The Problem with Omnipotence  
By Alice Loyd

Recently I heard it again. I heard someone asking, “Why did God let this bad thing happen?” I assume the speaker and most of the listeners were considering the problem of evil in the world, as in “Why do bad things happen to good people?” For me, though, the concern is with the verb, with the word “let.” To let something happen implies power over whether it occurs. And that idea brings up a problem with the concept of omnipotence.

For me, the concept of omnipotence applied to the ground of all being requires characterization. Whenever omnipotence—complete, unlimited, or universal power and authority—is regarded to be a kind of governance that doesn’t match the way things seem to me to be, I feel a dissonance. I’m not questioning the magnitude of this power. The more I open to the mystery of existence, the more I sense that something big is at work. I sense potency beyond my ability to grasp, and in the scriptures of religious traditions I find wording for my sense of awe. What I question is not the presence of power, but whether that power is expressed as force—the overruling of one by another.

Accepting “the natural world as the primary manifestation of the divine” (quoting from the tenth of the fourteen “Determining Features of the Ecozoic Era” of Thomas Berry), we can assume the quality of power present in the universe story will manifest the quality of power held by its source. As I contemplate the unfolding panorama of the natural world, what I glimpse is power dispersed rather than sequestered. I see signs of a large mind at work organizing toward immense goals, beautiful and benign, but I also see myriad minds, freely evolving with opportunity under the discipline of cooperation.

Scientists are better equipped than I am to give examples of how matter operates cooperatively, and I think process theologians describe well the interplay between creator and created. But even without fluency in either of these languages, I’m able to grasp nature’s nature by using my faculties, as I gradually learn better how to employ them. In other words, by observing my surroundings and studying my origins, I perceive both order and creativity, intricately interconnected.

Encountering these patterns of freedom with responsibility in the natural world, I feel far safer than I would feel in a world governed by a supreme being who sometimes made people sick and sometimes made them well. Likewise I feel more secure when I’m in relationships honoring individual autonomy limited by mutual respect. More is required of me in a democracy than in a dictatorship, and as I exercise my capacities to meet the demands of a democracy, I become more complete. I begin to become the person my nature is meant to be.

I’m not intending to gloss over the upheavals of the physical world: tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, and explosions of supernovas. In these events physical force rules, at least for a while. But when nature’s stars burst or nature’s ash falls, destruction leads to rebirth. Everything in nature is on its way to becoming something new. Death is not an enemy except when I cling to an imitation life that lacks the fluidity of living beings. Not one thing in the entire panorama of the universe lasts forever or overwhelms the whole. Nature’s losses all work toward the moment of birth.

I mention one final argument for the essential power of existence as collaboration rather than domination. Once when I was speaking to a Sunday School class at a large city church, a man said, “I don’t think God will allow global warming to get out of hand.” Since then I’ve tried to imagine what God would have to do to restore climate stability without human cooperation. Which would be more likely as God’s path: altering Earth’s biogeochemical system to better absorb human onslaught, or removing the human threat?
The answer is indicated, I think, by consideration of what is likely to happen if humans continue the present course of greenhouse gas emissions. Eventually Earth will indeed absorb the impact of aggregate human industrial activity—actions freely chosen and freely allowed. The consequence of this use of human autonomy will be removal of most of the community of life as it has existed for millennia, including human life. In other words, climate stability will indeed be restored, but in several million years, and as a new climate with a new kind of Earth community.

For me this example says the authoritative power within the universe does favor a partnership pattern of governance, and, even while being destroyed, the power moves inexorably toward becoming.

I bow in love and wonder.