According to Henry Nelson Wieman, the problem that religions seek to answer is – how to save humanity from evil and turn us toward the greatest good?

Wieman was a Unitarian theologian of the last century that influenced this religious movement and beyond. He explored creativity and examined not creative work, but the creative transformation of the individual into the wholeness of being. His thought was featured in Martin Luther King Jr.’s dissertation, “A comparison of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Wieman.”

Wieman wasn’t interested in the personal God of orthodox Christianity, but said, “the word God is irrelevant to the religious problem unless the word is used to refer to whatever in truth operates to save. Now, he was writing in the 1950’s so he says “man” to indicate humanity – but he says the word God is irrelevant to the religious problem unless the word is used to refer to whatever in truth operates to save man from evil and to the greater good no matter how much this operating reality may differ from all traditional ideas about it.” He actually used the term “creative interchange’ (not God) to talk about this operating reality – though he knew others might understand it to be God.

Theology of the last century can be a little dense, so I beg your forgiveness this morning – Wieman sounds a little like the geophysics that Seth studied 30 years ago – well, at least to me, someone with no training in geophysics. But please bear with me. I promise creative interchange relates to creativity in the end.

Creative interchange occurs when the individual finds one or more persons with whom she can engage in that kind of interchange which creates in each an awareness of the original experience of the other person and at the same time a recognition of the exceeding preciousness of this original experience, which lies beyond the judgements of good and bad, sin and evil, to use Wieman’s language. Bad habits, bad decisions, destructive tendencies, and ill will the things we’d like to change in ourselves and in the world. This creative interchange is grounded in an authentic experience of ourselves and others that doesn’t idealize or conceal or conform.

Wieman uses the example of the Tale of the Emperor’s New Clothes – where conventional experience and the rules of propriety dictate that the adults see clothes where none are present, and it takes a child to declare the obvious, that indeed, the emperor has no clothes. This child’s revelation is a part of this creative interchange – where the truth be told, true natures revealed, and reality exposed. Of course, what next occurs matters in terms of creative interchange.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was concerned that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism and a superficial optimism. “Liberalism failed to see that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man’s - again, he’s writing in the 50’s - defensive ways of thinking. Reason, devoid of purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations.”

What is this ingredient called the ‘purifying power of faith?’ That King says must be in the mix with reason in order to free it from distortions and rationalizations? King would argue that it is faith in God, but like Wieman I am not entirely convinced that this all hinges on God but rather that the word, “God”, stands in for a deeper reality that convention prevents other words from describing.
I believe that the purifying power of faith has to do with 1) our relationality, interrelatedness, our connections with each other and with the universe, our faith in not being alone, by being a part of life itself, and 2) our senses, our experience. Reason devoid of that faith in the information provided by our senses, that reason is what leads to distortion and rationalizations, I believe. Reason dictates that the emperor would be wearing clothes. Only the senses provide us information contrary to conventional ways of thinking about tailors and emperors and the nature of cloth itself.

In my last year of theological school in Chicago, I drove up to Green Bay once a month to preach in a program called the Mod Squad – MOD referred to Ministerial Opportunity Development or something like that. In any case, I was pulpit supply for a small fellowship that could not afford to hire a minister. There was a great deal of disagreement brewing in this small community. People were expressing their longings by taking sides about God. Some thought worship should always be about God and some thought Unitarian Universalist worship should not mention God. The tension was palpable.

In the midst of this dialogue, I preached a sermon – just a regular sermon for me – and one in which I did not once use the term God or even any reference to a higher being, the spirit of life, or any metaphor one might use for God. After the service, I received a nice note from one of the people most vocal about needing God in church, thanking me for the sermon, and expressing his belief that this sermon was exactly the kind of God-talk the congregation needed. (he was completely sincere)

It is clear that for this man, the word God was not necessary for him to have the experience of worshipping God. That’s because worshipping God is not a rational act. I don’t mean that derisively. What I mean, is that the act of worship is an experience, not a thought. I think it’s the experience of being at one with everything. Being part and parcel of the universe, to use Emerson’s phrase.

And that experience is described in different cultures and in different religions with different thoughts and language and ideas – but I believe the religious experience is something we share as human beings, even though we may describe it differently, interpret it differently, use different thoughts and words and ideas to make sense of it.

As a Unitarian Universalist I am partial to the understanding of this experience as described by those New England transcendentalists of the 19th century, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. As my inheritance, it’s the interpretation of my upbringing and my language of choice. The Oversoul of the One Universal Mind for Emerson describes better my experience of God, than does the word God, though Emerson wrote prolifically of God as well.

There is a gap, I believe, in many of us, inherited directly – in the way we interpret our experience. We deny what we sense or feel in light of what we think to be true and right.

And the religious journey, for me, is in many ways, about narrowing that gap. Integrating reason and senses.

Creative interchange is one way I know to narrow the gap – to engage in that kind of interchange which creates in each an awareness of the original experience of the other person and at the same time a recognition of the exceeding preciousness of this original experience even though it includes all of what we might label good and bad mixed up together.
One of my favorite examples which you may have heard from me before comes from Jean Baudrillard’s classic, The Consumer Society, in which he explores this gap in the area of consumerism and consumption. He refers to the miraculous status of consumption. Miraculous, because, he believed, many of us have convinced ourselves that if we buy a whole array of objects – things, clothes, furniture, candles, books, stereos, (or today, you could add PCs, smart phones, and ipads) we’ve convinced ourselves that if we buy these characteristic signs of happiness, then indeed happiness will befall us. Reason dictates this would be so. That we don’t actually feel any happier, somehow, doesn’t matter quite as much – because many of us have lost touch with the difference between feelings of real happiness and the logical signs of happiness.

True poverty, he says, involves not the quantity of goods a group possesses, but the nature of its human relationships. Our society is characterized by a scarcity mentality. In society, there is a constant need; an everpresent sense that one does not have enough. Rather than mutual sharing of what people have, modern society is characterized by competition which contributes to the feeling that there is never enough. Since the problem lies in social relationships, it cannot be solved by increases in production, a better economy or more things. The only solution to the problem, says Baudrillard, lies in changing social relationships and social logic.

If poverty involves not the quantity of goods a group possesses, but the nature of its human relationships, then that comes as very good news. For the gap between human beings is something we have been known to bridge, even if we struggle with it. It takes some risk to let others know how we really are, how we really feel, what we really see – because we’ve all been rejected on some level, whether it be because of our sexual orientation or ethnicity, our politics or religious identity or lack thereof.

Creative interchange is about taking that risk, of exposing our true selves, and not only letting others accept us as we are, but – and perhaps this is the most important part – accepting ourselves for who we are, all of the good and bad mixed in. No false idealism. We’ve made mistakes, we’ve hurt those we love, we’ve hurt ourselves, but through this creative interchange – this authentic relationship with others and the world, we can come to terms with human nature in all of its complexities.

I ask with Wieman “What can transform us in such a way as to save us from the depths of evil and bring us to the greatest good which human life can ever attain?”

Creative interchange…. Representing ourselves to others as we really are, not how we’d like to be or wish we were, or how it might be most politically expedient, but who we are, and seeking awareness of the original experience of the other in all with the good and the bad and all the between stuff.

Creative, because nothing stifles creativity more than deciding the outcome before you’ve started.... Now, I’m no expert on drawing, but I took this class once –based on the materials that come with the book Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain – perhaps you’ve seen this book? The principle is – and those of you who draw among us will see this as basic – but it is important that you understand the rest of us have to be taught this principle – is that if we have the completed picture in mind before we draw – that is, we take in the whole of the bicycle we are about to draw, then we might begin with wheels and a seat and handlebars as we think they are proportioned, and fail to notice the actual relationship between the parts., the angles and curves and real dimensions as they are – one method for teaching this way of looking – which those of you who draw don’t need to do, but that helps those of us who don’t think of ourselves as artists see the world as you do intuitively – is to turn the object you are drawing upside down, so that the completed image isn’t in your mind, but you are forced to focus on the actual lines and angles as they are, rather than as we have learned to see them. This is providing an awareness of the original experience even though it includes all of what we might label as beauty and ugly, the well-proportioned and ill-proportioned mixed up together.
Creativity has to do with relationality – proportion and relation - and sensing – seeing, touching, hearing, tasting, smelling: feelings that start as sensations in the body.

Creative interchanges is about the creative transformation of the individual to bring about the greatest good – through our relationships, recognizing our interdependence with each other and the world – to build healthy relationships, work on your relationships - and deep attention to the sensible world in which we find ourselves, noticing what is, not what we’d like to see, but what actually is.

These methods provide for me that purifying power of faith which King says can prevent our using reason to justify a defensive way of thinking leading to distortions and rationalizations. For we need no further proof that humanity is inclined to choose the low road. I think liberal religion can no longer be sentimental concerning human nature, and our superficial optimism has been clearly shattered. But the shattered remains are perhaps easier to see honestly than the idealistic images which preceded them. Our awareness of the original experience, even though it includes both humanity’s promise and degradation, recognizes the exceeding preciousness of it.

Creative Interchange, Wieman calls it. It’s true also for group identity: a congregation, a city, a nation. When we come to terms with the good and bad, our tendency to choose the low road, then it becomes all the more urgent to find that purifying power of faith and choose another way. One step at a time. May we see these dangerous times not as another point in history in which humanity chose the low road, but rather a transitional, liminal time in which we become aware of the original experience of the other and are transformed from who we have been to who we are to become. May we attain the greatest good and come into the wholeness of being by taking one more step.

Benediction

What might we create together? What might we breathe into life with our words and actions? What might we be for one another? May creativity abound this week and may the creative transformation of our society begin as we each seek to bring about the greatest good.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.