

Eva in the Hills



Our contemporary connection to the Khasi Hills had its beginnings in the “old” UU building on Washtenaw Avenue, where 100-year-old bound copies of “The Unitarian,” decades old copies of blueprints for the building, and assorted files of old correspondence and church records lay hidden, side-by-side, in drawers, and cedar closets, and garrets under the eaves. I recall one day in the late 1990s that our assistant minister, Eva Hochgraf and I were hovering over a very old piece of literature describing the travels of Jabez Sunderland in northeast India, and wondering pensively what was going on in that part of the world in our times. I wondered if the religion were even alive there any longer – or if it had faded away over the intervening 100 years. Eva, more enlightened than I was, knew that it still existed, but she was surprised to learn of the long ago Ann Arbor connection. Was the visit of Rev. Sunderland remembered, we wondered. Were their hymnbooks, printed in Ann Arbor, still being used?

Just after the turn of the millennium, Eva packed up her young family and headed off to northeast India on her sabbatical to see what she could learn.

There in Shillong she found the Sunderland Memorial School. One question answered!

She also found the Khasi Unitarians decidedly still practicing their self-made religion and fiercely proud of it, their theology informed by their own life experiences. She heard stories of hope and determination – of their great difficulties in keeping their faith alive in the face of being called “devil-worshippers” – of one man in the small village of Puriang – Hashen’s home village – who carried on services for himself – and only himself – for 12 years! There was now a strong village church in Puriang – and that man's granddaughter translated the first sermon that Eva preached in the Khasi Hills.

She found a people whose faith was marked by their love of God. Not the western, Judeo-Christian god, but a god that comes from their own original tribal understanding of God – something that is more akin to what UU's in this country might describe as “goddess” – the creative, nurturing, ever present force of love in the world. We have a dear Khasi friend who often refers to this force not as “God,” but as “the Divine.”

She found a religious movement which despite having (at that time) no formally trained clergy, very little outside funding, and no LARGE and EXCITING community service projects ... despite all this ... had a self-made faith that was truly alive and sustaining them. She found a religion whose motto is “To Nang Roi,” which translates as “keep on progressing,” or “be an agent of progress,” or “keep evolving” depending on who is translating.

She found a people who despite their lack of material wealth were full of love and knew how to share it. While visiting rural villages with a Khasi friend from the state capital, she watched him arrange infant care for a young mother who was hospitalized and unable to care for her baby, then go home and enlist another urban church member to join him in providing money for the family – an arrangement that was to continue for at least two years; she reached into her own pocket as he reached into his to provide on-the-spot repair funds for a village school whose roof had been peeled back by a typhoon at the beginning of monsoon season in the wettest place on earth. In town she heard the story of the rice set aside by the Women's Wing – how each time a woman cooks rice for her own family (which is at least twice a day) she sets aside a handful that will be sold for funding development projects in rural villages.

As Eva was preparing to return to Ann Arbor, her thoughts turned to how WE could share OUR love, and how to do some good, but to do it with dignity – so our Unitarian friends there could retain their pride. She realized how far a US dollar would go in the Khasi villages, and how by helping to support the small schools there we could help not only the village children, but the urban, anchor churches, who could then budget some of the funds they would ordinarily send to the schools to other worthy projects.

She envisioned a program connecting individual Unitarian Universalists from Ann Arbor with Khasi students in a village school – **a program** that would help provide nutrition for the students, supply them with books and notebooks, and perhaps even their school uniforms, which are a big part of education in India – **a program** in which we would listen to the teachers to learn what it is they really need and what they can manage on their own – **a program** that *most importantly* would encourage life-long friendships between people on opposite sides of the globe.

In all of this she wanted to go “beyond a handout, into a kind of relationship with people” that would – yes – include money, but that would also provide the students with a “cool school” that had more opportunities for them than before, and some *really* cool American friends that were writing to them, sending pictures, and asking them how they were doing – saying to them, “you matter.” In her words, “in the face of the march of our western culture, in the face of [the influx of] the Indians from the plains, in the face of the 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.”

Khublei. God bless. Blessed be.

Comments on the Khasi Hills Sponsor a Student Program

Many of you have supported the Khasi Hills Sponsor a Student program. Some of you since its inception. If you are interested in learning more about, or supporting the program you may:

Find us in the Social Hall through November 9.

Leave contact information in our mailbox in the church office

Attend one of our meetings, the second Thursday of each month in the Sunderland Library.

Presented by Cathy Doherty and Allen Duncan, October 26, 2014