

The Spirit stumbles into philosophy class

MORMONISM AND THE CREATIVE ADVANCE INTO NOVELTY

By Rebecca Buchert

A FEW YEARS AGO I SAT IN A SEMINAR ON THE American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), listening to a discussion on Whitehead’s conception of God.

With some surprise, I recognized the physical sensations I associate with feeling the Spirit: a quickened heartbeat and a “burning” in the chest combined with sudden mental clarity. I debated internally whether I should tell my colleagues about what was going through my mind and heart. Then, totally out of character, I piped up and practically bore my testimony right there in PHIL 717. I’m sure no one in that room really cared—if anything, it probably sealed my social status as Suspect—but that didn’t matter; I felt moved to speak my truth and marveled afterwards that I did, quavering voice and all. Though many particulars of similar afternoons have now faded into shadow,¹ this moment stays with me, one instant of felt religious experience.

What was it that moved me so deeply about Whitehead’s theories? A 1977 short film, *Powers of Ten*, explores the microscopic and cosmic dimensions of the universe by zooming in and out from a simple picnic scene by powers of 10. I’m going to follow suit by zooming out from this microcosmic moment to put it in the context of Whitehead’s thought.

EVER SINCE PLATO, everything in the universe—including God—had been conceived in terms of Being. In other words, thinkers have defined the world according to what exists. Generally, what counts as existing or Being is that which is stable, static, and often tangible. Thus,



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metaphysical systems that emphasize Being are dominated by materialism or the “stuff” of the universe.

Whitehead turned the entirety of Platonic metaphysics on its head by rejecting Being as the king of the universe. In its place, he enthroned Becoming. What exists for Whitehead is not static things but fluid process. “How an actual entity *becomes* constitutes *what* that actual entity is,” says Whitehead, “so that the two descriptions of an actual entity are not independent. Its ‘being’ is constituted by its ‘becoming.’ This is the ‘principle of process’”² (emphasis Whitehead’s). Becoming is not only the main characteristic of the world as we experience it, but the fundamental nature of the entire *universe*, including God. The universe is in process; reality is process. Whitehead thus precipitates a paradigm shift in metaphysics from the systems dominated by materialism and dualism to an organic metaphysics of process emphasizing creative evolution, holistic interdependence, emergence, and aesthetic quality.

For example: one day, while in a meditative mood, I considered my living room. I saw a verse my husband had illuminated on one wall, a feminist sculpture from a friend on a bookcase, a poem on the facing wall composed by another friend, books from university courses on shelves, and drawings of Brahms from my piano teacher. As I contemplated them, I got the vision of myself as a chalk-covered billiard ball bouncing around in time and space, subtly changing hues as I knocked into other differently colored billiard balls. In other words, my encounters with people, places, and ideas create in me a unique combination of experiences that define who I am—or better put, who I am becoming.³

The billiard ball vision is Whiteheadian in spirit; I am who I am because of the specific place I occupy in a vast field of relations. In more technical terms, I am a unique, dynamic, evolving field of relations exhibiting certain patterns and felt qualities.

The billiard ball analogy is one way to envision dynamic re-

lations. There is a Buddhist metaphor that also illustrates inter-relatedness. The Vedic god Indra is said to have a jeweled net hanging over his palace. Each node or connection on the net contains a jewel that reflects all the other jewels on the net, symbolizing interpenetration and the intimate connection of all things.

Combine these two metaphors, and you'll get an idea of what the universe looks like to Whitehead: an infinite field of relations interacting in constant, creative flux. The universe is a complex, dynamic process; events come together out of disparate "multiplicity" to form a new entity—and then another and another, *ad infinitum*. And the progression never ends. "Neither God, nor the Word, reaches static completion. Both are in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground, the creative advance into novelty."⁴

In this whole process, God supplies the fundamental value pattern for creative synthesis. Or, in Whitehead's words, "the ultimate role of God in the universe is creative purpose or value in the temporal world."⁵ It should also be noted that the entities of creative synthesis (i.e., us) have absolute free will. In other words, God does not control the outcome of the creative process; he does interact with the world, but each entity self-determines the outcome. Each entity is influenced by a myriad of relations (indeed, everything either positively or negatively) but is itself finally responsible for how those background influences are realized in the ongoing process of creative self-causation.⁶

According to my professor in PHIL 717, Whitehead's conception of God not as "I Am" but as "I Am Becoming" is what makes Whitehead's God so radical. This idea that God changes deeply challenges the attributes ingrained in monotheistic religious concepts of God: omniscience, omnipotence, immutability, absolutism, eminence, transcendence, impassibility, as well as Aristotle's ideas of God as efficient cause and unmoved mover.

NOW LET'S ZOOM out some more to include the background I brought to this discussion. One of the reasons religious feeling pervaded me at that moment in my philosophy seminar was because of how the ideas interacted with my Mormon background, like two intersecting waves amplifying resonance. Mormon doctrine comes closer to process theology than any other Christian denomination that I know of because of its espousal of eternal progression.

Mormons make the startling claim that "as man now is, God once was, as God now is, man may be." We are familiar with this quotation from Lorenzo Snow, but Joseph Smith and other prophets preached the principle as well. Joseph Smith taught about eternal progression in the King Follett Discourse. In that address he states, "[God] once was a man like one of us and ... God Himself, the Father of us all, once dwelled on an earth the same as Jesus Christ himself did in the flesh and like us."⁷ Not only was God once a man, but human beings can progress to become Gods: "You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods in order to save yourselves and be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done—by going

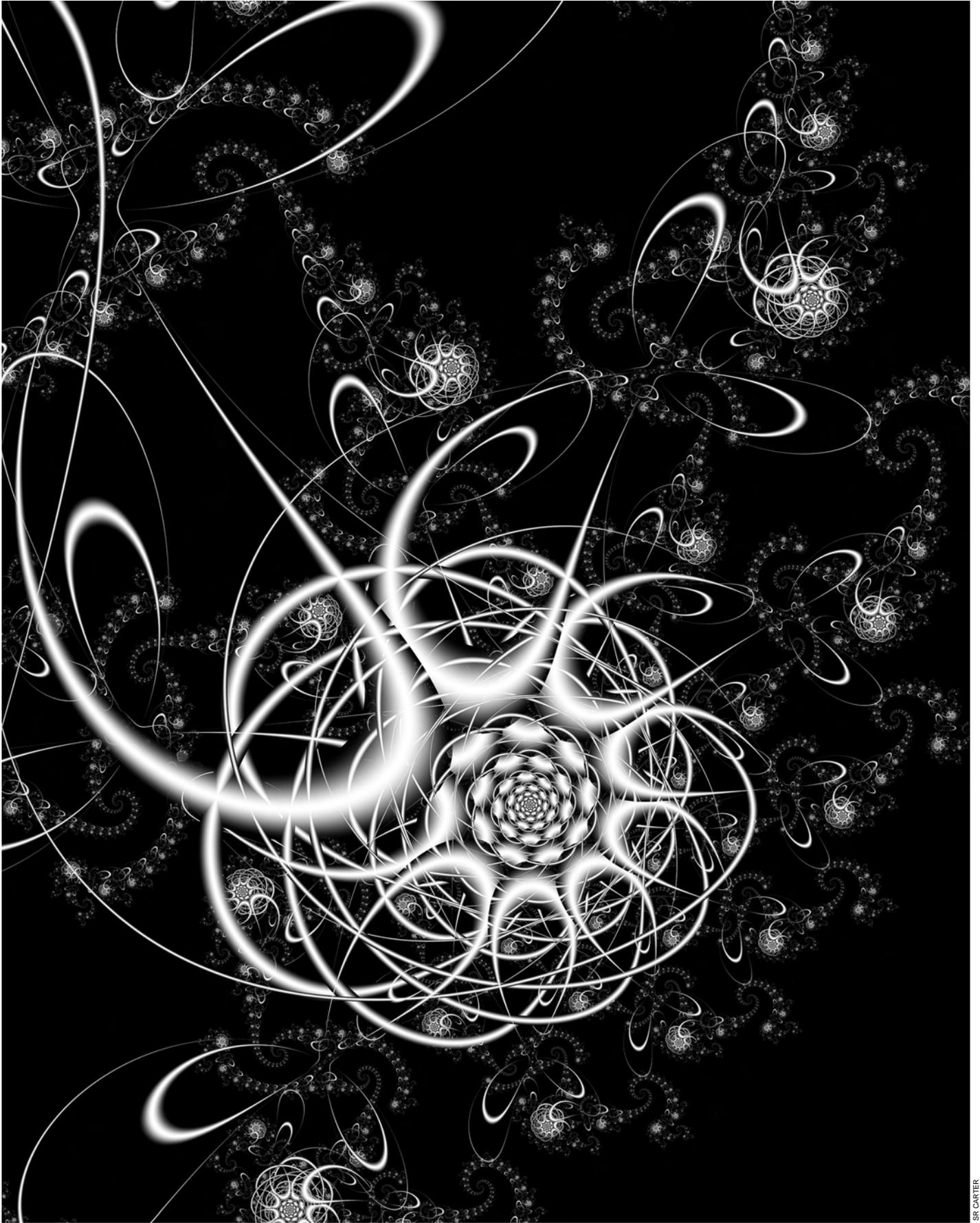
from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection of the dead, from exaltation to exaltation—till you are able to sit in everlasting burnings and everlasting power and glory as those who have gone before, sit enthroned." Joseph Fielding Smith said that this doctrine has "been known to the prophets of all the ages and President Snow wrote an excellent summary of it."⁸

The claim that God was once a man presupposes a process for God, otherwise God would still be human. But not only *did* God progress, prophets have stated that God still progresses. Consider this quote from President Brigham Young: "Some men seem as if they could learn so much and no more. They appear to be bounded in their capacity for acquiring knowledge, as Brother Orson has, in theory, bounded the capacity of God. According to his theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power, but the God that I serve is progressing eternally, and so are his faithful."⁹ The late apostle Hugh B. Brown has stated, "The Latter-day Saint concept of eternal progression includes eternal development, eternal increase of knowledge, power, intelligence, awareness, and all the characteristics and capacities that make for Godhood."¹⁰

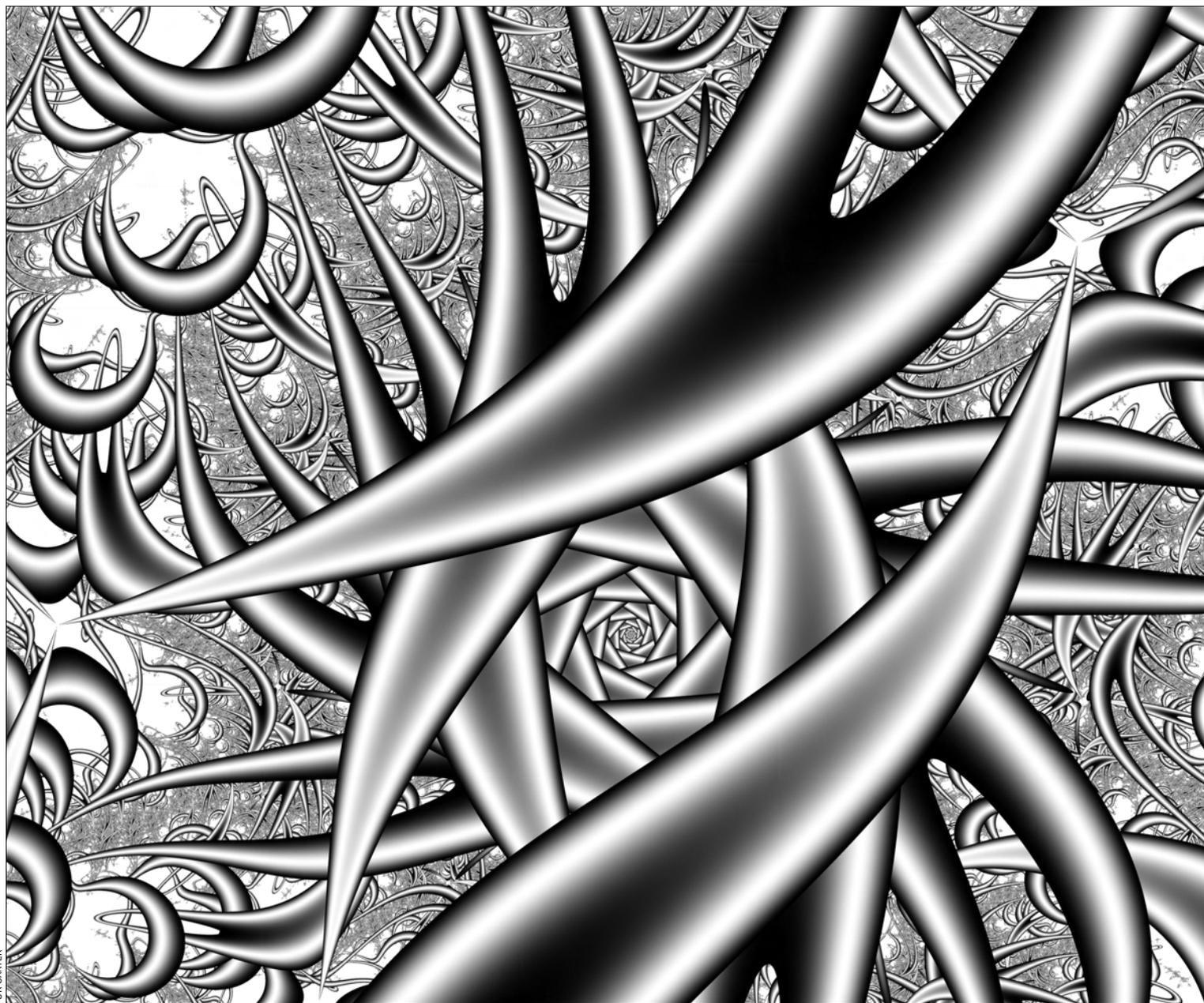
Some scholars have noted that the doctrine of eternal progression has been somewhat controversial within the Church. Bruce R. McConkie, for example, denies any possibility of change for God, and some apostles have emphasized more absolutist attributes of God.¹¹ However, scholar Eugene England points out that the early prophets of the Church were clear in this doctrine. Indeed he says that "Brigham Young felt that the idea of eternal progression was what he called the mainspring of all action and acted strongly to assure that the central concepts he had learned from Joseph concerning progression in both humans and a finite God must be kept alive in the Mormon heritage, as well as the proper emphasis on God's power and glory."¹² England describes a dialectic in popular Mormon theology between those who prefer an "absolute, sovereign, justice-oriented God" and those who prefer "the adventuresomeness of an open, progressive universe and a limited but infinitely loving God working with us eternal moral agents."¹³ However, whether or not the doctrine of eternal progression is in ascendancy or decline at the moment in Mormon culture is immaterial for my purposes; Mormonism, at least in its inception, holds the seeds of radicalism also seen in process theology.¹⁴

Whitehead emphasized God's loving nature, an attribute many religions champion but often abstractly. In mainstream Christianity, God is described as unchanging, which seems to preclude him from experiencing emotions. But Whitehead's God cares for and interacts with the world. "God is the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands."¹⁵ God "dwells upon the tender elements in the world ... slowly and in quietness operat[ing] by love."¹⁶ "He is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness."¹⁷ Thus Whitehead's universe is an open-ended, never-ending progression of creation, with God overseeing the process to maximize value, wasting nothing.

I wonder what Whitehead would think of the account in



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the Book of Moses, in the Pearl of Great Price, when Enoch asks the Lord, “How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?” (7:29). God then describes his care for the world: his intimate knowledge and investment in his creations, his careful preparations for salvation, and man’s rejection of his counsel. God weeps because he is so intimately connected and concerned. When Enoch com-

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prehends this, “his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned; and all eternity shook” (Moses 7:41). There are many scriptures that depict God’s investment in the world. For example, Jeffrey R. Holland refers to the allegory of the olive tree as “an indelible image of God’s engagement in our lives.”¹⁸ The late apostle Marvin J. Ashton even suggests that “love brings eternal progression.”¹⁹



NOW LET'S ZOOM out even further to include broader aspects of why these ideas resonate with me. I love Whitehead's celebration of Creativity, the "category of the ultimate."²⁰ The idea that the nature of existence is fundamentally creative and in progressive motion is a beautiful one to me. And more than that, the universe is not mere progression, but beautiful progression, aesthetic cosmic harmony. As Dieter F. Uchtdorf recently said, "The desire to create is one of the deepest yearnings of the human soul . . . We each have an inherent wish to create something that did not exist before . . . Creation brings deep satisfaction and fulfillment."²¹ Creativity exhilarates. It challenges, engrosses, and consumes. It is acting and being acted upon. It is the process of experimenting, producing something new, making novel connections and combinations. This vision of eternal creativity resonates with me. It uplifts me. It excites me. I find it hard to imagine a state of existence without this never-ending change; static angelhood, even static Godhood, seems comparatively boring!

I also love the idea of myself as a being in process. What I am becoming—my potential and future possibilities—comes to the fore and overshadows the flaws that so dominate my being at the present. An emphasis on Being captures me as a product, how I am right now in all my imperfection; an emphasis on Becoming reveals me advancing in process. Seeing myself as a work in progress helps me consider others in such a light as well, making me more interested in who they are becoming, rather than getting stuck on who I have known them to be.

LET'S REVERSE DIRECTION now and zoom back in to the afternoon I sat in class awash in the Spirit. This microcosmic moment constituted a "throb of experience including the [whole] world within its scope."²² Such an occasion, Whitehead states, "repeats in microcosm what the universe is in macrocosm."²³ That small moment of truth that broke in me like "life-giving light"²⁴ is one jewel that mirrors the process of learning line upon line and precept upon precept forever. It was a discrete moment of spirit, heart, and mind synchronizing and amplifying one another. It reflects the eternal process of increasing in awareness, intelligence, and knowledge. Imagine another verse of "If You Could Hie to Kolob" glorying in never-ending creativity. That's the vision! When I contemplate the universe (or perhaps the pluralistic multiverse) as a "creative advance into novelty" with a loving God overseeing the eternal process, my heart, like Enoch's, starts to swell wide too. ☺

NOTES

1. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 15.

2. *Ibid.*, 23.
3. See Steve Odin, *The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), for a more robust explanation of this fascinating idea.
4. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 349.
5. Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Fordham University, 1996), 100.
6. See Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 88.
7. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Joseph Fielding Smith ed. (Salt Lake City, Deseret Book, 1976), 342.
8. Gerald N. Lund, "I Have a Question," *Ensign*, February 1982, 39–40.
9. *Journal of Discourses* 11:286 (emphasis added).
10. Hugh B. Brown, "The LDS Concept of Marriage," *Ensign*, January 1972, 60 (emphasis added).
11. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies," *Speeches*, <http://speeches.byu.edu/reader/reader.php?id=6770> (accessed 21 October 2008).
12. Eugene England, "The Weeping God of Mormonism," *Dialogue* 35:1 (Spring 2002): 70.
13. *Ibid.*, 76.
14. For further discussion of this dialectic, see also H. Olaiz, "Are We Still Gods in Embryo?" (2008 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, August 2008, SL08221).
15. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 351.
16. *Ibid.*, 343.
17. *Ibid.*, 346.
18. Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Grandeur of God," *Ensign*, November 2003, 73.
19. Marvin J. Ashton, "There Are Many Gifts" *Ensign* November 1987, 20.
20. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 21.
21. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Happiness, Your Heritage," (address given at the General Relief Society Meeting, September 2008; <http://www.lds.org/library/display/0,4945,285-1-54-31,00.html> (accessed 4 December 2008).
22. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 190.
23. *Ibid.*, 215.
24. "We Thank Thee, O God, For a Prophet," *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 19.

ENCOUNTERING ANTELOPE

A herd of antelope
looked up from a stony ridge,
stood still in the sun,
faces curious, crowned
by delicate horns,
tan and white bodies
shivered in the heat.

After a long moment
the greatest gave his gaze
beyond road and dark pinons;
the rest shifted stance
and glanced toward him,
then heads huddled, backed
hooves over smooth rock,
pretended to sniff, sample scrub,
dry grasses at their feet.

Reluctant, I made a show of leaving,
and all eight moved gently across the road
heads back, horns black
against the noon blue, barely
remembered me in the wind.

—BETH PAULSON