

WHY I AM A PANENTHEIST
UU Church of the Restoration, Philadelphia, PA
Sunday, February 6, 2011
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Today I want to share the religious impetus that energizes my life. I've been a follower of Panentheism, also known as Process Theology, since 1966, and have given overviews of its development called "Another Way of Understanding God" at other Unitarian Universalist churches. I'll email it to you at your request. Cynthia has done a scholarly paper on this subject, and she'd be happy to share hers the same way. We'll have a Question-and-Answer after today's talk and I hope you'll hear something to kindle your interest in Panentheism, and go on to study it. There's a Bibliography in your Order of Service, and I've printed out some references and will leave them in our library downstairs.

For this service the new title is "Why I Am a Panentheist" and the focus is personal. For me it started just before I turned 17, when I gave up my fundamentalist church in Florida and became a Seeker for almost three years. I checked out as many religions as I could find, and a lot of them were admirable, but in 1956 I chose Unitarianism. I admired the reliance on reason, the numerous Unitarians who were scientists (all the way from Isaac Newton to Buckminster Fuller) and fellow church members who seemed to hold a point of view that in college we called Deism. Now, I'd studied Deism and knew that it wasn't a formal religion, but was a way of life that combined Humanism, a naturalist search for God and reality and religious tolerance. It was developed by Protestants, Catholics, Jews and several Unitarians, attracted the brightest people over three centuries, and was the chief belief system of the Enlightenment.

That was good, but Deism dated from the 17th century. It was Newtonian and pre-evolutionary, and tended to support anti-communal individualist economics that I didn't admire. Deists could sometimes be smug, including some Unitarians who took for granted that the Enlightenment was the highest point of human achievement, that it was here to stay, and that most of us lived in a comfortable universe established for the benefit of humanity. It was nice to believe that a master architect designed the universe so well that, after the original winding of the clock, our loving Creator could retire and let us run the show. (Unfortunately, we don't run it very well.) I don't mean to make fun of the Deist and Humanist viewpoint. I still admire most of it. Deism is ecumenical, open-minded, and it inspired some great revolutions. But its four-square universe didn't yield enough poetry or mystery, and my soul needs something beyond rational comprehension. About all the Deist poetry I can remember are the lines of Alexander Pope from *Essay on Man*: "presume not God to scan, / the proper study of mankind is Man."

Even with a few doubts, accepting the Deist God and Unitarianism was my first step away from an inadequate Protestant religion. But the doubts kept nagging. In college I'd loved visionary poetry, and philosophers and sociologists who exhorted people to change the world as it is. In the 50s and 60s "as it is" meant a world of bigotry, endless war, brinkmanship and nuclear stockpiles. As an adult I could no longer believe in a God of love, or if there was one he wasn't paying any attention. Others felt the same, which is why so many Unitarian Deists became Agnostics. For about 6 years I was an Agnostic. That was my second shift out of childhood.

I sometimes think I'm the Forrest Gump, or Zelig, of Unitarian Universalism, because so often I'm at the right place at the right time for something amazing! One of the most wonderful coincidences was that I attended the Austin, Texas 1st Unitarian Church in the mid-1980s, at the same time as Charles Hartshorne, who developed the theology of Evolutionary Panentheism and became its leading philosopher throughout the middle 20th century. Dr Hartshorne died in 1999 at the age of 103, and I knew him in his 80s—when he was as bright as a 20-year-old. When I attended his seminars he considered himself both a Unitarian and a Methodist, a sign of Panentheism's ecumenism, and both faiths have taken the lead in the American development of this theology.

Those Texas years became a period of spiritual growth. but I first encountered Panentheism 20 years earlier, in 1966. Up until then, I'd never heard of it or hadn't paid attention. I'd studied some philosophers in college, knew about the Transcendentalists, most of them Harvard Unitarians and Universalists, who had sought a new understanding of God. They were followed by another Harvard Unitarian—a scientist and logician, a founder of linguistics, semiotics and Pragmatism, and the greatest philosopher this country has yet produced—Charles Sanders Peirce. I did not yet know that his work might have been neglected and forgotten except for a great Anglo-American mathematician and philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead's American student, then his respected colleague, Charles Hartshorne, edited many of Peirce's disorganized papers, and they both recognized a kindred spirit, a precursor of evolutionary theology and the demands of religion-based social justice. Whitehead created a system called Process Philosophy, to comprehend the principles of the universe in the perceived reality of continuous evolutionary change. Hartshorne expanded the philosophy into a metaphysical system called "Process Theology" or "Panentheism". Like Deism, it isn't an organized religion, but a belief system that attracts people from many faiths.

1966 was the year the Navy transferred me to my last duty station, in Manhattan, where I became very active in the New York Humanist Association. At each Humanist

meeting we had a speaker, and one of them was a Unitarian ministerial Intern from one of the New York City churches, who spoke on Process Theology and said it was his viewpoint. I was mesmerized by that talk. He was describing the only definition of God I could accept!

Here's what he said, plus other aspects of Panentheism I learned later. It's only a guess whether God existed before the Big Bang and created the universe, or was born with it, or came later when consciousness arose somewhere in the early cosmos. Although the universe exists in equilibrium, it has imperfections that seem like the carelessness of a child. Surely an omniscient Judaeo-Christian God or Deism's Master Mason wouldn't have thrown together something with so many pains and terrors and slaughters of the innocent, which make physical and biological nature appear amoral, even immoral. Think of the survival of life at the expense of weaker plants and animals (which was very troubling to Peirce and Darwin) or the likelihood that multiple billions of living beings have died in the explosion of supernovas, which is nature's primary way of recycling heavy elements into the rest of the cosmos. Why must such worthy goals bring so much suffering? Panentheists therefore envision God as not yet grown-up, not omniscient, not omnipotent, an entity that yearns to be the all-powerful source of love, but isn't yet capable. Evolution is the core of Process Theology—that God is still evolving—and this is why the beliefs are often called Evolutionary Panentheism. There have been plenty of earlier faiths that included some portions of Panentheism, but very few that have a sense of changes wrought by time and maturity, and gods that grow up.

Some Eastern religions do, and Panentheism adapted some time concepts from Hindu thought, and also from Buddhism and Western Neoplatonism, but Process Theology looks to the future more than they. It's also different from other Eastern theology. Pan-en-theism means "all is encompassed within God", and that's not the same as Pan-theism, "all is identical to God". The Pantheist perceives every part of the world as God, but this can encourage accepting the world as it is and neglecting ethics. Why bother to cure leprosy if disease is an incarnation of God? Why pick up garbage from the streets? Why change anything? That helps explain the paradox of sensitive theological ideas coexisting with callous social structures in societies like India's that believe that the world of matter is only illusion, called maya. To a Panentheist matter is real, it can hurt and cause pain.

Another difference from some Eastern theologies is that in Panentheism each entity remains individual. Every being is as important—and ought to be as cherished—as every cell in a human body. Pain and sickness should not be accepted fatalistically. Let's live long lives if we can, and however long we live, let's contribute to overcoming the sorrows of the world in practical ways. Panentheism satisfies my need for a high religious

justification of ethics and social justice. To take just one current issue, I've avoided referring to God as "he" or "she". In the Panentheist definition, God is neither male nor female, nor neuter, but embraces every possible gender. God touches all beings on all planets that have life, and can't have a human shape and face—definitely not a bearded white man, that's for sure. And not a goddess either. Obviously Panentheists have no problems with heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans-gendered human beings, or frogs for that matter, since zoologists now know that we are far from the only animals that engage in sex in multiple ways, and for all sorts of reasons.

Panentheists differ also from traditional Christian Theists, although we share monotheism. While some believe in an afterlife, many consider the survival of the ego, or the attempt to perfect oneself, to be unimportant when contrasted to our real task, turning to the needs of the world. To me, the highest form of salvation is the saving of my fellow creatures from my own mistakes based on anger or naive or arrogant misunderstanding. This goes beyond Christian Theism, and Deism, and Secular Humanism, and the ecological implications seem obvious. Moral action, however, isn't always obvious. It can be subtle, demanding that we learn as much as we can before making vital decisions, instead of jumping in. After deciding, we need to stay flexible, ready to change our minds if we're wrong. Panentheism requires us to judge continually. We must assess what we do, and the social applications of abstract ideas from the standpoint of reality, morality and sanity—especially the far-ranging concepts of politics, public policy, economics, science and technology.

Panentheism is different because it embraces all of these, including modern science. One of science's discoveries is that living systems are the only ones that reverse the direction of time, called entropy, in the second law of thermodynamics—in which energy is steadily dissipating. Entropy still happens on the cosmic scale, but living systems, instead of using up potential and kinetic energy, organize energy and, in a still somewhat rough and often immoral way, life evolves to greater complexity. Why is life different? Panentheists believe that God and living creatures are connected by an ancient Neoplatonist concept called the "divine spark." With the divine spark, God interconnects with us, enabling us to empathize with the rest of creation. Now we have come to the great and joyous purpose of our existence: that we can help God grow—because God can't do it alone! The awakening, evolving and sensitizing of conscience in ourselves goes back to God, who learns from us and radiates our love out to the cosmos. This makes every sentient being in the universe important. We are the active principles. Our free will is limited, but it allows us to take part in building greater caring and competence into the world. When we do this, the world becomes holier, and so does God. It may take billions of years to work out the completion of God—call it nirvana? A happy

culmination to entropy? Juliane of Norwich, my 14th century mystic friend, understood that in the long run “All will be well. All manner of things will be well.”

But at our evolutionary stage, we are imperfect. We lack knowledge, and much of what we do or don't do is unworthy. If we neglect problems, we create nothing worthwhile for the world or God. That's a sin of omission. Our sins of commission include pride, which the Greeks called hubris, and, in their wisdom, understood as our most tragic flaw. Hubris nowadays endangers even the existence of our planet. In 1968, only two years after discovering Panentheism, in the midst of the hideous Vietnam War, I resigned from the military and chose not only to challenge war, but to work against pollution and for alternate energy. That was my daily job for years.

Panentheism helps me realize that even bad experiences, even our ordinary lapses and mistakes, can teach, so, in the process of learning, hard knocks become useful, and we can learn that the simplest things can provide the greatest epiphanies. God is not yet grown up, but still billions of years older and wiser, containing all the knowledge and love in the universe thus far. Panentheists seek this evolved wisdom through prayer, meditation, great art, social action, scientific insight, and whatever sensitivity to others we're capable of. I've written poetry, but I can't express the delight Panentheism brings me. Nevertheless its demands are tough. It isn't for someone looking for easy religion. We need not feel guilty because we often fail—everyone does—but I hope to receive a nag from somewhere, maybe a friend, when I wander too far off the path and need to be set back on it. When we do wrong, even wrongs born of ignorance or omission, there's no easy absolution, no magic formula, no ritual, no parental kiss that will make everything all right—only repair of the damage if we can, new understanding, changing our way of life, and trying to maintain self-control for the rest of our lives. Panentheist theology places moral responsibility for our voluntary free-will actions and inactions squarely where it belongs: not on the devil, not on other people, but on our individual shoulders! No passing the buck. But if the universe observes us, then God does care about the fall of a sparrow, the suffering of a sick child, an abandoned pet, the extinction of an endangered species, and all other tragedies.

I built the foundation of my theology a long while ago, but continue to build it while struggling to practice it. Following my bliss back in 1966, learning much more in 1986 and from books and many UU sermons, I found a religious path with a God that didn't contradict what I knew of the world's realities, one that encourages me to commune with every aspect of existence, that enables me to keep my religious faith strong no matter what strange turns the future discoveries of science may take. It's consistent with our Unitarian Universalist principles. Its metaphors and myths encompass the entire span of

creation from the Big Bang to the ultimate spread of Love, from the complexities of microscopic living creatures to galactic clusters at the farthest known limits of space. Although I don't know very much, these are my grown-up myths, and as long as I'm able I want to learn as much as I can about every wholesome aspect of creation. There's nothing boring, nothing we can't learn a little about. Although I'm not a scientist, I still read a broad spectrum of science avidly. Luckily most contemporary scientists are sensitive to ethics, if we can believe Encyclopaedia Britannica, which estimates that most of them, whatever their religious affiliation, are likely to be Panentheists, even as those of the previous two hundred fifty years were Deists. Many don't even know it. I suspect many Unitarian Universalists are Panentheists, too, but don't know it—until a chance comes to learn about it.

I hope I've been a good evangelist today, because this is Good News. Panentheism is different from any organized religion in our Western world—except which one? Our own Unitarian Universalism! As Unitarian Universalists, we need to understand Process Theology better and find out how much of it works with each of us. Panentheism suits us. From my count, most UUs don't just volunteer but go into helping careers like public service, medicine, teaching and social work. Somewhere down deep maybe we all know that whenever we nurture something worthwhile, we are helping to heal the whole universe. Close to home, we might consider that our neighbors who identify as unchurched or members of some other religion—yet seem to have so much in common with our feelings—may unknowingly share Panentheism with us, because this is the great binder that stretches empathy and love and respect across and around religions and other boundaries. I only know that for me, Panentheism is a spiritual liberator, an incredible intellectual stimulus, a secure comfort, a constant ethical prod, and a source of visionary joy. Thank you.

BENEDICTION:

Cynthia: Connectedness is the defining feature of an emerging world view.

Sandy: To come alive, to be who you really are, means making commitments.

Cynthia: Don't ask what the world needs.

Sandy: Ask what makes you come alive and go do it.

Together: Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

Together: Amen, Namaste, Shantih, Salaam, Shalom.