

Rev. Linda Simmons  
Principle in Action  
July 31, 2016

I have recently returned from a one week conference of The International Council of Unitarians and Universalists in the Netherlands. The president of this council is Rev. David Gyero, the minister of our partner church in Transylvania who has visited us here several times. It was good to see a familiar face when I arrived on Sunday sleep starved and far from our island home.

Though the Netherlands are not strange to me. I lived in Amsterdam for 2 years when I was in my late 20s and met my daughter's father there.

I had not returned for all these years in between so there were many moments of self discovery awaiting me when at the end of the conference, which was held outside of the city, I spent two days in Amsterdam.

But the moments that really broke me open were of discovering others. How much you would have loved to be at this conference with me my friends. Unitarians from the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi, Transylvania, and Britain, Holland, Australia, New Zealand and the States as well as other places told their stories of what it meant to them to be Unitarian, what their struggles were, what they loved, what they hoped to changed, what they had changed, what had changed them.

I listened to stories about what people risked to be Unitarian Universalist and thought about our principles in action, what that meant, how that looked in lives all over the world. It looks stunning my friends.

In Indonesia, my friend Ary with whom I rode old Dutch bicycles for 2 hours in the Netherland forests of Veluwe at 6am each morning, taught me much. He shared his spiritual odyssey with us during the conference. He and his family began as devoted Seventh Day Adventists in Indonesia and one day they attended a religion seminar that raised a question that changed their lives:

"If Jesus is God, how can he become our perfect example? If Jesus is 100% God and 100% man, how can we that are only 100% man follow his lead?"

He and his family who all live in a large complex: uncles, aunts, father, mother, several people his family has taken in- stayed up for one year into the night, risking their employment the next day with their weary minds and bodies, pouring over the bible and other texts, looking for proof of the trinity and divinity of Christ, doubting everything they had ever held dear. They were leaders in the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist community.

After one year, his family came to the conclusion that they there could be no trinity and that Jesus was a prophet and holy man but not god. In their 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist community, this news spread until one day, the minister, who was good friends with Ary's father and their whole family, from the pulpit pointed his finger and said to the family, "Get out, you are no longer welcome here!" Ary and his family came to understand soon after that they were Unitarians.

In order to start a new denomination in Indonesia, one must go before the Muslim government with signatures from 3 other churches.

They were worried this could not happen. But it came to pass that there was a change in the government and the in coming president was a good friend of Ary's father so they went to the government with their petition to become Unitarian and it was accepted. They were concerned at first that there would be opposition but then realized that the Muslims feel that the trinity is a non-monotheistic paganism and that Unitarianism is closer to the Muslim faith and so took heart. Just after this struggle, they were accused of being communist by another Christian church, a serious charge in their country with huge repercussion. The International Council of Unitarians and Universalists intervened on their behalf.

Ary says that in a country of 2.5 million and with their now Unitarian church of 250, they are literally 1 in a million! He is not daunted however.

On one of our bike rides I told him that though I had sacrificed much to be a minister, I did not think I ever really sacrificed anything to be Unitarian. He told me as I huffed and puffed to keep up with him, Ary is a professional bicyclist who races in the mountains of Indonesia, that Jesus says, "When you are on the path, it is not necessary to seek difficulties, they will come to you in good time."

I do not usually reflect on these interpretations of Jesus' words, but those words will not leave me. Ary lives out our principles. Especially I thought the 4<sup>th</sup> principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

There are also 6 Unitarian Universalist churches in Kenya. I met Emma Wanjiru and Ben Macharia from Kenya. Emma is in her 20s and was in my chalice circle group, a group that met at the end of each day to unravel the day's topics. I learned that there are 42 tribes in Kenya and that the churches in Kenya all represent different tribes. It is only in the Unitarian church that 7 different tribes meet in peace.

When I asked Ben, who is the minister of one of those churches, why he thought this was possible he said to me, "Unitarianism is about acceptance of other sources of truth besides the bible. This creates an understanding that other people are worthy and good. This is what separates the UU church from all the other churches in Kenya," he said, "the acceptance of others."

Emma told me that she thought that if there is trouble in their country in which one tribe begins to threaten another, she hopes that the UU church will be able to a sanctuary and take in members of the threatened tribe and offer them safety.

I heard so many of our principles from Emma and Ben, especially our 7<sup>th</sup> principle, Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

In Burundi, the Unitarian minister there was jailed and is now exiled in Canada, thanks to the financial intervention of the Candian Unitarians and Unitarians from around the world. I am going to read the words of Rev. Fulgence Ndagijimana directly:

“[Burundi] has been plagued with violence for many years, since we got independence in 1962. There was violence between Hutu and Tutsi, the main ethnic groups, and a series of killings in '65, in '72, '88, '93. But '93 seemed like a very serious turning point. Tutsi leaders had been in power for a long time and in '93 we got, for the first time, a Hutu leader elected, and then the president was killed after only 3 months in office, and a civil war started, with Hutu leaders getting angry and asking Hutu villagers to kill their neighbours. That's how 50 or 60 thousand people were killed in a very few days.

“And the civil war went on from 1994 up to 2005 when we got elections and the current president got elected. Before that, Tutsi and Hutu leaders went to Arusha, a city in Tanzania, where they reflected on all the problems, tried to analyze and understand, and they came up with a peace deal.

“The treaty was not perfect, but it was something we could live with, it definitely allowed the two communities to live in harmony for 10 years. One of the things the treaty said was power would be shared and the presidential terms would not exceed two.

“So the current president was elected in 2005, and then again in 2010, and in 2015 he had this idea that the first term was not a term, because he was actually not elected by the people, but by the parliament. And that is the beginning of the problem, and the serious breach of trust between leadership and the people, resulting in the very reasonable fear of everyone that we are going back to war. And that's what we have today.”

This complicated history set the stage for civil war, while the Unitarian Church in Bujumbura, led by Rev. Fulgence worked to fight against injustice and restore the peace treaty that had calmed the conflict for the past decade.

“Personally in our church, I was very involved in fighting that. It was the right thing to do, I still believe that, that something that helped Burundians after 50 years to live together, at least for 10 years, was worth protecting and was worth fighting for.

So I wrote about it, I spoke up about it, and the government was definitely not happy.

“In November 2015 I was kidnapped, taken in the bush for many many hours and later I was saved by a group of the police who were not part of a clearly laid out plan for the government to harm me. Then I was detained again and later on released, thanks to very strong pressure from Unitarians around the world. Then I had to escape Burundi, I stayed for a few months in Kigali (Rwanda), and then was able to come here, thanks to the Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC).” (And the generosity of the International Unitarian community.)

Fulgence came to us over Skype to the Netherlands. I was reminded by Fulgence and his story in Burundi of the 2<sup>nd</sup> principle, Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

And what of us my friends? Your board has spent the last 3 years checking in each at board meeting around the principles they live into each month and taking a portion of each board meeting to discuss the readings they have done about our history as UUs, about vision, missions, and covenants. They discuss this in relation to what it means to be Unitarian Universalist in 2016 in general and specifically on this island and what it means to be spiritual leaders in this congregation. So when the board retreat came round this spring, they were ready to set congregational goals for the 2016-2017 year.

At the annual meeting that will come after this service, they will be presenting these goals to you and will be giving you all an opportunity to give your feedback, suggestions, and editions to them at 4 different meetings between now and the board retreat in mid-October.

This congregation has a board that reminds me most clearly of our 3<sup>rd</sup> principle: Acceptance on one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations and our 5<sup>th</sup> principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process without our congregations and in society at large.

You see, Unitarian Universalism needs all of us to thrive. It needs our goodness, our courage, and our simple humanity too when humanity is our willingness to keep showing up and hashing this all out together, one day at a time, and missing the mark so many times when we come with all of our wonderful, heart felt ideas and need to forge them in relation to all the wonderful ideas already on the table sometimes losing our way (and I just did that so well very recently at a committee meeting), and we go on in love, in peace, with the understanding that what matters most is the justice, compassion and dignity that we are joined to see manifest in the world. What matters most is that we keep adding our voices to the voices of goodness in this world.

So many around the world are counting on us to not give up, to keep going, to keep shining our light into the beacon of light that is our faith that shines into the night and proclaims:

We will go on in the knowledge that and there is room at this table for all to join us who believe in peace and dignity and the worth of others.

So add your voice, your love, your commitment, your hope, your vulnerability, your wisdom, your humanity to this our life giving faith and keep adding it until we are heard here among us and around the world, until in Indonesia and Burundi and Kenya Unitarians know that they are not alone, that the work of inclusion and love and mercy and unity is work worth living for. Amen.