

A Sermon for the Unitarian Society of New Haven by Rev. Claudia Elferdink

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Seeing Ourselves Reflected in Each Other's Eyes- American and Transylvanian Unitarians

This is the time of return. However you spent your long warm days, inevitably the question arises, "What did you do this summer?"

I was very fortunate this summer to take a month-long trip in Europe with my 18 year old granddaughter, Rylee. We spent the first ten days celebrating the 450th anniversary of Unitarianism in Transylvania. Some of you are aware of Unitarianism's deep roots there.

When we share our stories, we take the time to look into each other's faces, and see ourselves reflected in each other's eyes. We see our common ground. Here's how many of my conversations go these days after I enjoy hearing others' summer stories.

You went where this summer? Did you say Tasmania?

No, Transylvania, far away from Tasmania, in Eastern Europe.

Why would you ever go there? A playful smile fills their face, oh you went to see Dracula! Did you see any vampires? I also smile.

Actually, Dracula, vampires and werewolves only live in Bram Stoker's classic horror novel lives only in the movies. Although Stoker's famous gothic horror tale is based in Transylvania, the locals there smile at the American and British fixation on this figment of imagination. Over the years a thriving tourist industry has grown up from this now classic fiction. Entrepreneurs there are happy to exploit the tourists with garish souvenirs made in China. No, I did not see Dracula or any vampires or werewolves.

I went to the celebration of the Unitarian Church's 450th Anniversary. Unitarianism began there in 1568 with a declaration of religious tolerance, in a town called Torda.

Actually, my Transylvanian journey started thirty years ago in a rocking chair. It was at Star Island, a Unitarian Conference center off the coast of New Hampshire. Some of you have gone to Star Island and know well that porch overlooking a broad vista of the Atlantic Ocean.

A minister friend of mine from Manchester, CT. I had not seen her in a few years. She sat down in the rocker next to me. She had an envelop of new photographs to show me. She had just come from Europe. Her name was Gretchen Thomas... the woman Richard mentioned in the reading.

This was 1990. Gretchen had just been to Transylvania and visited Unitarians there who had recently and painfully emerged from behind the Iron Curtain. I had never heard of a real Transylvania. I certainly did not know Unitarians were there.

Gretchen enthusiastically showed me her photographs and I will always remember one of the stories she told me about how they had services on Sunday mornings. With the total suppression of religion under Communism, they were not allowed to have services in their own village church. On Sunday morning, Jozsef Kaszoni, the village minister, loaded her and church members into several horse-drawn wagons. They were sitting on wooden planks that were not nailed down to the sides of the wagon. They traveled together up steep winding paths into the mountains. The planks shifted with each curve. Gretchen nervously looked down the steep cliff. Surrounded by piles of picnic food, they did arrive safely. There they had their Sunday service, then a delicious picnic.

Today, we can appreciate the comfort of this sanctuary worship without a long bumpy wagon ride and, more importantly without the fear of being imprisoned. And I imagine we will enjoy our picnic today as they savored their's. delicious food, finally safe in the woods.

Well, I was certainly surprised and intrigued by Gretchen's travels. Really? Unitarians in Transylvania? Having grown up after World War II with the iron

curtain hiding all that was happening behind it, I knew nothing about eastern Europe. Literally nothing.

I began to notice occasional mention of Transylvania in Unitarian Universalist publications. A few years later I jumped at the chance to go on a pilgrimage there. When I was planning my sabbatical in 2013, again I decided I was going to Transylvania. I wanted to volunteer in the Unitarian archives there.

Amazingly, it worked out. At the Hungarian Unitarian Church Archives in Transylvania's provincial capital of Kolozsvar, now called Cluj, Romania, I saw a woman's portrait that transfixed me. It was in the national Unitarian offices there and it was one of two women's portraits hanging among dozens of old paintings of men.

Somehow one woman seemed American to me. Who was she, and why was she among all these revered leaders and benefactors? Immediately I went downstairs to the Archives. I asked my friend Molnar Lehel, the Archivist. He smiled and said, that she was an American, from Providence Rhode Island. Her name is Anna Richmond. Her name may sound familiar because she had been mentioned in the research I was doing there. He knew she was never in Transylvania and never even met a Transylvanian, let alone a Transylvanian Unitarian. That was all he knew.

Now I was really curious!

Jozsef Kaszoni's account of feeling isolated and lonely as a Unitarian in his years under Communism was clearly true. But had Unitarians from America connected with Transylvanians before the Iron Curtain cut off communication? Before Jozsef had even been born?

Anna Richmond might reveal a story that folks on both sides of the Atlantic had forgotten. How might all these barriers have been overcome over a century ago? Were we not as disconnected as Jozsef felt in his despair?

Anna was from a wealthy old New England white family. When her kind industrialist husband died young, he gave her complete control of their family money. It was very unusual at the time to give a woman this power. They were a Unitarian family with a history of making sacrifices to support freedom of religious belief, the importance of reason, education, science, and justice.

Her father, Samuel Eddy, was elected from Rhode Island to vote on the ratification of the American Constitution. Anna's mother Abigail died in 1818, when Anna was only eight years old. In the same year her father, who was a "pillar" of the Roger Williams Baptist Church and a young lawyer, was elected to congress. Anna was struggling with the loss of her mother and her father's new political life, when in 1818 he published a controversial essay called "Scripture as its own Interpreter." From his careful reading of the Bible, Samuel Eddy found no basis for the trinity. Furthermore, he said Jesus as a Jew and a monotheist would never support the idea of a three-headed God.

All laudatory liberal conclusions, and his public beliefs threw his vulnerable family into a religious firestorm. Eddy published his ideas in Providence a year before the Boston Unitarians went public in 1819 with William Ellery Channing's ground-breaking Baltimore sermon, "Unitarian Christianity"! His family lived surrounded by the great religious controversy of the time. It was not a private life for Anna, still mourning her mother's death. His fellow Baptists were troubled by his beliefs. They called him before the Roger Williams church leaders and eventually kicked him out from the Baptist church on charges of "heterodoxy," wrong belief. Her father did not pressure her; she adopted his Unitarian faith.

Understandably, Anna Eddy Richmond was proud of her principled father. She needed a very private life protected by her father's love. As she grew to adulthood she found comfort in her kind industrialist husband George, their nine children and her Unitarian church. She had no interest in a public life.

When she became a widow, she took on being a discreet philanthropist donating to her passions: education and children. And Unitarian schools such as Harvard Divinity School, Meadville, Antioch and her local Church. She gave generously but always firmly insisted on privacy, that her name never be associated with the gifts. Only her family knew of her wide generosity.

Near the end of her life, her beloved daughter Caroline and daughter-in law Julia returned from attending the 1874 National Unitarian Conference in Saratoga Springs. They were excited about speakers they had heard in Saratoga: Edward Everett Hale and an Englishman named John Fretwell. Hale and Fretwell had spoken about the desperate need for funding for the Unitarian Schools in Transylvania. At the time, they were being financially strangled by the Habsburgs

and suffering under a smallpox epidemic. Keeping the schools alive was vital was becoming impossible. Knowing their mother's love of children and education, the daughters encouraged Ms. Richmond to contribute. Anna Richmond invited Mr. Fretwell to Providence. Here the letter, in part, she then wrote to Transylvania,

My dear Christian brethren,

When I heard of the noble zeal with which you support the cause of Christianity; of the enthusiasm with which you run your educational institutions, as well as the benign work you do for the benefit of your compatriots regardless of race or religion; I decided to offer the Unitarian College \$5000... \$500 a year to cover the salary of a teacher.

My wish is that the gentleman who is chosen for this teacher's position be of the Unitarian faith, of thorough knowledge and moral integrity, and generally thus a person who earns respect for Unitarianism and promotes the interests of your school in every possible respect.

I was pleased to hear that you have translated the works of Dr. Channing into Hungarian and I hope you will do what stands within your power to disseminate them.

Your loving sister in faith,

Anna Richmond

Mrs. Richmond's gift not only provided much-needed financial help equal to several hundred thousand dollars today, it also gave them moral support from America to continue their struggle to keep Unitarianism alive despite all odds. It was so important that they added Anna Richmond's portrait to their gallery of very important benefactors and leaders.

A century before Jozsef was born, Anna Richmond, through English Unitarian John Fretwell, had looked into the eyes of Transylvanian strangers and seen in their faces her own reflection, a passion for children and education.

Sadly, during the communist era, both Americans and Transylvanians had forgotten the depth of their connections. As it turns out, the Anna Richmond rediscovery is but one of several connections that show a long history of Unitarians overcoming differences to build loving mutual support.

I want to share one more story to give another glimpse of common ground despite vast differences. In the last decade, much research has been done to reveal important aspects of the oldest story, the founding of Unitarianism with the Edict of Torda in 1568.

It was very long time ago, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth the First in England.

Really? Hold on.

This morning I can only share a small glimpse four and a half centuries to give you a taste of this rich Unitarian heritage. The quick version is that there was early contact among Unitarians in Transylvania, England and America. For the first three centuries, the British and Americans would remember and then forget, then sometimes remember again.

To give British and American Unitarians credit, during these centuries there was persecution of the European Unitarians in the Inquisition, the Catholic Hapsburg Empire continually tried to crush the persistent Unitarian minority, the Muslim Ottoman Empire used Transylvania as a military buffer, and Americans went through a Revolutionary War. Connections were lost amid centuries of war and tumult. When the Puritans and the Pilgrims fled to America seeking religious freedom, the old Unitarian connections to Eastern Europe were forgotten.

During these early hard times on the other hand, the Transylvanian Unitarian community stayed united in harsh times and remembered their Unitarian sisters and brothers in foreign lands.

The story of the founding of European Unitarianism.

Long ago, about the time Columbus sailed to North America, the Pope in Rome was determined to rid the world of anyone who did not agree with his Catholic dogma. He built up an army called the Inquisition to enforce Catholic beliefs. Muslims and Jews, gays and Roma people who wouldn't give up their beliefs and lifestyles were tortured, hunted and murdered.

High on the Pope's list of heretics were reformers who wanted to change the Catholic church, get rid of corruption, and give people the right to interpret the Bible for themselves, rather than follow the Catholic dogma. Among the most

hated of these reformers were Unitarians who argued for reason, science and compassion in understanding Christian scripture. Unitarians rejected the trinity because careful reading of the Bible revealed it was not even mentioned.

To get away from persecution, many reformers went to places far from Rome and out of the reach of the Pope's inquisition. Transylvania was such a haven. Daily life there in the far eastern region of Europe meant constant interaction with more tolerant neighbors, Muslims and Jews.

A liberal Queen Isabella invited Italian humanist reformers, including a doctor, Biandrada, and others to her far Eastern refuge. A young Catholic priest, Ferenc David, who studied with Martin Luther returned to his home in Transylvania and spread the news of the reformation. And a cadre of international visionaries formed around this circle of radicals, including a former priest from Greece, Palaeologus. They were followers of Michael Servetus, a Spanish doctor who had been burned at the stake by John Calvin for his anti-trinitarian views.

A member of the group, Heltai had a printing press. This group collaborated to create a Hungarian translation of the Bible so common people could read the scripture for themselves. I actually saw this 1562 Hungarian-language Bible at the Torda450 celebration. These anti-trinitarian reformers were determined to spread their liberal thinking to the Western world.

When the young King John Sigismond came of age, his mother Isabella stepped aside and the King called for debates to settle the religious tension in Transylvania. The preacher Ferenc David argued for reason and compassion in following the actual teachings in the Bible. He argued against the trinity and saw a fully human Jesus, not the Catholic dogma.

The young king Sigismond declared himself a Unitarian. However, unlike other kings, he did not require the people of his kingdom to follow his beliefs. Instead he declared an Edict of Toleration. The Edict of Torda in 1568 recognized four received faiths: Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic and Unitarian. People had the right to choose their faith and their congregation's minister. This was 1568 and such tolerance had never occurred before.

David became the "superintendent" of the Unitarians and invited the Greek, Palaeologus, to the esteemed position of head of the Unitarian College.

Palaeologus was a highly educated and respected intellectual. He was an anti-trinitarian who also argued that the trinity did great harm to the traditional relationship of Christians, Jews and Muslims. By setting up the trinity as required by Catholic dogma, not only was it not based in the Bible, but also it sharply cut off the Muslims and Jews from their Christian sisters and brothers who had a common root as “people of the book.”

This enlightened inclusion is an ancient root for Unitarian Universalist interfaith work today, such as CONECT and Columbus House.

The era of Unitarianism as a respected faith only lasted a few years. The young King Sigismund, never of strong health, died unexpectedly several days after a carriage accident. Palealogus, the great intellect fled and sadly was eventually beheaded in Rome. Ferencz David, the popular preacher and leader was jailed and died in prison.

The powerful political leaders who followed were threatened by liberal Unitarianism and moved continually to suppress it. Years of persecution by the Catholic Habsburgs in Vienna and cruel Protestant leaders created unbelievable hardship for this now small minority faith.

During the late 19th century, partly shaped by the circle of Anna Richmond’s generosity, British, American and Transylvanian Unitarians forged strong moral and financial ties. Then the 20th century, two world wars and a half century of communism, all isolated Transylvania again from their western Unitarian sisters and brothers.

Today, in the twenty-first century, we Americans find ourselves faced with real threats to our democracy, absolutism is closer than we ever imagined. England’s liberalism is challenged. Yet Transylvanians are having a rare time of relative freedom.

Can Western Unitarians now look East to the Transylvanian experience for insight into surviving hard times?

Accepting differences is hard work, it requires trust. Can the Transylvanians

embrace American Unitarian Universalists with such a wide range of beliefs? And will Americans expand our wide tent of inclusion to graciously to again include liberal Christians?

Are our hearts and minds truly open ?

Will we be able to look beyond our many differences now, as we have done before, and again find our deep Unitarian common ground?

So be it.