

Order of Service

My India

Sunday, March 22, 2009

Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

Tasha Petroff and Greg Howarth and kids

It's a homecoming for me today here at Evergreen.

But each week it's a homecoming for someone

Because this Fellowship is our Spiritual Home.

We light our chalice this morning

In the name of Coming Home.

Let us worship together.

Meditation and Prayer

Of all the complex beauty and ineffable mysteries of the
spirituality

Of the Indian sub-continent,

The central message is remarkably simple.

Find moments of silence in your life.

Then let them grow, so that silence walks with you

Wherever you go.

Now noticing the silence

That is here with us right now...

Amen.

Readings: Mahamrityunjaya Mantra, Gayatri Mantra
~ Rev. Bruce Davis – Evergreen UU Fellowship

OMM.

**Triambukam Yajamahe
Sugandhim Pushti Vardenham
Urva Rukamiva Bandanam
Mrityor Mukshya Mamritate,
Swaha.**

Translation:

Invoking the All.

Oh, adored and sacred Source of Life,

Your sweetness draws us to Fulfillment.

Like the cucumber hanging by its stem on the vine,
So may we release our attachment to all that is not
eternal.

We offer this prayer.

OMM

Bhu, Bhuva, Swaha

Tat Savitur Varenyam

Bhargo Devasya Dhimahi

Dhiyo yo nah Prachodayat

OMM

Translation:

Invoking the All
In the earthly realm, in the sky, in the farthest
reaches of space,
We encounter the Adorable Light of all-pervading
consciousness
That is the Source of our own Being and
That is the goal of our deepest Yearning.
We meditate on that divine radiance, and
We pray that it may inspire and guide us
Understand the true Reality.

Sermon *My India* Rev. Bruce Davis (2193+483)

Only three weeks have passed since we've been together. But it seems much longer. As I wandered through North India, you have been in my heart. My hope is that, in the months ahead, I can share with you some of the ways this short study leave has begun life-altering transformations in me.

I'm imagining a series of questions that you may have about my experience. As you begin to interview me about my time away, about My India, let your heart be the learner. I have included a few virtual photographic images in my message to you, so I invite your imagination to awaken, as well.

Your first question is probably this: "Where exactly were you during these three weeks?"

Slide 1: Map of Northern India

I've drawn the route of my journey with red marker on this slide. I landed there in Delhi, in north-central India and traveled directly north into the foothills of the Himalyas. That great river you see, formed from Himalayan rain and snow-melt, is the Ganges or Mother Ganga, and it formed the backbone of my pilgrimage. My first stop was for ten days at an Ashram or retreat center in Rishikesh. From there

the road led further north to the holy towns and villages of the high Himalayas, including Uttarkashi, Myssori, and Haridwar, circling back down to Delhi for the flight home.

Your second question follows naturally enough from your first: “What did you do there?”

The honest answer here is this: “Not much.” But, as you may have already guessed, the trip was not primarily about *doing*.

More than half of the trip was spent at the Ashram in Rishikesh, and here are a couple of representative slides from my time there. They pretty much tell the story of my time at the ashram.

Slide 2: Bruce sitting in a group meditation before dawn

Slide 3: Bruce upside down in a yoga posture

Slide 4: Bruce dangling his feet in the holy, healing Ganges River

The whole of my journey, but especially the time in Rishikesh, was more about being there, practicing presence, than seeing the sights.

After the ten days at the Ashram, most of the rest of the journey was traveling on primitive mountain roads, stopping in at the holy temples and places of natural beauty along the way. It was not travel season, and I was often alone in temples with the priests who performed ancient puja ceremonies for me.

Slide 5: Bruce at the Kunjapuri Shiva Temple at sunrise.

The priest has just finished doing the puja offerings and he has directed me to meditate at the side of the small inner-chamber. OMM NAMAH SHIVAYA, he instructs. The slide is dark, but that doesn't matter; the experience is more about the ringing of bells, the rhythm of the chanting, and the smells of burning incense and camphor from the ceremony.

Your third question might relate to the people I encountered. Who did you meet, Bruce, and what did you learn from them?

Slide 6: Puujaswamiji

This enlightened man is the spiritual leader of Parmarth Niketan Ashram, where I stayed. In this photo I'm sitting with him in a small group in his garden, late in the evening. By his saffron robes you can see that he is a renunciate. You can't miss his long frizzy hair and beard, graying in this sixth decade of his life. But what I want you particularly to notice is his playful smile and the sparkle in his eyes as he talks with me about my life, my home, and my work with you.

Pujyaswamiji encourages me to open my heart more and to surrender to the flow of life itself. He urges me not to rely so much on the controlling and rational ways that have been central in my Western up-bringing. Further he invites me to embrace "seva," a Sanskrit word meaning spiritually-guided service. Spiritual practice is incomplete unless it leads also to a practice of compassionate action. I appreciate this about his message and his life. He has established foundations for drawing first-world financial resources to respond to poverty, illness, and homelessness in India.

Slide 7: Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math

No problem if you chuckle a bit at the appearance of this great Indian saint. He won't mind. He's well beyond all that. His likeness to an overweight Danny DeVito in this shot is in sharp contrast to the depth of his enlightenment. I am kneeling here, touching his foot with my fingers in a traditional expression of deep respect and surrender, at some level knowing that the being of his high level of consciousness is not other than the being of my own awareness.

He is the current leader and principal exponent of the eighth century teacher, Adi Shankara. Like the Buddha, Shankara was a great reformer of the ancient Vedic tradition of India.

Slide 8: Sadhvi Bhagwati Saraswati

Bhagwatiji, as she is called, is the number two spiritual teacher at the Ashram. This picture shows her in a private consultation with me. That I am in tears here as I disclose the spiritual dimensions of my life story is testament to the openness of her heart and her compassionate nature.

She encourages me that my spiritual leadership with you, my family commitments, and my spiritual practices are coming naturally together as an integrated whole. Through my time at the Ashram it was Bhagwati who more than

anyone invited me to consider a whole new level of commitment to spiritual practice as part of living a more personally rewarding and spiritually grounded life.

There were many others I learned from during these three weeks, but these three have invited a profoundly positive transformation in me.

Your fourth question gets to the heart of the pilgrimage. Bruce, what did you learn that matters to you most? The answer is, too much to share all in one sitting. But I will give you the countdown of my top five, with a few pictures along the way.

a) Learning Number Five: Who is God?

I was walking one day in the Ashram garden and encountered an older woman from Mussori who was visiting there.

Slide 9: The lady from Mussori

You can see here in this slide, clothed in her bright yellow sari and her engaging smile. She was a school teacher and must have thought I needed a lesson in Indian theology.

“We none of us,” she explained,” can maintain that direct experience of pure divinity, that silence of being, for more than seconds at a time, unless we are one of the few enlightened persons. We must therefore,” she continued, “project divinity onto the natural manifest world of form, in which we live.”

Her implication was that as humans we will rarely if ever have direct transcendental experiences, but that doesn't have to mean an absence of divinity in our lives. Thus, the high Himalaya, where sky touches down onto high peaks, becomes the body of the god Shiva. The Ganges River, flowing out of the Himalaya, bringing water to the wheat fields and fruit trees, becomes the divine mother, Ma Ganga. We know that the *form* we project of Shiva or Ma Ganga is not that *formless* mystery we call God. But absent the capacity to know God without form, she asserts that worship of God with form is all most of us have.

Thus the cobra, the tree, the sun, the moon, the tiger, the human, the monkey the cow—all become Hindu devas and are worshiped as God with form, each to his own preferences. But this is not the worship of many gods. All of these devas express the same undifferentiated universal consciousness.

b) Learning Number Four: A Deeper Commitment to Non-Violence

I have long espoused non-violence, or in Sanskrit, “Ahimsa.” I believe that causing bodily harm is wrong, and I believe that we hurt others with our speech, as well. But I had to ask myself in the course of this journey, “Does my commitment go deep enough?”

Who shall I not harm? The human being? What about the cow, or the bird, or the harmless spider on the wall? The reach of non-violence goes well beyond what I’ve committed myself to in the past.

Furthermore, how might I cause harm beyond just actions and speech? Might I cause violence through thoughts or silent intentions? How through hasty judgment do I denigrate others in subtle but powerful ways, even without words or actions against them?

I ask myself, how does my opulent American style of living deny a minimal standard for comfort and safety for those in poverty throughout the world? How, indirectly, do I harm our children and our children’s children by denying them a clean and healthy earth-home?

I have a lot to work on here in my personal choices as I try to get closer to the ideal of Ahimsa.

a) *Learning Number Three: The Pain of Poverty*

My India includes the powerful impact of poverty on the lives of people whose worth and dignity is the same as our own.

Slide 10: Beggar and Baby

Here is a picture of a young woman and her baby, begging at the entrance to an ashram in Mussori. Her smile here shows gratitude and the simple friendliness that I found throughout India. I gave her a 500 rupee note, a substantial sum, even though I know it will not change her life situation.

Signs of impoverished living were everywhere. In the street below my window in the Ashram in Rishikesh there was a man who coughed all night long, every night. My response was concern as I woke to his loud and painful hacking. Tuberculosis, I thought, or a chronic broncho-pneumonia. What can I do?

After a few days I decided to take the risk and go out into the dark alley-way at first light. I wanted to find him, whom I called Coughing Man, to give him enough money for medicine. It is amazing to me that it costs only \$10 for a full tuberculosis cure in India!

Slide 11: Coughing Man

This slide shows what I saw. Not one or two but fifteen or twenty homeless persons are lying there on the street. Here you see them wrapped like cocoons against the cold mountain air. But which one is Coughing Man? Who should I waken? How can I give money to one homeless person and not all of them? And, finally, like the Beggar and Baby, what difference will I ultimately make here?

A shift took place inside of me in that moment. I cannot reach these people or do anything directly to alleviate their poverty. The only real change that I can offer must come through the hands of humanitarian organizations. Several days later I found the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital in Haridwar dedicated to the care of indigent persons. Here I was able to give a significant donation to help people like Coughing Man, with the hope of eventually changing the underlying system of poverty and illness. I spent the whole day at this Mission, this Sevashrama, meditating before the image of Ramakrishna, talking to the monks about their order, and commiserating with one of their physicians about the pressures of practicing with insufficient financial support.

b) *Learning Number Two: Time to Surrender!*

When we are used to being *in control* of our lives, or at least imagining that we are in control, the question of surrender doesn't even come up. If we are used to *thinking* our way through life challenges, we may have little or no experience listening to our lives with our hearts. This journey was a chance to stretch some new wings, designed to soar *with* the wind rather than fight against it.

It's particularly in *unfamiliar* environments when we have the chance to learn about surrender. In a comfortable place that we are used to, it's easier to let go and follow the flow. In India I was a stranger in a strange land. Surrender meant letting go *outside of* my comfort zone.

Slide 12: Market-Place Crowd

In this picture you can see hundreds of people jammed into a market place, pressed by the narrowness of the dirt street. See the guy over on the right side of the frame? That's me. You can recognize it's me by that deer-in-the-headlights look on my face. You can also pick me out as the only white person in a sea of color.

Slide 13: Crowded Train Compartment

It's another picture of me, outside of my comfort zone. You see, it's a train compartment packed with Indian women. I know by my ticket that it's where I'm supposed to spend the next eight hours, but I get the distinct feeling that, because my skin is a different color or because I am a man, they don't want me here. From time to time they smile shyly. Eventually I snap a couple of photos with my I-phone, and they are delighted to see their pictures. We come to a place of peaceful co-existence.

Surrender means yielding control. It means for me taking on the risks of a strange environment and accepting myself within it—possibly even finding a new home. It means allowing to happen what is necessarily happening anyway.

But *why* surrender? Especially since my ability to control my environment has helped me do much good in the world. Well, there's a downside to trying to control everything. I've lived through my adult years with more faith in *me* than in the *life* I'm living. More faith in my ego than in the Spirit of Life that holds us all. Learning to trust that Spirit of Life to get it right, accepting what comes, these are my much-needed lessons of surrender.

c) *Learning Number One: Simple Contentment*

The countdown concludes with a lesson about happiness. The whole idea of happiness has a new potential in my forming worldview, based on the Sanskrit word, "Santushta."

I used to think of happiness as times of pleasure, in which my desires are being fulfilled in a tangible, measurable way. But not all desires *get* fulfilled, and when they do, the happy results just don't seem to last very long. A world built on this kind of happiness is filled more often with frustration and suffering.

Santushta is one of the so-called "observances" or "Niyamas" of the Yoga Tradition that has its roots in this part of India. The idea is almost too simple. Just be in this moment. Perhaps notice your breath or feel this body you are in. Now,

fully in this present moment, notice the contentment that is there. Feel it all over your body. This is Santushta. Happy with your experience as it is.

Slide 14: Santushta

Here's a picture of me, taken at random, at the Ashram. I'm just walking down to the shore of the Ganges, just to sit for a while. Nothing special. Then why is there that smile on my face? Because, in that moment, I'm consciously observing Santushta or contentment. The photo could as easily have been of me doing my laundry or sipping soup.

For now Santushta has become an important part of my practice, because I like happiness and want more of it. My hope is that with practice such contentment, independent of my desires, will become an on-going habit.

So, these are three areas of learning, selected from probably hundreds. We have much to learn from India as Unitarian Universalists. Swami Vivikananda, foremost student of Ramakrishna, who founded the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital in Haridwar, wrote that the Unitarians were the one faith group in the West most closely aligned with the ancient wisdom of India.

There are Unitarian congregations in the Northeast corner of India, at the opposite end of the Himalayas. My dream is that one day, maybe when the economic crisis settles down, a group of us from Evergreen can travel there, with the goal of establishing a partner-church relationship with them—a teaching-learning relationship, in which we both grow personally and spiritually at the junction between dramatically different cultures.

Meantime, I'll keep digesting what I've learned, integrating it into my heart and mind, and sharing with you what I know of India so far.