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Diwali: Hearing Earth's Cry

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On the occasion of Diwali 2014, I want to share a reflection on one of the central narratives associated, in the Hindu tradition, with this festival. This is the narrative that connects Diwali with the celebration and rejoicing over the return of Rama to his home, after a lengthy exile, and his defeat of the oppressive and tyrannical, Ravana. Citizens welcomed him by lighting thousands of lamps, even as over one billion Hindus do today throughout the world. The story of Rama has become a central narrative of Diwali because of the Hindu understanding of Rama as embodying divinity and also because it addresses the universal human longing for freedom from oppression and the hope of living in a world where there is peace, justice and prosperity.

Rama's return to his home in Ayodhya and the joyous illumination of the city with earthen lamps conclude the story of his life as told in most versions of the Ramayana. I want, however, to return to the beginning of the story. For this, I turn to the version of the life of Rama authored by the religious poet Tulasidas in the 15th century.

The Ramayana begins with an account of unbridled greed, the violent exercise of power and oppression perpetuated by Ravana and those who served him. He ravaged the earth, and used its resources, human and natural, to serve his own ends. "There is no limit," says Tulasidas, "to the evil of those whose hearts delight in violence."

The first to protest the suffering of the world is Earth herself. Tulasidas personalizes her describes her as being alarmed and distressed. "The weight of mountains, rivers and oceans," she says to herself, "is not as burdensome to me as one human being who oppresses others." She notices also that people are silent from fear of speaking out. After careful consideration, she takes the form of a cow and goes to the place where all the good beings are hiding in fear. With tears flowing from her eyes, she tells them of her suffering, but receives no offers of help. In her condition of grief and sorrow, they accompany her to the world of the deity, Brahma. Realizing his own inability to help, Brahma advises that they seek the help of God, who alone can bring the suffering of the earth to an end.

There is a predicament, however, before they can approach God to seek God's intervention. "Where can we find God so that we may plea for help?" they wonder. Someone suggested that they all go to heavenly world of Vaikuntha. Another reminded them that God dwelt, not in Vaikuntha but in the ocean of milk. As the discussion went on, Shiva, who was present among them, offered a word of wisdom. God, explained Shiva, is identically present everywhere. There is no place and no time when God is not. God pervades the entire creation. There is no need to go anywhere. "It is love alone," said Shiva, "that reveals God, even as friction reveals fire." Shiva's words bring tears of joy to everyone and a beautiful hymn of love spontaneously rises. In response, a heavenly voice assures them that God will incarnate among them as a human being to relieve the earth of her suffering. Shri Rama is then born in Ayodhya as the child of Dasaratha and Kausalya.

I chose to describe Tulasidas' profound and poetic framing of the advent of Rama since it speaks powerfully to our contemporary context and especially to our degradation of the earth and its fragile climate. His narrative

deepens our understanding of our relationship with the earth and suggests a fundamental value for our transformation. There are three insights from Tulasidas that I want to lift up and share.

The first is that human actions are consequential. The consequences of our actions, however, are not limited to impacting other human beings. Our actions disrupt the balance of the natural world. Greed, and the violence that inevitably accompanies greed, rupture the web of life and earth suffers. The effects of greed can never be compartmentalized or limited to the world of human beings. Tulasidas is calling our attention to deep unity of existence in which human choices always have implications for the natural world. In Tulasidas' account the earth is the first to speak out against human evil and its effects on her. "The weight of mountains, rivers and oceans is not as burdensome to me as one human being who oppresses others."

The second insight from Tulasidas is that the earth is a living system. Earth is alive. He represents her as suffering and distressed by human choices. The earth is not a passive and inert field, dualistically separate from us that we may thoughtlessly and inconsequentially exploit for our purposes. Our lives are inextricably bound together and our well being inseparably linked. The earth community includes every creature depending on her for sustenance and so Tulasidas has earth speaking of her pain in the voice of a tearful cow. The impact of climate change adversely affects every life form. The cow is a powerful symbol of the generosity of the natural world pleading for human reciprocity and concern.

The third insight of Tulasidas is embedded in the words of Shiva. When the helpless gathering is debating God's location, Shiva reminds them that there is no need to search for God anywhere. God is equally present everywhere and in everything (hari byāpka sarbatra samānā). God becomes manifest, Shiva explains, only through love even as fire is made visible through friction. The teaching that God exists equally in everything, repeated twice in this conversation, is a call to us to see the radiance of God in the earth. In the Hindu tradition, everything in which God is present is regarded as God's form (rūpa). This means seeing the entire universe as embodying the divine. The Isa Upanishad opens with the beautiful invitation to see the world as enveloped by God (isa). Such seeing, described in the beautiful Sanskrit word darshan, must express itself in a profound and loving reverence for earth. This loving reverence, as Shiva attests, calls forth and releases a tremendous energy that is devoted to saving the earth. God's energy is manifested when our actions are inspired by love.

The tears of our earth, poignantly described by Tulasidas, have not ceased, afflicted as she is by pollution, the rapid loss of her bio-diversity and by climate change that threatens her ability to sustain life itself. Our religious traditions must awaken and re-awaken us to a reverence for the earth and inspire energy and action to respond to her plea and to relieve her from suffering.

We celebrate Diwali with lamps molded from the earth, in which we place cotton wicks soaked in oil. As we hold these fragile lamps in our hands this year, may we be mindful of our earth. May we know our unity with her and be filled with gratitude for her gifts. May we be attentive to hear again her cry and may we respond with loving actions.

(Inspired by the Religions for the Earth Conference at Union Seminary NY (19-21 September 2014) and the UN Climate Summit that followed)