

**Art as a Hammer:
The Ministry of Imagination**
By Kent Saleska

Jacob, in the Hebrew Scriptures, calls the place where he wrestles with the unnamed being "Peniel" because, as he says, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."¹ It is the human Jacob, not an anthropomorphic presence of God, who defines his struggle as divine. But how is it that Jacob knew he was struggling with the divine? The unnamed being with whom Jacob wrestles never states a name, never declares itself "God" or even an emissary from God. Just who, or what, *is* God, and when do we know that we have seen "the face of God"?

In the wake of the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center, Americans seem to feel a collapse in a lifestyle we thought to be stable. Though this anxiety and rootlessness is a way of life for many people around the globe, we, in much of the "civilized" and industrialized West, feel anxiety and uncertainty at levels unprecedented in the 60 years since Pearl Harbor, because of a disruption within the political borders of the land on which we live. If traditional methods of seeing the world as safe and secure no longer apply, then how are we to interact with others on our planet? If anthropomorphic understandings of God no longer fit a collective experience of the world, then how is it we may acquire a moral compass of how to act in the world, and by what (or whose?) authority are our actions valid? Do we even believe that God, or *any* God, still exists?

In ministry, as in the movies *Chocolat* and *Zorba the Greek*, imagination is paramount. Without imagination we are stuck in traditional ways of behaving and engaging the world. Through imagination, however, we may transcend ill-will and oppression, even to the point of shaping our own reality. I have a quote from Bertolt Brecht under a painting on my wall that states, "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it." Walter Brueggemann echoes this sentiment when he writes that when we live "as if," it means we are living a life which is opposed to the "facts," and conceding our lives to someone else's set of "givens." He says, "By contrast, 'as' makes no such concession. Thus the injunction to live 'as free persons' means to accept one's status as free and to live that way, no matter how much some dominant social definition may cast one as a 'slave.'"²

As we will see, both the character Vianne, from the movie *Chocolat*, and Zorba, from *Zorba the Greek*, minister to their communities with the injunction to live using the imaginative "as."

Some Definitions of God

Perhaps at this point it would be useful to present some understandings of religion and God. According to process theologian Marjorie Suchocki, Reinhold Niebuhr believed "that since the human transcends nature, only that which also transcends nature in an even greater capacity can provide humanity with its limits, norms, judgment, and meaning. He finds this greater transcendence in God - more specifically, in the will of God."³ Suchocki herself, however, redefines "sin," not as rebellion against God, but as rebellion against creation. "Sin," she says, "is always an act that attacks creaturely well-being."⁴

Vine Deloria, Jr., a Native American author, writes that "the Christian idea of the complete alienation of nature and the world from human beings [is] a result of Adam's immediate postcreation act [and it is unlikely that Christians] can find a reconciliation with nature while maintaining the remainder of their theological understanding of salvation."⁵ The goal of Christian salvation, as humorously

reframed by Deloria's aboriginal understanding "is to win eternal life where followers receive imperishable bodies in which they can do exactly the same things that were punishable offenses in the present life."⁶ In an attempt to describe what some people call "God," Deloria says there is "a mysterious spiritual power which cannot be described in human images" which must always remain the "Great Mystery."⁷ Also, unlike many Western prayers to God for things and for favors, Native American prayers are directed toward animals, plants and the earth because "humans appear as one minor species [and are] badly in need of assistance from other forms of life."⁸

In some similar ways, God in Process Theology does not have the power to intervene in the course of events. Rather, God is seen as a "co-creator" with creation, and is a "co-sufferer" of pain.⁹ God urges the greatest well-being (i.e., maximum freedom, or maximum fulfillment) for each particle of existence at each moment of time. Fundamentally, Process Theology is relational. That is, whatever one particle, or person, does affects through a chain of events the well-being of every other piece of creation. When we pray, or meditate, we transform ourselves, we become more peaceful, and this in turn provides God with new material to work with at the next moment in time. In this way, our thoughts, our imagination, influence both our own actions and God's actions, and do change the world. In Process Theology, the "becoming" of a person is real (because time is dynamic and keeps moving), while a person's "being" is an abstraction (because a moment of time quickly becomes part of the past). Initially, it is our own transformation we effect, but then it is that very transformation and "becoming" which restructures and reimages the world.

It is my feeling that much of science and theology are re-imaginings of ancient understandings. When I was 12 years old I read a Reader's Digest version of a book (which I later purchased) called *The Tracker*. It is written by a white man, Tom Brown, Jr., who as a child was taught how to track animals by Stalking Wolf, an Apache elder. Brown describes the Native American idea of *wholeness of feeling* when he says that "*Nature* is the best word English can come up with to describe something as various yet as indivisible as the bond between all living things...We learned a world view in which Nature is a being larger than the sum of all creatures, and can be seen best in the flow of its interactions. In the movement of each animal, all animals move."¹⁰

Unitarian Universalists, in our "Principles and Purposes," have a description that may apply as a definition for God: "The living tradition we share draws from many sources [the first of which is] Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."¹¹

It is a combination of these ideas, in the context of practice, which attempt to encompass my understanding of "God." God is relational, is a Nature that is larger than the sum of all creatures, and God is our own "direct experience" of "transcending mystery and wonder." The "face of God," therefore, is something we each define for ourselves, and is a result of our own imagination through direct encounter with the eternal in our ever immediate "becoming" present.

An Image of Ministry in the Movies

When a hierarchical God does not exist, are we not free to act as we please? Without a God, but only our own free will, are we not "allowed" to take any course of action we want? What prevents the "Godless" among us from closing our hearts to compassion, from being selfish hedonist gluttons, intent only on our own internal welfare? As a partial answer, I turn to imagination in the movies; not just the imagination it takes to make a movie, but imagination found within the thoughts and behaviors of a movie's characters. Whether they know it or not, Vianne and Zorba are both Process Theologians.

They present to us through their example a possible life, a ministry, a way of being that necessarily intertwines freedom and responsibility, free will and compassion, imagination and transformation.

On some level, ministry involves a *presence with* which then provides a *process of* transformation. This transformation, or even transcendence, involves both God and creation, the minister and the ministered-to. Also, the ministry flows back and forth. If God is by nature a limited entity, a "co-creator" with humanity while also being a "Great Mystery," then we (all of existence), while recognizing painful present realities, are ultimately responsible for imagining a world without (or with less) pain, and for making that vision manifest in the here and now. *Why* is it we *must* do this? Partly, it is because ministry (whether formal or informal) *is* selfish: what enhances all of existence also benefits me. Put more eloquently though, we are impelled by imagination to the ministry of compassion because, as Tom Brown says, "In the movement of each animal, all animals move."

In *Chocolat*, Vianne is an atheist. She does not attend church (even to keep up appearances), she wears brilliant red clothing in a town draped in greys and blacks, and she opens a chocolate shop during the season of Lent. In *Zorba the Greek*, Zorba is an itinerant jack-of-all-trades whose unschooled understandings of the world rival in practice what many theologians believe to be true only from their reading of books. Though they have their failings, both characters engage the world with an eye towards "the greatest well-being" of others. Both Vianne and Zorba transform the worlds they inhabit: Vianne through her ability to melt, mix and reform chocolate, and Zorba through his unique perspective and vivacious gift of music and dance.

The Beginnings of a Divine Struggle

Vianne arrives with a "sly wind from the north" in a town that holds fast to its traditions. She and her daughter arrive in town while everyone else is in church, listening to the young priest say, "Where will we find truth? We will find it...." Just at that moment, the sly north wind bursts open the church doors and it's as though the fresh breath of imagination blows out the dusty, oppressive traditions on the cold air. Vianne first transforms an old pastry shop into a *chocolaterie*, a chocolate shop with the finest hand-made delicacies. Then she begins to transform the villagers. Vianne has a plate that spins like a top, a plate with inlaid Mayan mosaic art:

Woman: What's this?

Anouk: What do you see, Madame, in this?

Woman: Sorry?

Vianne: What does it look like to you? Just say the first thing that comes into your mind.

Woman: Ummm - a woman riding a wild horse? ...Oh, that's a silly answer...

Vianne: Oh no, there are no silly answers. The paper triangle, that's for you. A tiny hint of chili pepper, to play against the sweetness...tangy, adventurous...

Vianne looks beyond the surface of things. She does not enforce her own view or rules on others, but instead draws out what is deep in a person's soul in a kind of Rorschach test of inner vision and desire. The woman who is sensually and sexually unfulfilled sees a woman riding a wild horse. Vianne gives her a chocolate aphrodisiac. Luc, the sickly boy who longs to run and play sees turbulent visions of blood and death. Vianne gives him dark, bitter chocolate. When Armande, the crotchety old diabetic, says she doesn't have time to play games with the wheel, Vianne pours out two cups of real, thick, hot chocolate, and the two women begin to talk.

Each tiny moment of time, in the words the process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, is the "actual

occasion," and all of our past, the past of all of existence, is known as "causal efficacy." In these moments of actual occasion in which Vianne engages, the causal efficacy of tradition is transformed, through her imagining, from the hierarchical *power relationship* between God and mortals (or between Comte de Reynaud and the villagers), to the communal *power of relationship* which Vianne shares with creation.

A divine struggle takes place between Reynaud, who represents all manner of hierarchy (especially church hierarchy), and Vianne, who represents the sensual "earthy" relationships. Reynaud is "a patient man" who is "a student of history." He leads by an example he expects others to follow as he models himself after a God he understands. He greets people at the church door to see who attends; he dictates what is morally acceptable in the town (exemplified in his "boycott immorality!" campaign); he makes politically-motivated house calls to check on his charges; he "inspires" the priest by rewriting all the sermons; during Lent he abstains from both the sensual delicacies of chocolate as well as ordinary healthy food; and he enforces "voluntary" confession.

Vianne, on the other hand, provides a new vision to counter ages of tradition. She presents a model of free will by not attending church; she lures people toward their own deepest callings through the use of her spinning platter; she engages the people of the town because she is genuinely curious and compassionate; she embodies a sensuality that is almost too passionate for the villagers to comprehend; and she offers an interaction that is egalitarian and relational through the heartfelt conversations of "confession" at her counter.

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Zorba also arrives on the winds of change. When we first see him, he is standing in the rain, peeking through the waiting room window at Basil, the Englishman. He then opens the door to enter Basil's world, and we hear behind him the roar of the storm, the raging call to the fierce beauty and vitality of a passionate, engaged life. While waiting, Basil tries to read a book from his vast, portable library in the dim light of the waiting room. As he tries to manipulate his book to receive the greatest illumination, what he encounters instead is Zorba's looming presence behind him.

Zorba discovers that Basil, a reticent bookworm of the highest order, is heading to Crete to re-open a mineral mine left long dormant through his family inheritance. In a swirl of inspiration, Zorba offers his services as engineer and foreman of the project, and Basil accepts. As they toast their relationship, Basil says, "Well Zorba, God bless!" and Zorba retorts with an impish grin, "And...the devil, too!" Zorba encompasses the whole of life. Though he has experienced the destructive tendencies of humanity, he is also aware of the inherent goodness. But he knows too that goodness isn't simply a remote practice of lenten abstention, but may also be a lustful engagement (sometimes associated with the notion of "sin") with all "the forces which create and uphold life." As the two men leave the waiting room and head for the boat that will take them to Crete, we hear on the sound track the first few plucks on the Greek *santouri*: the inviting opening notes of the life dance Zorba and Basil will share from that moment on.

As in *Chocolat*, a dynamic tension between tradition and transformation also exists in *Zorba the Greek*. Initially, there is the tension between the contemplative Basil and the passionate Zorba, but after the two men move to Crete, we become aware of tensions and contrast in other areas. The film itself is in black and white; there's the conflict between Western (England) ideas and Eastern (Greek and Middle Eastern) ideas; discussions abound about God and the devil; views conflict over love and sex between men and women; there is book learning versus practical experience, old ways versus new, the secular (capitalistic business) and the sacred (women, God and the church...in that order!),

sensuality versus abstinence, life and death.

In *Zorba*, there is a continual separation from the community of the village. As opposed to *Chocolat*, where the story revolves around how Vianne's positive influence on the village grows (and how she grows in response to the town's embrace of her), *Zorba the Greek* mostly portrays the intimate relationship between the two men, and how Zorba's positive influence grows only in Basil.

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In her first outright act of defiance (as opposed to the defiance the villagers feel simply by her presence), Vianne storms into Reynauld's office when she hears he has forbidden the townsfolk to enter her chocolate shop during Lent. "Am I breaking any laws?" she declares. "Tell me! Am I hurting anyone?" When Reynauld is unmoved, she retorts (as she backhands the photo of his absent "traveling" wife), "Well, if you're expecting me to just shrivel up and blow away, you will be highly disappointed." This sets in motion the competition between the theology of exclusion, as practiced by Reynauld, and the theology of inclusion, as practiced by Vianne. From that point on, Reynauld tries everything he can to expel Vianne from the town, while Vianne dives more deeply into herself, to reach down and draw out her own resources of imagination and creativity to make chocolate and throw her arms wide to embrace the town. Reynauld lectures his theology at the town council:

These people [the gypsies/river rats] are ruthless, Godless drifters. Theirs is the way of slovenly pleasure. They would contaminate the spirit of our quiet town, the innocence of our children. Now, the chairman of the council is quite right. We cannot force them to leave, but we can help them to understand that they are not welcome.

Vianne, on the other hand, engages in conversation with Roux, one of the River Rats:

Roux: I'd like to apologize. For all of us. Sincerely.

Vianne: What for?

Roux: For whatever it is you're here to accuse us of.

Vianne: And why would I do that?

Roux: Well, because we River Rats are the dregs of society, with horrible diseases and criminal impulses.

Vianne: (laughing) Sounds terrifying. Is it true?

Roux: It's what you townspeople always think, isn't it?

Vianne: This is not my town. Sorry.

Roux: Well, then what do you want? Are you here to save us? Are you the Catholic Aid Society, French Family League, Communist Workers? Which ideas are you selling?

Anouk: Chocolate!

And so it is chocolate that creates a bond. Both Vianne and Roux have experienced ostracism as they travel as "outsiders" from town to town, but in the sensual earthiness symbolized in chocolate, both discover a connection unlike any they have ever had. In the larger view as well, chocolate is the bond that unites all the villagers, and is what ultimately transforms the mayor.

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Zorba is not defiant in the same manner as Vianne. While both embody a theology of inclusion and sensual passion for life, which is often interpreted societally as a form of "defiance," Zorba (perhaps because he is a male and comes from a male-dominated culture) is more regularly outspoken. He is

constantly spouting off deep understandings in a joyful, almost off-handed way. His understandings are not of the "daily affirmations" variety, however, they are borne out of many life experiences that have often brought a great deal of pain.

Zorba is resourceful enough to find other work, should his engagement with Basil fail. It is not the work that defines him or holds him to any one place, but the constant new relationships and experiences, both painful and joy-filled, that life brings. Though he enters into the relationship as Basil's worker (or even a servant to some degree), as the two men become more excited about their new relationship, Zorba still makes his boundaries clear:

Zorba: We make everybody happy!
Basil: We'll have fun...
Zorba: Yes!
Basil: ...swim...
Zorba: Uh-huh!
Basil: ...drink wine...
Zorba: Ahhh...!
Basil: ...and [pointing to Zorba's instrument] you'll play the *santouri*! [long pause while Zorba sits] What's the matter?
Zorba: It's about the *santouri*. We make a bargain, or I cannot come. In work, I am your man. But in things...like playing and singing...I am my own.
Basil: How do you mean?
Zorba: I mean...free.

Zorba makes it clear that his creativity and his imagination are his own. While he must work and be paid to live in this physical life, he has no desire to live *as if* he were free. He must *live as* a free person. Without retaining his own imagination, he is just living in someone else's dream.

Comforting the Afflicted: Tools of Imagination

In their own unique ways, both Zorba and Vianne follow the injunction, often heard within Catholic Worker circles, to follow the example of Jesus by "comforting the afflicted, and afflicting the comfortable." Because they each "see the face of God" in their work, Vianne and Zorba are called to wrestle with (and hopefully prevail over) the forces that oppose and deny life and love. Their "authority" for such a divine struggle derives from their perhaps unconscious awareness of what our UU principles describe as the "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," and the "interdependent web of existence of which we are a part."¹² They concern themselves with the well-being of the world. Why? Because without compassion and a concerted effort to promote the well-being of the world, there is not much point to life. Bill Murray's character in *Groundhog Day* found that out when he had to live one day over and over until he stopped being selfish and focused on the needs of others. He overcame causal efficacy and was transformed when he realized a requirement of the divine call: to increase the well-being in the world, and especially the well-being of his love. Zorba says it best when he tries to influence Basil out of his inaction: "Boss, *life* is trouble! Only death is not. To be alive is to undo your belt and look for trouble!"

Each person has a unique gift for transforming the world. Zorba's gift is dance. One day, while working at the mine, Zorba looks up and sees the mountainside full of trees. He suddenly has a vision for how to get the trees down the hillside and use the wood to prop up the old run-down mineshaft. Later that night he comes home, full of his new idea and fear that it won't work. He asks if Basil can

dance, and when he says "no," Zorba tells him, "Then get out of the way or I might knock you down!" Zorba is filled with the "Great Mystery," and there follows a scene of Zorba's explosive passion expressed in the dance. Later, as he is lying on the ground, utterly exhausted, Basil comes over to him and says, "Zorba, are you alright? What came over you?" Zorba responds, panting:

When a man is full, what can he do? Burst! When my boy died, everybody was crying. Me, I got up and danced. They said, "Zorba is mad." But it was the dance, only dancing that stopped the pain. See, he was my first. He was only three. When I am happy, its the same thing.

The dance of life is what is important to Zorba. The God of life is a communal God, urging us towards the interplay of our bodies with our hearts, the dance between scientific understanding of the molecules of our brains with the theological understanding of the spirit of our minds, one person with the larger community of the "Great Mystery," one note with an entire symphony. It is vital that we participate in the dance, or we suffer an existence of loneliness, exclusion and misery. Zorba understands that it is not a matter of whether or not we move well, only that we participate to our best ability.

Vianne's gift is her ability to create and blend chocolate. She uses chocolate to draw people in to her sphere, and once the chocolate is on their tongues, the sweetness loosens their tongues and opens their hearts. The mayor of the town guides his people morally by his overbearing presence and through the coercive use of his power over their will. Vianne, on the other hand, blows into town and provides an example of new moral leadership, a breath of fresh air. She uses the power of her imagination to create beautiful, delicious chocolate potions. The love and passion that go into Vianne's chocolate is like the passion Babbett infuses into her meals in *Babbett's Feast*, or like the love the violin-maker has in *The Red Violin* for his dead wife, a love which he then incarnates in the body of the perfect instrument he creates. Vianne empowers others to help them imagine another way of life. She brings the community together, mixing individual gifts as easily as she swirls together the ingredients of her chocolate confections. The eating of Vianne's chocolate becomes a sacrament, a formal sacred religious act which is a symbol of spiritual connection.

Vianne creates her friendships slowly and deeply, as though she were mixing chocolate. Early on, Josephine steals a piece of chocolate from the *chocolaterie*, and later, Vianne delivers a similar piece to Josephine at her house saying, "Here, you forgot this." Josephine, who has been abused at least all her married life, has no concept of how to respond to the kindness. When Serge, Josephine's husband, calls for her to come out from the back room, Josephine spits out the chocolate and anxiously says she has to go. Later, as Josephine attempts to explore Vianne's kindness in more depth, she stops by the *chocolaterie* for a cup of hot chocolate:

Josephine: I heard you don't go to church.

Vianne: That's right.

Josephine: (laughs) You won't last long here. People talk (nervously spills her cup) Oh! Sorry! I'm behaving badly aren't I?

Vianne: No, it's OK

Josephine: You don't misbehave here. It's just not done, did you know that? If you don't go to confession, or if you don't dig your flowerbeds, or if you don't pretend...if you don't pretend that you want nothing more in life than to serve your husband three meals a day, and give him children and vacuum under his ass, then you're...you're crazy.... You must think I'm stupid to stay with him...

Vianne: No, I don't think you're stupid...

Josephine: Well, I am. I'm weak, I don't love my husband and I lie.

Vianne: Things could be different for you Josephine. Serge doesn't run the world.
Josephine: (nods slowly) My husband...
Vianne: Is that what you believe?
Josephine: I know it.
Vianne: Oh...then it must be...must be true. My mistake.
Josephine: (sips her drink) You make the most wonderful chocolate.

The chocolate shop *is* a confessional, but in Vianne's world, the only "penance" anyone has to do is become aware of their own limitations, limitations which they set on themselves. In the realm of imagination, it is horrifying to see how Josephine uses her imagination to convince herself that the existence she has is the only one available to her. Fortunately, Vianne enters her life, and by approaching her with a piece of chocolate saying "You forgot this," forgives her. Vianne does not judge Josephine, but only empowers her to re-image the use of her imagination. As Marjorie Suchocki writes, "Forgiveness as the will toward well-being does not eliminate or dishonor pain. Rather, it releases pain to time, letting time do its work of gently leading us to transformation."¹³

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Zorba and Basil have their own pain to work through as well, though in their relationship, Zorba doesn't so much engage in transformation himself (as Vianne does), as he teaches Basil how to transform his own interaction with life. Part of the reason, I believe, Zorba does not "transform" as many characters in movies do, is because he has so completely incorporated a Process view into his life that there is not much remaining that he may transform into! He takes it all in: he is wildly happy and heartbreakingly sad...and he moves through both as though he were moving through water, or as though he is joined with both in a cosmic, endless dance. Also, Zorba's transformation occurred long before the movie story takes place. At one point, because Zorba, a Greek, mentions that he had a friend who is a Turk, Basil provokingly accuses him of not "giving a damn" about his country, and Zorba responds:

Don't you talk to me like that! Look here and here and here! [showing bullet wounds on his chest] Nothing on the back! I have done things for my country that would make your hair stand. I have killed, burned villages, raped women...and why? Because they were Turks or Bulgarians! That's the rotten damn fool I was. Now I look at a man, any man, and I say, "he is good, he is bad." What do I care if he is Greek or Turk? As I get older, I swear by the bread I eat, I will stop asking that. "Good" or "bad," what is the difference? We all end up the same way: food for worms!

Zorba understands that we are all part of each other, but it is not until he accumulates vast experience with the whole of life through the length of his time on earth that this awareness is revealed to him. He sees a world free from false lines of demarcation. Put in more academic terms than Zorba's, Suchocki echoes Zorba as she continues her definition of forgiveness, saying that,

Through the transcendence of memory, one differentiates oneself from absorption into the past by allowing the past to *be* past....Through the transcendence of empathy, one gains the ability to separate self from other and to see the other as fully other, even in relation to the self.... Through the transcendence of imagination, one receives release from the past through openness to a new future. In and through imagination, the will to well-being moves into visions of well-being, which themselves empower one to work toward well-being. Thus memory, empathy, and imagination are the means through which forgiveness exists, not simply as a release from sin, but

as the movement into transformation.¹⁴

Basil sees the value in Zorba's approach to life, but never seems to be quite sure how to just "undo his belt and look for trouble!" But one night, while Zorba is off getting supplies, Zorba's influence and Basil's desire build to the bursting point. Basil, unable to write, dirty, disheveled, and resembling Zorba to a remarkable degree, begins a few awkward dance steps in the house by the sea with only the music in his head. Finally, he grabs his jacket and heads off to the house of the beautiful dark-haired widow, with whom a sexual tension has been building throughout the movie.

Unwittingly, however, by going to the widow's bed, Basil sets off a chain of events that lead to the knifing death of the widow. As Zorba had explained in passing to Basil earlier, if the other men in town couldn't have her, than no one will. In a heroic act of defiance against the crowd, Zorba comes to the widow's rescue. But in this instance, the causal efficacy of the mob is too powerful for Zorba's one act of imagination, just as the causal efficacy of the planes on 9-11 was too strong for any one person or being, or even the Great Mystery, to change events at that moment. The village idiot, who is more in tune with morality than the villagers and has been faithful in his service to the widow, is inconsolable upon her death. Zorba questions:

Zorba: Why do the young die? Why does anybody die? Tell me.

Basil: I don't know.

Zorba: What's the use of all your damn books? If they don't tell you *that*, what the hell do they tell you?

Basil: They tell me about the agony of men who can't answer questions like yours.

Zorba: I *spit* on their agony.

Basil's answer is a good one. As with a communal God who co-creates and co-suffers with the creation, sometimes the most we can do is sit and hear each other's stories, and through that communal relationship be more or less healed and transformed over time. But Zorba is searching for answers, as we all do, in times of crisis. His words remind me of a line (paraphrased, I'm sure) from John Cobb which we learned in process theology class, that "Any theology which is not related to an actual world problem is irrelevant." All the books and all the knowledge still don't take away the pain, and still don't prevent painful events from happening. What we do see during this dialogue, however, is Basil taking care of Zorba's wounds from the fight. Zorba is the afflicted one, and Basil is the one who provides comfort. Since we are unable to change past, and since God did not cause the pain, maybe the best we can do, *all* we can do, is help to heal each other as we participate, to the best of our ability, in the dance of life.

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Final Transformations

The nature of relationships maintains that the very possibility of relationships depends upon the ability to respond to relationships, and that this "response-ability" is at the core of every moment of our lives...[thus, human freedom] is an ability to question the givenness of oneself and one's world; it is self-transcendence exercised through one's responsibility.¹⁵

Without the anthropomorphic God of ages past (yet still within the ancient realm of Native beliefs), our primarily relationship is with all of existence. Thus, our "Godless" freedom is guided by our desire to be in a relationship.

Like Zorba, Vianne also becomes afflicted by what seems an overwhelming brokenness in relationship: attitudes of disdain and exclusion towards her embracing love and inclusion. Even though she has "seen the face of God" in the villagers and has helped one couple regain a sensual, sexual spark in their marriage, reunited a grandmother and grandson, welcomed the river rats as family, influenced an elderly couple's romance, and empowered an abused woman to engage in and behold her own beauty and identity, Vianne still cries to Armande that "The whole town is against me." It is one of the easiest things in the world, to lose sight of a vision, to fall away from living constantly in a state of revelation and imagination. You need the "back" to begin working in the "back and forth" relationship in order to be refreshed and go out into the world again. Vianne asks Armande, "What can I do?" and Armande says, "Throw me a party. Wednesday's my 70th. Let's show the bastards we're ready to go down dancing!"

Vianne, too, engages in the dance of life. As preparations for the party begin, the sly north wind picks up again and Vianne must decide whether she will go away again as she always does when things get just a little too difficult, or whether she will view the villagers as her congregation and stay on, working to bring conflict into the open and name it, to continue her relational ministry with them. It is not until later though, the day before Easter when she decides she must pack and leave, that two events occur simultaneously and alter her world view. The first event is the destruction of the urn that carries her mother's ashes (and limits Vianne's imagination of a settled life). The second event is her discovery of her closest friends, the six villagers she embraced and transformed with her love and kindness, all in her kitchen, being taught by Josephine how to make the confections for the pagan spring festival. In that moment, Vianne's transformation is enacted. Her friends imagine a new life for *her*, a settled life, and show her welcome by their engagement in her life. They see the face of God in Vianne.

"The transcending self," Suchocki writes, "must reconfigure the past anew in light of the new influences brought to bear upon the self by its wider environment."¹⁶ Thus, with each passing moment, the past *can* be changed, *is* changed. New elements provide new perspectives on the past. Vianne is not limited by her past, and neither are the villagers. When Reynauld is discovered in the window display box, coated with chocolate, Vianne provides the most relational forgiveness possible. With a smile she says, "I won't tell a soul."

The priest, unaccustomed to, but quite happy with his new-found freedom, gives a short, heartfelt Easter homily on the humanity of Jesus:

Do I want to speak of the miracle of our Lord's divine transformation? Not really, no. I don't want to talk about his divinity. I'd rather talk about his humanity. I mean, you know, how he lived his life here on earth, his kindness, his tolerance. Listen, here's what I think: I think we can't go around measuring our goodness by what we don't do, by what we deny ourselves, what we resist and who we exclude. I think we've got to measure goodness by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include.

Anouk, the narrator, says it was not the most fiery sermon Pere Henri gave, "but the parishioners felt a new sensation that day, a lightening of the spirit." The whole community is brought into the circle. The whole town of Lansquenet, on that day at least, could be called "Peniel," for they all see the face of God in each other, and have prevailed. They do not prevail, however, by winning some victory *over* one another, they prevail simply by engaging in relationship *with* each other in the dance, and by continuing to engage each other time after time.

The last day for Zorba and Basil does not hold quite so much promise as the pagan spring festival. The log run is destroyed by the logs flying down the wire, the people and the priests have scattered, the roast pig has burned to a crisp, the mine is in ruins, Basil has used all his money and is broke, and both men are dirty and dejected. Basil traveled to Crete with one idea, one image of success. But, people change "by the offer of new models, images, and pictures of how the pieces of life fit together...Transformation is the slow, steady process of inviting each other into a counterstory about God, world, neighbor, and self...[this] can be liberating for the church as a transformational body, liberating even for its ministers who must stand up and imagine."¹⁷ Is Basil a minister? Perhaps not in the same way Zorba is, but he does begin to engage life more fully.

"The mystery leaves itself like a trail of breadcrumbs," Tom Brown says, "and by the time your mind has eaten its way to the maker of the tracks, the mystery is inside you, part of you forever. The tracks of every mystery you have ever swallowed move inside you own tracks, shading them slightly or skewing them with nuances that show how much *more* you have become than what you were."¹⁸ Basil does not learn all the answers to the great mystery of life, but the mystery enters him and he is transformed. He "reconfigures the past anew in light of new influences" and in a powerful, small moment, discovers the face of God in Zorba, in himself, and in his "ordinary" daily life. The truth, his *imagination*, shall set him free. What is left, then, for Basil and Zorba as they sit upon the ash heap of their grand endeavor?

Zorba: Dammit boss, I like you too much not to say it: you've got everything except one thing, madness. A man needs a little madness or else...

Basil: Or else?

Zorba: ...he never dares cut the rope and be free. (at this, Basil stands up and walks a few steps away in the sand) Are you angry with me?

Basil: Teach me to dance, will you?

Zorba: Dance? Did you say...."Dance"?

And so, as the camera retreats in an ever-expanding view of the empty beach and the ocean beyond, in an enduring image of a "force that creates and upholds life," Basil and Zorba, arm in arm, dance. What else *is* there to do?

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¹Wayne A. Meeks, general editor, *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 50.

²Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 14.

³Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence* (New York: Continuum Press, 1999), 34.

⁴Suchocki, 161.

⁵Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1994), 91.

⁶Deloria, 154.

⁷Deloria, 152.

⁸Deloria, 153.

⁹The following paragraph is a paraphrase from "Process Theology" class notes, discussions and readings.

¹⁰Tom Brown, Jr., *The Tracker* (New York: Berkley Books, 1978), 14-21.

¹¹Statement of Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes, affirmed at the 1985 UUA General Assembly.

¹²From the *Statement of UU Principles and Purposes*.

¹³Suchocki, 66.

¹⁴Suchocki, 152.

¹⁵ Suchocki, 132.

¹⁶Suchocki, 38.

¹⁷Brueggemann, 25.

¹⁸Brown, 1.