

Reading: "You Will Forget" by Chenjerai Hove

If you stay in comfort too long
You will not know
The weight of a water pot
On the bald head of the village woman

You will forget
The weight of three bundles of thatch grass
On the sinewy neck of the woman
Whose baby cries on her back
For a blade of grass in its eyes

Sure, if you stay in comfort too long
You will not know the pain
Of child birth without a nurse in white

You will forget
The thirst, the cracked dusty lips
Of the woman in the valley
On her way to the headman who isn't there

You will forget
The pouring pain of a thorn prick
With a load on the head.
If you stay in comfort too long

You will forget
The wailing in the valley
Of women losing a husband in the mines.

You will forget
The rough handshake of coarse palms
Full of teary sorrow at the funeral.

If you stay in comfort too long
You will not hear
The shrieky voice of old warriors sing
The songs of fresh storied battlefields.

You will forget
The unfeeling bare feet
Gripping the warm soil turned by the plough

You will forget
The voice of the season talking to the oxen.

Reflection on Trip to the Philippines by Brian Weller

I can rarely get close to, and never get involved in, the lives of the poor, underprivileged, uneducated, destitute and hopeless people in Pittsburgh, where I live.

I'm afraid to enter the community nearest to me where the most poor and hopeless live, because of the random and regular shootings that occur. I read the news reports and public reactions to the senseless crimes, usually by teens, always with guns, always tragic, seldom solved. The reactions? Need jobs, need a male parent nearby, need to finish high school, need to control drug traffic.

In January 2009, in the Philippines, I got close to and involved in the lives of the really poor, uneducated and NEVER hopeless.

There were two primary focuses (or foci) of our visit. First, the UUCP (UU Church of the Philippines). Among the 7000 islands and 89.5 million people are 29 UU churches with 2500 members.

The dedication and motivation of the UU's I met equaled any I've seen anywhere in the USA. The leaders there are unsurpassed in their enthusiasm and efficiency in promoting our religion. That's especially significant in a country that reports 90% catholic believers.

I was impressed, in Dumaguete, when we hopped on a pedi-cab, that the driver (pedal-er) knew instantly where the UUCP was. Wouldn't happen with a taxi in Pittsburgh. So, on the main island, Luzon, where Manila is, the UUCP is establishing presence all around, including in the most horrible slums.

Looks like the Internet is easing the way for those needing new, hoping for help, longing for belonging and seeking solace. The UUCP is a strong and available open house for those willing to risk reaching out for solace. The UUCP deserves strong support from the UUSM.

The second focus was UUSM's partner church at Cabighuan on the island of Negros. An hour plane ride from Manila, where avg. income is \$500 USD per month. On the island of Negros, it's \$150 USD. So, get in the van, an hour ride from Dumaguete, with the final stretch a harrowing, bumpy, muddy, uphill trek to Cabighuan, where the monthly income is less than a book at Borders and lunch at sandwich joint.

The village is a mountainous, jungle-like collection of bamboo huts...no electricity, water or store, with one solid building...the concrete block UU Church of Ulay / Cabighuan. That building, with funds from UUSM, and the labor of the people of the village, is the symbol and home for determined and devoted members of the community. The REAL community center and worthy house of worship. Your money, and the spirit and involvement of people like Lori, Hal, Susan, Carol, Vail, and yes, Zinn, have already enriched the sixty Filipinos involved at your partner church.

All of them are smiling more broadly, singing more boldly and surviving more bravely because of your initial help. A few of them will benefit more seriously from your continuing support, and will surely "pay back" your generosity at their home church in 2010 and beyond.

You, in San Mateo can be proud that you made a good start, and will have a significant impact on the lives of these gentle, loving; desperate people, who understand and have adopted Unitarian Universalism as a vital part of the family life.

It's not about salvation... it's avoiding starvation

It's not good works....it's getting work

It's not sustaining mother earth....it's surviving next week

It's not picking the best school....but getting into and walking to elementary school.

The UUCP with help and guidance from UUSM is carefully and firmly working on those problems, one family, one congregation at a time, while always promoting the Spirit Of Life.

Singing Together There Is More Love Somewhere

Sermon “Poor and Rich, Rich and Poor: Partner Church Sunday” – c. Rev. Vail Weller
Sunday, March 22, 2009 at the Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo, CA

Here's the point of the sermon: there is more love somewhere. More hope. And more joy. And that somewhere is here [points to heart]. While that is the point of the sermon, I actually do have more I'm going to say...

The journey was a long one.

We started on an airplane, a 16-hour trip crossing the international date line. A van for an hour, then another hour's plane ride. A pedi-cab trip, and a four hour van ride. Then another hour's drive up a windy mountain road, turning off the road onto a rocky, bumpy, muddy path for the last 2 kilometers. All of this to connect with the eyes of the very real Unitarian Universalists living in one rural village in the Philippines. All of this to connect with my own humanity. All of this to suddenly understand the trouble with our economy and how to end world poverty.

Two months ago (this past January) a group of 7 of us from this congregation traveled to the Philippines to meet Unitarian Universalists there, with the special purpose of meeting the members of our partner church, in Ulay/ Cabighuan, on the island of Negros. We spent three days in our partner church village and I feel we really got to know the people there. On the second day, the families stood and told us about the members of their families, and with openness, they shared about the joys and struggles that they face.

This is a place where there is no electricity, no running water, no passable road, no grocery store, no school. The homes are simple structures with bamboo, people sleep on the floor on little mats. Chickens walk around loose. A few lone water buffaloes dot the hillside. Dogs run around underfoot.

The clothes that the people wear are washed at a well, one kilometer away. They eat what they grow, and they sell their crops as well. When the harvest comes in, they must carry it on their backs to the market, walking down the boulder-covered road in their flip-flops. If they cannot transport the crop themselves, they must pay someone who charges them almost all of their profit.

Health care does not exist in this village. People who are ill have to heal themselves or simply suffer. Basic ailments which we easily treat, might mean the end of a person's ability to farm, there. Before our trip, I didn't fully understand how Unitarian Universalism in the Philippines could have faith healers; but now I do – with no health care, it's natural that a person's faith would expand to include healing.

Children who can afford to go to school must walk a long way, and if the delicate balance of the family changes they will be needed to farm and will have to stop school. Those who do get an education and go on to college must leave the village to earn money to send back. Laborers who have a specific skill often leave the village to go earn money elsewhere (often working under horrible conditions for months at a time) so that they can send money home. This means that they are separated from their family for months at a time.

It is a drastic cycle of poverty. But don't let these facts give you the impression that life is hopeless and desperate. The people in Cabighuan welcomed us so warmly. They were so excited that we were there. They came very long distances to be with us, some of them walking through the mud for hours. They had planted flowers all along the walkway to the church. They had a banner emblazoned with each of our names hung across the building. They had ribbons and flowers draped across the doorway to the chapel. They cut down coconuts so that we could drink the milk.

In Cabighuan, the families invited us into worship. They sang for us. They smiled at us with their whole being! They were all so open and loving. They gave up three days of their farming – no little matter – so that they could get to know us, and so that our partner church relationship could be strengthened.

The Unitarian Universalist church in Ulay/ Cabighuan is central to the lives of these families. Their UU faith is not hypothetical, nor is it taken for granted.

In this overwhelmingly Catholic culture, in this place where all they do centers around working, from dawn to dusk, to feed themselves and their families... imagine what the message of Unitarian Universalism means to people. Their faith says to them that god loves them. That they are whole, and holy, and beloved. They are reminded that they are free to decide what is true for them. That through their choices, they can make the world a better place. That their lives matter. *Again, that god loves them.*

And the institution of the church is life-saving to them. It is the church which is bringing clothing, food, religious education, support for their parenting and health concerns. It is the UU Church of the Philippines that is doing the community organizing with these folks, which is all about empowering them in the most practical ways. The villagers will be educated about what the local governments can do to improve the quality of their lives, and they will decide for themselves what their priorities are. I want you to understand very clearly that it is the UU church which is making this possible.

When Rev. Rebecca Sienes from the UU Church of the Philippines visited us a few weeks ago, she told the story of her father and his founding of Unitarian Universalism in the Philippines. She told of how her father reached out to the-then "Universalist Church in America" and said, "We need your help. Please send Universalist missionaries." And when she told the story here, that line got a laugh. When his letter was received in Boston, it might as well have gotten a laugh, too. "We don't do that," they responded.

Rebecca's father was confused by that response. Rebecca is still confused by that response. And having been there myself, I am now confused, too. Spreading Unitarian Universalism in the Philippines is about healing lives. It is about getting water and food and health care and roads to people, empowering women, and strengthening families. And it is about giving people their **first-ever** taste of hopeful, loving theology. Suddenly, I felt shame when I realized that the response, "We don't do that," pointed at just how much we take our faith for granted. *It is not a luxury*, I realized. *It is the breath of life for those in Cabighuan. If only it could be so for us, here. If only we could see how much we have to offer them. If only we were willing.*

Well, our trip ended and we landed in San Francisco, and my family was reunited. We got in the car (which we own) which carried me, my husband, my two children and my father easily. We drove to our home (which we own)...a home, which though small by some standards, allows us to live in what would most definitely be called luxury by many people. We talked about what we were most in the mood to eat, and we went about getting it. We watched the Inauguration of our new President, Barack Obama, which had happened earlier that day – but we were able to "Tivo" the inauguration to watch it at our leisure. We unpacked our suitcases and made piles for the laundry, which would be done by machine, not by hand. The weather outside was chilly, but we had the heater and a glowing fire to keep us warm. We have one another, we have good health. We have everything we could possibly ever need...and then some.

That night, I had a restful sleep in a wonderful bed, and I slept until my body felt like waking up. After a healthy breakfast and my favorite tea, I caught up on the headlines.

All of the talk was about the economy, the stock market, the uncertain future. "We are in a recession", "This is the new Depression", "Things are falling apart"...the headlines read. I had the strangest sensation of being a part of two stories, each one very different from the other.

I had just returned from a place where people live full and fulfilling lives without any of the comforts we take for granted. And the word here is that things are falling apart. *But we have plumbing*, I thought to myself. *We have a place to live. We have clothing, food, education. We have work that pays us a great deal of money, compared to what most people in the world live on.*

Now I'm not suggesting that the current global crisis is not a crisis. Many of us have lost assets, some have lost jobs, and there are very real side-effects. We will have to adjust our lives. I am suggesting that we have an opportunity, right now, at this critical juncture, to make a change in the way we understand our assets. Let's get clear about what they are, and what they could do.

As fate would have it, on my way to meet with the Partner Church committee to plan for our service two weeks ago, I heard an interview with Peter Singer on the radio. He was talking about his new book, entitled The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty¹.

According to the World Bank, you are in extreme poverty if:

¹ Singer, Peter. The Life You Can Save (New York: Random House, 2009).

1. You are short of food for all or part of the year, often eating only one meal per day, sometimes having to choose between stilling your child's hunger or your own, and sometimes being able to do neither.
2. You can't save money. If a family member falls ill and you need money to see a doctor, or if the crop fails and you have nothing to eat, you have to borrow from a local moneylender and he will charge you so much interest as the debt continues to mount and you may never be free of it.
3. You can't afford to send your children to school, or if they do start school, you have to take them out again if the harvest is poor.
4. You live in an unstable house, made with mud or thatch that you need to rebuild every two or three years, or after severe weather.
5. You have no nearby source of safe drinking water. You have to carry your water a long way, and even then, it can make you ill unless you boil it.²

As he went through the list, I made "check-marks" in my head. In our village, we heard stories of kidney disease, arthritis and cataracts, none of which are being treated. We heard time and time again of children stopping their education due to the family's inability to pay the school expenses, and so that the children can care for the livestock. We heard of the local lenders charging 6% per month. We saw what the villagers ate, and learned that the water source is 1 kilometer away. The families living in our partner church village meet every one of these criteria. It is a place of extreme poverty. And now, extreme poverty has a face – many faces... and a name – many names...for me. And I brought something home, a new appreciation for what's most important.

When we had the privilege of hearing the personal stories of the families in Cabighuan, the president of the congregation (and father of ten, who walks with his family 10 kilometers to church), Bonifacio Viliejo, began his sharing by saying, "We may be poor in many ways, but we are rich in children." What they have is EACH OTHER.

In his book, Peter Singer points out the ways in which global poverty "works" – what creates it, what sustains it, and what might actually reverse it. He educates the reader even-handedly, taking up a variety of philosophical and practical arguments against helping the truly poor, before making his case that *we must*. I learned so much from this book: I highly, highly commend it to you. I even might go so far to suggest that it is a moral and ethical imperative to read this book and wrestle with the implications.

What Singer ends up proposing *is* a stretch, but it is not his suggestion that we sell everything we own and go open a care center in Africa to care for the millions of AIDS-orphans.

But he *does* suggest that we have an ethical responsibility to use some of our wealth to save the lives of those who won't be saved otherwise. He says that if we agree that the toddler in the pond deserves to be saved, then we must be willing to sully our clothing to save that child's life. He proposes that our willingness to continue to buy ourselves luxury goods – and make no mistake about it, most of what we are buying for ourselves are luxury goods – then we are choosing to do that instead of saving the one life that we could save. It is my unfortunate responsibility to point out to you what you deep down already know: there is a cost for being a part of this culture with its taken-for-granted standard of living.

² Singer 5-6.

So here is where the rubber hits the road. We Unitarian Universalists talk about, and I think we do truly believe in, the inherent worth and dignity of each person, as well as the interdependence of all life.

We are also, **statistically speaking now**, extremely well educated and wealthy. (One study that I read shows that among 25 major religions, Unitarian Universalists are the most highly educated group, earn the highest SAT scores, and rank second in median annual household income³). This is not to say that this represents all of us, but just as we seek to welcome all, we need to also be honest about how we could actually transform the world if we so chose.

In *Becoming Enlightened*, the Dalai Lama said, “I cannot help but observe that we often are content with merely wishing and praying for the happiness of others, whereas for our own purposes we do everything we can for our betterment, not just wishing!”

Peter Singer lays it on the line when he writes:

We live in a world in which 27,000 children die from avoidable causes every day. That’s more than one thousand every hour.... We can do something about these things. That crucial fact ought to affect the choices we make. To buy good stereo equipment... is to put more value on [this enhancement] to my life than on whether others live or die. Can it be ethical to live that way? Doesn’t it make a mockery of any claim to believe in the equal value of human life?⁴

Our economy is in a tailspin because capitalism went to its logical end-point. If people are able to find any way to make more profit, they will do so, even if it seems “too good to be true”, even if it’s unproven and dangerous, just because they can. If one has no measure for how much is “enough”, it will be almost as though there is no such thing as “enough”. It is easy for us to point fingers at “those executives” at AIG or BearStearn... ***but I must ask each of us to answer this question: have you figured out for yourself how much is enough? What are your physical needs for food, shelter and clothing? And what do you choose to do with all of your resources beyond that?***

Since my return from the Philippines I have been really living into those questions. I hope to make some major changes in my life and I hope that some of you might be inspired to join me.

I’m calling my plan “The Year of Giving Generously”. (It might at times feel like the *Year of Living Dangerously*, but I feel this plan’s time has come.) The program has a number of tenets, each one is a part of creating a new relationship with compassion, service, and money. Each involves stretching to do more. It means that I will tithe, giving 10% of my income away. It means I will use my life energy to help others, and I will be supporting the institution I most cherish with more dedication and zeal, and to a degree that will require sacrifice. Here’s the plan:

³ [Socioeconomic Rankings of Religious Groups in 2001](#), by Ariela Keysar and Barry A. Kosmin Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, Trinity College. See also: [Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans, Who, What, Why, Where](#) by Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar (Paramount Market Publishing, Inc., 2006).

⁴ Singer 149.

First, contact me at UUSM to become a part of the list of people participating. We will need to support one another.

Then, make a commitment to do the following tangible things.

- Read the book “The Life You Can Save”, because it is filled with education about global poverty and directs us towards the best ways to actually, tangibly help.
- Commit to expanding your horizons over this next year. Step out of your comfort zone in a very real way. Once you do, these issues will no longer be hypothetical to you. Join in a pilgrimage trip to the Philippines. Join the interfaith group going to Leon, Mexico this summer. Join the service trip to rebuild homes in New Orleans next spring. If you absolutely cannot go on a trip, then join the group for study and support.
- Commit to give 5% of your income to directly combat extreme poverty. Research is available to guide your choices so that you can be assured that your money will go where it actually will make a difference.
- And we all know that charity begins at home. Commit to dedicating a portion of your life energy by volunteering within UUSM. (Our upcoming pledge campaign will ask you to not only commit to a financial pledge but also to commit to a pledge of service.)
- And finally, commit 5% of your income to UUSM. This is a congregation which nourishes spiritual lives, provides invaluable religious education, and demonstrates Unitarian Universalist principles through social action locally, nationally, and internationally.

“The Year of Giving Generously” asks a lot – it is a commitment to give 10% of our income away. This will mean choices, and indeed, sacrifices. But I believe it will help us to use our privilege in ways that will make a real difference. It will help our hearts and souls to grow in love. And it will help us to remember what is most important, and that we are indeed all connected.

I predict, no, *I promise*, that “The Year of Giving Generously” will reconnect us with our own humanity. It will strengthen our Unitarian Universalist faith. It will help us to deeply understand the economy and it will help us to do our part to end world poverty.

May it be so.

Thoughts for Reflection

- I recommend that instead of worrying about how much you would have to do in order to live a fully ethical life, you do something that is significantly more than you have been doing so far. Then see how that feels. You may find it more rewarding than you imagined possible. – Peter Singer
- Abundance is not something we acquire. It is something we tune into. – Wayne Dyer
- Set your heart on doing good. Do it over and over again, and you will be filled with joy. – Buddha
- Abundance does not spread; famine does. – Zulu Proverb
- It is more blessed to give, than receive. – Acts 20:35

- I put a dollar in one of those change machines. Nothing changed. – George Carlin
- The whole course of human history may depend on a change of heart in one solitary and even humble individual – for it is in the solitary mind and soul of the individual that the battle between good and evil is waged and ultimately won or lost. – M. Scott Peck

Spiritual Homework

- Join in UUSM's "Year of Giving Generously", which involves four elements:
 - Commit to pledge 5% of your income to UUSM, which nourishes spiritual lives, provides religious education, and demonstrates Unitarian Universalist principles through social action locally, nationally, and internationally.
 - Commit to give 5% of your income to directly combat extreme poverty.
 - Commit to dedicate a portion of your energy by volunteering within UUSM.
 - Commit to expand your horizons by stepping out of your comfort zone – join the service trip to rebuild in New Orleans next spring, join a pilgrimage trip to the Philippines, or join the interfaith group going to Leon, Mexico. If you cannot join these trips, join the groups for study and support.
- Give and receive encouragement to others at UUSM joining in the "Year of Giving Generously" – contact Vail at minister@uusanmateo.org or 342-5946 ext.11 to be added to the list.
- Read The Life You Can Save by Peter Singer (New York: Random House, 2009).
- Visit www.TheLifeYouCanSave.com.