

## A Letter From Transylvania

*James Field*

*Field* is a fourth-year Starr King School M.Div. student who spent six months of 2006, along with his wife and three children, in the village of Homoródszentpál in Transylvania, Romania. There he assisted the Rev. Csaba Todor, former SKSM Balazs Scholar, in his ministry and with translation of texts and hymns from English to Hungarian, the language of most Unitarians in the region. Field is the school's first intern in the Parish Immersion Field Experience in Transylvania Pilot Project, sponsored by the SKSM Balazs Scholars Program.



*Field in his robes outside the Unitarian church in Homoródszentpál.*

There is a long body of literature both religious and secular in America that extols the virtues of those who work the land. The founding myth of America is the creation of a republic of small farms. The utopian ideal of the rural farm is juxtaposed against the depravity of city life, trade and finance. There is an undeniable connection between the land and those who work it.

There is power in the knowledge of a place. The French have created a new word for this “terroir” which combines the word for land with the word for knowledge and ability. While I may have guessed at the reality of this, I don’t think I truly understood it until I came here to the Homorod Valley of Transylvania.

One could walk the length of both the big and little Homorod Valleys in a couple long days. The distance between villages is very small. But in each village, you will find slightly different ways of life and slightly different ways of working the land and raising animals.



*Field in the Homoródszentpál church pulpit.*

This is not from some sense of novelty or innovation. Nor is it the result of radically different geography. One village may have access to more wood and trees while another may have easier access to stones. But in general, the villages of both valleys are basically similar in geology and climate.

The residents of each village have built up over generations an intimate knowledge of their microclimate and locale.

Each tiny difference is probably unnoticeable to the outsider. Whether it be small variations in how hay is stacked, when or where difference crops are planted, or how animals are kept and pastured. It is even reflected in the contemporary use of cement, tractors and combines. One can see slight but systematic variations in the selection of construction materials and tractor attachments.

On my very first day in Transylvania I was asked about why I had come here and what I would do when I returned to America. One older man suggested that I could tell everyone how bad it was here. I must say that I have not seen anything so bad in my time here.

In planning to travel to Transylvania, I prepared my self for the worst possible conditions. I did not know what my house would be like. I did not how I would eat. I did not know if people would be hungry or dirty or begging in the streets.

In the villages I have seen nothing like this. People are poorer here than in America. But rural poverty here is similar to rural poverty at home. Houses are heated, food is cooked and water is warmed by burning wood. Most houses have electricity and most houses I have visited have a washing machine for laundry. While many things are stored in cellars for winter, every house I have visited has a refrigerator.

People here are very concerned about my well-being. They always want to know how I am doing here and if I am able to



*The street leading to the Unitarian church in Homoródszentpál.*

eat. My strict vegetarian diet is a mystery to most people, but everyone wants to be sure that I am eating well. The strange thing is that vegetarian soup broth and some soy products are cheaper and more readily available in even small markets here than at the Safeway in my hometown.

In my hometown there was recently a small conference on economic localization which had participants from 7 states and several countries. The point of this conference was to look at how local economies could survive based on sustainable agricultural and supplies available within a 100 mile radius. The thinking behind this is that there will eventual be a collapse of the economy based on cheap oil as oil becomes less and less available in the world. I try to tell the farmers of the Homorod Valley that what they have practiced for hundreds of years, people I know are paying to learn. And it all comes down to an intimate knowledge of a place and its particularities.

Now, I can talk at length about the problems of provincialism and the fatalism that it can create. I have seen it myself teaching both the economically isolated urban poor and the geographically isolated rural poor. But I also know with a religious faith that the treasure of human diversity and the keys to human survival were born in the intimate knowledge of and deep rooted connection to place.

My home in California is in the great redwood trees. They are the tallest living things on earth. They grow almost 100 meters tall. But the paradox is that they have shallow roots. Rather than sinking roots deeper and deeper into the earth to support their massive weight, their roots spread laterally, where they intertwine with the roots of other trees. Their very survival depends on the survival of the other trees, and on that of the other plants, like fern, sorrel, and wild iris, that have adapted to their particular ecosystem. Their survival depends on the health of their community and place. And it is thus with humans as well. Our survival depends on our



*Field teaching hymns to village children.*

community and environment. And for this knowledge I owe a great debt of gratitude to the people of the Homorod Valley, where I live days shaped by the daily trip of the cows to the pasture and back. Where even the smallest details of life are shaped by mysteries of working the land and preparing for winter in ways I am only beginning to understand.

I think some Unitarian Universalists probably suppose that we in North America have a lot to teach other religions, even our brothers and sisters in Transylvania about earth based spirituality. But the truth is, that people like me (and most modern Unitarian Universalists) who are generations removed from living off the land, may have a millennium of learning to catch up on.

For we are small and the earth is big. And we can only live in one place at a time. And similarly, we can only observe the rhythm of life and its cycles in one place at one time. And the lives of our brothers and sisters in the Homorod Valley are holy volumes of this knowledge, that even if we were to cross divides of language and distance, we would still face a great difficulty in truly comprehending. It is my fervent hope that in my time here I can develop even the smallest understanding of what it means to live according to and in the creation of this knowledge.

***STARR KING SCHOOL for the MINISTRY***  
***Educating Unitarian Universalist ministers and***  
***progressive religious leaders since 1904***