

## Watch the Donut, Not the Hole

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READING: from the *Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter 10,

*I am the Self that dwells in the heart of every mortal creature: I am the beginning, the life span, and the end of it all. I am the radiant sun among the light givers, I am the mind; I am consciousness in the living.*

*I am the beginning, the middle and the end in creation; I am the knowledge of all things spiritual. I am glory, I am the divine seed of all lives I am the strength of the strong, the purity of the good.*

*I am the knowledge of the knower.*

*Whatever in this world is powerful, beautiful, and glorious, that you may know to have come forth from a fraction of my power and glory.*

The text of our reading this morning comes from a very ancient source; the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Hindu scripture, which was written about 500 BCE, but reflects a philosophy expressed in the *Upanishads*, which date from about a thousand years before that. It's interesting to note that the deity this text describes is so completely different from many of the ways religions have characterized the divine since then. There is no explicit authority, agenda, morality, or control. Here Brahman is described as pure consciousness, mind, knowledge and creativity. But it *is* in harmony with another description from about the same time, the "I am that I am," from the book of *Genesis*, and also with the claim that "God is Love," from the New Testament.

Now, the first thing folks usually do when they hear a statement about the nature of God is to ask whether or not they believe it. Actually there are also those who have concluded that any definition of divinity is meaningless and so don't even

wonder whether or not they believe it. But there's another way to consider the issue: independent of whether or not we think it is true, what does it do? What would it mean for a person to enter into the perspective being proposed?

If we consider the statement from the *Bhagavad Gita*, we find, first and foremost, that it would give us an expanded perspective on the nature of consciousness, the primary dimension of our lives. If we were to consider consciousness to be a universal phenomenon in which we take part, rather than an isolated event generated by our neurophysiology, the concept of the isolated individual disappears completely. We immediately become a part of something greater than ourselves and can no longer draw the boundaries of selfhood quite so narrowly as before. It takes us out of ourselves and into a new relationship with life, the universe, and everything. It would change the way we interpret our experience and provide a transcendent meaning for everything we encounter, for we would see ourselves as being part of a whole greater than ourselves.

This is what religion is for; this is what religion should do! It accomplishes this by various means, but the end is always the same. We tiptoe around this fact in our seven principles, but must always return to the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

There are psychological as well as neurological reasons why this is so. All human perception is rooted in a process of comparison. We don't see anything in isolation, but only in relationship. Light is meaningful in relation to darkness; good is meaningful in relation to bad; up is up because down is down.

When we regard individual things or events, we do so in relationship to their context, a process called figure-to-ground. A photo of someone standing on a beautiful Hawaiian beach feels different to us from a photo of the same person seen standing on a train platform or on the ledge of a building.

Consider the difference we perceive between a happy person standing on a sidewalk enjoying the sunshine, and the image of the same happy person standing on the same sidewalk but unaware of something which only we can see: a grand piano falling from the rooftop above, plunging directly toward the unsuspecting victim below.

We can see that it's our context, our frame of reference, that gives meaning to the events in our lives. When I was young, the dynamics of my family created relationships based on inclusion and exclusion. As the only boy in a family of seven children, I was often the odd one out, excluded from the play of my sisters. I internalized this family dynamic as I grew and projected it upon my experiences outside the home and often felt excluded as a result. At parties or gatherings, people would talk in twos or threes or more, groupings in which I might not be included for whatever reason – and I would tend to interpret this as an exclusion, that I was less interesting or desirable to those involved in the conversations. I'd tend to feel a little melancholy and sorry for myself.

I finally figured this out with the aid of some years of psychotherapy and was able to let go of that negative programming and realize that I had been responsible for those feelings of rejection that I'd felt. Once I was free from this self-judgment, I was able to notice that I spent just about as much time on my own as before, but now because that's what I really wanted! I'd actually been doing what I really wanted all along, but had persecuted myself with a negative story about what that meant. Changing the story changes the experience, even if it doesn't change the behavior.

Similarly, if we have a history of being hurt by abusive authority figures, simply being asked the question, "Why did you do that?" may immediately result in a painful response blending fear, guilt, anger, resentment and defensiveness. But if we've been lucky enough to have been free of that kind of abuse or blessed enough to have healed from its effects, we may respond by simply considering the events and decisions that led up to the question.

As Hamlet said, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

And we humans *will* think and we *will* decide what is good or bad based on the stories we tell ourselves. The ultimate usefulness of religion is that it can provide us with a context, a way of thinking and experiencing that can help us to feel safe and connected, able to unfold into our highest potential rather than running after happiness and pleasure or retreating from pain and fear.

The genius of liberal religion is that it recognizes that there is no single answer to what works for every person and frees us to find and choose the context that works the best for us. It's not the details that free us so much as whatever it takes to help us to feel free, safe, and part of something greater than ourselves, as described in Philip Booth's poem, "First Lesson"

Lie back, daughter, let your head  
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.  
Gently, and I will hold you. Spread  
your arms wide, lie out on the stream  
and look high at the gulls. A dead-  
man's float is face down. You will dive  
and swim soon enough where this tidewater  
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe  
me, when you tire on the long thrash  
to your island, lie up, and survive.  
As you float now, where I held you  
and let go, remember when fear  
cramps your heart what I told you:  
lie gently back and wide to the light-year  
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

Lie back, and the sea will hold you. We are all held in a great sea of meanings and forces that are beyond ourselves. Whether we call it God or Nature, or Humanity or the Tao or Creativity, we are all held in its embrace.

Fred Campbell has described four of the basic choices for an expanded context in his book, *Religious Integrity for Everyone*. He calls these "four faiths," humanism, naturalism, theism, and mysticism.

Humanists use the human community as their primary transcendent reference system of meaning. They can feel secure in being part of the larger human family.

Naturalists, on the other hand, find meaning through experiencing themselves as participants in and dependent upon the natural world, which includes all living organisms on Earth and all elements in the universe.

Theists root their faith in the idea of a transcendent agency, which they call God. They may relate to this through scripture, prayer, or worship. This perspective gives them the context they need to give meaning to their experience, and to feel securely part of something greater than themselves.

Mystics have the experience of a union with the transcendent. These experiences are so strong that they cannot be denied and are experienced as proof of a dimension beyond the physical world, a dimension so beautifully described in our reading from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

I invite you to notice that these perspectives do not necessarily exclude each other. They can stack together like Ukrainian nesting dolls. And they all share the same first step: the humanistic awareness of the self beyond the self, whether that self is another person, the intimacy of nature, a divine entity, or Self as the nature of universal consciousness. And they all share the same stepping outward beyond one's selfhood into a context providing a larger meaning for our experience.

As I've said, that is what religion is for. The quality of our lives is directly dependent upon the context we choose. It is critically important that we choose wisely because everything, I mean *everything*, follows from that choice. And if we don't choose well, we will suffer for it.

And it's so easy to miss out on choosing well. Our culture doesn't really support this kind of thing. We can't avoid perceiving the world in contrasts, in figure to ground, in relationships between this and that. But if we fail to root ourselves in a perspective that transcends our own experience, we'll use the narratives we create out of our own experiences as our frame of reference. We might even call it "reality."

This can lead to interpreting the world from the perspective of whether or not it makes us happy, or safe, or whatever plot line feels most attractive to us. This can give us a culture of people, each with their own narrative, competing with each other to make their own lives stories of happiness and success.

It can make us vulnerable to influences that feed on our need for a coherent narrative, so we can be manipulated into wanting cars or houses or vacations or beer, inadvertently conflating our personal happiness with increasing the wealth of the corporations that provide us these things.

Or we'll identify with a cause, a religion, an issue, or a sports team in order to feel part of something greater than ourselves. This can be satisfying but leaves us vulnerable to projecting our needs and anxieties onto a larger canvas, and we have ample evidence of the abuses and even atrocities to which this can lead.

This is why true religion is always countercultural. Cultures are made up of personal and collective wants, needs, and relationships and true religion is based on seeing beyond those things to a sphere of greater inclusion.

This brings us back to the Brahman, the Self in every mortal creature. As Jesus said in each of the four gospels, "The stone which the builders rejected is the cornerstone." Many Christians interpret this as Jesus referring to himself, but there is a deeper meaning: the most immediate, obvious thing about our experience is our consciousness itself. Consciousness is the basis of everything, the cornerstone. The one thing that all our thoughts, feelings, and experiences have in common is that we hold them in our awareness.

This is why true religion is so hard to hold onto, we keep rejecting the cornerstone, over and over, in favor of the narratives of our experience, putting the story of our lives ahead of our lives themselves.

When we can choose wisely to place ourselves into a context that is greater than ourselves, we gain a perspective from which we can see all that happens without drama or agenda. We can become clear-minded observers of our own lives. Of course our thoughts, feelings, experiences, and agendas are important – but we can gain a place from which we can stand as impartial observers as well as participants.

This place is so radically different from our cultural norms that it has been described in ways that may seem not to make sense. It is absolute peace, abiding love, nirvana, the Kingdom of Heaven which is within you.

From this perspective, you are greater than the contents of your lives. There is something stable about you that transcends your thoughts, moods, and experiences. It is the capital “S” Self to which the ancients gave all those confusing names that we translate as “God.”

This larger perspective that holds us steadfastly in awareness, in our own awareness, is the stone the builders – and everybody else – rejected. Reclaiming that perspective gives the contents of our lives a radically new meaning, a meaning that rests on a secure foundation of conscious love rather than the tides and storms of human anxieties and desires.

There’s an old song by Burl Ives that I remembered while considering this. It says, “As you go through life, make this your goal: watch the donut, not the hole.”

Our culture teaches us to watch the hole, not the donut. We’re encouraged to base our narratives on our desires, anxieties, relationships, successes and failures. But from this new point of view, all those are the hole, not the donut. Of course they’re important. You can’t have a donut without a hole. But without the donut, the hole’s is empty of intrinsic meaning.

Watching the donut is what spiritual practice is all about. Spiritual practice is the time we spend deliberately and intentionally focusing on a context greater than the contents of our own lives. And one thing we have learned over the millennia is that if we don’t spend that time training ourselves to see beyond the borders of our minds, that greater perspective will not arise on its own. We become flotsam on the tides of our lives and culture, rising and falling as events dictate. We become trapped within our narratives, even and especially the narratives that cause us pain and discomfort, like my old story about being excluded by others.

This is why everyone needs a spiritual practice that works for them, a discipline that can provide a more stable foundation than rationality can create. Spiritual practice is the way we can enter into the larger consciousness of happiness, joy, and love that true religion has promised. It is the pathway to “metanoia,” the larger frame of mind that has been mistranslated as “repentance.” We don’t need to regret our past in order to claim our spiritual birthright. All we need is to expand our perspective beyond ourselves. This is the good news of Universalism: the

ultimate is available to everyone within every moment of our lives. As Thomas Merton wrote,

The reality that is present to us and in is:  
call it Being . . . Silence.  
And the simple fact that by being attentive,  
by learning to listen  
(or recovering the natural capacity to listen)  
we can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness  
that it cannot be explained:  
the happiness of being at one with everything  
in that hidden ground of Love  
for which there can be no explanations. . . .  
May we all grow in grace and peace,  
and not neglect the silence that is printed  
in the centre of our being.  
It will not fail us.

Spiritual practice may seem far-out and strange, but it's actually quite straightforward. As James Ishmael Ford, Unitarian Universalist minister and Zen teacher summed it up, saying: "Really, the deal is pretty simple; all one needs to do is just sit down, shut up, and pay attention. This is the universal solvent of the heart. Become as wide as the sky. Just notice."

I've found mindfulness practice to be the spiritual discipline best suited for most Unitarian Universalists. It is non-theistic, not far out, and it invites us to think critically. We enjoy sitting and walking together, and sharing our challenges and insights every Tuesday evening here at the church. I invite you all to join us, try it, and see if James Ishmael Ford and Thomas Merton, and Jesus, and Buddha, and Lao Tzu, and everybody else, might just be onto something good.

May we all grow in grace and peace, and not neglect the silence that is printed in the centre of our being. It will not fail us.

May it be so.