

Welcoming the Sacred, Welcoming the World

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 17, 2023

There are two ancient Buddhist tales that serve to articulate the meaning and purpose of faith. One likens faith to a gem. This gem, once tossed into a stream just after an emperor's army has passed through, suddenly settles the disturbed sand, mud, and silt, causing the disrupted body of water to quickly become clear and translucent again. The second story offers a narration of a person poised at the edge of a riverbank unable to judge whether it may be possible to leap over the deep and turbulent waters. In the next moment, a stranger approaches the riverbank and quickly and easily jumps over it. Watching the successful leap to the opposite shoreline created a deep confidence that reaching the other side of the torrent was, indeed, possible. What do these stories communicate? Two characteristics of faith: the ability to invite a calm and settled mind, and the inspiration to persist and persevere.¹

Last week I posed to you the question, "How are you changed by engaging with all things sacred?" This week my questions are two-fold. First, "What do we gain when we welcome faith and spirituality into our lives?" Our journeys are unique and different in sacred ways, yet hold some common, foundational attributes. Which leads to our second question, "Who do we welcome when we explore the universals of world religions?"

Faith invites myriad life-giving understandings of the sacred. The awe-inspiring colors of a sunset, the sky transitioning from blue to orange to pink to black. The interdependence of life exemplified by the stardust that runs through each of our veins. A God offering unconditional love and unrestricted forgiveness. Innumerable divine entities interacting with one another, their efforts reflected in the well-being of faith adherents. Metaphors, I offer, for the unknowable, the ineffable, the source of all that is, unique to each culture, each society, each faith tradition – welcoming into our lives just what we need to love and to persevere. To

¹ The Foundations of Buddhism by Rupert Gettin pg. 169

Buddhists, faith offers clarity and perseverance; what I translate into my faith language as peace of mind and hope. What else does faith provide us? Well, we will see.

In exploring the value of faith and all it offers, we don't simply ask what faith unconditionally and generously provides us with, but what we offer faith in return - what faith asks of us - for this is transformational as well. Faith calls for us to be vulnerable and submit to the unknown. It invites a life of intention – each action, sacred or profane – to be holy, good, well-intentioned, and loving. We are asked to engage in deep introspection, the sacred inviting us to question, “Who am I?” “Why am I?” To both connect with what we hold within and engage with that which is well beyond – to foster an intimate relationship with that still, small voice within, that spark of the sacred, as well as to that great mystery which transcends all that is.

In my work as a chaplain, as a minister, as a student of theology, faith, and myth, I have seen attachments with the sacred – a welcoming of the holy and all she offers – paramount during times of desperation and during times of awe. In working with those in health crises at a hospital, the unhoused in an inner city of New Jersey, teenagers in the midst of a battle with the evils of addiction and the woes of mental illness, despair was abundant, distress plentiful, and a welcome for the sacred much needed. In my role – which I hold sacred and purposeful each day – I was a vessel for the sacred, and I believe you can be too. I was a vessel, connecting with my own holy to react to the unique, tender, immediate and desperate requests of each devastated soul. We united for just a moment on a distinctive, individual journey towards and with the sacred, the unknown, the unknowable. At times we sat and grasped hands, welcoming into the intimate silence and pain filled void a moment of hope – offering a brief prayer for an aching soul to persist. Sometimes the suffering ones needed prayers of petition – asking the divine in humble and panicked tones for a successful surgery, a job, another day sober. Sometimes we simply invited solace and peace for one brief moment when caught in the throes of despair and anguish. Calm and peace, one might say. Perseverance and hope.

Beauty and awe offer a profound welcome to the sacred as well. It is when that nature, that interdependence, that God or multiple deities we mentioned earlier expresses itself through the beauty and wonder that our senses can engage with. It is a gift, an offering, a moment of magic. It is the natural beauty of the vast sky sprinkled with stars stretching far above us, the acknowledgement that the moon we see is the same moon the natural world has witnessed since the dawn of consciousness tying us all together. Beauty and awe - it is a connection to the love that saturates this planet we call home, the answer to a prayer, a moment of gratitude or hope. We welcome the sacred, and the sacred welcomes us.

Faith offers abundant hope, love, solace, persistence, and beauty, and we offer intention, introspection, and vulnerability in return. And yet in order to foster this reciprocity we are called to engage in spiritual practices that allow us to welcome the sacred into our hearts, minds, and bodies. For millennia, the faithful have engaged in practices of prayer, of meditation, of immersion in the natural world – practices that have stood the test of time.

There are no prescribed attributes to prayer, it is but an intimate connection between the finite and the infinite – a pause for one’s inner being to connect with the ultimate, the source of all that is – a moment, perhaps, of gratitude, of petition or request, of connection with the ancestors, of a moment to ask “why?” a time to simply pause and fill one's heart with love and hope, to become a vessel oneself for all that is holy.

Or a practice of meditation, taking many forms, perhaps simply sitting with the breath. I meet monthly with a leadership coach, and as a wise mentor she ushers me through my practice of meditation. When I expressed to her my frustration with my ever-wandering mind, she offered me inspiration that calls me to sit with the breath each day. She offered that this practice allows us to access our inner selves, often hidden, cloaked behind anxiety, insecurity - to connect with that inner, always present yet often concealed innate wisdom that we each hold within – allowing each of us to access our full selves, every piece of us, releasing that which

leaves us dependent on the external. Simply by pausing, focusing, releasing, and breathing. What else could a minister want?

I mentioned, too, an immersion in nature. This may evoke prayer or serve as a practice of meditation. It can also elicit and initiate many of those characteristics inherent to a faithful life – appreciation, gratitude, hope, peace, inspiration, awe – found in the velvety darkness filled with what appears to be thousands of flickering fireflies, the slow transition from seed to sapling to towering oak, the plummeting depths of a canyon as water and sediment slowly carves through rock.

These are those individual, unique characteristics of faith we hold within, found between and within differing faith traditions, here, specifically, within Unitarian Universalism. I offer an inventory of what we gain when we welcome faith and spirituality into our lives – our own understanding of the sacred, our own offerings back to that which is divine, the unique spiritual needs we have in times of desperation and that which we cherish during times of awe, as well as our own way of connecting with all of this. What is universal to the faiths of the world?

Buddhist scholar Rupert Gethin refers us back to those ancient tales we began with, arguing that a settled mind and the inspiration to keep persevering are the inherent goals of a faithful life. A calm mind, and an ability to never give up. Gethin offers, in his interpretation of Buddhism, that if sacred rituals and worship result in these two characteristics, they are valid.²

Buddhism offers another story, one that we have explored before, so I'll revisit with brevity. Religion is akin to a group of blind people trying to understand an elephant. One grasps on to the tail and offers, "an elephant is like a paintbrush." Another holds a leg and exclaims, "No! An elephant is like a tree." A third grabs the trunk and proclaims, "An elephant is like a great snake!" The confusion continues. The message? All faiths are different ways of understanding one ultimate truth, one unknowable, ineffable essence. We are inevitably bound by our limited

² The Foundations of Buddhism by Rupert Gethin pg. 169

worldly experiences, changing and morphing between continents and cultures. All we can do is pause in respect, curiosity, love, and acceptance.

Jewish scholar Bradley Shavit Artson offers that arguing which religion, which faith, which understanding of the sacred is correct or superior is a fruitless and harmful venture. There is no literal understanding of God's will – or the will of any sacred being. The ultimate is simply a metaphor, as I offered before. Quarrels over religious truths are inconsequential, harmful, and unnecessary. Faith, he offers, is not one ultimate God, one creed, one doctrine, one way to worship, but that which lights us up – which illuminates the inherent love and goodness held within communities, cultures, and individual lives alike. Religion is not a profession of ultimate truth, nor can it claim to be. Instead, faith offers a way for each soul and each collection of souls to make sense of the world – to comprehend the incomprehensible. Religion serves to provide meaning, purpose, and offers followers questions to reflect on: Why am I here? What am I to do with this one, precious life? Any life-giving faith, any religion worthy of followers, fosters compassion, justice, and goodness. That is what inherently matters.³

Which leads us to our ultimate question: “Who do we welcome when we explore the universals of world religions?” I offer you my reflections. We welcome anyone who has hope, listening to that still, small voice within, that spark of the divine, calling them to keep going. Anyone who has love, caring with a full heart, mind, and soul for one another and the holy. Anyone who has compassion, seeing the fullness in each person. Anyone who is vulnerable, connecting with something we can never fully understand. Anyone who finds comfort in the sentiment that we are not alone. Anyone who has solace and understanding that there is something greater than we can ever know journeying with us. Anyone who aspires to a calm mind, connecting with that innate goodness and wisdom within. Anyone who grasps but a bit of that expansive elephant and uses that limited understanding to better themselves and the world. So often faith and religion have been named to foster violence, opposition, and oppression. When I encounter

³ *Panentheism Across the World's Traditions* “Holy, Holy, Holy! Jewish Affirmations of Panentheism” by Bradley Shavit Artson pgs. 32-33

such blasphemy, I think of the love that fostered the beginnings of each of the world's religions. Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Muhmmad, to name but a few prophets. What would these holy people offer our disjointed, oppositional world today? In all my inherent ignorance and wisdom, I believe it is a message of hope, love, and justice that we need. So may we be that message. May we go forth, with all we hold sacred, each of us a force to heal those who are broken, to comfort the afflicted, to love the destitute, for that, my beloveds, is faith.

May it be so, and Amen.