

# *Creative Transformation*

*exploring the growing edge of religious life*

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*Each moment of life arises from God's aim at wholeness, intensity of experience, and beauty.*

A Publication of Process & Faith, based on a Relational Vision of Reality

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## Creative Transformation...

takes its name from the belief of process theologians that God's work is always creative and always transformative; and that wherever creative transformation is occurring, God is there. This means that instead of clinging to past formulations of faith and the ways of action that used to work, we are striving to be co-workers with God by seeking new formulations and more effective ways of action. —John B. Cobb, Jr.

## Creative Transformation

*exploring the growing edge of religious life*

Volume 11:3 Summer 2002

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# Making a Difference

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## Process & Faith News

### **Process Theology, Creativity, and the Arts**

This issue focuses on the creative process as it yields the insights of beauty. Alfred North Whitehead suggested that the whole universe tended toward the creation of beauty. Beauty involves an intensity of contrasts held together in harmony, and can be found in the natural phenomena of our enviroing earth, in living creatures in their ways of being together, and in human creations that bespeak the wonder of emotion, meaning, and value through the various arts we create.

We at Process & Faith felt that a little journal called *Creative Transformation* might well focus on the arts, and so emphasize this aspect of what creative transformation is all about. And so we treat you to these joys: the explosion of beauty on our cover, which is the light of a fireworks display passed through a diffraction grating; the insights of James Wall, noted film critic, into the vision of a major film director; the beauty provided through the reflections of Patricia Farmer; the artistry of our regular columnists; and—as a special addition—a humorous graphic story about the creative process from Graham Annable, a cartoonist/ animator currently enjoying life in the Bay Area of California.

Read, meditate, enjoy!

### **Beardslee Consultation**

The first Beardslee Consultation took place at Claremont School of Theology on April 29, 2002, with sixteen participants, representing Islam, Judaism, and Christianity (Roman Catholic and Protestant). Consultants from each tradition presented a brief paper outlining the way persons of faith deal with their respective sacred texts. The issue posed was whether or not contemporary scholarship within each tradition affects the understanding of scriptural authority within congregations. We wanted to probe whether or not the different traditions experience common problems, and to what degree we can learn from one another. The spirited discussion that took place throughout the day indicated a lively interest in one another's approaches to these issues, and a sense of commonality as we shared insights and experiences. We expect to publish a small volume that includes the papers and aspects of the conversation.

We are now engaged in preparations for the 2003 Beardslee Consultation, and are pleased that most participants in the 2002 discussion have asked to be included again. We will continue to focus on the issue of sacred texts. Next year's consultants will explore the impact of the various texts on issues of ecology.

The aim of the Beardslee Consultation is to honor Will Beardslee by exploring scriptures from a process and interfaith perspective, and to make resources from these consultations available to communities of faith. Will Beardslee was not only our founding editor and P&F director for seventeen years, but also an internationally recognized New Testament scholar. His important work, *A House for Hope*, develops a process perspective on the New Testament, and has recently been republished (see the review written by John B. Cobb, Jr. in the April 2002 issue of *Creative Transformation*).

We are grateful to Claremont United Church of Christ, where Will Beardslee was a member, for a generous grant that partially funds the Consultation. Other funds come from the Beardslee Endowment, which was established following Will's death in January, 2001.

### **New phone number**

P&F has a new phone number. Now you can reach us directly at 909.447.2559. The fax number (909.621.2760) is unchanged.

*P&F News continued on page 19*

# The Visual Artistry and Spiritual Vision Of Krystof Kieslowski

James M. Wall



James M. Wall is Senior Contributing Editor, Christian Century magazine, a Chicago-based publication for which he was editor from 1972 through 1999. He is also an adjunct professor of religion and culture at the Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California.

Film scholars have startled the average filmgoer with the assertion that American director John Ford is the Shakespeare of 20th Century cinema. Ford—who often dismissed his work with the comment, “I make westerns”—a modern day Shakespeare? Absolutely, because John Ford, like William Shakespeare, employed the popular medium of his time to convey an artistic vision through intimate stories presented against a large backdrop of major events. And, another mark of art, his work lives on well beyond its time because of its timeless themes, its demonstration of artistic skill, and its substantive content.

The high regard which his fellow film artists continue to hold for Ford was recently illustrated by a scene in George Lucas’ *Star Wars: Episode Two: Attack of the Clones*, a clear homage to a scene from John Ford’s *The Searchers*. Anakin Skywalker, the future Darth Vader, approaches a native camp in search of his kidnapped mother. He peers down on the camp from a ledge and then drops quietly to the ground below where he must make his way past small animals and guards to the tent where his mother is held captive,

the exact action used by Ford in *The Searchers*. Anakin enters the tent—creating an opening with a light saber—and finds his mother, whom he hasn’t seen for many years. The parallels with *The Searchers* come in the images that evoke the memory of the John Wayne character, angry at the treatment of the woman he loves, and determined to gain revenge for her death.

Unless you know *The Searchers* well, not likely in the case of most of today’s viewing audience, you will miss the parallels, but the important thing is that Lucas doesn’t care whether you know *The Searchers* or not. He respects and honors Ford as a mentor, as do most contemporary film makers, and he deliberately presents the meeting with Anakin Skywalker’s mother to demonstrate that respect. Lucas also reveals the “dark side” of the future Darth Vader—the villain of subsequent *Star Wars* episodes—by casting a young actor, Hayden Christensen, who knows how to change a smile into a sneer, as did John Wayne, who portrays a man barely concealing his fury.

In one classic shot in *The Searchers*, Ford shows Wayne in a zoom

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closeup of his face, showing the anger he feels over what has happened to his family. The viewer can see in Wayne's expression the decision to battle evil with evil. In Episode Two of the Star Wars trilogy, a similar shot—a close up of a sneering Anakin—prepares us for the future Darth Vader's total embrace of his own "dark side."

Krystof Kieslowski worked in a different cultural environment than that of John Ford. But like Ford, Kieslowski had the eye and the soul of an artist, a film maker who understood that he was working in a medium that allowed him to probe reality with his personal vision and to do so with an understanding that only by the process of probing could he do justice to the ambiguity of the human condition. This ability of the artist to anticipate the future and, at the same time, demonstrate the ambiguity of the present moment, was classic John Ford film making. As Andrew Sarris wrote in *The John Ford Movie Mystery* (Indiana University Press, 1975), Ford's visual style offered "the double vision (through classical editing) of an event in all its vital immediacy, and yet also in its ultimate memory image on the horizon of history." (p. 173).

It is in this sense, then, that we speak of Ford and Kieslowski as fellow artists, vastly different in subject matter and personal worldview, but linked in purpose and ultimate artistic goals. Until 1989, Kieslowski worked under the control of the Polish Commu-

nist government, making films that were financed by the government and designed to be shown to Polish audiences. Ford worked in a commercial atmosphere, dominated by film companies that provided film directors with the freedom to create but always with the understanding that for a film to be successful, it had to make money. Both artists worked under constraints, communist and capitalistic.

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When the Cold War ended and his government funding ceased, Kieslowski moved into Ford's capitalistic environment, living and working in Paris where he continued making films, retaining his personal vision but now with a desire to reach a larger western audience. Unfortunately, Kieslowski's career was cut short with his early death in 1996. When Kieslowski died in Warsaw, on March 13, at the age of 54, he left an enormous void in the world of film art, not just because we lost his creative genius and cinematic skill, but because he

was one of the few film artists working today whose art projected a religious vision in an industry notoriously tone-deaf to spirituality.

The visual styles of Ford and Kieslowski are quite different. Ford told small stories in the context of vast landscapes and against the backdrop of major American political developments. Kieslowski painted visually on a much smaller canvas, focusing on details of daily life in enclosed spaces to convey his vision of a world surfeited with spiritual possibilities. Ford assumed God's existence and never questioned it. His strong Catholic ethic permeated his films. Kieslowski, on the other hand, has rejected the established church and classic beliefs. Born into the Catholic church, Kieslowski's films reveal a man of God, not in conventional structures, but in the remarkable way in which the lives of his characters interact under what he clearly intends us to understand is a divine presence.

Both Ford and Kieslowski made effective use of music in their films. Ford relied on traditional music, folks songs and religious hymns (one of his favorites was "Shall We Gather at the River") often underscoring scenes of funerals or visits to grave sites. Kieslowski's music came from his close working partner, Zbigniew Preisner, who wrote original compositions for the films, which play an important role in the films, both as soundtracks and as plot devices.

# Making a Difference

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*The Double Life of Veronique*, for example, is the story of two young women who are both singers and who are so connected to one another that they are played by the same actress, Irene Jacob, who will later be featured in perhaps Kieslowski's best-known and certainly most accessible film, *Three Colors: Red*. The two women, one French, the other Polish, never meet but their lives are parallel, and they function on the same emotional wave length. The music in *Veronique*, much of it composed by Preisner, is listed in the credits as the work of Van den Budenmayer, a fictional composer whose name appears in both *Blue* and *Red*.

Kieslowski may well be remembered best for a ten-part series he presented on Warsaw television, *The Decalogue*, 55-minute examinations of each of the ten commandments, stories set in and around a Warsaw housing complex. These are not didactic films which argue for the commandments; they are rather, revelatory films "inspired" by each of the ten statements Moses delivered from Mount Sinai. In a filmed interview, Kieslowski made the assertion that his films do not provide answers, they only raise questions. What he doesn't say, but which his films do convey, is that his answers in all of his films evoke the presence of a transcendent reality which links us to one another and to a divine creative power. How and why this is possible, are questions he leaves to the theologians.

Kieslowski's career began with a series of working class stories made under communist funding, and progressed to ever-increasingly bold stories that questioned what it was to live in a dictatorial society. In his 1984 film, *No End*, for example, a wife whose husband, Antek, a lawyer, dies while working on a case that involved a Solidarity worker, struggles to adjust to life without her husband. The husband's "presence" remains with the wife, a presence she senses but cannot actually see. In typical commercial fashion, a video box description describes the film as part ghost-story and part court room drama. It is neither; rather, it is a portrait of a woman who feels that death is not the end of life.

The commercially oriented promotion of *Decalogue* underlines the importance of the need for a methodology with which to view film through more than one set of lenses. Suzanne Langer, the art historian, gives us a schematic method which suggests how this may be done. She notes that in viewing art, and I apply her suggestion to film, we have to view the work on both the discursive and the presentational levels, what the work is about, and what it is.

I call this the "aboutness" and the "isness" levels of film viewing, the surface data that is obvious and the beneath-the-surface data which is not. Langer refers to the presentational level of viewing art as viewing the work "between the facts." Commercial films usually

don't have sufficient depth, which discourages probing beneath the surface, since there is rarely anything there.

David Lynch, one of our finest contemporary film artists, seemed to deliberately want to address this issue when in the opening of his film, *Blue Velvet*, he moves from his portrait of a perfect suburban community, smiling families waving at passing fire trucks, by extending his camera onto the perfectly manicured green lawns, and then suddenly plunging the camera beneath the grass to see slimy grubs and other grimy sorts that lurk just beneath the surface of the community's presumed innocence and beauty.

In Kieslowski's *No End*, the film opens with an introduction to the lawyer who had died four days earlier. We find out a great deal about him and his family in a few short scenes, and we discover also that the important case he was working on will have to be confronted during the course of the film. The transcendent hand that hovers over Kieslowski's work steers the young widow on a journey into the jungle that Polish jurisprudence has become. There are no answers as to why the husband died so young and left the case behind. But he did, and to harken back to a famous Ford line uttered by John Wayne, "a man has to do what a man has to do." And Antek's presence in his wife's life enables him to do just that.

*The Decalogue* was made in 1989, four years after *No End*, and four

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years later, in 1993, Kieslowski made the first of three films in his trilogy, *Three Colors: Blue*, which was then followed by *White* and his last picture, *Red*. Kieslowski said in interviews that he meant the colors to represent the three colors of the French flag, his newly adopted country to which he moved after the end of the Cold War. The colors in the flag stand for Liberty, blue, Equality, white, and Fraternity, red.

The irony in his work is made manifest in these colors, since in *Blue*, liberty comes to the film's central character, Julie, played by Juliette Binoche, only after she loses both her husband and her daughter in an automobile crash, and discovers that her husband had a mistress, who she then discovers is pregnant.

This shattering of the image she had of her husband destroys her sense of self and sends her on a journey of self-discovery. In Kieslowski's worldview there is no such thing as absolute liberty or absolute freedom because if we are to be fully human we give up freedom in favor of love. And love always comes with a price, the price of having our love dependent on flawed fellow humans.

Each of the trilogy films is marked by the use of the colors in the title, or in the case of white, the lack of color. In each film Kieslowski's narrative develops the themes of liberty/freedom, then equality, and finally fraternity. The equality he suggests in *White* doesn't exist in any perfect form; and the ab-

sence of equality is highlighted in the story of a Polish immigrant in France (somewhat autobiographical in tone) who struggles to gain equality while remaining an outsider.

In *Red*—fraternity—we are given the third of the three biblical definitions of love, following eros in *White*, caritas, or the love which gives with no thought of return, in *Blue*, and fraternity, in *Red*, the love that is more than

*The strength of this film lies in the heavy emphasis on the manner in which the human community is linked to one another in ways fulfilled and perhaps by choice, unfulfilled.*

eros, a fraternal connection above both eros and caritas. I have found nothing in material I have researched on Kieslowski to suggest he ever indicated that his trilogy parallels the French flag trilogy with the three biblical definitions of love.

But I am persuaded that this is evident in a close reading of the three pictures. Perhaps in one of his interviews, Kieslowski mentions this parallel, or just maybe

the eros, caritas, fraternity trilogy is a future doctoral dissertation waiting to happen. In any event, the trilogy is rich with Kieslowski's spiritual sensibility and these three views of love most certainly could have been in his thinking.

When Kieslowski died he had begun work on a second trilogy, which he planned to call, *Heaven, Hell* and *Purgatory*. It is an interesting, though sad reminder of his death, that the first of these remained as a script and has just been developed into a feature film, entitled, *Heaven*. That film opened the 2002 Berlin film festival; no other word has been released about the other scripts, if they exist.

The concept of caritas permeates *Blue*, in which a young widow gives away some of her possessions just to disappear from life because of her deep depression. Later, she gives away her remaining possessions, including her home, as a gift to her husband's child and mistress. This expression of caritas is a giving with no thought of return. In *Red*, fraternity emerges primarily through the relationship of the central character, Valentin, played by Irene Jacob, a model who is linked to a retired judge, connected by the strange event in which the car she is driving accidentally hits the judge's dog, Rita.

The strength of this film lies in the heavy emphasis on the manner in which the human community is linked to one another in ways fulfilled and perhaps by

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choice, unfulfilled. Early in the film, for example, we have a segment in which Valentin, the model, accidentally hits Rita, the dog, as she drives through rainy streets. She takes the dog first to the judge and then when he is indifferent to the dog's welfare, she takes it to the veterinarian. Just before the accident, a young man who is studying law walks across the street after Valentin's car has passed. He drops his books and when he picks them up he finds one of the books opened to a passage which later in the film we discover to have been a question that appears on his bar exam, for which he has prepared, just in case he did get a heads up, from somewhere.

Valentin and this young man, in the course of the film, meet. And we find that the judge has had a similar experience of dropping a book and finding the right question for his exam. Are these just interesting sets of coincidences, or is there a divine hand moving in our lives in ways we can never understand except after the fact? How you answer that question will no doubt be determined by what you believe regarding any such thing as a divine hand or a transcendent force.

Linkage in the human community is a common theme in Kieslowski's art. Moments in films are echoed in later moments; not only with the use of some of the same performers—as was also the case with John Ford's repeated use of his team of actors, John Wayne, Jimmy

Stewart, Henry Fonda, Ward Bond—but also with specific connections. In *Red*, for example, there is a reference to the musical composition of a composer whose name is fictional and used in a scene in *Blue*. In *White*, in a court room dealing with the divorce of the two main characters, the Polish immigrant is pleading to be heard even though he doesn't speak French. In the background we see Valentin open

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to respond to these  
opportunities.*

the door, and then hastily depart. In *Red*, this scene is repeated from Valentin's perspective.

Also in *Red*, Valentin and the young man she eventually will meet, are shown living in apartments across the street from one another, and at times they appear in the same frame but do not

meet. It is not until after her encounter with the judge that circumstances are set up so that their meeting takes place. Life is seen turning on found or missed opportunities over which we have no control, except as we make our choices as to how to respond to these opportunities.

If our views of Kieslowski's films are determined by the blurbs that describe them as mysteries or ghost stories, or love stories, then we are likely to remain fixed at the discursive level of film viewing, accepting these works as entertaining or diverting but not as disclosures. If, on the other hand, we are prepared to receive these films at the presentational level, not just what the film is about on the surface, but what they are from the depths of a vision, we will be enriched through encounters with an artist with a profound religious sensibility.

Kieslowski, like John Ford before him, fulfills the mandate of film as art as described by Russian film maker and scholar Andrey Tarkovsky, who writes (in a less gender-conscious age) in *Sculpting in Time* (University of Texas Press, 1986): "It is perfectly clear that the goal for all art . . . is to explain to the artist himself and to those around him what man lives for, what is the meaning of existence. To explain to people the reason for their appearance on this planet; or if not to explain, at least to pose the question" (p. 36).

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# Patricia's Ponderings

## Van Gogh's God

Patricia Adams Farmer

*"I always think that the best way to know God is to love many things."*

—Vincent Van Gogh

Standing in a room full of paintings by Vincent van Gogh is a religious experience if ever there was one. When the van Gogh exhibit from Holland came to Los Angeles, nothing could stop me from being there. It was a pilgrimage.

Standing in the midst of self-portraits and peasants and crows and flowers—color and light and simplicity—my heart takes a leap and I wonder: what is the inspiration behind this red-haired man of mystery, myth, and madness?

I bought a book at the museum bookstore called *Van Gogh and God* to see if I could unravel the mystery. And in this book author Clifford Edwards remarks that Vincent van Gogh's God has many parallels with the God of Alfred North Whitehead's "process philosophy." (Ah! My dearest philosopher and this glorious artist in one breath! Things are starting to make sense.)

Whitehead's philosophy paints a picture of a tender God, creatively alive within all things, offering richly textured possibilities for beauty in an evolving universe. So it is with van Gogh's canvasses of color and light. A tender, earthy love—imbued with vulnerability and mystery—this is the essence of van Gogh's art. It is interesting

that Vincent embraced a true religious experience only when he gave up the calling to the ministry, a calling he associated with a narrow view of God, and began to open up "to love many things."

Vincent looked to a God beyond the usual lawgiver model of his day to one who is Love incarnate in the world. He says in a letter to his brother Theo, "What a mystery life is, and love is a mystery within a mystery. It certainly never remains the same in a literal sense, but the changes are like the ebb and flow of the tide, which leaves the sea unchanged."

The love in this man's heart is juxtaposed with pain from his mental illness. But it is in this disharmony—this very imperfection—that Vincent took hope in a future that is full of possibility. Imperfection in his illness and in the larger flawed creation of human pain was part of what he saw God to be: the vulnerable Struggling Artist in process of creating a universe of beauty.

When Vincent pledged himself to be an artist in 1880, he had surely left behind the "God of the clergyman"—the same God that Nietzsche proclaimed was dead—and turned to this more expansive view of God, a God who loved many things. In this transforming image, van Gogh's God becomes intimately vulnerable, and at the same time, a mystery that lures us into the depth of things.



I look again at his art, this time with new eyes. I see both aspects of his God in his paintings—the earthy simplicity of peasants in a field, and yet the dreaminess of his work that is without detail. This God of both concrete personal experience and dreamy mystery unfolds in color and light and texture.

The Struggling Artist needs van Gogh's vision of love. And mine, too. And yours. We are all a part of it, this grand work of painting love in the world.

I feel a kinship with this man of mystery because his life was a quest for unification, a search for how to integrate the noblest ideas in religion with art, literature, and nature. His mental illness may have taken his life much too soon, but what he left behind only grows more powerful as lagging human sensitivity to divine tenderness catches up to Vincent's own.

His art speaks to us. No. It shouts out to us in color and light and texture and form: God is in *all* things! And so it is, to all things we must give our love.

*"And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."* —1 Corinthians 13:13

## Process from Our Perspective

### The Evolution of Credo Group

James Koukl

About twenty years ago, an adult Sunday School class was formed at Marvin United Methodist Church, located in Tyler, Texas. Called the Discovery Class, it was led by a young associate pastor and consisted of middle- to upper-class couples, mostly professionals: doctors, dentists, lawyers, professors, real estate professionals, teachers, bankers, etc. About twenty couples attended most Sundays, with belief systems ranging from agnostic to strictly fundamentalist. Folks came from all types of religious Christian affiliations.

When my wife and I joined the class, one of the members was leading a discussion on a book by Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*. We must have spent six months every Sunday morning reading and discussing that book. It was not like any Sunday School class we had ever attended.

We jumped from Peck to other types of books and topics throughout the next few years, not really having a particular direction. The Discovery Class Sunday School group continued to see each other on Sundays with some in the group forming tighter friendships as we all began to know each other on a more personal level.

A number of years later another associate pastor arrived to take over the education role for Marvin Methodist Church. His background was diverse. He came from a strong Pentecostal family, and his father was a well-known televangelist. He had gotten his Ph.D. in theology from the University of Tübingen in Germany, with Rudolf Bultmann as his mentor and dissertation advisor. He came to Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, then to Marvin.

One of the first things he did was to form an adult Bible study for which he wrote his own curriculum. Once a week, for approximately three years, about 300 of us saw scripture, for the first time, in a different light from what I call a “fifth grade understanding.” Though we didn’t realize it at the time, a bridge to process theology was being constructed. One of the first things we realized was that we had to learn to shut down the movie camera in our brains when we read scripture so that the literature of the Bible could come through. Another concept we all picked up from our association with and guidance from this associate pastor is that it was the “disposition of one’s heart” that



Members of Credo Group with Marjorie Suchocki

becomes important in daily life. [The pastor left Marvin about six years ago and is currently on the faculty of the School of Theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee.] The Reverend Jerry Carpenter came to Marvin Church as the new associate pastor in 1996. He taught the “Disciples” Bible curriculum, which most of the Discovery Class attended, and other biblical studies that still continue for members of Marvin Church today.

After a number of years of listening to these two associate pastors, and reading and studying with them, many of us in the Discovery Class were wondering why people in the pews were not exposed to some of these new concepts that we were encountering. We wondered how far can we as a group go in exploring and asking theological questions without being ostracized. We wanted to know more about the current theological dialogue going on within the church and in seminaries. Finally, we wanted to know what is

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actually taught in seminary? We approached Rev. Carpenter to ask if he would be interested in meeting with members of the Discovery Class to help answer some of our questions.

It was decided that we would meet once a week in each other's homes. The first book Rev.

Carpenter recommended to the group was *Credo* by Hans Küng. Jerry said that one of the aspects of seminary was that each student builds his or her own credo based on personal experience and study. A small group from the Discovery Sunday School class then became known as Credo Group, and it continues to meet once a week.

Credo Group continued to study books—*Introduction to Christian Theology*, by Hansen; *The Meaning of Jesus*, by Borg and Wright; *Reading the Bible for the First Time*, by Borg; and various other works. Then Rev. Carpenter recommended a book to the group written by Marjorie Suchocki, *In God's Presence*. At the time, none of us knew what process theology was, and this book was our introduction to it. I think I speak for the group that it changed our lives. For me, it has changed my life significantly: how I see the world, how I deal with others, the living creatures that surround me daily, and indeed all of creation. It is difficult to put into words, but I perceive members of Credo Group having similar thoughts.

Discussing the concept of God was the beginning. We thought of

God in the way Marjorie expressed it in her book. The concept made sense to us. I think we all felt this concept in our minds and our hearts but could not express it as she had. It was like a high-five “yes!” or an “aha” experience. The road to process theology for the Credo Group began.

After reading and studying *In God's Presence*, the group embarked on a number of different books, some members reading other works on their own and then sharing them with the entire group. The list included: *The Birth of Christianity*, by Crossan; *The Fall to Violence*, by Suchocki; *The Whispered Word*, by Suchocki; and a number of books by Bishop Spong.

A few years ago we invited Dr. Suchocki to Marvin Church to address not only members of Credo Group but also members of the congregation on a Saturday morning. That afternoon Marjorie agreed to come to Credo Group at a member's home so that the group could discuss *In God's Presence* with her. What a grand afternoon. We became “Suchocki Groupies” that afternoon. There have been other opportunities to visit with her over the past few years, and the group has realized that not only have we found a theology called process, but also a very special friend.

The group has not formally studied the following books, but some in the group have read Suchocki's *God Christ Church*, and *Trinity in Process*, edited by Suchocki and Bracken. The last two books Credo Group has

studied together are *The Social World of Luke-Acts* by Neyne and *Re-Imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, by B. Scott. When we finished the Scott book, we decided to take a break for the summer, but we continue to meet every Wednesday evening at a local eatery to share the past week's activities with each other and have dinner. We have found a close community with each other and because of process theology have expanded that sense of community on a wider basis.

I am not sure where Credo Group goes from here. We are in community. We love each other, we depend on each other, we take care of each other. We wish we could expand the community and share what we have found, but we also realize that individuals must have desire and stamina to pursue what we have experienced and continue to experience. I wish every member of Marvin United Methodist Church could have experienced our journey. It takes a great effort, but it is a rewarding and enjoyable effort. We also realize that the collective group of individuals we call Credo Group evolved at a special time, at a special place, with special mentors, and with a collective mind set to try to comprehend “God stuff.” I don't think Credo Group could do anything differently. Where does Credo Group go from here? I think the group will continue to study all types of theological literature. Some we will agree with; some we will not. The journey continues.

# Process in Practice

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## A Light to My Path: Reflections on Psalm 119:105

Ronald L. Farmer

Psalm 119 is a fascinating psalm from a structural point of view. In addition to being the longest psalm in the Psalter, containing 176 verses, it is also an acrostic psalm. Each of its 22 stanzas begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Although other psalms use this literary device, none does it as extensively as does this psalm. Each of the eight verses within each stanza also begins with the same letter of the alphabet. Verses 105-112 form the 14<sup>th</sup> stanza; hence, each of the verses begins with the 14<sup>th</sup> letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *nun*, which corresponds to the English letter “n.”

Scholars frequently describe Psalm 119 as a meditation on God’s *torah* or teachings. Six synonyms for *torah* are used in verses 105-112: word, ordinances, law, precepts, testimonies, and statutes. Five additional synonyms occur elsewhere in the psalm: commandments, decrees, ways, promises, and judgments. As the richness of these synonyms indicates, *torah* refers to the total revelation of God, not just the Mosaic legislation or even the Pentateuch.

The psalmist frequently exclaims, “How I love your law, O God!” “Your word is my continual delight!” “Teach me your ordinances!” “Give me understanding

of your commandments!” As these exclamations demonstrate, the psalm is both a hymn of praise to God for faithfully making known the way people should live, and a prayer expressing the psalmist’s continuous need for God’s gracious guidance.

Indeed, the 14<sup>th</sup> stanza reveals that a crisis has enveloped the author: “I am severely afflicted . . . I hold my life in my hands . . . the wicked have laid a snare for me.” With his life in jeopardy, he prays for guidance and promises to follow God’s revelation. “Give me life, O LORD, according to your word . . . teach me your ordinances.” “I have sworn an oath . . . to observe your righteous ordinances.” “I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.”

To understand why the psalmist so fervently desires to know God’s will and promises to follow it no matter what that may entail, all we need do is reflect on the stanza’s opening verse, one of the most famous verses in the entire Psalter: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

Living in the age of the electric light, it is hard for us to experience the full force of this verse. Whether we live in large cities, small towns, or even rural areas, the night is pierced by the ever-present streetlight glowing from

dusk till dawn. To experience nighttime darkness as the psalmist experienced it, we must go camping in the wilderness, far away from civilization. And even then, we must put away our battery-powered, high-intensity flashlights that project long beams of light—for the lamp of which the psalmist spoke was a tiny, flickering flame.

When I was a boy, summer’s highlight was the annual family camping trip to the Rocky Mountains. Prior to our trip one summer, I had memorized Ps. 119:105 in Vacation Bible School. As I walked along a thickly wooded path one night carrying an old Coleman single-mantle lantern, I made an interesting observation. The lantern cast only a small circle of light, enough for the next step or two, but it did not illumine the path far in advance. Suddenly I realized what the psalmist meant. God’s *torah* illumines the path for the next step or two; therefore, daily light requires daily communion with God.

That was a good observation for a grade school kid. Much later as an adult I had occasion to reflect back on that experience in the woods. I realized that the observation I made that night was more profound than I could have fathomed as a child. Let me explain.

## *Process in Practice*

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For some time—I am ashamed to say how long—I was not content with the small circle of light God shined on my path daily. I wanted God to shine a floodlight so I could see far down the path that lay before me. Eventually, however, I came to understand that there are at least two reasons why God shines a lamp rather than a floodlight on our paths.

First, I now believe that if it were possible for us to see very far down the path, we would become discouraged because of what God calls us to become. If as an eighteen-year-old college freshman God could have revealed to me that I had twelve more years of formal education ahead of me and four more languages to learn, I fear I might have dropped out of school. I am confident that if we could see very far down the path, we would become discouraged. But as it is, each step we take prepares us for the next; in this manner we can accomplish things we would never have thought possible. We can become the people God calls us to be when we take it a step at a time.

The second reason God shines a lamp rather than a floodlight on our paths is that the future is not determined. This statement strikes at the heart of one of the most controversial questions that has plagued the Western world since the time of the Greeks. “Is everything completely determined, or does genuine freedom exist?” With the exception of hyper-Calvinists, most Christians have been uncomfortable with the

notion of complete determinism for at least two reasons. (1) The biblical authors assume that people have genuine, though limited, freedom and hence are responsible for their decisions and actions. (2) In everyday life we seem to have a degree of freedom; we experience ourselves making real choices between real alternative courses of action. Of course, our freedom is never absolute; it is always exercised within certain limits. But our experience of freedom seems genuine.

*According to the testimony of the psalmist and countless others across the centuries, God faithfully lures us in the direction we should go, moment by moment.*

During the last three hundred years, however, leading thinkers and scientists have increasingly told us that our experience of freedom is just an illusion. As Newtonian physics and materialistic philosophies came to dominate the “modern period,” more and more people came to believe that everything is completely determined. Indeed, the universe came to be viewed as a gigantic machine, and we humans as mere cogs within it. For those who hold

this mechanistic world view, all talk of freedom and God is judged to be utterly meaningless.

But that was the modern period. We now stand on the threshold of a new era in human history, a “post-modern age.” Newtonian physics has given way to quantum mechanics, the theory of relativity, and field theory. Materialistic philosophies are slowly being replaced by post-modern ways of thinking, such as process philosophy. Leading thinkers and scientists now speak of indeterminism, genuine freedom within limits, and God.

If this is not a mechanistic universe, if the future is not determined, if we have genuine (though limited) freedom—how do we know which way to go? How can we choose wisely between alternative actions? Freedom can be a frightening thing! What if we make the wrong choices?

According to the testimony of the psalmist and countless others across the centuries, God faithfully lures us in the direction we should go, moment by moment. When we become sensitive to God’s persistent promptings, when we follow the Spirit’s gentle guidance, the highest good results both for ourselves and for everyone around us. God stands ever ready to shine light upon our paths.

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# Stories, Images, and Sound

Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore

*Tell me a story,  
Paint me a picture,  
Sing me a song;  
I long to touch your soul,  
To see your passion,  
To imagine earthy textures  
from daylight to dawn.  
Tell the stories of your people,  
Paint the visions of their past,  
Sing the songs of their  
belonging;  
We yearn to know what's real,  
To imagine the past and the yet-to-be,  
To dance with the rhythms of  
humanity.*

For almost twenty years, I have introduced several different classes with a film-showing. I have discovered that those classes launched with a film are usually the most focused and generative that I teach. I have come to believe that a learning community grounded in a common story has a touchstone to which people return again and again as we read, reflect, analyze, and theorize. After a first class session with lights dimmed and windows covered, students know they have traveled at least one common journey, however differently people may have experienced the film. From that point in a course, students often prepare diverse texts and community observations for weekly assignments; the film continues to be a shared experience within which such diversity can be shared.

### POWER OF NARRATIVE

Film is much more than that, of course. It is a narrative, with all of the power that narratives bear—the power of connecting viewers with another world; the power of invoking relationships among people, and between peoples and places; the power of connecting past, present and future; and the power of stirring imagination about what the world might be. Film is also a picture (a hundred thousand pictures), that transports people into another world, as surely as a magic carpet. And film is a medley of sounds—harsh, lyrical, pensive, haunting, inspiring—that give voice to the human drama. It is no wonder that literary-minded educators, such as Maxine Greene, have seen narrative as a force for social transformation. Nor is it a wonder that literary philosophers, such as Soren Kierkegaard and Rene Girard, see so clearly into the internal struggles of human beings. Girard's work as a literary scholar, for example, led him to see the potential destructive and salutary effects of religion, contributing to scapegoating and victimization on the one hand, and to salvation on the other. Girard even turned to the Bible as a literary vessel for uncovering the world and pointing to salvation; he found the power of the Bible in its literary richness.

### PROCESS PERSPECTIVES ON FILM

Reflecting on film from a process perspective, the power is underscored. A film does not portray the world as a pile of things, but as a flow of reality or imagined reality. In film, substantive approaches to communicating the world, characteristic of most post-Enlightenment philosophy, are replaced with process approaches. To grasp this, one does not need to be self-identified as a process thinker, or a disciple of Alfred North Whitehead, John Dewey, or Charles Hartshorne. Most people experience most of life as a flow of experience—the very way that film portrays life. In film, experience sometimes flows in sequential and orderly fashion, and it sometimes flows in every direction at once. Either way, experience *flows*.

A process perspective on narrative can also highlight the relationality of reality, a subject about which I have written in the past (*Teaching from the Heart*). In film, people, places and events are portrayed in relationship, and those relationships are inherent in every aspect of a film's plot (or lack of plot), visual images, and sound. The relationships are neither metaphysically nor ideologically presented; they simply *are*. Certainly metaphysics and ideology help to make sense of those relationships, raising self-consciousness and analytic

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frameworks for understanding and acting upon them. On the other hand, most people experience most of life as a web of relationship—the very way that film portrays life.

### **THERAPEUTIC AESTHETICS OF FILM**

Film not only reveals; it also works on its viewers. I confess that the very best therapy for me when overwrought by tragedy, weariness, or stress is to view a film or stage play. When the situation is extreme, I prefer to view a series of creative works in a short period (a weekend bash). I have pondered why such aesthetic “diversions” are important to me. Certainly one reason *is* diversion, but this is not the full explanation of my quirk. Film has a therapeutic aesthetic power, which is never a one-dimensional, quick remedy for superficial symptoms. Film—when well-crafted and engaging—reaches far into people’s souls. The therapeutic magic is complex, touching many persons in many ways, and usually in more than one way at a time. With this in mind, we turn to some of the therapeutic qualities of film (exemplified by a few enduring classics). Of course, these qualities are not discrete, and no film represents only one quality. The discussion is meant to be evocative, leaving space for further reflection.

One can say quickly that film is *diversionary therapy*. When I need diverting, I usually choose films that portray comic, compassionate or hopeful pictures of human life (anything from slap-

stick to *Chocolat* to *Places in the Heart*). Film is also *emotive therapy*, evoking emotions deep in our psyches and integrating them more fully in our lives. Several years ago, our family went to see *Beaches*, and when one of the main characters died, our daughter began to sob. When the film ended, she and I went to the women’s room where she cried her heart out, expressing grief that had been accumulating for several

*Most people experience most of life as a flow of experience—the very way that film portrays life.*

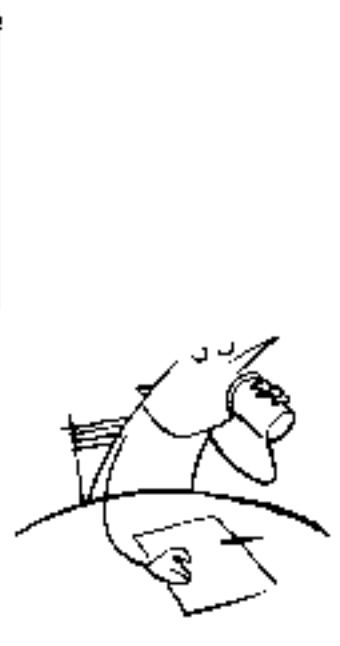
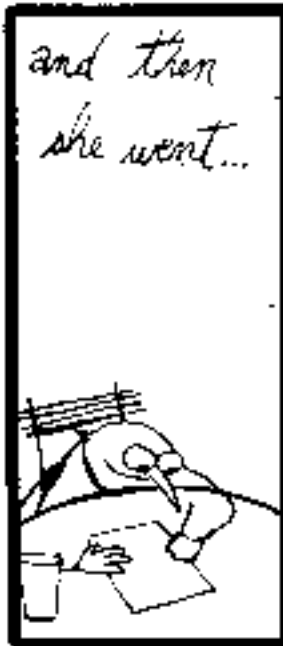
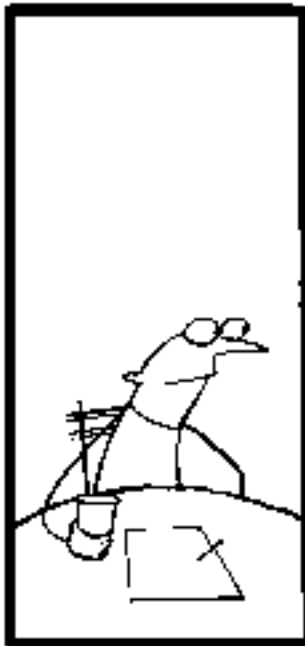
months since her grandfather’s death. Another therapeutic quality of film is *grounding therapy*, uncovering aspects of reality which people have forgotten or have never known (whether the portrayal of desperation and hope in *Boyz n the Hood* or the shocking picture of undying evil in *The Usual Suspects*).

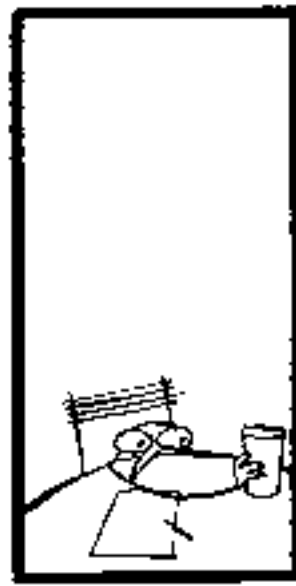
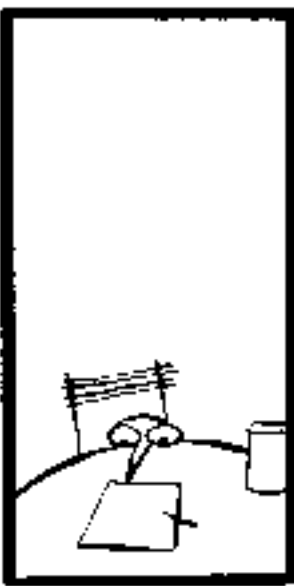
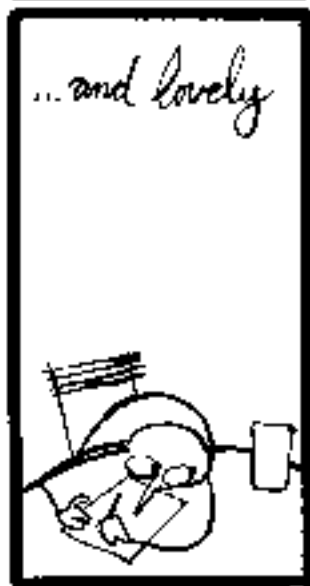
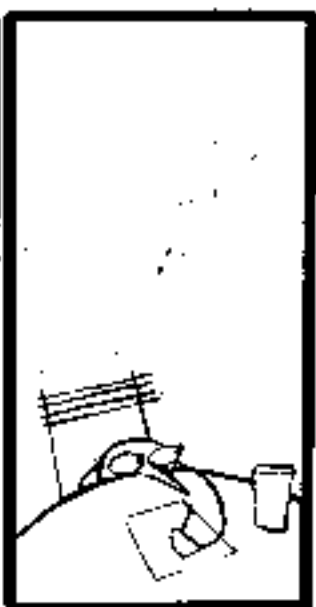
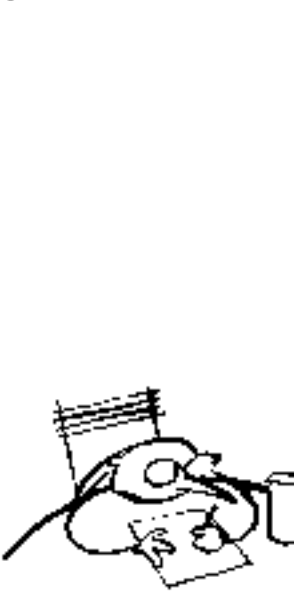
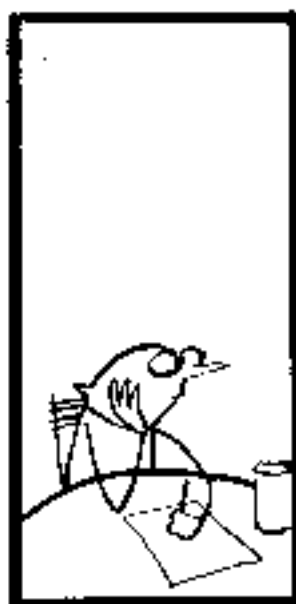
In a very different way, film is *disorienting therapy*, shaking people from their daily routine and routinized pictures of life, and pointing to a world that jars their sensibilities (*Thelma and Louise*). Similarly, film can be

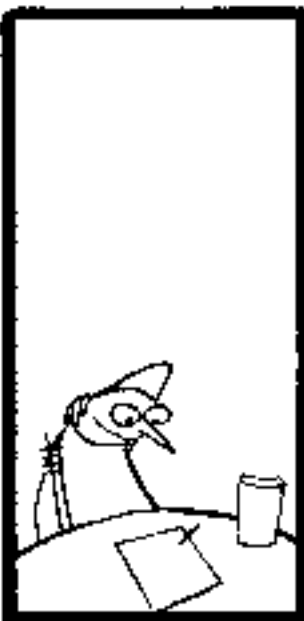
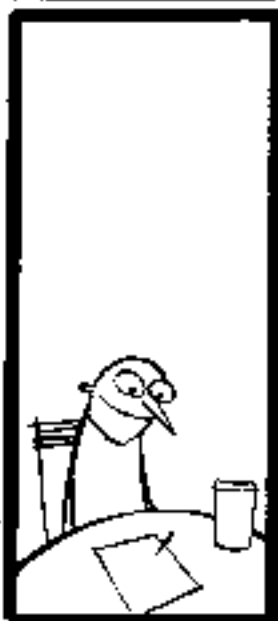
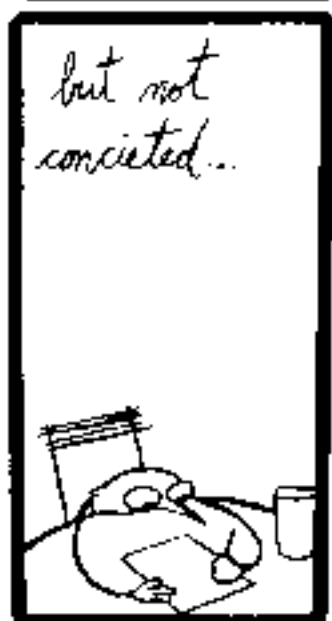
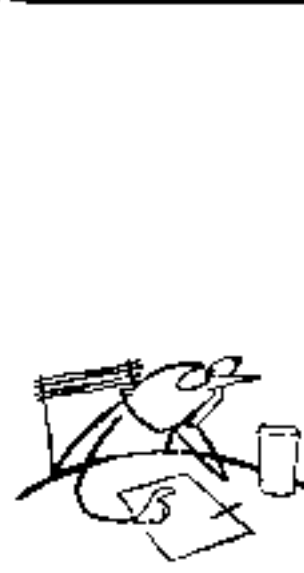
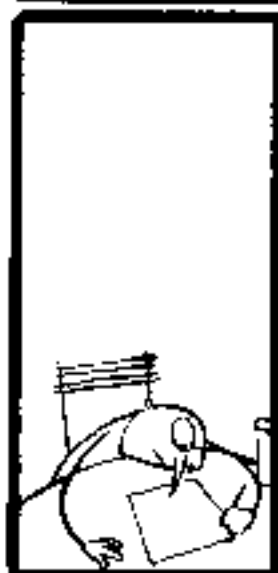
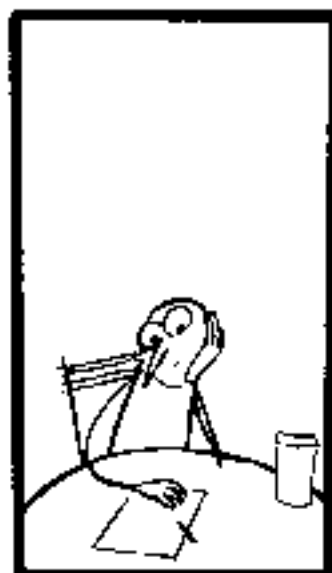
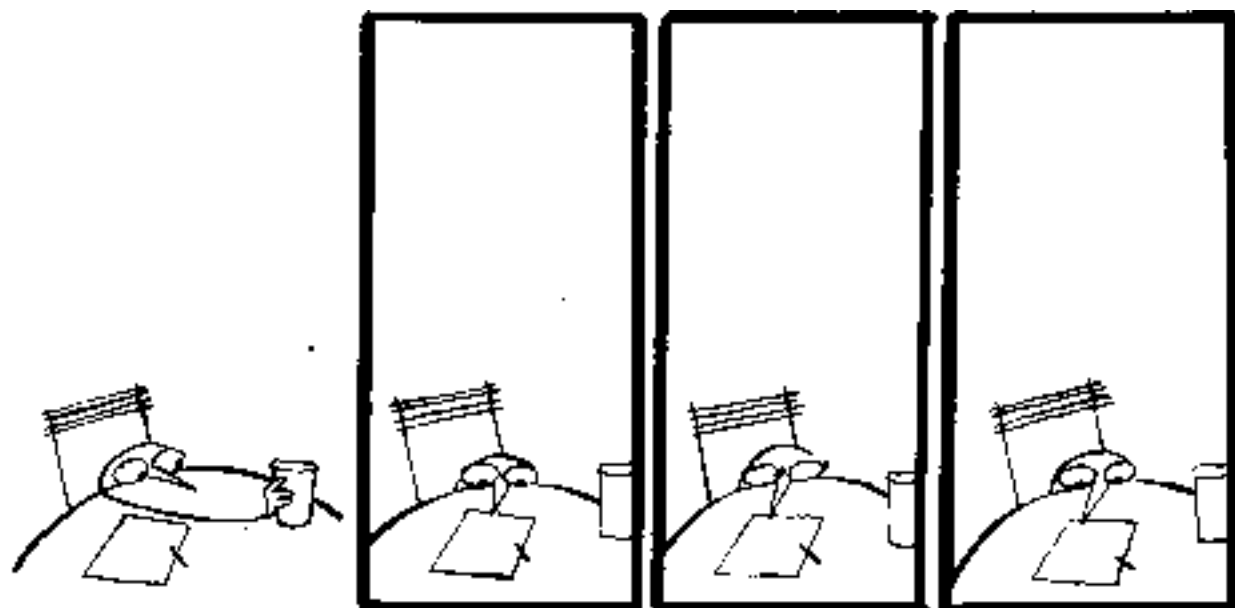
*perspectival therapy*, awaking people to worlds beyond their limited horizons and to worldviews that stretch, challenge or reinforce their own (*The Mission*). Finally, film can be *inspirational therapy*, arousing deep passions and commitments in human lives—passions that have been dormant or even actively suppressed by stress and distraction. As in most therapies described here, inspirational films might be light or heavy, historically-based or fictional; consider, for example, *Erin Brockovich*, *Goodwill Hunting*, and *Babette’s Feast*. The therapeutic qualities and films named here could be extended and reshaped, but even a brief discussion points to the broad range of aesthetic and healing potential.

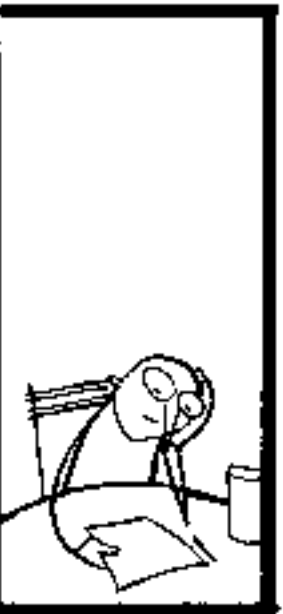
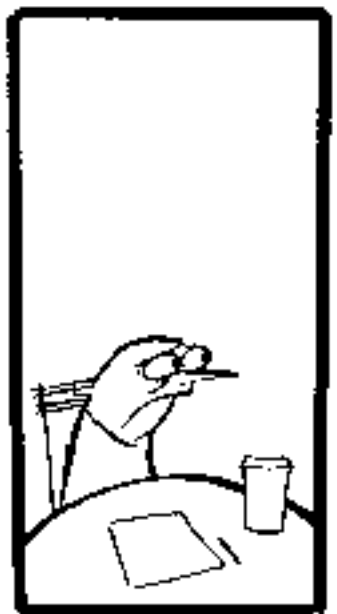
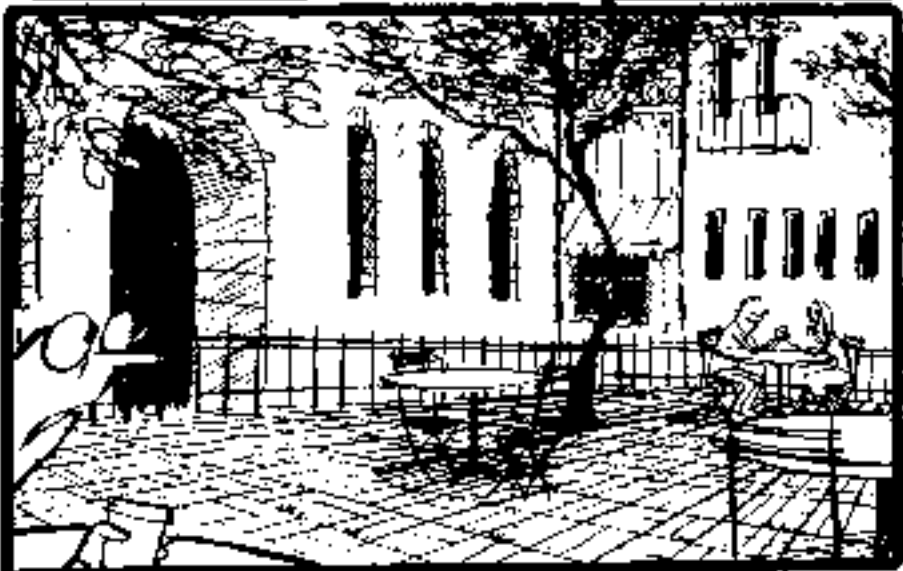
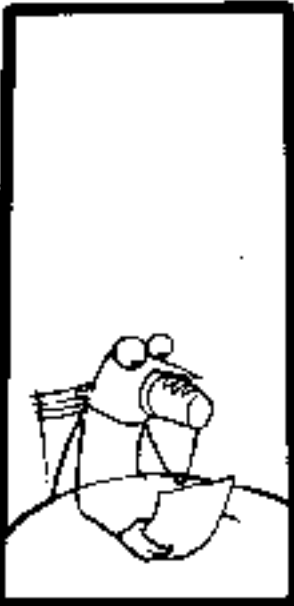
These aesthetic and healing qualities of film are part of the educational power, leading to such worthy pedagogical goals as: deepened understanding and feeling, disorientation, reorientation, and inspiration. Film invites people to engage with the flow of experience and web of relationships portrayed on screen, and those evoked in their own lives. This engagement has its own satisfaction, but it contributes to the ongoing healing of life as well. Education that fosters such healing is the work of *e-ducere*, leading people out from the narrowness of their lives into bold new worlds that they can enjoy, mourn, analyze, critique, and imagine. What a gift!

*Moore, continued on page 15*









end.

## Can Anything Good Come Out of This?

Adrienne Brizee

I was making my way toward the I-5 freeway following a meeting at our Pacific Northwest Conference offices in downtown Seattle. As I drove through an intersection I was startled first by a loud bang, then a hard bump to the head. I was soon on a backboard in an ambulance on my way to Seattle's Harborview Trauma Center. I had a green light. The officer wrote me a ticket!

In the ensuing hours I was scanned from head to thigh, on an IV, and finally released with a large hematoma on my head and rapid swelling and discoloration of my face. Fifty years of driving and never a ticket or an accident. This is not fair! At first, pain was my dominant experience. Then the disbelief, retelling the story to family and friends and contact with the insurance company brought the reality of what I was facing to the fore. The car was quickly towed away for repair but my outrage and disbelief was not so easily dealt with. Friends did not hesitate to say that they were certain that it could not have been my fault. The other driver, whose car was not in my vision until she "t-boned" me, had leapt from her car calling out to someone(s)? I could not see that she was in the right. Surely they would not be valid witnesses.

Only later did I see the errors on the police report. The street

diagram showed me colliding into the side of the other car, yet the outline of my car on a second sheet showed damage to the driver side. The \$6000 in repairs were all to the left side of my car. If those errors were made, could not others have been also?

However, the insurance company decided one of the witnesses had enough reasoning to think I may

*I am convinced  
that God is active  
in each of my  
experiences,  
strengthening me  
to respond in ways  
which add to the  
good of all.*

have had a red light. So now, how to reconcile this information with my certainty that I was in the right and with my previously unblemished driving record?

As time passed, my face turned even more colors and friends comforted with food, flowers, cards and visits. The most appropriate gift I received was a multi-

colored plush rabbit! The ticket came in the mail and I returned it with the box checked asking to contest the ticket. Again came the doubt as to the validity of it all as my birthdate was wrong and the box for the amount of a fine was blank. Then came more reflection on what was possible in this situation. I gathered information on my options and increasingly faced the choice that I was likely to have to pay the ticket or ask for a trial. Also, I learned that what the insurance company would do did not rest on my fighting and winning on the issue of the ticket. Their process would be entirely separate from the legal process as they negotiated with the other party. It seemed time for some creative transformation of this experience for myself.

I recognized many positive possibilities had already been actualized by my friends and family. I had been listened to by my spouse and others. I had explored options. I was doing all the daily assigned exercises by the physical therapist. My face was beginning to heal. I inched my way toward the idea of acceptance of what was possible in the situation and what was not possible. I had been fighting for "justice," but now I was beginning to ask, "What is possible here?"

I began to celebrate that I was not injured more seriously. As I wrote

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numerous “thank you” notes, I also celebrated the wealth of friends and family who cared for me. I could recognize, and even begin to experience God’s activity in the restoration of the person I know myself to be. The divine invitation was extended to not allow this accident to define me, it was my decision to act upon it. I began to move in this direction, sensing it to be the right path. Occasionally I glanced back at the path of feeling unfairly defined by the legal process but chose not to spend much time there.

Creativity in my situation was assisted by my past, by a relationship with God, who calls me to be a good steward of my time and energy, and by a supportive spouse and a need to not let myself be defined by outside experiences to the extent that is possible in my life. I recognize that not everyone has the same support and may be struggling with much more serious situations. This could mean that creativity in the lives of others is limited to smaller increments of change. I am convinced that God is active in each of my experiences, strengthening me to respond in ways

which add to the good of all. I also believe this is true for all of creation. I am hopeful that my experience and response to it has in some incremental way added to that good. I know that this process has left me with a greater appreciation for the struggle for the fairness and justice that is often unavailable to others. I also know that I have more energy for my teaching, my family and friends for having chosen to respond to the possibilities of doing what I could do and moving on to new experiences and possibilities.

What I could do was to go to Seattle with Bob to contest my ticket. In a very humane process, I learned that the magistrate at this level of the system could not change the ticketed charge. What she could and did do was lower the fine from \$133 to \$50. What did I do? I paid the \$50, deciding not to use my energy and my finances to prepare for a court trial and to move on with my life.

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*P&F News, continued from page 1*

## **Summer Course: 2002—and 2003?**

Prof. Jay McDaniel, noted process theologian who teaches at Hendrix College in Arkansas, taught a lively summer process course June 25-29. McDaniel is noted for his writings on both ecology and interfaith dialogue, and these elements of process theology were featured in the course. Reviews of the course—as was expected!—were very positive.

We are now in the planning stages for next year’s course, and are considering a new format that combines classes and retreat activities. How would you respond to a week in early June that features John Cobb and Marjorie Suchocki team-teaching process theology for three hours each morning, combined with various meditative walks in the afternoons? Our location provides for walks in Ice House Canyon on Mt. Baldy beside an icy mountain stream, a beach walk on the Strand of the Pacific Ocean, a woods walk through Santa Ana Botanical

Gardens, and a walk along the foothills on the Thompson Trail. Housing would be in a retreat house here in Claremont, where we would hold evening vespers. None of these walks are strenuous—not even Ice House Canyon—and of course they would be optional for those who prefer to Think Great Thoughts in the quiet of the retreat house. But our goal would be to set theology within the natural beauty of our Claremont setting, and to provide a time and place where P&Fers from around the nation might come for the joy of thinking, walking, and meditating together.

We’d surely appreciate your letting us know whether you think we should go ahead with these plans. Email your opinion to us at [faith@ctr4process.org](mailto:faith@ctr4process.org). Then we’ll have a better idea as to whether we should try this new format with its fifteen hours of class time and afternoon walks, or whether we should stay with our thirty-hour format. Thanks!

# Creativity in Liturgy

Paul S. Nancarrow

For some people, the phrase *creativity in liturgy* may seem like a contradiction in terms. And indeed, maintaining a creative approach to liturgical practice can be a great challenge to all sorts and conditions of congregations and faith communities.

Part of the challenge comes in the way we usually think of creativity. For many of us, the word *creative* seems synonymous with words like *innovative* or *new* or *non-traditional*. Creativity in this sense can go against the grain of liturgy, since one of the main purposes of liturgy is to carry on the tradition of the faith community. Liturgy has the function of bringing the *past* into the present: liturgy reenacts, in words and gestures and symbols and images and metaphors, the ideals the community inherits from its past. The symbolic forms of liturgy represent the core truths, the eternal objects, of religious tradition, so that those core truths can be experienced anew in the lives of contemporary worshipers. As Norman Pittenger observes, in liturgical action “those past originative events are newly prehended or grasped and are made effectual in the experience of men and women.”<sup>1</sup> Liturgy helps make the foundational past of faith not merely a dead memory, but a lived experience.

Consider, for example, the public reading of scripture in a liturgical

setting. Scripture is read *out loud* in worship not merely for reasons of convenience or aesthetics, but to provide a shared experience in the actual worlds of the gathered worshipers. The public reading of the text makes the text not just a historical reminiscence, but also a contemporary address. When the reader says, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with Christ so that we may also be glorified with Christ”—when the reader speaks those words out loud, we can receive them as addressed to us and to our concerns and contexts. We may know that they were originally addressed to Christians in Rome in the first century of our era, and we may reflect that the Romans’ situation was in many respects far different from our own; but as we *hear* the words spoken to us, they become an address to *our* era and *our* situation, as well. The prehension of the Spirit as bearing witness with our spirits, known first by Paul’s community, becomes available for us also, as that form of definiteness gains ingression into our experience through the liturgical reenactment of the

reading. By means such as this, liturgy transmits the tradition by bringing the *past* into the present.

It is precisely this function of transmitting the tradition that can make liturgy resistant to things that are innovative or new or non-traditional; it is this importance of the past that can make it difficult to be creative, in the usual sense, in liturgical worship. If the symbols and gestures and texts of liturgy change too much or too quickly, they can lose their felt connection to the originative events they are meant to represent; if ministers and leaders of liturgy get too innovative with their materials, they can lose touch with the deep streams of influence that flow from salvation history into our present need and thanks and praise.

But the function of liturgy is also to bring the past *into the present*. The originative events and core truths of religious tradition can only be made available for prehension into contemporary experience if they are presented in a way that is actually relevant to contemporary experiencers. If the symbols and gestures of liturgy become too archaic and old-fashioned, they can lose their power to present the core truths of the tradition, and those forms of definiteness can then no longer be effectual in the worshipers’ lives. If the text of

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scripture read in liturgy, for instance, is from an older translation or version, one far removed from the actual speaking style of the congregation, or if it uses exclusive or patriarchal language, then the experience of hearing those words will be more opaque, and will not convey the same feeling of being addressed by a contemporary spiritual reality. The presentational forms of liturgy must be innovative enough to be relevant to people's actual worlds, without being so innovative that they lose their ability to convey the eternal objects of the core revelation. Only in this way can liturgy fulfill its function of bringing the *past* into the *present*.

And it is this that makes creativity in liturgy such a delicate balancing act. Liturgy that refuses to try *anything* innovative or new or non-traditional loses its ability to communicate; liturgy that is *nothing but* the innovative and new and non-traditional loses the content of

its communication. Liturgical leaders and participants must be constantly re-creating their materials, so that the aims of God, the lure of Love at the heart of the Everlasting that first

*The paradox of creativity in liturgy is that liturgy must be continually innovating in order to be continuously traditional.*

called the community and that continues to constitute the community, may be experienced afresh in every worshipping moment. Creative advance that blends the new with the old is a necessary element in living liturgy. The worshipping community must make liturgical practice

a focus of its creative activity, because liturgical practice is also a focus of *God's* creative activity: in the deepest sense of the word, liturgy is creative because in liturgical performance *God acts* to renew and re-create, God gives initial aims and streams of influence, derived from God's own primordial nature, that create new possibilities for experiencing the Peace that is God's faithful purpose in all creation. Liturgy creates godly actualities—but only if it is done with creativity in its symbols and words and gestures.

The paradox of creativity in liturgy is that liturgy must be continually innovating in order to be continuously traditional. In that respect liturgy mirrors life, as God's creative advance constantly takes what is old and makes it new in actual occasions of divine love.

<sup>1</sup> Norman Pittenger, *Freed to Love: Process Interpretation of Redemption* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1987).

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*Sturm, continued from page 24*  
particularly harsh in his critique of public policies oriented preeminently toward economic growth—which policies, despite their pretense to the contrary, exacerbate many of the social ills that pervade the world.

As a concluding word, Cobb acknowledges that all forms of public ethics, including his own, derive from a limited perspective, but suggests that the genius of

constructive postmodernism is its principled intent to embrace as wide a scope of diverse understandings as possible as potentially complementary to each other.

As usual, Cobb's arguments are judicious and cogent, worthy of close and careful scrutiny. However, we are left with two puzzles to resolve—how to persuade policy makers here and abroad to acknowledge the wisdom of

constructive postmodernism and how to bring congregations of the faithful to acknowledge that public policy is an inherent obligation of any adequate theological articulation or, more succinctly, that faith without works is dead!

*Editor's note: This book is available from Process & Faith for \$21.95; cost to members 19.95 (plus tax and shipping).*

# A Process Pentecost?

Bruce G. Epperly

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were staying. Divided tongues as of fire appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:1-4)*

*Every event on its finer side introduces God into the world. Through it [God's] ideal vision is given a base in actual fact to which [God] provides the ideal consequent, as a factor saving the world from self-destruction and evil. The power by which God sustains the world is the power of [the Divine] as the ideal. God adds [Godself] to the actual ground from which every creative act takes its rise. The world lives by its incarnation of God in itself.<sup>1</sup>*

Recently, one of my students at Wesley Theological Seminary invited me to look at my spiritual journey from an unexpected perspective. After taking my course on the healings of Jesus, he noted, "Bruce, I think you're a charismatic Christian." At first, I was a bit skeptical, since I do not speak in tongues nor do I identify myself with the flamboyant and supernaturalistic approaches to healing characteristic of many of the charismatic televangelists. When I inquired as to what he meant by this description, he replied that "a charismatic is

someone who believes that God shows up and does great things!"

Now, I suspect that few process theologians, pastors, and laypersons would identify themselves as charismatics in the narrow sense of the word. We mistrust the arbitrary invocation of the supernatural in daily life and the often irrational spiritual experiences of our Pentecostal friends. Our vision of God denies that God is an external force who can be manipulated into action on our behalf by the right kind of prayers or the frenzy of the crowd. We are skeptical of the linear identification between speaking in tongues and divine inspiration and intimacy that we often see among charismatic Christians. And, frankly, we can't relate to the conservative, imperialistic, and often exclusivist theology that is embodied by many Pentecostal and charismatic Christians.

But, spirituality lives by what it affirms not by what it denies. In this spirit, I believe that process theology may be described as profoundly charismatic in nature. In contrast to the modern world view that separates mind and body *and* God and the world, process thought proclaims that "God does show up" everywhere and in everything. Each moment of life arises from God's aim at wholeness, intensity of experience, and beauty. Every moment has its own unique spiritual gift, grounded in

its potential to embody God's desire for our own self-actualization as well as the well being of the world. The Divine Eros inspires us each moment, and over a lifetime by our moment-by-moment decisions, toward becoming our fullest self in relationship to the transformation of our world. This eros toward beauty that gives birth to our own inner eros is physical and emotional as well as mental and spiritual.

In the spirit of Pentecost, God's aim is—like a rushing wind—unfettered and dynamic. Arising out of our personal history and historical context, God invites us to become the artists of our own experience by creating something lively and beautiful for the world beyond ourselves. God invites us to go beyond familiar personal limits and self-understandings to embrace the novelty arising in the present moment. Frederick Buechner states that a person's vocation is the place where "your deep gladness meets the world's needs." Our mindful embodiment of the divine aim in our unique and singular way, moment by moment and over a lifetime, reveals our personal vocation or calling in life. Yet, in contrast to static and substantialist understandings of vocation, process thought sees our calling as dynamic, contextual, evolving, and social in nature. Our embodiment of God's aim for our life is both

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for ourselves and for the world. With Eric Liddell, the protagonist of the film *Chariots of Fire*, we can affirm—each in our unique way—“God made me fast, and when I run, I feel God’s pleasure.” But, God’s own erotic pleasure radiates beyond our personal experience to bring joy and fulfillment to others.

As process people, we need to reclaim the word “charismatic” as part of our own spiritual vocabulary. Though we assert that we are constructive post-modernists, our expectations of ourselves and God’s work in our lives is still thoroughly modern. We seldom expect breakthroughs of the Spirit, and we often mistrust the mystical and dramatic manifestations of the Holy Adventure. Yet, in process thought, God is constantly showing up and leading us to new adventures. Though we don’t look for external, linear, and arbitrary supernatural interventions, the God who works within “nature,” the one “in whom we live, move, and have our being” can inspire us to achieve and experience new and abundant life. We are always on holy ground. We are always incarnating the divine aim. In mindful openness to God’s aim, we grow in grace, stature, beauty, and love. We experience great and surprising things as we join our gifts and passions with the world’s needs.

As God’s partners, we open ourselves to the charismatic gifts of God in a variety of ways. First, we can simply listen for the divine aim that speaks to us in “sighs too deep for words.” As Parker

Palmer notes, “vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening.”<sup>2</sup>

Each moment bears the inspiration, guidance, and wisdom of God for those who listen deeply.

Akin to listening is the prayerful awareness that intentionally and consciously opens our lives to God’s presence. The quality of our spiritual lives shapes the nature of God’s gifts to us. In our openness to listen and experience God in the events of our lives, we may choose simply to ask God to give us a vision of the divine aim for the moment or for this time in our life. We can pray for guidance through dreams, synchronous encounters, insights, and the wisdom of others. Asking God for answers is not manipulation but a willingness to listen faithfully to God’s voice in the present, often challenging, moments of life. As the Quakers affirm, “have faith and the way will open.” Our mindful openness to God’s adventurous presence enables God to present us with surprising and occasionally dramatic possibilities for spiritual, emotional, intellectual, physical, and relational transformation.

Our gifts and insights are for the world as well as ourselves. Our momentary self-creation has a global impact. Accordingly, we discern our gifts in relationships. In the Christian tradition, the “body of Christ” (I Corinthians 12) is the environment where gifts and insights are nurtured and affirmed. Within the faithful community,

which may be a circle of friends, a spouse, a spiritual friend, or a church, we discover our gifts even as we appreciate the gifts of others. We open to others’ insights on our own gifts and talents as we mutually guide and support each other’s growth.

I believe that the word “charismatic” needs to be reclaimed by liberal, mainstream, and seeking Christians. We need to affirm that God is at work in our lives to bring forth something of beauty in the world in which we live. We are challenged to let the mighty and surprising wind of God’s Spirit guide our journey to adventures of inspiration, healing, unity, and service. In the words of Whitehead, “[E]very act leaves the world with a deeper or fainter impress of God. [God] then passes into [God’s] next relation to the world with enlarged, or diminished, presentation of ideal values.”<sup>3</sup> Let us be partners in the birth and growth of divine beauty and hope one moment at a time. Let us move with the Spirit.

<sup>1</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 149.

<sup>2</sup> Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Religion in the Making*, 152.

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# Process Resources

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## Critic's Corner: Film

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki

*Spider-Man*

Columbia Pictures: 2002

Director: Samuel M. Raimi

Starring: Tobey Maguire, Willem Dafoe, Kirsten Dunst

Action hero movies are always interesting from a theological standpoint. They invariably include interpretations of evil and dramatic forms of dealing with evil. Frequently the way in which these themes are developed is reminiscent of the basic Christian paradigm: We are affected and infected by evil, and it takes more-than-this-worldly help to deal effectively with evil. This is particularly prominent in the “superhero” stories such as the Star War series, and the dramatizations of comic book heroes such as Batman and now, Spider-Man. *Spider-Man* is especially intriguing given the human/superhuman nature of our hero, Peter Parker.

### **The Basic Story**

Peter Parker, orphaned but lovingly cared for by his aunt and uncle, is a timid high school senior who longs for the girl next door, lovely Mary Jane. On a school field trip they are shown a new breed of spider, genetically altered to incorporate the most effective elements of all spiders. But one of these super-spiders has escaped, and bites Parker. The bite turns him into a “super-

human” with miraculous powers of strength and spider-like qualities. Meanwhile, his best friend’s scientist father has been on an analogous adventure, seeking a serum for military use that will give humans extraordinary powers. He tries the serum on himself. The film then explores the differing uses that each figure—Parker and Osborne—makes of his newly gained superhuman abilities. Parker uses his for good, whereas Osborne uses his for evil. Naturally it is only a matter of time until the two superheroes face one another, and just as naturally, the “best man wins.”

### **Evil**

Minor instances of ill-will can have a snowball effect of devastating consequences. Parker, defrauded of money he has earned, has the opportunity to use his powers to halt a robbery of the person who has defrauded him. Instead, he simply watches, holds the elevator open for the robber, and responds to the query, “why didn’t you stop him?” with a shrug, saying that it wasn’t his problem, echoing the earlier words of his adversary. Later he discovers that the robber he let



escape then hijacked the car of his beloved uncle and murdered the uncle. Peter learns with horror that his own small act of vengeance has unwittingly led to great evil. We exist in an interrelated web of life, and every action has consequences that easily exceed our intentions or control. As Parker absorbs this reality, he resolves to use his powers to stop crime.

Meanwhile, our malevolent “anti-hero” is at first unaware of the violent transformation the serum has caused in him. But indeed, the serum becomes the catalyst for a “Jekyll and Hyde” split for Osborne. His already developed lust for power and wealth is unleashed from any inhibitions or natural feelings toward the good, becoming magnified into a persona who destroys all who interfere with his will to power. Whereas at first the evil persona is separated from Osborne’s consciousness, the film details the gradual coalescence of these two

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components until finally they are merged into the near total corruption of Osborne. The glimmer of goodness left (if it is indeed goodness) is a concern that his son be protected from the knowledge of his evil. But of course the film suggests that his son, out of his ignorance, will pick up the mantle of evil dropped by his father.

In both Parker and Osborne, the film presents not only the corrupting power of evil, but also the ambiguity of evil. Our “good” hero shows his own participation in evil, and our “bad” hero shows that evil is finally dependent upon the good. Evil, like cancer, can only survive through a host that it then proceeds to destroy. Its perpetuation depends on its ability to infect others, through whom it gains new lives that are corrupted and destroyed in turn. But this corruption depends upon the willing co-optation of the host. That is, in order for Osborne’s corruption to be complete, he must consent to become one with his evil persona. His lust for power must finally determine his entire being.

### **And Salvation?**

How, then, is there redress of evil? On the one hand, the *Spider-Man* script follows the usual “hero beats villain” theme necessary to the genre. But as our hero valiantly stops one crime after another, it is increasingly clear that not even a superhero can stop all crimes. The crimes are like the hydra-headed beast: no sooner is one evil head chopped off than another one appears!

The only real way to deal effectively with evil and its ripple effects is through Parker’s initial decision once he realizes his own implication in the problem—he resolves to break the chain of violence, to cease returning evil for evil. But of course the film does not follow this possibility any further, since Parker’s response to the violence of crime is to stop crime through violence. Nonetheless, the film raises the issue.

In some sense, Parker parallels

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summer  
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hearing.*

aspects of Christ: Parker is both human and more-than-human; he is misunderstood by some of the very people he helps, and he is maligned by public figures, who call for his arrest. No one wholly understands him, nor indeed can they, given the mysterious nature of his powers. He is a lonely figure whose best friend betrays him, and who cannot accept the

love that he finally wins from Mary Jane. He is a savior figure who sees his solitariness as essential to his chosen path of helping others. But this in fact may be his major flaw. There is no communal web of good joining him in his efforts against evil—there is not even a “Tonto” to his “Lone Ranger.” The promise of this film is not the emergence of a “beloved community,” but the production of a sequel in which Spider-Man will repeat his lonely forays against evil, most likely in the form of his erstwhile friend, Osborne’s son.

*Spider-Man* is a wonderfully entertaining film, technologically brilliant, and well cast. It is summer entertainment at its best! But beneath the fun of its pyrotechnics are some pretty serious theological issues that surely deserve a hearing. We *do* live in an interrelated universe, every process person knows that. Has the film faithfully portrayed good and evil in an interrelational world? And what about that savior figure? Can a solitary savior save? How can the interrelational nature of the world save the savior from isolation, and therefore increase his or her effectiveness? And what is salvation, anyway? Rescue from crime? The ability to break the cycles of violence internally as well as externally? And how, precisely, is that to happen? *Spider-Man* raises the issues, leaving it to us to ponder them and—perhaps!—to formulate our answers.

# Mutual Transformation in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

Chris Scriven

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

Sony Pictures Classic: 2000

Director: Ang Lee Starring  
Michelle Yeoh, Chow Yun Fat,  
and Chang Chen

The relation between beauty and truth can be seen most clearly in art when art takes the form of cinema. A movie can do what no other art form can—allow the viewer to look into the living eyes of the characters. It is human interaction that makes film a prime vehicle for cross-cultural interaction, as the medium allows the viewer to cross over not only to another culture, but even to the life of another human being.

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

effectively combines the vast tradition of Chinese martial arts films with the narrative structure and emotional intensity of American movies, and it is a cinematic example of mutual transformation between cultures. For example: James Schamus, the writer, notes that the script was originally written in English, but was then translated into Chinese by Wang Hui Ling, and then translated back into English to maintain both the western narrative form and the layers of meaning in the Chinese language spoken in the film.<sup>1</sup> This tension is exactly what Ang Lee, the director, was trying to promote in creating this movie. He states: “Rather than choose between

these two, [Western and Eastern cinematic styles] I let the creative tension between these two styles become [sic] an important part of the making of *Crouching Tiger*.”<sup>2</sup>

In *Crouching Tiger* the story revolves around Jen, a young aristocrat betrothed to someone she does not love. She does not want to be controlled by anyone, including the man that she loves, and her teacher. Jen is railing against everything that her society demands of her, and the central question of this film is how will and how should she respond to the tugging from so many directions. The film dares the viewer to provide a solution where there is no solution. Who can say that the correct response in her situation would be to marry and embark on a life of misery? *Crouching Tiger* examines the tension between Eastern and Western ethical structures and does not attempt to provide answers but rather leaves the viewer to ponder. The contrast remains in flux.

Jen senses that things are not right, but she is not sure what is the source of evil. All of the characters in the film are very complex, and it is difficult to pinpoint one character that could be considered the “bad guy.” Even Jade Fox, the most likely candidate, is motivated by her society’s

refusal to recognize her. As she confronts Li in their first battle, she states: “Your master underestimated us women. Sure he’d sleep with me, but he would never teach me. He deserved to die by a woman’s hand!” It is clear that her bitterness and violent nature is provoked by her oppression by societal structures, and this is the source of evil in *Crouching Tiger*. All of the misfortune in this film is a direct result of the restrictions placed upon women in Chinese society at the time. They have judged their society as lacking and are fighting for better alternatives.

Even Li, the traditional hero, seems to be searching for a greater purpose than revenge or an elusive justice—and in fact wishes to set aside the life of violence. Note his discussion with Yu about a spiritual experience that he had. “I didn’t feel the bliss of enlightenment. Instead . . . I was surrounded by an endless sorrow.” His vision of suffering suggests an Ultimate that suffers along with humanity. It shows to him the pointlessness of the interpersonal conflict that he is embroiled in and the inability to defeat an elusive evil by violent action. Jen learns the same lesson after fleeing her marriage bed. She is confronted in a bar and proceeds to beat up an entire gang of male foes while, in a very power-

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ful moment, she proclaims her own identity: “I am the Invincible Sword Goddess. Armed with the incredible . . . Green Destiny. Be you Li or Southern Crane . . . lower your head . . . and ask for mercy. I am the desert dragon. I leave no trace. Today I fly over Eu-Mei. Tomorrow . . . I’ll kick over Wudan Mountain!” In this moment her own spirit and will have triumphed and she stands erect and powerful in a gesture of domination, her face confident and proud. She has achieved the Western ideal: independence. And yet, unlike most American movies, Jen finds that this does not solve her problems. Evil is elusive and has no face. She has triumphed but no resolution is found. In the end all she manages to do is get those closest to her killed and she finds herself in the same place she started: trapped. The film suggests that evil is not defeated by violence and self-assertion. Independence is meaningless if it requires exile. Her enlightenment is that balance must be struck between individual happiness and communal duty.

*Crouching Tiger* utilizes cinematography to aesthetically enhance the narrative structure. It has some of the most graceful martial arts sequences yet put to film. The first battle between Yu and Jen is breathtaking in its tension and excitement, a harmony between the contrasts of the fight and the dance. The scene echoes the mood of the narrative . . . Jen is trying to escape and the action is quick and tense. Compare this with another

fight scene later in the movie where Jen and Li take to the treetops to battle in an awe-inspiring display of the beauty of nature. By this time, neither of them really wishes to fight anymore. They cling to branches and float with the breeze as they parry and thrust, drifting past each other in a sea of green leaves. The fighting is slow and almost nonchalant, more like a ballet. A poignant moment is when Li floats downward as Jen floats upward past him, and they exchange a couple of sword strokes but then the camera pauses for a close-up of Jen’s face as she floats by in slow motion. Her face in that moment describes what words cannot, the frustration and angst, mixed with courage and defiance that is the culmination of all that she has undergone in the film. Her countenance has changed since her triumph at the bar. The viewer passes over into her situation in this moment, understanding her emotion through the efforts of a very talented actress. In this face we see the embodiment of mutual transformation resulting from the tension between Eastern and Western elements struggling in her. She is torn and pained, but also serene. It is this face—that reaches deep and demands acknowledgment. Beauty and Truth come together here as time slows down to recognize the importance of the moment. She evokes a cross-cultural response.

And as the movie ends, her face reveals her journey through the

tear in her eye as she makes love to Lo for the last time, and her visage as she floats through the clouds with a look of serenity and completion after leaping from Wudan mountain. There are no profound answers to life’s mysteries here; the film remains ambivalent about the questions that it has raised. However we see in her face the result of a process . . . we see in her face moral development and creative transformation. We see both the tragic result of her own power imbalanced and also a glimmer of something else: *hope*—perhaps found in the words Lo tells her before she jumps: “A faithful heart makes wishes come true.”

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a movie that affirms interdependence over independence, and other-centeredness over self-centeredness. It shows us that art can take us to another place and introduce us to eternal truths, namely, that life is inter-relational and that Beauty and Truth are two parts of one Whole. It teaches us to question our own notions of superiority and affirm the being of others. It embodies mutual transformation.

1 Ang Lee and James Shamus, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: A Portrait of the Ang Lee film*. (New York: Newmarket Press, 2000), 130.

2 Lee, *Crouching Tiger*, 137.

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# Critic's Corner: Books

Douglas Sturm

*Postmodernism and Public Policy: Reframing Religion, Culture, Education, Sexuality, Class, Race, Politics, and the Economy*, by John B. Cobb, Jr. (Albany: State University of New York Press), 2002, xvi + 208 pp., hardcover \$59.50, softcover \$20.92.

We are, at the moment, confronting a grave historical crisis. If we have the slightest inkling of what that crisis portends for the future, our lives must become ever more finely attuned to its presence. We are called upon to develop ways of acting that might, if pursued diligently, provide a constructive means of creating a new era more conducive to the enrichment of life than our present circumstance.

That message has been an abiding concern of John B. Cobb, Jr., for the past several decades and has resulted in an impressive array of publications of which *Postmodernism and Public Policy* is the most recent.

“Postmodernism” is a moniker appropriated by critics from diverse angles who find fault with the modern world, but is intended in Cobb’s work—who prefers the more specific term, “constructive postmodernism”—to signify commitment to an affirmative way of thinking about a more adequate approach to our common life.

Much of the modern world, declares Cobb, “is now destruc-

tive and threatens the future of the Earth” (p. 6). Modernity, despite its virtues, is grounded in a distorted understanding of reality that is competitive and conflictual, individualistic and dualistic. In contrast, Cobb proffers the tradition of process thought as a far more cogent comprehension of life to develop a vision of how to proceed toward a more supportive means of living our lives together.

While constructive postmodernism of this sort may not inform us in detail about what we are to do, it reframes the questions we confront and points us in a more promising direction in shaping public policies. Central to Cobb’s rendition of constructive postmodernism is the principle of internal relations: each person (indeed, each entity) does not exist in isolation, but in intimate interconnection with the whole of life. That deeply embedded interdependency of our lives informs all the questions of public policy Cobb scrutinizes in this text.

As a Christian theologian, Cobb finds it needful initially to sketch a postmodernist understanding of the meaning of Christianity as a socio-historical movement, originating in the “Jesus-event” and dedicated to the kingdom of God—a compelling image of what the created world can and should become. But Christianity, however persuasive it may be to

its devotees, has much it can learn from other religious communities, theistic and nontheistic: in this sense, religious insights from diverse traditions should be understood, Cobb insists, as complementary.

A similar approach informs Cobb’s reflections on multiculturalism in education. To move toward a genuine appreciation of divergent cultures, we should engage them directly in the curriculum, not create separate and distinct school systems or allow mainstream culture to govern what is taught by majority rule.

Cobb’s sophisticated discussions of the kinds of conflicts and animosities that permeate issues of gender, race and class call upon principles of several kinds—ontological as well as psychological—to sort out the issues and develop resolutions to them. As we might expect, Cobb constantly drives us to recognize that our destinies are conjoined. That’s why we must bend our energies toward the formation of genuine communities through which the freedom of each and every participant is expanded rather than diminished.

The norm of community is central as well in Cobb’s analyses of forms of governance and of the character of economic systems. Not surprisingly, he is

*Sturm, continued on page 21*

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# P&F Outposts

## Wenatchee, Washington

Process and Faith: Wenatchee completed Karen Armstrong's *History of God* in its Sunday class and has begun a group concerned about the Middle East crisis. Earlier a group participated in an experimental class presenting the first section of Wenatchee's adult curriculum on Process Theology, while seven are preparing to offer *Adventuring with God*, Wenatchee's first class in the lay school of theology, to youth at the outpost's conference camp in August. The outpost added a new class to the spring schedule of its lay school: *A Theory of Violence*.

This fall the Sunday class will study Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters*, and they will schedule an event to inaugurate and promote membership in Process and Faith: Wenatchee. The outpost is presently involved in expanding its Five Theologies class to Ten, which will be a great improvement. The revisions will be presented at a meeting with Chalice Press presently scheduled for the last week of August in St. Louis.

For more information, contact Adrienne and Bob Brizee at [brizeeab@aol.com](mailto:brizeeab@aol.com).

## Belgium-France

Process and Faith: Belgium-France has two new members, a Catholic priest and a Protestant who wishes to know more about process. The group has also received Henry Babel, a renowned liberal protestant preacher, as an honorary member.

Freddy Moreau has finished the translation of *God and the World* and sent it to Andre Gounelle, teacher of theology in Montpellier, France, for corrections. Gounelle is the author of *God's Creative Dynamism*.

Contact Freddy at [freddy.moreau@skynet.be](mailto:freddy.moreau@skynet.be), and visit his web site at <http://www.protestantismeliberale.be>.

## Toronto

The study group of Process and Faith: Toronto has taken a summer break but will continue in September, finishing Walter Wink's *The Powers That Be*. Helen Goggin will be preaching in Winnipeg, Manitoba in August for a couple of Sundays, where she hopes to share some process ideas.

For more information, contact Helen Goggin at [hgoggin@utoronto.ca](mailto:hgoggin@utoronto.ca). Twin Cities, Minnesota

## Minneapolis-St. Paul

Process & Faith: Twin Cities is off to a fabulous start! Twenty-five people gathered for a salad potluck and organizing meeting on June 3. The congenial group included students and professors, clergy and parishioners, all delighted to share a mutual interest in process theology.

Given the number of people, folks decided to proceed by forming three smaller groups: clergy resources, a *Creative Transformation* discussion group, and a film/arts discussion group. The small groups set meeting dates for August, and the full group agreed to convene again October 18 at St. George's Church in St. Louis Park.

The contact for Process and Faith: Twin Cities is Kirsten Mebust: [kirsten.mebust@cgu.edu](mailto:kirsten.mebust@cgu.edu).

## Atlanta—new outpost being organized

Calling all process folk in and around Atlanta! Monica Coleman is starting a P&F outpost to be structured as a reading group. Monica is a Claremont Graduate University doctoral student living in Atlanta. Contact her at: [revmonica@worldnet.att.net](mailto:revmonica@worldnet.att.net).

**Thank you!**

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