

THE ALABASTER VILLAGE AND BEYOND
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
September 21, 2003

Contemplation

Faith is not so much belief despite evidence. It is more like courage and gratitude in spite of life's losses. And hope is not a matter of knowing that all will be well—either for oneself or even for all of us together. Rather it is a commitment, a loyalty to the spirit the “beloved community,” always beyond the horizon, but without which there can be no meaningful human future. And love is no mere sentiment, but a way of living, in community, serving that spirit by seeking justice and mercy. (The Rev. John Buehrens from a sermon delivered at The First Unitarian Church, Kolozsvár, 7/17/94)

Reading

I want everyone to know
that I did not die here.
My village's moods and problem
did not drown me.
I sowed myself only into
this tiny place.
I hid myself all over here
under the clod.
Let me be seen thus:
I will sprout in these fields
in the spring.
There will be blossoms here
which will bear good fruit.

("Viligatas," by Francis Balazs [1901-1937], Unitarian minister of Mezsko,
1930-1936)

Sermon

In the southish part of Transylvania, there is a holy Unitarian shrine.

High on a hill overlooking the Maros Valley, lie the hugely-imposing ruins of a 16th-century castle-fortress, its crumbling stone walls open to the sky. Visitors clamber over piles of stone rubble large and small, after hiking up the mile or two of grassy, rock-wall-lined winding lane. Some of the walls are still two or three stories high, thrusting jagged edges into the air, with sentry ledges and lookout holes, commanding a view of what looks like everything in the world.

At ground level (formerly dungeon level, of course, when the fortress was complete), a small cell huddles at a still-intact corner of two stone-and-mortar walls. If you peer inside, you see a rather splendid marble monument, and you can make out the words, "David Ferencs." It still looks like a dank prison hole, for modern Unitarians

have erected a strong metal grille on the door, to keep vandals from defacing the monument. Above the door, you see again, “David Ferencs.”

I was there last summer, as part of a pilgrimage to Transylvania, the northwest corner of Romania, one of those pawns-of-war places that has belonged to both Hungary and Romania over the centuries. (All Transylvanian Unitarians are Hungarian.) The English rendering of “David Ferencs” is Francis David, a forefather who reminds us—as does most Transylvanian Unitarianism—of what is precious about our religious tradition, what is precious but often taken for granted by Americans. David died in that dungeon cell in about 1579, and is buried “where no one knoweth”—but not before he had achieved a feat almost unimaginable in his time.

Western history up to that time had been pretty much characterized by unity of church and state. If you were a citizen, you basically had your religion chosen for you (read “imposed upon you”) by the monarch. With one brief, shining exception, this church-state oneness continued for a couple of more centuries.

In 1568, Transylvania was ruled by young King John Sigismund. He decided to hold a “diet”—a days-long debate/theological wrangle—in the city of Torda. For ten days, King John and fascinated citizens listened to preaching by Lutheran, Calvinist, Roman Catholic, Unitarian preachers. Francis David carried the Unitarian banner, and he also carried the day, preaching eloquently for religious tolerance and the theological proposition that God is One. King John issued the Edict of Torda, which said in part:

Our Royal Majesty... confirms that every orator shall preach the gospel by his own (personal) conception, at any place if that community is willing to accept ...And no one, neither superintendents nor others, may hurt a preacher—no one may be blamed because of their religion. No one is allowed to threaten others with prison or divest anyone of their office because of their profession: because faith is God’s gift born from hearing and this hearing is conceived by the word of God.

It is what we believe today: I have freedom of the pulpit, to preach according to my beliefs about what is good and holy, and you are free to accept them or not. We might part company if the differences became too pronounced or painful, but we wouldn’t put each others’ life or freedom in jeopardy. Not only are superintendents forbade to hurt us, we don’t even have superintendents.

Unfortunately, the Edict of Torda only lasted a few years, until King John’s premature death, at which time business as usual was resumed, and a subject’s faith once again became the ruler’s business. Since then, Transylvanian Unitarians have suffered much persecution. The Orthodox church declares them beyond the pale, because they are not trinitarians. They were terrorized by Nazism. Communism’s reign could have destroyed the centuries-old church, as it pitted minister against minister, paying clergy spies to betray their colleagues, forbidding the teaching of Hungarian. The dictator Ceausescu planned to demolish Hungarian (Unitarian) villages in Romania, and haul the people who had farmed for centuries into cities, to live in the squat, ugly, unadorned cement apartment blocks built by Communists.

On our pilgrimage this summer, we visited large towns and tiny, isolated villages—and our partner church in the village of Mezsko, of course—sojourning many

miles in our nine-person van. Every place we went, my heart was touched anew by a people who have persisted in their faith for all these centuries—a faith that is my legacy, that is our legacy. I thought of a question posed by a member of our congregation, who had been in Transylvania the year before:

What is it that has given them comfort, solace, and conviction through political and economic upheaval? What is it that would cause members to say they would die before they would allow the state to destroy their church? (Liz Ratcliff)

I came to feel anew the responsibility to live our faith as a beacon of freedom and tolerance, as a religious body that understands the evolving nature of religious ideas, as a modern denomination for all people, with our faith in the innate good of all people, as a faith that sees God as one, mysterious to humans. I was renewed in my respect for those who practice the “old” form of our religion, quite different in theology from ours, but steadfast in upholding acceptance of all religious groups, steadfast in championing public education free from religion, steadfast in their bone deep understanding that faith means devotion and commitment to religious community.

The trip was particularly poignant for me because of my traveling companions. One was Judit Gellard, known as Zizi, a vivacious and exuberant Hungarian Romanian with a deeply-sad side. She is an M.D., a concert violinist, a beautiful singer—and a woman who spent her childhood in the dark shadow of Communism. Her Unitarian minister father was taken in by the Securitate (Secret Police), tortured and imprisoned for four years. Her mother, driven by political necessity, divorced her father while he was in prison. Released in 1964, his next fifteen years were hell, and in 1979, faced with the likelihood of another incarceration, he committed suicide—with the antidepressants his daughter prescribed. Zizi was our translator and our interpreter of the past.

My other companions were a family I have known for many years. Peter is a close friend of over 35 years. His father was a Unitarian minister; his brother is a Unitarian Universalist minister; Peter has served our religion as a minister for 50 years. (He will preach here in November, on the fifteenth anniversary of my ordination.) He is a sometimes-crusty, no-nonsense kind of guy, with a deep, abiding, unsentimentalized love for our faith tradition—the only times I have ever seen him cry were in Transylvania, in the presence of those who have suffered and prevailed, for the sake of Unitarianism. Peter has a very serious heart condition—we all knew there was a possibility he might die on the trip—and I love him dearly. My heart was wrung over and over to see him on his final pilgrimage. My being was inspired as I saw once more what this living history means to him.

And his UU minister daughter, Deborah—an acquaintance of my own children, when they all were young, a dear colleague of mine now—was one of the pilgrims, too, along with her nine- and thirteen-year-old sons. The Raible family has an unbroken and overlapping history of dedication to our religion for at least three-quarters of a century, a long time in the American branch of our faith. Every day—even when the family was wrangling, as families do—I gave thanks for their embodiment of the dedication we were also seeing in the towns and villages we visited.

The inspiration of the years and centuries touched me, renewed my devotion to my calling, to our congregation, to the larger movement.

At the same time, the modern world is bringing major challenges to our religious motherland. We who are fortunate enough to live here will do well to shoulder the responsibility of helping our Transylvanian sisters and brothers come to grips with the challenges.

Not surprisingly, Unitarianism in the larger towns is much healthier than it is in the villages. Think of the US in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cities beckon, offering jobs, an aura of glamour, adventure for the young person chafing to leave the familiarity and restrictions of home. And, in the throes of American urbanization, they didn't even have television to make rural and village people long for more and more "stuff," to be acquired with more and more money. Transylvanian homes definitely have televisions—or at least a neighbor's TV—even when other amenities, like plumbing and heating, are primitive.

Our partner village, Mezsko, is no exception, especially since the industrial town of Torda is very close, as is the capital, Kolozsvár. To add a complication most congregations do not have, our church suffered the trauma, in about 1996 or '97, of their minister committing suicide, having embezzled church funds while in the grip of drug and alcohol addiction.

This is certainly not to say that our partner does not have a lot going for it. Their current minister, Zsuzsa Bartha, is a brilliant and compassionate young woman. (Although, having spent a year in Berkeley, as Transylvania Scholar at Starr King School For the Ministry, she sometimes feels discouraged at the gap between the two countries, both in standard of living and in understanding of how churches survive and grow.) Ours is the village and church in which the famous Unitarian minister Francis Balazs served, and his grave is a shrine known to Unitarians all over Transylvania. The book *Alabaster Village* is his wife's account of their time with our partner congregation. ("Alabaster" is a very soft white rock that abounds in the area, mined for industrial abrasive.)

Very near our village is the Torda Gorge, a huge and beautiful gash in the earth. A stream runs through it; trees and lush greenery abound; great boulders invite the casual clamberer; rock faces challenge the technical climber. We pilgrims picnicked at the mouth of the gorge, and tourists/hikers/climbers visit it all the time. There are no places close to the gorge, to stay overnight.

In Mezsko, I preached in the high, high pulpit that characterizes all Unitarian churches. With Zsuzsa's blessing, I spoke of my recovering alcoholism (21 years now), and of the higher power necessary for such recovery—I figuratively named it an "angel." I acknowledged the tragedy of those who, like their former minister, perish without that experience of grace. I spoke of how Mezsko and Boise are "angels"—agents of grace—to each other, in very different ways. (Parenthetically, it was a liberating experience to write a sermon in which I didn't have to think of any alternative phrases for the word "God.")

I wore Zsuzsa's Transylvanian robe—a Dracula's-cape sort of garment—and she translated for me. The congregation listened with the customary serious demeanors they always display in church, so I am not sure how the sermon went over. At the end of the sermon, the child who, in 1995, had given me flowers—now a beautiful teenager—gave me flowers, and two women presented me with a gift for our congregation. [You will see them later.] I presented the digital camera (with which Zsuzsa's husband had been taking pictures all the while), and confirmation gifts for the children.

Afterwards, we met in the “parish hall,” and exchanged toasts and ate chimney bread (made by hand, dough wrapped around a kind of small log and baked/toasted over coals). We spoke of how our relationship may flourish, perhaps by our sponsoring a couple of lay people from the village to come here.

How our relationship may flourish.... That is the question for us, too. The issues facing our sister church are complex and admit of no simple solution. The time is long gone when we can throw money at them, or see them solely as holders of our heritage, a kind of Unitarian museum. They need us—we who are so incredibly fortunate in our material goods and our freedom to worship in any way we choose. They need us to help them figure out how to keep Transylvanian Unitarianism from succumbing to the worst of capitalism and the twenty-first century, how to evolve in a way that maintains their essence while also changing to prevail in a changed world.

I hope that some of you will join the Partner Church Council, a national organization dedicated to helping partner relationships thrive. (You can do a search from uaa.org) Perhaps some of you wish to join those of us who are visiting Mezsko next summer—or you wish to contribute to our costs. (In addition to your regular contribution, of course.) Maybe you just wish to read *Alabaster Village* (or encourage Beacon Press to reissue it, then buy it), or read Judit Gellard’s *Prisoner of Liberte*. Perhaps you might start reading books on the complex subject of Central and Eastern Europe.

Or maybe you simply want to acknowledge the deep debt of gratitude we owe to our Transylvanian brothers and sisters, understanding that the human connection is ultimately what will save us.

Let me close by reading a letter from Halmagyi Helga Julia, one of Mezsko’s children, hastily translated by Zsuzsa:

Dear Sisters and brothers in Boise. You brought in our heart a lot of joy preparing this surprise. We would like to do the same for you. After my opinion, there would be very nice if we could be pen pals and we can send pictures to each other and every Sunday to to pray for each other. This would be my wish.
Halmagyi Helga Julia

Sources

Gellard, Judit. *Prisoner of Liberte: Story of a Transylvanian Martyr*. Chico, CA: Uniquet, 2003. **You may buy a copy of this book by contacting Rev. Peter Raible, 11300 1st Ave. NE, #301, Seattle WA 98125; peter@raible.com**

Kaplan, Robert D. *Balkan Ghosts: a Journey Through History*, Vintage Press, 1993.