A New Way of Loving

Jewish Hasidim tell the story of a rabbi's child who used to walk alone in the dark woods. At first the rabbi let his son wander, but over time he grew concerned. The woods, after all, were dangerous; the father did not know what lurked there. He decided to discuss the matter with his child. One day he took him aside and said, "You know, I have noticed that each day you walk into the woods. I wonder why you go there."

The boy said, "I go there to find God."

"That is a very good thing," the father replied gently. "I am glad that you are searching for God. But, my child, don't you know that God is the same everywhere?"

"Yes," the boy answered, "but I'm not."[1]

For that same reason, I suppose, as much as any other, God invited me to step into the world of refugees.

The refugees, Nhia Bee's wife, Seng, and their children—Pheng, Xia, Ong, Chai, and Yeng, ages fourteen, twelve, ten, six, and one year old, respectively—eyed me guardedly, rainwater dripping with their tears onto the red-carpeted motherhouse lobby. They did not know where Nhia Bee had been taken. They did not know whether they would ever see him again. They did know—as I was to learn later—that Nhia Bee had been in a fight that left another man seriously injured, and that police had removed him from the scene in handcuffs, after which Jade brought his family to our convent. They were, as Jade had said earlier, Hmong: A proud, fiercely independent ethnic group from the rugged mountains of Laos, mostly preliterate but skilled in slash-and-burn farming. During the Vietnam war era, the Hmong formed the backbone of the CIA's mostly secret side-war in Laos; after 1975, when US forces pulled out of that corner of southeast Asia, the triumphant communist Pathet Lao hunted the Hmong with a fury, causing thousands to flee their mountains for the first time ever, escaping across the Mekong and into refugee camps in Thailand. Having known only thatch huts, I cannot imagine what the family must have thought of their sudden insertion into our huge convent with its one hundred and fifty rooms.

I led the family up the stairs to a fourth-floor corridor behind the chapel organ gallery. There I pointed out the five bedrooms I'd reserved for them. Convent bedrooms, formerly known as cells, are small in size, with just enough space to fit one single bed, a small desk and sink, and a narrow closet designed to hold two black habits—nothing more. This was not really a problem for Nhia Bee's family because, as it turned out, they had no possessions other than three shoebox-sized cardboard boxes tied with string.

I showed them where to find the bathrooms and the stairwell that led down to the dining area. Pheng, the eldest, was doing his best to head up the family in the absence of his father and in these puzzling new surroundings. Though he knew no English, he spoke to his

mother and siblings in their own language every time I said or pantomimed anything. Who knows for sure what he told them? His face told me nothing.

The next morning I went to retrieve them for breakfast and was alarmed to see that four of the five bedrooms had not been touched. All six family members were piled together in one tiny room, having pulled the mattress onto the floor. At the time, of course, I had no idea that privacy is not a core value in all cultures, or that the American concept of personal space meant little to the Hmong. Only later would I learn that for those who live in poverty, especially those outside the Western world, there is really no such thing as separate bedrooms. For the nine wonderful weeks they lived at the Oaks, the family never used more than that one tiny ten-by-twelve room.

The children settled in quickly and soon transformed our quiet convent with their spontaneity. We taught the older children a bit of English each day and shared in the exuberance of their many discoveries: the miracles of toaster and doorbell and elevator and running water; the television with its amazing remote control; the odd food, gratefully accepted, but with astonishment—rice was not served at every meal? When the children figured out how to work the in-house telephone extensions, they exploded with delight. Supposing that this marvel worked only in English, they spoke over and over again the phrases they had learned, laughing uncontrollably all the while. They played outside and wrestled with one another on the lawn and clambered on the limbs of our lovely oaks. They fell asleep in our arms whenever we went for an outing in the car.

We took them to the aquarium in San Francisco, where they ran from tank to tank pointing out the colored fish. It was all we could do to pull them away at closing time. They sat glum-faced and silent during the ride home. Only later did we realize that they thought we had gone there to select their dinner. We went on shopping forays for shoes (a novelty) and basic clothing. Twelve-year-old Xia showed up for breakfast the next morning wearing only her new cotton slip—she

informed us that it was so pretty that she didn't want to cover it with her new dress. We had to grab fourteen-year-old Pheng before he headed out the door wearing only his new Jockey under-shorts to play soccer with the high school girls. And how they all loved the bathtubs! While the community was in the chapel early each morning for meditation, the splish-splashing and squealing of the children drifted happily down from behind the choir loft.

Meals and bedtime brought joys as well. Our community of nuns eats dinner in common at the Oaks, and ten-year-old Ong quickly learned that if he cleared the Sisters' dishes from the table after dinner, he could be the ice cream server. Serving ice cream for several tables, he discovered he could join each table and enjoy dessert over and over. Chai, the family's irrepressible six-year-old, stole my heart from the beginning. When I sat down to read him stories in the evening, he would climb onto my lap, snuggle up as close as he could, then pull my arms around him into a tight hug and gently bend my head down until we were cheek to cheek and I could rock him for a while. Things got a bit more serious when the baby, Yeng, came down with chicken pox and we had to begin a series of visits to various medical clinics. Gradually, the family adjusted to life in "the big house," and we adjusted along with them.

A few days after their coming, we learned that Nhia Bee had indeed been locked up in a local jail for attacking a volunteer with a length of metal pipe.[2] To this day, Nhia Bee has no memory of the incident and can only surmise that he was feverish and confused after the long flight from Asia. When he realized that he and his family were being escorted by uniformed personnel from the airport, he most likely thought that they were being taken captive, and so he struck out in an effort to protect them.

Once jailed, Nhia Bee assumed that he would be killed by "the authorities" for having injured an American. To avoid the shame of that, he attempted suicide in his jail cell, whereupon his jailers transferred him to the psychiatric ward of a nearby hospital. Sadly, all of

this transpired with no interpreter available. He was alone throughout this ordeal.

When Jade informed me of this pitiful chain of events, I immediately drove Seng to the hospital to visit her husband. What neither of us knew until we entered Nhia Bee's room was that he was being kept in restraints, tied to the bed, considered by the doctors to be a danger to himself and others. I was as horrified as Seng at the sight of him bound and immobilized. I pleaded with the doctors to untie him and let him go free. After much whispered discussion among themselves, the doctors finally allowed him out of bed. As Nhia Bee walked slowly up and down the hospital corridor with Seng at his side, his face a portrait of bewilderment, I continued advocating with the medical professionals for his discharge. *No way,* I was told. *Too dangerous*.

Certainly, these professionals were doing their jobs. Given what they knew of Nhia Bee's behavior outside the airport, they had to consider him a dangerous man. And because of the language barrier, they were unable to discover his motivations or his mindset. They had to keep him restrained while they figured out how to treat his case.

But once I saw him in person and watched his face soften with affection at the sight of his wife, I felt immediately that Nhia Bee was not a deliberately violent man. Something about the tender way he gazed at Seng, followed by the silent, pleading look he directed toward me, convinced me that this was all a terrible mistake.

I called refugee processing headquarters in New York City and argued for his release: "Let Nhia Bee come to stay with his family at our convent. I have seen this man's eyes; he is not going to hurt anyone."

"Sorry," came the answer. "That would be recklessly putting the nuns' lives in danger."

"No! Trust me; this has been a terrible ordeal, but it can't be corrected in a hospital." Day after day, I stubbornly chipped away at their resolve to hold him as an inpatient. After Nhia Bee had spent several weeks on the psych ward (all the while without an interpreter), the doctors finally—and very reluctantly—released him to our care.

When Nhia Bee reunited with his family at our convent, the children swarmed over him, hugging and crying and laughing. The anxiety that had lined his face during his weeks of confinement melted quickly away as he played with them and stroked their heads and listened to their stories. Then he went upstairs with Seng, motioning for me to follow. From one of the family's little cardboard boxes he pulled out something heavy, wrapped in fabric. He unfolded the faded gray cloth to reveal a bamboo sheath from which he pulled a metal dagger, obviously hand-fashioned. He bowed low, held out both hands with palms upraised, and ceremoniously presented the knife to me. No doubt this was his most valuable possession—perhaps his only possession. Any shred of worry that this man might harbor a violent streak evaporated with that gesture. We became fast friends.

Still, Nhia Bee was required to see the doctors in San Francisco every week for the next four weeks. I sympathized with their dilemma. Here was a stranger from a place and culture these professionals knew little about, a man who had inexplicably lashed out with a piece of metal pipe, inflicting injury on an American volunteer, and then attempted suicide. What was going on in Nhia Bee's mind? How was he interpreting his surroundings? Might he behave in ways that would put others or himself in danger again?

The truth was, Nhia Bee was one of the gentlest men I had ever met. Officials in New York phoned me regularly: *How were we* (the Sisters) *doing? Did we feel safe? Would we mind keeping the family until the doctors felt more confident that he was stable?* I chafed at the implication that Nhia Bee was some sort of unpredictable lunatic—though I had to admit that his behavior at the airport gave ample reason to draw that conclusion.

At the same time, I was secretly and quite selfishly glad about the professionals' continued caution: It meant that the whole family might stay with us longer.

Inevitably the day arrived when the medical experts confirmed what we who lived with him had long felt: Nhia Bee was fine. He

and his family were cleared for travel to the church group sponsoring them in the Midwest. And so we bade our sad farewells at the airport in April with images of doves and wedding sashes, soccer scrimmages and bedtime stories and ice-cream-loving mini-waiters brimming up behind our own tears.

It turned out that this was the beginning, not the end, of my life with refugees. Several months later, as my administrative assignment at the motherhouse was coming to a close and I was planning to return to high school teaching, I had a dream. Not a vision or a prophetic utterance—just an ordinary dream, in the middle of an ordinary night like any other, a night that gave no hint of being auspicious.

In my dream I was standing in a large schoolyard. My arms were full of books. The bell for class was ringing. Suddenly, at the far side of the yard, I spied Nhia Bee's five children. They saw me at the same instant and came running. I dropped my books and scooped up six-year-old Chai into a bear hug. I felt deliriously happy at seeing them. They all crowded around me, and I squatted down to greet each of them. I had not seen or talked to them since they'd flown off to Illinois.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Impishly, Chai grinned back, "We're here to teach you a new way of loving."

With those words I awakened. It may sound strange, but when I awoke I was convinced that this was an invitation from God to involve myself full-time in refugee work. I immediately felt a tremendous surge of happiness and energy. Shortly thereafter, I followed my heart's prompting and committed to spending a year working in a Lao refugee camp in Thailand. There I would learn that the name *Chai* means "heart".

Several years later, when I was back in the San Francisco Bay Area, I heard that Nhia Bee and his family had relocated to California's Central Valley. I drove to see them and stayed overnight in their small apartment, sleeping on a mattress they arranged for me on the floor. For breakfast, Seng sizzled garlic and fish in a large frying pan. The

television blared a cowboy Western. The children's English was now fluent, so we were able to converse at length for the first time. We sat together and talked and laughed about their memories of "the Sisters' big house." Suddenly, in the middle of a sentence, Pheng jumped up from the couch and slammed off the television with his hand.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Don't you like cowboy movies?"

"Sure," he replied, "but you have to be very careful. When the cowboys point their guns toward us, the bullets can come out and we might get killed." He, the eldest son, was carefully protecting his younger siblings. After three years in the United States, the family still struggled to find the line between what was real and what was not in this perplexing new land.

That summer I invited the four oldest children to vacation with me near Lake Tahoe. We stayed in a cabin at a 6,000-foot elevation in El Dorado National Forest. What an experience! After all, the Hmong are mountain people; this family had been starved for mountains since their US arrival. We spent several glorious days hiking through forests of pine, fir, and incense cedar. The children bombarded me with questions: "What is the name of this plant? Is this berry poisonous? What sicknesses will this leaf cure?"

I confessed that I didn't know any of the answers. They stopped walking to stare at me in disbelief: "You *live* here, don't you?" Still they plied me for information: "What about wild animals? How do you catch them? Are there any farms? Can we stay here all the time?"

They were ecstatic at seeing their first mountain creek. Though surprised by the coldness—it was snowmelt, after all—they waded right in and got busy. With sticks and leaves the older boys constructed a partial dam, and then stood to the side of it, legs apart and motionless, staring into the fast-moving current. I thought they were playing.

I was wrong.

After standing immobile for quite some time, Pheng and Ong suddenly scooped their bare hands into the icy water and emerged with

shouts of triumph, clenching slippery, wriggling trout! My mouth dropped open in sheer amazement.

The next day we chanced upon some national park rangers standing on a bridge, dumping barrels full of trout into the south fork of the American River. Now it was the children's turn to be dumbfounded: "What are they doing?" I explained that the men were stocking the river so that people could enjoy fishing. Xia turned to me, incredulous: "Why don't they just *give* the fish to the people?"

Again I had no satisfactory reply, but by this time in my life, I was learning to hold things more lightly, to laugh at life's incongruities, and to view the world from more perspectives than my own suburban upbringing had previously allowed. By this time, I had begun my new way of loving and was more at home with a world of paradoxes, mysteries, and unanswered questions.

As romantic as a "new way of loving" may sound, it has in fact been a rather humbling experience. Through my subsequent relationships with refugees from so many parts of the world, my ways of thinking have continually been brought up short.

To begin with, there is the American fixation with time. Like most Americans, I absorbed this precision even before I could read. School started at 8:20; recess spanned exactly 9:55 to 10:10. As I grew older, I accepted without question the peculiar notions that time is money and that it is the height of rudeness to keep anyone waiting. Then I moved to rural Thailand to work in Nong Khai refugee camp.

On my first free weekend, I decided to take the bus to Udon Thani, some thirty miles south of Nong Khai. Locals told me that the bus would be at the marketplace on Saturday morning. I pressed them for a specific time. Maybe around 8:00 a.m., they told me, shrugging. I arrived exactly at 8:00 and climbed aboard, dictionary in hand, to negotiate the fare with the driver. There were two other passengers: one older woman carrying a basket of fruit, and a young man holding

two live chickens. I smiled at them and the chickens and settled into my seat. Then I waited. And waited. A full hour passed. Then another. Meanwhile, several other passengers had joined us. The bus, which had been comfortable in the morning light, was now stiflingly hot. The chickens were restless, and so was I. Finally, having cobbled together my question from the Lao phrase book, I approached the driver. I asked him, as politely as I could, "When. Will. The. Bus. Leave?" He seemed surprised by the question. "When it gets *full*," he said.

Later that year, during a visit to southern Thailand with another nun, I learned something about personal space. We needed to take a taxi in order to reach a village not served by any buses. We approached a Toyota sedan parked nearby. I stepped back when I saw that the car was already full. In the front seat—besides the driver—sat two men, one of them carrying live roosters. In the back seat were two women (substantial packages on their laps) along with three small children. My companion opened the back door and motioned for me to get in. I didn't see anywhere to sit. While I hesitated, the women and children obligingly scrunched over to create a space. Dubious, I squeezed in, and then watched in amazement as the other sister (who had lived in Thailand for many years) piled in behind me. Before I could say anything, two more men entered the front seat from the other side, forcing the earlier occupants to straddle the gear shift box. Now we were twelve!

The driver, to make room, opened his own door and shifted his body almost completely out of the vehicle. But he didn't start the engine. He continued studiously cleaning his fingernails with a pen knife. The other nun then exchanged a few quick sentences with him in Thai that I didn't understand. He thanked her, put away the knife, revved up the engine and sped off on the dirt road, driving with his door still wide open and most of his body hanging outside. Only one foot and arm remained inside the taxi. He careened along the rutted road, using only horn and accelerator while passing huge trucks like some steroid-crazed leapfrog, as if making up for the taxi's small size with

his bravado. I held my breath—there was hardly room to breathe anyway—and prayed. Only when we had finally reached our destination, exited the cab, and paid the driver did I ask my companion what she had said to him at the outset.

"I told him I'd pay for the extra fare so that you wouldn't feel crowded."

"What extra fare?" I asked, restraining myself from commenting on the "so I wouldn't feel crowded."

"No taxi will start until it has ten paying passengers aboard," she explained, "and children don't count."

Another revelation was the significance of rank and seniority in many cultures. My democratized American brain considers everyone to be equal. It's simply a given for me, a starting place for social interaction. Not so in Asia or Africa.

The standard greeting in Thailand is a slight bow, accompanied by the *wai*, palms pressed together in a prayer position, as you say "*Sa wa dee kah*!" Etiquette requires that the *wai* be adjusted according to the status of the person you are greeting. To say hello to a child, perform the gesture so that the tips of the fingers touch your own chin. For a peer, put your hands in front of your face, touching your nose. For a superior (anyone who is even one day older, or anyone of greater social importance) the tips of your fingers must be pointing toward the top of your forehead.

In Thailand the head is considered to be the sacred location of the soul, and therefore a person of lower status (for example, a child) will always keep his head below the level of any older person's head. This explained the constant ducking and stooping that occurred as people passed one another. It was especially awkward when the elder was seated, since it necessitated deep crouching in order to move past him or her. To this day I still retain this habit; when forced to walk between two people—say, in the hallway of an office—I'll duck quickly and murmur, "Excuse me," but what I'm really thinking is "*kaw toht*," the reverent Lao apology.

This cultural practice was dramatically displayed on the day the Thai king's son got married. The brief Buddhist ceremony was broadcast live throughout Thailand, and the whole country came to a halt to watch it wherever there was a television. The king was seated on a low cushion, so naturally his head was quite low. When the prince and his bride-to-be entered the hallway, arrayed in royal splendor, they literally crawled on their bellies up the full length of the room to greet the king! The ceremony lasted only a few minutes but left an unforgettable impression on me.

Years later, during a time when I was the manager of a large refugee resettlement office in California, I asked Musa, one of our new employees and a refugee from Sierra Leone, to please set up the conference room for a routine staff meeting. All I wanted him to do was to drag a few tables together into a square and arrange chairs around them. This he did, but then he approached one of the other team members with a question.

"Where is Sister's chair?" he asked.

"What are you talking about? Sister doesn't have a special chair."

He ran off and asked another colleague, "Where can I find Sister's chair?" but got the same response. He began to sweat, thinking that his co-workers did not like him and were trying to get him fired. Frantic, he returned to ask me directly, "Please, where may I find your chair?"

I was in a hurry, so I answered him rather brusquely, saying that I would sit anywhere—just fix the room with fifteen chairs. Now he was sure that he was going to lose his job. He ran from person to person, begging to be shown where the Director's chair was kept, all to no avail, except that his co-workers were beginning to wonder about his sanity.

We held our usual staff meeting that afternoon, sitting around the conference tables. Musa remained silent for the entire hour, as wide-eyed and tensed as a cornered animal. Afterward, he again came to me to apologize for not having set up the right chair. I asked, a bit exasperated, what in the world he was talking about. After hesitating

a minute, perhaps trying to decide if this were a trick question that could lead to his dismissal, he explained that, of course, the Chief always had a designated chair that was carved and decorated and much larger than any other chair in the village. Only the Chief could use it. No Chief in Africa would ever use anything less. Musa assumed that it must be the same in America. Even when I assured him that I was not a Chief and would never require special seating, it was a long while before Musa completely lost the look of someone nearly brought before a firing squad.

One year Musa joined my family for Thanksgiving dinner. After the meal my father, a spry eighty-year-old, rose to help clear the plates and rinse them in the kitchen. A look of horror crossed Musa's face, but to his credit he also got up to help. He told me the next morning that he had never, ever seen a man work willingly in a kitchen, that it was especially unthinkable for an *elder* to do so, and never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that he would ever do it himself—but that he was learning this impossible etiquette by observing Americans in action.

One of the immediate goals for every refugee in America is to obtain a job. To that end, the refugee resettlement team prepares the newcomers for employment by assessing their work histories and transferable skills. Some refugees had been carpenters or tailors or teachers and could move after minimal retraining into the job market. But others were subsistence farmers or non-literate vendors, or they carried serious scars from war. It was much more challenging to prepare them for jobs.

One refugee who arrived with his pregnant wife had had his right arm chopped off by rebels during a West African war, ostensibly because he had voted "for the wrong candidate." He was, understandably, still deeply traumatized and having difficulty in his transition to life in America. My co-workers were coaching him daily on the reality facing him: "You will start at a low-paying job; but if you apply yourself, you will be able to work your way up the ladder over time." They

explained that they would do their best to find him a job paying about eight dollars.

He objected strenuously, refusing to consider it even for a minute. "I will *not* take a job paying eight dollars! *Impossible*! I refuse to work for anything less than *twenty*!"

"Twenty?" The staff tried to reason with him. "Look, you have some handicaps; you have no work history here; your English skills are very minimal; you don't have a high school diploma. You will need to start at the bottom and be patient. Over time you will learn new skills and get a better-paying position."

He dug in his heels.

"I won't do it. I have calculated what I need for my family to survive, and I can't do it on less than twenty!" His manner was verging on hysteria.

At that point I intervened in the conversation in an attempt to calm him down. "OK, let's look at the numbers." I penciled it out for him on a sheet of paper: his monthly revenue, less taxes, at eight dollars per hour in a full-time job. Then I asked him to show me his estimated monthly expenses for rent, food, transportation, etc. He didn't budge. He was staring at the first number.

"What is that?" he asked.

"You can see it," I told him. "It will be your income for one month."

His eyes locked onto it for another minute or two. The fight seemed to have gone out of him entirely. He slumped slightly in his chair and then looked up at me apologetically. "Oh. I thought you meant eight dollars per day, not eight dollars per hour." The latter was a rate nearly inconceivable to him. He accepted the next job that was offered.

While living in Thailand, I was particularly bothered by one custom that I witnessed over and over: people blew their noses by holding one nostril closed and blowing out the other one, straight onto the ground. I found it disgusting but felt it would be impolite to mention it. A colleague, somewhat more assertive, directly asked one of

the Thai men about this practice and told him how offensive it looked. The man immediately countered with his own rebuttal on the peculiar habits of Westerners: "Well, why do you people use a piece of tissue—snort, snort—and then carefully put it in your pocket? What are you saving it for?"

Notions of beauty also differ among cultures. One coming-of-age ritual for boys of the Dinka people in southern Sudan is the removal of several front teeth. I was involved in the resettlement in California of many Dinka refugees who had fled the civil war in Sudan, and most of them arrived gap-toothed. I asked one of them the reason for this custom, which, now that they were living in the States, left them at a disadvantage for enunciating certain English sounds clearly. The young man looked at me as if the reason were perfectly obvious to everyone: "Well," he said, "no girl would *ever* marry you if you had *all* your teeth!"

They were dismayed to learn that American women had different views on attractiveness. Many of the Dinka in the United States eventually turned themselves and their hard-earned dollars over to orthodontists.

Some of the refugees also suffer the indignity of having names that do not translate comfortably into English. *Dung,* for example*,* is a common Vietnamese name. I know an African man, so black he looks almost purple, whose given name is *Albino*. And another with the name *Ding Ding,* who named his sons *Ding Dong* and *Riing Ding*.

All of these things, small in themselves, heighten the refugees' self-consciousness about fitting in and succeeding in their new homeland. The unspoken norms governing relationships are painfully confusing. Is it OK for heterosexual males to hold hands in public, as is commonplace in some parts of Africa? What is the proper way to greet people? How can you make friends here? Who arranges marriages? How will dowries be paid where there are no cows? Most perplexing and tentative of all, naturally, are social interactions with the opposite gender. Where does one begin? What is appropriate? What is taboo?

One Christmas, a handsome twenty-year-old refugee from West Africa, Gerard by name, pulled me aside at a holiday gathering, anxious to talk privately.

"May I ask you a moral question?" he whispered.

Nodding, I said, "Of course."

"Is it OK to give a Christmas gift to a young woman through her grandmother?" Gerard looked distinctly ill-at-ease.

"Yes, of course," I replied. "I think that would be very appropriate."

"But I tried to do it this morning," said Gerard, "to a girl in the apartment adjacent to mine . . ."

"And . . . ?" I waited for him to continue.

". . . and her grandmother accepted the gift but then said loudly to me, 'Oh, Gerard, you *shouldn't* have done this!' Now I don't know if it was correct to give it to her or not. I'm afraid I did something quite wrong."

I explained, insofar as I could, that the grandmother's remark was meant as a gracious exaggeration, a way of saying thanks, certainly not as a reprimand. I presumed that Gerard was feeling chagrined by the perceived rebuff and was agonizing over how to approach the girl again. To set him at ease, I asked,

"So, how old is this young woman?"

"Three," answered Gerard.

His simple attempt to reach out to a child in a neighborly way on Christmas Day had left him mired in self-doubt. Much greater is the angst surrounding peer friendships and dating. Invariably, these are the areas most confusing to the refugees. Many times I have been asked, "Sister, how can we make new friends here?" The answer to that, I believe, lies not with the refugees but with the welcome (or lack of welcome) from the resident communities into which they arrive.

I'm grateful for the many ways the refugees have opened me to new ways of seeing and thinking, new understandings of diversity, new ways of loving. I'm different because of my interactions with them.

This prayer, attributed to Voltaire several centuries ago, now echoes my own:

> O thou God of all beings, of all worlds, and of all times,
> We pray,
> that the little differences
> in our clothes,
> in our inadequate languages,
> in our ridiculous customs,
> in our imperfect laws,
> in our illogical opinions,
> in our ranks and conditions, which
> are so disproportionately important to us
> and so meaningless to you,
> that these small variations
> that distinguish those atoms that we call men,
> one from another,
> may never be signals of hatred and persecution.[3]

This may require a new way of loving on the part of us all.