

Ohm and Om
The Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson
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Let's start here.

Om.

O. M.

This is a Sanskrit word.

It's in the Rhenberg window, out in the narthex.

Here it is.

We pronounce it OM. Or AUM.

It is a sacred word, a Hindu chant,
also sometimes used in Jainism and Buddhism.

Om is the bow; the arrow is the soul; Brahman, or
reality, is the mark.

Om is what takes the atman, the individual soul,
into the presence and awareness of Brahman, the
universal soul.

By the chanting of the word Om,
we connect ourselves to that flowing stream of
existence, to that which is wider and larger than us.

To the universe.

To the gods.

To life with a capital L.

Om is the sound that the universe itself makes when it
vibrates; it is the song of the stars.

Christians say in the beginning was the word,
and Hindus would say the word is "Om."

So, let's try it.

Put your books and papers down.
Feet on the floor if they reach.
Take your thumb and touch it to one of your other
fingers -
I usually use the ring finger, but any will work.
Breathe in. Breathe out.
And chant with me, all together. Three times.
Ommmmmm.
Ommmmmm.
Ommmmmm.

Breathe in and breathe out.

Does your atman feel connected to Brahman?
Does your soul feel more one with the universe?
With the vibrating reality of existence itself?
Did it work?

I am willing to bet that for those of you who have done
this kind of thing before -
Buddhist meditation, Yoga, and so forth -
that this little taste of Om was more powerful, in
general, than for those of you who just encountered it
for the first time. In general.

I'm willing to make that bet because what I know
about spiritual practice is that it is practice.
It is habit and ritual and something your body learns to
do, to respond to.

I am a runner, as most of you know.
When I started running, almost 3 years ago - wow! -
when I started, it was hard. First day, I made it about
3/4 of a mile and just about collapsed.

Now I do 5-7 miles a few times a week as a matter of course. I've trained my body to be able to do it. And, most days, usually around the 4-mile mark, I start feeling really good. Alive. Loose. The runner's high.
That did not happen right away.
It takes practice.
Work.

Spiritual work is the same way.
You might have a transcendent moment by surprise. Maybe some of you just got grabbed, right now, and taken to a place of power, without any practice. That happens.
But usually not.
Usually, it is habit - learning the way of things. And whether it is singing, or journaling, or prayer, or yoga, or a walking meditation, spiritual practice is learned. It is a created, intentional, habit.

So if you want to chant Om and feel your soul connect with the universe, try what we just did a few times a day. Every day.
And see what happens.

Through practice, through repetition, we open up the pathways for the spirit, the universe, to be more present to us; or, rather, for us to be more aware of how we are connected always and already. We are always already connected to all that is - to God, to spirit, to energy, to life; whatever word we use, however we understand it, we believe that each and every person is always already connected, included, loved and held in that flowing stream.

But we forget.

We get in our own way.

Society tries to teach us that only some of us matter, that only some of us are worthy of love.

Or, we are afraid that if we feel that power, that connection, it will mean we have to live our lives differently than we have so far -and that's scary.

The flowing stream is always in motion, but each moment is impermanent; and we become attached to things that are impermanent, we crave them, and so we don't want to reconnect with the flowing stream.

Or, we're just too damn busy.

We're trying to get through the day in one piece, and reaching out our soul to the wider soul seems like one more item on a too-long to-do list.

For whatever reason, we resist.

Even though we are always already connected, we resist living in awareness of that connection.

We resist.

We resist the flowing stream; we resist our connection to Brahman; we resist the power of Om to bring us out of ourselves; we resist the love that flows through our being; we resist the call to justice and the mercy and wonder that always sounds around us; we resist the mystery of the hour; we resist the struggle and the power.

Resistance is our theme for the month.

What does it mean to be people who resist?

Sometimes resistance is good - when we resist injustice and empire, when we stand against the forces that destroy human dignity.

And there are times that resistance, though perfectly understandable, does not serve us at all. There are times that resisting the change only prolongs the pain, and times that resisting the truth only extends the delusion.

Sometimes we need to resist, and sometimes we need to conduct. To let the flowing water rush like a mighty river.

Sometimes we need to be rubber. Rubber resists. Electricity stops, and cannot flow through rubber, at least not very well. You can think of times you need to be rubber. When an unhealthy family dynamic needs to end - you just stop transmitting the bad patterns. When you are caught up - as we all are - in empire, being rubber, resisting, is a way to promote positive change.

But other times, we need to be copper.
We need to conduct.
Let love flow through us.
Let spirit flow through us.
Let energy flow through us.

Something like rubber, an insulator, has a very high measure of resistance. Electricity doesn't run through it, it slows way, way down - so much so that unless you have an enormous amount of electricity, it stops. Something like copper, a conductor, has a very low measure of resistance. Electricity runs right through it without losing very much power at all.

The measurement of resistance for electricity is called .
. . . wait for it . . .

Ohms.

Some of you saw that coming.

It's named for the German physicist George Simon Ohm.

It is a complete coincidence that Om - the Hindu sacred chant -

and Ohm - the measure of electrical resistance - are words that sound the same.

Complete coincidence.

But when I sat down to plan out the sermon schedule, this idea popped into my mind:

Om and Ohm.

There's something here.

To feel Om - the vibration of the universe itself - we have to reduce our Ohms - our resistance to the flowing stream of life and power.

To be more connected to Om we need less Ohms.

We need to reduce our resistance to the spirit, the flowing power of life.

Let it flow.

Let the power of life, the Om, the universal soul, flow in and through you.

Stop resisting so much.

Stop fighting it.

Let it come.

How?

How do we do that?

Spiritual practice.

Through training, my muscles are now less resistant to running.

Through prayer, meditation, practice, your spirit becomes less resistant to the sacred all around us.

You notice, feel, conduct that inner glow; you light the flame that gives brightness to the sky.

You do it by practice.

By slowing down so you can notice what's around you.

By opening your heart to the wonder that surrounds us.

By serving others and the wider cause of justice in the world.

By breathing in and breathing out.

By practice.

By habit, you learn to be a conductor instead of an insulator, to let the spirit flow instead of resisting.

I chose the hymn "The Human Touch Can Light the Flame" because I was looking for something with electrical or fire metaphors, with light-in-the-darkness kinds of ideas. And the sense that the spirit flows through us, that we have an inner glow, that the spark of the divine lives within us, is beautifully stated in those words by John Andrew Storey.

But another thing I love about the song is the affirmation that the spirit doesn't just flow from the universal to the individual, but also from person to person. That our inner glow, that our human touch, can light the flame for others; that we can inspire others and be inspired by them - through kindness, through the friend's embrace, through learning, we let knowledge and wonder and love flow -

so the question isn't just about being a conductor for the power of the spirit, but being a conductor for the spirit of one another, for the beauty of the earth.

I've been using this notion of electricity as a metaphor. An analogy to the spirit, to OM, to the universal soul. And it works as an analogy. But of course it isn't just an analogy, it isn't just a metaphor.

For, in fact, we are stardust.

We are fire.

We are electricity and energy.

The law of the conservation of mass says that nothing is ever destroyed, just converted from energy to matter and back again, forever and ever.

We are the dust of stars.

We are, the earth is, all life is, all planets are.

Everything is.

Even stars are the dust of other stars, reanimated, re-lit, by the explosion of atoms.

So it isn't just a metaphor.

Knowing that we are star dust, knowing that we are energy, is one of the ways that we can let that spiritual energy flow through us.

When you feel distracted by the day-to-day struggle, when you feel alone or isolated, when you are scared of the true majesty of your own and others lives, remember this:

you are made of the dust of stars.

Who are you to shine?

A star.

Who are you to feel part of the universe?

Who are you not to? You are part and parcel, connected to all that is.

Remember.
Don't forget.
Don't resist. Conduct.

This statement, on which I have based this sermon and indeed my whole ministry:

that we are always already connected to the holy, the sacred, the mystery - we just forget, or get distracted, or get pulled; but we are connected, we are sacred, we are able to love and be loved and discover and make justice -

that our lives count,

that we are worthy, each and every one;

this statement - we are always already connected - is a theological claim.

It is the central theological claim of our living religious tradition.

That we each have a direct connection to the powers that create and uphold life.

That we are the dust of stars and one human family and the spark of the divine.

Not everyone sees it that way.

Some will say that we are not star dust, we're just dust; that life is just fate; that our relationship to the holy is just fate - some are included and some are not, and that's just the way it is; that spiritual practice doesn't make a difference.

Some will say that we don't conduct the holy, we are only at its mercy.

It was such a theological attitude that Benjamin Franklin challenged when he thought to "disarm the

clouds of heaven” and “snatch from [God’s] hand the sceptre and the rod.”

Lightening was punishment from God, and to control it? To use a conductor - iron - to grab the lightening and direct it into a safe insulator - the ground - so that it would not destroy buildings, start fires, kill people - this was seen by some as an incredible act of hubris. How dare we?

In Philadelphia, Franklin attended the congregation led by Joseph Priestly - the Unitarian minister who discovered the properties of oxygen and invented carbonation, among other discoveries.

There, he heard a message that elevated the human capacity for reason and discovery and justice:

That it was God’s will for us to discover the secrets of the universe, not to live in ignorance of them.

John Adams, who hated Franklin personally but nonetheless admired his discovery, was also a Unitarian, as were a large number of the founders of this country who, in contrast to the kings of Europe, believed people were capable of governing themselves. That we were — in the words of yet another Unitarian, Jefferson this time - endowed by our creator with certain inalienable rights, and that we could, if we summon the best of ourselves, live in a democracy. Those founders themselves did not fully embody that promise - indeed, some owned slaves - and we seem to regularly put to the test the proposition that we have the capacity and the wisdom for democracy. One only need to read the headlines to doubt our wisdom. In our fear, our anxiety, our resentment,

sometimes we resist our own dignity and long for the sceptre and the rod.

It's work.

The spiritual life is work - the creation of habits of conductivity, of openness to life and love.

Science and discovery is work - the creation of habits of learning and curiosity, to be open to what might be.

Democracy is work - the creation of habits of civic engagement, an expanding vision of citizenship and responsibility.

We cannot abandon the spiritual life on a daily basis and then hope it works when we need it any more than we can lay aside the work of democracy and then hope the better angels of our nature will show up in the last second to rescue us from ourselves.

It's work.

To break down the power of resistance and become conductors for all that is good and worthy.

To welcome mystery and beauty.

To let the spirit flow through you, and from you into others, and from others into you.

To create the habits of conductivity and loving kindness and compassion.

To affirm the dignity of the person and the sacredness of the earth.

It's work.

To let the flowing stream flow through you - to lower your resistance - it takes practice.

Breathe in, breathe out,
put your fingers together,
and say with me:

Ommmmmmmm.
Ommmmmmmm.
Ommmmmmmm.

My blessing for you and for all of us today:
remember you are star dust.
Remember you are sacred.
Remember you are a flame of love and wonder.
Let the flowing river rise in you so that you are filled
with truth and hope;
so that you conduct and transmit all that is good;
so that you and others can rise above your fears;
so that the arrow of your soul connects with the
universal and we each connect with each other,
one human family;
so that praise and peace sing in your bones;
so that you learn to vibrate with the universe itself,
feel that motion and that spirit, rest in its grace and
conduct its wonder, this day and every day.
Amen, blessed be, Salam and Shalom.
Namaste. Namaste.