

**Arjuna and Krishna on the Battlefield**  
**March 7, 2010**

Do you believe in divine intervention? Not even intervention, necessarily, but maybe just divine consultation? Divine conversation? Of course the question arises, what do I mean by *divine*? The word *divine* comes from the Latin *divinus*, which itself comes from *divus*, related to *deity*, which means *god*, of the lower case *g* variation—which happens to be my favorite way to write it. Actually, you may have heard me say before, I don't think I believe in any particular god or gods, or goddess or goddesses, so much as I believe in a kind of god-ness—which my computer always wants to spell as goodness, and which I also might call *grace*. But, for goodness' sake and gracious me, let me return to my original thought. Let me return to divine intervention. Or maybe I mean, let divine intervention return to me.

To intervene simply means to come between. So *divine* intervention essentially means god, or goddess, or god-ness, or goodness, or grace, coming between two things. Usually one of those two things is oneself. The other “thing” is usually, well, like all nouns, a person, place or thing, a particular meeting with which, whether physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual, could cause some kind of harm to one or both parties.

In my family, as I’ve mentioned many times before, some of us were lucky enough to have god or goodness or grace intervene, come between, when we were in collision-course relationships with drugs or alcohol. Some of us were *not* so lucky. Why some of us received that intervention, and some of us didn’t, I will probably never know. I am grateful for the grace I have received.

And I imagine, if I give you each a moment, most of you will be able to recall and be grateful for a time when grace intervened in your life, whether directly or indirectly, and *changed* your life for the better. Let me, in fact, give you such a moment to look inward and reflect on divine, good, graceful intervention in your own lives.

**[moment of silence]**

Were you able to think of such a time? If you're willing, would you raise your hand if your answer is yes? OK. So divine intervention, or grace, or whatever you would like to call it, isn't anything new to some of you.

Now, to give another example of just how *not* new divine intervention is, let me share with you a story from India that goes back *perhaps* as far as the fifth century B.C. It is the story of Arjuna and Krishna on the battlefield. It is the story of the *Bhagavad Gita*. You heard little glimpses of it in the

readings Steve shared earlier, but the main premise is that Arjuna, a leader of the Pandavas clan, who has taken his army to do battle against their evil cousins, the Kauravas, is out in the middle of the battlefield with his charioteer, with the two armies in front and in back of him, when suddenly, as translator Stephen Mitchell notes, “he drops his weapons and refuses to fight.”

Now, I remember the first time I read this, I thought, excellent! Arjuna was the original nonviolent resister! He is Mohandas Gandhi’s exponentially great grandfather! And Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, too!

But not so fast. “This,” says Mitchell, “is the cue for Krishna to begin his teaching about life and deathlessness, duty, nonattachment, the Self, love, spiritual practice, and the inconceivable depths of reality.” This is when Lord Krishna, previously known only as Arjuna’s driver, says to Arjuna, as is

quoted on the cover of your order of service, “Blessed are the warriors who are given the chance of a battle like this, which calls them to do what is right and opens the gates of heaven!”

The first time I preached about this charge of Krishna’s to Arjuna, I remember sharing with the congregation that I was speaking to my disappointment that Krishna was not in fact going to commend Arjuna for refusing to fight, but was, instead *encouraging* him to go into battle! When the sermon was done, a woman attending that day, who happened to be of Indian descent, and I’m guessing of Hindu descent, said, “But don’t you see? Krishna is talking about the *internal* struggles we all live with! We’ve got to face them. It’s the nature of life! Gandhi was *deeply* influenced by these teachings for those very reasons!” she said. So the next Sunday, I had to revisit the scenario of Arjuna and Krishna with that congregation, with a newfound appreciation of Krishna’s imperative to

Arjuna not to give in. Maybe, in a sense, that woman in the congregation was herself divine intervention in my life.

For, as much as I would love to have seen Arjuna drop his weapons, and then seen both armies, one by one, line by line, warrior by warrior, drop theirs, Krishna's teachings to Arjuna once he reveals himself not merely as Arjuna's charioteer but as his divine intervener, Krishna's teachings call me to confront my own struggles, my own battles, and to explore how they in turn might call me to seek the wisdom to do what is right.

In fact, one might say that upon reading the *Bhagavad Gita*, which literally means "The Blessed Song," but which is more accurately a monologue of Krishna's, with Arjuna interjecting questions, one might say that reading this blessed song, one is given weapons with which to fight for what is

right—or, if not fight, to struggle, to strive, be steadfast toward what is right, and if not weapons, tools, instruments, means.

So what are the means by which Krishna teaches Arjuna to confront the complexities of life? As we heard from Steve, Krishna introduces to Arjuna the notion of the three *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. Now, *guna* essentially means quality. The quality of *sattva*, says Arjuna, “untainted, luminous, free from sorrow, binds by means of attachment to knowledge and joy...” The quality of *rajas* is marked by passion, born of craving and attachment....” And by attachment, here Krishna is talking about attachment to *things*, to outcomes. *Tamas*, “ignorance-born,” says Krishna, “deludes all embodied beings; it binds them... by means of dullness, indolence, and sleep.”

Now, while Krishna is implicitly telling Arjuna, “you might want to choose the *sattva* route—strive for luminous, untainted knowledge and joy,” and against craving and

dullness, *stopping* at the quality of *sattva* will actually stop one short of the *real* goal. Arjuna asks Krishna, “How can I recognize the man who has gone beyond the three gunas? What has he done? How does he act?” And Krishna answers, “Whatever quality arises—light, activity, delusion—he neither dislikes its presence nor desires it when it is not there.” Krishna continues, “He who is unattached, who is not disturbed by the gunas, who is firmly rooted and knows that only the gunas are acting, who is equally self-contained in pain or pleasure, in happiness or sorrow, who is content with whatever happens, who sees dirt, rocks, and gold as equal, who is...serene in success and failure...that man has gone beyond the three gunas.”

So what lies ahead for he who goes beyond the three gunas? Krishna says to Arjuna, “He who faithfully serves me with the yoga of devotion, going beyond the three gunas, is

ready to attain the ultimate freedom. For I am the foundation of that birthless, imperishable freedom, the basis of eternal duty and of limitless, perfect joy.”

Basically, Krishna’s saying, I’m it. I’m the goal. Through devotion to me, you will be free. We heard this earlier, in one of the readings, when Krishna says to Arjuna, “Whatever you do, Arjuna, do it as an offering to me...” “Any offering—a leaf, a flower or fruit, a cup of water—I will accept it if given with a loving heart.”

Now, for such a deity- and authority ambivalent bunch as us, doing things in devotion to the Lord (whether Lord Krishna or Lord Jesus or even just the *landlord*) may not be very enticing. Still, before we dismiss it, let us do our best to keep our hearts and minds, our eyes and ears open. Let us, if need be, keep our theological translators very near at hand.

Krishna says to Arjuna, “Meditate on the guide, the Giver of all, the Primordial Poet, smaller than an atom, unthinkable, brilliant as the sun.” While it may not be a *direct* translation, I hear in Krishna’s words echoes of the benediction we often sing, and which we will sing at the end of today’s service: “To see the world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wildflower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour.”

In thinking of Krishna’s teachings about meditating on the divine, I’m also reminded of an exercise I did just yesterday, with a group of people gathered at U Bar U, the camp and conference center near Kerville. We were there to plan for the upcoming southwest district Unitarian Universalist summer camps. Each one of us was asked to think of one word that’s really important to us, to write it down, and explain to the others why it was important. The

words we came up with collectively were love, awe, kindness, relationships, community, and stillness. Whether any of these notions could ever take us beyond the three gunas to complete freedom, I'm not sure. But looking at them together out there in the hill country, I couldn't help but sense a moment of divine intervention, of god, goddess, god-ness, goodness, grace, coming in between myself and any possibility of myself dropping my weapons and giving in. Not that I was in any particular danger. But I was reminded once more of my own theology, of my own devotion to the godness and goodness of beloved community—community that is created through love, awe, kindness, relationships, and yes, even stillness.

For it is in stillness that we are able to be mindful. And it is in mindfulness that we are able practice kindness. And practicing true kindness, we do so without attachment to any particular outcome, but with a devotion to the collective good.

Not that It's always easy. In fact it's often times a real struggle, one could even say a battle! And sometimes, I believe, it's a battle—a struggle, a striving—that takes divine intervention. Or maybe just divine consultation. Maybe even just divine conversation.

But divine nonetheless. And you never know where it may occur. Arjuna thought he simply had a driver to drive his chariot, and that driver ended up being Krishna, who taught him all the wisdom and equanimity and steadfastness he needed in that moment when he was on the verge of giving up. Maybe your Krishna will be the woman at the checkout stand, or the long-term parking ticket taker at the airport. Maybe it will be your cat, who looks up at you in a particular way, or your child or grandchild. Maybe it will be the person sitting next to you. Wherever, whenever and in whatever form goodness comes to intervene, or consult, or converse, greet

that goodness with kindness. Greet that goodness with awe.  
Be in relationship with that goodness, that grace, and beloved  
community will be made manifest. And living in beloved  
community, we shall, effort by effort, struggle by struggle, be  
made free.

So may it be. Amen.