

Sermon: Waking Up White: A Pilgrimage of Love and Justice

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Nine days ago I returned from a pilgrimage to Transylvania.

I love the look on some people's faces when I tell them where I've been. While many Unitarian Universalists know of Transylvania as an important part of our Unitarian heritage other people have stared at me with a bewildered look and either claim that they did not know Transylvania was a real place or they ask half jokingly about a particular count and his liquid diet.

I assure them that Transylvania is real and in fact contains a beautiful landscape of rolling hills and forests dotted with small villages. It's an area with deep religious and political history as well. Transylvania has been part of many different kingdoms over the ages. In the 16th and 17th centuries it was a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire, In 1867 its separate status ceased and was incorporated into the Kingdom of Hungary. After WWI it became part of Romania then in 1940 the northern part reverted to Hungary until after the end of WWII when it was reclaimed by Romania. We met people whose grandparents had been born Hungarian, became Romanian then were Hungarian and then Romanian again all without ever having moved their home!

Our travel cohort consisted of 18 Unitarian Universalists from the United States and Canada (an equal distribution of ministers, ministerial students and lay church members). We were accompanied by three people who lived in Romania that had done the legwork to plot the trails we would take in our 2 week journey advertised as a Mindful Walk, A Transylvanian Pilgrimage.

Although Unitarian Universalism does not have a doctrine which calls for us to go on a particular pilgrimage as a Muslim may go to the sacred land of Mecca - I felt drawn explore what a pilgrimage experience could be in the lands where the first Unitarian churches had been erected.

We began our journey in the city of Cluj- which is the Romanian name. To those who spoke Hungarian it remained Kolosvar. We would encounter this dual identity, multi-lingual reality - a tension really - throughout our trip. The Unitarians we met all spoke Hungarian and retained a Hungarian identity even as their official status was Romanian.

The first day in Transylvania our group probably looked like typical tourists traveling to new place. Lots of looking around, asking questions, noticing what was similar and different from our own country, excitedly discovering that an American dollar was equal to almost 4 Romanian lay which made everything inexpensive by american norms.

Those first few days included lots of photograph taking, I took selfies standing in the tall pulpit of the Unitarian church of Cluj and hugging the rock where it is said the Catholic turned Lutheran turned Calvinist turned Unitarian, Francis David first proclaimed his belief in the oneness of God. We went inside the church where he had a hand in the writing of the edict of Torda in 1568. You may know by now that this was a document which proclaimed a sort of

religious freedom for Transylvanians and allowed the spread of Unitarianism throughout the country. Some of the pictures I took were of places, many included myself posed as excited tourist.

On the third day, the walking portion of our trip began and we would soon face an important decision.

This was the day we first encountered the Romanian countryside with the small villages, older residents out in the fields or standing in the doorway to their humble homes, with sunbaked skin and hand made clothing. Almost every home had a well in the front yard and most villages had strategically created these large metal nest frames and attached them to the top of telephone poles. It was a way to encourage the many storks who lived there to get a head start in building their nest thus avoiding the issues that came when they chose chimney tops instead for their homes. These nests were huge and the large birds fascinating to watch fly. And each village, no matter how sparsely populated always had a Unitarian church.

Many in our group continued their picture taking that we had begun in Koloszvar with a promise to share the photos on a group drop box on line when they returned home.

Our first days of walking were long and I think I can speak for the group when I say our feet were hurting each afternoon when we arrived at our destinations for the night. Happily in each small village we were greeted by local Unitarians who welcomed us with Palinka (a very strong drink, fortunately served in small glasses) - we would discover that this was a staple in the diet - at least for Unitarian ministers. At each stop we also enjoyed simple but delicious home made meals and heart filled hospitality.

On day two of our walking we gathered after dinner to check in with each other to see how the journey was going.

One person in our group, having watched many pictures being taken of the local population invited us to consider the idea of 'consent' and we entered a deep conversation - Had we asked permission to take pictures of the people we had encountered and photographed or did we just assume the right to do so? If we had made an assumption - what was it about our own identities and culture that led us to believe that not asking for consent was totally ok?

We also talked about the idea of narrative: What was the narrative that we as picture taker would assign to each person when we shared their photos with others - and how accurate would that narrative be?

As the group conversation evolved I had an epiphany.

It started to dawn me that we each had a choice to make at that moment. It was a choice not simply about picture taking but about how we were we going to move through the spaces that we had made part of our pilgrimage.

In simplest terms - Were we going to be tourist or pilgrims? And what would distinguish the two?

In general, a tourist is defined as someone who is traveling for their own pleasure. When we are a tourist we are usually pretty clear about getting some enjoyment in exchange for our time and effort in traveling and we like to declare the places we have been. I personally had a thing for fridge magnets for a while and have a shoebox full confirming my travels.

But what about a pilgrimage? What defines a pilgrim's journey?

In its simplest definition a pilgrimage is about a journey to sacred sites. But although we were traveling to important sites of Unitarian heritage, I think the destination was not really wasn't the defining mark that would make this journey a pilgrimage.

In today's reading Yvonne Seon talks about transcending boundaries. Although she does not use the word pilgrimage I think she is defining the work of shifting from being in our lives as a tourist to journeying as a pilgrim. Seon says, "transcending boundaries is hard work. For one thing, I've created more of them since I was young, and I've built them higher and stronger than they once were."

She continues by admitting, "I'm much more self-righteous and much less humble than I was then..." referring to how she used to occupy her world when she was a child. She concludes saying that she now attempts to, "...take a few deep breaths and begin to release the fears that are the boundaries between me and my fellow humans"

As a tourist we can maintain our boundaries. As a pilgrim I think more is asked of us.

As I continued my journey and because I had hours each day to simply walk and ponder I began to expand this question of tourist or pilgrim beyond the walk in Transylvania. Am I often a tourist in my own life I wondered. Do I slip in and out of places trying to be unscathed or do I "take a few breaths and release the fears that are the boundaries between me and my fellow humans?"

As Unitarian Universalist we speak of a commitment to create a Beloved community where the inherent worth and dignity of each person is honored and lived through our commitment to justice. But in what ways do we move through our faith commitments as a tourist - not really removing our boundaries?

I thought about Debby Irving's book *Waking Up White* while I walked through villages and noticed the inhabitants. I thought of her invitation to those of us that inhabit white bodies to become more aware of how these white bodies allow us to move through spaces in this society with a certain amount of assumption about what we can do - not dissimilar to how we as a group of Americans and Canadians had been moving through these Transylvanian villages assuming that taking pictures of people we saw was just fine and in general not necessarily considering how our walking through another's space may impact them. It is said that one of the signs of white privilege is the assumed safety that our identity allows - it's an assumption that we often do not even know that we are making.

As my pondering and the miles of dirt paths and forested hills continued I found three questions repeat themselves in my mind. Consider them musings from a pilgrims journey - perhaps they can be useful in your own wanderings in our faith.

The first questions was this: Who or what is being centered here?

By looking at the photos that I had taken early in my trip I could clearly see who was being centered. I was in the pulpit, I was laying on Francis David's rock. I was walking across the landscape.

I wondered what it would be like if I did not place myself at the center for the rest of the journey-

This idea of de-centering myself although not knew but still challenging.

My first encounter with this concept of not centering myself occurred in seminary in a class called, "Educating to Counter Oppression". We had a long conversation about the experiences of black people in this country and we were asked to look at the ways our culture privileged whiteness. I could feel my frustrations build as the conversation went on. Finally I raised my hand and blurted out, "why are you making all white people racist" But the thing was the conversation was not implicating me in a knowable evil that signified that I was a bad person and yet something made me hear it that way and I had become defensive. The conversation was not about me - it was centering the voices and the lived experiences of people of color. I was just being asked to practice de-centering myself.

I know that this congregation has done some deep work around the idea of centering, one of the results being the declaration that you hung outside your door that says Black Lives Matter. It is a statement that black lives are important to center. It is a declaration of a pilgrim of justice.

The tourist will often see themselves as the most important part of the journey.

The pilgrim recognizes that they are in the landscape but the landscape does not revolve around them.

The second question I pondered was from my fellow pilgrim who invited us to ask: what narrative is being told and is it accurate?

When we spoke about picture taking and the idea of consent and assumed privilege we were reminded by our fellow traveler that our history is filled with examples of the harm that can be done by a narrative. Those that hold positions of power and authority in a society are the ones that tell the tale of events and often define the conversation about certain people or groups of people.

I had read a little about the official history of the transitions of Transylvania's national identity. But it was not until I sat with Transylvanian Unitarians that a fuller narrative emerged. One of

our hosts told the story of her grandfather whom had just recently passed away. She told us his story of having his garden being 1/2 in Romania and 1/2 in Hungary for a time and of how the post war Treaty which declared him a Romanian citizen broke his heart but not his Hungarian spirit. She told this tale as we enjoyed some homemade sausage that he had made early that year before his death. The sausage of her grandfather as well as the drying meat of most other villagers hung in the rafters of the walls that surrounded the Unitarian church. It was a community act of mutuality whose tradition went back for generations. What a generous gift that was for her to share this limited resource made from her beloved grandfather's hands. I remembered the pictures I had taken of the church earlier that day and thought of how the narrative I would have told about it had now been completed altered by this crossing boundaries we had as we shared that meal.

Again I thought of our racial justice work and pondered the narratives I have often assigned to our black and brown brothers and sisters without fully crossing the boundaries of my fears to meet my fellow humans.

As a tourist it is easy to take a pictures of people without their consent and construct a narrative about their lives - but who would that serve?

As a pilgrim we are responsible for the explicit and implicit narrative that our pictures and stories tell. Creating a culture of consent is not only respectful of the individuals involved but can begin to release the fears that are the boundaries between us and our fellow humans.

The third and final question is one I am still asking about this pilgrimage: How have I been changed by the journey?

A tourist can enter a place, take pictures, gather some fun stories, set up social media platforms to share those stories and then in a week or two be back to their normal routine, ready to plan their next trip.

As a tourist to our social justice work we can show up for the event - serve at the soup kitchen, march, protest but are sure to not allow those experience to change us - we keep a certain distance.

But I believe that Our faith calls us to be pilgrims, not tourists. Pilgrims who are not afraid to step from the center's spot light and instead be present as those from the margins are illuminated.

Our faith calls us to be pilgrims who do not construct narratives without mutuality. Pilgrims who will listen deeply to the heart and soul of our fellow humans

And Our faith calls us to be pilgrims that are changed by our journey. Changed from isolated individuals to pilgrims that fearlessly journey hand in hand with each other.

Swami Kripaluvanandaji, my grand guru said “love is the only path, love is the only God and love is the only scripture. Only love can bring unity and move the separation between all living beings. Only love purifies the body and mind. Love is not far away; it is as close as your heart. You can find it living there without walking a single step. Love is my only path. I am, in fact, a pilgrim on the path of love”

May whatever pilgrimage is calling you and wherever it takes you, find you taking a few deep breaths and releasing the boundaries between you and your fellow humans - may you too be a pilgrim of love.