

Time, Place & Circumstance

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In August of this year, my husband and I had a three-week honeymoon adventure in Bali, a small island in Indonesia. We had no plan, just a single hotel reservation for the first night after the 22-hour plane ride. I knew enough about the culture to expect that the natives would be friendly to us, and that our plans could just naturally fall into place. They did. We were often in the right place at the right time, under the right circumstances.

We met a British medical doctor while waiting in line for our visas. He said, "Oh – did you know there's an international conference starting tomorrow about leadership and global healing?" Why no, we didn't know that, but we ended up participating in about half of it. People from all over the world were in attendance, and topics ranged from spirituality to ethics to ecology. Most importantly, this is where we met some local Balinese, who invited us to their hometowns to experience the rituals of their families and communities.

Everything revolves around ritual in Bali. It is an unusual place – in the most populous Muslim country in the world, there are few Muslims in Bali. The culture has maintained animistic traditions that are centuries old – this means that they believe all things of this world are animated – the rocks, the waters, the trees, for example, all have their own spirits and must be respected through rituals and offerings. It's not quite polytheistic, but nevertheless, the Muslim government wasn't pleased that the Balinese are not Muslim. Some decades back, the government struck an unspoken agreement of sorts with Bali, in the interest of tourism. The historical influence of Hinduism on Bali would be emphasized, which at least is monotheistic – Hinduism offers many faces and many paths to God, but there is just one God, as in Islam.

So what we have in Bali today is a rich mixture of animism, cultural tradition, and what is called Balinese Hinduism. Key spiritual concepts are shared with Indian Hinduism, but other than that, some anthropologists contend that Hinduism was assigned to the Balinese in the interest of image and compromise in a predominantly Muslim nation. The Balinese seem happy with the arrangement, and recognize several Hindu deities in their intricate schedule of ceremonies and celebrations – statues of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are ubiquitous. Any Balinese schoolchild will be able to tell you which faces of God they each represent: Brahma is the Creator, Vishnu is the Preserver, and Shiva is the Destroyer.

Hinduism, the world's oldest religion, is an enigmatic and fascinating collection of stories, gods, rituals, and cultural traditions. For this reason it is very difficult to explain or to understand, especially from a western point of view. Like liberal religion, you are encouraged to find your own path to the divine, and there is no single, right way to do it. You are to take responsibility for your own actions and their consequences. It's up to you how seriously you want to take your spiritual path, and the directions for how to proceed are not that clear. There are no Ten Commandments, nothing as prominent as the Gospel, or the Koran. In Bali, my western way of thinking was challenged.

The most significant challenge was in the area of good and evil. Once you're in the southeastern part of the world, you realize how binary your western thinking is. We Westerners are very attached to symbol, and the need to categorize meaning. We prefer a simple moral compass that distinguishes good actions from bad actions. In Western eyes good and bad always fight – cowboys and Indians, the outsiders and the insiders, the locals and the foreigners, Catholics and Protestants. The list is almost endless. Western thought is centered on the world being an either / or type of place.

But in Bali, nothing is purely evil or purely good. Good and evil are part and parcel of existence and are inseparable. The Balinese accept that good and evil are in all things, in all people, in all situations, in varying amounts. Whether good or evil predominates depends on three things: the time, the place, and the circumstance, all three of which are constantly changing. The Balinese believe that the more they pay attention to these three things, the better the chances are of life running more smoothly.

The Balinese world is much like the Chinese concept of yin and yang. It is a both / and type of world. One cannot have good without bad. The same is true of other seemingly antipodal characteristics: cold and hot, wet and dry, up and down, male and female, lethargy and energy, and so on. One of a pair cannot be separated from the other. One of a pair may dominate at a particular time and under particular circumstances, but this is usually a temporary, reversible situation.

Rather than classifying good and evil, the Balinese are more interested in maintaining the balance of good and evil. On a regular basis, their rituals recognize the shadow side of life – at certain times and at certain places, they feed both the higher spirits and the lower spirits with simple offerings such as rice and flower petals. That may sound superstitious and un-evolved, but it nevertheless serves a function that we Westerners tend to ignore at our peril.

Balinese rituals serve the purpose of naming – it is through naming evil that we proclaim our awareness of it and hence diminish its unpredictable power. Acknowledging and integrating the ever-present challenge of evil is not something Westerners are good at, especially those of the liberal religious persuasion. We like to focus on the positive and redeeming elements of the human condition, which is fine, but ignoring the counter-part of our shadow-side is dangerous. It is healthy to find ways to acknowledge the problem of evil, whether it's through ritual or nurturing a deeper sense of humility.

Think of how much power a dark force has in our lives if we are in denial of its existence. Maybe it's a problem at work or at home, a bad habit, a character flaw. Our denial feeds the problem and creates a snowball effect – the problem gets bigger until we name it. We can't solve a problem until we first name the problem.

Sometimes the naming of a problem comes in the form of a confession. Ten days ago I was affected by the confession of former Olympian Marion Jones, when she admitted to lying to officials about her use of steroids. I shed a few tears when I heard her statement on the radio, and I read every article or editorial I could find about it in the LA Times. I kept looking for something. What were her thoughts that preceded her surrender? The articles didn't say.

Back before the 2000 Olympics, there was a time, place, and circumstance that created the conditions for an unsound decision to be made. Marion Jones is responsible for her actions, and now she's paying the consequences. Much ink has been spent on how other athletes will be paying the consequences, too. But it seems to me that, through her confession, she has named a problem that turns out to be widespread in professional sports. As the standards become higher for testing, steroids won't be as much of an option for athletes and that is a good thing.

Marion Jones has stopped running in more ways than one; she's no longer running from the truth. While she has destroyed her career, she is also creating a new future.

Though it may take a while, I bet Marion Jones will be remembered for helping to change the collective circumstances for athletes. She said so herself that she promised these events would be used to make the lives of many people improve. At least she's not giving up her willingness to be an example. Though sad, her story is powerful. John Hoberman, a UT professor and expert on steroids in sports was quoted in the LA Times saying, "The Jones case testifies to how the pressure to excel alters our moral compass."

Somehow I doubt this is limited to the world of sports. The pressure to win, to be the best, to come out on top is a common pre-occupation in our society. I doubt there are many of us who, on some scale, have not compromised our moral compass for some kind of prize. Think back to a decision you made and came to regret – an event that may even have led to disaster. At the time you made the decision or chose to act, how relevant were the time, place, and circumstance?

Part of being able to forgive ourselves involves examining the factors that created the perfect story of time, place, and circumstance. Taking responsibility is a big relief and central to healing, but in our tendency to think in a binary fashion, we can also be too hard on ourselves, and be tempted to think, "I am a bad person," or maybe even, "I am a sinner."

The thing is, to be a sinner is to be human. None of us can make the right decision every time, under any circumstance. Using the words, 'sin' or "sinner," is a big no-no in the UU world, but that partly has to do with our unwillingness to admit that the problem of sin exists. If you reach way back into the word's etymology, there is a definition of sin that comes from a Hebrew term in archery: to sin is to miss the mark.

During my time in Bali, it was apparent that the Balinese are very concerned about not missing the mark. To fail to observe or mark a certain ceremony would make them very uneasy. In the family compounds where people live with an array of extended relatives, Balinese women perform offerings in the ancestral temples up to five times a day. This involves delivering the offering, often praying, sprinkling holy water, lighting incense. It would be unthinkable to them to not do these things at the right time every day. And since everybody else is doing it, it's easy to do. There is a collective performing of ritual in Bali that seems to run like clockwork – every piece of society reinforces the other parts, and the societal pressure to not deviate is quite high.

If I had to live in Bali, there are many Western values I would sorely miss: critical thinking, lively debate, creative expression, and of course, the competitive spirit. Even so, I admire the Balinese ability to create their time, place, and circumstances together in such a collective manner. In every village, everybody plays a part in the major ceremonies and celebrations – the symbolic meaning of the ritual is far outweighed by the reinforcement of a common, cultural identity – the satisfaction comes from doing it right, doing it the way it's always been done.

If there's any cardinal characteristic of western culture it may be innovation – we are always looking for ways of doing things quicker, better, bigger. I worry that, with all the examples of dishonesty we see around us lately, that we have lost our collective influence on time, place, and circumstance. In what ways do we reinforce collective values and circumstances that make it easier to make the right decisions? We seem to miss the mark quite often these days. If our role models are letting us down, something is amiss.

Regardless of how influential our collective values are on us, in the end, it does come down to the individual. It is up to each of us to change our minds, and set a new course. It never fails to amaze me what good results can come out of inviting the unknown into our lives. It is a blessing to be able to trust the unknown. I believe the making of our time, place, and circumstances is a collaborative effort of free will, luck, and the holy. It seems to me that the free will to choose courage almost always begets good luck and more favorable circumstances. We have to put ourselves out there in honor of a greater vision, in the belief that, under the right conditions, grace is available to us.

That has certainly been my experience in my travels, both personally and abroad. The best story I heard in Bali was at the conference on global healing. It was in a workshop called Moral Courage, told by a young man who is an Afrikaner, from South Africa. We were asked to tell our true stories of moral courage, and this is what he shared.

A few years ago, he went to see the presentation of an inspirational speaker, who was speaking against racism. He talked about what a problem it is that the Afrikaners are so racist. This Afrikaner stood up and said, "How dare you call me a racist! It is my parents' generation that was racist; I have nothing to do with that." The speaker asked him if he still enjoys all the benefits of being white, all the privileges that his parents enjoyed. He proposed, "if you're not racist, then go live in a shanty-town where everyone is black." After the talk was over he had a discussion with a friend who challenged him further, who said, "Well, maybe he's right; I bet you never would go live in a poorer neighborhood of all Africans."

That night, the more the Afrikaner thought about it, the more he came to the conclusion that he probably was racist, and didn't even know it. He needed to know just how deep his racism ran, and decided that he would in fact move to a shanty town and live there. This all happened in a few days time and his parents thought it was a crazy idea and pleaded with him not to do it, but his mind was made up; somehow he located a flat in one of the most segregated neighborhoods in Johannesburg. By the time he packed up all his belongings, it was late in the evening. His father insisted on at least driving him there.

The town they went to had no street-lights, and it was very dark. As soon as they stopped the car at the right place, a group of black Africans immediately surrounded the car. The younger Afrikaner panicked and thought, "My god, have I just made the biggest mistake? Should I press the gas and get the hell out of here? Are they going to rob me and then kill me and kill my father too?" It was a moment of decision. He rolled down his window, and someone asked him, "Why are you here?"

There was only one answer the Afrikaner could think of, and it was the honest one: "I have discovered that I'm a racist and I've come to live in your neighborhood so I can cure myself of my racism."

There was a big pause, silence. No one spoke. Finally, one of the locals said, "Well – then can we help you unload your car?" And just like that, the circumstance changed. By putting himself in that time and place, this young man embarked upon an experience that would change his life. The next morning, he was sitting on his new front-step, drinking his morning coffee. A school boy walked by and saw this white man sitting there by himself, and did a double-take, "what are you doing here?" The Afrikaner explained and afterwards the boy had only two words for him before continuing on his way to school: "Welcome home."

In our lives, the three Hindi faces of God are always at work: we are always in the process of creating, preserving, or destroying – and destroying must not consistently be regarded as a 'bad' thing. To destroy dishonesty in our lives is to renew ourselves; to let something end means we are simultaneously creating what comes next. This is why Shiva the destroyer represents a positive force in our lives. Shiva can change our circumstances for the better. Destroying creates the space for new creation.

In a world in which anxiety only seems to be increasing by the day, it's so easy to fall into either / or thinking. In our fear we want to latch on to one side, to one face of a given situation. But before we make up our mind about something, perhaps we could name our fears first; this may help us to come to terms with the time, place, and circumstance we find ourselves in. Perhaps we could look more closely at what may cause us to miss the mark. There are times to be Shiva and destroy; there are times to be Brahma and create. Most of the time, we are Vishnu, preserving what is most dear to us.

What's going on here is nothing less than salvation; being born again, born of a more integrated spirit that shows itself in our behavior. It's a kind of gift, a souvenir, I brought back from Bali to offer to you:

Admit and embrace our shadow side,
Integrate it, and act from this place of more wholeness.

"Welcome home."