

Renewal of the Spirit in All Time Zones
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On March 9, I left Los Angeles International Airport for Manila around 10 p.m. on a direct plane flight to Manila. The direct flight turned into a nonstop flight when the combined passenger and freight load was light enough that we did not have to land in Guam for refueling. The flight was normally 15 hours heading west, though skipping Guam may have saved us an hour. Most passengers were Filipinos. I have never been on a flight with such a mellow “vibe.” When we landed at 3:30 a.m., I realized that my oh-so-convenient departure time had resulted in a not very convenient arrival time. Rev. Nihal Attanayake met me at the airport and was genuinely gracious. So began a rewarding two and half week encounter with Unitarian Universalists in the Philippines.

As I share highlights of the trip with you, PowerPoint will do its magic and cycle through about 100 photographs. You will know the photographs are from our partner congregation in Calapayan when you see the bright yellow welcome banner shown on the front of the Order of Service. Eleven Unitarian Universalists from around the United States visited 10 UU congregations in the Philippines and visited one UU discussion group. Together with our luggage, we filled two brand new minivans. We were the fourth group of Americans to visit the Philippines in a trip during the month of March. My hope is that you may want to be part of a tour group in a future month of March.

The small discussion group in Manila had middle class members. The one congregation in Manila was in a poor neighborhood. Each of the nine congregations we visited on the island of Negros was in a poor rural area. Rice, mangoes, and bananas are agricultural mainstays. As it turned out, we visited one congregation which was about seven kilometers from an exchange of gunfire between government forces and Communist rebels, according to the local news.

We were never at risk of blundering into that kind of conflict. The staff of the UU Church of the Philippines had our routes, meals, and accommodations well planned. Two members of the group required medical attention on account of falls, but no injury was life threatening.

During the first couple of days in Manila as we were shaking off jet lag and before we took a one hour plane flight from Manila to the city of Dumaguete on the island of Negros, we had periods of unstructured time. I did not wander around by myself in Manila, but my colleague Rev. Roger Jones did. Rev. Roger is the Family Minister at the UU Society of Sacramento. This is from his blog post entitled “*Maslow’s Manila Hierarchy of Need.*”¹ I share it with his permission and for what it says about human motivations.

“I went out of the hotel Sunday late morning for a walk through several urban neighborhoods and for lunch,” he said. “Near the boulevard by the bay, many highrise office and residential buildings loomed. Just blocks away, some streets were narrow, others wide, some clogged with pedicabs and Jeepneys (station wagon-shaped jeeps that go on set routes and charge a nickel a person), motorbikes and cars. Lots of food stalls and a few department stores, upscale bars closed for the daytime sharing street space with hungry and homeless parents and children.

“Men come up to offer me things like fake designer watches: “Omega only \$10, sir.” No thanks, I don’t wear a watch. “American silver dollar coins, sir, 1801, good price.” No thanks, I don’t collect coins. No, thanks, really. “Viagra, Cialis, sir, your choice.” Do you think I need Viagra? I joke in a demanding tone. “Sir, you are strong, but this will make you stronger.” No thanks, I say numerous times.”

“On another street, a short, worn looking man in a brown tee shirt comes up. He motions for me to come over to a bar and meet the girls. No, thanks, I say. He pulls out a laminated card with face pictures of several young women. Are those your daughters? I ask. He doesn’t get the joke, or the insult. I decline. Then he pulls up his sleeve to show me a tattoo on his upper arm. “I am a gang member. This is my area for the mafia. I will keep you safe for 200 pesos (\$5). I’ve already killed two people.” I respond, Why do I need you to protect me when there are security guards outside all these restaurants and hotels? [Every business establishment seemed to have one or more security guards.]

¹ See <http://ironicschmoozer.wordpress.com/2011/03/13/day-3-in-manila-maslows-manila-hierarchy-of-needs-and-2-uu-congregation-visits-on-sunday/>

He lowers his protection price, and I keep walking. Then he says, “Please just give me 20 pesos so I can eat something.” I decline. Then I say, You were going to charge me money not to kill me and now you want me to help you out?”

Our human motivations are a mixed bag. We want to thrive, and we want those we care about to thrive. It is tough for many Americans to thrive today, except for the wealthiest segment of society. It is even tougher for Filipinos to thrive if their families are not part of the wealthy elite. “So, under Spain, the Philippines became the only Christian country of Asia – and, through Christianity, the West’s first foothold in the region,” writes Stanley Karnow in his book *In our Image: America’s Empire in the Philippines*.²

“Spain left another heritage, in the form of land grants to Spanish settlers – which, passed on to rich Filipino *mestizo* families, created the oligarchy that wields power today.” When Americans colonized the Philippines in the early 20th century, they “found in the Philippines a society based on a complicated and often baffling web of real and ritual kinship ties,” he writes.³ “At its best, this mutual obligation pattern is an ideal social security mechanism. Filipinos help to raise their siblings and later care for their aged parents. If they become wealthy or rise to high office, they are required to support their relatives or find them government jobs. Even the poorest scrape to aid their more indigent kin, and no house is so humble that it lacks a spot for an unfortunate relative. Thousands of Filipinos rely on remittances from their children in the United States.”

“The Philippines also owes its worst abuses to the strong blood and ceremonial alliances, whose mutual obligations spawn pervasive corruption . . . The elaborate kinship system accounts as well for the social rigidity of the Philippines. Bishop Francisco Claver, a professor of sociology at the Ateneo de Manila, a Jesuit university, maintains that the country’s values have hardly changed since pre-Spanish times. Families, he explained, are really ancient tribes in modern disguise, with the father the uncontested chief and everyone else occupying a designated niche in the pyramidal structure. ‘So Filipinos have been taught since childhood to respect authority, not to rebel or to question, and they are passive, even fatalistic. The poor believe that they are destined to be poor, and the rich assume that their wealth was ordained . . . A Filipino journalist

² *In Our Image: America’s Empire in the Philippines*, Stanley Karnow, Ballentine Books, New York, 1989, page 9.

³ Page 20.

phrased it more succinctly: ‘It’s not what you are and what you can do, but who you are, your name and your connections.’”⁴

This is the precise point of disagreement between traditional Filipino culture and Unitarian Universalism. For over 50 years, Filipino clergy and lay people have said “No, it’s not who you are in terms of your family name and your connections. It *is* what you are. You are the child of a loving God, not a judging God. It *is* what you can do -- what you can do to bring more love into the world by how you treat others. How that message must have resonated with poor farmers in remote rural areas!

Often we traveled with Rev. Rebecca Sienes, the daughter of the founder, who is the current president of the UU Church of the Philippines. She pointed to an elderly minister at one congregation and said he was the last surviving minister of her father’s generation. Sadly, her father, Toribio Quimada, was killed in the early 1980’s, presumably by paramilitary forces allied with the government. Communist rebels struggled with government forces in the rural districts where Rev. Toribio planted his churches. Rev. Rebecca believes that the paramilitary forces probably assumed that he was a Communist because he worked in areas where government forces clashed with Communists.

Someone from our group asked if we could visit the cemetery where there is a monument to Rev. Toribio and to his wife, Sergia. When we were gathered amidst the gray stones, she asked me to say a prayer. “Spirit of Life and Love,” I began. I gave thanks for her father’s example and asked for strength for all of us to continue to live out the values and promise of Unitarian Universalism.

The UU Church of the Philippines is guided by Principles, just as we are in this country. However, rather than affirming seven Principles, they affirm eight Principles. “There’s God.” according to the first Principle. In order to be accepted as a church in the religious landscape of the Philippines, it is necessary to affirm the existence of God. Edna, a young woman from the Calapayan congregation, gave me this letter to read to you:

⁴ Page 21.

“Beloved Partnership,

To all . . . I would like to greet you a pleasant day. Hope you are in good condition to each of you . . . I’m wondering you all, you came here also in our church . . . I want to see you all . . . I’m so, so very thankful to all for your full support in our church and pathway. And I pray to God, each of you, receive more blessings from God. Blessed from from your business, and good health to everybody.

I wish that some day, I came there in your place to visit you all. You know, I’m so very thankful to God that have a people like you, who’s willing to help, willing to support and have hearts of willingness to support. Once again, thank you, thank you to all of you. I’ll be waiting also your response. God blessed you all every time. Your friend, Edna”

I conclude with a vivid memory from our partner congregation in Calapayan. In that village, 10 of the 15 families in the village are Unitarian Universalist. There are about 50 people in the congregation. After the gathering inside the chapel, which looks sturdy and beautiful thanks to this congregation’s generosity, we had snacks on the table outside. Now, the Hospitality group here at Monte Vista UU Congregation supplies wonderful snacks after our Sunday service. But I have to say, munching on bananas, mangoes, cassava, pineapple, and rice at Calapayan was out of this world. Edna wielded a machete with great skill as she cut away the exterior of the pineapple and diced the interior into bite sized pieces.

Individual servings of cooked rice were distributed to each of us.

Each packet of rice was about the size of the palm of your hand. Strips of leaves – banana leaves, I think – were woven into an artistic, protective casing surrounding the rice. To snack on the rice, I unraveled the leaf strips. With each unraveling movement, I was conscious of the care and hospitality that went into the gift. I felt connected to the people in Calapayan and to the force that Barbara Wells calls the Weaver of our lives:

“O Spinner, Weaver, of our lives,

Your loom is love.

May we who are gathered here be empowered by that love
to weave new patterns of Truth
and Justice into a web of life that is
strong, beautiful, and everlasting.”

In the years to come, may our partnership with the Calapayan congregation become ever more
beautiful as a pattern of Truth and Justice. May it be so!