

## CONNECTING TO WHOLENESS

### Neelam Bakshi: Unitarian Address 31 January 2010

Thank you for inviting me (and Rory) once again to your Church, where I feel very much at home. I am a Hindu, but certainly not part of the orthodoxy. More someone rediscovering Hinduism through much of the new learning about science, and the new age of spirituality, but also working within the old traditions and philosophies which are remarkably sophisticated.

Today, I have an eye to the future rather than the past, hopefully with some strong links to the ageless wisdom that is to be found across religions.

Over the last year I have been exploring the world of social media. For those not similarly afflicted, I'll give a few words of explanation.

The internet is a whole world in itself. Social media is a way of communicating with people who connect to that world. It's more than e-mail. Twitter, for example, is social media where we have the opportunity to send a message of 140 characters or less to anyone at all – yes I did say 140 characters including spaces. The way it works is that people find your name through keywords, you have followers and people you follow and so you create new networks with people you'll never meet in any other way. There are plenty of other examples such as Facebook, My Space, and even ones for professional connections such as Linked In and Ecademy.

You can share what's going on in your life to the extent you want – post photos for friends or the whole world to look at, play games, send messages and virtual gifts from hugs to bouquets, invite people to events, tell people what you're doing today, or at that very moment, share triumphs and challenges, what's inspiring you today and books you're reading. You can create and join fan clubs, join networks and discussion forums. You can share your life in intimate detail through blogs which you can use as often as you want, and say as much or as little as you want.

Frankly you can live life vicariously and never get up from your computer screen. Or, if you have a really active life, you can do much of this on the move from your phone, and share photos of yourself ski-ing or whatever. And apart from the cost of the hardware and the internet connection, the rest is free.

This world is very different from the one I was born into nearly 50 years ago and it's time for us all to be a part of the information age.

Facebook has allowed me to find people that I haven't seen for years and haven't been in touch with, including people I haven't seen since the 1970's. With some people, I've really had a pretend relationship. I mean members of my family who live abroad, or in England.

A virtual relationship is different from a pretend relationship – now I get reminders about birthdays, they share what's going on and we can send messages and join in conversations with people in each other's networks. I have been able to create and recreate connections with people I may never see again for life is unpredictable. Unfortunately, this isn't working so well for my family in India who don't seem to have discovered Facebook – but good old e-mail has been a partial substitute so far.

I've found friends from school, from university, work colleagues, people I've been on courses with, old political allies and some foes. I originally started using Facebook

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thinking that I would have people I actually knew and liked – but then it got complicated. I got requests from people to be their friend on Facebook – and that old thing about wanting to be nice and to be approved of showed up, just like in real life friendships. Some people have the aim of creating massive networks on Facebook so I succumbed and let a number of them into my network. Of course, we also now have the concept of “unfriending” someone.

And it's been fun. People are doing things and putting out comments that make them really interesting. I'll just name drop for a moment – On Thursday, I knew that Jack McConnell was out doing things for Mary's Meals at Holyrood before the press was reporting it. By the way the name drop isn't Jack, it's Mary's Meals which is an amazing charity based on providing a meal at school so that children will go to school, because their families know they'll get a meal. The cost to feed a child for one year in Africa is £8.40.

So, I got the chance to congratulate Jack because it's nice to be acknowledged for doing a good thing, if I want I can become a fan, and I took the opportunity to be a Twit and tweet some information on Twitter to remind people about their consciences and the cost of a couple of magazines versus the life of a child. Not bad for 140 characters. .

Political lobbying has changed. You can create campaigns and Obama's success is partially due to his effective use of social media. You can access people across the world to join in any campaign, and Rory did just that in the case of Gary McKinnon who is due to be extradited to the States for judicial proceedings because he hacked into their national computer system thinking they were covering up UFO's. Gary has autism so there are many factors that point to unfairness.

Did I mention our own brush with autism? It is now confirmed that Rory has Aspergers Syndrome. He's happy for me to share the information with you – I know this because he announced it to the world via Twitter and has been blogging (not bragging) about it for months now. It has led to some funny incidents with family. Rory's brother announced in a tweet that he had discovered, through Twitter, that his brother had Aspergers. Before that, he had been a little put out when he discovered he had a new grand-niece. He called Rory to ask if Rory had intended to tell him about our new grand-daughter, Teighan, to be told that it had been tweeted. Well, that explained why I was getting congratulations from family round the world before I'd made all the obligatory phone calls within the U.K. Oops..

To be serious for a moment, it's been very useful because it allows Rory to keep in touch with people in a very non-threatening way. He doesn't have to visit people, and has hundreds of Facebook and blogging friends. In fact, we both reacted with some amusement when the therapist offered information about local self-help and networking groups for people with Aspergers since one of the characteristics is about limited social skills and challenges in being able to interpret body language. When, at his diagnosis, he was told he would be given details of social groups for people with Aspergers we were both a bit startled, and I suggested that perhaps Facebook was the social group for people with Aspergers.

Rory still doesn't know how to define what a friend is, but then I'm not sure I do either. I do know from one of this blogs that wife doesn't get counted in the category “friend and I did reply to that blog. Folk think it's a bit weird that we have

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conversations via blogs and Facebook, but that's much better than a marriage with no conversations or only ones with hidden undercurrents. Did I forget to mention that difficulty in dissembling or masking ones feelings and thoughts is a characteristic of Autism and Aspergers – back to Gary McKinnon again and the original view that he was spying? Great for relationships by the way – well sometimes.

One of the opportunities available in social networking is the opportunity to reach out across the world, to hundreds and possibly thousands of people. Therefore it's also used for marketing and job-hunting. It can be a real irritation being on the receiving end of several invitations to courses, to buy this product and that and so on. And of course, one of the consequences of sharing so much personal information is that employers see these sites as a good way of researching candidates – how would you feel if you thought your employer was looking at your friends and holiday photographs before deciding whether or not to promote you?

The law has not yet caught up with the information age.

Until last week, I thought I had a reasonably good idea about the scope if not the full implications of these tools. But I got a surprise. As I read through the comments on one website, I saw that someone had expressed some despair, saying that she didn't feel life was worth living. It caught my attention and I felt the pain deep inside. I've done enough self-awareness work now to know when I'm connecting with someone at an energetic level, though I hadn't experienced it this way before. And when someone is in pain –we have choices to make. To ignore it, to deal with our own reaction only, to reach out and... well how do you reach out to someone you don't know, have never met, and will never meet. I did the best I could. I sent out a supportive comment, sharing my own experience of depression and hoped it might make a difference. Then providence intervened.

The next day I read a comment from another friend who had shared a link to a 7 minute video on YouTube called Bodhisattva on the Metro. I watched it and was really glad about that man's calling in life. Wouldn't you love to have a calling that has you change every face on a train to one that is full of laughter – what a stress reliever, what a way to help people change their approach to the day. And what did he do in that video ? He just got on the train and laughed, loud belly-aching laughs until it was infectious. And so I sent the link to this unknown woman across the world who couldn't face being alive and she responded saying she hadn't laughed so much in years.

Now there's a twist on the story of the Good Samaritan. So the power of the internet to deliver random acts of kindness becomes a possibility that I just hadn't know about before.

The whole experience has made me think about this information age. We have unprecedented access to information. I think back to how unusual a family we were considered to be because we had a full set of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Now it comes as a giveaway on magazines, and you can find it, and so much more, through the net. Of course, you can also find lot of rubbish so the challenge is one of information overload and finding the nuggets of gold.

They say that information is power, and it is if you can find the right sort of information. Despite the challenges, I'm grateful for the generosity of one man – Tim

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Berners Lee. Tim created the world-wide web only 21 years ago, wanting to link researchers and help them to share information. Instead of trade-marking and profiting from his creation, which would have kept the information loop very tightly closed, he gifted it to the world. A single act of generosity that was the foundation of a revolution – and I don't use the word lightly. I forgot that Tim is associated with the Unitarian movement and that you have a poster about him downstairs.

As an aside, around 10 years ago the concept of freedom of information was gaining ground in Britain. I was delighted when the first Scottish Information Commissioner was appointed. I met Kevin Dunion before he became the Chief Executive of Friends of the Earth, and while he was editing Radical Scotland. Now, that's the kind of person who know what information has been kept hidden, and a radical streak might point to a particular direction in decisions about the release of information. I don't know who made the decision to appoint Kevin, based on competitive interview but nevertheless making a stand about what freedom of information was about. Again, a single decision with major implications.

While I was writing this piece synchronicity appeared on cue. Kevin posted a link to the BBC website reporting on the Scottish Government's view that the FOI did not cover requests for specific documents. Well, you can guess what Kevin did with that one. And then last night, I opened the January edition of your newsletter and found the piece on Mary's Meals. I learned a long time ago that these coincidences aren't. They are signals and my job is to interpret them. My sense is that for some reason, linking these issues and raising them here has some wider purpose. But in the bigger scheme of things, are you getting the sense that something bigger is afoot about information and accessibility?

I discovered last night that the BBC were showing a programme about the net called the Virtual Revolution. They even stole my words. Well, I think the Virtual Revolution is a social and spiritual revolution, and in a really odd way, a socialist and capitalist revolution at the same time.

What the world wide web has done is to make sure that people can't hide themselves or their actions. News is out in a moment – the mobile phone camera and the internet in combination record history instantly, and we have already seen that in some legal cases. People and politicians can't rewrite their own histories quietly, or the history of the world. It can't be written now only from the perspective of the victor. Through Facebook I learned that the historian Howard Zinn had died. I didn't know who that was, but I knew the person who was touched by Zinn's death. I was able to search instantly and discover that he rewrote American history in the book *A People's History of the United States*. One obituary said "In Howard's book, the central actors were the runaway slaves, the labor radicals, the masses and the misfits. It was history writ by Robin Hood, speaking to a desire so many share: to actually make history instead of being history's victim." So, now I have a new radical hero and a new old book to find and read. And Zinn will reach a new audience just as they are beginning to be disillusioned with Obama.

The web permits equality of access to information in a way and on a scale never seen before. It lets people connect irrespective of location, colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and for the most part, irrespective of disabilities. A world with few boundaries though we will have to be vigilant to keep it that way.

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Being able to connect with anyone gives a whole new meaning to “freedom of association” and to “workers of the world unite”.

But the web also revolutionises Capitalism. Being able to connect with anybody means you can sit at home and be a global business. Did you know you can have virtual PA's who will deal with your administration while you sleep because they are on the other side of the world? Or that you can publish a book and have it printed one order at a time, for dispatch to anywhere that hard copies can get to, or on-line to anyone who can order it on-line. The internet provides new business opportunities and there are many people making a lot of money. This is not the dot.com revolution – this is capitalism available to everyone, with no need to exploit labour and the opportunity to delivery quality and value.

I've already covered the social revolution – connecting with people and having virtual but very real relationships.

As well as the thread of accessibility, a number of other threads are apparent in this story. Truth, integrity, connection, being able to inspire interest and massive campaigns, to generate money and be able to share and contribute and help others, the possibility of self-reliance rather than dependence, and opportunities to communicate messages without veto and without censorship. There's something about spiritual values here too, and inevitably, there are examples of amoral and immoral behaviour.

Just like life, given that we are in the middle of the Chilcott Inquiry into Iraq where the major characters have now been interviewed, and in my view, its pretty clear who's lost the plot.

I think this new world is exciting. Do you remember when we talked about the 21<sup>st</sup> century and how it would herald a brave new world of leisure and plenty. And we look around in this recession and can't see it. The point that I'm making is that we are looking in the wrong place. It has slipped in, under our eyes, and still hidden except to the younger generations, and the few of us oldies aware that something spectacular is happening.

My focus has been on social media, but I hope you have perceived that this is really about what it symbolises – the collective unconscious, access to the wisdom of the ages through information and people, and the opportunity to reconnect and be reminded of abundance, and spiritual values.

Various questions come to mind.

- How does this relate to you and the things going on in your life?
- Which values call to you?
- Which ones are you struggling with and which ones could be easier than you think?

Perhaps you are pondering over what you want to achieve, or wondering if you can make a difference, or maybe you are remembering and thinking about people you want to be in touch with? Or perhaps you want some fun and surprise in your life?

- What actions are you taking or not taking?

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- What would make it easier?
- And most importantly, what are the opportunities right under your nose that you haven't spotted yet?

I hope this short meditation will allow you to go deep inside yourself and access the wisdom we are all connected to that will help you find just what you need.

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### Meditation

1. Take a moment to consider what is important to you in your life. What are you wanting to accomplish that is stuck? Who are you out of touch with?
2. Now, close your eyes and begin to relax. Notice that you are connected to the light. Allow the light to flow into you, through the top of your head. As it flows through your body, notice how relaxed you are feeling, as the light flows and releases the tension in the back of your head, and the light flows over your face, relaxing the muscles around your eyes, and your jaw muscles, and your neck, and as it flows through your neck and shoulders, let your shoulders relax, and your back muscles lengthen and relax, and as the light fills your body, notice your chest relax and your breathing is becoming easier. And as the light continues to flow through you, down, through your hips, release any tension in your lower back, your stomach and hips, and the light continues to flow down your legs, relaxing your thighs, and your knees, and your calves, notice the light flowing through your ankles into your feet, and connecting you through the soles of your feet to the ground so now you are connected to the light and the realm of infinite possibilities, through your head, through your whole body to your feet.
3. Notice that you are aware of your current situation, and that you know that in the future you will have resolved this, and that you already have or will acquire everything you need to do this.
4. As you continue filling with light, notice that you sense your future self, at some time in the future when you have resolved the current situation. Notice that your future self has wisdom and learning to share with you and allow them to send this to you, through the light so that as you receive their message, you understand what you have learnt, and realise what you previously had not noticed about the situation; what is right in front of you that now you are noticing them allows you to feel, and know just what are the next steps for you.
5. Become aware of your learnings and thank your future self.
6. Now turn and face the past, and be aware of yourself at some time before you first encountered the situation that has been troubling you. Notice that you are connected to your past and your future selves, and in the same way that your future self shared their resources with you, you can now offer all of your resources to yourself in the past, knowing that the situation will be resolved in a way that means you can move forward in the present with confidence and clarity

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7. Communicate with yourself in the past and allow yourself to receive these new learnings. Notice how your past self changes – how confidence and resourcefulness are now available to them and how they can deal with the situation in a better way, as you integrate all the learnings consciously and unconsciously. And as this becomes clearer, notice how they are filled more and more with light and the connection to the light is stronger.
8. Notice as you move through the past to become your present self, how the situation has changed and how resourceful you are.. Be aware of how much more relaxed and free you are feeling. Look again at your future self and notice how much more light and connection there is, notice how much brighter the future is, and that the people, circumstances and resources are already there, ready to manifest just when it's right for you.
9. Thank yourself for allowing these changes to take place. Bring yourself gently back to now and notice yourself back in your own body, feet on the ground, connected to the light through your head. Feel yourself fully in your body. And allow yourself to bring yourself back into the room, opening your eyes and becoming aware of your surroundings and the people around you. And notice that now you are connected to the light, you are aware that others are connected to the light, and part of this wonderful web of life and light and energy.