

Faith in Action

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The last time I spoke to you from the pulpit was a Trinity Sunday, so you may remember the irony that I am a Unitarian. (Preface: As a Unitarian, sometimes I use different words; words like Universe and Love instead of God or Jesus or such. Each week when I sit out there, I use the words in my head that work for me. I ask that you use the words this week that work for you.)

Coming from a Unitarian Universalist tradition, one of the values I was taught growing up was about living our faith. Not just talking about our faith, but actually walking a path in line with our beliefs. I believe we are all loved, and that it is important to reflect that love to others sharing our world.

Today I want to tell you a little about a recent journey. There are three main characters in today's story: First is my friend Beth, who currently lives in Baltimore. She and I have been friends since we both served as Peace Corps Volunteers in Nepal. A few years ago she decided she wanted to start a family, and for an accumulation of her own reasons, chose to adopt from Nepal.

Beth's journey to motherhood was long and arduous. There were many obstacles and setbacks and unforeseen challenges. She endured, patiently waited out the bureaucracies and political games. But even for a stubborn woman like Beth, these were trying times. I can't tell you how many times she called to tell me she thought it would happen in the next couple of months. But it just kept going on and on. Finally the call did come this last spring: she had been matched with a child, and had travel clearance to go pick her up.

Because Beth is single, she wanted to have a friend come with her when she traveled to pick up her child. Enter me, this story's Mary Poppins. Conveniently, I am a Mary Poppins who speaks Nepali and understands Nepali culture. Additionally, I supported Beth's decision to adopt and was excited for her, as excited as for my friends who were pregnant.

Before I could blink, I found myself back in Nepal. After having been back in America for 6 ½ years, I was amazed at how quickly the language came back to me and how Kathmandu felt like home. The endless patter of life, the smells of food and incense, the heat of pre-monsoon weather – all enveloped me in a familiar welcome. As tempting as it was to slip into nostalgic waves of memories, however, Beth and I had work to do.

Once adoptive parents are in country, the process involves at least 2 weeks of paperwork. During the first week, parents go to the orphanage for a few hours each day to bond with the child. The rest of the day is spent working on Nepali documentation. Once the official adoption decree is signed, the parents then have full custody, and spend the second week working on American documentation (while also juggling the new soul in their lives).

Enter our third main character of the story: the petite 2-year –old girl Beth had been matched up with. She had been abandoned at a police station when she was a month old. She was taken to an orphanage called Garden of Friendship, where they named her Shristi, which means creation. When we met Shristi at the orphanage, she was shy and tentative. She had very big eyes, and would observe everything for a long time before making a decision about what to do. She was affectionate with the other children in a reserved manner. When we drew pictures, she was most interested in the crayons, and putting them in the container with all the tips lined up.

Each time we went to the orphanage, the caretakers would shove Shristi into Beth's arms and then sit around and watch them. I would try to distract them with conversation or get all the other kids involved in an activity, so Beth and Shristi would have a chance to bond, but it was often very awkward.

Every day was filled with appointments and running around the city, shuffling documents from one department to another. Some days we would get several steps done and felt very productive; other days we were impeded with erratic business hours, doctors' strikes, and endless waiting around for the right person to show up.

During the second week, when Shristi was with us full time, we began to see more of her personality show up. She explored everything: our rooms, the gardens, our

clothes, food, the toys Beth had brought for her. Everything was given thoughtful arrangement in her world. She likes to climb things, she loves animal crackers and bananas, and she always wants to show you – and have you admire - the newest thing she has discovered. I had to walk a fine line with Shristi: I had to bond with her enough so I could help take care of her and travel with her, but she had to bond with Beth more – she had to understand that Beth was her primary caregiver.

In a matter of mere days, I was witness to some amazing transformations. I saw Shristi blossom, from a glassy-eyed timid child to a child full of ideas and delight and personality. I saw Beth blossom, from a caring woman, a concerned citizen of the world, to a *mother*.

While we were in country, I knit up a bunch of hats and booties and little teddy bears for the orphanage. On our last day, I made a final stop at the orphanage to deliver these, as well as to thank the caregivers for what they do. Being able to knit for the kids gave me a way to express gratitude in more than just words, especially since my words in another language and when I'm emotionally compromised aren't always as eloquent as I would like.

The trip home was both less traumatic and less dramatic than we expected. Shristi slept most of the 2 day journey, and when she was awake, she was content to explore a new airport or the tray table in front of her. When we arrived stateside, bleary-eyed, exhausted and foggy, it was all we could do to gather our luggage, get through customs, and find Beth's sister. But the next morning, after a recuperative sleep and clean clothes, we went for a walk. Walking through the neighborhood that Beth had picked out specifically because it was family-friendly, lifting Shristi up so she could see the fish in the spring ponds, laughing at Shristi's delight at seeing dogs, ducks, flower gardens and families riding bikes – amidst all this, I turned to Beth and said, "You did it. You worked hard for years, and you never gave up, and now you have a family. This is it, Beth – this is the moment you've been working towards!"

So what does all of this have to do with living my faith? This whole experience was living my faith outside the bounds of a Sunday morning ritual. I believe in helping your friends when they call with genuine need, so I answered the call to travel with Beth. I believe in mindfully listening to the situations of others, so I

can respond with what is best for them, not what I think I may want to get out of a situation. I believe in reacting to life with a positive attitude, even through the challenging days. I believe in the values of patience, compassion, flexibility and playfulness. I believe in walking a path of mindful conversation with the Universe. I believe in the power of Love, and the power of showing love to others.

When I look at Shristi, the world sparkles. I see magic. I see the world through the eyes of excitement and wonder. I see the connections of love all around her, and I am grateful to be a part of that.

So who is your Mary Poppins, the person in your life you can call when you need a hand, an extra umbrella, or help getting some medicine down? Who is Beth in your life, someone who counts *you* as a trusted friend, and can call on you for a listening ear, an extra pair of hands with the yard work, or support during a life transition? Do these people know they play these roles in your life? Have you told them recently?

And who is your Shristi, someone who inspires you and helps you see magic?

So, for our take home message, I will leave you with Sara's guide to living your faith in 6 easy steps:

1. Be open to the nudge from the Universe.
2. Utilize resources all around you.
3. Practice tenacity.
4. Open a channel with the Universe and express gratitude.
5. Live in the moment and recognize the magic!
6. Help someone else find their path.

And with that, my friends, I bid you go out into the world: be mindful of the questions, be mindful of your faith, be mindful of the expressions of your love.