

Into the Mystery

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD May 14, 2023

Through the art of parable, Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain texts teach devoted readers about truth. As the story tells it, many centuries ago, a group of five blind men heard myriad tales from world travelers, introducing them to the wonders of distant lands. One day, one of these travelers brought with them an exotic animal - an elephant. Filled with curiosity, the blind men sought to understand the elephant in the best way they could – by touch. The inquisitive group arranged to meet the traveler and this unknown creature. Each of the five men pressed their hand upon a different part of the elephant’s body and exclaimed with great excitement what they felt. The first man grasped the elephant’s trunk and cried, “an elephant is like a thick snake!” A second man placed his hand upon the elephant’s ear and exclaimed, “no, an elephant is like a banana leaf!” A third man touched the leg of the elephant, and proclaimed, “you are both wrong! An elephant is like the trunk of a tree.” Another held the tusk, which he found to be akin to a plow, while a fifth held the tail and likened it to a rope. In this vein the men continued to argue, until a wise teacher interrupted their quarreling. “The elephant is quite large – and you are each only touching one part,” she explained. Each man – in attempting to understand the great elephant – was partially right. It was like a rope and a leaf, a plow and a tree.¹ Poet John Godfrey Saxe brought this story to a western audience and introduced the elephant as a metaphor for God and faith.² This is what we explore today – the possibility that each of the world’s religions are creatively interpreting their own faith and meaning making from the same common essence or source of all that is. Last week we introduced creativity as a journey towards all that is beautiful. This week we explore creativity in trying to understand the unknowable source of all that is.

I am reminded of a quote from the English poet John Keats, “We need those who can dream of things that never were.”³ Is this not the essence of religion and the creativity that elevated the

¹ Compilation of several traditional narratives

² Wikipedia

³ *Soul Matters Worship Research Packet 2022-2023, Creativity*

world's great prophets? Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad – all creating theological and life-giving meaning from that which not even science could understand; inviting us to step into the mystery of faith, religion, and meaning making. I am by no means a great prophet and yet I have attempted to venture into the mystery as well, and in my journey – guided not by the senses but by intuition and prayer – dreamed love to be at the center of my theology – the center of my being. Love – that ever-elusive love – that which I have heard in sacred prayer in mosques, that I have heard elevated through song before Christian devotees took communion, that I have ruminated upon with Buddhists as I sat amongst practitioners of Metta meditation. Love – what I find to be universal. And so, I wonder, is there one ultimate truth, one final reality, one source of all being that each faith is creatively trying to understand and interpret? One, shall we say, elephant? Today we venture, yes. I hold this synonymous not with one God of many names but with many Gods of many names – with polytheism and monotheism and religious naturalism, which worships no deity, all held true side by side. Why does this matter? In this world so pervasively divisive, I wonder how our interactions could change when we realize and understand all that we share at the level of our very essence. Today we explore this theological journey through the lens of prominent scholar Huston Smith.

The first argument Smith articulates is perhaps seemingly egocentric and presumptuous but is actually quite spiritual and held as a sacred truth by many, interpreted in myriad ways. The center of each person is the center of the cosmos. “Holy Palace” the Kabbalists call it. “Divine Station” say Muslims, or the Taoist Void where all things unite. Indigenous leader Black Elk, enchanted by beauty while at the top of a mountain placed himself as the center of the universe, with the added caveat that “the center is everywhere.” In the Buddhist faith, followers understand that “there is a Buddha in every grain of sand.” Another religious leader reflected, “God is a sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.” Each and every living thing – perhaps even every grain of sand – is simultaneously the center of all things sacred and holy.⁴ When lying on the beach under the blanket of the night sky, a plethora of stars reminding us of our own insignificance, when alongside death, reminded of our own

⁴ *Forgotten Truth* by Huston Smith pgs. 30-31

finitude, likewise in each ordinary and mundane moment, we are the center of all things sacred, which ties us intimately together with all that is, tangible and intangible, finite and infinite, transcendent and imminent.

Smith further argues that religions share a common vision of what he calls “levels of selfhood.” Each of us is akin to a concentric circle begun as stone is tossed in a placid body of water. We start with the body, expand to the mind, ripple further out to the soul, finally reaching the spirit that is held within each of us. In reflecting I will gloss over body and only briefly touch on mind. The mind: that which is tangible, serving to interpret sense perceptions, interacting with that which surrounds us through the veil of past experiences.⁵ Let us, instead, first focus on our soul – that which is closer to our essence than our mind could ever be.

In my mind the soul has a Christian connotation that could be off-putting as we extrapolate upon religious universals. So, I invite us to understand the soul in, perhaps to you, a somewhat different way. I appreciate the following metaphor: “If we equate mind with the stream of consciousness, the soul is the source of this stream.”⁶ The soul, understood universally, is ultimately our essence – who we are at our core – beyond the tactile mind and body – entirely uncontainable. When I read about this I reflected on my own idea of universal love – for love is inherent in the soul as well. Divinely held deep within the soul is our love for the sacred and the sacred’s love for us – a “constant flowing and reflowing of [divine] love”⁷ – whatever that divine may be. Can we hold within our essence the whispers of the wind, the embrace of the many Goddesses, the unconditional forgiveness of our Universalist God? May we graciously offer our own love in return.

Finally, beyond the soul, we have the spirit. The spirit is nothing more than an element within us that directly relates to the divine – identical, in a sense, to that which is holy. The spirit is the presence of the sacred within. Different, as we are finite and the other infinite, but impressively

⁵ Ibid pgs. 69-70

⁶ Ibid pg. 74

⁷ Ibid pg. 84

similar.⁸ Understood as an entity, perhaps, or the awe of our ever-expansive universe, or the essence of love.

Smith argues that is what we hold universally within – body, mind, soul, and spirit – and that different faiths – Buddhism, Judaism, Unitarian Universalism, Taoism – are simply different ways of creatively extrapolating upon these four universal truths. Each faith is blessed with that sacred creativity that allows prophets and devotees alike to “dream of things that never were”⁹ – crafting meaning from interpreting all of that which is entirely unknown, unfathomable, hidden, and mysterious, yet grounded in these four “levels of selfhood.”¹⁰

There is a religious universality in all that lies beyond us, as well – that which stretches far beyond our own simple, finite, existence, that reaches far further than our small, blue dot, further than our milky way – into the realm of the unknowable and the unfathomable. Let us break this down into different planes of existence – different levels of reality. Again, I will not focus much on the tangible piece of this argument –the plane we currently occupy, the realm of space, time, matter, and energy.¹¹

Instead, let us begin with Smith’s subsequent argument, that there is a second plane held between the finite and the infinite, between the human and the divine. This is the realm of the discarnates – of ghosts, of souls that are in limbo. In Tibetan Buddhism this is the “bardos”; the space where an essence exists between cycles of death and rebirth. This is a space where spiritualists and mediums are in touch with the departed, where shamans travel in trance.¹² I wonder if, in our faith, this is where we hold our cloud of ancestors.

Beyond this thin of the disembodied lies the realm of the infinite. The infinite is so unknowable, so mysterious that we often describe it simply in terms of what it is not –

⁸ *Forgotten Truth* by Huston Smith pg. 89

⁹ *Soul Matters Worship Research Packet 2022-2023, Creativity*

¹⁰ *Forgotten Truth* by Huston Smith

¹¹ *Ibid* pg. 37

¹² *Ibid* pgs. 38-39

unconditional, ineffable, unknowable. You have heard me speak of the infinite – what I call the source of all that is, also unconditional and everlasting love. I appreciate Smith’s description: “The Infinite is more like a lion that exists than a unicorn that does not, more like creatures that experience than like objects that do not, more like ourselves when we are fulfilled than when we are wanting.”¹³ Perhaps we can but begin to experience it in a moment when we are engrossed in a cascading waterfall, entranced by the depths of a canyon, or witness the fleeting light of a far-off shooting star. Noticing but one small, beautiful, tangible piece of all that is, was, and ever will be. Perhaps we can experience it when immersed in a moment of romantic or parental love, or during that tender moment of transition of a beloved from this realm to the next, or during an intimate moment of prayer or meditation. Sacred like that, but eternal.

Again, Smith offers what he holds universal – realms tangible, intermediate, and eternal. He offers truths that he claims each of the world’s religions have grappled with and creatively interpreted, dreaming “of things that never were,”¹⁴ – the unknowable, ineffable, infinite, held far beyond our simple, fleeting, finite lives, beyond the sun and the milky way and the galaxies billions of lightyears away.

As inquisitive and devoted people of faith, I wonder, what can we create? Perhaps a better world. How drastically would society change if we, each of us – Buddhist or Muslim, Democrat or Republican, rich or poor, black or white or shades of brown – if we understood each person as enveloped in the same universal truths. I preach this message of ubiquitous religious ideas in the midst of a divisive, hateful, antagonistic world. And I preach this message amid an altruistic, compassionate, and revolutionary world. Both are true. We regularly encounter people we dislike, disdain, or vehemently disagree with. Each of them – the center of the cosmos, holding within a reservoir of divine love, hidden, perhaps, behind trauma or fear. We live in an unfortunate, painful world of “othering” and “-isms” and violence and yet we are a people of faith, and as such we are called to side with the destitute for they, too, are our siblings. I hope

¹³ *Forgotten Truth* by Huston Smith pg. 55

¹⁴ *Soul Matters Worship Research Packet 2022-2023, Creativity*

that in understanding that which binds us together in sacred and holy ways – focusing on our commonalities, not on that which divides us – that we can understand a bit more about one another and each of our actions. Not condoning that which causes harm but finding basic commonalities and reacting with love – holding the world in redemptive love. I hope we can celebrate that there are more similarities than differences between the wealthy and the destitute, the victims and the incarcerated, the sanctified and the condemned, the Buddhists and the Christians and the Muslims and the Sikhs. We are bound together by all that is sacred – let this be a catalyst for creative living bounded by unconditional love.

I want to end with a reflection on the sky, and all she holds within. No matter what your theology, no matter what your soul or your spirit or your tangible or your infinite, we each experience the same sunset, the same sunrise, the same moon. We each say goodnight to the same stars and have for millennia. That, if nothing else, binds us together in an unending relationship.

May it be so, and Amen.