

**With Vision More Global**  
**by Scott Gerard Prinster**  
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**Reading from *The Cocktail Party* by T. S. Eliot**

To approach the stranger is to invite the unexpected, release a new force, let the genie out of the bottle. It is to start a new train of events that is beyond your control.... You will change your mind, but you are not free.... You made a decision. You set in motion forces in your life and in the lives of others.

**Reading from *Video Night in Kathmandu* and  
“Why We Travel: A Love Affair with the World”  
by Pico Iyer**

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.

## **Reflections**

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Just two days ago I received in the mail my airplane tickets for a trip to Eastern Europe. I'll be traveling this May on behalf of First Unitarian to the Transylvanian village of Nagyajta,<sup>1</sup> where we have an ongoing relationship with the Unitarian church there. Our connection with Unitarianism in Transylvania has become very special for me, and I hope that this will also become a significant relationship for you as Unitarian Universalists. In the words of T.S. Eliot, these global connections have the potential to set in motion important forces in our lives, and it is this possibility that I would like to share with you this morning.

Because we associate Eastern Europe with the totalitarianism that dominated it in the 20th century, Americans are often surprised to hear that, at one time, it was the most religiously liberal place

known. During the tumultuous 16th century, when the Protestant Reformation swept through Europe, places like Poland, Hungary, and Romania were briefly islands of religious tolerance. The Unitarian faith that sprang up there has persevered through centuries of difficult history and struggles to this day to survive.

The part of modern day Romania that is known as Transylvania was fated to be at the heart of Eastern Europe's conflicts. It is a region almost half the size of Wisconsin, enclosed by a crescent-shaped mountain range called the Carpathians, separating Europe from the old Soviet empire and Islamic Turkey. There the most beautiful countryside stands in striking juxtaposition with soulless apartment blocks, hideous monuments to dictator Nicolae Ceauçescu's megalomania, and the worst industrial pollution I have ever seen.

My female students, just in their early 20s, were already suffering thyroid problems from Chernobyl's fallout in their air and water, and we remember vividly the horror stories of the orphanages filled with HIV-infected children. Living in a centuries-old tug-of-war between ethnicities, between East and West, the lives of Transylvanians have been shaped by a history of hardship. For a brief time in the mid-1500s, though, they were able to respond to this tension with an unprecedented openness. Widowed Queen Isabella, ruling as regent until her son the king reached adulthood, kept the peace in Transylvania by declaring that “each person [shall] maintain whatever religious faith they wish, with old or new rituals ... just so long, however, as they bring no harm to bear on anyone at all, lest the followers of a new religion be a source of irritation to the old profession of faith or become injurious to its followers.”<sup>2</sup>

For the next few decades, scholars were free to examine their faith critically and challenge the inconsistencies of traditional church doctrine. In 1568 Ferenc Dávid, the founder of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church, argued so cogently the case for Unitarianism and religious tolerance that the King and much of his court were apparently converted on the spot. When Dávid returned home to the city of Kolozsvár, he was met by the townspeople, who had already heard of his victory.

Mounting a boulder at the edge of the town square, he preached the gospel of the oneness of

God, and the majority of the town converted that very day. The King declared Unitarianism one of the four protected religions, which were required to respect and tolerate one another's presence—a remarkable development considering that other nations were beheading dissenters at the time. Unitarian theology spread throughout the region, and the people embraced Dávid's message with the cry "*Egy az Isten*"—"God is one." For the first and only time in history, Unitarianism was the majority religion in a nation, and a nation ruled by a Unitarian king at that.

Unfortunately, this state of tolerance lasted only a short time. When King John was injured in an accident and died shortly thereafter, his Catholic successor and advisors wasted no time in doing away with the decree of tolerance, and imprisoned Dávid for heresy. Ill and weak, languishing in a stone cell, he carved the words of his conviction on the walls: "Neither the sword of popes, nor the cross, nor the image of death—nothing will halt the march of truth. I wrote what I felt and that is what I preached with trusting spirit. I am convinced that, after my destruction, the teachings of false prophets will collapse." Dávid died in that fortress prison in November 1579.

In the same way that Unitarianism touched people so strongly in Transylvania, we see that other Unitarian movements have appeared, apparently independently, around the world. Just how broad our scope is as a world religion became abundantly clear to me two years ago, when I attended a conference of Unitarians and Universalists at Oxford University. Representatives of our movement were in attendance literally from the corners of the earth—not merely from the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe, but also from Eastern Europe and Russia, from Nigeria, Pakistan, and India, from Japan and Australia, and we discussed as well the areas that hadn't been able to send representatives, like the Philippines and South America.

Because such a conference had not been held in over a century, most of our work was about getting re-acquainted with one another and with the diverse experiences of liberal religion in different cultures. For example, the Rev. Taiyewo Aiyefuwa from Nigeria told us about his church in Lagos, which is quite solidly Christian, and serves people in the midst of the tribal conflicts that are common there. Nina Nazrenko from Moscow spoke about their churches striving to give people hope in the midst of painful national transitions, as she put it,

going from bring a world power to "the laughing-stock of Europe." The Rev. Marbaniang from north-eastern India told of the indigenous Unitarianism among the rural people of the Khasi Hills. And the Rev. Andrew Brown spoke of what seems to be a slow decline of Unitarianism in England, exacerbated by situations like his own, in which he was recently refused admittance to a theology program, because "Unitarians are not Christians."

These encounters with diversity are critical ones for American Unitarian Universalists, for we often forget that our own experience of liberal religion is merely one strand in a larger family. Members of our churches are surprised to find that our Transylvanian kin are unapologetically Christian, and we have to be reminded that the path chosen by the American movement simply would not have served the needs of religious liberals in other contexts. The global reality of liberal religion is so much greater than our local experience of it.

This begs the question that was raised at the conference by British Unitarian minister Cliff Reed,

But *what* holds us together? Do we gather around anything more than the flaming chalice and a name? Are we united by humanist values? By faith in the One God? By membership of a movement founded on a way of being religious rather than on a doctrinally-defined religion? What links a university professor in Massachusetts with a farmer on the island of Negroes in the Philippines? A German humanist with a liberal Christian in Madras?<sup>3</sup>

This already-vexing question of what lies at the core of our Unitarian Universalism is even more

challenging at the global level. We found that our real commonalities emerged when we stopped trying to analyze our movements and collaborated in worship together. To hear Pakistani ministers weep to tell that they were forbidden to perform funeral services for their dead, to sing together Polish and Russian Unitarian hymns, to see such a panoply of humanity represented in the pulpit and the pew was to find understanding beyond words of what we share. We each came away with a new comprehension that our message of human worth, religious freedom, the power of reason, and

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the importance of tolerance, is so important and so badly needed around the world.

It was also worship that communicated for me the depth of our kinship when I was in Transylvania. 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's followers and filled them with new authority. Pentecost is one of the four church holidays when the Transylvanians serve communion, and I love their dignified ritual of bread and wine.<sup>4</sup> On this particular Pentecost, however, we ministers were feeling more despair rather 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 emotions 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 say that God was present among them, and dare to celebrate the Pentecost message of new hope? What words did we have that would comfort them in their grief? I felt like an imposter, and a hypocrite.

After the sermon, we six ministers stood and walked to the center of the sanctuary, where the carved wooden communion table waited with bread and wine. As we sang the communion hymn, the members lined the aisles and central open space

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in order of age. I took up one of the 450-year-old chalices of Ferenc Dávid, and walked to the head of the line, where the congregation elders waited. Gnarled hands, arthritic hands, battered by decades of work and life unimagined to me, received the heavy chalice from me and celebrated their community of faith.

As they drank the wine, each of them looked into my eyes with a seriousness and power that moves me still to think of it. And in that moment, the truth of our shared faith became most clear to me: "We've been here 400 years, and we're not going anytime soon. We have seen so much suffering, but we who have survived, live in dignity and hope." And I was ministered unto by the 500 of them present that morning, demonstrating spirit and faith in a way that made them comprehensible for me and

buoyed up by the eyes and the hands of the people who would not be destroyed by their circumstances. My own spirituality was irrevocably deepened in that wordless encounter.

Those of us who have been touched by our contact with the Transylvanian Unitarians travel there with feelings of deep reverence, as if we were on a pilgrimage. We do not travel there as consumers of exotic experiences, but rather open to the possibility that we might be transformed by this contact with our historical faith and with people whose church has literally kept them alive through horrific times. Perhaps most importantly, we do *not* build relationships with them merely so that we can recreate them in our own image, as some American churches have demanded.

The Partner Church program, through which this congregation has maintained its relationship with the village of Nagyajta, is a grassroots movement of connections between Unitarian churches in the East and West. Although financial support for Transylvanian Unitarians is often an important part of the relationship, especially during the difficult transition out of a socialist economy, we in the Partner Church Council believe that it is ultimately the steadfast human connection that is the source of the most significant transformation. Being in genuine and constant relationship with someone who shows us another face of our own movement draws us both into deeper ways of being ourselves.

This point was underscored for us at the international conference by Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School for the Ministry, my seminary alma mater. She shared a poem "The Love of Travelers" by Angela Jackson,<sup>5</sup> which tells of a group at a roadside rest stop finding a butterfly mired in an oil slick. Trying to clean the oil gently from its wings, they find that their assistance only damages it further. Unable to bring themselves to kill it, they leave it there, consumed with awe for the beauty it was, and grief for what it had become. Rebecca's address reminded us that our own gift to the world may not include being able to save it, especially if we think that saving it means rebuilding it in our own image. The world is so much larger than our understanding of it. Often, the only blessing we have to offer is merely to be present with a fully-opened heart, to witness in meticulous mercy the struggles of those we love.

We are inherently relational beings and, in the words of our readings, to be in relationship with the world around us is to set in motion a journey that

may demand our own transformation. I hope that our relationships with religious liberals around the world, especially with the Unitarians in Nagyajta, will be as moving and as transformative an adventure as it has been for me.

The reward of my own journeys there has been to find myself exchanging spiritual navel-gazing for a vision that extends outward even as it educates me about myself. This faith-in-relationship gives our movement both roots and wings—the roots of forebears who have struggled and persevered, fed and warmed by a faith stronger than persecution, and the wings of a broader and richer vision, embracing even those strands of our faith that challenge us. The church that emerges at this threshold—the edge between East and West, the edge between tradition and freedom—is not a church of simple answers and cheap salvation. But it is, I believe, a place where we may find a sense of belonging to a great and fertile religious family, and reap the rewards of an honest and radically deepened faith. Amen.

### Notes

1. It is customary in Unitarian Universalist circles to use the Hungarian name of our Partner Churches, since Transylvanian Unitarians are ethnic Hungarians. The official name of our Partner village is the Romanian one, Aita Mare.
2. From *Freedom Legislation in Hungary 1557-1571* by Sándor Szent-Iványi, published by Hungarian Faith Brotherhood, 1957.
3. Reported in *A Global Conversation: Unitarian/Universalism at the Dawn of the 21st Century*, eds. Andrew M. Hill, Jill K. McAllister, and Clifford M. Reed, published by International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, 2002.
4. American Unitarian Universalists are often surprised to hear about Unitarians celebrating communion. Most Unitarian movements do not see Unitarianism and Christianity as mutually exclusive, and the communion celebration of Jesus as the human exemplar of faith is a core element of belief for the Transylvanian Unitarians.
5. Rebecca Parker's use of this poem can also be read in her lecture "Meticulous Mercy is the Work of Travelers" at [www.sksm.edu/meticulous.html](http://www.sksm.edu/meticulous.html).