

“Life, Breath, Change”
First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo
Rev. Karen Fraser Gitlitz
June 6, 2010

Meditation

Everything has a deep dream
by Rachel Naomi Remen¹

I've spent many years learning
how to fix life, only to discover
at the end of the day
that life is not broken.

There is a hidden seed of greater wholeness
in everyone and everything.
We serve life best
when we water it
and befriend it.
When we listen before we act.

In befriending life,
we do not make things happen
according to our own design.
We uncover something that is already happening
in us and around us and
create conditions that enable it.

Everything is moving toward its place of wholeness
always struggling against odds.

Everything has a deep dream of itself and its fulfillment.

¹ Adapted by Meg Wheatley in *Finding Our Way* (2007), p. 230.

Hymn #1009 “Meditation on Breathing”

Melody Lyrics:

When I breathe in, I breathe in peace.

When I breathe out, I breathe out love.

Sermon “Life, Breath, Change” Karen

In our children’s story this morning, Spider Woman wove the stars, plants, and animals, including humans.² All things, all beings are held in relationship to all others by a web so sensitive it responds to the gentle touchdown of a fly.

In the Taoist worldview, “name’s the mother of the 10,000 things.”³ There is an ebb and flow between being and non being as the forms of this world come into being out of formlessness, are named, have their time of living, and then return back to the unnamed.

Myth stories and accounts of origins reveal to us our beliefs about reality, and suggest to us how we might go about living in this world.

If our basic understanding of reality is that “it’s a dog eat dog world” our actions will reflect this belief. And if we believe that reality is essentially good, that there is an original blessing, then our actions will reflect that belief.

In the early 1920s, stunned by the implications of Albert Einstein’s ideas on our understanding of reality, British mathematician Alfred North Whitehead set about re-thinking religion for the modern era.⁴

His ideas rested on two foundational claims about reality and religion:

First, he said that human beings have an urge to live in harmony with their understanding of reality.

² By Kenneth Collier, in *Our Seven Principles in Stories and Verse* (1997).

³ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Ursula K. Le Guin (1997).

⁴ Alfred North Whitehead’s foundational book is *Process and Reality* (republished 1978).

Second, he said that reality is in process. Life is change, becoming, growth, and decay. It is not fixed or static.

Whitehead's philosophy came to be called process philosophy, because it took the processes of life so seriously.

Charles Hartshorne, who picked up Whitehead's ideas, looked at some of the traditional attributes ascribed to God – unchanging, all-knowing – and decided that they didn't make sense.⁵

If reality is changing and growing, and is affected by chance, so too must God be affected by these things as well. If we take change, growth and chance seriously, we cannot believe in a God who laid everything out according to plan, knowing what would happen through time.

***When I breathe in, I breathe in peace.
When I breathe out, I breathe out love.***

[Congregation is invited to sing one verse . . .]

Process theology is unique amongst 20th century theological movements in that it was developed by both theists and religious naturalists. It is also unique in having a strong Unitarian Universalist connection. Theist Charles Hartshorne's wife Dorothy was a Universalist and he attended Unitarian churches at several times in his life. Religious Naturalist Henry Nelson Wieman was raised Presbyterian, switched to Congregationalism, and then in retirement joined a Unitarian Universalist congregation. So it is no surprise that many Unitarian Universalists find process theology to be congenial to their ways of thinking and being!

The theist and non-theist approaches to process theology are best seen in their understanding of change and possibility. How does change happen? If all things are coming into being, and are influenced by their past moments of being, how do new things come about?

⁵ For Charles Hartshorne, read *Divine Relativity* (1948) or *Reality as Social Process* (1971).

Religious naturalists believe that the processes that some call God are entirely explainable through reference to natural phenomena. We will never have a complete understanding of reality—there is always more to know—therefore our religion should have a meaningful way of incorporating this aspect of our knowledge, without having to make reference to the supernatural.

For Wieman, the term ‘God’ stood for those processes that produced creative good—the larger good that we participate in, and in doing so, are transformed. What generations past called God was understood by Wieman as a way of expressing our dependence on processes outside of ourselves. We are not entirely self-contained, rather we are radically dependent, and often scared to admit it.

This larger good, the Creative Good, is not something that arises from one individual, but from the creative engagement of several people, or new ideas. Wieman called this process creative interchange.

Process theists, on the other hand, do find it useful to name God, but their God is not that of traditional theism. They are panentheists, understanding the whole world to be “in God’s body” the way a cell is within and the same time is a part of the human body. God’s body is a metaphor, of course, they are not imagining a body like a human body. They are describing an experience, their sense of being immersed in God, and also aware that God is more – God is larger than themselves.

For process theists, God is the divine lure. We are within God, and at the same time, God contains the possibilities of our yet-to-be. God is what meets us at the edge of becoming. God is the lure that pulls us out of ourselves and into the next phase of becoming, into new life.

The Process God is radically influenced by what we humans do – the divine grows and develops with us because we are all within God. As new species emerge, as new possibilities arise, God grows and develops with them.

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[Congregation is invited to sing one verse . . .]

Some ways of understanding beginnings emphasize the “clean break”; we “start fresh”; we begin with a clean slate, or perhaps a revolution.

Other beginnings are harder to pinpoint. Where does the oak tree begin: with the seedling? With the acorn sprouting open, or falling from the tree? With the parent tree, which produced the acorn?

What about me. Where does my story start? With my coming into consciousness? With my birth? With my parents birth? With the beginning of the human story?

The first creation story in the book of Genesis begins with “in the beginning”:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.⁶

But in the late eleventh century, the Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, known as Rashi, observed that common understanding of this most famous first sentence did **not** follow Hebrew grammar.

The first word in the first book of the Bible is “Bereshit.” Usually translated as “in the beginning” it is actually a subordinate form, better understood as “in beginning” or “when beginning” NOT “the” beginning.

The story of God separating the light from the dark does not happen at the beginning, it just begins, in the middle of the story as it were.

Rashi put it this way:

⁶ King James Authorized Version

At the beginning of the Creation of heaven and earth, when the earth was without form and void and there was darkness . . . God said Let there be . . .⁷

Ever since the rise of Hellenic influence on Judaism and then Christianity, God was understood to have created the world *ex nihilo* “from nothing.”

Now we see that the story starts part way along. As do all our stories.

Process theologians like Catherine Keller pick up Rashi’s interpretation of Genesis as “a” beginning, rather than “the” beginning and find in it a story that places more emphasis on the description of the spirit breath hovering over the deep as the place of creative possibility than in defining a particular moment in time. This is the “big birth” rather than the “big bang.”⁸

Perhaps, suggests Keller, beginnings are less about finding an origin and more about opening out, following the Old Teutonic *be-ginnan*, meaning “to cut open” or “open up.”⁹

The possibilities of the void are endless. They are also scary—this is not the world of order and neatness, but the messy world filled with surprises, where things go bump in the night.

If Whitehead’s second thesis is correct, and reality is in process, and life is change, becoming, growth and decay, then the deep, the chaos out of which existence emerges is an important resource for us in times of change.

For religion isn’t just about beliefs and the actions inspired by belief, it’s about a certain type of experience or way of living. In the words of a process theist, we need to experience ourselves as God breathing.¹⁰ Or in the words of a process religious naturalist, we need to experience our own participation in the creation of the creative good.

⁷ Analysis and quotation from Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (2003), p. 9. This is not an easy read, but repays careful study.

⁸ Keller, xv.

⁹ Keller, xv.

¹⁰ Jay McDaniel, *Living From the Center: Spirituality in an Age of Consumerism* (2000). This is an excellent introduction to process theology by a Buddhist-influenced Christian theologian.

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When I breathe out, I breathe out love.***

[Congregation is invited to sing one verse . . .]

In times of change, when the ground shifts underneath our feet, and everything seems to be spinning round, we are reminded that we are co-creators of the good. There are multiple possibilities in front of us. In order to see them, we need to slow down, breathe in time with the universe, and listen to what others have to say.

This is not as easy as it sounds. If I truly believe that we are each co-creators, then I need to acknowledge that my own ideas and efforts are not sufficient. I need others. I need to listen to others.

I need to be willing to be disturbed. For that is the sign that other perspectives are present.

I forget this of course. We all do. When things slip sideways I grasp to hold on. When things begin to fall apart I attempt to shore them up, to build more moats and walls to keep my sand castle safe from the incoming tide.

The tide is there to remind me, though, that there is a larger perspective. The tide reminds me that there are larger forces at work, if I'm willing to look and listen. To breathe and to open up. There are always possibilities present. It may be that this time, I need the help of the person—or people—beside me.

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[Congregation is invited to sing one verse . . .]

We return to Rachel Naomi Remen:

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We uncover something that is already happening
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Everything is moving toward its place of wholeness
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Everything has a deep dream of itself and its fulfillment.

Amen. Blessed be.