

I suppose you are all aware that the Unitarian movement began in Transylvania in the 16th Century. No? Well let me tell you about it.

Transylvania was a kingdom in Eastern Europe surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains. There, a former Calvinist Priest by the name of Ferenc David was teaching a doctrine that refuted the Holy Trinity, you know: The Father (God), the Son (Jesus) and the Holy ghost (I have no idea what the Holy Ghost is.) Ferenc David (who we now call Francis David) and his followers believed instead that Jesus was only a man who was *Inspired* by God, but not a deity himself, and there is only one God. Hence the term Unitarian instead of Trinitarian. They also did not believe in the infallibility of The Bible.

Transylvania eventually became part of the Hungarian empire, and then after World War II, became part of Romania. There are about 100,000 Unitarians still living there, all of them ethnic Hungarians.

I lived in Romania for a little over two years, from 2003 to 2005, as a Peace Corps Volunteer. I was on the southern edge of Transylvania, in the Carpathian Mountains. While I was there, I visited 3 different Unitarian churches. In all of them, the service was given in Hungarian; unfortunately, the Peace Corps had only taught me Romanian (which is a romance language, by the way.)

In two of the Unitarian churches I visited there, the women and men sat on opposite sides of the room for the service. Which I found odd but I didn't comment on in any language.

Many North American UU congregations have established “sister church” arrangements with Transylvanian Unitarian churches. Such is the case with a congregation in Kansas City (which is where I am from.) They contacted me in Romania and said there would be a group from Kansas City visiting their “sister church” in Galesti in central Transylvania, so I arranged to be there at the same time.

In deference to their American visitors, they had hired an English translator for the Sunday Service. The minister spoke a lot about God, and I was surprised to hear him refer to the congregation as “God's chosen people.” I wasn't sure if he meant Hungarians or Unitarians. Or maybe he meant Hungarian-Romanian Transylvanian Unitarians.

The Unitarian movement which evolved from there, to Poland and Czechoslovakia, to England and eventually to North America in the late 18th Century has resulted in something very different. We now believe that there may or may not be a God, or Gods, or goddesses, or whatever we find on our spiritual journeys.

In the mid 20th Century, we found that our beliefs were so close to that of the Universalist movement, mainly that no one is going to Hell, that we merged with the Universalists in 1961. Now there are more than 1000 Unitarian Universalist congregations and fellowships in North America which form the Unitarian Universalist Association (henceforth referred to as the UUA.)

Headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, the UUA acts as the central organization of the denomination. The UUA supports congregations in their work by training ministers, providing religious education curricula, coordinating social justice activities, publishing books and a quarterly magazine, and more. Their website, uua-dot-org, is a valuable source of all kinds of information and resources. Each fiscal year, this fellowship gives its fair-share (which is a dollar amount based on our membership numbers) to support the UUA and its work.

They hold a 5-day General Assembly every year for the purpose of gathering together delegates of each congregation to vote on policy changes, amendments to the by-laws, to elect new officers, to adopt issues to be studied and acted upon as an entire denomination. This convention also features lectures, workshops and break-out sessions allowing people to share information and “best practices” from one congregation to another.

This year the General Assembly was held in Kansas City in late June. Our Board of Directors asked if my sister, Lyn, and I would go to represent our fellowship since we are from Kansas City and might be going there anyway to visit friends and relatives. So we did.

I would like to report now on some of what we did there:

We voted to amend the UUA's by-laws to make them gender neutral: language referring to "him or her" will be changed to "they." And we also voted to change the wording in one of our Principles and Purposes to read "people" instead of "women and men" in deference to those people who do not identify exactly as a woman or a man.

We voted to change the by-laws to reflect that there will be two youth representatives on the UUA Board instead of just one. There were some other changes we voted on that are just too tedious to get into here.

While we were there, Lyn attended sessions that had a lot of ministers attending and surreptitiously handed out info about our fellowship to entice visiting ministers to come, and to look for a part-time minister.

We also met with representatives of UU-RISE, which stands for Unitarian Universalists Refugee and Immigrant Services and Education. They are a non-profit organization trying to help those who would be deported from the USA with legal help to try to stay there. We gave them information on Caminamos Juntos, the non-profit organization founded right here by our fellowship, which helps those who, despite everything, are deported back to Mexico. If you are not familiar with Caminamos Juntos, we have brochures and information over there on the welcome table for you to take and read, and become involved if you wish to.

Every 4 years at General Assembly the UUA adopts a social issue to study and then make suggestions for actions we could take as congregations regarding that issue. This is called a Congregational Study/Action Issue. The last one concerned Challenging Economic Inequity and as a result the UUA released this *Statement of Conscience*:

"Challenging extreme inequity locally and globally is a moral imperative. The escalation of income and wealth inequity undergirds many injustices that our faith movement is committed to addressing. We are committed to working to change economic and social systems with a goal of equitable outcomes of life, dignity, and well-being experienced by all."

The UUA then goes on to suggest actions we can take as individuals, as congregations, and as a denomination. These actions include (but are not limited to):

- Seek out and support businesses owned by racialized and marginalized groups.
- Recognize and support other enterprises directly benefiting those who are marginalized or oppressed.
- Spend money compassionately, considering whether items are ethically sourced and employers have ethical labor practices.
- Invest in micro-loan projects, crowd-source funding, and other finance options outside the corporate banking and investment system.

There are many more, and they can, of course, be found at the UUA's website at uua-dot-org.

This year at General Assembly we voted to adopt for study the issue of Dismantling White Supremacy. The wording of this raised some eyebrows. Most of us associate "White Supremacy" with neo-Nazis, the KKK, and other racist hate-groups. But they don't just mean those guys, they mean all of us! We were all raised in a Culture of White Supremacy which most Americans and Southern Canadians inherited from our roots in Anglo-Saxon dominated Western Europe. As these white people started "colonizing" and subjugating people

of color, they developed a belief that not only are white people better than other people, but the way white people do things is better.

Many of the workshops and lectures at General Assembly were concerned with this topic and with understanding how White Privilege is involved.

In her book *Waking up White*, Debby Irving writes “As a white person raised in America, I found that people were mostly friendly, I felt mostly safe and that those with authority mostly encouraged and supported me.

I could go shopping alone without the expectation of someone following or harassing me.

Whether I used checks, credit cards or cash, I could count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of my financial reliability.

I could swear, dress in second-hand clothes, or cut in line without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.

And I am never, ever asked to speak for all white people.”

At General Assembly we were given some examples of our Culture of White Supremacy, how the “white way” of doing things is considered better. For instance:

- The Expectation of Perfection. Little appreciation is expressed to people for the work they are doing, it’s more common to point out any imperfections.
- A belief that there is one right way to do things and once people are introduced to the right way, they will see the light and adopt it.
- Quantity over Quality. All resources of an organization are directed toward producing measurable goals. If it can’t be measured, it has no value.
- An ever-present Sense of Urgency that makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, to encourage thoughtful decision-making, to think long-term, or to consider the consequences.

And the list goes on and on. The UUA is currently in the process of understanding how the Culture of White Supremacy operates in its day-to-day functions, in order to make any necessary changes. Some of the UUA staff who are people of color have created a “teach -in” which is available to congregations who want to learn about it.

I know most of us who live here have had experiences with our way of doing things clashing with the Mexican way of doing things. Do you think our way is right. Do you think our way is better?

In an article I wrote from Romania back to my UU congregation in Kansas City, I explored this issue. I wrote:

Time is relative. I’m no Einstein, but I know this much to be true.

I have been trying to operate on a perception of time that is sequential and linear. I view time as something that can be spent, and having been spent, cannot be reclaimed. This is what experts call a “mono-chronic” perception, and they say it is typical of Anglo-Saxon cultures. However, I am trying to work within a culture that would be described by these experts as “poly-chronic”. That is to say, where time is perceived as being unlimited and simultaneous, where several activities can happen concurrently and time can be expanded to accommodate them. This is said to be typical of Latin-influenced cultures (including Romania and Mexico) and also in the Middle-East.

So I wondered: “Can the best part of each of these two perceptions of time be merged?” Maybe there is a way where the more task-oriented, decisive and efficiency-driven way of doing things can be incorporated into the more people-oriented, flexibility-driven way of doing things. I’m not too sure that it can.

For instance, the project that I have initiated here in Romania, and received funding for, involves the members of a rural women's association conducting traditional crafts workshops with tourists. The plan was that I first put the marketing elements together to 'get the ball rolling,' But "the ball" does not roll in Romania. The "ball" must be pushed, and coaxed, and sometimes picked up and carried; and sometimes the ball can't be found and must be replaced, or the guy that has the key to the place where the ball is kept can't be found and we have to wait.

So, I thought that maybe we could have a 'meeting'. My idea for this meeting is that the various people involved in the project could be at the same place, at the same time, ready to discuss the same tasks that need to be achieved for the same objectives. For this to happen, we would need to 'set a time' for the meeting. After asking my co-workers to confer with 'the boss', the meeting was scheduled for 'tomorrow.' When I tried to get more specific, it was agreed that the meeting should take place during that rural Romanian time-frame known as 'dupa masa.' Literally translated, this just means "after the meal", but it is commonly agreed to mean "after the mid-day meal." But when is that?

For almost two years now, I have been told variously that the mid-day meal is normally eaten "when it is ready", "whenever you want", or "when the people are hungry". While I think this flexibility is wonderful, and the fact that it is the very people who are to prepare and eat the meal who get to decide when it will take place; it does make the term 'after the meal' a little on the un-specific side.

There is no such thing as a scheduled 'lunch break' for Romanian office workers, shop clerks, government functionaries and the like. The low-level workers snack on something brought from home while remaining at their posts (an example of simultaneous activity), while the management level workers are likely to go to a restaurant and spend a few hours eating and drinking 'whenever they want' (and of course time will expand to allow this.)

So.... What time did my meeting finally end up taking place? It hasn't yet. We have gone back to the traditional method of doing things in which talking about achieving goals, and thereby getting to know people better, takes precedence over timely achievement of those goals.

Is that a bad thing? No. It just takes more time.

And that's all the time I have today.

Thank you.