

Why Do Birds Sing?

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*"It is important to ask what Wordsworth found in nature that failed to receive expression in science.
I ask this question in the interest of science itself." —Alfred North Whitehead*

Imagine a *theological* system of understanding the cosmos — one that highly regarded, very *au courant* physicists respect. Imagine something beyond post-modern constructs, that academic minds can agree on to engage new conversations. Imagine something working as a model for *everything* — from human systems to mathematics. Imagine that this great Unified Theory of Everything offered us new possibilities because it radically honored diversity and allowed everything, even particles, something like freedom and consciousness.

For me, all roads lead to process thought. Process theology. Maybe I just don't understand philosophy enough to think critically, but from the level at which I do observe life, it seems that we are onto something big: a starting place for new metaphors for the cosmos, new answers to the great questions of meaning and — most importantly as we reframe who we are in creation — a deeper and deeper connection with and concern for the earth itself. Gaia.

The seventh principle of our own Unitarian Universalist tradition actually says it all. "We respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Think about this

statement. It doesn't direct us to a pyramid or an ascending hierarchy. It doesn't conjure ideas of individuals required to agree or move together in the same way, at the same time. It points us toward an interrelated field where we belong and are shaped because our very existence is interwoven. We are who we are because we are all in this together. You've heard me say that a few hundred times. In fact, all of the boundaries of everything are illusion. We're in this messy soup of being, and we are all together.

For this reason, process theology is sometimes called process relational theology. The happy news is that scientific exploration helps us in our search for religious meaning. The other happy news is that whether or not we are scientists or scholars or philosophers, we can know process thought through our own intuition. That's why we began today with Wordsworth and William Bryant Logan*, both of whom offer us an experience of touching the eternal and the universal.

Alfred North Whitehead, considered the father of process thought, was a mathematician, famous for Principia Mathematica, written in 1900. Here is a little taste, in his own words, of his view of the nature and philosophy of mathematics: "...The ideal of mathematics should be to erect a calculus to facilitate reasoning in connection with every providence of thought, or external experience, in which the succession of thoughts, or of events can be definitely ascertained and precisely stated. So that all serious thought which is not philosophy, or inductive reasoning, or imaginative literature, shall be mathematics developed by means of a calculus."

Whitehead is not an easy read. Talented process scholars like Rev. Joy Atkinson admit that they simply let his language flow over them like poetry, occasionally bringing a bright moment of clarity. Philosophers like Henry Nelson Weiman interpret his work and give us easier access to process thought. I myself can't even understand Weiman. Instead I read Rev. Bruce Southworth about Weiman. A book like At Home in Creativity gives me glimmers of understanding. But, those glimmers are worth a great deal.

*This service began with two readings: an excerpt from "Tintern Abbey" by William Wordsworth, and "Reflection" by William Bryant Logan

The best-known process scholar right now is John Cobb, who recently retired from Claremont School of Theology. I met him while I was a student up on Holy Hill in Berkeley. What I understood from his address was that human beings are evolving and moving through various stages of learning and becoming. Dr. Cobb was hopeful that we are transitioning from Homo economicus — being fixated on our individual economic wants and needs — and moving toward a new state of being, where our priority will be the care for our environment and each other. He said that if we don't make that transition, there will be no other transitions for hominids to worry about. You see, our theology does shape how we live in the world.

Within our denomination, Charles Hartshorne is the most famous process thinker. Early in his life he decided against the philosophy of materialism. Materialism is the philosophic view with which most of us grew up. Materialism asserts that inside atoms the universe is made of infinitesimal particles that are lifeless. Hartshorne came to believe, as modern physics has proved, that there is no "material" here at all, but inside the insides of all the stuff of our universe, inside all the things we experience, there is not a jot of matter at all but rather tiny intermittent blips of something like energy. Inside of what we call "matter" is an "occurrence." I've called it energy, but it is less tangible than energy. Whitehead called it an "actual event." Nothing is actually, discretely separated from anything else. Nothing has a boundary. Nothing can be understood except as it moves with everything else and affects everything else. At the quantum level, we could even think of these "actual events" as consciousness.

Now think about this statement by Rev. Gary Kowalski: "To believe in God is to believe that something somewhere is not stupid." That's a juicy statement. It would be great to have a circle worship and simply sit with that phrase and then talk about it. "To believe in God is to believe that something somewhere is not stupid."

And from physicist Nils Borg: "The universe is not only stranger than we suppose, it is stranger than we CAN suppose."

What caused the Big Bang? Why do we have something instead of nothing? Maybe we can call all of it "God." The Sufis who go into rapture about that oceanic feeling of belonging may be experiencing this interconnected flow of actual occurrences. The Hindus who speak of the moment of enlightenment report something that seems to be just this. Christ consciousness? Perhaps exactly this.

A way to grasp a bit more of this in your own experience is to play the "I am that, too" game.

Observe the world. Observe other people and their interactions. Observe inanimate things. Observe the most foreign thing you come across on your journey and say to yourself, "I am that, too." "All boundaries are illusions." "Tsam Tsvas Tvat." "I am that, too." That banana slug. I am that. The street person sleeping off a bad night. I am that, too. The buds on the roses preparing for spring. I am that. Walk and look and say it over and over with your full attention. Realize that you are not material stuff at all. You are made up of events. You have no real boundaries. Who you are is infinite and eternal. Light and dark. Beautiful and not so beautiful. Although, in the right slant of light, so much is beautiful.

Everything is events interacting in creative, novel ways. Yes, novel ways. Not predictable ways. Nothing is always the same. Not formulaic. Not by immutable laws. Subatomic particles change behavior when we look at them, remember? What doesn't have consciousness? What is not alive? Perhaps they are not self-reflective. I mean, how would I know? But alive.

Dr. Charles Harsthorne was an ornithologist. Always a profound observer of the world, he shifted from strictly scientific work into the realm of philosophy. Trained by the scientific method to see carefully. To compare and contrast. To be careful and to measure and to eliminate mere speculation as far as possible, he was struck by the observation and finally came to believe that his beloved birds sang because they had emotions. He believed that birds sing — sometimes, at least — because they love to sing. Within the world of science, this is a remarkable thing to assert.

If you believe that birds sing because they want to sing, not merely because they are attracting a mate or calling to others for safety or food, the universe changes.

Our model of the universe has changed many times. From Aristotle until the Middle Ages, people thought of earth as an impure land existing under Heaven, where pure ideals were timeless and everlasting. Everything existed for the benefit of people, including the earth and the heavens. Now we are saying that there is not a hierarchy at all. Nothing exists just for the benefit of anything else. We are all mixed up together in an astonishing soup of life.

From a 2003 UU World article by Rev. Gary Kowalski on Hartshorne:

In his autobiography, The Darkness and the Light, the philosopher Charles Hartshorne relates an early religious experience that took place when he was a soldier stationed in France during the First World War. On a small ledge, located a few feet under the edge of the great chalk cliffs that faced the English Channel, the young man liked to sit and think, not daydreaming about wine or women or battle or any of the other preoccupations of military men, but reading William James' The Varieties of Religious Experience and thinking about the nature of ultimate reality. Perhaps James, who once defined "religion" as "what one does with one's solitude," was right in this particular instance, for it was in this isolated spot, with only the wheeling gulls for company, that the future theologian had two pivotal experiences that would shape all his later career.

"I had been thinking of certain aspects of my life that seemed discouraging," remembers Hartshorne. "These somewhat gloomy reflections were interrupted by a simultaneous multitude of shrill sounds." Looking to his left almost vertically down to the bottom of the cliff, he saw a school playground filled with shouting, laughing French children. The contrast was enlightening. "Suppose my own life is unsatisfactory," he thought. "So what? I am a tiny fragment of human life. The rest of it is not all unfortunate or wretched. Nothing compels me to think of myself miserable rather than others — those children — happy. Never since then," writes Hartshorne, "have I allowed myself to identify, unless briefly, the question, Is life good and beautiful? with the question, Is my life now good and beautiful? And I have not wavered in the two convictions that there is some minimal good, beauty in all life, including my own, and that what finally matters, even to me, is the life of the Whole, the Something that includes me, outlasts me (save as I contribute myself to it), and contains more good than I can distinctly imagine."

Hartshorne's other religious experience occurred as he was looking across and up the valley, at the wide, scenic landscape. He says he had been thinking about the question of

mind and matter and pondering the dualistic hypothesis that these are two irreducible kinds of reality: an outer world, governed by blind and unthinking forces, and an inner world of thought and emotion. But the rolling terrain, its vibrant greens and earth tones, its serenity and calm, convinced him otherwise. He realized, he says, that the landscape he beheld was itself endowed with feelings, was sensitive, as restless and filled with nameless stirrings as he himself.

If you are still attentive at this point, you may be shocked to think that Hartshorne believed that the landscape itself had feelings. The landscape was living. Now I immediately see the dilemma of drawing the line between what has feelings and what does not. Even among the animals. Where do we say feelings cease to exist or matter? Only humans have feelings? Only humans and dogs? What about sea urchins or microbes? My experience has been that if I am enormously attentive, the line of demarcation moves further and further away. I haven't ever found the line and I am willing to say that it doesn't exist. But a landscape? Surely a landscape has nothing like sentience about it. And yet....

There was an evening camping by a river in the shadow of a very large mountain. I was sitting, being with the mountain and the growing dark, and two lines of poetry kept running through my head. One from Wendell Berry: "He goes dark into the life of the hill." I felt something true in that. "He goes dark into the life of the hill." I was both peaceful and awed and connected in a way that I am not usually aware of. "She goes dark into the life of the hill." It did feel right.

The second line was from the Chinese poet Li Po. "We sit together, the mountain and I, until only the mountain remains." "We sit together, the mountain and I, until only the mountain remains." Well by golly, I have had the experience too of the life of the mountain and my connection with it.

Most of us have had such an experience of being small but connected to something grand and radiant. Today I say such experiences offer us glimpses of the process of which we are a part, and, while the particular moment fades, we are left changed.

What else can be said regarding the God of process? Hartshorne himself wrote thirty books on it. It is hard to single out just a few things at the end of this sermon. I decided to mention two attributes. One is that this new God is neither omnipotent nor immutable.

Imagine for a while: this *God* is constantly becoming. Every event is creative, not determined. *God* is not all-powerful or unchanging. *God* is the great flow of all, the Tao perhaps, the soup itself.

And, *God* remembers. *God* feels with us, suffers with us, experiences joy with us and never forgets. All of our behaviors have consequences, and *God* remembers to the ends of infinity. We cannot be lost or left behind or forgotten. We are forever held in *God*. Astonishing. It would not be wrong to call this *God* "love." Because of the relationality of this model, it would not be wrong to call this *God* "love."

Taken out of context these statements seem archaic! Yet, to me here, through this lens of process theology, they are fresh and new.

When I say at the end of the service, "we are never alone," I believe it is from this sense of connection that I speak. We are all in this together and we can never be lost. Although I forget and remember and yet forget again, I believe that the deep truth of our inter-connection holds us. Holds everything. Holds every one of us in a love that will not let us go.

Blessed be.