

Remembering the Surge of the Tsunami

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It is more than two years since the Tsunami tragedy. As we remember its surge of death, devastation, and heart-wrenching pain, we draw upon the wisdom of poetry to console us. Let us read a passage from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. It comes from Eliot's third quartet, "Dry Salvages," named for a group of rocks (*les trios sauvages*) on the northeast coast of Massachusetts. Clearly these rocks have withstood the centuries-old force and fury of the Atlantic. In spite of being in the wet waters they are "dry," and in spite of their "savagery" danger, they "salvage." Eliot's poem brings stability and hope to our memory of the catastrophic deluge. He tells us that these rocks off the New England coast have a "beacon." And so we are dynamically steered towards the East — to the land of Jesus Christ, and farther to the Indian Ocean — to the land of Lord Krishna and the Sikh Gurus. In the spirit of Walt Whitman, Eliot urges us to set sail across the infinite waters and unite east and west, body and soul, past and present:

The river is within us, the sea is all about us;
The sea is the land's edge also, the granite
Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses
Its hints of earlier and other creation:
The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone;
The pools where it offers to our curiosity
The more delicate algae and the sea anemone.
It tosses up our losses, the torn seine,
The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar
And the gear of foreign dead men. The sea has many voices,
Many gods and many voices.

Eliot's theme of unity ripples with Indian metaphysics. We humans, and the natural world around us, are not divided: "The river is within us and the sea is all about us." Nothing, nothing separates us. Each of us shares with the universe the basic physical elements: earth, fire, air, and **water**. Over and over again the Upanishads (sacred texts of Hinduism) elucidate that we are all made up of the same ingredients. The self in any particular form is not a part, nor a division, nor a fracture or fraction of the all pervasive Absolute but rather That Absolute Itself. "Behold now the entire universe, with everything moving and unmoving centered in my body," exhorts Lord Krishna (Bhagavad Gita, 11:7). In my own tradition, the Sikh scripture celebrates life and living in diverse forms: "born of the egg, from the womb, from sweat, from earth, That itself is all the continents and all the worlds" (Guru Granth, 604). Humans and nature partake of the same reality, for "the earth is not false; water is not false" (Guru Granth, 1240). The varied shapes and forms of our universe — human, plant, animal, mineral — are embodiments of the singular Substance. "The sea which is all around us" and which happens to be "the land's edge also" reveals the intricate and profound mutuality of all life that is so central to Indian metaphysics.

A second theme that emerges in Eliot's poetry is the unity of life and death. The life-giving, life sustaining sea is also the devourer. Tide and ebb are hers. The sea has "many gods," and "menace and caress" are both aspects of the same wave. In the Bhagavad Gita we have an instantaneous vision of the "many gods" embraced in the figure of Lord Krishna (11: 39): "You are Vayu (the wind god), Yama (god of death), Agni (the god of fire), Varuna (the sea god), Shashanka (the moon), Prajapati (the lord of creation)...." For me, Eliot's

transparent diction also reflects the goddess Kali. She is worshipped by millions of Hindu devotees as the Mother who gives life and as the Mother who takes it back. Birth and death are her powers and she implements them both equally, most naturally. Indeed, the sea that gives life to millions of creatures, the sea that nourishes humans biologically and spiritually, that sea on December 26 destroyed life with unprecedented ferocity. She even cruelly ripped countless children from their mother's arms! On that unforgettable day the caressing waves of the Indian Ocean became most menacing and dangerous.

A third theme from Eliot: we share a common human history. The present moment is a unity of past and future. The sea for Eliot contains our history and prehistory. Our past is lodged in its vast womb and we see it unfold when "It tosses its hints of earlier and other creation." Skeletons of whales, carcasses of "foreigners," and all sorts of relics and wreckage floating on its surface remind us that we are not individuals isolated in time and space but belong to a long continuum of generations that have passed and generations that have yet to come. So we are related vertically with people from the past and future; we are related horizontally with our families, classmates, and communities — near and far. We are intrinsically bonded with our human family. When we look out at the sea with Eliot's sensibility, we get a glimpse of the Divine Body in which our variegated humanity is securely harbored.

Eliot's poetic waves with their complex and multivalent undercurrents are not just to be admired. Rather, they place special possibilities and moral responsibilities on us. They motivate people from all faiths to action. We share our cosmos with infinite species, and we must act in ways that are not divisive or endangering. Unfortunately however, we have been living in a world of extreme selfishness. Fractured fundamentally into body and soul, we operate on the dualistic model of *us vs. them*. We have erected narrow walls within which we function — separated from nature, history, and our neighbors across the Atlantic and the Pacific. Sediments of class, caste, race, sex have kept human societies oppressed and segregated. We have had a very warped view of ourselves. The Tsunami surge, with its etymological roots in the Japanese language and its hidden origins in the depths of the Indian Ocean, violently attacked our anthropocentric and hierarchical assumptions. We humans are not the center of the universe and cannot control the awesome power of nature. Rich or poor, white or brown, young or old, man or woman, Sikh or Christian — we are all totally at *her* mercy. The infinite sea is all around us and we must figure out ways of living in harmony with nature and with our fellow-beings across the seas.

Now we did come together after September 11, but come to think of it, it was more a togetherness in war. We united against a common enemy, al Qaeda. We continued to operate on an antithetical mechanism. The Tsunami tragedy brought us together in an entirely different way. We found ourselves united in a real sense. This colossal tragedy of the Indian Ocean created a solidarity that we have rarely experienced before. Peoples of different religions, castes, races, beliefs, ethnic origins experienced something of the common humanity in which poets from East and West have tried to immerse us.

Facing the surge of the Tsunami, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Christians transcended religious barriers. They compassionately worked to rescue thousands of the living and the dead. People from all over the world travelled to the ravaged areas to help out selflessly. Amidst horrific smells and ghastly sights and heart-wrenching cries, they supplied water, medicine, food, clothing. Mosques and temples became community centers, feeding and sheltering the injured and the homeless, comforting orphans and mourners — Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and Sikh alike. Tragically these sacred, comforting spaces of festivity and ceremony served as morgues as well — burying the thousands of dead, without distinction of race or creed.

Amidst that devastation, it was good to have seen American and British soldiers helping in a positive way. Our soldiers headed for life, not death. They rescued not overthrew. They dropped food not bombs.

We were all touched by the Tsunami disaster. How awful we feel when one neighbor dies. And here within seconds we lost 157,000. Who knows how many more lives were lost to hunger and disease. Two years later, we must think of unique ways to tap into our own morality and generosity. We must keep the spirit of unity alive in the future. We must keep helping our distant neighbors. Memories can be short-lived, and absorbed in our everyday lifestyles, we seem to have already forgotten about the Tsunami. Isn't it strange that in our global society we have succeeded in establishing McDonalds in the farthest corners of the world; we have even utilized the cheap labor from around the world. But we could not help set up a tsunami warning system? A simple simple system could have saved thousands of lives! We must continue with our united efforts and support these countries and other underdeveloped areas to create infrastructures that can cope with such catastrophic natural disasters. Together we must help in the rebuilding process at all levels. We must remain united to fight against poverty, disease, illiteracy, and injustice in all parts of our globe.

I conclude with an optimistic flashback, a news report from CBS (January 1, 2005) — about delicate Buddha statues salvaged from the brutal surge of the Tsunami:

Legs folded, smiling serenely, several Buddha statues of cement and plaster sit unscathed amid collapsed brick walls and other tsunami debris. To many residents, the survival of the 10-foot-high figures is a divine sign. 'The Lord Buddha is a blessed person, so the statues were protected,' said U.M. Husain, a Muslim municipal worker who survived the floods by climbing onto a table, and then clinging to a grill in a wall when the table floated away.

Now the reaction of this Muslim municipal worker is very different from the fundamentalist Islamic attitude towards sacred images. Through the centuries, the anti-iconic tradition of Islam has had difficulty accepting the wealth of Hindu and Buddhist iconography.

We all heard about the extreme case of the Taliban wrecking the giant Buddhist statues in the Bamiyan Caves of northern Afghanistan. Those ancient statues of the Buddha belonged to our human heritage. But the insular mindset of the Taliban could not tolerate them, and their hatchets and explosives reduced those colossal images to rubble. In contrast, here is the case of a Muslim Tsunami survivor who reached out in his own mind: "The Lord Buddha is a blessed person, so the statues were protected."

Such internal reaching out to the *other* is precisely what is needed today. Our laws, democracies, foreign policies, and global networks will succeed only when we begin to reach out to *others* from the depths of our self. This is when we so change our consciousness and gradually eliminate that alienating notion of "them" that we unconsciously start thinking of everyone as "us."

The sea has many voices,
Many gods and many voices!

We must learn to hear them. We must learn to respect them. We must keep the lessons of the Tsunami alive.

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