

## Whispers of Divine Love

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, Oct 18, 2020

It is like the air we breathe in all around us – like that gentle wind we feel on our necks, our arms – it is like the sound of the wind that whispers in our ears as it rustles through the crunchy leaves of fall. This is the divine of process theology – always present, like the air we breathe. Always whispering to us, like the gentle wind, urging us to do good. The love of a process God, seeping into our pores. The sacred guidance that the divine tries to offer us – constantly.

And while we use today the word “God,” God has many names. Spirit of love, Spirit of life. Goddess. Nature. Science. Higher power. This is one of the many blessings of Unitarian Universalism. Today we use the word “God” because that is the word process theologians use. We are in a gentle place where we are each allowed to choose a name and an understanding that holds true and safe to each one of us. As Unitarian Universalists, this name may simply be “love.”

This whisper of divine love. Process theology is but one explanation used by theologians to navigate the world around us – to make sense of things – to understand good and bad, love and evil, God and suffering. And inherent in this theology is listening – deep listening – for the process God is always whispering to us like the wind in the leaves. Whispering to each one of us – persuading us to do good in this world. We need each listen like Mary Oliver as she prays, finding in herself “a silence in which another voice may speak.”<sup>1</sup>

God in process theology – the divine – is love. Sacred love. The divine – whose love is the “foundation of all reality.”<sup>2</sup> The divine – whose love is infinite! The divine – whose love touches each and every creature; a love that enters each moment of our lives.<sup>3</sup> Is this not reflective of our Unitarian holy who made us inherently good? Is this not reflective of our Universalist holy who damns no one, but offers each and every person, no matter what their actions, salvation? The God of process theology shares the experience of each and every creature. When we are joyful, the holy is joyful. When we cry with damp tears of sorrow, the holy aches with us. The divine is co-suffering, sharing with us every sorrow. This love and this co-suffering overlap – for any being who truly loves someone and sees them suffer

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<sup>1</sup> *Mary Oliver: Devotions* Mary Oliver “Praying” 131

<sup>2</sup> *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* C. Robert Mesle pg 8

<sup>3</sup> *Making a Way Out of No Way* Monica A. Coleman pg. 63

ultimately feels this suffering within themselves! Not only all-loving and co-suffering, a process God is also omniscient – knowing everything there is to know. A process God is omnipresent – with us always just like the air we breathe. And yet – and this is the true beauty of process theology – the divine is not all powerful! Instead, the holy has persuasive power. The holy cannot make us choose good or prevent us from choosing bad. God can but simply – and profoundly – offer us persuasion to make the best decisions possible. Each one of us is blessed with freedom – freedom that can lead to evil, and freedom that allows each and every one of us to combat this evil – both within and beyond ourselves. In process theology God patiently and consistently persuades us towards good, helping us get the very best outcome from each and every decision we make. God calls us to do good.<sup>4</sup> God whispers in our ears, like the wind in the leaves. We need always listen! Our experience with the divine and our experience with the world are profoundly interconnected and overlap in sacred ways, each shaping the other.<sup>5</sup> The divine is filled with all of the possibilities of the world!<sup>6</sup> Each and every decision we could possibly make – these are all held within the sacred, and the sacred offers them to us, like a sparrow feeding her chicks, offering them sustenance for the days ahead when they will soar.

If God is so loving, why is there evil? Why is there suffering? Why do bad things happen to people who work each and every day to do good in this world? Why doesn't God prevent this? In process thought – it is because God simply can't. With each and every evil that tears at our souls, the divine is suffering right alongside us. The divine wants this pain to stop – but is simply not all powerful. The divine's role is to help us – each and every one of us – to do the good that the holy aches to see in this world, this world that the holy loves so much. God has the power of persuasion. God can only persuade us to do good, and not evil. God cannot force.<sup>7</sup>

In process theology, the evil we experience in this world is due to the freedom we all have; is due to human choice to create evil in this world<sup>8</sup>. This happens when we don't listen to God.<sup>9</sup> And yet so many truly good people suffer! How can we possibly make sense of this? Evil may not be our own inability to listen, but another's. This ripples out like our interdependent web. One stone of evil cast into society and the ripples flow out, affecting those all around. In process theology there is no satanic figure, no evil

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<sup>4</sup> *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* C. Robert Mesle

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *Making a Way Out of No Way* Monica A. Coleman pg.54

<sup>7</sup> *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* C. Robert Mesle pg 20

<sup>8</sup> *Making a Way Out of No Way* Monica A. Coleman pg. 61

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 70

God – there is personal freedom, human agency. And yet, as spoken by theologian Monica Coleman, “evil will not have the final word. There are always ways to preserve life.”<sup>10</sup> Stones cast of love ripple out in our web as well. If we listen carefully and act upon what God is whispering in our ears, we can work to overcome evil!<sup>11</sup> God has a vision for a good world. God shares this vision with each and every one of us, over and over and over again, attempting to avoid evil.<sup>12</sup> What else would we expect from a being who is perfectly loving?<sup>13</sup>

This doesn’t mean that each of our decisions will have a good outcome. Sometimes, even the best choice possible has harmful outcomes. There is no way to change that. God can only work with what God has been provided. And in these situations, as always, the divine suffers with us. Sometimes the way forward, even if it is the best way forward, is painful, sorrowful.<sup>14</sup>

In our suffering, we are not alone.

When a child loses a parent, God is with them, feeling the pain of those heaving tears.

When a person experiences violence, God is with them, aching with injustice and loss.

When disaster strikes and lives are displaced, God is there! God is always there.

In process theology, no matter what, the sacred is present. And no matter what, the sacred is urging us to do good – whether caring for an ailing neighbor, or being on the front lines of justice work, or tending to the bereaved, or laughing with a friend! The holy is always persuading us to choose good. To choose the best decision possible. To overcome evil and live the fullest life.

How does this make sense to folks who are not process theists? How does this make sense to folks who do not believe in a God at all? Everyone tries to make sense of what happens in the world; a way to understand evil and find goodness; a way to be comforted. Evil exists – no theology disproves this and no one can concretely answer the question, “why?” And yet our lives are formulated by our response – by the response of those around us. It comes back to the recurring theme of Unitarian Universalism – love. Our response is love. Mary Oliver pauses to hear another voice speak, pauses in prayer to hear the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid 45

<sup>11</sup> <sup>11</sup> *Making a Way Out of No Way* Monica A. Coleman pg. 71

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 59

<sup>13</sup> ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 57

voice of another, without specifying whose voice.<sup>15</sup> Could we simply listen to the voice of love? If we pause and measure each decision with love in mind, will we not make the best decision possible? If we offer ourselves endless compassion! If we do not feel alone when we suffer because we know, inherently, that there is love within us, love surrounding us. Love always pushes for the best way forward. Evil dissipates if we measure our actions in love.

I have a friend we will call Sarah with her own story of the saving power of love. I have been given permission to share her story. Sarah was a senior in college when her sister was involved in a horrific car crash and died. She began to isolate, separating herself from her friends. She had been very studious but began missing classes. More and more she stayed in her room, in silence and in darkness. She had one friend, however, who never gave up. A friend we will name Claire. A friend who invited her to lunch or to the library to a social gathering, always asking even though Sarah's response was always, "no." One day, Claire sat outside the door of Sarah's dorm room. She said, "I'm going to wait here for you until you're ready to go." And she sat. And waited. With her friend outside her door, Sarah knew she was loved, even though she had spent weeks pushing back. Even though she felt like she forgot how to be a person. Someone there had not given up on her. Someone felt she was worth fighting for. Someone loved her. Sarah learned that God is in the person who does not give up. This occurrence – this connection with unconditional love – changed Sarah's life. While still missing her sister – always missing her sister – she healed. She experienced unconditional love, that – while emanating from her friend – also felt, to her, to be divine – to be her God. Everyone suffers. And we each have the love within us to help – to not give up – to sit and wait for another until they are ready to face life again. Sarah listened to her friend's requests for lunch and study dates. She listened to her friend insist that she would sit outside that dorm room no matter how long it took. She heard love – love of her friend and love of her divine. She was not suffering alone. She healed. She was transformed.

What about in the social context? We are experiencing so much as a nation, as a world. We know it all – a pandemic, a racial uprising, an election, a climate crisis. It reminds me of the idea of Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, words later adapted by Martin Luther King jr. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." No matter what happens in the upcoming months – no matter what – we will keep listening to that voice – to that whisper in our ears. That whisper that urges us to do good. If we each always act towards good – we bend that arc! Theologian Monica Coleman writes, "we

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<sup>1515</sup> *Mary Oliver: Devotions* Mary Oliver "Praying" 131

must combat evil and try to overcome it. We can't, but we must."<sup>16</sup> Process theology calls for justice work as we are urged to make decisions that better the world around us – responding with love to anything that may happen. We can, as a community, always listen to the divine love whispering in our ears, and act on it – choosing to do good in each action, no matter how small.

We have choices. We have freedom. This is why bad things can happen! When people do not listen to love, when they do not hear love.

There is this process idea that the divine constantly works to persuade folks to do the best they can, even when options are limited.

This idea that the divine is with you – in joy and in struggle. When you suffer, the divine suffers. You are never alone.

This divine that is there – aching with you – even when all else seems lost.

The divine that – at its core – is love.

The holy sees the inherent worth and dignity in every single person. And that goodness ripples out. Our Unitarian Universalist holy does not require anyone to be good or perfect to receive divine love. Humans were created for good and holy purposes. You are loved.

It is like the air we breathe – always with us, sustaining life. It is like the wind that rustles through the leaves, whispering into our ears life-giving strength, providing sustenance, urging us towards good. It is love.

May you always hold the holy with you – no matter what your holy is

May you never forget the power of love

And may you always listen to the whisper of divine love – urging you towards good.

May it be so, and Amen.

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<sup>16</sup> *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* Monica Coleman pg 77