

Living Our Lives in Widening Circles

Rev. Scott Prinster

April 3, 2011

UU Church of Toledo

Reading: from *The Places That Scare You* by Pema Chödrön

An analogy for bodhichitta is the rawness of a broken heart. Sometimes this broken heart gives birth to anxiety and panic, sometimes to anger, resentment and blame. But under the hardness of that armor there is the tenderness of genuine sadness. This is our link with all those who have ever loved. This genuine heart of sadness can teach us great compassion. It can humble us when we're arrogant and soften us when we're unkind. It awakens us when we prefer to sleep and pierces through our indifference. ... Even ordinary people like us with hang-ups and confusion have this mind of enlightenment.

A young woman wrote to me about finding herself in a small town in the Middle East surrounded by people jeering, yelling, and threatening to throw stones at her and her friends because they were Americans. Of course she was terrified, and what happened to her is interesting. Suddenly she identified with every person throughout history who had ever been scorned and hated. ... Something cracked wide open and she stood in the shoes of millions of oppressed people and saw with a new perspective. She even understood her shared humanity with those who hated her. This sense of deep connection, or belonging to the same family, is bodhichitta.

Sermon:

Pema Chödrön's words in our reading this morning suggest that our true being may be found in that moment when the armor of our invulnerability and comfort is pierced, when we are touched in our tenderest heart with the knowledge of the deep connection that joins us all in spite of our apparent differences. Although I had studied sentiments like this during my seminary education, that we might have more in common than separating us, it was not until after I had spent two years working with the Unitarians in Transylvania that I understood how true and transformative this idea could be.

Because most of us experience Unitarian Universalism primarily in our local congregations, it's easy to forget how many thousands of other seekers are gathering today in religious communities very like this one. Many of us associate this movement with our immediately local experience of it, or perhaps think of the free and rational impulses in religion as uniquely western, especially suited to the Emersons and Thoreaus of New England culture.

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What a surprise, then, to consider the many expressions of liberal religion that have developed in such diverse settings around the world. In particular, it would be easy to overlook completely the tumultuous 16th century when the Protestant Reformation swept through Europe, and surprising places such as Poland, Hungary, and Romania were too briefly islands of religious tolerance, more progressive than in England, for example, where dissenters were regularly assaulted or even executed. What a surprise to learn that the roots of our own liberal religion were flourishing in Eastern Europe long before they were even planted here in the United States. Throughout the turbulent history of this region, even through the later misery of its people under communism and totalitarianism, desperate poverty and bureaucratic absurdity, we see that there have also been congregations and individuals who have nurtured the spirit of liberal religion and the work of religious tolerance, suffering because of their efforts, but persevering nonetheless.

Thanks largely to the work of Irish novelist Bram Stoker, perhaps none of these places is as mysterious and evocative as Transylvania. We associate the name with fantastic images – of Dracula, of course, and sinister, shadowy castles, both romantic and eerie. Occupying a mountainous region about the size of West Virginia in what is now northwest Romania, the real Transylvania is both complex and challenging, and also an important key to the history and identity of our religious movement.

My real interest in worldwide religious partnerships really began in 1994 when a Transylvanian Unitarian minister, the Rev. Sándor Léta, and his wife Erika came to Berkeley, California to spend a year at Starr King School for the Ministry, where I was a student. Instead of the names and dates and places in our history books, Sándor and Erika shared with us the real story of how Unitarianism was able to emerge and survive in a world so different from our own, in the very Eastern bloc that Ronald Reagan once called “the Evil Empire.” And I had the same questions that many of you likely have: what form can religious liberty take in a setting so different from American democratic society? What do Transylvanian Unitarians, who are unapologetically Christian, have to do with American Unitarian Universalists, many of whom have an uneasy relationship with Christianity? Is there any reason to see us as religious kin, and any reason to cultivate a connection with them? These are questions worth asking, if our link with the Transylvanian Unitarians is going to be anything more than sentimental wishful thinking.

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When I arrived in Transylvania in 1996 to serve as the English teacher in the Unitarian seminary in the city of Kolozsvár, I had the good fortune of already being able to speak both Hungarian and a little Romanian, so I didn't feel a stranger there for long. I was able to follow the sermons and prayers in church, and soon even preached some of my own, as well as participating in the community life of the student body, so I was soon being treated like one of the family. I was able to be involved emotionally in people's everyday lives in a way that a typical visitor might not. The stories and experiences that I absorbed there helped me to appreciate their history in a new way and grasp how significant the Unitarian faith has had to be in their everyday lives. Much of that understanding has come as a result of having to acknowledge the harsh realities of life for the people living in Transylvania.

My first views of Romania as we crossed the border from Hungary were from the highway as it threaded through the city of Nagyvárad, or Oradea in Romanian. I was horrified to admit how much the city looked like every cartoon of Eastern Europe – gray, crumbling buildings lined the road, punctuated only with the garish red of Coca-Cola signs and the faded colors of laundry hanging from balconies. Although my later impressions were far more positive and I came to love the gorgeous countryside and the hospitable people, I cannot shake even 15 years later my shocked memories of that first glimpse of my new home. A brutal history under dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, and Romania's struggle to reconnect after decades of forced isolation from the rest of the world, had made demands upon its people that I could scarcely imagine. The inflation rate there had been appalling, so bad that prices had tripled in the first six months I was there. Interethnic and interreligious hostility, although improved since then, had found expression in conflict, discrimination, and simmering resentment. The industrial pollution was horrifyingly bad, so unhealthy that the life expectancy was as low as 50 in some mining cities. My female students, then just in their early 20s, were worrying about potential thyroid and reproductive problems from Chernobyl's fallout in their air and water, a sobering thought as we now wait to learn more about the damage to Japan's nuclear reactors. And it wasn't all that long before that Romania's epidemic of HIV-infected orphans had burst upon the world's awareness.

The historical circumstances of Eastern Europe and of Transylvania in particular made it difficult not to see this region as a world completely alien, wholly unlike our own. As much as I bristle when I hear others caricature Transylvania as a picturesque land of quaint, simple villagers, I have to acknowledge that I also struggled with the conclusion that it was a place that had nothing to do with my own affluent life and my own smugly comfortable Unitarian Universalism. Over my two years in Transylvania and the many years that have followed, I have returned again and again to that land and to the question of how we -- whose lives are among the most privileged, the most comfortable and, until a decade ago, the most sheltered in the world – understand life in this context. More to the point of our time together this morning, how do we make sense of a Unitarianism practiced by a people whose lives seem so different from ours?

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I found that, only by listening to their stories, grieving with them the absurdity and hardship they have suffered, and celebrating together with them the wonderful persistence of the human spirit, was I able to comprehend the critical role that Unitarian faith had played in their survival. Through their worship and their stories I was able to understand how much our two churches truly have in common, and how much each of us gains from our connection with one another.

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, one of the four Sundays when the Transylvanians serve communion, a dignified ritual of bread and wine which I soon came to love. On this particular morning, however, I was feeling more despair 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 felt that I was seeing my own overwhelm and dismay on the other ministers' faces. After deaths so recent and so central to the congregation, what clever words could I possibly offer that would convey the Pentecost message of the genuine presence of God in their lives? I felt like a disappointment and a fraud, utterly at a loss about what to say.

When it came time for the communion ritual, we six ministers stood and walked to the center of the sanctuary, where the great carved wooden table stood, the bread and wine laid out. Singing the communion hymn, members rose and lined the aisles and central open space of the sanctuary. I took up one of the chalices, the 450-year-old chalices of the founder of Unitarianism Ferenc Dávid, and walked to the head of the line, where the congregation elders waited. Hands received the chalice from me, pair by pair, and raised the wine to their lips. Gnarled hands, arthritic hands, battered by decades of work and hardship still unimaginable to me, held the heavy chalice and reaffirmed their place in that community of faith. And as they received the wine from me, each of them looked into my eyes – I had been completely unprepared for this – looked into my eyes with a seriousness and power that moves me still to think of it. And each pair of eyes seemed to say, “Don’t worry – we’ve been here for 450 years, and we’re not giving up anytime soon. We have seen so much suffering, but we who have survived, live with dignity because of this community of faith.” Even the decades of violence upon the human spirit could not overcome the redeeming power of the Unitarian Church’s message, and the hope they found in being together, especially at the moments when despair threatened to overwhelm them.

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It's not surprising, considering the many experiences like this I have had in Transylvania, that the land and its people hold a special place in my heart. My relationship with the Unitarians there has shown me something critically important about my own faith tradition, that it becomes more authentic as it is expressed in ever larger circles of connection. The Partner Church Program of the Unitarian Universalist Association, which was catalyzed in 1990 by Transylvanian native Judit Gellérd to pair American Unitarian Universalist and Transylvanian Unitarian congregations, sums up its mission in a bumper sticker we sell that says, "The most radical thing we can do is to introduce people to one another." These introductions have created life-long friendships between religious liberals on both sides of the ocean, and made Transylvania a pilgrimage destination for hundreds of Unitarian Universalists, who have gained, as I have, a radically enriched understanding of our movement and ourselves.

In the last decade, as Romania has developed economically to join the European Union, these partnerships between congregations have been challenged to move to a new level of maturity. I realize now that I was despondent over my lack of words that Pentecost day and astonished at the Transylvanians' resilience because I had thought of our relationship as one of rescuer and rescued -- we Westerners often participated largely in terms of sharing our wealth, and were going to fix them by making them more like us. The genuinely meaningful pilgrimage destination of Transylvania has constantly run the risk of becoming a spiritual entertainment destination, which we visit as consumers to participate in their exotically different life. In this role as victim and recipient of our western generosity, the Transylvanian Unitarians' religious depth and courage seemed to surprise people – how could their faith life be so sophisticated and authentic without the conspicuous affluence and individualism we enjoy in the United States?

As most Romanian citizens have enjoyed the shift to a more western standard of living, the historic city of Kolozsvár enjoyed the appearance of new goods and new opportunities, including a couple of shopping malls bigger and fancier than anything I've seen here in the United States. Although not everyone has benefited equally from this success, and their congregations still struggle to stay afloat financially, we have had to consider the Transylvanian Unitarians as something other than our poor eastern cousins, and our partnerships have become less based on this rescue model.

Aboriginal Australian activist Lilla Watson wrote, "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." This is the sentiment that best encapsulates for me what is happening now in our partnerships, like yours with the congregation in Aranyosrákos, like hundreds of congregations worldwide in these partnerships – we are coming to see that our wholeness and our authenticity are in fact bound up inextricably with one another.

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American Unitarian Universalism and Transylvanian Unitarianism still have a great deal to offer one another, even as our relationships are evolving. We have benefited so much from their long history and courage in the face of enormous adversity. They have looked to us for examples of how to modernize their movement as Romania struggles with the new opportunities and challenges of western capitalism. The worldwide movement that is cultivated at this threshold – the edge between East and West, the edge between tradition and freedom – is not a church of simple answers and cheap solutions. I believe that it is, more than ever, a meeting place where we can find a sense of belonging to a great and tenacious religious family, where we may reap the rewards of a real and honest faith. May we be grateful for this opportunity to grow in authentic relationship with a world that still has so much wonder to offer. May it be so.