

"Follow the Yellow Brick Road!"
ASUUC Service Message - June 17, 2018
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Today is the third installment of a new sermon series that Rev. Nori kicked off on June 3. The series is about Creation Spirituality ... and for those who might have missed her earlier sermons, I'll briefly review what she said to give you a context for my remarks today.

On June 3, she introduced Creation Spirituality as a way of newly discovering the ancient spiritual tradition of experiencing the oneness of everything. She shared the first two tenets of Creation Spirituality: first, that the universe itself is an original blessing, a gift to us all; and second, that what we think of as the Divine, or God, is in all things. And she suggested, as Creation Spirituality does, that simply by living in closer relationship with the Earth and our environment, we can grow our spirituality and deepen our compassion for all life.

On June 10, Rev. Nori told us that Creation Spirituality calls us to be intentional about raising our awareness of the interconnectedness of all things, including us. She then explored spiritual practice in the light of the next two tenets of Creation Spirituality: first, that since the Divine is in all things, we are free to find our own methods of spiritual practice; and second, that through spiritual practice, we discover our true selves and transcend beyond fear to compassion.

That brings us to my topic for today: the spiritual journey.

Creation Spirituality teaches us that the spiritual journey has four mystical paths, each with its own practices and gifts. These paths feed into each other but also intertwine; at any point in life, we might find ourselves moving more intentionally in one path than the others. So the spiritual journey can be seen as a dance in which we move in and out of these paths.

Before I go further, I want you to know that I'm doing something up here that I've never done before. I've spoken from this pulpit many times in my time at All Souls ... but always on topics of my own choosing. Today, at Rev. Nori's request, I'm shoehorning my own interpretation of Creation Spirituality into the middle of what she has already said -- and of what she will say in the coming weeks. So ... I apologize in advance to you and to Rev. Nori for any confusion I might inject into the conversation.

To that end, I will also try to explain the title of my sermon, which Rev. Nori also chose. Following the yellow brick road, which Dorothy and her friends did on their way to Oz, was not unlike what Creation Spirituality asks us to do on our own spiritual journeys. The road wasn't straight; their journey led them off the road from time to time; and during the journey they learned that the answers they sought were not available, as they had been taught, from an all-powerful other -- the Wizard -- but were in fact within them the whole time. The true purpose of the Wizard was to help them see that fact.

So it is, I think, with Creation Spirituality. We move along these paths of our own accord and at our own pace. We are always free to choose how we move along them, and we are always responsible for what we get out of the journey.

I'm going to describe the four mystical paths of the spiritual journey in the order Matthew Fox presents them in his book, *Original Blessing* ... and I'll share some personal experiences that make these paths real for me. At the end, I'll give you my opinion on how these paths can be meaningful for us not just as individuals, but as a congregation.

The first path is the *Via Positiva*, and it is the path of affirmation. Along this path, we come to experience the universe and all it contains, including ourselves, as a marvelous creation. The keys to this experience are awe and wonder. Simply put, awe and wonder are 1) the ability to perceive something far more vast and deep than merely thinking allows us to comprehend, and 2) the willingness to let that perception take its rightful place in our understanding of the universe and ourselves.

Two experiences in my life stand out along this path.

The first happened my second year in college, as I sat alone in the woods at Saint John's University in central Minnesota. I felt, and then noticed, a fuzzy caterpillar walking up the sleeve of my shirt. Forsaking my usual urge to shake it off, I kept still and focused all of my attention on watching it move, stop, move, stop, and move again, until it finally left my shirt of its own accord. In that moment, my perception of the universe as something to control shrank away, and I was at one with everything in it.

The second experience happened soon after we arrived in Colorado Springs in the early 90s. It was a busy Saturday morning on I-25, and I was driving my family and our dog, Alex, to Evergreen for a last-resort cancer treatment for Alex. The tires on our Ford Escort station wagon were worn nearly bald, so I was driving carefully in the high-speed, bumper-to-bumper traffic. Just past the Highway 105 entrance in Monument, a jeep moved into my lane without noticing me. Instinctively, I swerved sharply to avoid a collision – so sharply that we went into a 540-degree spin that left us on the side of the road. In the heat of the moment, I confirmed that everyone was safe, and then I jumped out of the car and spoke some very choice words to the jeep driver, who had pulled off and was approaching. It was only after this encounter, when my adrenaline subsided to normal levels, that I realized the profound mystery – miracle, perhaps – of what had just happened. Had the tires not been bald, we would surely have flipped. Instead, we emerged untouched from a 540-degree spin in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

That experience taught me that things can happen in life that defy logic and are totally beyond my control. It re-opened me to perceiving the interconnectedness – and the wonder – of the universe in a new way.

Of the many characteristics of the Via Positiva, these four resonate with me most profoundly: 1) trust – of self, of others, of life itself – is the currency of faith ... and the essential ingredient of living the possible; 2) to experience "sacred time" – the time in which the fruits of goodness can be

realized for all – we must see that time as Now, not some time in the past or in the future; 3) that the celebration of holiness – or the affirmation of life and the universe – starts with the recognition that beauty and imperfection go together ... that imperfection is a sign that, as wondrous as it is, creation leaves scars – and we can and must celebrate these scars; and 4) accepting the inherent worth and dignity of ourselves – that is, accepting the wonder of creation – also means accepting our shared responsibility for preserving creation through our own actions in support of justice.

That's the first path. The second path is the Via Negativa, or the path of letting go and letting be. Along this path, we learn to befriend the darkness in our lives as a useful part of understanding ourselves and the universe. While the Via Positiva teaches us the cosmic breadth of living, the Via Negative opens us to our divine depths. Pain is an unavoidably essential part of this path. As Matthew Fox puts it, "when one has suffered deep pain and allowed the pain to be pain, one can visit the Grand Canyon and learn that it has nothing on the human person who is even deeper and more powerfully scarred over millions of years by the flowing tides of pain."

With the increasingly easy availability of light and sound, we have become afraid of the dark and of silence. We have also learned to fear death, both for ourselves and for the loss of those we love. If we do not frontally face the darkness we fear, if we don't befriend it – let it be what it is – we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to know who we are in those spaces, and thus deprive ourselves of the full spiritual experience.

Two experiences in my life – the passing of my father in 1973 and the passing of my mother in 2000 – have illuminated the importance of what I just said.

My father dropped dead of a heart attack when I was one week into a college trip to Ireland. He and I had argued unresolvably in our last significant moments together before my trip. Getting home from Ireland for the funeral was a nightmare: horrible weather on the East Coast

turned my 6-hour flight into a 3-day odyssey of grounded flights and a near-crash on the final bus ride, after which I drove my family 300 miles over ice-covered roads to get to the funeral on time. I was numb throughout the funeral service and the days afterward, unable to let my conflicted thoughts about what had happened between my father and me go long enough to feel the pain of my loss. That conflictedness stayed with me for years.

Eventually, I let those thoughts go and let the pain in. As a result, when my mother died in 2000 – even though I was too late to be by her side when she passed – I was able to feel the pain of her passing and the joy of her life ... and I was able to include my memories of both my father and my mother into the spiritual experience of delivering her eulogy.

For those who might worry that the Via Negativa seems like a path that simply has to be endured, remember that there is no Via Negativa without a Via Positiva; how can one let go of what one has not fallen in love with?

And for those who might be tempted to let the pain linger simply to avoid facing the unknown that comes after letting it go, remember this: the purpose of letting pain be is to let it go.

Matthew Fox describes the role of pain in this part of the spiritual journey in this way: "We pick up our pain as we would a bundle of sticks for the fireplace; we necessarily embrace those sticks as we move across the room to the fireplace; then we thrust them into the fire, getting rid of them, letting go of them; finally we are warmed and delighted by their sacrificial gift to us in the form of fire and heat and warmth and energy."

One more characteristic of the Via Negativa resonates strongly with me. Embracing silence means letting go of all images – oral ones, auditory ones, visual ones, and cognitive or imaginative ones. It is about letting silence be silence. This has implications for the next path.

That next path is the Via Creativa, the path of befriending creativity. Along this path, we experience the power of birth, of creation. We learn to

accept that we can create, can birth, something new. We learn to accept that – regardless of what we have learned to think about our abilities and potential – there is an artist in each of us. The artistry, the creativity, has nothing to do with how well we stack up against any outward measure of skill or quality ... rather, it is about trusting ourselves to reveal what is inside us.

A simple, yet profound lesson stands out for me along this path. In high school, I sang my first solo in choir at a concert attended by my parents, and I strove mightily to be perfect in every part of the performance, including my diction. After the concert, my mother praised me and then said, "You don't have to be perfect. When you try to be perfect, it doesn't sound like you." It took a few years to realize that lesson, but today when I sing, although I still work hard at my performance, I don't worry about how well I sing; I focus instead on the experience of singing and how I am connected in those moments with the audience ... and that, for me, is a spiritual experience.

Several things Matthew Fox says about the Via Creativa resonate strongly with me: 1) to create is always to learn, to start over, to begin at zero – so we must embrace, rather than fear, being at zero; 2) to add beauty to the world, we must be able to see the beauty already in it; 3) the spirituality of discipline is the recognition and practice of our passion for something – it encourages us to pursue hard work for the pleasure of creation rather than to avoid failure; and 4) to be truly creative, we must also rediscover what it means to be childlike, as the child is not afraid to let go or to trust newness in experience – and the key to making this happen is to play.

The final path is the Via Transformativa. Along this path, we befriend new creation with compassion and justice. New creation is creation seen anew and righted in its direction; it is the cosmos mended and made whole again.

New creation does not invalidate the original creation; we're not talking about throwing out the baby with the bathwater here. We cannot create anew if we don't embrace the original well enough to understand it.

Rather, we accept the seed of goodness embodied in the original and honor that seed even as we acknowledge that all things must change for the better. And we acknowledge that, to be better, change must be intentional, even if our intentions are unclear before we start.

Before the birth of Cate, my oldest daughter, I had no idea how to be a father, and that caused me some sleepless nights as Marguerite approached giving birth. Eventually, I decided to trust in my ability to be a good father – that even if I hadn't been "taught" what being a good father is, my love for my wife and my future daughter and my desire to do the best for them, paired with being open to learning as I went, would be enough to get started. And I was right. Being a father has been one of the most satisfying spiritual experiences of my life.

Two characteristics of the Via Transformativa resonate as strongly with me as any of those I've mentioned before:

1) New creation is a task that belongs to all of us, including those who have previously been excluded from this effort or who come newly to it.

2) Because we see the inherent worth and dignity of ourselves and others and the interdependence of all as characteristics of creation, we must therefore make justice and compassion the architects of new creation.

This leads me to suggest some things we can do as individuals and as a congregation to fully experience this spiritual dance and to realize the fruits of it.

First, we must be open to the dance. We must courageously put aside our fears and trust in ourselves, in each other, in life ... for each of the four mystical paths of Creation Spirituality is a journey into trust and a journey of deepening trust.

Second, we must embrace each other as equal, beloved partners in this interconnected universe before we notice the differences between us.

That way, we can treat our differences as assets instead of obstacles in the lives we share.

Third, we must be willing to play with each other. RE wisely encourages play downstairs as an essential part of learning; perhaps we can re-introduce playtime upstairs in some useful form.

Fourth, we must be ready to accept new ways of thinking, of expressing ourselves, and of doing as possible tools in accomplishing the shared task of new creation.

As one who has long regarded himself a Humanist, I was pleasantly surprised to discover, going back a long way in my personal history, that I had made room for spirituality and spiritual experience in my life. I look fondly forward to sharing that experience with each of you.