

*Death is not extinguishing the light;
it is putting out the lamp because
dawn has come.*

TAGORE

Dear Friends,

FORTY YEARS AGO,
when I was twenty-three, I had
the life-altering experience
of living in Bangladesh for two
weeks (then known as East
Pakistan). I was visiting a
friend in the Peace Corps
in the town of Barisal on
the mouth of the Ganges.
Although Barisal then had
a population of 200,000, it
could only be reached by boat
or plane, and there were no
hotels to be had.

I stayed instead with three
nuns of Madonna House, a
Canadian order founded by a
Russian who escaped from
the Revolution. I was deeply
impressed by these nuns,
who wore the traditional sari,
who had studied the language
and culture for two years, and
who, much to my amazement,
were teaching the Koran.
When I shared my astonish-

ment, they quipped, “You can’t make a good Christian out of a bad Moslem!”

“Besides,” they quickly added, “We are not here to convert, but to bear witness to God’s love.”

The nuns shared with me their love of the poetry of Tagore, the Bengali poet who is regarded as the Shakespeare of Indian literature, and who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. They even taught me one of his poems in Bengali, which, remarkably, I can still recite after forty years.

What made those two weeks so memorable was my total immersion in the lives of some of the world’s desperately poor. I remember lying in my little concrete hut, with the rain thundering on its tin roof, so much better off than the Bengalis in their grass huts with thatch roofs.

Peeking under the latched
shutters I watched, horrified,
as the cyclone's winds bent
the palm trees to the ground.
That night in Barisal five
hundred men, women and
children perished as their
grass huts were swept away
in the flood.

Forty years later, as I
searched for words which
might comfort the dying
and their loved ones, I was
inextricably drawn to the
poetry of that great mystic,
Tagore. I opened a little book
of his poetry to this poem,
which I knew I was meant to
find. Tagore, whose own life
was heavily immersed in
tragedy, reaches out to
comfort us.

May his words bring you
and your loved ones peace,

KATE STRASBURG

Who is
Rabindranath
Tagore?

*By Swami
Adiswarananda*

RABINDRANATH TAGORE (1861—1941) is widely considered the greatest influence in modern Indian literature. In his native land of Bengal—which is known today as the country of Bangladesh—his influence is equal to that of Shakespeare throughout the English-speaking world. His songs are sung in elementary schools, and his poems and other writings are the subject of numerous theses and dissertations at the universities each year. Indians revere Tagore as an artist, sage, reformer, and spiritual leader; Tagore's work and life are the subject of frequent conferences and books that

deal with what his vision might mean for the future of India.

He made a significant contribution to education, expanding his father's small school into a university and instituting reforms that are in place to this day; created a new form of Indian musical composition; founded an important ashram; became a vital conduit of Indian culture to the Western world at a time when Britain and India were warring with each other; and, late in life, while exploring his own emergence as a visual artist, introduced modern and abstract painting to his people. Tagore was innovative in writing his poetry in the vernacular Bengali language rather than the traditional Sanskrit—thereby almost single-handedly creating what is now Bengali literature—and his poetry

evokes the flavor of the real Indian countryside, not the Anglicized India of the colonial period.

Tagore's influence has also been felt around the world. His books have been translated into numerous languages, and his verse speaks to people from all backgrounds who seek a deeper understanding of self, country, creation, God, and love. People have hungered for Tagore's wisdom; in the last two decades of the Soviet Union, in the 1970s and 1980s, more than a million copies of his books were sold in translation, despite (or perhaps because of) their obvious spiritual themes.

His vast literary output, the remarkable diversity of his talents, and his wide range of personal influence made him perhaps the most important bridge between the

spirituality of the East and the West in the first half of the twentieth century.

An accomplished poet, novelist, short story writer, painter, playwright, philosopher, and educator, Tagore first achieved fame in the West when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.

Tagore's mystical approach to living was also fed by tremendous sorrow in his personal life. Over the space of only five years, in the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, Rabindranath's wife and two of his children, a boy and a girl, each thirteen years old, died. His three other children moved away from the family home; two daughters married and his other son went off to college in America. Tagore turned these tragedies and the resulting loneliness into great

depths of spiritual insight. He saw these happenings in a much broader context than his own life; his own life, in fact, had no boundaries. “He sought God not merely in the privacy of his soul,” writes one critic who worked with Tagore for several years, “but in every manifestation of [God’s] play in the outside world.” Sadness and gaiety, beauty and tragedy, all were held in the life of God among us, according to Tagore’s mystical perspective.

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INTO A LARGER
EXISTENCE

Peace, my heart, let the time
for the parting be sweet.

Let it not be a death but
completeness.

Let love melt into memory
and pain into songs.

Let the flight through the
sky end in the folding of the
wings over the nest.

Let the last touch of your
hands be gentle like the
flower of the night.

Stand still,
O Beautiful End,
for a moment,
and say your last words
in silence.

I bow to you and hold up
my lamp to light you on
your way.

RABINDRANATH TAGORE