



George Allan
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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I was born on the first morning of 1935, a bleak wintry day on the windswept plains of North Dakota in the midst of the Great Depression. I learned as I grew up there that good things are born or made only with difficulty and that even the best of them perish all too soon. My family found no fault with this way of the world, celebrating the good things when they came and when they were gone rejoicing that once, uniquely and fortunately, they had been.

At Grinnell College, my teacher Henry Nelson Wieman introduced me to Whitehead's thought. The key to the process philosophy I discovered, resonating with my childhood intuitions and thereafter guiding my rational imagination, was its insistence on the radical temporality of all things. My graduate study with Daniel Day Williams at Union Theological Seminary and with Bob Brumbaugh and John Smith at Yale University allowed me to develop this insight. Then teaching for over thirty years at Dickinson College, serving twenty of them as academic dean, has rubbed my nose constantly in the practicalities of life and learning, the difficulty and ephemeral nature of thinking insightfully and accomplishing something worthwhile.

I am convinced that too many process thinkers and Whiteheadian interpreters, and often Whitehead himself, undermine the intuition that all things come to be and perish by claims about the importance of eternal or everlasting realities or about the necessity of timeless metaphysical principles needed to ground time-bound actualities and even time itself. My presidential address defends the opposing hypothesis: all things are finite achievements, created as a result of creative acts effected in contingent situations, and are therefore precious because fragile, always at risk, always in need of reformulation, and always eventually lost.

I have published three books on the ontological foundation of social values that exemplify my kind of process thinking. They explore the idea that social values lie in the massive stability of previously successful accomplishments (*The Importances of the Past*), that they are found in the identification of possibilities by which a given situation can be transformed into a better one (*The Realizations of the Future*), and that they are functions of hierarchically organized structures that foster adaptive change while preserving what is fundamental (*The Patterns of the Present*). In each case, my argument eventually pushes beyond the constraints of temporal contingencies in an appeal to claims about timeless realities, and there it flounders. A fourth book, still in the making, reconciles these different approaches by rescuing them from the siren song of the timeless, rooting them instead in North Dakota realities.

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2012