

## Religion and the Environment

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### God, Sustainability, and Beauty

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#### Introduction

[1] The purpose of this essay is to outline aspects of a theology of beauty for an ecological age. I must acknowledge at the outset that we do not live in an ecological age. We live in a historical period in which economic rather than ecological thinking dominates much public policy, and in which, according to some, economic growth is an unmitigated good by which most human and environmental problems can be solved. By virtue of these assumptions, some contemporary Christian theologians – John B. Cobb, Jr., for example – speak of our age as an age of economism.

[2] If we do indeed live within an economistic age, then we might add that the public religion of economism is consumerism. By consumerism I do not mean the activity of consuming more and more without ever saying enough; I mean instead an entire philosophy of life that undergirds economistic thinking and encourages unlimited consumption (McDaniel 2000: 57-80). The god of consumerism is economic growth; its priests are the economists and policy makers who understand its mechanisms; its evangelists are the advertising executives who display the products of economic growth and convince us that we need them; and its church is the shopping mall. Its doctrine of creation is that the earth is real estate and that plants and animals are mere commodities for consumption. And its doctrine of salvation is that human fulfillment comes – not by grace through faith as Christians claim, or by enlightenment through letting go as Buddhists claim – but by appearance, affluence, and marketable achievement.

[3] Of course this is not the whole story. There are many people in the world, some of them now very poor, who want to enjoy the benefits of healthy and modest consumption, but who do not want to accept the religion of consumerism. They want to live in a world where the well-being of life, not the well-being of the market, is the ultimate standard of measurement, and thus where distinctions are drawn between healthy growth and unhealthy growth. They realize that once survival needs are met, the purpose of life is not to accumulate more possessions and status, but rather to enjoy meaningful relations with friends and family, to enjoy work that contributes to the well-being of society, and to live with respect and care for the greater community of life in a spirit of creative frugality. Some of these people are Christian, some Muslim, some Buddhist, some Jewish, some Hindu, and some are, by their own self-definition, spiritually interested but not religiously affiliated. Some are Chinese, some Western, and some African. Amid their differences, they are drawn toward a world in which people live lightly on the earth and gently with one another, without inordinate greed. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. I will call it the sustainable community.

[4] An ecological age, then, is one in which there are meaningful approximations of light and gentle living, that is, of sustainability. Thus it is the people just named, often unknown to the bright lights of celebrity culture and image-preoccupied society, who are the quiet pioneers of an ecological age and who can be encouraged by a theology of beauty for an ecological age. There is no guarantee that such an age will come about or be approximated. It is possible that consumerism, the world's newest religion, will survive into the indefinite future. My point, though, is that if an alternative and more satisfying way of living is to emerge on our planet, it will need to be inspired, not only by the ideals of truth and goodness, but also by the ideal of beauty.

[5] We learn from Plato that there are three laudable values in life: truth, goodness, and beauty. A theology of beauty pays attention to all three values, but also takes note that, when it comes to what motivates people at a deeply emotional level and gives people a sense of meaning, there is a special power in beauty that is not always found in "truth" when truth is reduced to merely accurate ideas, or in "goodness" when questions of goodness are reduced to matters of abstract "principles" and "rules." As I will propose shortly, beauty consists of harmony and intensity in the living of life. The best kinds of harmony and intensity that can inform a person's life are also truthful and good. The harmony of a person's life will take the form of harmony with the way things are, which is another name for truth; and the intensity of a person's life will take the form of sympathetic response to the needs of others, which is another name for goodness. But somehow beauty is more than truth and goodness added together. I teach at a college whose motto is "education for the whole person." Beauty is the wholeness of the whole person.

[6] What does it mean, then, to be whole? Of course, people will understand wholeness in different ways. As a process theologian in the Whiteheadian tradition, I find it helpful to understand wholeness not as a static condition but as a way of living, and then to imagine this way of living on the analogy of listening to, and perhaps also performing, live music. Following the philosopher Bruce Benson, I call it *dwelling musically in the world* (147). Of course this way does not require an ability to play an instrument. But it does require an ability to listen deeply to the voices of other people and the natural world, responding to

them with wisdom and compassion. It requires knowing that the world around us is fluid and music-like, rather than solid and fixed, so that we avoid reducing other people to objects of private possession. It requires remembering the past but also living in the present, so that we can be obedient to the call of each moment. And finally, in the spirit of improvisational jazz, it involves trusting in the availability of fresh possibilities, so that we do not become stuck in the past or immobilized by the tragedies of the present. In this trust there is a harmony with the wider horizon in which we live and move and have our being: a harmony with God which some call faith.

[7] What I offer, then, are some building blocks for a theology of beauty pertinent to an ecological age. One of these building blocks, but not the only one, is the idea of dwelling musically in the world. The essay is divided into ten brief sections in which these many ideas are presented. Each of the sections is relatively self-contained and merits much more discussion, but my purpose in this essay is to offer a bigger picture. In these sections my aims are: (1) to introduce readers to ecotheology and to the “process” or “Whiteheadian” approach to it, which is the form of theology that shapes this essay; (2) to offer the proposal that beauty can be understood as harmony and intensity in lived experience; (3) to offer a distinction between two forms of sustainability: “environmental” sustainability and “inclusive” sustainability; (4) to name some of the virtues of sustainability, taking special heed of creative frugality; (5) to identify three dimensions of human life which need to be part of sustainable living; (6) to offer a way of understanding evil in ecological context, interpreting it as the debilitating suffering from which living beings suffer and also as missed potential; (7) to explain further the Whiteheadian understanding of the universe, showing how, from Whitehead’s point of view, the universe has music-like characteristics; (8) to suggest that the reality of music offers a helpful way of understanding God’s presence in the universe; (9) to suggest that we humans can understand our task in life as dwelling musically in the world; and (10) to explain that musical dwelling includes two activities that are essential to sustainable living: protesting the world’s injustices and living by hope that suffering can be reduced and justice served. My suggestion is that when the ideas in these ten sections are held together and seen in their discreteness and their connections, they form a gestalt – an image – of a theology of beauty for an ecological age. In the summary at the end, I offer an image of the entire gestalt.

[8] Readers interested in the entire image might read the summary first. This is because the essay unfolds by means of what can be called “radial” thinking as opposed to “linear” thinking. Both kinds of thinking are valuable. Linear thinking seeks to build an argument point-by-point, avoiding repetition as much as possible; radial thinking has its eyes on a central point, analogous to the center of a circle, and then approaches that point from multiple points of view, any one of which could be a starting point, each of which illuminates something of the center not illuminated by the other points, but none of which make sense without the others. At the center of this essay is the general idea of a theology of beauty for an ecological age. Our first line of approach will be to consider various ideas within the kind of theology that now takes ecology seriously: namely ecotheologies.

## Ecotheology

[9] Ecotheologies are religious and philosophical points of view that help people build and live within sustainable communities. Typically, these theologies have three components.

[10] First, they say that the environment is not simply an issue among issues but a context for all issues, because “the environment” is the web of life. This means that the environment includes plants, animals, hills, and rivers; but that it includes also human beings, our thoughts and feelings, our villages and cities, our acts of kindness, and our acts of war. On this view, then, the web of life includes much that is good, true, and beautiful. But it also includes terrible suffering and missed potential. It includes evil, some but not all of which is due to human agency.

[11] Second, ecotheologians say that our collective calling as human beings is not simply to enjoy private happiness, but to help build and live within sustainable communities, which are healthy for people and also for the rest of nature. Sustainable communities are communities that are creative, compassionate, equitable, participatory, respectful of diversity, ecologically wise, and spiritually satisfying – with no one left behind. The community at issue can be a farm, household, village, neighborhood, city, workplace, schoolroom, church, synagogue, mosque, province, or nation. To the degree that it approximates the qualities just named, it is sustainable in two senses. It can be sustained into the indefinite future, given the limits of the earth to absorb pollution and supply resources, and it provides nourishment or *sustenance* – material, social, and spiritual – for human life.

[12] Third, they say that these communities need people who recognize that all living beings – individual people to be sure, but also individual animals – have intrinsic as well as instrumental value, which means that each living being deserves respect and care on its own terms and for its own sake. This means that the individual animals whom we consume for food must be treated humanely in their rearing and transporting for slaughter, and that they must be slaughtered with minimum apprehension.

[13] Considered as a whole, these three ideas imply that a truly sustainable community will include justice for human beings, a humane treatment of animals, and a protection of habitats for other living beings – none to the exclusion of the others. To be sure, some ecotheologians emphasize the first two ideas more than the third. Some are more interested in species of animals than in individual animals, in a protection of habitats than in a kindly treatment of individual creatures. But each of these three ideas is very important to process theology.

[14] Process theologies come in many versions: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist, for example. All are influenced by the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, whose way of thinking offers a cosmology that helps ground the three ideas just named with insights from the natural sciences. Process theologies in the Christian tradition utilize Whitehead’s philosophy in much the same way that Aquinas used Aristotle’s philosophy or Augustine used Plato’s philosophy as mediated by Plotinus. They believe that Whitehead’s philosophy offers a cosmology for interpreting and affirming key themes in the Bible and the Christian tradition, but also that the Bible and tradition offer ideas and insights for deepening and enriching the Whiteheadian point of view. For most Christians with a process

orientation, there are four sources of insight for the Christian: scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. Whitehead's philosophy offers a resource from the worlds of reason and experience, but this resource is rightly supplemented by insights from scripture and tradition. In this essay I focus on Whitehead's philosophy, but I do not want to imply that his thought is sufficient for a full-fledged ecotheology, Christian or otherwise.

[15] When we consider ecotheology at a global and multi-religious level, we realize that some ecotheologians are non-theistic. They find the sacred in the intrinsic value of living beings themselves, in mutually enhancing relations among human beings, and in mutually enhancing relations between humans and the rest of nature. They emphasize what might be called *the horizontal sacred*. The horizontal sacred consists of the felt and satisfying connections – the connections filled with beauty – that people can enjoy with one another and the rest of nature. A person can believe in the horizontal sacred and not believe in God, understood as a higher power or deeper source.

[16] On the other hand, other ecotheologians are theistic, which means that they include an emphasis on a higher power in whom people place their trust, or deeper source to which humans can awaken. They emphasize *the vertical sacred*. People who adopt this form of ecotheology do indeed believe in a higher power or deeper source, but they also recognize the intrinsic value of each and every living being. They speak of God loving each creature on its own terms and for its own sake, because it is inherently good.

[17] Of course, many ecotheologies combine an emphasis on the horizontal sacred with an emphasis on the vertical sacred, saying that we find the vertical in the horizontal, but that the vertical is also more than the horizontal. Whiteheadians are in the latter category. They find God in the universe and the universe in God, but also say that God is more than the universe and that the universe is more than God. God is in the universe as an indwelling lure toward beauty, living within each creature as an ideal aim for wholeness relative to the situation at hand. In biblical language, God is a calling presence. And the universe is in God in the same way that an embryo is inside a womb. The embryo is not identical with the womb, but it is nourished by the womb and what happens within the womb, happens not only in the embryo, but also to the mother whose womb it is. For process theologians the fact that the universe is in God means that God shares in the joys and sufferings of all living beings. Their experience is known by God.

[18] Nevertheless, God is more than the universe as a source of novel possibilities and a companion who shares in the joys and sufferings of its creatures. And the universe is more than God in that the entities within the universe possess a creativity – a spontaneous capacity for creative response to their surroundings – that is not reducible to God's agency or controllable by God's agency. Thus, for Whiteheadians, it is not true to say that everything that happens in the universe or on our planet happens because God wills it. Many tragedies occur that even God cannot prevent. Living beings can and do frustrate the aims of God. Additionally, the universe transcends God in that its myriad creatures – individual human beings and other animals, for example – have intrinsic value of their own, God or no God. God does not create their value; God takes delight in their value, much as a parent might take delight in the value of a child.

[19] An interesting feature of Whitehead's approach is that he believes that both God and living beings in the world seek beauty. To be sure, for Whitehead, God already contains a large degree of beauty: God is a hidden harmony within and beneath the world whose experience weaves together the many experiences of living beings into whatever whole is possible, not unlike the way in which, when we listen to music, we weave together different notes into whatever wholes are possible. As one who shares in the world's joys and sufferings, God is the Great Companion. But there is always more harmony available to God's experience in the future than is ever contained in the present, which means that mutually enhancing relations between God and the world can add beauty to the divine life that would not be there otherwise. Put simply, in living lightly on the earth, compassionately toward animals, and respectfully in relation to one another, we humans add to God's life, satisfaction, and beauty. We add to God's glory and this glory is partly of our own making. Conversely, in depleting the earth of its beauty, treating other animals with cruelty, and harming one another, we diminish the life of God. We can cause harm to God.

### **Beauty as Harmony and Intensity<sup>1</sup>**

[20] In this essay, using ideas from Whitehead, I am adding an aesthetic component to the already existing moral concerns of those who advocate sustainable living. I do not want to suggest that aesthetic categories are sufficient for sustainable living. We should respect the earth and all living beings because they have intrinsic value, and not simply because such respect is satisfying. Nevertheless, I do want to suggest that aesthetic categories are too often neglected and that they add another dimension to how we think about sustainable living.

[21] All over the world people share a need for clean air and water and a need for beauty. By beauty, following Whitehead, I mean harmony and intensity. Understood in this way beauty is not a property of art objects or even objects in nature. It is a quality of experience, as lived from the inside, when we receive and respond to influences from the world and our own past.

[22] Of course, this more subjective sense of beauty can be evoked by objects in the world. We enjoy beautiful sunsets, beautiful relationships, beautiful souls, beautiful hopes, and beautiful memories. They can be beautiful to us because they are interesting, poignant, emotionally moving, or sublime. Beauty is what we feel inside our own immediate experience, emotionally as well as intellectually, when we find such realities beautiful. We feel harmonious intensities and intense harmonies. Whitehead calls them forms of satisfaction. The need for beauty, then, is a need for satisfaction. The need for satisfaction is a need for harmony and intensity.

[23] Beauty is not precisely identical with what we find beautiful, and we can know and feel certain kinds of beauty even in the face of what is not beautiful. When we share in the sufferings of others, for example, we feel a certain kind of harmony and intensity. But this beauty is not evoked by their suffering. In this case beauty is the sense of communion that

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<sup>1</sup> This account of beauty builds upon Whitehead's ideas in *Process and Reality* and *Adventures of Ideas*. In *Process and Reality*, the dominant image of beauty is intensity, albeit the presupposition that the aim of experience is intense harmony. In *Adventures of Ideas*, the dominant image is harmony, with God understood as the Harmony of Harmonies. I am combining the two.

we feel in being with them in their suffering. This sense of communion is a form of harmony and intensity, even as it may be filled with great pain. The beauty at issue is not necessarily pleasurable. Still it feels right and satisfying in its own way. The beauty is not in the situation itself, but in our response to it.

[24] This need for beauty begins with birth. From the moment we are born we do not simply want to survive; we want to survive with satisfaction. The aim toward satisfactory survival comes from our genes or God, or both. It is part of our original nature and stays with us all of our lives. Even when we are dying, we will want to die with satisfaction. Whitehead speaks of our desire for satisfaction as our *subjective aim* and suggests that not only human beings, but all living beings, have such an aim. Other animals seek to survive with satisfaction; living cells seek to survive with satisfaction; and non-visible realities, from quarks to angels, likewise seek to survive with satisfaction. The need for harmony and intensity is universal. In Whitehead's view, even God seeks beauty: that is, satisfactory existence.

[25] The idea that God seeks beauty can be offensive to people trained in classical theology, because it suggests that there can be yearning and thus a sense of incompleteness in God. Classical theists prefer to say that God – and only God – is complete and self-contained, needful of nothing. But theologians in the Whiteheadian tradition prefer biblical imagery, which continually presents God as having moods and feelings, sometimes happy and sometimes not. They point out further that the very idea that God has a will means that God has desires or subjective aims and that the very idea of desire contains the idea of incompleteness, of being not-yet-fulfilled. Thus process theologians propose that the process view is much more biblical than the classical view. God's aims for the world, and God's aims for God's own life, are for satisfaction, for beauty.

[26] The satisfaction we seek is best understood as a verb rather than a noun, because it is not a static state of affairs. It can be gained and lost; and even when we enjoy meaningful degrees of it, it flows over time, like music. If we are to live satisfying lives, we must relinquish the illusion of a permanent and changeless satisfaction. We must recognize that life is a process and that satisfaction occurs moment by moment. This means that a satisfying life is not simply one that gets what it wants; it is a life that can let go of things when they pass away. As a Buddhist would put it, a satisfying life has made peace with impermanence. This peace is a kind of harmony.

[27] The satisfaction we seek in human life is subjective in one way but not subjective in another. It *is* subjective in the sense of pertaining to our feelings and modes of awareness, but it *is not* subjective in the sense of being private. A human being is not a skin-encapsulated ego cut off from the world by the boundaries of her skin. She is a person-in-community or a relational self; and the subjectivity of her selfhood consists of her felt relations with other people and the natural world, along with her responses to them. Moreover, Whitehead does not think a person has her feelings, as if the person is one thing and the feelings another. A person is her feelings. The harmonies and intensities that she seeks in life are not different from who she is or can be. This means that, at a deep level, where she is in touch with God's will for her life, her desire is not simply to enjoy beauty, as if beauty were one thing and she another. It is to become beauty: that is, to become a *whole person* in her own finite way. The

subject-predicate mode of grammatical expression might lead us to think that the person is one reality and that feelings of wholeness are quite another. But the phrase “whole person” rightly suggests that the two are inseparable. The wholeness is the person and the person is the wholeness. Wholeness consists of harmony and intensity.

[28] The degree of beauty that we enjoy is shaped by the subjectivity of others, including their moods and intentions; our own subjectivity emerges in a complex of inter-subjective relations, a community of shared feeling. There are degrees of satisfaction and the highest forms – the most harmonious and intense – occur when we open ourselves to the feelings of others and allow ourselves to be shaped by them. In much Western religion emphasis has been placed on a cultivation of harmony and intensity in response to other human beings and to God. Faith in God is a form of harmony with God and the life of faith can be filled with myriad kinds of intensity amid the relationship, including the intensities of lamentation, doubt, and protest. In our time, though, there is a need for people of all religions, including Western religion, to extend their horizons and realize that the need for beauty can and should be extended to the rest of creation: to the hills and rivers, trees and stars. This can involve (1) a recognition that so much of the rest of creation is indeed beautiful in the sense of containing the expressions and forms of harmony and intensity that rightly evoke a sense of wonder and awe, and (2) that we humans must somehow dwell in a way that contributes to the greater beauty of the whole, quite apart from whether or not we find it beautiful. Later in this essay, I speak of this manner of dwelling as dwelling musically in the world. It is best understood as a way of living that can help build and nurture sustainable communities.

### **Sustainability: Environmental and Inclusive**

[29] Two images of sustainability are available in our time. The first we might call *environmental sustainability* and the second we might call *inclusive sustainability*. Inclusive sustainability builds upon the idea that the environment is not simply an issue among issues, but a context for all issues, because it is the web of life. This web of life includes human beings with our bodies and our subjective feelings and thoughts, and it also includes other members of the web of life, including plants and other animals. In other words, it includes the whole of life. Building upon this image of the environment as a web of life, *inclusive sustainability* includes a concern for human-human relations as well as human-earth relations. By contrast *environmental sustainability* focuses primarily on human-earth relations.

[30] A community is *environmentally sustainable* if it lives within the limits of the earth to absorb pollution and supply resources, if it allows space for other species to flourish in their habitats, and if its human inhabitants live with a sense of respect and care for the larger community of life. Practical manifestations of environmental sustainability include the use of pollution-free technologies; the design of green buildings and cities; an adoption of ecologically wise forms agriculture and forestry; a willingness to act with caution and restraint when the environmental impact of a policy is uncertain; and a preservation of forests and wilderness areas for the sake of species preservation.

[31] An inclusive sustainability adds a concern for human-human interaction into the mix of what it means to live sustainably. An inclusively sustainable community is one that is *creative, compassionate, equitable, participatory, respectful of diversity, ecologically wise, and spiritually satisfying, with*



*no one left behind*. In other words, it includes the concerns of environmental sustainability, plus more. Inclusive sustainability is important for two reasons. First, with its emphases on compassion, equitability, participation, and respect for diversity, inclusive sustainability requires justice for the human poor and marginalized, who are so often the first victims of environmental abuse. Second, by virtue of its emphasis on compassion, inclusive sustainability includes an insistence that individual animals under human domestication – farm animals and companion animals – be treated with respect and care. Thus inclusive sustainability includes the concerns of advocates of social justice and animal welfare as well as the concerns of the environmentalist. It is a contemporary version of the notion of “beloved community” as developed by Martin Luther King, Jr., adding individual animals and the earth into its horizons of care.

[32] Of course inclusive sustainability cannot emerge once and for all, or all at once. It emerges by degrees, and even meaningful approximations of sustainability must be sustained over time. Moreover, a community can have a high degree of sustainability in one dimension but a low degree in another. For example, a large city may be creative in that it provides excitement and adventure to some of its inhabitants, as is characteristic of many large cities in the world; but inequitable because some of its citizens are very poor and marginalized, and ecologically unwise because it pollutes the atmosphere. On the other hand, a village might be sustainable because it lives within the limits of the earth to absorb pollution, but oppressive because it fails to provide its inhabitants with a sense of creativity and adventure, because it is intolerant of outsiders, and because it lacks compassion for animals. The need in our time is for meaningful approximations of an inclusive sustainability in rural and urban settings, which is good for the natural world, which sustains other living beings with respect and care, and which satisfies the human need for community and adventure, security and creativity, harmony and intensity. In communities that embody these approximations, humans can themselves find deep joy.

### **Creative Frugality**

[33] Given the notion of inclusive sustainability, the question emerges: how might people be motivated to seek it? Many well-meaning advocates of sustainability speak primarily in terms of moral exhortation and warnings of disaster. They say we *ought* to live sustainable ways because all living beings have a right to be protected from harm and respected as intrinsically valuable, and because our survival depends on learning to live within the limits of the earth to absorb pollution and supply resources. Some within religious communities add that we are *commanded* by God to be live gently with one another, and thus to approach the earth as its stewards, not its conquerors. There is wisdom in these lines of discussion. Sustainability can indeed be an ethical and divine imperative.

[34] Nevertheless, amid these discussions, we often neglect a more joyful and aesthetic way of looking at things. We forget that sustainable living can have its own kind of beauty and that God can be understood, not simply as a source of obligatory commands but as an indwelling lure toward beauty. We neglect the fact that there can be a joyful side to sustainability: a side that includes laughter, play, merrymaking, rest, relaxation, dancing, and music. A sustainable world that lacks joy and merrymaking will not be sustainable.

[35] Of course, a sustainable world also needs people who, amid their merrymaking, have certain moral virtues: wisdom, compassion, courage, creativity, curiosity, generosity, and delight in diversity. Indeed, a capacity for merrymaking is itself a virtue of sorts. It is a capacity for letting go of inordinate seriousness that bespeaks an inflated view of one's own role in life. In any case, all of these virtues are best taught by example rather than exhortation. Children learn to be wise and compassionate by seeing it in their parents, grandparents, and teachers. Adults remember the joys of curiosity by seeing it in their children. Both can be shaped by the best of cultural and religious traditions that offer practices and insights relevant to the emergence of such virtues. In an ecological age, however, there is still another virtue that must be highlighted if sustainable communities are to be approximated. It can be called creative frugality.

[36] By creative frugality I mean a capacity to live from need rather than greed. Of course, it is very difficult to distinguish these two. Do middle class people all over the world want new cars, or new clothes, or new cell phones because they need them, or because they have become convinced by the advertisements that they must have them? People who are creatively frugal wrestle with this question, leaning in the direction of freedom and simplicity. They realize that, once basic needs are met, the purpose of life is not to grow in the quantity of one's possessions but rather to grow in one's capacity for wisdom, compassion, and creativity in community with others. Their creativity lies in their capacity to make the best of materials at hand rather than always needing more, and their frugality lies in a desire to live more simply, within the carrying capacity of the planet.

[37] Often we see this spirit of creative frugality in people who live in rural settings and have modest means and also in people who are poor. In their frugality they are not stingy but rather generous, sharing with others. Sustainable communities are not poor communities. To the contrary they are prosperous by many measures: prosperous in compassion, prosperous in economic opportunity, prosperous in diversity, prosperous in justice. But they are not prosperous in greed. Their citizens have mastered the arts of humility and respect for the earth.

[38] What is needed, then, is an image of sustainable living that unites respect and care for the community of life and a sense of moral responsibility – an honest appraisal of the human condition and humanity's own capacity for evil. From the perspective of process theology, these various traits can be understood within the broader context of beauty.

### **Beauty and Happiness**

[39] Whitehead proposes that all living beings seek beauty in their lives. The first and most fundamental form of beauty is simply to survive in the immediacy of the moment, relative to the situation at hand. It is harmony with one's body as realized, for example, through the satiation of hunger and thirst. Once this need is met, other needs emerge, including a desire for novelty and heightened forms of enjoyment, which can have their own kinds of harmony and intensity. Among social animals, for example, harmony can be enjoyed in various forms of play and cooperative work, which can themselves contribute to survival. Birds provide an illustration. From a Whiteheadian perspective, birds sing to one another, not only to establish turf and enhance mating, but also because they enjoy periodic variations in sound and rhythm. Like their human counterparts, birds enjoy what humans call "music."

[40] This does not mean that songbirds transcend evolutionary history. It means instead that the development of a sense of beauty on the part of songbirds evolved over time and was somehow adaptive in some way. From a Whiteheadian point of view, a history of aesthetics rightly begins, not with Paleolithic humans painting in caves, but rather with spiders weaving webs and birds learning to sing, or even earlier. There is a lure toward harmony and intensity – and thus toward beauty – in the ways that molecules feel drawn toward covalent bonds and stars toward patterned relations. Understood as harmony and intensity of experience, beauty is not limited to its human embodiments. It begins with the birth of the universe and is grounded in God.

[41] Of course, when it comes to biological life, each species seeks its own unique kinds of beauty, relative to its genetic endowments and environmental conditions. Dogs enjoy odors humans find repugnant, for example. Generally speaking, once our survival needs are met, we humans seek beauty in three ways: (1) through healthy social relations with friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, and the natural world; (2) through meaningful work which is either interesting, or rewarding, or helpful to others; and (3) through opportunities for rest, relaxation, and leisure. These are, as it were, the three ingredients of happiness.<sup>2</sup>

[42] As we consider prospects for a sustainable future, it is important to remember that the first among these – healthy social relations – can and should include healthy relations with other animals and with the earth. Of course, this includes living within the limits of the earth to absorb pollution and supply resources, upon which our very survival depends. But healthy social relations are not limited to matters of survival. They include palpable forms of communion. Many people enjoy rich forms of harmony and intensity in respectful and caring relations with companion animals; many also enjoy the watching and learning about wild animals in the wild, which is its own kind of communion, albeit with a respectful distance; and all people need the freshness of green plants in their lives. The society in which we live is the web of life, not the human world alone.

[43] Additionally, as we consider prospects for a sustainable future, it is important to remember our own bodies. They, too, are societies of a kind, made of cells, and we ourselves are the psychic wholes within which the various members of this society – arms and legs and stomach and eyes – can be jointly felt. As we feel our bodies, we feel the presence of the web of life most intimately, realizing that the natural world is not simply “out there” where the birds sing, it is “in here” where my heart beats. What might it mean, then, to have a healthy relation with one’s body and thus enjoy some degree of harmony and intensity amid bodily life? Of course this can include the pleasures of movement and bodily expression, including the enjoyment of what the Chinese call the four basic postures: lying, sitting down, standing up, and walking. And it can include the pleasures of eating and drinking. It is important to realize, though, that a healthy relation to one’s body is not reducible to bodily health. A man can have a healthy relation by accepting the fact that his body is in decline, as occurs in aging, while welcoming other aspects of psychic life – spiritual growth – that might not be available apart from disease or aging. And a person can have a healthy relation with her body by accepting one’s body as it is, even when it does not conform to unnatural and

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<sup>2</sup> The account of happiness, with its three components, is indebted to the work of Argyle.

often oppressive conventional standards. A ninety-year-old woman can have a healthier relation with her body than a thirteen-year-old teenager, even though the teenager may be “healthier” by medical standards.

[44] In any case these three areas – social relations, work, and leisure – seem critical to human happiness. When only one of these areas is satisfied, as occurs when a person gives himself to a job at the expense of healthy social relations, or when a person enjoys healthy social relations but lacks a job, a person is frustrated and often others are affected. Consider the plight of children who never see their parents because their parents are forced or choose to work all the time. And consider the plight of the unemployed and unhappily employed whose work is tedious, backbreaking, boring, or meaningless, serving no larger purpose than private greed. The ideal, then, is for the enjoyment of harmony and intensity – of beauty – in all three areas. This means that, politically speaking, societies are most harmonious when people find satisfaction in all three areas. Thus the Whiteheadian point of view invites what might be called a politics of beauty and an economics of beauty. This is not a politics or economics focused on art; it is a politics and economics focused on enabling people to enjoy healthy social relations, meaningful work, and healthy leisure.

### Evil<sup>3</sup>

[45] There would be no need for developing a politics of beauty were there not political problems in our world. So far my discussion has focused on what is good. At this stage it may be helpful to speak of what is evil.

[46] Why is there evil in our world? From a Whiteheadian perspective, part of the answer lies in the fact that the universe is inherently creative. Here creativity does not refer to something good, but rather to the capacity for decision-making that lies in the depths of actuality. The word “decision” literally means to cut off certain possibilities in the act of actualizing others. By this definition, decisions need not be conscious. In responding to its environment, a cancer cell makes decisions, and in responding to cancer, a human being makes decisions. In the Whiteheadian universe there is something like this capacity for decision-making all the way down into the depths of matter. Moreover, the universe has no temporal beginning, which means that into the beginningless past there has always been decision-making – freedom – in the universe. God is an instantiation of this freedom, but so are all other creatures. The creativity of the universe is morally neutral, and can unfold in terms of great beauty, but also in great horror and sadness: that is, in evil. By evil I do not mean moral evil, as occurs when one person harms another. I mean the harm itself as suffered by another person or living being, whatever the harm happens to be. I mean tragedy.

[47] In life on earth tragedy has two faces: (1) the terrible and debilitating suffering which, all things considered, would have been better had it not occurred, regardless of what instrumental good might come from it, and (2) missed potential, amid which the lives of living beings are cut short, for whatever reason, without their potential for a fullness of life

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<sup>3</sup> In *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead defines evil primarily as discord or destruction, one instance of which would be intense suffering. At the end of the book he turns to a discussion of tragedy, understood as the falling short of an ideal, one instance of which would be missed potential. In the account I offer, I am building upon Whitehead but defining evil as intense suffering and missed potential.

being realized. Moral evil occurs when human beings voluntarily and intentionally inflict or allow such suffering to occur, when they can and should have acted otherwise. In Christianity, Islam, and Judaism it is called sin.

[48] The first form of tragedy – debilitating suffering – can be seen in the horror suffered by individual victims of genocide, rape, and murder. Even if successive generations of people learn from their final minutes of horror, we rightly wish that those lessons would have been learned otherwise; and we rightly recognize that they could have been learned otherwise. The need in human life is not to eliminate *all* suffering. But it is indeed to reduce the kind of suffering that is inherently horrible. It is important to recognize other living beings – not just human beings – can fall victim to debilitating suffering. When animals are treated cruelly by human beings, they are victims of such suffering. It is also possible that the pain they suffer at the hands of other animals is of the debilitating variety. When the fox eats the rabbit, the rabbit suffers. Often we say that the suffering is justified because the fox was hungry and could not act otherwise. There is no need to condemn the fox. But it is also important to ask how things felt from the rabbit’s perspective. Observers may call her suffering *necessary* for the sake of an instrumental good. But the individual rabbit would argue the contrary, could she do so. Understood as unwanted suffering, tragedy does not begin with human life.

[49] The second form of tragedy – missed potential – can be seen in the life of an alcoholic who “drinks his life away” at the expense of wife and family. Let us imagine him as a man of tremendous intellectual and personal gifts who had much to offer the world, but who made bad choices, again and again, until his own potential for helping others became unrealizable. Missed potential can also be seen in the situation of a small child who develops cancer and dies, not having had the opportunity to experience life to the fullest. In each instance there may not have been debilitating suffering, but there was missed potential. Furthermore, for those left behind – the family members of the alcoholic or small child – there is great pain, often of the debilitating kind. This kind of tragedy, too, can be suffered by the more-than-human world. When human beings destroy the habitats of other living beings, thus preventing them from flourishing in their own right, humans are a source of missed potential. Of course the question emerges: Potential for whom? It can seem odd to say that missed potential for the future generations of animals, because those future generations do not exist as living beings who can miss the potential. But somehow we sense that there is a wider perspective from which diverse forms of life are appreciated for their own sake, even if not obviously useful for human beings. People may not miss this or that species of beetle, but *something* will. For Whiteheadians, this something is called God. In order to explain more about the Whiteheadian understanding of God, I must say more about the Whiteheadian understanding of nature.

### Nature as Discordant Harmony

[50] Chinese philosophy says that we live within the larger context of Ten Thousand Things. This phrase is preferable to the word nature for two reasons. It does not bifurcate reality into two realms, one human and one natural, saying that humans are not part of nature; and, with its plural grammatical form as translated into English, it reminds us that nature is not a single substance but rather many different entities, each with its own distinctive nature. If we picture a Chinese landscape painting in our imaginations, we see ourselves in one small

corner, nested within this larger arena of the hills and rivers and trees and stars. We then recognize that our collective calling in life is to live in creative harmony with one another and within the larger whole.

[51] With the Chinese let us say that that a sustainable community is a *harmonious* community. Some people might like to imagine harmony as a state of affairs in which people live in balance with the natural world. Certainly there is moral wisdom in the theme of balance. When articulated in engaging ways, the theme invites us to recognize the limits of the earth to absorb pollution and supply resources, and it calls into question our Promethean impulses to conquer the whole of nature in the name of progress. It encourages the adoption of what environmentalists call the precautionary principle: the principle that actions that alter the environment should be avoided when their effects on human health and the well-being of the rest of nature are uncertain.

[52] But an increasing number of scientists challenge the idea of a balance of nature. They tell us that the Ten Thousand Things have never been perfectly balanced and that an impulse toward novelty – toward newness – is part of the evolutionary process and local ecosystems. One of these scientists is Daniel Botkin. In *Discordant Harmonies*, Botkin explains that the traditional but now outmoded idea of the balance of nature contains three ideas that are now shown to be false (229). The first idea is that, if left in a state undisturbed by human beings, the form and structure of a natural system – a forest, for example – will be constant and predictable in its changes over time. The second is that a natural system, if disturbed by human beings but then freed from that disturbance, will return to its original and balanced condition. And the third is that this constant condition is good and desirable. Given these three ideas, people could easily conclude that the best way to treat nature is to leave it alone and that, among all the species on the planet, only human beings are evil, because they cause disturbances that would not otherwise occur.

[53] This image of a “balance of nature” is problematic for two reasons. First, it encourages a false kind of environmentalism that pictures humans as one kind of ontological reality, nature as another, and then says that humans are evil while nature is good. A healthy environmentalism is built on the recognition that humans are part of nature, that they will inevitably influence the more than human dimensions of the natural world, and that the central question concerns *how* they will do this. A healthy environmentalism does not romanticize nature or demonize human beings. The second reason that the idea of a “balance of nature” is problematic is that it is false to the facts as now understood by scientists. Even when natural systems are not disturbed by human actions, they carry spontaneities within them on the basis of which their successions over time are not completely predictable.

[54] For purposes of illustration, imagine a forest. The balance of nature view will say that, if released from disturbance by human beings, it will return to its original state. The current view says that it will evolve into a new kind of forest. If we envision a primeval forest that is undisturbed by human beings, we might say that this forest is a harmony of sorts. But we must quickly add that the harmony is a discordant harmony and that the harmony will change over time. Over vast periods of time, the harmony is an adventure, a journey into newness.

[55] If a forest is a journey into novelty, then so is the universe as a whole. Physicists tell us that the universe as we understand it began with a primal explosion some fifteen billion years ago and that it has been developing ever since in various galactic systems. We live on a small planet orbiting a small star in the Milky Way galaxy and there may well be other planets on which other forms of life also dwell. The journey of life on earth, including humans, transpires within the larger journey of a solar system, which transpires within the larger journey of the Milky Way, which transpires within the larger journey of the universe, amid which there may be other journeys. Our universe is much larger than we can easily imagine, much older than we can easily imagine, and much more creative than we can imagine. In some ways it is more like music than a painting. Thus sustainability can itself be understood, not simply as a way of living in harmony with the Ten Thousand Things, but as a way of making music.

[56] In order to understand this music-making, let us imagine that, within the village of our imaginary Chinese landscape painting, there are musicians who are playing jazz, Chinese style. Of course they need not play musical instruments. They have their different voices; but they also listen to one another and hear one another in speech. They are not afraid to solo, but they are also willing to sit in the background, allowing others to solo. They agree to “hang in there together” even when things may seem to fall apart; and they forgive one another their mistakes. They have respect for the past but they also live in the present, where the music lives; and they are also willing to improvise and add new ideas.

[57] In order to dwell in this way, the villagers will need ecological ears. By this I mean that they are inwardly attuned, not only to the voices of one another, but also to the voices of the natural world: the voices of the hills and rivers, trees and stars, plants and animals. These voices are not “voices” in a human sense. I am not even talking about the audible sounds of animals. Instead, I am talking about the way that the plants, animals, and minerals within nature express themselves just in being what they are. This mode of self-expression is their voice, and science can help us understand the differences and relations between the voices. Those who dwell musically in the world will need to understand that these voices, too, are part of the larger community to which they belong and thus that they themselves are part of, not apart from, a deeper and wider music that belongs to the greater order of things. They will need to keep in mind that they are among, not apart from, the Ten Thousand Things.

[58] This remembrance will give them new eyes for their own distinctively human creativity. They will not see their creativity as a uniquely human possession with no parallels in the natural world. Instead, they will see it as an expression of, not an exception to, the creativity of nature. Thus they will see sustainable living as a way of collaborating with the rest of nature.

[59] Among recent philosophers, Whitehead comes closest to this understanding of nature as creative flow, and of human creativity as an expression of, not an exception to, a deeper creativity that permeates the universe. Indeed, Whitehead imagines the universe as an ongoing act of creative improvisation and proposes that each actual entity in the universe is a moment in the flow. It is not solid and unchanging like a rock, but is instead flowing like a river. For Whitehead even rocks are flowing at the microscopic levels. The molecules and atoms that compose rocks are dances of energy never quite the same at any two instants.

Thus Whitehead speaks in ways that resemble Buddhism with its doctrine of impermanence. Whenever we look deeply into something, we do not find something solid and unchanging. We find flow.

[60] Of course the flow of the universe is *patterned* flow. Whitehead was a philosopher of science and he knew that all entities – atoms and molecules, hills and rivers, people and stars – behave in law-like ways that can be understood scientifically. But he did not see the laws of nature as templates imposed on the universe from afar. Instead, he saw them as habits of behavior that emerged within nature in the remote past and that now have a power of their own. The laws of nature were like jazz standards; and every event in the universe plays one or another of these standards. The most general standards are played by all entities and they have no choice in the matter. But every event plays the standard in its own unique way adding its own voice. All apples may fall from trees but no two apples fall in exactly the same way. We live in a universe that is both structured and creative.

[61] The patterns that we see within nature – the laws of nature – can also be considered apart from their instantiation in the events of the world. One example of this lies in mathematical thinking. In such thinking we can envision possible patterns that may or may not be actualized in the universe, but which have a character of their own that can be intellectually explored. Consider the idea of a forty-six dimensional universe. No such universe may exist in actual fact, but mathematicians can entertain the idea of such a universe and work out its geometry, even if such a universe is non-actual. In Whitehead's philosophy these geometrical relations are called pure potentialities. He believed that they have a timeless quality to them, so he also called them eternal objects. In this context the word eternal does not mean everlasting, which suggests temporality without end; they are instead non-temporal. The geometrical relations of a forty-six dimensional universe would not be objects in space or time but they can be intellectually apprehended by mathematicians.

[62] Whitehead further recognized that there are other kinds of timeless potentials, not of a mathematical kind, which can also be conceptually entertained even if not actualized in the universe. They were eternal objects of the subjective species, and they consisted of possible ways that human and non-human feeling can unfold. If we imagine, for example, that the forty-six dimensional universe is inhabited by living beings who have capacities for “feeling the feelings” of one another from a distance, then the very process of “feeling the feelings” of others would be a potentiality that may or may not be actualized in fact. Of course, the same situation applies in our own world. We would call it *empathy*. Empathy, too, is a kind of relation, but it is a felt relation between living beings, rather than a geometrical relation in abstract space. In a general way, we might say that mathematics deals with eternal objects of the objective species and religion deals with eternal objects of the subjective species. Mathematics is concerned with patterns of objects; religion with the feelings of subjects.

### Panentheism

[63] Thus the question emerges: Where are these pure potentialities even before human beings apprehend them? One option would be to say nowhere. They simply come into existence at the time that they are apprehended, and the very apprehension of them makes them real. This would suggest that they are created rather than discovered. But many people



feel that this is not true to actual experience, because in point of fact we humans do indeed discover ideas and not simply create them. There is a receptive quality to the creative imagination, amid which it explores potential realities that are somehow present to be explored, albeit in spaces of the mind rather than spaces of land.

[64] This led Whitehead to speculate the universe contains within it a holding tank of potentialities: a dimensionless place within which the infinite number of potentialities reside as felt by a cosmic mind. He spoke of this cosmic mind as the Primordial Nature of God. This mind is not located in space or time, which means that it might better be conceived as non-spatial but also everywhere-at-once. We might say it is no-where but also now-here. When mathematicians explore the distant mental horizons of abstract geometry they are exploring one corner of the Primordial Nature of God, and when human beings consider the possibility of entering into empathic relations with one another and with other species, they are exploring another corner. All the corners are connected to one another in a single complex of pure potentialities that may be “actualized” by entities within the universe.

[65] Whitehead also believed that there is a receptive side to God: a holding tank for all the experiences and actions that living beings undergo and undertake. He called it the Consequent Nature of God. For him the tank was not really a tank. Rather it was an ongoing activity of feeling the presence of everything that happens as it happens, and thus sharing in the joys and sufferings of the world. Thus we might call it a Deep Listening. Just as, in human life, when we listen to sounds, the sounds are inside us as well as outside us (because they come from others); so, in the divine life, the joys and sufferings of the world are inside God even as they come from other sources. This is what contemporary theologians call pan-en-theism. It is the idea that God is an inclusive life – a deep empathy or inclusive compassion – in whose ongoing life the world unfolds.

[66] One helpful analogy for understanding panentheism is that of a mother who carries an embryo within her womb. The embryo is analogous to the universe in Whitehead’s philosophy. The embryo is not precisely identical with the mother and her womb, and yet the embryo is part of the mother and her womb. Just as what happens in the embryo, happens in the mother, so what happens in the universe, happens in God. The sufferings and joys of all living beings are known by God. Nevertheless, just as the embryo has power of its own, not precisely reducible to that of the mother, so that universe has power of its own, not reducible to that of God. In Whitehead’s philosophy this power is the creativity of the universe itself. The creativity at issue is not normative; it can unfold in ways that are evil as well as good, given the notion of evil defined above. Thus the power of a cancer cell to replicate itself causing terrible suffering in the life of its victim, and the power of a physician to help minimize the cancer cell’s power, are both instances of creativity. Likewise the power of human beings to engage in war with one another, and the power of peacemakers to help prevent such war, are both creative. In the Whiteheadian vision of the universe, creativity is the ultimacy of agency per se, and it is found in both God and the universe. God, then, is the nurturing mother who, as containing the universe within her own womb, seeks to bring healing out of suffering, good out of evil, hope out of despair. God is the lure toward beauty within individual lives and toward sustainable community. We experience this lure as God’s spirit at work in the world. If we stick with the analogy of the embryo, then we might compare the spirit to amniotic fluid. It can nourish the embryo even as it does not control

the embryo. But perhaps a better metaphor, at least for understanding the presence of the spirit in human life, is music.

### **God and Music**

[67] From a Whiteheadian perspective, the living spirit God in the world is indeed a lot like music. The Spirit cannot be grasped as an object among objects and yet can be palpably felt; it can be inside you and outside you at the same time; it can be inside other people even as it is inside you; it can challenge and stretch you but also console and comfort you; it can be filled with tensions and yet also filled with harmonies; and it flows over time.

[68] Of course, some might people draw a sharp distinction between God and God's Spirit. They say that God is the one who sends the Spirit and that the Spirit is different from God. It would be as if God were breathing upon us and within us, and that we should distinguish the breather from the breathing. But in human life we cannot sharply distinguish our breathing from who we are. Our breathing is inside us and part of us even as we are more than our breathing. And when we share our breathing with others, in the process of speaking to them and talking to them, we are indeed sharing part of our lives. We are in our bodies but also in our voices. So God is in God's spirit. This means that when we experience the Spirit we are experiencing God.

[69] What, then, are some of the ways in which we experience this music-like Spirit? Perhaps one way is through music itself. If God can be flesh, as Christians say, then perhaps God can become sound, too. Indeed, there are many people in the world for whom music is a primary medium through which they experience something holy and transcendent. They may not believe in God in a formal way recognized by others; but they believe in music, and in believing in music they are, in their way, believing in God.

[70] But of course there are many other ways to experience the Spirit, too. Another way that we experience God in our lives is as a still small voice, hidden deep within our minds and hearts, by which we feel beckoned to live wisely, compassionately, and creatively in our daily lives. This voice is an indwelling lure toward wholeness or beauty. It is very much like live music. We walk with God when we trust that this still small voice is inside other people even as it is inside us, when we are open to the possibility that this voice can challenge us as well as console us, and when we realize that the callings are changing over time but constant in their nourishing power. Given the fluid nature of divine callings, we ourselves must be flexible and adaptive in our way of living in the world. We cannot get stuck in the past or obsessed by the future; we must live in the present, where the Spirit lives. We must learn to live musically in the world. In Christianity, this more musical way of living is called the life of discipleship. It is a life of following the leadings of the Spirit.

[71] Of course, in historical Christianity people have not often understood the life of discipleship in this more musical way. Why have we so often neglected acoustic understandings of God? Part of the reason is that so many of our metaphors concerning God and the world come from visual experience rather than auditory experience. We speak of world-views but not world-hearings, of seeing God face-to-face at the end of time but not of making music with God, voice to voice. This preference for visual metaphors is based on our reliance on visual experience for gaining our bearings in daily life. If we were dogs we

would speak of world-smells and imagine God as pure Fragrance. If we were bats we would speak of world-echoes and God as the everlasting Echo. We are visual creatures.

[72] This is a problem, though, because God is not an item of visual perception. God is not a tree among the trees or a stone among the stones. God is more like the wind that blows through the trees and over the stones, brushing our faces as well. Our reliance on visual metaphors is also problematic because it lends itself to an impulse to think of God as separate from us, with a fixed and conceptually graspable essence. A unique feature of items of visual perception is that they have clear boundaries and can be identified as discrete objects, as compared to sounds that have a field-like nature and cannot be located in a simple way. Sounds are inside us even as they are outside us, whereas visual items – a tree in the distance for example – often seem outside us, pure and simple. Given this character of visual items, visual metaphors lend themselves to an epistemology of control – that is, to ways of knowing where we feel in control of the subject to be mastered because we have a mental picture of it. Indeed, we often think of all ideas, including ideas of God, as mental pictures inside the mind, composed of images or words that re-present something external to our bodies. We want to have photographs of God that we can hold in our hands.

[73] Of course, the impulse to master God amounts to idolatry, whether physical or mental. Physical idolatry lies in confusing something finite and tangible with God. Mental idolatry lies in making a statue of God in one's head. The problem is not simply that idolatry makes God angry, because God is a jealous God. Let us hope that God transcends jealousy. The problem is that, if God is field-like and not located in one region of space at the expense of another, then an excessive reliance on visual metaphors misses the reality of God. In order to offset this tendency toward idolatry, there is a need to supplement visual metaphors with auditory metaphors, which lend themselves more readily to an appreciation of we might call divine fluidity and divine vagueness.

[74] By divine vagueness I do not mean nebulosity or divine abstractness. A gentle breeze is not nebulous or abstract; it has concreteness and power. But the breeze is field-like in its occurrence and does not have clear boundaries or a fixed essence. If God is boundless in certain ways – boundlessly loving and thus ever adaptive to each new situation – then we need to think and feel in ways that are sensitive to this boundlessness. We need to remember that God does not have edges. This, then, is what I mean by divine vagueness. Divine vagueness is not wishy-washiness, though God may indeed be more sensitive to ambiguity than are we humans. It is divine edgelessness and thus divine freedom. Acoustic metaphors can help us recall and reclaim a respect for the edgeless and free nature of the spirit.

### **Dwelling Musically in the World**

[75] In considering sustainability many people focus on the nuts and bolts of it: how to retrofit buildings so that are energy-efficient, how to reduce carbon emissions so that the global warming slows down, and how to improve public transportation. They are focusing on the hardware of sustainability, to borrow terms from computer science. In this essay I have been focusing on the software – that is, on how we think and feel as we undertake these activities. In this final section I want to suggest that, if we learn to dwell musically in the world, we will be better able to sustain sustainable communities.

[76] Dwelling musically is a metaphor. A person from China might also call it living in creative harmony with other people and the earth. A Buddhist might call it practicing the way of the Buddha. A Christian might call it following Christ. Thus dwelling musically is but a shared disposition among people who are fully immersed in more particular, historically condition, and socially defined ways of living. It is an archetype.

[77] One of characteristic of dwelling musically is *deep listening*. This is the activity of hearing the voices of others in a relaxed yet attentive way, allowing their feelings to compose one's own life not unlike the way in which music composes the mind of the listener. Whitehead helps us understand how we can listen to the feelings of other people but also how we can listen to the voices within the rest of the natural world. He sees all living beings as expressing themselves in one way or another and he invites us to see them – to hear them – with recognition of their voices counting in the larger scheme of things, even if their voices are quite different from our own. We can listen with respect and care for the community of life.

[78] Another characteristic is *improvisation*. In *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, Bruce Benson proposes that improvisation is the activity of fabricating what is conveniently at hand and, in so doing, improving upon what is received. Whitehead helps us understand how improvisation is a feature of the universe as a whole and how other living beings – human beings to be sure, but also plants and animals and even minerals – are improvisers. This capacity for improvisation lies at the heart of that ongoing adaptation that we call biological evolution, and according to Whitehead it is at the heart of galactic evolution as well. In Whitehead's philosophy, the universe as a whole is like a jazz concert. It is a creative advance into novelty that builds from the past and yet moves into novel futures. The building blocks of the universe – Whitehead calls them “actual entities” or “actual occasions” – are acts of improvisation, not in the sense of creating themselves out of nothing, but rather in the sense of creating their own existence by receiving and integrating influences from the immediate and distant past, which are then part of the objective make-up of the entity at issue.

[79] This means that improvisation and relationality, creativity and community, novelty and tradition are inseparable. A human being, an animal, a living cell, a microscopic event within the depths of an atom successfully receives and integrates influences, not by cutting itself off completely from the past, but by selecting impulses from the past that compose it in the present. Thus we might say that in Whitehead's philosophy each actual entity is made in the image, not only of God, but also of a musician in a jazz ensemble. Our own task as human beings is to make music, but also to learn to make music with others.

[80] A third characteristic of dwelling musically is *trust in the availability of fresh possibilities*. In a Whiteheadian context this is another name for faith in God. God is a spiritual presence within the universe who beckons each living being to realize its potential for harmonious and intense living and who offers possibilities for novelty relative to the situation at hand. This giving of possibilities is part of God's love for the world and for each living being. God can be understood personally as a subject in whom one places one's trust and also trans-personally as a source of fresh possibilities. God can also be understood as a Listener who feels the feelings of all living beings and thus as the Deep Listener at the heart of the universe. Faith in God is trust in the availability of fresh possibilities and also trust that the

whole of the universe and each voice within it is present in what John Coltrane calls a Love Supreme.

[81] Dwelling musically in the world includes deep listening, a freedom to improvise, a respect for the past, and trust in the availability of fresh possibilities. Musical dwelling is not limited to Christianity. With its capacity for paying attention to the voices of other people and the earth, it resembles the spirit of mindfulness in Buddhism. With its spirit of adaptability and its sense that reality is flowing over time, it resembles the way of living we find in Taoism. With its trust in the availability of fresh possibilities, it resembles what Christians and Jews and Muslims call faith in God. This means that Christians can dwell musically as Christians, Buddhists as Buddhists, Jews as Jews, and Muslims as Muslims – and each will add something to musical dwelling that the other lacks.

[82] For example, a Christian can see the healing ministry of Jesus, with its continuous give and take as he improvises responses to new circumstances, as an aspect of musical dwelling. She may also see Jesus as an incarnation of a deeper music – the living Wisdom of God – which is everywhere at once. She can then see the Eucharist as a ritual that enables a person to dwell musically in the world and the Gospel itself, not simply as a verbalized expression of propositional truths, but as a calling presence, an invitation, to follow Christ in the way of wisdom and compassion.

[83] Similarly a Muslim can see the Qur'an as the living voice of God bequeathed to the world, taking special delight in the sweetness of its sounds as recited and listened to. She will then see prayer as a way of expressing gratitude for the gift of the Qur'an, and she will see the surrendered life, which seeks to dwell in harmony with other Muslims but also with the wider world, as a way of walking in sonorous beauty of the Islamic way. She, too, may draw from visual and olfactory metaphors, but the acoustic metaphors are also helpful. The Christian and the Muslim alike can learn to think of their respective paths in acoustic terms, developing their own acoustic theologies. People of other religions can do the same.

### **Summary**

[84] We experience God's Spirit in many ways. One of them is through the still small voice inside us who calls us, moment by moment, to walk in beauty and find that place where, as Frederick Buechner puts it, the gladness of our hearts meets the sufferings of the world.

[85] Most of us spend our entire lifetimes trying to listen to this voice. Sometimes we are successful and sometimes we are not. When we fail, it is not necessarily because we are evil people. It is because we confuse the voice of the Spirit with the voice of our own individual and collective egos, or the voices of cultural greed. The good news is that, when we fail, we can get up and try again. From the point of view of Whitehead, every moment is a new moment, and there is no moment in our lives when new beginnings are not possible. This would be true even if there is life after death. Even in heaven, and even in hell, there will be fresh possibilities availed by God, and thus the possibility of fresh starts. God does not give up on anybody.

[86] But we ourselves are not yet in heaven or hell, should they exist. And we are not devils. We are in a place called earth and our task, as human beings, is to dwell musically in the world. I have said that this manner of dwelling is respectful of the past and yet open to the

future. It consists of trusting in the availability of fresh possibilities and responding, moment by moment. There are two ways to respond to this calling. In much of this essay I have emphasized the more positive side of such a response, but I have also tried to be honest about the reality of evil in the world. I close with by trying to bring the negative and the positive together.

[87] The negative way is to join in the spirit of the blues that is so often found in jazz. This is the spirit of protest against evil. Evil consists of debilitating suffering and missed potential that human beings undergo, some of which is caused by human beings. In the face of evil we feel called to lament the unnecessary pain and denounce the injustices from which many people and animals suffer. These injustices are broken harmonies, and they are readily apparent in the murder of innocents, the rape of the weak, the hatred of the stranger, the abandonment of the forsaken, the abuse of the animal, and the sheer unfairness that too many people have too much when so many have so little. As we bear witness to these injustices, and perhaps suffer from them ourselves, we rightly respond with “No” and add a voice of dissonance to the ongoing concert. This dissonance is creative dissonance rather than destructive dissonance, and it is ultimately motivated by hope that things can be better. Thus, as we sing the blues, we are not protesting the overall concert or the players. We know that all living beings deserve a place in the Ten Thousand Things. But we are protesting the way in which the voices of the privileged and powerful have become dominant, arrogant, and oppressive of others. We add beauty to the whole of creation by speaking truth to power and trying to make a constructive difference in the world.

[88] The second way of responding to the call to beauty is deeply affirmative. It is a profound “Yes” to life, and it found in the spirit of praise and celebration that is also found in jazz. The praise comes from recognizing that much of life is already quite beautiful, despite whatever pain people suffer, and that even the sorrow can be woven into wider harmonies. The practical outcome of praise is the development of a constructive vision of a new and better kind of community. Martin Luther King, Jr. called it the beloved community. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. In this essay, I have called it the inclusively sustainable community. It is a community that is creative, compassionate, equitable, participatory, respectful of diversity, ecologically wise, and spiritually satisfying, with no one left behind. From a panentheistic perspective, the divine call at work in the world today is made flesh in the concrete efforts of people all over the world to help build these communities. In so doing, we will naturally and rightly seek happiness for ourselves and others in the forms of satisfying work, enjoyable social relations, and leisure. We will understand that work is truly satisfying, not only when it helps other people, but when it protects the earth and other creatures. We will know that enjoyable social relations include our relations, not only with other people, but also with our spiritual and biological kin, the other animals. And we will know that leisure itself – genuine rest – is most relaxed when it unfolds with the hills and rivers, which likewise need their Sabbaths from human manipulation. We need not pretend that inclusively sustainable communities can emerge all-at-once or once-and-for-all. But meaningful approximations are well worth the effort, and even if these approximations do not last forever, they add beauty to a wider harmony that does indeed last forever. The wider harmony is God, the indwelling Spirit, who never gives up on anybody and in whose ongoing life the Ten Thousand Things dance, moment by moment.

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