

Turkey to Transylvania: Reflections for a New Year
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Imagine the spice bazaar in Istanbul, the vibrant colours of spices piled high on table after table and stall after stall. Imagine the rich smells of cinnamon, curry, sage and saffron. My fellow travellers and I are invited upstairs to an office above one of the stalls. The owner is a successful businessman, proud of his accomplishments. His office is decorated like the inside of a mosque, with an arched ceiling and windows outlined with floral designs.

Five of us and our guide sit around a small coffee table. We are an unlikely group of travellers: clergy, academics and a former journalist. We are the Canadian contingent, though not one of us was born in Canada. We carry British, Polish, American and Italian passports, though I am the only one not yet a Canadian citizen.

Our guide is in charge of the Dialog Foundation's Montreal office. He has led us all over Turkey, from Istanbul to Izmir, Antalya, Konya, Cappadocia, Kayseri and back. Along the way we have met with numerous individuals and organizations all connected with and inspired by one man, Fethullah Gülen. We have met with the Journalists and Writers foundation. We have met with an NGO (non-government organization). We have toured a factory that produces sesame oil and halvah. We have toured a TV station and a newspaper that claims to be the third largest in Turkey. We have been dinner guests in private homes.

Along the way, we have seen all the highlights: Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace, the ruins of Ephesus, Pergamon, and Aspendos, the house reputed to be that of the Virgin Mary, and the fairy chimneys and ancient underground cities of Cappadocia. Every guide, every family and group we have met, wherever we have gone, has been connected to the Gülen movement.

Now we are back in Istanbul at the end of our trip, sitting in an office above the spice market. The table in front of us is being covered with bowls of dried fruit, nuts, baklava, Turkish delight and other sweet delicacies. Just when we think there can't possibly be more, more arrives, until there is no more space on the table. "You can't leave until you've finished everything," our host jokes.

It has taken me half the trip to figure out the right questions to ask. We, the guests, are still trying to figure out the scope of this movement. How large is it anyway? How powerful? Each place we visited seemed to be experiencing great abundance. There were new office buildings and large, elegant conference rooms. There was a newspaper positioned to expand. Turkish hospitality was lavished upon us and we ate and ate, just as we are eating today.

The owner of the spice company is one of the many businessmen who have sponsored our trip. He is also proudly sponsoring the construction of a new wing to the school he helped build.

You see, education and schools are the key to the Gülen movement. Gülen preaches an Islam of dialogue and tolerance. He has convinced his followers that they should do more than give money to the mosques. Zakat, charity, giving alms, is one of the five pillars of Islam. Why give to mosques? There are plenty of mosques. Why not build schools? These would be secular schools, with religious education as an optional afternoon activity. They would be open to anyone who could pay or qualify for a scholarship. "The only way to change the world is through education," Gülen would say. This is what his followers would tell us again and again. It is ignorance and poverty that destroys humanity. Only education can bring dialogue and peace.

"What inspired you to become part of this movement?" I ask our host. This has been the question that disarms the people we have met throughout our trip. Ask for specific details and you will get nothing. Ask about inspiration and the information flows.

Our host tells us that he had worked with different groups helping out in the aftermath of floods and earthquakes. Each time, the Gülen movement was there. Impressed by the people he met, he got involved. "You work, you live a life of luxury, you don't need anything else, so then you want to do something more. You learn that happiness is giving to others."

These are the stories we hear. Several of the young men we meet tell us they grew up with little educational opportunity, but they tested well and were accepted on scholarships to Gülen private schools. Tutored and mentored by members of the movement, they came to learn more about Gülen. They consider themselves intellectuals who were given the opportunity to do more with their lives than if they had stayed home in their villages. "If it hadn't been for Gülen," one journalist told me, "I'd be a shepherd – a very smart shepherd. But a shepherd."

I am moved by these stories. Yet my fellow travellers and I are not wholly trusting. We see the power and the wealth of this movement and it unnerves us. Are we seeing reality or are we being fed a particular version of reality? We are not used to movements that are so inspired by a single individual. We struggle with our Western bias and our cynicism. These are people who speak the words of love and tolerance that we speak. Why is it that we do not feel at ease?

At night in my hotel room, I try to do research on the Internet but all I can find are two sources of opposing information: The Gülen movement itself, and right wing think tanks in the United States (sorry no Canadian sources) that I know to be certifiably paranoid. The Gülen movement paints a beautiful picture of itself, while the Americans warn of extreme danger. One day, a young imam in the movement tells us that there are those that say that Gülen works for the CIA and there are those who say he promotes peace and tolerance. There are those that say he is the next Osama bin Ladin.

"You see," says the imam, "it is like the story of the Turkish folkhero, wiseman and fool, Nasreddin Hoja." The people come to the Hoja and ask him if a series of

opposing facts are true. One by one, the Hoja says, yes each fact is true. "How can that be?" the people ask. "Because each is your truth," the Hoja responds.

In the end, I know that truth is often somewhere between the polar extremes. I know that religious movements can be used for political gain, even as its followers have the purest intentions to live meaningful lives. On this trip, I know I have met people with good hearts, and I am sure I have met others who are opportunists. I know that I have only scratched the surface of the complexity of Turkey.

We have met many people who are convinced that Turkey holds a unique position in the world; that it literally stands as a bridge between East and West. They look back to the days of the Ottoman Empire and they see a model for religious tolerance. They see an Ottoman Empire that welcomed Jews who fled from the Spanish Inquisition and allowed for each religious community to practice within limits. They have no kind words for Ataturk, who, they tell us, forced the closing of the Sufi schools and pushed for secular modernization. The people we met want the world to know that they can be both religious and modern. They have faith that when they open their doors to strangers, their followers will do what their culture knows how to do best: to be open, welcoming and hospitable.

One day we take an impromptu trip along the White River to the Antalya coast. The day is oppressively hot, with the temperature well over 45 degrees Celsius. The new seven-star Mardan Palace Hotel, huge and gleaming in gold and white, rises imposingly on the right bank of the river. It must be several city-blocks long, shameful, really, in its opulence. On the left bank we see a makeshift shantytown with roughly constructed shelters made of poles and covered with cardboard. The contrast is surreal.

We land close to the beach and walk through the temporary settlement. To our surprise, a woman in one of the shelters graciously invites us to tea. We sit up high, enjoying the refreshing sea breeze, in a space that serves as an all-in-one living room, bedroom, balcony and porch. The woman and her husband (a retired government employee), serve us glasses of delicious homemade sage tea and tell us the story of the settlement, while their infant grandson plays upon the floor.

The same families have been coming to this spot along the sea for thirty years to escape the summer heat in their village. Yes, they are squatters, but the land belongs to everyone. This is the first year that the authorities have been less accommodating, most likely because of their luxurious new neighbour. Who knows if the community will survive? On this day we experience genuine, unplanned Turkish hospitality that knows no barriers. It helps me to appreciate the hospitality of all those we meet in a new light.

Towards the end of our trip, I meet a young Turkish man in the waiting room of the Kayseri airport. He has studied in New England, and his English is flawless. "I've never seen so many tourists in Kayseri. Why come to Kayseri?" he asks me. I

explain that we were returning from an excursion to Konya and Cappadocia, and that our trip has been organized by followers of Gülen. His eyes grow wide.

He tells me that he is impressed by Gülen's ability to build so many schools all over the world. "They even have schools in Africa," he says. We talk for a while and I ask him, "So what do you think about Gülen?" "People are afraid of him," he answers. "Why is he spending all this money? No one is that good. No one has been that good since Jesus." We walk out to the tarmac to board the plane, but we are separated. We aren't able to finish our conversation.

A month later, my partner and I travel to Transylvania for the conference of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists. (Transylvania, once part of the Ottoman Empire, the Hapsburg Empire, and the Hungarian state, is now part of Romania...) We meet people from the four corners of the earth, all with a wide range of perspectives on what it means to be Unitarians and Universalists. Some stand clearly in the Humanist tradition while others stand firmly in the Christian tradition, and there is everything else in between. Yet we choose to come together as one, to find unity in vast differences of theology, culture and wealth. It is no easy union, yet it is inspiring. We celebrate the human spirit and we share a passion for religious freedom.

Oh, I have much to tell you about my travels in Transylvania. I have so much to tell you about our history. That's Part 2 in this sermon series. Still, I must answer the question so many of you have asked me since I've been back: Yes, the Transylvanian Unitarians consider themselves Christians. But there are no crucifixes, no crosses, no icons in their churches, only the words: Egy Az Isten. God is One. This is what gave birth to the name "Unitarian" 500 years ago. The Sermon on the Mount is the cornerstone of their theology, but they see Jesus as a man, not God. This is our meeting point. This is our shared history.

During my days in Transylvania, I couldn't help but reflect upon the contrast between our movement and the Gülen movement in Turkey. They have power, money, schools, a TV station and a nationally circulated newspaper. Could we learn anything from them? Or do we fear having power and influence in this world? And is our fear healthy? Part of me says yes, and part of me wonders: "what if?"

I see a shift happening between the Unitarian and Universalist movements of the industrialized world and those of the developing world. In a few years there could be more Unitarians in Africa and Asia than in North America. These are groups seeking greater religious tolerance. They read our early history, they find our websites on the Internet, and they are inspired to join us. So, perhaps, we are not as powerless as we think. "To be a Unitarian is a big responsibility," one of the Transylvanian ministers reminds me.

Source of peace, bless us with peace, on this day as the Jewish New Year has begun, as the days of Ramadan have ended, and as the International Day of Peace approaches. There are dreams we have to keep dreaming. There are uphill struggles we cannot give up, as much as every cynical bone in our bodies tells us that it's useless.

I have travelled the world, from Turkey to Transylvania to Montreal, and I come back to this: My faith has to be a dedication to peace, to greater love, to justice that heals all hearts and undoes the imbalances in this world. Yet faith is so often co-opted, its best intentions twisted by politics and power. It is hard to get back to the essence, but that is what I believe all of our Unitarian and Universalist brothers and sisters are striving to do, no matter where they live and no matter how they identify themselves on the theological spectrum.

Getting back to the essence. That is where I choose to cast my lot in this New Year.