Late in the third century, a popular theologian was preaching on the watery deep. He was riffing on a verse from the first creation story: “Let the waters produce living things, and living things were born” (Gen 1:20, in Ambrose’s translation). “Imitate the fish,” he proclaimed. Though the fish does not appear high on the pecking order, food chain, or hierarchy of creation, to you “it should appear as a miracle.” Bishop Ambrose turns the fish into a metaphor of all our struggles amidst chaos.

He is in the sea and he is on the waves, he is in the sea and he swims with the swell of the water. On the sea the storm rages, the winds scream out, but the fish swims; he is not swallowed up because he is used to swimming. To you, this world is the sea. Its currents uncertain, its waves deep, its storms fierce. And you must be this fish, that the waves of the world do not swallow you.1

If it were my sermon, I might continue: Even when life seems to be flowing along calmly, its rhythms pleasingly supportive, currents of uncertainty ripple

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1Quoted in Peter Cramer, Baptism and Change in the Early Middle Ages, c. 200 – c. 1150 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 69. Emphasis mine. I thank Rita Nakashima Brock for sharing this story with me.

Is chaos dark, dangerous, and evil? Or is it the primeval soup out of which all life develops? Perhaps our doctrine of creation is better served today by reading Gen 1 through other biblical texts like Ps 104, which celebrates the oceanic and the fishy grace of the deep.
through my day. Waves of anxiety warn of some gathering storm amidst my relations or my obligations. The tempest may dissipate, or it may blow in. It may be personal, it may be professional, or it may be political. An undertow of chaos tugs at every moment. How I try to ignore, control, or flee that chaos! But what if, instead, we learn to swim right through its swells? This fishy grace is not just for the calamitous storms when the monsters of the deep make their appearance. If we can practice our strokes during the calmer seas, we may be prepared to keep on swimming through raging storms.

**Creation out of the Deep**

The “in the beginning,” the “God said,” the “it is good,” the “in the image of God” of the ancient testimony to creation permeate the Western imagination of what we are. But we are also haunted by the waters of the deep. The mysterious imagery of a bottomless chaos from which the ordered world emerges has played (for reasons that will become apparent) a very minor role in theology until recently. Yet, hidden in plain view, that bottomless chaos plays a major role in the Genesis narrative. Our truth-quest, with its critical fidelity to Scripture and its engagement of the most trusty knowing we can find about our shared reality, puts its hermeneutics to the test in this reading of Gen 1. For in the primal waters is hidden like treasure a key not just to what we are but to who we are becoming. Recall that the very word “genesis” literally means “becoming.” So a theology of becoming both resists the literalizations of our knowledge (whether they are scientific or theological) and insists upon our creaturely knowing-together, our creativity and our responsibility as spokespeople for what we may call the genesis collective.

The tehomic depth, for all its chaotic risk, is not evil. The open-ended interactivity of the process of creation exposes us to suffering and evil, but also to great good. And sometimes it will take great discernment to tell the difference.

In other words, the chaos—the turbulence, the uncertainty, the storms, and the depths of our actual life-process—is all signified by the watery deep, the tehom, of Genesis. And in the symbolic codes of many ancient peoples, including the Hebrews, from that womby chaos the universe itself is born. The first creation narrative of Genesis is, of course, also giving perpetual birth to the biblical canon itself.

The face of the deep presents us with a profound potentiality for theology. The deep—its very darkness is mysterious to some, terrifying to others. Indeed, many theologians have identified this chaos with evil itself. Yet, other Jews and Christians have interpreted the deep differently, as a mysterious fold within a dignified liturgy of cosmic beginnings. In much of the theological heritage, the relation of the divine spirit to the dark waters seemed far from menacing.
To return to our sermon: When you make a fresh start—perhaps just getting up after a night of dark dreams, or starting to write after a spell of blockage, or loving after a time of loneliness, or living after a great loss—you have faced the dark waters. But are they evil? Or are they rather more ambiguous, chaotic, turbulent—surging with still unformed potentials along with deformed pasts? There may be evil mixed in, as often there must be in this world that Augustine called fallen; but the tehomic depth, for all its chaotic risk, is not evil. The open-ended interactivity of the process of creation exposes us to suffering and evil, but also to great good. And sometimes it will take great discernment to tell the difference. It will take great spirit. We are always in over our heads.

DEATH OF TIAMAT

We are reading the water. We touch its ancient tracery of wrinkles. The semitic relative of the Hebrew tehom is the Sumerian Tiamat, which also means salt water, deep, chaos. Both are grammatically feminine. But in the cuneiform of the oldest creation epic, the Enuma Elish, Tiamat is very much a woman. She is the Grand Mother, the creator-goddess, of a tradition the Hebrews would have encountered during their Babylonian exile. Before the beginning, Tiamat mingles her waters with her mate Apsu, “abyss.” From their union the gods precipitate. She is the fluid matrix in which this new life develops. As the story goes, the children then beget a third and boisterous generation. Now begins the trouble (interesting how most narratives of origin tell of some kind of “fall”). Apsu wants to kill the noisy grandchildren: “By day I cannot rest, by night I cannot sleep; I will destroy (them)...and then let us sleep!”\(^2\) Agonized, Tiamat protests, sounding a way of nonviolence poignantly at odds with her writers’ culture: “Why should we destroy that which we ourselves have brought forth? Their way is indeed very painful, but let us take it good-naturedly!”\(^3\) Apsu goes on with his scheme, but the grandchildren kill him first. After a bout of mythico-clinical depression, Tiamat gets in touch with her anger. The poet, breeding monsters, transmutes her into a symbol of pure evil—quite a demotion! The loving mother of reality is turned into the monster of the deep.

Evil can now for the first time be identified with femininity: “Only a female thing, only Tiamat flies at you with all her contrivance,” sneers the great warrior god Marduk at his peers, who are afraid to confront her.\(^4\) He successfully manipulates their terror, frames Tiamat as primal terrorist, and slaughters her. He then rises to rule the universe that he constructs from her bleeding corpse. Creation, in other words, is a work of matricide.

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\(^3\) Ibid., lines 45–46.

\(^4\) This would correspond to tablet II, line 111, in Heidel, p. 29; but this translation is by N. K. Sandars, found online at http://www.angelfire.com/nt/Gilgamesh/enuma.html (accessed October 29, 2011).
TEHOMOPHOBIA OR TEHOMOPHILIA?

Given the parallels, may we read the Genesis _tehom_ as an allusion to Tiamat and Elohim to Marduk? Biblical scholars draw on divine warrior motifs in Isaiah and the Psalms to make a case that the biblical God does create through violence, that the chaos is evil, and that God creates and redeems not from nothing but from the struggle with the sea monster, sometimes called Leviathan. Some Jewish and Christian interpreters thus discover in Gen 1:2 a quiet replay of creation by murder. Is this then the mystery of the lost chaos? Must it be hidden because it echoes a bloody patriarchal warrior myth?

_Certainly there are biblical texts that demonize the deep and its monsters. So it is not insignificant that the text of Gen 1 does not even hint at violence, let alone matricide._

Certainly there are biblical texts that demonize the deep and its monsters: “You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan” (Ps 74:13–14). This is a poignant theopolitical response to invasion by Babylon. Such a fearful response is perfectly human. The psalmist hopes—as the poets of Babylon also hoped—for the most powerful force of all, the strong arm of the Divine Warrior, to come to the rescue, to save us from all that we fear—imperial enemies out there and intimate threats within; whatever shadows our light; whatever transgresses boundaries, leaks across categories, sneaks out of closets; whatever she-sea might suddenly flood our fragile confidence. To rescue us from our fear of the “female thing,” of all things too deep and too fluid. We may call this fear “tehomophobia.” Robin Morgan’s feminist stanza—“I am a monster/and I am proud”—runs like a chant at the back of my mind whenever I hear of great warriors, gods or men, slaying their various dragons.

So it is not insignificant that the text of Gen 1 does not even hint at violence, let alone matricide. The text implicitly counters any ideology that demonizes chaos to justify a brutal _order_. So in Genesis the watery chaos does not signify an evil to be conquered by a good God reigning high and dry above it. It is more like the very womb of the world. Thus Job’s whirlwind God returns to the same scene:

Were you there when I stopped the waters as they issued gushing from the womb?

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when I wrapped the ocean in cloud
and swaddled the sea in shadows? (Job 38:8–9).7

Similarly, the great creation poem Ps 104 celebrates the oceanic: the monster Leviathan is exalted as a playmate of God, and the great sea monsters are a source of joy to the creator (vv. 24–26), no scarier than all the fishy life that swarms in the sea in Gen 1:20–21. This biblical counterculture does not romanticize the chaos. But like the whirlwind, like Gen 1, it celebrates the fishy grace of the deep; we may call this alternative sensibility “tehomophilia.” Embracing the depths of life, in which are mingled the depths of divinity itself, we participate in an open-ended creativity. We no longer huddle within the frozen order of an absolute power, waiting to be saved from the creation itself. We are called into a process of interaction with our fellow creatures—and with the one who calls us forth.

If the world is the great ocean, as Ambrose preached it, then life remains a creative risk. But we may trust in the divine process.

ON THE SHORE OF MYSTERY

We grieve our losses so that we ourselves will not get lost. Already in the grieving, the generativity of genesis—the flow of becoming—begins. The undertow of tehom can be painful. The pull of new beginning may seem to add insult to injury: to rub our faces not just in dead actualities but in the lost possibilities, in all that might have been but cannot be.8 Theology is here and there beginning—just beginning—to discern the face of the deep as the edge of our life’s chaos. “Recovering the luminous possibilities of seascape, dwelling at the edge of the sea’s mysteries—not forgetting its tragic aspects—is one way of experiencing the graced possibilities of sacramental poetics.” So theologian and ecological activist Mary Grey reflects on that moment of the Easter Vigil, the moment of the rising sun/son, when the candle symbolizing the resurrection is unsqueamishly plunged into the baptismal font. Here the tradition has not lost “the fertile promise of the watery depths of chaos.”9

If the world is the great ocean, as Ambrose preached it, then life remains a creative risk. But we may trust in the divine process. If we unclench the needy, greedy ego and let it “let be,” the divine process, in spirit and in truth, will not do our swimming for us, but may guide us within a depth that even now bears and

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births us. There is in the process of genesis a generosity that never ceases to offer re-generation.

“And you must be this fish, that the waves of the world do not swallow you.”

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