

“Partners in Faith: A Transylvanian Experience”
A Sermon by Rev. Charles Blustein Ortman
September 28, 2008

READINGS: ANCIENT AND MODERN

Our ancient reading is an adaptation from the Hebrew Book of Isaiah:

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
...it shall be for God’s people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
[and] everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Our modern reading is from the person widely known as the Father of Unitarianism in Transylvania, Francis Dávid.

"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.
God is one."

SERMON: “Partners in Faith: A Transylvanian Experience”

Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote, “We are all travelers in the wilderness of this world, and the best we can find in our travels is an honest friend.” I have had the great fortune, through this summer’s travels on the Partner Church pilgrimage, to make *several* good and honest friends. Some of them are here this morning singing in the choir and I want to thank them for the experience of a lifetime in our travels, for being here this morning to sing for us, and for bringing more of their friends along to sing for us, too. It is so fine to make new friends!

What I'd like to accomplish this morning, is to provide you with some snapshots, to share something of the experience of our travels, at least from my perspective, in the hope that we can generate some enthusiasm for a renewal of our relationship with our Partner Congregation in Szen-tabraham, Transylvania. The folks in Summit have a most engaged relationship with their partners in Barot, and this trip has opened my eyes to some great possibilities for us. That's why I'm so glad that our new friends have agreed to meet and greet you in the Alliance Room after the service.

And, by the way, we already have a financial contribution for our Partner Church set aside in our annual budget. So, we're not talking about money, this morning. We're talking about connecting more deeply with some folks, halfway around the world, folks who are already our partners, with whom we share a religious heritage and tradition. How rich and rare is that!

Before I get into my picture album though, there were a couple of questions I had before the trip about some political and theological things I had a hard time understanding. I thought it might be helpful to address them here. The first one is regarding political boundaries. It seemed to me that Transylvania, Romania and Hungary were names of countries that for some reason seemed to be used interchangeably.

So, here's the scoop. Transylvania was once a nation that was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Today, Transylvania is the largest of five counties that make up the country of Romania. It is actually larger than the other four combined. Many, if not most Transylvanians, are less than thrilled to be a part of Romania. That animosity is largely reciprocated. But that's how things worked out in the divisions that were made after World War I, and that's how they remain today. The Transylvanians maintain a strong Hungarian ethnic identity including the use of language, dress, food and so on.

The country Hungary is the largest remnant of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In a recent referendum, its citizens made clear that they don't want to assume Transylvania or Transylvanians into their nationhood, as that might cause a glut on the Hungarian labor market. The rejection was something of a bitter pill for the Transylvanians to swallow.

My other question was theological. Our Transylvanian partners embrace the brotherhood and the teachings of Jesus as central to their belief system. American Unitarian Universalists embrace the principle of freedom of conscience so adamantly that we are willing to consider the thought that the great mystery underlying this universe can as reasonably be thought of as "God" just as well as it might be thought of as "not God." So, how can we say that we are of the same faith tradition?

We have to look deeply to see the underpinnings of our common foundation. Listen again to these words of Francis David. If you must, please substitute the words "not God" for "God." I can find no better articulation of our *common* heritage.

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Salvation must be accomplished here on Earth...

Egy Az Isten.

God is one.”

Do we believe exactly the same? No, but neither do those of us who are gathered in this room. We need not think alike to love alike! We are equally dedicated though, on both sides of the Atlantic, to religious principles that are peculiar to this faith tradition that we share: freedom of conscience, religious tolerance, and the use of reason in religious matters.

Now, on to the snapshots of our pilgrimage... There are a number of lingering images that are quite precious. Some of the snapshots include singing with a choir that loved to sing, and sing we did – from a concert at a large Unitarian church packed by townspeople on a warm summer evening, to an impromptu presentation at a German Fortified church on sunny afternoon. Another is of strolling up a wooded, mountain path to tour the summer palace of King Carol I. The hike was made enchanted by an old gypsy playing a pan flute that filled the woods with a mystical, wistful melody. In so many of my memories there are images of our tour guides, the brother/sister combination of Robbie and Kate Balent. Their facility in tending to all of our varied needs was characterized by unwavering graciousness, warmth and humor. I have so many memories of our shared laughter, on the bus and everywhere else we went. And I can't forget the 91 year old retired Unitarian minister in Varygas, who looked and sounded much how I'd imagine the ancient prophet Isaiah, himself.

Our stay in the small town of Barot was splendid. This is the home of the Summit Congregation's Partner Church. We stayed there for four nights. My sermon last week came out of one experience there, but there were so many others. Arriving on our bus at suppertime, greeted by Alpar Kiss, the minister (who by the way, sends his greetings to all of us here this morning through Jean Crichton, our faithful tour coordinator) greeted by Alpar and a throng of members from the congregation. We were portioned out to our host families, who would provide us with a place to sleep and breakfast over the next several the days. The rest of our time in Barot, we would be otherwise occupied with singing, or touring, or drinking Ciuc Beer in the local cantina, or whatever.

I was sent off with my host, Margrit, a woman about my age. We were driven to her home, a very modest fourth floor walkup, just a few blocks away. There, I met Margrit's husband, István. At once, I knew I was in for a special and unique experience. István, who was mostly confined to bed or his wheelchair, had suffered a stroke five years earlier. Margrit, who had been a nurse, took early retirement in order to care for him. The amount of love that filled their simple apartment, love they had for one another and for their two sons who were away at university, was palpable. Oh, and I forgot to mention, neither of them spoke more English than I do Hungarian, which was pretty much limited to good morning, good night, please and thank you.

Still, each morning, Margrit would eat with István in his room and then provide a lovely breakfast for me, way more than I could ever eat. The kitchen table was arrayed with two tablecloths, one that was always in place, and another, beautifully woven and embroidered, that she spread in front of my place at the table. We would sit and talk – *or try to talk* – using Hungarian, English, Romanian, Yiddish, Spanish and German words. So, we didn't talk much, but the communication was still very rich. Photo albums can be very helpful.

On our last morning there, I arranged for faithful Kate Balent to join us, so that we could actually speak through an interpreter. We exchanged symbolic gifts, told stories, and explained many things we had tried to say on the earlier days. I learned that the second tablecloth was one that had been hand-made for Margrit by her mother as a wedding gift; it was used, "...only for the most special occasions." We laughed and cried and hugged many times. It's difficult to express what transpired in my visit with Margrit and István, but it had surely been something very meaningful. Strangers in intimate proximity, opening their lives to one another, communicating in ways unfamiliar to any of us. It's a memory that will remain a part of my life.

Also while in Barot, there were many musical performances. On Sunday morning, we sang for the worship service. All of our hosts were so proud of their guest celebrities. Later that afternoon, there was a Hungarian-style barbecue. The food and beer were great, and the entertainment was unforgettable. There was a marching band, six brigades of baton twirlers and four troops of traditional dancers. The mayor spoke to welcome us and there were several choral group performances made by choirs, as well as a number of soloists.

I was touched by a couple of young girls who performed solos, playing piano and sang traditional songs, quite beautifully. I found myself standing in the churchyard with Robbie and Kate as we listened to these girls sing. I would ask with each song, "What's the song about? What are the words?"

"Well," Robbie would say for nearly every song, "this is a very sad song. Someone has been left by a lover....Well, someone's parent or sweetheart has died... Well, someone has lost all their possessions. We are often a very sad people," Robbie commented. "We feel at home when we sing about sad things," How gloomy, I thought. It was only later when I recognized that the tragic themes he had listed, read like the Top 20 charts of our own country/western music stations. We really aren't all that different.

The barbecue ended late in the evening with an impromptu international sing-along with about 30 of us standing in a circle in the church yard – singing away, with a cup of Ciuc in hand. It was a joyful experience of UNITY.

Moving on to another set of pictures, we come to a most amazing event! Our tour happened to be in Transylvania for the Annual World Gathering of Unitarians which was celebrating the 440th anniversary of the birth of Unitarianism, of Francis David standing on "the rock" in Torda declaring, "Egy Az Isten."

I was invited to process with the clergy and then to give greetings to the gathering on behalf of the Unitarian Universalist Association of America. Let me fill in some of this picture for you.

An estimated 4,000 Unitarians gathered out in a very rural location. A huge field and hillside were blanketed with people from towns and countries, near and far. At the edge of the field was an enormous stage, large enough to seat the scores of clergy who were part of the proceedings. Just prior to the processional, I was introduced by Robbie to the Unitarian Bishop of Transylvania, who was just the nicest guy, with the most excellent shock of white hair. We bonded very easily!

The procession itself was quite a religious experience for me. There was a seemingly endless stream, row after row, of colleagues in traditional dress. We made our way on a path through the crowds, around the perimeter of the field, along the foot of the hillside in the blazing summer sun. We were preceded by a marching band, composed mostly of brass and drums; they made a large and full sound. The band was preceded by a regiment of horsemen; with banners unfurled, who provided an appearance of something between a regal march and a rodeo parade. It really was spectacular! As I moved along through this magical procession, amid the blare of the horns and drums, amid orders to the horsemen, amid the thousands of people, I had the most satisfying feeling that, even in this extraordinary and unfamiliar experience, I belonged right where I was. These were my people and I was theirs. There we all were, living in the first three syllables of our shared name – we were in UNITY as Unitarians.

That I'd been invited to address the assembly, that I got to sit with my friend Robbie, the Bishop and the other clergy on the dais, looking out across the landscape of Unitarians, well, that was just icing on the cake. And after that ceremonial event ended, I got to join my other friends from Summit, back on the stage, and once again we sang. It was quite a day!

That weekend was rounded by a visit to our own Partner Church in the *very* small town of Szentabraham. I was a guest in the home of their new minister István Iberie (who is 33 and whose energy level I only wish I had half of), his wife Anüka, and their four year old son, Tomas. Even though their house was across the road and two doors down from it, their home was very much an extension of the church. Their gracious hospitality toward me was beyond nearly anything I've ever experienced. On top of that, on Sunday they served the whole lot of us, well over 30 at this juncture, a lavish meal in their dining room and sprawling out onto the front porch. The home-made lunch had been prepared that morning and most of the day before, by Anüka, her mother, her sister and her brother-in-law. It was fabulous!

István arranged the opportunity for me to visit Danis and Eva Jacob in their new home. Danis is the retired minister of Szentabraham. Some of you will remember them from their visit here in 1998. István and I also had several opportunities to talk about things – the challenging life of a young, new minister, serving in a culture where things do not change so easily. We talked about our partnership and about possibilities and hopes for our future collaborations that we might embark upon. One of István's ideas that I like very much was that maybe we could send and they could host a youth group tour, so that some of our teens could get a chance to experience the world in a very different way. We reaffirmed our personal partnership as well as the partnership of our congregations. The door is open, my friends, and we have been invited.

I brought greetings from you and preached the sermon at the service there on Sunday morning from the lofty perch of the pulpit, located traditionally, high up on the wall. István read the

translation from the floor. The organist led the death-defyingly slow hymns on perhaps the worst sounding organ I have ever heard in my life. And again, there was a feeling, awkward though it sometimes was, of the UNITY that we shared with these rural, unfamiliar Unitarians. We are a part of all that is!

As the service came to an end, gifts were exchanged. I'd brought a number of presents on your behalf. Among those were some of the little dolls made by our own Doris Williams. I presented them to the Church for its kindergarten program, saying the children would grow up with our love sewn into those dolls by Doris' stitching. István presented a gift to us of a wood carving of the Transylvanian Unitarian symbol. He asked that we place it somewhere to help us remember our partners regularly.

After the gifts, the choir performed our very last performance of the trip for the people of Szentabraham. It was a touching moment. Toward the end of our program, as we often had, we sang, "T'filat HaDerech" or "The Traveler's Prayer." Mitchell Vines invited me to explain that we were singing the song as a prayer for all of us – as we are all travelers on this Earth, all pilgrims on a journey – a prayer that we might be blessed as we go on our ways, on those journeys... (Here, the choir sings the first part of "T'filat HaDerech," by Debbie Friedman.)

(Here the piano continues playing as backdrop to the these spoken words.) As we sang, I looked around the room at the people of Szentabraham. We had only just arrived, it seemed, and so soon we would be leaving them. My eyes met those of my partner, István, and we exchanged a warm smile. I looked to my left into the faces of the congregation's President and of the men and boys dressed in their Sunday finest, attire that could not belie their work-hardened faces, shoulders and hands.

As my vision panned to the right, there were the women, who for the most part could have been from any of the last several centuries. The older ones had such deep, wise eyes. And then far to my right, near the wall, I saw Anüka, the bright, gracious, young wife of the minister. She sat listening to the song, with tears streaming down her cheeks, as we sang, "...may grace and compassion find their way to every soul..."

I choked back my own tears, and knew that something very good, something important, something of momentous UNITY was at hand, and was holding us together there. We were on – *we are on* – something like what Isaiah called, "The Holy Way." (Here, the choir sings all of "T'filat HaDerech.")

This trip has opened my eyes, and now I hope yours too, to some great possibilities in store for us. The door is open, my friends, and we have been invited.