

An Equal and Opposite Reaction

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My father has a reputation in our family as something of a worrywart. Just to give you one small example, he cannot enjoy himself on vacation if he is constantly worried that a toilet is overflowing in his house—so he arranges for someone to check midway through any trip he’s on.

Given this, a few Christmases ago I happened across an amusing book, which I promptly bought for Dad’s Christmas stocking. Entitled *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*, the little yellow tome contained detailed instructions for repelling shark attacks, escaping from the trunk of a car, using a defibrillator in case someone you’re with has a heart attack, and surviving being sucked over a waterfall in a small boat (among other things).

It does not tell you what to do if you find out while in Aruba that your toilet has been running for a week.

Nor does it provide instructions for how to get through an economic situation like the one we’re in. Oh, how I wish that it did, or even that the recession could be turned around as surely as a charging camel.

So those instructions were left to me to figure out, and though my gut told me what the answer was, I needed to search through both science and theology to figure out why.

One of the very first things physics students learn are Isaac Newton’s laws of motion. These rules create a framework with which those students understand the mechanical interactions of everything in the universe. The third of Newton’s laws is usually summed up as “for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.”

Action and reaction also form part of my own theological exploration, most notably through the theological school known as “process theology.”

The work of Alfred North Whitehead is closely associated with the beginnings of process theology in Britain and the United States in the early 20th century. Whitehead is an interesting figure—trained as a mathematician, his explorations took him into the realm of physics, and this led him (in a way that makes complete sense to me) to philosophy and theology.

His was a scientifically-based theology, a view of all being that was simultaneously concrete and transcendent. By the end of his career, he was a professor of philosophy at Harvard, and his work sparked the imagination of countless theologians who had the fortitude and stamina to make their way through his densely-written, jargon-filled work.

Whitehead wrote that each thing—each and every entity in the universe—is made up not of unchanging, essential stuff, but rather of a collection of reactions to every other thing in the universe and the context in which those reactions take place.

Planets hurtle through space the way they do because of the forces of interaction between them and other bodies out there—and so they change based on those forces. Atoms vibrate, causing nearby atoms to react and do something they would not have otherwise done.

People exist in relationship to everything around us, and thus we are all in the process of becoming something else as we absorb information from outside ourselves and react to it. From moment to moment, we are not the same being we once were, as new reactions are added to the old ones and we become something new, something better than we were before.

In Whitehead's view, the importance of each individual thing is in how it shapes the becoming of every other thing. We are not important in and of ourselves—it is only in the ways in which our being shapes others that our importance is understood.

Which brings us to how I believe we are supposed to react to the current state of our nation and our world.

It is tempting, when faced with fear, with uncertainty, with great despair and with the suffering of people we care very much about to run. Perhaps this is our survival instinct kicking in—the instinct that helped humans figure out that sharks hate being hit near the eyes and gills.

It is not, however, the instinct that is best.

Today, I argue that this natural reaction to flee, to cower in a corner, to prepare for the very worst things that could happen to us is the very opposite of what we should be doing in this time. It is in fact the *very opposite* of what will add the most good to our world.

Instead, we should seek what I'll call (with apologies to Newton, because this is not what he meant) an equal and opposite reaction to the events of our day.

We must seek instead to engage *more*, to give *more*, to love *more*, to do *more* for those in our community who seek justice and equality, to make ourselves *more* visible as a liberal-thinking people of faith, to provide *more* ministry for our children and youth.

It is tempting to run and hide. We need an equal and opposite reaction instead.

Why? I believe that it is no less than our very goodness as humans that is at stake. Our goodness that can be measured in how we react to pain in the world around us.

Henry Nelson Wieman was a theologian who reinterpreted Christianity based in part on Alfred North Whitehead's scientific theology. Born a Presbyterian, Wieman became a Unitarian midway through his career, as he realized that traditional Christianity was not expansive enough for his growing theology.

Among Wieman's most important works is *The Source of Human Good*, in which he locates the good derived from relationships in the context of community.

In that book, Wieman argues that the ultimate source of good is the creative power of the universe and its beings, and that the formation of community based on open, honest relationship is a necessary condition for creativity to happen.

He wrote, "this community includes both intellectual understanding of one another and the feeling of one another's feelings, the ability to correct and criticize one another understandingly and constructively. It includes the ability and the will to co-operate in such a manner as to conserve the good of life achieved to date...." (Wieman, 64)

To Wieman, withdrawing from community was withdrawing from the relationships that fuel human creativity. And isolating ourselves from the drive toward creativity was to invite evil into our lives. Evil! Imagine.

Wieman wrote that "there is no virtue in despair for its own sake." However bleak things look, we must not "cease to strive" for the good, we must not take ourselves out of the creative processes of life, remove ourselves from the relationships that feed us, give up on trying to make a better world. (Wieman, 49-50)

Let me repeat that quote: there is no virtue in despair for its own sake.

And yet, that's what I'm seeing in so many places—despair that is eating away at community, despair that is isolating people from others, despair that is frightening people into doing things that a year or two ago they would not have done. Our world is full of despair—some of it very real, born of pain and loss and frustration, but some of it is despair for its own sake, and this, I tell you, must stop.

My own immediate family is not immune from this despair. Before Eric and I moved to New York almost two years ago, he was laid off from his job in North Carolina, despite glowing evaluations and nine years at the newspaper that employed him.

Things worked out for us. I was called to this Fellowship's ministry and Eric got an amazing job once we had moved here, but the emotional and psychological effects of that experience are long-lasting. Every news story with an announcement of layoffs, every rumor of downsizing yet-to-come at his current employer, every story of someone we know facing the loss of a job sends a shockwave through

our home, bringing old trauma to the surface. To be honest with you, I struggle to give him the support he needs in this time, and I know I don't always meet the mark.

It is tempting for us to give in to that trauma, to cower in fear, to hide under the bed until the economic all-clear is sounded. It is tempting to hoard the resources we have, to put off any plans to spend money (even in sound investments), to live always expecting another financial bomb to drop.

But like victims of physical trauma suffering flashbacks, we need to remind ourselves that our reality is remarkably different from our fears. Our jobs are stable (as far as we can reasonably tell). Our income is sufficient to pay for our home (no matter what that home might be worth if we had to sell it today). We're not going to retire any time in the next thirty years (so there's no need to even open the 401(k) statement to see how little is left there—it surely *has* to rebound in the next three decades).

Our reality even includes two sets of parents who are in good health—physical as well as financial—all of whom have made it clear that should their children suffer hardship in this economic climate, they would be there to help.

All in all, we're quite fortunate to be in the position we are. That is our reality.

And so, with every fiber of our being, we fight the urges to hide, to withdraw, and to postpone the dreams we have. Instead, we choose an equal and opposite reaction.

We pursue our dreams. We stay engaged with the world around us. We live fulfilling lives. And, we continue, no, we *increase* the generosity—to this Fellowship as well as to other organizations we care about—that has become an important part of our life.

If your reality is similar to ours, I urge you to do the same.

Because it is possible that your reality is starkly different from the one I describe in my family. I know that there are people in this Fellowship community who are facing job loss and economic hardship.

For you, the reaction of increased engagement with the world around you will be even harder. But I insist that it is worth it. There are people who will help you through this. There are shoulders you can cry on, arms to surround you in caring embrace, brains to help you think of new job possibilities, and even funds to buy you groceries or pay your electric bill.

While you might not be able to respond to a call for increased financial generosity in these troubled times, I don't want you to feel guilty. Do what you need to in order to care for yourself and your family—and when things are better, you can be generous again.

Right now, the rest of us need to do your share. And then some.

Those of us who can—whose financial situations are OK (no matter what we fear they might be in six months or a year)—must find it in ourselves to increase our giving to the Fellowship next year.

Together, the members and friends of this Fellowship can start to create an equal and opposite reaction to the despair so prevalent in our society.

Together, we can raise enough money so that the talented and experienced education professional with whom I have had the absolute pleasure of working this year can afford to spend another year with us. To be quite frank, Donna can't go on working (and being paid for) thirteen hours a week of work. Let's make it 20—a half-time position. With enough giving to our pledge campaign, next year we can also train teachers for exciting new curricula, continue strengthening our youth ministry, and create exciting intergenerational opportunities for worship and justice. Together, we can do that.

Together, we can increase our Fellowship's presence in the community outside our doors. We can, with enough of your generosity, budget for significant contributions to the Mount Kisco Interfaith Food Pantry and the Emergency Homeless Shelter projects—two vital sources of support for the neediest people in our community. We can continue sharing our offering each Sunday with important causes in our world. We can begin a long-term engagement with the newly-forming Center for Environmental and Social Sustainability. Together, we can do that.

If we choose the path of increasing our commitment and our generosity despite the turmoil of our society, together we can raise enough money to send current and potential leaders to educational programs and trainings. We can seek help to guide us in envisioning a new and brighter future. We can repair and beautify our physical home, making this a place we want to spend more and better time. We can continue welcoming new people to our membership, and we can engage with the other thousand congregations in our Association in new and different ways—ways that give us ideas, energy and excitement. Together, we can do that.

We can do all of these things if we choose not to give in to fear, if we choose not to go down the road of despair.

We can do all of these things if we choose to stay engaged in relationship with one another—no matter how hard our lives are at the moment.

We can do all of these things if we put down the Worst-Case Scenario book that has been playing itself out in our heads and pick up pens and checkbooks and hammers and nails. Together, we can get to work building a better future. It takes only an equal and opposite reaction.

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