

PROCESS THEOLOGY AND LIVED OMNIPRESENCE:
AN ESSAY IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGYⁱ
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I

In God we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:28)

Cleave the wood and I am there. (Gospel of Thomas)

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming
into the world. (John 1:9)

Despite its technical language, process theology is profoundly concrete and practical in nature, and is the most insightful resource for progressive and ecumenical spiritual formation and theological reflection in our time. Unlike many theological systems, process theology joins the cosmic and the intimate, the planetary and the personal, and the infinitesimal and the universal. At home in the fifteen billion year cosmic adventure and its vision of billions of galaxies and trillions stars, process theology also proclaims the significance of the smallest of things – the occasion of experience that arises and perishes in the blink of an eye – in its vision of cosmic wholeness and divine wisdom.

In the spirit of Psalm 8, process theology affirms our awe at the grandeur of the universe.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them? (Psalm 8:3-4)

But, process theology equally affirms, with the Psalmist and the tradition of creation-affirming mysticism, the divine intimacy that embraces each and every thing as an important participant in God's holy adventure.

Yet you have made [humans] a little lower than God,
and crowned [humankind] with glory and honor.

Though committed to metaphysical clarity and coherence, process theology is also at home with the mystic's affirmation, "God is the circle, whose center is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere." God speaks to and through *our* lives, but also addresses *every* creature, even non-human creatures, with intimate care. Process theology's vision of God as both cosmic and intimate enables us to experience the divine omnipresence that we theologically affirm.

II.

In his description of speculative philosophy, Alfred North Whitehead asserts the essential unity of the concrete and abstract in forming our metaphysical vision.

The true method of [metaphysical] discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight into the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation.ⁱⁱ

Metaphysics and theology are grounded in lived experience – the momentary and dynamically creative experience of the self; the lively interdependence we experience in relation to our immediate and cosmic environments; the energetic and evolving flux of life; the infinitesimal novelty of each moment of experience upon which adventure,

creativity, and morality depend; and the life-transforming realm of possibilities that lure us toward new visions of ourselves, human life, and the universe. The most mundane and the most mystical moments are appropriate data for theological and metaphysical reflection.

Metaphysics and theology are profoundly concrete in their moral and spiritual implications. In the introductory chapter of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead notes that “morality of outlook is inseparably conjoined with generality of outlook.” Inspired by the thin air of metaphysical generalization, the antithesis between the general good and the individual good is abolished.ⁱⁱⁱ Further, healthy religion “should connect the rational generality of philosophy with the emotions and purposes springing out of existence in a particular society, in a particular epoch, conditioned by particular antecedents. Religion is the translation of general ideas into particular thoughts, particular emotions, and particular purposes; it is directed to the end of stretching individual interest beyond its self-defeating particularity.”^{iv} This is what Bernard Loomer described as “stature” or “size.”^v On the one hand, religious experiences and practices provide data for metaphysical reflection. On the other hand, a person’s character is formed in accordance with her or his metaphysical vision, one’s most deeply held beliefs about reality, including most especially one’s vision of God’s nature and purposes in the universe, both in the macrocosm and the microcosm.

The traditional “omni” words of philosophy and theology provide a creative context for living out our own spiritual adventures and vocations. While none of these words – omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience – can be separated in the holy trinity of God’s dynamic and evolving adventure in the world, process theologians have

typically given more explicit attention to the meaning of omnipotence and omniscience in their attempt to transform Christian theology. Omnipotence has been redefined in terms of God's creative omni-activity, persuasion, and power congruent with the integration of optimal order, novelty, and creaturely freedom. God's power is persuasive, rather than coercive, in nature. Though all-encompassing in influence, God is but *one* of the many factors that give birth to each moment of experience. Each moment of experience is a creative synthesis of God's ideal aim and the relevant universe. God rejoices in freedom, novelty, and surprise, even if it means God must adapt to the world in novel and unexpected ways.

Process theology has also redefined omniscience in terms of God's complete awareness of all things, the actual as actual, and the possible as possible. Perfect knowledge is temporal as well as spatial in nature. Divine awareness is ever-increasing in its embrace of the emerging and evolving universe. Perfect knowledge involves continuous transformation, rather than static completeness. In its redefinition of omniscience and omnipotence, process theology affirms that divine knowledge and power increases rather than decreases freedom and creativity in the creaturely world.

In many ways, a process-relational understanding of divine omnipresence embraces the unique insights of the other two members of this holy trinity of "omni" words. Like omnipotence, or omni-activity, and omniscience, divine omnipresence must be understood both spatially and temporally as all-inclusive, and yet constantly evolving in real time, the time of our lives and the evolution of the universe, and not as an abstract and changeless presence.

Simply put, the word “omnipresence” means that God is present everywhere and in all things. Psalm 139 captures the vision of omnipresence in its description of God’s ever-present companionship.

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

If I make my bed in Sheol you are there. (Psalm 139:7-8)

In his speech at the Areopagus in Athens, the apostle Paul captures the essence in divine omnipresence in his affirmation that the insights of Stoic philosophy – “in God we live and move and have our being” – accurately describe the God revealed in Jesus Christ. God is not restricted to a particular geographical place, as Abraham and Sarah discovered when they left their homeland for God’s promised land, or a specific stream of revelation, such as the Hebraic or Christian traditions, but is intimately and variably present everywhere. Wherever we are, we are in God’s presence! In every encounter, we can experience God’s touch!

God addresses us in each and every moment of experience. Divine wisdom, creativity, and inspiration come to us in every thought and encounter. “All things are words of God,” as Meister Eckhardt affirms. All moments are channels of divine presence and activity. Though God is always more than we can envisage or imagine, God enters every experience as the source of creative possibility and holy interconnectedness. God is in all things, just as all things are in God. Process theology is profoundly *kataphatic* in its theological affirmation that God can be experienced in any and every thing.

Yet, to some persons, divine omnipresence can be stifling as well as liberating! When I once used the passage from Psalm 139 as a text for a spiritual retreat, one participant saw God's lively presence as negative, rather than comforting and supporting. She saw the omnipresent God as "over-functioning," not unlike a parent who never leaves its child alone, but constantly hovers, over-protects, guides, and counsels. Perhaps, some visions of omnipresence are stifling in their intimacy. I suspect that Rick Warren's "purpose driven God," who plans every detail of our lives *without our input* is a popular example of a "stifling parent God."^{vi} But, here again, process theology redefines divine omnipresence. God is present in all things, but God's presence leaves room for growth, creativity, and privacy. In the spirit of Jewish mysticism, God withdraws God's wonder and glory (*zimzum*) in order to promote creaturely freedom and creativity. We experience God in all things, but the God we experience is "hidden" in our experiences of other creatures and "folded" into the many events from which each moment's experience arises. Present in all things, and providing an ideal possibility for each moment, the non-local God primarily enters our lives through the depths of the unconscious experience and our concrete encounters with other creatures. Ever-present, God "hides" God's face so that we might find God within our experience and respond to God in our own unique way.

Although we dwell in a divine environment, perhaps as cells of the cosmic body of which God is the ever-present mind and spirit, God addresses us within the many factors that call each moment in into becoming. As Marjorie Suchocki notes, God's omnipresent and personal word is more often a whisper than a shout.^{vii} God's spirit enters our lives as a "sigh too deep for words," (Romans 8:26) often so soft and subtle,

that we must still our minds or focus our attention in order to experience it consciously in our lives. But, noticed or not, God's ubiquitous presence gives birth, insight, and direction to our lives.

III.

As a practical theologian, I am particularly concerned with the spiritual, vocational, ethical, and social aspects of faith. Too often progressive and mainstream theology has painted a picture of God and the world, but has not given us a pathway to experiencing the reality of which it speaks. I believe good theological and spiritual reflection shape one another in an intimate dance of theory and practice:

- 1) Theology gives us a vision of God, the world, and ourselves.
- 2) The witness of faith affirms that we can experience the world described by our theology.
- 3) Spiritual practices enable us to experience the God of whom we speak, and awaken us to new dimensions of this ever-evolving, infinite, intimate, and lively God.

In other words, our theology shapes our spiritual practices, which – in turn, as objects of theological reflection – transform our theology.

IV.

Theology has struggled to understand God as both hidden and revealed in conscious experience. Often this has resulted in an unbridgeable chasm between the *apophatic* and *kataphatic* ways of theology. According to the *apophatic* way, God is

beyond any description. Eternal, changeless, and infinite, God is not a “being” but beyond all beings. This is the “God beyond God,” affirmed by Meister Eckhardt and Paul Tillich. This God cannot be experienced or described except in terms of mystery, infinity, and the deep and abiding experience of interdependence from which consciousness arises. A chant from the Shalem Institute in Washington D.C. expresses the heart of the *apophatic*, or negative, approach to theology and spirituality.^{viii}

Ageless and calm

Deep mystery

Ever more deeply rooted in Thee [or me].

The *apophatic* way is given voice in the hymn “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise” and its affirmation that “only the brightness of light hideth Thee.”

The *kataphatic* or positive way rejoices in the world as the mirror of divine creativity. All things reveal God. All moments are epiphanies for those with eyes to see. We catch a glimpse of the *kataphatic* approach in hymns such as “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” “All Creatures Great of our God and King,” and “This is My Father’s World.” The *kataphatic* way is affirmed in Rabbi Joshua Heschel’s assertion that “radical amazement” is the primary religious virtue. Another chant from the Shalem Institute captures the *kataphatic* way:

I thank you God

For the wonder of my being.

I thank you God

For the wonder of all being. [or a specific being]

Process theology's vision of a dynamic, relational, and evolving God embraces the insights of both the *apophatic* and *kataphatic* in its lively integration of the eternal and temporal, abstract and concrete, and primordial and consequent natures of God. While I believe that process theology has a bias toward incarnation, concreteness, and embodiment, characteristic of the *kataphatic* way, process theology also affirms that God is more than we can ever envisage – both in God's eternity and in God's temporality. God can be experienced intimately in the here and now, but God cannot be limited to one revelation, holy place, scripture, person, or galaxy. Experiencing divine revelation in an encounter, thought, or creature opens the door to experiencing God in all things, and standing in awe of the One whose creativity births every "big bang" and gives energy and direction to each of many billion galaxies and the billion solar systems, estimated in each galactic realm.

V.

Process theology gives us pathways and practices that enable us to experience "lived omniscience" in our daily lives. This path embraces our five senses, mystical experiences, multiple intelligences, and the many yoga paths. It embraces darkness as well as light, suffering as well as joy, and death as well as life. Indeed, process theology inspires us to create Christian "yogas," aimed at addressing the uniqueness of personality types and ways of encountering the world. Further, process theology affirms that there are a multitude of practices of spiritual discipline and formation, each of which addresses the variety of revelations of the living God in human and non-human experience. In what follows, I will briefly lay out a few practices of lived omnipresence that arise from a

process-relational vision of reality. While I focus primarily on the approach of the senses in this essay, process theology also has the resources for spiritual practices that address emphasize Myers-Briggs personality type, non-sensory experience, enneagram type, or multiple intelligences as providing diverse ways to approach the divine in ordinary life.

The Path of the Senses. If God is omnipresent, then each of our senses reveals the divine and can be an icon of personal and relational transformation. Despite the verbal orientation of modern theology, especially in its Protestant form, process theology affirms that God comes to us through the wonder of all of our senses.

Sight invites us to a spirituality of cosmic awareness, of simply opening our eyes, and seeing the world as if for the first time. Gerard Manley Hopkins speaks of this in terms of the world charged and shining like shook foil with God's grandeur. Elizabeth Barrett Browning reminds us that there is a "burning bush" around every corner.

Earth's crammed with heaven,
and every common bush
afire with God;
And only he who sees,
takes off his shoes –
The rest sit round it
and pluck blackberries.

While those who pluck blackberries may also experience God, the poet reminds us that we need to pause and notice our world in order to awaken to God's presence in our lives. Process theologian Patricia Adams Farmer reminds us to take a "beauty break" to notice the many revelations of God in ordinary life.^{ix} The path of sight, whether it involves

gazing attentively and openly at a child's face, an icon or mandala, a cherry blossom, or the morning sunrise, awakens us to the universe as the body of God, revealing itself in new ways each moment. Sight also awakens us to the pain of victims of terrorism and war, the grief of those who mourn, and the anguish and hope of persons facing life-threatening illness.

Taste. The Psalmist reminds us to “taste and see that [God] is good.” (Psalm 34:8) Divine revelation is visual and sensate and delicious as well as verbal. The pleasure of really noticing good and healthy food is a form of holy hedonism that embraces the spiritual and ethical dimensions of life, for tasting not only fills our tongue with joy, but reminds us of the profound interdependence of life. Our food is the gift of other's toil. Our approach to eating and drinking can be a matter of life and death to other persons. When we taste God's goodness by eating with mindfulness and gratitude, our attention moves toward those for whom our simplest meals are feasts, and calls us to live simply so that others might simply live.

Sound. All things are words of God. The revelation of God in sound, whether a silent mantra or prayer word, a chant, the morning birds, a child's squeal of delight, a Bach fugue, or electronic hymn to tragic beauty by U-2, calls us to listen. To hear we must be still and know that God is revealed in sound as well as silence. Psalm 46 describes God's whisper beneath the cacophony of political crisis and social upheaval. We are called by a spirituality of sound, as Simon and Garfunkle noted in the 1960's, to “listen for the sounds of silence” amid the words of the prophets and the sounds of commerce. One voice speaks through the many voices, gently and quietly, calling to us - as Divine Wisdom calls on the street corners - and inviting us to listen and follow, be

aware of divine guidance in the tumult of your heart and the affairs the of the day. God's voice speaks in the cries for justice of the marginalized and the prayers for peace of persons in war-torn lands.

Smell. The biblical tradition describes God rejoicing in offerings of incense that rise to the heavens. Jesus reveled not only in the touch of the woman who massaged his feet but also rejoiced in the fragrance of the perfume. An aroma of wholeness and beauty and holiness can transform our lives. Smell awakens us to the wonder of breathing. As one of my spiritual mentors, Allan Armstrong Hunter, taught, "I breathe the spirit deeply in." The simple act of breathing gives us life and enlivens our experience of the world. Think of the smells that give life to you – a rose, a familiar cologne or perfume, incense in worship, freshness of the morning, and the aroma freshly baked bread or cookies.

A spirituality of smell calls us to breathe deeply and intentionally the wonder of living. Psalm 150:10 rejoices in all things praising God and concludes with "let everything that breathes praise God! Praise God!"

While some smells may offend us in their raw humanity, even these odors invite us to holiness by reminding us that death is part of life and that transformation is built upon destruction. As part of my own spiritual discipline, I take a sunrise walk in my suburban neighborhood in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Over the hill from our home are factories that produce breakfast cereal, chocolate, and pet food as well as dairy and produce farms. One of the surprises of each morning involves awakening to the smell of the day – will it be whiff of chocolate from the manufacture of Cocoa Puffs or candy, the grainy smell of dry dog food, or the acrid scent of cow manure. In the ever-changing world of revelation, all aromas call us to rejoice. Process spirituality counsels us to

pause, breathe, inhale, and notice the unique aromas this good earth. We inhale God's aroma with every breath.

Touch. In light of the challenges of appropriate professional behavior, we need to reclaim a healthy and life-affirming spirituality of touch. We are healed or harmed by the touch of others. Touch has been scorned as a spiritual path because of its profound focus on embodiment. In contrast to body-denying visions of spiritual formation, process theology affirms that the body is beautiful. The body is never inherently an occasion of sin, nor does embodiment turn us away from God's vision of our lives. God's visions for our lives comes through our bodies as well as our spirits. Indeed, in an interdependent and psychosomatic world, the body is inspired and the mind enfleshed. Some process theologians, such as Charles Hartshorne, even describe the universe as the body of God, a revelation of God's pervasive spirit of life and wisdom. The apostle Paul spoke of our bodies as the "temples of God" and challenged his community to spiritual practices that "glorify God" through embodiment. (I Corinthians 6:19-20) Jesus touched and was touched as a means of sharing God's healing energy.

In a world in which many of us scorn our bodies or have experienced inappropriate touch, a spirituality of touch calls us to "love God in the world of the flesh" (W.H. Auden) through emphasizing healthy and healing touch – touching oneself in a holy way, giving and receiving hugs, massage, reiki, energy work, laying on of hands, and anointing. We can, as reiki and healing touch practitioners remind us, pray with our hands as well as with our voices.^x We can learn to experience the energy of life – the energy of God – flowing in and through our finger tips and our skin. We can awaken to

the “feel” of things by noticing the many textures of life. We can share holy touch with intimate companions.

VI.

While there is much more that can be said about process theology’s contributions to practices of “lived omnipresence,” one of the greatest gifts of process theology to the spiritual journey is its multi-faceted understanding of spiritual experiences and disciplines. Christians have too often limited their spiritual imaginations, assuming that there is only one path to experiencing the fullness of divinity. Process theology invites us to envisage a variety of Christian paths to the divine, or Christian yogas, in light of the multiplicity of personality types and ways of learning and experiencing the world. A dynamic, intimate, and omnipresent God invites us to explore different spiritual pathways, each of which is valid and transformative, depending on our age, culture, gender, religious tradition, personality type, ethnicity, and life experience, and each of which awakens us to the holiness “in whom we live and move and have our being.”

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ⁱ This essay is based on a lecture given at Claremont School of Theology, under the auspices of the Center for Process Studies, on July 25, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition* (New York: Free Press, 1978), p. 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 15.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 15.

^v Bernard Loomer, “S-I-Z-E is the Measure,” in Harry James Cargas and Bernard Lee, *Religious Experience and Process Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1970), 69-76 and “The Size of God” in William Dean and Larry Axel, *The Size of God: The Theology of Bernard Loomer in Context* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 20-51.

^{vi} Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

^{vii} Marjorie Suchoki, *The Whispered Word: A Theology of Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999).

^{viii} For more about the Shalem Institute see www.shalem.org

^{ix} Patricia Adams Farmer, *Embracing a Beautiful God* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002)

^x For more on reiki and healing touch, see Bruce Epperly and Katherine Gould Epperly, *Reiki Healing Touch and the Way of Jesus* (Kelowna, British Columbia: Wood Lake Books, 2005).