

FROZEN IN TIME

Last week I talked about change; our resistance to it and how we might become a little less fearful. Today I want to examine the theological basis for change and how it relates to Unitarian Universalism.

About a year ago New York Times columnist, Tom Friedman, wrote a column devoted to reasons for us to end our addiction to oil. This isn't a new theme, but a particular phrase in his column caught my attention – **frozen in time**. Friedman was talking about the so-called stability of the Middle East dictatorships where Western and, yes, Asian attitudes have treated the Middle East “as if it were just a collection of big gas stations”. He said, “These attitudes, enabled the Arab world to be insulated from history for the last 50 years – to be ruled for decades by the same kings and dictators.” He goes on to talk about the deficits of education, freedom, and women's empowerment that resulted from the stability of the kleptocracies.

Insulated for fifty years. We Unitarian Universalists celebrated our 50th anniversary last year. I wonder if we, too, are frozen in time. We're still struggling to define who we are and articulate it to those outside our gates. Unitarian Universalism has been a denomination for 51 years, and our congregations still look much the same as they did in the 1960s – minus children. Our worship style hasn't changed – really since the 1700s -- except that the sermons have gone from 2 hours to 20 minutes tops. Most of us seize up when anyone utters the words ‘multi-media’ or ‘social networking’. We have a lot of the characteristics of a people frozen in time.

To tell you the truth, I could be comfortable with staying frozen in time. I like my position in the dominant culture and the comfort and security and insulation it affords me, and believe me, I don't want to lose it. I don't think you do, either. But stasis isn't an option for Unitarian Universalists. The seventh principle of our free faith – the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part -- references our foundations. It references process theology. In a nutshell, process theology proclaims that everything in the universe is interconnected – like Indra's Net – and it doesn't stand still. The universe isn't frozen in time. The universe is in a constant process of motion and change. Since we are part of the universe, it follows that we, too, are in the process of motion and change whether we like it or not.

Process theology speaks of a Force -- God or the ultimate mystery – that is profoundly affected and changed by what we human beings do to one another and to the creation. The nature of this ultimate mystery is creative-responsive love, urging all of existence toward creative transformation. It speaks of ultimate reality as creative process, a long, long series of events-occasions – all of which are interdependent upon each other -- not in the next life, but in the midst of this one.

I want to read Rev. Rebecca Park's description of process theology's God-related reality:

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“You can picture it like Indra’s net. Indra’s net is an interconnected web of countless strands, and at every intersection there is a jewel drop of water, and that jewel drop reflects the whole. If you can picture this bejeweled net – like an intricate spider web covered with dew – just do one more thing in your mind’s eye. Picture this web lasting only for an instant; then it blips out of existence and in the next instant it reappears only it isn’t exactly the same as the previous moment. It is slightly different. In each moment the whole is configured in a different way, and over time – over a series of blips – the net appears to be in motion – shimmering or undulating. These shimmers are people running, tides moving, comets soaring, grass growing, suns burning, rock eroding. And in the people running around there are emotions flowing, thoughts forming and passing, things remembered, things forgotten, and all of it is the cosmos, in an every-changing pulsation of becoming and ceasing, become and ceasing, becoming and ceasing....”

While conservative theology often presents God as immutable, as having formed an unchangeable will for all that occurs, a progressive theology declares this static God of classical theism is dead. Hear that again. In our progressive theology, *the static God of classical theism is dead*. In process theology God is always interacting with creation. God’s nature is relatedness with creation. Why? Because the Creative Force endowed each thing in the universe with the Creator’s initial aim. What is that aim? In the words of process theologian John Cobb, it is “to actualize the best possibilities open to it, given its concrete situation.”

Process theology – the idea of being in a continuing process of effecting change and being changed – undergirds and informs our Unitarian Universalist principles, especially the respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The four high priests of process theologians are Alfred North Whitehead, Henry Nelson Wieman, Charles Hartshorne, and John Cobb, Jr. All of them use the term “God” to speak of an overarching reality beyond any group’s conception of that reality. These four people are the developers and early articulators of process theology, which embrace several concepts.

First, God is **not** omnipotent in the sense of being coercive. The divine has a power of persuasion rather than coercion. Process theologians interpret the classical doctrine of omnipotence as involving force, and suggest instead a forbearance in divine power. "Persuasion" in the causal sense means that God does not exert unilateral control. The angry, judging, punishing, omnipotent, omniscient God of classical theism that so many people are reacting against has no place in the Unitarian Universalist firmament .

The second concept of process theology is the affirmation that the cosmos we experience through our senses is real. While it does not deny an unseen reality beyond that provided by our senses, the universe we experience through our senses is also real, not an illusion. This is where

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it departs from some oriental philosophy. Reality is made up of serially-ordered events, which are experiential in nature. These events have both a physical and mental aspect. All experience is important and contributes to the ongoing and interrelated process of reality.

The third concept states that the universe is characterized by process and change carried out by the agents of free will. Self-determination characterizes everything in the universe. We are presented with possibilities that would lead us into the new, but we decide.

Related to self-determination is the question of why there is evil. If God does not have all controlling power, the potential for evil is in the very structure of things. In the view of process theology, evil exists because with the arrival of humans also arrived a true capacity for self-determination. And the capacity for self-determination brings with it an increased capacity to knowingly form ourselves in such a way as to make ourselves objectively destructive elements in the environment of other humans and the earth as a whole. In John Cobb's words, "increasing the freedom of the creatures was a risky business on God's part. But it was a necessary risk, if there was to be a chance for greatness."

This brings us to the subject of responsibility. The staggering consequence of process theology is we cannot avoid our responsibility for the consequences of our actions. Satan does not make us do evil, and God cannot prevent us from doing evil. We bear sole responsibility. Furthermore, the consequences of our actions are eternal.

A fourth concept states that because God interacts with the changing universe, God is changeable (that is to say, God is affected by the actions that take place in the universe) over the course of time. However, the abstract elements of God (goodness, wisdom, truth, justice, beauty, etc.) remain eternally solid. This is linked with Dipolar theism, which is the idea that God has both a changing aspect (God's existence as a Living God) and an unchanging aspect (God's eternal essence).

Finally, on the subject of death, Charles Hartshorne believes that people do not experience *subjective* (or personal) immortality, but they do have *objective* immortality because their experiences live on forever in God, who contains all that was. Other process theologians believe that people do have subjective experience after bodily death. So the jury's still out on death.

You may well ask if the result of all this process is disorder and chaos? Instability. Not according to Whitehead. Order, rather than being defined as something stagnant, is, for Whitehead, "the refusal of the deadening influence of conformity and the tendency toward new forms and ordered novelty."

I embraced process theology with the fervency of a born-again Christian. What I understand of it is completely consistent with my experience of the universe and of the divine.

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So between my study of process theology and my awareness of the decay of the social order, I have had to re-evaluate my lust for stability in the face of the inevitability – in fact, the sacredness -- of change.

Implicit in all this talk of process theology is the notion of transformation – changing something into something else. Whether process theology is a valid lens for you depends on how you view your own life experiences. But I'm sure all of us can agree that there have been changes in our lives that we didn't predict. The way we reacted to those changes transformed us into who we are right now. So if you share my preference to be frozen in time out of a sense of fear of the unknown I have news for you. You've already been transformed. You've already gone through the process of change. I say this to you as individuals, but also to you as the UU Fellowship of Marion County community.

Change, grounded in love, is a process definition of humanity. Process theology is a hopeful theology, framing the idea of change as an ultimately positive thing. For process theology the future is truly open. To be part of the interdependent web means that we have opportunities to break out of our ruts, to see all things differently, to imagine what has never yet been dreamed. We decide what to choose among many possibilities. Unfortunately, being frozen in time isn't one of our possible choices. May it be so. Amen.