



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“The Divine in You and Me”

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Centering Thoughts:

The highest revelation is that God is in every [person]. Ralph Waldo Emerson

The spark divine dwells in thee: let it grow. Ella Wheeler Wilcox

It is within you that the divine lives. Joseph Campbell

*To love is to see the divine in the person beside us,
and to meditate is to see the divine within us.* Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

Sermon:

Thank you, Marguerite. Your poem was a perfect introduction to our topic. And I'm so glad our monthly themes encourage you, and others, into deeper exploration and creativity.

Hello, Shalom, Aloha, Namaste.

Around the world people greet each other differently, but they hold in common some expression of respect and humility. In Europe and North America, a bow, curtsy, or tip of the hat were once common, but now we just shake hands, hug, or bump fists. In Europe and parts of Latin America cheek kissing is still the norm. Japanese bow and Chinese kowtow. Muslims wish salaam, or peace, upon one another and they may make a sweeping hand gesture moving from the heart, to forehead, then above the head. West Africans avoid looking at you directly in the eyes because it seems too aggressive. Namaste also signifies respect and humility to the person being greeted.

Pride, arrogance, and entitlement would not have us place our bodies in such vulnerable positions. A bowed head means you cannot see the other person's actions, signifying you trust you'll be safe. An open, out-stretched hand holds no weapon for defense or assault. A humble bow before another admits that your own opinion of yourself is not so high that you cannot offer a show of respect. Royalty have long enjoyed the privilege of expecting people of lower status to bow and scrape, while they bow to no one.

Because the United States is a country comprised of immigrants, we're exposed to a variety of cultures, religions, and religious practices. This sometimes brings awkwardness. Once when I was introduced to an Imam, I extended my hand to shake his, but he placed his hand on his

heart and simply inclined his head. I understood he considered it disrespectful to touch a woman not related to him, so I quickly moved my outstretched hand up to my heart and nodded back. I hoped to show respect for his custom.

But since I am not a Hindu or a Southeast Asian, I wonder if I am being *disrespectful* by saying ‘Namaste’? Am I succumbing to the latest superficial fad? Am I guilty of cultural appropriation and leading you to misuse someone else’s customary religious practice? To lessen this possibility, it behooves you and me to know more about what Namaste means, more than simply ‘I bow to you’ or ‘I see the divine light within you that is also within me.’

As with Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, great theological diversity exists within Hinduism. These differences affect what particular Hindus prioritize and how they practice their faith, so I don’t want to over-generalize. But Hindus do share the central belief that all is one, everything that exists comes from the same source. Called Brahman, ultimate reality, or even God, this source is both transcendent and supreme (out there, above and beyond), as well as immanent and accessible (within and tangible).

The Sanskrit expression ‘*tat tvam asi*’, frequently translated as ‘thou art that’, conveys this essential Hindu truth about the nature of reality. The 3,000 year old *Chandogya Upanishad* (6.8.-6.16) text proclaims:

That which is the finest essence – this whole world has that as its soul. That is Reality.
That is Atman (or Soul). Thou art That.

This little phrase, *tat tvam asi*, has a huge message. Thou, you, are the same as that, as everything and anything that exists. And everything that exists is divine, everything is religious. There is nothing that isn’t sacred—although cows seem to be especially sacred. This view makes the universe one whole. What appears to be different is merely illusion. Our distinctiveness is like many grains of salt dissolved in water. We each make the water salty, but we’re one with the water.

Reality, Brahman is divine because it originates from the mind of Lord Brahma, Creator of the universe. With Lord Vishnu as creation’s Sustainer, and Lord Shiva as its Destroyer, these three deities together represent the cyclic nature of existence. They represent the three forms of creation which some ascribe to the three-fold sound A-U-M (or Om), the sacred song of creation.

In Hinduism, as in many other world religions, light symbolizes divine energy or presence. Carl Sagan famously said we are all made of the stuff of stars. Those burning balls of light and energy begin new cycles of creation when they die explosively. Science seems to harmonize with the Hindu understanding of the universe.

Astronomer Neil deGrasse Tyson agreed that the atoms which make up his body (and yours and mine) come from the stars. Knowing this makes Tyson feel big because it connects him to the stars and the universe. Tyson adds:

That’s really what you want in life, you want to feel connected, you want to feel relevant.
You want to feel like you’re a participant in the goings on of activities and events around

you. That's precisely what we are, just by being alive. (*Being Hindu*, page 64)

Just by being alive we're quite literally connected to something bigger than ourselves. We truly are one with the universe. And if you believe, as 'Namaste' affirms, that divinity, that spark of light, exists within each of us, then we're connected on a deeply symbolic level, too.

The author of *Being Hindu*, Hindol Sengupta writes, "The Hindu mind sees the inherent seamless unity in all things and, therefore does not seek to separate the strands and distance them from one another, but rather to revel in the oneness."

Can we revel in that oneness? Can we affirm the shared divine spark within each person? Our 1st Principle claims we each have inherent worth. Does Namaste affirm the same idea more poetically or symbolically by calling us divine? Our 7th Principle says we are interdependent with all that exists. Interdependence implies interconnection. Hinduism doesn't just imply, it claims unity and calls it divine.

By describing the universe as a divine creation, all creation becomes sacred, holy, and miraculous. Words like special, even grand, just don't seem to raise the awesomeness of creation high enough in my view. To me, religious language describes the wonder of life and existence more profoundly.

Can you imagine the difference it might make to the world if everyone truly believed deep in their hearts that we are one? That hurting you is the same as hurting me, as the story told of Ganesha and the cat demonstrated?

Difference defines our world. Regretfully, even in predominantly Hindu countries all is not peaceful. Our country is deeply divided, too. Yesterday's 'March for Our Lives' illustrates this. Many people want gun law reform—and many do not. Ethnic, racial, and religious wars require separating people from each other. Hinduism and Unitarian Universalism both teach that we are climbing the same mountain to God or goodness. If only the world would listen.

If we truly believed we are one creation and one family, we would value each other's lives more. We would have little reason for intolerance and hate. We might even take better care of our planet and the life forms that depend upon its health, including ourselves.

We are one. When you next say 'Namaste,' know the truth of what you are saying. Hindu or not, we cannot deny we're made of the same star stuff. We all come from the universe and will return to the universe.

Let's revel in our shared life, even in our shared sparks of divinity.

Namaste.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. In what ways does (or doesn't) the concept of 'divinity in all things' resonate with you?
2. In your opinion, does the greeting 'Namaste' mirror the UU 1st Principle (*see back cover*)?
3. To be humble, a person may 'bow' before something they ascribe ultimate value to (i.e. God, life, love, peace, even wealth or fame, etc.). What, if anything, do you bow down before?