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TOWARD A PROCESS THEOLOGY OF PARTNERSHIP:

REDEMPTION THROUGH INTIMACY AND MUTUAL EMPOWERMENTⁱ

The same-sex marriage controversy has demanded public debate about the institution of marriage. Yet amidst this controversy about homosexual unions, the fact is that heterosexual marriage is in trouble in the United States: 65% of all marriages end in divorce, and wives initiate 60-75% of these divorces.ⁱⁱ One implication of these statistics is the break down of traditional religious beliefs regarding heterosexual marriage roles. Thus as we enter the twenty-first century, we have the opportunity to reconsider our theological understanding of one of the most intimate aspects of our lives.

In Whitehead's theory of relationality, we are continually being constituted by our relationships. Our personal and corporate identity is dynamic: just as we are shaped by external influences, so we impact that which is other than ourselves: "There is no entity which enjoys an isolated self-sufficiency of existence" (Whitehead 1941, 670). Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki poetically describes this ontological relatedness of all creation when she writes: "The world as described by process thought may indeed be beautiful, but it is also dangerous" (Suchocki 1988b, 22). The danger arises from the fact that relationality is an inescapable fact of existence, making us peculiarly vulnerable to each other. Thus, our intimate partner relationships are one of our greatest opportunities both for sin and for redemption. I define sin as a violation of our inter-relatedness that causes harm to oneself or to another. I understand redemption as creative transformation toward the good (following Wieman as described above), and I agree with other process thinkers (for example,

Suchocki) who have argued that redemption can occur only in community.ⁱⁱⁱ In proposing how a process theology of partner relationships can enhance our opportunity for redemption through intimacy, I discuss three issues: power, the concept of God, and the relationality between body and soul.

Power

Marriage has been an unequal power relationship throughout most of Western history with the husband having legal and religious power over his wife. During the Roman period, only upper-class men and women were allowed to marry, and these men had the power of life and death over their wives through the law of *pater familias*.^{iv} In England, medieval and Reformation period husbands could exercise their power through the common law "rule of thumb" which gave a husband permission to beat his wife with a stick as long as the stick was no thicker than his thumb.^v The battered wife had virtually no power to seek redress from either religious or legal authorities. For example, most Christian leaders held that wives should submit to their husbands based on biblical texts such as Ephesians 5:22: "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as you are to the Lord"(NRSV).^{vi} Legally, wives had virtually no identity separate from their husbands until the early decades of this century when women won the right to vote.^{vii} One ramification of these centuries of power imbalance in intimate relationships is the current statistic regarding violence against women: three out of four offenders committing domestic violence are spouses, ex-spouses, boyfriends or ex-boyfriends.^{viii}

Process theologians have argued that the concept of power as dominance over others creates a barrier to love and intimacy. For example, Bernard Loomer writes:

If power always means the exercising of influence and control, and if receiving always means weakness and a lack of power, then a creative and strong love that comprises a mutual giving and receiving is not possible. (Loomer 1976, 19)

Rita Nakashima Brock builds on Loomer's work as she describes how the traditional dominant male/subordinate female arrangement exploits both women and men:

While the male seeks to dominate those with less power, he is expected to sacrifice himself to God, country, or company. Hence, while self-sacrifice and martyrdom seem more feminine, being exploited is expected of men for the sake of higher authority. . . .In addition, both male domination and female dependency require the suppression of the self's own feelings. (Brock 1991, 32)

Thus as we are socialized to behave according to gender role stereotypes, we must suppress our own feelings, and this suppression creates effective barriers to the genuine intimacy we could experience with each other.

In contrast to the concept of power as dominance and control, or unilateral power, Loomer identifies an alternative concept of power as relational. Relational power "is the ability both to produce and to undergo an effect. . . .[it] involves both a giving and a receiving" (Loomer 1976, 17). Similarly, Brock describes relational power as the power that exists in the interactions of the relating:

We must move away from seeing power as a commodity possessed by a self toward seeing it as the bonds which create and sustain, and are recreated and sustained by relational selves. (Brock 1991, 34)

In a process theology of intimate partner relationships, both partners are empowered through the practice of relational power. This practice releases each partner from preconceived power roles of dominance or submission. Through both giving and receiving, partners are free to express their authentic feelings, thus creating bonds of mutual empowerment and possibilities for genuine, redemptive intimacy.

In suggesting the concept of redemptive intimacy, I am building on Loomer's notion of the "true good." He asserts that the "true good is an emergent from deeply mutual relationships" (Loomer 1976, 19). Loomer argues that even when love for the other motivates one to seek to control the other for the other's good, the exercise of unilateral power has the limitation of a preconceived good. The preconceived good is a limitation because it "often exemplifies the conscious or unconscious desire to transform the other in one's own image" (Loomer 1976, 19).

For example, if I seek to transform you in my own image, I pressure you to suppress your authentic feelings and intimacy is blocked. I have sinned against you by seeking to limit the possibilities for the self you are becoming and the possibilities for the selves we can become together. Loomer describes how the possibilities for each partner emerge from the particularities of the partner relationship itself:

A wife is not the occasion whereby a man actualizes husbandly possibilities that reside or subsist wholly within the confines of his enclosed selfhood. The husbandly and wifely possibilities of the respective partners are peculiar to and are created out of that particular marital relationship in which each helps to create the other. The more deeply mutual and creative the relationship, the wider the range of emergent possibilities for those participating in the relationship. (Loomer 1976, 20-21)

God

In seeking to conceive how partners can experience redemption through practicing relational power, one must also address the traditional concept of God. This is necessary because the association of the husband's authority with divine authority has been one of the primary justifications for the traditional power imbalance between husbands and wives. This power imbalance was affirmed by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1998 with their resolution that: "A wife is to submit graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ" (Woodward 1998, 69). Proposing an alternative to the traditional

concept of power in partner relationships thus necessitates proposing an alternative to the traditional concept of God.

In contrast to the omnipotent, impassible, "unmoved mover" of traditional Christian theology, Whitehead proposes that God's "consequent nature" is determined largely by the actions of the world (Whitehead 1978, 345 [1929]). Embracing Whitehead's notion of the consequent nature of God enhances our capacity for intimacy in relationship because this notion of God's relationship to humans is intimate: we participate in God's becoming complete.^{ix} History has demonstrated that our human relationships mirror our image of our relationship to God. For example, the image of God ruling over creation is mirrored in the image of the husband ruling over his wife. Following the Whiteheadian notion of God, this hierarchical image of God's rule is turned on its side; power flows from God to creatures *and* from creatures to God; we become co-creators with God and we experience our relationship with God as a creative process. This experience can encourage us to risk a relationship of creative process with a human partner. This creative process includes the practice of relational power, the giving and receiving necessary for honest communication and empathy. Whitehead's description of God's love as both giving and receiving becomes the ultimate model for how we can love each other toward creating genuine intimacy:

What is done in the world is transformed into a reality in heaven, and the reality in heaven passes back into the world. By reason of this reciprocal relation, the love in the world passes into the love in heaven, and floods back again into the world. In this sense, God is the great companion - the fellow-sufferer who understands. (Whitehead 1978, 351)

Body and Soul^x

Similar to the traditional correlation of God's authority with the husband's authority to legitimize the husband's rule over his wife, the association of male with the superior soul and female with the inferior body has been another primary justification for the rule of the husband. These

associations from classical Greek philosophy were incorporated into Christian theology and have functioned to devalue both the body and women. This devaluation has been further exacerbated by the Christian association of sin with women, the body, and sexuality.^{xi}

An alternative to this traditional Greek and Christian hierarchy of male/soul over female/body is found in Whitehead's ontology of relationality between body and soul. Foundational to Whitehead's conception of how body and soul are related is his principle that reality is composed of occasions of experience. As each occasion of experience is coming into being, it has a "physical pole" through which it receives the influence of the past or actuality, and a "mental pole" through which it entertains the possibility of novelty. Both body and soul are composed of occasions that have physical and mental poles, so a simple association of physical with body and mental with soul is not accurate in Whitehead's philosophy.

Although the mental pole of every occasion, cellular or psychic, is the occasion's entertainment of new possibilities, the body is organized as to allow one type of occasion, that which constitutes the soul, to be especially affected by novelty and then to transmit that novelty to successive occasions so that the novelty is cumulative. This accumulation constitutes the soul as a "living person." As a result, the soul is the locus of the entertainment of ideas for the whole body (Whitehead 1961, 275). Because the body is organized so that bodily sensations or feelings are "poured" into the ongoing moments of the soul (Whitehead 1968, 211), the occasions of experience which constitute the soul can include more elements of bodily experiences than any other individual part of the body. Thus the body depends on the soul as a center of organization for the perceptions of the human being.

Yet simultaneously, the soul depends on the body. The body provides the most immediate and most influential environment for the soul as the body mediates the contemporary world to the soul through experiences of space and time. Whitehead explains this bodily mediation as the "withness of the body":

For we feel *with the body*. There may be some further specialization into a particular organ of sensation; but in any case the '*withness*' of the body is an ever present, though elusive, element in our perceptions. . . . (emphasis Whitehead 1978, 311-12)

Although the soul is not limited to the influence of the bodily environment, for example, the soul can directlyprehend the past through memory, the body is primary because the soul is constituted by the actual world of experience mediated through the body. The soul also depends on the body to provide for the ongoing existence of the soul:

the continuity of the soul--so far as concerns consciousness--has to leap gaps in time. We sleep or we are stunned. Yet it is the same person who recovers consciousness. . . . Thus. . . the body in particular provide[s] the stuff for the personal endurance of the soul. (Whitehead 1968, 162)

Thus Whitehead understands that the soul depends on the body and the body depends on the soul in a relationship of mutuality.

This process of mutuality through which body and soul develop is also evidenced as body and soul guide each other through shared experiences. Through the body's perceptions of its surroundings, the body guides the soul; the soul receives both the influence of the past and God's best possibility for the person at that moment in the given situation. The soul is free within the context of its present to appropriate the past without being bound to the past. In this way the soul guides the body. The traditional hierarchy of superior soul over inferior body is overcome through Whitehead's metaphysics of reciprocity between body and soul.

Extending his theories beyond the individual human being, Whitehead also describes the relationship between the soul and the world:

the experienced world is one complex factor in the composition of many factors constituting the essences of the soul. . . .in one sense the world is in the soul. But antithetical[ly]. . .our experience of the world involves the exhibition of the soul itself as one of the components within the world. (Whitehead 1968, 163)

Thus Whitehead's metaphysics provide an explanation of the relationality of all creation: the world is a factor in the constitution of the soul, and the soul is one more factor that constitutes the world.

Whitehead's metaphysics of body-soul relationality overturns the traditional hierarchy of superior soul over inferior body, providing clues for developing a theology of intimate partner relationships. First, the body is not inferior to the soul because both body and soul are constituted by shared experiences in a relationship of reciprocity as body and soul alternately guide each other. The body is a source of wisdom for the soul as the body mediates experiences of the actual world to the soul. Thus, the bodies of both partners should be revered as the body has a primary role in physical and spiritual development.

Second, Whitehead's position undercuts the traditional association of soul with male and body with female because gender is not assigned to either body or soul. Therefore, the primacy of the body in daily experience is acknowledged for both partners as human beings. Whereas the body is not inferior, and woman is not associated with the body, therefore the wife is not considered to be inferior to her husband. The theological justification for her subordination to him on the basis of her inferiority is repudiated.

In summary, based on the Whiteheadian principle that our personal identity is constituted by our relationships, I have suggested that our intimate partner relationships are one of our greatest opportunities both for sin and for redemption. I have proposed how partners might experience

redemptive intimacy by practicing relational power, thus creating the "true good" that can emerge only in mutual relationships. Furthermore, I have described how our capacity for intimacy is enhanced by embracing the Whiteheadian notion of the consequent nature of God. As we experience the intimacy of co-creating with God by participating in forming the Divine nature, we can be encouraged to risk the intimacy of co-creating mutuality with a human partner. Finally, I have shown how intimacy is also enhanced through Whitehead's conception of reciprocity in the relationship between body and soul. Freed from the traditional associations of male/superior soul ruling over female/inferior body, partners are enabled to practice relational power.

Conclusion: A Response to the Current Marriage Debates

How can this process theology of intimate partner relationships be helpful in the current marriage debates? One answer to this question is found in the fact that in the process world of relationality, my partner and I not only influence the becoming of each other for good or evil, we also influence the becoming of our community. Suchocki describes this dynamic influence:

The value of communities as well as the value of individuals is to be judged finally not simply in terms of self-significance, but in terms of significance for others in the increasingly wider communities of the world and universe. (Suchocki 1988a, 75)

Therefore, I hold that one criterion for determining sanctioned partnerships in our society is not the gender of the two persons, but rather, what quality of partner relationships will enable the greatest development of good for the partners and in the community? In agreement with Loomer, I have argued that the "true good" can only emerge through the practice of relational power in deeply mutual relationships. With relational power as our criterion, we could simultaneously strive toward mutual empowerment in our intimate partnerships and work to change social structures that perpetuate violence and oppression through unilateral power.

Clearly, the continued practice of unilateral power will facilitate the destruction of all of us in our ecologically fragile nuclear age, ravaged by war and threats of war. But, as Loomer writes:

the practice of relational power is an incredibly difficult art to master. This type of power requires the most disciplined kind of mutual encouragement and criticism. The creative openness to this type of relationship involves possibilities of the greatest advance and the greatest risk. (Loomer 1976, 26)

My hope is that we will develop the "mutual encouragement and criticism" to risk mutual empowerment both in our intimate partnerships and in our communities.

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ⁱ Portions of this section have been previously published as "Marriage after Patriarchy," *Creative Transformation* 8:3 (spring, 1999) and as "Marriage After Patriarchy?: Partner Relationships and Public Religion," in *Religion in a Pluralistic Age: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Philosophical Theology*, eds. Donald A. Crosby and Charley D. Hardwick (Peter Lang Press, 2001).

ⁱⁱ See Dalma Heyn, *Marriage Shock: The Transformation of Women into Wives* (New York: Villard Books, 1997), 18.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Suchocki explains how the Whiteheadian concept of relationality is the structure that allows both evil and redemption to occur with her development of "freedom in community." See Chapter IV in Suchocki 1988a, 61-80.
- iv. For a discussion of *pater familias*, see Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 150-151. Only those few women who became Vestal Virgins were automatically exempt from the power of the *pater familias*.
- vi. For a discussion of the practice of the "Rule of Thumb," see Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1899* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 326.
- vi. The relationship between the Christian tradition and violence against wives is cogently described by Rosemary Radford Ruether in her article, "The Western Religious Tradition and Violence Against Women in the Home," in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 31-41.
- vii. In the nineteenth century, Western married women's civil status was non-existent in English common law, and they were treated as minors according to the Napoleonic Code. See Barbara Corrado Pope, "Angels in the Devil's Workshop: Leisured and Charitable Women in Nineteenth-Century England and France," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 309.
- ^{viii} From "Battering Statistics" compiled in October 1996 by the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women, 605 West Olympic Boulevard, Suite 400, Los Angeles, CA, 90015.
- ^{ix} I am indebted to Barbara Keiller for stimulating my imagination and thinking about intimacy and the Whiteheadian notion of God. See Keiller 1991.
- ^x For John Cobb's discussion of Whitehead's philosophy of the relationship between body and soul, see Cobb 2002, 86-89.
- ^{xi} For an extended discussion of this devaluation of women, the body, and sexuality, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 150-183.