



DIWALI CELEBRATION
Saturday 03 November 2018

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Growing up in the Christian church, in a small town in the Maritimes, I knew little of India and less of Diwali. India was a hot and exotic land with a rich history, and hot food, and Diwali was an exotic celebration that included lights. Lots of light.

Times have changed since I was in school forty years ago, and one of the great changes is that phenomenon we call globalization. Globalization means, for us, an increased understanding of, appreciation for, and even sharing in, life with different cultures, languages, religions. It is growing not only into an awareness of things that once seemed distant and exotic, but actually sharing in those things. It is moving beyond interest or fascination with far-off people and cultures, and seeing them not as “foreign” but international, part of the global world in which we live. It is coming to an awareness of, and more than that, an appreciation for, the cultures, traditions and peoples of our world, so that we can better share this planet with one another.

I have had the wonderful experience of sharing in the land of India, that once was just a distant place, known to be hot, where the food was hot, and the religious expressions of that land were exotic and different. Three times in the last few years I spent most of the summer in India, and I discovered some wonderful things.

First, it is hot. Extremely hot. In fact, I was told when I arrived in Mysore, in southern India, that the region around Mysore has only two seasons, summer, and hot summer, and I had arrived for the end of hot summer. The temperature was about 38 degrees, before the humidex factor was added in, and when I arrived in Delhi two months later, the temperature was 47, again before the addition of a humidex factor.

I discovered that the food was every bit as hot as I had imagined. And I also discovered that sweets are a big thing in India – the small confections sold in sweet shops on almost every corner are sweet beyond anything I had previously tasted.

And I discovered that, although the weather is hot, and the food is hot, the people are warm – I enjoyed such a welcome, & welcome back, from people who remembered me. In the institute where the students took their classes, I made friends. In the city, I connected with people at weddings, at tourist sites, in shops, and enjoyed wonderful conversations that opened India up to me in many marvellous and wonderful ways. In restaurants, shops, and other places, servers, autoricksaw drivers, and once a police officer, remembered me from five years earlier.

In my time in India, I saw the celebrations and rituals at temples as evidence of a people celebrating life and culture.

That is what we are about tonight – celebrating life and culture. And so I want to speak just for a few moments about this celebration, focussing on the elements of light, and people. Here tonight we pause to join together, Canadian and Hindu and Indian and other friends in a celebration of a significant moment in life. It is a celebration of light, and people.

The celebration of Diwali is rooted in autumn, as this season turns towards the shortest day; it is interesting to note that almost every culture, almost every religion, has its own festival of lights of some sort as we respond to the growing darkness away from the equatorial regions, and pronounce the goodness of light in the face of darkness. We turn the clocks back tonight, and tomorrow the evening comes earlier. In Canada, we struggle through the long dark days – even more so further north – and we rejoice in the coming of light again, especially as the light stretches out into long evenings in June and July. We want light - and to my dismay in my first summer in India, in the south closer to the equator, it would suddenly get dark at 6:30, with little lingering twilight. In Northern Canada, after the longest night, towns hold celebrations when the sun makes its reappearance again in early January, and everyone comes out to celebrate the return of light.

So at this time of year, and into December as the darkness grows, people all around the world celebrate light. In Judaism, Hanukkah is celebrated with lighting candles or lamps for eight days; in Christianity, advent candles herald the coming promise, and Christmas lights help us stave off the darkness.

Diwali, perhaps one of the oldest religious traditions in the world, reaching far back into Hinduism's deep and rich history, also celebrates light. This is perhaps one of the most primal instincts we have – to seek light, warmth, hope, to celebrate with one another.

Light, then, is a common element across many religious traditions. In the Chapel, we hold Vespers each Sunday, a time of worship and prayer that takes place at the end of the day, at dusk, as the day turns to night. We light candles as a symbol of light, the light of God's love that we carry with us always. Light is important in Christian worship.

Hinduism, like other religious traditions, also celebrates light and all that it represents: love, life, goodness, hope, celebration. Diwali is probably the most widely celebrated of the various Hindu festivals; it combines many different elements: it includes lamps and candles as symbols and indeed sources of light, and in India they will be lit in homes and temples around the country; and there will be a sense of celebration, good food, sweets. Diwali is celebrated with company and people getting together, as with many world religious traditions, faith and culture come together as people come together and feel they are one family once more. And of course, what celebration, especially of light and hope, is complete without fireworks. Fireworks are a part of the celebration, lighting up the skies with the spirit of celebration and joy.

In Hinduism, as in other world religions, a time of celebration is a time to light lights, to be with one another, and it is also one of those times when the ancient stories are retold, including legends about battles between good and evil or light and darkness, highlighting for some the return of Rama and Sita as described in the epic tale, the Ramayana. The mythic tales of Diwali differ from place to place, but they all point to joy and the celebration of Diwali with lights as a reminder of the importance of knowledge, seeking the good, holding hope.

In this global world of ours we increasingly need celebrations of light, and the hope it represents. Light is a metaphor – for all people – for resisting evil, dispelling darkness, showing the way to demonstrate love and compassion to others. It is the celebration of an inner light over spiritual darkness, of knowledge over ignorance and right over wrong. It becomes, in India, a festive restatement of the Hindu belief that the good ultimately triumphs over evil. It becomes, in Israel, about the perseverance of the human spirit in the sight of God. It became, in Christian Europe, a celebration of the promises of goodness and hope.

In our technological age, we still know the power of a single candle; in our age of instant electric light, the atmosphere of candles appeal to our primal need for light, hope, joy, community. And so in this darkening time of the year, and in the face of some of the darkness in the news of the world around us, we yet proclaim and celebrate light:

 this is knowledge in the face of ignorance,
 joy in the face of struggle,
 goodness in the face of evil,
 hope in the face of despair,
 even life in the face of death.

So whether Hindu or not, Indian or not, it is good to come together as a human family, a global family, to push back against bad news, evil, hardship, and to celebrate the love we have for one another - peoples of all cultures and faiths – and to celebrate the light that shows us the way to live, in peace, joy, and celebration. So let's celebrate!