

# “The Beauty of Creative Events”

a Sermon by Rev. Doug Inhofe  
given at the Unitarian Congregation of Taos  
Taos, New Mexico

July 17, 2022

*Opening Words: “Invocation,” by May Sarton*

*Reading: “The Lanyard,” by Billy Collins*

*Closing Words: “The Silken Tent,” by Robert Frost*

*Blurb about the sermon in the Newsletter:*

Our sense of our worth, of being fully human, is a consequence of our social recognition. Ideally this process is reason based: “we’ve all talked, and there’s a consensus on values.” Simple enough, until someone asks, “what does God say about values, about who is recognized?” Recognition becomes power based, supplanting a world of reciprocal recognition, creating injustice and distress. The way back relies on humankind’s capacity to create good, to create meaningful lives through creative, conversational exchanges. Some theorists stop there, which is quite far enough. Others go beyond, calling the processes—these creative events—God. If they save us, from whatever our distress, it works!

/ / /

/ / /

The ultimate question today is, “what is the source of human good?” As in some scary movie, the answer is perhaps closer at hand than you might think.

Let me start my story at the beginning. Imagine that you’re the only person on earth, and have always been. Imagine there’s no loneliness, because you’ve never worked up the idea of another person. Wonder, while you’re imagining, if commitment and loyalty and love could exist—if you could *even conceive of them*

. . . for there would be no opportunity for a relationship. And finally ask what your sense of “good” might be, ask if your sense of it would be solely the personal comfort of being momentarily sheltered and fed. Indeed, even the concept of beauty, if it ever could occur to you, would likely encompass nothing more than that kind of personal comfort, limited as it is.

But the point is made. I imagine we already sense intuitively that our values are derived today from our relations with other people. Morality springs from our deep pasts, as members of small tribes, where loyalty was essential to the group’s survival, so our tendencies to helpfulness and constancy would be rewarded . . . you could sit nearer the fire, nearer the food, and further from the wolves. *The birth of values begins.*

There are of course strong leaders, to protect the tribe . . . and some who prefer their personal comfort arranged by others, and some became warriors and then royalty, and some deem themselves beyond the need for reciprocal kindness but can, instead, simply demand what they want . . . for they are, they say, different from us, divine and divinely inspired, and in turn they enlist priestly interlocutors to explain the rules to the lesser: “here’s the truth, live with it!” *The birth of power-driven, top-down religion is born.*

I don't mean to sound too certain or too unforgiving here. But I recall once a large billboard, one I passed often, depicting a newborn child, and the copy above it said, "God has a plan for you, come find out what it is." Followed by the church's address. If you accept there's a preordained plan, off you go, looking to God for the answer. After all, how else can you weather the inexplicable forces pummeling your life—after all, there's the devil, and there're all the other people, so the one source to trust—the one said to be "good"—must have the answer. *The will to believe is born.*

It really *is* tough to imagine that we've got the answers on our own, that we can build, from the bottom up . . . that we can say, these are our values, here's where they lead us, here're the models we create with them for our governance and conduct. But I believe we've got the answers. *And I believe the process to reach them is knowable.*

One of my favorite theologians, Gordon Kaufman, wrote a book called "God the Problem." The title says a lot. In it, Kaufman introduces what he's said elsewhere, which is that "'God-language' has its roots in [humans'] concrete (secular) experience . . . ." He doesn't quibble with its use—its genuinely valuable to many. But he goes on to say, "whether [God-language] is true or not is another question."

To be clear, this is not Kaufman's (or my) effort to disprove (or to prove) the existence of God. Most people in fact have a *concept* of God in their minds. Kaufman's concern skips over these concepts to focus instead on what he calls the *reality* of God. Whatever the reality of God, he says, is a mystery, and thus discussions about the real God are beyond *knowability*—there can only be theorizing.

And so we are left to ourselves when we seek to explain what's good, what's moral, and how we should conduct ourselves. Faith, some say, gives us the answers, but beware of the circularity of facing the next question, *where did your conclusions come from, the ones you base your faith on?* I venture that many who believe in God would say they do so on faith. ***The doubt about the knowability of God is thus the birth of faith.*** [as a personal footnote—my experience with parishioners of a mature age is that, whether they realize it or not, many have constructed their own personal theology, an often beautiful collage of sorts, based on their own values and often incorporating pieces from a number of traditions, and a number of people]

I recall another billboard, this one identifying a nearby church and touting the upcoming sermon, “Is there a God? Find out what He's like on Sunday.” The ad reminds me of a seminar I took in divinity school, taught by the same Gordon Kaufman, on the subject, “What can we know about God?”, and at the course's end

there was a long silence, which I took for deep respect for the semester's work, and then students began to see that the answer was, well, "Nothing." One student objected, arguing that our time had been wasted, that if there was nothing more than history and sociology and psychology and philosophy for an answer, the divinity school itself was a waste of time, and all the relevant courses, including Kaufman's, could've been taken in the undergraduate yard.

*Presupposing an answer—"the one and only authoritative one"—becomes the birth of a closing mind—or, put differently, of forsaking the value of doubt.*

If all this sounds a bit tough, either on God or Kaufman or the worth of divinity school, keep this in mind. Students choose which particular school of theology or seminary or divinity school they will attend—and each is free to introduce a different concept of God. You might ask, which school will actually vouch for a concept of God that describes in fact the real God? If you would like to know, who would you ask? Who would they ask? Thinking you've finally got the answer can lead to a sense of security, to an ever-evolving honing of your spiritual housing, and even, at times, genuine doubt. *Choosing your own authority is the birth of thousands of faith traditions. Long live the diversity!*

Passivity, on this "choosing" front, was the hallmark of the Puritans' lived theology. In 1636 they founded what became my divinity school, believing then

that you were born a chosen saint, bound to go to heaven regardless how you lived, or you were not—doomed, no matter how you lived. They spent their lives waiting—waiting for a sign of “chosen-ness,” waiting for the afterlife of glory if they were among the lucky. The early Unitarians forsook this passivity, raising their aspirations above all this useless introspection, with some, in time, becoming known as transcendentalists. Emerson’s “Oversoul”—number 531 in the hymnal—makes this point explicit: in it he says, “within us is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is 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.”

Here was something more intimate, more present, more immediate . . . here was what was called immanence—God was in everything, in the mountains, in the birds, in the people. This was a naturalist theology much like that of many indigenous peoples, much like the Hindus, and it gave us a role on center stage as repositories, as representatives of the divine. And, in the offing, it opened the door to a clear call to social action—the divine was there in others, in nature, we could care for it, so let’s do it. It was the Unitarians’ *tikkun olam*—the call to repair the world every day.

And we responded to the call. We became actors, people consciously engaged in experiencing the divine through nature, in reveling in God made truly visible, the divine made truly alive, the divine right before our eyes.

We could see all our work, all our social action, we could see the very process—and the results—that our wills had created. And looking at that process, looking at the work itself—we said then that *it* was divine. This kind of thinking was the birth of process theology, espoused most formally in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by many great thinkers, including Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead. And too, by a Unitarian minister.

In 1946, a University of Chicago theologian, Henry N. Wieman, published a book entitled “The Source of Human Good.” For its time, it was an audacious title, and it was an audacious book. The war had ended, and the world had seen the horrors of the camps and death marches. The question on most lips was, is humankind inherently evil? To imagine instead that there *was* human good, let alone to aspire to say where it came from, was a brave position to take. Some thought foolhardy.

Wieman was born in 1884, so he was at the time, in 1946, in his early 60’s. He had begun his life’s work as a Presbyterian minister and had begun, in 1926, to teach at the University of Chicago’s Divinity School. He was then 42, yet by his

60's he had changed his views and become a Unitarian minister; he went on to teach at two divinity schools that are predominantly Unitarian: Starr King, at the University of California, at Berkeley, and Meadville Lombard, back at the Chicago campus. He died in 1975 just short of his 91<sup>st</sup> birthday.

Wieman saw that if you ask the question, "Is there a God?", the mere asking presupposes that the questioner has already formed in her mind—has already assumed, as it were—the concept of God. If you ask, is there a coke in the fridge, you know of what you ask.

Wieman refused to indulge this presupposition. He saw that the word "God" should refer to whatever it is that operates in this world to transform people, to make them better, to make them more moral, to improve their lives and the lives of all those around them. Whatever this is, whatever it is that saves people, is for Wieman the actuality of God. It is the real God. In a sense, Wieman himself is here, much as our solitary self, wandering the earth, looking for values.

This was the beginning of his search for the source of human good. It was an empirical, fact-based search for whatever it is in our lives that has so much character and power that it will transform humans in a way that they cannot transform themselves.



A naturalistic theology is what he found. He said that God is what happens in our lives when we make a connection with another person, when the meaning that we communicate is integrated into our life, and theirs, when our ability to understand and appreciate the world, and others, is thereby deepened and enhanced, and when all the persons involved in the communication share in an increased sense of community.

This creative event is itself God. People can become better people, his argument goes, but they cannot do it alone. The kind of communication that does transform us is created by others, and it transforms us in ways that we could not accomplish alone. We experience this transformation, we experience this creative event, and in this process we create God. Humans make God happen.

So here's Wieman, trying to put some clothes on Kaufman's mystery.

Looking back, there was something truly inspired about Wieman's timing. The world needed a dose of encouragement about humans and what they're like, in 1946. The cold winds of war had blown away a lot of the systematic, classical structure of pre-war religion, and to some the cold winds kept blowing, too, from those soon derided as relativists and post-modernists and existentialists. The world's people needed someone who, like a clown, could be seen simply leaping

over all the debates about religion's failure, and its future, and, in doing so, showing them what they were really like inside. And that it was good!

Maybe Wieman's timing was inspired because he thought about all these things.

But maybe too Wieman was interested in giving humans something to lean on, something to weather the cold winds blowing from Europe, something to restore a semblance of faith in a post-fascist world—regardless whether his theology leaned too much on the assumption that if something was there, to transform us . . . to save us . . . that it must be God because it couldn't simply be something coming out of us alone. *[a riff here on Martin Gardner, who told me that he didn't believe, but that he firmly believed that we should live as if we do]*

And it is true that Wieman's book has in fact been looked at like this.

Wieman himself later said he wrote it to help us feel better, to save us, irrespective what some theologians might think of his underlying process theology.

I suggest another viewpoint, one that Wieman perhaps didn't see. It is that Wieman himself, with his own concern for saving us—for commending us to look inside, to communicate with others—was in fact being the first and most convincing exhibit of his own theory. Humans can make it happen. Humans can believe in themselves. *[and if they can take this last step only by imagining that*

*it's because they were made by God—the “problem” one, the “mystery” one—  
then so be it]*

I like this viewpoint a lot. It's optimistic. It comports with what I see in the world. We see a lot of dedicated people—people who do not publish their own theology or offer any ready answer to “why God?”—yet who act in ways that transform others around them.

These people are the saviors. It's the reason for fellowship. It's at the heart of this congregation. *[maybe needing to be saved from Kaufman's “God,” the mystery in his “God the Problem,” was simply looking the wrong way . . . being saved from God was not the problem [and never had been(?)] . . . being saved from humans was the problem, and finding a solution there was made much more likely if their worth and their agency—their divinity—was recognized and honored . . . hmmm . . .]*

Amen.

/ / /

/ / /

Intro to the following poem by Billy Collins, US poet laureate twenty years ago . . . all of us need recognition, it is crucial to human flourishing. We need it from those who love us, from those who honor our achievements, and from the state itself.

The poem shows magnificently that kind of recognition and, surprisingly, that recognition need not be the one-way street we so often expect.

The other day I was ricocheting slowly  
off the blue walls of this room,  
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,  
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,  
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary  
where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist  
could send one into the past more suddenly—  
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp  
by a deep Adirondack lake  
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips  
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard  
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,  
but that did not keep me from crossing  
strand over strand again and again  
until I had made a boxy  
red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,  
and I gave her a lanyard.  
She nursed me in many a sick room,  
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,  
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,  
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,  
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.  
Here are thousands of meals, she said,  
and here is clothing and a good education.

And here is your lanyard, I replied,  
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,  
strong legs, bones and teeth,  
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,  
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.  
And here, I wish to say to her now,  
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,  
but the rueful admission that when she took  
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,  
I was as sure as a boy could be  
that this useless, worthless thing I wove  
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

/ / /

/ / /

### Robert Frost's "The Silken Tent"

She is as in a field a silken tent  
At midday when the sunny summer breeze  
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,  
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,  
And its supporting central cedar pole,  
That is its pinnacle to heavenward  
And signifies the sureness of the soul,  
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,  
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound  
By countless silken ties of love and thought

To every thing on earth the compass round,  
And only by one's going slightly taut  
In the capriciousness of summer air  
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.