

Journey to the Khasi Hills
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I spent five months this past winter and spring in a really remote corner of India, visiting Unitarians. Now, some of you know that there are Unitarians up there, and when I was growing up, I had heard about there being Unitarians somewhere in India. But after hearing about them for so long, I really wanted to go and see for myself. And there is a Unitarian Union in that area, and it is made up of people who consider themselves a family in many ways. They are much more inter-related as a group of churches than Unitarian Universalists are here and just about any Unitarian you'd meet would feel he'd found a cousin if he met up with a Unitarian on the street. And the most important thing to know about them, is that they are not related to the Indians on the plains.

These people are tribal people, who lived with their own independent tribal governments until not so long ago, when the British conquered them in about the 1860's. Most of them are members of what is called the Hynniewtrep, which means seven huts. These seven huts are made up of 4 inter-related tribes down on earth (but all close by up in these mountains), and 3 sister tribes (who are all living up in the heavens). The four sister tribes each have their own name, and so although you will hear me talking about Khasi Unitarians--because that is the language used for interrelating, really there are Khasi Unitarians, Pnar Unitarians, Synteng Unitarians and War Unitarians. And also, due to missionary work on the part of these Unitarians, there are some few Unitarians not related to the Hynniewtrep tribes. But they are in the same region. And so it is a bit confusing. But I thought it would be better if you thought of them as a collection of tribal people right away. And not at all what we would traditionally think of as Indian people, like those who are part of the plains culture . . . wearing saris and eating hot curries, and all that. They are a collection of people all known as the Unitarian Union.

The songs we are singing today may be familiar to some of you, but I didn't choose them because I was in the mood for some old Christian recollection. I chose them instead, because they are favorites of the Khasi Unitarians. Now mostly they sing in Khasi, but there are some songs that they have in their hymnal in English, and these two are favorites. And Tom, my family and I all sang these songs quite a lot, because they'd try and stick in an English hymn especially for us. And Khasi's just love to sing. They sing strongly, even without any accompaniment. And the strength of their love for Unitarianism can be heard with the passion and the conviction with which they sing their hymns.

As I thought and thought about how I'd share the very rich experiences I had while I was there, I decided to follow the theme of the opening song: Hope, Faith and Love. For these are truly central themes to the Khasi Unitarians.

And so I'll start with hope. There is a lot of hope in my story. Of course, it starts with my hope to go. Many of you will remember that I planned this trip and did considerable historical research on it for several years . . . yet at the end it looked like I wouldn't go. But I kept on hoping, and kept on trying to get there. And eventually it did happen.

However, the best story of hope is the story of Hajom Kissor Singh himself. He was the founder of Unitarianism in the Khasi Hills, or as he termed it "The Religion of the One True God." He grew up in a context of the white, Christian missionaries having all the strength and power within the political context of the Britisher's rule. And even though he represented just the first generation of literate Khasi people, somehow he dared to think that he could create his own religion. He later hooked up with other people who had similar ideas, Unitarians in the U.S. and in England. But what hope he must have had, to persist in trying to found a religion, when quite clearly the real religions had Christian missionaries attached. At the time, the early Khasi Unitarians did hope that a missionary would be sent to help them through tough times of having their buildings burned down and so much slander said against them. And they told our Ann Arbor minister, Jabez Sunderland, their wishes when he visited them. And over the years they did have a few missionaries, most of them only visiting for short periods of time. They are a self-made religion, and now are proud of their own brand of Unitarianism.

The early years must have been incredibly hard, yet despite their small number the Unitarians there maintained hope. They carried on despite of many obstacles. I read a story of a single man in the village of Puriang who continued Unitarian services all by himself, just for himself, for about 12 years. The Christians had convinced people that Unitarianism was devil worship and so they all stayed away. Yet he had hope that someday they'd change, and indeed that hope prevailed and a strong village church exists there today. We had our Youth Wing Conference there, and it was huge.

That man's great granddaughter translated my first sermon given in the Khasi Hills.

Hope is still strong in the Khasi Hills. People have amazing hope for the future of Unitarianism, and for their own future. I visited small villages, in very remote and rugged places. And one of the primary things they wanted to talk about was

how to spread Unitarianism to other villages. These rural people, a group of farmers, with little education and no minister to lead them, would travel around to different villages and hold services in the center of town, creating a few followers in new places. They thought that Unitarianism had so much value, that they really hoped it would thrive.

And in many ways Unitarianism is a big hope for the future of the Khasi culture. This is a tribal culture that is really struggling with the march of westernization into their lives. People who's grandparents walked everywhere they went are now using cell phones, watching cable tv, and some young adults are even cyber cafe surfing. At least that's true in the cities. These are enormous changes, and yet the tribal culture and language are struggling to stay in place. Unitarianism, offers a chance for people to maintain much more of their tribal culture than the Christian religions that are so popular there. So there is much hope, that this religion will help remind the young of the value of being Khasi.

The next idea I want to talk to you about is Faith.

Faith played a prominent role in my experience there.

I should start off by saying that one of the most time intensive activities I experienced while there, I ended up doing without any notion in advance that I would be doing so. When I arrived in the Khasi Hills, I found that there was a strong desire on the part of the people to understand more about theology. I organized a theology group that met at my house twice a week for nearly the whole time I was there. This group struggled to articulate their own Khasi Unitarian theology. I discovered that they didn't really have any books of theology, or much of anything that helped to inform their theology other than their own life experience. And yet their theology, unlike UU's here in the states is fairly uniform. People tended to express the same beliefs. However, not having anything written down, and without having taken time to explore their faith thoroughly, they found it very difficult to talk to others about what is central to their faith.

Eventually we sat and talked and from these discussions I learned a lot about their faith. One of the primary aspects of their faith is love of God. This is not our western, Judeo/Christian God. This God which they speak of comes out of their own original tribal understandings of God. And yet even though they may quote extensively from the Bible about God, when asked about God, what they describe is a God very different from our western idea of God. It is more like what most modern UU's might describe as goddess: the creative, nurturing, ever-present force of love in their world. In fact, the Khasi speak of father-mother God in their hymnal.

In Khasi language, BLEI means God. The word BLEI is a condensed form of BA-LAH-EI, which means "Who can do for you without expecting anything in return from you" or "Who does for free". For Khasis, God created the world and the universe for the sake of creation and His/Her love is always there in plenty. For this creation, God is believed to expect no reward or payment.

The Khasis have a love affair with God as one of my Khasi friends said. God is so important in their lives. This is true of all the Khasis, Christians, traditional tribal believers, and Unitarians alike. And so, although, like us they don't have any creed to become a Unitarian, they all do believe in God. And when pushed about it, (and I did push more than once!) they just can't even conceive of a person who couldn't or wouldn't believe in God. They would express how sorry they would feel for someone who didn't have such love in their lives. To them God meant love.

Besides God being intimately present, they had some other ideas about God that are different from the average Western concept of God. Most people didn't believe that God was all-powerful, and laughed at those who made the mistake of praying to God for personal items or favors. One person in the theology group once said, "Well, I'd only pray for things I know I'd get, for it would be foolish to pray for anything else."

And I have to tell you about their motto, which is "To Nangroi." It is commonly translated into English as "Keep On Progressing". I think, in my Khasi studies, I'd translate it more as "Be an agent of progress." Yet no matter how it is translated, this is a very important part of their faith. It is in this motto that two theological ideas ring out. One of them in that religion is alive and must ever grow and develop, just as it is the duty of each human being to grow and develop.

The other idea that springs up from their motto is that, although you could reside near the doorway to god's house when you died (according to local expression), heaven and hell are states of being here on earth, and you have control over your life. It is up to you to be what they would call 'a righteous person.' Meaning, live a good life, spreading the love of God, and then you will experience heaven. Live a life of doing wrong, and your life will be hell. It is definitely what we in the trade call, "Salvation by character." Although they don't call themselves Universalists, they generally have ideas of salvation very similar to ours.

The amazing thing about the Khasi faith, to me, was that: despite the fact that they had no trained clergy, so the services were really of very mixed quality;

despite the fact that they have very little outside money compared to the Catholics and the evangelical Christians - and so had little in the way of exciting community projects, like BIG hospitals.

despite these things, which might seem as big burdens to people who are already marginalized citizens, this faith was really alive, sustaining them.

Their children came all on their own to Sunday school in the morning. (There is an afternoon service for everyone.) And the children and youth ran their own Sunday school service before and after classes. They knew what to do, and chose to spend their time doing it. The youth preached sermons, said prayers, and led the service, while everyone in the community looked on. And the elders were vital. They sat up front during the services, up on the platform. And their voices lifted up strongly in song, leading the others on. They spoke at special gatherings, and had key positions of authority. Those adults with kids came to services, and participated as they could - just like each of us with kids juggling our many and varied responsibilities. But you got the feeling that many of their churches were growing, if not in numbers than in the strength of Unitarianism. And all were alive because of those who really cared for them.

And care they did. What perhaps is most touching is the dedication of those people who are called church visitors. There are no trained clergy in the Unitarian Union, and so everything that's going to happen, happens through volunteers. There are some people who are so good in the work that they do for their congregation, that they are selected to be church visitors. This means that they not only continue to do the work in their own congregation, but they also go out and help with the small rural churches to keep them nurtured and feeling cared for. They do baby dedications, marriages and funerals. They preach sermons, and visit the sick in their homes. They do things like, say, run a shoe drive in their own church and bring shoes out to the village children who have so little. They give up their weekends, in traveling long distances on what I would say were very, very, bumpy roads in crowded buses, or on a motorcycle, to care for their fellow Unitarians. These church visitors really embody love.

And that's what we are talking about now: love. Our third topic.

There was one church visitor who I traveled with to visit several churches.

He is known as Bah Muhkim. He is a university lecturer and research assistant during the week days and a Dad and big brother to several younger family members who he supports so that they can get a college education. He is one who is filled with love, and lives that love. Let me tell you one of his stories. Once when he was visiting a village he met

a newborn baby whose mother was hospitalized and unable to care for it. So he just stepped up and figured something out. He arranged for a young single Unitarian woman to come from a different village and care for this baby. He knew that they would need money to survive so he enlisted the support of another urban Unitarian, and together for almost two years they have brought money to help that baby. I met that baby when I visited the village. He put cash straight into the hand of that child.

Once I visited a village with him, and when we went to tour their school building (it was a three room Unitarian school) we discovered that the tin roof had peeled back in the typhoon that had gone through about three weeks before. One of the school rooms was open to the sky for about half the length of the classroom. They were just entering rainy season, and although it wasn't raining buckets yet, this school was right next to the town that has been on record as the wettest place on earth due to powerfully strong torrential rains. I looked at the roof in dismay and thought 'what can I do?' I had no idea how easy it was to fix a tin roof, but it seemed like it should be easy enough. And worse, I had no idea if roofing was cheap or dear in the Khasi Hills. You never knew in this place, what would be cheap and what would cost a fortune. So I asked him how much he thought it would cost. About Rs. 400 was his estimate. Well, that's less than \$10, but a lot of money in a place where a loaf of bread is Rs.10. But he immediately had an idea and said, if you put up Rs. 200 and I put up Rs. 200, that would cover it. And he was right. Even though I worried about spending too much money while I was there traveling, I could easily put in the Rs. 200. And we slipped it to the school mistress and went on our way. Back to the city and to dry roofs.

Last week the Unitarian Union celebrated their anniversary. Now, church visitors are always invited to be special honored guests at the bigger churches to give out prizes at the contests, and be dignitaries. But Bah chose a different path for himself, and celebrated at one of the smallest churches in the Union. I've been there, and it is very small and in a very poor village, on the steepest of hillsides. I remember joking with the young men who took me, that we might have to take our shoes off and dig our toes into the mud to get up the hillside it was so steep and so slippery! So he went there and celebrated with a handful of people as the rain poured down. Drenched but happy, he returned home on his motorcycle. And wrote me an e-mail about the experience.

Now I've said a lot about him, and that's because we spent some good time together. But the whole Union works that way. People spreading God's love, and not in any saccharine kind of way, but with a deep and abiding interest to do something meaningful with their time and their money. Its hard to imagine, when they live every day in the face of our

incredible wealth and our posh existence. Oh yes, cable TV brings them HBO, Cartoon Network, Discovery Channel and all the rest into their living rooms just like it does into yours. They know how we live!

You know, in that city church that I lived near, even the richest of people in that church didn't have a flush toilet. And its not because flush toilets weren't available . . it was just that they could live with their trench-in-the-concrete-flushed-by-a-scoop-of-water kind of toilet just fine. And then their money could go to helping out children in the rural areas, allowing them to go to school, or get medical care.

Oh, and I loved it when the women's wing told me of their on-going fundraiser. What a gift of love. It shows in some respects how far apart we are from each other. Each time a woman in the congregation cooks rice, she sets aside one handful for the woman's wing. They cook rice a couple times every day, so it is something they think about, their women's wing, a couple times each day. Imagine asking people to do that here! With their funds, they help in development projects in rural villages. One time they showed me a road they had put in, saying that there was plan to have a big church meeting there a few years back, but the road had been impassible. So the woman's wing used their fund to build a new road.

It was these kinds of experiences that left me feeling like they had so much to teach me about how to be a good Unitarian. And they taught me by extending that love to me for all the months that I was there. Now the Khasi's really are a shy people, and yet they extended their love to me over and over again. And gave me wonderful gifts, but not just of things, but of time to take me places, and show me things, and to teach me about their culture, and really to create a wonderful experience for my whole family.

And as I was, in many ways feeling like it was they who should be teaching me, particularly the women also spoke to me about how significant it was for them to have me be there as a woman leader. And they really pushed to get me around preaching and visiting and doing everything I could at every kind of service, primarily because they liked the different style I had, that feminine approach to doing things, they said. And that enabled me to feel very close to those women. One young woman who seemed to take an active role in the services really impressed me with her presentation. On the week of her graduation from college with honors, I went over to her house after church for a party and she sat next to me on the couch, and told me that she hoped she would be able to preach sermons as well as me some day. It was very humbling, yet at the same time, made me so pleased that I was able to be there. That they were

able to have that experience. That she was able to have that experience herself. Because we do have things to share with each other. And love can spread both ways.

And that is the last thing that I want to talk with you about. How to spread our love, and how to do that, to do some good, but with dignity.

Being in any third world, or developing nation makes you stop and think about how much you have. Translating your American dollars into rupees, or any other currency, makes you see how much you can buy with so little money. And from there, it is easy to realize that you can help here in such small ways, and yet have a big impact. It is difficult to imagine how little money it takes to do things there compared to here, for all kinds of things. Yes, there are some things, like cyber cafes that are just as pricey there as they are here. But even for someone like me (not at all wealthy by American standards), I found myself thinking, I could spend so little and help so much. \$10 fixed a roof and as a result there were probably 40 kids not sitting in the rain after that. I met a young Unitarian fellow who is from a remote village, but he has managed to get his high school diploma and wants to start college. His mother doesn't want him to go, because she can't afford it. The crops have had a bad year with some kind of blight in the trees. So he asks if I can help him out. To stay in the city, and buy books and pay for school he can do it all for a couple hundred dollars. No, he's not going to live the kind of life our kids are going off to school live . . . but he doesn't need to live that life. He would just be happy with a roof over his head and a place to light a small fire to cook some rice and tea.

So as I pondered how to have a big, strong effect. And how to do it with dignity. I decided that perhaps the best approach I could think of would be to set up an adopt-a-child program using the existing school system the Unitarians already have up and running. They have access to so many kids already. And currently many city people live much simpler lives than they could, so that these kids can have schooling. And so the impact of helping out schools would not only help the rural Unitarian children, but also all the church members in the cities. These urban, anchor church's budgets might be able to be increased a bit, if they weren't giving so much of it to the running of these schools themselves.

Schooling is an important idea in the Khasi Hills. Most people I talked to loved the idea of school and felt very strongly about its value. I rode in an Ambassador cab one day, coming home from a rural visit. That cab picked up 5 of us, and then picked up another 12 people. That made 16 in one car all together. And you know, four of those 16 were kids

in their school uniforms with their backpacks. They were catching a cab out in the rural area and riding about 30 minutes into the nearby town so that they could go to school. Being packed in the cab like that . . . that was part of their daily experience. But it shows how they valued school.

Now we lived near Shillong peak, the highest peak in the area. One day when we were climbing it for recreation we met a young man in his school uniform. When asking him if he was going to the peak to see some friends, he explained, no he lived on the other side of the mountain and had to climb over it with his book bag every day, and down into town. It was not an easy climb. And book bags there are really heavy . . . just ask my kids. But education is valued. And kids proudly crowded onto rough benches, would happily share with me what they were learning, their smiles bright and their demeanor proud.

Whatever we do, we need to do it so that that pride and happiness remains. But I believe that we can set up a program here in the US that would hook up individual UU's from here up with Khasi kids through the schools. And we can use the schools as a kind of social service organization to make sure that the kids get a good lunch each day (just like the free lunch programs work here in this country,) that they have their books and notebooks provided for them, instead of the usual need of having to buy them, and of supplying the uniforms. These uniforms are a very big expense but a real part of every Indian school education. And once we get the program up and running, we can figure out with the teachers what really is needed and what they can manage. And, perhaps most importantly we could begin life-long friendships with people from far corners of the globe. People who know a great deal about spreading God's love. People who have a unique and different vision of how things are, and how to deal with things. You can't meet a Khasi or Pnar or War or Synteng person and not be affected by them. They have their own strong tribal culture, which unlike our native tribal cultures, is still strong and alive in many facets of their society. People still speak their own language, even when they know English perfectly well and use it all day at work. They read Khasi-language newspapers, and church services in their own language. Who they are is still strong in them, and knowing one will make a difference for you, even from afar I believe.

In truth, there are many different ways we could help, and I know that this project is ambitious. Like the shoe drive we ran when Fran Lyman was in Morocco . . . we could send shoes. Most of the rural people only have flip-flops, even for winter wear. We could send coats . . . it does get cold there. We could send mittens, hats, or even long underwear. We hopefully will be sending books for a school library . . . since that is a project that Tom Ewing has said he would help

them with.

But somehow, I want to get beyond a handout, into a kind of relationship with people. Yes, money would be involved. But I am hoping that for the kids, it wouldn't be money as much as a really cool school that just had a lot more for them than before. And some really cool American friends that are writing them letters, and sending them pictures and asking them how they are doing. Saying to them "you matter". In the face of the march of our western culture, in the face of the Indians from the plains, in the face of Christian missionaries, this 'you matter', is the most important message we can give them. I said it over and over again, in my sermons, in my talks, in my idle conversations, yet it didn't seem I could say it enough.

Now, I need some people to help me explore and flesh out this program. I began talking about my ideas of this program in the Khasi Hills before I left, and people there liked the idea. But, it will take some work before it flies.

And its really very important for me to find some way to connect with these people not just here in Ann Arbor, but all over the country. Right now we send our President or some official to go to some BIG gathering. And they go and act like a dignitary, as that is what is expected of them. And that doesn't seem to be the best way to connect with people. But I am hoping some of you will tell me it sounds like a project you'd like to work on, and we can work on it together.

I really must go back there someday soon. The relationships I established are unlike anything anyone has done in recent years, and they told me just that much. It would be a shame to lose that valuable connection. My hope is to bring some UU's on a trip there, to enjoy the natural beauty, (which is stunning), to experience the crush of a third-world city, (which is overwhelming), and mostly to meet some new friends.

I also hope in time we can bring some Khasi's here for training. And I have good hopes we'll have one visit this winter, because she's in Boston now studying there. So perhaps we'll get to meet her soon.

I hope you have enjoyed meeting some of my friends today, if only in story. There is so much more to tell, and so I hope you'll get to hear more over the coming months. And when I get my book finished. But most of all that you'll remember the faith, hope and love that makes up the Khasi religion.

Now please indulge me by turning to your neighbor and saying "Khublei." It means, god bless, also hello and good bye. It was the one Khasi word Jabez Sunderland learned when he visited over 100 years ago, and he said he said it

all the time. And its still just as meaningful and useful today in reaching out to our friends. So, Khublei!