

“There’s a Whole World Out There: Global UU Awareness”

Sunday, March 29, 2009

Rev. Kathleen Owens, Associate Minister:

Here we are. From this view in space it looks small and complete, doesn't it? Whole in one entity. From this distance we see only masses of land, water, and cloud cover. From here we don't see borders of countries or language barriers or the clash of cultures. And yet it doesn't even require a view from this distance to see and to experience that even with borders and different languages we human beings have more in common, there is more that unites us than separates us. This weekend as we finish our monthly worship theme of brokenness we are celebrating our Partner Churches; celebrating that relationships between countries do not have to be broken but are strengthened. And ours are strengthened, with our partner churches, on the basis of our faith. This liberal religious faith of ours is not merely a North American phenomenon it is a faith that extends the world round. There are communities all over the globe, in Europe, England, India, the Philippines, growing even in Africa, that are based on our Unitarian and Universalist theologies. This church, First Church of San Diego has two partner churches; one in Transylvania and one in the Philippines. Now partner churches are not the UU form of missionary work, they are not. They are churches that have already been in existence; whose faith tradition matches ours and we partner with them in a variety of ways to strengthen what is already there. We support these churches in many ways and sometimes in that support we can be lulled into thinking that we are all about giving to them, forgetting all that they give to us. Today we celebrate our relationships with them and attempt to answer the question, “What have they given and taught us?”

Len Pelletieri, Philippines Partner Church Committee Member:

I'm wearing my Filipino shirt today and my necklace that was a gift from our sister church Malingin. The dominant language in the Philippines is Tagalog, and one of the ways they greet each other is by saying Mabuhay (Ma Boh Hi). Let me hear you yell “Mabuhay.” My name is Leonard Pelletieri. Cardiologist named Mimi Guarneri author of the book “The Heart Speaks” says that ten years ago she was happy in her work installing stints in the hearts of people who had had heart attacks and she thought she was doing good work. Then she met people that taught her how to prevent stress and heart attacks with things like mediation, yoga, and vegetarian dieting. Today Dr. Guarneri's advice is, “pursue your passion.” It gives purpose to your life and releases DHEA and other hormones that delay aging. Two years ago, I would get up in the morning, look in the mirror and say, “Are you still here?” Now I get out of bed and I, still in my pajamas, run to my computer to see if there is any e-mail from the Philippines. Did Eva May Casteñera hear anything new from her father, Reverend Miguelito Casteñera? How's she doing in her nursing studies? Any advice about the status of our village electrification project? Have

we gotten any new computers in the library in Dumagetti yet? What's the status of our build project, to create a two story guest house and dormitory and events center that will bring in enough revenue to sustain the twenty-nine churches in the Philippines, UU Churches? Churches where UUs like you want freedom of thought, education, women's rights, and social justice. This is what gets me out of bed every morning. I have important work to do. This electrification project is a \$12,000. Project and thanks to the Rotarians we've collected all we need, with just a few hundred dollars short. The committee is just a few hundred dollars short of getting this shovel-ready project going. It fills my life with living my values and color and excitement and it's good to be part of something that is great.

Rev. Kathleen Owens, Associate Minister:

On behalf of Kevin Mann, a church member who could not be with us today, his family is from the Philippines and he expresses this, "Visiting the UU Church of the Philippines was a life changing event for me. My partner Noah and I had the opportunity to visit several of the churches. I never thought that I would have the opportunity to connect with people from my Unitarian Universalist faith, all the way in the Philippines. The churches and the people were so welcoming and every community was filled with generous and smiling faces. Large-hearted people. Several of the churches are located in rural areas in farming and fishing villages. And I was amazed to see UU chalice symbols on the churches, hear Unitarian Universalist songs and see our principles translated into the local languages. Reflecting on my trip I was filled with a renewed sense and a broader vision of our faith. I have no doubt that the message of Unitarian Universalism is very much needed in the Philippines. And I know that I will continue to build upon the relationships we have started and that they will last throughout my life."

Song: "Maglipay Universalist" by Toribio Quimada

Be joyful, Universalists, Come celebrate this company. Officials, members all unite, rejoicing in debate that's free. To teach the Universal light, To strengthen our democracy.

To teach the hope that is for all, Proclaim the Universal call. To teach the hope that is for all, Proclaim the Universal call.

Heaven is Universalist, For ev'ryone from rich to poor. We are not chosen from a list, To enter through the heav'nly door, Lift up your hearts to God's great grace, That beckons ev'ry race to soar.

To teach the hope that is for all, Proclaim the Universal call. To teach the hope that is for all, Proclaim the Universal call.

The rigid Bible worshippers, Restrict our God to ancient days. The priests, the Pope, the Calvinists, Are preaching far too narrow ways. Remember Universalists, The sun of God has many rays.

To teach the hope that is for all, Proclaim the Universal call. To teach the hope that is for all, Proclaim the Universal call.

Daniel Ratelle, Transylvania Partner Church Committee Member:

I was not raised in a Unitarian Universalist family, so I first learned about this denomination as an adult. I was impressed by its history, its prominence in the founding of America, and in the number of its admirable adherents, among them authors, thinkers, scientists, and civic leaders: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Thoreau, Alcott, Melville, Beatrix Potter, Linus Polling, Horace Mann, Clara Barton, well it's an impressive list to be sure. But becoming involved with the partner church program and especially in traveling in Transylvania, I have added an entirely other dimension to my understanding of what I had taken to be a largely American a largely rationalist phenomenon. I have been in churches and in villages that have been Unitarian since the 16th Century. More importantly, I have gotten to know people whose faith is not a casual Sunday morning choice, but rather an entire culture, a vital part of who they are in their country. And in fact, since their region has often changed hands, becoming now Hungary, now Romania, now a Monarchy, now mostly Capitalist. It has often times, only been their faith which has remained constant, in which has helped them to preserve their identity. This isn't just ancient history I'm talking about. We heard stories of those who grew up in the communist era. We heard about discrimination and even persecution of Unitarians. And we came to understand how these experiences served to deepen the bond they have with each other and with their faith, our faith. For though we are not the same, the services, the hymns, even beliefs are different, why there is even a Unitarian Bishop, yet we are connected in community. And it is this larger picture of the word "we" that has been the gift of our partner church connection to me.

Jan Gallo, Transylvania Partner Church Committee Member:

So what did I learn on my pilgrimage to Transylvania. Though I've been fortunate to have visited a number of countries, this trip was like no other. I've never traveled with a fairly large group of people that I already knew. In fact I've only traveled with more than one other person twice. This was a wonderful opportunity to share in the support and knowledge of others, when faced especially with unfamiliar situations. For me, that is public transportation, when all the instructions are in a language other than English. And it was a real treat to observe the reactions and responses of friends as we experienced another land and other cultures. Many pictures come to mind as I recall our time in Transylvania. The beauty of the countryside dotted with mounded

haystacks, rolling green hills, row upon row of vegetable crops, and a garden in front of every village home. We were treated like royalty, and though it made me uncomfortable at times, I was grateful that our presence meant so much to our partner congregation. Their generosity and desire to ensure that we were comfortable, well fed, and happy, was beyond anything we could have expected. When I first came to First Church and Unitarian Universalism, I heard the stories of how this faith began and always found it interesting. Though, I never totally integrated our religious history into my sense of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. My experience of traveling through Transylvania, visiting Unitarian churches meeting members of our partner church in Brassov, Romania, and listening to the stories of the persecution of Unitarians by Germans and Russians changed all that. I had moments of feeling like I had found my roots, as I sat in churches that have existed for hundreds of years. As I listen to Hungarian Unitarian ministers speak about how they have struggled to keep this faith alive when prevented from worshipping by the ruling governments. And when I observed the devotion the people of Transylvania have for their faith and their church community. It is hard to put into words how connected I feel to the Unitarian sisters and brothers, how wonderful it felt to know that our congregation here in San Diego, was essential to the Brassov church's ability to build their much needed social hall. It is a beautiful building, and the congregation will always remember that their partner church helped significantly to make it a reality. They couldn't have been more appreciative and we couldn't have been happier about sharing in their joy. In the Brassov congregation sanctuary hangs a quilt depicting the world's religions. It was made many years ago by members of this congregation. It feels wonderful to me to know they are reminded of our support and affection each and every Sunday morning.

Ken Herman, Transylvania Partner Church Committee Member:

What I learned in two visits to Brassov, Romania to our partner church there is a far deeper way to understand a faith. When some fifty of us from this congregation arrived in Brassov in 1995, our Unitarian brothers and sisters were just beginning to recover from life under Marxist, Leninist philosophy, and living at the cruel and often inhuman results of the policies of a cruel dictator and his wife. They were ethnic Hungarians in a majority Romanian culture and as such our Unitarian cousins had not yet achieved equality of opportunity in pursuit of education or in commerce. And at that time the Romanian economy infrastructure was one of the weakest of all the countries that belonged to the former eastern block. But at long last they were allowed access to the west and when we arrived they greeted us with an exuberance and a warmth that was unexpected and it was like greeting long lost blood relations. And when they described to us what their life was like living in a Communist state, we learned that faith was the one thing that the state could not take away. They could confiscate church properties and schools, they could take away their opportunities, they could cut off their communication to the world outside. But it could not take away their precious faith. And so, they practiced it every Sunday and every holy day. They taught it to their children. And they lived it, even when it cost them. In the words of

the apostle Paul, “they learned that neither principalities nor powers could ever separate them from the love of the eternal.” And when a slightly smaller group of us returned last summer, the topography of Transylvania was strikingly different. Now a part of the European Union, Romania was enjoying a level of prosperity that it had not known before. And this was evidenced as we entered every city and medium-sized town by a ring of new auto dealerships and big box stores. To be sure this was not Sweden or the Netherlands, but it was a great leap forward for the people of Romania. And we learned something additional, about faith, and that is you can’t store it up, you can’t take it for granted. We learned that in some places, because of the relative prosperity and open borders, church membership and attendance had fallen as much as fifty-percent. We learned that faith had to be renewed daily, it had to be a conscience choice, and it still had to be lived courageously. Our beloved Mathé Sandor, minister of the First Unitarian Church on Brassov who has visited this congregation several times and preached to us and given us the wonderful icon of Unitarian history on the back wall. Mathé Sandor reminded us of the words of the first Unitarian theologian, Frances David, who said, “faith is a gift from God.” Or to put that in more Universal terms “faith comes to us from the heart of the Cosmos.” Unbidden it is not part of our callow wish or work. What we do with it is our work. What we do with this confidence is our inherent worth and our security in this fragile cosmos. It is something we can count on. What we do with that makes all the difference. And this is what no one can take away. And this was the challenge and the gift that we received and for which we will always be grateful.

Rev. Kathleen Owens, Associate Minister:

The larger understanding of the word “we” traveling to a new land and seeing pieces of home in a UU chalice understanding what faith can really mean. They are us and we are them. In all the ways that really matter there truly is no separation for we are one community. Mark Twain once wrote that travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness. As long as we are willing to be changed by our experiences the stories that we hear, the sights that we see, as long as we are willing to let them into our hearts and take us on an inward journey to expand our understanding, deepen our compassion, if we are willing to do that then there is hope for the planet, there is hope for humankind. That our faith is one of the ways that we do this, that our faith is the vehicle to take us on that journey, is a precious gift, is an important, life saving gift. And tending it well, we are blessed. May it always be so and Amen.