

The Path to Calapayan
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We are in the season of Advent in the Christian liturgical year. Advent, a time of anticipation of the arrival of the divine in a new way. Eleanor Farjeon was born in 1888, and she died in 1965. She wrote “People Look East,” with words set to a traditional French carol. “People Look East” is number 226 in the hymnal, in case you would like to follow along:

“People look east, the time is near of the crowning of the year.
Make your house fair as you are able,
trim the hearth and set the table.
People, look east and sing today: Love, the Guest, is on the way.

Furrows, be glad. Though earth is bare, one more seed is planted there. Give up your strength
the seed to nourish,
that, in course, the flower may flourish.
People, look east and sing today: Love, the Rose, is on the way.

Stars, keep the watch. When night is dim,
one more light the bowl shall brim,
shining beyond the frosty weather, bright as sun and moon together.
People, look east and sing today: Love, the Star, is on the way.”

To which direction should we look? East? West? North? South? The hymn urges us to look east toward Bethlehem, for according to the Christian Bible, a star appeared in the east, alerting the wise ones that divine Love was about to arrive in a new way. That is a wonderful reason to look east, and we might look east for another reason. Africa lies to the east.

This very day, Unitarian Universalist Association President, the Rev. Bill Sinkford, is wrapping up his 19-day pilgrimage to Africa.¹ In South Africa, he met and worshipped with Unitarian Universalists in Cape Town. He met with a variety of leaders of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He met with leaders of “The Triangle Project,” a leading gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights organization in Cape Town. He met with a program partner of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) to discuss their efforts to secure water rights in Soweto.

From South Africa, Rev. Sinkford traveled to Uganda, Kenya, Ghana, Senegal, and Nigeria. At several places, he worshipped with Unitarian Universalist congregations. I did not realize how many Unitarian Universalist congregations there are in Africa (there are 40 Unitarian Universalist congregations in Kenya alone). Rev. Sinkford was present for the very first worship service of the new congregation in Masaka, Uganda. During the trip, he met with program partners of the UUSC, including an alliance of street vendors and informal traders. In Dakar, Senegal, he visited Île de Gorée, a site that, today, serves as a powerful witness to the Atlantic slave trade.

In this era, so prone to information overload, it may well take a personal connection to some faraway place to awaken the heart. For the past couple of weeks, I paid more attention to news from Africa just because I knew that Rev. Sinkford was there. Among other stories from Africa, I read newspaper stories of pirates intercepting ships off of its northeast coast.

It is hard to believe that pirates are alive and well in the year 2008, but alive and well, they are. I do not want to make light of the violence inflicted by pirates or to make light of the limited options for survival in Somalia (and elsewhere), which often drive people to become pirates. However, I must also reluctantly confess to being a middle-aged fan of Johnny Depp. As such, I am inclined to like pirates. But this preference for pirates was also the case many, many years ago (in pre-Johnny Depp days). I remember being asked, “What do you want to be when you

¹ See <http://www.uua.org/news/sinkfordafrica/119587.shtml>.

grow up?” I said something that was socially acceptable, but in my heart, I thought, “I want to be a pirate!”

Later, I realized that, in a world where piracy prevails, being a pirate works pretty well if you are a man, but not so well if you are a woman. Gender mattered then, and gender matters now. Gender expression mattered then, and gender expression matters now. Even today, gender expression can be a matter of life or death. Last Thursday, November 20, was the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance. Transgender Day of Remembrance is a day to remember the transgender people who have been killed because of their gender expression. Too often, transgender people are victims of those who have bitter hearts, narrow minds, and impoverished souls.

It is vital not only to remember the dead but also to honor the living. This morning, I honor Stu Rasmussen, the mayor-elect of Silverton, Oregon. Earlier this month, she became America's first openly transgender mayor. Her constituents say they elected her not for her looks, but because she promised to put a halt to the rapid development that has threatened Silverton's small-town charm . . . ² She is stopped every few feet by people who want to shake her hand and congratulate her on her victory, in which she took 52% of the vote against 39% for [the] incumbent . . .” People, look north, look north to Silverton, Oregon.

People look east, people look north . . . people look west to the Philippines! Here, in California, we live on the Pacific Rim. This congregation could have partnered with a Unitarian congregation in the old country (Transylvania, now part of Romania). Four hundred forty years ago, the only Unitarian king in history issued an Edict of Toleration which read, in part, “In every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation [may] like it, [that is all to the good.] If not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve.”³

Yes, there are compelling reasons to look east. Romania is OK. Transylvania is fine. Nevertheless, *we* live on the Pacific Rim. A few months ago, the Rev. Nihal Attanayake,

² See <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-transgender20-2008nov20.0.6169794.story>.

³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edict_of_Turda.

president of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines, visited this congregation. He and I and a few others were talking one night after dinner. Rev. Nihal outlined in broad terms the project that Jackie Albay-Yenney will talk about in more detail in a few minutes. The project will dramatically improve the path from the bottom of the mountain to the mountain top where the village of Calapayan is situated. Rev. Nihal said that the improved path would allow Unitarian Universalist villagers to reach neighboring markets more easily. A motorbike would even be able to navigate the new path. The village would be less isolated. The quality of life for Unitarian Universalists in Calapayan would improve since travel and trade would be easier.

At first, I was resistant to the idea of a project that sounded exclusive.

“I want a project that helps the *poor* people in the village, not just Unitarian Universalists,” I said to Rev. Nihal. Before I finished the sentence, he was shaking his head to say “no.” “You don’t understand,” he said. “If you want to help the poorest people in the village, then help the Unitarian Universalists.” It is not true that Unitarian Universalists everywhere in the world are relatively privileged. North, south, east, west – the lives of Unitarian Universalists are not the same in every place.

This morning, I supported the Calapayan UU Congregation by purchasing a car wash for \$100. I am grateful that our youth are offering their labor and that Jackie Albay-Yenney comes up with creative ways to raise money for our Philippine partner congregation. The photograph on the cover of the Order of Service was taken by Rev. Nihal inside the church building in Calapayan. I plan to frame this photo and keep it in a special place at home. In July 2010, members of this congregation will have a chance to meet our partners in Calapayan. A delegation from here will visit the Philippines, and we will travel on the improved path that our contributions will make possible. Let yourself dream of being part of the delegation. We have a year and a half to turn the dream into reality.

While members of this congregation will actually walk on the improved path that our contributions will make possible, in all likelihood, we will never see the many worthwhile projects around the world made possible by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

(UUSC). That is all right with me because my dollars are in good hands. Funds raised through the Guest at Your Table campaign and through UUSC membership carry our good will, our love and caring, and our values east, west, north, and south.

The turmoil in the financial markets is enough to make even people who are usually cool, calm, and collected more than a little hot, bothered, and worried. Given the sinking stock market and the rising unemployment rate, it is tempting to cut back on contributions that benefit people half a world away. That would be a mistake. When Rev. Nihal was here, several of us showed him around the premises. We walked around the buildings and grounds and described the kinds of activities that took place in each location. We reached the shed and went inside. We were a bit apologetic about its appearance and the jumble of items inside it. In a matter of fact voice, Rev. Nihal said, “This shed is better than any of the Unitarian Universalist churches in the Philippines.”

Without international engagement (such as UUSC membership and the relationship with our partner congregation in the Philippines), we are likely to lose perspective. Without international engagement, we are likely to forget that even in catastrophic economic times in the United States, we remain among the most economically privileged people in human history. I do not mean to minimize the trauma of jobs lost or in jeopardy, nor do I mean to minimize the trauma of homes lost or in jeopardy. And don’t get me started on health care reform, which I believe is the single most important social justice issue of our time. All that said, it does not hurt North Americans, once in a while, to suffer a fraction of the anxiety accompanying a precarious daily life, which is not the exception but the rule in most of the world. Our sheds *are* better than most houses or most houses of worship elsewhere in the world.

No project has ever been sustained because of guilt. We cannot “guilt trip” each other into supporting our partners in Calapayan. We cannot “guilt trip” each other into supporting the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. What does sustain people, who then sustain projects, is hope – hope that with caring, love, dedication, and sacrifice, we can make this world a bit better than it was when we born. The Czech writer and politician Vaclav Havel says this about hope:

“Hope is a state of mind, not a state of the world
Either we have hope within us or we don't.
Hope is not a prognostication —it's an orientation of the spirit.
You can't delegate that to anyone else.

Hope in this deep and powerful sense is not the same as joy
when things are going well,
or the willingness to invest in enterprises
that are obviously headed for early success,
but rather an ability to work for something to succeed.

Hope is definitely NOT the same as optimism.
It's not the conviction that something will turn out well,
but the certainty that something makes sense,
regardless of how it turns out.

It is hope, above all, that gives us strength to live
and to continually try new things,
even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.
In the face of this absurdity, life is too precious a thing
to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptyly,
without meaning, without love, and, finally, without hope.”⁴

May our spirits be oriented toward hope. May we know that Love, the guest; Love, the rose;
Love, the star -- Love is on the way. May people look east -- and west and north and south.
May it be so!

⁴ See <http://www.hopehealing.org/Havel.asp>.

