

Polity, Pine Trees, and Process Theology

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Rev. Douglas Taylor

Part One: the base story and song

Let me begin in the middle with the “Pine Trees” because I’m pretty sure that’s the interesting part. This begins with a story about John Muir, the great naturalist from the late 1800’s. He is the “Father of our National Parks” and founder of the Sierra Club. Muir might also be called the progenitor of our modern Extreme Sports. Really, he was a bit of a thrill-seeker! He was born in Scotland in 1834 and one story I read has it that he and his brother David used to dare each other to do dangerous things. They called them “scootchers.” They would climb out the second-story bedroom window and hang by one hand, daring the other to do it next. That’s a scootcher. Not to be outdone, the other boy would climb out the window and hang by just two fingers! One time John Muir climbed out the window and went up onto the steep roof during a great windy evening. He found it exhilarating and loved the view. He called it a ‘Capital Scootcher!’ His brother, who followed after was quite unnerved by the experience, it was a bit too much and David began to panic out there in the wind on the peak of the house. Young John told him not to shout for help because if their father came and found them, they’d both be in big trouble. So John went out and helped his brother back into the window, and David gave up trying to follow young John on any more dangerous dares of that sort.

But that’s not the story I want to tell you. That just sets the stage, like foreshadowing if you will. The story I want to share is from later in John Muir’s life by about 30 years. In his journal (*A Wind-Storm in the Forests*) he wrote: “One of the most beautiful and exhilarating storms I ever enjoyed in the Sierra occurred in December, 1874, when I happened to be exploring one of the tributary valleys of the Yuba River.”

He was on his way to visit a friend that day, but when he noticed the fine wind-storm brewing he decided to instead push out into the woods to enjoy it. I don’t know about you, but when I see a wind storm coming I like to have some shelter. John Muir was led by a different impulse. “For on such occasions (he wrote) Nature has always something rare to show us, and the danger to life and limb is hardly greater than one would experience crouching deprecatingly beneath a roof.” After spending a good while walking around the woods in the midst of this great windstorm it occurred to him “that it would be a fine thing to climb one of the trees to obtain a wider outlook.”

So he hunted for a good choice. He found a tall copse of Douglas Spruces growing close together. He knew that the wind was strong enough to uproot a single tree standing alone, but a dozen or more trees together served to protect all the trees in the copse. “Though comparatively young, (he write in his journal) they were about 100 feet high, and their lithe, brushy tops were rocking and swirling in wild ecstasy. Being accustomed to climb trees in making botanical studies, I experienced no difficulty in reaching the top of this one, and never before did I enjoy so noble an exhilaration of motion.”

He clung to the high slender tree as it bent and swirled in the storm. The tree bent from 20 to 30 degrees in arc but he trusted the companion stand around him to keep his tree rooted and upright throughout the experience. He describes it as exciting and beautiful. He felt the wind in his pulse. Can you imagine it? Can you imagine yourself up in that swaying pine? He described light and wind sweeping across the valley spread before his eyes as if he were watching waves on the open sea; the trees undulating and swaying in concentric circles, lines of wind chasing each other in a water-like flow from one end of valley to the other. "I kept my lofty perch for hours, (he writes) frequently closing my eyes to enjoy the music by itself, or to feast quietly on the delicious fragrance that was streaming past."

This experience was a seminal moment for Muir's sense of connectedness with all nature. "We all travel the milky way together, trees and men; but it never occurred to me until this storm-day, while swinging in the wind, that trees are travelers, in the ordinary sense. They make many journeys, not extensive ones, it is true; but our own little journeys, away and back again, are only little more than tree-wavings--many of them not so much."

Why have I told you this story? I use this story as a parable to offer up a religious point. People will often use the word 'parable' to mean exclusively those stories told by Jesus in the Christian Scriptures. As a Unitarian Universalist I take a broader view of what counts as scripture and thus also what is allowably called a parable. One of the wonderful aspects of any parable is the way it can be read narrowly and literally or it can be read broadly and metaphorically. Both perspectives can uncover a good religious message. The parable of the Prodigal Son, narrowly understood, tells us that we can go home again and that forgiveness among family members is a good thing. But a good parable will offer layers of meaning. The story of the Prodigal Son can also tell us about the nature of God and about ourselves. You may argue with the theology, but the lesson that God is like a forgiving parent is a great story.

Perhaps you are not interested in exploring the parables of the Christian Scriptures. Perhaps as a Unitarian Universalist you are happily released from trying to make meaning from the old stories. And certainly you are free to arrive at that conclusion. At our core theologically, Unitarian Universalism has long held fast to the freedom of conscience. We have a deep commitment to individual experience as the arbiter of truth and meaning. Faith cannot be coerced. It starts here, in the heart of each person. This, of course, is not a freedom to believe anything we want; it is a commitment to allow each other to believe as we must, as the light of conscience demands from within. Our theological center is not in a set doctrine or creed; rather it is in our covenant: our pledge to help each other in the search for what is ultimately meaningful in life. So what I present this hour is my offering of support for you, and in no small way for myself, to continue that search. A wise colleague once said that we ministers are called to meet people where they are, but we are under no obligation to leave them there.

But all that is a background to my present point. In looking at this story of John Muir in the swaying pine trees, we find literal and narrow lessons that are valid and true. We can learn that there are certain trees and groups of trees that you can climb in a windstorm and trust to not blow over. We can learn that the natural world is alive and you are a part of this great interconnected web of existence. John Muir said, "When we try to pick out anything by itself we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." This interconnectedness that we keep talking about as

Unitarian Universalists is a literal fact. A good parable can show you, through a literal and narrow interpretation, valuable insights into living.

But there is more for those willing to seek deeper. There are deeper religious lessons to be found. And really, that is what I want to unfold for you this evening. I want to tell you about Spirit and faith from a Unitarian Universalist perspective. I want to shine a light on the movement of the Spirit in our lives.

Part Two: Of Process and Polity

Let me offer two possible interpretations derived from a metaphorical and broader interpretation of this John Muir story that I use as a parable. One interpretation is theological, the other ecclesiological. First: perhaps we can speak of God through this story. Too often as Unitarian Universalists our conversations about the word God get caught up in what we don't believe, what we don't accept. May I gently suggest this to be a fine starting point but a foolish place to stop. And in terms of the concept of the holy, the All, the Spirit that Life and Love, perhaps we can speak of God as the wind that blows through the trees. Or perhaps we can speak of God as a tree that we cling when the storms of life blow over us.

Too often I find poems and scripture verses and songs about that image of God as a rock we cling to for support in a storm. What if we could speak of God not as an inert, static, lifeless rock; but as a tree? What if the image were of something alive, even something alive with us?

Peter Mayer is the songwriter who wrote the lyrics to our wildly popular hymn Blue Boat Home (#1064 STJ). How many of you sang that song last Sunday, the Sunday before Earth Day? Peter Mayer has another song I want to tell you about called "God Is a River" that carries not the same imagery of a tree in the windstorm, but certainly uses a river metaphor in the same way I am suggesting John Muir's tree can be.

*In the ever-shifting water of the river of this life
I was swimming, seeking comfort; I was wrestling waves to find
A boulder I could cling to, a stone to hold me fast
Where I might let the fretful water of this river 'round me pass*

*And so I found an anchor, a blessed resting place
A trusty rock I called my savior, for there I would be safe
From the river and its dangers, and I proclaimed my rock divine
And I prayed to it "protect me" and the rock replied*

*God is a river, not just a stone
God is a wild, raging rapids
And a slow, meandering flow
God is a deep and narrow passage
And a peaceful, sandy shoal
God is the river, swimmer
So let go*

Two years ago we invited Peter Mayer to come visit us in Binghamton, NY. I had the pleasure of sharing the Sunday worship with him. I asked him to sing this song “God is a River” as a companion to the story I shared about John Muir strapping himself near the top of a pine to experience a storm. The song and the layer of interpretation I put on the story offered up a compelling fresh image of God that is very much in line with Process Theology.

What if, in the most troubling times of your life, you could imagine your refuge and security to not be found in stability but in the freedom to bend and sway? Have you ever felt swept under by the storm? Have you ever felt scattered, lost, broken, or cut off? When the storms of life blow over you, can you bow and bend like a bamboo reed rather than hunker down to hide? In a chapter of the Tao Te Ching (# 76) we read:

A tree that is unbending is easily broken.
The hard and strong will fall.
The soft and yielding will overcome

The reed is a natural example of how to hold fast with conviction and commitment to ever remain in place through the strongest of winds. We can be as tenacious as the reed. This valuable lesson is echoed in the story of John Muir in the swaying pines. But more amazing still is the suggestion Peter Mayer offers in his song and that I dare to offer in my interpretation of John Muir’s story. We can see God as a bending reed, as a river, as a swaying pine – not simply as a living element of nature but also as the living strength in which we can rest our faith.

Part Three: some Process Theology explained

What I am describing is generally understood as Process Theology. Process Theology starts with Alfred North Whitehead, the progenitor of this school of thought. Whitehead (1861–1947) was an English mathematician and philosopher from the late 1800’s through the mid 1900’s. He wrote books which set the groundwork for modern mathematical philosophy and logic. The philosophical ground of what we now know as Process Theology arises from Whitehead’s response to Einstein and quantum physics. I won’t go into detail, I can’t go into detail. But the crux of the idea is this: in quantum physics we see that everything is in motion. We discover that nothing is fixed, everything is moving. Atoms, those tiny things that are the basic building block of everything, are not simply little building blocks. They have sub-parts, and those parts are spinning and vibrating and changing.

Everything that seems solid, fixed, and stable, is in fact in dynamic motion. The electrons of an atom are not even little balls orbiting the nucleus like I was taught in high school. The models I was offered in school looked very similar to astronomical models of small round objects orbiting a larger central object: like our moon circling the earth. By college I was learning about the ‘electron field’ because it wasn’t accurate to say it was orbiting – it was doing something else. I won’t go into details, I can’t go into details. The point is this: everything we thought was fixed, stable, solid, turns out to be vibrating, changing, shifting.

Whitehead saw this and figured this applied not just to the physical world but to the metaphysical world as well. He came up with a philosophy that trusted ‘becoming’ over ‘being.’ He talked

about ‘events’ as the discrete base of reality rather than matter. He really messed with our sense of time and reality. A simplified version of what Whitehead seemed to be getting at is “if it seems static, don’t trust it.”

This is a remarkable sentiment when applied to religion. Back when scientists proposed that the Earth could be moving through space, the church countered citing Psalm 104:5 to say that God “set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved” and Job 38:4 – 6 “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements ... or who laid its cornerstone?” The church dismissed the notion that the physical world was in constant motion not simply because it contradicted what scripture said about the physical world but also for the implications it held for the nature of all existence and even of God who set those foundations of all existence according to the traditional theologies.

Traditions, foundations, and ideals are generally thought of as static, stable, and secure. Certainly in Western Philosophy and Christian theology, we want truth to be unchanging, our deepest values ought to be unchanging, there ought to be some firm ground on which we stand – metaphorically speaking. But when the literal firm ground we stand on is made up of vibrating atoms then perhaps the metaphorical ground we stand on is also subject to shift – not because we’re wrong or that we’ve chosen unstable ground – simply because that is the nature of ground.

By this theology, and in my understanding of the nature of God, we’re not talking about a traditional concept of God. We’re not talking about a being, a person or creature that looks a little like you and me, maybe with a beard and a thunderbolt. No. I have heard the arguments against using the word God in Unitarian Universalists circles. “Why make up new definitions for the old words?” But I respond that we don’t need to cede the meanings of the word to the fundamentalists. I understand that when I say “God” other people who hear will think I mean something I might not necessarily mean. (In case you are tracking this talk by the write up I gave, this is the part where we ‘tangle with some problems of epistemology.’) How do we know what we know? How do we know what the word God means?

But consider this: if I say the word “red” do you think everyone in the room will have the exact shade of red come to mind as the one I mean? Earlier this month I was preaching and I mentioned our Standing on the Side of Love banner and I called it orange. Three people came up to me afterward and said, “Oh, I thought it was yellow.” What color is the hymnal supplement Singing the Journey? Aqua, blue-green, turquoise, teal? Luckily, with the example of colors, we can point to an object and say “That color, that’s what I mean.” Perhaps with God the best we can do is describe an experience of the movement of the Spirit and say, “That’s what I mean.”

Or consider it from another angle, can we allow the words of spirit and faith to evolve as we have allowed other words to evolve as our understanding has grown? We still, for example, use the word “Planet” even though it literally means “wanderer” and we know now the planets do not ‘wander.’ We can still be a little bitter about Pluto’s demotion, but we must acknowledge that our understanding of the word “planet” is allowed to change as we understand more about the nature of planets. So, too, can our understanding of the word “God” change as we understand more about the nature of God.

God is a name given for the dynamic source of your living, for the creative energy in everything, for the whole of which you are a part. This is perhaps a little vague. But then the trouble with God really began when people started to speak of God as a literal character in literal stories. Cast away all literal interpretations of the nature of God. They are illogical and irrational. Seek instead the source of your living. Seek the creative spirit that flows around you and through you. Seek the whole of which you are a part. If it seems static, don't trust it. Seek instead the movement of the Spirit!

Part Four: JLA and polity of the free church

All this talk of Spirit leads me to my second interpretation, that of ecclesiology. For that I turn to the works of James Luther Adams, Unitarian theologian who described the Free Church as a body of believers freely joined in a covenant of loyalty to the holy spirit of love. He said the Free Church is governed by its own members, with the reign of the spirit of love among those members.

In the reading we have by him in our hymnal, #591 ("I Call That Church Free" by James Luther Adams) if you are taking notes, Adams begins with theology. He says "I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence, that sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands." This reading clarifies the theological and covenantal nature of our gathered religious communities. To state our polity, we first state our theology. This is something we have let slip as Unitarian Universalists lately. Adams says "I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship." And he goes on to describe it as "a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit." And then he closes quoting scripture saying, "It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit 'that bloweth where it listeth (John 3:8) ... and maketh all things new. (Rev 21:1)'"

John Muir clung to the top of a tall pine to feel the wind blow where it will. It is not an insignificant piece of the story that the tree was a good and safe choice because it was in a cove of trees – a community of trees supporting each other. Or to read it metaphorically, a gathering of individuals in a caring and trusting fellowship! For our theology of the Spirit to be made real in this world it is best enacted in community. It starts here, in the heart of each individual, but it can't stay here: the spirit must move!

"The wind sings four-part harmony: aspen, piñon, ponderosa, and spruce." The opening line of Elizabeth Tarbox's reflection entitled Pine Forest Fugue. She goes on to say, "What a language this is: beyond the reach of words." This language of trees in the wind Tarbox talks about reminds me of the experience Muir had in the Sierra when he understood the trees as a living organisms, travelers of the Milky Way as much as we. But it is hard to put into words. Sometimes trying to understand each other is like listening to the "theme of a thousand pines."

Have you ever experienced what Tarbox describes but in reference to this community of the spirit instead of the community of the forest? I listen and hear you like you are the "aspen, piñon, ponderosa, and spruce." We each speak from our own understanding, our own experiences. We hope for a harmony of voices in our congregations, but we each have more in

our living than we can express with words. We each know more of love and of spirit that we can express in common discourse together. And yet, we are together.

This is more than academic for me, more than clever theological debate or semantic trick. I have had experiences that lead me to believe my prayers do make a difference and that grace is real. Yet I stumble in an effort to move beyond words. I trust our covenanted congregations and am committed to their health and enrichment. But I am the kind of person who desperately needs a theological framework to hold it all. I see God as a dynamic Spirit luring the best out of me, luring the best out of us as a people. I have felt the Spirit flowing through me. And I have nurtured my relationship with the Spirit through the care of my faith community.

Part Five: a personal story to tie it all together

The real reason I am so fascinated by Process Theology is personal. I have had experiences of grace and the power of the Spirit that I am still trying to understand. Hear now a two part story from my own experience.

The first half of this story is part of the last chapter of the life of Roland Austin. Roland was a member of the Binghamton congregation who died in 2009. The story I want to tell is of the last day he came to church. It was the first Sunday of April and the youth were leading the service. His wife drove up to the front circle just outside the door to let him out before she parked the car. But Roland was not able to make it the dozen or so feet from the car to the door and we ended up calling an ambulance. He was taken to the emergency room which is where I visited him later that afternoon.

Roland was one of our staunch peace activists; a gentle soul through and through. Roland was a Conscientious Objector in World War II – and that was a hard war to object to. Roland was one of the people who traveled to Russia during the last years of the Cold War, establishing relationships and witnessing for peace. Roland was a well loved and respected member of the congregation and his fading health was painful for us all.

I went in to the emergency room that afternoon and saw that his wife was taking on her cell phone, probably to one of their kids. I nodded to her and circled around to Roland who lay sleeping in the hospital ER bed. I bowed my head, about to offer a prayer, when his eyes fluttered open and he said, “Oh! They’re standing over me.”

His eyes focused and he said, “You’re standing over me.”

Then he smiled and I smiled back saying hello and asking how he was feeling. What he said next has been echoing in my soul ever since. He said, “It’s pouring out of you and into me. And I feel really good.” It was several weeks later that Roland died peacefully at home. That moment of prayer in the hospital with him has come to be a turning point in my faith and in my ministry.

Now, I don’t know what Roland experienced, I don’t know who he sensed standing over him before he saw me standing at his bedside, I don’t know how Roland would have named what he

said was pouring out of me and into him. Was it energy, was it God or angels? Perhaps Roland experienced what was pouring into him as a prayer, or healing power or love. I can't answer for Roland. And truly, this point is implicitly at the center of our Unitarian Universalist gatherings every time we come together. I can't tell you your answers. Yet we each have experiences that lead us deeper. Truly this is the heart of why we are covenanting communities of faith rather than a people with a creed. It starts here, but it can't stay here.

This is a two part story. The events of my encounter with Roland happened within the context of a very difficult and significant weekend in Binghamton, NY. The Friday morning preceding Roland's last Sunday morning visit to the congregation, was April 3, 2009. On that Friday morning a man entered the American Civic Association and opened fire on people studying to become citizens. He killed 13 people before taking his own life. I heard about this on the news that Friday.

Later that evening, after the police and emergency responders had the situation in hand, I received a call from the mayor's office asking me to come in and sit down with other local clergy Saturday morning to talk about how we would respond. We decided to host a community wide memorial service at one of the high schools on Sunday evening. The school was a neutral, non-religious space and it was large enough to hold the number of people we anticipated would show up. I ended up as one of the lead organizers for the service for two reasons: One, I am not able to keep my mouth shut in situations like that; and two, because I know more than one name for God; meaning I am comfortable and competent weaving different theological needs into a single worship, that's what we do nearly every week in our UU worship services.

The dead and their families were from Pakistan and Iraq, Vietnam and China, Haiti, Brazil, the Philippines and Ukraine. They were Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Orthodox and Catholic. The American Civic Association helped us arrange for translators to make the words spoken accessible for two other languages. We pulled together clergy to speak or read from as many of these religious traditions as possible. We found a few people to offer music, including my daughter who played harp. (I remember she was nervous so we didn't tell her the service was being broadcast live to tens of thousands of people around the greater Binghamton area. She thought she was playing only for the 1,500 people in the room.) My role in the service was to read the announcements leading into the event and to offer the opening prayer. After my part I sat down and listened.

As I sat there listening to my clergy friends offering their prayers, as I listened to the hurt and the anguish, the loss and the anger, and the cry for healing, I remembered what Roland had said to me a few hours earlier that Sunday afternoon when I had visited him in the emergency room. It had only been three hours earlier that Roland had looked me in the eye saying, "It's pouring out of you and into me, and I feel really good." So I took a deep breath and imagined myself opening up and pouring out what was needed by these people in the room with me. I imagined it as healing energy; I thought of it as prayer, and considered my actions and my intentions to be that of a vessel through which God's love might pour out. That's what I saw they needed: God's love and healing comfort. So that's what I aimed to give to them.

Now, I have no way of knowing what everyone else in the room was experiencing or if it had anything to do with the Spirit and healing I was trying the channel. I don't know. But here's what I do know. I was exhausted for the rest of the week, I could barely move. I was exhausted, in the sense that the etymology of the word 'exhaust' is Latin meaning to draw off, to use up, to take away – literally it is to draw off water. I felt drained.

I went through the motions for the next few weeks. I was drained and empty until later that month I arrived among my Unitarian Universalist colleagues for our district UU Ministers and Religious Educators gathering. Many of my colleagues had called me in the days and weeks after the shooting. Many had written to me, cards and e-mails. But gathering there with them finally weeks later, being in the rooms with them, seeing their faces and touching their hands I was finally able to let go and receive their support. I told them my story and I cried and they held me and they prayed for me and I received the rest and relief I needed to recharge.

I was cradled in the four-part harmony of my forest. I was holding fast to my pine as it swayed in the wind. I was awash with the whispers of the Spirit. I was held in the loving arms of the Life. God was no rock for me. God was my living, dynamic tree that bent when I bent, moved when I moved, bowed when I bowed, wept when I wept, and was still when I was still.

You may not agree with my theology, or with my interpretations of these stories. But you don't need to. Your experiences should lead you to your own interpretations, your own theological understanding. But we each can witness to what we know. How has it been for you? What are your experiences of spirit and mystery? Poet Gregory Orr (in "How Beautiful the Beloved") writes:

*Grief will come to you.
Grip and cling all you want,
It makes no difference.
Catastrophe? It's just waiting to happen.
Loss? You can be certain of it.
Flow and swirl of the world.
Carried along as if by a dark current.
All you can do is keep swimming;
All you can do is keep singing.*

So what is your song? Which metaphors do you use? How do you describe the movement of the Spirit in your life? This is what I know: there is a Spirit, an energy, a movement that stirs within by whatever name you know it. It is the base inheritance of every one of us. Thus we have declared as Unitarian Universalists throughout our history. It starts here, within each of us. It starts here, but it can't stay here. As Unitarian Universalist we have long concluded that we need not think alike to love alike, that so long as we agree in love, no other disagreement can do us any harm. Agreement is not our goal. What I am saying is only what has always been at our center theologically: It starts here, in the heart of every person; it starts here, but it can't stay here. It must move.

In my experience God is that creative and transforming power in my life, ever new, ever leading me to put my faith and trust in the beckoning future. I believe God is the Spirit of Life and Love,

the creative energy found in all life. God is that transformative power of Love that lures us to become better people building a better world. God is a loving, dynamic Spirit.

*God is a river, not just a stone
God is a wild, raging rapids
And a slow, meandering flow
God is a deep and narrow passage
And a peaceful, sandy shoal
God is the river, swimmer
So let go*

Regardless of how storm-tossed we may feel, may we stay open to the movement of the Spirit. Regardless of the many ways we feel scattered or lost or broken or cut off, may we learn to trust the deep connection tying us to all, binding our troubled lives into a community of truth and Spirit. Regardless of the evidence presented to us each day that we are alienated and alone, may we have the faith to trust the Spirit. It starts here, in the heart of every one of us. It starts here, but it can't stay here. The Spirit must move. And may we learn to let go enough to heed the call and follow that lure of the Spirit into becoming the free people we long to be, building a better world for all.

In a world without end, may it be so
-douglas