

“The Magic Ring/Can’t Hide Beautiful”

by Rev. Dr. Tony Larsen

The Hindu religion, which we are celebrating today, teaches that everyone is God, and everything is God – that everything we see around us: the floor, the ceiling, this chair, the lights, this pulpit, the organ, the windows, me, you, Everett, the lamppost outside, the sidewalk, the people walking around – everyone and everything is an unfolding of God.

This is a hard idea for a lot of people to accept. Many Christians object that this leaves no separation between God, the creator, and the creatures God creates. (You see, in Hinduism, God doesn’t create the world – God unfolds into the world; God blossoms into the world.)

So, many Christians find this idea contrary to their beliefs. So do a lot of Jews and Muslims. And actually, so do many humanists, because if you don’t believe in God in the first place, you’re certainly not going to believe that everything is God.

And of course, the other problem is: Even if you had no theological problems with this Hindu idea of everything being God – sometimes it’s pretty hard to see God in some people.

When someone has lied about you; when someone has stolen something from you; when someone has hurt you or betrayed you or hurt someone you love – it’s pretty hard to look at them and say, “Oh, that person is part of God; that person has a light inside; that person is holy.”

That’s pretty hard.

So I’m not going to tell you to believe everyone is God. I’m not going to tell you to believe everyone is really good and holy inside. (I’m not going to ask you to do that.) But I am going to ask you to pretend that they are. And since kids are usually better at pretending than adults, I’d like all the kids to come up here so I can tell you a story – and any adults who would like to join them and feel they still know how to pretend – you come up too.

Let me tell you a story. There once was a woman who had a magic ring. It looked kind of like this. It was a very special ring – it made whoever wore it good and kind and helpful. Anyone who wore this ring would never say mean things about anyone or steal from them or hurt anybody. They would just be caring and thoughtful towards everybody.

Well, this woman had this ring, and she was always that way. But when she got very old and was ready to die, each of her kids was hoping she'd give them her ring, because they all wanted to be that way too.

So each of her three children separately came in to see her and asked if she would give them her magic ring.

And you know what? She told each of them that she would give them the ring before she died. But she had her maid go out to find the finest jeweler in the land and asked him to make two rings that looked exactly like the first one. And then when they were made, she gave each of her children a ring, without telling them about the other two.

Well, after she died, the three kids eventually realized they all had identical rings, and they couldn't tell which one was the magic one. So they went before a judge to figure out who had the magic ring. And the judge looked at them and couldn't see any difference. And then he said, "Why do we have to decide now? We'll just see who lives a kind and loving life, and we'll know that that's the one who has the magic ring."

And you know, each of the three kids acted as if they had the magic ring. Each of them was kind and thoughtful and giving. So no one ever knew which one actually had their mother's ring.

What I want to ask you to do today is pretend that you've got that magic ring. And act in such a way that no one will know for sure that you don't. And to help you do that, you've got to pretend that everyone you see is a part of God – (that) everyone is ... holy. Or if those words don't work for you, think of everyone as having inherent worth and dignity – everyone has a light inside.

Now, some of them are hiding it pretty well – some people do mean things and hurt others – so you may not see their goodness at first glance – but if you pretend that it's there – if you act as if it's there – it may just show up. And even if it doesn't, if you think of everyone you meet as a part of God, you'll be a better person, you'll be kinder to people.

Okay, you can go back to your seats now and take your ring with you and I'm going to tell the adults a story – that you can listen to too, if you want.

One of the problems we see in our society today is young people who have given up on inherent worth and dignity – their own and others' – and have turned to drugs or crime.

What do you do, besides warehousing them in prison, to help them see the light in themselves and in other people?

Well, I want to tell you about a program that gave some young criminal offenders a chance – a chance to be needed and to help others. It's from a book called How Can I Help? What I'm going to read to you is in three parts – the first is by the person who put together the program, which consists basically of getting young offenders together with older people at a senior citizen's center – and having the young offenders help the senior citizen's play bingo.

Come along on a tour of this place, led by the person who created the program. These are his actual words, as he leads an interviewer on a little tour of the center.

Take a look around: We're the only building left on the block. All the rest is rubble from urban renewal. We got some renewal going on here, though. We call it Project Return. I helped set it up, but now it has a life of its own.

What's going on at this moment, as you can see, is what you might call Bilingual Bingo, what with the different languages and accents some of these elderly people speak. Look at it. Sometimes it'll take five minutes for a single number to get around the room. Different languages; some folks are a little deaf or distracted or confused; three people yelling "Bingo!" when we haven't even pulled enough numbers for it. It's insane; it's just great. And don't tell me this isn't how the whole world is running, by the way. I see this as an average situation. "Excuse me, Richard, Mrs. Schwartz is looking for her coat."

So . . . these boys moving around like waiters at a fancy restaurant, flirting up these old ladies, putting on their sweaters, reminding them of their numbers. . . these guys were heavy. I mean heavy. Years of crime, dope, doing time. They're in a program called Prodigal. Last shot for rehabilitation. Miss this one, you're done; no more programs. And I bring them over here to this Senior Citizens Center to give them a chance to make that last step home by looking out for someone beside themselves. Because maybe this center's a last shot for some of the old folks too. Last shot for companionship, last shot before dying, alone. Both groups on the edge --why not bring them together?

Of course, people were a little skeptical at first. "Ex-junkies, ex-cons, helping old ladies? You gotta be crazy. They're out there mugging them, man," [that's] what they said initially. Then I'd say, "I see that, but think about it a little more. How are we going to stop this madness? I see something in this idea for everybody. Chance to break out of the old patterns. We'll pull everybody just a little more out of their thing." Well, it was different enough for them to give it a chance. . . as simple as the idea really is.

So look around. There's so much life here I think it's going to explode sometimes. And strange moments too. Some guy comes up to me and says, "That lady over there, she looks like someone I done one time." I say, "Go ask her if there's anything she needs." And he does. And I'm amazed. I can't believe it myself, and I set up this scene, this crazy little world here...

And now, here's from one of the women who comes to the center: "I come to this center for company, I suppose, older women like myself. But I meet these boys here. Very interesting, very different than I expected. This young man who walks me home, he's a very nice boy. His mother, she should be proud of how he acts with me. I know he's done wrong. Look, they did it to me. One kid once put a gun to my head and went for my diamond ring and wedding band. He bit my finger to try to get it off. But you know what? I wasn't angry. Maybe he never had any parents --who knows what happened when he was very young, who knows?"

I had some terrible experiences when I was young. Poverty and war. World War 1. I was ten years old. The Germans dropped bombs. A woman jumped on me to protect me. Her body was ripped in half. She saved my life; I was very frightened after that. I'm frightened now. But I'm grateful for life, although it's a little lonely. But this boy. . . he walks me home. He helps with my groceries. He says, "Wear lipstick; a nice dress. You're very pretty. You should get married again, a nice lady like you. That man in the center, he wants to get married again." "He's not good enough for me," I say. "You're right," he says, "Marry me." "You're good enough," I say. "But an old Jewish lady and a young black criminal? What would they think?"

I don't know what he sees in me, to be so nice. All I know, he walks me home. We talk and joke. I learn things about how things are in the world now, which I don't know much anymore. And I don't get the feeling that I'm just a little old Jewish lady. You think that's nothing? You know how many other people I don't feel like a little old lady with? None. Nobody. That's the truth. How's that?

And now from the young man himself: Try to shake having been a junkie and done time, man. Everywhere you go, you get that. That's who you are. But this woman, it's like she doesn't care. She says she had a hard life too, maybe that's it. I told her how I robbed things. I told her about jail. She says, "Your mother must have been very upset. Let's get groceries. You have time to do that?" Nobody ever treated me like I had anything to give. Just to take. So that's all I ever did. Take.

Never knew my folks, started in when I was nine, four juvenile institutions, two escapes, on the street at twelve, dealt heroin, burglary; by fourteen I had my own car and apartment. Got caught. Did a three-year bid in prison. Had to stay in the hole because people try to sodomize me. One guy stopped some

other heavy guy trying to sodomize me and got cut bad doing it, cut real bad. Only time anybody risked anything for me.

This woman, she shows me something. I seen give courage, but she's brave, living all alone, being old. She doesn't recognize just how much she understands about life. Ain't nobody ask her questions anymore now, so she forgets how much she knows. I ask her questions. I'm curious. She's interesting. We learn things together just looking around on the street. We have a good time. And I done a lot of time.

Old or young, no difference. I'm twenty-five and I feel old, My voice sound old on the phone, they say. So old people, I understand their situation a little. They're scared, I been scared, They live alone, like in a cell. I lived alone, in a cell. So this place, this attitude toward life they got going in this center, it's showing me some things. And this woman too. I'm not who I always thought I was, being with her, just walking her home. Her too, probably. It's like you're free for that period. I've done enough time. I've done enough taking. Time to be free.

[from How Can I Help? By Ram Dass & Paul Gorman, 1988, pp. 231-5]

I read you these not because I think every criminal offender could be helped if we just gave them the opportunity to help someone else.

There probably are some people who are so far gone, that maybe no one can help them – or at least, there aren't the institutions available that could create the right environment for it.

But this I do believe: that many people who are wasting away in prisons – or wasting away in the prison cells of their own lives – could be helped ... if only they could be given the chance to see that they have something to offer, that they have a light inside, that they are part of something beautiful.

There was a song on the radio the other day that went: "You can't hide beautiful. You can't hide wonderful." And I guess I believe that maybe you can hide it for awhile – and maybe people can cover it up – but given the right opportunity it peeks out – it says, "Here I am."

And if we could really see, and if not see, then at least believe -- or if not believe, then pretend – that there is something beautiful in other people, something holy – it just happens to be extremely well hidden sometimes and can be a challenge to find (but aren't challenges exciting?) then we could really say: I bow to that place inside you, where, if you're in that place in you and I'm in that place in me – there's only one of us. Namaste, my friends. Namaste.