



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Arriving in Wonderland,”
a sermon given by Julie Lombard
on January 11, 2015

Have you ever had an experience that changed your life and for the better? Some of us have, these events are like detours on our journey. We might not exactly plan them as part of our original route, but as we follow them we are ultimately blessed by arriving at a place we never intended to go. It's a little like the story of Alice in Wonderland as she discovers a new world.

Now, let me tell you a story that changed my life for the better while helping others. It started when I got involved with a group many years ago at my UU church in Concord, NH. It was called UU Friend of Refugees. They were asking us to help the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. I liked what I was hearing and I wanted in. Some women at church who had experience working with refugees had the idea of creating resettlement teams known as circles to help refugee families arriving in our small city.

I eagerly responded to the call to promote this type of social justice work, but I was told I was too busy with all my other church and family responsibilities to join this group. I pleaded with the leader to reconsider, but she had her mind made up. She knew this commitment took a lot of time and attention. She wanted the circle to be successful, so she only picked the best candidates.

I watched as this circle grew into what would be eventually called the First Circle. It consisted of a handful of UU families who were lined up with a refugee family from Africa. The First Circle helped their family adjust to their new home, taught them the ways of the land and our customs, and offer them rides to the many places they would have to go in those first few months- to doctor's appointments, to schools, to the market, to job interviews, and other such places.

For many of these new arrivals, coming here turned their lives inside out. Sure, they were safer here rather than in the refugee camps, but they found themselves in a place that was often alien to them. Many did not speak our language. Can you imagine being a parent going to a dentist with your child for the first time? As the dentist caps their mouth full of cavities, your child screams in pain and you don't know why or what the dentist is even doing? Comforting a parent and child through this ordeal can be what refugee resettlement looks like.

There is so much to get use to- let's not forget about the snow! I have a refugee friend that stepped off the airplane in January from Africa in flip-flops not ever having seen snow before.

Imagine that walk and I wonder if she even had a winter jacket? If she did, it was because someone anticipated her needs and brought her one to wear.

I knew a little about working with refugees from my time working at Rundlett Middle School before starting a family. I would sometimes work in the ESL classroom where English was a second or other language. I would teach classes of every subject to students who understood English at various levels. If there were ten students in an ESL classroom, they might have spoken 10 different languages. I enjoyed working with these students because they were not like the average middle school student.

From the start they were more respectful to adults and had an innocence not yet crushed by our culture which freely flowed through the rest of the student body. They were hard working people. They would sit in awe watching a movie at school like "The Little Mermaid". They weren't too cool for such things and most didn't have TV at home anyways. They were hungry to understand, learn, and they listened. It was as if they knew that their life depended on what they were learning. To me, these students were a teacher's dream come true. But even with my knowledge, I wasn't aware of how all consuming it would be to do refugee resettlement.

From outside the First Circle, I watched as they invited the African refugee family to the church's annual Thanksgiving Dinner. The refugee family arrived in garb that they would wear in their country of origin. It was fascinating to hear about what the First Circle was doing. As their six month commitment ended, there was interest in beginning a Second Circle for the next family. I rearranged my life and my commitments, I went to the information meeting, and I signed up to join the Second Circle.

I was told that I would need to attend sixteen hours of training at Lutheran Social Service about Refugee Resettlement and to attend many planning meeting at church before the family arrived. So, I did. As the resettlement training came to an end, the leader of the Second Circle began talking about where our family might come from. We would most likely be serving a Bhutanese family and it would be a family with many kids. So, I looked in my trusty atlas and found out where in the world Bhutan was. I quickly learned it was not in Africa. Bhutan is a small country between India and China that sits along the Himalayan Mountains. The internet filled me in on the rest.

Some of the Bhutanese families had been in their refugees camps for close to twenty years. The government of Bhutan felt threatened by a quickly growing minority living in the southern part of the country. These people were forced to leave their country first going to nearby India before they built the camps in Nepal in the early 1990's. Many of these Bhutanese people who were forced to leave had Nepali heritage. What these Bhutanese refugees experienced was a dirty secret, it was ethnic cleansing. The camps offered little relief. There was not enough food and they could be dangerous places.

The first time I met the Second Circle family was in their two bedroom basement apartment. Driving into their apartment complex was like nothing I had ever experienced in Concord. People were walking around the parking lot dressed in clothes from around the world. I knock on their door and came eye to eye with six people who would soon become like a second family to me.

I was Alice in Wonderland feeling ten feet tall as I stood beside them. Few members of their family stood five feet tall. With wide smiles they welcomed me into their home. One of the first questions

came from the eldest daughter. Binita asked me if I had children and where were they? I assured her that I had a couple of children and I would bring them next time. The children would be the bridge that solidly linked our families together.

All four children were born in the camp without a country and are now US citizens. Binita, the oldest daughter, arrived with the strongest handle of the English language. The older children attended school in the camps and learned British English, but Binita would claim her English was a work in progress. She soon became the family translator as everyone else's English began to improve.

One way they learned English was through listening to music. If you were friendly with Jack and Annie during that time, you would be forced to listen to the Beatles. I will never forget the day Basanta walked into a room belting out the Beatles' Revolution with hardly a hint of an accent. Yes, her English was improving fast if she was ready for a revolution. We all want to change the world. Hey Jude was their way of life. They could take a sad song and make it better.

I was told many things about the family that I later learned were false. I was told they were vegetarian, they were not. They wore necklaces with crosses, so the Second Circle all thought they were Christians. In Nepal, the family was told to wear the crosses before they arrived in America because Christian Americans would most likely be the ones helping them. Only after we tried to bring them to every Christian church in Concord did Binita ask me why we wouldn't bring them to our church. I said we weren't all that Christian. That's when she told me that neither were they.

Often their youngest children sat on my husband's and my laps during services before heading off to Sunday school. People asked us if we had adopted a couple of kids, our responds was they were the Second Circle family. The older daughters attended OWL. Binita traveled with youth group to help rebuild New Orleans and in a few months Basanta will be going on a service trip with youth group to Nicaragua.

It sounds like they've had a lot of opportunities and they have, but they've had some hardship, too. It took their father eleven months to secure his first job here. Here's the thing, despite all the hardships they faced; racism, joblessness, and poverty- they were usually smiling. It's not because they were always happy either. It's because they knew their smiles were a path to better times ahead and it opened many doors for them.

They willed their own happiness and lead me to mine. They had a knack for finding the joy in life. Over time they changed me from someone trying to keep up with the Jones's to finding out I had been blinded by my own privileges. They helped me to see not because they thought they should fix me, rather because they accepted me for who I was as is. Our six month commitment came and went a long time ago. Today, we are still committed to one another in a very special way. You could say we are still singing: Let it be a dance we do.

I am far from being an expert at resettling refugees. The Rai family taught me and my family more than we taught them on the subject of justice. Their participation at church inspired many more Refugee Circles at Concord UU. The church has now helped refugee families from around the world; Iraq, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Bhutan and they are not done. I'm not saying this church ought to start a Friends of Refugee Committee, but perhaps this story has reminded you of the

benefits that come to you when you reach out in love. I know that you know what I'm talking about because of your commitment to helping others through your work with Habitat for Humanity, the Drop-in Center, the Food Pantry, and by hosting Community Meals.

I don't get to go to Concord UU much anymore, since going off to seminary and starting to serve other churches like yours. I think you can tell that the Rai family's immigration story is very important to me. Immigration is important to me because their story became my own immigration story. We are family friends forever linked by our journey together and changed by the love we share.

Blessed be. Amen.