

Our Transylvanian Roots
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on the Theme by Lacey Stokes

I've always been a horror and fantasy lover so for me, when sitting down to write a reflection for a service about Transylvania, really only one thought came to mind: Dracula. The original vampire, Dracula has always made for a particularly unsettling monster. While other monsters are deemed scary for various reasons relating to the unknown, Dracula is particularly frightening not simply because he IS a monster, but because he has the ability to turn others into monsters as well.

I think particularly in this political climate, we can appreciate the terror of a monster who turns others into monsters just like him. It has been sobering to watch people I love and respected turn into monsters who no longer seem to care about the well being of people who have been deemed "different".

There is so much fear being sold on all sides and fear makes such a perfect bedfellow with hate. We are certainly seeing more hate rise up too.

I was raised fundamentalist evangelical. The hard core kind. Sheltered from the sins of the world with fear and hate preached just often as "loving" god. I often liken leaving that church to leaving a cult because that's what it was. I don't know if I ever would have even started to question if it hadn't been for a woman named Denise.

I had joined an online forum for mothers of twins when my own twins were tiny, looking for support from people who knew exactly how hard it could be to raise two babies at the same time. Denise was one of the kindest women I had ever spoken to. She was raising her twin granddaughters and I was drawn to this exceptionally warm, compassionate and loving woman who genuinely cared about every single person she came into contact with. It was several months before I saw a post from her about her wife.

I remember the shock I felt. Denise is GAY?? But she seemed so... Normal. Here was this vibrant, caring woman whom I had grown to love and respect who also just so happened to be gay.

I remember not long after that sitting in a service and the youth pastor preaching once again on the dangers and evils of homosexuality. I remember just sitting there and thinking, "He just must not know any gay people because he's absolutely wrong." That moment was the beginning of my questioning all the hate and fear I had been taught for years.

I think the Bible itself puts it best. Perfect love casts out all fear. Love. When we love someone, we counter the fear that develops into hate. When we see the worth and dignity in every soul, we act differently towards them.

I am still friends with Denise twenty years later. Our twins have played together. I was her maid of honor when Washington state legalized gay marriage. She and her wife have stayed at my house. Denise changed the course of my life. Could I have ever come to understand that I was pansexual if I had been so terrified of gay people in general? How would I have reacted when my own children came out? Our home became a safe haven for gay and trans teens and we have had several over the years find the love

and acceptance they so needed. Who will they in turn help? The power of those ripples Denise started are monumental.

I understand intimately how the monster who turns others into monsters is particularly terrifying. Fear of those who are “different” is manipulating normal people into acting like monsters themselves but it is the fear being spread that is the true monster we face. While a stake to the heart might have taken out Dracula, against this monster, love is the best defense.

Denise’s love has rippled out twenty years to change the lives of myself, my family, and so many others that I have been able to love and support. As more and more we are sold fear stories designed to make us hate, I’m going to follow the example Denise set. I’m going to choose love.

Our Transylvanian Roots© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

The Edict of Torda articulates the theological thru line of Unitarian and Universalist and Unitarian Universalist history, that we each have our *own understanding of the Gospel and no one shall compel others for their souls would not be satisfied*. We are a spiritual tradition that resists hatred, oppression, and the narrow view that there is only one way to be faithful, to be religious, to be free.

Thank you for that beautiful rendering of the Edict of Torda. I am taking the trip of a lifetime and a career in couple of weeks. I am headed to Romania. I’m taking a tour of historic Unitarian sites before attending the 4th International Convocation of Unitarian and Universalist and Unitarian Universalist and other liberal religious women.... Yes, that’s a mouthful.

The first place we go on this tour is Turda – where the Edict of Torda was issued in 1568, and we go to the Turda salt mine, one of the oldest in the world. We’ll go to the museum to see the famous 1896 canvas by Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch, depicting David Firenc addressing the Diet.. but let me back up a bit.

Transylvania is an historic province in the present day Romania, but a part of Hungary in the 16th century. This part of the world was a major trade route where East meets West, likewise an invasion route by which Eastern armies invaded the West. Transylvania in the 16th century existed on the fringes of Roman influence. There were Greek Orthodox, Islamic and Jewish influences as well – again, where East meets West. Much of its 16th century history was shaped by the ongoing confrontation between Islamic forces of the East and Christian forces of the West. It seems significant that there was heterodoxy here, pluralism as we talk about it today, the meeting ground of many different religious ideas.

The legend of Count Dracula predates our Unitarian history in this part of the world – well, the legend by Abraham Stoker, Bram Stoker, is written in the 19th century, but is about 15th century characters, namely the 15th century Romanian prince Vlad Dracul III, who was famous for defending his territory from invaders by impaling his victims, skewering them on tall wooden stakes and leaving them on display along the borders of his territory to discourage invading armies. The 19th century gothic novel embellishes and romanticizes this true horror story from history.

But our story begins with the Reformation, which enters Transylvania with Luther’s writings. We’re in the 16th century – more than a hundred years after the historic prince that Bram Stoker turned into Dracula. At this time Lutheranism is becoming popular and the Catholics are losing power. Queen Isabella of Poland and Hungary, a Catholic at the time, flees. While she’s gone, Calvinist Protestantism

arises as they seek further reform. When Isabella returns, Protestantism is too deeply rooted to outlaw, and so she decrees toleration for both Lutheranism and Calvinism – and allows for public discussion and debate of issues that had been raised by the Reformation. Isabella dies in 1559, leaving the throne to her son, King John Sigismund, who was - in name- the King of Hungary, but whose throne extended over little more than Transylvania.

This is the environment in which Dávid Firenc, or Francis David, as he is known in the west, enters. Originally a Catholic parish priest and rector of a Catholic school, he begins to embrace Lutheranism, and is named rector of the Lutheran School in Kolozsvár. While defending Lutheran beliefs in a public debate with Calvinists, though the Lutherans win the debate, the Calvinists apparently win over David. He is chosen as the Superintendent of the Reformed Churches in Transylvania, now a Calvinist. And significantly, he is chosen as Court Preacher. And the debates continue, now to resolve questions of doctrine.

Another important reformer of note is the King's physician, Giorgio Biandrata, who explores questions of the Trinity. Biandrata and David, the physician and the preacher, become allies in this reformation. David had read both Erasmus and Servetus, Erasmus, a Catholic, who found the doctrine of the Trinity "peculiar" and Servetus – well,

Servetus is known for the book he wrote entitled "*On the Errors of the Trinity*." Something you learn about when you take our UU history course here because this church was founded on the 400th anniversary of his death – he was burned at the stake by John Calvin. And this church was first known as the Michael Servetus Unitarian Fellowship in his honor.

In any case, David had read both Servetus and Erasmus and together, he and Biandrata began to question the nature of the Trinity, the Christian Godhead as one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Those who believe God is One and not in three, are called, you got it, Unitarians. Egy Az Isten. God is One. Egy Az Isten is Hungarian for God is One.

So the Unitarian church emerges in Transylvania. King John Sigismund and most of the court become Unitarian in 1569, and most of the population does, too. 1571 there is legal recognition of the Unitarian Church, naming Unitarianism, Calvinism, Lutheranism, and Catholicism as the four received religions of the realm.

"By almost any standards, certainly the standards of his time, King John Sigismund was a remarkable ruler." I'm quoting now from David Bumbaugh, my preaching professor in seminary and author of the book *Unitarian Universalism, a narrative history*. Bumbaugh goes on to say, "Following the policy of his mother, he made toleration the hallmark of his reign. When he identified himself as Unitarian, and found the majority of the nation supporting him, he only demanded of those who disagreed that they live in peace with those with whom they differed. The consequence was that this was one of the few places in Europe where the reformation was carried out without bloodshed." End quote.

There's so much more to the story, and I'll tell more when I return, especially about how it came to be that the radical reformation that had started there rather froze in place and quit reforming such that the Unitarianism of Transylvania bears little resemblance to the Unitarianism of the Unitarian Universalist Association in this country. But I'll save that for my return, once I've been with Hungarian speaking Unitarians in Romania, and have gotten to know them better.

One of the things I'm most looking forward to at Convo is the small group I'll be co-leading with a Hungarian counterpart – it's like our chalice circles here. It will be bilingual in English and

Hungarian. Only about 7% of the people of Romania speak Hungarian, but those are the Unitarians and those hosting this convocation in Cluj-Napoca, which is Kolozsvár in Hungarian.

But this morning, I want to bring us around to the fictional Dracula and the current issues of our lives – I mean, I honestly don't think it is of prime concern to you all whether the Lord's Supper is considered a sacrament or a meal, or infants should be baptized, or whether it's appropriate to worship Jesus or invoke him in prayers, which were the theological concerns of the day. And they are the theological concerns of others to this day, such as the family Lacey grew up in. But you who are here this morning and watching us online are probably more concerned that we live in peace with those with whom we differ – that our reformations and revolutions be peaceful ones without bloodshed. That we treat difference as a gift and a blessing and not a problem.

This week, I finally got to read the 2022 mystery novel *The Maid* by Nita Prose. I'd been waiting for it from the library for many weeks. Its protagonist has a mind that is neurodivergent. She struggles with social skills and misreads the intentions of others. Goodreads calls it "A *Clue*-like, locked-room mystery and a heartwarming journey of the spirit, *The Maid* explores what it means to be the same as everyone else and yet entirely different—and reveals that all mysteries can be solved through connection to the human heart." The book made me cry, I so related to that protagonist. And I'm neurotypical but like most people I feel like I'm the same as everyone else and yet entirely different. I've been stung by the unkind remarks of others and healed by true heart connections.

As a murder mystery, of course, this book has a murderer – a monster, and the protagonist, Molly, who struggles reading social cues, has a hard time distinguishing the good characters from the evil ones. And isn't that just the case for us all, how difficult it is to understand another and determine whether they are good or safe or healthy for us, or if their intentions are selfish or hurtful or evil, even. The mystery of the parlor murder mystery and the mystery of theology or God or the Universe are not that different. We want to make sense of things that don't make sense – violence, tragedy, war even, and we want to create an order out of chaos.

The theological thru line of our history is that which was articulated in the *Edict of Torda*, that we each have our own understanding of the Gospel and no one shall compel others for their souls would not be satisfied. We are a spiritual tradition that resists hatred, oppression, and the narrow view that there is only one way to be faithful, to be religious, to be free, to be human.

It is so tempting to respond in kind when hateful rhetoric is thrown at us, and its easy to call political figures monsters when they foment hate and fear and incite violence, but we all have those in our lives whom we think of as basically good people, but who have adopted the popular rhetoric of hate and disdain, the habit of "othering" those who are different, and ridiculing the powerless. Or maybe they don't do those things themselves, but rather vicariously through the politicians they support who do it for them. "The world seems full of good men-even if there are monsters in it" wrote Bram Stoker in 1897.

It became quite clear to me in the wake of the pandemic that our work here is to break the chain of violence, to heal a traumatized people and world, to make room for all people and accept and celebrate difference. The fear and hate we see and experience in the world appears because people feel threatened and when they feel their survival is at stake, their brains get hijacked by the amygdala, and they really can't be rational or think clearly.

Those who do harm, whom we call monsters, were often harmed themselves and never healed enough to break the chain of violence. Let's go back to one of our original monsters, the Romanian prince Vlad Dracul III who put severed heads on posts around his property to keep out invaders – he reportedly

killed, singlehandedly, 40,000 to 100,000 people at a time when murders were done singly and by hand. He blinded, strangled, hanged, burned, boiled, nailed and buried alive his victims. If a hundred years after that, the Edict of Torda proclaimed religious liberty and ushered in a peaceful reformation, then I believe there's gotta be hope for our time.

Of course, I know it's not that simple, because this peaceful reign of the only Unitarian king in history – King John Sigismund, did not last. The King died shortly after declaring Unitarianism one of the four received religions of the realm, from injuries in a carriage accident. And the partnership between David and Biandrata broke down in the worst fashion. They become enemies. Biandrata put David on trial for innovation for which he was found guilty. He died in a dungeon at Deva in 1579, as my teacher wrote, “a martyr to the cause of Unitarianism in Transylvania, and still the great hero of those who proclaim Egy Az Isten/ God is One.”

Even still. I just have to believe that if we hold tight to the truth that we each have our own understanding of the Gospel and no one shall compel others for their souls would not be satisfied, we can continue to resist hatred, oppression and the narrow view that there is only one way to be human, to be religious, to be free. We can reveal the great truth that all mysteries can be solved through connection to the human heart.