

‘Paths to God’: An Appreciation of Hinduism, by Rev. M. Lara Hoke March 27, 2011
a homily preached at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover

[Earlier in the service, I shared some basics about Hindu avatars of God/Brahman during the time for all ages. Before I began my homily, I shared a few more basics about Hinduism, more accurately known as “Sanatana Dharma” (Sanskrit for “eternal law”). Hinduism is the oldest of the scripturally-based world religions, and it is the third-largest world religion (behind Christianity and Islam). I also briefly explained the “Trimurti”, or the three main forms/avatars of God/Brahman: Shiva (destroyer), Brahma (creator), and Vishnu (preserver). I briefly explained that Ram is thought to be the 7th incarnation of Vishnu; Krishna the 8th incarnation; and Buddha the 9th incarnation. What follows is the text of my remarks, which I followed more loosely than usual.]

Hinduism and I go way back. Well, not on a cosmic scale. But in terms of my own life scale. Hinduism and I go back to 1985, 26 years ago, believe it or not. During the summer of 1985, the summer before my senior year of high school, I was lucky enough to participate in a program called “the Pennsylvania Governor’s School for International Studies” in Philadelphia. It was an amazing experience. Each year (before budget cuts ended the program), the Governor’s School for International Studies picked a particular country or region of the world, and student participants immersed themselves in interdisciplinary courses related to that specific country/region of the world. In the summer of 1985, the focus of the Governor’s School was India. This meant learning about the geography and economy and political systems of India; beginning to learn the Hindi language; and learning about the religious traditions of India, particularly Hinduism. Exploring Hinduism and learning Hindi were my very favorite parts of the summer. It was strictly at the intellectual or academic level; I was not spiritually engaged.

But then, after I came home from my studies, something interesting happened. Perhaps it was synchronicity. The fall after Governor’s School, my father was reading our local paper, and he noticed that free Hindi classes were being offered. I was so excited that I would be able to continue my studies. But then I learned the catch. The catch was that the classes were being offered in the Hindu temple near my hometown. And the Hindi classes were on Sunday mornings; so it was basically the “Sunday school” focus for the children and teens of the Hindu temple.

And so, as it turned out, during my senior year of high school I spent many Sundays at the local Hindu temple. I was there for a Hindi lesson, but I also took in some of the worship. I loved everything about it; it was so different from my experiences in RE at the Unitarian Universalist congregation where I grew up. I loved the chants, the incense, the bright colors, the transcendent feeling that came upon me in that style of worship. It wasn’t something you had to think about; it was something you experienced. You saw it; heard it; smelled it; felt it. As a teenager, it seemed like that’s what was missing, often, in Unitarian Universalism. Now that I’m 42 and a UU minister... it still feels like what’s missing, often, in Unitarian Universalism.

There’s a stark beauty and an elegance in modern Unitarian Universalist worship, and there’s certainly integrity in the use of reason. But... but...

Don't you sometimes want your worship to be more vivid? Bright colors! Mystical sounds! Enchanting smells! I have missed those things from my senior year of high school, and my year of worshipping and learning with the Hindus.

Life has a funny way of cycling things back to us. In 2003, a tragedy helped me to rediscover Hinduism. As some of you know, my stepson Adam died suddenly and unexpectedly in late 2003, from aortic stenosis. He was just 19 years old. In the aftermath of this tragedy, in my grief, I found myself wanting to go deeper spiritually. I was still a lay person at the time. Somewhere in the back of my head, I remembered my experience in the Hindu temple from high school, and I did a little research. I discovered that there was a Hindu temple relatively near where I live. I decided to go and see what it was like. I went quite randomly on a weekday morning.

Like the temple I remembered from 1985-86, it was in a structure that obviously used to be a house. But inside... inside, it took my breath away. I was struck with vivid sights and sounds and smells, just as I remembered. I didn't see anyone in the temple, though the door was unlocked. I knew someone was there, though, because I heard quiet singing in what sounded like Sanskrit, and I smelled incense. I sat on the floor, in front of the statues and portraits of the avatars of God. I closed my eyes, and I meditated and prayed. Something about the visuals – something about the “over-the-topness”, for lack of a better term, helped me meditate better than I'd ever been able to meditate before. Something about the vivid images and colors helped to pull me out of myself. I felt connected to all things. It was a true spiritual experience. When I opened my eyes, I saw this man [I showed a picture of the temple priest]. When I opened my eyes, he was sitting there meditating too; apparently he had quietly joined me. He probably wondered what on earth I was doing there, but he took it all in stride. Eventually he opened his eyes, and smiled and nodded at me. He began to sing quietly in Sanskrit. Then, after a time, he gave me a handful of nuts and dried fruit (a kind of communion offering in Hinduism known as *prasad*), and he said, “God bless you” with his heavy accent. Then he went back to his room in the temple.

I visited this temple many times the year after Adam died. Always, the priest ministered to me through meditation, singing in Sanskrit, the *prasad* and the blessing. I discovered that he speaks little English; he speaks Hindi. And as I speak very, *very* little Hindi, in spite of my studies, we've never had an in-depth conversation. He's a humble, quiet man, nothing flashy about him. But I consider him to be one of the most important religious figures of my lifetime. I still go to the temple occasionally, but nowhere near as often as I'd like. I'm overdue for a visit, in fact.

So, my first appreciation of Hinduism is something I'm trying to share, the best I can, this morning: and that's the vividness of the tradition. The vivid sensory experience so different from anything I'm accustomed to in my own lifetime – other than, perhaps, going out into nature's beauty itself. It helps me feel the warmth and wonderful diversity of creation. It helps me feel mysteriously connected to it all.

And my second appreciation? It's something embodied by the temple priest. Namely, a humility. A wise sense of knowing and not knowing, and a comfort with that. I'm reminded of

one of my favorite excerpts from the Vedas, one of Hinduism's major scriptures. Here are words describing the creation of the universe from the Rig Veda:

“At first was neither Being nor Nonbeing. There was not air nor yet sky beyond. ... In whose protection? Was Water there, unfathomable and deep? There was no death then, nor yet deathlessness; of night or day there was not any sign. The One breathed without breath, by its own impulse. Other than that was nothing else at all... In the beginning, Love arose, which was the primal germ cell of the mind. The Seers, searching in their hearts with wisdom, discovered the connection of Being in Nonbeing. A crosswise line cut Being from Nonbeing. What was described above it, what below? ... who really knows? Who can presume to tell it? Whence was it born? Whence issued this creation? Even the gods came after its emergence. Then who can tell from whence it came to be? That out of which creation has arisen, whether it held it firm or it did not, He who surveys it in the highest heaven, He surely knows – or maybe He does not!”¹ [There ends the scripture.]

Notice the comfort with the questions, rather than the answers... It reminds me a little of Unitarian Universalism in that way. It's hardly the certain “this is how the heavens and earth were formed” of Genesis. There's so much room for mystery, and for simply not knowing. Or as the great Hindu Mahatma Gandhi said, “It is unwise to be too sure of one's own wisdom. It is healthy to be reminded that the strongest might weaken and the wisest might err.”

My third appreciation of Hinduism? It is *leela*. *Leela* is the Hindu concept that the Divine power within the universe is playful. According to the ideas of *leela*, the universe is all about inter-play. Why be so serious? God plays, and why shouldn't you? *Leela* includes an appreciation for Krishna as a playful jokester and prankster, and an appreciation of Shiva as a dancer – dancing even as he destroys. You can be pious and playful simultaneously. God wants you to laugh and play. There is no need to decide between saving the world and savoring the world (as E.B. White put it). Because of *leela*, you can save the world and savor it, all at once.

I'll close with my final appreciation of Hinduism for this morning, and I've hinted at it in the title to this homily. Namely, Hinduism offers *many* paths to God² or to what is Divine. There are many paths to *moksha*, or release from the endless cycle of reincarnation. There is not one path. There is no attempt to force one path. There is no claim of the one path or the one truth. Within Hinduism, you have multiple paths to knowing the Divine. The three most popular paths to knowing God are yogas, or paths to union or communion with the divine. They are *karma* yoga (the path of action, through doing one's duty/*dharm*a and good works); *jnana* yoga (the path of knowledge, through study and meditation); and *bhakti* yoga (the path of devotion, through singing and praising the divine). The most popular is *bhakti* yoga, which we will get to experience today with *kirtan*.

But beyond these three yogas, there are many, many more... and what's more, Hinduism acknowledges paths to union with God that are beyond the bounds of traditional Hinduism. For

¹ Rig Veda 10.129, in Andrew Harvey's *Teachings of the Hindu Mystics* (Shambhala Press, 2001), pp. 1-2.

² I have seen the term “paths to God” used in a few contexts to describe Hinduism; it is the title of a Ram Dass book for one instance.

instance, Christianity (and other traditions) are usually regarded as valid ways of coming to know God. Loving and worshipping God in its incarnation as Jesus? That's a kind of Bhakti Yoga, for instance, and it's accepted as a worthy path.

Hindus are remarkably uninterested in converting others to Hinduism. It's not because they aren't enthusiastic about Hinduism; it's because they feel the path you were born with can work just fine, if you make the effort. So the priests at the two Hindu temples that I've been associated with have never been remotely interested in converting me. Why? Because there's nothing wrong with Unitarian Universalism! I just need to continue to work with it as my path to God. Besides, it's not even clear that one can convert to Hinduism; one can become a devotee of Hindu avatars of God, and one can practice Hindu yogas or paths to God... but without being born a Hindu, it's not clear that one can fully become a Hindu. But that's a discussion for another day.

In closing, the question for today, perhaps, is this: How *can* we make Unitarian Universalism a better path to God, or the Divine? Like our Hindu sisters and brothers, we Unitarian Universalists honor many paths to God. But how can we add more vividness? How can we increase our humility? How can we be more playful? Is there a way we can feel more vividly and mystically connected, rather than reading about and talking about inter-connectedness?

[We closed our service with kirtan, a call-and-response singing/chanting in Sanskrit, led by John Calabria.]