

All Lifted Hearts

Rev. Peggy Clarke
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A few weeks ago, I attended a conference called the Ministerial Institute for Excellence. On the first or second night, I showed up for 9pm vespers in our primary worship space, a large ballroom set up that morning with a full orchestra and 40 member choir. It was late and I was tired and I was only going to this service because someone told me the best thing about the Institute was worship and, let's face it, I don't go to worship very often as a participant, so I convinced myself I should attend. I admit, my heart wasn't in it, as evidenced by my seat. I was as close to the outside door as I could get, far away from the worship leader and, really, anyone else. In the program, this vespers service looked like it could be weird, so I wanted an easy and inconspicuous out. The worship leader was Jai Uttal and his style is Kirtan which is part of the Yoga tradition of Bhakti or the Yoga of Devotion, which comes from the Hindu tradition. His percussionist is a birthright Hare Krishna. I'm a collector of unusual religious experiences, so I was open to whatever was coming, but I was also a little guarded and tired and willing to leave at any moment.

That is, until the door beside me was thrown open by an enthusiastic colleague. I don't know too many people at these things, but the woman coming in the door was familiar to me. We'd served on a committee together and while we'd never met, we've seen each other on videoconference once a month for a few years. The moment she stepped inside, she spotted me and in a single motion, grabbed my arm, declared, "We're sitting up front" and whisked me off to the very front- and the very center- of the room. Once there, she introduced me to a few of her friends all of whom told me I was in for a treat.

And I was. Jai sat cross legged on the floor of the stage with an instrument the name of which I do not know. I thought it was in a box, but, the instrument was the box. Beside him sat Dharma, a drummer in his early 20s whose parents converted to Hare Krishna 30 years ago and who, himself, is a devotee. (I know this because, fascinated by his drumming, I sought him out for breakfast the next morning.)

So there I was, trapped in the front of the room, hundreds of ministers behind me and a new friend hugging my arm, both conspiring to keep me in this room, like it or not.

And I didn't think I'd like it. Jai explained that we'd be singing for an hour or so. I'm not a singer. He said our music would be made up of a single chant. I'm not a chanter. He said our chant would be comprised entirely of the names of god. I'm not a namer of god. No, this wasn't going to be for me, but the exit was way behind me, and my new friend was welcoming me to a practice she'd been dedicated to for years, so I decided to accept my fate and settle in.

Jai started. He told us the names of god. He had 5 of them. Hindus believe there are 330 million names for god so we got off easy with 5. We practiced the names and he gave us a simple tune and told us to just follow him. And he started. My colleague squeezed my hand like Bruce Springsteen had just stepped on stage.

-Gopalah, Rama, Sita, Ram, Shamala-

We started to chant. He'd say it. We'd repeat. He'd say it again. We'd repeat. Over and over. Huge room filled with music. Hundreds of voices. The beat of a drum. **-Gopalah, Rama, Sita, Ram, Shamala-**

I don't know how long we were there. I don't know how long it took for my inner critic to shut up. I don't know how long it took for me to forget that I was still at work or that I was tired or that, before this started, I wanted to call home. I don't know at what point my colleague jumped up and started to dance. I don't know when dozens, maybe hundreds of other ministers followed suit. And I don't know how a simple 5 word chant in a language I don't speak could have opened me- or us – the way it did. But it did. I got lost in the music, lost in the moment. Nothing I knew mattered for that short time. I was able to connect to something that didn't require my overstuffed brain.

After chanting and singing for a good long time, after losing ourselves in the music and finding ourselves again in a new and deeper and more open way, my new friend and I sat until the room cleared out, talking and listening to each other. When the vacuums stopped and the lights were dimming, we got the hint and moved the conversation outside. Something had opened for us; we'd shared an experience that was somehow both electrifying and grounding.

That's not the kind of story one might expect to hear when talking about the wisdom of the world. Usually these sermons start and end with our heads. I was prepared to confess my secret Taoism or what I believe to be the genius of Confucianism as a model for a peaceful civilization. I think the Shintos are connected to a rich spirit of family and the Hindus nail it when they claim that Atman is Brahm.

But that's all about what I think. Interfaith work sits in our heads. We talk about our commonalities, we find nuggets of wisdom everyone can use, regardless of geographic or temporal location. The narration in that gorgeous piece the choir sang is representative of that 20th century interfaith head tradition.

You may know that the title of this service was originally Wisdom of the World and I changed it to All Lifted Hearts after hearing the full cantata from which today's choral piece was taken. Wisdom of the World is about what we know; lifting our hearts is about how we are moved. The narration throughout this cantata is obvious and a little stuck in the realm of the head making it almost shallow, but the music has real potential. The music creates something bigger than the words and hints, I think, at the same thing all the world's religions are trying to get at.

Religion was created, and continues to exist, as a way to face mystery and live deeply. We can and do think about mystery, devising ways to understand it. But we are most effective when we move beyond our heads and seek to connect with it. I say this after many years of studying theology and discovering that it doesn't matter how much you know about religion; what matters is how well you connect to it.

That all the people of the Earth have a handle on truth isn't something about which I need to convince you. Limiting those corners of truth to a 15 minute sermon is a travesty. They are worth so much more, they have so much more to give us.

But no matter how much time I spend talking about any one of those glorious traditions, what makes each of the world's religions so magnificent isn't their written theology, but their spiritual practice. We can't simply recite basic theological concepts and think we've heard something. We have to live it. Engaging in practice, even once, is a more authentic path of discovery.

Kirtan, the practice in which I engaged that night at the Institute, is the calling, the crying, the reaching across infinite space, digging into the well of the heart. The practice of singing the names of God and the Goddess, the multi-colored manifestations of the One, is an invitation and an invocation, making the Infinite present. I've studied Hinduism, gone to Hindu temples, brought students there and planned and implemented interfaith prayer services with Hindu priests. But it wasn't until I started chanting did I have any real concept of the Path of Devotion. It wasn't until I turned off my brain and let go of the ego-self and allowed someone else's practice, someone else's very real and honest and raw response to mystery, to change me.

Joseph Campbell told a wonderful story once of an American delegate at an international conference on religion, trying to figure out what Shintoism was about. He said to a Japanese Shinto priest, "We've been now to a good many ceremonies and have seen quite a few of your shrines. But I don't get your ideology. I don't get your theology." The priest paused for a bit and then slowly shook his head. "I think we don't have ideology," he said. "We don't have theology. We dance."

We aren't dancing today, unless any of you are so moved, but we are going to sing.