

River Renewal

This morning I would like to tell you about my experiences on the Ganges River in the city of Varanasi, in the north east of India. Those experiences were holy experiences, moments of wonder and awe. Those moments are few and far between, especially in the world we are living in currently. I hope you are finding small ways to create those moments – we surely need them right now, more than ever.

Many of you know that right before the pandemic closed the world down, I was fortunate to be able to travel to India in March of this year, on a trip with the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council. Our goal was to visit the Unitarian Churches in the Khasi Hills of far northeast of India, but political unrest in Meghalaya prevented our group from traveling there. Instead, the trip was turned into a Indian world religions tour, with visits to temples and mosques thousands of years old. The first leg of the trip was a visit to Varanasi.

We arrived at the River Ganges close to sunset on our first day in Varanasi, and were taken on a boat tour of the river at sunset. In one direction down the river was the city's holiest crematory. As our boat paddled close by, we observed families circled around each bonfire. The bodies are brought to the ghat (or stone embankment), washed with water from the Ganges, and wrapped in linens, firewood is piled onto a pyre, and the fire lit.



The fire burns for hours, until there are only ashes left, and family will return a week or two later, after rituals are completed, to cast the ashes into the Ganges.

The Ganges River, affectionately known as Ganga, flows past the city of Varanasi. The river originates thousands of miles away, from the Gangotri glacier in the Himalayas.



The name Ganga also means mother, and Hindus believe that rivers are feminine, accepting all and forgiving all. Rivers purify as they flow past. In Varanasi are places called tirthas, or holy places, and tirtha in Sanskrit means “crossing place” or a junction between places that meet and do not meet, like “blessed water”, the water between heaven and earth that circles down to earth and back up to heaven in purification cycles that we in the western world recognizes as the water cycle and our youngest children learn about in school.

It is believed that to die in Varanasi, or to be cremated in Varanasi, is to achieve moksha (which you might also know as Nirvana).

To achieve moksha means to bypass the cycle of death and rebirth and go straight to what Christians might call heaven. Moksha is more precious than renewal – it is liberation from renewal, liberation from bodies, pain, and grief.

After viewing the crematory ghats, we traveled further down the river to observe the Ganga Arti, or the sacred rituals that take place at sunset. As part of the ritual, we were given diyas – floating lamps with flowers – and reminded to make a wish as we watched the diyas float away.



The many hundreds of floating pots on the River Ganges that night was magical. All those wishes sent out into the world!

Hindus make pilgrimages to tirthas, or holy places, and Varanasi, believed to be the oldest continuously occupied city in the world, is an especially holy place. Hindus believe that to bathe in the Ganges is purify one's soul, and pilgrims go to the River Ganga to address remorse or perform penance.



We were back out on a boat on the Ganges early the next morning at sunrise, in order to observe the ritual bathing. The river was quiet, peaceful, still, soothing to my soul. It was magical in a different way, allowing us to experience wonder in the stillness of early morning before the city was truly awake.



As our boat paddled down the shoreline of the Ganges, we observed holy men setting up for prayers, Vedic students assembled for morning rituals, and men and women purifying themselves in the waters of Ganga.



As we listen today to the stories around Yom Kippur and the ideas around atonement and renewal, I hope you will also think about

what it means to have your sins washed away, to have your regret washed away. The story we heard earlier, *Even Higher*, explains that the time between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is a time to reflect on and repair what's broken in our lives. Hindus go to the water to repair what has been broken in their lives.

Like the rabbi in *Even Higher*, we don't need miracles in our lives. We can make a better world through kindness and compassion. We can allow the holy waters of rivers to wash away our pain, to liberate us, to purify us.

What kind of pilgrimage might you begin, to renew, to heal yourself, to build a better world? Will you serve others without recognition? Will you go to the waters to heal?