

“It’s a Process”
Rev. Kimberley Debus
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Text as Prepared

Reading – “Remember” by Joy Harjo

Remember the sky that you were born under,
know each of the star's stories.
Remember the moon, know who she is.
Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the
strongest point of time. Remember sundown
and the giving away to night.

Remember your birth, how your mother struggled
to give you form and breath. You are evidence of
her life, and her mother's, and hers.
Remember your father. He is your life, also.
Remember the earth whose skin you are:
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth
brown earth, we are earth.

Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their
tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them,
listen to them. They are alive poems.
Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the
origin of this universe.

Remember you are all people and all people
are you.
Remember you are this universe and this
universe is you.
Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.
Remember language comes from this.
Remember the dance language is, that life is.

Remember.

Sermon – It’s a Process

There is something a little bit special in the moment when a conductor hands their choir a new piece of music. As the scores get passed around, there’s a buzz. “have we sung this?” “I don’t know it” “Oh, I love this composer” “how does this go?”

And as you get your copy, you look at it, look for your part, examine it.

Some of the music's potential is already there – depending on how well you read music, you can see the weaving of parts, and perhaps building of tension, and how the themes combine to make a whole.

As you begin to rehearse, you begin to hear its potential too – as folks find their notes, you hear hints of what the composer has intended. The more you sing it, the more you find the lush passages and the clever rhythms, and as your knowledge grows, so does the beauty of the piece.

But rarely does something miraculous happen.

And when it does – well, you write sermons about it, for one thing.

But when it does, you realize that the miraculous isn't in the notes on the page – it's in the singing.

I first got to sing this miraculous moment in seminary eight years ago, and then five years ago in the General Assembly choir. It is a short piece by Norwegian composer Ola Gjeilo called “Ubi Caritas,” or “where charity is” – we know those words from the Taizé song found in our teal hymnal *Singing the Journey*. Gjeilo's choral piece was inspired by another gorgeous setting of the text by Maurice Duruflé, as well as Gregorian chant.

And the piece begins simply, with high voices in unison, then lower voices joining, then breaking into full harmonies.

(first 25 seconds of the piece)

Many choral pieces begin this way – it's a familiar form, and feels comfortable..

But then... 29 measures in... as the lyrics in Latin offer this phrase “may we love each other with a sincere heart”... this happens:

(center 20 seconds of the piece)

the voices all come together on the same note – not the same pitch in different octaves, but to one... single... note...

and then there is a breath... a rest...

... mystery... shows up....

...another phrase then repeating that text, their hearts now changed by their connection....

With new complexity....

... and then ...the voices complete the song with a glorious amen,

(final 15 seconds)

... leaving the audience and the singers uplifted, satisfied, and changed.

God – the divine – the mystery – something shows up in that moment – the voices coming together, the space between.

In theory, yes, it's written on the page. But the moment doesn't happen on the page. The moment happens in the doing. In the creating. In the relationship between the voices. In the relationship between sound and silence. In the process.

This is at the heart of what's known as process theology – the idea that the divine is not separate and apart from us, but is part of us, in relationship with us and we in relationship with all.

Long before there was a name for it, we see these ideas in the writings of the 19th century transcendentalists – in this passage from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Oversoul":

"Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds. As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul where we, the effect, cease, and God, the cause, begins.

"I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine. There is deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us...

"The soul's health consists in the fullness of its reception. For ever and ever the influx of this better and more universal self is new and unsearchable. Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.

"When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love."

It is love. Echoed in our Universalism – the idea of a loving god who does not want to punish us but wants us to do good in the world.

It is affirmed in our long-held belief in the goodness and progress of humanity; we find it in Unitarian theologian James Freeman Clarke's affirmation of the "the progress of humankind onward and upward forever." And John Dietrich, considered the father of religious humanism, spoke of a 'cosmic theism, which "interprets God as the indwelling power in the universe rather than an individual, separate power."

These ideas show up in our historical Unitarian and Universalist theologies and are what lead us to our understanding that it is in how we treat one another that matters, and that there is always more to know – or to quote James Luther Adams, "revelation is continuous."

So by the time the term “process thought” emerges in the 1920s, Unitarians and Universalists are already experiencing and expressing the healing power of connection and relationships, the human potential for good and healing.

Now the scientifically-minded among us are going to like this next bit – because process thought starts with Albert Einstein.

More specifically, it begins with a British mathematician named Alfred North Whitehead, who was fascinated with Einstein’s work in quantum physics, where we see that everything is in motion; everything – from the biggest bodies of mass to the tiniest quark, is in motion; it turns out that everything we thought was fixed, stable, and solid, is actually vibrating, changing, and shifting. Whitehead realized that this didn’t just apply to the physical world, but to the metaphysical world as well, and he developed a philosophy that proposed that events - not matter - are the discrete base of reality. Essentially, the core of Whitehead’s philosophy is “if it seems static, don’t trust it.”

Soon, process philosophy found a home in theological circles; Charles Hartshorne and John Cobb realized that if everything was an ever-changing event – then surely God and all of creation was equally ever-changing. Instead of an immutable God – above us, creating the rules of nature but not in nature; this God is as mutable as the quark – at once a vibration and a particle. This God – like us – is always being created, is always creating, is always happening; this God – like us – is eternally becoming. This God – like us – can’t be simply defined as any one thing, and is in everything.

The mechanics of process theology – much like any theology, really – gets pretty quickly into the weeds of the kind of academic speak that made me glad I only had to take one class on systematic theology.

But if process teaches us anything, it’s not the words on the page that matter any way. Just like the Ubi Caritas, it’s in the doing, the living, the relating.

Simply put, all things are in deep relationship to one another. Every moment that we engage with each other and the world, we change. The world changes. And that mystery beyond us – the universe, the collective unconscious, the infinite all, the divine, God – that changes too, because we are in deep relationship to the universe and it with us. Everything living is always becoming.

In process thought, time is not linear; instead, it is unfolding in many directions all at once, each new moment ripe with possibility. In that eternal now, we are constantly becoming. Each new moment presents us with all that has been known, offering a chance to glimpse all possibilities, inviting us to creativity and positive choices.

And this works, because the first moment – the big bang – was a positive event. All of the forces of nature are about attraction and order – even the makeup of the universe itself is a little more yes than no, a little more order than chaos, a little more matter than anti-matter.

And it is the yes that persuades us to yes again. To love again. To goodness again. In process

theology, much like Universalist theology, God Is Love, and that love is expressed in a faithfulness toward creation, that god is with us for our good and seeks to persuade us toward love.

This God of process theology lives in the spaces between – in the breaths – in the relationships between others. This relational God is perhaps the most relational reality of all. Human choices to hurt others hurt God. And maybe that is what evil is – when we make choices that hurt others. Process theologian Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki suggests that “In positive choices, we blend our own interests with the interests of the wider communities within the world. In negative choices, we secure our own interests against all others. Process thinking affirms that God calls us beyond violence toward communities of well-being.”

Okay, that’s a lot to think about, and I’ve not even really scratched the surface yet. I’ve been captivated by process theology for a decade now and I am still trying to puzzle it out.

But what I know is this: When I first encountered process thought a decade ago, I got excited, because I discovered that there was a name to the theology I already believed, without ever knowing such a thing existed. And apparently, I am not alone. UUs all over are realizing that this is the narrative imagery of God that many of us understand intimately.

Process thought aligns with our Unitarian belief in human potential and reason as our way toward truth and meaning; it aligns with our Universalist belief in universal goodness and love, which propels us to do good in the world.

We see process in our principles and sources too – from the free and responsible search for truth and meaning – which, as we know, always changes us – to the interdependent web of all creation, which includes us – to the way we celebrate our direct experience of mystery and wonder. And we are persuaded by goodness to affirm peace, justice, dignity for all, compassion, and equity.

And in this way, the call of our principles becomes even stronger. Process invites us to act, to make something happen, to find the divine in all things, to seek the mystery of connection, to do a little better, a little more good, always becoming. We are compelled by this loving, relational way the world works to turn our principles into our practices, to love the hell out of this world, to build the beloved community, to work for justice, and equity, to seek liberation for all.

Not just freedom, but liberation.

At General Assembly 2020, the Commission on Institutional Change published their report, *Widening the Circle of Concern* – in which they call for a shift in our collective theologies to Liberation; namely, what does it mean to view *how* we are Unitarian Universalists and how we understand our principles and sources when we consider not just freedom from constraints and our fairly common reliance on self-reliance – to considering those both in and outside our congregations and their collective liberation from poverty, bigotry, and oppression.

When we change our view from “how am I free from constraint” to “how are we liberated from oppression” we understand the power of Unitarian Universalism to be about the tide raising all boats, to help create a world where all of us truly are free, to actually build the beloved community described in Dr. King’s dream. When we change our view, we understand the power of Unitarian Universalism to affirm that none of us are free until all of us are free. That’s liberation.

Process theology helps us with the how of liberation. How do we create this world? Through our relationships. Storytelling. Learning from our experiences. Learning from others. Engaging in life. Noticing what happens when we connect – not just between us but around us. Holding multiple truths and building a new way. Creating. Affecting change. Allowing ourselves to be changed. Giving not just from our wallets but from our very hearts and spirits. Always in flux, always becoming.

This idea of God – the mystery of all existence – existence itself – is not isolated or selfish. No one is an island. We are all connected. In the words of author Octavia Butler, “All that you touch You Change. All that you Change Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God is Change.”

Let us be a people of change. A people changed by love. A people changed for love ... and hope and liberation.