

A COMPREHENSIVE VISION

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This past week, I traveled to the University of Chicago to attend a memorial service for Franklin Gamwell, known as Chris. He was a much-loved member of the University of Chicago Divinity School faculty from 1979 until his retirement in 2011. His research and teaching focused on the intersection of philosophy, theology, and political theory. He served as Dean of the Divinity School throughout the coursework and comprehensive exam phase of my PhD studies. During that time, I took numerous courses with him — both regular seminars and individual reading courses. Along the way, he became an essential intellectual mentor to me and a trusted friend.

After a 10-year hiatus between completing my exams and beginning my doctoral dissertation (I began my tenure as a minister of All Souls during this hiatus), Chris readily agreed to serve as advisor for my doctoral dissertation. After my graduation 20 years ago, Chris and I corresponded regularly and met in person whenever I visited Chicago. He read the manuscripts of both of my books and offered his typically generous and always incisive observations.

In terms of my intellectual development and theological orientation, no one has been more important to me than Chris Gamwell. At his service, I was able to pay tribute to the profound role he played in shaping my approach as a minister and as a public intellectual. Among many other gifts, he introduced me to the thought of Alfred North Whitehead.

Some years ago, my wife Holly Atkinson and I spent a weekend in Chicago visiting Zoë and her then fiancé and now husband, Connor. One afternoon, we were walking around the campus of the University of Chicago. As we proceeded on our meander through the main quadrangle, we came upon Swift Hall, which houses the Divinity School. Holly commented that she had never been inside Swift Hall, even though she had attended my PhD graduation outside on the quadrangle lawn a decade or so earlier.

We entered Swift Hall, and I began showing her around. When we reached the third floor, I opened the door to a seminar room in one corner of the building and invited Holly to step inside.

I was completely unprepared for my reaction that followed. Tears began flowing down my cheeks, and I felt overcome with emotion. For a few moments, I couldn't speak. Holly broke the silence by saying, "This is where you first studied Whitehead." She didn't have to ask the question. I nodded that she was correct.

In discovering Alfred North Whitehead under the tutelage of Chris Gamwell in that seminar room several decades ago, I found my intellectual and spiritual North Star. An early-twentieth-century Cambridge mathematician who later became a philosopher and theologian at Harvard, Whitehead was equal parts scientist and theologian. He showed me how to think about spirituality and ethics in the modern world.

For a theologian, Whitehead had an unusually profound understanding of the natural world. A mathematician by training, Whitehead collaborated with Bertrand Russell in writing *Principia Mathematica*, widely viewed as one of the most important books of the twentieth century. Whitehead's major philosophical work, published in 1929 under the title *Process and Reality*, takes with utmost seriousness the insights of Einstein's theory of relativity. Even more recent scientific developments such as string theory seem to have been anticipated by Whitehead's philosophy.

For a scientist, Whitehead had an unusually profound understanding of spirituality and the divine. From a close reading of the book of nature, Whitehead argued that one cannot account for the creative advance of time and history without an understanding of the role of the divine, which Whitehead called God. Beginning not with revelation but with observation, Whitehead built a bridge across the centuries-old divide between matter and spirit, between science and religion, between fact and value, between knowledge and faith, between metaphysics and ethics.

Whitehead's central insight is that everything becomes whatever it becomes by virtue of how it relates to everything else. Whether you are a photon, a person, or even God, your identity over time develops through a process of relating to everything else.

Through his work, Whitehead developed a deep confidence in the order of nature — as he put it, “the faith that at the base of things we shall not find mere arbitrary mystery.” Whitehead added, “To experience this faith is to know that our experience, dim and fragmentary as it is, yet resonates with the utmost depths of reality.”

These were the words that I longed to hear — hence my reaction in the seminar room. Having recently set aside the biblically-based dogma of the Mennonite Church, I wanted reassurance that my confidence in the world of our experience was well placed. I wanted to know that my experience resonates with the depths of reality — with the way things really are.

The founding principle of all existence is this: Everything is constituted by relationships. If you could disassemble the material universe into its constituent elementary particles (there are currently twelve: six quarks and six leptons) and pack them tightly together, you'd have a mere handful of material. (It's hard to believe, but it's true.) Everything else is relationships: the experience of these particles as they relate to each other.

Whitehead insisted that what's true of the physical world is also true of the spiritual world. Just as atoms are never lost in physical reactions, so no human experience — however sad or tragic — is ever suffered alone or eternally forgotten. Once something has happened, it remains forever part of the experiences that make up

existence as we understand it. As Whitehead put it, everything that happens in the universe — “its sufferings, its sorrows, its triumphs, its immediacies of joy” — is woven into the harmony of a completed whole. Whitehead termed this binding element, which unites everything and ensures that all experiences have an enduring refuge, God.

This is not the God of the patriarchs or any traditional religion. Rather, it’s Whitehead’s way of describing spiritual experience at its most comprehensive and most profound. It’s a feeling — and Whitehead described it as a feeling, not as a person or an idea. I describe it as the ultimate spiritual experience. It’s the experience of feeling deeply connected to everything: all that is present in our lives and our world, as well as all that is past and all that is possible.

When I use the term God, which I occasionally do, I do so in this sense: as the experience of ultimate belonging. For the universe to exist as it does, the many elements must be connected in one particular way at each moment, held together by nuclear, electromagnetic, and gravitational forces. By the next moment, things have changed, so everything must be connected in a somewhat different way. But the process is the same. The many elements that constitute the universe become one moment of experience, in which everything is ultimately connected to everything else in one particular way. In so doing, the universe thereby gains another moment of experience. In Whitehead’s words, “the many become one and are increased by one.”

This is the fundamental process by which events take place and time moves forward. Everything is ultimately connected to everything else. In a culture that continually touts individuality and self-reliance as defining virtues, it’s a counterintuitive claim that we are defined not by how we are independent of the people and world around us, but by how we are connected to them. It’s a claim that happens to be true.

One of Whitehead’s principal interpreters, the theologian Shubert Ogden, believes this sense of ultimate belonging is what human beings are talking about when we use the term God. Because each of us has an essential place and thus plays an essential role in the universe, our existence matters profoundly. Ogden says, “I hold that our primary use of [the word] ‘God’ is to refer to the objective ground in reality itself of our ineradicable confidence in the final worth of our existence.”

I love that phrase: our ineradicable confidence in the final worth of our existence. In other words, whatever name you give to the source of our confidence that existence has ultimate worth, the confidence rests upon what Whitehead calls the utmost depths of reality. For this reason, our confidence cannot be eradicated.

Why does any of this matter? In a conference convened to honor Chris Gamwell upon his retirement in 2011, David Tracy, also a longstanding and highly decorated member of the Chicago faculty and my adviser during the comprehensive exam phase of my PhD, reiterated Whitehead’s point that religion always includes a comprehensive understanding of the good. The key word is comprehensive: there’s no aspect of life that religion’s vision of the good doesn’t include.

In fact, Tracy went on to say, bad things inevitably happen when any aspect of life gets detached from our comprehensive vision of the good. He described a forum he attended at the University of Chicago in the 1970's, shortly after he joined the faculty. Milton Friedman, a leading light in the then-ascendant Chicago School of economics, was one of the speakers. At the time, several of the Chicago School economists were advising the Pinochet regime in Chile. During the question period, someone asked Friedman how he justified giving economic counsel to an immoral dictator who routinely suppressed dissent with torture and even murder.

According to Tracy, who was taking notes, Friedman's answer was that economics and morality have nothing to do with each other. Economics is rational, Friedman said, and morality is not. Therefore, morality cannot be argued and should not be discussed publicly.

My guess is that there's no part of that answer Friedman wouldn't have wanted to reel back in, at least partly. Though seldom stated with such clarity today, the view that morality is a separate division of life persists. Indeed, the absence of a comprehensive vision of the good underlies a lot of the economic and political chaos in our world today.

Sometimes we consort with autocrats, and sometimes we don't. Sometimes we intervene to prevent human rights abuses, and sometimes we don't. Sometimes we come to the aid of people in need, and sometimes we don't. Until we develop a comprehensive vision of the good (based on liberty, or equality, or humanity — and these are quite different options), it's hard to know what's right. Instead, we make Friedman-esque choices: what's politically viable, or economically profitable, or militarily feasible. Here's the point: any time you make a decision about what's the right thing to do, no matter the context, you're making assumptions, even if unknowingly, about the comprehensive nature of the good.

It took me seventeen years to complete my PhD. At times, I wondered whether I would ever finish the dissertation. I came to doubt myself and often felt discouraged, overwhelmed by more pressing responsibilities, unable to clear the time and make the commitment to write. Somehow, I stayed the course. Championed by Chris Gamwell and my wife Holly, I managed to follow through on my intention.

After my graduation, I mentioned to Chris that it had taken me a long time. He replied, "It's true that your path to here took you through a lot of other places along the way. But you always stayed pointed in this direction." When pursuing a vision, the key is always to stay pointed toward it and always to keep moving, even if slowly.

For my part, I eventually wrote a book about how to decide what's the right thing to do — given the comprehensive nature of the good. It's titled *The Way of Gratitude: A New Spirituality for Today*. In the book, after examining in some detail the nature of the universe and the structure of human experience, I articulate seven basic principles for living, which I describe as gratitude goals:

1. Take personally the needs of the natural world.

2. Increase the quality of your relationships.
3. Bless the sources of life that sustain you.
4. Make the best of each moment.
5. Create more beauty wherever you are.
6. Maximize human dignity.
7. Advance the potential of the future.

Our comprehensive vision of the good declares that we all come from the same source: the comprehensive source of all that is good and all that is possible. It also declares that we ultimately share the same destiny. This vision unites us with everyone and everything else, and also unites us with the ground of all being.

This vision also focuses us on the future and expands our sense of what is possible. As Chris Gamwell was fond of saying when asked about his idea of God, “God is looking forward to what you will do next.”