

Many Paths to God

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I begin with a 19th Century Zulu faith declaration from South Africa. It goes: “I; I am; I am alive; I am conscious and aware; I am unique; I am who I say I am; I am the essence of life; I forever evolve inwardly and outwardly in response to the challenge of my nature; I am the face of humanity; The face of humanity is my face.”

How many of us have the self-confidence to declare such a role for ourselves in the unfolding of life in the universe? The Christian theologian Howard Thurman, in his book *Creative Encounter*, affirms: “It is my belief that in the Presence of God there is neither male nor female, white or black, Gentile or Jew, Protestant or Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim, but a human spirit stripped to the literal substance of itself before God.” We are here now.

All of existence -- the universe, everything -- is mysterious and holy. Mystics, those who seek direct experience of the divine, have named four paths to such experience. By their Latin names, they are Via Positiva (experiencing God through delight and joy); Via Negativa (experiencing God through suffering and letting go); Via Creativa (experiencing God through cooperative co-creation of reality); and Via Transformativa (experiencing God through doing justice and deepening compassion in society).

You may recognize these four paths among Jewish and Christian mystics, but they are also employed by Sufi, Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist mystics, as well as many who seek to find their own path to what is ultimate. I wish to explore how these paths might serve us on the spiritual journeys we find ourselves on today.

Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* captures the essence of Via Positiva in writing: “Love all creation; the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, and every ray of light. Love the plants. Love the animals. Love everything. If you love everything you will perceive the Divine Mystery in all things. Once you perceive it, you will comprehend it better every day. And you will come, at last, to love the whole world with an all embracing love.”

Some would call this the path of the Buddha. We are beings that exist to love. Most religions view all of creation, everything we experience in our lives, as mysterious and sacred; so these religious paths extend this love to all sentient beings, animals, plants, rocks, and everything that occurs in nature including human beings. We open ourselves to receive love unconditionally and then become channels of love ourselves to other people.

Some of you may have guessed that given my sunny disposition and my socioeconomic location in society, the Via Positiva is my preferred path into the Divine Mysteries. I love to greet the sun as I arise, to dwell upon the many and diverse blessings in my life, to think upon the ones I love and who love me in return, and to extend that love to the world that surrounds us and the infinite universe. I am in relationship with the universe and it fills me with awe and wonder! I experience

the divine in all things. I rejoice in many names for God: Mother God, Father God, Spirit of Life, and even creative serendipity.

Love is the path I most often travel to God, where I seek to rest and dwell in that love, and by so doing commune with the ground of all being. I love this world as I love you all.

Those traveling the Via Negativa find solace through suffering, and become one with the ground of being by letting go. A 19th Century Catholic prayer expresses this by saying, “I adore thee God, confessing my own misery and nothingness. Let me burn and be tormented here; spare me not here that thou may spare me in eternity.”

Ancient Hebrew psalms also travel this journey, captured by John Milton’s poetic rendering of the seventh psalm. “Lord my God to thee I fly, save me and secure me under your protection while I cry; lest a lion with no rescue near tear my soul asunder. Lord my God, if I have thought or done wrong, if wickedness be in my hands, if I have wrought ill to him that meant me peace, or have given less than I ought to give, or not freed my foe from harm, let the devil pursue my soul and overtake it, let him tread my life down into the dust, and there outspread lodge it with dishonor foul. Rise in your anger, show yourself to me in the rage of my foes that urge like fire; and wake for me their fiery urges your judgment to engage.”

This negative theology, called apophatic by theologians, attempts to become one with the ground of being by letting go of all illusions and all grasping after salvation. In Hinduism the Via Positiva is captured in the spiritual teaching that *I am That*; and the Via Negativa, also called the path of renunciation, is captured by the phrase *neti, neti* (not this, not that).

Those who walk the Via Negativa sometimes view those on the Via Positiva as naïve optimists who don’t understand the true nature of reality and the dark emptiness within the divine mystery. The Upanishads are perhaps the world’s greatest source of apophatic mysticism. In Islam this negative theology, *Lahoot salbi*, is most common within Shia and among Sufis. Chinese Taoism also seems to place apophatic assertions at its very core, and yet can experience joy even on such a path.

This is a difficult path, one often not chosen by UU’s, yet can feel the only possible path for some in deep distress when God seems entirely unjust. Elie Wiesel, writing of Jews living in a WWII concentration camp, describes the path this way: “Once, in a concentration camp during WWII, the Jewish people imprisoned there decided to put God on trial for failing to live up to his promises to protect them. Officiating at the trial were three rabbis, who appointed a lawyer for the people and a lawyer for God. There was much evidence introduced and many days of deliberation. Finally the verdict was read, and God was found guilty. When the trial was over, the people were quiet. They looked at the rabbis and one person asked, ‘What do we do now?’ The only answer that made sense to the people, the only answer in the face of reality, was that they must pray.”

There are times and circumstances under which this appears to be the only reasonable path to God. Sorrow brings us closer. If you ask what letting go looks like, I might answer with a Polish Hasidic tale: “Once some tourists from the United States were visiting Poland. They had heard

about the famous Polish rabbi Hafez Hayyim and managed to receive an invitation to visit him in his home. When the tourists arrived, they were surprised to see that the rabbi's home was only a simple room filled with books. His only furniture was a table and a bench. 'Rabbi, where is your furniture?' they asked. 'Where is yours?' he replied? 'But we are only visitors here,' answered the tourists. 'So am I,' said the rabbi." And so it is when in the face of insurmountable suffering we learn the hard lessons of how to let go and let God be.

If we are only visitors here -- if everything, no matter how horrible, will surely pass -- then we can rest in God's love.

Via Creativa, the path of co-creation, is fundamental to Unitarian Universalism. In our seventh principle we affirm our respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Taking our part in the unfolding of the interdependent web is the Creativa path.

The medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart wrote that: "God is creating the entire universe fully and totally in this present now. Everything God created ... as God made the world, God creates now ... God is in everything, but God is nowhere as much as God is in the soul. There, where time never enters, where no image shines in, in the innermost and deepest aspect of the soul, God creates the whole cosmos. Everything which God created millions of years ago and everything which will be created by God after millions of years -- if the world endures until then -- God is creating all that in the inner most and deepest realms of the soul. Everything of the past, and everything of the present, and everything of the future, God creates in the innermost realms of the soul."

What is our role in this co-creating of a universe? As the mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme says in *Soul of the Universe*: "Even when there are no atoms, and no elementary particles, and no protons, and no photons, suddenly elementary particles will emerge ... The base of the universe seethes with creativity, so much so that physicists refer to the universe's ground state as *space-time foam*."

So how will we each contribute our unique rhythms to the emergence of human life within this space-time foam? I enjoy the very concept of being co-creative with that creative serendipity that some call God in the emergent unfolding of this universe within space-time. This is Via Creativa on a grand, macro scale! Our generativity co-creates with God; through our own creativity, we help to sustain the unfolding universe.

The Zen Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hahn says Via Creativa operates at the personal, micro scale as well. He writes: "When we look into the heart of a flower, we see clouds, sunshine, minerals, time, the earth, and everything else in the cosmos in it. Without clouds, there could be no rain, and there would be no flower. Without time, the flower could not bloom. In fact, the flower is made entirely of non-flower elements; it has no independent, individual existence."

What is true of the flower is also true for us, we have no independent existence, we exist only in relationship to our families, our community, our planet earth, and the unfolding of the wider universe within this deep foam of space-time. The universe is a continuous, radiant, numinous

revelation,” Swimme says. “Contemplating the wonders of the unfolding creativity of the cosmos is a mystical, ecstatic, awe-inspiring event.”

The final path, Via Transformativa, comes from our own response to this engagement with the ground of being. If we do not vow to do justice, to love kindness, and walk together with our God, then we have missed the point. When Jesus said, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the state prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” I think he was speaking of Via Transformativa, for he continues: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

This path doesn’t even require that we believe in God, but only that we are willing to do our share in promoting justice and in responding to the deep needs of this world. Those who took action in response to Haiti’s devastating earthquake were perhaps walking this Via Transformativa together, as long as they themselves were transformed by their very efforts to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and welcome the stranger.

What we do is far more important than what we say. Yet it is not enough that we do good. Unless we are transformed in the process, we will not come to know ourselves as living within the unfolding of the universe. In our relief of suffering, in combating injustice, and in celebrating how much more a community struggling together for justice and compassion can achieve than any person could on their own, we walk Via Transformativa. That is why in our Small Group Ministry groups we say, “Thank you for helping us do together what no one of us could ever do alone.”

Of course, few of us walk just one of these paths. They will interconnect and weave through our lives as we make our way through this four-dimensional space- time foam upon our spiritual journey.

Matthew Fox, a leader in creation spirituality and former Catholic priest, regularly leads alternative Masses that move progressively through all four paths during the worship service: Via Positiva through invoking awe, wonder, joy and gratitude; Via Negativa through invoking darkness, silence, sorrow, and letting go; Via Creativa through invoking renewal, rebirth and creative expression; and Via Tranformativa through invoking compassionate social action and justice-making. He says, “Without all four [paths] you don’t have a full spiritual life.”

So for those who have focused on only one or two of these paths, and may have found their spiritual journeying becoming stale or boring as a result, please consider these other paths as well. I love you all dearly!

Amen and Blessed Be.