

Spirit Sightings in the Heart of India

By

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Before I left on my recent trip to India, my friend Kathy Payne gave me a piece of advice. She said, “Keep one eye on the beauty and the other eye on the shit.” She meant it literally!

India is a country of paradox:

- I was stunned by the richness of the land, its lush beauty and the exotic architecture surrounded by piles and piles of garbage;**
- I witnessed the power of food and humanity at the Kitchen Temple, where one chef and hundreds of volunteers take on the Herculean task of feeding ten thousand people a day a hearty meal of rice, lentils, vegetables.**
- Varanasi is a city that assaults the senses in its concentrated intensity of colors, smells, and sounds yet, floating on the Ganges, the city is a place of peace and serenity;**
- Just down the street from the Taj Mahal in Agra, the iconic monument of love, is Sheroes Hangout, where five women, all badly disfigured in acid attacks, wait tables and cook curries gaining confidence and raising awareness of this horrific crime.**

Crime,

overwhelming poverty and hunger,

the enormous social and political challenges in a population of 1.3 billion.

Yet, the people of India personify hope.

If I were to deconstruct the hope I saw in the faces of the Indian people, I might attribute the optimism to a number of things:

- **The prime minister of India, a man from the spiritual center of the country, is working diligently to solve the social issues that have historically plagued the nation;**
- **Traditions of caste, arranged marriages and the role of women are beginning to change;**
- **Community groups such as the Sheiks and their Kitchen Temple volunteers wouldn't consider taking a day off from feeding the hungry;**
- **The power of forgiveness is seen in the victims of the acid attacks;**
- **Celebrations, with rich color, music and fire recognize everyday events such as the sun rising as well as a great number of Hindu religious festivals held throughout the year.**
- **The deeply rooted spirituality of the Indian people demonstrates an almost palpable belief in something that guides us.**

Last week I was asked to identify what gave me hope. I responded that I needed to look at the world naively, that I required some distance from reality. I take that back.

The reason I have hope is that I am awed in my daily life. In an article entitled, "Awe Trumps it All," my neighbor, Jim Thomas, the Reverend Canon of Trinity Episcopal, writes, " An experience of 'awe' places us in a right place spiritually as we are lifted up out of our present circumstance...An experience of 'awe' takes us out of the present and shows us where we are on our personal life journey."

I am awed by a glimpse of a pristine Fern Lake after working my way down a rocky trail; the sight rivals that of Lake Tahoe.

I am awed at the response of my church and my community to the challenges of immigration and deportation that exist here.

I am awed by the number of different organizations encompassing hundreds of volunteers that work to provide food for the hungry in Sonoma; there is no reason that anyone should go hungry in this town.

I am awed by the solidarity of 3000 women, men and children who joined together in Sonoma Plaza on January 21; yesterday's Climate March mirrored the commitment to beliefs that I saw in January.

I am filled admiration when I hear that our own Janice Mattison traveled to the Women's March on Washington to join thousands of other women in sending a bold message to our new government that women's rights are human rights.

I am overcome by the courage and love I see in Kathy and Veda as they face what is perhaps the greatest test of faith.

It is awe, the overwhelming feeling of reverence, that gives me a sense of hope, peace and serenity in the craziness and moral decay of the nation and the world.

And so, even as the curtain rises on the latest scene in Trump, the Opera, I am committed to "keep one eye on the beauty" while doing what I can to clean up the mess.