

**Co-Creating Our Future:
Reflections at New Year 2002
On Genesis 1:1-27**

**Notes for a Talk Delivered At
The Unitarian Church of Calgary**

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My first words must be words of gratitude and pleasure.

I am grateful for your kind invitation to worship with you and speak to you this morning. I am pleased to be here. I admire any group with an explicit commitment to creating and sustaining community, to thinking deeply and clearly and to living fully and compassionately. I look forward to meeting more of you over a cup of coffee.

Now to the task at hand: Let us pray... In the name of God: may the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts enable us to hear and respond to the Word of God.

I am particularly thankful that this is the first Sunday of 2002. New years are great! They create a sense of fresh starts, new beginnings and open horizons. Especially when the year is new – hardly even bruised yet – there is new hope that this year we can make a difference... in our own lives and within our families, communities, workplaces and societies.

This experience is both widespread and powerful. But is it grounded in reality or just a warm, and useful, illusion. Is our hope for new beginnings and truly new futures warranted? This is the question I want to explore with you today.

To begin with, I happily acknowledge that our experience of fresh starts is shaped, at least in part, by the rotation of the earth – both on its axis and around the Sun. Without these rotations there would be no days, no years, and hence, no “new year”. Be thankful our home is the Earth and not the Moon. On the moon, there is no new day, much less a new year.

However, for those of us in the Hebrew/Christian tradition, our place in the physical

universe is not our only source of hope for new beginnings. The God we experience is creator. To create something is to give it a beginning and, therefore, a future. Creating, therefore, is necessarily a future-opening activity. And, creating is what God does best. It is no accident that from beginning to end, the Bible is full of the image of God as the one who creates – who makes things new and offers us a fresh future. This image is in the very first words in Genesis – the creation story we heard a few minutes ago – and it crops up again and again: “I will do a new thing....” (Isaiah); “I will put a new spirit within you..” (Ezekiel); “I make all things new...” (Revelation).

Now... what are we to make of the fact that the God whom we experience and worship is a creating, future-opening God? What does this have to do with us in Calgary, Canada in January of 2002?

One way to get the perspective we need – on where we are in history and the deep work we will face in this new Century – is to ask this question: “What are the chances that the 21st Century will be any kinder to our late-Industrial deep, unconscious, taken-for-granted assumptions and dispositions, than the 20th Century was to the deep, unconscious, taken-for-granted assumptions and dispositions of our Victorian Grandparents and Great Grandparents?”

This is a sit-up-and-pay-attention kind of question, especially since persons who lived in Canada in 1901 turned out to be profoundly and distressingly wrong in their unconscious view that the future they faced would be both compatible with and kind to the way they understood their world and the ways they behaved within it. We now know that the 20th Century thoroughly deconstructed the Victorian understanding of life and its ways of living. Consider the following features of the Victorian world and how they have changed. I invite you also to listen for the implications for our own Century in these changes.

- In January 1901, Queen Victoria – alive. She died that same year.
- In 1901, firm and authoritative structures permeated every facet of life. Human beings were seen at the top of God’s creatures in the Great Chain of Being. It was important both to know and keep your place; to respect “your betters.” This sense is reflected in a Methodist hymn written in 1899 that includes this line, “The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate; God created both of them and ordered their estate.” Such a world is a far cry from our own. For good or ill, our world is increasingly egalitarian and ever less deferential. One result is a more open future for all.
- In 1901, the pace of living was still 2-3 MPH – a walking pace – as it had been for the whole of history up to that point. This meant that proximity alone created a sense of community with a robust social fabric – as it had for the whole of history. In turn, this meant that there were no institutions dedicated to weaving the social fabric. True, there were an increasing number dedicated to repairing parts of the social fabric, but none to its creation. Today, the pace of life ranges from 2-3 MPH to light speed. For the first time in history, and in an increasing number of places, proximity alone no longer generates community. It is no longer enough to repair the social fabric, we now face the novel challenge of taking responsibility for its creation. You will note, of course, that as yet we still have no institutions that are dedicated to creating our social fabric whole.
- In 1901, human experience was essentially local and provincial. Virtually no one would have the vaguest clue about how many other persons there were with whom they shared the planet... and for all intents and purposes it did not matter. Now it is not news to any of us that we share the earth with roughly 6 billion others... and now it matters. We share a common fate.

- In 1901, resources were king, work was largely physical and life was noticeably shorter. Today, intelligence is king. Work is intellectual, emotional and spiritual and the average life grows longer.
- In 1901, women were possessions that were found at home and in the community. Females could not vote or hold office. Few were well educated. Today, women are everywhere and can do everything. It gives a whole new meaning to the statement in the book of Ruth, “Whither thou goest, I will go.”
- In 1901, there was indoor and out-of-doors; there was no environment. The thought that we could affect, much less become responsible for the environment was simply unthinkable. Today we struggle with our effects on, responsibilities for and accountabilities to our environment. In Alberta, in 2002, water will be the environmental poster child.
- In 1901, those who were white-skinned were seen to be superior and were called the “white race”. Today, we are slowly becoming aware that the category of “race” is an ungrounded and destructive fiction; that “skin colour”, just as is the case with “height,” does not correlate with anything we deem to be important, especially not one’s culture.
- Finally, in 1901, reality itself was known to be unchangeable and truth timeless. Once something was known to be true, it was true forever. This deep presupposition is the source of our discomfort when we see the cartoon that has the pilgrim asking the great guru who is sitting on top of the mountain, “If these are the ultimate truths of the universe, why are they in a loose leaf binder?” Today, we are slowly changing our minds about the nature of reality of which we are a part – we are coming to digest the fact that reality itself changes over time; that time matters; that every claim to truth

must specify who is making the claim, when it is being made and where it is being made. We know that if any one of these factors is changed, let alone all three of them, that what is taken to be true will be different.

While this list is not exhaustive, because a merciful person I will not extend it. My point is clear – the 20th Century was not kind to a Victorian understanding of life.

With this established, let us return to the main question, “Is there any possible justification for the assumption so widely made in our society that the 21st Century will be compatible with and kind to our own late Industrial understandings and ways of living?”

It will not surprise you that my own response is, “No, there is not.”

In addition to the new conditions to which I have already referred, three facts stand out. First, the 21st Century will be the first truly global century for human beings. For good or ill, we will truly “get it” that we are stuck with one another and that there is no place to hide from one another. This means that Gorbachev was right when he became the first major leader to behave on the insight that in this world, now, win/lose games are an illusion. We either play win/win games or lose/lose games. This means that the dream we have had for millennia – that we could have a glorious future while our enemies perish – must be given up as an illusion. Second, since we came out of the trees about three million years ago as human animals, we have only developed three fundamental ways of living – as Tribal Groups/Societies, as Traditional Empires and as Industrial Societies. Third, that none of these ways of living can be scaled to 6 billion.

The implications of these three facts are clear. As it stands now, in 2002, human beings don’t have a sustainable future. If we are to have a future – if we are to live into and up

to the promises of the God who creates all things new – then we must invent a new way of living – one that is post-Tribal, post-Traditional, and post-Industrial. It must be the world's first truly global civilization – a civilization that is prosperous (poverty is not as ennobling as is often made out), inclusive, sustainable and humane. In short, for the first time in history, we must become conscious and intentional participants in the creation, not only of our own lives, but of a whole new civilization.

This, I suggest is the deep work of the 21st Century – a work to which the God who creates calls every one of us. This is also work for which we in Calgary, Alberta, Canada are particularly well positioned. Best we take it up as if our future hangs on it.

But... (and there is always a “but”) we cannot do this work, if we are in the grip of an inadequate understanding of God as creator. Put simply, the roles we must now play in history are seen as blasphemous within two frames of reference that deserve mention, if only because they are still so common.

On the one hand, we cannot and will not learn to become mature and responsible co-creators of our lives, relationship and culture if we take the pagan view that the earth – “Mother Nature”– is God. If we reduce God to Nature and the work of God to the rhythms of nature, then we have no role in creating our future. No mother teaches her newborns to act independently, much less co-create. Rather, the core message of Mother Nature paganism – whether in its aboriginal, feminist and environmentalist form – is, “Learn my laws and conform to them.”

On the other hand, we will not aspire to grow into the role of co-creators of our lives and future if we are gripped by an understanding of what it is to be faithful that is very common in both the Christian and Islamic communities – that the heart of our faithfulness is submission to God; that our only work is to know and submit to God's will and plan.

So... we appear to be stuck. We both need and hunger for truly new futures, futures of which we must be conscious co-creators, but our most common understandings of God won't allow us to take ourselves seriously in this new role. What are we to do?

This is Alberta, so let us follow William Aberhart's footsteps "Back to the Bible." Maybe there is something we have missed. Maybe if we could hear anew we would get it. Allow me to read again the 1st Chapter of Genesis. This time as you listen, remember that in Hebrew there is a preference for verbs over nouns. I invite you to listen as if the patterns and cadences of Hebrew thought really matter. Hear the Word of God.

Genesis 1:1-27

"In the beginning God created...

And God said... And God saw that (it) was good...

And God said... And God made... And it was so...

And God said... And it was so... And God saw that it was good...

And God said... And it was so... And God saw that it was good...

And God said... And it was so... And God made... And God saw that it was good...

And God said... So God created...And God saw that it was good... And God blessed them...

And God said.. And it was so... And God made... And God saw that it was good...

Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our own image... So God created human beings in his own image... And it was good..."

And God saw everything that she had made, and behold, it was very good."

Now, in light of this reading, even in English, what might it mean that "we are made in the image of God?" What is going on here that those who first told our creation story in the Middle East want us to understand and be shaped by here in Alberta in 2002? Maybe it will be easier if we ask, "What does God do when he creates?" The answer is pretty clear, when God creates he incarnates – his word becomes flesh; the deepest consciousness of God becomes and is. Further, when God creates, the result is good. Since God's consciousness is good, the form in which it incarnated is good.

So what might it mean that we are created in the image of God?

It means that we too are incarnators; that the deepest words within us also become flesh; that our consciousness matters. (The pun is intended.) It means that we need to learn to look at all of the stuff and patterns of culture as "frozen" embodiments of consciousness. It means that we must also understand that none are given forever; that new consciousness and new ways of living are always possible. It means that we must come to learn to be aware and accountable for the fact that we are co-creators of our own lives and societies. It also means that we need to own up to the fact that all too often we know not what we do – that we are unaware of the shape or content of the deepest words within us or how they are being manifest in our lives and our world.

That we have the status as co-creators of our lives and cultures is one of the great meta-messages that began to be heard in the 20 Century – a message we must still learn to

explore, understand, absorb and live by. The message that is slowly coming through is this – we live in a dynamic and unfolding world which is necessarily unfinished; social realities are social constructions, they have been made and can be remade; and in this world we are not victims of nature, history or the gods, rather, we are created by God as glorious co-creators of our own lives, families, communities, organizations and whole societies. These messages now pour over us from virtually every field – consider psychoneuroimmunology, quantum mechanics, family therapy, consciousness studies, the sociology of knowledge, guided imagery, stem cell research, the philosophy of science and risk analysis. In my view, the evidence from this incomplete list for this new understanding of human persons is undeniable.

So what does this mean to us?

It means that in the early years of the 21st Century a wonderful conjunction is taking place. On the one hand, we are slowly waking up to the fact that we live at a hinge-point in history, a watershed moment; that ours a time akin to the 13th to 16th Centuries when a fundamentally new consciousness began to emerge – a consciousness that would finally lead to the new and unprecedented way of living that we know as Industrial civilization; and that our deepest work in the 21st Century is to openly and intentionally embrace the historic project of creating a new post-Industrial civilization – the fourth major way of living on this planet. On the other hand, we are also waking up to the fact that the God who creates has created us as co-creators; she has seen fit to share with us the gift (and the curse) of the capacity for incarnation. For good and for ill, for us as with God, the deepest word within us becoming flesh. The lives, families and societies we create reflect and reinforce the basic shape of our consciousness and our imagination.

The fact that we are not yet very good at the role of being conscious and intentional

shapers of our future is irrelevant. We are stuck with it. In the 21st Century, we will either embrace this role with sufficient skill to get good at it or we shall die.

It may well be that what we learn about ourselves in the 21st Century is that we are not up to the task of facing the challenges that flow from the unique conjunction of our need to create new ways of living and our status as co-creators. But, I do not believe that this will be the case. Rather I believe that while it will be with much pain, anguish and even bloodshed, we will grow into the work of our time – learning to see and accept ourselves in the role of conscious co-creators of new ways of living. I believe that from the beginning God created us as co-creators and that she has been patiently waiting and working towards this moment – when for the first time in history human persons can openly embrace the role of co-creator in order to face the unique challenges of consciously creating new ways of living that finally come together in a new and truly global civilization.

I believe God is calling Calgarians and Albertans to be one of the first places on the planet where both the work of our time and our status in relationship to it are openly explored and embraced. Is it possible that, by the time we close our Centennial celebrations in 2005, we will be the most future savvy people on the planet – those who have gone furthest and deepest in equipping ourselves to co-create a post-Industrial future? I believe that it is and work every day to realize this goal and I invite you to do so as well.

Finally, in all of this, we must be conscious of the fact that our status as co-creators is both a gift from God and a calling by God. Our success is only possible because of the constant activity within and among us of the Spirit of the God who creates and offers new futures. Our calling from God has not changed. We are to take on, and embody, the mind of Christ.

Let us pray... Creating God, you know us better than we know ourselves. We hardly know what to say or as. But we know this, our only hope is in the presence and power of your spirit. Work within us even in the midst of our confusion. Take not your spirit from us. May the consciousness we embody in our lives be, with every passing day, a consciousness that is more at one with your consciousness. For the sake of the new futures you have set before us, hold us and heal us we humbly beseech you. Amen.

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Your comments are welcomed.

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