

A Transylvanian Pilgrimage

Rev. Eric Meter & Jolinda Stephens, DRE

August 11, 2013

Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening Words:

We are here,
after the return of summer storms,
to refresh ourselves in one another's company
through song and stillness,
and to celebrate the possibilities
of partnership with those either near or far away.

So, grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burden, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to awaken: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.

Singing #1023 *Building Bridges*
Ingathering *Only One Neighborhood* Gianna Collins
Greeting

Responsive Reading #566 *God is One* Drake Barr

In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation.

You need not think alike to love alike.

There must be knowledge in faith also.

Sanctified reason is the lantern of faith.

Religious reform can never be all at once, but gradually, step by step.

If they offer something better, I will gladly learn.

The most important spiritual function is conscience, the source of all spiritual joy and happiness.

Conscience will not be quieted by anything less than truth and justice.

We must accept God's truth in this lifetime. Salvation must be accomplished here on earth.

God is indivisible.

Egy Az Isten. (*pronounced Edge Oz Eeshten*)

And now, as you are, please turn in your dark grey hymnals to #352 as we sing together *Find a Stillness....*

Communing

Moir: As we move now into the center of our time together this morning, a time of stillness and reflection, let the words of this Transylvanian Unitarian prayer be our guides. And while the theology represented here may not match your own, please hear the spirit behind the exact words, and use that as your guide...

Where there is faith there is love.
Where there is love there is peace.
Where there is peace there is blessing.
Where there is blessing there is God.
Where there is God, there is no need.

ring bell

Gianna: Our lives are shaped by countless others. Into the stillness now let us bring to mind the names of those we love, those who challenge us in old familiar or brand new ways, those we miss, those we long to see again soon. We name them now, either softly into this shared space, or quietly in the embrace of our hearts.

naming

There are memories and there are moments. Moments that take our breath away. Dwelling on the former may cause us to miss the magic of the next moment, the next song, the next note. Together now, let us listen....

Eric: Just a quick note about the song you are about to hear. During our pilgrimage, we heard this song sung by two fine male voices – one baritone, the other bass – at the cell where the father of Transylvanian Unitarianism, Francis David, was martyred. Here for you now, the same song, in Hungarian, by two lovely female voices.

*The Song of Francis David, as sung by Rain Maxwell
and Kelsey Pierson*

A Transylvanian Pilgrimage

Rev. Eric Meter

“You need not think alike to love alike,” so said Ferenc David, author of our responsive reading and the song Kelsey and Rain just sang for us.

Born Catholic, David became a Lutheran and then a Calvinist before taking a long, cold second look at the Gospels. His studies lead him to begin preaching the oneness of God and the humanity of Jesus, holding up reason and tolerance as pillars of faith. David spoke so convincingly that over time he converted both his congregation and the Transylvanian King Sigismund to Unitarianism. This was during the mid to late 1560s.

Fast forward a few centuries.

The land that is still called Transylvania is now part of the nation of Romania, though the Unitarians of Transylvania still speak their ethnic Hungarian. The fall of Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989 opened the door for us to visit our cousins in faith after decades during which they had been thoroughly isolated from the outside world.

As I prepared to make my first pilgrimage to Transylvania, 15 years ago this week, I read in a guide book that Transylvania was “the Eastern Europe of Eastern Europe.” Never having been to Eastern Europe before, I could do little more than imagine just what that meant.

It meant weatherworn faces, horse drawn carts of hay, chickens pecking at my ankles as I showered in a makeshift shower my host family build for me in the corner of their chicken run. It meant being treated like royalty. It meant being humbled by the sacrifices people took on in order to show me how important my visit was to them.

Over the last 20 or more years, many of our congregations here in the States have developed partner church relationships with Unitarian congregations in Central and Eastern Europe and also now, India, the Philippines, and Africa.

Several years ago this congregation reached out and became partnered with the Unitarians of Bölön, Transylvania. That will be Belin on most maps, as they list the Romanian name of the village.

Several years ago Gretchen Faulstich and Kevin O'Neal were our first ambassadors to Bölön. This last summer our former Director of Religious Education, Jolinda Stephens, and I were joined by Danya Furda and Ben Iten and seven of this congregation's youth for a 10-day-pilgrimage to Transylvania this past June. Will our youth also rise?

Drake Barr

Katie Carey

Gianna Collins

Moirra Iten

Rain Maxwell

Susie Mesler-Evans

Kelsey Pierson

All but Jolinda and Susie are here with us today. Jolinda has retired to Seattle to be closer to her family, and Susie has since moved to Florida. We will send both of them copies of our service today.

Others from our group will share some of their stories shortly. The slide show that began when I started talking was put together for us today by Drake Barr from images taken by all of us. We hope you enjoy them. If you have questions for us, and we hope you will, please find us after the service in Fellowship Hall.

And now Kelsey has some reflections on what Unitarianism is in Transylvania. Kelsey...

On the Unitarians of Transylvania

Kelsey Pierson

Though I have been Unitarian Universalist since I was very young, I was unaware until very recently of the rich roots of our faith's history that stretch across the globe. Learning about the history of the Transylvanian Unitarians in such a personal and firsthand way was an amazing and often deeply moving experience for me: hearing the only surviving song written by Francis David sung to us as we gathered around the monument to his martyrdom in the cell where he died; visiting the tombs of the Unitarian King of Transylvania John Sigismund and his mother Queen Isabella in an awe inspiring thousand-year-old church that was once Unitarian; listening to the ancient history of the Transylvanian people as we took a night stroll through the back roads of Sighisoara.

I cannot recreate these experiences for you, but I can share with you what I learned of Unitarian history through my journey. Francis David, the founder of the Unitarian church, gave the first sermon preaching the principles of Unitarianism in 1565. The concepts of freedom of faith, God as One (as opposed to the Trinity), and the other philosophies of the Unitarian faith spread and were adopted by many. One of these

people was the King of Transylvania, John Sigismund, who, with the influence of these new faith values, proclaimed a law of religious freedom and conscience in Transylvania. For the first time in Christian history, an entire country embraced a standard of religious tolerance.

Unfortunately the enlightened period following the proclamation of this law lasted a mere three years. King Sigismund died young, and his successor was not of like mind, and passed an Act countering the progresses of the Unitarian Reformation. Francis Dávid, having been targeted specifically by this new law, was soon arrested for “Religious Innovation” and sentenced with life imprisonment. He was held in the Fortress of Déva, and died there after five months. Further decrees throughout the years resulted in the confiscation of Unitarian religious texts for censorship, seizure of Unitarian schools and churches, and forced dogmatic changes such as the worship of Jesus as God and baptism in the name of the Trinity.

However, in 1781, the Edict of Toleration was passed and Unitarians enjoyed a long period of freedom and development. This lasted until the Treaty of Trianon when Transylvania was taken from Hungary and made part of Romania after World War I. The Romanian Transylvanians were subsequently subject to the rule of several fascist and communist regimes until the Romanian Revolution of 1989.

Nowadays the Transylvanian Unitarian Church again enjoys freedom and success, comprising 126 congregations serving approximately 65,000 church members. Many of these congregations have formed partnerships with Unitarian Universalist congregations in the United States and Canada, such as our partner church in Bölön. These partnerships are opportunities for all of us to grow and connect personally with our faith heritage as we did on this trip, strengthening both of our branches of this great tree which roots we share.

A Transylvanian Greeting

Danya Furda

When I decided to join the Youth Pilgrimage to Transylvania, I was curious to visit our partner church. After all, I had been on our Partner Church Committee for years, and I remember the meeting when we decided where we would like to have a partnership. (Transylvania, by the way, is not the only place in the world where Unitarian churches exist.) Once we had decided upon Transylvania, the UU Partner Church Council matched us up with the Unitarian church in Bölön, partly because their congregation was a large one like ourselves and also because they had had a UU partner church in California, but that church had abandoned the partnership. Having this new, promising opportunity to partner with the Bölön congregation was exciting but, at the same time, a bit scary. We couldn't let them down again. So, Gretchen Faulstich and Kevin O'Neil were the first two courageous visitors from our congregation to visit the village and establish contact. Now that I have been there myself, I admire them even more than I did before. Not only did they not know what to expect and what language barriers they would face, but also the communication between our congregations was sometimes limited because Koszma Albert, the only

minister of our partner church, was extremely busy, and apparently the only one who seemed to be able to speak and write English.

So, with only sketchy details about what our meeting with those in the village might be like, based on Kevin's and Eric's prior experience, we began our pilgrimage. We were hopeful and yet anxious – two emotions that intensified as we approached our visit to Bölön, which was at the end of our trip. We pumped John Dale, the UU Partner Church Council Trip Coordinator traveling with us, with questions about what our visit would be like. Would our youth be able to talk to their youth? Eric and Jolinda asked Albert about having our youth do a service project with their youth. What would that project be? Where would we be staying? Would the Unitarian guesthouse be finished? What would they be like? What would the village be like? Most importantly, how would we be able to communicate with each other? Gabor, our translator, certainly couldn't be everywhere with us at once! We even stopped at a German version of COSTCO near Sighisoara in order to stock up on still water, fruit, bath towels, soap, toilet paper, and chocolate – anything that we were unsure of getting in the village and which we thought we couldn't live without. We didn't know much about our visit, and it was driving some of us crazy – well, at least, it was driving me crazy.

When we got out of the van, we realized several people had gathered to witness our arrival (or to check us out). It was comforting to sense that some of them looked as anxious as we felt. Several of our questions were answered immediately. We would be split up into small groups and would be staying with families in the village, as the guesthouse was not even close to being finished. Albert had every day of our stay planned out for us, and Eric would be preaching that coming Sunday. The answers to our other questions revealed themselves slowly. For one, there was no way Albert was going to have his honored guests, such as we were, do any kind of work. For another, we learned that very few of the youth, let alone the older villagers, could speak English with us. This included our host families that we were staying with. Many of us, however, learned to spend time each night communicating with them via hand gestures, pictures and Google Translate. (Thank goodness for Google Translate!)

However, despite the seemingly overwhelming language barriers, for most of us the time we spent in the village was the highlight of our trip! How could this be? Well, there was a definite connection made between us and the villagers, but it was accomplished not through words, but through hospitality and friendliness. Being in Bölön was like receiving a constant, big hug! Everyone went out of their way to show us around, to let us take pictures (even inside homes, gardens, and the clinic) to see what their lives were like, and to greet us with smiles. My host mother, Rosalina, is an excellent example. She had a husband and two sons to get out the door for work and school each morning, and yet she would listen intently for either Jolinda or me to stir so that she could rush into the kitchen, clean off the table, which only four people could sit at, and prepare us a lavish breakfast that I know no one in that family would ever indulge in. Each morning breakfast got more and more elaborate. On the second night, when Rosalina saw some of Jolinda's pictures of home, I think she zeroed in on what she thought we would rather eat for breakfast than what is typical in the village (cheese, bread, tomatoes and cucumbers), and it would magically appear on the table the next

day or in our “room” – orange drink, apples, eggplant dip, tea, or soft pretzels that the younger son Gelli went to purchase early at a shop. For the tea, she went outside near where the family kept their three goats, rabbits, chickens, and guinea pigs, picked the lemon balm leaves and brewed them in an outdoor kettle so as not to disturb us before breakfast or to make the kitchen too hot. Another time our shoes were very muddy from walking home on the unpaved, dirt road so that we left them outside our host family’s door. After changing our clothes, we went to put our muddy shoes back on only to find that they had already been cleaned and lined up neatly beside the living room door where we slept and had our things. In all, the best way to describe my entire experience of living with Rosalina and her family was like being smothered with kindness and concern. I don’t think that I could attain the perfection of detailed hospitality that Rosalina had attained!

As each day passed, I recognized more and more people and the smiles and nods got more frequent so that I fancied myself as a part of the village, because that is how it felt to me. I looked forward to seeing my storks in their nest at the top of a building indicating which road my “house” was on. I wondered how the village might change after our visit, if the economy would improve, if young people would remain in the village or go off to Brasov. I thought about Misha’s comment to me that he was planning to study English more than he currently was (at least six hours a day he said) so that he could be the translator for us when we visited again, and I decided that I would like to return to find out how everything went. Indeed, Albert was already planning our return before we even left, despite the fact that our visit and the first annual “Castle Days” held to honor us, without a doubt, cost him more money than the Bölön congregation could afford. In all, I find that I’m remembering my stay fondly and frequently - weeks after I’ve been back – which is definitely something I never expected when I first signed up to go.

Unexpected Faith

Katie Carey

As I’m sure life has gracefully, and sometimes not so gracefully, illustrated to each of you before that spiritual moments often come at funny and unexpected times. You see, we were told we would be embarking on a trip to explore our Unitarian Universalist heritage and to gain a deeper knowledge of what it means to be UU.

What we were not told – not even in the fine print, I checked – is that being in a completely foreign place somewhat strips you of your ego and leaves you feeling very vulnerable.

I say with some reserved certainty that if you asked us about the moments in Romania in which we felt the most spiritually connected – not all of them would directly involve Unitarian Universalism. Not to mislead: I hope to never forget our time gathered in a cave around Francis David’s tomb. Tears rimmed many of our eyes as we sat in silence after the story of our UU martyr was told. Equally as moving for me was Sunday’s church service in the village, and the melancholy, beautiful songs that filled the

surrounding area with a sound that couldn't be described as anything but divine. Imagine my surprise when I was so deeply moved by musical pieces I couldn't even understand the words to.

However, as meaningful as those moments were, there were others that had very little to do with religion and seemingly quite a bit to do with the individual spirit: soaking up rays of sunshine, catching baby chicks, and having the freshest goat cheese I will probably ever have in my life genuinely felt spiritual. Those foodies out there will understand how food can be religiously good. Feeding fish bits of bread in pouring rain – watching them pounce out of the water only to splash back in. Riding a wagon – turning and seeing the Roma – what we call gypsies – gaze back at us with curiosity while hanging fresh laundry on clotheslines. Even the castles: placing bare feet on stone which has been there before anyone I know – and anyone they know – was born – and knowing that it will be there long after I die.

Most spiritually connecting of all was the people. Seeing with fresh eyes that people who speak different languages than I, who kiss on both cheeks when meeting, who don't have paved roads, share the same aspects of human experience that I do. This is why the trip was weaved with Unitarian Universalist roots: not only because we visited the famous individuals, the numerous elegant churches, or even because we met with other UUs. It was because I found pieces of myself in others, and found solace and truth in the most unexpected circumstances. This is what I found in Romania: our values as a community do not affix themselves to us for one hour on Sundays. They shed light on many aspects of our lives: even the unexpected ones.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Ben Iten

We have traveled out in waves. Kevin and Gretchen the first wave, this trip the second wave. The interesting thing about waves as they crash on the beach is the smaller current that pulls them back to where they came from. As it does, it takes with it the little bit of shells and sand it can hold on to.

As we were pulled back to Columbus, we are excited that this second trip might have its own undertow. We have invited Rev. Kozma Albert and his wife, Ericka, to visit us early next summer. We are hoping the third wave to go crashing into Bölön is coming. We hope to plan a larger return visit to Bölön in the summer of 2015.

Offering

Many more than just those up on the chancel this morning were part of making this pilgrimage possible. If I were to thank list all of them now, you'd think I was reading the church directory to you. Still, we want to thank all of you who made this trip possible not only for us, but for the congregation as a whole.

Thank you. Or, as they say in Hungarian, *Köszönöm*.

And so now we will have our Sunday offering. In gratitude for all that went into making this congregation as truly vital as it is, we pause now for a moment of both appreciation and generosity.

Together we support such a community as best we can, in many ways, through our human presence, our gifts behind the scenes, and through this ancient and thoughtful way of supporting what we love.

Our ushers will now come forward. The offering will be given and gratefully received.

Returning

Before we close I want to direct your attention to the cover of your program today. This is a drawing Gianna made of the Transylvanian Unitarian crest. It depicts the serpent and the dove of the passage from Matthew quoted on the next page. Over the last generations this passage has been the most important one in all the Bible for our cousins in faith there. Taking the injunction to be wise as serpents while as gentle as doves helped them survive a political climate as unwelcome religion within an unwelcome people that I can only begin to imagine.

Clearly their culture, and their religion, are not ours. Yet we have much to learn from one another. This partnership will enrich us both. So will you please rise once more as we sing again, *Building Bridges*.

Singing #1023 *Building Bridges*

Blessing