

The Shadow Unveilers
Sermon, April 15, 2018
Rev. Linda Simmons

Who are You Now is a question that formed around me as soon as I landed in Kathmandu, Nepal. Who are you now Linda Simmons, Reverend, who are you when you cannot breathe the air because it is so dense with pollution and the rush of people and cows and traffic is so intense that you want to laugh and scream and stand still right in the middle of it to test its humanity, to give in and give up and surrender to the pull of life and destruction and somehow still love? Still so much love.

Who are you Now Linda Simmons, Reverend Linda Simmons when there is no water, or when the toilet is a hole in the ground surrounded by flies and a filth that you have never before experienced? Who are you now when the hands that serve you tea are as dirty as the cup it is in and flies land around it all but the smile is so true? Who are you now Linda Simmons as you ache all over climbing up and up into an altitude that challenges your lungs and will? Who are you now when there is no food you can eat and no water you can drink and who are you now when you cannot shower or brush your teeth and who are you now when you are cold, so cold and there is no heat and who are you now when the joy of the people is so good and whole and welcoming and real that all of your petty complaints shame you and who are you now when you have grown weary of this question and its answers and who are now when you the monks bless you and your meditations reach the stars and who are you now Linda Simmons, Reverend on sabbatical? Who are you now?

This question and its answer were rich guides for me in the Unitarian Annie Margaret Barr Children's Village. Rev. Annie Margaret Barr was a British Unitarian who dedicated her life to the people of the Khasi Hills in Meghalaya (which means 'abode of the clouds' in Sanskrit), India, located in the Northeast corner, above Bangladesh and below Bhutan.

She lived in the Khasi Hills for 40 years and opened schools for children as well as brought medical resources to the area. She also started an orphanage which closed when she died in 1973. Her ashes are still there in the Khasi Hills where she is revered.

The story of how Unitarianism came to these hills goes back to Hajom Kissor Singh born in 1865 who lived all his life in the Khasi Hills and when he came in contact with Christian missionaries felt that god and love and Jesus must be kinder, more willing to love, less constructed around hell and damnation. He became a Unitarian through his own studies and through contact with American Unitarians.

He founded a Unitarian church in the Khasi Hills where there are now more than 40 churches having some 10,000 members. We visited several of these churches with great joy! How magical to be in a place where saying the word "Unitarian" was a ticket to welcome and acceptance when English was not spoken.

The Annie Margaret Barr Children's Village, located in a small Unitarian village in the Khasi Hills opened in February 2009. All of the existing orphanages in the Khasi Hills until that time were religiously affiliated. The Unitarian Khasi community felt uncomfortable sending their orphaned children to orphanages that would likely convert them to faiths other than Unitarianism.

The Annie Margaret Barr Children's Village houses 10 boys and 14 girls ages 6-18. They have 16 staff which includes two mothers and one father, a part time doctor and a health worker, a counsellor, a case worker, an educator, an accountant, two cooks/gardeners and two helpers, a house-keeper and a Superintendent. We met all of these people and were moved by their love, commitment, joy and belief in the values of Unitarianism. What makes them Unitarian, or how would I know they were Unitarian if I did not know I asked them and they did not tell me?

They told me that the greatest thing that unites them beyond the belief in one god who is mother/father god and a god of love and Jesus as a great teacher and the need to respect all life and other human beings was the understanding that if we did wrong, we were responsible for this wrong in the here and now. Jesus or God would not fix it in some afterlife. We need to care for our wrongs, be accountable, ask for forgiveness, make amends in this lifetime.

This is what they teach the Unitarian children of the Annie Margaret Barr Children's Village, this is what the children teach each other in their Children's Church each Sunday that they led themselves at 7:30am in the morning. These people, these humble, brave Unitarian people...how they asked me to be a better person just by being with them.

Who are you now Linda Simmons, Rev. Linda as so many called me or Miss Linda as the children called me. Can you help me, Miss Linda do you want to play Miss Linda? Miss Linda do you want some tea? Miss Linda do you want to sing with us?

How we loved the singing! Falling asleep at the Annie Margaret Barr Children's Village in Kharang in the Khasi Hills chatter, laughter, outbursts of screaming in some kind of joyous reverie, and then a breaking into song...Khasi Unitarian songs usually.

And then back to playing, talking, laughing...

Until they would say a prayer and go to sleep. Even then in the night sometimes we would hear them wake in a bad dream or with whispers to those they called their mothers who worked there and cooked and cleaned and painted the roof and gardened and loved them and helped them with homework and sewed their clothes and taught them how to be moral, ethical human beings, these children left at such early ages.

They come to the Annie Margaret Barr Children's Village, like Alisha Mary and Esha Mary who came to the village only 5 months before we arrived whose mother had died of malaria and whose father could not care for them.

They came with hair matted and clothes filthy and skin infected and the children washed them and brushed their hair and cared for them, until the mothers took over. They both couldn't settle down, couldn't settle in. Especially the little one, Alisha, 6 years old. She thrashed and screamed and acted out. She had only the Khasi tongue then, just 5 months ago.

When I met her and fell in love with her, Gary and I have decided to sponsor her, she could sing the ABC song, count in English to 40 and spell her letters in English to 20.

The bell to wake the children would ring at 5:00am but Gary and I would rise at 4am, just to have time to face ourselves first. He would go to the kitchen to get me a bowl of hot water to wash my face and hands. There was no indoor running water. The kitchen had a dirt floor, one window that was always flung wide open to the hills and gardens and ducks and laundry, one gas burning burner and one fire pit that always had a wok like pot of something on it with logs burning. There were small stools too, about 1 foot high, where the cook sat, always surrounded by children.

There was always a tea pot going on that gas burner. Dishes were washed at the river most frequently or at the end of a faucet that ran rainwater that collected off the roof into a huge plastic drum. But water was low just before the monsoon. We bathed, did our dishes and washed our clothes at the river which was a 20 minute walk down a muddy path, around swamps and ponds, below the gardens where organic food is grown and bees are kept.

After washing my face and hands, and using a toilet that did not flush and could not accept toilet paper, I was ready to face....myself. Who are you now? Some days were harder than others. I was cold often in those mornings. I wanted to shower and feel clean and brush my teeth indoors not afraid of snakes or water that would give me a belly ache.

Facing myself day after day in India and Nepal, not only at this orphanage, I saw shadows and tricksters and mythical creatures out of storybooks dancing around me with my name on them. I will tell you more about these sacred teachers as we go this year, I know you will recognize some of them too.

And then the children would awake and roll into the big room, the main room, another room with a cement floor and big windows and tables pushed against the wall for eating and studying later. In the mornings, we just gathered, sleepy, the women and girls wrapped in our Ka Jinkups (Janita gave me one to wear too), and a child would read a passage from the Khasi Bible and then they would sing a song in Khasi and one of these children, these young children, would put down the bible and pray with their eyes closed and we would all shut our eyes, unwashed, hungry, cold, in our dirty clothes with our various shadows dancing around us, and prayer filled us and healed us and made us one.

After prayers, we would all go outside for yoga. This yoga was led by one of the mothers and one of the students. They would stand in front of us and lead us in exercises and we would breathe and the breathing would end in an OM. By the time we got to this OM, this

OM said by Unitarians one and all who all believe in the one creator called God, our hearts and minds were as open as the hills and sky.

And then it was time for the thought of the day. This too would be led by a student, said in English first and then Khasi. Some of them were as follows:

*Success is failing 9 times and getting up 10. Jon Bon Jovi

*How well did you love? How fully did you love? How deeply did you learn to let go? The Buddha

* Acquiring knowledge...it guides us to happiness, it sustains us in misery. The Prophet Mohammed

And then one of the mothers, Ianita, would tell the children how to interpret this thought of the day, in Khasi. I could feel her meaning, about living, loving, braving, giving, holding oneself in a certain way to receive the blessings that were available. She mentioned that a lot I think, that when we give from ourselves what we have to give, really give it not just half heartedly but fully and open our hearts to receive what is around us, blessings are possible.

This kind of ministry felt so real to me. To be in the presence of these children, this mother who came from a poor village and was poor herself, who had suffered terrible physical ailments before she came to the orphanage and who had healed herself through the very yoga and thought training that she offered the children, this kind of authentic ministry, I grew brave inside of it. I think that is the word. I grew brave enough to face myself. I grew brave enough to be one person with one heart and one life to live and to let it be my own- standing beside those children and those mothers.

And then it was time for tea, which was bread with no butter or jam and black tea with sugar. And then they studied for school, for the Annie Margaret Barr Unitarian School that they and most of the children in the village attend.

The village. The village that we walked through after the children dressed in their uniforms and brushed their hair and the older girls put hair ribbons in the pony tails of the younger girls....and they tied their patent leather shoes...we walked together to school down the dirt road through the village where there are chickens and cows and pigs and houses made of corrugated metal sheets nailed to concrete walls with one or two windows cut out that had no glass and from which smoke poured out. The children that poured with the smoke from these homes too, often 11-12 to one family, dressed in all kinds of clothes and hats with smiles so big and wide...playing with balls made of string and cloth.

Water came from a shared spigot and they filled huge aluminum containers they then carried on their heads. There were gardens and laundry blew on the lines and some had electricity and so few had phones so a village crier announced important meetings and events and deaths walking the dirt roads and yelling out.

After school, running, walking home, hand in hand, chores would happen. I have never seen children work with more ease, strength or lack of animosity. They swept, washed clothes and dishes at the river, gathered water at the local spigots, helped with cooking, took care of each other, mended things, combed each other's hair, helped each other think and feel through life.

And I would watch and listen and comb and touch and let myself be touched. They helped me these children. I call them *the healers*. They do not know they are healers. I was asked to say the prayers before meals once or twice and I told them they were the blessings, but it is not something one can tell another. This is something one must show another.

This is our village, this church, this meeting house, this place of our gathering. This is our community and center of nourishment and hope and shadow unveiling so that we can be stronger, better, more whole and clear and good when we face the rest of it all.

This is where we grow one another into our best versions of who we are. This is our place or strengthening and remembering and joy creating and learning to be forgiving and loving all at once. This is our place of letting: *Who am I now* shape us into the best versions of who we can be.

The children's village taught me to be the blessing while asking to be blessed, to count what is enough while noticing the lack, to let love make me whole even while smallness nips at my heals, to love as an act of being a Unitarian so that when they look at us, when they see us, they know we are Unitarian by our love, by our love.

It is good to be back with you. You are blessing on this earth and in my life.

Amen.