

**“The Gladness of This Rhythm:
The Theology of Rabindranath Tagore”
6 June 2004
Unity Church–Unitarian**

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READING: The Gladness of this Rhythm (from Tagore and Einstein)

Tagore: I was discussing with Dr. Mendel today the new mathematical discoveries which tell us that in the realm of infinitesimal atoms chance has its play; the drama of existence is not absolutely predestined in character.

Einstein: The facts that make science tend toward this view do not say goodbye to causality.

Tagore: Maybe not, yet it appears that the idea of causality is not in the elements, but that some other force builds us with them an organized universe.

Einstein: One tries to understand in the higher plane how the order is. The order is there, where the big elements combine and guide existence, but in the minute elements this order is not perceptible.

Tagore: Thus duality is in the depths of existence, the contradiction of free impulse and directive will which works upon it and evolves an orderly scheme of things.

Einstein: Modern physics would not say they are contradictory. Clouds look as one from a distance, but if you see them near by, they show themselves as disorderly drops of water.

Tagore: I find a parallel in human psychology. Our passions and desires are unruly, but our character subdues these elements into a harmonious whole. Does something similar to this happen in the physical world? Are the elements rebellious, dynamic with individual impulse? And is there a principle in the physical world which dominates them and puts them into an orderly organization?

Einstein: Even the elements are not without statistical order; elements of radium will always maintain their specific order, now and ever onward, just as they have done all along. There is, then, a statistical order in the elements.

Tagore: Otherwise the drama of existence would be too desultory. It is the constant harmony of chance and determination that makes it eternally new and living... There is in human affairs an element of elasticity also, some freedom within a small range which is for the expression of our personality. It is like the musical system in India, which is not so rigidly fixed as western music. Our composers give a certain definite outline, a system of melody and rhythmic arrangements, and within a certain limit the player can improvise upon it. He must be one with the law of that particular melody, and then he can give spontaneous expression to his musical feeling within

the prescribed regulation. We praise the composer for his genius in creating a foundation along with a superstructure of melodies, but we expect from the player his own skill in the creation of variations of melodic flourish and ornamentation. In creation we follow the central law of existence, but if we do not cut ourselves adrift from it, we can have sufficient freedom within the limits of our personality for the fullest self-expression.

READING: from My Boyhood Days” – Rabindranath Tagore

(Note: a palanquin is a conveyance, usually for one person, consisting of an enclosed litter borne on the shoulders of men by means of poles.)

The palanquin belonged to the days of my grandmother. Lordly in appearance, it was large enough to have eight bearers for each pole, but when the wealth and glory of the family faded like the clouds at sunset, the palanquin bearers, with their gold bracelets, thick earrings and sleeveless red tunics disappeared along with it. The body of the palanquin was decorated with colored line drawings, some of which were not defaced; the surface was stained and discolored, and the stuffing was coming out of the upholstery. It was in a corner of the countinghouse veranda as though it were a piece of common lumber. I was seven or eight years old.

I was not yet, therefore, old enough to do any serious work, and the old palanquin had been dismissed from any useful service. Perhaps it was this mutual inactivity that attracted me to it. It was an island in the midst of the ocean, and on holidays I became Robinson Crusoe. There I sat within its closed doors, delightfully safe from prying eyes...On holiday noons, those in charge of me eat their meal and go to sleep. I sit alone; my palanquin travels on imaginary journeys. My bearers, sprung from the air at my bidding, eating the salt of my imagination, carry me wherever my fancy leads...Sometimes my palanquin becomes a peacock-boat, floating on the ocean until the shore is out of sight. The oars dip into the water with a gentle plash, the waves swing and swell around us. The sailors cry to us to beware, a storm is coming.

READING: The Most Valuable Contribution – Jane Addams

Perhaps the most valuable contribution, which can be made to our perplexing age is a revelation of the essential unity and validity of all human experiences, that our intellectual and emotional understanding may approach our commercial and political arrangements. In spite of the magnificent methods of communication modern science has placed at our disposal, such a revelation can be made only in the age-old way – through the spirit of genius. This message to be natural and inevitable must be varied as well as profound, romantic as well as classical, delightful as well as poignant; above all it must be clothed in beauty sufficient to carry it over the gulfs lying between different peoples, especially those who live in the East and those who live in the West.

Rabindranath Tagore has met all the requirements of genius combined in a man who is at once a poet, a philosopher, a humanitarian, an educator...He has once more made clear to us the saying we so often used in the early days of the University Settlement: “The things that make us alike are finer and deeper than the things which make us different.”

SERMON: The Gladness of This Rhythm:

The Theology of Rabindranath Tagore – Rob Eller-Isaacs

I'm not sure why at my age I still tilt at windmills. Now and then I still set off on some unlikely journey whose purpose is compelling but whose end is not in sight. Attempting to preach on the life and theology of Rabindranath Tagore is just such a journey. And so I begin by acknowledging how little I know, how vast my subject and how humbled I am at the scope of his greatness. He was a poet, a philosopher, an educator, a playwright, a novelist, a journalist, an activist, a patriot, a scholar and a student and a citizen of the world. At home in Bengal he is best known for the songs he wrote. Though almost forgotten in our day when fame has become synonymous with greatness, Tagore was among the most influential minds of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He combined the ethereal force of Emerson, Whitman's sheer, sure, simple love of life and a fervent, world-embracing voice. He wrote more than 3000 songs, some of which became the freedom songs of the most successful non-violent revolution the world has ever seen.

He lived and worked mainly in Bengal. He was born in 1861 when British rule was at its zenith. His grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore was a Brahmin merchant prince who had welcomed the coming of the East India Trading Company with open arms and made a fortune in service to British commercial interests. His father, Debendranath Tagore, was a liberal religious reformer and a man of great influence. As successor to Ram Mohan Roy, who in 1828 had founded the Brahmo Samaj, Debendranath led a monotheistic, liberal movement within Hinduism – a movement, which parallels our own Unitarian Universalist tradition as a movement initially within Christianity. The Brahmo Samaj was established by upper caste, merchant class, western-influenced Indian intellectuals as a synthesis of western ethics and eastern spirituality. Roy saw Jesus as the great ethical teacher of human history but he rejected the Trinitarian Christianity. For a time in the early 1820's he identified with the Unitarians but he and his followers wanted to stay within the Hindu fold and so the relationship remained one of influence more than of affiliation. They saw themselves as a purifying force within Hinduism. Their rejection of polytheism and image worship, their struggle against child marriage and sati (the practice of burning the still living widow on the pyre of deceased husband), their affirmation that one need not be one of the priestly class in order to be a religious leader, and their belief in the Unity of God, taken together demonstrate a set of principles which would come to shape the founding of modern India.

Rabindranath was the youngest of 16 children born to Debendranath and his wife Sharada Devi. (Family planning was not among the reforms for which his father was an advocate.) His brilliance was recognized early and his family had the resources to provide every benefit to their children. As a young child he was gladly willing and able to memorize the epic poems of his people and to recite them at family gatherings. But he found formal education distasteful and galling. In his memoir *My Boyhood Days*, he writes: *Through the morning all kinds of studies were heaped upon me, but as the burden grew greater, my mind contrived to get rid of the fragments. Making a hole in the enveloping net, my parrot-learning slipped through its meshes and escaped...*

I can't begin to offer you a chronological biography. I have neither the knowledge nor the time. What I can do is present a few of the tensions and principles, which shaped and guided this

remarkable man. Though he always espoused democratic values Tagore was himself an aristocrat. Though he founded an intentional community – a humanist training school the Ashram at Shantiniketan, his stunningly productive literary life required that he spend most days alone. And though he loved India and in particular Bengal, he also knew and loved the universal soul and recognized it shining in the eyes of all the people of the world. He lived and worked in the tension between personal identity and cosmic consciousness.

Once, he recalled, on a visit to a small village inhabited mostly by poor Muslim peasants he had seen the animated, entertaining performance of a *jatra*, or opera, belonging to a Hindu sect no longer in existence. Its subject was the different elements, material and transcendental, that constitute the human personality: the body, the self and the soul. One of the dialogues was between a person who wanted to reach *Brindaban*, the Garden of Bliss, and the garden's watchman who accused him of theft. It turned out that the person was hiding his self beneath his clothes thinking he could smuggle it into the garden rather than surrendering it to God. Tagore remarked:

*Under a tattered canopy held on bamboo poles
and lighted by a few smoking kerosene lamps, the
village crowd, occasionally interrupted by howls of
jackals in the neighboring paddy fields, attended with
untired interest, till the small hours of the morning,
the performance of a drama that discussed the ultimate
meaning of all things in a seemingly incongruous setting
of dance, music and humorous dialogue.*

In the highly stratified environment of 19th century India, Tagore crossed lines of caste and culture as he called the people of Bengal and of all India to set aside their differences and to become one nation. Surrounded on all sides by advocates for "racial purity," Tagore instead insisted that in the words of Jane Addams, "the things which make us alike are finer and deeper than the things which make us different." This message may seem trite or shopworn but until it's realized that's a risk that you and I will have to take.

Tagore's message is particularly vital for America today. Just as he spoke out against the threat of high caste Hindu theocratic authority, we must speak out against the right-wing, so-called Christian threat. Just as he spoke out against British colonialism in India, we must try to temper American imperial pretensions. And just as he refused to fall into the trap of inspiring unity by fanning the flames of anti-British sentiment we too must take care lest we succumb to narrow, hateful ideology.

Tagore was among the first to recognize the inspired leadership of Mohandas Gandhi. He was among the first to revere him by calling him Mahatma. His friend and student in turn addressed Tagore as Gurudev. Gandhi was among the many organizers, intellectuals and artists who studied with Tagore at Shantiniketan. He shared Tagore's conviction that the future of free India depended on the well-being of her villages. Both Gandhi and Tagore sought ways to restore both the dignity of village people and the economic viability of village life.

Tagore endorsed non-violence. But he was disdainful of Gandhi's devotion to symbolic acts. He was uncomfortable with Gandhi's insistence that each member of his Congress Party spin at least 2000 yards of homespun cotton every year. He found the so-called *kahdi* movement to be pretentious and contrived. He was concerned that by spinning cloth Indian politicians could indicate their alignment with the freedom movement without bringing their hearts into alignment with the demands of love. His concerns about Gandhi's tactics were foreshadowed in the early 1920s. He wrote:

Some of us are reported to be of the opinion that it is mass animosity against the British that will unify India...So this anti-British animus, they say, must be our chief weapon...If that is true, then once the cause of animosity is gone, in other words when the British leave this country, that artificial bond of unity will snap in a moment. Where, then, shall we find a second target for animosity? We shall not need to travel far. WE shall find it here, in our country, where we will mangle each other in mutual antagonism, athirst for each other's blood.

He was a true humanist but he was not an optimist. Again and again over the course of his long life the pendulum of his public involvement swung back and forth. He traveled the world lecturing on the hope to be found in the synthesis of the spirituality of the East with the scientific rationalism of the West. But then the horrors he encountered, the War to End All Wars, the depression, British resistance to the Indian freedom movement, the partition of Bengal and then the rise of fascism and the start of World War Two, forced him back into his troubled solitude.

One can't avoid drawing parallels between his time and ours, between his psychological state and our own. He was an intensely creative, deeply faithful man. And yet time and again he sank into despair and hopelessness. What kept him faithful in the end was the sheer force of the principles he was brought up to believe:

- The essential truth that spiritual integrity is to be obtained by inward honesty and the cultivation of an inner life
- That negation or renunciation is not enough; that one must take positive action in order to develop one's life and
- That compassion for others, and in particular for the lowly and the lost is the essence of Holy living.

This is no orthodox creed. It is instead the kernel of truth, which remains when we strip away the concealing outer leaves of every true religion. It is the essence of what really matters in religious life. Though, like him, we suffer through our times of despair and hopelessness, may we, like him, rise up as well to turn back toward our obligation to be partners in creation, true companions living out a larger hope. May we be glad with the gladness of this rhythm and may his songs be ours to sing.

Amen