

Passages from India  
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker  
Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation  
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**Prologue:**

In October of 2018, almost exactly 2 years, I travelled to Jabalpur India (very much off the tourist map) to spend nearly three weeks at the Brahmarishi Mission/School with fellow UU Lisa Thiel. The memories, morals and the glow of the Divali festival lights, continue to shine brightly for me, as I reflect anew on my experiences in the beautiful and brutal country that is India.

The Corona virus has hit India hard, and given the prevalence of poverty and poor sanitation there, this is not surprising. I offer these passages (written originally in a journal and on the airplane home back in 2018) with a seasoned gratitude and also with greater appreciation for the experiences we gain through travel outside of our comfort zones.

In his essay, "Why We Travel," Pico Iyer, reminds us that "we travel to find ourselves and to lose ourselves. We travel to open eyes and hearts, to bring what little we can, in our ignorance and knowledge, to those parts of the globe whose riches are differently dispersed. Travel guides us towards better balance of wisdom and compassion and in leaving our beliefs and certainties behind."

In all of these ways, my passage to and from India, has enabled me to, indeed, travel in search of an innocent eye and return transformed by love. Today, I am wishing the people of India as happy a Divali as they can have (beginning on November 14th this year for 5 days) and that the festival truly brings about its intention for our planet of the spiritual "victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance".

**Passage #1: Arrival**

Immediately upon arriving to India, you are hit with this sort of full on sensory experience of being somewhere different. You have this combination of haze incessant smell of something that smells like its burning, sweat, spices, and cow dung; in addition to other things, you are sort of assaulted by the environment because its so different from what you are used to; and it is hot ninety to ninety two degrees every single day even in the shade.

We stay in Delhi over night because there is only one flight to Jabalpur every day, it is not on the tourist grid and its right In the center of the country; it's a traditional place where we wear traditional clothes, and every day we are expected to cover our neck with a scarf a tuni worn exactly as I'm wearing this one now, in fact this one went with me and I wore it regularly. We finally do get to the mission and it is presided over as I said by Did Gwanishvari (or DidiG) this person of incredible humor, warmth, love, and political skills, she was quite a combination.

Everybody greets one another there with there hands pressed together and says "Jai Virat" which means, honor all beings, or literally victory to all living things; and after you have had "Jai Virat, Robina Ma'am" said to you by literally hundreds of little glowing faces every day at the school it sort of vanishes every negative thought you could have.

I feel myself coming back to life in a new sort of way after a couple days, but it's sort of slow because I really am coming out of this very different rhythm and environment into something very new; but I make a commitment to be patient with myself and write in my journal every day; and I do in fact do that, in fact exceeding greatly my expectations of my writing every day and what that would bring me, and of course the meditation practice in the garden.

Life is very simple but its enriched in a special kind of way. A bath is taken with a large bucket and a small scoop if the water is hot; and if the water isn't hot you heat the water and you stand in the bathroom and you bathe yourself, the water flows into a little drain in the corner and then you squeegee the floor: once I got the hang of it, it was great, by the time I left there it seemed like the normal way to bathe yourself.

Nobody complains about these things, nobody says "the water isn't warm today, what is wrong with the water?", or "the lights went out what is wrong with the electrical system?"; there is a kind of flow to life there that is very accepting. So I'm overjoyed that I'm going to be living in community for two and a half weeks, and I'm not sure quite what to expect, but community was exactly what I received in every possible way.

## **Passage #2 Sacred Cows in the Passing Lane**

Cows in India are sacred, I think we know that to some extent they don't eat cow's there, and there are thousands of stray cows wandering around in India; wherever they wish to roam, thank you very much, along with the many street dogs. They definitely occupy the top run in what is the most crazy traffic dance I have seen in my life. There are no traffic lights for the most part, because it would actually mock up the works; and the pecking order is cows, cars, scooters and motorcycles, auto rickshaws and rickshaws, bicycles, people, and dogs.

Oddly this becomes completely normative to me after about a week; cars flying, all these various elements flying through the streets, somehow slowing down and speeding up, and passing on roads that really are barely one lane; and you just stop holding your

breath after a while you assume that they know what they are doing, I never saw an accident, I never saw any road rage.

Two of the people that work for the Brahmishi mission, Budu and Deepak, pretty much drove us anywhere we wanted to go, we were very sheltered and protected by the people there in the sweetest possible way: we got to know Budu in particular, extremely well, and came to trust his driving even under the most difficult circumstances. As I said, there is no road rage there because this is just the way they move around the city, and road rage really comes from the idea that “I deserve to be in this spot and you don’t, you weren’t going fast enough this is my space, you are taking my space”.

The horn is constant in traffic in India, but it isn’t an angry horn honk, its an informational horn honk, “I am on the side of you, I’m about to pass you, I don’t want to hit you, here I come across the road without any warning”, meanwhile veering around cows, dogs, and people. You figure that in a country where there are one point three billion people, a civilization that is been around since thirty-two hundred B.C. they’ve had to figure out some way to coexist, and traffic it’s the greatest metaphor for that when you go to India.

Because I realize that even though the place has a cast system and traffic has a cast system, you realize that if even one person in this scenario thought that they were more important than the next, the whole thing would fall apart and you would have gridlock and crack ups every three feet. So, I took away from this, this idea of a kind of harmony in which we don’t think that we are more important than the next person; and that everyone deserves to take up a little space on the road. I was thinking about one person in particular who after two minutes of this madness would have literally had a cow.

### **Passage #3: Birthday Bash in the Chakra Ballroom**

After a day with the students teaching them English, or at least attempting to teach them English which turned out to be far more challenging than I expected, but enormously satisfying nonetheless; Lisa and I went with DidiG and Matraiya, who was another younger swami at the mission, to a very posh “rich people’s” birthday party at one of the only really grand hotels in Jabalpur.

It was held in the Chakra Ballroom which made me laugh because it seemed like an oxymoron to me, but the contrast was like a cold slap between the simplicity of the mission and the opulence of this ballroom and this party; and we had spent part of the day on this boat ride at a place called Marble Rocks, and the boat looked like it had been welded back together about a hundred times.

So, I’m looking around with all these people and their silks, and their jewels, and this huge buffet of food, and I feel contempt; and I asked myself when did I become such a snob about rich people? I realize that this party coming only a few days into my time there, that this shindig would have feed thousands of everyday Indians who live the most hard scrabble poverty you’ve ever seen in a normalized way; it would have feed them a simple meal, the kind of meal they eat, something like Dahl and Chapati.

So, I mentioned this to Lisa when we get back, and she very objectively replies: “it’s all part of the picture, those are the people who support the school, and the hospice, and all the other charities in Jabalpur. you have to have people with money to support these causes”

And I thought she is right about that, because I got to know some of those people during my trip and their devotion to the school, hospice, and other things in the city was beyond admirable. (We even attended a fabulous Diwali party in one of their houses with live Bhangam musicians). A light bulb went off over my head about this, and I thought, It’s always worked this way hasn’t it? Since ancient times we have always had class, we’ve always had some form of caste systems; they’ve taken hold in our cultures,

And I come back to America, vowing to find out why that happened or when that happened, and if that can be transformed, or if instead it’s like the traffic metaphor where these pieces fit together in certain way, for better or ill (mostly ill).

#### **Passage #4: Danyavad, Oops never mind**

Indu, Budu, Bai, Krishna, and so many others that worked at the mission, that worked at the school, and at the hospice; they cooked our meals, they drove us around, they generally cared for us in simple ways. They were servants, I even hate saying the word, but they were servants that were so much a part of a family like structure, if somewhat differently; and I had discomfort for my western perspective, sort of my perhaps overly “woke” lens about the whole thing.

There was so much mutuality and respect among the people regardless of all this, and no weirdness about it at all. Indu who was like the Radar O’Reilly of the place, DidiG was constantly calling his name “Indu, Chai please or Indu, the hostel boys need you.” I cried when I said goodbye to him, he was so endearing and wonderful; but the ease and the readiness between the two of them was beautiful to see.

Indu came to live at the school from an early age, and ended up staying there to work there and there is just deep love and respect; his new bride Archina also is now at the school, she is studying to be a medical assistant and she is going to work at the hospice. They are from the same village, about an hour away from Jabalpur, and it was an arranged marriage. Arranged marriage is still very common at all levels of society in India and she was very lovely.

So, the word for “thank you” in Hindu is “danyavad” is was one of the words I learned first because I wanted to be able to say it, and then I was told I shouldn’t say it to the people who worked at the mission; Quit saying thank you? I don’t know how to stop saying thank you! Thank you is what you say when someone make you a meal, or does something nice for you, you say thank you.

Lisa explained to me that every time I said thank you, I created distance between me and them, and that what they were doing for me it was what was expected of them in a beautiful harmony; and that I was creating formality and distance and they weren’t. And

I thought about that, here I was thinking that I was doing something that was showing them respect as the serving class of the place, but in fact what I was doing was creating awkwardness.

Overtime I was able to move from saying dhanyavaad, to just smiling and showing appreciation saying “svaadish” which means “delicious” to compliment the food rather than thank them for their service. I think the gratitude was so evident, and just the feeling of gratitude for the space was so lovely and so natural, that danyavad did not need to be said. Can we feel and communicate gratitude in this way, here in the West?

### **Passage #5: I'm Dreaming of an Orange Diwali**

I didn't realize Diwali was going to feel so much like a Christmas kind of feeling, but it did. The way people prepared for it was sort of funny, there was crazy last-minute shopping the day before Diwali, and the city became even more intensely charged; a lot of it is buying things on the street from vendors who sell specific items. I feel really lucky to have been there for Diwali and seeing that aspect of their life there, and the preparations, the beautiful decorations, the rangoli in the sidewalks, the lights everywhere.

We took an overnight train to Bhopal for a day trip; an overnight Indian train that is a whole other story, to see this amazing Shiva Temple and these painted caves. When we came back on a day train, it was the day before Diwali and it was packed with people going home for Diwali just the way people go home for Christmas and thanksgiving; with their packages, and their suit cases, and wrapped presents. I really could feel this sense of light, and the idea of welcoming light back to the planet, from the hovels and the manor houses.

One of the things that I was surprised to see was the prevalence of cellphones everywhere, including at the mission; both Swamis had cellphones, they both had Facebook accounts. A priest came to lead a Puja for Diwali; Puja is this elaborate ritual ceremony of all these things that get put on altars, and beads around the statues and fruit, I mean is very elaborate it goes on and on;

So of course a male priest in their tradition comes, he is wearing all white, and I noticed him at one point during the Puja that he is checking his text messages, and I realized that modern culture has pretty much invaded everything. It also made me realized how I had romanticized things that I thought I'd see and do when I went to India, I think that I had myself inside that picture, without factoring in that India is a modern place too. Even in people standing outside of basically a hole that they live in on a cellphone, then you see how technology has woven its way in, but the priest checking his text messages; I think sort of took the cake in between venerating Ganesha and staying current on who had texted him.

So, note to self -- don't romanticize and project narratives onto things you are going to experience, just go and experience them. Diwali was very joyful, DidiG surprised Lisa and I by giving us Mehndi as a gift, Mehndi is Henna tattoo its temporary, and it was a beautiful gift for her to give each of us in one of our hands for Diwali.

## **Passage #6: Swami with a Killer Instinct**

If you have played the classic board game Parcheesi, then you will grasp how Ludo the Indian version is played on a Swami's cell phone. So, Lisa, Matraiya, and I passed the time on the train back from Bhopal playing Ludo on this six-hour trip.

Matraiya, who is suami in orange robes, has the killer instinct of a Las Vegas card shark. She keeps sending Lisa and I back to our home base giggling and proclaiming with glee "Killer, oh sorry" with a twinkle in her eye; we remind her that karma is a... rhymes with witch, which is hilariously apt as we are talking about karma, because somehow she keeps almost beating us and in the end we keep sending her back to her home base.

They really do become real people to me after first meeting them and thinking "oh they are swamis in orange robes and everything that comes out of their mouth is spiritual, and everything they do is spiritual." But underneath all of that: the orange robes and the foreheads with the red powder, are two women who were deeply loved and respected; who provided incredibly unconditional love, spirit, and community glue, and who also watched spiritual soap operas; we watched them together - this one channel where the soap operas are all based on Indian source stories about dieties like Rama and Ganesha.

And as I've said, the Swamis spent a lot of time on Facebook, too. I was really pleased that these two people who I expected to have some sort of distance from, became so real and so textured to me and it just heightened my sense of respect for them. Not gurus...real people. Fingers pointed at the moon...not the moon themselves.

## **Passage # 7: Chitta Chitta Bang Bang**

Chitta in yogi philosophy is one of the four aspects of consciousness, allowing our emotional reactions to experiences, this can be mind stuff or heart stuff. I realized through my journal writing and lots of honest processing away from my regular life, that we actually attract what we need to grow the seed of chitta until its time to bring forward the seed: that there are ways to move from pain and hard emotions, to processing, to clarity, to more processing, to an almost like a neutralizing of our emotions, without somehow ignoring them or invalidating them.

I think for me this was the most transformative thing that happen to me on this journey, was this deeper understanding and actually experience of taking hard emotions, hard situations and Chitta, and moving towards a place of greater neutralization; I wasn't expecting that, but I am deeply grateful for it.

8. And finally, **Passage #8: Arti Party**, which also I call **Sitting shiva with shiva**. So, as you may recall, there was a shooting in Pittsburgh when I was away, it was at one of the synagogues in Squirrel Hill, where I grew up, I've spent much time in that synagogue and luckily did not know anybody personally who was killed in that tragedy; but it was very hard to be away from Pittsburgh and I even considered coming home - that's how hard it was, to be so separated from a community I know and love

going through something so hard. I wanted to be there with them, yet I felt like I was able to follow what happened pretty well, and be brought there through various connections; and as I did my morning meditation “that I am (repeated 6 times),” it became so clear – That I am... Jewish girl from Pittsburgh” sitting shiva with shiva a long way from home.

The day of the shooting, that night, was the first night we had been taken down to the Gat (the river) for the nightly Arti prayer ritual; and it was the first time I bought one of those small biodegradable oil lamps that are made out of paper; they are filled with flowers, and powder, and a little oil lamp, and you set it out on the river with prayers.

I set out several of those lamps. It’s quite an elaborate ritual and it happens every night; hundreds of people come down to the river not just our river but lots of rivers, it’s just what happens. There is a swami, and there are the people on platforms, and there are candles, there is all this stuff; and I look around and I realize that ritual is not just something that these people do, ritual is part of who they are. It is them; it isn’t what they do, is who they are, “that I am (repeated 3 times)” and it just brought a whole new meaning to that ritual for me.

To see it so naturally woven into peoples lives at all levels of society, I asked myself how do we in our culture, how do we in this community, this congregation, have ritual, worship, spirituality, not be what we do, but who we are? Woven more into our identity. I would say that aside from the Chitta and the neutralizing of emotions, my biggest takeaway from this whole thing was love, just love.

We create narratives in our lives that don’t support our intentions, they don’t support our desire to be close to people; we crave, and grasp, and want, a smooth unimpeded ride along the road; but what we often get is a metaphor for the traffic in India. Auto rikshaws and stray dogs that are not going to obey just because they annoy us and trigger our pain, guilt, loneliness, and contempt.

Really it sounds corny but being in this community for almost three weeks and seeing the way Indian people seem to be with each other, I was brought back the idea that we are love essentially; and we can be love in an even greater way, we can open ourselves to the full sensory life of joy, sorrow, riches, trash, strewn around us.

I am game to take India even more inward and keep dodging the sacred cows. Joy is there everywhere,” Tagore tells us, beautiful joy. Jai Virat, Shanti, and blessed be.

