

# The Story of My Call

-by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister



There I was, living on the banks of the Ganges River in India. In a flash of insight, I suddenly knew what I was meant to do with my life. Three years earlier, I had set off for Japan, leaving behind everything and everyone I had ever known. I had no arrange-

ments or contacts in Japan, only a plane ticket and the knowledge that there were jobs for native English speakers. I would spend the next 22 months teaching, traveling, learning the ways of Japan and Buddhism, and building a bicycle that would eventually carry me more than 25,000 miles around this planet.

I had set off on this odyssey with the intention of discovering the world and finding my place in it. Before long, I found myself sitting at the feet of monks and gurus, cave dwelling ascetics, nomadic peoples, tribal elders, swamis, priests, mullahs, and more. My journey took me from the advanced base camp 20,000 feet up Mt. Everest in Tibet to the Dead Sea in the Judean desert of Israel 1,300 feet below sea level. More important, it brought me face to face with families of many colors, cultures, creeds, and conditions. Despite all of our vast differences, there seemed to be certain transcendent truths that united me with all of the people I encountered. I became fascinated with discovering the essential unity beneath our blessed diversity.

By the time I arrived on the banks of the Ganges, I had cycled over the Himalayas and two of the other tallest mountain ranges in the world. I was in the best physical condition of my life when I arrived at a Hindu ashram where I lived and studied yoga and the sacred texts and techniques of Hinduism. One day in the midst of meditation, I felt my call to become a Unitarian Universalist minister. I had grown up in this faith, and I had been taught since childhood that Unitarian refers to the belief that all life originates from a single source and that Universalists believe that we are all heading toward a single destiny. The underlying sense of life's unity and the church's openness to learning from all faiths and cultures made it the right place for me to dedicate my efforts and share my knowledge and passion.

During the next two years I sought out Unitarian and Universalist teachers and communities as I circumnavigated the globe. In India I discovered Unitarianism among matrilineal tribes in the Khasi Hills where they worship five or more times each Sunday. In the Philippines I came across a long tradition of Unitarian Universalist faith healers. In Pakistan, I saw how Unitarianism formed within a distinctly Muslim culture, and in Sri Lanka it was born out of a Buddhist background. By the time I made it to the European Unitarian



India - with Ascetics in the Himalayas

churches in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania, my idea of how the guiding principles of this faith can be interpreted and lived out in different ways had been forged.

Upon returning to the United States five years later, I was asked by the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) to lead a bicycle trek across North America during which I spoke at dozens of UU churches from Massachusetts to Canada and Washington state, about the need to find ways to make UU faith and values accessible to a new generation. Next, I was accepted to Harvard Divinity School and offered a position at the UUA national headquarters in Boston as the International Aide. The following year, while continuing my studies, I became a ministerial intern at Boston's oldest church (known today as First Church in Boston) where both Ralph Waldo Emerson and his father had served as Unitarian ministers. During the internship, I developed a new type of worship experience called *Soulful Sundown* as a way of reaching young people who

were otherwise uninterested or even offended by church. My master's thesis was about how to re-imagine UU worship in ways that appeal to a new generation. It was later turned into a guidebook and published by the UUA.



Jordan - with Bedouins in the desert

On October 31, 1999, I was ordained as a UU minister in Boston. The ordination service was a ritual embodiment of the ministry I sought to create. I intentionally assembled participants including people of many races, ethnicities, cultures, and sexual orientations. The service included a transgender person, a Buddhist from Japan, and people of many theologies and generations.

Six weeks later, I received a call asking me if I would consider applying for the Senior Minister position at All Souls in Tulsa. It made absolutely no sense! I was relatively inexperienced in ministry, I was a much younger minister than the congregation in Tulsa was looking for, I was already employed, and after living and traveling in some of the most exotic places on the planet, could residing in Oklahoma really be my destiny? Then, over the next few months, it became clear to me, to the search committee, and ultimately to the congregation, that my calling to ministry and the call and mission of All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa were compatible and congruent. All Souls in Tulsa was a flagship UU church that had grown to be one of the largest in the country with its quality of worship, its work for racial justice, and its pioneering efforts in television ministry and small group (Branches) programming. At the dawn of the 21st Century, both the church and I were prepared to carry this proud legacy into a new era.

Since I arrived in the summer of 2000, my call to the ministry and to this congregation has been reaffirmed again and again. As I look around and see the growing diversity of people and worship styles, the range of music, the multitude of classes on spiritual practices and social and intellectual pursuits, and the varied ways in which members of All Souls live their values through outreach in the world, I see the UU ideal of being "one church with many expressions." My ordination ceremony was a ritual embodiment of my calling, and serving All Souls in Tulsa is a living, congregational embodiment of that same ministry and calling. I can honestly say, there is no other church like it in the world!

My hope and prayer is that each person who is a part of All Souls will find their unique calling and the way that their gifts can serve the world's needs. What remains to be seen is whether together, we can offer humanity a strong enough witness to the possibility of life's unity - not to save souls, but to save the planet and the human spirit in love and peace and fellowship. †