

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Memorial Sunday – May 27, 2018 – Youth Recognition / Culmination
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister
John 3:1-17

FOR REFLECTION

“In learning you will teach, and in teaching you will learn.”

~ Phil Collins (b.1951) English musician

Teacher Students

Due to concerns about a seriously curtailed short-term memory, I have had blood tests, a CT scan and a visit with a neurologist. To reduce my anxiety my husband let me know that he would teach me coping skills he learned with his childhood onset Alzheimer's. We both agreed that a sense of humor will go far as we continue to age and have issues.

One coping skill I rely on is having people send me an email – or I write down the request or piece of information. Answering services and cell phone records are a godsend when it comes to remembering to call someone back and why. I used to turn my wedding ring around to remind me to remember something. Now I can't remember why I turned the ring around – no longer helpful.

I used to be a fairly good student – retaining and integrating new information regularly. This doesn't happen automatically any more – and rarely even with effort.

In the past, the best tool for learning, I found, was to teach the material to others. It forced me to study up, remember, and communicate the information in accessible ways. Again, less retention happening now. But the fact that the best teacher is also learning constantly is still true.

Luckily, we now have Siri and Alexa and Google and Wikipedia – and a gal I like to call Linda who gives us directions on the map app. They are regular participants in conversations with my son Peter, date nights with my husband John, and coffee with friends. And as amazing as reference librarians are and were over my lifetime (I married two of them along the way), these App Buddies are more likely to know the lyrics to “Soft Kitty, Warm Kitty” than a human reference librarian would be.

I admire to no end people like Ruth Bader Ginsberg who can learn, teach, advise, think critically, pass reasonable judgment – and retain everything. AND she can do planks, sit ups and lift weights – all at the age of 85.

In seminary – it was impossible for our professors to impart all the knowledge they had gained over lifetimes of study and teaching. Biblical, theological, philosophical and historical contexts were too numerous to enumerate. What they would do is give us samples – and the tools to apply to other samples – so that we could continue to study and learn and teach while we served churches. We couldn't know it all. So, we learned how to find reasonable answers with various tools we knew how to use. And I learned early on that most parishioners knew more than I did about a lot of things – that by pooling our knowledge we could come to a larger understanding of the world and our faith and the G-d we sought to know.

One of the philosophical subjects taught at Claremont School of Theology was "Process Theology". It developed out of the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947):

...most notably by Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000) and John B. Cobb (b. 1925), [one of my professors – now living at Pilgrim Place retirement community].

Process theology and process philosophy are collectively referred to as "process thought".

It is dense stuff if you do "process talk":

For both Whitehead and Hartshorne, it is an essential attribute of God to affect and be affected by temporal processes, contrary to the forms of theism that hold God to be in all respects non-temporal (eternal), unchanging (immutable), and unaffected by the world (impassible). Process theology does not deny that God is in some respects eternal (will never die), immutable (in the sense that God is unchangingly good), and impassible (in the sense that God's eternal aspect is unaffected by actuality), but it contradicts the classical view by insisting that God is in some respects temporal, mutable, and passible.

According to Cobb, "process theology may refer to all forms of theology that emphasize event, occurrence, or becoming over against substance. In this sense theology influenced by Hegel is process theology just as much as that influenced by Whitehead...Pierre Teilhard de Chardin can be included among process theologians...

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Process_theology

You may wonder why I might have had retention problems even back then.

Basically, what I understand in Process Theology is that G-d is not static or unchanging. G-d is influenced and changes through G-d's own experience of events in the universe – including our human actions. G-d is seen as both Teacher and Learner – evolving along with everything and everyone else. This fits with the Hebrew name for G-d often translated as I Am Who I Am – but also means I Will Become Who I Will Become. It also fits with the theological belief that we are made in the image of G-d – evolving over lifetimes – over generations – over millennia – whatever that actually means beyond the human construct.

Something that I learned this week and actually retained was a study out of Tel Aviv University, Israel, that proves that memories can pass between generations through DNA.

<https://www.facebook.com/ScienceNaturePage/videos/1319435594855362/UzpfSTE2Mzk3MTc0NTU6MTAyMTQ3Njk5O TU3OTcwNDc/>

It is something I've believed for a long time – due to other studies plus anecdotal evidence and my own experience.

Experiments with rodents have shown that, for instance, experience with a maze is passed on to their progeny – so the babies don't start from scratch figuring it out. Recipients of organ transplants have reported having new memories, cravings and other changes that have been traced back to the organ donor. Experiments with rodents have shown that, for instance, experience with a maze is passed on to their progeny – so the babies don't start from scratch figuring it out. And it has been proven that DNA passes on characteristics like eye color and bone structure – as well as propensities for certain diseases or mental illnesses. It also passes on attributes like musical ability, mathematical wizardry or the ability to memorize a script and interpret it with body and voice.

The study out of Tel Aviv is entitled:

A Tunable Mechanism Determines the Duration of the Transgenerational Small RNA Inheritance in *C. elegans*.

Houri-Ze'evi L1, Korem Y2, Sheftel H2, Faigenbloom L3, Toker IA3, Dagan Y3, Awad L3, Degani L3, Alon U2, Rechavi O4.

The abstract begins with:

In *C. elegans*, small RNAs enable transmission of epigenetic responses across multiple generations. While RNAi inheritance mechanisms that enable "memorization" of ancestral responses are being elucidated, the mechanisms that determine the duration of inherited silencing and the ability to forget the inherited epigenetic effects are not known. **We now show that exposure to dsRNA activates a feedback loop whereby gene-specific RNAi responses dictate the transgenerational duration of RNAi responses mounted against unrelated genes, elicited separately in previous generations.** RNA-sequencing analysis reveals that, aside from silencing of genes with complementary sequences, dsRNA-induced RNAi affects the production of heritable endogenous small RNAs, which regulate the expression of RNAi factors. Manipulating genes in this feedback pathway changes the duration of heritable silencing. **Such active control of transgenerational effects could be adaptive, since ancestral responses would be detrimental if the environments of the progeny and the ancestors were different.**

PMID: 27015309 DOI: 10.1016/j.cell.2016.02.057
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27015309>

It sounds a lot like Process Theology. But the gist of it is that memories can pass between generations through DNA. A seemingly irrational phobia could be the result of

a traumatic experience of an ancestor. Imagine the impact slavery had on the DNA of generations of slaves in this country – not to mention the ensuing Jim Crow reign of terror and subsequent massive incarceration and murder by police. The impact could go beyond sociological or psychological – it could embed DNA with survival skills, resistance to restraint, community organizing skills, heightened awareness of peril. [We could imagine the same for those whose Japanese American ancestors were incarcerated, those whose Gay-Bi-Trans ancestors were closeted and persecuted, those whose ancestors were massacred by foreigners, the list is endless.]

Can you imagine the impact power and privilege have had on generations of whites or males or rich people – especially those who are all three? This DNA which I am forced to claim could be riddled with the biological form of entitlement, assumptions of superiority, staff organizational skills, dulled awareness of the precariousness of my own stature.

Yes, I know that all of this is conjecture – that all of the above has sociological and historical systems that can and do create and shape such skills, resistance, awareness, assumptions. But if DNA is also involved – we have a lot more work ahead of us to transform our mistakes and those of our ancestors into positive biological memory for the future.

You may wonder what ANY of this has to do with today's text from the Gospel of John. Before I forget, perhaps I should tell you that all of this rumination came from vv. 9-10.

9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

The context was first century Jesus followers tired of not being believed or understood by the Jewish orthodox leaders. But my response to the text was to relate heavily to Nicodemus – well-educated, steeped in his tradition, a teacher taught to learn over a lifetime – who didn't have a clue what John's Jesus was talking about. I felt for the guy and wished the Jesus in this text could have been a little kinder to our scholar. Teachers DON'T know everything. And if they say they do, watch out.

And if ALL of us are gifted and burdened by the knowledge and experiences of our ancestors – we are in the position of having to learn life forward and backward – making sense of our past as we redeem our future.

The good news – at least from the Process Theology perspective – is that G-d is in this with us. G-d knows the human experience from the inside out – is evolving too – is providing corrective guidance and loving us along the way.

We will become what we will become. G-d will become what G-d will become.

May we be blessed by one another and G-d in this evolutionary journey called Life.

John 3:1-17

1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" 11 "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."