



“Finding the Light”

Reflection: November 15, 2020

The Rev. Paige Getty

One of the tricky things about being Unitarian Universalist is the tension that arises because of our pluralism—our celebration of many different ways of being religious. Because of that pluralism, we run a pretty big risk of inappropriately claiming others' practices as our own, rather than respecting the unique and sacred identity of those practices in their own tradition.

We Unitarian Universalists are sincerely open to many ways of knowing ... many truths. We as individuals practice deliberately considering how others might view an experience or the world differently than we do. We recognize that other people have beliefs about human nature and our metaphysical reality that are legitimate, even if they differ from ours. We also know that some beliefs are harmful—beliefs held by other people, and beliefs held by ourselves.

One of the other aspects of this tricky tension is the risk of conflating all religious perspectives such that they become meaningless—saying, “all religions essentially believe the same thing”. It's like “color-blindness” in talking about race and ethnicity—by denying differences, we essentially make invisible anything that isn't the dominant cultural perspective or experience.

Religions do not all share an essence. And yet, as we celebrate light today, inspired particularly by Diwali, I'm aware of how tempting it is to claim that every religious tradition in the Northern Hemisphere has some sort of light-related observance at this time of year. A lot of them—of us—certainly do. But not all.



The Indian celebration of Diwali is a celebration of a light within each of us—a light that we bring to the world for our individual and collective benefit. Knowing that I risk the conflation and dilution that I have just warned against, I'll observe that this celebration feels a bit like it honors our first and seventh Unitarian Universalist principles, and their relationship to each other. We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person (an inner light) and also the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part (how our light affects the world).

Earlier from Robin we heard a creation story from the Maori tradition that expresses how each of us has a divine light to offer the world. There's a story in Judaism that's similar. Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen tells it like this, as it was told to her by her grandfather:

This is the story of the birthday of the world. In the beginning, there was only the holy darkness, the Ein Sof, the source of life. Then, in the course of history, at a moment in time, this world, the world of a thousand thousand things, emerged from the heart of the holy darkness as a great ray of light. And then, perhaps because this is a Jewish story, there was an accident. And the vessels containing the light of the world, the wholeness of the world, broke. And the wholeness in the world, the light of the world, was scattered into a thousand thousand fragments of light. And they fell into all events and all people, where they remain deeply hidden until this very day.

Now, according to my grandfather [Dr. Remen says], the whole human race is a response to this accident. We are here because we are born with the capacity to find the hidden light in all events and all people; to lift it up and make it visible once again and, thereby, to restore the innate wholeness of the world. This is a very important story for our times — that we heal the world one heart at a time. This task is called “tikkun olam” in Hebrew, “restoring the world.”



Many religious traditions carry some sort of belief about humans having such an inner light—a divine spark, we Unitarian Universalists often say—but not all religions do. I was working on an interfaith project last year, and we were trying to come up with some language to describe the purpose of our project, and I suggested that we could say something about how we want to give each participant an opportunity to reveal their own divine spark, the holy truth, that they carry within. A Muslim partner gently corrected me, saying that in her tradition, they don't believe that Allah—nor any part of Allah—resides within them. For our Muslim siblings to be included, we needed not to use that frame.

And that lesson reveals another tension I navigate on this religious journey—the necessary adjustments of my own beliefs and understanding when new information and different perspectives are introduced.

Janet Hutchinson, a Unitarian Universalist poet, expresses this tension in her poem [Of Course](#):

Of course I want the truth,
but here's the rub:

Truth doesn't sit around
still as a rock,

it breathes and flows
and turns inside out.

Ever seen a lion in a cage?
He paces and glowers.

That must be how God feels
locked in our little religions.



Look how big the sky is,
the deep distances between stars.

Little speck, that's you;
laughable speck, that's me.

How could we contain The Truth,
all that overwhelming light?

Our truth is just a pinprick
in mystery's velvet curtain.

Even so, see how we struggle
to fix an eyeball to that—

peepshow's tiny window.

“Our truth is just a pinprick.” And yet, it is a pinprick. It is not nothing. And that's another truth that many—if not all—of us as individuals, and in our collective religious traditions can affirm: that *together*, our individual pinpricks of light—of truth, of understanding—*together* they can more effectively illuminate the wholeness of being.

Writer Somini Sengupta reminds us that Diwali is a holiday that “means different things to different communities.” Still, she says,

Everywhere we celebrate, we light a lamp. ... [a reminder] that we may banish illness and ignorance, ... that we may restore justice.

... Diwali is a celebration of light. It comes on the darkest night of the lunar cycle. It marks the triumph of good over evil, justice over tyranny, knowledge over ignorance. It reminds [us] that we can help one another get through...



I'm reminded of Auden's words from the poem with which I opened the service this morning:

We must love one another or die.
...dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I...
Show an affirming flame.

We have the power ... the power to bring justice and wisdom and hope and courage to one another ... the power "to restore the innate wholeness of the world" (Remen) ... *tikkun olam*.

What is your light? Is it your kindness, your compassion, your artistry, your curiosity, your ability to make connections among disparate pieces of information, your patience, your generosity, your ability to quietly observe? Maybe it's your words or your music or your painting that brings beauty or comfort or healing.

Each of us has it—a light that is powerful and valuable and *needed*. As the Rev. Abhi Janamanchi (who is both Unitarian Universalist and Hindu) says, "May the Inner Light lead us away from ignorance, untruth, despair, and fear toward wisdom, truth, hope, and courageous love."

It's a difficult, oppressive time in which we live. And each of us can take a turn in "dispelling the misery of the world", as a [Prayer](#) by Shantideva says. Shantideva was an 8th century Indian Buddhist monk. As I close, I offer one of many forms of this prayer):

May I become at all times, both now and forever
A protector of those without protection



A guide for those who have lost their way
A ship for those with oceans to cross
A bridge for those with rivers to cross
A sanctuary for those in danger
A lamp for those without light
A place of refuge for those who lack shelter
And a servant to all in need
For as long as space endures,
And for as long as living beings remain,
Until then may I, too, abide
To dispel the misery of the world.

“We must love one another or die.” Let us “restore the innate wholeness of the world.” Amen.