“The Power of Observation”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
September 23, 2018

In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, one of our six sources states that we draw “wisdom from the world religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.” And yet, have you noticed that we perhaps draw a bit more from Christianity and Judaism than perhaps some other world religions? Today I want to lean into this stated intention to draw from world religions and discuss a bit of Hinduism to explore our monthly theme of vision.

In Sanskrit, the language of Hindu scripture, the word for seeing is *darśan*. Within Hinduism, *darśan* is a major element of religious life. In her book, *Darśan*, scholar Diana Eck explains,

> The central act of Hindu worship...is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one’s own eyes, to see and by seen by the deity... Since, in the Hindu understanding, the deity is present in the image, the visual apprehension of the image is charged with religious meaning. Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessing of the divine.[1]

As someone raised with a Protestant disdain for religious images and a Christian prohibition of any images of God, this idea of seeing the divine as central to worship startles me a bit. Of course, images are not entirely absent from Christianity. Art and images of Biblical figures, particularly those of Mary as well as of Jesus, play a significant role. Anyone who has traveled to the great cathedrals or museums of Europe can testify to this. And yet, sitting as we do in this plain Meetinghouse with its minimal décor, I wonder what role *seeing* plays in our religious and spiritual lives? Eck even writes,

> The Mexican villager who comes on his knees to the Virgin of Guadalupe, leaves a bundle of beans, and lights a candle, would no doubt feel more at

© Stephanie May 2018

> home in a Hindu temple than in a stark, white, New England Protestant church.[2]

While we may have updated the paint color of our Meetinghouse walls from white to a warmer color, it's clear that she's referring to a place like this. There are no images hanging on our walls and our windows are clear, not colored. Our one symbolic object, the chalice, is a quite recent addition relative to the age of the building. So, I wonder what the role of images, of seeing, is in our religious and spiritual lives?

In another white, New England church, the First Parish of Lincoln, where I was once a member, they celebrate their architecture by naming their church directory, "Clear Windows." In their congregational identity, the clear windows express a sense that the view OUTSIDE of the building is part of their spiritual experience. During the long moment of silence in the service, many eyes are wide open observing the natural world outside. Could this too be an effort to *see* the divine? What might seeing the divine mean to us?

When comparing religions and religious experience, I have been taught to respect the distinctiveness of each tradition. And, according to Eck, the Hindu practice of darśan is different than other world religions. She notes how the common expression in Hindi is to say that one *receives* darśan that the deity or holy one *gives*. When one goes to a temple or on a pilgrimage to see a holy person or place, you would say you are seeking to receive the *darśan* of the holy one. The image is not the passive object upon which a person actively gazes. Rather, the presence of the deity in the image actively gives a blessing which a person passively receives.

My Protestant self wrestles with this idea. An object is just an object—just stone, wood, plaster, metal, and/or paint. Right?! And yet, I'm also intrigued. In such an expression of religious life, the material world becomes enormously important. Eck describes how Hindu worship engages the senses:

> One "sees" the image of the deity. One "touches" it with one's hands, and one also "touches" the limbs of one's own body to establish the presence of various deities. One "hears" the sacred sound of the *mantras*. The ringing of

© Stephanie May 2018

> bells, the offering of oil lamps, the presentation of flowers, the pouring of water and milk, the sipping of sanctified liquid offerings, the eating of consecrated food—these are the basic constituents of Hindu worship, *pūjā*. For all its famous otherworldliness, India is a culture that has also celebrated the life and this world and the realms of the senses.[3]

This sensual embrace of this world as the place where we find the holy resonates with me. What if our sense of the divine were not 'out there', but shows up here beside us. What if we can truly feed, eat, touch, hear, see and be seen by the divine?

But, isn't this all irrelevant to all you atheists sitting in these pews? I know you're there. And, I know others believe in some sense of the divine, of God—although I suspect that the understanding of God varies from person to person. Indeed, I suspect the God that the atheists do *not* believe in also varies from person to person. This too is part of the exercise of comparative religion. Can you describe specifically what you do or do not believe in? What you do and do not see when you look at the world?

I am not a scholar of Hinduism and I am pretty certain that in some way I am botching the description of *darśan.* And yet, learning a little bit about the practice challenges me to consider in what ways *seeing* is part of my spiritual life. How does it fit into your life?
And I should acknowledge, that our sightedness varies as humans. Some of us are able to correct our vision with glasses, contacts, or surgeries and others move through the world with partial or total blindness. Sightedness is not a guarantee. Perhaps not taking this for granted can deepen our reflections on what role the ability to *see* plays in our lives.

For Transcendentalist poet, Ellery Channing, seeing allowed him to describe the world below a mountaintop in his poem "From Wachusett." In some ways, his poem is flatly matter-of-fact. He does in fact simply point out what he sees. But why? Tucked in the middle of the poem is this line: "*But I love dearly to look down at them.*" Could his words simply be a love poem to his beloved New England?

© Stephanie May 2018

Perhaps some might have questioned the merit of depicting the quotidian scene of small-town New England as poetic material. For example, his closing line simply states:

> *And where the land's so poor, it will not pay*
> *For Farming, winds the Railroad's yellow way.*

That's it. An odd rhythm describing the presence of a railroad. Perhaps we could dismiss the poem as mediocre—you wouldn't be alone. His received mixed reviews from his contemporaries. But before we take this easy out, what if we consider his poem as an expression of his seeing the divine.

Writer Annie Dillard suggests,

> *We are here to abet creation and to witness it, to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. Together we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach, but we notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.*

Could it be that noticing the view from Wachusett is a witness's account of creation? Or, for the evolutionary biologists among us, could the poem be a witness's testimony of the wonder of the universe?

When we look over our New England landscape, what do we see? Could we be seeing the holy?

In my understanding, when I say 'the holy', I do so with a lower 'h'. For me, the holy is all that radiates with ultimate meaning. The holy, in this sense, is a word to describe the 'stuff' that makes life valuable and creates a sense that being here, taking one breath after another, matters. Whether we use language of God, Krishna, energy, ethics, or the holy, my sense is that we are all seeking ways to understand and name what makes life meaningful.

© Stephanie May 2018

And while we may not identify as Hindi, perhaps we can all learn something about meaningful seeing by learning about the practice of *darśan.* Blogger Max Cooper describes his understanding of *darśan* this way:

> In India, there long has been a feeling, or a recognition [that] all is divine. That all is God. Thus, it makes perfect sense in the Indian tradition to speak of seeing the divinity. Of seeing something holy. Physical forms can indeed be holy.
> And the divine can express itself through physical forms. Indeed, the divine does express itself through each and every one of us. There is in particular a notion that, at our heart(s), that each one of us is truly divine. That each of us is God, deep deep inside, so to speak.[4]

If all is God, if the physical and material can be holy, then perhaps seeing and being seen by one another is an experience of the divine? Perhaps life itself shimmers with the presence of the holy?

Perhaps this is not the language you would use. Perhaps none of this resonates with you. Or, perhaps the sense that the holy is everywhere around you enlivens your spirit. When Ellery Channing stood on that mountaintop and described the church spires, farmland, and ribbon of railroad, I hear him singing a hymn of praise to the holy landscape of his everyday life. The holy does not need to be locked within a church or in religious rituals; the holy can be found by noticing what lies before us.

In whatever way we may or may not describe the holy, I hope all of us have experiences of really noticing the world around us. Seeing can be a powerful way of not only observing the world, but of finding meaning in and connection with the world. As we prepare to leave this New England Meetinghouse with its clear windows, may we all be attuned to see people and places that renew our sense of what really matters and makes life meaningful.

So may it be. Amen.

© Stephanie May 2018

[1] Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India, 3rd ed.,* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass,1998), p. 3.

[2] *Ibid*, p. 21.

[3] *Ibid,* p. 11-12.

[4] Max Cooper, “Reflections on “Darshan,” and my Darshan of the Dalai Lama”, Blog: Silent Cedars, Dec. 12 ,2014. https://silentcedars.wordpress.com/2014/12/12/reflections-on-darshan-and-my-darshan-of-the-dalai-lama/. Accessed September 22, 2018.

© Stephanie May 2018