

**White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**  
An Open Exchange: Philippines Pilgrimage Update  
Nico Van Ostrand and Rev. Jack Gaede  
Sunday, November 24<sup>th</sup> 2019

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## **The first reading is a poem by David Whyte called Everything Is Waiting For You**

Your great mistake is to act the drama  
as if you were alone. As if life  
were a progressive and cunning crime  
with no witness to the tiny hidden  
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny  
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,  
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;  
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding  
out your solo voice. You must note  
the way the soap dish enables you,  
or the window latch grants you freedom.  
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.  
The stairs are your mentor of things  
to come, the doors have always been there  
to frighten you and invite you,  
and the tiny speaker in the phone  
is your dream-ladder to divinity.

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the  
conversation. The kettle is singing  
even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots  
have left their arrogant aloofness and  
seen the good in you at last. All the birds  
and creatures of the world are unutterably  
themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

## **Reflection #1 - Jack**

So for those of you who don't know...Nico and I took a pilgrimage to the Philippines last month. It was a trip led by the UU Church of the Philippines, and it was co-sponsored by the UU Partner Church Council. Both Nico and I have gotten the impression that some people in our lives think it was a mission trip, and I want to take a moment to correct that thought. This trip was offered in the spirit of a true pilgrimage, where the travelers were asked to take on the attitude of a pilgrim--that is to say, a seeker, one who is open to learning something new. One who has done the humbling work of preparing oneself for an honest and open exchange. A mutual exchange of stories and of kindness, of connecting and encountering. (reach for the chalice) As a welcome gift that honored the mutuality of our exchange, we received this homemade chalice. And I'm going to take a moment to light it now as we begin our reflections.

It is in that same spirit of mutual exchange that we are offering our reflections this morning, and we want to be very clear that it will take work on your part to hear these stories from a place of humble curiosity. Be reminded by the poet David Whyte: "Your great mistake is to act the drama as if you were alone...To feel abandoned is to deny the intimacy of your surroundings." Look around you...we are in this together--(sung) all we kindred pilgrim souls. Whyte says, "The stairs are your mentor of things to come, the doors have always been there to frighten you and invite you..."

The invitation today is to come through that door, even though thresholds can often be scary. When we pass through, we are leaving one room behind and entering into a different room. And that mirrors the experience of a pilgrimage. Leaving behind a former self and encountering a future one. Knowing that we are changed by the experience.

During our trip, we encountered a deep and beautiful quote by David Whyte, which is how we stumbled onto this reading. He says, “There is no self that will survive a real conversation. There’s no self that will survive a real meeting with something other than itself. It is in this self-forgetfulness--where you meet something other than yourself--that all kinds of astonishing things happen.” I heard this quote early on during the pilgrimage, and it became a sort of mantra for me. What does it mean that I won’t survive this pilgrimage if it involves real conversation--real meeting? Am I ready to be changed? And what will Future Jack look like compared to Former Jack? Well, one thing that I can be sure about is that I sought to make real connections and have real conversations on this pilgrimage, and I have been changed.

This was not a missions trip nor was it vacation or tourism. It was an open exchange, full of wonder and learning, mistakes and humility, heartbreak and beauty. Many people here at church have been asking about the trip, and I’m glad to experience the sense of engagement. And I’ve also

been struggling with how to answer. How do I summarize a deep and intense engagement with Unitarian Universalists who live in a different context than my own? How do I speak about the experience of our mutual exchange that happened within a postcolonial context with a very imbalanced sense of power dynamics? How do I talk about the beauty of what we found without mentioning the meager circumstances that many of the UU congregations were in? Especially if I don't want the main story to be about a poverty of resources when there was such an abundance of joy and of relationship?

For just a moment, I want to ask you to join me for an embodied practice. Take a moment to find a comfortable seat. If possible, rest both feet on the floor and rest your hands on your knees, palms up. Feel free to close your eyes or gaze at your hands. Imagine with me that resting in your two hands are all the stories that you know about the Philippines. Picture also all the stories that you know about Unitarian Universalism in an international context or even just the stories about a Unitarian Universalism that looks different than the one you know. Now holding all of those stories carefully I want you to bundle them up into one hand--cupping one hand over the other. Be sure that you can hold all of those stories with just your bottom hand. And then...when you're ready, remove your top hand and return it to your knee--palm facing up. Now...with one

hand open and empty, you are ready to receive new stories. Stories that will change you, stories that will challenge you, and stories that will add complexity to the ones that you already know. You may not survive this conversation, and that's how it needs to be.

“Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you.”

While in the city of Dumaguete on Negros Island, we were invited to be participants in the first-ever regional conference of the Asia-Pacific Unitarian Universalists. There were participants from India, Australia, and the Philippines all gathered together with a few pilgrims from America. At the closing ceremony of the conference, they unveiled a permanent peace pole standing on the grounds of the UU church there with a prayer for peace written in multiple languages. We heard a few words from the builder of the pole, and we heard the prayer for peace spoken in the many native tongues of a diverse representation of Unitarian Universalism. Then, we sang a hymn written by Philippino students from that city's main academic institution (Silliman University). The lyrics of that very hymn will be our

second reading. I invite you to keep one hand open and imagine this experience as the words wash over you.

**“Creators of a New Reality”**

People of the planet earth, tell us what you see,  
So many of our people are not free;  
Why do few have so much land, so many have no homes  
Why have you been silent for so long?

*(REFRAIN)*

Together we have felt the fire struggling with the poor,  
Together seen the bonds that hold us down;  
Together hear our people cry, calling us to be,  
Creators of a new reality.

Power of principalities, make difference all the same,  
Destroy our lands, and sterilize our seas;  
Violence and security, the tool to keep us down,  
The poor provide the plenty for the strong.

*(REFRAIN)*

Together we have felt the fire struggling with the poor,  
Together seen the bonds that hold us down;  
Together hear our people cry, calling us to be,  
Creators of a new reality.

The people are awakening, the church begins to see,  
Its sinfulness in siding with the strong;  
Women kept in ignominy, oppression lurks in hierarchy,  
In bonding with the bound we will be free.

Proclaim to God our life and song revealed among the poor,  
Echoed in the bounty of the earth;  
Celebrate diversity, in justice find our unity,  
Transforming fire, new grasses growing long.

*(REFRAIN)*

Together we have felt the fire struggling with the poor,  
Together seen the bonds that hold us down;  
Together hear our people cry, calling us to be,  
Creators of a new reality.

**Reflection #2 - Nico**

Four years ago I got in a Prius with some fellow UUs went on my first pilgrimage to Selma, Alabama on the 50th anniversary of the Bloody Sunday march for voting rights there. That experience launched my interest in social justice movements and the next year, I threw myself into a Social Justice undergrad degree. As my studies deepened I honed in on the relationship between US imperialism in Southeast Asia and Asian fetishism.

I traveled to the Philippines this October with a strong research background in the US/Philippines relationship. I know the statistics on human trafficking from Asia by (predominantly White) American men. I hold my own experiences with fetishism and my grandmother's stories of living through WWII in the Philippines.

Understand that my connections to this pilgrimage run deeper than just my connections to this church, which are deep already. I am immensely proud of my educational achievements. I am immensely proud of my racial identity and the stories passed down along with it. Invalidation and ignorance cut me deeply, and those cuts fester.

Most people who belong to minority or oppressed demographics are familiar with the idea that our anger is invalid and must be subdued so that the oppressor will take us seriously and give us the rights we want. I am unlearning this oppression and fighting for the strength to demand space. I am trying to become comfortable making others uncomfortable simply by naming the ways that they hurt me.

My initial impulse today was to censor myself. But I've challenged myself to be raw and genuine -- to bring my whole self to the table today. My experiences, my research, and my reflection validate my feelings. White people, Americans born on American soil, financially secure people, men, I will not spare thought to your feelings today. This is my time to share, and your time to listen. I want to share with you my feelings of wonder, joy, and

belonging. I want to explain what makes me sad, lonely, and deeply angry. I don't want you to survive this conversation. I need you to stay open to me, as I open up to you.

I went to the Philippines with Rev. Jack to visit UU churches and build relationships with them. I hoped to bring back a deeper understanding of Unitarian Universalism and of my Filipino heritage.

I embarked on this journey at a pivotal moment in my life. I'm relatively new to the post-undergrad professional world. I'm struggling to heal from multiple traumas that all but erased my ability to feel safe around men. I am learning what it means to be biracial, non-binary, UU, and American. I could not have embarked on this journey alone.

I brought more baggage with me than just my suitcase, and in order to truly interact with this pilgrimage in the way I intended to, I needed support.

In practice, support meant having long conversations with Jack in which I spoke, ranted, and occasionally cried. Support meant frequently saying "I'm not comfortable advocating for myself here, will you start this conversation so I can jump in when I feel ready?" Support meant I knew I wasn't alone because it was consistently and repeatedly proved to me.

That is what I needed. I didn't need my local White man to swoop in and speak over and for me. I needed someone I trust to connect with me -- to take time to shut up and listen and really truly hear me. So that when I

felt uncomfortable speaking in front of others or advocating for myself, my words found life and strength through the trust I placed in Jack.

I didn't always need Jack to speak up for me, but I always knew the option was available. This allyship created space for me so that I didn't have to expend the considerable energy it would take to create that space for myself -- one less thing on my list of responsibilities, allowing me to devote that energy instead to taking in, responding to, and reflecting on the pilgrimage.

So my question for you today: are we saviors or allies?

Saviors speak over and for others. They think they know what's best for others. Saviors lead with their egos and operate under the assumption that the power they hold grants them the indisputable right to make decisions on other people's behalf. By definition, saviors can only deepen power disparity and dependence.

And allies -- the allyship relationship can be fraught, it can be difficult. The power dynamic is of course still in play. But the ally enters into an intentional covenant -- a true relationship that requires deeper work than throwing money at something until it goes away or is "fixed" to the benefactor's satisfaction. An ally's job, first and foremost, is to set their thoughts and judgments aside -- to stay open when challenged and to be willing to place themselves where asked.

If after today you still think our Asian UU siblings need to be saved by us American UUs, then I will have failed to properly communicate what I encountered and learned in the Philippines.

Our country has a violent, complicated history colonizing the Philippines. The wounds that that history left are not all closed — and cannot be forcibly closed by Americans, even well-meaning ones. We are not saviors.

In much the same way that Jack offered allyship by using his words and his privilege to create space when I asked for it, American UUs' responsibility in our covenant with our Asian UU siblings is to offer allyship by allowing our voices to be directed -- to create a new reality together, as the Filipino hymn goes. "Together we have felt the fire struggling with the poor."

Are we saviors or allies?

There is a right answer to this question, but naming that we intend to be allies is just the first step in consistently and repeatedly proving that we truly are allies.

### **Reflection #3 - Jack**

My hope today is that the open exchange that began across an ocean will continue here in this very space--that we will be allies in the work

(along with our Asian Pacific siblings) to become creators of a new reality. A reality where “together we have felt the fire struggling with the poor.” A reality that honors the intersections of identity that we all hold. A reality where “in bonding with the bound we will be free.” I want to be able to paint a picture for you today of what it felt like to complexify my understanding of our faith movement and to better understand its theological diversity.

Here in the US we often describe our churches as a place where theists, agnostics, and atheists can gather together to make meaning of their world and hence a place that is necessarily theologically diverse. While we don't have a creed, we do promote and affirm seven principles that help guide us as a set of values by which ethical decisions can be made.

Interestingly, at the same time that we in the US are working on adding an 8th Principle that addresses the need to dismantle white supremacy and other oppressions, I learned that the UU Church of the Philippines also affirms and promotes eight principles. They share our same seven core principles, but they have an additional one. It's listed first, and it simply reads, “There is a God.”

Similarly, the Unitarian churches in Romania also have a more theistic worldview. It is unsurprising to me that in different contexts our faith movement takes on a different shape--different shades and nuances. Even if theism doesn't ring true for you, how will you knowingly hold open

one of your hands to receive the blessings of encountering a theistically inclined UU? And this is where we are invited to do the work of translating. I recently spoke with someone who describes himself as a non-theistic but hopeful agnostic. He is slowly losing a beloved family member, and he is currently finding the word “god” to be helpful. For some, there’s just not many other equally rich ways to express the sense of mystery and wonder before, behind, above, and after this complicated life we live.

There are some theists who live amidst and among an almost constant state of suffering and oppression, and for them believing that there is a God and believing that that God is on the side of the oppressed--not the oppressor--is highly liberative and life-giving. There are some theists who view god not as a personal being but as the ground of our being--the ground from which we come and the ground to which we return at the hour of our death.

After living through the time of the Holocaust, Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein explains this ground-of-being concept in a very specific way that some people would even consider quite dark and brooding. He says, “Neither Judaism nor Christianity could entirely suppress the awesome knowledge that Earth is a Mother, a cannibal Mother who gives forth Her own children only that She may consume the fruit of Her own womb. Almighty Necessity has never ceased Her omnipotent reign. We are born but to perish.” Wow! Dark, I admit, but also deep and layered--and

informed by Auschwitz. This Rubenstein quote helps remind me to allow others the same complexity of thought that I allow myself. Sometimes people mean vastly different things even though they use the same word, the same referent. The same Spirit of Life that comforts some challenges others and liberates still others. It is a dark and mysterious spirit for some and a bright and shining hopeful one for others.

While we were in the Philippines, we encountered a different expression of Unitarian Universalism than the ones I have grown accustomed to--familiar melodies but tuned to a different key. And why would we expect it to be otherwise? The Universalism that took root on Negros Island in the 1950s has blossomed into a beautiful organization of 20 or so small congregations in rural farming communities--bringing joy, sustaining resilience, and celebrating a liberative hope. A surprising and beautiful thing is that in almost every congregation that we visited we sang one song in English, and it was the same song that my home congregation sings every single week: Spirit of Life--a song that I know deep in my bones.

With one hand open, feeling connected to the congregations that are half a globe away, will you please rise in body or in spirit to join me in singing Spirit of Life?

**Reflection #4 - Nico**

The majority of conversations I've had about this trip circle back to violence. "But did you feel safe?" People ask about Duterte's war on drugs, the fighting in Mindanao, and kidnappings. People want to know about diseases carried by mosquitoes and other sanitation-related health issues.

For as long as I can remember, the Philippines has always been referenced as a country of irredeemable violence and corruption. It's always been an unsafe place to travel. A major part of learning to take pride in my identity was learning the nuanced reasons that violence exists in the Philippines. I had to seek out counternarratives and gain a broader understanding of the historical and colonial forces at play on the islands. I'm still learning.

"But did you feel safe?"

What drives you to ask me that question?

It is true, we learned that the local college, Silliman University, was temporarily shut down a few weeks prior to our trip in response to a bomb threat. We learned that more than 20 rural farmers were murdered around the same time, 14 on the same day -- suspected extrajudicial killings by Duterte's militarized police force.

I share these stories back here at home and consistently receive the same response — gasps of horror and shaking heads, or nods that say "yep, that confirms what I've heard about how violent the Philippines are." We sit here in our American exceptionalism and shake our heads at the violence of

that far off, “developing” country. We sit here shielded by American ego feeling thankful that we live *here* -- here where 2019 has had 45 school shootings so far, and over 800 people killed by police so far. Where my own college was locked down three times in my senior year because of a gun on campus.

I could talk all day about the problems with this country, but I think it is enough to say that the acts of violence that occur in the Philippines should not horrify you differently than the acts of violence that occur in the United States. And if they do, I ask you to pause and wonder why. Is it racism? Classism? Some other ism that results from being part of an empire? Self reflection is not easy, but avoiding reflection so you can avoid discomfort only serves the oppressor. We all must work to rewire our brains into an anti-colonial mindset that does not allow us to mistake Americanism for superiority as most of us have been trained our whole lives to believe, whether we are aware of it or not.

Shake your head in horror at the loss of human life, but do not follow that shake with a sigh of relief that you don't live *there*. Those in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, and it's windows all around us here.

You ask me to tell you if I felt safe in the Philippines.

I was for the first time in my life surrounded by people with the same racial identity as me. My biracial and American identities complicated this of course but for the first time in my life I was with more Filipinos than

White people for a full 10 days. For the first time in my life almost every face around me contained the features of my own face that mark my difference. White people, you cannot possibly understand the vulnerability of existing in White-dominated spaces -- like this -- without the protection of Whiteness. And so you cannot possibly understand the comfort of visiting for the first time a country filled with people who look like you, with unfamiliar pieces of the environment and culture hitting your senses and feeling somehow deeply familiar. You cannot possibly imagine the grief of boarding a plane to leave that place when the pilgrimage ends.

Did I feel safe?

I embarked on this trip with the blessing of this congregation. This community granted me not just the financial support that made the journey possible but also words of blessing and tangible pieces of this part of the world to take with me to that part of the world. I was travelling physically away from this church community but the roots I have here comforted me as I went to explore the roots I hoped to find there.

Did I feel safe?

At UUCP I met Rev. Tet Gallardo, a non-binary, Filipino UU minister from Manila.

I am so fortunate to have my UU faith shaped and held by Revs. Victoria, Laura, Luke, and more recently Revs. Sara and Jack -- but how

can I possibly imagine what it would mean to be a non-binary Filipino UU minister until I have an example to reference? Representation is important.

My potential future in the pulpit aside, I have worked here for over six years, and come to this church for longer than that, yet I still have constant insecurity about whether my identities and I belong in UU spaces. I cannot overstate the sense of belonging that comes with listening to a sermon woven with the same Filipino accent my Lola has, spoken by a minister who holds the same gender identity that I do.

Yes, I felt safe.

I hope that if you have asked me a question about safety and violence in the Philippines, you will tuck that away in your closed hand now. I hope that after the service you will come to me with your other hand out, and ask questions that will deepen and broaden your understanding of the nuances of the Philippines. I am not asking for your apologies, I am asking for your openness.