Rediscovering Unitarianism in Transylvania
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March 9, 2008

Opening Words
We are here to celebrate the free spirit,
wherever it has arisen:
under the fists of tyrants,
where fear drives us to forget our vision;
surrounded by the horrors of war,
where chaos drives striving from our minds;
in the degradation of poverty,
where want eclipses all other thoughts;
or in a life of ease and safety,
which lulls us into complacency.
In all places and times, our hunger for meaning has refused to be silenced.

We gather in the midst of all that is our lives to give thanks for the persistence of the human heart, for the clarity of the open mind, and for communities such as this one, where our seeking is welcomed and affirmed.

First Reading *from "A Call for Historical Consciousness" by the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, 1994*

Unitarian Universalists often see hope and liberation in escaping the past and venturing into the new. That new may be the fresh immediacy of life lived here and now, or of encountering life on one's own terms, not pre-described by the experiences of others. It may be a new life oriented to hope for what could be, free from the bondage of what has been: the future good always out ahead, the present a place of pilgrimage, and the past defined as evil.

For come-outers, departure means saying "no" to what one inherited. The danger is that we become habituated to saying "no" as the only saving grace, and find ourselves only leaving, only backing away from life, only dissenting. As our identity becomes tied to what we reject, our spirit languishes, and the past is just a cardboard box labeled, "No good. Discard." Were there treasures in this box? Did we label it in haste?

Second Reading *from* Video Night at Kathmandu *by Pico Iyer, 1988*

Every trip we take deposits us at the same forking of the paths: it can be a shortcut to alienation -- removed from our home and distanced from our immediate surroundings, we can afford to be contemptuous of both; or it can be a voyage into renewal, as, leaving our selves and pasts at home and traveling light, we recover our innocence abroad… If every journey makes us wiser about the world, it also returns us to a sort of childhood. In alien parts, we speak more simply, in our own or some other language, move more freely, unencumbered by the histories that we carry around at home, and look more excitedly,

with eyes of wonder… We travel, initially to lose ourselves, and we travel, next to find ourselves. We travel to open our hearts and eyes and learn more about the world than our newspapers will accommodate.

Sermon

I'm sorry not to be delivering this service to you in person, but Mark and I very much wanted you to have the text of the sermon at the very least. As central as the printed word is to our lives, it will be up to you to imagine the enthusiasm I wished to share with you about our relationship with Transylvania. This mountainous region halfway around the world, just smaller than the state of Ohio, has become a place of pilgrimage and a spiritual second home to many Unitarian Universalists. I hope that my love for this place, its great-hearted people, and its rich history which is partly *our own* history, will shine through the printed word and touch your life as well. And I look forward to visiting you in the not-so-distant future, and making good on my promise to Mark to share my message in person.

It's ironic that the very source of Unitarian Universalism's prophetic voice can also become a source of short-sightedness. English historian Lord Acton is credited for having said, "Every institution finally perishes by an excess of its own first principle." For our congregations this double-edged principle might be our love of freedom, the freedom to seek out and embrace new ways of seeing and doing. In exercising this freedom and liberating ourselves from the shackles of dogma and the weight of tradition, we have often overlooked the possibility that we might also be disconnecting ourselves from important sources of wisdom and guidance.

Many Unitarian Universalists, new to our movement, are surprised to realize that our tradition draws upon a long and important past, and is part of a much larger movement for religious freedom that has arisen in different times and places around the world. Few of these places, though, strike us as more *unlikely* a home for liberal religion than Eastern Europe. Most of us think of this region first as a former pawn of the Soviet regime, the "Evil Empire," as Ronald Reagan used to call it. We imagine featureless gray buildings, oppressive governments and faceless bureaucracies, ethnic and religious conflicts in places like the former Yugoslavia, and, more recently, the American outsourcing of torture to Poland and Romania. These places strike many of us as alien, chaotic and terribly backward, almost medieval. It is unexpected, then, to learn that during the tumultuous 16th century, when the Protestant Reformation swept through Europe, places like Poland, Hungary and Romania were islands of religious tolerance. What a surprise to learn that the roots of our own liberal religion were flourishing in Eastern Europe long before they were imagined here in the United States. Throughout the turbulent history of that region, misery under communism and totalitarianism, constant poverty and bureaucratic absurdity, we see that there have also been communities who have nurtured and sustained the principles of religious freedom, suffering because of this work but persevering nonetheless.

Amidst the names of places so foreign to us, the mention of Transylvania calls to mind particular mystery. We associate it with a world of fantasy – of Dracula, of course,

and sinister mountaintop castles, a distant Shangri-La, both romantic and eerie. Bram Stoker chose Transylvania as the setting for his novel *Dracula* without ever having seen it because he found its name so evocative of this mystery. Stoker's fiction aside, Transylvania's story remains both complex and challenging, and important for Unitarian Universalists to know about, especially as we consider the difficult relationship the United States is currently in with the rest of the world.

My real interest in Transylvania was peaked when a Unitarian minister, the Rev. Sándor Léta, and his wife Erika came to spend a year at Starr King School for the Ministry, where I was completing my seminary studies. Instead of the dates and names and places in our history books, here was the real thing, the real story of Unitarianism in such an exotic a place as Eastern Europe. I soon came to realize, though, that Transylvanian Unitarianism involves some significant differences from our movement in the West. Most surprising for many of us is that the Unitarians there unapologetically call themselves Christians, in the sense that theologian Marcus Borg calls himself a Christian, which is to take completely seriously the life and work of the human Jesus. Even with this liberal definition, their theology is still a potential challenge for American Unitarian Universalists, some of whom have an uneasy relationship with Christianity. Also, as much as our movement is a reflection of its American context, their church is an expression of its Transylvanian setting. It's worth asking ourselves, can liberal religion shaped by such a different world mean anything more to us than an exotic oddity? Is there any reason to see Transylvanian Unitarians as our religious kin, any reason to pursue a deeper relationship with them? These are questions worth asking, if a connection with them is to be anything more than shallow sentimentality.

My two years as an English teacher at the Unitarian seminary in Transylvania brought me into daily contact with questions like these, and the answers had the effect of changing my life permanently. When I arrived in Transylvania in 1996, I had the good fortune to be able to speak both Hungarian and some Romanian, so I wasn't a stranger there for long. I was able to follow the sermons and prayers in church and soon preach some of my own, as well as participating in my students' conversations with one another, and I was soon being treated like one of the family. Because of the common languages between us, I was able to be involved in people's everyday lives in a way that a tourist might not. The stories that they have shared with me there also help me to understand our shared history on a different level – on the level of everyday experiences – and appreciate what a life-saving force faith has had to be for the Unitarians there. In addition to already having their language under my belt, though, much of my understanding has been a heart-centered connection, the result of being open to the realities of life for Transylvanians.

It would be easy to romanticize Transylvania as merely picturesque and quaint, but we do so at our own risk. Their brutal history under dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu, and the nation's struggle to recover after decades of forced isolation from the rest of the world, have made demands upon people that we can scarcely imagine. The inflation rate has been staggering, so bad that prices tripled in the first six months I was there. Interethnic hostility, although improving, has historically been a source of conflicts,

discrimination and resentment. Industrial pollution is horrifyingly bad, so dangerous that the life expectancy is as low as 50 in some cities. In the midst of breathtakingly beautiful countryside and open-hearted people are towns uglier and dirtier than I could have imagined. Some of my female students, now just in their early 30s, are already suffering thyroid problems from Chernobyl's fallout in their air and water. And the widespread problem of HIV-infected orphans is still fresh in the world's memory. How do we, whose lives are the most privileged, the most comfortable and, perhaps until recently, the most sheltered in the world, understand life in this context? And how do we understand a Unitarianism that has persevered for more than four centuries in the midst of such a life?

I found that, only by listening to their stories, grieving with them the absurdity and hardship they have suffered, and celebrating with them the wonderful persistence of the human spirit in the midst of pain, was I able to find some sense in such a different world. Through their worship and their stories I was able to understand how much our two churches truly have in common, and how much each of us has to gain from our connection with one another.

I think back to when I had been there a little less than a year, and the church was celebrating the spring holiday of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is said to have come upon Jesus' apostles and filled them with new authority. Pentecost is one of the four church holidays when the Transylvanians serve communion, and I had come to love their rich and dignified ritual of bread and wine. On this particular Pentecost, however, we ministers were feeling more despair than joy. The 23-year-old son of the congregation president had committed suicide just that week, as had another young Unitarian woman in an unrelated suicide. As we put on our robes and prepared to enter the church, I could see the same overwhelm and dismay on the other ministers' faces. How could we – after such senseless loss, deaths so recent and central to the congregation – how could we presume to claim that God was with them, and dare to celebrate the Pentecost message of that genuine presence of hope in their lives? I felt like an imposter, and a hypocrite.

After the sermon, the six ministers rose and walked to the center of the sanctuary, where the elaborately-carved wooden communion table stood, the bread and wine laid out. As we sang the communion hymn, the members also rose and lined the aisles and central open space. I took up one of the chalices, the 450-year-old chalices of church founder Ferenc Dávid, and walked to the head of the line, where the congregation elders waited. Hands received the chalice from me, pair by pair, and raised the wine to their lips. Gnarled hands, arthritic hands, battered by decades of work and hardship still unimaginable to me, held the heavy chalice and celebrated their community of faith. As they received the wine from me, each of them looked into my eyes – how could I not have seen it before! – looked into my eyes with a seriousness and power that moves me still to think of it. And in their old, old eyes I saw the message, "Don't worry – we've been here for 400 years, and we're not going anytime soon. We have seen so much suffering, but we who have survived, live with dignity." And I was ministered unto in that raw and hurting place, by the 500 of them, demonstrating God and Spirit in a way that has ever since made those words safe for me to take seriously. Not just once, but the next spring as well, when an 11-year-old Unitarian boy had been hit by a brick dropped

by playmates from their apartment roof, and lay dying in a coma, I was overwhelmed by the same despair, and buoyed up once again by the eyes and the hands of people who would not be defeated by their circumstances. Even the lasting damage of violence upon the human spirit could not quell the redeeming force of faithful community, a power which can lead us back to wholeness and offers the possibility of living more deeply and authentically.

In the days that followed the September 11 attacks, in the midst of presidential posturing and flag-waving, I remember that the most meaningful and moving words for me were from my friends in Unitarian churches overseas, and especially from the Rev. Dr. Arpád Szabó, the Bishop of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church, who closed his letter by writing, "Our prayers and thoughts are with you in these hard days of trial. May God bless America and humankind with a safer future." This from a people who have lived with tragedy and suffering for centuries, and have never had the luxury of doubting whether evil exists. They know that the United States is a relative infant when it comes to experiencing tyranny, but their own history has had much to say about repression. In the midst of tragedy, our response must not be to withdraw into further isolation, as tempting as that impulse might be – hitting the malls won't save us, flag-waving won't save us, and finding ways to numb ourselves won't save us – only by recognizing the universality of that raw and tender place we all carry may we reconnect with our fullest humanity and deepest wisdom. Throughout their difficult circumstances, Unitarianism has helped our Transylvanian cousins to find meaning, strength and comfort – a faith that, like ours, is a growing, living presence, rather than a dusty relic to be idolized. A faith that, like ours, brings the human element into the religious life, creating meaning in *this* world, building justice in *this* world. A faith that, like ours, thrives on human strength and dignity, rather than encouraging and exploiting human weakness. A faith that, like ours, celebrates the hopeful spirit that refuses to surrender, even under the most grotesque of circumstances. These are *our* roots, growing deep, deep into history and deep into the human heart, and our congregations gather partly to share this depth with one another.

The Partner Church Program, which helps connect American Unitarianism Universalist and Transylvanian Unitarian congregations, produced a bumper sticker that says, "The most radical thing we can do is to introduce people to one another." It is in mindfulness of our connections that our species' deepest wisdom is expressed. American Unitarianism Universalism and Transylvanian Unitarianism have a great deal to offer one another. We show them what is possible with wings – the wings of individual worth and radical possibility. We show them how to question and challenge and change. The Transylvanians offer us a fundamental rootedness – rooted in a long history, rooted in human relationship. They show us how to trust and praise and persist. The church that emerges at this intersection – the edge between East and West, the edge between tradition and freedom – is not a church of simple answers and cheap salvation. It is, I believe, a place where we can find a sense of belonging to a great and tenacious religious family, and where we may reap the rewards of a real and honest faith. Amen.