

Ganesha – THE LORD OF BEGINNINGS
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STORY

In the beginning of time, when the world was created, but not yet finished, they say that Gods and the First People walked the earth. The great Creator God Shiva and his shakti-wife Parvati lived in a divine abode on the Himalayan Mountains, just below the roof of the world. Shiva had conceived of the entire universe and through Parvati had brought it into being. Now he wanted to remove himself from the work of creating and sustaining all things. Parvati wanted him to stay with her and improve their home, but he would have none of that. He was after pure spirit and clarity of mind, so he decided to ascend to the top of the world, to the highest mountain to meditate. (Mount Everest, or Jomolungma Peak.)

Parvati was all alone and decided to rest. But she was wondering about how to guard herself as she slept. Now, Parvati had perfumes and oils anointing her skin. Dust and pollen had settled on these. So as she prepared for bed she scrubbed her arms and body and gathered all that came off into a pink ball, like a ball of wax. Looking at this she had an idea. She formed it into a little boy, pink and round. Being divine she then breathed life into him. “Mahadevi ‘Great Mother!’ he said. “My little One” she replied, embracing him. “How may I help you mother?” he asked. Parvati told him, “I want you to stand guard in the door of our home. Stand at the door, upon the very threshold and do not let anyone enter while I rest.” “Yes Mother”, he agreed and ran off to do his duty.

Now, Shiva, in meditation, realized that his dharma was with his wife and home. So he appeared there, but something had changed. Now there was a guardian, one that he did not fully recognize. “Good guardian,” Shiva said, “move and let me pass.” The pink guard said, “None shall pass.” Well, Shiva was Lord of the Universe, Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer of all things. He was not going to be hindered by such a small being. “Move” he demanded “or I shall cut your head from your body where you stand”. The little guardian said “I shall defend this door and be an obstacle to any who try and enter”. So Shiva took his great axe and with the sound of thunder chopped the guardian’s head off! Some say it burned to ashes in a moment. Others say it rolled away and the demons took it to make trouble for Shiva. I don’t know. But Shiva did not care about such a small thing and rose to enter his home, only to find a new obstacle.

There in the door stood Parvati, who had been woken by the fighting. “What have you done to our child?” She demanded. Shiva knew then everything. He knew, especially, that he had to repair the damage he had done. So he went looking for a new head. He came to one of the greatest of the First People: Elephant. Now, Elephant was known as being very wise, very thoughtful, very kind and generous. When Shiva told him what was needed Elephant did not hesitate; he kneeled, bowing his head and let Shiva use his axe once more. Don’t worry though. All the First People, like Coyote or Elephant, they die many times and yet they always come back. So Shiva took the head and placed it on the body of the little guardian and restored the spirit of life.

Shiva said, “I name you Ganesha, the first of all my ganas”. (Ganas are like angels, they are the thousands of servants of Shiva.) Shiva added, “You, who risked everything to guard a doorway shall become the guardian of all doorways. You, who

were a most certain obstacle, shall be the lord of obstacles, placing and removing them as you desire. You who have had such a noble beginning shall always be the Lord of Beginnings.” People the world over, Hindus and Buddhists, and even some Muslims and Christians, know of Ganesha. You can see images of Ganesha everywhere, especially in India. He is always round and pink, happy and confident, wise and thoughtful, and he is the only god with an elephant head.

SERMON

We stand on the threshold: of my ministry here and in a new year in the life of our congregation. It is natural at such a moment to want to leave the past behind and to look forward with optimism. It is easy to dream great dreams and imagine wonderful futures sprouting from this moment. But before we do that we should pause and admit two things: that the past comes with us into this moment and thus our path together could be blocked by obstacles. As a source of wisdom I draw upon the image of Ganesha, the elephant headed god of India. Hindus know him by many names, including “Lord of Beginnings,” and this one of many stories of his birth can hold lessons for us as we celebrate the beginning of new relationships, a new life for my wife and me, and the start of a new era for this congregation and its place in the life of St Louis.

I draw on Ganesha for three reasons: First, I think Ganesha is charming. He is one of the most beloved deities on earth; honored by Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, and even some Muslims and Christians. This is partly because elephants are massively impressive and yet kind and funny all at the same time. When I was a child in the 60s elephant jokes were very popular. I still remember a few. “How can you tell if there is an elephant in your refrigerator? You will see his footprints in the butter. What if there is no butter? You will smell the peanuts on his breath. “And this one that was a little more subtle:” Why do elephants drink so much? To try and forget.” Ganesha is very wise and never forgets.

Secondly: Though the roots of this church and the Unitarian tradition go deep into Jewish and Christian soil, we also have a tap root into the religious traditions of India. Hindu thought and practice have inspired and been changed by Unitarians over the centuries. In summary I will throw out a few names you can look up later if you don’t know them. Two Unitarian Ministers, William Adam and Charles Dall, directly inspired Hajom Kissor Singh, Keshub Chandra Sen and especially Rhamoun Roy. Roy is known as the Father of Modern India, inspiration of the poetry of Tagore and all else that happened in 20th century India. When Vivekananda came to the World Parliament of Religions in 1886 Unitarians welcomed him to this nation and gave him a platform. Likewise, the most famous Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, as well as the writings of Rhamoun Roy, directly inspired Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson inspired Henry Thoreau who’s writing directly influenced the Mahatma Ghandhi, and so-on.

Finally, I like the way Hinduism faces the realities of religious diversity. Hinduism is not really one single religion. It is the latest name for a rich religious heritage that has been developing in south and southwest Asia for many centuries and has influenced the religious life of people around the world. Hinduism is often described as polytheistic, but one reason that Hinduism has fascinated me as a Unitarian theologian is its take on monotheism. Thousands of years ago the idea arose in India that behind all the Upanishad’s “three hundred and thirty million gods” there was one, un-named, ineffable,

ultimate reality or singular godhead; beyond full human conception or description. “Neiti, neiti,” ‘not this or that’ is a famous theological description of this ultimate truth. But there were no political powers, no authoritarian theologians able to force this idea upon the popular piety of the Indian people or to banish worship of the many Indian gods and goddesses. Instead, the idea of ultimate unity became like a slender thread that invisibly holds together the many different beads of a beautiful necklace. One of those beads is Ganesha. Or perhaps the One is the string and the beads all together.

Be aware: I am not a Hindu. I do not speak for orthodox or traditional Hindus in any way. I do not worship Ganesha or use him in any regular religious practice. I am a UU minister and everything I say here is as a UU. The point here is that Unitarian Universalism is also built upon the principle of unity in diversity. Our Association bylaws state: “The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources....” One part of our pluralism is the Hindu tradition, and one part of that is Ganesha.

Who is Ganesha? In his simplest form Ganesha is a god of good luck. All people, especially those at the bottom of the economic system, know how luck or chance can make the difference between survival and ruin, between a good beginning and a failed start. More specifically, his image is prevalent whenever anything begins. His face at times is carved on doorways. You will often find his image before the title page of a Hindi book. Hindu bookkeepers will honor him when starting a new ledger. Students will sometimes draw a little devotional sketch of him just at the beginning of a written test at school. I once received a wedding invitation with a picture of Ganesha dancing on the cover with his servant the mouse. Coincidentally, last week, on a shelf in the Bride’s Room of a Seattle venue where my daughter dressed for her wedding, a statue of Ganesha rested with clear water continuously streaming from the lotus petals of his throne.

There are many stories about the birth of Ganesha. I think I like the one I shared today for many reasons. The story begins with a conflict. The Great God Shiva, the ultimate truth, and Parvati, God’s karmic-creative power, are at odds. To put it more prosaically, Parvati and Shiva are arguing. He wants to meditate, she wants him to stay at home and do his chores. Those of us, gay or straight, who are in committed relationships, can understand this situation. We can also understand this tension as Unitarians. Sometimes UUs feel a tension between thinking and talking on one hand and acting on the other. It has been said that if given a choice between going to Heaven or a discussion about Heaven, we would choose the discussion. Beyond that, theologically, the conflict is between an idea of God as perfect, unchanging and complete, but who nonetheless creates a universe that is imperfect, ever changing and incomplete. This tension appears, for example, between the ideals of Spirit and Incarnation in Christianity.

The key point I want to make this morning is that our expectations are a primary source of obstacles and trouble in relationships. Often we don’t even know what our expectations are until they are not met, then we struggle in frustration. So it is in the story that Parvati expects that Shiva will not return. Shiva expects that he can return when he wishes without question, and together these expectations create problems.

Out of this tension, or into it, arises a child. He seems the perfect child. “What can I do for you mother?” he asks with simple devotion. Ganesha retains to this day the playful, happy, even carefree attitude of a child who is loved and loving. He is not fat, he is well-fed and for whom everything is possible and the world is rich. He gladly returns love with devotion. “Go,” says Parvati, “stand at the door, upon the very threshold and

do not let any one enter while I rest.” So Ganesha, by the divine order of his mother, becomes the Lord of the Threshold, the Guardian of Doorways, keeping evil from entering homes. Ganesha is thus the Opener of Ways, but he is also the Lord of Obstacles.

The lord of ganas not only removes barriers to success but also will deliberately place them in one’s path when appropriate. Truth will always test our awareness, our care, our will to struggle through difficult places and times. Ganesha, as an image of reality, can even be a bit of a trickster, reminding us that we are not always in control, even of our own desires. He is not just an image of forces beyond our control, but a model of how to face difficulty. As we move forward together let us admit the reality of trouble and be humble in the face of it, not giving up any of our dreams, but not clinging to them too tightly either. Instead may we be as flexible and playful as a child.

So, the child is born of conflict. I have long said that children come into the world to remind us of how little we control. Each child is not a pure beginning; each comes to the world ‘in medias res’; into a story that is already in process. Often conflict or tension between spouses will draw the children in as well to form a triangle. Children become, completely unknown to them, pawns in a larger struggle. In the long run Ganesha represents the resolution of conflict, but first he reveals the nature of obstacles, interpersonal triangles and conflict.

To apply it directly here, note that everyone in this congregation and I have been doing ministry for some time and we come into this moment with expectations, fears, and hopes. All of these can become obstacles. For instance, when I worked on my sermon a few weeks back I expected it to still be in the computer when I returned. Everyone in the office assumed the computer would not erase everything when we unplugged it to repaint the room. But then, when I turned on the computer this Monday everything was gone. If I had clung to my expectations I would have suffered a week of looking for something that was gone. Instead I accepted what was and started over. I carry many expectations from my past eleven years of a very stable and successful ministry. Meanwhile you carry expectations from nearly ten years of interims and change. It is good simply to be aware, to become aware of expectations.

Note this: I am a highly-educated-white-middle-class male. Most of the ministers of your past have also been such. At the same time the city of St. Louis has 42% of its people who identify as Black, 42%. Out of the 1 million people in St Louis County those who call themselves white are 70%, and Black are 23%. Yet our congregation is nowhere near either 23 or 42 percent anything other than white people. These facts are born of habits and expectations that are not ours alone. We are part of social patterns that go back not decades but centuries. These patterns create expectations, and perhaps we should not just become aware of those, but break them and step beyond.

Ganesha comes to stand guard in a doorway, serves the will of his mother and that has created a barrier for Shiva. So God becomes angry trying to reason with this foolish child. “Do you not understand what you are doing?” he protests. “I am the Lord God of the Universe, Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer of all. You cannot oppose me.” Ganesha says simply, “I am to let no one enter while my mother rests.”

Now, anyone who has ever lived with a two or three year old child knows exactly what is going on here. Power struggle is common as we try to force our will upon a person who is learning to develop his or her own personal will. I, myself, have gone

through this very pattern of escalating conflict, where I kept insisting more and more harshly that it was “time to go” or “let go of that stick” or “don’t touch that cord” and a little girl simply became more and more determined to do exactly what ever I didn’t want. I think this is not merely a child rearing problem, that when we are two we are practicing for when we are twenty-two or fifty-two and get into a conflict with another adult. Often images of Ganesha hold a goad or a noose, both tools used to control and discipline elephants. They serve as a reminder of the sacred importance of self-control if you are to reach your goals and overcome your obstacles.

Shiva simply asserts his power, which is rightly his as God Almighty. He must battle his way in, so he takes out his great sword and with one great swing he chops off the head of this foolish guardian. It seems so easy to overcome some obstacles. Fundamentalist Hindus, if they accept this story, will argue that Shiva knows what is going on here and is merely testing the will and discipline of Ganesha. Some Christians will argue the same thing when Jesus refuses to heal the Canaanite woman’s daughter, and instead insults her. But I think that it is usually better to seek understanding through kindness. Shiva should have asked, “Why are you here, who do you serve?” Instead he asserts his will and as he looks into Parvati’s eyes he knows that by killing Ganesha he has actually made the little guy into a more powerful and permanent obstacle.

Ganesha’s head is a reminder of the sacrifice that is sometimes needed to overcome an obstacle, to reach a goal. There is another story of Ganesha’s later life when he had to sacrifice his tusk in a fight to defend his own brother. In all images of Ganesha you will see that one of his tusks is broken, and sometimes he will even be holding the broken tusk as a further reminder of the importance of sacrifice in reaching toward a goal. So it is always with those who begin something new. We may find that something of our old ways must change, or be sacrificed, as we move into the future together. In this church, at the very least, you and I will have to give of our time, energy and money to reach the goals we set together as congregation and Minister.

In the end Ganesha, with his new elephant head, is not only restored to health, but is made ruler over all of Shiva’s lesser servants. Shiva says that he will ever stand at the threshold, blessing those who call upon him, and placing obstacles before those who blunder gracelessly into new beginnings. So I have summoned the image of Ganesha to mark this day of new beginning. As Unitarian Universalists we do not expect some supernatural being to fix anything for us. Our future, our dharma, is in our hands. But Ganesha is here to remind us that we bring our past with us. I come with twenty years of ministry in four different congregations. That will shape, for good and ill, how I think and act here. Your image of past Ministers will shape how you perceive my work and me. Let us be careful not to create triangles with our past, but face one another directly and honestly. Let us avoid power struggles as we move through changes. And finally may we choose our sacrifices carefully so that together we all become successful and honored, removing obstacles and dancing playfully, like Ganesha, Lord of Beginnings.