

# **“PILGRIMAGE - MY JOURNEY INTO COMMUNITY AND LIGHT”**

By MAUREEN K. PORTER

MARCH 24, 2019 SERVICE

## **FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF PITTSBURGH**

[NOTE: *Italicized words in the sermon relate to elements of the hymns, poems, and spoken word elsewhere in the service. See end of the sermon for information about the rest of the service*]

### **Khublei!**

This is a word that you have heard over the years when we talk about our fellow congregations in the Khasi Hills of India. Like the *Hawaiian aloha*, it is a greeting, but also it represents an ethic of how to treat one another, a call to be our best selves. It is said when arriving as well as when taking leave. It is used to express one’s gratitude for a gift, an opportunity, or a blessing. Therefore I open and close by saying to you, my home congregation, *Khublei!*

### **OPENING**

At first when I considered joining a UU Partner Church *Pilgrimage*, I was not very sure about that label. I like to go on my own terms. “*I am not a pilgrim!!*” I said to my ever-skeptical self. I felt odd, even defensive, about taking on that noble mantle. The word simply had too much colonial baggage, too much of the sense of being a missionary, driven to save the heathen whose religion had not yet seen the light of day, of bringing them into the community of true believers, of uniting them with us, Global Unitarians. That was not *my* mission!

“But who then *is* a pilgrim?” I asked myself as I lugged my burdensome cultural baggage through the airport. I had embarked on this trip alone, the only person from Pittsburgh to go this year. I certainly encountered many, many other pilgrims while underway in the airports: happy groups of Muslims were relaxing in their glistening white *ihlan* en route home from the Hajj in Mecca; eager groups of Christian missionaries were chatting in their garishly colored, matching T-shirts -proclaiming that they were “on a mission!” But I didn’t identify with them. What kind of pilgrimage did I sign up for? What kind of *kum-bay-yah* experience was this going to be?

Preparing to finally go to India, I had dared to wear my chalice necklace in public, something that I don’t do all that often. I don’t like to wear my religion like a pilgrim’s badge of honor on my sleeve, akin to asking for mercy and hospitality by wearing a scallop shell along the Santiago de Compostela route in northern Spain. I don’t have the T-shirt. So what am I doing here? Which ethical standard banner could I hold up high as I trudged through customs?

One of the theological and ethical challenges that I have taken up in life comes from one of my mentors, the feminist philosopher of education, Nel Noddings. I try to live out an Ethic of Care. Central to this ethic is not acting *upon* others to enforce your will, but being receptive to listen intentionally to what they need, to acting *with* others, being receptive to what others are risking to offer to you. *This* is what I thought I could strive to do as a pilgrim.

For me, the greatest challenge of being a Unitarian Universalist pilgrim is just this – being receptive. As a scholar, anthropologist, educator, feminist, and ethnographer I am well-versed in being a professional outsider and being intellectually vulnerable and sincerely open-minded. But being a faithful pilgrim, now to me that means being willing to not just show up *intellectually* but being willing to feel and willing to risk. But what could a pampered pilgrim truly risk?

From our online virtual prep sessions, I realized that I was going to be asked to respond to their hospitality, to be mindfully present, *maybe even to sing in public*. That seemed a lot like *doing church*, and I am used to that. On site, our community quickly grew from the dozen of us to the whole fellowship of Unitarian Khasis. Representatives were right there waiting for us to land. *They* didn't have hesitations about this newest set of visitors; *they* were ready. Once I was there, slowly I realized that I too was indeed ready to be receptive, that I felt, in a heartfelt way, a much more concrete and long-lasting responsibility to be fully present and engaged. We needed to be more than guests; we needed to show that willingness to engage with our whole selves. We needed to feel vulnerable and ask them for help and hospitality.

We pilgrims had to be receptive to the Khasis reaching out to *us*, sincere in the faith that we would respond with *dignity and respect* for them, for their struggles, for their truths. From the first day, they were willing to open themselves to us, to reveal their humble possessions and rich liturgies, their physical hardships and creature comforts of good food around a warm hearth. And we *were* grateful for every drop of clean water, warm blanket, and rousing joke that they offered.

As Barri said to us at the church service, “We are poor. We know that we are poor. All we have to offer you is our friendship. Please accept this from us.” Wow, I realized, they were also scared. For them to host us in their homes for several days, some for the very first time, was just as much a risk as it was for us to undertake the journey. They had to be willing to feel vulnerable, to rethink who *we* are and what we value. For this to be a reciprocal exchange, they *needed* us, just as we depended on them. We *both* were on this pilgrimage: towards one another.

As a result of my extended pilgrim-time dwelling in the villages, I became receptive, even eager, to acknowledge two things. Pilgrimage is an active state of grace, a time of being fully alive and fully engaged in the moment in order to experience *something*

*transcendent* that lasts far beyond that brief sojourn away from home. In this sermon I wish to share just a few short vignettes, moments of clarity about these two lessons:

Pilgrimage is about *community*; who you become in life depends on who cares for you and whom you come to care about.

Pilgrimage is about *light*; let your light so shine that you can see which direction to go *and* you can imagine a better future.

## COMMUNITY

Our group of wayfaring pilgrims came from all over the US: Atlanta, Dallas, Seattle, Needham (Massachusetts) and Manhattan (Kansas). Although we had corresponded via videoconferencing, we only met each other for the first time in the small, far-flung regional airport in Guwahati. We recognized each other by the shared green UU luggage tags that we had pledged to display prominently as badges of hoped-for belonging.

When you are a UU pilgrim, even though there are times of solitude, you are part of a team. You start by helping *strangers* load their luggage into Jeeps at the arrivals gate, you go on to find drinkable water for new *friends*, and soon you are sharing communal sunscreen and rubbing it into the toasted, sore shoulders of fellow *companions*. You are Unitarians, together.

That is the first astounding realization about being in community. Pittsburgh is not alone on our quest to be a good partner for the school in Karang. Fellow congregations are trying to figure out best practices too. Some stand, skeptically and carefully, wondering if a partnership is even a good fit for them. Others have hard-won advice to share. We are part of a world *community* of Unitarians working hard over sustained years to demonstrate faith in one another.

The next level of understanding what it means to build a beloved community only came about during the weeknights that I spent at my homestay with the Mynsong family. Imagine this. The matriarch of the Mynsong family is just two years older than I am. But she is raising eleven children, the oldest five of whom are now married or making their way in the world. The oldest three daughters live just across the road or down the valley with their own children on land that they inherited from their mother. One is a teacher at the school, and the other two are heavy with their sixth and second children respectively. Their little ones run in and out of Grandma's homestead all day and evening. Around dawn there they are again - eagerly the youngsters look down at the strangely colored, long-limbed guest sleeping on the floor, and smile. Then, like little children everywhere, suddenly they turn, not impressed, and run off to go find the kitten.

Later in the morning when you wake up and rise from your warm, deep nest of blankets, there will probably be at least a few family members already up, heating water on the hearth, ready for making fresh milk tea to warm your spirits. A visiting elder

daughter will arrive with newly peeled potatoes to fry up. Another daughter adds fresh fruit from the family orchard to peel and eat after you wash your face and hands in the warm soapy water boiled especially for you. One of the younger boys will help you set up your solar charger up on a few rocks by the chicken pen, so that the already brilliant morning sun can quickly charge your phone. Then the mom calls you back inside to sit right beside her near the fire with your tea and morning rice.

As a pilgrim your needs are reduced to the *basics*: warmth, meaningful work, nourishing food, and, perhaps surprisingly, to me, for companionship. Your hosts are sincerely glad to see you. In a family this generous and dynamic, you are not alone. You are welcome there at the hearth, in the circle of a large and close-knit family.

It was only as a pilgrim that I truly felt the truth that as Unitarians, we are a small but hearty bunch of *wayfaring strangers* scattered across this wide, wide world. *We need one another*. Who you can become depends on who cares for you and whom you come to care about. We can be, we are indeed, a beloved community, striving to live in grace and gratitude. Pilgrims are welcome.

*Khublei!*

## LIGHT

The 10,000 plus Khasi Unitarians in Northeast India have a lot of indifference, even antagonism, to *overcome*. From the outside, some of this takes the form of discrimination due to the Khasis' proud and visible adherence to their indigenous religion. Some takes on more subtle bureaucratic forms as regulations, recognition, and licensing based on urban norms. Closer to home, the land is both a sheltering presence and a constant challenge. Their rocky and mist-enshrouded hillsides are unforgiving, the fields good mostly for potatoes and cabbage. It would seem that theirs is life of hardship and bleak futures if they cannot get, and use, an education. Their school and determined teachers are right there every step of the way. Kids learn Khasi, and expand to Hindi and English. They learn local hymns, national history, and global conservation strategies. They draw on a wealth of ethnobotanical knowledge. Even the town Children's Council practices community networking that is organized along matriarchal lines. They are strong, together. They know that shared knowledge is power, strength, and *light*.

We shared in their wisdom every day. In the villages and in the state capitol of Shillong, we had half a dozen opportunities for meetings with elders, elected officials & theologians. One of the first meetings was with three gentlemen: Khlor, a scholar, regally dignified in his turban and spectacles, and Mankara and Tyhok, two of the great grandsons of Hajam Kissor Singh himself. Over evening milk tea, these faith-filled elders spoke at length about their deep gratitude to God - their Mother and Father - who wakes them every morning and to whom they say in praise, "Khublei for this day! Thank you that I could wake up and have this magnificent daybreak! I am blessed and grateful."

They talked about how fortunate they feel to be part of the enduring grace and power that is the Khasi sense of this God of the soaring mountains and lush forests, the spark of life that is immortal, and to whom their soul will return after their short time in human form is over. Khasis know what it is to be beloved, part of something that endures. It is the brilliant *Spirit of Life* that resides in the heart and becomes visible to others [and when they speak about God they make this heart hand-up gesture]. We *all* share this divine spark, including Unitarians who happened to arrive to this world in Pittsburgh, not in India. We are all kin. Consider how much this *means* in a kinship-based society, something individualistic US Americans often fail to perceive.

Theirs is a deeply felt, personal sense being faith-full. As a fellow Unitarian, Mankara declared that *"Each person has a responsibility to be a seeker."* A teacher himself, he talked about how essential it is to have an enduring *light*, a beacon of hope, a spark of inspiration. Evoking a parable of trekking in the woods as being akin seeking to make progress, this storyteller translated for us assembled pilgrims the proverb, *"Without light we cannot travel!"*

When I asked him later how to say that provocative phrase in Khasi, an interesting conundrum came out. While he had translated it to the simple English word "travel" to keep the flow of conversation moving, once prompted to rephrase in the original Khasi he realized that there were really two different words that he could readily use. *"Ngi donkam ia ka jingshai ban jam."* The final word *"jam"* in the sentence makes it mean, *"We are in need of light in order to travel by walking."* He explained that we need both the literal torch [American: flashlight] carried by a companion as well as the energy that people gain by being underway together. Mankara added, *"We need the people around us to help us keep our spark alive because we are social beings!"* His other option is to use the word *"jingsnewthuh"* which makes the sentence mean, *"We are in need of light in order to travel with our mind."* This includes moving forward in our dreams and creative ideas. It means being a seeker and being receptive to hearing and seeing new things, or the same things in a new way. It means having a new understanding of ourselves and the social world. It means accepting that they have their own unique *song* for their Khasi people, *with hopes and dreams that are as true and high as ours.*

Over the course of several extended conversations that week, our Khasi partners said that their sustained relationship with Pittsburgh is what gives them that *light*. We offer inspiration and make new dreams worth dreaming. We keep in touch, keep them accountable, keep asking what they would like to embark on together next. Over more than 15 years we have kept a candle lit so that they can, literally, build a better future through their Secondary School (middle school) and now the very first Higher Secondary School (high school) rooms. With this light they have worked, together, to forge new paths, ones that are just right for *their* dreams for *their* children. This is being in beloved community, holding a light up with four hands so that we can travel this new set of paths together - not as just their sponsors, nor as missionaries with all the orthodox answers, but as their companions.

*Khublei!*

## RETURNING

Coming “home” is a sad - if inevitable - part of being a pilgrim. My feet are weary and my mind is contemplative.

At First Unitarian most mornings, I arrive early, a solitary attendee. I like to choose a seat in this sanctuary, over on that side [gesture], where a sunbeam is already waiting for me to arrive, a place where I can seek out even a feeble ray of restorative light. There, held in its buoyant embrace, I am a little more emboldened, more willing to be receptive. I try set down my spiritual baggage and to just *be*, to receive, as best I can in that moment, what others are willing to risk sharing.

This time, when I returned here to a homecoming in that sunny seat, *I return a pilgrim*. I am better at trusting, being receptive to receiving the grace of others. I am one of many who were on the road together. While I do not have a new pure white ihran worship garment that proclaims my transformed status --- and, darn, I never did get a groupie T-shirt --- I do have an inner lightness, even a renewed sense that my own inner guiding *light* hasn't gone out.

Back in the Khasi Hills, sitting at night around the kitchen fire among three generations of other Unitarians, sleepy toddlers nested on my lap, and that kitten on my feet, *I was unafraid* in the darkness. Assembled around the hotel lounge with the other US travelers singing hymns that we shared in common across our congregations, *I was unafraid* to sing out loud. I knew I was not alone.

I am still not alone. I believe, sincerely, that I am part of a *beloved community* that extends far beyond this place, a larger sanctuary where I am welcome to return again and again. I know that we are on intermingled paths, even if our ways only cross in person a few times a year when we exchange letters and make plans for new strategic investments.

As a returned pilgrim, I encourage you to join a future UU Partner Church pilgrimage. You'll find it to be well-organized, uplifting, and spiritually enlightening. *Take courage friends*. You may well find new *companions* for your journey through life. You may rediscover that your own inner *spark* is stronger than you thought.

*Khublei.*

I am blessed and grateful for this pilgrimage. I give thanks to all of the organizations here at First Unitarian who have funds ready to help the next pilgrim on his or her journey. I appreciate the ongoing support from the UUPCC and all their work behind the scenes to make things go so smoothly each trip. Without their extensive financial investment and congratulations, my own pilgrimage would not have been possible. You *can* afford to go, and you will be welcome.

We are offered something precious from our sisters and brothers in the Khasi Hills: the opportunity to be in beloved *community* with them and with their dreams, to reflect

and enlarge the *light* that they already hold up for their children. We all need to take heart and remember a common Khasi saying: “To Nangroi” which means “*Make progress, advance!*” Our stouthearted sisters and brothers in the Khasi Hills are indeed *overcoming*.

From their stories and worship service [and from the video that we just watched of the schoolkids singing We Shall Overcome], we know that *deep in their hearts/ they do believe/* that we are *walking hand in hand*, as free seekers of truth and wisdom/ working to *make peace* not just some day, but today. Together, we are *building a land where sisters and brothers can create peace, peace like an everflowing Khasi stream*.

My brothers and sisters of First Unitarian, let us rejoice and *say with me now as I take your leave, Khublei*.

***Khublei!*** [Conduct for saying in unison]

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## **Annotated Order of Service**

Khasi Hills Partnership Worship Service 3/24/2019  
First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh

### Participating:

Partnership Committee  
Dance Choir  
Liturgist  
RE Director  
Family Choir

### Thematic Elements:

Paths  
Being not alone  
Beloved Community  
Light  
Courage  
Legacy

### Focal Quote:

“Children have been my salvation, each an individuality to be respected, developed, and loved, each with his or her own special gifts, defects, needs, and potentialities.”  
– Annie Margaret Barr (1899-1973) British Unitarian Minister and Founder of many Khasi Hills Unitarian schools

### Informal singing:

Siyahamba/ We are Marching in the Light of God #1030

### Call to Worship:

A prayer from the Khasi Hymnal

Gathering Hymn:

We Shall Overcome #169

1. Video of Khasi schoolkids singing the first two verses
2. We sing the next two (recorded to send back to them)

Chalice Lighting:

Time for All Ages:

Dance Choir - Colorful scarf dance (for Holi)

Family Choir – De Colores #?

Scrolling photos from the Khasi hills behind them

Song to dismiss the kids to RE:

Peace, Shalom, Salaam by Emma's Revolution that we sing often

Congregational readings:

# 691 and # 681, read with each half of the congregation facing one another and speaking their reading to the other side

#681=

Deep peace of the running wave to you.

Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.

Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

Deep peace of the infinite peace to you.

- Adapted from Gaelic Runes

#691

Help us to be the always hopeful gardeners of the spirit

who know that without darkness nothing comes to birth as without light nothing flowers.

- May Sarton (UU)

Homily:

Maureen IK. Porter

Hymn:

We'll Build a Land #121

Spoken Word Trio: - done with all three at the pulpit mike, kind of huddled together while performing

"Take Courage Friends" – Wayne B. Arnason

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/closing/183796.shtml>

Take courage friends.

The way is often hard, the path is never clear,  
and the stakes are very high.

Take courage.



For deep down, there is another truth:  
you are not alone.

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Joys and Sorrows:

Prayer and Meditation:

Music:

Congregation learns the refrain "Come to me, Come to me" in Khasi

Two people perform Spirit of Life in Khasi

The congregation chimes in on the refrain each time that she sings it through

Share the Plate Message:

Member of the First UU Partnership Committee tells about the current initiative (to fund both the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade teachers' salaries for the year – about \$9,000) and new ideas

Offertory:

La Primavera by Ludovico Einaudi, played on the Steinway

Messages:

Sending Hymn:

This is My Song #159

Benediction:

Postlude:

"Hope and Joy: by Elizabeth Alexander

Program notes throughout the service gave context and legacy of our partnership as well as UU history in the Khasi Hills