

At the Parliament of the World's Religions

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*If it is language that makes us human, one half of language is to listen.  
Silence can exist without speech, but speech cannot live without silence.  
Listen to the speech of others. Listen even more to their silence.  
To pray is to listen to the revelations of nature, to the meaning of events.  
To listen to music is to listen also to silence, and to find the stillness deepened and enriched.*

--Jacob Trapp

*"To pursue a life of revolutionary love is to walk boldly into the hot winds of the world  
with a saint's eyes and a warrior's heart  
– and pour our body, breath and blood into others." --Valarie Kaur*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, that patron saint of Unitarianism you've heard so much about this autumn, was an early champion of interfaith understanding. Emerson and his fellow Transcendentalists were among the first to introduce North Americans to Eastern traditions. In his journals and letters he often quoted the Hindu sacred text, The Bhagavad-Gita. Emerson wrote:

"I owed – my friend and I owed – a magnificent day to the Bhagavad Geeta. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us."

In this spirit we gather again –

As Unitarian Universalists – a people of many beliefs but sharing one faith: the faith that while we share no common creed, we consent to work for the common good:

Here we gather

To ask the big questions

to wonder together,

to risk a reply now and then,

and to sing together.

Come, let us celebrate being together.

Sermon: "At the Parliament of the World's Religions" J. P. Rodela

*How are you breathing today? Because I'm having trouble with the current political climate: are you having trouble breathing? There is a global trend threatening human rights. What if this darkness is not that of the tomb, but of the womb? Waiting for a great transition to be born, the midwife in her wisdom tells us to breathe. It is time to breathe . . . then push.*

This was the challenge posed by Valarie Kaur, a civil rights activist and lawyer who leads the Revolutionary Love Project<sup>1</sup>. Informed and inspired by the Sikh tradition, Kaur's inspiring call to action set the stage for the week's gathering of the Parliament of the World's Religions, held in Toronto last month.

The first worldwide interfaith gathering was held in Chicago in 1893. Hindu holy man Swami Vivekananda had traveled across the globe to speak to the assembly. Plagued by travel hardships, prejudice, poverty, and then a bout of paralyzing stage fright, the Swami procrastinated his speech before finally taking his place on the

dais on September 11th. The crowd, weary after days of dozens of speakers who read elaborately prepared treatises on their theological superiority, and in particular the Christian organizers who in some ways had envisioned the event as an opportunity to proselytize to heathen Easterners, eyed the Swami with curiosity.

He had no notes.

He was clearly nervous.

He began simply:

“Sisters and Brothers of America . . .”

The crowd of seven thousand, addressed finally in the spirit of the cause for which they had hoped to gather, stood and cheered – for a full 3 minute standing ovation.

Swami Vivekananda’s simple heartfelt greeting gave birth to the spirit of interfaith understanding in North America (2). The next such gathering was 100 years later, and since then it has been held every 3-5 years. One month ago I was one of nearly 8000 registrants, from 80 countries, representing 220 distinct faith communities with the purpose to share our stories and learn from one another. We gathered in Toronto, listed by the United Nations as “the most diverse city in the world” to explore a weighty theme on this seventh such gathering: “The Promise of Inclusion; The Power of Love: Pursuing Global Understanding, Reconciliation and Change.” No wonder the conference took a full week . . .

At that first historic interfaith parliament 125 years ago Indigenous faiths were not represented at all. But here, in Toronto, Indigeneity was a centrepiece, intersecting with every other major theme: justice, women’s dignity, climate change, reconciliation and the promise held by the new generation that has inherited the dubious claims of my generation. At the opening plenary, Chief of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, Stacey LaForme, warmly welcomed we 8,000 participants to Toronto with his customary humour and corny charm and then pointedly reminded the assembled:

*Remember – it’s just a visit – we made that mistake once before.*

Chief LaForme’s double-edged welcoming caveat became a theme of the experience for me: to remember that in all our relationships, we are each simultaneously hosts AND guests in one another’s spiritual ‘houses.’ As Unitarian Universalists, religious pluralism and the value of interfaith understanding are taken for granted; we can forget, from the view of our limited context just how unusual an endeavour it is to gather in a church-like setting as a congregation serving a plurality of beliefs. What we do here on Sundays is . . . well just weird from the point of view of most people!

The political backdrop of last month’s gathering brought our purpose into focus – we met just a few days after the tragic shootings in Pittsburgh by a White Nationalist Extremist who murdered eleven people while screaming “All Jews must die.” The U.S. was facing its midterm elections which one speaker declared as ‘nothing less than a referendum on White Nationalism.’ Political tensions were high, with many of our gatherings invoking prayers for Pittsburgh and hopes to dismantle President Trump’s fascist regime, recognized as a global concern.

Another anniversary weighed heavily at the conference. One of the many representatives of the Sikh faith explained: “The first week of November is a time of reflection and a painful reminder for the Sikh community as it is the anniversary of [an organized massacre in] November 1984 – during which over 3,000 Sikhs were killed across India by ravaging mobs with support from the Indian government. [34 years later no one has been brought to justice or ever convicted for the genocide] November 1984 was the Kristallnacht of the Sikh community. Let there be no doubt that peace without justice is a peace of the graveyard.”<sup>3</sup>

Toward the end of over four intense hours of the first evening's programing, ceremony, stories and speeches, Christian Jim Wallis, founder of the American Christian Social Justice organization Sojourners, startled us by announcing we had already proven we could achieve our lofty goal – that we have what it takes as evidenced by our ENDURANCE of four hours of speeches . . . He excoriated the so-called Christian advisors to President Trump who he accused of having traded Jesus for power. He proclaimed: Jesus taught us to love your neighbour, so we must ask WHO is my neighbour? Mere helpfulness or charity is NOT the message – your neighbour is the one different from you, the one whose path I've put myself into. True faith – of any stripe – requires RISK. What if, he challenged, WE marched to the Mexican border en masse along with the troops deployed by President Trump and welcomed the so-called migrant “caravan” as our neighbours?

Throughout the Parliament we were encouraged to dare *not* despair, that we follow the wisdom of our Sikh sisters and brothers and others to become saintly warriors, armed with love, humility, compassion and forgiveness. Over the course of the week I heard many calls to be a ‘saintly warrior’.

We learned from Wande Abimbda about the Yoruba faith, who taught us that African religions have always been a citadel of inclusion, and such inclusion does not stop with human beings, but includes animals, birds, trees & rivers.

We chanted with a teenaged dance troupe of enthusiastic environmentalists, poised as the “no plastics posse” but reminded us not to despair: “If you asked the world for its blood type, it would say: B Positive.” We sang: “There’s no them, there’s only us” They prescribed empathy, urging us in every encounter to check in by asking “What if that was ME?”

We cried with Parisa Khosravi, a Zoroastrian journalist who from personal experience urged us to not take heartbreak personally. We have a choice in how we choose to apply lessons in life; sometimes challenges turn into opportunities (and vice versa). None of us are *born* leaders, we become leaders. She urged us to focus on the three all-encompassing Zoroastrian values of good thoughts, good words and good deeds.

We gathered to hear stories in a makeshift longhouse, air thick with smoke from smudge sticks, led by Indigenous elders, one of whom remarked with amusement at the disconnect in cultural expectations, but that he would ‘try to pay attention to the time, but normally this story would take 5 days.’

In every session, in every room, there was a restless flow of people in and out and among the sessions; the speakers constantly interrupted by the click of heavy conference doors snapping shut at every entrance and exit, like punctuation marks at the end of every claim. I was quite nearly one of those having decided that of the forty-two choices offered in the same single hour on a Saturday afternoon I chose to attend a Zoroastrian service. I didn't have an idea of what this would involve, but I did not expect to encounter a young man in a black robe standing at a conference table reading from the ancient holy book, the Avesta, in a rapid drone. In its original language. For a really long time.

A really. long. time.

But then the praying stopped, and he looked up and then began to explain, with the fervor of the converted, the intricate history and theology of Zoroastrianism and how he himself, a Catholic who grew up in Panama now living in Austin Texas, came to devote his life to its study and practice the world's oldest unbroken religious traditions. Like Unitarian Universalism, Zoroastrianism prioritizes CHOICE as a primary human value. Humans are co-creators with divinity – we are active agents in working toward good in THIS earthly life. And when this life as we know it is over, we pass into “nonlife” (not death – nonlife). We are brought then to the Bridge of Choice where we are met by Justice, Conscience, and Covenant who ask of us one simple question: “Are you a good person?” “Were you good in word, thought, and deed.”

There is no lying in the afterlife. . .  
So you respond with a true assessment.

If you answer NO, then Conscience sends you down a narrow staircase to the fiery House of Lies where you will be punished until purified and redeemed .

But if you can answer YES, you are a good person, then the Bridge of Choice widens and you are welcomed into the House of Song, where you join the Symphony of Song until it is time for Good People to return to Earth and triumph over evil once and for all.

### *MUSICAL INTERLUDE*

Bhagavad Gita means “The Celestial Song” or “The Song of God” . . . At a session exploring the modern relevance of this holy book from the Hindu tradition, a Hindu scholar from India urged us, whatever our faith tradition, to *not* worship our sacred texts as literal transcripts, nor disregard them as primitive nonsense, but rather to engage with the enduring mythologies as useful philosophical challenges to help us make better choices in our everyday modern lives – for him, this was as true for his own holy text as others.

The Bhagavad Gita tells the story of Prince Arjuna, who stands stymied by indecision in the middle of a battlefield. He turns to his charioteer, Lord Krishna, who holds the reins of five wild horses, for advice. The ensuing debate about the nature of conflict is an analogy of the human condition – our body is the chariot, and wisdom is our charioteer; the five wild horses pulling us in every direction at once are our five senses; and the slight reins that hold them is the mind. Our mind, therefore, always ever has a tenuous tether over experience – but it CAN rein it in<sup>4</sup>.

For Prince Arjuna, as for ourselves, though we seek constantly for what is outside ourselves and focus our battles outwardly, the true battle (and therefore the true way to ‘win’ over evil and hatred and violence) is always the battle within ourselves. Our Hindu guide used our participation as an example: “you decided (with your mind) to come here today, and then your body followed. There is always a split between inner self and outer self. . . to win the outer war we must first cultivate inner strength, compassion and wisdom – we seek outwardly not understanding that ‘seeker and sought are one and the same.’”

We modern interfaith leaders nodded sagely at the received wisdom of this: “yes, we concurred, this is of course how it is” . . . but an agitated man at a center desk could not contain himself any longer. He challenged the speaker; the only thing I could understand from the complexity of his theological arguments is that this person was from a more orthodox school of Hinduism; he was deeply offended by the younger scholar’s liberal interpretations. After a fiery engagement I could not follow, the orthodox man left the room. We stared in wonder, and the speaker explained that his own temples in India had been vandalized and burned to the ground by more orthodox practitioners. Interfaith compassion, he explained, must also encompass **intra**-faith understanding.

As uncomfortable as it was, these moments of personal conflict – where our cozy consensus was challenged with earnest disagreement provided the finest teaching moments during the conference. While interfaith work understandably dwells in commonality, true growth in relationship and understanding only ever happens in the wake of daring to disagree. Those who most ardently oppose interfaith work –fundamentalists of all stripes – were not at the conference – these are not people who make room at their table nor spare the time to sit at another’s. The conflicts at the Parliament, therefore, were mostly from very real political and social conflicts. There was a pointed neglect of inclusivity of sexual orientation or non-binary gender identification or – everywhere – the differences in our languages of reverence and very often the ‘assumption’ of “one God.” The sometimes uneasy interfaith alliances were most clear in forums where multiple speakers shared a dais

where the politics of polite denials negated any real accountability – an LGBT activist from East Africa took a seat next to a government official from her country who had advocated for criminalizing homosexuality. A Sikh member shared a dais with a government official from India; Palestinian Muslims shared a podium with Israeli Jewish activists. One Baptist missionary pointed out the stark reality that the number one reason people of faith are killed is by other “people of faith.”

In a world of such strident long-standing conflicts, still evident in our Parliament gathering, how do we ever hope to achieve interfaith understanding?

But the fact of our gathering held the answer in its very premise and promise:

- Scholar Karen Armstrong reminded us that religion can be an agent of change, because we cultivate compassion – and compassion is uncomfortable. It HAS to be – because compassion requires we be aware of suffering. “We should allow ourselves to be distressed”
- Zul Kassamali (a Muslim from Uganda) decreed: “we haven’t changed but we are changing”
- And Christian activist Jim Wallis decreed: “Hope is the act of believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence CHANGE.”

At the opening ceremony of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, Valarie Kaur, the Sikh founder of the Revolutionary Love Project urged us to reclaim LOVE as a public ethic. She reminded us that birth includes pain. She asked:

*“How are you breathing today? Because I’m having trouble with the current political climate: are you having trouble breathing? ...What if this darkness is not that of the tomb, but of the womb? Waiting for a great transition to be born, the midwife in her wisdom tells us to breathe. It is time to breathe . . . then push.”*

Ours can be a sweet labour, but there is no labour without sweat. We must build the trust to understand: you are enough! We need music and movement and meditation as we consent to three practices of revolutionary love:

First: See no stranger. Look at others with wonder and appreciation. SHOW UP .

Second: Tend the wound. Love your opponents –they need healing too. They are also fearful and insecure. Listen to them.

Third: This is not a time for mere resistance – this is a time for rebirth. Now is the time, as the midwife says, to breathe and push.

Now is the time to breathe and push.

May it be so.

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<sup>1</sup> RevolutionaryLove.net

<sup>2</sup> [parliamentofreligions.org](http://parliamentofreligions.org)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theinterfaithobserver.org/journal-articles/2018/11/14/sharing-joy-and-pain-in-toronto>

<sup>4</sup> The Gita was a special comfort and inspiration to Mahatma Gandhi who said: “I find a solace in the Bhagavadgītā that I miss even in [Christianity’s] Sermon on the Mount. When disappointment stares me in the face and all alone I see not one ray of light, I go back to the Bhagavadgītā. I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies – and my life has been full of external tragedies – and if they have left no visible, no indelible scar on me, I owe it all to the teaching of Bhagavadgītā.”

This sermon was also informed by *Consuming Religion* by Vincent J. Miller