

SPIRITUAL ENRICHMENT FROM TRANSYLVANIA

Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Phillip Hewett

May 4, 2014

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Phillip Hewett visiting the Brassó Unitarian Church circa 2004

Seventy one years have passed since I became a Unitarian, and as you see, I still am one. But I don't need to add that I am not the same person as I was at that time, nor is the movement I was joining the same. You will notice that I said "the movement I was joining", and I chose that word "movement" deliberately, because it signifies something that has not changed. You see, I came in by an unusual process; in fact, until the beginning of this year I had never run into anyone else who had joined us in the same way. I was in search of what might be a form of organized religion in which I could find a congenial spiritual home, and I was running down a list of possibilities by checking them out in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. I had almost given up by the time I got to "U", but when I did I was so impressed that I wrote away for Unitarian literature, which confirmed that I had at last arrived at the right place. But I had never to my knowledge met a real live Unitarian, and there was no local congregation anywhere near where I was then living.

So what I joined was indeed a movement, not, as for most of you, a local congregation. And this has had a marked effect upon my subsequent career. Until I came here as minister I had a wide variety of experiences of local expressions of what being a Unitarian means in many different places, and during my ministry here I did a good deal of travelling around the province and further afield, encouraging local

developments wherever I found people who were interested. And I was similarly interested in the way such developments had occurred in the past as well as the present, again in a variety of different places. I had found my home in a movement that transcended the forms it took in particular places and particular times.

Looking back now, I suppose it was natural that when the practice of providing ministers with sabbaticals began back in the sixties I should choose to spend a major part of my first one in 1969 in exploring the movement as it existed or had existed in various parts of Europe. Most of those were at that time behind what was called the Iron Curtain, so it was quite an adventure when my wife and I picked up a Volvo car from the factory in Sweden and made our way around the continent. Besides visiting historical Unitarian sites in France, Italy and Switzerland we made our way to Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and Romania, in each of which countries we met with fellow-Unitarians. By far the largest body was in Transylvania, historically part of Hungary but incorporated into Romania after the First World War

Thus began my first-hand acquaintance with Poland and Transylvania, which fascinated me so much that I went back again during my summer vacation three years later, and I have now made six visits to Poland and nine to Transylvania. It was on that second trip in 1972 that we first visited the Unitarian congregation in the city which is called Brassó in Hungarian and Braşov in Romanian, where we were very hospitably entertained by the then minister and his family. Under the rigid Communist controls over everything, they could not invite us to stay with them, but they were able to invite us to dinner in their parsonage. I well remember the atmosphere of that occasion. They had two daughters, then aged 16 and 14, a point in their lives that in our society is so often marked by teen-aged rebellion. But there we all sat around the table as fellow-conspirators, well aware that if anyone present were to repeat what we had been talking about in a more public place it could have been picked up by government agents and the parents, at least, would have found themselves in jail. As a matter of fact, quite a number of Unitarian ministers did end up in jail.

After the overthrow of the Romanian Communist regime at the end of 1989 it became possible to revive a practice which had existed back in the 1920s, of forming partnerships between congregations in North America and in Transylvania. This congregation was one of the first to enter into the plan, and on the basis of my experiences there we requested to be partnered with the congregation in Brassó. What I didn't know, though, was that in the meantime the number of Unitarians in the city had grown to an extent that the congregation had divided into two, though for the present the second congregation still had to meet in the same building. They had acquired land, but not permission to build.

But it was with the Second Congregation that we were partnered, and it was just a few months later that I first met its minister, Ferenc Szász, at the IARF Congress in Hamburg. A number of us from this congregation were there, and took part in a memorable post-Congress bus tour to the Unitarians of Transylvania, but Brassó was not on the itinerary for that trip. In subsequent years, however, quite a number of us have visited there, and I have delivered a sermon from their pulpit on several occasions. Ferenc Szász and his wife came here in 1999. We have been able to send them funds to help renovate their buildings and erect a fine new hall, to be dedicated next Sunday.

Now I find myself asking: how much of my own spiritual evolution over the past forty five years do I owe to these contacts with the Transylvanian Unitarians? I think back to that first visit when so few people from the West were making the trip. One reminiscence comes back clearly. Few people there could afford a car, so we were able to make ourselves helpful in driving a student for the ministry, together with his supervising professor, out to a fairly remote village where he was to use the occasion to practise conducting a service. After a trip over incredibly rough roads we found ourselves in this little village that was almost completely Unitarian. After the service we adjourned to the parsonage for lunch, together with the church board. What I recall so vividly was meeting the board president – and when I say “meeting” I mean something more than simply a passing introduction. We had not a word of a common language. As I grasped his hard and calloused hand I understood that here was a man who spent his days in hard physical labour on the land. I’m sure that if he had books in his home they could have been counted on the fingers of one hand. But despite all our differences I felt intuitively as I gazed into his eyes that we were kindred spirits in the things that really matter – the things that the church service had been designed to celebrate. There was a fierce independence and integrity, combined with an outreach of love and community. I realized that he was almost certainly my superior in the art of living.

That encounter set the stage for many subsequent ones with our fellow-Unitarians there, with this deep sense of sharing despite so vast a variety of obvious differences. I have no time today to mention more than one or two. I’ll begin with the place of the church in our lives. Their church as an institution is something they have had to fight for almost continuously since the sixteenth century, often against formidable attempts by political or religious opponents to wipe it out. So they have a very high regard for it and loyalty to it. Like so many other Unitarians in the Western world, I had left the church of my upbringing and strongly asserted my individuality. If that’s where you set your emphasis, then it can easily happen that you run up against something in church life you don’t care for and move out again – the so-called phenomenon of the revolving door. But when I started reflecting on how Unitarians see their church in Transylvania I

got a new sense of the importance of the church as a continuing institution within which one can continue one's own personal growth in community with others – not only that, but I realized that I had known this implicitly all along. Why otherwise, when most of my peer-group were leaving their ancestral church at the same time as I did, was I almost alone in seeking an alternative? Yes, it was really important to belong to an ongoing religious community.

I used that word “ongoing” to emphasize that we weren't born yesterday. Again, for many of us here, when we join a congregation our focus is so much on the here and now that we spend little time in looking back in gratitude to all we owe to those who created and maintained this free religious tradition over the centuries. In Transylvania, as in some other parts of world, Unitarians do look back in that way. They hold an annual service to remember their great leader of the sixteenth century, Francis Dávid, and another festival to remember the landmarks in religious tolerance worked for and achieved by Unitarians in that same early period. And more continuously they look back to the life and teachings of the man whom Dávid regarded as a purely human figure to be followed, Jesus the prophet from Nazareth. Under that definition they see themselves as Christians.

This raises the question of traditional religious terminology. At the meetings of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists that I attended in January, the Transylvanians had brought a book just hot off the press containing some of their worship materials and sermons in English translation. The title they gave that book is “Humble in Front of God”, a title I don't think we would be likely to give to a Unitarian book here. In fact, God-talk has almost disappeared from our vocabulary here, except in some hymns. That's not confined to Unitarians. In many other religious circles as well, to say nothing of ordinary everyday conversation, it has become embarrassing to talk freely about God, apart from what is said and heard in church. The exception, of course, is fundamentalist and evangelical circles, and what we have seen is a silent surrender to their literal-minded personification of God as a sort of Superman up in the sky. We don't want to be thought of as holding such a naïve idea, so we use all kinds of circumlocution. The Transylvanians make no such concessions to popular caricatures. They know what they mean by God and are able to use the word freely. Let me quote what one of their leading ministers, Maria Pap, wrote in the new book to which I have referred: “When we talk of God and you of Spirit of life we try to express the same human desire, the same human aspiration to overcome our limitations, to understand and make sense of our life and struggle, to feel the connectedness with the world around us.... [T]he basic values of our lives are the same and have their roots in our faith.”

As I reflect on the various manifestations of what she is talking about in my own experience, again I feel helped. It's true, of course, that when we sing *Spirit of Life*, this is an invocation, a reaching out for the sort of spiritual reinforcement that will give us both roots and wings, using a kind of personification. We know that we are speaking metaphorically, but we are still reaching beyond our everyday encapsulated ego. Isn't that what the Transylvanians mean by being humble in front of God? In both cases we are talking about a nourishing Mystery at the heart of things, and any personification is no more than a faltering attempt to say the unsayable. But when you come to think of it, that is a process that is at the core of religions everywhere that have stood the test of time. Persons and stories have been their life-blood and very often they are named after their founders or heroes. Otherwise one can run into what the poet C. Day Lewis called "the drain of the real into abstractions", and this can cause our religion to wither on the vine. George Santayana once wrote that people "will often accept the baldest fictions as truths; but it is impossible for them to give a human meaning to vacuous conceptions, or to grow to love the categories of logic, interweaving their image with the actions and emotions of daily life"

We begin to move dangerously close to the problem he identified if we try to base our religion on abstract principles rather than, like the Transylvanians (and indeed, Unitarians in other places as well), on persons, and on the shared stories that make up the ongoing tradition in which we too share. We need also the outreach beyond the limits of our everyday self if what we call prayer or meditation is to be more than simply a form of auto-suggestion.

Let me turn now to another feature to which Maria Pap points when she says of the Transylvanian Unitarians: "We belong to a minority ethnic group, Hungarians living in Romania, feeling always threatened in our heritage and culture, ... and whose members feel many times second-rate citizens." Struggling for the rights of minorities is of course something to which we here are committed, and such rights are now legally safeguarded in this country, if not always fully respected in practice. Working to secure the rights of First Nations, or of gays and lesbians, gives us some degree of empathy with what it means to belong to a minority that is not always respected, and we don't have to look very far back to see situations in which we have certainly not been accorded equal rights as a religious minority. Today we suffer no social disadvantages from being Unitarians, but speaking for myself I can say that I feel my life deepened by recalling when we did, and seeing how those who still suffer in that way handle life under such handicaps. There is a solidarity of community in any persecuted minority group that is often lost in a more diffuse majority -- a felt loyalty to what is shared that protects its members from becoming what Matthew Arnold pungently called "light half-believers of our casual creeds."

There is a different feature of being a minority group which picks up from there. Maintaining a supportive organization requires a financial outlay, and we here have often enough had to struggle to make ends meet. But ours is a wealthy nation, and as individuals most of us are pretty well supported by that. Romania is a poor nation, and certainly there are not many Transylvanian Unitarians who could be called to any extent wealthy. So maintaining the infrastructure of their organization calls for a higher degree of financial sacrifice, which in turn calls for a high degree of dedication. I have been impressed by what they are able to provide out of their limited resources, in maintaining their buildings and activities. Their ministers subsist on minimal salaries, supplemented by the provision of a parsonage and in most cases of a smallholding on which they can grow much of their own food and raise livestock. That is an accepted part of life, and I don't recall ever having heard self-pity or complaint. On the contrary, it seems to foster a sturdy self-reliance, and I hope that if ever we found ourselves in the same situation our response would be the same. As things are, I feel we have been privileged in being able to send some modest material help, and I myself feel that the expenditures of time and money that I have made in visiting the Transylvanians have been more than amply repaid in spiritual enrichment. I could hope for the same from some of you, and that at least you can support the retiring collection as you leave today's service.

Learning from a partnership such as this goes in both directions, and one of the things that has struck me is the extent to which this can often be a complementary process. Let me illustrate this from a sermon I delivered to our partner congregation on one occasion. As I said earlier, they make much of story, and what we can learn from story. So I took as my point of departure a well-known story from the *Book of Exodus* in the Bible, which tells of the people's long pilgrimage through the desert in hope of reaching a Promised Land. After they had passed a night in camp, they looked up in the morning. Sometimes the sky was clouded over; sometimes it was clear. If it was clouded over, they stayed where they were; if it was clear, they struck the tents and moved forward. This, it seemed to me, was symbolic of how our relationship to one another could help us both. There is a time to pause, to take stock, to evaluate where we are and where we have come from; there is a time to look into the beckoning distance ahead and follow the gleam. If we stay too long in one place, we lose our momentum, if we dash ahead too precipitately we can easily go off track. Our two expressions of the Unitarian spirit can add together productively, to our mutual advantage. Once again, it is a matter of "roots hold me close, wings set me free". We need both.

There is much more I could say, but I hope that what I have said illustrates why I feel spiritually enriched through the contacts I have had with these fellow-Unitarians on the other side of the world, however different they may appear at first sight.