

Sermon “Faith in the Borderland” – Rev. Abhi Janamanchi

Flash forward from the mythic past, if you will, at warp speed, to a review of the new Star Trek movie, eleventh in the series of epic films, as described by Natalia Anatova, Editor of Global Comment:

“There is something particularly eerie and vulnerable about . . . the threshold of exploration . . . : [where] a human body is suspended in space, graceful and horrible, seconds after being ripped from the safety of its ship For all its outstanding action sequences, this is what makes the [movie] work : the idea that imagination has consequences.”

Trisanku’s neurotic imagination had tragic consequences, and still today we shudder to imagine future outcomes of feeling suspended between two worlds like a human hyphen in that final frontier of faith.

You may not feel sympathy for Trisanku’s predicament, caused by his own egoism. But perhaps you can identify, as I have, with his isolation—caught upside down and in-between worlds. For most of my life, I have felt caught in-between.

Growing up in India, I felt like a social outcaste, a cultural hyphen, a religious hybrid: an only child of a short-lived marriage between a lower-caste Muslim father and an upper-caste Hindu mother, being raised by my mother and maternal grandfather who became my surrogate father, learning a different language and culture from my own, less affluent than my schoolmates, yet having the audacity to fall in love and marry a girl from a respectable Hindu family. In many people’s eyes, I was Trisanku, the triple sinner.

Despite my best efforts to blend in (I became a devout Hindu, prayed to various deities, went to the temple regularly, and even wore a sacred mark on my forehead to prove my credentials), I felt isolated from a society that seemed hostile to the values I held dear.

After my beloved and I married, we felt drawn to the Brahmo Samaj, a Unitarian-Hindu religion. That association led me to the International Congress of the IARF in Bangalore where I met, among other Unitarian Universalists, Spencer Lavan, then Dean of Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago. Spencer saw something in me that I had not seen in myself and encouraged me to study for the ministry. I took a leap of faith, leaving behind for a time my wife and infant son and my native land.

In the US, I felt like a visitor from outer space. I did not know where I fit as a Hindu-Muslim-Indian with a physics degree and a banking career, studying to be a minister in an unfamiliar faith. I did not really belong in the local Indian community, either, as my calling put me at odds with all the doctors, engineers, IT professionals, and motel owners. My vocation is still a conversation-stopper each time I am asked by a fellow Indian, “So, what do you do for a living?”

In the anonymity of Chicago, I wanted to belong--as a natural part of the human landscape, not an aberration to be tolerated. I wanted to be comfortable in the presence of others and know they were comfortable in mine. I did not want to be caught upside down and alone like Trisanku in

the fault lines between worlds, cultures, and faiths. A part of me wished for a metaphorical sage to liberate me from my isolation.

And appear he did. The late Reverend Frank Robertson, then Minister for Religious Education at the Unitarian Church of Evanston, invited me to his church. Frank gave me the incredible gift of seeing myself as more than just the sum of my identities. He showed me what Unitarian Universalism was all about: a faith open and welcoming to people regardless of ethnicity, theology, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or political affiliation; a faith where theological crossbreeds, cultural mutts, religious hybrids like you and me can struggle and connect in the hyphenated space between perspectives; a faith where being a mutt or a mongrel is not an awful place of last resort but an intentional first choice. Instead of promising a heaven of sameness, Frank invited me into a community of individuals working at creating a heaven on earth.

I have been telling my own story to point out some of the reasons people might have for joining a Unitarian Universalist church. People join

to be part of a sanctuary;
to affirm a personal identity and be accepted for who we are, as we are;
to prevent our children from being, as the Reverend John Wolf said, “saddled with guilt or terrified of some celestial peeping Tom;”
to be in a religion that is this-worldly, concerned more about life before death;
to be part of a religion that calls no one a sinner, yet is deeply aware of struggle for wholeness within the human heart;
to live in a way that says, “You need not think alike to love alike,” for “love has no boundaries nor barriers.”

Not that Unitarian Universalism is the religious equivalent of the Humane Society. That sounds more like a temporary shelter than a life-long haven. Our faith is not a “comfy homestead.” Many of us struggle to belong in this faith—as people of color and from minority cultures, as differently-abled people, as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning people, as Christian theists, pagans, atheists, secular humanists, Hindus, Buddhists, or as Republicans.

It is particularly a struggle for those of us who are people of color or from minority cultures because it is difficult to feel nourished by an aspiration, rather than a reality. Many of us find ourselves feeling a deep commitment to the promise of this faith while coming to terms with the frustration about our current reality as a predominantly Euro-American movement.

Yet, we stay. We keep showing up. Why? – because we know we are not alone. Somehow, we know that we belong here and that the struggle to belong is an integral part of belonging.

I have stuck it out, even through doubt and ambivalence, because Unitarian Universalism is the way I want to live my life. My Unitarian Universalism lets me practice my Hindu faith; it helps me be a better Hindu, a better human being.

I stay because Unitarian Universalism has a healing message for a broken world yearning for reconciliation and wholeness.

I stay because Unitarian Universalism is committed to working through race and class, homophobia and able-ism, though we have much to learn and far to go.

I stay to celebrate my multi-hyphenated identity not so much as an American melting pot but rather a South Indian thali – a selection of tasty dishes in different bowls presented on a single plate. Each dish tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next. They belong together because they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast.

I stay to practice interstitial integrity, a term I borrow from Japanese-American protestant theologian, Rita Nakashima Brock who says:

“Interstitial integrity is how I improvise a self, recognizing the diverse cultures and experiences that have made me who I am. It is how I mix a life together from myriads of ingredients.”

I stay to find the strength to live honestly among the various interstices of my life; to take responsibility for the ambiguities of my pluralistic identity while seeking common ground with others. But trying to live a life affirming a plurality of identities can be a counter-cultural process. Our culture tends to prefer its citizens to be “pure racial types” and monolingual people who can be categorized easily as citizen or alien, friend or foe, elect or damned, patriot or terrorist. It often seems to label people as “one of us” or “one of them” – no hyphens allowed.

But labels tend to suck the life-force out of society. In seeking a utopian future, people live partly in an imaginary world, dissociated from the fullness of being that eludes them. They obsess about an imaginary heavenly future while “hanging around,” perpetually dissatisfied and lonely, like Trisanku.

With no tolerance for the “hyphens,” humans leave behind too much destruction and express too little love. They create an ethnocentric morality that obliges them to take care of only their own, without providing a place for those on the margins. Ultimately, they create “sacred societies” instead of “holy communities.”

Dr. Darrell Fasching, a professor of Religion at USF, describes the difference between the two.

“In a sacred society, all who are the same, fitting the description of an ideal type, are considered human and all who are different, all who are aliens and strangers, are taken to be less than human.”

In contrast (Fasching continues), “a holy community is founded on the hospitality to the very strangers that a sacred society rejects. (It has) no sacred center because its center and sense of identity lies outside itself—in the stranger.”

The center of Unitarian Universalism lies outside of itself, in the stranger, in difference rather than in similarity. In our faith, the margins hold the center.

Our “good news” affirms that God prefers the pluralism of a world of strangers to the uniformity of a sacred society; that God loves difference, and prefers to be discovered through difference rather than sameness, entering our lives through the presence of the stranger. We are called to create holy communities where strangers are not only welcome but where all are enjoined to do the work of healing and transformation by wrestling with the strangers within themselves.

In Genesis, an important struggle yielded not a curse, but a blessing. “The whole world spoke the same language using the same words.” When the people built a tower “with its top in the sky,” the LORD “confused the speech and scattered them all over the earth” so that not one understood the other. Babel gave us the gift of diversity: a world of strangers called to be in right relationship with one another, striving with humility and compassion to learn one another’s new languages and creating holy communities.

The hope of peaceful co-existence lies in recognizing many kinds of hyphens that express our diverse affiliations as common inhabitants of a wide world, sort of like the cosmic crew of the Starship Enterprise. We are not just passengers, cloistered in cabins on this spaceship earth. As Herbert “Marshall” McLuhan has said, “We are all crew.”

I believe that we are boldly going where no faith has gone before. Despite all the travail, economic uncertainty, and various other crises that threaten to engulf us, we are present at this sacred moment when new life is about to emerge from the womb of the past. What now begins to breathe can become our shared future of mutual openness to accept others in all their differentness while affirming our common humanity.

Will we recognize the mystery of this possibility? Will we be open to its opportunities to construct a more compassionate, sustainable, and interdependent way of being in relationship with one another and the planet? Do we dare to aspire to a higher level for humanity? Are we willing to help it be beamed up into the light of tomorrow?

These are not questions. They are the agendas of today. They are the exciting, irresistible invitations to each of us to abandon prejudgment and stubborn refusals to hear one another more deeply. They are the program and the means for people like you and me who struggle for justice and reconciliation, who are willing to sacrifice to attain a more just and equitable economic order, and who dream of a new global society based on cooperation and peace.

Not by the old rituals that separate us from earthly life like Trisanku, but by living authentically, we can take our consciousness intact to a more enlightened expression. If we join our dreams with the dreams of so many other people, real change is possible; and it is the task of our faith to link those dreams and make them a reality.

Let us pause for a few moments to wonder how we might – by what we say and do and by how we live this life -- be the religion that embodies our deepest yearnings.

I wish to conclude with a traditional Hindu prayer:
May good befall all,

May there be peace for all,
May all be fit for excellence,
May all experience that which is auspicious.

May all be happy.
May all be healthy.
May all experience what is good
And let no one suffer.

(Abhi will chant Sanskrit prayer)

Live long – and prosper!