

Nurturing an Idea©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on March 17, 2019

What do you do with an idea? All of us have answered that question. We have answered it sometimes consciously and at other times unconsciously. We have answered it with action or inaction. And we have answered it more times than we could possibly count over the course of our life.

Now comes the harder question. How do you determine the quality of an idea you have? In the responsive reading Cathy just led us in, the French philosopher Albert Camus states that; "Great ideas, it is said, come into the world as gently as doves." Does that mean lousy ideas come into the world like a brick, with a thud? I ask this second question because it is one that is at the forefront of my mind this morning. The question is on my mind because, like the boy in our Story for All Ages this morning, I have kept the idea I am about to share with you hidden away for many years. So as I prepare to share an idea that came to me years ago I wonder, will the idea fly like a dove or will it go thud like a brick? Will it make a positive difference in someone's life? Or will it be met with indifference or possibly even scorn? As I consider these questions I recall a portion of an ancient wisdom story I shared with this Fellowship just before you called me to be your minister. No matter what happened, the farmer in the story always replied, "Who knows? We shall see."

Before I share the idea though, I want to give you some history of how it came to me. This idea was sparked by a course I took in 2008 while preparing to go into the ministry. The course was titled "Process Theology." The concepts this theological perspective set out are way beyond the bounds of any other theology I am familiar with. That is understandable when you consider the person who developed process theology. Alfred North Whitehead, who is its founder, was a British mathematician and philosopher. From 1924 to 1937 he was a professor of philosophy at Harvard. One of his many notable students was Bertrand Russell.

Process theology is more expansive than any other theology I am aware of. It is so expansive that I continue to have difficulty comprehending its depth and complexity. For example, the God of process theology is quite different than the God most of us may have learned about. In process theology God isn't singularly ultimate. Creativity, as a process, is also ultimate. Creativity, according to Whitehead, is a driving force in all that is, was, and ever will be.

With this thought of creativity as an ultimate element of all that is, I began to consider what I might write about for the final paper of my class. And one day, seemingly out of nowhere, an idea came to me. I say it came to me because the idea never seemed to belong to me. The idea seemed to be completely independent of me or my thinking. It was a grand idea, and by that I mean it was large in scale. I still have no idea whether it is a great idea or a lousy one. The idea was so grand that, like the boy in our story, I initially tried to ignore it. But it kept coming up, again and again. It was very insistent. Before using the idea as the basis of my final paper I shared it with my wife, Sandy. Since then I have shared little about the idea with anyone else until I began planning for this sermon. So this morning you will help me discover whether the idea that came to me gets wings or goes thud.

The idea that came to me more than a decade ago involves completely and totally transforming our economic system. When I say “our economic system,” I am not just referring to our country’s economic system. I am referring to the economic system of the entire developed world. Like I said before, this is a grand, as in very large, idea. Not only is it large, it is radical compared to the economic systems that are currently in use. All of the economic systems I am aware of have, as a primary motivator, the acquisition or accumulation of material goods. For example, until 1971 the value of the U.S. dollar was tied directly to a fixed amount of gold. So our country and many other governments and individuals have accumulated stores of gold that just sit and that do little if anything to benefit the vast majority of the world’s people. Today the U.S. dollar is no longer tied to a material object, namely gold. Instead, the dollar’s value is recalculated almost every day based on a set of criteria that few people know or understand. Yet one of the primary functions of the dollar continues to be gaining access to material goods. Even the new cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin have material acquisition and accumulation as a primary purpose.

But what if the world economy had a non-material foundation and focus? What if the currency of the world was based not on the amount of material wealth one could amass, but on the amount of joy, love and peace that we were creating or sharing in any and every given moment? Instead of dealing in dollars and cents we would be exchanging joy coins, love bits and peace pences. As I share this with you I recognize how incredibly idealistic this sounds. Even today this idea seems totally impractical, even bordering on ludicrous. But I would ask you to imagine how the world might be different if all of us focused first and foremost on generating joy, on spreading love, and on advancing peace in our lives and in the lives of others. For millennia spiritual teachers have been telling us that joy, love and peace have more value than material possessions. Yet in every age humanity has continued to maintain economic systems that ignored, or at the least minimized, the importance of each one of these. So this morning I would ask you to consider what dollar value you would place on a world where joy, love and peace were of paramount significance—a world where everyone you encountered cared about and was attentive to the joy, the love, and the peace they were helping to manifest each waking moment?

And as you ponder that let me add the next level of this idea—the place where it gets really radical. Today the vast majority of currencies around the world are determined by some centralized or organized system—whether a government, a bank or a computer network. Imagine, if you can, what it would be like to have an economic system that was decentralized. By decentralized I mean that every person would have an equal ability to influence, in any given moment, the value or worth that is assigned to a situation or a material object. In every moment all of us would have the ability to make the world economy more robust, or richer if you will, by generating joy, by spreading love, and by advancing peace. I say this is the place where the idea gets radical because it would completely up-end the human power structures of today’s world. It would no longer allow the possibility of the 1/10th of 1% to amass over 90% of the world’s wealth. And it is radical because the economy would grow best not by amassing and keeping material things. Instead, the economy would grow by sharing with others that which we value.

I will admit that an economic system based on joy, love and peace could initially increase feelings of fear in some people. It is quite possible that today's ultra-rich might fear or even despise the idea of a decentralize system. It could be terrifying to think that those who previously had little or no wealth now have more control over your wealth than you do. Or worse yet, that all of the material wealth you had accrued could become nearly worthless. I am not one of the ultra-rich but I will admit I have some concerns about how the transition to this new economic system would go. In spite of my concerns though, when I imagine a world in which greed doesn't benefit a person, hope begins to calm my fears.

As I said earlier, I have remained relatively quiet regarding this idea of a new world economic system for more than a decade. I share it with you today because I believe the idea needs to be nurtured. It seems clear to me that not only does it need to be nurtured, it needs to be nurtured by more people than just me. So today I want to ask you to consider nurturing this idea with me. If this idea has winged into your heart like a dove then you might want to feed and nurture it. And as you feed and nurture it I would encourage you to watch what begins to happen. If, on the other hand, this idea has landed like a brick with a heavy thud on your heart or in your head, I apologize. I will do my best in the days ahead to make up for that thud. My intention is and will continue to be to bring more joy, more love, and more peace into your life.

Now that I have shared with you the idea that came to me, it seems only fitting to read again the ending of the Story for All Ages.

I liked being with my idea. It made me feel more alive, like I could do something. It encouraged me to think big...and then, to think bigger. Then, one day, something amazing happened. My idea changed right before my very eyes. It spread its wings, took flight, and burst into the sky. I don't know how to describe it, but it went from being here to being everywhere. It wasn't just a part of me anymore...it was now a part of everything. And then, I realized what you do with an idea... You change the world.

So may it be.