



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Ill Fares the Land

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October 10, 2010

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In the 1990s, I made two trips to Romania to visit the Partner church of the congregation I served in Virginia. There are indigenous Unitarian [not Universalist] churches in Romania, in Transylvania, the ethnically Hungarian part of modern Romania. A number of UU churches in the US have partnered with Romanian churches.

Unitarianism in Romania goes back to the 1500s, and the somewhat early days of the Protestant Reformation. Remember that Unitarianism means that we believe – or believed – in one God [someone once said that Unitarianism is the belief in, at most, one God] and denied the trinity. We believe, or believed, that Jesus was fully human but not divine, and that there was no resurrection.

This was perhaps the single most important and contentious issue in the early church, and at the Council of Nicea in 325, when orthodoxy was decided for Christianity, the big argument was over the nature of Jesus. The Trinitarians won; the Unitarians lost, and Unitarianism became a heresy.

But in the early 1500s, beginning with the wide availability of the Bible in common languages, people began to wonder whether the trinity had any Biblical basis. Up until the 1500s, the Bible was only in Latin [some Greek] and was essentially the property of the clergy. Along with the availability of the Bible, the earlier Renaissance, the beginnings of science, exploration of all fields of knowledge, including religion, had opened up. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jan Hus, Ulrich Zwingli [my favorite name!] all attacked the hegemony of the Catholic Church over matters of doctrine and argued for a more personal and immediate understanding of faith. They insisted that the Church and its sacraments were not a necessary medium for faith.

A corollary effect was that the Holy Roman Empire and its connection with the Roman Catholic Church broke down and national churches arose. Luther argued that the faith of a kingdom or duchy, or whatever the governing body was, should decide the faith of that land.

And so it happened that the King of Transylvania died and his son, John Sigismund acceded to the throne. He was asked what faith his kingdom would be. He had been educated in Poland, a leader in liberal thinking and he said 'We'll have a debate to see which faith is best for us.'

So four representatives of Christianity – no other religion was considered – were chosen: a Catholic priest, a Lutheran minister, a Reformed minister [a follower of Calvin] and a Unitarian. His name was Francis David. David had been a Catholic priest, then Reformed minister, then Unitarian minister – at the end of his life he went to prison, charged with religious innovation.

The King decided that David won, became a Unitarian himself, and issued the Edict of Religious Toleration in 1568 – the first law of religious freedom in the West. This meant, above all, that local congregations were free to determine their style of worship and chose their ministers.

We are the heirs of Francis David. He is known for his claim that we do not need to think alike to love alike.

I visited the small town of Szent Gerice in Transylvania. About 900 people, mostly Unitarian, some Reformed, and some Gypsy, it was rural. One paved street, a couple of houses had plumbing, most had electricity, one store, two churches, ducks, geese and pigs in the street. We stayed with the minister. I preached both times in a church building dating back to the 1300s. Women sat on one side and men on the other. It had a pump organ, the organist had to pump with his feet. The keys were hand carved – though not by a master carver. They played Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* and *Spirit of Life*, and at the end, with the windows closed and shuttered, the Hungarian National Anthem.

Romania had maybe the worst of the Communist dictators – Nicolai Ceausescu. He was brutal, and attempted genocide against the Hungarian part of his country. He was overthrown in 1989; Unitarians were central in the revolution.

The minister of our Partner Church talked about how his childhood had been stolen by the Communists, and how precious freedom was, yet how fragile the future felt. He was a bit caught between the old and the new – the old was awful but the new seemed uncertain. Young people had little to keep them in the village; the older people knew nothing else.

How could he keep a community together when there were so many dynamics pulling it apart? We assisted by helping fund a medical clinic and re-opening the elementary school.

This is always a tension – the past and the future. What to retain and what to create – what to bring with us from the past and what to let go of? It is the theme of The Leopard, the wonderful novel I read at the end of the summer.

It also brings to mind what Martin Buber said: that after the great revolutions of the late 1700s and early 1800s, there were three principles – liberte, egalite, fraternite. Freedom and equality and community. Buber said that in the 20th century, equality went east and became the faceless collective. Freedom went west and became license, but that community was lost.

These ideas are at the heart of Tony Judt's wonderful little book I am urging you all to read, Ill Fares the Land. It is in our bookstore. Tony Judt was a European Historian, who most recently taught at NYU. He died this year. About 5 years ago he was diagnosed with a virulent form of Lou Gehrig's disease – ALS. His essays in the New York Review of Books, especially the one called 'Night,' are excellent.

I happen to think that Judt's analysis is exactly right – that for sometime we have bought into the notion that material wealth will bring happiness and meaning, and that there has been a turning away from the public to the private. I think he is right that selfishness has overtaken our culture and that inequality is perhaps the moral issue of our time.

Judt addresses what Buber saw – that if freedom and equality are to have any real meaning and strength they will be found when glued by community. The anti-government fervor, the demonization of public employees, thinking taxes are an evil rather than a responsibility, the belief that the private sector is somehow better – more efficient or more moral – than the public sector. These are wishes grounded in selfishness and naiveté.

My vision for this congregation is that we become 'a beloved community,' that we all contribute to the whole of Neighborhood, that each one of us be here just for our own selves but for each other. That we think of 'we' as often as we think of 'I.' We are responsible for the whole; only 'I' can create the beloved community; only we can bring about more justice. We.

After the service a number of people are headed out to stage a protest at a Valero Station and urge people to vote no on proposition 23 – the anti-environmental proposition on the ballot funded primarily by out of state oil interests. We have staked a claim here – the congregation voted to become a Green Sanctuary as a direct expression of our belief that we are the ones who must save the earth, and that it will take public thinking and some sacrifice to reverse all these years of believing we have everything we want, without cost.

Only we can green the world; only we can help reverse the tide of global warming.

What Judt challenges us to do is to find a way to talk about the role of the public sector, because we cannot live without it. The world is too complex; we are too interconnected for there not to be public solutions to what ails us – climate warming is just one of those ills. Judt urges us to consider 'we' and not just 'I.'

Rev. Forrest Church used to talk about the American ideal of 'E Pluribus Unum.' [By the way, when is someone going to call all these politicians who say the Founding Fathers were Christians to task – when will some remind them that Jefferson and Adams were Unitarians and specifically denied the divinity of Jesus? Indeed Jefferson wrote the

Jefferson Bible, distributed well into the 20th century to all members of Congress – let’s revive that custom – maybe swear oaths of office on that!] Out of many, one.

We are good at the many, but the one seems to be escaping us.

What is religious about this? Judt asks, in so many words, what it means to be a citizen of any state, but especially of a democracy where citizens choose their government and create their culture. He argues that we have lost our way – that we have turned our back on the common good and turned toward private pleasure, and that this cannot end well. We see that now in our country.

But what about here, in our faith? Unitarian Universalism is, if not anything, the religion of the individual. We have denied any authority outside of the self, argued that whatever we know of the sacred, we know by ourselves through experience and reflection. We claim no scripture as authoritative. We believe in the freedom of the pulpit but also the freedom of the pew. It is up to each one of us to decide what we believe and how we express that belief.

Yet we gather together in congregations for – for what reason? Well, we come for individual reasons – to educate our children, to find solace in hard times, to be inspired by word or thought or music, to hang out with others who think like we do. All that is true.

But is that enough? If Judt asks the question of what it means to be a citizen in a democracy, our question is what it means to be a member in a democratic community.

Paul Tillich, the great theologian wrote a profound little book very difficult, called The Courage to Be. He explores how we can live full and authentic lives in spite of everything – in spite of death, in spite of alienation, in spite of sorrow; in spite of our contingent nature. In spite of it all - how do we live authentic lives, become whole beings?

Tillich thought it took courage, and, yes, it does. It takes courage to live a full life. It takes courage – we all know that. This is part of what we celebrated yesterday at Brandy’s memorial. He knew this – it takes courage to live an authentic life, to live as if this life really mattered.

Tillich said that courage came in two forms – the courage to be as a self and the courage to be a part. For a full life, both are necessary. We must be ourselves fully but we can’t become full by ourselves. We need also the courage to be a part – to be with others in relationships and community.

And this requires some sacrifice, sacrificing our own desires, perhaps, for a larger good, sacrificing what we want for the inclusion of others.

When I meet with prospective members, I tell them I have five expectations of members. The first is to come, be present. Why join if you won’t be here. It is the first responsibility of members – to be present. And present not just in body, but in spirit. Be your whole self here, bring sorrows and joys, questions and answers. Be present – we need you.

The second is to grow and deepen your faith. Develop a spiritual practice – faith is practice, practice, practice. It is not what you think or believe but how what you believe is embodied.

The third is connect with others; this is a community, a congregation, a beloved community, not a collection of isolated individuals.

Fourth is to do something here – help in RE, be a part of our caring network, do social justice, sing in the choir – something.

And fifth is support the church financially – make a pledge and be generous. This place saves lives. I guarantee that we can make a bigger difference than just about anything else you give support to. We need you; you need us, the community needs us.

Yesterday this place was packed with people remembering Brandy Lovely, our former minister and minister emeritus. He loved this place. Brandy knew that our salvation depended on healthy congregations, on our public space in which individuals could find faith and hope and meaning. He knew that community was the glue that could hold freedom and equality together. He knew that there is an illness in our land – the illness of selfishness and materialism – and that we can offer something better and something healing.

Out of many one. I love you all.

Amen

Readings:

Tony Judt Ill Fares the Land

Marge Piercy 'The Low Road'