“The Only Tragedy”

Divali Sunday, October 30, 2016
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“How can anyone ever tell you, you are anything less than beautiful…” That conviction from Libby Roderick, in our Doxology, reflects the spirit of Hinduism.

_Tat Tvam Asi_ – “That Thou Art”

This morning I begin with a poem that a wedding couple gave me a long time ago after I officiated at the ceremony in their apartment. She is a poet herself, a MacArthur Fellow some years back, but she did not write this one. The groom, a graphic artist, inscribed the poem on a piece of parchment in a beautiful script.

It was not until I sat down on the bus as I returned to the church that I had a chance to read it carefully.

It was a blistering July mid-day, and the temperature was almost 100 degrees. I sat in the last row of the bus with engines beneath me groaning and spewing fumes outside and into the bus. The bus was jammed with people, all sweating in the heat, and everyone seemed miserable as the bus inched its way down Fifth Avenue near noontime. I was utterly miserable.

I took the blue ribbon off the parchment and unrolled it to read a poem by A. R. Ammons titled, “Still”.

I said I will find what is lowly
and put the roots of my identity
down there:

each day I'll wake up
and find the lowly nearby,
    a handy focus and reminder,
a ready measure of my significance,…

But though I have looked everywhere
    I can find nothing
to give myself to:
    everything is
magnificent with existence, is in
surfeit of glory
nothing is diminished for me:
Then with commentary about the grass, or moss; beggars/the homeless, the poet continues:

I said
though I have looked everywhere
I can find nothing lowly
in the universe:

[ I ] at one sudden point came still,
stood in wonder:

moss, beggar, weed, tick, pine, self, magnificent
with being!

Transfixed on a noisy, slow, hot bus… I, the bus, everyone on it, the day – at one moment, all were transformed. As I looked up from the parchment and looked all around from the back row of the crowded bus, and as I sat over the groaning engines on a sizzling day in July, everything, everything was “magnificent with being”, and so too, this day, this day, so kindly given and of so much use, this day is magnificent with being.

And, this event is recorded as an “Incident in Central Park:”

Entering the park at West 72nd Street
I stared so long at a chestnut tree
That I fell into it
Or it fell into me,
And, I got to be it

Hinduism puts it this way, in Sanskrit: *Tat tvam asi*, “That thou art.”

Perhaps, you too have fallen into a tree, or felt the “magnificence of being” in unexpected ways – “a surfeit of glory”? And words may fail… or imagination soars, perhaps poetry or imagination with the exuberance of Hindu mythologies with its 330 million gods and goddesses.

Each fall, about this time, whether soon or late, I find myself blinking in astonishment at the red, orange, and yellow leaves. The novelist Alice Walker would say that’s just God showing off….

*Namaste*

And this is not always just a private, personal, mystic moment. Years ago, at a conference of the International Association for Religious Freedom in Hamburg, Germany – a globally interfaith gathering – I was speaking with another religious leader whose vocation of service and of caring was in India.
Perhaps you know the Hindu word, Namaste. “I honor the light within.” We began to speak about this greeting and farewell, and this teacher suggested to me that it translates more fully as, “I honor the light within you, which is also within me, and when we are both in that place, then we are one.”

Such is the interconnected web of all existence, of which we speak in our tradition.

“O Light invisible, we give thee thanks….” (T. S. Eliot)

_Divali – The Festival of Lights_

Hinduism’s Festival of Lights arrives today in India and many other lands, and we include it in our Celebrations of Universal Religion. We seek to deepen our spirits and lives with some of teachings and wisdom of Hinduism, and I have long felt something deeply sustaining in its vision.

Much is peculiar… challenging to me, in my western, Enlightenment philosophical grounding. Yet much resonates with my mystic impulses and faith. Its elaborate metaphysical mythologies of Creation and Time escape me. And there is nothing good to say about the caste system, now outlawed in India, that once embraced strict class divisions, including the untouchables.

Yet the calling in the Gita to do one’s moral duty is profound. And, as noted in our newsletter: “When a person responds to the joys and sorrow of others as if they were one’s own, one attains the highest state of spiritual union.”

Grounded in Hinduism’s holy text of the Bhagavad-Gita, Mohandas Gandhi embraced the untouchables in his seismic transformation of India from colony to nation. Gandhi, whose bust is here and to whom this pulpit is dedicated, offered teachings of soul-force and militant non-violence that continue to echo and teach.

Hinduism, odd as it may be to many of us in the West, does enrich my faith….. So, this morning, another installment in our on-going embrace of Universal Religion.

_Hindu Wisdom Here_

It occurs to me to note again the many ways in which we are drenched in the light of Hinduism here at Community.

Among our banners is the Sanskrit OM, the unifying mantra of healing and freedom chanted by many Hindus… a combination of sounds representing the essence of divinity, Brahman, by which we too can attain unity.

Annually, we have our celebration of Divali, and I recall the first visit of two young adults who became members, who had grown up in Delhi. It was on Divali Sunday.
While not as extravagant as the profusion of candles and lights in their homeland, 
(which I have been privileged to experience when on sabbatical some years ago,) they 
were touched by what we offered.

I mentioned to them the banner, and also noted that we are greeted in the back 
of the Hall of Worship by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who helped introduce the *Upanishads*
into our western culture. Emerson’s naturalism and Transcendentalism found a deep 
unity amid the multiplicity of our experience and reality, like Hinduism.

The glory – magnificence around us, there, here, whether we always see it or not….

“O light invisible, we give thee thanks…”

Returning to Gandhi and one element of that epic story of the *Bhagavad-Gita* is 
the counsel from the God Krishna to do one’s duty and to renounce the fruits of one’s 
action. Derrick Bell, the legal scholar and activist, echoes that in his conviction that our 
salvation is in the struggle, not necessarily in the results…. A life of passionate integrity 
– a life of ethical ambition – is its own reward… its own delight!

The spiritual message is to act… and then to let go. Amid doubts, consternation, 
wounds, heartache, righteous conviction… do what you can and must, … holding it 
firmly yet lightly… and continue in the struggle.

The *Gita*… so close to Gandhi’s heart… my heart… this teaching is part of the 
light of creation in so many traditions, including Buddhism, meditation practices, and 12-
step paths.

Here, also, each Sunday, at least most Sundays, we have our Affirmation of the 
Church Universal, from Keshab Chandra Sen, adapted by our minister John Haynes 
Holmes for use here since 1929. Keshab Chandra Sen was a member of the mid-19th 
century Hindu reform movement based in Bengal known as the Brahmo Samaj, who 
aspired to create a universal religion.

Among its many positions on social issues were the elimination of the caste 
system and the equality of women – issues that were seeking to shake the foundations 
of a rigid, orthodoxy, patriarchy and class stratified society.

The Affirmation adapted from Keshab Chandra Sen also reflects the spirit of 
Ramakrishna and his disciple Swami Vivekananda who was so instrumental in bringing 
Hinduism to global conversation in the late 19th century.

The spiritual – bearers of light – and the practical – improving this world… the 
inward journey and ethical action… rooted in Hinduism and so many traditions…. 
Surrounding us on multiple levels… in this our sanctuary….
What We Want

In this pursuit of spiritual/religious maturity and wholeness, one of the insightful dimensions of Hinduism is its doctrine of human nature – not that it would ever particularly categorize its approach in such western theological terms.

Hinduism has the wonderful capacity to recognize that we humans are different. We have different needs, different stages of life, and different paths to awareness. I don't have time to examine all these, but I do want to say a few words about Hinduism's diagnosis of human nature. (With thanks to Huston Smith.)

What do we want in life?

(1) Hinduism says that first of all we seek pleasure; biologically, psychologically, this is fundamental to human nature. Hinduism does not scold; it says that if pleasure is what you think you want, then go for it. Enjoy, but do it intelligently. Be moral. Do not lie, cheat, or steal, but enjoy the beauty of the world.

Just know that it is not ultimately satisfying. Ultimately, physical pleasure is transitory.

(2) Hinduism also knows that the second major goal that many of us want is worldly success: wealth, fame, and/or power. Hinduism recognizes this goal and acknowledges that the pursuit of success has a social dimension, which puts it on a plane somewhat higher than purely personal pursuit of pleasure. We in the West know a lot about these goals and needs, and only some in our society recognize the limitations.

Worldly success is precarious, competitive, generally insatiable. We always want more – and guess what? It is ephemeral; it too is transitory. It does not really satisfy.

(And I know: Many of us would like to give wealth a try at least – to discover for ourselves, on our own, what Hinduism suggests about how this goal will also fail to fulfill us.)

(3) The third major goal is toward community and duty. We step outside our purely personal pursuits. We serve and help others. We thereby gain respect and connect with others. This is good, very good.

But Hinduism goes on to say, to remind us, "This too shall pass." Our lives in community, this is part of history, and history is tragic. History is imperfect.

Spiritual, religious maturity must arise some other way.
As natural as pleasure, success, and duty are, Hinduism says what we really want is to be, to know, and to enjoy infinitely. We want some kind of transcendence, liberation, and freedom.

That is what humans really want. But how? Through different paths of freedom, unity, wholeness, for different persons:

- The path of knowledge and understanding for some.
- The path of adoration, of love of Nature, Creativity, God, for others.
- The path of work and service, helping others for some.
- The path of exploration and adventure for others.

Different paths with what result? Hinduism claims boldly that we can have what we most want. It claims we already have what we most want. Already within us, deep within, is something holy, precious, transcendent, and this Atman – this light – is at one with creation, the Brahman, the light of the Universe.

Who We Are – Our Hearts and the Heart of Creation

Who we are, at heart, is the same as the heart of the universe.

The wave crashes on the shore and disappears, but the ocean remains.

Every seven years every cell changes in our bodies. This body is different, but something remains.

Our lives are like a string of pearls; the moments of our lives are these pearls, and the string remains.

We are like the water with sugar invisibly dissolved in it… How sweet it is… how sweet we are!

Deep within each of us is something holy, precious, transcendent, and this Atman – this light – is at one with creation, the Brahman, the light of the Universe.

“O light invisible, we give thee thanks….”

Hinduism counsels us to embrace the light within as the light of creation…. What we most want, we already have: freedom to transcend the pain of any hard day…. not to deny it… but to accept it as part of the dance, even the glory of this gift of Life.

The Only Tragedy

The only tragedy, according to Hinduism, is lack of awareness of our connections to creation and to each other; lack of awareness of your own beauty, your own light,
your own divinity. And the first and last thing: Hinduism says our separation is an illusion. We already do and can have what we want.

With his cosmic naturalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, our Unitarian forebear who among many things translated the Upanishads into English, would sometimes speak of the “days (as),, gods” “muffled in ten-fold disguises” awaiting our seeing what is before us all the time. The glory there, here, whether we see it or not….

The playwright Tennessee Williams once wrote, "The great magic trick of human existence is to snatch the eternal out of the desperately fleeting."

Durga, the goddess, reminds us to keep a sense of humor when engaged in “spiritual battles of epic proportions.” I am not sure if it is still there, but once there was a sign at a Yoga center in Chelsea that warned with regret about recent thefts in the locker rooms, then concludes, “All are divine but not all are aware of it yet. Aum. Shanti.”

At times, truly, when I am befuddled, or hurting, but not entirely forgetful, I recall the Hindu greeting Namaste. As gods, we look into each other’s eyes and say, Namaste, “I honor the light within you, which is within me, and when we are both there, we are one.” And we have what we need.

Embracing the votive lights from Divali, which decorate our Hall of Worship this morning and honor Hinduism’s Festival of Lights, I am drawn back to a poem written by church member Karen Ethelsdattar. It is titled “Candle lighting time at Grano Trattorio”.

It’s 5:00 o’clock, dusk, at a favorite small restaurant of mine, especially for one or two people. Grano’s on Greenwich Avenue, in New York City. February 22, 2005. I’ve finished my … soup & … salad…. I’m waiting for espresso with a twist of lemon & the complimentary biscotti. A young… waitress, in black, of course, makes her way from table to table. with a tray of lit candles. I fancy she’s saying, "Here’s a little bit of light for your life, & yours & yours & yours, & even for you, empty tables.” It’s ceremonial, this giving of lit candles, it consecrates our food,
it connects us all in a special joy. 
It's like Sweden's Santa Lucia Day every evening. 
City lights & candle lights 
making a winter's night seem sacred.

The human spirit has this universal fascination with and need for Light, and human imagination creates symbols by the millions, also represented in the Celtic goddess Brigit and the Greek goddess Artemis, Bawu in West Africa, Saint Lucia in both Scandinavia and the Caribbean, and so many others.

Similarly, Hinduism and Divali honor many goddesses, and among them foremost is Lakshmi, goddess of light and spiritual wisdom…. So this day, I think of the waitress in the poem serving as Lakshmi, as an incarnation of Lakshmi, handing out gifts of light and biscotti… part of “the magnificence of being.” Offering a little bit of light, here and here and here and here….

“How can anyone ever tell you, you are anything less than beautiful…”

The only tragedy is lack of awareness of our beauty and unity.

“How Light invisible, we give thee thanks for thy great glory….”

**Meditation/Prayer**

O gods, goddesses, O Gift of Life, with the gifts of Memory, of the searching Mind, of the Heart, and our bodies… and the gift of Imagination

…. All these things that bless us, bless us, bless us, and challenge us, distract us, and sometimes keep us from being here, now….

Awaken us… here... now… such is our prayer. Amen.

**Opening Words**

The great 20th century poet T. S. Eliot was a student of Eastern religions and Hinduism in particular, having studied Sanskrit and Pali in college. These candle-lighting words this morning are an excerpt from his *Choruses from the Rock*, and it seems to echo elements specific to the Divali festival.

O Light Invisible, we praise Thee! 
… We thank Thee for the lights that we have kindled, 
The light of altar and of sanctuary;…

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In our rhythm of earthly life we tire of light. 
We are glad when the day ends, 
when the play ends; and ecstasy is too much pain. 
We are children quickly tired: children who are up in the night 
and fall asleep as the rocket is fired; and the day is long for work or play. 
We tire of distraction or concentration, we sleep and are glad to sleep, 
Controlled by the rhythm of blood and the day and the night and the seasons...

And
we must extinguish the candle, put out the light and relight it; 
Forever must quench, forever relight the flame. 
Therefore we thank Thee for our little light, that is dappled with shadow....
And we thank Thee that … [the shadows] remind… us of light.
O Light Invisible, we give Thee thanks for Thy great glory!

About Divali

This morning, just a few words about the festival of Divali. It is celebrated throughout much of India in late October or early November, dated by a lunar calendar. It is a winter festival of the New Year, but is also a season of planting. Many put on new clothes to signify the renewal of life and life’s riches. One of the major gods of the celebration is Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity who rides through the air on an owl and who distributes gifts.

The word Divali itself in Sanskrit refers to “rows of clay lamps,” and such lamps, as legend goes, were used to light the way and to celebrate the return of Rama after his epic struggles and 14-year exile that culminate in his victory over evil and his coronation as king. Thus, the lights also celebrate the triumph of good over evil. The Ramayana epic seems to date back to prehistory of myths and legends and was then written down something like 2500 years ago. The celebration itself also dates back to among the earliest nature festivals of the subcontinent.

Throughout much of India beginning today this festival of lights lasts for five days. People place candles or lamps in their windows. (And in these days, we also saw a gazillion neon displays in addition to the simple divas.) Families and friends exchange gifts and greeting cards. They explode fireworks. They visit one another in their homes and will share sweets to eat.

It is a joyous time with many local customs, variations and many gods honored. And of all the themes, a faith in goodness overcoming evil is prominent along with the faith in human ability to vanquish ignorance that distracts us.
Readings


One sort of pluralism that has always prevailed in India is what I would call eclectic pluralism, or internal or individual pluralism, a kind of cognitive dissonance, in which one person holds a toolbox of different beliefs more or less simultaneously, drawing upon one on one occasion, another on another. Multiple narratives coexist peacefully, sometimes in one open mind and sometimes in a group of people whose minds may be, individually, relatively closed. A pivotal example of such individual pluralism can be found in the law text of Manu, which argues, within a single chapter passionately against and then firmly for the eating of meat….

When it comes to ritual too, an individual Hindu may worship several different gods on different occasions, to satisfy different needs, on different festival days, in fellowship with different members of the family (a bride will often bring into the home a religion different from that of her husband’s), or as a matter of choice as new gods are encountered…. (44)

Hinduism … (is) a pendulum of extremes that are never resolved and that are also constantly in motion: (quoting herself in a different context) “By refusing to modify its component elements in order to force them into a synthesis, Indian mythology celebrates the idea that the universe is boundlessly various, that everything occurs simultaneously, that all possibilities may exist without excluding each other… [that] untrammeled variety and contradiction are ethically and metaphysically necessary.”… I think it is a Good Thing. (48)

(2) I am reminded of a colleague Rev. Dr. Duncan Littlefair (Fountain Street Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan) who was pondering this gift of awareness, of consciousness that makes us human – something amazing and sacred. He says, “Thirty thousand years ago, or whenever it was, we started on a long slow ascent out of animal nature to God-like consciousness, and we’re still on the way…. When we got consciousness, we became like God, don’t you know that?”