

# Sometimes One Must Travel Far to Find What is Near

## A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen

February 24, 2013

Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara

Story: The Treasure by Uri Shulevitz

(This children's book is based on an old rabbinic story of a rabbi named Isaac who lives in Krakow. He is very poor and often goes to bed hungry. Three nights in a row, he dreams about finding a great treasure in the capital city. He travels for days to the capital to see if he can find the treasure. The area where the treasure is buried in his dreams lies just outside the palace and is guarded by day and night. He stays around hoping to find a moment when the area is unguarded. After several days, the captain of the guard asks Isaac why he's there. He shares the dream. The captain tells him to quit chasing silly dreams. Why, if he chased dreams, the captain shares, he would have followed a dream he had and traveled to Krakow to the house of a rabbi named Isaac. In his dream there was a treasure buried beneath Isaac's stove. Isaac thanks the captain and returns to his home. There, he finds a treasure buried beneath his stove. He never goes to bed hungry again. He builds a beautiful synagogue and puts this motto on the wall: "Sometimes one must travel far to find what is near.")

### Sermon

It was a classic "sit-the-kid-in-front-of-the-TV-and-let-the-tube-babysit-her" moment. My wife and I were madly rushing about getting ready for our daughter's fifth birthday party. She had received the kids' video A Little Princess a week earlier for Christmas. None of us had watched it yet. We popped it in the VCR, plopped our daughter down in front of the screen, and went back to our preparations.

Maybe forty-five minutes later, she came tentatively up from the basement. She was visibly shaken. "Mama, Dada: I think the dad just died!" she said with tears.

We gave her a hug. "Oh honey, why don't you watch Barney instead? We'll sit with you and watch the movie after the party."

When we watched the movie with her, I was immediately captivated. It remains my favorite movie. The movie is based on the novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett (of The Secret Garden fame). It's a good book and an even better movie. In the skillful hands of the director, Alfonso Cuarón, it accentuates the magical role of India in the story. He does this especially by superimposing the great Hindu epic the Ramayana on

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the story. Interesting: a Mexican filmmaker making a movie in Hollywood based on a book by a British author and choosing to anchor the movie in a Hindu myth!

The film centers on a twelve-year-old girl named Sara Crewe. Hers is a wealthy British family living in British-ruled India. Her mother is dead. Her father is a captain in the British army. The movie opens with Sara and an Indian friend playing on the head of a giant Buddha statue that fell into a river. Her friend's mom is washing clothes in the river. Sara tells the first installment of the the Ramayana, a story centered on a princess who is abducted by a demon god. Sara asks her friend's mom, "Did you ever see a real princess?" The woman replies by saying that her late husband was a prince, and she a princess. "But I mean real princes and princesses," Sara says.

"All women are princesses," she says. "It is our right."

World War One upends Sara's life. Before he reports for duty in France, Captain Crewe takes Sara to an elite boarding school in New York. Trouble lies ahead: the head mistress of the boarding school, Miss Minchin, doesn't believe every girl is a princess. She thinks Sara is a spoiled brat who only thinks she's a princess because her dad is rich.

Captain Crewe ends up missing in action and is presumed dead. The British government seizes all his assets, leaving Sara penniless. Miss Minchin allows Sarah to live at the school in a decrepit attic in return for her being a servant to the students and Miss Minchin. "I expect you to remember, Sara Crewe," she says, "that you aren't a princess any longer."

Alone and bereft, for awhile Sara believes Miss Minchin. Slowly, though, she comes to realize that she still is a princess—regardless of how much money she has or how many possessions she owns or whether her parents are alive or dead. Take it all away, and she's still a princess.

This realization within is unlocked through the character of an Indian man and his pet monkey. They remind her of the magic of India and what she learned there. There's a wonderful scene where a snowstorm blows in Sara's porous windows up in the attic. She joyfully dances in the snow as the Indian man watches with a smile from his balcony across the alley. As the dance ends, he bows to Sara. He knows she's a princess. Sara remembers that she is too. Every one of us is a prince or princess.

Like Sara Crewe, the magic and lessons of India are in me, too. My most profound encounter with the subcontinent happened during my junior year in college when I studied in Sri Lanka, the little island nation just off India's southeastern coast. The program ended with a three-week independent study. My focus in Sri Lanka was studying religion. I wanted to be a professor and teach world religions. I decided to

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study Hindu rites of passage for my independent study, so my professor sent me to the northern part of the island where the Hindu population is concentrated. The Sri Lankan civil war erupted months earlier, and the northern part was not safe enough for my whole student group to go. But he felt okay having me go solo. I arrived in the northern capital city after dark and didn't know a soul. I had one name to contact—a professor at the now closed university.

The next day I found the professor and through a chain of different conversations ended up in a refugee camp next door to a Hindu temple. I lived in the refugee camp for three weeks, sleeping on a straw bed, bathing in a pool as everybody stared, using the toilet that was basically nothing more than a hole in the ground. I wasn't in Kansas—or Michigan, where I grew up—any more. I was in a land so vastly different. And I was experiencing a religion that in its exponential multiplicity of divinity and its physically embodied essence could not be more different from the antiseptic Unitarian Universalism I was flirting with in college. Yet somehow there, of all places, I found out deep truths about myself.

When I walked next door to the temple and attended a worship service—a puja—I saw devotees worshipping an image of a particular Hindu god as if the god was actually embodied and alive in the image. This god was one of millions of gods and goddesses in Hinduism. What could be more different from our traditional Western notion of a monotheistic, monolithic unchanging, utterly transcendent God? And how much further could you get from the vague, agnostic notions of my college Unitarian Universalism? All of God—the infinite—is in this particular image, the Hindu claims. God is not some distant figure up in the heavens or some purely abstract construct in our minds. God the picture of a goddess on the family altar or this very statue I'm looking at. What's more, God is alive in the soul of every person, even me! That's why the message of *A Little Princess* is profoundly Hindu.

That experience in Sri Lanka changed the trajectory of my theological development. The Hindu view I experienced there has slowly made more and more sense to me. God for me now is ultimately a symbol of the mystery that lies at the heart of the universe. How can one, monolithic view ever fully capture the complexity of this infinite mystery? I need more than one picture of this mystery in order to begin making sense of it. Though I can't take in all the millions of Hindu deities, an abundance of pictures help me better understand the mystery that I call the Divine. Hinduism's relentless polytheism—grounded on a paradoxical understanding of the oneness of the divine—unlocked my understanding. As I've learned more about Transcendentalism, I've discovered that these Hindu ideas have had a place in Unitarian Universalism for hundreds of years. Transcendentalists—especially Emerson—drank deeply from the well of Hinduism.

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One day I stopped and talked to the priest as I was walking out of the refugee camp. Through my translator, he told me that he sensed in me a calling to the priesthood. What? I thought. I'm going to study and teach about religion, not do religion. But a seed was planted that would dramatically change the course of my life. Sometimes one must travel far to find what is near.

So, what is it about India and Hinduism and Sri Lanka that can trigger such transformation in someone from the other side of the world? How can India be so magical for Sara Crewe and for me and for so many countless other people in the Western world, including your minister Aaron? It is so radically different and other from the West; you'd think it wouldn't be anything more than an exotic novelty. But here's the thing: when we look into the window that is India, we see not just the strange, mysterious figures inside, but also our own faces superimposed on the window. The window turns out to be a mirror, too.<sup>1</sup> A British character in the movie *A Passage to India* says, "In India, one comes face to face with oneself."

I've discovered in recent years that this can happen in other places, too. Anytime we encounter a culture different from ours, we have the opportunity not just to learn about a rich variation on the human experience, but also to learn truths about ourselves. This has been my experience as my congregation in Appleton, Wisconsin entered into a partnership fourteen years ago with a Unitarian congregation in Transylvania and, a couple years ago, with a Unitarian Universalist congregation in the Philippines.

I first voiced the idea of entering into a partnership with a Transylvanian Unitarian church shortly after my congregation moved into a new building in 1998. We had worked long and hard to make that building a reality. Trying to peer into our future before we moved into the new space, we couldn't see much besides the building looming in our future. But now the future had arrived. What would be next for us? Maybe an international partnership?

Nine people founded my congregation in 1955. One of them, a woman named Christine, had been married to the most famous Transylvanian Unitarian minister of the twentieth century. He was called the "Gandhi of the Balkans." When he died of tuberculosis in his mid-thirties, she and their young daughter moved back to the U.S. where Christine was from. Their path eventually led them to Appleton. Most of the congregation—me included—had only a vague sense of this particular founder's story.

The same could be said of our understanding of our faith and its origins. The nearest congregation was two hours away. We were a lonely, isolated outpost.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Other People's Myths* (New York: MacMillan, 1988), p. 146.

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Midwestern Unitarian Universalism often feels disconnected not only from other congregations but from our heritage, too. A partnership with a Transylvanian church: that could change things!

Happily my congregation jumped at the prospect of having an international partner congregation. As fate would have it, we were matched with the church in Deva. The most significant Unitarian pilgrimage site in Transylvanian Unitarianism happens to be in Deva. It's the prison cell in the citadel in which the founder of Unitarianism in Transylvania, Francis David, died in 1579.

Two memories particularly stand out in addition to visiting David's prison cell from our first pilgrimage to Transylvania a year after we entered into the partnership. The first memory was walking up a windswept hillside just outside a small village. Buried in the village cemetery was our founder Christine's husband. I could picture her with her young daughter looking on with broken hearts as the coffin was lowered into the earth. Soon they would leave the village and go back to the other side of the world. In helping to start a Unitarian church in Appleton, Christine would keep a part of her husband alive. My congregation has some of important roots planted in that forlorn graveyard.

The second memory was rounding a corner with the others in our delegation on our way to the very first service we would share with our new partners. Every member of the church was waiting outside, ready to greet us. They had flowers and other gifts and massive smiles on their faces. They surrounded us and showered us with hugs and kisses and tears. We had never met before that magical moment, and yet clearly we were already deeply tied together in a bond of a shared faith. The service we shared together was more different than like our services. Their understanding of our faith was not the same as our understanding. But we realized instantly that we are brothers and sisters in faith, tied together by a common story and a common heritage.

For fourteen years, our partnership has connected my congregation with our Unitarian heritage. In partnering with a congregation thousands of miles away, we have come to understand our congregation and our faith better. Sometimes one must travel far to find what is near.

Our new partnership with the Unitarian Universalist Church of Banaybanay in the Philippines is similarly transforming us. Maybe most significantly, it is forcing us to rethink some of our elitist assumptions about our faith--you know, like our faith really only appeals to well-educated, middle and upper class folks. The members of the Banaybanay church are primarily subsistence fishers and farmers. They found this faith of ours and it resonated with them. Maybe as we look through the window at their church and see a mirror, too, we are learning something about ourselves. Maybe our

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faith has more potential in Appleton to resonate with a wider range of folks than we thought. This, friends, is a profound realization. Sometimes one must travel far to find what is near.

I know that you have been considering entering into a partnership with the Northangmy church in India. They have extended the hand of partnership to you. It's time for you to decide whether you're going to take their hand, or tell them they should look for another partner. Putting on my hat as an officer of the UU Partner Church Council Board of Directors, I hope that you will reach back and take that hand. We love to see congregations like yours enter into partnerships. Your amazing passion, creativity and vibrancy make you an ideal partner. I have no doubt that partnering with you would be a great gift for the Indian church.

But here's the thing: the gift is a two way street. Partnering with them would be a great gift for you, too. If you think partnership is about tossing a few bucks at a poor Indian church and maybe an occasional visit, forget about it. That's not partnership. That's imperialism. If, on the other hand, you're looking for a mutual relationship that will bear amazing gifts for both your partners and you, then jump in! If you want to enter into a relationship with a people very different from you but also related in a unique and powerful way, jump in! If you want to look into an exotic window and see your brothers and sisters in faith and also yourselves reflected back, jump in! It will deepen your faith. It will change you. Sometimes one must travel far to find what is near.

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