“A Good Thing or a Bad Thing?”

_Divali_ Sunday, November 11, 2012
A Sermon delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister
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**Delhi and Divali**

Five years ago at this season, the gift of sabbatical time took me to India where experiencing Divali at first hand was one of my goals.

When we arrived in Delhi, it was the day before this Festival of Lights, and the first thing we did, eagerly, was to make pilgrimages to the Gandhi museum and to the memorials at the site of Gandhi’s assassination. And yes, we saw the Community Church medallion presented to Gandhi in 1932, which was among the artifacts with him at the time of his death.

The mood on the streets was energetic and joyful. Throughout the next five days, wherever we went, we saw the ornaments on buildings, the lights usually top to bottom and multi-colored, festive dress, and the smaller candles in the windows, on ledges, and along sidewalks and gardens…. It was luminous and radiant… A giving of thanks.

The festival rejoices in the daily, small blessings – where God, the sacred, something trustworthy may appear … God… gods… Where? How?

- Family gatherings,
- special meals,
- giving of gifts, generosity of spirit,
- placing votive candles in windows and gardens,
- festooning buildings and streets with electric lights, sometimes even neon strands… celebrating light, the Light within and Light eternal;
- New Year’s resolutions.

God where? Getting right with neighbors… rituals of renewal common to so many faiths.

God… everywhere!
As frustrating as our human condition surely is at times..., there is an ancient truth: we already have what we need, what we want.... Be here now... here....

We already have what we want and need: This is one of the lessons from Hinduism that I return to as we celebrate Divali – Hinduism’s Festival of Lights as part of our celebrations of Universal Religion.

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

A light within, even on days of thirst and thorns....and even after storms... blessed despite all our inconveniences and hardships.... At my home, we were without water for five days; without electricity for seven days, with erratic phone service, without heat or hot water for eleven days.... And many are worse off. And we were ok.... Ok with simpler, quieter though harder, new routines.... We did a pretty good job of accepting the invitation to focus on basics and on gratitude, and we remain most blessed by simple gifts...of this Life.

Maya – Illusion: Tricky and Gracious

In response to our wounds and heartaches, Hinduism offers its concept, one I find helpful, its notion of maya – illusion. The Sanskrit word maya and our English word magic have the same root. When Hindu thinkers reflect upon this world, reality, the cosmos, they are saying there is something tricky and mysterious about it; not tricky in a mean, vengeful way, but in a playful way.

Throughout the week, I kept thinking about a somewhat annoying, yet illuminating story. Part of why it comes to mind is that President Obama was asleep, distracted, whatever, in the first debate with Mitt Romney.

You may recall it: A farmer awoke one morning to find a wild horse had wandered onto his farm looking for food. He put the horse in with his own horses, and his neighbors exclaimed how lucky it was that such a fine specimen had come to him. The farmer replied, “Maybe it is; maybe it isn’t.”

The next evening the new horse broke the fence, and all his horses ran away. “What an awful thing,” his neighbors sympathized.

“Maybe it is; maybe it isn’t,” the farmer replied.

Then the government came through to tax all the property and the domestic animals, but his tax was low because of the lack of horses. Later his horses returned, including the wild one! “Wasn’t this a good thing?”

“Maybe it is; maybe it isn’t.”
The farmer’s son then decided that he should tame this wild horse, so it wouldn’t run away again – and in the process, he was thrown and broke his arm and was laid up in bed and couldn’t farm.

“Was this bad?”

“Maybe….”

But then the army came through the village and conscripted all able young men in the village, but left the farmer’s son laid up in bed.

Was this good or bad?

“Maybe it is, and maybe it isn’t.” And so the story continues.

Tricky… and gracious… Perhaps President Obama needed a wake-up call, and the poor first debate was a good thing….

A good thing or bad thing? Life’s tricky in its blessings and challenges….

The farmer’s story counsels, of course, a sense of relativity in our judgments, that the passage of time offers new events, and circumstances do continually change.

You may know the old joke about how to make God laugh. Tell her your plans.

Flux and change are Life’s way, evolution’s way, God’s way even. But, flux and change often engender uncertainty, and that uncertainty unfortunately generates discomfort in many of us.

The farmer’s story is also an appropriate introduction for another dimension of Hinduism. Hinduism takes a longer, deeper view of time and humanity’s place in the cosmos. It is quite contrary to contemporary Western culture that stultifies on immediate gratification and immediate judgment.

More than Meets the Eye

Modern science tells us this as well, that there is often more than what meets the eye.

All that is solid – the pulpit, our pews, the wood, is full of space… vast distances within an atom. Things aren’t always what they seem.

Hinduism suggests that there is more than meets the eye; it says that there is at the deepest level an illusion of separateness. At the deepest level, the sacred, sweet
cosmic Creativity, the bubbling incandescent radiance that has made you and me, that has made zebras and aardvarks, this cosmic Creativity is our fundamental identity.

Hinduism puts it this way, saying that *Atman* – our core being – is at one with *Brahman*, the Creative energy of the universe.

So, Hinduism speaks of *Maya* – illusion. The illusion of separation.

Things are not always what they seem. Burnt ashes, coal, and diamonds – each of these is composed entirely of carbon, though structured differently chemically, that has come from the Big Bang creation, created out of the stars, like you and me....

Similarly, the biases, prejudices and deeper structural oppressions that too often lead to violence and hurtful behavior toward those who are somehow different, these are a failure to see that each one of us shares in the same stream of life.

On a deeper level, in the face of natural disasters, and human carelessness, or even cruelty, Hinduism asks, “Why is the cosmos, our world, our experience this way – tricky filled with beauty, abundance and with pain? Hindu teachers have no definitive explanation and may simply speak about the world as a cosmic dance, God's play... cosmic Creativity that Hinduism describes as the dance of the God Shiva, among its extravagance of images.

So what are we to do?

The playwright Tennessee Williams in rather Hindu fashion declared, “To snatch the eternal out of the desperately fleeting is the great magic trick of human existence.”

Sometimes that’s a difficult faith to sustain, when all we feel is rage and hurt and pain. Sometimes we are so busy, preoccupied, we miss the eternal in the present, our connectedness to all things.

There’s a brief moment in the movie *My Dinner with Andre* that condemns those infatuated with the things of the world, with affluenza, rather than non-market values … a moment that challenges – akin to the sleepiness and lack of mindfulness that Hinduism describes as our tragic option.

Andre offers an observation – and I’m paraphrasing – about (contemporary life) perhaps we New Yorkers: “We are like inmates of a vast concentration camp. The doors to the camp have been unlocked for years. We can go if we wish. But, we stay, not because we are truly in our hearts happy, but since we helped build the camp, we are so proud of how it looks. We may be slaves here, but who knows what lies outside the gate? So we stay and redecorate our cells.”
Hinduism declares that the only tragedy is lack of awareness of our divinity and our own possibilities…

_Bhagavad-Gita_

Another lesson for me from Hinduism helps me grow in spirit, and live more fully, calmly, powerfully, compassionately.

I return again and again, at times of my own distress or confusion or pain, to Hinduism’s scripture known as the _Bhagavad-Gita_. It offers the image of two great armies poised for war.

Imagine, if you will, a wide-open plain with the two armies in their full battle regalia prepared to enter into battle. Three thousand years ago, the feudal aristocracy of India was in truth engaged in wars against one another in mutual slaughter. Two clans related to each other, face one another on the battlefield, and the young prince Arjuna is about to lead his brothers and their soldiers against his own cousins.

But he hesitates. He understands what senseless destruction is to commence. In that moment of delay, his charioteer reveals himself to Arjuna to be the God Krishna. (And I would add the god Krishna is often depicted with black skin.)

Krishna declares,

> Cast then away all desire… for the fruits (the outcomes) and
> (simply) perform your duty.
> Do your duty and renounce the fruits of your action.

Thereupon, Arjuna commences battle for it was clear that his duty, as a member of the elite caste, was to fight. To do his duty in that time meant to fulfill the responsibilities of his caste.

For us today, Joseph Campbell, the incomparable student of mythologies and universals in religion, universalizes the teaching: To do your duty is to fulfill the moral impulse within you; to exercise your best judgment and then to let go.

What difficulty is troubling you? What nags at your heart, at home, or at work? What moral dilemma? What shortcut or compromise stings or tempts? What values undergird you and keep raising their compelling voices, when it may feel easier, or safer, to take shortcuts? What loss is breaking your heart?

How do you respond?

You summon your best thought, your keenest insight, your heart’s fundamentals, the lessons of experience. You weigh it all, you sift it, you ponder, and then you take a risk. You act. You have no choice. You may not feel confident about which way to go;
you may see two conflicting values or goals, or a choice between two evils, and you may not know which is lesser.

But you have to act, and so you do. You do your duty, and then whatever comes, comes. You cannot be attached to the outcome. You did your best. It may be the right thing, or it may not be good enough. But do not be attached to the fruits of the action. There are always consequences; we have to live with results. But you have done the best you can. Do not dwell in second thoughts, recriminations, numbing guilt, old wounds, self-poisoning, or self-congratulation (if you have made a particularly good decision).

You let go. Hinduism says that you accept the reality of the consequences and then make your next decision and act as best as you can. It doesn't mean inaction; it means we act to the best of our ability.

Hinduism says that to be attached to outcomes is to live in misery.

Do your duty as best as you can discern it, and then renounce the fruits of your action. Let go. Of course, those familiar with 12 step programs are familiar with its adage “to let go and let God.”

Spiritual traditions around the world have counseled such a path.

And as we judge ourselves less harshly, we also judge others less harshly, knowing that we all make mistakes, all need forgiveness and all can begin again in love, in honor of the light within.

**Who We Are – Our Hearts and the Heart of Creation**

There is both a cosmic and a deeply personal vision in Hinduism: 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.

We replenish/replace all our blood cells every 120 days, and all our skin cells every 35 days.

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….”

*The Worst Karma Possible*

A retired colleague Barbara Merritt, who served the Worcester, Massachusetts congregation so wonderfully, reports wisdom from her Hindu teacher. She writes,

In India recently someone asked my spiritual teacher a question: “What is the worst karma a person can undergo here on earth? What is the greatest difficulty? The harshest circumstances?”

She asks us, “How would you answer?” and then offers,

A few responses that came to my mind include financial poverty, to be born in a war torn country, mental illness, debilitating physical illness, domestic abuse… my Lord, the list seems endless.

She continues,

I was astonished by my teacher’s reply. He answered (and I paraphrase), “The worst karma is to be ungrateful. If you suffer from ingratitude, then it won’t matter what blessings and goodness are in your life, you won’t be capable of receiving it. In contrast, if you are grateful, then even in the most challenging of circumstances you will be able to recognize the many gifts that you are receiving.” (CLF, *Quest*, May 2011 p. 3)

Each of us travels that path differently, and we may get lost or forgetful, taking the ordinary for granted. And at times, gratitude arises after encounters with the worst of storms and tribulations….

So, what then is spiritual maturity in Hinduism, which invites us too to grow our souls?

- Knowing that life is filled with illusion and change, yet we have what we need in this inner light.
- Affirming with all one’s being that “That thou art”: Atman and Brahman are one – a creative spark deep within.
- Doing your best, your duty, and letting go…
- Living with honor and gratitude, as we take upon the duties of our days.
Another colleague, David Blanchard, offers seasonal help, everyday help, as he ponders dinnertime prayers – sometimes mandated when visiting friends or family, especially at Thanksgiving. He expresses his ambivalence about such moments – sometimes a bland, warm fuzzy blessing, or sometimes spoken so quickly nobody knows what was said.

Even so, as his notes, expressing gratitude on a ritual occasion, or my goodness, each day, is recognition of “big stuff. ... the blessings of human companionship and love, the sustenance and strength derived from the earth and the magic and mystery of our relationship to Creation.” That's “big stuff.” And it's a good thing to “give a nod” to “all we've been given, unbidden.”

He reports he has figured out his Thanksgiving blessing:

It’ll be the same one my family uses every time we sit at the table together. But it’s not a prayer I lead. I have a young zealot that set our tradition in place. When she was three, my daughter Emily must have been to a young friend’s house where they said a prayer before eating. She returned home, took our hands, and said, “Praise!” “Praise!”

So that is what we started to do. I recommend it. Let us praise.”

(CLF, Quest, November 2006, p. 5)

The first and last thing: Hinduism says our separation is an illusion. We already do and can have what we want. The only tragedy is lack of awareness of your own beauty, your own potential, and your own divinity.

“O Light Invisible… we give thee thanks for thy great glory!”

Meditation

O gods, goddesses, O Gift of Life, with the gifts of Memory, of the searching Mind, of the Heart, and of 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;...

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!

Responsive Reading

At the outset, the Hindu festival of Lights, of Divali, celebrates the triumph of good over evil in cosmic terms. Such is the abiding faith. It apparently emerged out of pre-history and nature celebrations rejoicing in the sun and in the end of the monsoon, rainy season each fall.

In mythic terms of the Ramakrishna epic, it celebrates the return of Rama from a 14-year exile, and how he was welcomed home with small votive candles lining the road, thus the lights we have. Divali is a Sanskrit word for “rows of clay lamps”.

I am reminded of a colleague Duncan Littlefair 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?”

Let us turn to the Responsive Reading \textit{Brahman}.

\textbf{Reading for Veteran’s Day} “The Flags of Our Sons” - Billy Shore, \textit{New York Times}, 0p-Ed, A-17, 8/4/06. (Billy Shore is the founder of Share Our Strength, an anti-hunger organization.)

… I saw the military honor guard boarding US Airways 1:45 p.m. flight from Boston to Washington earlier this week.

I was heading through the gate when I first noticed Senator Ted Kennedy, walking down the concourse and arriving fashionably late, not an uncommon sight on this route. I stepped aside and followed him down the ramp.

As we got to the arched entrance of the plane, the members of a Marine honor guard in their dress blues were coming up that outside staircase usually used for stowing strollers and allowing mechanics on board. The marine in charge held in both hands a flag that had been folded into a triangle as if it had been previously draping a coffin, which it had.

Senator Kennedy extended his hand to the marine and said, "Thank you for your service."

"Thank you, sir," replied the marine.

"Are you escorting remains?" asked Senator Kennedy.

"Yes, sir, a marine."

"And the funeral is at Arlington Cemetery?"

"Yes, sir, on Wednesday."

"Thank you, I’ll try to get out there."

The marine went back to sit in coach but a man in the last row of the first-class cabin went over to him, shook hands and offered his seat. The marine reluctantly accepted. Half the passengers broke into applause.

The rest of the flight was uneventful, though quieter than usual. When we landed, the marine took his white gloves from where he’d stowed them inside his hat, put them on, and again gripped with both hands the precious cargo of the folded flag.
Then he went over to two people quietly sitting in first class - the parents of the fallen marine. None of us had known they were there.

He escorted them off the plane and into the terminal. Because of the afternoon's oppressive heat and humidity, he had persuaded them to wait inside, instead of on the tarmac.

The father looked as if he might have once been a marine himself, a handsome man of perfect posture…. The mother['s] … glasses made her eyes seem bigger than they were. They both looked calm, if a little lost, and gave off an aura of deep quiet.

They stood at the window between Gates 43 and 45 and watched as a full Marine honor guard marched up the tarmac, coming to attention between the plane and a silver military hearse. The unloading of their son's coffin from the cargo hold was very slow, and every time someone inside the terminal noticed and stopped to stare, someone else noticed and did the same, and this kept happening until about 20 people stood in silence watching out the window.

The mom leaned her elbows on the window ledge, supporting her chin and cheeks with both hands. She remained perfectly still. She stared for 10 or 15 long minutes and never moved. The father stood nearby, rocking from foot to foot and pacing a bit….

Down on the tarmac the white gloves of eight marines snapped their final salute as the doors of the hearse closed.

The P.A. system announced flights for Atlanta and Chicago. Travelers rushed to business meetings or summer vacations. The line for Auntie Anne’s pretzels was as long as ever.

Except for a handful of us standing frozen at a respectful distance from the window, the war and its carnage might as well have been on another planet. The disconnect between those who serve and those of us who are beneficiaries of their service has always felt great to me, but never greater than at that moment.

The mom and dad... waited until the marine in charge came back up from the runway to escort them to a government vehicle. I went to my car and drove to work with no ambition for the day other than to be worthy.