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Cloudy with a Chance of Creativity

“Films are the common language of people around the world; we share our cultures through film; we share our perceptions of what it is to be human, our trials and our transformations.”

— Whitehead Film Festival¹

Introduction

As a Unitarian Universalist, I approach holy scripture, from all religions, as the stories from a culture that have withstood the test of time in providing an understanding of cosmology, sociology, familial dynamics – indeed, everything about what it means to be human in that particular community. We take the same approach to “secular” literature and other art forms besides the written word. Everything is holy and inspirational to us in how it can be used to inform and enlighten our lives, with both understanding and with joy. In addition, the seventh principle of our congregational covenant is “the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part.”² It has become clear to me, over the last few years, that we lay claim to a Whiteheadian-inspired common philosophy/theology across our denomination without truly being aware of it.

Additionally, the last few years have also seen a number of studies expressing a rise in the population of the “nones” – those who claim no religious affiliation and often declare themselves to be “spiritual but not religious”³. This is accompanied by editorials about the end of religion as we know it⁴, leading to panicked sessions in religious institutions wondering how to bring these people into the

1 <http://whiteheadfilmfestival.org/about/why-whitehead/>

2 “Our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources,” *UUA.org* (18 November 2013).
<<http://uua.org/beliefs/principles/index.shtml>> .

3 For example: “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” *Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project* (9 October 2012)
<<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>> .

4 Gary Laderman, “The Rise of Religious ‘Nones’ Indicates the End of Religion As We Know It,” *HuffPost Religion* (20

fold of conversion. I would propose the wrong question is being asked – it should not be, “How can we bring these people in?” but rather, “Why are our institutions not offering something they value and can connect to?” I believe the answer lies in many religious communities' rejection of pop culture, specifically stories like *Harry Potter* and *Doctor Who*, that have proven to bring people together in strong, fulfilling communities that support their members, and in many cases promote social justice outreach. These are the stories that are providing meaningful emotional and sociological development of the self in our rising generations.

Some argue that pop culture and religious institutions, reduced from here on in referred to as “church” in order to shorthand for my purposes, are in competition with each other, that church is meant to do something other than what pop culture does but somehow have the same effect. Robert Johnston responds in *Reel Spirituality* that “If the theatre and the church are simply in competition, or if movies represent the 'classic degeneration,' then why bother watching movies at all? The question is nonsensical to many, particularly those under thirty. Movies are simply part of contemporary life.”⁵ Religion, and church, should speak to us about the living we are already living, not the lives other people were living 100 years ago. Johnston continues to insist on the inclusion of movies as an aspect of spiritual life and formation, because as an art form like literature (or scripture), they broaden our exposure to life and provide alternative readings of life's meaning and significance. Values and images are formed in response to life's experiences, with movies providing the data of countless new stories. In fact, as society's major means of telling its stories, movies have become a type of lingua franca.”⁶ Rather than exclude the medium of film from the volume of material one uses to inspire a congregation in deeper engagement with life, it is necessary to acknowledge that they are more mere entertainment and diversion. Rather, they are life stories that both interpret us and are being interpreted by us.”⁷

March 2013) <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-laderman/the-rise-of-religious-non_b_2913000.html> .

5 Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000) 21.

6 Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000) 24.

7 Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000) 24.

If Whitehead were around today, I believe he would agree. In *The Aims of Education*, he maintains that “[n]o more deadly harm can be done to young minds than by depreciation of the present. The present contains all that there is. It is holy ground; for it is the past, and it is the future.”⁸ Fostering not only the lives of the youth in our care, but the future of our churches requires us to identify and acknowledge what constitutes the present for those youth. Most of the time, it will be some form of pop culture that speaks to them and their state of mind, such as movies, video games, and television shows as well as the more conventionally accepted media of books and music. And it is our responsibility to experience for ourselves what the youth see in their choices, because otherwise, we have failed to make a connection to them. We must take their ideas and relate them “to that stream compounded of sense perception, feelings, hopes, desires, and of mental activities adjusting thought to thought, which forms our life.”⁹ Once we fully comprehend that children will be watching these movies, that; it is a given of our modern culture, then we see how important it is to address films watched by children and youth during early formation, for “the mind is never passive; it is a perpetual activity, delicate, receptive, responsive to stimulus.”¹⁰ Ergo, we have an obligation to think carefully about what films, television, and video games our youth encounter, and with which ones they choose to develop relationships, in order to use them as teaching moments the way previous generations used stories from the Bible and other scripture. Going to what the children like is also teaching them about examining themselves and the world around them, instead of merely assimilating what they are told, and Whitehead argued that this was the essence of education: “education must pass beyond the passive reception of the ideas of others. Powers of initiative must be strengthened.”¹¹ This is, he says, a “task worth of the highest genius. It is the training of human souls.”¹²

8 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1967) 3.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*, 6.

11 *Ibid.*, 47.

12 *Ibid.*, 53.

So now it comes to media specifically aimed at children and youth, and how that often gets overlooked in academic circles. One of the perpetual complaints I hear about Whitehead, Process, and Philosophy of Organism, is that it is too difficult for a layperson to understand, and therefore people simply don't try before entering in dialogue with the material at an undergraduate or graduate level. I believe that this does Whitehead and Process thought a disservice, as its relational nature is not only a core component of much of Unitarian Universalist thought (without many congregants realizing it), but also a way of thinking about the world as a global community and as the homeless man on the corner a neighbor. It is a frame of mind that could change how the world operates, for the better, if we could only condense it for the purposes of making process thought a fundamental, embedded way of thinking about the world and our relationships to each other and all things, as opposed to only a lens applied later in academic settings. In order to have such a sustainable civilization, Process must become what people default to in their routines, for as Whitehead says in *Adventures of Ideas*, “[u]nless society is permeated, through and through, with routine, civilization vanishes.”¹³

The Approach

As a rabid consumer of pop culture, I see references to Whitehead and Process on a daily basis. In my experience, philosophy of organism is already seeing into the cultural consciousness without many creators even being aware of it as a distinct area of the study humanity and how it interacts with itself. This is in line with what Whitehead claims about the progress of ideas in the larger consciousness of civilizations, specifically that “[t]here will be a general idea in the background flittingly, waveringly, realized by the few in its full generality—or perhaps never expressed in any adequate universal form with persuasive force.”¹⁴ I see here an opportunity to aid the cause of a great idea—process thought—into becoming a persuasive force, but it requires taking the elegant and yet extremely complex writings essays of Whitehead that explain the development of his worldview and reducing them into base,

¹³ Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967) 90.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

easily-absorbed concepts that children can both visualize and work with as they receive other input from their life about how the world works. Going back to *Aims of Education*, “[y]ou cannot read Homer before you can read; but many a child, and in ages past many a man, has sailed with Odysseus over the seas of Romance by the help of the spoken word of a mother, or of some wandering bard.”¹⁵ The story of the film used is more important than the direct comprehension of how it was created and formed. The movie can be a teaching tool without a deep understanding of Whitehead thought – indeed, the philosophy must, if it is to become embedded, and eventually separate itself from the name to become universal.

Since we are attempting to teach something to children on a broad scale, it is also, necessary then, to form the explanation in language that is more accessible to the general public, as opposed to the minority of adults who have familiarity with Whitehead's essays. John Cobb laments this reductive process, saying that “Of course, part of the richness and precision of Whitehead's thought is lost in these simplifications,” but also acknowledges that “[n]evertheless, much is also communicated. Much more of this kind of writing is still needed.”¹⁶ He continues that “[o]ne reason for trying to make understanding of Whitehead's text easier is that this may make it possible for students more quickly to grasp accurately what he proposes and then genuinely go beyond him”.¹⁷ We want our children to go beyond us, to think more, be better, and change the world. In order to do this, we must meet them where they are right now, with material that will engage their emotional sense and embed in them a concept of relational philosophy to carry forward into future occasions. And without the comprehension of the supervising adults, this cannot come to fruition. To be clear, this is not intended to be the forcing of an idea on to a populace that is not yet ready for it, as Whitehead considered this to be “a childish view of the history of ideas.”¹⁸ The purpose of this exercise is to point out the “the gradual growth of

15 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1967) 16.

16 John B. Cobb, Jr., *Whitehead Word Book* (Claremont, CA: P&F Press, 2008) 6.

17 *Ibid.*, 7.

18 Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967) 21-22.

the requisite communal customs”¹⁹ that has already begun, as evidenced by the appearance of process models in films such as *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*.

What follows is going to be a guide to the basic concepts of Whitehead's essays, boiled down as far as my limited experience is capable of doing so, as expressed in the movie. The intent is to point out the elements to the parent/guardian who is engaging the film with the child, who will then adjust any discussion according to the needs and abilities of the child. This is in line with Whitehead's approach to education, as he says that “The environment within which the mind is working must be carefully selected. It must, of course, be chosen to suit the child’s stage of growth, and must be adapted to individual needs.”²⁰ The target age for the film is young children who fall into Whitehead's Romance Stage of Learning, described as “first apprehension [...] vividness of novelty [...] unexplored connexions with possibilities half-disclosed by glimpses and half-concealed by the wealth of material.”²¹ We want them feel the movie, absorb it, with only gentle nudges as to what more might be under the surface of the narrative they are experiencing. For particularly young children, I would even go so far as to refrain from initiating any discussion at all upon the first viewing, unless specifically prompted by the child. Adult-initiated discussions can be had upon subsequent viewings. On a personal note, the movie is clever and entertaining enough for audiences of multiple ages, so one should not feel limited to exploring the concepts and themes with older youth and fellow adults. Remember, the “appreciation of literature is really creation. The written word, its music, and its association, are only the stimuli. The vision which they evoke is our own doing. No one, no genius other than our own, can make our own life live,” and “[a]rt also has the same function as literature.”²² By engaging with art that they respond to emotionally and mentally, they are in the process of creation, of becoming.

19 Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967) 21-22.

20 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1967) 32.

21 *Ibid.*, 17.

22 *Ibid.*, 57.

The Movie²³

Opening Titles: The first thing to notice is very subtle, but it is very important. Almost every film made as part of the Hollywood machine includes a title card at the beginning that says “A Film By _____” of “A _____ Film,” wherein the name in the blank is only the director. Considering that the making of a film requires a screenwriter, actors, hundreds of onsite and offsite crew, musicians, and that the Oscar award for “Best Picture” (as opposed to Best Director, Writer, or Actor) always goes to the film's producer(s), this title credit is the height of arrogance and refuses to acknowledge the relationality of the filmmaking process. In this movie, however, you will notice that the “film by” title card reads “A Film By A Lot of People.” This is the first indication of Whiteheadian thought, and it's before we've even had a line of dialogue.

Opening Montage/Voiceover: Here we are introduced to Flint Lockwood, the lead character of the movie (for now). His character is created for us as a series of experiences: inventing things he believes will make his community better; humiliation by his peers; encouragement from his mother; and no significant interaction with his father (something which leads directly to their inability to speak the same language during the film, despite both using English constructions). These events not only define him, but also define how other see him in their own personal series of defining events. In Whiteheadian thought, moments like this are, in fact, who and what we are. Just like there is no “person” that is Flint Lockwood outside of what we know from the series of events that have been shown to us, so are we, ourselves, as human beings made up of our experiences, from single split-second moments to encounters that last weeks or even years. We are what we experience. As the movie continues, you will see this construction of character in others as well. Also pay attention to the

²³ All scenes references from this point on refer to Phil Lord et al, *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*, iTunes edition (Sony Pictures Animation, 2009).

montage of all his inventions, as you will continue to see them throughout the film as an example of how our past experiences are always with us, no matter how much we would like to get rid of them or pretend they are not a part of us anymore.

Lines to remember:

“You can't run away from your own feet.”

“The world needs your originality, Flint, You just need to grow into it.”

Swallow Falls: Due to the series of experiences that town had centered around its identity as an extension of the now-shut sardine factory, the town is in decay, trapped in its past without any sense of moving forward. It is stuck in the power of its own past, unable, possibly unwilling, to feel the influence from the universe that would allow a Creative solution to their troubles, and allow Swallow Falls to fulfill its full potential.

Lines to remember:

“Life became grey, and flavorless.”

The First Test: Converting Water to Food: What does it mean to convert water into food? What do you imagine is missing from the equation as presented? How does this relate to the inability of the city of Swallow Falls to convert water into viable food instead of a surplus of sardines? At this point in the movie, Flint offers no explanation of how this process works, not even made-up technobabble for which shows like *Star Trek* are so famous.

The Failed Test: Conversation with Tim, the Dad: Note the ratbird, a previous invention of Flint's, appearing in the background to kidnap a small child. Tim, not having shared experiences with Flint, does not understand his son's interpretation of his “calling,” or what he is hearing from the

universe that he described in the opening: a sense of what he is meant to contribute to the world. He wants him to turn away from the call. In Whiteheadian thought, this is turning away from God and the ideal vision God has for the world.

Sardine Tourism: The mayor's plan is an example of how we can convince ourselves that we are being Creative, and seeing God's ideal vision for us, when in fact we are simply repeating past mistakes and cannot move beyond them. Sardine Land is not how Swallow Falls can turn water into food.

Brent (the Baby): Brent is defined by his experience of modelling as a baby, and has had no experiences since then to add more to his existence. This is why he is physically older but still trapped in a child's mind, and repeatedly shown in a diaper and animated as recreating the iconic image used in the advertising on the perished sardine factory.

The Mayor: In the commercial for Sardine Land, he says that he built the amusement park without consulting anyone else. In his monologue to Brent, he reveals that his vision is totally selfish, with no regard for his role as a leader of his community. This goes against the relationality between all beings that is at the center of Whitehead's philosophy of organism and theology of God.

Officer Earl Devereaux: When he first appears, Earl represents how the events in our past, particularly the choices we have made, can follow us around as if we are being haunted, and prevent us from accomplishing new intentions if we can not find Creative ways around those obstacles. Pay attention to how Earl can sense what Flint is about to do from across the town square, and is determined to stop him.

Sam Sparks: While we got a hint of Sam during the lead-up to the Sardine Land disaster, is it not until she runs into Flint and begins to create experiences with him that we see who she really is: a woman who has grown up in a culture that values physical appearance over intellectual prowess, and so in order to survive she has chosen to subsume her scientific interests into an identity that she believes will keep her safe and provide for her future. How does Sam's existence as this particular series of occasions question the values of our society?

The Oncoming Storm: Here is where Whitehead's model of individual event creation enters the movie. We have already seen Flint building his machine to water into food, a machine that he was inspired to build by listening to his call. He never told us what, exactly it is that turns the water into food, and he can't get it to work within the confines of his own limited experiences. But, once the machine is ascended, it takes in the water from "heaven," combines itself with Flint's input via the machine, and a new state of being is achieved. God speaks to us, we work with God, and something new comes out of it: food out of water for Swallow Falls.

Lines to remember:

"For a town stuck eating sardines, this is totally manna from heaven."

Can You Do It Again?: Moving into Act Two of the narrative, Flint's co-creation with God has given Swallow Falls a new beginning. However, both the Mayor and Sam see a link to their own personal future success independent of the community Flint is trying to make better, and so they put pressure on him to repeat his success simply for sake of doing it, to prove that he can, and not because Swallow Falls and run out of food. Given that part of Flint's makeup is a history of invention failure and humiliation, the power of this past means he chooses fame over sustainability and relationality. For the rest of the movie, pay attention to how the Mayor reinforces this aspect of Flint's past in order to

manipulate him for his own ends.

Flint and Sam in The Lab: Pay attention to how what we know of Flint's and Sam's individual experiences that make up who they are interact with each other in this scene. We once again see how his machine is a co-op with God, and at the same time the technobabble we've been looking for to explain God's part in the process comes from Sam, as her suppressed identity slips out. When these two are in relation with each other, they make each other better. Their shared experiences are making them into better versions of themselves. Who will they be by the end of the movie?

Making Dinner: Once Flint establishes the remote connection to the machine and is able to send commands, we see that at a molecular level, the food is all made of the same stuff, and therefore, we are made the same stuff as the food. Until put into a certain order of events inside the machine, Flint's bacon was simply water. In some form, we are just water. Like Flint's machine makes water into food with the help of God, so we make ourselves into patterns of people with the help of God. All that changes is the code that is used to establish the pattern.

The Name Game: Between the efforts of Flint, Sam, and the Mayor, the town of Swallow Falls has been re-created as Chewandswallow. Is it a totally new town? Or does it still carry baggage from the tragic events in its past? Does anything else need to happen for the community to truly move on into a sustainable pattern of living?

The Activity in the Woods: Here is Flint attempting to recreate himself into a person with no previous romantic experiences with girls into someone who has. However, the events in his past in which his peers teased him have made him self-conscious about his value, and so the power of past

negatively affects this new experience with Sam... at first. Pay attention to when they are walking through the field—you will see his “remote controlled tv” walking around, indicating yet another scene in which he is haunted by past mistakes. Given what we saw happen between Flint and Sam in the lab, how do you think another shared experience will affect them this time? How do the new details about Sam's past change your experience of her character? How does the reclamation of her ponytail and glasses subvert the common trope of “plain/nerdy girl makes her life better by getting a makeover”?

Lines to remember:

“You were okay before, but now... you're *beautiful*.”

“This is the real you, right?”

The Roofless: We are moving closer to Act Three, which means norms are shifting and choices are having greater impact. Flint is let into the restaurant while Brent is left outside; how is this different from the scene in the tackle shop when Brent was introduced? How have the values of the town changed? As Flint has pursued his personal validation at the expense of the town's wellbeing and food supply, what is happening because of his choices?

The Mayor in the Lab: In this scene, Flint has a choice. He hears the input of both the Mayor and his conscience (an aspect of God's persuasiveness), but the choice is ultimately his own. This is why it is always him who presses the button up to this point, and for this last disastrous food order. Others can influence all they want, but we are made up of our experiences and our choices, and no one/ nothing else can take that moment of choice away from us. Pay attention to how the Mayor's emphasis on the word “choice” is repeated into Flint's ear.

The Ribbon Cutting: Here is the end of Act Two, and here is where it will all go wrong. Brent

loses the ceremonial scissors, thereby losing his identity. Flint has re-created himself (so he thinks) into a success story, but at the expense of his future experiences with Sam. How will he deal with the consequences of the choices he's made? Pay attention to how as soon as Flint takes on the new identity, the storm of consequences arrives.

Lines to remember:

“Who am I?”

The Aftermath: Flint is overwhelmed by the power of his past (humiliation) and his bad choices made only for himself without consideration for the community around him or the world at large. His father comes to him, representing how the past we always carry with us is sometimes exactly what we need, even if we are trying to pretend it never existed. This is where the shared experiences between Flint and Tim over the course of the movie come together into a new understanding of each other: Tim uses one of fishing metaphors that Flint doesn't understand to express his belief in Flint's value as his chosen identity: an inventor who makes things to help his community in trouble. The scene ends with Flint remaking one of his failed inventions into a success: the flying car. This is how we transform ourselves in the future: by understanding and acknowledging who we are right now, given what we bring with us from our past.

Lines to remember:

“I'm junk, so I threw myself away.”

“When it rains, you put on a coat.”

God in the Machine: Pay attention to the first shot of the machine once they can see through the fog. The image is a perfect representation of how Whitehead process works: God goes in to our machine, we work with God as the machine to create, and the new creation is released forward into

new experiences to start the process all over again. God experiences all of our experiences with us.

Inside the Machine: Walking around inside the equation (represented by the machine and the clouds), we see that everything they need to move forward is already present—a marshmallow torch to light the way, for example. While inside the machine, with direct access to Creativity and input from God, Brent is finally able to remake himself into something new, both literally and narratively. How does their presence inside the machine also allow Tim to remake himself outside the machine?

The Climax: Flint is offered another choice between saving his community or selfishly going with Sam and running away. This time, having learned from his past instead of being overwhelmed by it, he chooses to save the world. This point is driven home by his use of the spray-on shoes to shut down the machine, and the ratbirds banding together to save his life and bring him home to his community. Also of note is Steve's role rising above the comic relief to which he has been limited this whole time, first in taking out the gummy bears attacking the car, and then in the final solution. In a world based on Whitehead relationships between all things, since we are all made of the same stuff, even the monkey is vitally important and is indispensable in the relationship between all things.

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