

Partner Church Team Service

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Reading

Our reading is an excerpt from *Encountering God: a spiritual journey from Bozeman to Banaras* by Dianna Eck.

Discovering one's own faith is inherently part of the human pilgrimage. What motivates us deeply, what orients us to the world, what nourishes our growth and gives rise to our most cherished values? Every human being must cope with these questions or suffer the anxious drift of avoiding them. But our challenges on the human pilgrimage are not solved once and for all by the unfolding discovery of our own faith, for we encounter other pilgrims of other faiths. Dialogue means taking a vibrant interest in what motivates these other pilgrims, what orients them to the world, what nourishes their growth and gives rise to their most cherished values. To live together we need to know these things about one another and to risk the changes of heart and mind that may come when we do.

Homily

Good morning everyone. I am glad you wandered into the service today. It is so good to see your faces on the screen. We all come together with our hopes, and perhaps with our fears; we also come because we are seeking truth. Indeed, our 4th Principle that guides our Unitarian Universalist faith is: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Each of us has our own story, our own journey, for how we have discovered, or not discovered, truth and meaning. My own faith was born in a small, fundamentalist Christian church and it was there that I learned to value love and community, as well as

a very narrow standard for truth and meaning. I was told the Bible is the word of God and everything we believed had to be backed-up by the written word. I was taught that to look for ultimate truth outside of Christianity was a “slippery slope,” leading to loss of faith, and maybe much worse. As a young adult I studied the writings of Hans Küng, a liberal, ecumenical, Catholic theologian who had many conflicts with the Church and its hierarchy. He pointed out that even in the words of the apostle Paul in the book of Romans, God can be known by simply looking around at the world we live in. The idea that everything we are to believe has to be pointed to in the Bible, is not biblical. This was a turning point for me, an opening to truth and meaning no longer bound by artificial constraints. I came to see that looking for truth is more akin to a journey of discovery and that this journey requires the willingness and the courage to wander. So, to my fellow wanderers this morning, I am grateful for your company.

When I think of this transition in my thinking, the image that comes to mind is borrowed from the book, "Touching the Void," about the harrowing journey of 2 climbers in the Peruvian Andes, who at 19,000 feet elevation experienced a tragic fall. One of the climbers, Joe Simpson, broke and shattered bones and then he had to climb out of a deep crevasse. Seeing the light at the surface, he pulls his injured body higher until finally breaking through the side of the mountain, he sees the world. Struggling with all the strength he had, he pulls himself out of the darkness where there is light, and hope, and the world spread out before him.

Thinking about your own faith, what was your moment of discovery when you could see the world in all its grand and sometimes frightening glory? Or, when was your “ah-ha” moment, when ideas came together, maybe God moved in your soul, you saw the world in a new way, maybe for the first time? We all have junctures in our life in which we clearly see a turning, a shift toward something that calls us to a deeper, more real and authentic faith.

You heard Rev. Mary tell the story of Francis David who was in his day a religious wanderer. From Catholic, to Lutheran, to Reformed/Calvinist and eventually Unitarian, his pursuit of the truth must have been accompanied by many critical junctures as his ideas changed. I feel an affinity with Francis David, for I too have wandered. From evangelicalism, to mainline Christianity, to joining a Mennonite church for 10 years before discovering Unitarian Universalism. Perhaps, we could say Francis David was a “liberal” in his day, even so, a 15th century liberal is going to look much different than a 21st century liberal, so we must be careful not to misappropriate him for our own uses. Some scholars think that Francis David was influenced by Mennonites and other members of the radical reformation during his time in Slovakia. The Mennonite belief in “praxis,” or, what you do is more important than beliefs and doctrine, was for me an important transition to UU faith that is beyond belief.

However, I must be honest with you, what brought me to UU was more than truth seeking. I found groups and connections in the UU church. This makes me wonder what the real “inside story” is about Francis David? His journey in the 16th century from one faith to another was unusual for his day. Maybe he had other interests beyond the pure road of truth seeking? We will never know. What we can say is that his willingness and courage to wander on his journey of faith, is for us an example to follow.

Last year seven members and friends of our congregation made a pilgrimage to Transylvania. Beneath the tower where Francis David was imprisoned and died, our group from OUUC along with UU’s from across the country, shared stories and thoughts reflecting on the experience in that sacred place. I recall a sense of unity in shared gratitude, grateful for the light of Francis David's commitment to religious freedom, grateful for our Transylvanian sisters and brothers sharing their faith with us.

At the end of our trip our group from Olympia met with Rev. Lehel Molnár who was the Balázs scholar who spent a weekend with our church in 2018 and is the archivist for the Unitarian church in Transylvania. He pulled from the shelf of the archives the Bishop's record from 1725, and he just happened to open it to the place where the bishop had visited our partner church in Kissolyomos. He read from this ancient text how the Unitarians in Kissolyomos were being accused of being "Sabbatarians" by the Catholic monarchical authorities. This was a banned religion at the time and the Bishop had to work to keep congregation members from jail, or worse. Unitarians in Transylvania have always had to survive and thrive as a minority religion subject to less than equitable treatment. Religious liberty is not something to be taken for granted. Oppression can come from both religious and secular authorities.

The longing for community and a sense of belonging is a core value of UU partner church movement. Those of us who visited Kissolyomos experienced the hospitality of their congregation, but perhaps more importantly, we witnessed their commitment to community. The minister, Rev. Levente who you heard on video this morning, knows everyone in the village and knows when someone is in need. People may leave Kissolyomos for work and opportunity, but it is clear that their home is in this village and their faith is Unitarian. They give us an example of what community can look like when we remain committed to our faith tradition and to each other.

Harvard religion professor and founder of the "Pluralism Project," Diana Eck, has been instrumental in articulating a vision of a world community that embraces the value found in each tradition while calling us toward a deeper understanding of one another. She describes a perspective that moves beyond, on the one hand, the exclusive boxes that religions create, while on the other hand avoiding the tendency to look at religions in a homogenized manner that deemphasizes the particularity and validity of each faith. The former she describes as "exclusivism," a conviction about the finality and absolute

priority of one's own faith over competing views. On the other end of the spectrum is "inclusivism," in which "the diversity of peoples and traditions is included in a single worldview that embraces, explains and supersedes them all." Inclusivism was the view I adopted early in my adult religious growth moving from "only one right way," to, "my way includes your way."

Moving beyond inclusivism, Diana Eck describes "pluralism" in which "we do not need to build walls to exclude the view of the other, nor do we need to erect a universal canopy capable of gathering all the diverse tribes together under our own roof." From the pluralistic perspective, the presence of many religions is not a "problem to overcome" but an exciting, wonderful quality of the human race that reflects our inherent human diversity.

Transylvanian Unitarians are part of our family. In families, we might have different beliefs and practices, different ways in which we find meaning and live our lives, and still we come back together for reunions, celebrate birthdays, and care for each other even when oceans of mind and distance separate us. We don't have to think alike to love alike. Our relationship with Transylvanian Unitarians, and specifically with the Kissolyomos congregation, is a way to live out a vision of faith that is fully UU, while embracing pluralism and all the blessings and discoveries that it has to offer.

Our world needs truth seekers willing to wander and share life across all that divides us. A faith that wanders is a healing faith, taking us to places of love and restoration that we don't expect. On Labor Day I was backpacking in the Indian Heaven Wilderness in the south Cascades. I went alone because the Covid virus made it unsafe for my buddy Dave to join me. After hiking everywhere I had planned to go, and fishing all the lakes on my list, the last day I set aside for wandering. Hiking that day among the high mountain grassy meadows where Indians used to gather, I felt myself more alive, the

huckleberries more delicious, my mind rested and I returned home full of gratitude. In this time of pandemic and what can seem like endless injustices, let your faith wander, see what you discover, and let your soul be mended by the life and mystery all around us.