

Church Family Thanksgiving Service

by Rev. Colleen M. McDonald

The Unitarian Universalist Church, Rockford, IL

Service leader: What would it be like to spend a week with another family, in their own home, somewhere else in the world? What would we learn from living in a house made of dirt, in Mali; a remote village in the Himalayan Mountains; or a war-torn city in Bosnia? Would our host family be rich or poor, and how would we be able to tell? And what would we think—how would we feel—about our own lives, our own way of life, once we returned home?

About 10 years ago, a photographer named Pete Menzel organized a group of his colleagues to travel to 30 different nations around the world and live, for a week, with a family judged to be “statistically average” for that nation. The photographers asked the people about their daily responsibilities, their income, their wishes for the future. They snapped pictures of family members at work, play, school, and mealtime. At the end of the week, they photographed the entire family, standing outside their home, surrounded by their possessions—“a few jars and jugs for some, an explosion of electronic gadgetry for others.” These stories and photos were published in a book entitled *Material World; A Global Family Portrait*.

In a moment, you will hear stories about 5 of these families, representing life in five different countries. Remember that each of these families is considered “average”—within each nation, there are other families who have more, and an equal number of others who have less.

As we listen to the stories, let’s ask ourselves, “How do our own lives compare?”

The United Nations reports that over 700 million people in the world are hungry are starving.

(This number is more than twice the current population of the United States.)

Think for the moment about how many different kinds of foods you could have eaten this morning for breakfast.

How many meals will you eat today? Over 960 million people don’t have access to restaurants of any kind.

How many of you went out for breakfast this morning?

How many will eat out later today?

Eat out at least once a week?

First story: I'm here to tell you about the Yadav family, who live in north central India. The Yadavs do not have a radio, a telephone, a TV or VCR, or a car. They do have a bicycle, but it is broken.

The Yadavs do not have a toilet, a bathtub, or even a bathroom. Every day before school, while Mother cooks a breakfast of tomatoes and rice, the three oldest children scrub themselves down outside, with soap and water from their well. Then they walk to school, which is close by—a four-minute walk. But the school is too small for all of the students to get inside. So they have their lessons outside, in groups of 20 to 40 students. The youngest children get to sit in the shade. The older children sit in the sun, closest to the blackboard. None of the students has books, pencils, or paper; they write with chalk on slates (which are like little blackboards).

Leader: One out of 750 children in the world has a chance to learn to read and write and do math.

How many of you have been, or plan to go, to college?
Can you estimate how many books you have in your home? 100 or fewer? 1000 or more?

Second story: I'm going to tell you about the Namgay family, who live in the Himalaya Mountains in the country of Bhutan. There are thirteen people in this family—including a grown daughter and her family—and they all live together in a small, three-story house. The family's cows occupy the first floor.

The Namgays have no refrigerator, stove, microwave, or toaster. They cook their food on an open fire outside their house. Flies are everywhere, annoying the people inside and outside, and spreading illness; the Namgays often suffer from diarrhea.

There is a school in the Namgays' village, but the teenage daughter in the family had to wait until she was 14 to start classes there; for many years, the family depended on her help on their farm. The family's oldest son, who is 17, goes to boarding school, an hour's walk away; he is home only on the weekends.

Leader: One out of 8000 people in the world has a refrigerator and stove.

How many have both a refrigerator and a dryer? Now put your hand down if you don't have a microwave, too... a dryer... a toaster... a garbage disposal.

Over 450 million people in the world have no radio, cassette player, or CD player.

How many of you have all of these? Think about how many music-playing machines you have in your home. How many have fewer than three? More than five? More than 10?

Third story: I represent the Kalnazarov family, from Uzbekistan. This family of eight lives in two small homes; in winter, they live in a small, heated house with two rooms. (At night the women and girls sleep in one room, and the men and boys sleep in the other.) Their summer home, which is unheated, has four rooms. The kitchen, with its oven made of stone, is in a separate building all by itself. There is a bath house a mile away from the family's home. It is open only four days of the week--two days a week for women and girls, and two days a week for men and boys. In between baths, the family members melt a bucket of snow to get water to wash themselves.

Leader: One out of 760 million people have hot and cold running water and a private indoor bathroom.

How many of you have only one bathroom in your home? How many have three? More than three?

Over 500 million people in the world (more than all the people in the USA) have no weatherproof shelter to live in.

Think for a moment about the number of rooms you have in your current home. How many of you have five or fewer? How many have ten or more? How many of you own more than one home?

Fourth story: The Cakoni Family lives in Albania. They feel lucky that each one of them has a pair of shoes—the father even has an extra pair—because they do a lot of walking. They get their water not from a sink but from a well, which is half a mile from their home. It takes the three school-age children an hour and a half to get to school each day—and an hour and a half to walk home. Every two weeks, the mother and father hike for four hours to get to the closest town, seven miles away. There they buy food and supplies for the rest of the month—coffee, bread, and soap. The youngest child in the family is five years old and cannot walk; there is no doctor here who can tell his parents what is wrong with him or what they can do to help him.

The Cakonis do have a television, and it is on most of the day, showing them many wonderful things that other people have, that seem too good to be true.

Leader: 1 out of every 7000 people in the world owns a TV.

How many of you do not own at least one television?

How many have three? How many have more than three?

Over 700 million people die each year because they have no medical care.

How many of you have been to the doctor within the past year?

How many of you take some kind of medication every day?

Fifth story: The Getu family, from Ethiopia, wonder what they would do without their cattle. Every morning the mother of the family collects fresh cow dung from the corral and mixes it with straw to form a paste. Some of this paste is used to plaster the walls of the family's house. The rest of the dung is flattened and dried then broken into pieces and burned as fuel. (There is no electricity.)

And what would they do without coffee? Ethiopia grows strong, delicious coffee. Even the children drink it three times a day, when their family gets together to enjoy a short coffee ceremony. Besides that, life for this family means work, work, work. Daily chores are difficult, with no running water, no gas for cooking. The mother works 18 hours every day, fetching water, cooking meals, cleaning the animals' corrals, making the dung patty fuel, and taking care of the children and the men.

School is free in Ethiopia, but the Getu children cannot go-- they would need to buy school supplies and school clothes, but they have no extra money and can only afford one set of clothes for each person in the family.

Leader: Over 800 million people in the world have only one set of clothes. Many more have no shoes, coat, or underwear.

Think about the many different kinds of clothes you have at home.

How many pairs of shoes do you think you have only 1 pair? At least 3? At least 10? At least 20?

How many of you have clothes in your closet or bureau that you haven't worn for a year?

Musical interlude

Leader: Perhaps your family shares the holiday ritual my own family carried out when I was a child—with the Thanksgiving meal spread before us, we would say a grace made up of each person's statement about what he or she was particularly grateful for that year.

"I'm thankful I don't have to walk a mile when I want to take a shower."

"I'm grateful I don't have to share my house with a cow."

"I'm thankful I don't need cow dung in order to cook my food."

Note! As we count our blessings, how many of us would think to mention our good fortune in having constant access to clean water and electricity, in being able to enjoy relationships with animals as companions—even members of our families—rather

than as possessions we depend upon for food? The average family in the U.S. takes for granted so many things that the families in the stories we have just heard would consider signs of great wealth.

It is important to take the time to feel and express our gratitude. And it is important to notice, to recognize, how much we have to be grateful for. These messages are inherent in the “global family” portrait our readers have just painted for us and in the Thanksgiving holiday.

Has anything you’ve heard this morning left you feeling guilty? That’s a common feeling during the holiday season Thanksgiving ushers in, but it’s not the point of this service, nor of the holidays. Guilt is an inhibiting feeling that turns us inward, suggesting that we shouldn’t have, or don’t deserve, the things that we have. Gratitude, on the other hand, is an empowering feeling of joy and appreciation, that can inspire us to reach out by caring and sharing.

Our church provides us with many opportunities to acknowledge our own blessings by helping others gain access to the resources and advantages in life that all people deserve. One of these opportunities is the Guest at Your Table Program, through our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Our Service Committee, or UUSC, is a non-proselytizing, humanitarian organization which focuses on justice and human rights for women, children, and the oppressed, both in the United States and abroad. It operates by forming partnerships with grass roots groups, tapping local leadership and ideas to create long-term solutions to problems such as illiteracy, the spread of the AIDS virus, and the damaging effects of war.

What would it be like to invite someone from another part of the world to spend a week living in your home? The GAYT box is your virtual reality visitor—a young child from Burundi, a mother from Afghanistan, a migrant farm worker from California. Put the box on your kitchen or dining room table and feed your guest with coins at mealtime. Imagine the real life story behind your visitor’s photograph on the GAYT box and visualize his or her presence in your daily life. What would your guest learn from the way you spend your time and money? Would he or she think you were rich or poor—what would be the clues? What would you want your guest to take home from his or her visit with you? What would your guest give you?

We close with one more story from within our human family:

Sixth story: Fatana, a young mother, lives in the mountains of Afghanistan. She has always worked hard to care for her family, but she felt satisfied that her family’s basic needs were being met. Then the Taliban government made life more difficult for women, Fatana’s husband was killed, and the recent war caused shortages of food and other necessities. To avoid starvation, Fatana found herself boiling grass so her family would have something to eat and melting snow so they would have water.

Fatana is grateful for the emergency food supplies the UU Service Committee recently provided to her and to about 500 other families in central Afghanistan, and she is beginning to have hope for the future. “We live a very difficult life,” she said. “This is the first time... [my family has] received aid. We are very happy that now we can go to sleep with full stomachs. But we have to start a new life. Please tell our story to the world.”