



River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Story SPARC March 5, 2017

Sam's Story: A Gift

Introduction to the Story:

The Rev. Jacki Lewis wrote about the power of stories when she said:

I believe our identities are formed by stories told to us, about us, and around us. We are living texts, formed by multiple, interweaving, competing, and, sometimes, conflicting stories that we receive from our culture via our parents, other adults, our peers, the media, and congregational life. Stories about race, gender, theology, generational differences, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class work consciously and unconsciously to form our identity. Stories also teach us values, ethics, and meaning. Stories help us know who we are and who we are not; they create boundaries, or borders, for us. Identity development can be thought of as the process of refining, editing, and authoring one's own story in conversation with others.

Today we're sharing stories from our own congregation that invite us to renewed courage even and especially in vulnerable times. The piece of our shared story that we'll reflect on today comes to us from the family of Sam Worthington, a faithful volunteer here at River Road. In his work life, he is the CEO of Interaction, the largest U.S. alliance of nongovernmental international organizations. His story comes from both his experience of service and from his heart.

Sam's Story: A Gift

Sometimes a day can change you. The monsoon rains were late. For hours, we travelled west then south from what is now Chennai. A kaleidoscope of people, carts and bicycles, cows and trucks, assaulted my senses. Eventually all the hustle and bustle on narrow roads was left behind as we bounced along a rutted dirt track, and then walked over the dusty landscape to a small village. Disturbing images from that morning's drive still flashed before my eyes. We had passed a man lying on the road next to his mangled bicycle. A crowd slowed us to a crawl, but there was no sight of the car that hit him. Circling around was a growing mob of angry animated people. A man was being propped up even as he coughed up a steady stream of bright red blood. Before anyone could say a word, it was obvious that he would not survive his injuries. My first instinct was to open the car door. This was all wrong. A sharp, "Sam, no," and a warning glance stopped me. The smart thing to do was to stay put even if it was not an easy choice. There are times and places where foreigners should not get involved. Crowds can turn ugly. Rural India in all its stark beauty brought into sharp contrast how quickly a life can be extinguished, and how little you can do.

My colleague Abiola, a young doctor from Nigeria, had stopped talking and we drove on in silence. As I struggled with a man's mortality, I wondered what the day would have in store. I

was here to visit one of our programs, one of many child survival interventions that would save millions of lives around the world. I was here to help save lives. It was an inauspicious beginning. Little did I know that my day would include a beautiful experience that would confound me, an act of courage and love that would shape my life-long efforts to promote human dignity, to do what I can to help end global poverty. A girl named Nalini would shatter my assumptions of what it meant to help, to care. Decades later, the power of the gift I received from her still haunts me.

We continued our journey on foot, walking along a dusty path to a small hamlet. A stream of children flooded out to greet the novelty of strangers. They were the reason why I was here. Our project, in partnership with the local non-profit Myrada, resembled countless others with interventions that would help children make it through the first five riskiest years of life. As Dalit untouchables, the children and their parents lived apart, off a dirt road behind a larger, slightly better off, but still very poor village. Mud brick houses were scattered along both sides of what could be best described as a dirt path.

Standing next to her thatched roof home, Nalini should have been much taller; instead, typical of the children in this hamlet, she showed all the signs of stunting, a malnourished child who physically and mentally would never grow to her full potential. As I said “Hi,” she shyly glanced at me with her dark brown eyes. Strangers are interesting but scary. At ten-years-old, she was roughly the same weight as my thin six-year-old daughter. Like millions of other children, Nalini’s size and very thin frame were not an exception. She was growing up perpetually hungry. Picking up a malnourished child removes any abstraction, you feel hunger in the stick that is an arm, a leg, the bony angles of a body, or in a lethargic gaze empty of energy. We weighed in one young child after another, plotting their weight on yellow charts, adding to a line of dots that fell far below the norm. I knew that thanks to our efforts these children would survive. What I did not know then, but is now established science, was that each child would remain permanently stunted. None of them would grow up with their full mental potential.

Decades later I have grown almost accustomed to seeing the extremes of global poverty and human suffering. Faces of people dying in a pandemic blur under a veil of tears. If you ignore the shrapnel marks, a city block gutted by artillery and bombs resembles one flattened by an earthquake. Buildings transformed into graves harden you. Human suffering knows no boundaries, but in the poorest places, it takes on a different dimension. Life can be nasty, brutish and short. A man’s death reminded me that people oppress, torture, rape and kill each other. Powerful elites seek more wealth in societies with few rules that apply to them. A quest for more power is ubiquitous. It is easy to find places that crush civic collaboration. Populations can be manipulated through fear and prejudice. The poor and marginalized are often caught in the middle with nowhere to run. If you are the wrong tribe, religion, sexual orientation or gender, your future can be bleak. That day in May 1994 my introduction to acute malnutrition was not the horror of a famine, it was just another day spent in one of the many very poor hamlets scattered across rural India.

Yet, no matter where they are from, children are still children. Nalini followed me throughout the day, always at a safe distance. I acknowledged her curiosity with an occasional smile. It was a long day, so I walked off by myself to drink water from a hand pump we had helped install.

Sitting on the concrete slab at the base of the pump, I was hot, covered by dust, hungry, and ready to call it a day. To my surprise Nalini walked over to me. She stood there for a bit before she grabbed my hand, pulling me up and toward the only concrete building in the village. At first, I was not sure what to do, but she was insistent. How had she found the courage to grab my hand? I had no idea what she wanted, and there was no one nearby to translate, so I stood and walked with her. Clearly she wanted to show me something. It was just a short jaunt to stairs with no railing that went up the outside of the structure. We took the short flight to a flat roof bathed in late afternoon sunlight. There, I saw thousands of peanuts drying in the hot sun. As I stared at the nuts, Nalini walked across the roof, bent down and scooped up a handful. She then did the most unexpected thing, she offered them to me. She knew that at the end of a long, hot day without food that I must be hungry. Having accomplished her task, Nalini picked up a handful of nuts for herself.

A waif of a girl – who knew the pain of acute hunger – thought that I must be hungry. She decided to act, finding the courage to overcome gender and cultural barriers to help a foreigner. As we both ate some nuts I managed to say “thank you” as best I could. She acknowledged my gratitude with a nod and small smile. Nalini turned around, headed back down the stairs, leaving me alone on the roof eating. It all seemed rather surreal. An acutely malnourished child had decided to feed me, offering me the only food she could find a way to share. Before walking down the stairs, I took a picture of the roof and pocketed the rest of the peanuts. It was as if I needed some evidence that this exchange had taken place, that her gift to me was as real as her abject poverty.

Why would a very hungry child offer food to a stranger? At first glance, it did not make sense. For years, I had trouble getting my head around the idea that Nalini had helped me. “Wasn't I the person trying to help?” After all I had all the privileges of wealth, race, gender and an American passport. There is joy, or some would say salvation, in the act of helping someone. By tapping this human drive, I wanted to help the Nalini's of this world. I was here to save lives. And then it came to me, empathy does not flow one way and it is certainly not perversely tied to any class, amount of wealth, or a race or nationality. Families with barely enough food to survive routinely help each other. Our best selves even pop up during wars and epidemics. These actions make us all human.

We all can and do show empathy, we want to love and take care of each other, and we want to be loved in return. Love makes us human and the desire to care for someone does not skip over Nalini, a hungry malnourished child. Her gift filled me with hope. It made partnering possible. It made me whole. A few peanuts eventually traveled home in my wallet. For years, they sat on our living room mantelpiece.

Questions for Reflection

- 1) How do you think Sam's story exemplifies both courage and vulnerability?
- 2) Share a time in your life when you did something that required both courage and vulnerability.
- 3) Tell about an experience of courage and vulnerability here at River Road?
- 4) How could this community help you to live and act with courage and vulnerability?