



**October Theme:**  
***What does it mean to be a People of Courage?***

**Diwali:**  
***Courage, Humility, Community!***  
**Sunday, October 22, 2017, 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m**

**Reflection I: “The Courage of Humility”**

*by Gautam Biswas*

In this month where our theme is being People of Courage, I would like to discuss briefly in the context of Hinduism this theme using the epic that we just saw performed. [The Story for All Ages this morning was the story of the two brothers, Bharata and Ram, drawn from the *Ramayana*, adapted by C. Rajagopalchari .] I would like to elaborate on how Ram’s behavior exemplifies a Hindu notion of a courageous life.

Ram is certainly heroic in the conventional way that heroes are. In the *Ramayana* he fulfills the usual obligatory deeds of slaying demons, vanquishing evil, rescuing damsels in distress. But what I find equally heroic is his courage in the face of life-altering events that completely change the trajectory of his life.

Ram is destined to be the king, the ruler of a large and prosperous kingdom, yet fate has other plans for him. Instead of being allowed to assume the throne as his aging father’s health declines, he is exiled to the forest for 14 years by his stepmother.

What makes Ram’s response for me noble, though, is that he does not curse his fate, nor does he wonder, “Why me?” Ram leaves willingly without protestation. He accepts—nay, embraces his exile as his path, as his *dharma*. It is always difficult to translate abstract concepts of one philosophical paradigm into the constructs of another, but *dharma* roughly may be thought of as one’s duty to a cosmic law or order, an organizing principle that connects the cosmos to one’s own personal life and to one’s choices, not merely to the situational and provisional but to one’s place in the universe. His exile is part of his *dharma*. This is his path, who he is, who he is meant to be. What is paramount for him is that he honor his father’s word to Kaikeyi, his stepmother who had once saved his father’s life—even though doing so is for him at great personal sacrifice. It is the right code of conduct for a prince; it is what is expected of a prince.

Being in exile, however, does not diminish Ram’s princeliness. On the contrary, the choice affirms his claim as the rightful heir to the kingdom. Ram is

seen as a man of great virtue, one who is living in attunement with *dharma*, the cosmic law. He has yoked his own personal values and choices to a transcendent one. It is what is expected of a prince: the courage to be humble, to accept what might transpire, and to embrace what one becomes.

Ram is thus a person of great courage—a true Hindu hero!

## **Reflection II: “The Courage of the Long View”**

*by Sundar Mudupalli*

In preparing for this service, we members of the worship team had a robust discussion on why we celebrate Diwali in our church. Are we being cultural voyeurs? Is this another aspect of white supremacy benevolently accommodating other cultures when convenient?

What I see is not voyeurism, but a wholeness that comes from incorporating aspects from other cultures that speak better to me than my own. For example, in the spiritual practice of my birth, I don't have a way of honoring the dead. I find that the Day of the Dead celebration, which we will honor next week, incorporates my desire to respect and honor my ancestors.

So, too, from Diwali, we can incorporate the long view presented in the *Ramayana* into our spiritual practice.

In the story that we heard, Rama takes the long view and decides to stay in the forest because that is the right thing for him to do. Little does Rama realize that his wife Sita will be captured there by the demon-king Ravana. Rama has to kill Ravana to rescue Sita. Staying in the forest leads to a loooooonnnnnng story. But in spite of these trials, Rama eventually returns to rule his kingdom, Kosala.

Today, in the age of instant gratification and speed dating, it is hard even to understand, let alone adopt, the long view. Amazon Prime delivers the same day, so why do we need to wait? Perhaps this concept of the long view is not relevant to us anymore.

I will relate two stories, both in our life-time, that attest to the power of the long view.

Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life in prison in 1962. He spent over 26 years in high-security prisons. Throughout his imprisonment he was not bitter towards white South Africans. He demanded that the prison guards treat prisoners humanely. The last two years of imprisonment he remained on the prison grounds, but he was given a private house with a cook and he was allowed to receive visitors. Yet he refused to leave prison until he had negotiated for the rights of his people. Mandela was unconditionally released in 1990 after spending 28 years in

prison. Mandela took the long view and waited for the long arc of the moral universe to bend towards justice.

Some of you remember the church fire here in 1995. Esther Flory had been a long time member of the church and was then in her 80s . Her husband Chester had passed away a few years earlier. With a lot of difficulty, we had just raised half a million dollars to repair the church. While a new roof was being installed, the roof caught fire, resulting in major damage. I recall vividly when the whole church met in St. James Senior Center across the street to consider our options. A number of the board members were concerned that we could not afford to rebuild the church after the fire. I was concerned that we would lose our home. During the discussion, we suddenly heard Esther's clear voice from the back of the room saying, "We are going to get back into the church because that is what we are going to do!" For Esther, this was a statement of fact, plain and simple.

I recall thinking: I am not sure if Esther is even going to be around long enough to see us back in the building. But I believe the whole congregation was energized by Esther's vision. We all worked very hard for many years to make it a reality. We raised more than \$5 million in cash and services, in addition to insurance settlements. The money came from different sources, including additional capital campaigns, services from members like the painting of the church, the Packard Foundation, the city of San José, and Hollywood (yes! Hollywood—ask me about this after the service). We were not aware that we would find these sources of funding when the project started. Yet when we started walking in faith, doors opened where there had been walls.

This building is a testament to the power of the long view, of faith, especially when the path forward is not clear.

I moved to the United States more than 30 years ago. I came because the opportunities here were much better than elsewhere. I stayed because I am treated as an equal, no matter how imperfectly. I became a citizen more than 10 years ago. When I look at the theater going on now in Washington, I am sometimes in despair. But my life experience teaches me that I must use the filter of the long view. Just like in the *Ramayana*, the good battles on health care, religious freedom, LGBTQ rights, and *Roe v. Wade* will have to be fought. And then, after all these travels and travails, we will arrive back home. I have faith that the country that welcomed me 30 years ago is still right here amongst us.

### **Reflection III: "Building Community, Sharing Culture"**

*by Ram Kakarala*

Diwali is celebrated by Hindus worldwide. One place where it is celebrated is Singapore, where I lived for six years. In Singapore, the holiday is called Deepavali, which is another way of saying the Festival of Light.

I'd like to say a little bit about Singapore. It's a small country, barely 40 miles across. It's famous for many reasons. You may know it because chewing gum is banned there. But I don't want to talk about that. I went to Singapore for work, moving from the Bay Area in 2008. I enjoyed living there for a long time, six years as I said, and have many friends there still.

Singapore has a mix of peoples and cultures. The majority, around 70 percent, are Chinese, and there are minorities of Indians and Malays. How do these peoples get along? What helps them to form communities? That's a complex subject. I'd like to tell you three interesting things that I saw that relate to community building.

First, I'll start off with a subject which is very important in Singapore, namely food! Around 2010, a local newspaper in Singapore printed a story about a dispute between a Chinese family and their Indian neighbors. The Chinese family didn't like the smell of the curry cooking next door. They asked the Indian family to stop. A dispute began, and escalated, and was finally settled by the neighborhood association. According to the article, in the settlement, the Indian family agreed to only cook curry when the Chinese family was out.

Many people, Indian and Chinese alike, read the article, and were outraged. How could a family be asked to stop cooking the food they love? A movement started, on Facebook and other social media. The movement acquired a mission: build bridges through curry. The movement promoted a national "Cook a pot of curry day." The idea was for Chinese and Indians to cook a curry, and invite their neighbors to share it.

A dispute over curry may seem like a small matter. There are real tensions between races in Singapore. There were race riots in the 60s, and more recently, one in 2013. Sharing food is one way of building bridges between communities.

I'd like to share two other stories about how communities form and cultures are shared.

In Singapore, there's a fancy shopping center called Chimes. Picture something like Santana Row, with trendy boutiques and outdoor cafés. At Chimes one day, I came across a historical plaque and learned about Chimes history. There once was an orphanage on that site, where families, or sometimes just mothers, could relinquish babies that they could not, or did not want to, care for. This is surely a most painful decision. Fortunately it's rare, but it happens. Now, in the Chinese zodiac, there is a year of the Tiger happening once every 12 years. The historical plaque noted that, during Years of the Tigers, a larger number of Chinese girl babies were relinquished. The reason for this was a superstition held by a few,

a very few, in the Chinese community that girls born in the Year of the Tiger would be hard to raise and bring bad luck to their families.

What's amazing is what I read further on the plaque. It explained what happened to these Chinese girls. Many were adopted by Indian families. The Indian community has our own superstitions, but just not that one about the Year of Tiger. These Chinese girls were adopted and brought up as Indian girls, growing up speaking Tamil, steeped in Indian culture. In black-and-white photos from the era, they look out, wearing Indian dress, looking at home in their adoptive families.

That's an example of how cultures support each other—in that case, how the Indian minority supported the Chinese majority. I'd like to connect that story with another example, which is about the other way around. This is really more about Deepavali.

During Deepavali, people in the Hindu community dress up, decorate their houses, and light firecrackers. I'd seen that before, in India as well as in the USA. But in Singapore, I observed something I didn't expect. On the Deepavali holiday, I saw many Chinese women wearing Indian dress. That was widespread, from the food stalls to the commuter trains and the shopping areas. Why did they do this? I asked a friend of mine, who is an anthropologist. He said that this was more than wearing a dress for a day. This was the Chinese women showing that they embrace cultural diversity and relate to the Indian community.

I've shared three stories about how communities form, seen through the lens of distant Singapore. Here at home, on this Deepavali, may we use the light of the holiday to form better communities with our neighbors.