

## Generative Process – Joining with God’s Way of Creating

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[View clip from Andy Goldsworthy’s *Rivers and Tides, Working with Time*]

Vision at St. Gregory’s began with something shared between Rick Fabian and me. What we see here comes from thirty-four years’ collaborative work and discovery including our foundational work at the Episcopal Church at Yale (for Rick 1970-1976, with Rick and me collaborating there from 1972-1976), a period of us working separately, and to some extent a division of theory and practice (Rick observing parish visitations throughout the diocese of California and writing the plan for St. Gregory’s while I was working to introduce the 1976 Proposed Book of Common Prayer [what we now know as the 1979 Prayer Book] to a conservative, small-town congregation in Idaho, 1976-1978 for Rick, 1976-1980 for me), and finally a long progressive sequence of development, practice and discovery with the congregation of St. Gregory’s (1978-present) and the people of St. Gregory’s have become major collaborators with us as have colleagues like you, clergy, musicians, seminarians, lay leaders and parishes, around the country.

I hope this afternoon to give you a real feel of that process and its unfolding. Personal vision (even a vision shared with someone else) is less than act and only a seed of community. St. Gregory’s came to be because people gathered around what we were doing, and why we said we were doing it, and what we said we hoped to accomplish. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the people said, “I can support that. I want to be part of that. I want to help make it happen.”

Along the way there have been times that Rick and I steered it pretty forcefully – toward building this church, for example, rather than contenting ourselves to be a small and exquisite community in rented space – which was where one of our really wonderful (and I do mean that) non-stipendiary clergy tried to steer the congregation when we were small and at least sometimes exquisite.

That clergy member had a powerful voice because we were trying to get the congregation (and all its members) to take responsibility for shaping their life together. Along with shaping a highly participatory liturgy, we asked the members to define membership and think about who was a member and who was not, we experimented with consensus decision making, we tried a great variety of planning processes we learned at various workshops. We created a small booklet of formative decisions members made about their life together. We tried to examine everything together and to make our common life very deliberate. We all learned a great deal, but Rick and I kept saying we were doing all that on the way to building the church building we’re in now and making a congregation like the one that’s hosting this conference. We pushed to build the church because we wanted to model something new for churches that had to deal with mortgages, leaky roofs, heating bills and all that ordinary stuff.

When we built this building St. Gregory’s congregation began something new. Rick and I, like Moses and Aaron or maybe Moses and Elijah, had brought the people to the edge of the promised land. Moving into the building, the congregation grew exponentially and began to take responsibility for its own life in ways we had to run to keep up with. We and the congregation began to see that the particular way that Rick and I had been the prophets whose God-given words called the people into being wasn’t meant to last. It didn’t end in 1995, and it’s not fully ended yet. But October 1, 1995, our first liturgy in this space, we all knew the people gathered had a reasonable expectation of a next generation and generations beyond that of St. Gregory’s.

The maturing of our congregation has brought St. Gregory's to a new question – one we share with older, longer established congregations. How does a people or group listen to God? How do WE do the discernment work of seeing and hearing what God asks of us next. How do we discover our deepest DESIRE (desire, where Gregory of Nyssa says we are most like God and where we meet God)?

The process of making (discovering, uncovering, unfolding, synthesizing) a central vision *together* was new to us and we looked for sources or authorities to guide us doing it. Our last decade of trying to share the work of shaping liturgy and systematically giving other PROPHETIC voices in our congregation's life has been a path of discovery. I also want to offer some observations about this path from the seemingly unlikely theories of an innovative and sometimes contrarian architect named Christopher Alexander.

With Christopher Alexander's help, I've been thinking about the long, slow process of making St. Gregory's, and I think those questions of process will teach us big things about church, sacraments, Christian formation, and mission.

So what have we been doing for the last thirty-four years? Liturgical experimentation is the answer we're often given, but we've usually resisted calling our work 'liturgical experimentation,' because much of what goes by that name, 'liturgical experimentation,' is an undisciplined, unsystematic, and rather random (by our lights) glorification of 'trying new things.'

In fact, what we've done has been a long, slow process of research, experiment, and development. The liturgies themselves haven't been experimental (though Rick jokes about my ordination to the priesthood, which he planned at the Episcopal Church at Yale in 1972, the trial use days before there was a 'new prayer book' Rick warns me that when I arrive at the pearly gates to check in, St. Peter will say, 'Presbyter? No, I don't have your name. Oh, wait a minute, I see you listed here among the deacons. What could have happened? Yes, I see now there's a note, in the book, that priestly ordination was one of Fabian's. Too bad. It didn't work.') The point of Rick's joking is actually pretty clear. Of course it 'worked,' so the liturgy wasn't experimental like George Bush's hastily deployed, untested 'missile shield.' The liturgies are real and 'they work.'

But St. Gregory's relationship to all liturgy has been one of continuing experimentation, real, lab experimentation – study, comparison, hypotheses, small adjustments, new trials, and so on. What did you see? Did it flow? Why? Why not? Any liturgy may lead us to discovery if we pay attention to what's happening.

I'd now say a better description than 'experimental' would be 'generative.' A generative process is what leads us to discoveries as we making or doing something. It unfolds a step at a time, and at each step there is possible discovery and probably problems. Generation happens by doing this over and over again AND paying attention to what's happening. How many cones has Andy Goldsworthy already made before his four failures on the beach? Could he even have had those failures without the successes that had gone before? And would the cone that stood through the incoming and outgoing tide have been possible without so many previous (valid!) cones and without the four failures?

Christopher Alexander quotes a traditional Samoan chant that taught the generative steps for building one of those great ocean-going canoes:

First find your tree.  
Cut down the tree.  
Hollow out the trunk.  
Next carve the prow.  
Shape the hull of the canoe.  
Start shaping the inside to form the seats...  
[until finally]  
shape and carve the prow to form a figure.

Notice that it's not a blueprint but a sequence of steps each of which contributes to the steps that follow. The carver has an idea in mind, but the material, the day by day unfolding of the process shapes the specifics of a canoe. What the chant tells us is that the right sequence, each step done as it needs to be done, it what makes a good canoe.

So, here's the important distinction – it's not a blueprint, or even a design, but a process. That's actually how life works. Listen to this from the biologist, Lewis Wolpert.

All the information for embryonic development is contained within a fertilized egg. So how is this information interpreted to give rise to an embryo? One possibility is that the structure of the organism is somehow encoded a descriptive program in the genome. Does the DNA contain a full description of the organism to which it will give rise? The answer is no. The genome contains instead a program of instructions for making the organism- a generative program – in which the cytoplasmic constituents of eggs and cells are essential players along with the genes like the DNA coding for the sequence of amino acids in a protein.

A descriptive program, like a blueprint or a plan, describes an object in some detail, whereas a generative program describes how to make an object. For the same object the programs are very different. Consider origami, the art of paper folding. By folding a piece of paper in various directions, it is quite easy to make a paper hat or a bird from a single sheet. To describe in any detail the final form of the paper with the complex relationships between its parts is really very difficult, and not of much helping in explaining how to achieve it. Much more useful and easier to formulate are instructions on how to fold the paper. The reason for this is that simple instructions about folding have complex spatial consequences. In development, gene action similarly sets in motion a sequence of events that can bring about profound changes in the embryo. One can thus think of the genetic information in the fertilized egg as equivalent to the folding instructions in origami: both contain a generative program for making a particular structure.

Lewis Wolpert, *Principles of Development* (NY, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 21), quoted in Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order, Book Two, the Process of Creating Life*

In fact any builder can tell you that in a finished building, a blueprint several stages short of what was built. My brother was the builder for this church. When he went to engineers to ask how to build the wall behind the dancing Christ (which had to have one exterior skin from the roof peak to the corners, and when he asked the engineers how to get the compression ring and

contraction ring in place to support the cupola and roof, the engineer said, 'I have no idea. I only know it will work when it's all in place.' The builder had to discover process. Because this happens at every level, there are lots of little changes from drawings to construction. Drawings of what really happened are called 'as built.' Things happen that are beyond the architect's control.

I can show you one in this church. Take a look at the doors out to the baptismal font. They're not centered on the wall. Notice the distance between the glass doors and the closet doors to either side of them). This is a construction 'error,' but I think it's an important, life-giving one. In the blueprint, the doors out to the font are centered in that wall and centered beneath the clerestory windows. In fact the doors are subtly off-center. What happened? There was, we now know, a small architect's measuring error on the blueprints, carpenters found dimensions that didn't make sense and made their adjustments. It was all within a range that wouldn't compromise the building. In other words, an adaptive process. But what did it produce? An imperfection that makes the symmetry live. There's another way to see it – if you go outside, cross the street, and study the font doors and porch in relationship to the tower cross, you may see that the porch and doors aren't quite centered. Other than my brother's spotting it, I don't know that we'd know it happened. But it makes the building more beautiful.

I'm suggesting that was a mistake and a series of adaptive fixes in this instance stumbled into generative process, the real way evolution happens. A long series of steps and the intelligences and hands working on actual material made something different (and better) than the drawings. The process of creating life made something more living than the 'idea' or 'ideal' in the drawings. Which actually pretty much how life and universe do it. In other words, it looks like the process of creation.

Origen, Gregory of Nyssa's teacher, thought the idea of God's omnipotence was philosophically problematic. He thought it was simpler and more adequate to say that God didn't make any more universe than God could ultimately manage. Generative process. Thy Kingdom come. Creation is a genuinely ongoing work. And don't trust any theologian who wants to tell you 'it's all in the plan.' In fact, it's all in the making and the making together.

So, in truth, our liturgy (and probably yours) began with some ideas (large and small), a broad vision of a whole, and a lot of detail that needed to be filled in which was best filled in by unfolding discovery and some amount of trial and error, or trial and discovery/correction.

In this Rick and I were blessed (and chose to work together) because we saw we were gifted with friendship and trust and with enough common understanding of the overall vision that 'working through the particulars' felt as though it would be genuinely collaborative. We also shared a fascination with ancient liturgical precedents, figuring out what on earth it might mean to be faithful to Jesus' teaching, and a very Anglican conviction that we could gain insight into church from contemporary scientific, social, psychological and other kinds of process research. All of that is genetic material. Resourceful ways and means of responding to the next moment.

Looking back over thirty-four years now, we can see strands, threads, or vectors of the work that were completely present from the beginning that we didn't really 'see' or articulate until much later. (think genes again). Shared intuition made that possible. Also some patient response to failure as we looked for underlying human patterns in ritual and community ('understanding the stone' as Andy Goldsworthy put it) that shape us all from our beginning. Rick and I and now our many collaborators work to shape community, liturgy, common life, and creativity and mission by paying close attention to:

- ☞ Naturalness in shaping ritual,
- ☞ Trying practices to understand them, and trying them long enough to make small corrections and improve result,
- ☞ Public liturgy (i.e. not house church or monastery),
- ☞ Building everything around welcoming the stranger,
- ☞ A context of affection and ritual expression of warmth,
- ☞ Rituals that allow people to touch one another in matter-of-fact safety,
- ☞ Movement,
- ☞ Attention to gesture and action,
- ☞ Multiple centers of action and shared authority,
- ☞ Interplay between structure and spontaneity,
- ☞ Trust of ‘popular’ liturgy and ritual,
- ☞ Giving the congregation a real voice,
- ☞ Large musical aspirations,
- ☞ Care for the visual,
- ☞ Interplay between noise and silence,
- ☞ A contrarian hunch that the Spirit *has never stepped moving* in the church.

Though circumstances may make certain historical periods particularly rich fields, there’s life and discovery in any era of the church’s history and any pattern of human ritual and community. A lively engagement with tradition will draw on the whole of Christian history and to make something both modern (and culturally authentic) and vitally rooted in Christian traditional,

Does this list sound like an arbitrary cluster of ideas? (It does to me a bit. Some of it comes from memory, some of it’s like brainstorming.) What holds it together? What’s it got to do with ‘first you find a tree?’ What’s the wholeness?

Throughout the work **desire** and **love** and **trust in a merciful, forgiving God** have shaped the process and disciplined our ideas, principles, research, and liturgical idealism. Particularly since moving into this building in 1995, that is, since having a fundamental grounding of place,

space, and a feeling that we had a future ahead of us, I've sensed that we'd learned a generative process to care for the flow of liturgy. We've paid consistent attention to a living whole that is always emerging and which is more than the sum of any constituent list of liturgical events, principles, or texts.

Our liturgical planning has always looked at the constituent parts in their dynamic relationship to an unfolding whole. Practically this means paying most attention to what holds things together such as overlapping, shared leadership, chronological transitions of focus, and attention to boundaries and the positive step of crossing of boundaries.

Along the way we've stumbled into processes and theories that seemed to serve our goals, our group, and our mission. I think we've recognized an intuitive fit in gathering the theories and processes or practices that have shaped us, for example Tavistock Group Theory, Appreciative Inquiry, Aikido, Byzantine Simultaneous action and shared leadership, bits of systems, process and chaos theories.

Most recently for me it's been Generative Processes as I've mentioned in talking about genes and origami. And it's sensing that elusive (and all pervasive) character of generative process that I hope this talk gets you to. I think it's what underlies nearly everything we've said to you. What we're all asking is how to make our congregations live. Steady, patient practice of generative processes is how God creates life. Do the same, and something startling will happen for your Holy Week this year and even more in the years to come.

Generative Processes. I describe this as 'stumbled into' because in every instance, we were already at work when one or the other of us happened on this material and approach. Rather than being 'something we ought to try out' (which has been our relationship to traditional liturgical material we have mined from research and adapted) Generative process presents itself with one of those "a-ha!" recognitions – it's 'very like what we're doing, only clearer.' I hope that's the main thrust of your experience of being at St. Gregory's – not a negation or correction of what you've been doing back home, but a setting and events that give you clearer eyes for you've already begun and a different discernment to take what your home congregation knows very well to new places.

Such a new yet familiar cluster of approaches, ideas, means of analysis and synthesis, and practices presents itself and its 'aha' of recognition exactly as the processes of life and creation present themselves. Gregory of Nyssa and his Cappadocian friends might suggest we were recognizing means of welcoming the *logoi* of our created world and cooperating with the divine energies/will already present and moving through things.

It's a non-problem-solving, non-Archimedean, non-Cartesian hunch about the world. Instead of Archimedes famous saying, 'give me a fixed point and I can move the world,' we're practicing joining as 'a way to reconcile the world,' (O Sensei describing Aikido). We're NOT trying to make a compelling rhetoric of the hidden nature of things ('just how things are') but try to observe and cooperate with God at work in 'WHAT'S HAPPENING/'

The God of the Bible, the real God, Gregory and our other Cappadocian teachers would insist, is utterly unknowable in God's immutable, immovable, essential, hidden otherness. The God-ness of God is forever beyond our reach and actually none of our blessed business.

But the dynamic unfolding of God's continuing work and consistent purpose, that's another matter.

As Maximus the Confessor said, 'Everywhere and in every way the Divine Word has been longing to become incarnate,' or as Gregory put it, 'Human life is an unending, infinite journey

into God.’ So, we’re not talking about fixing what’s broke. And we probably won’t get *what’s happening* if we’re urgently concerned about the thrownness or fallenness of humankind, in other words about our primordial fall and eschatological restoration. A narrative frame (and idea and concept) that begins with what’s wrong with the world does give us a great way of talking about suffering and evil, but it’s a killer. Creation and redemption are one. God’s love IS God’s judgment. So we’re talking about God’s continuing work of creation and our Spirit-guided pathway into God, which the Eastern Church boldly calls our ‘deification.’

Paul Bradshaw’s fascinating article, “The Eucharistic Sayings of Jesus,” uncovers and tracks the broad and apparently independent tradition of what we used to think of as Johannine: ‘the bread of life’ quasi-Eucharistic sayings. You’ll remember that John has the footwashing at the Last Supper and no account of the institution of the Eucharist. Actually, Bradshaw argues, two distinct strands of Gospel tradition about how Jesus offered bread and wine. John has one, and both appear in the synoptics. One strand doesn’t appear particularly tied to the Last Supper narratives, and it “sees the Eucharistic body and blood of Jesus primarily in terms of nourishment for human flesh and so giving it the hope of resurrection to eternal life.” Bradshaw’s quotation of Irenaeus gives some of the feel of this as Irenaeus brings speaks flesh that gives life tradition in his description of the Eucharist – Jesus “took that created thing, bread and gave thanks, saying ‘this is my body.’ And the cup likewise, which is part of that creation to which we belong, he declared his blood.’ Both phrases are without the sacrificial language of ‘broken’ or ‘shed.’

Feeding the people on Jesus who is our life, we want to discover and follow the natural, God-given, seemingly chaotic processes by which Life breaks in on us. Beginning with the useful tools of analysis, dissection, and problem-solving won’t get us closer to life. Beginning with that little cluster will take us toward power, confrontation, insider/outsider, finding who to blame and compelling them to repent and change their behavior. To get to life, we’ve got to begin with a whole and its movement.

Paying attention to experience, feeling desire, longing and love, heeding joy and ache, paying attention to where we’re really alive, pursuing it, and reiteratively asking, ‘does this make us more alive’ will begin to uncover Good News already present, God and God’s Kingdom already here and powerful among us, God’s constant longing to be in communion with us (try comparing that to the kind of stories and practice we see in Jesus our teacher – it’s what he does!).

I’ll offer a large specific. It’s a parable of liturgical planning at St. Gregory’s: ‘We offer communion to everyone and to everyone by name.’ How did we get there? In our founding document, the 1977 Plan for a Mission of St. Gregory’s of Nyssa, the Vatican II, broad liturgical movement norm of one baptism as a means of uniting all people in Christ was still explicitly operative and present. We talked about welcoming all baptized Christians to the Table and making certain that baptized children received communion.

What led us to Open Communion was a combination of pastoral flexibility and Gospel scholarship (not liturgical theory). In the process we rejected a mainstream liturgical blueprint.

Probably the first step was letting go of the priestly role of communicating each person. In our single circle around the Table, bread and wine were passed from person to person. The clergy lost control and the sacrament naturalized itself. We quickly realized that our people always offered communion to the person next to them, and more often than not, visitors received and then offered communion to the person next to them. Specifically, Rick and I regularly heard after liturgy from non-believers, inquirers, and Jews who felt so included in their neighbor’s

offer of communion that they received. In part because we saw no way to ‘do anything about this’ without taking away the people’s experience of giving one another communion, we decided to trust the people and God.

At the very same time that we were watching our congregation offering unbaptized visitors communion most Sundays (and as we continued reflecting on the desire and inspiration that moved them to receive), we were exploring in classes and discussions at St. Gregory’s Jesus’ teaching and the prophetic sign he made the center of his ministry - welcoming everyone (including unprepared sinners) to feast with him in God’s kingdom. Norman Perrin, in *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, may have been the first to argue that Jesus was crucified because of his prophetic sign of welcoming the unprepared to feast with him. It’s become something of a commonplace in New Testament studies, though some liturgists resist considering what it has to do with who can receive communion.

Pause and notice what made this a fertile moment for discovery. In the life of our tiny congregation two elements came together

- We were trying look openly at what was really happening and
- We were trying to hear what Jesus really said and did.

The kind of problem-solving approach to the pastoral circumstance most of us learned in seminary would have intervened intellectually to prevent discovery from happening. And if not problem-solving, problem-dismissing might be used to protect liturgical principle and sacramental blueprint inviolate. That’s what we get to when we invoke the old saying ‘the exception that proves the rule.’ Just what does that mean? The clearest and most logical explanation is that ‘proves’ means ‘tests, in other words an exception is an essential piece of logical data as in a Euclidean *reductio ad absurdum* where you make a proof by assuming something’s not so, and proceed to find and demonstrate the exception to disprove the hypothetical rule and proves its opposite.

Let me offer a wonderful and heartbreaking story about this, a generative process that didn’t lead to discovery (though a piece of God’s work got done anyway). In 1993, a bright, committed, appealing Canadian liturgist visited St. Gregory’s, and after church told us a wonderful story of a two girls who lived next to his church in a very poor, troubled part of Toronto. They just showed up in church one Sunday and sat shyly in the back. But they came back, watched what people were doing and imitated everything as precisely as they could. So within the first couple of weeks of every showing up every Sunday, they began receiving communion. As the weeks went by, they stayed for coffee hour and got to know people a little bit. They were friends, not sisters. Their mothers were single women who lived next door and slept in on Sunday morning. The vicar recognized that probably meant the mothers were among a handful prostitutes who worked from the apartment building next to the church.

After a year or so there was a baptism one Sunday. The girls were fascinated and impressed. Here was something new they could do in church, and they wanted it. So they asked the vicar is just anyone could ‘get that thing with the water or was it just babies?’ The vicar told me this was the first moment it occurred to him that they might not be baptized. ‘Oh, anyone who is not baptized can have it,’ he responded. The girls nodded their solemn nods of consideration. The next Sunday at coffee hour, they happily reported that they’d asked their moms and that neither of them was baptized. The vicar decided to pursue the question of baptism but not disrupt their receiving communion. ‘It seemed like the best course at the time,’ he told me.

With the girls’ encouragement the vicar asked the mums if he could make a pastoral call to talk about the baptisms. He said it was the first time he’d been in the building next door. Each

woman said exactly the same thing - it was all right with them if it was what their daughters wanted. And both women showed up in church the Sunday of the baptism (and in fact came themselves from time to time after that, sitting together in the back as their daughters had done when they first came to church).

It took a much longer time before either of them would stay for coffee hour. But by then it was easy for the congregation to welcome them and talk with them. The whole parish had fallen in love with the women's daughters. They were already volunteering to tutor the girls and help them with schoolwork. They sent them off to church camp for the summer. They helped them find good after school jobs. As they were completing secondary school parishioners helped them apply for college and got up a fund to support the girls in their studies. The vicar was still in touch with one of the girls who was a school teacher, had married happily and now had a couple of children of her own.

The vicar told me this story with evident delight and then said with some frustration, 'We both know the Eucharist has that kind of power, but don't you see? These are the exceptions that prove the rule. Baptism is what admits us to communion.' We can't be using these inspired anomalies to guide our thinking about sacraments.

He lived the story, saw its power, was grateful for it, and despite all that still wanted to protect the blueprint.

Trusting generative processes will take us places we did not expect to go. As we can allow mind to follow body, practice and reflection to lead theology, we will find our way forward and in finding our way, discover God at work.