

Light the Lamp of Love

a sermon by the Reverend Dr. Susan Veronica Rak
on Sunday, 19 October 2014

First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, a Unitarian Universalist congregation

"The night is black

Kindle the lamp of LOVE

With thy life and devotion." -- Rabindranath Tagore

Unitarian Universalists have had a connection with Hinduism from our beginnings in the 19th century. When the Enlightenment finally took hold in New England, the Transcendentalists were on fire with new ideas and radical suggestions of human interconnectedness. Ralph Waldo Emerson was probably one of the greatest influencers of this interchange. Long before intellectuals and religious leaders in the United States knew about Hinduism - beyond some inklings tinged with the prejudice of it being a chaotic, exotic religion - Emerson was studying and absorbing the wisdom of the Vedas and Upanishads, The Laws of Manu, The Mahabharata and Ramayana. There was cross-fertilization as well, with encounters between British Unitarians and Rammohun Roy, founder of the Brahmo Samaj, the religious group with which Rabindranath Tagore was aligned.

Hinduism may appear exotic and not something we feel kinship with as readily as say Judaism, Christianity or even Paganism. But through people like Emerson, Hindu thought was subtly woven into the fabric of what would become Unitarianism as we know it... a faith that broke from the confines of bible-based Trinitarian Christianity to become a universal understanding of humanity.

The living tradition from which we draw includes a multitude of possibilities. How we include and honor the sources of our faith deepens from year to year. We might understand Hinduism as a polytheist religion full of fanciful legends and impenetrable scriptures (and rituals that last for hours and hours...), and we can also see its teachings and traditions as guiding lights for our living today. Tagore knew this and celebrated the possibilities in poems and songs and writings. With his roots in the Hindu culture of his origins, he offered a new kind of teaching that celebrated the oneness of all life through the personal experiences of life, of our connection to one another and to all of creation, the love that abides.

This morning I invite us to reflect on the simple essence of Diwali as a time of practicing love, of letting love shine, of lighting lamps that illuminate the lives of others. I've been slowly gathering stories from people about their time here at First Unitarian Church. And what I've been hearing is that they are here because of the religious liberalism of Unitarian Universalism - its values and principles.

And they stick with First Unitarian because of the community they find here. And from that I infer that people - those who stick around, those who feel a part of this Unitarian Universalist congregation - do so because they belong, or feel as if they belong.

But this belonging is not just something that happens because you sign your name in a Membership Book or show up here on a regular basis. It has more to do in HOW we show up, more than simply that we do. What belonging to this congregation - or being part of any relationship or institution worth its salt - demands is that we "kindle the lamp of love with our lives and our devotion."

Brené Brown - research professor of social work and author and nationally known speaker (her TED talk on “The Power of Vulnerability” is one of the most popular ones) - tells us this about belonging:

“Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it.

Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.”

The community is only as strong as its members. So then each of us who come here, looking for that sense of belonging are asked to bring our whole selves into this enterprise. The word “devotion” is slightly old-fashioned - not something we use often in conversation. But I think this is a way we might practice devotion - through commitment, through what Brown calls “wholehearted living”. This is the cultivation of love... allowing ourselves to be seen and known just as we are. It means developing, encouraging and nurturing the values of trust, respect, kindness and affection.

One of the most challenging aspects of the cultivation of love is vulnerability – a scary topic for some of us. Think of it - Vulnerability - like an animal showing its soft underbelly... defenseless... open to being hurt or worse. But Brown believes that

“Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.

“... [it] s not knowing victory or defeat, it’s understanding the necessity of both; it’s engaging. It’s being all in.”

That makes profound sense to me. So aptly describes what we are about as a religious community, bound by our principles and our covenant and our commitment to one another. It means we need to be what my mentor Reverend Rudy Nemser called “long-haul people”

You find them in churches
when you’re lucky;
other places too, though I mostly
only know ecclesiastical varieties.
Long haul people
upon whose shoulders
(and pocketbooks and casseroles
and daylight/nighttime hours)
a church is built and maintained
after the brass is tarnished and
cushions need re-stitching.
They pay their pledges full and on time
even when the music’s modern;
support each canvass though the sermons aren’t always short;

mow lawns and come to suppers;
teach Sunday School when
there's no one else and they'll miss the service.
Asked what they think of the minister,
or plans for the kitchen renovation,
or the choral anthem, or Christmas pageant,
or color of the bathroom paint,
they'll reply: individuals and fashions
arrive and pass.
The church—their church—will be here, steady and hale.
For a long, long time.
It will.
For long haul people bless a church
with a very special blessing.

“Long-haul people” are not just steadfast and true... they are folks willing to err on the side of community, and possibly make mistakes in the process; they are willing to experiment, take risks. Not just in projects, but in relationships. In being open to one another. In accepting that we will not always agree on things, but that differing opinions don't have to be harmonized. Nor do we have to just "agree to disagree" and leave it at that. (I find a harshness in that sentiment, leaving a bitter aftertaste.)

To be a “long-haul” person has nothing to do with your age or how long you've been a Unitarian Universalist or how long you've been a part of this church. You don't have to be a church elder or a senior citizen to be such a person - I've met plenty of young adults who already possess this quality - some of them right here in this room. To be a long-haul person is a state of mind and a state of heart. And even as it sounds like such people are strong and power forward through difficulties and practice devotion by showing up day after day and year after year, they bring something else to the community. They bring vulnerability. We are asked to be vulnerable... not in a wimpish way but in an empowered, very human and open way.

Brown's point is that whether we are fully aware of it or not, everyday life presents us with challenges that invite vulnerability. This, she says, “is not weakness.” What we confront in our day-to-day lives - uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure – are not options if we are going to be in relationship with others and with our world. “Our only choice is a question of engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose...”

If we can't practice even a bit of vulnerability, if we cannot embrace or even tolerate uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure, we will never change, or keep evolving. Because to change means we'll have to try something new and see what's next... and it may not work out exactly as planned or at all. And we need to be okay with that. One of my favorite Emerson quotes talks about being okay with our errors: “Do not be too timid and squeamish about your actions. All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better. What if they are a little coarse and you may

get your coat soiled or torn? What if you do fail, and get fairly rolled in the dirt once or twice? Up again, you shall never be so afraid of a tumble.”

We protect ourselves from being vulnerable because we fear failure, we fear looking foolish or being ridiculed or dismissed. This is our fear of disconnection. But nothing of value - be it personal relationships, a thriving corporation, a loving community or a healthy religious institution - ever came into being and thrived without this risk, without these experiments, without vulnerability.

How vulnerability is experienced in our past may make this idea hard to embrace. If we're carrying scars from hurtful encounters or times when we've been bullied or taken advantage of, the last thing we want to do be vulnerable. I am not talking about putting yourself or your psyche at risk here, or creating an unhealthy environment that allows domination by a few. Along with the expectation of creating a community of belonging and openness is the requirement of maintaining a compassionate and safe space. And being a healthy and vital community means we build trust enough so that we can engage and have confidence in and respect one another. It does not mean we will never make mistakes or feel hurt. But it does mean that we will heal. And that is the work of love.

Growing up in a parochial school that made the most of "guilt", and punishment, there was a strong inclination to be tough. And hiding emotions became a comfortable, safe place for me to be. It took a long time for me to unlearn that toughness is not strength. That reserved appearance is not the same as calm. That to be vulnerable does not necessarily mean I will be hurt. That love is not really possible without a little risk. [Brown] “Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow...”

We all know there are no guarantees in this life. But day after day, we kindle the lamp of love - or attempt to at the very least. We do so aware that the love we offer may not always be returned. We may love someone who may not love us back - or who may love us back in the same measure that we offer. But we stay in it, keeping the connection. We are loyal even when there is the risk - the very human risk - of betrayal [large or small - it happens]. That is vulnerability. “... [it] s not knowing victory or defeat, it's understanding the necessity of both; it's engaging. It's being all in.”

This is “wholehearted living” - engaging with our lives, engaging with one another, from a place of worthiness. Being all-in. bringing your whole self - talents, imperfections, strength and vulnerability - to the table.

“... cultivating the courage, compassion and connection to wake up in the morning and think, ‘No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.’ It's going to bed at night thinking, ‘Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn't change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.”

This is how it happens... how community is made... how it is nurtured and carried through from generation to generation. ***Courage, compassion and connection.***

Every day... every year, come what may.

Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead by Brené Brown (Gotham Books, September 2012)

http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en