

Be Thou My Vision

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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Welcome to the fourth in our series of services on embodied spirituality. Today we engage the sense of sight. As I've mentioned in the previous services sight is one of the big two in religion. Sight and hearing, the senses that you can engage from a distance, have long been prized above the other messier senses that require actual proximity to the thing or person being sensed.

As with hearing, seeing in religion is about something beyond the physical act of taking in light through the eyes and the brain processing it into recognizable shapes. Seeing is about understanding and meaning. After all, seeing is believing, right?

With his battlefield photography, Matthew Brady brought the reality of the Civil War home in a way that most people had not experienced before. The newsreels of World War II brought citizens at home closer into what it meant to be at war even with their layer of propaganda. Abraham Zapruder's eight millimeter home movie brought the assassination of JFK into every American living room giving it an immediacy that no newspaper account could. How many times have we watched the World Trade Center towers fall?

We believe what we see, and we give more weight to what we see with our own eyes. The Hindu scriptures say that "The eye is the truth. If two people were to come disputing with each other... we should believe him who said 'I have seen it,' not him who has said 'I have heard it.'" We believe what we see and we even believe what others said they saw. In an interview on NPR's Fresh Air this past week, Dr. Haider Warraich talked about performing CPR in a hospital setting. He said that, even when the patient dies, relatives who have seen CPR performed on their loved ones have less complicated mourning. They accept the death more easily because they know in a deep way that everything was done that could be done. They saw it for themselves. It may not be true in medical terms, but in their understanding they saw the effort the medical staff made to save to loved one.

In religion, too, we look to the evidence of sight. In many different traditions, those who have visions are revered as touched by special divine blessing. Those who prophesy are known as seers. Even within the most prosaic aspects of religion, we talk about our aspirations as the vision of our community. We can, and we do, construct our worldview through images. One of my favorite stories from Hinduism is the tale of the great god Shiva and his wife Parvati kidding around at their mountain home in the Himalayas. When Parvati playfully placed her hands over Shiva's eyes the whole world was suddenly thrust into darkness. If god could not see the world, than neither could the world see itself. Reality was constructed through sight.

It is not only the gods who construct reality through sight. In our first reading this morning we saw how we can even construct our understanding of ourselves through images. In her essay on creating a scrapbook for her friend's birthday, Jan Phillips spoke of how, through images, she

related her inner emotional journey to someone else. More than that, she also came to understand her own experience through images. By seeing the translation of the emotion on the page she was able to process and heal from the sorrow of losing her vocation. Through constructing image, she constructed understanding and meaning. As Aristotle said, “the soul never thinks without an image.”

Experiencing the world through sight (even if it is the sight of the mind’s eye) is very much connected to our understanding of it. Even when we try to see something as nothing more than form we can’t help but give it deeper meaning. The comment from my online class is a perfect example of how, even when we try to just see, we can’t help but imbue what we see with meaning. The *I Ching* (Hexagram #22, Grace) says this: *By contemplating the forms existing in the heavens, we come to understand time and its changing demands. Through contemplations of the forms existing in human society, it becomes possible to shape the world.* Through contemplation we shape the world.

In the book *Quantum Theology*, priest and social psychologist, Diarmud O’Murchu, says that we go past pure form to meaning because seeing creates relationship. He writes, “Observation gives way to relationship, a complex mode of interacting, fluctuating between giving and receiving, until a sense of resonance emerges.” It’s through that sense of resonance between observed and observed, O’Murchu says, that the individual parts lose their discrete identities and become yoked in discovering the “the interdependent relationship of the whole.” I guess that’s why gazing deeply into the limpid pools of your lover’s eyes is a staple of romance fiction the world over.

But in religious terms it reminds me of the Hindu concept of darshan. Darshan is an important element of Hindu worship. Darshan moves worship beyond a matter of prayers and offerings and even beyond an attitude of devotion. It moves it into the realm of sight. Darshan means seeing the divine image. That means seeing the divine, not merely a representation in physical form. In the Hindu understanding the deity is present in the image. That is frequently misunderstood by outsiders as idolatry, but Hindus do not mistake statues for gods. Still the gods inhabit the image and darshan, seeing that image, is charged with meaning. Devotion is communicated through the eyes and blessings are received back as the divine is allowed to see you.

When a new Hindu temple is built, the last things to be installed are the divine images of the god or gods to whom the temple is dedicated. The images arrive as mere statues, carefully created according to ancient specifications, but just statues, not yet divine images. It is only when the statue’s eyes are opened that they become suitable for the divine to inhabit. This is done by the priests and master craftsman who, when everything else is ready, carve the eyes of the statue or open the eyes already there with a golden needle. Now the statue is ready for the “great darshan,” first sight. Usually it is a cow brought before the image that receives the powerful first sight. The first sight by people is through a mirror, because it is too powerful to experience directly. And, thus, blessings are exchanged, through the mighty power of seeing one another.

Of course, Hinduism is not unique in the use of images for worship, for centering devotion and for constructing meaning. Even more common though is the use of symbols, which stand in for more complex images or concepts.

The most common symbols in religious history are the circle and the cross. When we think of a circle we probably go most quickly to the mandala of Hinduism and Buddhism, the cosmos in a circle. But the circle is a symbol of unity and wholeness across many cultures. It can be found in religious contexts on from Mexico to Kampala. The cross, which we would readily associate with Christianity, is also an ancient symbol, almost as widely used as the circle. You can see it in the religions of Meso-America, China, Southeast Asia, Egypt and on and on. Two of the simplest and most ancient forms, layered with meaning, symbols of entire systems of thought communicated through a few lines.

So what are the symbols in which you find connection and meaning? The symbol of Unitarian Universalism is the flaming chalice. A cup containing a flame. Also a fairly ancient symbol, but one which takes on a particular understanding in this context. It's not that the chalice has one single meaning, still it is a symbol that points the principles of inclusion, diversity, love, and justice for which we stand. Like other symbols it has evolved over time.

History:

USC

1950 Universalism

1962 UUA

2005 UUA

2014 UUA

Diversity

UUBN

Symbols are enormously powerful things because they speak to our deepest concerns of belonging and relationship. To understand the complexities to which a symbol points is to be part of the culture that agrees on that symbol's meaning. To claim that symbol as your own is to define your own sense of belonging. To sense the power that lies in symbols you must only consider the reaction to protest movements that burned or defaced the flag.

Culture jamming is rising phenomena that understands the deep power in symbols. Culture jamming is a way for those who do not hold power to interrupt the conversation of the dominant culture. It started, particularly, as a way to interrupt the culture of commercialism that saturates our society. From sports arenas to classrooms, entertainment venues to school cafeterias, on roadsides, hospital walls and your home computer corporate logos and carefully crafted messages define the cultural narrative of consumerism. That narrative is no friend to people without economic and social power. It is crafted to push political and social realities aside in search of feel good culture. Culture jamming is a way to change the conversation by changing the symbols.

The slogan emblazoned across the golden arches is modified to read "McDeath. East fast. Die young." The Nike swoosh logo formed from pictures of child laborers gains the caption "Just make it." When the conservative party in England advocated for cutting social relief benefits their signs read, "Let's cut benefits for those who refuse work." Strategic letters were painted over to read "Let's cut benefits for those who are poor."

Culture jamming is about taking the messages being force fed to us by those with power, and changing the conversation to tell a different truth, to bring issues of social and political concern into the fore. It started with consumerism, but culture jamming is spreading and it is working. #BlackLivesMatter signs are culture jamming, changing the conversation of the dominant culture. Occupy Wall Street was culture jamming, making economic inequality part of the conversation. And it works. No one is still staging a sit-in in New York's Zucotti Park, but the last presidential election was forced to address issues of economic inequality because it had become part of the national conversation.

In today's political climate, culture jamming gives me great hope. It is something that every one of us can engage in, finding ways to change the conversation from what we are told to believe to what we truly believe. One of the most poignant sights of the Women's March a few weeks ago was a hijab, the traditional Muslim headscarf, covered with the pattern of the American flag. What an incredibly powerful statement of symbols merged to say that all are welcome here.

Symbols are enormously powerful. What we take in through our sense of sight helps form our understanding of the world, helps shape the meaning of our lives. It draws us into relationship—with one another, with all creation, with the divine. To return to the question posed in our second reading: is it possible to create an image devoid of meaning? I think not.

I close with the words of the Oglala Lakota medicine man Black Elk:

While I stood there I could see more than I can tell, and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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