

**From Turkey to Transylvania, Part Two**  
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Letter to a Unitarian minister in Transylvania

Dear Sister in Ministry,

Surely you must have days when your heart is so full with what you want to share with your people, but your mind can't seem to organize the thoughts. That's the kind of day I'm having. Yesterday, a young man wrote to me to say that he wasn't sure he was still a Unitarian.

"I believe in God," he wrote. "This certainly has not always been the case for me, but my life experience has taught me repeatedly to trust in God and in the power of Life, follow my intuition and surrender to powers greater than myself. I am not afraid of words and ideas like God, Faith, Duty...etc. I appreciate very much that others have important reasons why they are not comfortable with these ideas, but I feel frustrated, like I can't grow in the ways that my spiritual path is leading, if I have to tiptoe around these concepts, or don't feel fully supported or understood by my community in exploring my own spirituality."

Still, he says, he can't seem to shake his roots and he's reaching out to find the spark that will rekindle the Unitarian fire in his soul. He and I will meet to talk soon, but my heart aches as I read his words. It aches, not because I feel I have personally failed him. It aches because I have known the same longing. I think of you saying what a big responsibility it is to be a Unitarian.

You and I serve in such different worlds. You live in a small village and you have reminded me that the only frequent flyer miles you will ever earn will be for walking. You look at our congregations in North America and you see our abundance. We come to your country and we know so little. You wish that the North American ministers would do a better job of teaching our history.

So I think of the best way to tell my people a complicated story without having their eyes glaze over. At the end of August, I flew on Whizz Air from Italy and landed in a city called Cluj in a country called Romania, to serve as a Canadian delegate at the meeting of the International Conference of Unitarians and Universalists. You, my sister, took a bus or caught a ride to the same place, but to you this is a city called Kolosvar. This is your homeland, Transylvania.

It hasn't been that long since Romania became a country. It will only be 20 years this December since the dictator Ceaușescu was overthrown. Things are beginning to thaw, but you, the Transylvanians, have lived through many years of oppression, and still struggle as a religious minority in a land that is deeply divided along religious and ethnic lines. Your people and your lands have moved back and forth between empires and regimes, but you will always see yourselves as Hungarians. In the streets we say *buna ziua* and *multumesc* in

Romanian to the people we meet, but in the halls of the University at the Unitarian Centre, we say *jó napot* and *köszönöm* in Hungarian. Good day. Thank you.

Your history goes back more than 500 years. To me, the story begins when Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva in 1553 for writing that God was one (and not a Trinity). That he dared to interpret the Bible for himself and reasoned his way to an understanding of a God that existed in all people and all things was a dangerous threat that had to be extinguished. You can kill a man, but not an idea. The sparks that arose from the flames that consumed Servetus ignited a movement that travelled from a small Italian colony in Geneva to Poland and eventually found their way into the heart of your founding father, Francis David (Ferenc Dávid as you know him).

Your young ministers reminded me that Francis David never stopped evolving. What courage it must have taken for him to transform himself so many times, while the Reformation split Western Europe apart. He began as a Catholic priest, became a Lutheran, then a Calvinist, until he finally became the founder of the first religious movement to be literally called Unitarian. How remarkable it is that the faith he found in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century would be echoed in the words of Channing, Emerson and Parker, nearly three hundred years later – even though they never had a direct connection. God was in everyone and everything, available to every person without priest or prophet to stand between us.

How moved I was to stand where Francis David had stood, there in the Catholic cathedral in Turda. It was David who persuaded King John Sigismund in 1568 to enact the Edict of Turda, an act of religious tolerance never before seen in the history of Western Europe. Remarkably, King John decreed that there would be no state religion. “No one shall be reviled for his religion...for faith is the gift of God.”

As a pilgrim I traced the path of Francis David. We took photos by the boulder that now stands inside the vestibule of the Unitarian Church of Kolosvar. It was on this boulder that David stood to proclaim the simple unity of God. The people were so moved that they carried him on their shoulders to the church in the square. They say that the entire city converted to Unitarianism that day and four or five hundred Unitarian churches sprung up across the land. Three years later, King John was dead and replaced by a Catholic monarch. Not long after, Francis David was betrayed and martyred for his refusal to pray to Jesus.

Thirty or so of us attending the conference ascend the steep hill to the Citadel in Deva where Francis David was imprisoned and left to die in a cold dungeon. No one knows the exact location of his cell, but we leave a wreath on a memorial plaque among the ruins as we sing Spirit of Life together. *Roots hold me close, wings set me free.* We can hear the words of Francis David speak out across the centuries: “Neither the sword...nor the cross, nor the image of death—nothing will halt the march of truth.”

My dear sister in ministry, how short lived were the heights of your history. I find myself trying to comprehend. How did you keep your faith alive all those hundreds of years? How

did you manage to stay true to Francis David? In the Unitarian Church of Kolosvar we hold his silver communion chalice and I wonder how it was preserved for so long.

I'm home now, scanning my memories of Transylvania. Like many of our churches, your churches are filled with elders. The young people stay home now, even though they call themselves Unitarians. Life has become too demanding, and religious practice has become something optional. Yet you and the other young ministers have chosen a path of faith. How you have all impressed me with your vibrancy and your brilliance. I am awed by the sacrifices you make to keep your Unitarian faith alive.

You and I laugh and share stories of being female ministers and the traditional roles our spouses refuse to play. I listen as your most outspoken colleague speaks plain truth. When she studied in North America, how shocked she was to meet Unitarian ministers who could not say what they believed. Ouch! Her words sting, and the stinger stays firmly planted in my flesh. I am so grateful for her directness. Yes, we have been taught to mince words here, to offend no one.

I can see how you and I are both struggling during these days of the conference. My mind is still filled with my travels through Turkey with a Muslim religious group. I have been to the tomb of Rumi and I have seen the faithful praying at his tomb. I have travelled with those who quietly pause five times a day to pray, careful not to disturb the rest of us. Now I have been on a Unitarian pilgrimage and my mind is gnawing on what my faith means to me. How can I be a religious leader when so many conflicting expectations are placed upon me?

I think of that night the entire conference rode in buses to the countryside. What a beautiful evening as we looked out upon that great mountainous rock shaped like a sleeping giant. So many of us filed into the village church. You ran upstairs and played a hymn for us on the organ. Then the young minister who had served in the church for five years spoke. He told us of the unusual seating arrangements during church services. The younger women sat on one side in front with the elder women behind, the older men across on the other side of the sanctuary, and the young men in the balcony.

When he first arrived as their minister he had asked his parishioners, "Why don't you sit together? The back of the church is cold. Won't the elder women be more comfortable up close?" But the members of the congregation refused to budge, especially the older women, who liked to keep an eye on the younger ones. It had been a tradition for hundreds of years and they had no intention of changing for some young upstart minister.

Then he told us about this church's tradition of communion, something done only four times a year, in remembrance of the teachings of Jesus (no crosses, no blood and body of Christ). Here in this small village church, members came forward to take communion in groups organized by gender and age. At first he found that strange as well. Then one day he was struck by the beauty of the women in their 80s sharing in the ceremony, just as they had been doing four times a year since they were young girls. Year by year, they had marked the milestones in their lives, through marriages, pregnancies, illnesses and loss. With each communion they were honouring life's passing together.

Afterwards, we pilgrims walk to the evening's festivities at a beautifully restored inn where we eat goulash cooked over an open fire and listen to violinists play Hungarian folk songs. The Bishop sings for us. He has a beautiful voice and he is the kindest soul who watches over the young ministers with affection. They reflect back love and respect. How do I explain to my people that he is mostly Bishop in name and more dignitary and spiritual guide in practice?

The moon and the stars shine over the sleeping giant. I think of all the stories we have shared – Francisco from Mexico working as a Unitarian chaplain in the prisons. “Our faith can give them back their dignity,” he says. Fulgence surviving years of civil war in Burundi, leaving the Dominican priesthood and leading a congregation of 50 into new Unitarian territory. Alex in Hong Kong discouraged with the homophobia of the evangelical Christianity of his childhood finding Unitarian Universalists on the Internet and beginning his own small group. Rebecca opening a Universalist children's school in the Philippines. Esther and Ari from Indonesia, rejected by the Seventh Day Adventists, realizing that despite our cultural differences they have found a home with us.

On day during the proceedings, we talk about the long range plan for ICUU. I can see your anger. Later, as we walk with a large group on a tour of the Unitarian sites of Kolosvar, I ask you what you had meant when you spoke. You tell me of your frustration. “The North Americans export their brand of Unitarian Universalism. They don't think that the Transylvanians have anything to offer.”

“Yes,” I say, “I hear you. We've lost touch with our roots.” You suddenly disappear amidst the stalls of the small market in the square and return with a small package. “Here,” you say. “This is a gift for you. A necklace made of beads. You can wear it and remember us. At least it is black, so you can wear it when you preach.”

Here in North America, we think we have it all figured out. Yet I wonder if we have broken open the vessel of our faith so wide that the contents have poured out and we are left empty handed. We sing “roots hold me close, wings set me free,” but instead we chop up the roots, and leave our trunk and branches with little support. Our people cry for spiritual sustenance, while your people cry for daily bread.

You lament that your people struggle so much. They gain nothing as they toil so hard each day in the village. “Why?” you ask. “Simply because of where they were born?”

We partner with your churches. We give money. We come to build things. We come with our need to be useful, and if we feel you are too unlike us, we abandon you, because you no longer fit into our program. You tell me that you are short on patience at these international gatherings. “I understand,” I say. “The differences are so great, and yet if we walk away from each other, what then? We will both have lost so much.”

This is what I want to explain to you. We are trying to create a home for so many, and yes our theology does get diluted. I want to create a safe place for our humanists and our

theists, because I don't see them as their labels. I see them as my people, the people I love with all their foibles, and with all their passion to change the world. I love them the way you love your people, with all their imperfections, the squabbles and the inflexibilities. Like you, I struggle with my impatience. I stand in the pulpit alone and I know I must have something more than an empty vessel. Otherwise, I get caught in the form of things and forget the substance. For me, that substance is God, even if I rarely say the name.

I see you the morning our Indonesian colleagues led the worship service. Ari plays the piano, while Esther sings the gospel hymn "Thank You Lord." Her voice fills the auditorium of the Unitarian University. Her voice must fill the streets of Kolosvar, enveloping the passersby in the street below. Ari speaks of the meaning of family, the family we create with each other and in our communities. He says a prayer for us. I cannot remember the words, but tears come to my eyes. After the service, I stand close by as you fling your arms around Ari. I perceive you as someone who is very reserved, and I'm surprised to see the passion come flowing out. But I know why you are thanking Ari. Our hearts have been broken open this morning. We have truly worshipped.

So, my esteemed colleague, I will wear the necklace you gave me and I will think of you. I will think of you the day I meet with this young man and I will think of what you have taught me. I will tell him that Francis David never stopped evolving. I will tell him that the world is full of Unitarians who *do* believe in God and that our faith can be expressed in many ways. I will tell him that he is not alone in his hunger. I will remember these words of Francis David:

*In this world there have always been  
many opinions about faith and salvation.*

*You need not think alike to love alike.*

*There must be knowledge in faith also.*

*Sanctified reason is the lantern of faith.*

*Religious reform can never be all at once,  
but gradually step by step.*

*If they offer something better, I will gladly learn.*