

## “That Inviting Darkness” Partnering with Transylvanian Unitarians

In his book, “Why We Travel,” Pico Iyer compares foreign travel with a love affair, since both require entering a realm “where you can’t quite speak the language, and you don’t know where you are going, and you’re pulled ever deeper into an *inviting darkness*. To me, Iyer’s phrase “inviting darkness” perfectly captures what a pilgrimage to Transylvania is like. I first journeyed there in the summer of 2006 with a group of 11 other pilgrims from the UU congregation of Atlanta. For me, it definitely was the beginning of a love affair. Now, married men are allowed to have such love affairs and can even get the blessings of their wives to participate in them. Until this past summer my wife, Kathy, did not understand why I had come under the spell of the people in Transylvania. That’s when she accompanied me as I returned to the site of my initial liaison. Then she got her own chance to be enchanted by the people who had completely won my heart the year before in that inviting darkness.

There is a darkness and a mystique to Transylvania, to be sure. The first images that come to most people’s minds when you mention Transylvania is vampires, and Dracula, and dark castles in forbidding mountains. Then there is the name of the place itself. Transylvania is a Latin phrase meaning “the land beyond the forest.” Medieval traders would have to cross Transylvania as the shortest route from the orient to the west, or from southern Europe to northern

Europe. Since Transylvania is relatively isolated from the rest of the world by the Carpathian Mountains on the east, west, and south, and remained largely under the feudal system until World War I, visitors are still privy to what life was like in medieval Europe, or at least vestiges of it. If all that isn’t enough to cast the place in a shadowy mystery, there was the iron curtain.

Transylvania has been a part of Romania since World War I. Hungarians living there are now an oppressed minority due to forced relocations and the ravages of war. They are at home yet in a strange land, experiencing themselves as displaced, somewhat comparable to the situation the Tibetans within China. Until 1989 Romania’s government has consisted mostly of fascist and communist dictators, the most notorious of which was the last, Ceausescu. He tried to systematically destroy the culture of the ethnic minorities living in Romania, such as the Hungarians. He would raze whole villages, imprison the ministers or force them into hard labor, and send the people off to soulless concrete block apartment buildings in the cities. These architectural monstrosities still line the roads in most all Transylvanian cities and serve as bleak reminders of Ceausescu’s reign of terror to an entire generation of people.

How can a land and a people cast in such darkness be so inviting, you may be asking yourself. Let me take you back to the moment I made my decision

to go on the pilgrimage. It was a cold and rainy January evening in 2006. The partner church group at the Atlanta congregation was giving a presentation on the upcoming pilgrimage that summer. I was vaguely interested, so I stopped by. Besides, I had heard they were serving some Hungarian wine, and I wanted to check that out too. In the course of the presentation some members of the group gave testimonials about their experience of pilgrimage. I will never forget the woman who related her story of hospitality offered by her host family – how warm, generous, and loving they were and how much she learned about their culture and their beliefs simply by sharing meals with them and watching them interact as a family. Then she teared up and said, “They are so poor, but they are so rich.” I was hooked. The look in her eyes as she shared all this let me know that she had been touched deeply by the experience some years ago, to such a depth that she continued to be quite moved by it.

I guess I have always been a sucker for paradox. “They are so poor but they are so rich.” What did she mean by that? Obviously something that touched her deeply. That summer I was to find out.

We spent the first couple of days in Budapest doing things that, at first seemed a bit touristy to me, but in retrospect seemed designed to give us a chance to acclimate to the time change and the Hungarian culture. Actually our tour guides did a marvelous

job giving us a feel for the enormous impact that the World Wars and communist occupation have had on this culture. Then the real adventure began. Now, anyone who remembers anything from their brief survey of Unitarian history in New UU class knows the names of King Sigismund, the only Unitarian King in history, and Francis David, the founder of Unitarianism in Transylvania and arguably its best spokesperson ever. We crossed the Hungarian Plain by bus to enter Transylvania – a land that is to Unitarians what Jerusalem is to Christians and Mecca is to Muslims. Over the next couple of days we stood on “Holy Ground” if you will. The Church where King Sigismund, the only Unitarian king in history, issued his famous Act of Religious Tolerance in 1568. King Sigismund’s tomb, which commands a constant flow of grateful Hungarian Unitarians bearing wreaths. The rock upon which Francis David preached his famous sermon that convinced 3000 people to join the Unitarian viewpoint on the spot - that rock now enshrined in the Unitarian Church in Kolosvar. Also the citadel where Francis David was imprisoned a mere 11 years later for preaching those very same views – imprisoned until he died a martyr’s death.

During the next phase of our pilgrimage we stayed with our host families. UUCA’s partner church is in Szekelyudvarhely, a town of about 35,000 people located in the heart of Transylvania. We arrived late on a Saturday evening, and a contingent from the church

greeted us at the church where we got our first chance to partake in palinka. They offered us these tiny shot glasses of this plum brandy called palinka. I was very tired, but my mind was working well enough to reason, “Such a small amount, what harm can it do?” Well, let me tell you, a thimbleful of palinka is all it takes. My first transport into that inviting darkness, you might say.

Then we were introduced to our interpreter, who stayed with us in the home of our host family, and the interpreters introduced us to our hosts. For the next few nights, we stayed in the homes of various families in the town who were fortunate enough to have extra bedrooms. The next morning we attended worship with our hosts. The minister spoke fairly good English, as does most everyone there under the age of thirty. But of course the service was conducted in Hungarian. Nothing gives you an appreciation for the power of nonverbal communication like sitting in a worship service and feeling spiritually lifted without understanding hardly a word. I was beginning to get a glimpse of the soul of Transylvanian Unitarianism. The weather beaten faces of these people radiated a quiet joy. A lifetime of hardship under communism did not seem to repress their enthusiasm for life. These were the careworn countenances of a people who know from personal experience just how precious it is to have the freedom to participate in worship. As the Rev. Gary Smith of Concord, Massachusetts said, “Our spiritual mentors in

Transylvania had to fight for our faith, not in the time of the Council of Nicea, not in the Middle Ages, not at the time of the Reformation, but in our own time, in our own generation. Even if they lost everything to wars and dictatorships, they kept their faith. They had the courage to stand up for something, to live a life far simpler than ours materially but richer in spirit, a shared faith.”

We would pass the next 8 days in the warm, hearty embrace of our host congregation. During daytime hours we had many options for field trips to view local artisans, help with a service project, tour castles and caves and other sites of interest, and visit project Harvest Hope, a Unitarian Universalist initiative to help procure cows for the local dairy farmers. In the evenings the locals entertained us with folk dances and cookouts. At night we would experience family life in the ambience of our hosts, the first half of the week with an interpreter, the second half without. The Partner Church Council has been arranging these pilgrimages for fourteen years now, and they have learned many lessons about how to maximize the benefits to everyone on both sides of the cultural exchange. And having the interpreters step out of the relationship is part of this learning. Why? Well, by the middle of the week, all the pilgrims had established communication with our hosts in a way that transcended language. Yet another paradox. How can a human being understand how easy it is to communicate without a common language when we

have so much trouble communicating in this country where we speak the same language?

Now, this may seem a rather strange confession for an aspirant to the UU ministry to make, but at times I can be a bit cynical. Now, knowing that dark secret about me, try to imagine what this scene was like. This occurrence happened on an evening rather late in my week there in Transylvania. It was one of the real highlights of my pilgrimage. I was with my host family on the sofa, their teenage kids sitting on either side of me, showing me pictures of themselves dressed up in their folk costumes as they participated in one of the many cultural festivals they have every year. The kids were so animated as they described how the boys and men sprinkle their girlfriends and female relatives with perfume during their Easter celebration and dance around them and sing a little poem. They were also excited to explain some of the history of their town and their region of Transylvania. They did not just know the history so well, but they were actually interrupting each other in their exuberance to tell me the stories and legends. It was such fun listening to them because the stories were interesting and they told them with such enthusiasm. But what really got to me was watching the parents take such pride in their children's participation in these cultural events. They had known all the pain and the hardship of life under a harsh dictator, as did their parents, but yet they have

managed to invest these children with tremendous hope and excitement about the future of their peoples. And they have done it all by keeping their culture alive. Now, my kids are good kids, and I think I did a good job raising them, but I have not been able to give them anything like that. If my kids were entertaining guests from halfway around the world, they would not be telling them stories about American history and culture, they would be playing x-box with them or taking them to the mall. But as I sat on that couch, all my cynicism about youth and the future of our world melted. I was in the presence of a generation whose spirit has been given those rare gifts that can only be bestowed by parents and grandparents who have known such lives of deprivation and hardship. In those moments it felt like I was at the very heart of something very inviting.

Let me tell you, there's nothing like being around these people. It is absolutely amazing to experience trust and friendship established simply through goodwill, a lot of laughter, and a spirit of love. If they got to me, I can't help but believe that they could soften up the most jaded and cynical among us Americans.

As I mentioned, I am always intrigued by paradox. Over the course of those eleven days, the enigma of this land only deepened, as I was bombarded with contrasts and contradictions. Americans are used to Unitarianism being a religion of the well educated, and you hardly ever find a congregation here unless there is a college or

university. In Transylvania, Unitarianism is a rural phenomenon. Ninety-five percent of the congregations are found in the villages. Ninety percent of Unitarian Universalists come to the faith from another tradition. In Transylvania most everyone is Unitarian because they were born into the faith. Many people have access to TV's and internet, and yet they still order their day around the chimes of the bell in the church tower. That's another thing - in all the villages and in most of the towns, the church steeple is still the tallest structure. There are villages where the Unitarian church is the *only* church. People have modern cars, yet the roads are terrible. There are no tractors, yet most everyone seems to have a cell phone. Farmers still cart the hay in horse drawn wagons, wearing Nike shirts. These people meet life with such gaiety and their days are filled with so much laughter and playfulness, and yet their worship is so somber. Their minds and hearts hold their faith with such a tenacity and they live it with every breath, and yet they are reluctant to discuss it openly. They take such pride in it because of what is has sustained them through. They are so poor, and yet they are so rich. Truly it is an inviting darkness.

Despite all that history has thrown at the Unitarians in Transylvania in the past four hundred years - no, maybe it is because of it - they are still a strong and vital presence in this region of the world. 80,000 of them in 120 congregations. The second largest body of Unitarians in the world and the oldest

continuing Unitarian movement in the world. Their mere existence is testimony to the nurture they receive from a free faith. My visit there reminded me powerfully that Unitarianism is a global faith with many local expressions. That Unitarianism arose independently in different cultures at different times in different parts of the world suggests to me that Unitarianism itself is an elementary idea, or archetype, of the human psyche. As Joseph Campbell taught, the religious impulse comes out of the common ground of human experience and the unconscious, and manifests itself in similar ways, yet always tinged with the flavor of the local culture. To actually go half way around the world and experience a Unitarian faith that is very different from mine in form and ritual, and yet so similar in values and practice brought me home strengthened in my convictions regarding liberal religion and in the virtues of my chosen faith.

It must be stressed that these relationships between American Unitarian Universalist churches and the Transylvanian Unitarian churches are partnerships. That is, both parties contribute valuable pieces to the relationship. Some American UU's get the impression that they need our money, and a certain amount of support has been given for such things as refurbishing sanctuaries and replacing bells melted down for war cannons. But they need our presence more than our money. When the Romanian government sees Americans take such an interest in these people, they are extremely

reluctant to oppress them and further gain the ire of the international community. And we American UU's have so much to gain from the partnership.

I want to extend an invitation to each one of you into that inviting darkness. Partner Church relationships are still available in Transylvania, and India, and the Philippines. Even if you cannot go with us, you can still join the Partner Church Council as an individual or as a congregation, establish relationships perhaps as pen pals, and be kept up to date on happenings as we continue to create global community. Thank you for your kind attention. I never tire of the opportunity to convey a little of what it is like to enter that inviting darkness.

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