

*Reflections on Traveling and the
Third Eye*
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Friends,

I considered a number of topics for this Spring Awards Convocation. First, I wanted to talk about History as a form of commemoration, or perhaps of History as a moral science. Then, I was tempted to explore with you that captivating thirst for transcendence which I had observed among Hindu and Muslim mystics. Finally, I decided to address a third theme: Reflections on Traveling and the Third Eye.

Today, more people than ever travel. We travel for professional reasons, to conduct business, and for recreation. We travel to commemorate — just think of the visits to the battlefields of the American Civil War. We travel for educational reasons; how many of you have studied abroad? Millions still go on pilgrimages. Hindus go to Benares on the Ganges, Jews and Christians to Jerusalem, Catholics to Rome, and Muslims to Mecca.

Today, I will not speak about organized travel, not about tourism which so often degrades the world that it touches, but about old-fashioned individual travel. Individual travel has been documented for millennia. Travelers set out to find immortality, to visit sacred

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sites, to discover new worlds, or to gaze at monuments of human achievement. In this pursuit, they often discover the fullness of their own humanity and catch a fleeting glimpse of the Other.

I passionately advocate solitary travel. Admittedly, this type of traveling makes you more vulnerable. But it is this vulnerability which almost invariably provokes spontaneous kindness and hospitality among the people you meet.

I have loved traveling since my early childhood. At age seven, I took my first solitary trip, hiking to a medieval castle eight miles down the river from my hometown. Later, I traveled on foot and on bicycle through Europe. I traveled at first with my father, then, starting at age 14, on my own. I learned to love the diverse regions of Europe. Italy, like to many northerners before me, was a revelation. Marked by the Second World War and its aftermath, I was a serious child, probably too serious. In Italy, I discovered a sunnier, more carefree world, filled with a vibrant joy of life. Later, I traveled with family and children, delightful times that make me rather sentimental when I recall them occasionally. And, finally, in 1986, I discovered India, land of my early childhood dreams.

I have always extended my actual travels through imaginary ones. I devoured books on travel, adventure and foreign cultures. Sinbad, the sailor, *Robinson Crusoe* and the *Last of the Mohicans* were my early companions. Later, Sven Hedin and Wilhelm Filchner took me on their explorations through Central Asia. Like Marlow in *The Heart of Darkness*, I poured over old maps, dreaming of traveling to those blank spots of Asia and Africa, which Western curiosity and greed had not yet penetrated.

Today, I want to limit my reflections on traveling to India, a sub-continent which I traversed six times within the last 15 years for a total of 500 days! These travels have enriched me immeasurably and transformed me in subtle ways.

The great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, whose translations of the psalms into German I greatly admired as a student, has helped me to articulate some of my own experiences as a traveler. In his book *Ich und Du (I and Thou)*,¹ published in 1923, Buber suggested that we occasionally meet the ever distant Other, the divine Thou, in extraordinary moments. Such meetings may involve nature, works of human genius or other people. Common to these experiences is a feeling of extreme joy. For a fleeting moment, we

touch a transcendent realm that leaves us transfixed, speechless, gasping. As Buber puts it, heaven opens as we glimpse that Divine Thou. On my travels through India, I have had some of these unforgettable “I and Thou” experiences.

I remember mesmerizing landscapes in the Himalayas, moonscapes interlaced with snow-capped mountains, valleys with patches of green willows, golden fields, ripened barley, and Buddhist monasteries, clinging like beehives to mountaintops. I remember the legendary Kishkinda on the Deccan Plateau, home of Hanuman, the kindly monkey god. Arid mountains everywhere, huge rounded boulders spread out like pebbles in a divine game. I traveled through this land on the mighty Tungabhadra River with a local ferryman in his saucer-shaped boat, made of bamboo and palm leaves. Along the shore, ruins of the Vijayanagar Empire — bridges, bazaars, palaces, temples and fortifications remain — all in eerie silence. Then, at the top of a steep mountain path, the birthplace of the beloved monkey god where pilgrims sang in his honor with abandon. The views from the summit across the Deccan over barren mountains with hues of yellow and brown and valleys with green patches of sugar cane, rice fields, and palm groves — unforgettable!

Wherever we travel, there are the obligatory sights. I prefer to visit less familiar places such as the temple of the 64 Yoginis, a yoni-shaped mother-goddess temple, open to the sky and decorated with 64 female forms of the Divine. This unusual sanctuary is located amidst rice fields and next to a silent lake in the remote village of Hirapur.

And I love the Raja Rani temple in northeastern India! I have been at this temple dozens of times — at sunrise, sunset and during the broiling heat of high noon. Located in a spacious park, the temple with its slightly curved tower over the sanctuary stands like a gigantic mushroom against the sky. Covered with statues and intricate carvings, it reminds me of a wedding cake. The idealized sculpted gods in their niches stand solemn and dignified. Seductive Apsaras, those female inhabitants of the Hindu heaven, stand relaxed, smiling. Reaching up for branches of a tree, they make them bloom by their very touch. Their smiles, enigmatic and otherworldly, remind me of Greek kouroi. Gazing into their world, you begin to share their joy.

I never forget that sculpted head of a young Buddha in the

Government Museum in Calcutta, finely carved and idealized, radiating serenity and peace. I often returned to this mesmerizing sculpture. In its presence, time stood still.

I remember another “I and Thou” meeting in Madras, the cultural capital of South India. Mallavika Surukai, a leading Bharatanatyam dancer, performed a solo dance drama about interior and exterior spaces. Dancing in the classical style of South India, Mallavika expressed perennial and contemporary human experiences and fears such as falling in love and falling out of love, living in a degraded environment and confronting a technology focused on human destruction. The audience, and I with them, were practically in tears, but finally Lord Krishna, flute on his lips, in a restored nature, provided a glimpse of hope for a tortured humanity.

Beautiful and haunting landscapes and unforgettable creations of the human genius are powerful motivations for traveling. And yet, the best of traveling is meeting people.

Imagine people in villages, towns and cities who invite you, the stranger, into their homes. Imagine farmers in the fields at harvest time, stopping their work and asking you to join them for a short rest and that mandatory cup of tea. Imagine that teacher with her little daughter in the courtyard of the gigantic Kapeeshwarar Temple — asking you to sit down with them and share their simple home-cooked food. Not to speak of friends who generously give the little they have. My friend Sonam, who drapes that white silken scarf over my shoulders and slips a silver ring with a turquoise stone on my finger. Or Asmath, the Muslim teacher, who gives me that sweater which her mother has knitted for me in long nights at the light of smoking candles. Or that humble Hindu clerk in Madurai, whose name I have forgotten, who presses into my hands a finely carved sculpture from an ancient temple chariot, the only item of beauty in his austere home. Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu, three cultures, the same depth of human affection, the same generosity. Reversed roles. There, I am empty handed. Like a beggar!

I had “I and Thou” encounters in places as different as a Himalayan monastery and a workshop in the Government Museum in Calcutta. Last fall, I traveled to the Buddhist monastery of Phyang, located up a valley from the Indus River, high in the Himalayas. It was a cold and cloudy day and it started to snow. After a long wait, a young boy opened the gate and led me to a sanctuary

upstairs where a monk chanted his morning prayers, punctuated by the sounds of a bell, drum and cymbals. The monk greeted me with a warm smile and a few words in English. After he had finished his prayers and tended to his chores, he took me through the maze of the monastery and answered my curious questions with patience and good humor. He told me that he was the caretaker of this monastery of over 100 monks. Finally, we settled down in his cell for more talk. Frail and delicate, a child of the valley below, he radiated kindness and peace. We talked about what mattered in our lives. I spent the entire morning with him. We had met as strangers and parted as friends. I and Thou!

In Calcutta, I visited the modeling unit of the Government Museum to purchase a replica of a sculpture that I cherished. I returned repeatedly since the chief of the modeling unit didn't yet want to sell the finely crafted reproduction. He always found another excuse to delay the sale. Finally, my patience snapped and I made some careless remarks about the Indian character. A young woman who worked in the unit was ostensibly hurt by my thoughtless words and took up the challenge. Soon, we were sitting down, drinking one cup of tea after another. The whole crew of the unit gathered around us and listened. I do not remember how long we talked. What started as a tense confrontation, blossomed into mutual respect. No, more than that: admiration! As I was ready to get up and leave, the young woman suddenly knelt down before me and asked for my blessings. Strangers had become friends, had found a common language, had discovered a glimpse of that divine Thou in each other.

How often in India, on trains and buses, and once even on a trail through the jungle, have strangers disclosed to me their innermost feelings. I think of that Hindu girl's tragic love for a Muslim boy, of that heartbroken father who carried his son's ashes to the Ganges for immersion or of that zealous missionary of the Church of South India who dreamt of sainthood.

Away from familiar settings, we often drop our masks; no longer do we feel the need to pose and play roles. Disclosing ourselves unreservedly and sharing what moves us, opens that vision toward the Eternal Thou.

Beyond "I and Thou" encounters, there are others which will remain etched in my memory forever, encounters which were unex-

pected, some wonderfully uplifting, others rather frightening.

I remember when Mother Teresa invited me to spend an evening with her and her Missionaries of Charity. Mother's simple, unaffected piety brought back long-forgotten childhood memories. I remember dining with an impoverished prince in his sprawling palace in Thanjavur. Defiant pride in a glorious past alone sustained this survivor of bygone days. I remember racing against time — an impending snowstorm — in a jeep across the Himalayas, traversing 200 miles of uninhabited lands, climbing some of the world's highest passes and fording a raging river where the bridge had been swept away. I remember being abducted from a bus in Chandigarh by armed men who marched me to a police station where I witnessed an upsetting scene of a brutal beating as a paralyzed bystander.

While I and Thou encounters fill us with unspeakable happiness, there are also travel experiences which make us painfully aware of our limits of understanding. I recall my confusion when I witnessed ritual blood sacrifices of Hindu women at the Kali temple in Kalighat. I recall my frustration over the classical vocal music of Dikshitar which moved packed audiences to ecstasy, night after night! I attended these performances for a whole week, desperately trying to connect, yet remained strangely untouched.

E.M. Forster in his *A Passage To India*² has compellingly illustrated such confusions and incomprehensions. More explicitly has Anne Wilson, an English traveler to India at the end of the 19th Century, articulated my occasional anxieties when she wrote:

How strange these people are! What would I
not give to be inside their heads for one hour,
to look out at life with their eyes!

What do they think about, what do they love,
what do they hate, what pains them or gives
them pleasure? Are we really like each other
fundamentally, or have we not a thought or a
feeling in common?³

I commenced my last travel to India after September 11. Ordinarily, I would have left by the end of August but anxiously awaiting the birth of another grandchild, I had delayed my departure.

Like in 1994, when I traveled to an India smitten by the plague, that dreaded Black Death, family and friends again reminded me of

the risks of traveling in such dangerous times. I was unwilling to cancel my trip. After all, this was my last sabbatical!

Admittedly, the silence and emptiness of airports in the U.S. and Europe was unsettling and my itinerary through India included potential trouble spots. For three weeks I would live in Kashmir, a region in the Himalayas bordering Pakistan. I would have to touch down in Delhi where a leading Muslim cleric had called for a jihad, a holy war against Americans, and I also planned to spend a week in Hyderabad, an ancient Muslim stronghold where an anti-American riot in the Mecca Mosque just had been clubbed down by the police. Was I foolhardy? Reading the newspapers and following the news on CNN and BBC only heightened my anxiety.

And yes, there were some moments when fear stalked me. One time, I found myself alone on a deserted road in the Himalayas with a fierce looking Muslim driver. Another time, invited to a Muslim home for dinner, I discovered that the windows, a ready escape in case of trouble, were covered with heavy iron bars. And imagine my feelings when I entered the Mecca Mosque in Hyderabad and the gates suddenly clinked shut behind me. What tricks fearful imagination can play on us!

My Muslim driver turned out to be a gentle soul. He broke out in a broad smile when I spoke a few words in Arabic to him and reminded him of “Allah Akbar,” that God is great. My Muslim dinner host was kind, attentive, an excellent cook and sparkling conversationalist, who was deeply concerned about the educational progress of a beloved niece. And that Mecca Mosque was a beautiful place of exquisite Deccani architecture where no sinister fanatics lay in wait.

Soon, I felt in India safer than anywhere else. Everywhere, people were friendly and helpful. There was no hatred or anger in the eyes of those Indian Muslims whom I met. Perhaps here and there, a tinge of sorrow, as we talked about the war in Afghanistan. During my ten weeks in India, to my knowledge, not a single Western traveler was harmed. Had I trusted the media who trumpeted into the world isolated incidents of fanaticism, I would have cancelled my journey. But I trusted that Buddhist abbot whom I met upon my arrival in India at the airport of New Delhi who smilingly assured me: “You will be safe in the land of the Buddha.” And in October when the war against terrorism commenced in earnest, some

Buddhists told me in disarming innocence: “We are praying for peace.” Believe me, in a time of war, a war just next door, so to speak, and the simultaneous anthrax scare in the U.S., I felt so safe among the people of India — and not just in a physical sense. And a media-inspired fear of Muslim beards, skullcaps and burquas turned into a sense of shame, when Muslim strangers befriended me and generously shared the little they had.

I’m still not sure why I’m addicted to traveling. It must be a mixture of a mysterious desire and intellectual curiosity, a taste for change, novelty and adventure and a need to discover my limits.

Perhaps, we also leave, only to come home, to rediscover the familiar with new eyes. Returning home, I look at the familiar with a new sense of affection, but sometimes, detachment also. With shifted perspectives, priorities have changed. I discover what matters and leave behind that world of trivia which so often consumes us.

Life itself is a journey across the ocean of becoming. We are all perennial travelers. Traveling is a means of self-discovery, like reading poetry, pursuing a vocation or competing in sports. But traveling, like those other activities with which we fill our lives, can also be a flight from that abyss of nothingness which we glimpse in moments of silent reflection. And for some of us, traveling might be a restless search for a transcendent realm which human travelers have tried to uncover as early as Gilgamesh, almost 3000 years ago.

Sometimes, on my travels through India, friends and strangers have marked my forehead with a dot, a dot of red powder, yellow sandalwood paste or gray ashes. This dot becomes a Third Eye. It expresses a sweet blessing, a wish for deeper insight, greater sensitivity, wider truth. The Third Eye is to reveal reality behind the veil of appearances. This Indian custom reminds me of our Western allegory of truth: a naked woman holding a mirror. She has stripped away masks and concealments. In India, goddess Kali proclaims a similar message. Standing naked before her devotees, Kali promises liberation through truth. And closer to home, Christianity proclaims: “Veritas Liberat” — truth sets free, Juniata’s motto. Truth like that imaginary Third Eye cuts to the core, covers fall and life appears in its awesome beauty.

My parting wish for the seniors soon to graduate is that an imaginary Third Eye may help you to live a life of integrity, justice and truth while you pursue your dreams and push human limits

beyond the known!

The music at the outset of my talk was recorded in the Buddhist monastery of Phyang, emblematic of the distant Other. Now, we are returning home with Ludwig von Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" from his 9th Symphony, celebrating human brotherhood in troubled times!



NOTES

¹ Martin Buber, *I And Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2nd Edition, 1958).

² E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924).

³ Quoted in Indira Ghose, *Women Travelers in Colonial India: The Power Of The Female Gaze* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 165.