

Sermon: Same River Twice  
Delivered Sept 16, 2007  
UU Church of Ellsworth, ME

Mother Ganga--the river Ganges--flows down from the Himalayas, glacier-fed and holy. On her journey to the Bay of Bengal she picks up every offering from the earth and every contribution from her people, until she is rich in everything from mountain silt to ash and dung and rotting flesh. So enriched she winds her way from India into Bangladesh and finally out to the ocean.

In Patna where my father was born the water runs thick and grey-brown, the *ghats* crowded with people mourning and celebrating and praying from the depths of their souls. Patna's sacred history has been obscured by generations of corruption and poverty; it is the capital of Bihar, known still as one of the "backward states" of India--least developed, least forward-thinking, least wealthy, least stable. Like the river, Patna lives in paradox.

The Ganges is at once a goddess and a sacred, filthy mess. All the devotion, all the holy power in the world cannot make her waters run clear, although they are still the cleansing waters, the heart and soul of Hindu India.

If you're not expecting it, your first glimpse of the river Ganges can be quite a shock. Layers of silt and dung and corpses of people and animals mix with the icy water until lukewarm grey-green liquid saunters past people standing hip-deep in the cleansing waters of the goddess made real.

People who make pilgrimages to see her will tell you that she alone can wash the sins from your body and soul, but to Western eyes it looks like a risky proposition at best. It is generations of belief--of knowing beyond knowledge—that have honed the worshippers' confidence to a fine edge. They belong to a tradition embedded in a culture many thousands of years old—a combination of beliefs and practices whose pedigree is so strong that logic has little bearing on it.

Apparently bacteriophages—organisms that eat bacteria—have been found in the water, so as is often the case, the original premise carries some grain of truth. But to the faithful, it is the faith that is important.

Some people say that you cannot convert to Hinduism, and the role of the Ganges is a perfect example of the issue. To them, the condition of Hinduism is so complete that it cannot be learned. You must be steeped in the culture, beliefs and expectations, in order to understand them. Hinduism is something you must know in your gut—it is not something that can be taught.

There is no central authority in Hinduism, and not everyone believes the same way, but I must say that I have never met a mainline Hindu evangelist (the Hare Krishnas are definitely not mainline). It's a different approach to belonging—one that rests so heavily on the unspoken that articulation seems almost clumsy.

India is a country which runs first on tradition. They are smart and strong and innovative and deeply rooted in a culture thousands of years old. Tradition balances on a knife-edge with

modernization in this satellite tv- and cell phone-dominated world. So far, we second-generation emigrants are lucky--there are pride movements keeping us connected to the place where our mothers and fathers began; so far we have managed to find that place where the river continues to flow, thick with its history. Without the motion we will lose our lives; without the history we will lose our basis for living.

\*\*\*

\*\*\*

My best friend Lara is a consummate athlete, entirely unable to give up the pleasure of pushing her flesh and bones to the edge of possibility. When we were in high school she lettered in three seasons of track: cross country, indoor, and track and field...and promptly discovered that even her knees had limits. She limped through her sophomore year in Germany, where her knees were reassembled by a cutting-edge surgeon, but running was off the list of possibilities. So when she got to college, she took up rowing crew.

Now Lara has never been one to do things by halves, and so she went to Columbia University, on the edge of Harlem in New York City. Crew practice was on the Hudson River. The Hudson in New York isn't sacred like the Ganges, but it does run through the heart of our quintessential city, and it carries all the flotsam that that implies. She says they always had a home advantage when other teams came to row in New York, because other teams didn't have to contend with human skulls floating by the ends of their oars. *Everything* gets into the Hudson eventually.

Poet, writer, and activist Alice Walker writes good advice for Columbia's rivals:

expect nothing. live frugally  
on surprise.

\*\*\*

If we can cleanse ourselves of expectations, we can circumvent disappointment...but expectations are shaped from memories, from what we know, from what we have learned. If we throw away history entirely we are at risk of repeating it so somewhere in the middle lies the balance.

We must expect, but not too much. We must remember, but not cling. We must hope. Always we must hope.

We tend to forget that familiar is not always better. You might get a warm fuzzy feeling if you smell your favorite food cooking, but that's only half the story. You know that feeling when you realize that you forgot your sweetheart's birthday again this year and it's been a month? That's a sensation of familiarity, too. We don't always want or need the familiar.

There's a blog--an online journal--called Real Live Preacher that I try to follow pretty closely. It's written by a liberal Baptist pastor in Texas named Gordon Atkinson. His pieces are so sweet and real and strong that he's developed a large following, gotten a book deal, and helped a few other people develop their readerships, too. One of the things he writes about is his ongoing

experience of depression, including the process of finding an antidepressant that will work so that his work and his life can continue. Recently the medication he was on stopped working. He wrote,

*This is so hard to write, but I fear something is wrong again. I've slowly lost the ability to feel happiness or love. Once again I have all of the words and none of the feeling. My need to be alone is becoming overpowering. I come home and want to go to bed or sit in a corner. The idea of interacting with people is painful even to think about. [My family] obviously know something is wrong.*

*Damn it! I don't want to do this again. I'm going to have to go back to the doctor and start the process over again. I hate the idea of medication. I hate thinking of myself being dependant on medication.*

\*\*\*

*But I'm going to the doctor. Yes sir. I'm not hesitating this time. I already have the appointment. And I'm going to do whatever he tells me to do. If he gives me pills (and he will) I'll smile and say, "Thank you, sir. May I have another?"*

*Because this is the story of my love. Do you understand what I'm saying? This is my love. My love for God and for ideas and for truth and for our church and for writing and for my friends and for my [children...and my wife...]*

\*\*\*

Atkinson is struggling with expectations, with obligations, but it is that compelling love that draws him out of his bed and sends him seeking treatment for a depression which otherwise leaves him disconnected from the world and silenced. Expectations are a double-edged sword. From others we need them, and we fear them. In our own thinking we barely notice them. Our expectations are so smoothly blended with our understandings of reality that it is a true spiritual discipline to maintain awareness of the things we take as truth.

Denial is a funny thing—it makes possible in our minds the one thing that is impossible in the world: undoing that which is done. It is vital to our survival—it gives us time to adjust to realities we cannot imagine accommodating—the death of a loved one, or a major tragedy. It allows reality to seep in slowly, a beat at a time. Rosh Hashanah was last week, and we are now halfway through the “days of awe”—time allocated in the Jewish calendar for people to atone for their sins. We are also in the middle of Ramedan, the month of fasting and self-examination marked by Muslims every year. For both the Jews and the Muslims this is a time of deep introspection and cleansing. If they were Hindus they would make pilgrimages to the Ganges to wash away their sins. But they come from a desert tradition and so they fast and pray and apologize. In practical terms, the religious demand is that Jews and Muslims examine the past year of their lives and make amends. There is a place for denial, but this is the time to consciously step away from denial gone on too long. There comes a moment when denial is no longer serving us—it begins to get in our way, obstructing our ongoing growth.

\*\*\*

Years and years ago, horror novelist Stephen King wrote a novel called *Pet Semetary*. The premise was deceptively simple: behind the place where all the local kids buried their pets was another, older cemetery with a cloudy past. By rumor and by accident, the main character discovers that a pet buried there will come back to life...sort of. The body is ambulatory, but the spirit seems to remain dead.

Stephen King is good at his work: it kept me awake for weeks. Of course, the bottom line is that you can't bring things back to life. Even the gods are limited.

Ganesh is one of the most famous of the Hindu gods. With a taste for sweets and the head of an elephant, he's sweet, cute, accessible, recognizable...and critical. Without him, we wouldn't have the Vedas—some of the holy texts—but more important, he is the blesser of beginnings and the remover of obstacles. Without him, very little would happen at all.

But he came by this power in an unusual way.

Once upon a time, many years ago, Shiva's consort, Parvati, wanted to take a bath...

...even Shiva couldn't bring him back to life as he had been—there is always a price. There is always a change. We can never do exactly the same thing twice. Never.

This is a blessing and a curse. I'm glad I've lived most of my life, but I wouldn't want to repeat most of it. Each thing, even the hard things, shapes what happens next. If we like who we are, then we must at least credit our lives with bringing us to this point, usually in ways we hadn't expected.

Perhaps that surprise is the way we share ourselves with the world, and the way the requires full participation of us. Surprise moves us in a way that the expected never can.

\*\*\*

One of the sweetest, gentlest examples I've ever seen of dealing with expectations was from a wonderful professor/nun at Chicago Theological Union, the Catholic seminary in Chicago. She was my Hebrew Scriptures professor, but she was mostly teaching scholarly examination of the Old Testament to a brand-new crop of Catholic students training for religious life of one kind or another. Many of them had just come from overseas, from countries where religion is not as pushed and pulled as it is here, where questioning authorities is less of an ingrained practice and more of an anomaly, and where they had been taught for all of their 25 or 65 years that the Bible contained the inerrant word of God.

In ten weeks she gracefully took them from absolute inerrancy to the hazy middle ground of religious academia, where the word of God is inerrant in our hearts, but not in our heads. We expect some kind of consistency from a religion that is thousands of years old but the fact is, as Gordon Atkinson writes,

*The New Testament - the uniquely Christian part of the Bible - is a messy collection of books and letters. No one can be absolutely sure what parts are important and what parts are the cultural containers that hold the important parts.*

While the Hebrew Scriptures aren't quite the same collection of books and letters, they are equally messy, and even more obscure. We don't really know when people started writing these stories down, or who wrote them. Without that information we can't know what influenced the authors other than a sense of something holy in the stories they were telling. In fact, we don't even really know *that*, although we assume it, since the stories were passed down in religious contexts and eventually entered into the canon as indisputably holy writings.

Those stories set up incredible rules and vast expectations for human behavior, but they also tell stories of a world that was as violence-torn as ours is today. Religious wars existed, and unethical people, and class discrepancies, and poverty and hunger and fear and senseless violence. Some people think we need to go back to the good old days. We don't need to go back. In fact, we haven't made that much progress, if progress is measured by peace and love among world peoples. As a people, we humans are as unholy and godless as ever.

We still need to learn to see the utterly beautiful and sacred in every face. *Every* face. And the presence or absence of a god is not going to get us there. It's up to us.

It all comes down to expectations. We expect that people will think with the same kinds of logic and reasoning that we do, and will therefore come to the same conclusions. We expect that people will be the kinds that share our values. Anyone who doesn't should be talked into it...right?

Motion is part of what is familiar. A river isn't a river if it doesn't flow, if it doesn't send new water right past the same places, as it has been doing for hundreds, maybe thousands of years. The Ganges changed course in the 18th century, joining with yet another river before it reached the Bay, but it is still the Ganges. There is something more persistent than the view from one place on one bank, but the sum total of all the places on all the banks, the place it starts and where it goes--these are what makes the river this and not that one.

That motion, that continuation, is part of what must be preserved, and the motion is a result of our differences--differences between us, and differences within us.

\*\*\*

I attended a fabulous concert here on Friday, organized by Matt Baya, co-sponsored by the Downeast Concert Collective and WERU. Pat Humphries and Sandy O are Emma's Revolution, singing songs of personal transformation and social change for a better world. I loved it, and I was jealous. They are able to sing and speak from exactly what they think and feel. We in church have a more complicated task, because we are compelled by theology and community, by personal belief and some larger something, to make this a diverse and welcoming space. That means that there needs to be space for what I believe, and what you believe, and what the person who isn't here yet believes...

...and yet we have to draw lines--we have to mark off boundaries and borders somewhere. There are things we cannot stand behind, and beliefs we cannot support. We must be able to set some expectations, some minimum of...something...in order to be a part of this community. Oddly enough, our traditional marker is money. If you have signed the book and made an identifiable contribution, you can come, you can vote, you will receive our newsletter, you will be considered a part of us. I think that's a little bit strange, frankly. Money is important, especially at this time and in this culture, but I can't say I understand how it makes us members of a Unitarian Universalist congregation. I become a member of a religious institution by building knowledge and skills about that congregation and the faith tradition of which it is a part. I joined a UU congregation for the first time when I was 14, after a coming of age ceremony and the years of preparation that preceded it--really, all 14 years were part of my learning and training, part of my preparation for adult life in a congregation. It is part inculturation, part values training, part education--is this something that fits enough with me that I can reasonably be a part of it? Is this something I understand enough to claim membership in public? Do I know what I would say to someone who asked me why I joined this congregation and this faith? Do I understand those inarticulable boundaries that form half of the border between Unitarian Universalism and the rest of the world?

Membership is about expectations--a kind of mutual understanding set up between the congregation and the individual--and about promises. The congregation must commit to provide some kinds of support to its members--spiritual and emotional and perhaps other things, too. The members must commit to provide support to the congregation, too--traditionally, that's what the money means: a fulfillment of that expectation of support. But I can tell you, money is not the only thing we need from each other. In this crazy world where violence is accepted in cartoons but love and sex are considered too adult for our sixteen year olds we need some context of values not driven by box office revenues. We need some support for deeply considered ethics. We need a place where we can come and focus on something that cannot be measured, that cannot be graphed, that is relational, that listens to the still small voice within us and within others. We need to know that there is good in the world. We need to love, and be loved.

This is not the only religious community with these concerns. But we do have some fundamental differences from the other faiths in the world, and so this is a community with edges. This is a community with expectations. But this is a community that lives in a state of flux. The river keeps us alert and flexible, because we never know when the current will change. And we are both the feet in the river and the river itself. Each of us expects something of this community, something more specific than love and interconnection. We turn to our UUA Principles for a glimpse at the shadow of Schrodinger's cat--they let us start to see where our edges might be, where our expectations might fall.

But one of our fundamental expectations is that a person would not join a congregation which had covenanted to affirm and promote things with which that person disagreed. We expect people to seek consonance between behaviour and belief, and to value it. The conclusion of the principles is the most powerful part, because it tells us *what* we do with all these noble-sounding things:

"Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennoble our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support."

We must remember that the Principles are not vows--we do not individually promise any of those things. We have no creed, nor creedal test, except what may be contained in our own hearts.

\*\*\*

what they do is they give us the shape of our expectations, the path that the river follows. We must determine for ourselves, and determine again and again, what those expectations are, what is acceptable and what is stifling. By refusing to enshrine our expectations on paper we acknowledge the flow of the river, the change of the water, even the shifting of the path. We know that this is a volatile world, and we know we must have the means to make choices accordingly. We know that we are different, and different congregations will seek different things. We know we seek comfort, but we refuse to let that make us lazy. This work of understanding belonging is ongoing, but we must not be afraid. Let us stand strong in the water, and shift as the current shifts around us.

What does it mean to be here?

What does it mean to belong?

We cannot know.

What, then, does it mean to belong today?

blessed be, and amen.