

*Opening to the Midst of Life: A Psychotheological Approach  
to the Four Paths of Creation Spirituality.*

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Abstract

This research study is based on the argument that the ecological crisis also constitutes a collective psychological and spiritual crisis. In addition to raising awareness of the scientific implications surrounding global climate change and its effects from species extinction to rising sea levels, we must also acknowledge the psychological and theological constructs that have contributed to our disconnection from each other and from our innate interdependence in the web of life. This disconnection manifests in the failure to recognize the transcendent immanent to everyday life and encourages aggression towards the Other and the living Earth. Bringing together Sigmund Freud and the Judaic theology of Franz Rosenzweig, Eric Santner's On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life provides the point of departure for exploring the workings of the unconscious, the role of defensive fantasies in maintaining identity within the socio-symbolic order, and the therapeutic implication of monotheistic traditions (as interpreted through Rosenzweig) in opening to the midst of life. This sets the stage for a psychotheological discussion of Matthew Fox's Four Paths of Creation Spirituality—reframed as the Via Negativa, the Via Creativa, Via Positiva, and the Via Transformativa—which I propose provides a therapeutic and spiritual praxis for opening more fully to the midst of life, what constitutes a spiritual awakening. From here, human beings find redemption in their day-to-day relationship with the neighbor and in the work of ecological reparation.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.*  
—John Donne

Every second of every day more than an acre-and-a-half of rainforest is lost from the planet. According to the *Save the Rainforest* organization, at the current rate of destruction, half of our remaining rainforests will be gone by the year 2025, and by 2060 there will be no rainforests remaining. Species extinction is occurring at a rapid rate due to habitat loss, global climate change, industrialization, and over population forcing an excess demand for natural resources. Currently, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and its members are working tirelessly to save the polar bear from extinction which is inevitable with the melting polar icecaps. In our lifetime scientists predict that we will see the end of oil. What then? Although the environmental crisis is

encroaching upon the cultural landscape of our consciousness (e.g., google “global climate change” and you get 11,000,000 hits) through media sound bites, political discourse, and celebrity-endorsed activism, to date there continues to be no significant change in our collective consumption habits that fuel a growing economy. Al Gore’s comprehensive documentary An Inconvenient Truth addresses the issue of global climate change through a scientific frame and is an important and necessary first step in shifting consciousness; however it is the argument of this thesis that the environmental crisis is indicative of the wider psychological and spiritual crises of our time. In other words, until we collectively awaken from the delusions that prevent us from recognizing our necessary interdependence within the web of creation, actions to slow the destruction of the Earth’s biosphere and all life therein will not occur fast enough to reverse the imminent ecological destruction facing all life on Earth. In his film Gore says, “many people go from a position of denial, straight to hopeless despair without leaving any space for action in between.” In order to awaken from this position of denial and take action towards healing our relationship to ourselves, to each other, and to all creation, we might begin by acknowledging the level of psychic trauma that the human mind endures on a daily basis and the role fantasy plays in defending against the anxiety that comes with being human. Working through the fantasies that prevent us from living more fully in the midst of life is a mode of revelation that can be defined along the lines of a spiritual awakening. From this consciousness, human beings are no longer driven solely by a desire for material gratification; instead, we seek personal satisfaction—and find redemption—through our day-to-day relationships to the neighbor, God, and World. As a consequence of this renewed world view, individuals are more likely to engage in generative actions that benefit our world including the necessary ecological reparation that must occur in order to insure a livable future for all life on Earth.

Among environmentalists, liberals, progressives, and scholars significant blame for the ecological crisis often lands on the shoulders of religion, specifically those grounded in the Judeo-

Christian tradition. This is a valid argument when we look to Genesis 1:28. It states: “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’” (NRSV). This has been interpreted throughout the millennia as permission for the exploitation of the natural world for the sole purpose of benefiting humankind. As such, our socio-religious predisposition to exert "power over" nature has contributed to the dominant anthropocentric vision of our world that continues today. Similarly, the monotheistic notion of a personal transcendent deity eradicated the human relationship to the divine presence in nature which was later reiterated through the First Commandment given to Moses. In Exodus 20:2-4 Yahweh commands that: “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth” (NRSV). Because of literal interpretations of these and similar narratives over time, religious institutions unanimously rejected the divine presence of God *in* creation and distanced themselves from anything relating to earth-honoring spirituality in fear of being associated with paganism. However, “pagan” which comes from the Latin *paganus*, simply means “country dweller.” This debate continues today among fundamentalist religions who reject any form of religious praxis associated with nature. Instead, those who recognize the divinity within the natural world and consciously live in reciprocity with the earth are often seen as worshippers of false religions and are pejoratively labeled pagan, tree-huggers, environazis, or witches. This type of dogma generates more socio-religious and political polarity as well as a backlash against those who believe in sustainability and ecological responsibility, as they are perceived as an economic threat to global capitalism which is dependent upon growth and the exploitation of natural resources.

Because we in the West are informed, whether one practices or not, by moral doctrines born of the Judeo-Christian tradition, discourse across the disciplines has emerged around the implication

of this socio-cultural ideology in the wake of the twentieth century—one of the bloodiest in human history. Within this discourse, I would suggest that instead of rejecting or condemning religion in general, we might ask ourselves how we can reframe these teachings in a way that encourages an ethical and ontological paradigm that encourages favorable relationships to the neighbor and stewardship of creation. Two voices working within a Judeo-Christian framework who contribute to this conversation are psychoanalytic theorist Eric Santner and theologian Matthew Fox. Santner, working within a psychoanalytic and theological landscape informed by German-Jewish scholarship, provides the framework for understanding the workings of the unconscious as it relates to our relationship to the neighbor/stranger. Fox, an Episcopal Priest, works within a German-Christian context and argues for the reformation of Christianity to support his theology of Creation Spirituality as it informs our relationship to all creation. The review of the literature pertaining to this thesis will provide a dialectic between these two disparate schools of thought in order to illustrate the possibility for undertaking an existential journey, in Santner's language, from *undeadness to the midst of life*.

The first step in understanding how human beings have become disconnected from our innate interdependence is to recognize the significance of the role of the unconscious and its effect on our relationship to the Other and, by extension, the world. Drawing from the psychology of Sigmund Freud and the Judaic theology of Franz Rosenzweig, Santner's On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life provides the landscape for navigating this terrain. The research will show the level of psychic trauma the human mind endures throughout life—from birth to death. In Freudian terms, the excess excitation, i.e., "too muchness," that is generated through our encounter with the Other and the world is considered traumatic and as such is unable to be assumed into the psychic apparatus. This excess excitation, or what Santner terms *surplus animation*, is defined here as *undeadness*. In other words, we're alive but not fully living in the midst of life—right here, right now. In the harried pace of the postmodern world, the human mind is bombarded daily by external

and internal stimuli; as a result, fantasy plays the central role in defending against the anxiety born of this psychic trauma and as a means of adaptation to the socio-symbolic order; therefore, the research will expand on the notion of defensive fantasies. Both the fantasies that place us outside the flow of life as well as the fantasies associated with our sense of legitimation within the social order, or what Santner terms the *science of symbolic identity*, will be explored in the first half of Part One in the literature review. The second half brings forward Fox's argument pertaining to the notion of original sin and its impact on the human psyche. Drawing much of his theology from the sermons of 14th-century German mystic Meister Eckhart, Fox argues that our psychic trauma emerges out of the egregious interpretation of the Garden of Eden narrative (Genesis 3:1-24) by the early Christian founders. Here, Fox rejects the Augustinian doctrine that first introduced original sin which is the basis for the dualistic fall/redemption paradigm that undergirds much of our current socio-cultural identity. In other words, believing we are born with inherited sin, human beings experience shame and/or unworthiness and often seek redemption in a future Eden, i.e., Heaven. The research from feminist theologians, eco-philosophers, and religious scholars including Fox illustrates the negative impact of original sin on the human psyche resulting in mankind's domination *over* Nature and, by extension, women due to the Biblical association to the first woman, Eve. The effect of this Christian-based dogma also encourages addictions of all kinds including those to food, sex, pornography, alcohol, drugs, and shopping which perpetuate fantasies of a life beyond the one in which we currently inhabit.

Although Part One paints a bleak portrait of the human condition, it is my assertion that it is possible for each of us to work through the fantasies that perpetuate our individual and collective denial and awaken to the transcendent that is available to us in everyday life. Through this revelatory process, human beings find redemption not in a life beyond this one, but in the here and now through our relationship to the neighbor/stranger and through our actions that benefit the common good and all creation. For Santner, the *psychotheology of everyday life* pertains to the way

in which we open to or defend against the aliveness that is available to us in everyday life. Parts Two and Three of the literature review will outline the ways in which we can open more fully to this aliveness in order that we might open to the midst of life. Therefore, the remainder of the literature review will continue with Santner's analysis of Freudian-Rosenzweigian thought in the context of revelation and redemption in concert with Fox's Four Paths of Creation Spirituality—the Via Positiva, the Via Negativa, the Via Creativa, and the Via Transformativa.

In Part Two, Revelation, the research will identify the way in which we can unbind the fantasies that keep us in a state of undeadness. For Santner, this constitutes *opening to* the surplus animation, or what he coins a *deanimation of the undead*. Comparatively, Paths One and Two in Creation Spirituality provide a framework for moving through denial and despair although Fox's theology is grounded in the mystical tradition. Here, the Via Positiva recognizes the revelatory miracle of creation and the Via Negativa, which is synonymous with the notion of the "dark night of the soul," honors the darkness, letting go, and moving beyond denial. In Part Three of the literature review, or Redemption, the first half of the research addresses the biblical commandment pertaining to neighbor love including Freud's theory against the possibility of "loving thy neighbor" or the stranger. However, Santner argues that redemption is available to us through love of the neighbor. In other words, revelatory love is exercised through the day-to-day encounter with the neighbor/stranger. In Creation Spirituality, redemption is found in the reclamation of our creative inheritance and our work on behalf of all creation. The research pertaining to the Via Creativa draws from various sources including Fox to support the importance of creativity as a spiritual practice for reconnecting to ourselves, to each other, and to all creation, meaning God. The research for the Via Transformativa will show that we find redemption through our work in service to the healing of our world and engage in what theologian Thomas Berry defines as the "Great Work" of our time.

The review of the literature sets the stage for Chapter Three where I synthesize these two dissimilar voices to argue that the Four Paths of Creation Spirituality—reframed as the Via Negativa, the Via Creativa, the Via Positiva, and the Via Transformativa—provide a therapeutic and spiritual praxis to work through defensive fantasies and open more fully to the midst of life. The process constitutes a deanimation of the undead and is, in my analysis, synonymous with the notion of spiritual awakening. I begin my argument by demonstrating the relevance of Santner’s thesis in an environmental context. This is followed by drawing similarities between Rosenzweig (as interpreted by Santner) and Fox as it pertains to the therapeutic implications of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Where Santner argues that *opening to the surplus animation, or undeadness, that characterizes contemporary life is necessary for opening to the midst of life*, he does not provide a “practical” model for this process. Is this transformation only possible in the context of a traditional therapeutic setting? Instead, what I propose is a permanent, locally-based, spiritual community grounded in the Four Paths of Creation Spirituality. The community provides a supportive environment for slowing down and deanimating the undeadness through fully-experiencing and expressing our anxiety, fear, grief, and despair. This is a three-part process grounded in the Via Negativa that includes a meditation practice, co-creating a spiritual community, and seasonal retreats. The Via Creativa provides therapeutic support in the expression of our deepest feelings as well as an ongoing spiritual practice. Opening to the midst of life, we cultivate a mystical awareness that is the heart of the Via Positiva. From this revelatory place, we find redemption by practicing an “engaged mysticism,” what constitutes the Via Transformativa, through our relationship to the neighbor/stranger and working in service to the greater good including the work of ecological reparation.