



The Len Cederleaf Award

Becoming God

Mary Ann Brody

I have always loved science and nature. In college, I majored in physical education, and I minored in biology. The outdoors has been a place of spiritual connection. Some of my most cherished memories were times spent in the woods or lying in the grass in our yard. I have felt close to God in creation, especially on the trails and mountains of my beloved Adirondacks. It will always be my heart's home and the ground of my constantly emerging theology. Like many Episcopalians, my theology is a blending of many strands, but three themes emerge as relevant in my supervisory practice: incarnation, sacramental presence, and Holy Communion.

These three themes come together for me in the process theology of Marjorie Suchocki and the spirituality expressed in the writings of Judy Cannato and Diarmuid O'Murchu.

INCARNATION

Thomas Aquinas was a classical Christian theologian who also saw connections between science and theology. Judy Cannato writes, "Thomas Aquinas said that a mistake in our understanding of creation will necessarily cause a mistake in our understanding of God."¹ As a result, Cannato begins her book *Radical Amazement* at the beginning of creation by talking about the "big bang," the burst of energy that many scientists believe was the start of our universe. The dust that traveled through space and time as

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our planet coalesced from a formless cloud of gas and particles into a solid sphere in orbit around a star is the same dust that was used in bringing life into being. Over millennia, single-celled bacteria composed of DNA, a bit of mitochondria, and a cell membrane evolved into complex organisms containing tissues, organs, and organ systems. The same atoms that existed in those early single-celled organisms have been recycled many times over and are now intertwined in our own cells. When we die, those same atoms will be recycled into another new life. That reality is best expressed for me theologically in the words from Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."² Nothing created lasts forever. All matter is recycled into energy. Nothing is lost. Everything is in the process of becoming.

As our understanding of the cosmos has deepened over the last several decades, scientists have also explored energy on the quantum level, in the realm of atoms, morphogenic fields,³ and holons.⁴ Those discoveries in the quantum world have led to new insights about our spiritual evolution, resulting in a new awareness about our spiritual connections with one another, with the created world, and with God.⁵ Our expanding understanding of cosmic history has provided a vision of God fully embedded and active within the process of evolution.⁶ This process of becoming isn't limited just to matter. Marjorie Suchocki describes the present moment as a process of co-creation with God. "Every unit of existence is formed through conjoining of past and future," and "the influences of the past and the possibilities of the future are combined by the becoming entity in its own creation, which is the creation of the present."⁷ We are literally taking part in our own becoming in space and time. Past experiences are the actualities that inform our decisions in the present, and God's energy of persuasion and possibility draw us into attainable futures. We are innately driven by our life force to survive, develop, and transform⁸ in an ongoing dance of evolution involving all of creation as God holds out all future possibilities for good to the world in each new moment. Even time is in the process of becoming.

Diarmuid O'Murchu, another writer on evolutionary spirituality, invites us to think of God as creative energy, energy that is manifest in the living creation itself. He sees transformation happening in "stuff" that is already present.

God did not create the world from nothing, but worked on the chaos — the unfolding raw material—that was already there. That which already

existed contained within it seeds of further development. It was a nothingness, with a potential to be shaped and molded into more creative structuring. The divine influence is calling forth the potential (order) through which the creative material can further evolve.⁹

Students do not arrive as empty vessels. They bring “stuff” with them: experiences of triumph, a past that haunts them, gifts they have cultivated. We are all influenced by a past not of our own making, influenced by societal forces set in motion by the generations that came before us. We are born into particular situations that begin molding us at birth and sometimes even in utero.¹⁰ Past actualities that result in oppression are what Suchocki calls the demonic, or original sin. Sin is conforming to old ways that perpetuate injustice and suffering and ignoring the new possibilities God offers us in the creative freedom of the future. Students can be re-formed by examining oppression in their own lives and recognizing how they have contributed to or been hurt by it. Just as atoms are recycled in matter, the past is the grist for new insight into the present. As students explore their inner world in the context of pastoral encounters, they begin to discover survival roles¹¹ that may have been lifesaving in the past but that interfere with relationships and pastoral functioning in the present.

Theologically speaking, God is in all of it, incarnated in and through the created order. Classical Christian theology recognizes the incarnation of God in one man, Jesus Christ, a first-century Palestinian Jew, yet I cannot accept that God would be so limited as to only come into humanity through one inbreaking in time. God *wants* to be known. God *wants* to be revealed. I do not believe that God would only make God’s self known to one particular culture, in one particular time, to one particular people. What I call Christ, the incarnated presence of God in creation, is for all people in all times. It abides in every person and in all creation.

Jesus is a particular focal point in human history where God’s inbreaking is unmistakable to me, so I call myself a Christian; yet I also experience God every day in people I meet, in the bitter, still, cold air of winter, in the pain of death, in a student’s struggle for identity, in the ecstasy of intimate relationships. During final evaluations, one student expressed her belief that in order to be saved one must accept Jesus Christ as Lord. She also claimed that everyone was a beloved child of God. That felt incongruent to me. I am a homosexual person. I have felt the pain of exclusion from God’s love by a theology that claimed it is okay to love the sinner and hate the sin.

I asked her how she reconciled those two aspects of her faith in a multicultural, multifaith environment without trying to convert everyone to Christianity. She simply said that she left that up to God. I had watched her extend God's unconditional love to others for six months, and I had experienced that same love from her. I doubt this student would express her theology as I do, but she taught me that it's possible for someone to hold a traditional Christian theology and still work lovingly in a very diverse setting. She really believed it was vitally important as a Christian to approach each patient as a beloved child of God, just as I do.

I had seen her do it. I had experienced her doing it with me, someone who at the start of the unit she didn't believe could be ordained by God. That was God intimately at work calling both of us into a creative new future, a future formed from the material of our individual past actualities impacting the events of the present moment, and drawing us out of the sin of prejudice and oppression and into love. Our past assumptions came smashing into the reality of our experience of one another in that moment, and something refreshingly new was created in us and through us by God. God was incarnated in us right then, however briefly, and that God energy pulsed within us. "Jesus, his followers came to know, was God enfleshed, and God now wanted to be enfleshed in them."¹² God was revealed in and through us.

Jesus experienced the full range of human experience, doubt, fear, pain, even despair, and God was there with him.¹³ Just as Jesus was never alone, neither are we alone. In fact, Jesus had the innate capacity to be a conduit for God's fullness in the world, bringing compassion and mercy where we often find condemnation. I seek to approach others and situations with the qualities of compassion, mercy, and challenge that Christ embodied. Paradoxically, the wounds of my past are the very tools that open me to connecting with others on their journey, just as it is the wounds of Christ that make Jesus accessible to me. In our Eucharist, Jesus is broken open each week during our worship. I follow a broken Messiah because in Him I see my own brokenness as a gift. We are what Henri Nouwen called *wounded healers*.¹⁴ It is connecting within the context of our shared human condition that makes it possible for me to serve a diverse population. Everyone has wounds. All students show up with them. When they begin CPE, they hide them or suppress them or deny them, but through reflection, the group process, and individual supervision, they can begin to see them for the gems

they are. Our human condition is the entryway into relationship and real presence with one another.

SACRAMENTAL PRESENCE

As an Episcopal priest, I have the privilege of officiating at sacramental rituals—in the water of baptism and the oil of healing, in the bread and wine of Communion and the touch of hands, in the bands of marriage and the dust of death. As a priest, these are mine to administer to those who request them. As a CPE supervisor, I have the privilege of experiencing sacramental moments with students. V. presented a verbatim about a 16-year-old boy who arrived in the emergency department at 3:00 am with third-degree burns over 98 percent of his body. The space in the group was filled with emotion. It felt like an encounter with *anamnesis* (a remembering).¹⁵ We were *living it* with her as she brought it from outside the group into the here and now. This is the CPE educational process at work. All the students were holding their own grief, and the group process gave them an opportunity to reveal it, explore it, and break through their isolation. Something was happening within the group that couldn't be experienced as an individual. Sharing the grief expanded the space and made the burden lighter. They felt it *in their bones*. I have the privilege of entering that space with others in supervision. That gathering was infused with God's presence. It was a sacrament, a most holy Communion.

As a supervisor, I walk with students as we all discover our own internal terrain, sometimes coming across boulders that need to be removed or tender shoots that need nurturing. Transformation is a part of the evolutionary process of human life, God's holy work in us. E. was a female student with an abusive past. Her mother never wanted her. Her mother's constant barrage of insults made her insecure and indecisive. I found myself becoming increasingly impatient with her. In therapy, I discovered in her an older sister I knew well. I discovered that my relationship with E. was woven with the threads of my past experiences with my sister. Realizing that connection was liberating for me. It allowed me to approach her with more compassion. Through counseling, E. came to recognize the material of her past that was impacting her relationships as well. That awareness freed her to begin to change. We were both freed to feel God's nudges into future possibilities for good. God could work with the raw material within her to bring fullness to

her pastoral calling where she had thought nothingness existed, and I was freed to see her more clearly. "The effect of God upon us is the transmission of vision, along with the conviction of its worth and attainability. God is the source of hope."¹⁶

I grew up Roman Catholic. As a young adult, I left that church and found much of what I valued from the Roman Catholic tradition in the Episcopal Church that became my new home: the liturgy, the centrality of Holy Communion, mysticism, the sacraments. The Episcopal Church allowed space for a greater diversity of being and of thought. Anglican theology is informed by tradition, Scripture, and reason, the traditional three-legged stool. There is ample room for difference. We value lived experience as a legitimate source of authority. Action and reflection are vital tools for my theological evolution. In life, my beliefs are put to the test, and they are refined in the crucible of life's suffering and joy. ACPE reflects these same values.

S. is a Roman Catholic woman in a diocese that is increasingly oppressive toward women. She struggles with her denomination but loves the ground that forms its foundations. As she openly talked about the tension she experienced in her own church, her struggles as a woman seeking to serve in a pastoral role, feeling called to be ordained and yet denied that opportunity, I could connect with her suffering and yearning spirit. I also connected with her desire to stay put and live in solidarity with all those who want more from the church than it is currently willing to give. I was touched by her determination and candor. I chose to leave that church, but she is choosing to stay; I commend her decision as a selfless choice in the midst of complex circumstances. Through her, I found hope for a church I have loved and left. I joined with her feelings of anger, frustration and fear. I watched as she began directing that energy to fuel her desire for justice, commitment, and compassion for herself in spite of feeling a deep tension and grief about her situation. There was something greater at work there in the space between us, something holy. We were both changed in that sacramental moment we shared.

HOLY COMMUNION

The Trinity embodies the fullness of unity in diversity for me. Traditionally known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Trinity illustrates God's

holy energy as One: the creative energy of the universe that fuels evolution; the incarnational energy or life force that drives our own existence; and the relational energy of communion that draws us together in love. The Trinity is energy working toward the goal of unification, not uniformity. As a supervisor, I try to build unity in a diverse group of students, to develop what Louis Cozolino calls a “tribal classroom” environment that is grounded on building trusting relationships between students and teachers.¹⁷ I’ve been formed more by the differences I’ve encountered in CPE groups and from reflection on clinical presentations involving parishioners and patients in CPE than I ever learned by sitting in a classroom. Those relationships have shown me how very much we have in common, in spite of the rich diversity expressed, simply because we share a common humanity. I experience God in relationship with others. That communion is part and parcel of our creation.

Every major religion has a story of creation. The Judeo-Christian tradition is no exception. In the past, the Genesis story has been used as a way to justify hatred toward homosexuals and the subordination of women, but I choose to reframe it as a metaphor for inclusion. God realized that the human was alone in the garden, and that was not good.¹⁸ So God set about making a companion—birds, cattle, beasts of every kind—but none turned out to be a suitable partner. Finally, God took a rib from that first person and created another human being. “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”¹⁹ Their creation, one from the other, was a connection that the first two humans had with no other part of the garden. The communion they shared was *in their bones*, a biological reality. It is the same communion that each of us seeks to find with another, an experience of Oneness that is expressed in almost all mystical traditions. It’s a deep sense that *everything belongs* to the One, and it is passed from one human being to another through our very cells.

What we see in that mythical story of creation, we also see reflected in emerging scientific research on the human brain; our human design comes prepackaged with the innate capacity to connect.²⁰ In the early 1990s, neuroscientists in Italy doing research on macaque monkeys and brain activity discovered mirror neurons, a type of neuron that some see as biological soft-wiring for empathy, a biological capacity to feel what others are feeling.

Those mirror neurons are at work in my students as they develop the skill of emotional attunement.²¹ Using Yvonne Agazarian’s systems-cen-

tered theory of functional subgrouping,²² students join on similarities at the apprehensive level. I watch as emotional energy moves around the circle. I listen as they describe with interest its movement within them. Someone expresses a feeling, and one by one they each join by building on it from their own internal experience. A smile travels with ease around the circle. Emotional energy expressed by one member is felt by others, whether sadness, excitement, tension, or union. With each joining, the connection deepens and differences within the apparently similar begin to emerge. They enmesh unity in diversity, often crossing barriers of ethnicity, age, religion, and economic status.

Some students will hit barriers too thick to traverse or have no desire to join with others. There is always a tension between joining and separation. H. tuned out every time E. opened her mouth to speak in group. She didn't want anything to do with her. She insisted that E. was taking up too much time and drawing attention to herself. I asked H. what E. might be there to teach her. She reflected on the gift that E. brought to the group, her personal pain and willingness to explore, things that H. resisted doing in group. H. realized that she had competing goals within herself. She wanted to join in the subgrouping, but she also wanted to remain hidden. What E. brought to the group so often was pain, the very thing H. wanted to hide. E. put H. at risk of feeling it, and H. wanted no part of it. That was H.'s choice, but she grew to appreciate E.'s contributions a little more.

Empathy is emotional attunement, and it is an essential pastoral tool. As Cannato writes, "As each of us moves, we generate an electrical charge. 'Every movement we make appears to be felt by the people around us,' McTaggart says. If our energy does in fact touch others, each movement creates a relationship."²³ That energy can be felt in pastoral encounters, in individual supervision, and in a group. I call it *holy energy*. In traditional Christian parlance, it could be called the Holy Spirit. St. Augustine called the Holy Spirit the love between the Father and the Son in the Trinity, the love that binds the three in one. St. Augustine wouldn't have recognized it as measurable energy, but Cannato does.²⁴ Pamela Cooper-White calls it *intersubjectivity*.²⁵ She claims that transference and countertransference are two ends of the same continuum, and in that shared space is where wisdom and reality are co-created. There is no objective observer who is unaffected by the encounter. Both contribute and both are changed. In that space, meaning is constructed for both the helper and the one helped.²⁶ I see that *inter-*

subjectivity as filled with mystery and power. God resides in that space and participates in the co-creation.

During a group session before Thanksgiving, the students were sharing their excitement about the coming break. H. wasn't looking forward to the holiday at all. In fact, she was dreading it. Her husband of only six weeks had died suddenly of a massive heart attack several months before the start of the unit. I felt her sinking into the "dark room" of her grief. "Don't leave me here," she pleaded. My father had died that spring, and this holiday would be my family's first without him. I joined her in that grief through functional subgrouping. Two pasts, both involving the recent death of loved ones, met in the space between us. God's creative energy went to work, helping us to use those past actualities in the present moment so that we could move into a future that held out the possibility of good for both of us. This was the first of several trips we took into her dark room together, an internal room that kept her from walking into the dark rooms on her units. Those trips were times of Holy Communion filled with God's incarnate presence.

Both supervisor and student are always in the process of becoming. Missteps are opportunities the help to form decisions in a constantly evolving future. Both my students and I make mistakes and have the chance to process them individually, in consultation with colleagues, and in peer group settings. That process is often hard formational work, encouraging us each to become more transparent to ourselves and others. In CPE we call it parallel processing. In theological terms, it is the hard work of co-creation with God, an evolutionary process that includes not only humanity but all creation across all time.

NOTES

- 1 Judy Cannato, *Radical Amazement: Contemplative Lessons from Black Holes, Supernovas, and Other Wonders of the Universe* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2006).
- 2 The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 265. This is the phrase said as ashes are imposed on the foreheads of Christians on Ash Wednesday at the beginning of the season of Lent. They are a sign of our mortality and a reminder of our beginning as creatures made out of the “dust from the ground” (Genesis 2:5).
- 3 Judy Cannato, *Judy. Field of Compassion: How the New Cosmology Is Transforming Spiritual Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2010), 30–33. Cannato defines a morphogenic field as “a non-material region of influence within and around a particular form. It can be thought of as a field of information” (p. 29). It surrounds any form, atom, system, or person and it contains habits, laws, communication, etc. The important point is that similar morphogenic fields build on one another and have an influence on emerging morphogenic fields. This is called morphic resonance, a quantum expression of communion.
- 4 Holons are *whole parts*. They are whole in themselves but are parts of a larger whole. Cannato uses the example of atoms being whole in themselves but part of molecules. Molecules are whole in themselves but are part of compounds. Holons move toward complexity. She claims that the same is true of systems. We are individuals and whole, but we are also part of families. Families are part of neighborhoods. Neighborhoods are part of larger communities. The theory holds that a holon depends on everything below it for its existence and that the removal of a holon changes everything above it. Remove a member from a group and we immediately recognize a difference in the group as a whole. This concept, though expressed in terms of holons, seems to parallel Yvonne Agazarian’s concept of isomorphism in living human systems.
- 5 Cannato, *Radical Amazement*. “Within each and every holon there is a spark of divine creativity and the power to develop into something new. In evolutionary terms, holons move toward greater complexity. In human psychological terms, we become less egocentric and more integrated. In spiritual terms, we open our hearts to the Spirit who is eager to work in and through us for the transformation of the world” (p. 101).
- 6 This is a brief paraphrase of a longer explanation of evolutionary spirituality from a post on an online evolutionary spirituality group conversation among ACPE supervisors and supervisory students posted by Timothy A. Thorstenson earlier this year. I think it nicely captures the core of evolutionary spirituality as I understand it.
- 7 Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), 29.
- 8 Yvonne Agazarian’s theory of living human systems says that the goal of all systems is to survive, develop, and transform. Yvonne Agazarian and Susan P. Gantt, *Autobiography of a Theory: Developing a Theory of Living Human Systems and Its System-Centered Practice* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2000).
- 9 Diarmuid O’Murchu, *In the Beginning Was the Spirit: Science Religion and Indigenous Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), Kindle Edition, Loc 506.

- 10 Being born into poverty or an abusive family situation, for example, can have deleterious effects on brain development even before birth because, for example, the mother is under constant stress and the fetus is exposed to consistently high levels of cortisol or because poverty results in poor nutrition or the lack of prenatal health care.
- 11 Agazarian describes the self as a person system composed of the survivor and the curious observer. When we encounter differences that are too large, we close the boundary between these two halves, and take on past adaptive roles that have helped us to survive in early life. Closing that boundary prevents us from learning and prevents us from integrating any differences. The theory of living human systems proposes that the only way to come out of those roles is to become curious about them; only then can change or personal growth occur. Agazarian, *Autobiography of a Theory*.
- 12 Cannato, *Field of Compassion*, 56.
- 13 Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34. Jesus laid himself bare in God's presence. This was evidenced most profoundly in the Garden of Gethsemani when he prayed for release from the task ahead, and on the cross when he cried in despair, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."
- 14 Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Image Books, 1979).
- 15 In our Eucharistic prayer, we repeat the words attributed to Jesus from the Last Supper, "Do this in remembrance of me." In the Greek, the word is *anamnesis* (ἀνάμνησις), which means remembrance. This has a deeper meaning than just describing or remembering a past event. It is bringing a past event into the present so that those gathered become participants in the event across time and space, as if they are actually present. As I observed the CPE residents, there were times when they brought events from outside the group into the here and now and we joined in Holy Communion, with God deeply present but not taking over.
- 16 Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church*, 78.
- 17 Louis Cozolino, *The Social Neuroscience of Education: Optimizing Attachment and Learning in the Classroom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).
- 18 "Then the Lord God said, 'It's not good that the human is alone. I will make him a helper that is perfect for him'" (Genesis 2:18 NRSV). Other bible versions use companion, helpmate, or partner in place of "helper" and use suitable, right, as a complement, a counterpart, and comparable, for the word "perfect" in this translation. The implication seems to be that something is shared between human beings that makes us compatible with one another in a way that is not shared with the rest of creation.
- 19 Genesis 2:23 NRSV.
- 20 Jeremy Rifkin, "RSA Animate: The Empathic Civilization," May 6, 2010, *YouTube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7AWnfFRc7g>.
- 21 As our physical bodies evolved from *Homo erectus* to *Homo sapiens*, the human brain developed into a social organ biologically designed for survival through connection. Early emotional attunement is critical to normal psychological and emotional development. Empathic connection is directly linked to the functioning of the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system in the human brain, biological developments that occurred as our species evolved over centuries.

- 22 See Agazarian and Gantt, *Autobiography of a Theory*.
- 23 Cannato, *Field of Compassion*, 137.
- 24 *Entrainment* occurs when two oscillating pendulums set in close proximity change their frequency and begin to oscillate in unison. Scientists believe that everything has a preferred frequency and emits tiny particles of energy in that frequency. When two objects are brought together, the energy released by each affects the other so that the frequency of one object slows and the frequency of the other accelerates until the two reach a resonance frequency that is shared. Together the two objects create a stronger signal than each would emit on its own. Cannato suggests that the same is true for us, that as human beings we emit energy as well. When we resonate with another human being, that resonance frequency is felt across time and space. Cannato quotes the Global Consciousness Project's comment that "the energy from a collective, intensely felt thought appears to be infectious" (*Field of Compassion*, p. 139). This is holy energy, thoughts and energy that are transferred between people. This sounds very much like Cooper-White's relational subjectivity.
- 25 Pamela Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom: Use of Self in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 5. Unlike traditional countertransference, which is seen as interference, totalist countertransference is information for pastoral work.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 47.