

Wrestling with God (Taos Congregation)

God is Dead. I saw the headlines. It was a scandal of course. Meant to provoke us into some engagement with our belief system. "God is Dead." It is a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher.

Of course Nietzsche is dead too. Since 1900. And for the last ten years of his life, he was clearly suffering from mental illness. Some say it was tertiary syphilis. Others suspect it was the suffering of a soul that systematically fought believing in something.

At the great risk of over-simplifying, I do in fact agree with old Friederich's pronouncement about God. The God that most of us were taught about, that we grew up with, is dead. That all-knowing, all-powerful male God, who was terribly jealous and vengeful and created levels of hell to torment us, his children, for all eternity, that God was never real.

Even apart from all of the horrible meanness, there were other flaws. Philosophers have tried throughout history to figure out how we can have both free will and an omnipotent god and evil.

Does God create and then step back so that we can have choices?

I mean, you simply can't have omnipotence, benevolence, the Holocaust and free will.

What do we make of a God who would allow the kind of suffering that is routine upon this earth? Natural disasters: the wanton destruction of life that seems to be nature's way. And the even more haunting destruction that people cause to other people.

How do we reconcile God and bad things happening to good people? To innocents? What do we make of it when those who are deeply committed to leading moral and ethical lives lose what they need for basic survival?

If there is any kind of personal, omnipotent God, how can such tragedy be part of our lives?

There is a haunting tale of Jewish men meeting in Auschwitz, a death camp. The subject of their conversation is God's allowing the Holocaust. How could this extinction of people happen? Not only people, but the Chosen People? Where was God in that suffering?

According to the story, the men argued for hours, trying to make sense of the atrocities visited upon them. Finally, it was concluded that God was guilty of misconduct. God was guilty of abandoning his children. God, who had promised to be constant with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, had ignored the Holocaust. God had failed.

Then someone noticed the time and the men began their evening prayers.

Surely we too live with mystery and unanswered questions and a need for some sense of being anchored somewhere in space and time and meaning.

Any ordinary concept of God we experiment with has a challenge embedded in it instantly. The dilemma of omnipotence and the fact that suffering exists. Without omnipotence, what kind of a God is it? Well, there are some newer answers to that old question in “process theology.” I’ll say more on that later.

Our concept of God shapes us, and I believe that all of us have one . . . even if it is one that we reject intellectually. We will believe in something, as our hymnal reading says. Ask an unbending atheist the question, “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in” and stay tuned for an interesting conversation.

I can’t imagine any self-reflective person who is not wrestling with ideas about meaning, for which the name “God” can be a placeholder.

What about those haunting questions, "Why is there something instead of nothing?" Or, "What started this particular cosmos rolling?" Or, "What comes after the edges of all the universes?"

I don't think this conversation is ever really over. Like every other great conversation there is always a new facet, a new possibility, a new construct that can offer something juicy to our lives, perhaps as a moral guidepost, perhaps as a source of meaning.

I am willing to back off if you have read all of Alfred North Whitehead. Until you tell me that you have wrestled that great philosopher and theologian down to your point of view, I declare that you are not yet finished with your final exams.

Whitehead, who died in 1947, was a British mathematician, logician and philosopher best known for his work in mathematical logic and the philosophy of science. He wrote a landmark three-volume work with Bertrand Russell, "Principia Mathematica", and contributed significantly to Twentieth Century logic.

During his time at Harvard from 1924 onward he worked toward a comprehensive metaphysical system, which has come to be known as process philosophy.

In his book, "Process and Reality", he introduced the idea that there is no "there" there in the atom or the universe, and that the elemental "thing" is not a thing at all but an "event." He called this an actual occasion. In Whitehead's view, an "actual occasion" is not an enduring substance, but a process_of becoming.

If you followed any of that, then you have either been doing your homework in quantum physics or you have an intuitive grasp of process theology. Process theology overlaps with physics.

But let's turn to the more common images of God. There are at least four different concepts in our culture.

The first describes a being "out there", separate from the world and us. The Watchmaker God this idea is sometimes called. This God created the watch, or the world, and then stepped back to let it run. This God

made the parts, but takes no hand is how things turn out.

The watchmaker God fixes the problem we encounter because there is suffering in the world. We do not have to blame this God.

Another name for this is supernatural theism. God is supreme to and outside of nature. If you conjure the idea of a remote sky God somewhere up there, out there beyond all we know of creation, a God who is not affected by our suffering or special requests, you can be called a supernatural theist.

This kind of God leads to the dis-enchantment of the world. God is way out there. What is here is ours to use. The universe is made up of stuff, and since we are the obvious top of the pyramid of stuff, we are free to make use of all the other stuff.

That's clearly not good for our planet, the earth.

Then there is a second kind of God modeled after ancient kings in Israel. God is imagined as a “super king” ruling with fierceness. When the ancient Israelites came down out of the Judean hills, and clusters of people began to farm in the valleys, rulers developed whose main tasks were the protection of the land and, only secondarily, the people.

The work of these kings was not public works but protecting boundaries. Now exaggerate the qualities that would be important to that kind of work and you get a tough, protective God, who rules with an iron hand and the threat of punishment. This God shows up commonly in the early books of the bible. If bad things happen, it is because we failed to follow the rules. Bad things are a punishment. God is just, but willing to lay waste to whole cities and all the animals if his rules are not obeyed.

If bad things are a punishment, we are left with an unsolvable, terrible problem about loss and suffering. If you are suffering, you must be out of favor with God.

Now, there are too many people who are good yet who suffer disease and loss, for us to accept this. I’m afraid

our fundamentalist neighbors are pretty much stuck with this magical interpretation.

Out of that "God as Judging King" construct comes the idea that prayer can change the course of one's life. It is possible that God will respond to prayers and change his mind. If you are suffering, and you pray sincerely, and your friends pray with you, the punishment may be lifted.

I hate where that leaves us when we have diseases or losses. In addition to the losses, we are asked to believe that we were out of favor and being punished. No wonder it used to be an embarrassment to have cancer.

Another God concept is something like a spirit that is in all things. This God, or Gods plural, animates everything. There is God in the trees and God in the stars and so forth. These gods may be experienced by connecting with each thing individually. Pantheism it is called. "Pan" meaning "everything." Each thing has its own God-spirit. The world is filled with magic.

Wicca honors this God-spirit.

The Gods of Pantheism are not separate from the universe but are emergent in everything around us. Different faces of God are visible in each creation. It is versions of these Gods we often meet in tribal religious expressions.

I'm guessing most of us have from time to time had a sense that a tree has a kind of consciousness. Or perhaps we know comfort by returning to a particular large rock. Perhaps lying flat on the earth has brought us peace in a time of terrible loss. In those times, we may be connecting ritually in a sort of dance between the object and ourselves as actors.

I hope that you have had such a sense of connection, whatever you call it, whatever you make of it.

I personally have never had a sure sense of what was living and what was inanimate. Imagine my delight when I learned that physicists have the same difficulty. Inanimate objects may just have a slower form of animation but are not without some kind of energy that

we could, perhaps, call consciousness. Think of it: rock consciousness.

One of the healing possibilities of this kind of theology is that we can have an experience of something rather like energy outside of ourselves on a scale that we can take in. We can feel intimately connected.

I have a wonderful friend, a Unitarian Universalist minister who has an elaborately detailed Hindu god tattooed on her hip. Ganesh, the elephant-headed god of new beginnings. Her theology is sophisticated and expansive, but she knows that she needs a more concrete visualization of that which is beyond naming.

Ganesh is her doorway into that other world. I get it. I can count on a similar connection with mystery by being in a forest, especially at night. I love the darkness, when my own boundaries disappear and my sense that I am part of the forest is enhanced.

Now expand pantheism into yet another image of God: God is here in our midst and includes everything and is more than everything. A kind of non-material

ingredient and the cause of all things. The universe is in God. God is larger than all of creation. Everything has God spirit and God spirit is the animating spark in all things. This idea is called panENtheism or, alternatively, process theology.

Now we are back to Whitehead. And Henry Nelson Weiman and John Cobb and our own Charles Hartshorne.

So, why does it matter? If we don't live with a judging God, who is going to punish us for eternity? If the best we can ever do is lead the best life we can and help other people in all the ways that we can, what difference if we do it in the name of God or humanism or just "ethics?"

I can only point to my own answer. I want to belong. Belong in my life and in the universe. When I think of my place in the family of things as being part of a living system, and when I believe that what I do with my own small life inside that system matters to the whole, then I am sometimes willing to use God language for that feeling of connection. You might not need to. For me it conjures up good possibilities that were hidden in

my more hard-core rationalist period.

A new possibility generally seems a good thing.

It has taken a lot of years to get over my own scar tissue enough to want to reclaim any God language. Why wake up that old dead guy who caused so much suffering?

Well, I find that I just don't want to surrender "God talk" to the small of mind and hardened of heart. I'm not good with any fundamentalist notion of how things are, but I still long for answers to "Why anything?"

I like the feeling that I belong here and that the universe is affected by my life. The universe described in the conversation about process thought is a bit more "homelike" than the universe of mechanistic cause and effect. We are products of processes which can partly be explained by science, but the relationships that I have are important in ways that science has not yet explained.

Really, process theology is about our first and last principals writ large. Every life has worth and we are all part of the interdependent web. It is not other than those two principals, and it reinforces my commitment to living more purposefully awake. It helps me to claim more profoundly our interconnection. How I live my life within this network of mutuality may have greater magnitude than I previously imagined.

Charles Hartshorne, the Unitarian theologian, ornithologist, and process theologian came to believe that birds sing for gladness. He asserted that ultimately life should be about "joy."

I God is Dead. I saw the headlines. It was a scandal of course. Meant to provoke us into some engagement with our belief system. "God is Dead." It is a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher.

Of course Nietzsche is dead too. Since 1900. And for the last ten years of his life, he was clearly suffering from mental illness. Some say it was tertiary syphilis. Others suspect it was the suffering of a soul that systematically fought believing in something.

At the great risk of over-simplifying, I do in fact agree with old Friederich's pronouncement about God. The God that most of us were taught about, that we grew up with, is dead. That all-knowing, all-powerful male God, who was terribly jealous and vengeful and created levels of hell to torment us, his children, for all eternity, that God was never real.

Even apart from all of the horrible meanness, there were other flaws. Philosophers have tried throughout history to figure out how we can have both free will and an omnipotent god and evil.

Does God create and then step back so that we can have choices?

I mean, you simply can't have omnipotence, benevolence, the Holocaust and free will.

What do we make of a God who would allow the kind of suffering that is routine upon this earth? Natural disasters: the wanton destruction of life that seems

to be nature's way. And the even more haunting destruction that people cause to other people.

How do we reconcile God and bad things happening to good people? To innocents? What do we make of it when those who are deeply committed to leading moral and ethical lives lose what they need for basic survival?

If there is any kind of personal, omnipotent God, how can such tragedy be part of our lives?

There is a haunting tale of Jewish men meeting in Auschwitz, a death camp. The subject of their conversation is God's allowing the Holocaust. How could this extinction of people happen? Not only people, but the Chosen People? Where was God in that suffering?

According to the story, the men argued for hours, trying to make sense of the atrocities visited upon them. Finally, it was concluded that God was guilty of misconduct. God was guilty of abandoning his children. God, who had promised to be constant with a

mighty hand and an outstretched arm, had ignored the Holocaust. God had failed.

Then someone noticed the time and the men began their evening prayers.

Surely we too live with mystery and unanswerd questions and a need for some sense of being anchored somewhere in space and time and meaning.

Any ordinary concept of God we experiment with has a challenge embedded in it instantly. The dilemma of omnipotence and the fact that suffering exists. Without omnipotence, what kind of a God is it? Well, there are some newer answers to that old question in "process theology." I'll say more on that later.

Our concept of God shapes us, and I believe that all of us have one . . . even if it is one that we reject intellectually. We will believe in something, as our

hymnal reading says. Ask an unbending atheist the question, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in" and stay tuned for an interesting conversation.

I can't imagine any self-reflective person who is not wrestling with ideas about meaning, for which the name "God" can be a placeholder.

What about those haunting questions, "Why is there something instead of nothing?" Or, "What started this particular cosmos rolling?" Or, "What comes after the edges of all the universes?"

I don't think this conversation is ever really over. Like every other great conversation there is always a new facet, a new possibility, a new construct that can offer something juicy to our lives, perhaps as a moral guidepost, perhaps as a source of meaning.

I am willing to back off if you have read all of Alfred North Whitehead. Until you tell me that you have wrestled that great philosopher and theologian down to your point of view, I declare that you are not yet finished with your final exams.

Whitehead, who died in 1947, was a British mathematician, logician and philosopher best known for his work in mathematical logic and the philosophy of science. He wrote a landmark three-volume work with Bertrand Russell, "Principia Mathematica", and contributed significantly to Twentieth Century logic.

During his time at Harvard from 1924 onward he worked toward a comprehensive metaphysical system, which has come to be known as process philosophy.

In his book, "Process and Reality", he introduced the idea that there is no "there" there in the atom or the universe, and that the elemental "thing" is not a thing at all but an "event." He called this an actual occasion. In Whitehead's view, an "actual occasion" is not an enduring substance, but a process_of becoming.

If you followed any of that, then you have either been doing your homework in quantum physics or you have an intuitive grasp of process theology. Process theology overlaps with physics.

But let's turn to the more common images of God. There are at least four different concepts in our culture.

The first describes a being "out there", separate from the world and us. The Watchmaker God this idea is sometimes called. This God created the watch, or the world, and then stepped back to let it run. This God made the parts, but takes no hand is how things turn out.

The watchmaker God fixes the problem we encounter because there is suffering in the world. We do not have to blame this God.

Another name for this is supernatural theism. God is supreme to and outside of nature. If you conjure the idea of a remote sky God somewhere up there, out there beyond all we know of creation, a God who is not affected by our suffering or special requests, you can be called a supernatural theist.

This kind of God leads to the dis-enchantment of the world. God is way out there. What is here is ours to

use. The universe is made up of stuff, and since we are the obvious top of the pyramid of stuff, we are free to make use of all the other stuff.

That's clearly not good for our planet, the earth.

Then there is a second kind of God modeled after ancient kings in Israel. God is imagined as a "super king" ruling with fierceness. When the ancient Israelites came down out of the Judean hills, and clusters of people began to farm in the valleys, rulers developed whose main tasks were the protection of the land and, only secondarily, the people.

The work of these kings was not public works but protecting boundaries. Now exaggerate the qualities that would be important to that kind of work and you get a tough, protective God, who rules with an iron hand and the threat of punishment. This God shows up commonly in the early books of the bible. If bad things happen, it is because we failed to follow the rules. Bad things are a punishment. God is just, but willing to lay waste to whole cities and all the animals if his rules are not obeyed.

If bad things are a punishment, we are left with an unsolvable, terrible problem about loss and suffering. If you are suffering, you must be out of favor with God.

Now, there are too many people who are good yet who suffer disease and loss, for us to accept this. I'm afraid our fundamentalist neighbors are pretty much stuck with this magical interpretation.

Out of that "God as Judging King" construct comes the idea that prayer can change the course of one's life. It is possible that God will respond to prayers and change his mind. If you are suffering, and you pray sincerely, and your friends pray with you, the punishment may be lifted.

I hate where that leaves us when we have diseases or losses. In addition to the losses, we are asked to believe that we were out of favor and being punished. No wonder it used to be an embarrassment to have cancer.

Another God concept is something like a spirit that is in all things. This God, or Gods plural, animates everything. There is God in the trees and God in the stars and so forth. These gods may be experienced by connecting with each thing individually. Pantheism it is called. "Pan" meaning "everything." Each thing has its own God-spirit. The world is filled with magic.

Wicca honors this God-spirit.

The Gods of Pantheism are not separate from the universe but are emergent in everything around us. Different faces of God are visible in each creation. It is versions of these Gods we often meet in tribal religious expressions.

I'm guessing most of us have from time to time had a sense that a tree has a kind of consciousness. Or perhaps we know comfort by returning to a particular large rock. Perhaps lying flat on the earth has brought us peace in a time of terrible loss. In those times, we may be connecting ritually in a sort of dance between the object and ourselves as actors.

I hope that you have had such a sense of connection, whatever you call it, whatever you make of it.

I personally have never had a sure sense of what was living and what was inanimate. Imagine my delight when I learned that physicists have the same difficulty. Inanimate objects may just have a slower form of animation but are not without some kind of energy that we could, perhaps, call consciousness. Think of it: rock consciousness.

One of the healing possibilities of this kind of theology is that we can have an experience of something rather like energy outside of ourselves on a scale that we can take in. We can feel intimately connected.

I have a wonderful friend, a Unitarian Universalist minister who has an elaborately detailed Hindu god tattooed on her hip. Ganesh, the elephant-headed god of new beginnings. Her theology is sophisticated and expansive, but she knows that she needs a more concrete visualization of that which is beyond naming.

Ganesh is her doorway into that other world. I get it. I can count on a similar connection with mystery by being in a forest, especially at night. I love the darkness, when my own boundaries disappear and my sense that I am part of the forest is enhanced.

Now expand pantheism into yet another image of God: God is here in our midst and includes everything and is more than everything. A kind of non-material ingredient and the cause of all things. The universe is in God. God is larger than all of creation. Everything has God spirit and God spirit is the animating spark in all things. This idea is called panENtheism or, alternatively, process theology.

Now we are back to Whitehead. And Henry Nelson Weiman and John Cobb and our own Charles Hartshorne.

So, why does it matter? If we don't live with a judging God, who is going to punish us for eternity? If the best we can ever do is lead the best life we can and help other people in all the ways that we can, what difference if we do it in the name of God or humanism or just "ethics?"

I can only point to my own answer. I want to belong. Belong in my life and in the universe. When I think of my place in the family of things as being part of a living system, and when I believe that what I do with my own small life inside that system matters to the whole, then I am sometimes willing to use God language for that feeling of connection. You might not need to. For me it conjures up good possibilities that were hidden in my more hard-core rationalist period.

A new possibility generally seems a good thing.

It has taken a lot of years to get over my own scar tissue enough to want to reclaim any God language. Why wake up that old dead guy who caused so much suffering?

Well, I find that I just don't want to surrender "God talk" to the small of mind and hardened of heart. I'm not good with any fundamentalist notion of how things are, but I still long for answers to "Why anything?"

I like the feeling that I belong here and that the universe is affected by my life. The universe described in the conversation about process thought is a bit more “homelike” than the universe of mechanistic cause and effect. We are products of processes which can partly be explained by science, but the relationships that I have are important in ways that science has not yet explained.

Really, process theology is about our first and last principals writ large. Every life has worth and we are all part of the interdependent web. It is not other than those two principals, and it reinforces my commitment to living more purposefully awake. It helps me to claim more profoundly our interconnection. How I live my life within this network of mutuality may have greater magnitude than I previously imagined.

Charles Hartshorne, the Unitarian theologian, ornithologist, and process theologian came to believe that birds sing for gladness. He asserted that ultimately life should be about “joy.”

In Process thought, we are, all of us and everything in creation, existing in a system of mutual care and relationship.

Your life matters. Your life affects everything. How you choose to live, how you define and live your morality, how you contribute to this world has significance beyond your imagining. Your gifts are unique and important.

All our lives are precious and important. All relationships interacting in the cosmos, all the events of time and space, all everything is and continually creates the God of process.

n Process thought, we are, all of us and everything in creation, existing in a system of mutual care and relationship.

Your life matters. Your life affects everything. How you choose to live, how you define and live your morality, how you contribute to this world has significance beyond your imagining. Your gifts are unique and important.

All our lives are precious and important. All relationships interacting in the cosmos, all the events of time and space, all everything is and continually creates the God of process.