

“Making a Way Out of No Way,” by Karen Quinlan

A Response to

“Hope in Process,” by Yvonne Schumacher Strejcek

Ohio River Group, November 2015

Yvonne, thank you for this beautiful paper. Like process theology itself, its beauty lies in how it draws me in and makes me want to feel whole.

I would like to start with an embodied response. A couple of years ago, I saw a large refrigerator magnet for sale at the UUA Bookstore booth at General Assembly. On it was the affirmation that you referenced in your conclusion, from Laila Ibrahim and Sherri Prud’homme. It stuck with me, and I often use it as part of my UU elevator speech. I’ve also created a simple movement meditation that goes with it, that I would like to offer to all of you:

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.  
We don’t have to do it alone.

I love that this affirmation appears in your paper. When I found it, a light turned on inside me, as I recognized that these four simple statements encapsulated the good news of the Unitarian Universalism I’m so in love with. And it was an example of this thing that happened to me throughout seminary, that still sometimes happens – when someone articulates something I know deep in my heart to be true, but haven’t yet been able to find the words for, sometimes haven’t even recognized it as a truth. This process of recognition and affirmation was integral to my becoming a minister, and becoming a more fully realized human being. And I have learned that this process is an incarnation of the process-relational theology of which you write.

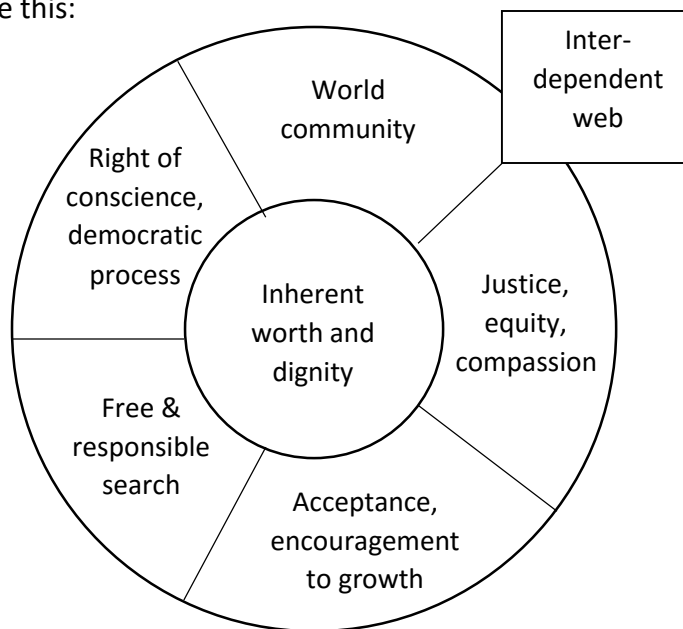
Your paper articulates so many things that I have known to be true. I’ve been flirting with process theology for years, never quite having the time or energy to fully immerse myself in it, and never quite understanding that I’ve been fully immersed in it all my life. I have to admit being pretty intimidated by Alfred North Whitehead! I want to thank you for making his ideas so accessible, for revealing the great beauty and wonder in this understanding of being as becoming.

I’m particularly moved by your description of entities “coming, coming, *becoming!*, in a split second it ‘concretes’ like a breaking wave, and *IS*, for just a moment, and then it perishes and is gone.” The possibility in this, in each and every moment, for each and every thing, is breathtaking. There will be more on this idea a little later in this response.

I'm also moved by the relational aspect of this becoming. I find it necessary to describe my own God concept here. One of the ways that I've described God is as the physical exchanges and the energy moving around the interdependent web of all existence. God arises within us and between us as we create relationship together. There is connection between all of us, and between us and that which surrounds us. That connection is physical, biological, energetic. But connection is amoral, and doesn't move us into creating better possibilities for and with each other. Relationship, the intentional creation of bonds that run deeper than the coincidence of connection, is the state in which we may grow into hope. It is also the core of our ministry. Our visions are co-created with our people as we walk together in faith.

Bernard Loomer, in his 1979 essay "The Size of God," wrote that "If we speak of the ultimacy of becoming, then we must speak to the primacy of relatedness. Becoming may be the more inclusive category, but without the presence of dynamic relationships from which actualities emerge, the notion of becoming would be empty of content."<sup>i</sup>

You write about the "primacy of the interdependent web," which a seminary colleague once told me he envisions like this:



This rendition of the principles, with the interdependent web holding the whole of our individual natures and the ways in which we strive to be together in relationship, has become for me a symbol of the process God.

You write that "God is consistent with scientific discoveries... about quantum physics and human perception..." As an ecologist, this rings so true for me. And as an ecologist and a person of faith, I've come to understand that science and religion are two ways to describe the same universe. But science is the vehicle of connection – it can describe, it can inspire awe and

wonder, and it can open our minds – while religion is the vehicle of relationship. It is in religion that we find meaning, and, as you so beautifully described it, hope and grace.

You mention the womanist theologian, Monica Coleman, just briefly in your paper, and her work is, for me, the next logical place to explore in the search for hope in process. A womanist theology is one that addresses the suffering of black women, which comes from three intertwined sources: sexism, racism, and classism. This makes it a theology of real life, one that directly confronts oppression and injustice, and that offers a way through them. Dr. Coleman says that womanist theologians show that “God cares about the lives of black women and helps them to deal with and overcome these circumstances,” and that salvation isn't always liberation and freedom from all pain and suffering – but “the survival and quality of life, and it requires the cooperation of the world in which we live.”<sup>ii</sup>

Dr. Coleman writes that process theology “explains the constant sense of change in the world and how we exist in the midst of stability and instability.”<sup>iii</sup> She explains it as working like this. God offers us possibilities. We are free to do new things, based on those possibilities and our past. When we do, it changes the way God's vision is played out in the world, and how God relates to us. Our relationship with God and each other is a process, and that process is open. And so, evil is one of the possibilities of our choices – it's built into the structure of the world, and comes out of our freedom to pursue our own ends. And because the process is so relational, choices that produce evil affect us all – supporting the idea that oppression hurts the oppressor.

In womanist process theology, salvation is also a process; Dr. Coleman defines it as “that which makes us whole.”<sup>iv</sup> It is concrete and part of this life; it is survival, justice, and quality of life. It is “making a way out of no way,” in which God offers us the resources to make change, but it's up to us to take advantage of them. The “no way” part of this doesn't mean that a path to salvation appears out of nowhere, but out of places not seen in the past. So making a way out of no way has four parts: there are unforeseen possibilities, human agency, the goal of justice, and a challenge to the existing order. As an example, Dr. Coleman writes about a child abused by her mother, who was abused by her mother – that child has the freedom to decide how to treat her own daughter in her turn, and that choice does not have to be based solely on her family history. It is possible for that child to find the love and support she needs to choose to end that pattern.

There are two important aspects to making a way out of no way. The first is that it's a creative transformation that happens in communities of teaching and healing. It's an activity, a process, in which the teaching and healing occur around the oppressions and injustices of sexism, racism, and classism, and the community is both the vehicle and the goal of that process; there is no salvation unless the entire community is saved.<sup>v</sup> Jesus' ministry, for example, offers us tools with which to move us into salvation: teaching, healing, praying, welcoming, and suffering-with. These are all things that are done in community. The second important aspect to making a way out of no way is learning from the past, from black women's histories with

violence and destruction, and from the lives of the ancestors.<sup>vi</sup> Dr. Coleman says that “we are working toward wholeness when we remember the past, lift up the most creative and life-giving activities, and carry those activities on into our current forms of becoming.”<sup>vii</sup>

I see a very current and relevant application of “making a way out of no way” in the Black Lives Matter Movement as it has evolved in Madison, Wisconsin, where I live. The Young, Gifted, and Black Coalition, or YGB, here in Madison is most certainly a community of teaching and healing. Alongside their work in educating through direct action, they lead teach-ins for all community members, provide training opportunities for African American youth, support the queer and trans community, and host social events for African American families and their white comrades. They began to organize when Michael Brown was killed, but have really galvanized around support for the friends and family of Tony Robinson, a young unarmed Black man who was killed by a police officer in Madison in March. YGB learns from the past, employing analysis of strategies from the Abolitionist and the Civil Rights Movements, and other struggles against oppressions. They acknowledge and take advantage of unseen possibilities, such as forming a highly flexible decentralized leadership, and working with their white allies to determine how our privilege can best be used. Human agency is their focus – they teach people about the issues of racial disparities and police violence and mass incarceration in the hope that people will respond with outrage and motivation to make change. The goal of justice and the challenge to the existing order are the heart of their work.

#### The Young, Gifted, and Black Coalition in Action



Photo credits: Facebook page  
“YGB Ferguson to Madison’s Photos”

When I think of each of these moments in the context of concrescence, that is, the moment of their becoming, I can see clearly all of the moments of unforeseen possibilities, human agency, the goal of justice, and the challenge to the existing order that surround them. I can see the process of this movement and its individuals. And I can see a process God in them, too. A God who is in the power of the voices lifted together and the intention behind them, in the trainer helping people prepare themselves for protest, in the human closeness created by shared pain and determination – a God who luring me into the hope that I see in these images.

Yvonne, you wrote, “*How we become determines what we become.*” This is so important. This is the human agency part of making a way out of no way. We can have power over what we become, simply through our control of how we are, through all of the moments of our lives. Not all moments are as dramatic as the photos I’ve chosen – but they are all moments of becoming in the midst of other moments of becoming. It makes me think of James Luther Adams’ teaching that revelation is not sealed, because there is some revelation at each of these and all moments, that we can choose to pay attention to or not. When we do, as you said, Yvonne, we can find hope and grace – because the moments will continue to become and there will be more opportunities to make a way out of no way as they do.

May it be so. And may we be so.

“Every Little Bit Of It”<sup>viii</sup>

Just beyond my sight, something that I cannot see  
I've been circling around a thought that's been circling round me  
Like the vapor of a song that is just out of ear shot  
I thought I knew the question, but I guess not

There it is just below the surface of things  
In a flash of blue, and the turning of wings  
I drain the glass, I drink it down, every moment of this  
Every little bit of it.

I swam against the tide, I tripped on my own pride  
So I'll try again today, to get out of my own way  
The face was always in the stone, said Michelangelo  
You just have to chip and clear, to see what is already there

There it is just below the surface of things  
In a flash of blue, and the turning of wings  
I drain the glass, I drink it down, every moment of this  
Every little bit of it.

There it is in the apple of every Newton notion  
There it is in the scar healed over what was broken  
In the branches, in the whispering  
In the silence and the sighs  
And the curious promise of limited time

It's true although it's hard  
A shadow glides over the ridge  
And one fast beating heart  
Tries with all its might to live  
And we sense, but can't describe  
From the corner of our eye  
Something nameless and abiding  
And so we keep transcribing

There it is just below the surface of things  
In a flash of blue, and the turning of wings  
I drain the glass, drink it down, every moment of this  
Every little bit of it, every little bit.

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<sup>i</sup> Loomer, Bernard M. 1987. "The Size of God," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, p. 31.

<sup>ii</sup> Coleman, Monica A. 2008. *Making a Way Out of No Way*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Press. p. 32.

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid.* p. 45.

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid.* p. 32.

<sup>v</sup> *ibid.* p. 97.

<sup>vi</sup> *ibid.* p. 101.

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid.* p. 122.

<sup>viii</sup> Lyrics by Carrie Newcomer, from *A Permeable Life*, 2014