Walking in Their Footsteps

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First Unitarian Church

Pilgrimage.

The word itself conjures images of Chaucer's Canterbury, of ancient Rome, of modern day Jerusalem, Petra and Mexico City. For only a very few does it conjure images of the Carpathian mountains, of Budapest, of Koslesvar/Cluj, or a string of small villages dotting a crooked path across Transylvania. But, then, Unitarians Universalists often take the less traveled route, choosing a path filled with experiences few others can imagine. Why would a pilgrimage devoted to Unitarian history be different?

These words by Marcrina Weiderkeh:

A pilgrimage is a ritual journey with a hallowed purpose. Every step along the way has meaning. The pilgrim knows that life giving challenges will emerge.

A pilgrimage is not a vacation; it is a transformational journey during which significant change takes place. New insights are given. Deeper understanding is attained.

New and old places in the heart are visited. Blessings are received and healing takes place. On return from the pilgrimage, life is seen with different eyes. Nothing will ever be quite the same again.

It was in that spirit that in April of this year, I joined eight other Unitarian Universalist pilgrims on a journey into the heart of our history. Working through the UU Partner Church Program, we ventured to Eastern Europe from Minnesota, Florida, Ohio, Massachusetts and Paris. At the beginning of our pilgrimage, most of us were strangers.

For two and a half weeks, we immersed ourselves in Unitarian history – visiting key landmarks, hearing hours of history, experiencing a part of the world many of us had only read about. We became pilgrims because we wanted to be better Unitarians.

Here in the states, we might hear the story of Francis David and how he preached in the city square in Cluj, balancing on a large rock, converting the whole city to Unitarianism -- with one amazing sermon.

I would offer to you that hearing the story is one thing, seeing and touching the same rock is a different experience. It brings forward the realization that the story of how he built our shared faith is not myth.

For the two clergy in the group, it was endearing to speak with current seminarians in Cluj who continue to draw strength and inspiration from that same rock. They told us that touching the rock is said to bring good luck. The students touch it regularly, and so did we.

It was emotional to climb the hundreds of stairs up to the walled prison in Deva where Francis David was held captive, where he became ill and died of exposure. It was overwhelming for some of us to understand how he was imprisoned for his radical beliefs, in a tiny cell on the top of a mountain until he died, and how his spirit lives on centuries later.
Every year near the anniversary of his death, hundreds of people gather in that crumbling prison cell for a memorial service, honoring his courage and sacrifice. Pilgrims stand in the small cell where he was held, they look out through the bars in the door, and if only for a moment, feel a bit of the chill he lived in. They see what he saw and experience the same.

Francis David is a living part of their history and they do not want risk forgetting his sacrifices nor his commitments. He is part of our history as well, leaving us a legacy that is ours to carry forward.

Those weeks in Transylvania were a good reminder that we can read about history, and we can watch a movie on the history channel or attend a lecture about history. However, walking the steps of our own history is an entirely different experience. It is that experience of walking in the footsteps of our forefathers and foremothers that history touches the soul and becomes real. Those weeks were an opportunity to set aside expectations, open myself to the unknown, experience another way of living and another way of understanding this faith I hold so dear.

One thing that stands out when I reflect back on this pilgrimage is that the range of how we do church is as varied as the number of our Unitarian Universalist congregations. But whether we call ourselves a church, a fellowship, a congregation or society –

whether we call ourselves Unitarians, Universalists, or Unitarian Universalists –

whether we are lay-led or have professionally trained leaders on staff –

whether we have 100 members or 1200, there is a shared history and core principles which bind us together as a people of faith.

As members of First Unitarian Church in Toledo, we are part of something far greater than ourselves; we are part of a faith tradition which stretches back not decades but centuries. Here in Toledo, we are connected to congregations of Unitarians who might not recognize how we “do” church any more than we would recognize how they “do” church in Romania, Transylvania, England or Poland. However, beneath any superficial differences, a common stream of liberal theology runs deep for all of us, regardless of how that theology is expressed.

Think for a just a moment about how you prepared yourself and your family to come to church this morning. Think for just a moment about how you chose your clothes for church. Think about what you did when you came into the building. Think about how you chose where to sit, and with whom. Think about what had your attention before the service, whether you were sitting quietly or chatting with people in the pews. Think about all that you see and hear and can touch here in our sanctuary. Those are all parts of how this congregation “does” church.

Now, imagine if you will a small village in the gentle hills of Transylvania. The village itself is picturesque, like something right out of the movie “Chocolat.” As far as the eye can see, it is a landscape of verdant greens, freshly plowed fields, grazing cows and sheep, neatly kept homes with window boxes filled with flowers. The roads leading into the village are mostly narrow and paved, but the ones inside the village itself are hard packed earth.
For this reason, the primary transportation for many families in this village, and others like it, is a horse drawn cart. Even tiny cars are expensive and horses are ultimately easier to maintain, with the added benefit of natural fertilizer.

Now imagine, a modern touch on these horse drawn wagons: the teenager at the reins is talking on his cell phone. It was that sort of juxtaposition of old and new that kept me on my toes.

Many of the homes and farms in this village date back hundreds of years. They are well maintained, clean and uncluttered, and it is not uncommon to see satellite dishes on the roofs. Despite their age, many of the homes have indoor plumbing, computers, Wi-Fi, and washing machines.

The Unitarian church in our partner village, Rochos, stands proudly at the center of town. The first part of the church was built relatively recently, in the 1600s. (The really old Unitarian churches in other villages were built in the 1200’s) The church is still surrounded by a high stone wall -- which in earlier times served as a protection against invaders and thieves. On a sunny day, its high silver steeple can be seen for miles, tall and proud against the fields and hills, announcing to everyone who can see it that this village has a Unitarian church and of this fact the people are extremely proud.

And then it begins to get a little different from what we know. On any given Sunday morning, the men and women of the village line up outside the church waiting to enter for worship. Because the church is centrally located, men who live on one side of the village line up outside the door nearest their homes, and the men from the other end of the village do likewise. Dressed in their Sunday best, each man is wearing suit, a clean shirt and tie, his shoes are polished and he has scrubbed off all evidence of the week’s hard work. The men line up not according to who got there first, but according to their age. The eldest, and therefore the most honored lead the line.

The women line up similarly, though in one line through the main, center door. The women are also wearing their Sunday best, suits and dresses, stockings and polished shoes, handbags firmly over their arms. Some of the women arrive with their heads covered, some in heavy coats to ward off the distinct chill in the church. They too line up according to age, with the oldest, and most revered, leading the line.

The unmarried younger people gather, ready to take their places in the balcony. They too are dressed for the occasion, the girls in dresses and the young men in suits. When the time comes for them to marry, the young women will sit with the wives and widows and the young men will sit with the husbands and widowers. Those who marry and move into the village, quickly learn their place in the hierarchy.

Promptly at 11 o’clock, the center door opens and the women file in, taking their assigned pews on one side of the church. The main doors close. Any children present, sit with the minister’s wife in her designated pew up front. Then the side doors open, and the men file in, taking their places on the opposite side of the church. The president takes his designated pew, and then the organist begins playing the old pump organ. The main doors open again, and the congregation rises to welcome the minister. When he has taken his place in his pew near the pulpit, the congregation begins singing the opening hymn.
That’s right. Men and women sit on opposite sides of the church. The young unmarried sit in the balcony. Families do not sit together. They enter the church separately and after worship, they exit in reverse order through the main door to shake hands with the minister. It has been this way for hundreds of years and though much of the Christian world does things very differently, they like it this way. It is how they “do” church. They do not see it as a form of sexism or discrimination; it is simply how they “do” church.

What I experienced in our partner church was something out of ordinary time. They were extraordinarily kind and generous to this strange minister from America. The women’s sewing group made this stole for me, which they presented on Sunday morning before worship. I was also given this wooden plaque to bring home for the church. It is the Transylvanian symbol of Unitarianism – including a dove for peace and a snake eating its own tail symbolizing resurrection and rebirth.

In my preparatory research, I learned that communion is a standard part of their liturgy and took them an engraved pewter communion cup as a symbol of our hope for a renewed relationship between the two congregations. They now have three: one from the 1600’s, one from the 1800’s and one from us.

In many ways, their liturgy is consistent to the ways we did church 150 years ago. Their prayers and hymns, the selected readings from the Bible have a different tone, but reflect values we share with them.

The Sunday I was there was not a communion Sunday, but I was invited to preach, and offered them a sermon on the theme of blessings. I spoke of how in each of our lives there are opportunities to bless one another with words or actions, how there are opportunities to accept blessings from others, and how it is sometimes in accepting a blessing that we are able to bless others. As the majority of the congregation has very limited English, their minister translated my text into Hungarian. The twenty-somethings in the congregation said he did a pretty accurate translation. It was not the first time a woman had preached, but it was the first time they heard a sermon in English.

Over the years in this small church, a visible path has been worn in the stone floor. Five hundred years of worshippers have literally left their mark on their church. The worn path in the stones is a constant reminder of all those who have come before, all those who came for worship for spiritual sustenance, all those who made great sacrifices so that those who would follow could gather in worship as they did. Their new minister sees these worn stones not as a flaw in the church building, but a gift and reminder from their shared past.

It struck me how much these good people have been through in the last century, and yet their heads are held high, and you will never hear them complain. Years under communist rule left their mark in ways far beyond architecture and statues in the parks. Now they are free to speak their minds and voice opinions without fear of death. They can now decide for themselves how they want to live their lives.

One additional change since the end of communism is the ordination of women in the Unitarian church. While we have been ordaining women for over 150 years, is only in the recent past that women can train for the Unitarian ministry on a path toward ordination themselves.
Previously, they were allowed to take classes, but only with the intention of becoming minister’s wives.

Throughout the pilgrimage to Transylvania, I was blessed with fellow pilgrims who adopted a “When in Rome” mindset, accepting with open hearts gifts of food and drink we might not have chosen ourselves, but food and drink which was prepared and offered to us because we were their honored guests. This was not a pilgrimage for vegans; hardline vegetarians would have struggled, though they could have gotten by. This is a culture where fresh vegetables like lettuce are considered rabbit food, and our hosts would not risk insulting us, by serving their honored guests food that was meant for their animals. If the family raised pigs, there was pork for dinner. If they raised cattle, we were served beef. The farms aim to be self-sufficient, with only a few items such as bread and milk sold in the village store.

I was most grateful for the spirit of camaraderie in our group which precluded even the slightest bit of complaining. The nine of us, plus our two guides and our fearless driver, were in this together. We embraced the fact that it was a pilgrimage, not a vacation. We all understood going in that there would be obstacles, and that we would find a way though. Thank god for Google Translate, strong coffee and a generous dose of humor.

This pilgrimage to Transylvania deepened my understanding around how being a member of a Unitarian Universalist church is in many ways to commit to being on a pilgrimage — with all that is unseen and unexpected. To be a member of one of our beloved churches, congregations, societies or fellowships is in many ways a commitment to explore the unknown, to meet unforeseen challenges with an open mind, to be able to set aside personal desires in the moment for the greater good. A well-planned pilgrimage can change your life if you let it.

If anyone is interested in an outreach project, we have a partner church in Rochos that is hungry for a serious partnership and it is not something I will be able to do alone. They are hoping members of this congregation will visit in the future and would be particularly excited if young people came. Their church has a drama program for their young people, and they would love to share the experience. From all the I learned from them, this is not about sending them money, though as with any aging building, money is always helpful. It would be more a matter of getting to know one another, through an exchange of letters and possibly through the internet. They are hopeful that a renewed partnership might bring with it a real connection to the larger world of Unitarianism. They “do” church very differently than we do, but we are all Unitarians.

Stepping out of Ohio and into Transylvania was transformational in ways I am still deciphering. But I am deeply grateful to my fellow pilgrims for their wisdom and insight, for our tour guides and their preparation, to the good people in our partner church who opened their hearts, and to the church here which made it possible. The whole experience deepened my understanding of our shared faith. It reminded me that it is possible to come out the other side after hardship, reaping benefits greater than our wildest dreams.

While I still have your reasonably undivided attention, I think it is important to be very clear about a couple of things.
Seven years ago, when I accepted the call to be your minister, I did so with the knowledge that that together we would walk through whatever the future brought with it – the good and the bad. And we have, beginning a major move to this building and painful staff cuts seven years ago. We walked through not one flood, but two, and an embezzlement. We have walked through a series of deaths and losses that have challenged much of what we know to be good and true.

And, we did it together, with as much dignity and grace as we could muster. Through it all, we maintained our consistently high standards, and did so with creativity and an openness to new ways of being together.

All of which demonstrated to me that within this congregation are those who truly believe in the future of Unitarian Universalism in NW Ohio. This congregation is deeply infused with a “can do” spirit that has transcended previous challenges and has all the capacity to transcend this one as well.

I have only the deepest affection for First Unitarian, regardless of how the most recent budget crisis resolves itself. I do believe that we can weather this latest crisis together, though a handful of very generous members cannot be asked nor expected to do it alone. That is not fair, nor does it genuinely reflect our shared values and principles.

If we are to weather this, we will need to rethink radically much of how we “do” church. Each of us will need to consider what is most important to First Unitarian’s long-term health, and we will all need to think about our role in making that happen. And then those thoughts must be transformed into action.

Since my return from sabbatical last week, I have been reminded more than once of a story about a man who was reflecting on his 50+ year marriage. When asked if he had ever considered leaving, or getting a divorce, he replied, laughing: “Of course, who hasn’t? But stronger than the desire to throw in the towel was my own curiosity about how it would all work out. To see how it worked out, I had to stay.”

May we each find ways to be motivated by the challenges facing us today and tomorrow, only then we will be here to see how it all unfolds.

So may it be,

Amen