

Welcome to the Family

This past July my partner Susan Grieger and I had the good fortune to meet Rev. Nihal Attanayake, President of the UU Church of the Philippines, and Lee Boeke Burke, of the UU Partner Church Council. They were our house guests for a few days when Nihal came here to the San Francisco Bay Area to speak with our congregation, Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo (UUSM). Listening to Nihal and Lee talk about Unitarian Universalism in the Philippines and their excitement about a future UUSM pilgrimage to our partner congregation in Cabiguhan awoke my curiosity and interest. I read the book they brought, *Maglipay Universalist*, and felt deeply moved by the history of the struggling UU movement in the Philippines. Until then, it would never have occurred to me to visit the Philippines. It is very far away! I don't speak the language. I'd never studied the culture. What was I thinking?!

We arrived in Dumaguete at UUCP headquarters after dark. To our amazement we found a big neon sign illuminating a huge banner with all of our names. 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 also about the Cabiguhan congregation specifically. They filled our bodies with delicious home-cooked 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 not easy stories to hear. We heard from a young woman who is completing her 2nd year of college and comes home on weekends to help lead Sunday services. Her father sold all of his cattle and water buffalo to pay her college expenses. He now has no more livestock to sell, so she has no funds to complete her last 2 years of college. We heard that one of the RE leaders 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 take care of the livestock.

We also learned that UUCP staff are trained in a highly effective process called Capacity Building which empowers communities to identify their own problems and solutions, and requires a minimal financial investment from us, the U.S. partner, to put in motion. The UU Partner Church Council 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.

So what was I thinking? 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, and I am working to engage the UUSM congregation in this effort. Our family longs for our presence in their lives.