

Pluralism Project and Andover Newton Theological School Co-Host Interfaith
Leadership Seminar, June 2012 | Site Visits

Student Reflection: Sri Lakshmi Temple



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Inspired by insightful writings and the world of creation, Betsy Tabor also draws on spiritual practices from different faith traditions to make meaning. A student at Andover Newton Theological School and Intern Minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading, she is studying for the ministry. *Betsy describes the sensory experience of approaching and entering into Sri Lakshmi Temple. She notes the smell of incense, the feel of the cold marble floor, and the sounds of the bells. Here she describes the sight of the priest ritually bathing the god Vishnu.*

Earlier, I puzzle over what looks like piles of groceries at the entrance to Vishnu's temple: dozens of gallons of milk, buttermilk and orange juice. I find out why when the priest climbs up onto a stepladder and starts heaving big bowls of milk over the statue's head! I can't believe it—after fifteen bowls, I lose count. Next he dumps gallons of orange juice onto the statue. They cascade onto Vishnu's head and shoulders. Great pans of water come next. Each new ingredient feels like an assault to my sense of the possible. The sight and sound of each splash pulls my thinking and my counting brain into amazement.

What a spectacle! The mess. The soggy towels on the floor. Now, thick yogurt slops down the head and the body of the deity. Drips off its saffron loincloth. The dark wood brightens—glistens—gleams white. Now more water. From the ladder, the priest leans on the deity's knee to get a better purchase while rinsing around to the far side of the torso, the legs. Such physicality! I think of my beloved Unitarian Universalist tradition, famously "in the head."

The priest now pours honey onto the statue. Whatever next! Splash! Now more orange juice! But thicker, deeper orange, maybe mango juice. With turmeric, he gently daubs the third eye on Vishnu's forehead. Water washes it away.

No worship service has ever taken my breath away, but when I next look up, I gasp as the priest now is rubbing down the entire body of the deity image with a golden paste of sandalwood and turmeric. I find myself beyond thinking. Just beholding.