

MINISTRY IN THE BARDO

Cedars UU Church

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QUOTE: “Most persons discover when they look back on their life that they have the whole time been living *ad interim*, and are surprised to see that which they let go by so unregarded and unenjoyed was precisely their life, was precisely in expectation of which they had lived.” - Arthur Schopenhauer

STORY: “How Ganesha Got His Head.”

Look at a picture of Ganesha. He is the most popular god in the world, in part because he is about good luck and overcoming troubles, and everyone is interested in that. He is also cute and playful and kind, which we all like. In an image of him, there are many things to notice, but the most striking thing is his head. His body and eyes are more human than those of an average elephant, but there is a story of how he got an elephant’s head.

Shiva and Parvati are the perfect couple. They are god, and goddess, unified in the creation of the universe. However, Parvati wants Shiva to focus only on the incarnation, on keeping the web of being together and on maintaining home and hearth. Shiva, on the other hand, is moved by transcendence, so he leaves her to meditate on the top of the highest mountain. Parvati, sitting alone in her bedroom rubs her skin to clean it of pollen and perfumes. A ball of pink and scented wax develops. She shapes it into a little boy. With the power she has as *Mahadevi*, the Great Mother, she gives breath and life to her creation and says, “Welcome my round bellied baby!”

The little boy says, “I love you mother.” They embrace in eternal love. He has no name, yet.

Then Parvati says, “Because I love you we will now play a game together. What I need is a guardian. So, while I take a bath, you will stand guard at the outer door and let no one through without my permission. Do you understand?”

“Of course mother,” he says. And he goes to stand at the door.

Meanwhile, Shiva realizes that transcendence is incomplete without incarnation. So, he returns home to find a strange, guardian at his door. “Move aside little one,” Shiva says kindly.

Ganesh says, “None shall pass.”

Shiva feels a little troubled that any should stand against him. “Do you not know who I am? I am the Lord of the Universe; the moon is a jewel in my crown; the mighty river, the Ganges, is in the flow of my hair; the fire of creation and destruction arise in my hands.” The boy seems unimpressed, so Shiva says, “Let me through. You cannot stop me.”

Ganesh replies, “No one shall pass without my mother’s permission.” Now, if you have ever faced down a two or three-year-old child in a battle of wills, you know how this conversation goes. Voices raise,

attitudes harden, and the two hit a stalemate. Then Shiva gets angry and wants to end the useless debate. So, he takes out his mighty world-splitting-demon-destroying axe. The little one does not move. Then Shiva takes one sweep, and he severs the guardian's head. The guardian dies.

Shiva looks upon the defeated obstacle with detachment and then looks up to see Parvati standing inside the doorway. At that moment, the entire universe begins to unravel. The fire of destruction and the impermanence of all things, flares in her eyes. "What have you done?" She cries. "That was our only son, born while I waited for you. You foolish one, arrogant with power and self-righteousness! I will never be one with you until you have restored our child and made sure that he is lifted up before all other gods. You must go north to restore his head and life, or remain forever powerless." She recedes into her home, where Shiva no longer has any shelter or welcome.

Of course, he begins searching for the head, and he takes his axe with him. It should be a simple thing to reattach it and restore everything to their former order. But, the demons of anger and fear and hatred, took advantage of the moment he was being castigated, and they stole the head away and destroyed it.

So, Shiva goes north. Along the way, he meets the Lord of Elephants. That great being is an old servant of Shiva. He is very wise and kind. The Lord of Elephants sees in one moment what is needed. He bows his head in reverence to Shiva, Lord of the Universe. In this way, he sacrifices his head to Shiva's axe, so that he may be part of the greater good. Shiva takes the head, returns to the center of the universe, and there attaches the new head to the guardian's body. When he gives him life, Shiva is overjoyed and names the little one "Ganesha," which means lord of the many servant spirits called the *ganas*. Shiva gives Ganesha his axe and also makes him the guardian of all doorways and beginnings. Finally, as the Lord of Beginnings, Shiva ensures that Hindu people will call on Ganesha at the beginning of any worship. Thus, very literally, he is lifted up before all other gods.

SERMON

One of my favorite cartoons from my childhood looked like this. In the first panel is a man in a suit is standing before a plain, bored-looking, female cashier. The word "Cashier" is on a sign above her head. He is holding out a \$10 bill and asks, "Change, please." In the next panel, the cashier has polka-dot clothes, a bouffant hair style, and is smiling brightly. The man says, "Thank You." I remember laughing out loud at that cartoon.

In the cartoon the change is instantaneous, just a thin black line separates the images. But now, I wonder, what is going on between the two panels? Does she change in a spinning flash, like Wonder Woman, does she run into a back room to change, or does she make the change right there at the counter?

You and I are all in transition, together. Ours is an Interim ministry, because I am between long-term ministerial settlements, and you are between long-term settled ministers. We are all between panels, and we must minister to one another in this time. The word "interim," comes from the Latin word "meanwhile." The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer noted that

we tend to live *ad interim*, literally “for the meantime,” or “temporarily,” on our way to something else.

An Interim is also a liminal space, or liminal time, neither here nor there, between one thing and another. The word “liminal” comes from the Latin word *limens*, which means “threshold.” Remember that Ganesha, in Hinduism, is the Lord of beginnings, doorways, and thresholds of every sort. Most of the time we ignore the liminal threshold spaces and pass by them easily. But they have great power, for good and ill. Liminal spaces in society are those edges where things are and are not at the same time. Think of all who live between homeowners and street people. Think about when we find ourselves in quasi-legal parts of the economy, or in the fuzzy edges between the law and lawlessness? This past week some wondered, troubled by North Korea’s threats, is Guam part of the US or not? In some ways, it is, in others, it is not. Theologically, people speak of liminal time as when we are closest to the holy, true and free. This is because our usual comforts and human conventions dissolve or become transparent or small, and we suddenly need to find what ultimately sustains us and who we are without those conventions and conditions.

In Buddhism, the ultimate liminal space is *bardo*. At its most literal, *bardo* is where we are when “in-between incarnations.” When we die, we go into *bardo*, which is both a state as well as a place, and then we are reincarnated out of it. The Sanskrit term is *antarabhāva*. “Bardo” is a Tibetan word. The famous Tibetan-Buddhist writings, *The Book of The Dead*, informs the reader that *bardo* is a state of great danger but one that also contains the highest opportunity for direct insight and liberation.

I don't want you to think of *bardo* as a literal place, any more than I want you to think of a literal *Heaven*, *Hell* or *Purgatory*. Perhaps the closest Christian parallel to *bardo* would be the time from when Jesus announces that he is going to die, until the time of his ascension. But, that is another sermon. In the story of Ganesha, the time between Shiva’s realization of his mistake and his establishment of Ganesha as head of the ganas is a *bardo* state. Ganesha is dead, and yet not. Shiva is in ruins, yet still the creator and savior of the universe. Shiva knows he will find a head, but does not know how or where. He is in between everything.

The point I am making is that *bardo* is not simply “out there” nor is it an odd once-in-a-lifetime, or once-between-each-lifetime, state. Instead, I insist that we are always “between panels.” Between the way things were and the way things will be, is NOW.

Does admitting we are in an interim or *bardo* change our ministry? What does it mean for how we open minds, encourage faith, deepen thinking, increase compassion, love and seek justice?

One response is to say that this is a momentary situation and if we change as little as possible we will get through it. We *can* pretend that this is just a regular ministry and act like everything is normal until the new persons, or person, shows up.

A deeper response is to admit that this is a unique time to pay attention to change and to engage with its opportunities and dangers wisely. For Cedars, the first panel is done, but the second panel actually will not be revealed until several months after your new settled-minister arrives. Calling a new minister does not end a time of uncertainty, but initiates more change. Thus, I am here to join with you in preparing for change and, at the same time, initiating change. There is ample evidence that if a congregation is conscious about using an interim wisely when they call a long-term minister the minister-congregation relationship will be more successful and fruitful. I have five general tasks for us to help us use this time wisely and fruitfully and I am using a Buddhist concept and a Hindu story to illustrate those five points.

These five points come from a seminal book on interim ministry, but I have adapted them for this sermon. One, we **claim** the past, two, we **recognize** our present, three, we **clarify** our powers, four we **reconnect** with our allies, and five, we **prepare for** the future.

These are valuable for congregations, groups of religious people, in times of change but they apply to individuals as well. They are especially important for those moments in life when the rug is pulled out from under us. There are times when the impermanence of life hits us in our gut, and it is very disturbing. Such times are many: when you know you are sick, but you have no diagnosis; or when you have the diagnosis but can't imagine how you will live with that; or when someone in your life dies, and suddenly there is this gap in your soul, and you don't know how to manage it.

The writer, Richard Rohr, describes *bardo* like this “... *It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait, you will run... [do] anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing.*”

So, the first thing to do in a moment of change is to breathe, center, calm down, meditate or pray. You should always find your center, but especially in times of stress.

Then, you are more able to engage in the first dimension of *bardo*: to claim your history and heritage. The first aspect of this challenge is to admit endings. Honor the truth of ruptures and then claim that the past is past. In one church, a minister before me had served them for 27 years. Even eleven years after that, and four intervening ministers, there were still a few who clung to the past. One day my wife was waiting for me in my office. A man stopped by and asked if I was in my office. She said “no.” Then he told her that he used to stop by now and then to have a cigar and a glass of scotch with the previous minister. Amy told him I would be far more likely to go on a walk in the woods, than smoke and drink scotch. The man left, a bit crestfallen.

To some extent, you have already grappled with this aspect of interim. The Ten Hoves told you they were leaving long before they did, and then they left, and you had many months to say

goodbye and consider the meaning of their ministry. The second part of this dimension is to tell your story anew. I will talk more about claiming your story and heritage more next Sunday.

The **second** dimension of interim is to recognize your present and forge a new identity. Buddhist teaching underscores the truth that our sense of self is contrived of certain conditions and because conditions change our old sense of self must be released. The simplest way to do this is to look at tasks to be done and decide how to do them. Shiva sees that to get ahead; he must go north. Once an elder woman, in a congregation I served, died. As I was talking to her husband, he revealed that he did not know how to pay the bills, or even what they were. He had let her do this for 30 years because, he said, he was “bad at math.” After he got his children to sort things out, and with a little guidance, he began paying the bills. In this he found a new sense of self, he found that he was good enough at math to pay all his bills.

Here at Cedars, you began this work when you looked at how to organize Sunday Services. You did not have a minister to do that for you, so you created the Sunday Services teams. In doing this, you found that this was work you enjoyed and when I arrived you asked for us to share this work. Your identity evolves as you find what needs doing and what you need a minister to help you do or to help you do better.

The third task of *bardo* is to **clarify** our powers. In a congregation, this aspect of interim work is about opening to changes in leadership. I guarantee you that there are people who liked working with the Ten Hoves, who will find me hard to work with, and other people who find my style liberating and empowering. I’ll talk more about this in later sermons.

The fourth ministry is to **reconnect** with allies. In the story, Shiva encounters the Lord of Elephants. He had not thought of this member of his ganas at all. But seeing him, Shiva recalls his wisdom, his good memory, his self-discipline, his love, and devotion. He is such an insightful friend and servant that he immediately knows what Shiva needs. Our friends are like this. We sometimes forget or don't know, their true worth until we need them.

In the first congregation that I served, a woman’s husband died. She was devastated. I visited her, but there was nothing I could do to break her depression. She could talk about it, but nothing changed. Then another member of the church, an older woman whose husband had died ten years before, began to visit the bereaved woman. The two women were more than a decade apart in age and did not know one another well, but the older woman would visit, and then asked her out to events. She would say, “I want to go the county fair but I have no one to accompany me.” And the younger woman began to get out of her house, and out of her depression. They ministered to each other’s grief and were both healed.

For a congregation, this aspect of interim includes connecting to the district and regional leadership and resources. It also means connecting with other UU congregations. Connect with your allies if for no other reason than to remember we are not alone, but always a member of a wide community of people who have to go through similar transitions.

The fifth ministry of bardo is to **prepare for** the future. I will not talk at all about this now. Perhaps more in winter, or spring. First, we must engage with the other dimensions.

So here we are, in the interim, and in the bardo. One incarnation of Cedars, with Jaco and Barbara as your ministers, has ended. My previous ministry has also ended. The next reality has no details yet is not ready for incarnation. I ask you to see this time, where we are together, not as a mere line between panels, but as a rich time of intentional change and ministry. This time can be a time of liberation. Here and now, together, we need to claim the past, **recognize** our present, **clarify** our powers, **reconnect** with our allies, prepare **for** the future: in other words, we need to find a new head and integrate it.

May Ganesha bless our work, and may we all do Interim ministry for one another exceedingly well.