

Rev. Linda Simmons  
Divinely Loved  
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When Gary and I were in India on our 2 month sabbatical recently, more than once, we saw and felt great suffering. Once in New Delhi, the air so thick with pollution it ate at your throat and eyes, when I was giving some money to women who had asked as I walked by, a small crowd gathered round me when I reached into my pocket. Of course, all the guide books tell you never to give money because of this. But there are times it is the only way one can give. Gary and I always had 2 pockets with money in them: One for spending for the day; one for giving away for the day. That day, we emptied both pockets.

And as I became overwhelmed when the money ran out that day, I started walking away and the women and children that had gathered tugged on my jacket, held onto my hands. Some of these people had sores on their hands and arms and faces.

When we got back to our hotel, I washed and washed. I was washing away not only my fear of their disease; but the fear of my disease too, the disease of separation.

How used to I had become to talking about interconnection in this land where I can spend so much time separate, resting up for the next interconnection!

It took time for me to recognize it, but India showed me that this interdependent web that we always talk about has consequences. The way we live here, the cheap cost of what we wear and buy that is made in the developing world is possible to get because there so often are no EPA standards, workers' rights, disability rights, minimum wage, or health care. This has real consequences in peoples' lives.

And yet, in all of this lack and pollution and physical pain, we saw so much fullness of humanity. We saw what can only be described as joy among so many communities, and sharing and love and giving and caring.

When I shared this on my blog or told people about this, many responded, "Well Linda, it's all they have ever known. They learn to find joy in it." I do not agree that this is why there is joy. Let me explain through a story.

I remember one event particularly at The Annie Margaret Barr Children's Village, located in a small Unitarian village in the Khasi Hills opened in February 2009. All of the existing orphanages in the Khasi Hills until that time were religiously affiliated. The Unitarian Khasi community, establish in the 1800s by an Indian man reacting to Christian missionaries, felt uncomfortable sending their orphaned children to orphanages that would likely convert them to faiths other than Unitarianism.

The Annie Margaret Barr Children's Village houses 10 boys and 14 girls ages 6-18. They have 16 staff which includes two mothers and one father, a part time doctor and a health worker, a counsellor, a case worker, an educator, an accountant, two cooks/gardeners and two helpers, a house-keeper and a Superintendent. We met all of these people and were moved by their love, commitment, joy and belief in the values of Unitarianism which they define as love, accountability, belief in a mother/father god and respect for all life. These people, these humble, brave Unitarian people...how they asked me to be a better person just by being with them.

So this one night, it must have been around 8pm or so and the girls & I and had been sitting around doing one another's hair or something. One of the "mothers" or women who care for and cook for the children said, "Come on, let's go, we're going to get a treat," and she grabbed me by the hand and about 4 other girls joined us.

We headed out into the deep, dark night, which worried me due to snakes but it was not snake season they promised. I crossed my fingers and brought a stick just in case. We walked down dirt paths and past water spigots where people were still collecting water in big aluminum containers, past the town crier telling everyone in Khasi of a meeting happening the next day that the Village Headman was holding, we pushed past cows and chickens, and at some point, I was guided like a blind person down some rocks and into a little cement building without windows or doors and an old woman was in there with a flashlight because the power was out, as usual. She had hanging from her cement ceiling treats: tiny bags of popcorn, sorts of gummy bears, all kinds of things. They bought me one of these bags and we happily munched all the way back to the Children's Home, singing songs and holding hands the whole way. I ditched my stick, snakes be damned.

When we got back to the orphanage, I was almost in tears from feeling so happy, so completely present, so alive. The power, which had only come to the village several years ago and was usually out, had come back on, and they had rigged up a little TV and adjusted once again its antennae and an Indian program was showing of some kind of place in India I am sure does not exist. It was more like Beverly Hills: perfectly manicured, no pollution, no poverty, no trash, everyone happy and a little plumb. The stores were big and bright, not America bright and big but maybe small town Europe bright and big.

They do know something else, if not in their own experience, they know if from social media and TV. Everyone, even in the most remote villages, sees these images now. They know from where they come and they still find joy and love.

One time, the children asked me to teach Sunday School after they had just woken at 4:30am, dressed one another, combed out their hair, swept out the church and the church yard they walked 20 minutes to with little brooms made of twigs and led the whole service for 1 hour themselves. Linda, you are a minister, can you teach us something?

I stood up. I was called. Here I am. And there I was there, standing there, completely unprepared, and I could only say, "You are the teachers. You are the ones who know the way. You are the way." I think they were disappointed.

People have asked since I returned if I felt guilty the whole time I was in India because I am American. No, I did not. I felt surprised to feel that what was mine to learn was that I did not know what love was. I had a whole list of things I expected to learn in India and Nepal but I did not expect to find within myself a recognition, unwanted quite honestly, that I did not know what love was.

It came in many ways, including like this:

Once when we were waiting for a train for 8 hours on the heat of a platform to where this train may or may not have been pulling into, we noticed that though we were agitated most of the time: pacing, checking the board which blinked and told contradictory information, asking various train station officers who found our performance amusing I daresay, drinking bottle after bottle of water, while the rest of the very crowded station lounged, breast fed their babies, gabbed, snored, picked things out of each other's hair, braided each other's hair, ate all kinds of food, and mopped things they spilled on each other off of themselves, I pondered, not for the first time: From where do these people find the patience and acceptance to be so at peace?

On one of my many walks to the bathroom, aka hole in the ground circled by various other creatures, I was approached by a woman who was one of the many people whom I later realized made the grounds outside the train station their home. Right outside of the station lived some of the poorest of the poor: tar paper shelters, their children naked or in torn clothes, open flames, no shoes.

She came to me with her naked 2 or 3 year old on her hip. His belly was swollen. She asked for money. I gave her some. She asked again. I said, as I often did, I am sorry. I would just repeat, I am sorry and keep walking. She held on to me while I walked back to the 1<sup>st</sup> class waiting room for which I did not have a ticket, but no one questioned me in there. Entry without a ticket. White skin privilege.

And when we pulled out of the station, some 8 hours later in a train that smelled like urine and had food that was prepared on dirty metal tables between train cars, which we ate anyway and kept down because we were learning not to make the gods angry by this point in our trip and had earned some grace, I saw her again through the window in that makeshift village just outside the station that was her home. She was bathing her child in a metal pan and laughing with her head thrown back and there were 6 or 7 people around her cooking some food and offering it to them both.

I am not suggesting that this kind of poverty is to be recommended. Statistics show that the rich in every country, live longer than the poor. Money does not buy happiness but it sure extends the possibility of finding it!

I could not shake this experience at the train station and many other experiences I had of a similar slant, nor did I shake my own reactivity to lack, deprivation, the absence of punctuality, or the definition of personal space...but a place opened up in me that had not been available before and I did what I do. I began asking questions.

This is what I heard. The people of India know they are divinely loved. I heard this over and over again. I contested it. I pushed on it. I said, come on! Even the woman whose baby has a swollen belly?

Yes, even she. And she knows you might suffer more than she in some way.

How could she know this? From where did she learn this? From what place did she gain access to this sight that I did not have? This was different than knowing there were stores with lights and clean floors and places without pollution and trash. This was divine love.

I am not saying that India does not have its share of stories of crime and abuse, personal, political and environmental. It does. I am saying that there is present an ethos that one can feel and that it is worthy of consideration.

One of the people I met in India who became a teacher to me sent me a video by a man named Raimon Panikkar, a Spanish Catholic Priest. In his video called "Windows" Panikkar says, "We all see the world through a window. The more clean the window, the more I don't know I am looking through this window. I need my fellow human beings to know I am looking through a window."

He goes on, "I cannot see through the window of my neighbor. I have to hear the description of what my neighbor says in order to see and understand another world and to recognize that there is another world...I need you to tell me I am looking through a window. We need each other. No single man, no single woman, no single system, no single religion can (do this)."

He closes, "We are all- all of us- the legitimate heirs of the sum total of human wisdom."<sup>1</sup>

What I learned in India is that inside of a deep recognition of interconnection through time, history, culture and religion, comes a meaning that allows acceptance.

Acceptance, which allows love, what I am calling here divine love, seems about seeing life as a mirror; reflections of who we are and will be and were. This is not indifference or victimization or spiritual by passing but an opening of awareness and self that allows a deep sense of interconnectivity. Divine Love is not about god. It is about recognizing self in other, or maybe that is god.

What do we need to learn more acceptance and love? How can we make more room for these qualities and so see one another and ourselves as whole and as holy? Our windows are too clean in the West.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNIKDGKhofw>

Our window cleaner too perfected. We are easily deceived into believing that we see the truth of the world and forget that we too see through a window, that ours is only one view, only one version of one reality.

I was once buying prayer beads from a man on the street. I didn't have any rupees that day, only several dollars in my pocket. He was up in one of those stalls on stilts and sitting cross legged so his torso was level with mine. I asked how much and he said, "2 rupees." I said, "I'll give you 2 dollars" which was about 140 rupees. He said no, only rupees. I had just arrived and was in some need of prayer and still arrogant enough to say, "But I am offering you 140 rupees." He said, "No, I do not want dollars." He had his son with him and they were clearly not rich merchants.

He reached out for my shoulder, and I let myself go with it. He took the beads and put them over my head. "These always belonged to you anyway," he said.

I use them now every day to say my om *mani padme hums*, a saying that offers purification and connection to all that is.

To see beyond what is right in front of us: to see the rest, the other, the mystery, through the windows that are not ours.

This is love.

This is love.

Amen