All I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Transylvania

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The story of our pilgrimage to Transylvania begins long ago, in a region of the world now known as Turkey, in a city called Nicea.

In the year 325, Christian bishops responded to a command by Emperor Constantine by meeting to resolve theological disputes within the Christian faith. On one side of the debate was Alexander, who contended that Jesus was God. On the other side was the theologian Arius, who argued that Jesus of Nazareth was divine but created by God and not of the same substance.
Within Arian Christology lie the seeds of Unitarianism, belief in the pure humanity of Jesus.

The notes from the meeting, better known as "the Nicene Creed," reveal how the debate was resolved:" "We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made…" The Nicene Creed could have just been three words in length: "Arius is wrong."

But Arian Christology did not die. The next pronounced affirmation of Unitarian Christology occurred in 1563 with the ministry of Francis David.

We Unitarian Universalists are known for our spiritual journeys. Francis David also engaged in a spiritual journey, beginning as Catholic, converting to Lutheranism, then becoming a Calvinist and arriving at Unitarianism. What is most significant about his journey is that when he became Unitarian, he served as the Calvinist preacher for the royal court in Transylvania. Through David's influence, King Sigismund came to affirm the oneness of God and the humanity of Jesus, thereby becoming the only Unitarian king in history.

In 1568, Sigismund passed the Edict of Torda, regarded as the first legal guarantee of religious freedom in Christian Europe. This edict, known as the Edict of Toleration, declared that followers of the four largest religions in the region, now including Unitarianism, could practice their faith without pressure, punishment or banishment. At the time, this was a radically progressive law. Under these protections, Unitarianism flourished and churches grew.

King Sigismund died young. Some say that the day after the Edict of Torda was passed, the world's one and only Unitarian king was fatally wounded in a freak carriage accident. Sigismund's successor upheld the Edict of Toleration. However, the familiar ways of religious and ethnic strife eroded the strength of this progressive edict. Ironically, over the course of history, Transylvania became known as a center of intolerance.

But Unitarian Christology did not die. By way of England, belief in the oneness of God and the humanity of Jesus took root in the British colonies. Then a revolution happened, yielding the country we now call the United States.

The next pronounced affirmation of Unitarian Christology emerged when William Ellery Channing preached a sermon in Baltimore in 1819 which served as a platform for the American Unitarian movement. Unitarianism flourished and churches grew.

In 1920, a treaty transferred Transylvania from Hungary to Romania, isolating ethnic Hungarians in that region from their homeland. In 1949, Romania fell under a Stalinist dictatorship.

Under Communism, the people and the faith struggled for survival. The TerrorHáza, or "House of Terror," a museum of life under Nazism and Communism in Budapest illustrates the tension between the state and the church this way: "Communism— advocating class-war—regarded religion as their enemy. While…dictatorships persecuted and murdered their victims based on collective criteria, religion looks upon sin and practices forgiveness on the basis of individual responsibility…They persecuted religion, the faithful and the churches, because ethno-religious teaching was diametrically opposed to the…communists' ideologies, which they wanted to elevate to the rank of creeds"

Then a revolution happened. In 1989, Romanian leader Nicolae Ceauşescu and his wife were executed on Christmas Day.

I cannot celebrate the execution of human beings but I do rejoice in the truth that the fall of the Ceauşescu regime brought freedom back to Transylvania. With this political change, American Unitarian Universalists saw an opportunity to connect with the churches that made their faith tradition possible. We were free to visit a "holy land" where, for centuries, Unitarians have upheld belief in the oneness of God. We could build relationships with the congregations that survived through so much struggle. Through the suggestion and invitation of leaders in the Transylvanian Unitarian church, a "partner church" movement was born.

Cedar Lane joined the Partner Church movement in 1996 by forging a relationship with a congregation in Dicsöszentmárton. The church in Dicsö was built in the 1400's. When we became partners, the Rev. Endre Fazekas and his wife Lydia served the congregation. During our ten-year friendship, Reverend and Mrs. Fazekas came to America and members of our congregation visited Dicsöszentmárton. With Rev. Fazekas' retirement, we welcomed the Rev. Endre Nagy and his wife Dodi to the United States.

In our ten-year friendship, we have supported their congregation through the Joseph Priestley Scholarship program, providing educational funding to their young people. We created opportunities for their craftswomen to sell handicrafts in America and led fundraising campaigns for special projects. But it is through our correspondence and visits that we give and

receive the intangible support of cultural exchange, religious collaboration and encouragement—the heart of partnership.

When the Partner Church committee approached me about visiting Dicsöszentmárton, I was excited and apprehensive. My apprehension was rooted in my lack of international travel. While I have been to Baltimore, I have not been to England or Turkey. All my international travel was restricted to one road trip to Canada. Going to Romania seemed like flying to the moon.

But excitement won over apprehension and, in late October, I joined Charlene Zellmer, Carol Bertaut and Ernie and Marion Carlson in a pilgrimage to Transylvania.

We flew from Dulles Airport to Germany and then to Budapest. After a short rest, we did a little sightseeing, exploring the ancient buildings of Castle Hill. The next day, we wandered all over Budapest, taking in the TerrorHáza, the grand statues of Heroes' Square, a shopping district called "the Vachy," the famous thermal baths and had dinner at an eccentric restaurant near our hotel.

The next day, we were greeted by Endre Jr., the son of the minister in Dicsö and a minister in his own right, and Dénès, our van driver. Along with his ability to navigate the precarious streets of Budapest and Romania, Dénès is vice-president of the Transylvanian Unitarian church.

From Budapest, we crossed the border into Romania, ending the day in Kolosvar. We met with a number of the Joseph Priestley scholars over dinner, hearing about their new romances, academic successes and struggles in finding meaningful work.

The next day, we toured the seminary and the adjacent Unitarian church, viewing the rock that Francis David stood on to convert the masses, what some seminarians call "the Holy Potato." We stopped briefly in Torda to visit the church where the famous Edict of Toleration was passed, now a Catholic church, falling into disrepair.

That night we arrived in Dicsöszentmárton for almost a week-long visit. We ate rich Hungarian food and drank their powerful brandy called

pálinka. We toured Ségésvar, the hometown of Count Dracula, and Marosvashely, home of the Hungarian Palace of Culture. We ate. We bought Hungarian handicrafts in Korond, a center for ethnic pottery and linens, what one might call a "genteel tourist trap." We ate. We shared American holidays with the Saturday morning catechism class through hosting a Halloween party. Rev. Nagy introduced that morning's class as "important instruction from our American guests" while Carol and Charlene were dressed in witch hats and I was wearing paper cat ears. We ate. We joined the Dicsöszentmárton congregation in their Sunday service, where we exchanged gifts in commemoration of our ten years of partnership and I preached a sermon that was then translated in Hungarian. In this service, Dodi Nagy surprised us by playing a recording of our choir singing the Doxology that begins every service at Cedar Lane. In response, our five voices echoed these familiar words while our companions listened in silence. We ate.

We also joined our partners in their recognition of All Souls' Day, bringing candles and flowers to the cemetery and coming together for a special worship service. We lay flowers at the grave of Lazlo Kiss, a Unitarian minister who died terribly young, remembered as a brave advocate for the Hungarian minority in Transylvania. On our last day, we piled into the van and made the ten-hour drive back to Budapest. In many ways, I left Transylvania feeling well-fed.

I am still making sense of my odyssey through Hungary and Transylvania. But, for now, I have identified three important lessons from our pilgrimage:

Lesson One: It does not take much to survive.

While preparing for my pilgrimage, I planned to learn some Hungarian. But with limited time and the reality that, second to Japanese, Hungarian is the hardest language for non-natives to learn, I arrived knowing very little of my hosts' language. By the end of my stay, I had learned about twenty words, including "good morning," "church," "beautiful," "please" and "thank you very much." So, if I wanted to say, "After breakfast tomorrow, I must go to the church to join the trip," I could get by with "good morning," "beautiful church," "thank you very much" and a few hand gestures. This technique, plus the use of an

English/Hungarian dictionary and a translator for formal conversations, allowed us to communicate with one another. It did not take much to get by.

But this lesson was best illustrated by our hosts themselves, throughout their many struggles over the decades. The stories we learned at the House of Terror about religious life under Communism were real for the people of Dicsöszentmárton. Rev and Mrs. Fazekas were once dragged away and interrogated in the middle of the night by the secret police, each pressured to spy on their congregation. Thankfully they were returned unharmed. Thankfully, members of the church had seen their capture and entered the parsonage so the young Fazekas children would not be left alone.

But the problems did not end with the fall of Communism. With apologies to any government employees, imagine what your living conditions would be like if you owned no property and the government were your landlord. Even with the change to democracy, the people gained authority over an economy in decay. Much of the housing in Dicsö is rundown, the infrastructure fragile at best. The minister and his family raise livestock and grow their own food, not for the novelty of gardening but for survival. (As Rev. Nagy's son, Hunor, puts it, "In Romania, rabbits are for eating.")

Conversely, it was strange to be among people who understand America as a place of wealth and opportunity. Despite my accounts of the great gap between the rich and poor in our country, the faulty health care systems, the corrupt politicians, coming to America, even for just a visit, is a powerful dream among the people of Dicsöszentmárton.

This was illustrated by Béla, the son of my hosts Béla Sr. and Ertzebet. Béla is studying to become a doctor. When I told him that it was possible that Cedar Lane could connect him with a medical internship in the States, he was very excited by this idea. Then he added, "Or, I could come to America and work as a lifeguard, like on the Baywatch." America is a powerful dream indeed.

Yet, despite the great political and social struggles in Romania, I left Dicsöszentmárton with a sense of our partners' incredible

wealth—wealth of spirit, of culture, wealth of heart. While the people in our partner church lead full, demanding lives, they never seem too busy. While they face real challenges and losses, they don't seem depressed. They have something that so many of us in America long to have. If anything, I learned in Transylvania how poor we can be in America, despite our great wealth.

Lesson Two: Some moments in human life are universal.

The Nagy family has a slinky, calico cat that they keep outside. But, every time someone opens the door, Yulie sneaks in. Eventually, someone notices Yulie in the corner of the kitchen or under the table, scolds her, picks her up and puts her outside. Then someone else opens the door and it happens all over again.

As we drove from Korond to Dicsö at night, the lights of our van blinded a pedestrian at the side of the road, who responded to his discomfort by greeting us with a raised middle-finger salute.

During a solemn prayer in Saturday's catechism class, a young girl's cell phone rang with a loud, rap music ring tone.

Enough said.

Lesson Three is best articulated by a figure in the American Unitarian tradition, Theodore Parker: "The arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice."

When the people of Dicsöszentmárton lived under Communism, the town took away one of the church's buildings. This small structure served as a Unitarian school but, under the authority of the town, it became a site for legal wedding ceremonies. If you visit Dicsö, you can't miss this building as it features a large, garish mural of a bride and groom facing the town square.

Our partner church is in a five-year process of reclaiming their building. When we came to Dicsöszentmárton and the church wanted to hold a welcome dinner for us on Sunday night, Rev. Nagy was in the awkward

position of needing to rent their own building from the town in order to have enough space for the event.

The welcome dinner was a wonderful celebration. We brought the cards and messages you signed and photos of the Cedar Lane community to share with our partners. We ate. We raised our glasses to international friendship. We made new friends and reconnected with old ones.

Near the end of the meal, Rev. Nagy stood to say a few words. He reminded the gathered community that this building we ate in was once their school building. Who remembers going to school here? About five hands went up. All the former students had white hair.

Rev. Nagy then named a truth that, beyond all my other experiences in Transylvania, told me why we were there, why we forged and sustained this partnership, all I ever really needed to know. He said, "We have not been inside this building since it was taken by the state. Tonight is the first time we have returned." He then invited the community to stand and to sing "the hymn of the Székely people."

With no pause or hesitation, members of the Unitarian church of Dicsöszentmárton rose and solemnly began sing,ing this ethnic anthem and, with their voices, rededicated their space. As they reached the final verse of the song, someone leaned over and whispered to me, "before, if we were caught singing this song, we could be thrown in prison."

It was a privilege to bear witness to this moment. We were not there when they lost their building. We could not be with them in the greatest depth of their struggles. But we were their companions in this informal but dignified moment of taking one more step out of humiliation, oppression and fear.

They might describe this moment as evidence of God's love for His children. We might say that this moment was "life taking the shape of justice." However we tell this story, in whatever tongue, English or Hungarian, the thread that ties us together, a thread that was first named in the city of Nicea, is a simple yet powerful truth: Egy Az Isten. "God is One." In this way, we, too, are one.