

Rev. Linda Simmons
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Flipping the Script of Independence

In February and March 2018, Gary and I will be traveling to India for two months. For the first several weeks, we'll be staying in the Khasi Hills in northeast India with Unitarian minister Rev. Darihun Khriam. The Khasi Hills are in the rainforests of India on the northern side of Bangladesh. In February, Darihun tells us they are very cold and we'll need big sweaters and blankets at night. After we leave Darihun we'll be traveling to central India to do some work in an Narmada Interfaith Welfare Society whose mission it is to promote and educate peace between religions, cultures and economies locally and worldwide. Our friend Niradhara who runs the Society tells us that it is so hot in February that we should think hell.

India is a land of extremes. It is not a restful place. I lived there as many of you know for a year when I was 21, so many moons ago. It is intense, fiery, fierce and everyone is so up close and that what is personal and public is redefined in new and surprising ways for westerners. In a land of 1,169 *people* per square mi, sharing space is a different matter than we think of here.

Darihun is a minister to 8 churches in the Khasi Hills. She travels to a different one every Sunday. Like the orchids that grow plentifully in the area, Unitarianism found favorable conditions for germination in the Khasi Hills. Within a radius of 50 miles in the highlands of northeast India, 98 percent of the over 9000 of the country's Unitarians live.¹

The Khasi people are a matrilineal tribal people who came to India from Southeast Asia, whose culture they resemble to this day. Their native religion, that taught service to others through one god and the recognition of various earth and sky deities, was brought into conflict with Christianity which came to the region in 1835 through the British and waves of Christian missionaries.²

Into that environment, Hajom Kissor Singh, the founder of Khasi Unitarianism was born in 1865. Singh, educated as a Christian in missionary schools, could not accept a religion that taught hell, fear and sin. He broke away to form what became Unitarianism.³

Rev. Darihun, the woman who will host Gary and I, has 3 children and her husband is a public school teacher. She has been a minister longer than I. She asked when I come if I could be part of training her lay people how to be better leaders. I responded, Darihun, how is it that I could train your lay people? You know what you need more than I. She said, But Linda, I have never been to divinity school like you. You can tell us what you learned there. And you went to Harvard!

¹ <http://www.icuu.net/node/75>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Oy Vey. This is when a name really is a liability and builds up false pretenses! I asked her, But don't you need a garden planted or school children taught English which I did long ago in India? Gary asked, Don't you need any ditches dug? She laughed.

Darihun then asked me about my previous travels to India and I told her about living in a convent for a time with Indian Catholic nuns and working at an orphanage with young children, so many of whom were without limbs or whom were blind or differently abled. She responded right away, "What a happy time for you!" I remember that time in India in the convent in the middle of big city.

I had a small room that did not have a bathroom or a lock on the door. I had to go down the hall to a tiny compartment that did not have a shower but buckets of cold water one would pour over one's head. The orphanage work broke my heart. It was not a rich orphanage, but a poor one and the children did not have enough of anything. I felt lost and alone. I was not happy. I remember saying to myself very often that I did not feel safe in this environment.

There is a long history in our country of stringing the expectations of safety and happiness together. I read you here a section of the Declaration of Independence: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

This is the declaration upon which we are founded and it was written at a time when men surely those who were not men were not equal and, when rights were not unalienable, when life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were believed the deserved fruits of some and not others. Safety and happiness, were and are still, not considered the rights of all. My favorite time at the convent was morning prayer, on my knees, a clean floor beneath us, words that I remembered from my Catholic upbringing, a cross with a broken Jesus hanging before us, the Indian heat not attached to the day with its relentless grasp and the sisters and their voices rising and we would become one for this brief time, the city teeming outside the walls, our voices holding us, rocking us, calling to a god that felt impossibly far away.

And then we would walk to the orphanage and I would lift an armless child for a bath and recoil in myself because of the dirty sheets and the smells and the heat and the fear in me and I would try to smile and be good and strong and filled with hope, and I would fail and fail and fail and pray and pray and pray and fail again.

And I think if I had another Declaration, not of Independence but of Interdependence, not one that promised happiness and safety but that we would not look away when another was afraid, that when we were uncomfortable we would not feel we had a right to comfort

but to humanity, that we had a duty to stand and be brave enough to know that we existed through each other, no matter our color or gender or language or race or ability or how we praised what we could not understand or even sometimes feel.

If we had a Declaration of Love not of Independence but a Declaration that promised that we would see each other to the end of it all, no matter what it was a declaration that said if anyone was not free then we were all bound, that comfort and happiness were dependent and that safety was not anyone's unalienable right unless it was everyone's unalienable privilege.

I often took long walks after working in the orphanage, or I did when I learned that I would still be able to find my way through that maze of a city back again in one piece. One day, I wandered through that deep city, cows in the middle of the road, rickshaw drivers yelling, people hawking things from stalls on stilts, like single cigarettes, rolls of this and that bound up in string and leaves and paper, and sometimes an offer of opium, heat and smells and traffic that makes 5 corners in mid summer look like a pastoral scene...and I fought through and was carried along in all of this to the sea.

A woman came by as I got there, she was in a worn sari and as she approached, she held out her baby to me and gestured, please, take her. I shook my head no, no and backed away. She followed me and held out her infant child again and again, please she gestured, tears streaming down her face, speaking in Hindi, take her. I put my hands out in front of me, no, no, no. This went on for a while and then I sat down by the sea that offered no breeze on the cement levy and she sat near me and we wept together, the child in tattered cloth, hungry, wide eyed, me clean and fed and with my skin glaring in the sun like metal. I took the child in my arms and wept.

I learned something deeper than happiness or something that lives inside of happiness that day. And it did not come from being free or independent or safe. It came from risking something, closeness to this woman and her baby, closeness to the fear in me of getting caught up in their pain and the pain in me that they touched, the risk of feeling the brokenness they mirrored inside of me.

I am not sure what to call what I found. Maybe it was a kind of humanity, a kind of wholeness, a realization, in my bones, that we are connected through our flesh and blood and beating hearts, our longing and birthing and seeking of love, and that when we can get inside of that, it makes a difference and everyone around us becomes different too, we become part of each other, we see them and ourselves as tied up in an intricate dance of human beings seeking humanity. I understood with my clothes stuck to me in the heat and that little child's hungry eyes looking into mine, that safety and happiness cannot be the privilege of the few and the free. That the only happiness that we can know is tied up in our willingness to increase the measure of love and justice in this world.

"That must have been a happy time for you," Darihun said.

I have been thinking often about what I will possibly offer her lay leaders that will feel studied and learned enough. I think I will offer that at divinity school I learned that

American Unitarianism comes from a context that began in Europe before the 1500s, from people risking everything for each other, just as the Khasi Unitarian history began, and that understanding this history and learning it at Divinity School with other people on their way to become ministers, people who decided to devote their lives to its telling and vision and service, broke my heart open again and again until I once more understood that a Declaration of Interdependence is all that keeps us alive, and this has kept me alive since.

I'll tell them that all I am sure of is that all true leadership must find the heart of interdependence to be successful.

And then I'll hope there's a garden to dig or children to teach.

Actually, Darihun told us that there is an orphanage in the Khasi Hills not far from where she lives and that she will share me with that orphanage contact since as she said again with such surety, I was happy there.

I pray that this time, I'll know how to be there. I pray that this time, I'll remember the way to happiness.

Amen.