

6. Experience: Transforming Evil into a Greater Good

Experience is the third internal factor that shapes our religious and spiritual beliefs. Let me start by sharing what Phil White says about experience as a formative factor in our religious beliefs. Be sure to note the final statement that is in italics. It is the key to understanding what experience is for a metaphysical Christian.

This formative factor refers to our individual experiences of living and our religious and spiritual experiences. It is here that we are in touch with the “story” of our life as we seek to organize our experiences in a meaningful way... It is through the formative factor of experience that we come to “own” our faith. Through experience we understand what we believe from the “inside,” it is “our” experience. As we share our experiences with others, we come to realize that our individual needs produce *experiences that are meant just for us*.

Postmodernism and spiritual elitism.

The idea that we produce experiences *that are right for us* means that our life experience is RELATIVE, specifically relative to us. In Insight 3, I said that, for postmoderns, Truth is RELATIONAL — what is “right and true” leads to loving relationships, or else we judge it as not based on rightness or Truth. And note that it is a

judgment that we are making. What we come to believe is true is shaped by our experience in life and life’s relationships.

Experience is the favorite formative factor for people we know today as postmoderns. Experience is the heart of the postmodern worldview. It is fair to say that most Unity congregants today hold that Truth is authoritative *according to our individual experience*.

However, there is a problem. While traditionalists, moderns, and postmoderns perceive Truth differently, they are not equally accepting of each other’s point of view. Huston Smith brings this out in his discussion of Spiritual Personality Types in his book *Why Religion Matters*.⁵⁴ He identifies and ranks four spiritual personality types — atheists, polytheists, monists, and mystics. He then says that there is operating among spiritual personality types a principle of one-way mirrors. He claims that mystics, ranking highest, can perceive the Truth that comes to the lower three, but each lower type is limited by a one-way mirror from perceiving the Truth that comes to anyone of a higher spiritual order. At the lowest rung, the atheist declares that spiritual realities are fictitious.

I will not characterize postmoderns as atheists, nor will I describe mystics as not being postmodern. To some extent, all people today are postmodern, including me. But many people today, particularly in Unity, have no notion of a God who is benevolent and engaged in our

⁵⁴ Huston Smith; *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit In An Age Of Disbelief*; p.4246

life. As I will point out in Insight 10, *Such people are not traditionalists. And my experience is that they can be pretty judgmental of people with traditional world views.*

They present two problems for Unity, in my opinion. First is that, to the extent that they see the world primarily through experience, they cannot understand the beliefs of those who see things through the traditional sense of revelation or the modern lens of reason. The second problem is that their solution to evil and suffering is generally to change the social order, not the consciousness of individuals.

A pivotal moment in my life came in 1976, at age 23, when I left the seminary in New England and my call to ministry to move south and join my family in establishing a manufacturing business in Louisiana. I remained there for nearly 25 years, living close to my extended family and garnering an understanding of the blue-collar, racially diverse, and deeply conservative life of people in the rural American South.

I learned that love and compassion could be found in all people, regardless of whether they were ignorant or educated, liberal or conservative, male or female. And, as I will say in Insight 23, *Seeing the Christ in Others*, love and compassion might be what life is all about.

I learned that not only could I love those from whom I was so different, but they could and would love me if I allowed them to do so.

As a practical matter in Unity ministry, I learned to set aside spiritual elitism. I knew that in the kingdom of heaven, there is no ranking of one's education, no ranking

of religious beliefs, no ranking of political views, spoken language, gender identity, or social norms.

I shudder at the thought of any religious movement which takes on a mission of raising the consciousness of any people other than its own. Jesus never said we must teach people how to love. He said that people would know us by how we love. We must lead by example.

As I said in 2019, Unity is not as diverse or tolerant as we think.⁵⁵ I ask for a bit of humility in Unity.

Why is this important?

People today are concerned about many things, including — politics, culture, climate, and racism. But I sense that what drives people, at an unconscious level, is what is known in theology as *theodicy*, commonly understood as “why does God allow evil and suffering?” I believe, as Charles Fillmore also believed, that if we can help people with the problem of understanding evil and suffering, other issues become easier to address.⁵⁶ So let's take a look at the opportunity before us.

Religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is often criticized for what is known as “the problem of evil.” People ask, “why would a loving God allow tragedy to happen?” When no satisfactory answer comes, the conclusion is often made that either God is not loving or

⁵⁵ *Seven Ways Worldview Limits Tolerance and Diversity in Unity* in <https://www.truthunity.net/the-human-side-of-unity/the-biggest-mistake-people-in-unity-are-making-today>

⁵⁶ *Judgment and Justice*. <https://www.truthunity.net/tracts/arthur-d-hall-judgment-and-justice>

has no power. So the problem of evil often leads to a rejection of religion and a life of faith.

Unity is especially vulnerable to this type of question because of our central claim that there is only “One Power and One Presence, God, the good, omnipotent.” In other words, we proclaim that God is both loving and powerful — and we make that proclamation the center of our faith.

I am not sure that Unity’s answer to this “problem of evil” is any better than that of the Judeo-Christian religion. However, I believe that Unity is much better equipped to deal with the problem of evil than mainstream Christianity. This is because of what we call the *3rd Unity Principle*.⁵⁷

The world of conditions and the world of experience.

Let’s begin with what the 3rd Unity principle does *not* say. The 3rd Unity principle does not say that we create our *conditions* by the activity of our thinking. Instead, the 3rd Unity principle says that we create our *experiences* by the activity of our thinking. There is a world of difference, literally.

When I ask, “Why did God allow me to get cancer?” I am asking about the physical world of conditions. The world of conditions is real enough and is not an illusion. We’ll get back to that in a minute. But for now, know that Unity’s teaching on a direct link between our thinking and our conditions has been ambiguous.

⁵⁷ *Why does God allow evil and suffering?* <https://www.truthunity.net/unity-and-christianity/why-does-god-allow-evil-and-suffering>

But when I ask, “How can God transform this tragedy into good?” I am then asking about the inner world of experience. The world of experience is how we have learned to respond to the world of conditions. About the world of our experience, Unity has always been explicit and has had much to say.

According to the 3rd Unity principle, our world of experience — the kind of response we make to conditions, whether heaven-sent or hell-bent — is the result of our thinking activity. What this means, in practical terms, is that we do not create conditions or tragedy by the action of our thinking. What we create by the activity of our thinking is the quality of response we make to conditions.

The Unity answer to evil and suffering.

Unity teaches from a perspective of One Power, One Presence, God omnipotent, and all good. This means, in practical terms: *no condition and no tragedy — from the common cold to unspeakable abomination — is outside of the realm of God to be transformed into greater good — when we align with God and bring our Christ-like nature to the condition.*

We do not cause all conditions, and we can not prevent all tragedies. But we can respond to all conditions and tragedies in transformative, divine ways — ways that transform them into all good. That is our claim.

What this teaching provides is hope. It says to all people, regardless of the conditions of their life — the victim of cancer, the refugee of war, the parent of a lost

child, the poor, the lost, the downtrodden, and the “wretched refuse of our teeming shore” — it says to them: we are one with God, we are by nature compassionate and good, and we are empowered by our unity with God to transform all conditions into the perfect image and likeness that emanates from God-Mind.

All Judeo-Christian traditions recognize human beings as created “in the image and likeness of God.” But Unity goes further. Unity declares “One Power and One Presence” and thereby implies that, with God, we can transform any evil into a greater good. All Judeo-Christian traditions recognize the “dignity” of human beings. Still, they do not all recognize human beings’ authority, power, or dominion to clean up the conditions and tragedies of life. Judeo-Christian traditions have often left the clean-up job to the providence of a transcendent God. In proclaiming more than the dignity of life, Unity can claim that we can and should do the same works as Jesus — even greater things (John 14:12).

What we must do.

Like Jesus, we are called not to ask, “Why did this happen?” but rather to ask, “How can this be transformed into good?” How can we heal? How can we empower? How can we love? How can we prevent war? That is the work and practice of anyone involved in Unity. Jesus never asked, “Why did God the Father allow this child to die?” He never asked, “Why is this person paralyzed?” He never asked, “Why do the Romans oppress my people

(the Jews)?” Jesus healed. Jesus empowered. Jesus loved. This is our calling too.

Perhaps, for some, it is also the calling we heard many years ago from Robert Kennedy: “There are those that look at things the way they are, and ask why? I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?” Kennedy was a perceptive political leader. He understood that people are more concerned about why God allows suffering than about political issues like climate change and racism.

Like Kennedy, Unity and metaphysical Christianity are idealistic — we teach that, because we are not separate from God, we do not need to accept suffering as the will of God. This is how Unity is different from much of contemporary culture. Many or most people are aware of “existentialist angst” — a pervasive sense of cynicism and loneliness that has risen in human culture over the past 100-150 years, mainly because science has kicked out from under us any sense of the order of life and because industrialization and war have replaced an earlier understanding of order with a sense of chaos, separation, and fear.

Hannah More Kohaus responded to the issue of evil and suffering with *The Prayer of Faith* — “God is my all, I know no fear because God and truth and love are here.”⁵⁸ Myrtle Fillmore picked it up and made it the central prayer of her spiritual life.⁵⁹ *The Prayer of Faith* is a radical statement for anyone living in contemporary

⁵⁸ Hannah More Kohaus, *The Prayer of Faith*. <https://www.truthunity.net/books/unity-song-selections/hannah-more-kohaus-the-prayer-of-faith>

⁵⁹ *Audio of The Teaching of Children and The Prayer of Faith by Myrtle Fillmore*. <https://www.truthunity.net/audio/myrtle-fillmore-the-prayer-of-faith>

culture. The claims of Unity differ from the cynicism of modern culture. I want to stress how important it is that Unity not “chase after culture.” Suppose there needs to be a healthy skepticism in Unity. In that case, it needs to be toward the persistent tendency in Unity to provide a platform for simplistic solutions to sickness, poverty, despair, and hate. Evil and suffering are not illusions.

Unity's understanding has evolved.

At one time, I claimed, “Unity has never taught that the activity of our thinking causes the world of our conditions.” That was not correct. Many great Unity teachers taught precisely that for decades. May Rowland is reputed to have stood on the Unity bridge commanding a nearby tornado to shift course. Stories about people who were embarrassed to be sick if they worked for Silent Unity were more troublesome. I have heard from several long-time Unity ministers that Unity teachers, some of Unity's best, used to respond to things that happened with the phrase, “this has occurred by right of consciousness.”

I don't know how much can be placed at the feet of Charles and Myrtle Fillmore or how much should go to their zealous students. But it's been going on a long time and is not unique to Unity.

Regardless, declaring that changing thinking and feeling changes our *experiences* is not proclaiming that it also changes our *conditions*. The notion that our thought and feeling enhance our ability to respond to tragedy and transform conditions is becoming better understood and

more substantiated. Barbara Frederickson and George Vaillant have identified how positive emotions enable us to overcome life challenges. I have more about that in Insight 24, *Positive Emotions That Turn On the 12 Powers*. What they have discovered not only supports the notion that we are called to transform tragedy into greater good but also provides deep insight into how we can do that — through positive emotions.

Our understanding has matured. My point in bringing in these contemporary writers is that the change hasn't occurred only in Unity. We have moved beyond “metaphysical malpractice” to a deeper understanding of spiritual principles. The older understanding is still valid — if it works for you — but there is another way in case it does not.