

A Sermon and Reflections On The Philippines

Rev. Rebecca Quimada-Sienes, Rev. Vail Weller, et.al.

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UU Church of San Mateo

Reflection by Rev. Vail Weller: “Three Cups of Tea: Humanizing the ‘Other’”:

In the wonderful book “Three Cups of Tea”, the mountain climber Greg Mortenson has an accident and wanders into a village in Pakistan/Afghanistan, where he is taken in and healed. As he comes to know the people in this rugged yet beautiful place, he has a conversion experience. He knows that he must use his influence, whatever and wherever he can, to help affect positive change in the villages he has come to know and love. He writes his book which sparks a world-wide movement, and he begins building schools around Afghanistan.

We decided way back last spring to do a service on this Mortenson and this book today...and then in the middle of the year, we were invited to bring a group of people to visit our own partner church in the Philippines. A group of 7 of us went this past January, and this Sunday seemed like the right time to share with you about our experiences.

And then, we got word that Rev. Rebecca Sienes, with whom we had spent much time in the Philippines, was coming to the US for the International Convocation of UU Women in Texas. Her ticket was extended so she could come visit us in person, and it just so happened that it would be over this weekend!

In “Three Cups of Tea”, Haji Ali (the Korphe Village Chief in the Karakoram Mountains) says: “Here [in Pakistan and Afghanistan], we drink 3 cups of tea to do business; the first, you are a stranger, the second you become a friend, and the third, you join our family, and for our family, we are prepared to do anything – even die.”

We visited our partner church for three days, and we were welcomed into their family almost immediately. I know I speak for the others when I say that we had our own conversion experience. You will be hearing reflections from 3 of our delegation, and then we’ll welcome Rebecca into our pulpit. Please be sure to stay, or come back, because after the second service we’ll have a special reception along with a brief film of the people and places we visited. There, we can share three cups of tea.

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Reflection by Carol Cook: Welcome to the Family

Until this summer, I never imagined that I would go to the Philippines. It's very far away. I don't speak the language. I knew very little of the culture. So why did I go? What was I thinking?

The night we arrived in Dumaguete at the headquarters of the UU Church of the Philippines, we found a big neon sign illuminating a huge banner with all of our names. We were amazed! Then the UUCP staff came out into the dark courtyard, greeting each of us with a necklace, a beautiful corsage, and the words "Welcome to the UU Church of the Philippines." Over the next few days they filled our minds with information about their efforts to bring economic stability to the impoverished UU farming communities of Negros Island, and with information about the Cabiguhan congregation specifically. They filled our bodies with delicious homecooked meals. Most of all, they filled our hearts with their warmth, generosity and commitment to their work. We all sang together "Welcome to the family – we're glad that you have come to share your life with us... And may we always be to you what god would have us be: a family..."

Everywhere we went we were welcomed with this song. We were overwhelmed by all the warm hospitality and preparations that had been made for us. We were told how much our presence alone meant to the people we visited, how much it meant to them that we cared enough to travel a great distance to meet them and learn about their lives. The families of Cabiguhan shared their stories with us – and they were hard stories to hear. We heard about Mary Grace Lopez, whose picture is on the bulletin board. She completed 2 years of college in computer science and comes home on weekends to help lead Sunday services. Her father, Rev. Rogelio Lopez, minister of the congregation, sold all of his cattle and water buffalo to pay her college expenses. He has no more to sell, so she has no funds to complete her last 2 years of college. We learned that Mary Jane Guillera, one of the RE teachers, has difficulty with her vision, but has not been to see a doctor because she has no money for treatment. We learned that most of the children do not go beyond elementary school because their parents can't afford the shoes, clothing and supplies required to send them, and the boys are needed to stay on the farms to take care of the livestock.

We also learned that UUCP staff have been trained in a highly effective process called Community Capacity Building which empowers communities to identify their own problems and solutions, and requires a minimal financial investment to put in motion. The UU Partner Church Council here in the U.S. administers this program, as well as a scholarship program for students of all levels. These are proven channels that we can use to effectively help our partner congregation to rise up out of poverty.

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So why did I go to Cabiguhan? I went there to learn on a deeper level what I thought I already knew: that there is no “Us” and “Them” – there is only one human family and there is more love than we know we have in us, to bind us together. A part of my heart remains there in Cabiguhan, and in Dumaguete and Manila, with this branch of my family that I never would have known, had I not decided, for some reason, mysterious to myself, that I needed to make this journey. My life is richer because of it. I am committed to supporting the scholarship and capacity building programs of the UU Partner Church Council to bring hope to our partners in Cabiguhan. I hope you will join me. Our family longs for our presence in their lives.

Reflection by Lori Fox: Woman on a Mission

Late last year I excitedly told a co-worker, “Hey, I’m going to visit your country in January!”

She said, “Oh wow, doing surgeries with Dr. Hamilton?”

And I said “No, this is a church trip.”

So she nodded, “Oh! It’s a mission!”

“Um, well,” and then I made a stuttering elevator speech about the UU partner church program. I vaguely recognized my aversion to the term “Mission” unless preceded by “Medical.”

This conversation happened over and over. I hoped to come home from the Philippines with a more elegant explanation.

We spent 11 wonderful days getting to know our UU sisters and brothers all around Negros Island. Life is hard for them, yet they radiate generosity, gratitude, and just plain fun! In my mind I have a family photo album of everyone I met, with the memory of something precious they said to me. I felt honored that they would share the details of their struggles and dreams with me, and I felt that I could be open, too.

I think a lot about how privileged many of us are here in San Mateo. No one here walks ten kilometers in muddy flip-flops to get to church. I know no elderly man here that ministers to four congregations, commuting many miles on a motorcycle that burns more fuel than he can afford. No one here has to worry about hiking for water or the safety of that water or being unable to plug in an appliance. Yet a lot of our time is wasted complaining about what we don’t have. I came home resolving to whine less, help more, and recognize the difference between a disappointment and a tragedy.

In my mind I have a picture of Victoria, with tears drying on her cheeks, having just talked about losing her business, home, and family. She is saying to us, “Do you want to meet my monkey?” So all thirty of us file out of the Cabiguhan chapel, up the muddy hill to a tree near Rev. Lopez’s house, where we all admire and giggle at Victoria’s monkey. Now that really breaks the tension after an intense meeting!

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Everywhere we worshipped, Zinn Weller brought us all together by teaching a game called "Pass the squeeze." It goes like this: Everyone in the room holds hands in a big circle. The leader squeezes the hand of his neighbor, who passes the squeeze on to the next person, and on we go until it gets back to the leader, who announces how long it took for the squeeze to go around the circle. Then we would try it again, and we would always get faster the next time. The giggling participants, Filipino and American, ages 3 to 80, would cheer as we all did our best to bring the entire group's effectiveness to a new level. What a great metaphor for the work we do as members of partner churches! I was so proud of Zinn's leadership!

I was surprised by the similarity of the UUSM and UUCP worship styles. All of us sang "Spirit of Life" with gusto and shared personal reflections about being UU as part of the service. The Offering Song is also one we know, which pretty much sums up what I experienced in the Philippines:

"From you I receive, to you I give;

Together we share, and from this we live."

We can share some more of what we have with our friends in the Philippines. They need our help to become financially self-supporting, and there are already programs in place to do that. The UUCP has been working hard to fight poverty and deserves our encouragement. They can help guide our effective action.

I guess it really is a "Mission" we are on with this Philippine Adventure. But the conversion that I am after is my own and that of my congregation. I want us to recognize how much we benefit from knowing these folks as real people, by helping their UU community to thrive, and living by our true values.

Reflection by Susan Grieger

Reflections on our Visit to our Partner Church in Cabiguhan

I wish every one in this congregation could see and live what our little group did on our pilgrimage to our partner congregation in the Philippines! We were told that we would be warmly welcomed and that we would be glad that we went. We were told that our partner congregation lived in great hardship and their lives were a struggle. All of this is true, but words cannot begin to convey the actual experience.

I found the Philippines, and especially Negros Island, to be a land of great contrasts. The land is very beautiful and obviously rich in natural resources, but it is very hilly and the roads are hard to build and maintain. Our partner congregation lives in an area where running water and electricity are not generally available. It is an area of plowed hillsides and deeply rutted, rocky, muddy roads that sometimes cling to the edge of a precipice.

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Small homes made mostly of bamboo, sometimes of concrete blocks, dot the roadside in small clusters. Farm animals wander the area: chickens, pigs, and goats, all three of a variety of colors and patterns I had not seen before, horses, scrawny dogs and cats. Brahman cattle and caribou can also be found nearby. The animals do not have pens or barns but often have ropes about their necks which may or may not be attached at the other end.

Sometimes the crops are plentiful, but the weather can be unpredictable and sometimes it causes a crop to be lost. Local lenders charge 6% a month for the money the farmers borrow for seed and fertilizer. A bad crop can be disastrous under those terms. Also, even a good crop will sell for much less if the farmers are unable to transport the crop to market themselves.

The members of our partner church congregation are very gracious, open and welcoming, although some of them tended to be a little shy at first. They are hard workers and slow to complain.

I was especially taken by the children. They are beautiful, bright-eyed, friendly and cooperative. They played and worked well together; the older children naturally helped the younger ones without being asked. They are well-loved by their parents and their community.

I had brought along a little paper craft project for the children that I hadn't actually planned to present myself, so I felt a bit awkward. However, you can see in the photos of our trip how attentive and receptive all the children were. There is so much potential in them. It is a tragedy that most of them have to abandon their educations early.

It would take so little for us to make a big difference in their lives.

Homily "Carrying the Flame of Religious Freedom", Rev. Rebecca Quimada-Sienes, Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo, March 8, 2009

Maayong buntag! Indeed, it is hard to believe that I am preaching to you in this beautiful church! Thank you very much for a warm welcome and a generous hospitality. It's one in a million.

Looking around the sanctuary you must have noticed something different, unusual, and unique. These things are very special and meaningful. The reflections that we have just heard are testimonies of those who have found a transformation – a conviction of their faith. I would like to praise and uphold you and your congregation for having such a dedicated/energetic partnership. The UU Church of the Philippines, Inc, the Ulay/Cabiguhan UU congregation, and of course, the UU Church of San Mateo is wonderfully blessed.

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Since 1988, I have come to the U.S every year to attend the General Assembly of the UUA. In 1991, I studied theology at Meadville/Lombard in Chicago to prepare me for a much larger role and responsibility. I witnessed the hard work my father, Rev. Toribio S. Quimada, did in embracing and preaching the faith. Back then, I was a housewife who did not care about becoming a minister, because ministry is a “man’s job.” However, several years after his death, I came to a realization and a desire that there should be someone in the family who would continue to carry on the flame of religious freedom. This credential is of highest importance to give me a name....a woman religious leader of our faith in the Philippines.

Perhaps, you’re asking, “how did the faith develop in the Philippines?” My father was raised a devoted Catholic. As a youth, he did not understand why only the priests were allowed to read and interpret the Bible. So, he desired so much to read or own a copy of the most prohibited book in the country- the Holy Bible. After years of longing, he finally got a copy, and treasured that opportunity. He left the Catholic Church and attended a Pentecostal church, Iglesia Universal de Cristo. That Church ordained him to become a Circuit Minister. While in the ministry, he was in need of religious education materials, but the National Office could not provide them. Rev. Quimada became so desperate and tried different ways to obtain them. One day, he got a letter asking him to dedicate a newly born baby, and that letter was wrapped with an old paper with a list of churches in America alphabetically arranged. He scrolled down to letter “I” for Iglesia, but found none, then scrolled down to letter “U” for Universal, and found the “Universalist Church in Wisconsin.” He wrote a letter, but got no response. Then, his cousin gave him a world almanac, where again there was a list of churches in the USA. Wanting so much to be connected, he did exactly what he did the first time. This time, he found the Universalist Church in Gloucester, Mass. The Minister responded to my dad, and connection started. That was in 1952. Later, my father was referred to the Universalist Church in America. And, the UCA (Universalist Church in America) sent books and other religious education materials to him. He then began preaching the Universalist faith to his congregations, and this made the Executive Minister of the Iglesia Universal de Cristo very angry at him. So, in 1954, Rev. Quimada was excommunicated. He wrote Rev. Dana Klotzle of the Universalist Church in America and requested that he send Universalist missionaries to organize the church in the Philippines, but he was told that they don’t do that. Yet, he promised that the UCA will support him in incorporating the Church, thus in April 25, 1955, the Universalist Church of the Philippines was legally registered in the Philippines. It was a great struggle; they faced much resistance, and there were many negative forces! Yet, Rev. Quimada’s conviction to the Universalist faith surpassed all those obstacles.

Through self-study of the books sent by the UCA, Rev. Quimada uncovered a transforming light and allowed it to shine. It brought more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of the people in Negros Island and now in Manila. He preached the message of hope in the midst of hellfire and eternal damnation discourses, in the midst of struggle, poverty and oppression. And that message of hope is well alive to this day even to the future.

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My father was an ordinary person, a traditional farmer and not highly educated, yet he had that undying passion and love to share his new vision of spirituality- the gospel of a loving God, salvation for all, religious tolerance, use of reason, freedom from oppression and poverty. With his saddled horse and sometimes on foot, Rev. Quimada crisscrossed the mountains, waded in flooded rivers on Negros Island, and shared the message of Universalism and Unitarianism from 1955 up to the time when his breath was shut off by bullets in 1988. Rev. Quimada's social justice ministry angered the people in power. He was assassinated and was burned. He died violently, and left a challenge for a much greater dream of the faith for the next generation.

When my Philippine friends in Chicago knew that I was returning to the Philippines, they told me, "Are you crazy? Why will you go back there! The Philippines is very poor... you cannot live a comfortable life.. you are crazy if you will go back..." Indeed, I am crazy to continue carrying the flame of religious freedom in a country dominated by Roman Catholicism, extreme poverty and oppression. Yes, I am crazy because I had wanted so much to continue and strengthen the connection that my father, Rev. Quimada had started. If these are the things that made me crazy, then I love it!

The influence of Roman Catholicism is evident in almost every angle of our Philippine society. It brought havoc to us, as well. Eleazar Fernandez, author of the book, *Toward a Theology of Struggle*, said, "...Filipinos were cowed into submission, even to the extent of accepting their plight with resignation and fatalism... the culture of violence has become, for many, a normal reality."

Along with this is the poverty of the Filipinos. Of the 84 million people, 2.5% of Filipinos get 65% of the total income of the country. This 2.5% is made up of around 130,000 families further allied into extended families and a few foreign corporations. They also share in the ownership and control of the country's resources. In his book, *Maglipay Universalist*, Rev. Muir said, "...the Philippines is a nation of people who live with a kind of material poverty unparalleled in the United States... a kind of poverty so foreign to the West that words and pictures cannot convey its character and effect." The peasants who cannot eat three meals a day, ask, "Is there God in the world?" If there is as what our faith tells us, and god is supposed to be a loving God, how can god leave us in this kind of situation? Within the context of faith, the peasants are struggling to make sense the cruelties of life. For them, poverty and oppression are not only economic and political questions, but theological as well.

Eleazar Fernandez further says, "... the history of the Filipino people is a history of struggle: a struggle to form a nation that truly embodies the sentiments and aspirations of the people, and a struggle against the negative forces, both within and without that continue to abort the people's cherished dreams. Caught up in the vortex of the rise and fall of global empires, the Filipinos found their dreams always nipped in the bud by their supposed liberators."

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This irony is best described by Constantino, a Philippine Historian. He said, "... the Filipino people have the misfortune of being "liberated" four times in their entire history. First came the Spaniards who "liberated" them from the enslavement of the devil," next came the Americans who "liberated them from Spanish oppression," then the Japanese who "liberated them from American imperialism," then the Americans again who "liberated" them from Japanese fascists. After every "liberation" they found their country occupied by foreign benefactors."

This is the portrait that overshadowed our being Unitarian Universalists. This is the portrait that pushed me to continue to carry on the flame of religious freedom.

With my six-year-experience in American culture especially within the UU culture, I am convinced that church partnership is one aspect of social responsibility ministry. The Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council believes that "...international engagement is moral and spiritual principle that enhances UU congregational life." Social responsibility ministry is a doing ministry; it's about life. It is one way of putting flesh and action into our faith. It is about giving freedom, justice and equity to those who are oppressed and deprived. Your partnership to Ulay/Cabiguhan UU Congregation is vital to the life of the people/the children. You are the hope of their liberation/salvation. Your partnership is vital to the growth of the congregation, its programs and activities. Your partnership is also vital to the life of the UU Church of the Philippines, Inc., the national body of the 30 UU congregations in the Philippines.

Also, I believe that church partnership is the 21st century evangelism strategy for the Unitarian Universalist. We have to share our faith; we should tell people community or in the world who we are as a religious community, or else we give all the chances to the religious right groups to pursue their traditional evangelism strategies. We must strongly build up our church partnership relationship - because we are the torch bearers of religious freedom! Let us not be bothered by American imperialism, cultural differences or economic disparities, but let us wake up to the realization for a need to share the meaning of our faith. If we do not, who will? If not now, when?

For the life of the people and for the growth of the churches, let us hold onto and nurture this partnership together.

So be it.