

**A Multi-Religious Journey**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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**Reading**

from *Polishing the Mirror* by Ram Dass

What you seek is already within you. This reality is subjective, not the outer objective reality. You may experience it as focused in the center of your chest. It can be called the soul, or in Hinduism the *Atman*, or in Buddhism the pure Buddha-Mind. Jesus Christ said, "The kingdom of God is within you." This is the space of full awareness that is in harmony with the universe; this is wisdom itself. The full spirit of God is inside each of us. When you want to approach God, go inward."

**Sermon**

I chose this sermon topic several weeks ago, but this week what has been on my mind and in my heart quite a bit more is our government's appalling and inhumane policy of separating children from their parents at the southern border.

So, though I will begin with my stated topic, "A Multi-Religious Journey," you'll see it that in the end it will come back around to those children and their parents.

Eight hundred or so years ago, the Muslim Sufi poet Jelalludin Rumi wrote, as translated by Coleman Barks:

What is praised is one, so the praise is one too,  
many jugs being poured

into a huge basin. All religions, all this singing,  
one song.

The differences are just illusion and vanity. Sunlight  
looks slightly different

on this wall than it does on that wall and a lot different  
on this other one, but

it is still one light. We have borrowed these clothes, these  
time-and-space personalities

from a light, and when we praise, we pour them back in.

All religions, all this singing,  
one song.

I've mentioned on other occasions a "coffee table book" my parents owned that was all about the world's religions. I can still picture this book (actually sitting on our coffee table!), with its many photos of temples, churches, mosques, of worshippers of many backgrounds and many parts of the world, of the symbols of the various religions: cross, star of David, lotus, wheel of the dharma, the Tao, and so on.

And in the decades since, I've had the opportunity to enter the places of worship not only of the Presbyterian Church in which I was initially raised and of course in many Unitarian Universalist churches... but also in Christian worship spaces as diverse as the simple Quaker Meeting House in which Susan and I were married and the cathedrals of Notre Dame and Chartres.

I've worshipped here in Hingham with our Jewish friends at Congregation Sha'aray Shalom, and I've placed prayers written on bits of paper in between stones of the Western Wall of the Temple in Jerusalem, this the day before walking on the grounds just above the wall of the Muslim Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque.

And I've been fortunate enough to sit in awe in Hindu temples in India, Buddhist temples in Thailand, and Shinto shrines in Japan.

All while carrying this intuition, long before I'd read Rumi's words, that "all religions, all this singing, are one song."

An intuition strengthened as I've studied the scriptures and other writings of the world's religions, each with a different perspective or emphasis, but part of one song:

The *Bible's* compelling message of love – even of so-called enemies!

The *Quran's* call to devotion and daily prayer.

The *Bhagavad Gita* reminding us there are many paths, including the path of selfless service in the midst of whatever our unique work in the world may be.

Buddhist scriptures naming the reality of suffering, the cause of suffering, and the path to release from suffering as we let go of so much that we hold too tightly.

The *Tao Te Ching* and its message of deep balance and simplicity along with the possibility of accomplishing what needs to be done with something called effortless effort.

One song of interwoven melodies.

I suppose this reading and study part of my path or journey began a very long time ago in Presbyterian Sunday school as we learned some of the Bible stories – Noah and the flood, the Exodus from Egypt, the Good Samaritan, and on and on.

Then, widening the path, in high school somehow a copy of the *Upanishads* came into my hands, and I sensed something important and maybe true in the central teaching that "That art thou," that there is a spark of the divine within each of us which is at one with the universal divine or spirit or world soul.

In college classes I read additional Hindu and Buddhist texts, again intuiting glimpses of universal meaning.

One summer during my college years I returned to the Gospels, reading this time apart from Sunday School lessons, discovering for myself the Sermon on the Mount:

Love your enemies...

Seek and you shall find...

Don't be anxious about tomorrow.

Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

The kingdom of heaven is within.

Altogether, then, it has indeed been a multi-religious path or journey I've been on and continue on.

What drew me to this path? I suppose an intuition (that word again) right from first viewing of that book resting on the coffee table that there was meaning to be had somewhere in this multi-religious world of ours, perhaps even unifying meaning in spite of the apparent outward diversity of these religions. After all, one might understandably wonder what a Christian reciting a creed on a Sunday morning has in common with a Sufi whirling in dance or a Tibetan Buddhist chanting several tones at the same time or an orthodox Jew praying at the Western Wall.

Yet actually I think it may be as simple as this (and what I'm about to share is not only be a metaphor):

Walk down a city street in one of the diverse cities of the world – certain neighborhoods in New York would do – and we encounter people of dozens of hues of skin color, varieties of hair styles, all sorts of clothing, speaking different languages. Yet we know for a fact that in each one of those human beings, so diverse in outward appearance, is a beating heart; and we know that each heart is pretty much indistinguishable from all the others, except I suppose for size and maybe slightly different shape or signs of aging.

In any case, there surely is no such thing as a black heart, white heart, brown heart; no such thing as a woman's or man's heart; gay or straight or trans heart; no such thing as a Christian or Buddhist or Muslim heart.

Well, just so with all these religions, all this singing: One beating heart at the center, heart of love, the heart that knows even when the outer being forgets that we are all part of the one light, that indeed that light shines within each of us, "this little light" that is part of one great light.

The differences in the religions? Different angles of vision, different sets of clothes, different modes of expression (sometimes in Rumi's words "illusion and vanity"), but each at the deeper levels grounded (though all too many adherents of one or another religion don't believe this)... each grounded (in the spirit of what is known as the perennial wisdom) in the one life we share, call it divine, call it cosmos, call it universe.

We had, you see, other so-called coffee table books, and one of the others that also made a deep impression was called something like "the world around us." It was a very large book, and filled with stunning photos of the natural world, including the stars and planets. This book was every bit as appealing to me as that book on world religions.

I wouldn't have articulated it this way when I was ten or even fifteen or sixteen years old. But today I imagine that this book appealed not only because of the beauty of the photographs, but because it offered a sense of the larger world, the universe really, in which we do live and move and have our being; the world, in other words, in which all these religions exist, trying in multiple ways to make sense of it all.

In other words, then... the natural world another way in to this intuition, even experience, that we are woven into one fabric of life, not separate from it or separate from each other.

And *all* this, in the context of the opening line of the *Tao Te Ching* that the Tao (or Way) that can be named is not the eternal Tao – in other words that “Tao” or “God” or “Brahman” or “Allah” are just fingers pointing to the ineffable that perhaps we can intuit and maybe now and then glimpse and for most of us even more rarely, but sometimes experience.

And that in the end it is the intuition and experience that matter far more than any words, names, creeds, or this or that scripture.

Which leads me to the final part of my message for today, which I’ll get into with a question:

What does any of this have to do with the pressing and troubling issues of the day, of this world in which we live? What does any of this have to do with the crisis of climate change or with North Korea or Iran, or with the suffering of the people of Yemen or Syria, or with the suffering our nation is inflicting at the southern border, separating children from their mothers and fathers, maybe even on this Fathers Day?

Well, to my mind this multi-religious journey (supported, not at all incidentally, by our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition, which encourages precisely such a journey) has everything to do with these huge issues and problems, everything to do with addressing suffering whether on the largest scale or in the midst of our personal lives.

Because we will better be able to address the big issues of the day and to live through our own times of challenge and turmoil, grief and sorrow, if we have a measure of grounding in something larger than our individual, only apparently separate self.

For we don’t get very far in our social activism or in caring for a friend if we are doing it because we think we should, or because we want to look good to others. Only grounded in sympathy for all life (most assuredly including a mother or father and their child at the border)... grounded in sympathy for all life because we experience ourselves as one with all life... only then will we have the energy and resilience to carry on, to continue to help, and, when we are weak, to allow others to help us.

And for me (particularly if accompanied by a practice something like meditation or prayer or perhaps just simple presence in the midst of the sea or the mountains or the woods in our own backyard or in the company of our neighbor)... for me the heart of the scriptures of humanity lead us to precisely this sympathy with life because they name (yes, I’ll say it yet again) that we *are* one with life, one with the divine however we understand the divine, the larger life and love in which we live and move and have our being.

Last word, then, from Ram Dass:

When I live in the place where I *am* love, I see love wherever I look. It’s very far out. Imagine seeing love in everyone and everything... We’re all right here in love... in the ocean of love, which is what Christ’s love is about. This love isn’t possessive. We can’t collect it. We can only become it.

So it is. So will it always be. One song.