

This sermon was delivered by Rev. Dr. William Schulz for the UU Partner Church Council program at General Assembly 2010 in Minneapolis, MN on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the modern partner church movement that he helped found.

“The peasants eat lots of mice,” Lajos Kovacs, then the Bishop of the Unitarian Church of Transylvania said to me on one of my early visits there in the 1980s as an official of the UUA. Lajos was a large man with a sparkling eye and a legendary sense of humor despite the travails under which he and his Church labored during the years of Nicolae Ceausescu’s dictatorship in Romania. So I took his observation about the peasants’ diet with a grain of salt. “Has it gotten that bad?” I asked. “Oh, no. Not bad at all,” he said. “They love mice. They grow the mice big and tall and then eat mice at almost every meal.” Since I was at that point on about my sixth meal of the day, I blanched a bit. “Have I been eating mice?” I gasped. “Oh, yes,” he said. “You’ve eaten it three or four times today already.” And, then, pointing to a corn field, he said, “You see, there it is—how tall it grows!” “*Maize*, Lajos!” I said with enormous relief. “Oh, yes, *maize*.” “That’s what I said,” he said, “*Miiiize*.”

That little misunderstanding might have been a clue that building what would eventually become the Partner Church Program might not always be simple despite the best of intentions on the part of everyone involved. But this incident occurred well before the fall of Ceausescu and well before the contemporary Partner Church Program was even conceived. It occurred during the years when contact between the UUA and the Unitarian Churches in Transylvania, Hungary and what was then Czechoslovakia was sporadic, furtive and often filled with intrigue and innuendo. “Whenever President Ceausescu is on television, we study his face very carefully,” Bishop Kovacs once said to

me in the presumed privacy of his own home. “I’m sure you do,” I said, assuming that he was referring to a desire to discern the true meaning behind the dictator’s words. “Oh, yes,” the Bishop went on, aware that even his home might not be entirely secure from the state’s ears. “We study his face carefully because we are very concerned about the state of his health.”

During these Cold War years the UUA’s primary objective in relation to our co-religionists behind the Iron Curtain was straightforward—to keep open lines of communication; to break down the terrible isolation in which these churches operated. The International Association for Religious Freedom –the IARF--and its General Secretary, the late Rev. Diether Gehrman, played a major role in making that possible. It was never easy for church leaders in Eastern Europe to get permission to travel to the West but interfaith meetings and conferences under the auspices of the IARF provided a reputable excuse for such travel and a venue for the exchange of books, medicine and other resources prohibited or unavailable in the East.

Nor was it ever a sure thing that UUA leaders would receive visas to visit the churches in Eastern Europe though every President from the first one, Dana McLean Greeley, on did so as often as possible. And when we did, there was always that moment of heightened tension at the border, particularly if we were carrying contraband, as we often did, when we would hold our breaths, wondering if the border guard would search the suitcase or find some flimsy excuse to deny us entry. When we visited, we would usually have an appointment with the so-called State Minister of Cults, the point of which

was for the Minister to assure us that the Unitarians were being treated with the utmost fairness and civility and for us to signal to the Minister that we knew he was lying and that there were people in the West who had their eyes focused squarely on the fate of these churches. And when we visited, we always knew that we had to be discreet in what we said and careful in how we said it, even in private; that top officials within the churches themselves were government agents and in some cases Communist pawns; and that we were always under surveillance, even in our hotel rooms.

The most telling example of such surveillance took place one night in the Hotel Transylvania in Kolosvar, the capital of that region, during the height of the Cold War years. Natalie Gulbrandsen of blessed memory, who served with me for eight years as Moderator of the Association, and her husband, Mel, had joined my wife, Linda Lu, and me on a journey to Eastern Europe. Nat and Mel were chatting in their room about 11 o'clock at night. "Melvin," Natalie said. "This toilet paper filled with wood chips is doing me damage! Run down to the drugstore and see if you can get me some Western toilet paper." "Natalie!" Melvin said. "It's 11 o'clock at night; this hotel is almost a mile from the center of town; there are certainly no drugstores open and, even if they were, they are unlikely to have Western toilet paper." "Oh, phooey," Natalie said and went to bed. But the next night in Nat and Mel's room but not in Linda Lu's and mine was Western toilet paper! That night I shouted into the lampshade, "I'd sure love a New York Strip Steak, medium rare." It didn't appear.

This was the environment, then, in which I learned around 1988 of Ceausescu's diabolical plan to destroy thousands of villages, many of them containing our churches in Transylvania, in the name of collectivization. I was desperate to figure out even a modest way in which we might express our opposition and toward that end I began appealing to the Unitarian Universalist Members of Congress and the Canadian Parliament to join me on a journey to Bucharest and Transylvania to register the outrage of our two governments. As it turned out the Canadian Unitarian could not go but sent a non-Unitarian colleague and the only Unitarian Universalist in the U. S. Congress who cared enough to join us was Chester Atkins of Massachusetts. But that was enough. Little did we know, however, that three weeks before our trip, which was scheduled for mid-January, 1990, Ceausescu would be overthrown and executed and that we would arrive to a cold and snowy Bucharest, its buildings still pock-marked from machine gun fire, its streets still filled with makeshift memorials to the slain.

Ours was the first American or Canadian governmental delegation to meet with the new government and, as such, we were received at the highest levels and at each meeting the Congressman made a pointed pitch that Romania could never hope to be welcomed back into the community of civilized nations until it improved its treatment of religious and ethnic minorities. Everywhere we went, whether in Bucharest or later in Transylvania, there was a feeling of promise and anticipation but also of anxiety and lingering fear. The country was still highly unstable, the notorious security police still assumed to be functioning. Indeed, on Sunday morning as Chet Atkins and I spoke to the Unitarian Church in Marosvásárhely, the service was interrupted by an armed guard

forcing its way down the center aisle through the packed congregation. People held their breath. Chet whispered to me, “You’re in charge here.” I whispered back, “You’re the Congressman, for God’s sake.” And then much to everyone’s relief we realized that the guard was merely the security detail protecting the hero of the revolution, a Reformed minister named Lazlso Tokes, whose courage had set off the revolution and who was paying us the privilege of a visit to meet the honored guests.

It was on our way home from this momentous trip, then, that Natalie and I and others in our party conceived the idea of resurrecting what had in the 1930s been called the Sister Church Movement in which North American churches were linked with counterparts in Transylvania. The truth is that, enraptured as we were by possibilities of this historic moment and schooled to think, given our experience during the Cold War, that mere contact was enough, we were astonishingly naïve at the beginning about how to make those linkages happen.

For a time Natalie insisted that she would just pass out at random the name of a Transylvanian church on a slip of paper--often retrieved from the bowels of her enormous purse--to any UUA congregation that wanted one and everybody would just take it from there, pleasant dance partners quickly in step with one another due to our shared religious heritage. Well, the waltz turned out to be more like a mazurka and soon people were stumbling over one another, stubbing toes, issuing shrieks and demanding dance lessons. Fortunately wise heads and busy hands eventually prevailed and gradually the Partner Church Council emerged, supporting UUA congregations linked not just to those in

Eastern Europe but in the Philippines and Africa and elsewhere until today--twenty years later—we have a sophisticated network of mutual engagement and learning that stretches around the world.

I want to spend the remainder of my time talking about why that is so important. But I want to start by talking about why this kind of engagement is so difficult. And I want to do that by referring to a Biblical story—not something I usually do in my preaching but I do today in honor of Transylvanian Unitarianism in which Biblical preaching is the norm.

In the order of service today you will see a passage from the Book of Luke: “And they beckoned under their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them.” Sounds straightforward enough and an eminently appropriate text for this sermon. But all you Biblical scholars know what happens next. This is the story of Jesus’s miracle of the fishes in which Jesus comes upon a group of fishermen who haven’t been having any luck all day at catching fish. Jesus orders them to try again and when they do, their nets are suddenly inundated with fish. One group of fishermen beckons to their partners across the way to come help them load up their ship with this amazing bounty. But when they do, the ship begins to sink under the load and one can imagine that, as it does, the men start swearing and sniping at one another as males are wont to do in the face of a crisis. Partners do more than dance, you see; they quarrel.

And why is that? Do you remember Linus's famous remark from the comic strip *Peanuts*, "I love humanity; it's people I can't stand"? Well, the truth is that, as Richard Rorty said in our reading today, it is very difficult to love an abstraction called "humanity." The truth is that we each start by loving individual people; it's "humanity" we mostly couldn't care less about. And the harder truth is that those individual people whom we first love are likely to be people who are very much like ourselves. Indeed, it is probably not possible to achieve a healthy sense of self without first identifying in some way with people who are like ourselves, with people whom we think of as "us": I am a male; I am a white person; I am a Unitarian Universalist; I am an American.

This notion makes us very uncomfortable because we know how much damage narrow identifications have caused. When I was head of Amnesty International and we were eagerly recruiting a more diverse membership, more gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered people, for example, more Native Americans, more people from the global South, longtime human rights activists would say to me, "But John [a gay person] John is working only on gay rights and Maria [a Peruvian] Maria is principally interested in Latin America. Don't they understand they have to care about *everybody's* rights?" And I would say, "But John didn't even know there *were* such things as rights for gay and lesbian folks before he came to Amnesty. Of course he's eager to help those with whom he identifies. But give him time."

No wonder it is so difficult to do cross-cultural work. Because in order for human beings to know who we are in the world, we need *to know who we not*: We need to

identify with some communities and not others. But that very identification tends to distance us from people who identify with those other communities. Cultural conflict and misunderstanding, you see, is built into the very nature, the very fabric, of being human. Some people might even think of this as what we mean by original sin.

When Transylvanian Unitarians come to the United States and hear American Unitarian Universalists laughing in church, they are often discomfited because in the tradition with which they identify—the tradition that helps them define who they are-- laughing would reflect a failure to take one's religion seriously. When we, on the other hand, discover that many of our partner churches around the world are far less encouraging than we are of women in positions of leadership and power, it is unnerving because we understand ourselves and our religion to reject such misogyny. Partners do more than dance; they quarrel and misunderstand and criticize each other.

But fortunately that is not all there is to it. Because once the fishermen stopped swearing and sniping at each other, they took a step back and beheld the miracle that had just occurred—fish flopping everywhere they looked, produced at the apparent whim of this itinerant preacher named Jesus. Their common sense of gratitude and astonishment overcame their bickering. “And when they had brought their ships to land,” Luke says, “they forsook everything and followed him.”

The way to gradually overcome cultural conflict, to widen the circle of those whom we call “us” to include “the family in the next cave” and “the tribe across the

river,” is to tell the stories of our common wonderment and our common frailty. If we can tell them face to face, so much the better. But even when we must tell them at great distances, they are the disclosures of grace that heal the world. That’s what the Partner Church movement facilitates our doing—to, quite literally, re-fashion the narrowness of our own cultural space by providing us a place to tell our common human stories.

The famous physicist Richard Feynman was a rationalist of the first order, stern, unbending. After his death, his children found the following letter addressed to Feynmann’s wife, D’Arline, their mother, two years after she had died:

D’Arline [it read]: I adore you, sweetheart. It is such a terribly long time since I last wrote to you—almost two years—but I know you’ll excuse me because you understand how I am, stubborn and realistic & I thought there was no sense to writing. But now I know, my darling wife, that it is right to do what I have delayed in doing...I want to tell you I love you. I want to love you. I will always love you.

I find it hard to understand in my mind what it means to love you after you are dead—but I still want to comfort and take care of you—and I want you to love and care for me.

PS: Please excuse my not mailing this—but I don’t know your new address.

I have had the privilege of traveling to 72 nations in my life and I know that passion and power and poignancy like that need no translation. They need only the opportunity to shower their graciousness upon anyone whose heart is open even a crack to the agony and radiance of existence. When that happens, everybody gets it—in Kolosvar and Budapest and Prague and Shillong and Dumaguete and Bujumbura. The language doesn't matter; the rituals fade into shadows. *Everybody gets it.* Everybody understands. Partners do more than dance, you see; they heal the world.

Betty Jo Bell was a hospice worker in Holland, Michigan, who told of a couple named Cara and Harry. They had been dancers on the stage together in Holland many years before but, though once wed, had subsequently been divorced. Cara was dying now and Harry came to visit her and he never left. Each day, as she grew weaker, and it became harder for her to reach the bathroom, Harry took her up from her bed in his arms; placed her tiny slippered feet on top of his shoes and they danced across the room. It was a different kind of dance than they had done when they were young of course but a far more important one for, as Harry looked on Cara, now bald and skeletal, he saw only her beauty. And shortly before she died, Cara said to Betty Jo Bell, "I have never been so happy. I have my faith and I have my Harry."

What a perfect slogan for the Partner church movement—we have our faith and we have each. Partners do more than dance; they heal the world. Happy birthday, Partner Church movement, and, as they say, many happy returns!