

## World Communion Sunday - Life of Pi

Jamaica Plain, October 2, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

Many of you may have read Yann Martel's exuberant novel *The Life of Pi*. It's ostensibly about a young Indian boy left by a shipwreck in a lifeboat with animals from his family zoo, including a Bengal Tiger. The book has a truly Franciscan wonder in the strange beauty of the natural world. However, in the time we have today, I want to focus on Pi's spiritual journey, which leads him to embrace three faiths, his native Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam.

Confronted by the offended representatives of his three religions in today's reading, Pi says, "I just want to love God." Last year I spoke about the book *The Divine Deli*, in which the author, John Berthrong, suggests that many Americans have multiple religious identities, and a person could be, say, 50% Jewish, 30% Buddhist, and 20% Christian. Pi, however, is truly equally all three of his faiths, and would then be 33 1/3% Hindu, 33 1/3% Muslim, and 33 1/3% Christian.

As I mentioned in today's prayer, we have a wonderful congruence of faith celebrations at this time of year. Today is the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, a great spiritual leader in the Hindu tradition; Tuesday is the feast day of the Christian saint Francis of Assisi; Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, begins at sundown on Monday; and the Muslim month of fasting for Ramadan begins on Tuesday. As quoted by Pi, Gandhi said that "all religions are true." However, Indian religious teacher Anthony DeMello, in his parable of the rescue squads, suggests all religion stray and are partially untrue. If all religions are more or less true, then what is to be our religious practice?

I mentioned *The Divine Deli*; we can personally choose a little of each. That approach was taken to an extreme in the 1950's at the UU Charles Street Meeting House in Boston. The Charles Street congregation had a large bookcase with Scriptures from all the great world religions next to the pulpit. This model didn't allow any depth in any particular

tradition, and the experimental congregation folded. Their building now houses a Hagen Daz ice cream shop.

Unitarian Universalism is an association of congregations, which grants enormous autonomy to local congregations. How those congregations respond to Gandhi's idea that all religions are more or less true is varied, to say the least. Some have theistic, liberal Christian, humanistic, or pagan identities, others don't. Last spring I heard a prominent UU minister argue for what one might call "the gospel of Pi." He suggested that focusing on one faith tradition in a UU congregation gave that faith an exclusionary sense of truth. Emphasizing two faith traditions would pit them against each other, so he suggested that three was the ideal number of traditions for a UU congregation to follow. Just like Pi. However, Pi's practice in the novel is that of an individual. He attends communities that follow the traditions and practices of Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Pi doesn't try to start a congregation that follows all three.

Martin Luther King's great mentor Howard Thurman (King carried Thurman's Jesus and the Disinherited in his briefcase) was the Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University. Thurman wrote, "There are many doors by which we can enter to encounter the Holy. However, we need to go through a door." Unitarian Universalists often like to discuss the qualities of the different doors.

Another way to put it is that we need to learn a spiritual language. Just as a child hearing sounds needs to learn a spoken language, so do we need a language for our spiritual experience. If you know one spiritual language well, you can probably learn another more easily; Christian mystic Thomas Merton connected well with Buddhist monastics. There are some people who are truly bilingual in language. While I have certainly known people who speak three languages, I have never met a true tri-lingual person who, say, dreamt in all three languages. We tend to have a "mother" tongue.

What do we do here in at the Unitarian Universalist church of Jamaica Plain for our practice? We follow some of the spiritual language model and some of the "divine deli"

model. We draw heavily from a UU Christian language and follow the broad outlines of the church year. For example, we celebrate Christmas and Easter. We also draw from other UU traditions and from the Jewish faith; we will have a service next week on the High Holy Days and a Passover Seder in the Spring. We also quote religious leaders from other traditions, like Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, in a context of equal truth; last fall we had a study group on mysticism in world religious traditions. Our combined UU Christian spiritual language and "divine deli" are in context of individual religious choices.

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday, trying in a particular Christian rite to express universal spiritual aspiration. The communion service has its origins in the Jewish Passover meal; other religious traditions also have memorial meals. While for Roman Catholics, communion is partaking of the body and blood of Christ and is "real," for the Protestant traditions of Unitarianism and Universalism, it has been thought of as "symbolic." I think of communion as a "mystery," not to be explained, but to go deeper into. A mystery that connects us to generations past, future generations, and the community of the present. In its particular form communion expresses Pi's universal truth that we are all trying to love God.

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From Anthony DeMello's *The Rescue Squad*

Long ago, there was a dangerous strait of the ocean that was especially difficult to navigate. Storm tossed ships would often break up on the rocks there, with great loss of life. Finally, some brave women and men decided to form a rescue squad.

When the alarm was sounded, they would rush to the beach, launch boats, and risk their lives to rescue the drowning sailors. People applauded their bravery, and others joined their crews. After a while, they realized that it was useful to have a simple boathouse on

the beach in which to store their equipment as well as first aid supplies for the rescued who were injured.

The rescue squad members were cold and wet when they finished their work, so they were hang out at the boathouse for coffee and donuts and to warm up. There was a lot of down time between rescues, and so recreational facilities were added to the boathouse. People started to gather there even if they didn't take part in the rescues. The boat house became more of a social club, and the emphasis shifted from rescue work.

Some of the rescue squad broke away from the original group and started a new rescue squad a little ways down the beach. From a simple boathouse, they launched their boats when there was a shipwreck, and saved many lives. More people joined them. Gradually, over time their boathouse became a clubhouse too. So another group broke away and formed their rescued squad and launched their boats into the storm.

After a time, a series of exclusive rescue clubs lines the beachfront. Ships still broke up on the rocks and sailors needed rescuing, but no one paid much attention.