



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Pilgrimage Reflections”

Delivered on November 15, 2015

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Centering Thoughts

*Wherever you go, you will always bear yourself about with you,
and so you will always find yourself.* Thomas á Kempis

*I soon realized that no journey carries one far unless, as it extends into the world around us,
it goes an equal distance into the world within.* Lillian Smith

*The object of pilgrimage is not rest and recreation – to get away from it all.
To set out on a pilgrimage is to throw down a challenge to everyday life.* Houston Smith

Opening Words

During the second half of October, twelve pilgrims—Violet Dawe, Michelle Leebens-Mack, Bud Newton, Lee and Clela Reed, Harry Schomberg, Nancy Solomon, Karen Solheim, Morgan Watson, Robin Williams, Lyn Clement, and myself, all with some connection to this Fellowship, traveled to Hungary and Romania to learn more about our Hungarian-speaking Unitarian partners in Oklánd and make deeper connections to our Unitarian history and values. Oklánd is a small village in the ethnic Székely region of Transylvania, once an independent kingdom but now located within Romania.

As I said to the villagers during the Sunday worship service in Oklánd, “We are pilgrims, not tourists, because we seek to walk in the footsteps of our ancestors who made Unitarianism possible. We seek to honor their sacrifices and courage. We seek to know our shared history better. We also seek to form stronger bonds with our faith and with you in Oklánd. We know you made sacrifices to maintain our faith when others wished to eliminate it. We wish to honor you, especially the elders of this community who lived through hard times under political leaders who did not wish you well. We are grateful for your courage and strength.”

Tourists tend to view people and sites from a safe distance, never engaging on a deeper level. But whether tourist, pilgrim, or one who stays at home, we all walk life’s journey, we all follow a path of discovery. We discover who we are even as we discover others.

This morning you’ll hear reflections from Bud, Clela, and me, and what we discovered on our Transylvanian journey. We begin with Bud.

Bud Newton

In light of the recent events in Paris, I am stunned into near silence – my thought process, my words, -- about anything – seem inadequate, uninformed, unsure, and honestly, just noise against the backdrop of sorry, sadness, and shock of the people in France and around the world.

I could just stand here for three minutes in silence, in remembrance of the dead, and in the hope that ideals and hopes, lost in this sad time, reemerge... without the need for more bullets and bombs and blood and boots on the ground in the Middle East or anywhere else.

Recently I traveled in Turkey, Hungary, and Romania for 37 days. I stayed on the coast of southwestern Turkey in the small fishing village of Assos for 14 days. Every morning the island of Lesbos, it's mountaintops shrouded in clouds, greeted me when I opened my curtains. And each morning a steady procession of refugees, mainly from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, could be seen motoring in large black rubber rafts from the coast of Turkey, across the Gulf of Edremit, towards Lesbos. The refugees carry very little in those tiny rafts. Mostly, they carry the hope of being welcomed into safety, and the opportunity to transition into more stable countries than the ones they left behind.

I hiked in the mountains above Assos every day, literally walking on the discarded remains of ancient Greek, Roman, Persian, and Ottoman civilizations. I also walked through the detris the present day refugees had recently left behind in their camps – empty water bottles, food wrappers, open latrines, cardboard bedding, tattered plastic shelters, blankets, abandoned clothing, shoes, dirty diapers, wheelchairs, and teddy bears. There are a lot of small children making this perilous journey with their parents.

I have a lot more to say about my time in Turkey, but I will leave it now and tell you a little bit about my pilgrimage to Okland.

On October 15th joined my fellow pilgrims at a hotel in Budapest near Heroes Square. My time in Turkey was a time of reflection and quiet, and I had slight misgivings about suddenly joining my fellow pilgrims to Okland. “Group engery” can sometimes be a fearsome prospect, and I certainly had a fear and trepidation. Fortunately, on of the first people from our group I saw was Violet Dawe, a fellow farmer, lover of solitude, and ex-southern Baptist like myself.

Big sigh of relief!! I knew I was going to be okay.

As pilgrims and tourists, we started off rambling and running through Budapest with Eva Keleman the next morning. We toured churches, museums, memorials to survivors of the holocaust and the communist era...and we ate amazing food. I had the opportunity to deepen relationships with old friends from the congregation, make new, lasting friendships, and discover facets of my fellow pilgrims that I had no idea existed. In between the educational opportunities were long bus rides through the bread basket of Hungary. The sheep, cattle, and various crops grown in abundance on small farms reminded me of my youth here in the south during the 1960s.

After eight days of touring through Hungary and the countryside of Transylvania together, we arrived in Okland late in the afternoon. Toasts with *palenka* were made in the courtyard of the

Keleman's home and parsonage and we all headed off to our host's homes. I was fortunate to be sharing my host family, Viorel and Anna Marie, with Harry Schomberg and Nancy Solomon. After setting my bags down in my room, I walked back to the parsonage to ask Eva, our tour hostess, a question. She came bursting out of her gate breathlessly running and telling me I needed to go help her catch a couple of horses.

So we both took off running through the muddy village streets. I could hear the thunder of a herd of horses getting nearer. As I ran I stripped off my belt, fashioned a crude lead out of my scarf, and readied for whatever was to come. I could hear the thunder of running hooves getting louder as we approached the intersection of a paved road, and I could hear the excited whinny of young horses. Here they came! Five adult horses and two yearlings. They saw us running towards the intersection and began to slow down. We luckily just managed to get in front of them and they slowed and stopped as they turned down the muddy road we had come from. We caught the two mares with yearlings and put leads around their necks and everybody began to calm down. The horses had been in their free range pasture for the day and they come home to backyard paddocks for the evening.

In many ways Okland is running at least a generation behind our Unitarian community here in Athens. Not only in regards to their agrarian lifestyles and living standards, but also in the expression of their societal norms and culture. Okland is evolving, and the Unitarian community there is at the heart of their cultural transformation. Before I left for my pilgrimage, I had questions about the level of change and acceptance that the Unitarian community in Okland has had in regards to gender equality, LGBT issues, and cultural and race issues.

While in Okland, I was a guest at a party which featured a wonderful Gypsy band. Some of you may be aware that they Gypsies live mostly separate in the towns and villages of Eastern Europe, much like I remember the black quarters of towns and villages in the American South I grew up in during the 1960s. The host of the party was Romanian. A large party of his friends were visiting the host from France. The Gypsies played before dinner, and when it came time for dinner, they excused themselves and went outside. The mother of the French family wanted to insist that the Gypsy band come and sit at the table for dinner with us. The host tried to explain that Romanians sharing a table and dinner with gypsies just isn't done. The French mother was insistent and more than a little indignant.

She prevailed to some extent. There were two older men in the Gypsy band who came and ate with us. The four younger men very politely and diplomatically refused, based on their having eaten before they began playing.

In closing, today I will make no judgments about the progress or lack of progress made to date in any country I visited on my pilgrimage. Today, I am not going to make no judgements about US policy in the Middle East over the past two decades, nor the current tide of refugees fleeing wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syria.

Instead, I'm going to simply give thanks for the people in this room and for our larger community of progressive thinkers and doers here around Athens. I had the opportunity in Turkey, in Romania, and in Budapest to share some ideas and world views that I share with many of you. I hope and I believe that I put our best foot forward.

Harry Schomberg, Nancy Solomon, and I attended *shabat* at a small progressive synagogue in Budapest. The Rabbi coaxed Harry and me to share some of what we have experienced as a part of the Unitarian Universalist congregation. When we finished, one of the congregation's members commented through an interpreter that it sounded like we must be a community of old hippies!

After Harry and I finally stopped laughing, I told him that some of us might be just that, but that in many ways we are just a normal slice of American life...working, raising children, following our passions, paying taxes, and celebrating—not only our common beliefs and ideas and values, but our diversity and the right to dissent, even amongst ourselves.

Clela Reed "Pilgrimage"

It was what we thought
and it was not.
Our buzzing brains too full
of preconceptions,
we stepped into the journey unawares
as pilgrims often do.
We sought to find what lay beyond,
what sights and facts,
 what historic space
might illuminate our thinking,
what roots in Transylvania's soil
would prompt a fertile knowing.

It was what we thought
and it was not
for facts were not the prize.
The journey turned within.

 And thus along this path—
the singing children in the ancient church,
the peaceful village beneath the sleeping giant,
the muddy path up the sacred mountain,
 each step chosen with intent,
our stones placed solemnly in the churchyard,
the dignity of the old Jew,
the resolve and hope of the woman priest,
the extravagance of homemade foods
 spread before us like treasures,
 the host's finest,
the cowbells and church bells of the village,
the humble cows in their homeward trek—
to these our core responded,
for they emerged as *holy*.

What we found at journey's end
in ourselves and in each other
was our own humanity,
leavened as fully
as the great round loaves in the village bakery,
warm and ready for sharing.

Rev. Alison Eskildsen

When I agreed to go on a second pilgrimage to Transylvania, I doubted it could match my first trip with members of the Fellowship four years ago. I'd been to most of the places we would visit so was there anything new left to discover? Naturally, there was.

Because this was a spiritual pilgrimage, I asked the group to reflect on these three questions during our time abroad:

- When did you feel most like a stranger – meaning when were you most challenged, discomfited, or surprised by something you encountered?
- What are you learning about yourself – spiritually, interpersonally, or intra-personally?
- When did you feel or notice the presence of the holy – meaning something of ultimate importance, wonder, or grace? What fed your soul or spirit?

I'll share two holy moments with you.

One of the pilgrims was my sister, Lyn. She definitely felt like a stranger because she knew no one except me. Since we were raised Unitarian together I thought she would enjoy the pilgrimage and the opportunity to connect to our religious roots. She also gave me a familiar roommate, since most of us shared lodging with another person.

Lyn was not the only stranger in the group. Violet was unknown to Robin; Robin didn't know Harry who'd moved from Athens before she joined UUFA; Harry brought his girlfriend Nancy, who really wasn't known to anyone; and Violet and Bud were not recently active here, so they were nearly unknown, too. We arrived in Eastern Europe a group of strangers in search of a sacred experience.

During the trip Lyn suffered from a systemic infection that made it difficult for her to stay warm. She frequently felt chilled and shivered. One night we made our way up one of the Carpathian Mountains to participate in a Székely event where about 168 bonfires were lit forming a circle of light around the Székely lands. This ethnic Transylvanian minority seeks political autonomy from Romania. The cold mountain wind and air made Lyn shiver uncontrollably. To help, I stood behind her, rubbing her arms and using my body to provide a wind break and some warmth. Others in our group saw me and created a tight circle around Lyn. Together we kept her warm until Eva Kelemen, our partner church minister's wife and guide, found someone to take her down the mountain.

In that moment of unasked for care and comfort to someone who essentially had been a stranger just days before, I felt the presence of the holy. Something metaphorically divine had taken place. To have the group respond to my sister in such a way was incredible for me. But it wasn't just about

Lyn. It was about all of us coming together as strangers but who would leave the pilgrimage as friends, even family.

My second sacred moment came in the village during a special meal with the Oklánd church Board members. On this trip we planned some intentional time with villagers. We wanted to get to know them more deeply, and not just as kind hosts who opened their homes to us. One day most of us gathered in Rev. Levente and Eva's parish home and, with a villager, Rosalia, we made rose hip jam. Another time, over a group supper, we talked to each other about our respective congregations. We held in common a devotion to Unitarian community and faith.

With the help of our young translators we exchanged questions and answers. We laughed about relationships between Board members and Ministers, and we commiserated about buildings in need of repair with no money to fix them. If you're a former president, you'll find this astounding. The current board president of the Oklánd Church has served for some 22 years! He's been president as long as Levente Kelemen has been their minister.

In the course of sharing joys and sorrows about church life, I felt we were making deeper bonds between us. I'd met their president four years ago, but I couldn't tell you his name. Now I know he is Bartha Dénes, or Dennis. At the end of the evening, Dénes came over to me, without a translator.

Before I share what happened, you need to know that Hungarians are not physically demonstrative. They'll shake a stranger's hand or kiss a friend or family member on both cheeks. When I asked Eva how I should greet Levente, she advised I exchange traditional kisses on both cheeks.

So imagine my surprise when Dénes comes to say goodbye. He looks directly into my eyes, leans in to kiss my cheeks, and then when I think that's it, he puts his brawny arms around me and hugs me for a moment. Of course I return the hug, but I'm in awe, knowing how this just isn't done. But I believe Dénes was trying to express without words that we had made a significant connection.

I knew in that momentary exchange we had accomplished my hope for a deeper bond between our congregations. In their eyes we were not tourists, but pilgrims and friends. What a holy moment. Recalling it reminds me, and I hope you, to continue our partnership with Eva, Levente, Dénes, Rosalia, and the other Unitarian villagers in Oklánd. When Eva and Levente visit Athens in February as they hope to, let us welcome them together and may you form your bond with our partners, past and present.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What journey made you feel out of place, marginalized, or like a stranger? Please share.
2. Describe a time you felt something sacred or holy (your definition) was present or occurring.
3. What pilgrimage or journey (internal or external) beckons you? What unfamiliar and possibly uncomfortable territory awaits your exploration?