in life, no matter the extent of evil, loss, and desolation. Finally, too, I began to understand grace.

We *think* we are separate and substantive, living in the flow of time. Touch your own hand, your own face; think about this. We think this separate solidity is such a "given" that it goes without saying, and maybe there's something wrong with us if we doubt it! We talk about our boundaries and needing our space. We insist on our individual, ego-centered rights. We sometimes feel lonely, separate and alone, and sometimes we do need to be alone for a time, and we do need to understand our own uniqueness, in order to thrive. But that's not the whole truth. Deprived of a

¹⁴ *ibid*, beginning of chapter 25, p.283.

larger vision, we fail to understand and to take our place in the bigger, more reassuring, loving, and profoundly hopeful truth.

A vision of that larger truth is offered to us as the Great Surmise, from our colleague the Reverend Doctor Carl Scovel, who has written: “At the heart of all creation lies a good intent, a purposeful goodness, from which we come, by which we live our fullest, to which we shall at last return. This is the supreme reality of our lives. This goodness is ultimate—not fate, not freedom, not mystery, energy, order, nor finitude, but this good intent in creation is our source, our center, and our destiny...”¹⁵

Our first Unitarian Universalist principle currently affirms the inherent worth and dignity of



Photo Credit: Stefanie Etzbach-Dale

every individual, which is sometimes taken to confirm separateness, uniqueness, and the primacy of the individual. But the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, presented early in the 20th century, then expanded by subsequent writers, thinkers, and artists into a systematic theology, and supported by science, affirms the primacy of the interdependent web. It says we are all a part of an inseparable wholeness, a Oneness. Our individuality does still matter, but in the context of relationality, connection, and responsibility, together, for all of ongoing creation. It is all a bejeweled, intricate web.

Oh.my.god.

Whitehead says, contemporary scientists do too, that we are energy-based events, *not* solid, enduring things. “The actual world is a process, and ...the process is the becoming of actual entities.”¹⁶ “Entities”¹⁷ in Whitehead’s system of thinking are themselves processes, momentary events in time, and cannot be considered in isolation. An “actual entity” is not a person, or an animal, or an ongoing solid thing. “Actual entities are the final real things of which the world is made up.”¹⁸ “Apart from things that are actual, there is nothing—nothing either in fact or in efficacy.”¹⁹ Entities are energy events that happen at the microscopic level as a momentary blip, a process, an experience: here it comes, it’s coming, coming, coming, *becoming!*; in a split second it “concretes”²⁰ like a breaking wave, and *IS*, just for a moment, and then it perishes and is gone. Done. Past. As each entity is in the process of becoming, it prehends what it can from all that is available to be received, to be felt, and all that it is capable of perceiving, of feeling. Each moment builds on all past and all possibility.

¹⁵ Scovel, Carl. “Beyond Spirituality,” 1994 Lecture in Berry Street. Found online here: <http://uuchristian.org/Sermons/BeyondSpirituality.html>

¹⁶ Process and Reality, p.22.

¹⁷ *ibid.* p.18.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.40.

²⁰ *ibid.*, pp.22-24.

Everything is in the process of becoming, even rocks, which hum! Listen to the humming of everything! Our colleague Lynn Ungar wrote “Listen. Every molecule is humming its particular pitch. Of course you are a symphony. Whose tune do you think the planets are singing as they dance?”²¹

The moment of becoming, of condescence, is also a moment of perishing. No sooner does it happen than it is past. It is *all*, always, beginnings and endings, *everything is*, constantly. So there is inherent grief in every moment as it slides into the past. But hope is in the coming of the next moment and in the fact that each perishing opens space for the new becomings, new creativity, and transformation. And perished entities *are not* really gone forever, Whitehead says, but rather are held in objective immortality, held in God, the illimitable Oneness that is what I mean when I say God. In that way all that came before is available to guide future becomings.

Everything is connected to everything else, and everything is wholly holy. Everything is relational. Everything is in a surge of becoming; everything is constantly in transformation. The smallest change has the potential to make all the difference. We, and all living, choosing events, are co-creators, not just of our own little lives, but *of all creation*. So what is it, moment to moment, today, tomorrow, next week, next year, that demands our help? What is it that awaits unfolding? What is really our calling, and why? What is it that we want to assure is our legacy? <Pause. Silence.> Oh my god! Our choices matter profoundly, even our thoughts, for everything else in the world now and to come.

By our becomings we participate in God’s own becoming. We are helping to evolve God! We are part of God’s way of making the wonders of creation happen. UUs like saying that revelation is not sealed – nor is creation itself! ...it’s still happening, still in process. “God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He [sic] is their chief exemplification.”²² God godself is in process. God takes in all condescended events, everything and everyone that ever was and is becoming, and holds all of it tenderly. Part of God’s ineffability, God’s mystery, God’s infinity, God’s omniscience is that nothing else, certainly none of us, mere us, is *able* to hold it *all* as God does. All crime, all good deeds, all tragedy, all beauty, all mercy and compassion, all horror, all love, all history, all dreams, all lies, all truth. Everything, infinitely. In process thought, it all becomes God’s consequent nature²³, that reservoir of all that has ever been. In some significant ways, truth limits what may become; *that’s why it matters what we choose*. This is why we affirm the search for truth and meaning in our principles. It will always be true that slavery and the Holocaust happened. No matter how much some deny it, it seems to be true that human life has caused major climate change on Earth. It will always be true that some of us may have been abused, or abusers. It will always be true that some have lived with oppression and some have been privileged oppressors. The point is:

²¹ Ungar, Lynn. “Boundaries,” in *Blessing the Bread: Meditations*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1996, pp.3-4. Also in her collection *Bread and Other Miracles*. Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse, 2012, p.5.

²² *Process and Reality*, p.343.

²³ *ibid.* All of Part V, “Final Interpretation,” Chapter two, “God and the World,” pp.342-351 is worth contemplation. Section VII of that part, pp350-351 describes the consequent nature of God.

knowing that, then what? What are we called to be and do in the face of what we know to be true? ...and in the face of what God knows to be true even if some of us are deniers?

The biggest view possible of truth and possibility matters and fuels hope. Truth includes Gandhi and Jesus, Micah, Amos, Mohammed and Buddha, the Japanese in Manzanar, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Trayvon Martin in Florida, Terrance Kellom in Detroit, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, and all the other recent killings that have led to #BlackLivesMatter, the immigrants who have died seeking a better life, death row inmates who have been exonerated – it will *always* be true that all of them lived, breathed, walked, talked and taught us something. Now their contributions are all a part of God’s consequent nature. And so are *our* lives, yours and mine; they too are part of the objectively immortal, tenderly held in the heart of God, undergirding forever that which comes later. We contribute to the unfolding of creation with our every action, our every breath. What an awesome responsibility it is to have the gift of life.

How we become determines *what* we become; our “being is constituted by [our] becoming,” Whitehead says.²⁴ This has direct implications for how we choose to spend our time and our resources and how we treat each other. *It matters for eternity.* That, too, is in process and is why our responding to and supporting each other in learning, growing, tending our feelings, and living our callings is an empowering source of hope, of possibility.

Whitehead offers a concept of “width”²⁵ – width and narrowness have to do with how much or how little an entity takes in as a part of the process of becoming, how informed by the past, how perceptive of the nuances of truth, how sensitive to the range of feelings in the world. Taking a narrow or insensitive view of the past limits the possibilities for becoming, so, for example, a table will pretty much always become table in the next moment. And a company’s determination that profit trumps everything else limits other goodness it could create in the world. The more we take in from the past becomings, in guiding our decisions towards our futures, the better we do. This is why we educate ourselves and keep learning. But we will never have God’s infinite knowledge because we are humans with limited capacity. The process God on the other hand is *the holder of It All*, that which was, is, could have been, and forever shall be. IT ALL MATTERS, every bit of it. Combining width with attention to God’s lures, God’s suggestions, and paying attention to our own deepest yearnings and creative instincts, helps us, with our every thought, and breath, and word and act, to move the future towards something that looks less wretched and more like divine. Hopeful. Less evil, more goodness. Heaven on earth is possible. Nothing is predestined; God does not control the future; in fact God eagerly, metaphorically, awaits our choices, hoping, luring, guiding, confirming or showing consequences. Maybe we might imagine, as we heard in the opening hymn, that God weeps when children tragically suffer and die. If God still hopes, holds, lures, and loves, even in the face of what is wrong or evil—and God in Process does—then so may we. From our engagement, our action, our love, our creativity, something good may yet come of it, though we be desolate, swimming in tears of sorrow.

A Whiteheadian Approach to Suffering, Evil, Desolation, and Death

Quoting Whitehead:

²⁴ *ibid*, p. 23. Also p.166: “*how* an actual entity becomes constitutes *what* that actual entity is.”

²⁵ *ibid*, pp. 110-112, and explored further in several other sections of the book.

The world is thus faced by the paradox that, at least in its higher actualities, it craves for novelty and yet is haunted by terror at the loss of the past, with its familiarities and its loved ones. It seeks escape from time in its character of “perpetually perishing.” Part of the joy of the new years is the hope of the old round of seasons, with their stable facts—of friendship, and love, and old association. Yet conjointly with this terror, the present as mere unrelieved preservation of the past assumes the character of a horror of the past, rejection of it, revolt. . . . Each new epoch enters upon its career by waging unrelenting war upon the aesthetic gods of its immediate predecessor. Yet the culminating fact of conscious, rational life refuses to conceive itself as a transient enjoyment, transiently useful.

This is the problem which gradually shapes itself as religion reaches its higher phases in civilized communities. The most general formulation of the religious problem is the question whether the process of the temporal world passes into the formation of other actualities, bound together in an order in which novelty does not mean loss.

The ultimate evil in the temporal world is deeper than any specific evil. It lies in the fact that the past fades, that time is a “perpetual perishing.” . . . In the temporal world, it is the empirical fact that process entails loss: the past is present under an abstraction. But there is no reason, of any ultimate metaphysical generality, why this should be the whole story.

In our cosmological construction, we are left with the final opposites, joy and sorrow, good and evil, disjunction and conjunction – that is to say, the many in one—flux and permanence, greatness and triviality, freedom and necessity, God and the World.²⁶

Someone once said, and it has often been repeated, commonly credited to John Lennon, “Everything will be okay in the end. If it’s not okay, then it’s not the end.” This is one simple way to read Whiteheadian process thought. It may seem bad now but it gets better. (It is also one way to understand how grace addresses evil in our world, providing hope. “Grace happens” affirms the bumpersticker in response to “shit happens.”) The process nature of the world enables us to understand that anything that’s terrible, horrific, painful, evil can become something good.

Rethinking our worldview in process terms for the cultivation of hope means thinking again and again theologically in response to what happens in the world, whether it’s good or evil, right or wrong, happy or sad. Here is just one example; I’m sure you can think of many more drawn from our readings and from our lives. In *Naming the Spirits*,²⁷ the second volume of the Argentinian trilogy I suggested for this year’s reading list, the book opens with the horrifying shooting deaths of a group of *Desaparecidos*, the Disappeared, at the hands of the brutal military junta, the regime that ran Argentina’s Dirty War in the late 1970s and early ’80s. The dead are hastily buried by their murderers in a crude mass grave. “Our story was supposed to end,” a spokesperson among them says in the novel,²⁸ “with the *matanza*, the massacre whose last traces were obliterated as the death squad carefully smoothed the earth with the backs of their shovels.

²⁶ Process and Reality, pp. 340-41.

²⁷ Thornton, Lawrence. *Naming the Spirits*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.

²⁸ *ibid*, quoted from p. 8 of the Advance Edition.

...That night they celebrated in restaurants on Calle Florida, or listened to *milongas* in a tango bar. They drank French wines and made love to wives or mistresses. That night... they believed our story had run out of words. But they overlooked one thing, those soldiers and policemen and politicians who had invented a new verb for our language. As they calmly went about the business of defining the usage of ‘to disappear,’ they overlooked the fact that grief abhors a vacuum. It never occurred to them that even though we were gone we remained alive in the memories of our families. ...[T]he mundane details of our everyday lives ...hadn’t disappeared with us but were transformed into prologues to the untold stories... waiting...for a voice to give them form.” The dead live on; the unjustly killed refuse to be silenced, and the reader hears from them again and again in the pages of this extraordinarily powerful fact-based novel. As we read about them even now, they live on. Of course the deaths of *los desaparecidos* mattered in what came later in Argentina; I daresay their deaths still matter there and will forever, just as the World War II European Holocaust matters still in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, and will forever, too. When I was in Europe myself, I found it inescapable.

I pray we ourselves may be empowered by these and other truths of the horrors of specific evils, to work for better ways so that those who have died did not die in vain. Sweet Honey sings in “Breaths,” “those who have died have never never left... they are in the rustling trees, they are in the groaning woods, they are in the crying grass, they are in the moaning rocks... ’tis the ancestors’ breath when the fire’s voice is heard, ’tis the ancestors’ breath in the voice of the waters.”²⁹ But while their truths are tenderly held in immortality forever, the making of meaning, the finding of hope, the fostering of motivation toward change, is up to those who live on, informed by what we know and what we learn. “America’s liberals and progressives need greater awareness that at the core of social and political issues lie competing responses to the classic questions posed by theology. Effective work for social change requires people of faith who are theologically literate and engaged. [We need to recover] hope-filled religious frameworks that inspired generations of activists to work for women’s rights, racial equality, economic justice, and peace. These frameworks embody reverence for the sacred, nourish community life, carry forward the aspirations of our forebears, and respond to legacies of violence and injustice that harm our bodies and souls.”³⁰ In that response, “hope rises... hope longs... hope remembers... hope acts... hope abides” as we “hold fast to that which is good” and engage the world “in love and struggle”³¹ with all our capacities and open hearts. This is our calling, our responsibility.

Conclusion

From our colleague Sherri Prud’homme and her religious educator companion Laila Ibrahim, both of our Oakland CA congregation, comes this affirmation, adapted into a beloved song that’s now widely used in our tradition:

It’s a blessing we were born.

It matters what we do with our lives.

What each of us knows about god is a piece of the truth.

²⁹ “Breaths” as sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock; lyrics by Birago Diop; music by Ysaye Maria Barnwell; recorded on four Sweet Honey albums.

³⁰ Buehrens, John A. and Rebecca Ann Parker. *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-First Century*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010, Introduction, pp.ix-x.

³¹ *ibid*, pp. xxii-xxiii.

[sung with the addition of the line from Rumi:
“Let the beauty we love be what we do.”]
We don’t have to do it alone.³²

Indeed we cannot in reality do it alone. Dorothee Sölle says it this way: “There is no salvation apart from the whole.”³³ We are part of a system that is much bigger than any of us, infinite in time and in space. The wellspring is the bigger power that nourishes, which loves, which heals, which remembers. There *is* this power in our world – it puts the seasons in the right order, it brings young ones to life, it fixes our broken bones and our broken hearts. It surrounds and holds us; in it we live and move and have our being. We have the choice to support that power or to impede it. We can go beyond the apparent boundaries of our misleading egos, our separateness, to listen, to care, to help someone else. I think of religious community as the place where we can intentionally focus on learning to practice and do this well. When evil happens, as it does, we can choose to aid redemption and healing; we can choose justice and mercy; we can choose reconciliation. We can choose the way of the spirit, and overturn the heartless moneylenders’ tables; we can Occupy Wall Street; we can Stand on the Side of Love; we can continue to affirm that Black Lives Matter; we can stand in front of the tanks going to war (remembering Tiananmen Square, remembering Rachel Corrie) and we can refuse the use of drones that kill children. Even in the face of disasters or horrific events such as 9/11’s attacks or the Katrina hurricane, even in the face of evils such as warfare based on lies, and entrenched racism, and homophobia, the extinction of species, and more (oh so very much evil there is in our world), yet both individually and collectively we have the power to say *no, that’s not right*, and act upon that conviction, with whatever courage it takes. And by so doing we make real our faith, our vision, our collective will to choose the better way, what we might even think of as God’s way, a hope-filled way despite the evils that are real. And then things can change for the better.

Yes, we are all human. We make mistakes. Sometimes in our brokenness or ignorance, we serve evil, we collude with it for benefit, sometimes unwittingly, sometimes willfully, instead of serving goodness. So we need each other and all of nature, all of it the bejeweled, interconnected web, to help hold ourselves to a better way, to learn, to make course corrections and to be accountable to a bigger vision, with oceans of mercy and infinite compassion. May we do our part to make the ideal real. May we remember those who went before and who showed us the way, even as we “revere the past and trust the dawning future more.” May we know we are capable; our hands are God’s hands; our eyes are God’s eyes; *there are no other. We are the heart of God.* We may be limited human creatures whose days are numbered but we have free will and creativity, and we can hold onto the notion that *everything* is holy. What we do matters for all that’s ahead.

In the process of the unfolding of the fullness of time, we can choose, we must choose, we are at our best when we creatively love as we choose – and therein lies the central essence of hope in process. We have capacity and together we have more capacity than we do alone. We can choose

³² <http://www.chalicecamp.org/>

³³ Quoted in Keller, Catherine. *On the Mystery: Discerning God in Process*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008, p. 144.

to remember together the words of the prophets, the psalmists, the wise ones and the brave whose lives provide a beacon.³⁴

May we use well our precious lives of presence, wisdom, and power³⁵, and in the brief time while we live, may we do all we ourselves can to keep hope alive and to assure that our world moves in the direction of sustainable well-being for all of life on Earth. And though all that lives also perishes – including, unbelievably, even we – may we find solace and strength in understanding, as Whitehead says with his final words in his masterpiece, *Process and Reality*, we will “perish and yet live forevermore.”³⁶

³⁴ As for just a few examples: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” ~ Amos 5:24, later quoted by Martin Luther King in “I Have a Dream.” Or David, in Psalm 23, “Yay though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death... surely your goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.” “Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted... blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled,” said Jesus in the beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-12. “You must do the thing that scares you...” said Eleanor Roosevelt, especially if it’s the right thing to do. “Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. ... God’s children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights wondering how this thing is going to come out. That’s the issue. And we’ve got to say to the nation: We know how it’s coming out. For when people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory. ... [though we as individuals may not get there] we, as a people, will get to the promised land!” ~Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And finally, “Let Love Be My Legacy” preached our good, gentle, late friend, Rev. Daniel J. Kane, blessed be his wise and loving soul.

³⁵ Marjorie Suchocki uses this framework – presence, wisdom, and power – as a way of understanding the Christian trinity in process terms, in her book *God Christ Church*.

³⁶ *Process and Reality*, p.351.

APPENDIX ONE: Dick Gilbert's reading in full
Referenced in the paper above on page 2.

God is ...
A three letter word,
Partner in profanity,
Companion of the sublime,
The deepest down darkness in me,
The rainbow wrapped around my shoulder,
The mystery beyond all knowing
or wanting to know,
The poet's literary friend,
The justifier of a thousand horrible deeds
and the why of a million-billion acts of love.
The question as inescapable
as it is unanswerable,
The macro-cosmic mystery
and the micro-cosmic explanation,
The word when there is a desert
with nothing to say,
And the subject of a jungle of books
The without which nothing
and with which what?
God is the theist's joy,
The atheist's foil,
The agnostic's doubt.
God is a simple
 deep
 dark
 light
 bright
up-tight
 three letter word.

from *In the Holy Quiet of This Hour: A Meditation Manual* (UUA, 1995)

APPENDIX TWO: Wholly Holy

Life Goes On, Evolving, Changing, Beginning Again Anew
The Rev. Yvonne Schumacher Strejcek

The woman glows, radiant with light, life, love, and inspiration.
In her warm, strong arms, like a hugely ripe pregnancy,
she holds the whole world, about to be born.

She tenderly cuddles it, carefully rocking it, gently crooning to it,
singing encouragement, singing her heart's yearnings,
deeply and artfully caring the next moment, the next generation, the future,
the entire creative universe, into its becoming.

She is so beautiful. She is deeply, profoundly peaceful.

We are assured "all shall be well."

The truth shall be ever thus:

what we imagine and how we become

that which unfolds from within

and from the connection of each to all

will determine what shall be.

May we so patiently, tenaciously, subversively attend
with wonder, selfless goodwill, and abiding love
all our becomings.

Holy, holy,

Wholly holy.

(inspired by one of Deborah Koff-Chapin's Soul Card drawings; see next page)



from Deborah Koff-Chapin's Soul Cards

APPENDIX THREE: A Selected Bibliography in Process Theology

*these are personal favorites

Foundational

Whitehead, Alfred North; edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. **Process and Reality (corrected edition): An Essay in Cosmology** (Gifford Lectures 1927-28). New York: The Free Press, 1978.

Recommended Books

Artson, Bradley Shavit. **God of Becoming and Relationship: The Dynamic Nature of Process Theology**. Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights, 2013.

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Cobb, John C. and David Ray Griffin. **Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition**. Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976.

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Fiction and Poetry

Hutchins, Christina. **Tender the Maker: Poems**. Boulder CO: Utah State University Press, 2015.

Kimmel, Haven. **The Solace of Leaving Early**. New York: Doubleday, 2002.

Thornton, Lawrence. The Argentina Trilogy: **Imagining Argentina** (1991), **Naming the Spirits** (1995), and **Tales from the Blue Archives** (1997).

Online resources

Center for Process Studies. www.ctr4process.org.

Also a public Facebook group.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ctr4process/>

Fat Soul Café

Public Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/719234491514930/>

International Process Network. <http://internationalprocessnetwork.com/>

Facebook presence: <https://www.facebook.com/internationalprocessnetwork>

***Jesus, Jazz, and Buddhism: Process-Relational Thinking for a More Hospitable World.**
<http://www.jesusjazzbuddhism.org/>

Nature in Process: Novel Approaches to Science and Metaphysics, the 11th International Whitehead Conference, July 25-28, 2017, in the Azores.
<http://whitehead2017.com/>

Pando Populus: process in the world as interdependent ecology.
<http://www.pandopopulus.com/about-pando/>

Process and Faith: www.processandfaith.org (see especially Lectionary Commentaries).
Also a public Facebook group.
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/2244674231/>

Process Philosophy for Everyone: a public Facebook group.
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/processphilosophyandthecultureofpossibility/>

Process Theism, from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-theism/>

Process Century Press (new applications of process thinking)
<http://processcenturypress.com/publications/>