

**THE MOST RADICAL THING**  
**January 26, 2020 - Thomas Paine Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Rev. Andrew L. Weber**

from The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry, by Rachel Joyce

“Excuse me,” a gentle voice above him said, “is this seat free?”

He shook himself back to the present. A well-dressed man was standing to his left and pointing to the chair opposite. Harold wiped his eyes, surprised and ashamed to discover that once again he had been crying. He told the man that the seat was indeed free, and urged him to take it.

The man wore a smart suit and deep blue shirt with small pearl cufflinks. His body was lean and graceful. His thick, silver hair was swept back from his face. Even as he sat he folded his legs so that the crease of his trousers fell in line with his knees. He lifted his hands to his lips, holding them there in an elegant steeple. He looked the sort of man Harold wished he had been; distinguished, as Maureen would say. Maybe he was staring too hard because after the waitress had delivered a pot of Ceylon tea (no milk) and toasted teacake, the gentleman said with feeling, “Goodbyes are always hard.” He poured tea and added lemon.

Harold explained that he was walking to a woman he had let down in the past. He hoped it was not a goodbye; he very much hoped his friend would live. He didn’t look the man in the eye, but focused instead on the toasted teacake. It was the size of the plate. The butter had melted like golden syrup.

The man sliced one half into slim soldiers and listened as he ate. The café was loud and busy, the windows so steamed they were opaque.

... [Harold] marveled at the neatness with which the gentleman posted the teacake between his teeth and mopped his fingers after each mouthful.

“Would you like some?” said the gentleman.

“I couldn’t.” Harold raised both hands as if blocking the way.

“I only want half. It seems a shame to waste the other. Please. Share it.”

The silver-haired gentleman took his cut-up pieces and arranged them on a paper napkin. He slid the plate with the intact half toward Harold. “Can I ask you a question?” he said. “You seem a decent sort of man.”

Harold nodded because the teacake was already in his mouth and he couldn’t exactly spit it out again. He tried to stop the butter from running by scooping it up with his fingers, but it shot down his wrist and oiled his sleeve.

“I come to Exeter every Thursday. I get the train in the morning, and I return in the early evening. I come to meet a young man. We do things. No one knows about this part of my life.”

The silver-haired gentleman paused to pour a fresh cup of tea. The teacake was lodged in Harold’s throat. He could feel the man’s eyes searching for his but couldn’t possibly look up.

“Can I go on?” said the gentleman.

Harold nodded. He gave a gulp that sent the teacake squeezing past his tonsils. It hurt all the way down.

“I like what we do, otherwise I would not come here, but I have also grown fond of him. He fetches me a glass of water afterwards and sometimes he talks. His English is not so good. I believe he had polio as a child, and sometimes it causes him to limp.”

For the first time the silver-haired gentleman faltered, as if he was fighting something inside. He lifted his tea but his fingers trembled when he steered the cup to his mouth, so that liquid spilled over the rim and slopped onto his teacake. “He moves me, this young man,” he said. “He moves me beyond words.”

Harold looked away. He wondered if he could get up but realized he couldn’t. He had eaten half the silver-haired gentleman’s teacake, after all. And yet he felt it was an intrusion to witness the man’s helplessness, when he had been so kind and appeared so elegant. He wished the man hadn’t spilled his tea, and that he would mop it up, but he didn’t, he just sat, bearing it, and not caring. His teacake would be ruined.

The gentleman continued with difficulty. The words were slow and spread apart. “I lick his trainers. It’s part of what we do. But I noticed only this morning that he has a small hole at the toe.” His voice quivered. “I would like to buy him another pair but I don’t want to offend him. And yet equally I can’t bear the thought of him walking the streets with a hole in his trainers. His foot will get wet. What should I do? His mouth folded over itself, as if it were pressing back an avalanche of pain.

The silver-haired gentleman was in truth nothing like the man Harold had first imagined him to be. He was a chap like himself, with a unique pain; and yet there would be no knowing that if you passed him in the street, or sat opposite him in a café and did not share his teacake. Harold pictured the gentleman on a station platform, smart in his suit, looking no different from anyone else. It must be the same all over England. People were buying milk, or filling their cars with petrol, or even posting letters. And what no one else knew was the appalling weight of the thing they were carrying inside. The inhuman effort it took sometimes to be normal, and a part of things that appeared both easy and everyday. The loneliness of that. Moved and humbled, he passed his paper napkin.

## **Sermon:**

When one talks about Unitarianism in Transylvania the stories have to start earlier than we in the United States may be used to. In order to share a personal story about a 2018 pilgrimage I took to our faith's birthplace I realized that I have to back up for context. So let's start a bit earlier, how about the 1500s? But really, we need a little bit of history before we start talking about Unitarianism in Transylvania. The 16<sup>th</sup> century, 1500s, were the time when the Reformation was spreading through Europe, when Catholicism and Papal authority were being challenged by the likes of Martin Luther and John Calvin. In Transylvania a major figure, especially through our Unitarian Universalist eyes, is Francis David, in Hungarian Dávid Ferenc. Dávid started his ministry as a Catholic, converted to Lutheranism, then Calvinism and finally came to embrace Unitarianism. This may be a familiar path to some of us here. In 1568 Dávid persuaded the King of Hungary and Prince of Transylvania, John Sigismund Zápolya, in Hungarian Szapolyai János Zsigmond, to sign an edict of religious tolerance. This Edict of Torda is where we look for the first glimmers of a free faith based on toleration.

A little after the Edict of Torda, in this time of religious exploration and theological self-discovery, there was a group of Unitarian Christians who started adopting elements of Judaism. It makes sense, as many reformers wanted to go back to the roots of Christianity, that some would go to the religion which preceded Christianity. These Unitarian Jews in Transylvania became known as Sabbatarians, named after their observance of the Sabbath. In a land legendary for its religious tolerance, there formed a group of Jews by choice, who had no ancestral or blood ties to Israel, but rather ties of faith and religious conviction. This is an extremely unusual occurrence culturally, but sadly the history of this small community parallels the hate and persecution which Jewish people saw all over the world. Although we laud the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a time of religious freedom and tolerance in Transylvania, it was a conditional tolerance. The 1568 Edit of Torda was for Catholics, Lutherans or Unitarians; it did not include tolerance of Jews, whether that Judaism was chosen or inherited.

The Sabbatarians did not gain many adherents over the centuries and by the nineteenth century there was a majority in only one small village, that of Bözödújfalú. In the two World Wars, this community, along with most of Hungarian Transylvania, was handed back and forth between political entities depending on whose side they were on and who was winning at the time. This village was and many others were part of Hungary, then Romania and back again. Some of the Sabbatarians were sent to ghettos, others killed at the hands of the Nazi regime. At the end of the Second World War Hungarian Transylvanians, including the

village of Bözödújfalú, found themselves minorities inside Romania. The people we call our siblings in faith, both the Unitarians and the Sabbatarians found themselves doubly minorities, by religion and by ethnicity. Sadly, the hardships didn't end there. Romania was under communist rule through the mid to late 1900s and the last Communist leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu, was especially harsh to minorities. Right before Ceaușescu's fall from power he decided to eradicate Transylvanian Hungarian communities by destroying their villages and moving the population to housing estates. Bözödújfalú fell victim to this plan, and in 1989 the river which flowed through the village was dammed, the buildings flooded and the inhabitants moved out. The Sabbatarians and Bözödújfalú were no more.

This is recent history, during most of our lifetimes. The village was flooded and its inhabitants displaced only 30 years ago. All that was left of the village were a few buildings reaching up above the surface of an artificial lake and some tombstones of an old Sabbatarian graveyard. Over the years this, too has been eroding, and now the ruins also have fallen into the lake. The history and my personal story overlap here, at the outskirts of Bözödújfalú where a memorial park has been erected. In this memorial park is a pathway mirroring what the village used to look like, with photos of the village and memorial markers at the site of each flooded building. One can now virtually walk on a path mimicking the streets of this flooded city. My most recent trip to Transylvania was a walking pilgrimage with a focus on mindfulness. When we reached Bözödújfalú, we stopped and took a moment to wander the memorial, look at the photos and think about the religious and cultural intolerance which occurred.

I co-led the walking pilgrimage group and was tasked with spiritual and logistic leadership. If you think that being in charge of Unitarian Universalists - a diverse and confident group of people - is hard, try it as you are walking through woods that are home to feral dogs, bears and somewhat rustic accommodations. Needless to say, it honed in me a certain set of parenting and ministry skills. My mindfulness meditation became walking behind everyone and keeping my eyes on those ahead of me, a ministry quite literally "pastoral". I continued my shepherding duties as the group shed their packs and began walking through the memorial markers at Bözödújfalú. While doing this I took note of a boy who was selling handwoven trinkets and milling about, as happens at almost any memorial or place where a visitor with extra cash might stop.

How did I respond to this young person around us? As a scared foreigner. I assumed that he was going to either riffle through our unaccompanied bags or interrupt our deeply spiritual experience. I did the classic

racist, ageist thing that so many young men of color experience all the time: I hung back from our group and kept an eye on him and our bags. And you know what happened? He came up to me and started chatting. He reached out to me over the gap I had constructed. Our conversation started shallow and grew deeper. First he wanted to know if one of the trip participants was Jean-Claude van Damme. This, of course, was not the case. As we got to talking he opened up to me and told me that his grandmother used to live in the flooded town. Not only that, but he showed me that by looking closely at one of the memorial photographs we could see her stoic face looking back at us through the house window. So there I was, living into my racism, ageism, cultural privilege... and being shown very precisely what I missed - namely, this boy's humanity.

Martin Buber, a Jewish Theologian said this, "When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them." How humbled and honored I was to have that authenticity and humanity offered to me. This is where this stories start to come into the theological. In our reading from [The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry](#), Harold assumes a lot about the stranger he calls the silver-haired gentleman. In my story I assume a lot about the local boy at Bözödújfalú. And we were both surprised when we found a human being.

This is precisely why "the most radical thing we can do is introduce people to one another." When I first was thinking about this topic I thought our call was to go past introductions, to go into deep relationships. But now I realize it isn't going past introductions, that isn't is at all. The call is to introduce *people*, to recognize what we call the "inherent worth and dignity" what others call "the divine spark", the person part of us. Not an introduction "hi I am Andrew" but an introduction to who I am, what my story is, possibly what my dreams are and what pain I hold in my heart. Those are the people we are introducing to one another, *real* people. "The most radical thing we can do is introduce *people* to one another."

This is my current ministry. I help introduce people between Unitarian Universalists in the United States and Unitarians in other places in the world, mainly Transylvania, North East India and the Philippines. So when I say let's do a radical thing and introduce people to one another, I mean just that. My presence here is twofold, one is the promotion of international partnership. You as a congregation have an opportunity to enter into relationship with a Unitarian community in another part of the world. The opportunity is to engage with both personal and congregational deepening of faith. Meeting Unitarians in other areas of the world helps us as groups and individuals, not just to learn about history, but to learn how Unitarianism can

be lived and embodied. We in the United States tend to be very good about heady religion: talking, discussing... What we sometimes fall short at is the lived faith, the faith outside of these walls and frankly, outside of our heads.

Which brings me to the second of my twofold reason for being here. Yes, I am here to promote partnerships and give you a glimpse of what that relationship might look like. But I am also here to say, "Go and make those connections, do that most radical thing and introduce people to each other, yourself included!" There is so much overlap... what does this look like? It looks like Harold Fry in the cafe, it looks like me talking with a local boy in Bözödújfalú. It looks like being genuine and whole and vulnerable and loving.

Theology is so much easier with examples. I returned from a partnership trip to India just last week, with a group from Dallas, TX who are partnered with a Children's Village - think boarding home for village children ages 5-18. A group of seven of us spent a week in a village so small it can't be found on Google maps. What does that look like? It looks like being somewhat forced into intimacy. We started as strangers but from working, playing, living, worshiping and eating together we began to see the God of electricity surging between us, we began to introduce ourselves to each other. Some of it was through planned activities but the majority was being open to the humanity of each other.

Each person on that trip to India came back more sure of their faith and more sure of how to live it. They experienced a uniquely earth-based Unitarianism without the baggage we usually bring around the term "God". That's right, nature based Unitarianism with theological language! And moreover, we saw and experienced a lived Unitarianism that was so deep-rooted it was beyond words and explanations. There is no secret formula for partnerships or cross-cultural/geographic relationships, but these in-person experiences are key. And this is what my ministry is now, what I can offer to you. I help show you a pathway, a door, to deeper faith and international relations.

I can't make it happen, I can't force introductions or deep connections. That's on you, on each of you. And when I say it's on you I don't just mean as a congregation making an international commitment. I'm talking about a religious imperative for all of us, every day!

One last story: my wife and I have two children, whom you may have seen running around. In order to help persuade good habits we use a sticker chart where each good action gets a sticker, and after some number you get a special award. The most recently achieved award was a trip to Dollar Tree, which, frankly is the only store where we can truthfully say, “you may pick out anything here to buy,” since it is all one dollar. My son picked a box of Pringles chips, which he promptly ignored to watch another customer buy helium balloons. With the awe that only a 5 and 3 year-old can muster, they both stood and watched the balloons be taken out of a drawer, fitted on the helium tank and filled. And the lady who was buying balloons, without hesitation, ordered two more balloons and gave them to us. Let me tell you, we had some happy children, unable to contain themselves and literally jumping with joy.

Why does this touch me? I’ll give you a hint, it’s not the Disney Princess or Paw Patrol pictures on the balloons. It moves me because that is exactly what I am preaching about. Actually taking the time and energy to make a personal connection. I don’t even know this lady’s name, nor would I recognize her if I saw her again. But there was a surge of electricity between her and our family. She reached out to where our children were and made that introduction. The call to live our live-saving faith is a call to recognize each other’s worth and dignity, but not through discourse or only with those we know. I can stand here and talk about making personal connections until I’m blue in the face, but my words pale in comparison to a two dollar gift of Mylar balloons.

From the 1500s in Transylvania to this week in Delaware the charge remains the same: to reach out with love and care, to introduce people to one another, to be open to those introductions, to make real connections. Make people wonder why you are so kind. Make people wonder why you are so open and loving. Go out into the world and be radical.

Amen.

**Closing Words:** 1 Corinthians 16:13 (NRSV)

“Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.”