

Making a Difference

The Crisis of Becoming: Reflections on a Whiteheadian Spirituality

Roland Faber



Roland Faber, a co-director of the Center for Process Studies, is professor of process theology at Claremont School of Theology, and professor of religion at Claremont Graduate University. His fields of research and publication are systematic theology, post-structuralism (Gilles Deleuze); interreligious discourse, especially regarding Christianity/Buddhism; comparative philosophy of religion; philosophy, theology, spirituality, and cosmology of the renaissance; mysticism (Meister Eckhart, Nicolas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno); and integrated studies in physics, philosophy, and psychology.

Spirituality is an activity. It is not an area, not a field of behavior, not even a method of performing certain techniques. More radically, it rests on nothing—no ground to settle; no base to cover; no structure to appropriate. And most disturbingly, spiritual activity has no subject that initiates it and no object to which it is directed. Its activity is that of the “spirit”—like a wind that blows where it chooses (John 3:8); like water that is poured out on us (Mk 1:8); like fire that energizes us (Acts 2:3). It is an activity of the future, the coming of God, the peace we await and the life that is promised (Joel 2:28). It is the activity of what is *not* in the midst of what *is*; or better: it is the power that transforms what *is* into what *is offered* to become, of what *has* become into what *could* become.

The Spirit is a gift—*this* gift, *the* Gift. It places us into the midst of a tension: the tension Whitehead calls “becoming,” or better: the tension *in* becoming that comes as its *crisis*: the crisis of becoming that opens up when we understand becoming as the Great Opening of Difference: the difference between past and future, between exterior and interior, between self and other, between public and private. Wherever this Opening arises, as it does only in becoming, it creates the difference between Life and death. The Spirit is the Gift of *this* difference and spirituality is the *crisis* of this Gift, the crisis of *this* process of becoming, the activity of the *In Between*, bridging the hiatus of the difference of Life and death, the process of the transformation that arises out of this crisis of becoming and *as* becoming otherwise.

Peace: Interests of the Spirit

In Whitehead's opus, a conceptualization of the process of becoming out of this Spirit appears only sparsely. Nevertheless, it has an important place in the scheme of his philosophy, namely when he addresses the ultimate categories on which he sees civilization and any deeper development of the cosmos as being based: the concept, experience, and practice of Peace. "The experience of Peace," Whitehead says famously in *Adventures of Ideas*, "is largely beyond the control of purpose. It comes as a gift. The deliberate aim at Peace very easily passes into its bastard substitute: anesthesia. In other words, in the place of a quality of 'life and motion', there is substituted their destruction" (*AI* 285). Indeed, the Gift of Peace cannot be controlled; any control may transform Life in its "bastard substitute": anesthesia, which is nothing other than, and precisely, the loss of the *tension* that is the crisis of becoming; the collapse of the difference of Life and death into the death of becoming: the death of future, novelty, creativity, and depth.

If the experience of Peace introduces this tension of becoming against the forces of its death, it must cope with the deep differences in a way that does not take away the crisis, but transforms it into a Life of "intentionality," thereby giving tension a direction, a purpose, an aim. "Thus Peace," Whitehead further elaborates, "is

the removal of inhibition and not its introduction. It results in a wider sweep of conscious interest. It enlarges the field of attention. Thus Peace is self-control at its widest,—at the width where the 'self' has been lost, and interest has been transferred to co-ordinations wider than personality" (*AI* 285). The intention that removes inhibitions—always followed by

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the shadow of its twin, "anesthesia"—does not remove "interest," but "the Self" that hinders the tension to become productive of Life. This Peace lies always already beyond the self-interests of personality. In fact, this *interest* in Peace is the crisis of personality.

It is precisely here, with this *crisis* of Peace, that Whitehead situates the Gift of the Spirit, because "[h]ere the real motive interests of the spirit are meant, and not the superficial play of discursive ideas" (*AI* 285). Spirituality, then, is to follow the "motive interests of the

spirit" in the process of becoming that put us into the crisis of becoming, the crisis of the Self and of personality—the crisis in the midst of the dangers of death, of anesthesia, of the loss of the Self for nothing, of the loss of the interests of the spirit for the "peace" of the grave, the dead past. In its ecstasy of self-transcendence, the Spirit shakes the rock of the (pre)given; it unsettles the powers of Being, it destabilizes the powers of resistance to becoming in its transformation beyond our Selves.

In order to analyze this Whiteheadian spirituality of Peace, I will lay out a map of three profound elements of the Gift of the Spirit that will form a landscape of approaches to the Spirit of becoming: Polarity, Eros, and Place. In the interaction of these elements spirituality will reveal its Whiteheadian flavor as experience and practice of Self-Transcendence to which in the end we then recur.

Polarity: Field of Difference

If spirituality is the activity of the Spirit, it always induces an experience of being in the midst of the crisis of becoming and, at the same time, in a process that transforms the hiatus, it opens into an integration that again opens up a new differentiation. Two elements appear to constitute this experience: becoming as the *opening* of difference and becoming as the *ending* of any mastering of this difference.

Indeed, in Whitehead's analysis of experience as an event of becom-

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ing, everything is situated in the *opening of differences*. First, there is no becoming that is not the Opening of the tension between past and future. Every happening is only an event of becoming because its process is the Transcendence of Being, past, history, and the “given” for an undecided future, a realm of possibilities *for* this past to become what it when it *has* become will *be*. Therefore, everything in experience is situated in a *field of polarities*. This field is the process of becoming. Second, every actuality, in becoming, is the Opening of the Difference between physicality and mentality: past events and possible new realizations, physical experiences of this past (actual entities) and mental experiences of abstractions from these physical experiences (eternal objects) that allow for a new realization. For Whitehead, every event exists only as an actual *entity* (unity) through the opening of the *difference* between physical experiences and mental experiences and their process of unification. Every experience is the feeling of other (past) actualities in their *being* in the space of unrealized *possibilities*, taken either from the unsettled past and drawn to its repetition or as a gift of an unsettled future with the offerings of unrealized possibilities to become otherwise.

Whitehead conceptualizes this opening of differences as the *fundamental “dipolarity”* of the event of becoming: the Field of Difference between a physical feeling of an external, public past (of what has become) as internal to a new event in the horizon of its mental feeling of possibilities (as potentials for realization). “Thus an actual entity is essentially dipolar, with its physical and mental poles; and even the physical world cannot be properly understood without reference to its other side, which is the complex of mental operations. The primary mental operations are conceptual feelings” (PR 239). An actual event of becoming is *everything* in this field of dipolarity between physical and mental pole and *nothing* without or beyond it.

It is this *dipolarity* that expresses the fundamental *tension* which is the crisis of spirituality: the tension between *receptivity* of the world and the *valuation* of this world in a unique unification. “The bare character of mere responsive re-enactment constituting the original physical feeling in its first phase is enriched in the second phase by the valuation accruing from integration with the conceptual correlate. In this way, the dipolar character of concrescent experience provides in the physical pole for the objective side of experience, derivative from an external actual world, and provides in the mental pole for the subjective side of experience, derivative from the subjective conceptual valuations correlate to the physical feelings” (PR 277).

In the *re-enactment*, every event is the expression of a world beyond itself as the event's own body. In the *internalization* of the world, bodily existence *in difference* to the subjective valuation becomes the critical impulse of becoming: we can either comply with the re-enacted world or re-evalu-

ate it in such a way that it re-integrates uniquely in the new event. The more we integrate an ever-diverse past in its diversity and otherness into an ever more novel, unanticipated uniqueness, the more we realize the gift of the Spirit. The more we are “concerned” with the world in the process of internalizing and the more we release novel possibilities in its integration, the more we not only intensify our own existence as events of becoming, but also liberate a world beyond ourselves to which we transcend our Selves, transforming ourselves into moments of the enriched becoming of Others.

This *field of becoming*, which is the tension between the poles, is both: the *opening* of the difference and the *intensification* of the difference. The crisis of becoming always situates existence always between the limits and on the edges of collapse or explosion: too much past or too much novelty; too much public socialization or too much privacy, too much repetition or too much novelty. Spiritual development is, indeed, the high art of balancing compassion for the Other with the stature of Uniqueness.

The field of difference is so profound that it becomes Whitehead’s expression of the fundamental structure of the universe *as such*: it reflects the process of *becoming-one* and *becoming-one-in-the-midst-of-many*, altered by the many unifications as they loose themselves into the world beyond their own becoming (cf. PR 21). It becomes the expression of the fundamental difference between God and the World as the final “contrasted opposites” (PR 348) in the process of becoming. And it becomes the expression of the nature of God as the ur-difference of Primordial Nature and Consequent Nature, of creation and salvation, of memory and initiation. “Any instance of experience,” therefore, is in *this* profound sense “dipolar, whether that instance be God or an actual occasion of the world” (PR 36).

In the field of polarity, the spiritual process of *differentiation* is an expression of the nature of the World and God and their internal and intermediate dipolarity; and God as Spirit reveals its character as Gift. “Thus the universe is to be conceived as attaining the active self-expression of its own variety of opposites—of its own freedom and its own necessity, of its own multiplicity and its own unity, of its own imperfection and its own perfection. All the ‘opposites’ are elements in the nature of things, and are incorrigibly there. The concept of ‘God’ is the way in which we understand this incredible fact—that what cannot be, yet is” (PR 350).

Eros: Traces of God

If *this Gift* is Whitehead’s concept of God (in which we are invited to understand the process of difference) then it is precisely the *difference* in the process of God and, consequently, the difference *between* God and the World that marks its dipolarity as the process of the *Spirit*. In other words: because in “every respect God and the World move conversely to

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each other in respect to their process” (PR 349), the Great Opening of the difference is not per se the dark abyss of indifferent chaos, but that of a purposeful openness. Because the “origination of God is from the mental pole, [while] the origination of an actual occasion is from the physical pole” (PR 36), God becomes the purposeful creator of the spiritual crisis, because *only in it* we experience the trace of the Divine Eros incarnating into the process of differentiation as the fundamental expression of the depth of the universe.

If the “initial phase of each fresh occasion represents the issue of a struggle within the past for objective existence beyond itself,” then Whitehead introduces God as the “determinant of the struggle” by being “the supreme Eros incarnating itself as the first phase of the individual subjective aim in the new process of actuality” (AI 198). In other words: God as Eros becomes the gift of every event’s “origin” in the sense of the Great Opening of Difference: the difference between the event and the world (that has become). This difference *is* the process of becoming, and by this *incarnation of difference* the process is characterized as a *spiritual* process.

Whitehead conceptualizes this disturbance of Being as God’s gift of an “initial aim.” This paradoxical notion is in itself already an expression of the spiritual field between beginning and end, initiation and purpose, origin and finale. It is not only the verbalization of the fact that every process, in order to begin, needs a horizon of purposeful unification or integration; it indicates even more profoundly that no event would *begin* to become in the first place if it was not created by the difference, the initial aim initiates, as the event’s possibly becoming *purposeful*. Hence “the initial stage of its aim is an endowment which the subject inherits from the inevitable ordering of things, conceptually realized in the nature of God” (PR 244). But because the gift of the initial aim is the *act of the constitution of the process itself*, it is not an “abstraction,” not just a general “eternal object” issued by God. On the

contrary, in its givenness by God the initial aim radically marks the beginning of the event *as a whole* and this whole in its *uniqueness*. This “immediacy of the concrescent subject,” then, is precisely what “is constituted by its living aim at its own self-constitution” (PR 244). Thus, while the dipolar field of differences (between past and future, externality and immediacy, objectivity and subjectivity) is a creative process that in “its completion depends on the self-causation of the subject-superject,” the truly “initial stage of the aim is rooted in the nature of God” (PR 244). We are traces of God.

Whitehead is well aware that if God is the gift of the initial aim of the process of becoming, this becoming is in its *constitution* nothing but a *spiritual crisis*. Because Eros lures from the lost past into an intense future, the intensity to obtain, and the tension to endure, will inevitably be tied into the complexities of the *struggles of the past* that seeks recognition beyond itself.

Hence, he articulates this “function of God” as gift of difference to be “analogous to the remorseless working of things in Greek and in Buddhist thought” (PR 244). Because the “initial aim is the best for that *impasse*” of the past, the crisis may be that “the best be bad,” appearing as “the ruthlessness of God [that] can be personified as *Até*, the goddess of mischief” (PR 244).

Always in midst of this impasse, therefore, the spiritual journey will realize the trace of the Eros in the dipolar field of solitariness and solidarity. “In its solitariness the spirit asks, What, in the way of value, is the attainment of life? And it can find no such value till it has merged its individual claim with that of the objective universe. Religion is world-loyalty.” Spiritual practice, Whitehead says in *Religion in the Making*, will begin with the awareness that the “spirit at once surrenders itself to this universal claim and appropriates it for itself” (RM 60).

In *solitude* the trace of God reveals itself in the initial

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aim as the gift of God *only* when we dive into the *beginnings* of ourselves, where we loose ourselves in the mystical moment in which we are not yet differentiated from the World and God. The mystics have always directed us to this moment of non-difference, the gift of the *unio mystica*. It might well be that the spiritual practice of attaining this “union” with God at the depth of creation itself is only possible by loosing any distraction from the noise of the world. We may look at this dark place of our own beginning with blind eyes. Only in our retreat from the world and ourselves, only in this dangerous mode of self-loss in a solitude of which we cannot control a *breakthrough* to the very beginning of the difference we in our becoming are, may we become aware of the Gift that we are. Only in the crisis of the missing world and the missing Self—always endangered by the abyss of anesthesia— may we be given the “union” of self-transcendence that is the moment of the creation of the Self.

If spirituality is the Gift of the Spirit, it is how this gift is given that forms what it is.

In *solidarity*, however, we turn our view in another direction. Because we cannot become aware of God in Godself even in this union (if attained at all), the true Gift of this union is not the unification with God, but the *differentiation* from God, the becoming-onself in the tension between God and the World. If this is the origin of our subjectivity, we are “born” to *follow* God’s incarnation into the World. In this *metanoia*, we become the trace of God by becoming world-loyal. In this self-transcendence, now, we do not lose ourselves in God, but we loose our Selves by becoming “important” *beyond* ourselves—for the development of the world, *her* intensities and harmonies.

Place: Nexus Beyond Personality

If it is true that (at least in a Whiteheadian context) the spiritual crisis always is generated from the dipolar field of differences, its transformative process takes place only when the Self that the field *creates* is, at the same time, profoundly *transcended*. Here, ethics is born from the gift of the Spirit in the midst

of the spiritual crisis of seeking self-transcendence. As Whitehead in his *Category of Subjective Intensity* notes: “The subjective aim, whereby there is origination of conceptual feeling, is at intensity of feeling (α) in the immediate subject, and (β) in the *relevant* future. This double aim—at the *immediate* present and the *relevant* future—is less divided than appears on the surface. For the determination of the *relevant* future, and the *anticipatory* feeling respecting provision for its grade of intensity, are elements affecting the immediate complex of feeling. The greater part of morality hinges on the determination of relevance in the future” (PR 27).

Self-Transcendence as World-Loyalty, in other words, is the “self-formation which is a process of concrescence” that at the same time “by the principle of objective immortality characterizes the creativity which transcends it” (PR 108). Again we find the spiritual process to be a transformation in the dipolar field. On the one hand,

we “become” as *self-collection* of relations of/to/within an internalized external world to which to be loyal means to respect its otherness in constituting the subjective process of becoming. It is the valuation of the self-transcendence of the Other as it constitutes the Self. On the other hand, we “become” as an act of *self-relativity* in which a future beyond the Self is not only accepted, but anticipated as a *moment* of the process of becoming itself. This is the dipolar field that Whitehead calls “subject-superject”: “the emergent unity of the superject” by which an “actual entity is to be conceived both as a subject presiding over its own immediacy of becoming, and a superject which is the atomic creature exercising its function of objective immortality” (PR 45).

In the *anticipation of self-transcendence*, the major ethical impulse is released in the midst of the spiritual crisis of the *immediacy* of the Self and the *importance* beyond the Self. This anticipation releases the transformation of concrescence into transition, of unification into multiplication, of the claim of Life

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into an “ethical death” of becoming, into importance beyond one Self. Whitehead’s so-called “objective immortality” is not just an interpretive category of ethical self-transcendence, but in its consciously anticipatory realization it should be considered an important spiritual practice by which we experience that we “become a ‘being’; and [that] it belongs to the nature of every ‘being’ that it is a potential for every ‘becoming’” (PR 45) beyond itself. Here, precisely, dipolarity is realized as a process of spiritual transformation: where we dare to experience, and to practice, a “‘perishing’ of [the] absoluteness” of the Self by “the attainment of ‘objective immortality’” (PR 60). “In this [spiritual] sense, each actual occasion experiences its own objective immortality” (PR 216).

Especially in the Christian context, this crisis has led to the suspicion that one of its most cherished notions of the worth of human beings is in peril of being lost: that of personhood. But for Whitehead the opposite is true. The acceptance of the gift of the spiritual crisis as a process of self-transcendence, even to the point where the Self is lost in immortality of its worth beyond itself, is the *true transformation* of a naïve notion of person into a spiritually informed understanding of personality. In one sense, personality would be lost, namely as “absoluteness of the subject,” which seems to be but a variation of the sublimation of the relationless “absolute” oneness so problematic to the formation of

a monotheism in which God (the Self) is considered as “requiring no relations to anything beyond himself” (AI 169). Instead, in Whitehead, personality can appear in the context of the “mutual immanence” of all instances of becoming, which was even the “origin” of formation of the Christian notion of person in the doctrine of the Trinity as “a multiplicity in the nature of God, each component being unqualifiedly Divine” (AI 168). With his transformed notion of personality, Whitehead is historically on rather firm ground, because the theological use of “person” came into being as an expression “of mutual immanence in the divine nature” (AI 168).

If, indeed, mutual immanence is the “characteristic” of personhood, Whitehead’s shift of usage of this notion in the context of the spiritual crisis, indicating the loss of absoluteness and “ethical death” of the Self as moments of the *constitution* of its own becoming becomes understandable. Instead of situating “person” in the realm of “identity” through a permanent “form”—the soul (cf. PR 104)—she becomes the most precious expression of the realm of the *khora*, the nexus of the Platonic “place,” the profound “natural matrix for all things,” the “medium of intercommunication” whereby “the many actualities of the physical world as components in each other’s natures” (AI 136). Of this “place” Whitehead says that once we have lost self-referential subjectivity and structural sustenance as basic moments of

the notion of personality, this nexus becomes the expression of a “personal identity [which] is the thing which receives all occasions of the man’s existence. It is there as a natural matrix for all transitions of life, and is changed and variously figured by the things that enter it; so that it differs in its character at different times. Since it receives all manner of experiences into its own unity, it must itself be bare of all forms. We shall not be far wrong if we describe it as invisible, formless, and all-receptive. It is a locus which persists, and provides an emplacement for all the occasions of experience” (AI 187).

Spirit: Gift of Self-Transcendence

Peace, Polarity, Eros, Place, Self-Transcendence—these are the elements we collected. In their light we may now ask again: What is the Spirit that informs Whiteheadian spirituality? And what, in light of this Spirit, is Whiteheadian spirituality? If spirituality is the Gift of the Spirit, it is *how* this gift is given that forms *what* it is (cf. PR 23): it is given in the form of the *crisis* that not just accompanies the process of becoming, but *is* its very process, its initiation and end. This crisis is the opening of a difference so profound that it characterizes reality *as such* and in its most intimate concreteness insofar as it is a process of the becoming of becomings and is a nexus of perishing in becoming. the “essence” of the “spiritual adventure” (AI 82), in Whitehead’s eyes, is the recognition and affirmation of

the thoroughgoing dipolarity of Life and death and “becoming” as the field of difference *in between*, which is the cosmos.

On every level the crisis of difference appears as the paradox of *antitheses* not dissimilar to, or better: precisely of the same order as the Six Antithesis between God and the World at the end of *Process and Reality* when their metaphysical function reveals what the spiritual process is about: to be(come) a transformation that induces “a shift of meaning which converts the opposition into a contrast” (PR 348). And if in the final analysis everything is embraced by the dipolar field in which “God and the World are the contrasted opposites in terms of which Creativity achieves its supreme task of transforming disjointed multiplicity, with its diversities in opposition, into concrescent unity, with its diversities in contrast” (PR 348), then this is the *essence* of the spiritual adventure.

In the end, we are left with the arch-difference that characterizes everything; it is the only positive nature of the Spirit, the Gift, and its activity: the “two concrescent poles of realization—‘enjoyment’ and ‘appetition,’ that is, the ‘physical’ and the ‘conceptual’” (PR 348). Spirituality, then, is the *actualization of the gift of becoming in/between enjoyment and appetition*, both being paradoxically differentiated in themselves and mutually intertwined: Enjoyment only provides satisfaction in transcending the Self that creates itself out of the relations it enjoys;

and Appetition is the erotic urge beyond the enjoyed world that is always the beginning of the adventure of becoming. Spiritual transformation reveals this final dipolar structure of the Gift to be a process of Self-Transcendence.

In the complexity, in which both Appetition and Enjoyment presuppose each other are mutually

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immanent in one another, the process of becoming reveals itself as the process of the Spirit. It is the process of the Spirit *herself* as their transformation in *her* own nature—suggested by Whitehead in referring to God’s own dipolar nature. Precisely by *embracing* the process of the becoming (that is the World) with the creative Appetition of the Primordial Nature and the Enjoyment of this becoming beyond itself in the Consequent Nature, God is Spirit. But God is Spirit *only in the process of*

the Gift of God’s own Self-Transcendence: the “objective immortality in respect to his primordial nature and his consequent nature” (PR 32). *Spirit is God beyond God*. Or as Whitehead says, “this ‘superjective nature’ of God is the character of the pragmatic value of his specific satisfaction qualifying the transcendent creativity in the various temporal instances” (PR 88).

The transformative realization, then, of this ultimate dipolarity of the Appetition and Enjoyment of God’s nature beyond God in the creative field of the World-Process (which again is always already a new realization of the difference from God in the embrace of God) indicates the spiritual process in the World. It is the creative crisis of this difference and embrace, and the perpetual mutual transformation of Appetition and Enjoyment into a *contrast* of integration and dissolution, of Immediacy and Immortality.

In spiritual practice, this multiply intertwined field of difference and transformation becomes most visible in the most extreme differentiation of either Appetition or Enjoyment, or their integration—as the practice of self-dissolution into the non-difference of the Eros opening the process in every initial aim, *or* as the practice of the “ethical death” whereby all becoming “enjoys an objective immortality in the future beyond itself” (PR 230). In the final analysis, it becomes the realization of the ultimate *formlessness* of the nexus of the creative field that God as Spirit

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opens and embraces. The spiritual adventure, then, is in experience and practice the most intense, creative, and world-sympathetic realization of the “self-enjoyment of being one among many, and of being one arising out of the composition of many” (PR 145).

Of course, if this is what Whiteheadian spirituality is all about, it will most certainly leave us with another crisis. If, indeed, the Gift of the Spirit is the transformative differentiation of Appetition and Enjoyment, the process of Self-Transcendence will always hinder us in becoming absolute; it will always relativize us; it will always take our youth and will age it; it will always have a tragic side. In a shockingly peaceful poetics, Whitehead envisions this tragedy at the end of *Religion in the Making* by remarking that the “universe shows us two aspects: on one side it is physically wasting, on the other side it is spiritually ascending. It is thus passing with a slowness, inconceivable in our measures of time, to new creative conditions, amid which the physical world, as we at present know it, will be represented by a ripple barely to be distinguished from nonentity” (RM 160).

The spiritual crisis consists *precisely* in becoming aware of this *character of love* as self-transcendence: “It is the feeling as to what would happen if right could triumph in a beautiful world, with discord routed. It is the passionate desire for the beautiful result, in this instance. Such love is distracting, nerve-racking. But, unless darkened by utter despair, it involves deep feeling of an aim in the Universe, winning such triumph as is possible to it.” Spirituality is always the Gift of *this* dipolar tension of the Becoming-In-Between. It is the Gift of “the sense of Eros, hovering between Peace as the crown of Youth and Peace as the issue of Tragedy” (AI 289).

Returning to the beginning again—and we are always spiritual beginners—we become experimenters *in this sense of Peace*. This “sense,” however, is always a crisis in which we become aware, experience, and exercise the “Adventure of the Universe [as it] starts with the dream and reaps tragic Beauty. This is the secret of the union of Zest with Peace: —That the suffering attains its end in a Harmony of Harmonies. The immediate experience of this Final Fact, with its union of Youth and Tragedy, is the sense of Peace” (AI 296) that Whiteheadian spirituality is all about. Here, of course, the sense of Peace will be a consequence of our activity that desires its reality.

Learn more from the newest co-director of the Center for Process Studies this summer when Roland Faber teaches “Whiteheadian Spirituality: The Process of Experience and the Experience of Process” June 11-15 at the P&F Process Theology Summer Institute. More information on page 33.