CONFESSIONS OF A PRACTICING NATURALISTIC THEIST: A RESPONSE TO HARDWICK, PEDERSON, AND PETERSON

by Karl E. Peters

Abstract. In my response to the comments of Charley Hardwick, Ann Pederson, and Greg Peterson, I continue the narrative, confessional mode of my writing in *Dancing with the Sacred*. First, I sketch some methodological decisions underlying my naturalistic, evolutionary, practical theology. I then respond to the encouraging suggestions of my commentators by further developing my ideas about naturalism, mystery, creativity as God, the place of ecological responsibility in my thinking, sin, and eschatology. I offer suggestions as to how I might widen the practical applications of my theology beyond environmental and medical ethics to other areas of moral responsibility in relation to the creative process. I do all this with much appreciation for the care and careful critical reflection that my commentators have devoted to my thinking.

Keywords: creativity; ecological; emergence; empiricism; eschatology; evolution; God; methodology; mystery; practical theology; pragmatism; sin; transcendence.

I want to express my heartfelt thanks to Charley Hardwick (2005), Ann Pederson (2005), and Greg Peterson (2005) for the sensitive and helpful ways in which they comment on *Dancing with the Sacred*.[1] Their comments help me to see some aspects of my work more clearly and encourage me to think further in promising directions. Hardwick encourages me to maintain an austere naturalism by challenging my use of the idea of mystery, to place my environmental ethics in its proper place, and to develop

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more fully a concept of sin. Peterson asks me to clarify how my naturalism can engage in dialogue with more traditional forms of theism in order to make room for transcendence, for a more robust naturalistic idea of God, for a deeper response to the problem of evil, and for a more solid grounding of hope in eschatological thinking. Pederson rightly stresses the practicality of my naturalistic theology: my goal was to write a practical theology for human living. She shows how my relational rather than dualistic thinking can apply to the practice of medicine. And she challenges me to continue to write in a confessional, narrative manner and to show further how my personal narrative is political, that is, how my reflections contribute to moral responsibility.[2] Their encouragement resonates with my own desires as I try to think theologically and live religiously in the context provided by the naturalistic worldview of modern science.

Further Origins of My Theological Thinking

The preface and the first chapter of *Dancing with the Sacred* present some of the personal background behind my theological reflection. One important part of my story, however, was left out. I share it now. In 1964 I graduated from McCormick Theological Seminary with a solid education in the Protestant reformed theology that stems from John Calvin and in the neoorthodoxy of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. I spent the next year studying at the University of Tübingen, focusing on reformed theology, New Testament exegesis, and catholic theology, the latter with Hans Küng. It was from Küng that I began learning to think for myself. His general method in lecturing on the sacraments, for example, was to articulate all the ideas from a variety of sources and then, in the end, to formulate his own views. As I saw him doing this for several weeks I was struck by the truthfulness with which he spoke his own mind. And I asked myself: "What does Karl Peters really think?" So began my attempts at thinking truly for myself theologically.[3]

While in Germany I observed something about the system of education that struck me as quite different from my own education in the United States. In German higher education, theory came before practice. In studying to be a minister, one took a four-year course at the University with the faculty of theology, received a degree, then entered a three-year practicum to complete one's training. The same was the case in becoming a physician. As I learned about this, I realized how different my theological education had been. It had integrated theory and practice from the beginning. From the very first year, academic course work was complemented with field work in churches and other social institutions.

It seemed to me that the reformed and neoorthodox theologies that I had learned in seminary fit very well with the "theory before practice" model of education in Germany. For example, a "theology of the Word of God" began with God's Word revealed in Christ, which was then wit-

nessed to in the words of scripture, which were then interpreted by the words of the minister in preaching and applied to people's lives. As I studied in Germany, I even thought of this as a more rationalist approach to theology. I began to ask myself what kind of theology would be more suited to what I called the "American mind," in which theory did not just lead to practice but was developed in relation to practice.

When I entered the joint Ph.D. program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1966, I came with this question in mind. I wondered where I could find a good, concrete example of the way my "American mind" worked. My answer was the empirical sciences. So I decided to see whether I could focus my thinking on the topic of religion and science. I asked one of my professors, Joseph Blau, what I might read to begin my studies in science and religion. He directed me to Ian Barbour's *Issues in Science and Religion* (1966) and to the new journal *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* (1966), both just published. So I began my explorations in science and religion in order to develop a theology that interwove theory with experience, and theory and experience with practice. My explorations resulted in several articles that attempt to ground theological reflection in both personal experience and in the kind of experience that underlies scientific theories. The use of such experience, I think, is one of the things that contribute to a naturalistic world view. As I attempted to put my ideas in a form that educated nonprofessionals could understand, the result was the narrative, practical, naturalistic theology found in *Dancing with the Sacred.* It is this theology that Hardwick, Pederson, and Peterson have engaged.

Some Thoughts on Methodology

As I explore the directions encouraged by my commentators, I begin by sharing a few ideas about my methodology, which has grown out of the narrative I just told. I start by talking about my intentional methodological decision to think and live religiously in a naturalistic framework. Next, I describe the general empirical method that underlies my naturalistic world view. Then I suggest how my theology is a practical, pragmatic theology for religious living.

In a graduate seminar in science and religion at Columbia University, I remember Professor Blau saying, "If you find yourself in a major disagreement with someone else over important ideas, look for underlying differences in the methods used to arrive at and support the ideas." The notion that differences in the content of thought are related to differences in methodology has stayed with me ever since. It was a key to the development of my doctoral dissertation (Peters 1971). It encouraged me to consider my own methodology.

Blau's observation led me to be more aware of my methodological decision to do theology in the context of modern science. This in turn led me

to choose to do theological reflection empirically, that is, in the context of the empiricism of science and in the context of the naturalistic world view of science. These choices underlie what Hardwick rightly sees as my austere naturalism, along with its theological implications.

However, I also want to say that in making a choice to do theology this way, I do not insist that I have it right. In fact, in the late 1960s I envisioned the possibility that my experiment in doing theology empirically and naturalistically might lead me to a dead end. I do not think it has, but it still could. And that would be all right, because trying out new ways of doing things that turn out to be wrong still gives us important knowledge (as in science). It is just as important to find out what does not work as what does. This was the spirit in which I entered into a lifelong theological exploration in which only a handful of others are engaged.

As a part of the experimental nature of my way of doing theology, I recognize that there are other methods of theological reflection—rational, intuitive, or revelation-based. I do not claim that the naturalistic worldview is the final truth about things. I am comfortable with other thinkers in science and religion who develop views of reality that include the world explored by science but go beyond that world to frame the work of science within a different metaphysical system such as Christian supernaturalism, panentheism, or Hindu Vedanta. Of course, when others do this, I would like them to be clear about the methods they use to establish and support their ideas, and I expect them to justify the use of those methods. I agree with Blau that differences in methodology underlie differences in basic ideas, including metaphysical systems or worldviews.

The method that I use in doing theology is a general empirical method. It draws on everyday sense experience and the refinement of that experience with scientific technologies of discovery and analysis.[4] My justification for empiricism, even in theology, is similar to that of Charles Sanders Peirce (1965). A test of the effectiveness of methods is their ability to settle disputes among competing ideas. Peirce suggests that the only way to do this is by asking what future experiences can be expected if an idea is true. He reviews other methods such as holding fast to whatever one wishes to believe (tenacity), appealing to authority, or rationally developing conclusions out of premises (a priori method). He shows that these do not work, because if the people following any one of these methods disagree, the disagreement cannot be resolved by that method. If, for example, I hold an idea to be true because my authority says so, and you hold a conflicting idea to be true because of what your authority says, we cannot settle our difference as long as we appeal only to our own authorities. Only by appealing to experiences predicted by our ideas and then seeing whether our predictions come about can we expect to resolve disagreements. This is the strength of empiricism and scientific methods.[5]

My general empirical method goes beyond Henry Nelson Wieman's direct empiricism to allow for using the empirically supported theories of science, such as nonequilibrium thermodynamics, to develop what Hardwick recognizes as my ontological grounding of the creative process.[6] I try to unpack the ideas of science and also the abstract ideas of theology with examples from ordinary experience. For a long time, I thought of this as the existentialist component of my theology, which I think resonates with Hardwick's use of existentialism in his valuational theism.

Using examples from ordinary experience is a key feature of *Dancing with the Sacred*. As Pederson so nicely highlights, one of my primary goals has been to explore how my naturalistic, empirical theology may be helpful in living religiously—to see whether it works practically. This is also the result of the influence of William James's pragmatism on my thinking. For me, Jamesian pragmatism is not a theory so much of truth as it is of the usefulness of theological ideas for life. (I'll explain why when I address Peterson's question about eschatology).

All of this may be summed up with what I say in the preface of *Dancing with the Sacred*, namely, that I am engaging in a thought experiment. My austere naturalistic theology is a thought experiment in empirical theology and also an experiment in religious living. I do not want to rule out other more traditional approaches, even as I offer a new alternative that I hope will be meaningful to many in today's world. This is why I welcome the encouragement of my commentators to extend my thinking in ways that take into account some of the basic ideas of traditional theism, especially that of Christianity. Christianity is my own religious home base. It is the religion that I feel most in my bones, so to speak, even as I have tried to reach out to use ideas from other religious traditions and from modern science.[7] In *Dancing with the Sacred* I have tried to show how my thinking might be incorporated into the framework of Christian thought as illustrated by Arthur Peacocke and by Denise and John Carmody.[8] More important, I find that Christianity helps me understand my experience as I develop a naturalistic version of the "way of the cross." For me, the cross is a primary religious symbol that is helpful in dealing practically with the problem of suffering. It also is a symbol that points to the truth about the way things are. So even as I strike out in the theological direction of empirical, naturalistic theism, I am also very much in debt to my religious heritage, and I welcome further dialogue with Christianity and other religious traditions in our mutual endeavors to think religiously in relation to modern science.

Naturalism, Emergence, and Transcendence

In his comments Peterson helpfully clarifies some options for naturalism. First, there is reductive naturalism, in which everything is nothing but

energy-matter. Second is nonreductive naturalism, which holds that everything is composed of energy-matter but that things evolve with novel emergent properties that cannot be reduced to their lower-level constituents. Third is Peterson's own view, that of "open system emergence": "what makes something emergent is not simply that it is a higher-order whole . . . but that our descriptions of the lower levels are acknowledged to be ontologically incomplete (and thus 'open')" (Peterson 2005, 694).

At this time I am not able to say where my thinking will finally come out in terms of these three options. Delving more deeply into naturalism in a way that takes emergence into account is a major project for my future reflection. In that project I want to include current scientific and philosophical thinking about emergence, self-organizing systems, chaos, and complexity. That would allow me to build on the ideas from nonequilibrium thermodynamics that I use philosophically in the book. I also want to work out more carefully the epistemological issues regarding what counts as a sufficient explanation in dealing with the question of reductionism. And I want to shift from what sounds like hierarchical thinking of higher and lower levels to thinking about parts and wholes—about systems becoming more complex systems as well as subsystems nested in larger systems.

All of this could deter me from considering reductive naturalism and lead me to one of the latter two forms of naturalism outlined by Peterson. However, it could also lead me to reformulate the alternatives themselves. Here follow some first thoughts that will lead to a response to Peterson's question about transcendence.

My general philosophical perspective is that of process philosophy, which focuses on both relationships and creative interactions or, as Charles Hartshorne once put it, on relation and becoming (Hartshorne 1971). In the subtitle of my book I use the words *ecology* and *evolution* to express this process perspective. I am interested in the way the parts of systems are related to one another and also to other systems. I also am interested in the way things dynamically interact with one another. The notion of dynamic interaction comes to the fore when I develop my model of creativity or creative transformation as a two-aspect process in which new possibilities emerge and some but not all of these continue. For me this process perspective is illustrated by the general ideas of nonequilibrium thermodynamics and Darwinian evolution. Hardwick nicely summarizes this part of my thinking.

How things interact and become related in new ways underlies my understanding of emergence. Hydrogen and oxygen atoms each have properties conducive to combustion. However, when hydrogen and oxygen atoms become related as H_2O, a new set of properties emerges in the ways water interacts with things, such as putting out fire, dissolving dirt, quenching thirst, and so on. None of these properties seems to be in hydrogen and oxygen themselves. So what is the difference? I think it must be in the

relationships between the three atoms in a molecule of water and then in the way molecules of water interact with one another. These relationships are what emerge. New systems emerge.

The importance of relationships or interactions as a key to emergent phenomena can also be seen in what Ursula Goodenough and Terrence Deacon describe as three forms of emergence (2003, 802). In first-order emergence, "properties emerge as a consequence of shape interactions." For example, the interaction between water molecules generates the new property of surface tension. In second-order emergence, "properties emerge as a consequence of shape interactions played out over time, where what happens next is influenced by what happens before." Most self-organizing systems, like snowflakes, exhibit this kind of emergence. In third-order emergence, "properties emerge as a consequence of shape, time, and 'remembering how to do it.'" For example, in biology "genetic and epigenetic instructions place constraints on second order systems and therefore specify particular outcomes called biological *traits*."

Looking at the three forms of emergence described by Goodenough and Deacon, it seems that a key idea is *interactions*. Natural interactions give rise to novel outcomes, which participate in a new set of interactions, which can give rise to further novel outcomes, and so on. In one example of the third form of emergence—the human brain that coevolves with culture to create a symbolic species—we find that "much of human transcendence entails a circling back" to the forms of nature, from which the brain-mind emerged, and a transfiguring of the rest of nature with our symbolic minds (Goodenough and Deacon 2003, 802). Following the thinking of Goodenough and Deacon regarding this third kind of emergence, I would say that my own thinking with language involves the creation of feedback loops of reflection and self-reflection to understand how I am a part of nature and also different from the rest of nature. All of me, all my thoughts and the words of this essay, emerge out of energy-matter, and all of these depend on energy-matter for their existence. Yet what emerges, because it is relational and interactive, is not "nothing but" energy-matter. What emerges is also "something more." In that sense it transcends energy-matter.

How does this relate to Peterson's question about whether my naturalism finds room for transcendence? I think it does, but I do not know if it is the way Peterson would expect. In my evolutionary naturalism, one of the ways I would talk about transcendence is in terms of the future. Transcendence is not something that breaks into natural systems from outside the systems. Rather, it comes from the inside when systems that make up our world—atoms, molecules, organisms, brains, and so on—transcend themselves through creative interactions that give rise to new systems. Such transcending can be spoken of as emergence. There are other meanings of transcendence that I will discuss as I respond to Hardwick's concerns about mystery.

WHY "MYSTERY"?

Hardwick likes my austere naturalism even as Peterson seems to encourage me to transcend it. However, Hardwick does not like my talk about creative mystery. He calls the idea of mystery a "shabby theological device" (2005, 678). (Knowing Charley quite well, I smile.) I agree that the word *mystery* has the problems Hardwick mentions. But so do words such as *God* and *naturalism*—because of the variety of meanings they can have. For me *mystery* is first of all a concept that is related to a second kind of transcendence, namely, "epistemological transcendence." By this I mean that there always seems to be more to the world that we can articulate with our present concepts. Science keeps opening up this "more," for example with the development of ideas of dark matter and dark energy to account for what is happening in the universe. Likewise, there is more to that which generates the world than any human ideas about creativity, including mine, can grasp. We humans have to be careful about pretending to know too much. I do not want our concepts, even my concepts about God as the creative process, to become idols.

So, why don't I just say that we reach the limits of our knowledge? Perhaps I should. But I want to say something more. Rather than just pointing to the limits of our human capacities, I want to express that there is something beyond our knowing capacities. I want to say that something is there still to be discovered as we develop our ideas further. (This is part of my realism to which Hardwick calls attention.) How should I name that something? It is "the Tao that cannot be named" in the *Tao Te Ching*. It is "that one thing" from the Vedic *Rig Veda*. I have called it "creative mystery." By this I mean both that there is something more about whatever it is that creates the world and that it will continue to create our understandings about it and about the world it creates.

There is still something else that the idea of mystery means to me, to which I want to remain open in my thinking. In my naturalism I say that everything is energy-matter and that energy-matter evolves into systems that interact in particular ways modeled by ideas from Darwinian and nonequilibrium thermodynamic thinking. However, I also want to ask, How did energy-matter and creative transformation arise in the first place? Such a question brings me to the limits of naturalism. It presses me to move beyond space-time thinking and beyond empiricism to a third kind of transcendence, what I call *ontological transcendence*. It opens a door that leads me to wonder whether there is something more than the natural universe. Yet, this is a door I cannot go through, because attempting to answer this question would take me beyond empirical, naturalistic theology. For me, the idea of mystery is one way I express the possibility of this kind of transcendence. Perhaps this is one way of interpreting what Peterson is asking for when he wants me to make room for dialogue between naturalist and nonnaturalist philosophies. I am open to such dialogue.

However, in such a dialogue I would like nonnaturalists or "more than naturalists" to state and justify the methods they use to support their ideas about that beyond the universe to which the word *mystery* and its ontological question point.[9]

WHY GOD-TALK?

Naturalism of any kind describes interactions within the natural world. My book focuses on interactions that are creative. Peterson rightly raises the question of why I use the idea of God to talk about creative interactions. One reason is that I came into the science-religion dialogue as a theologian, asking the question of how God and the work of God could be understood in relation to the worldview of modern science. In was in this context that I found the pragmatism of Peirce fruitful, because it led me to define the word *God* in terms of events or activities that could be observed in the world. Hardwick rightly points out that this is more in keeping with the "living God of history" in the Bible than with philosophical concepts of God (2005, 673).

Still, why not just talk about events and processes in the world that are creative? For me, another reason for using God-language is in response to the question of value. The idea of God is in part a value concept—a way to indicate the value of creative processes. This process is the object of ultimate concern, to use Paul Tillich's concept (1951). Or, as Wieman (1958) would say, creative interactions are an object of ultimate commitment. I believe that the creative event is the type of event to which our most fundamental life commitment should be made. It should be the primary organizing idea for our living. Pederson seems to recognize this when she draws out the moral implications of my thinking for medicine. Human lives are finite and limited. They are good, intrinsically good, but they are not the greatest good. The greatest good is that which creates human lives, all life, and the world. This we call God.

I do not expect scientists, as scientists, to develop this idea of the value of the creative process and call it God or the Sacred. That is the task of the theologians. And the task is not for the sole purpose of holding on to a word but to help others realize what these religious words signify, namely, that that which continually creates the world has the highest value. If a nontheistic naturalist were to recognize this, then whether we use the word *God* or not really makes no difference. Still, affirming the value of the creative process is one reason why I continue to use the word *God*.

My third reason for using God-language becomes apparent when someone asks, Why not just use a word like *Sacred* instead of *God*? I am sympathetic to this, because *Sacred* is a more general term. It can be used more easily in discussing all religious traditions and even modern thought that is nonreligious. This is why I used *Sacred* in the title of my book. However,

the word *God* conveys something to me that *Sacred* does not. It conveys the idea of agency.

Agency is something that I don't discuss in my book, and it is very difficult to talk about it without moving philosophically out of process, relational thinking into substantive or even personalistic thinking about God. Yet, when I think of that which brings things into being as a system of interactions that I call the creative process, I do want to convey my experience of particular instances of creative interactions acting on me—"urging" me, "calling" me, "guiding" me toward some new good. This experience occurs when I observe how specific happenings in the world, or specific words and behaviors of others, come together as an event that moves me toward new directions in my thinking and living. Hardwick notes that I call this the "grace-type event." For example, in teaching an introductory course in philosophy, I always go into a class with a detailed two- or three-page outline of what I expect to cover. About a third of the way through the class period, a student asks a question. I respond. Another student asks another question, and she is responded to by still another student. Suddenly I realize that the thinking in the class is diverging from my lesson plan. Quickly, I make an assessment. Do the interactions among students promise to lead us in a fruitful direction? If I think they might, I let the process continue, enabling it as much as I can. Sometimes, when this happens, a new insight emerges—sometimes a new insight for me as well as for the students. And I share this with the students.

Such interactions illustrate the agency of the two-aspect creative process that I describe in the book with my Darwinian model. One aspect is the random generation of ideas arising out of classroom interactions. The other is my evaluation, selection, and telling the students that this has helped me reach a new insight. What leads to the new insight is not the thinking of any one person but the interactions between people that Wieman calls creative interchange. The interactions, we might say, are the actor, the creator. The interactions together have agency. This is one of the reasons why I continue to use the word *God*—to indicate not only the value of creativity but also the agency of creativity.

Is the Concept of God as Creativity Rich Enough?

Peterson's concerns about identifying God only with creativity are well taken. Is my two-aspect model of creativity along Darwinian lines rich enough? Does creativity include other activities associated with God, such as redemption? Is identifying God with creativity helpful in addressing the problem of evil?

First, is my Darwinian model of creativity rich enough? Hardwick correctly deepens my model of creativity as a two-step process by clarifying my use of nonequilibrium thermodynamics as giving my naturalistic the-

ology an ontological grounding. Moreover, as Peterson hints, creativity itself might evolve. I claim in my book that the pattern of creativity—the emergence of new possibilities and the selecting of some of these to continue—occurs throughout the history of the universe. However, creativity also evolves: new mechanisms for generating and selecting emerge in the universe's cosmic, biological, and human cultural phases. In this way God evolves as the emergence of new kinds of generative and selective interactions in different phases of the history of the universe. In theological terms, God as Spirit and Word are constant, but the Spirit and Word themselves creatively evolve. This seems to me to be necessary in a universe that is dynamic and not static.

Second, can my concept of God as creativity include other key religious ideas, such as redemption? I have for many years wondered, as I developed my thinking about God as a kind of event or process, whether one might also think of God as the redeeming-type event, the healing-type event, the liberating-type event, the enlightening-type event, the type of event that brings peace, and the type of event that brings justice. In each case a task of theology would be to describe how these things happen in terms of a naturalism that includes human history and individual living. It may be that one could think of God as a system of events or processes, not just as the creative process. Yet, one also can ask what all these events have in common. The answer is that they are all transformations that are creative of some new good. This is how I talk of redemption in the book: as some new good coming out of destructive occurrences that we experience as evil. New good is created when people are liberated from oppression, when justice is done, when peace comes out of conflict, when enlightenment occurs. So all of these may in the end be new creations that emerge out of the interactions I metaphorically describe as dancing with the sacred.

The third concern with the adequacy of the idea of creativity as God revolves around the problem of evil. Peterson points out the ambiguity of creativity. He wonders if it can at times be diabolical. And he questions, as I suppose many others do as well, whether the cancer that killed my first wife Carol can ever be considered as an instance of God working as my naturalistic theology implies. The passage that troubles Peterson is as follows:

> During the coming months I learned much about cancer. One of the things I came to realize was that cancer cells are an example of Darwinian evolution. The cells of our bodies mutate all the time. At any one time, we have about two thousand cancer cells in our bodies, but our immune system detects and eliminates them. Random variations and natural selection occur not just in the transmission of genes from one generation to the next. They occur within the confines of our own bodies.
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> Theologically this means for me that I cannot regard cancer as evil, even though it caused suffering and death for me and someone I love. Cancer is simply the manifestation of the very same processes involved in evolution. Some genetic

changes lead to new forms of life. However, the vast majority of biological mutations lead to malfunctioning organisms, sterility, and death. The results of the cell changes in our bodies that cause runaway cell growth can create suffering and death. But the system of evolution that embodies constant change also has created our living planet, our species, ourselves. The dance of life is also the dance of death. The spirit of life is also the spirit of death. (Peters 2002, 114–15)

I am of two minds on this. The universe, everything in it, and that which creates the universe is good. This is the tradition of Wieman, Augustine, and Genesis 1. However, over the years I have begun to think about the dark side of things, even the dark side of God. I bring these two minds together in my concept of ambivalence, which is the latest major idea I am developing and a still unfinished aspect of my theology. Following Holmes Rolston, III, I have begun to use the central Christian symbol of the cross and talk about the cruciform nature of things. As an empiricist, it seems to me that the cross points to the general fact that, in a finite universe and on a finite planet, creation occurs only through death and rebirth. This is what creative transformation means in a finite world. Further, when sentient and thoughtful creatures are involved, creation may occur in the midst of suffering, sorrow, grief, and pain. The creativity at the heart of the evolving universe—including evolving human societies and individual lives—is thus a cruciform creativity.

This concept will probably not be satisfying to those who try to solve the problem intellectually of how God can be the highest good and also be the process that often brings about pain, suffering, loss, and death even in the creation of new good. But it does allow us to have a choice when we are confronted with something like cancer. How are we to regard it? We can fight it as an evil to be gotten rid of, and in some cases we should do that in order to continue living. But when we cannot stop the cancer, as in the case of my wife Carol, when we can't eliminate pain and suffering and death, what do we do? I suggest, as Pederson reminds us, that we can avoid a second, spiritual kind of deterioration and death by watching, waiting, and working for new good that is being created even in the midst of the interactions that are bringing about the dying of a loved one or even oneself. This is a moral implication of what Pederson lifts up as the political and practical side of my naturalistic, evolutionary theology.

Is My Naturalistic Theology Practical Enough?

I appreciate the way Pederson calls attention to the confessional, narrative, and political nature of my theology. This is why I use the word *confessions* in the title of this essay. All of these are important elements of what I consider to be practical theology, a theology that has a close connection with practice. That my book was turning into what I now call practical theology was first suggested to me by Gordon Kaufman. After reviewing an early version of the manuscript, he said that I was doing pastoral theol-

ogy. His comment gave me a sense of how I could more clearly write the final draft of the manuscript of *Dancing with the Sacred*. It helped set the style as one that was confessional and narrative: a sharing of my thinking and experience.

Pederson suggests that in my thinking the personal is political in the sense that my reflections are "freighted with moral responsibility" (2005, 683). She helpfully extends my thinking into the area of medicine and the teaching of medical students. I resonate with this, because in my last years at Rollins College I taught a course on "Religious and Philosophical Issues in Medicine." Many of my students were pre-med. One of my primary concerns in that course was to encourage students to think in a broader perspective than solving immediate medical problems. I encouraged them to think about long-term consequences and (like Pederson) to recognize the limits of human existence and how we were part of a wider evolving universe.

Pederson's reflections on the political-ethical nature of my theology encourage me to want to include other areas of human living in which people are mentally and emotionally ill, oppressed by others, suffering social injustices, and living in the midst of war. Any theology, including a naturalistic theology thought out in relation to the sciences, should also be a practical theology and address these kinds of situations. One possible way to do this is by expanding on what I said above about God as many types of event: the redeeming-type event, the healing-type event, the liberating-type event, the enlightening-type event, the type of event that brings peace, and the type of event that brings justice. All of these might be considered as ways in which the creative event brings new good in various situations.

When I talk about the creative event bringing new good, I am following Wieman in understanding value relationally. Something is intrinsically valuable because it is a system of relations of mutual support. In this way of thinking, truth is intrinsically valuable as a system of ideas that are related to one another and to experience in mutually supportive ways. Beauty is also intrinsically valuable as a system—say, in a painting—in which contrasting parts enhance one another in a vital way, which Wieman calls "vivifying contrast" (1946, 133–35). Love is a system of relationships among individuals who support one another in a caring way. Justice is present in a society in which all are treated fairly in relation to one another. Health is present when all the parts of the body are functioning well as subsystems in a larger whole. This is wholeness, or well-being.

This understanding of value—of intrinsic and also instrumental good—is part of the ecological aspect of my theology in *Dancing with the Sacred*. I develop it most clearly in my idea that we are social-ecological selves. Human beings are of intrinsic value because they are relational creatures woven together out of cosmic, biological, and cultural strands to be a system in which all the parts work together in mutually supportive ways.

Attitudes of prejudice, hatred, greed, and lust for power as well as acts of abuse, rape, oppression, and war contribute to the destabilizing of the relationships that make up a person. Such attitudes and actions contribute to states of sickness, alienation, and mental and emotional disorder. With Pederson's idea that my theology is political and has moral implications, I am led to suggest that one way to respond to things that bring about diminishment and destabilization of relationships is to understand how creative interaction occurs and then participate in it in its redemptive, liberating, healing, enlightening, justice- and peace-producing modes. This is a direction I intend to follow in enriching my concept of God as the creative process.

I also accept Hardwick's exhortation that I develop a more complete doctrine of sin. Before I follow up on his suggestion as to how I might do this, however, I want to show how what I have just said relates to his concern about the place of ecological responsibility in the structure of my theology.

Ecology and Theology

Hardwick understands and appreciates the ways I try to motivate ecological responsibility and the practice of environmental ethics. However, he is concerned that the amount of time I spend on this in the book suggests that I am using ecological responsibility as a way of grounding my religious stance.

In addressing Hardwick's concern I want to say two things, the first in light of my reflections on Pederson's expansion of my environmental ethics into an ethics of medicine and health care. I have just suggested that I need to expand the ethical consequences of my theology in an even wider manner. So I think Hardwick's concern comes from my using issues of environmental ethics and especially the problem of moral motivation to act for the good of the wider whole, including all of life on the planet and the Earth itself, as my primary test case for the application of my theology. However, it is not the only test case. Applying my theological reflection to issues of health, social justice, and war and peace are some of the other ways that I might test the practicality of my theological views. Doing this would, I think, address Hardwick's concern.

That being said, however, I also want to affirm that my ecological understanding of the self as a relational system is important for the structure of my naturalistic theology. This, in turn, is grounded in systems thinking in science and philosophy and also in Wieman's understanding of value as consisting of relations of mutual support. My theology thus has two foundations. One is the creative process of the evolving universe, evolving life, evolving society, and evolving daily living. This is the dynamic aspect of my thinking. The other is the relational aspect that sees value in stable

(homeostatic) systems, the ecological aspect of my thinking. These two are in tension because creativity is constantly transforming stable systems into new systems. So the dynamic creative side of my theology is primary. Hardwick rightly sees that. But the ecological aspect also provides some structure to my theology. That is why I included the word *ecology* along with *evolution* in the subtitle of my book.

Sin

The relationship between the evolutionary, dynamic aspect of my theology and the ecological aspect suggests a way in which I might respond to Hardwick's call for me to develop a more thoroughgoing concept of human fault or sin. I agree with Hardwick that Wieman's distinction between created good and creative good can provide me with a "Pauline/Augustinian conception of human sinfulness" (Hardwick 2005, 678; Wieman 1946, 54–58). I also think that the distinction between created and creative good can be used in relation to the Buddhist understanding of attachment in order to help us understand where human beings can go wrong.

In the evolutionary-ecological structure of my thinking, evolution—the dynamic aspect—is primary and the ecological aspect secondary. This is because all relational systems—whether they be forms of life, loving human relationships, systems of scientific truth, beautiful works of art, human communities, cultures, or religions—are, in Wieman's terms, created goods (1946; 1958). They are intrinsically and instrumentally valuable. However, in our evolving universe they are impermanent, and if we become too attached to them we fall into sin by elevating their value status to our highest good. Religiously, the status of highest good should be reserved only for that which creates life, love, truth, beauty, community, cultures, and religions. This should be the object of our ultimate concern or commitment. That which creates and not what is created is God. Sin is turning away from God to the things of this world. It is being unwilling to allow the creative process to continue to work. It is refusing to let go of something that is dying, admittedly not knowing always when to let go, in order that some new good might emerge. What makes it difficult to let go, why we become attached and even addicted to created goods, is an area of my theology that I want to develop in relation to both the insights of religious traditions and the scientific work of neurologists, psychologists, and psychotherapists. Also, I want to work more on how the idea of human sin as idolatrous commitment to created good, resulting in alienation from creative good, is related to what Peterson sees as the problem of evil due to the loss, pain, and suffering brought about by the ongoing creativity of the world that I identify with God.

Hope and Eschatology

As he struggles with the problem of evil in relation to my naturalistic theism, Peterson raises the question of eschatology. How are we to think theologically about the long-term future? He thinks that we need a strong vision of the future to address fundamental human issues of freedom, community, politics, and the meaning of death. Most important, he says that the "prime question from the human, existential standpoint is *What should I hope for*?" and he argues that hope "inevitably involves some kind of faith in the future" (2005, 698).

Some of the options Peterson gives as to what we might hope for are love, understanding, and justice in our global human community. I concur that these are things to hope and work for. However, I want to point out that these are created goods. As important as they are, I don't want to turn them into ultimate goods. And I certainly don't want to turn any particular conception of what love, justice, or understanding might mean into a "god" or ultimate vision. This would be the sin of idolatry. Further, if these goods are to spread throughout the human community, the way they will expand is through interactions that are creative—through sacred creativity. Such creativity may not only transform what we mean by love, justice, and understanding; it may also lead us to become transformed as to what our hopes for the future should be.

Underlying talk about eschatology is the issue of methodology. Echoing what Blau said, differences in how we think about eschatology are probably related to differences in theological method. So the question for me is, How do I establish and support ideas about eschatology—the long-term and final prospects of humans and the universe? One way is that of pragmatism, and this would fit with Peterson's saying that we need to address questions of eschatology in order to provide hope. In a way of thinking similar to that of William James, we can say that there are certain questions that cannot be answered empirically and rationally but the answers to which make a difference in our living. On this grounds we can argue that we have a "right to believe" if the question we are facing cannot be decided on rational-empirical grounds, if it is a question that cannot be avoided, if the alternatives are meaningful to us, and if the issue is momentous—fundamentally important for our living (see James 1897).[10]

If we follow James we might ask what question we are facing. Peterson suggests that it is a question of hope. When I look at the origins of eschatological thinking the question seems to me to be a particular hope, the hope for justice. It is a response to the problem that morally good and religious people suffer while morally wicked and irreligious people have happy and relatively fulfilled lives. Certainly one sees this in the Western religions in which the afterlife is a place of rewards and punishments, whether in Zoroastrianism (which is probably the historical origin of this

kind of thinking), in Jewish thought in the book of II Maccabees, in early Christianity, and in Islam. The eschatological hope, so to speak, is that the righteous (and what makes one righteous varies in these religious traditions) will live on in a divine kingdom or paradise and the wicked will be punished everlastingly. So the question is not one of hope for a continuing, individual life but of hope for justice.

I find this pragmatic argument for an afterlife based on the need for justice a powerful one, because I think we have evolved in such a way that justice, or fairness, is something we naturally expect (cf. de Waal 1996, 159–63; Goodenough and Deacon 2003, 808–9, 815–16). Because we are a symbolic species, we are able to build on evolved emotions related to justice by intellectually proposing the idea of divine judgment in a future life. Whether such an idea is true cannot be decided on rational-empirical grounds. Still, it is a question that cannot be avoided because of our innate desire for justice, and the issue is momentous—one of destiny.

The problem is that there is more than one intellectual answer to this question, more than one way in which people might have just deserts in a future life. One answer is that of Western eschatological thinking, just presented. Another comes from Eastern thought. Karma and reincarnation is a way of thinking that underlies a system of justice in the religions of India. This way offers two solutions to the problem of suffering in our lives. One is that if we are suffering now we are reaping the consequences of bad things we did in past lives, and so our suffering is explained. The other is that we can change our future by living correctly according to moral-religious law (*dharma*). As a result we will have better lives to come. Furthermore, in future lives we may be in a better position to escape the continuous rounds of birth and death as we realize a state of unification of our core selves (*atman*) with the self of the universe (*Brahman*) in Hinduism, or as we become enlightened about how we can become nonattached from everything in this constantly changing world and realize Nirvana in Buddhism.

These two alternative ways of thinking about the continuation of life, each equally sound on pragmatic grounds as a solution to the problem of justice, illustrate why in *Dancing with the Sacred* I set my practical theology not only in the context of a scientific worldview but also in the context of the plurality of religions. I respect all religions as resulting from the creative process and believe that all contain created good—for example, ways of resolving the problem of injustice. The dialogue between religion and science also has to be, in our times, a dialogue with various religions.

So where does this leave me? Because the pragmatic method offers me competing answers to the eschatological question of justice, I find myself falling back on everyday and scientific empiricism, which leads me to an austere form of naturalistic theology. In such a theology, what are the grounds for hope? How did I sustain hope in the darkest time of my life

when my wife of thirty-three years and I were on the fifteen-month journey of her dying?

I would say that my hope is grounded in faith—not faith in some future happy state but faith in the sense of basic trust in God as the creative process, trust that new good can arise in the midst of suffering. As Pederson points out, this is not an intellectual, rational resolving of the problem of suffering. It is a way of living through it. It is a way based on my own life experience and on scientific experience and theory about how the universe works. Things die, and in the process new and sometimes quite different things are born. My faith is in an everyday dying-and-resurrection process and not in some future, final new birth or resurrection, which I find difficult to support intellectually or pragmatically, because it is beyond my experience and because different solutions can be found.

Even more important, my hope, grounded in empirically supported faith in creativity, has allowed me to experience something more profound than life itself. It has allowed me to experience love in ways I could not have imagined. This is what I describe in chapter 13 of *Dancing with the Sacred*, which all my commentators appreciatively recognize. This emergence of love is what I experienced again at the beginning of this year when my present wife, Marj Davis, and I were present to the dying and death of my mother. Mom had been relatively healthy when she celebrated her 98th birthday on December 18, 2004. The next day she traveled with my cousins fifty miles for a family celebration of her birthday and Christmas. On December 21 she suffered a major stroke that disabled the left side of her body. She never recovered. However, before she died, I was able to show her a picture of her latest great-granddaughter—a new life in our family.

As I and others watched Mom die, I realized that we were watching a transformation—a transformation from life to death that was as remarkable as the birth of new life. I also witnessed another transformation as those who cared for her in the nursing home where she lived no longer were able to keep her alive. I watched a growth of loving care expressed in many small ways during my mother's final hours. I watched a transformation from life to love.

In the final analysis, I have no intellectual response to the problem of evil that Peterson and others have raised. With my empiricism and naturalism I do not have the kind of eschatological hope that many others have or seek. With the question of eschatology, phrased in terms of Western theistic traditions, naturalistic theism reaches its limits. However, I do have hope—hope that new good can come out of suffering—that is grounded in my experience. I also have faith that the creative process can always bring about new good even in the midst of suffering, and this faith is grounded in experience. And I know that one of the great goods—which comes when one is open to creative transformation in the midst of suffering—is love. This also is grounded in my experience. Faith, hope,

love: in its own way my naturalistic theism affirms these three. And from my own experience I echo Saint Paul's evaluation that "the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13). However, there is something still greater. It is the ongoing process of creative transformation that gives rise to love, a process in which we can all participate as we dance with the sacred.

NOTES

1. They also have written excellent books that both complement and challenge my own thinking—Hardwick 1996; Peterson 2003; Pederson 2001.
2. At a meeting in June 2004 of the Highlands Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought, Jack Gallagher and Susi Pangerl challenged me in a similar direction. Their comments and my response to them are being published in the *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* (September 2005) along with discussions of two other books on religious naturalism, Robert Corrington's *Nature's Religion* (1997) and Donald Crosby's *A Religion of Nature* (2002).
3. I was fortunate in being able to share with Küng how great an influence listening to him do theology was on my thinking when I saw him again at the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town, South Africa.
4. For an excellent set of essays on empirical theology in its variety, see Miller 1992. My own essay on "Empirical Theology and Science" is also published in *Zygon* (Peters 1992).
5. Over the years I have developed my empirical methodology further with the help of Lakatosian research programs (Lakatos 1978; Murphy 1990) and evolutionary epistemology (Campbell 1974); see Peters 1971; 1982; 1992; 1997.
6. Hardwick says that when he first read *Dancing with the Sacred* he was struck by how "Wiemanian" it was. The reader of this essay will note several references to Wieman. As part of my intellectual history I was first influenced by the thinking of Wieman as I did my doctoral studies. However, after I completed my doctorate I began to do more work in religion and science. I turned to the thought of Ralph Wendell Burhoe and others in science and religion. This made it possible to give what Hardwick calls the ontological grounding for Wieman's kind of thinking. Throughout most of the writing of *Dancing with the Sacred*, Wieman's thought remained in the background, more implicit than explicit. In recent years, however, I find myself using Wieman's thinking more frequently, especially when it comes to dealing with theological questions. Thus, Wieman's ideas are more explicit in the present essay.
7. I was fortunate, while a professor at Rollins College, to be able to teach a variety of courses in world religions as well as courses in religion and science. Such courses included New Testament, History of Christian Thought, Religion in America, and Religions of Asia. Such courses not only deepened my intellectual understanding of some of the world's religions but also led to engagement with bright students who practiced these religions.
8. The kind of Christianity I find most helpful to do this with is illustrated today by Marcus Borg (2003).
9. One person who does this quite well is John Haught. See especially his essay "Is Nature Enough? No" (2003). Haught is quite clear about his methodology, which is different from my empiricism. So the underlying question is, as Blau said, one of methodology.
10. In his 1896 address to the philosophical clubs of Yale and Brown Universities, titled "The Will to Believe," James argues that certain questions cannot be decided on intellectual grounds, that the questions involve options that are live and not dead, forced and not avoidable, momentous and not trivial. One issue is whether the two options I consider in response to the question of retributive justice are both "live" in James's sense or "meaningful" in my sense. James says the beliefs of a Muslim would not be live options for a Christian and vice versa. However, we live in a different situation than that of the late nineteenth century. Because of wider knowledge that people have of different religions and because dialogue among religious believers is more prevalent, we cannot as easily dismiss the options presented by religions other than our own as dead options, the way James did in his essay. At least in my thinking, some of the beliefs of other religious traditions are as much live or meaningful options as those of our own culture.

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