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Viata and Kaizen Re-Creational Outreach

May 2003 Newsletter

Greetings from Lupeni!

We have tried to weave a theme through this newsletter, and that is **moral courage**. Before we cast off into the newsletter, we would ask anyone who has not sponsored a kid or two (or ten!) to the Viata Program (a donation of \$86 will send one youth to Viata: send to *Young Life, Box 520, Colorado Springs, CO 80901*, and it **MUST** have x248-Romania in the memo line) to do your part. We have confidence that the funds will be provided, but we are still about 75-80 kids short of our goal of 500. Make a commitment move and help us keep the Viata Program going!

This newsletter includes:

- ✓ **What's New**
- ✓ **Easter in Romania**
- ✓ **Kaizen Kudos (one young woman's example of moral courage)**
- ✓ **Moral Courage and Economic Development**

What's New

Gala Contest

The Viata program placed runner-up in Romania's largest and most prestigious community development "best practices" contest. It was judged by the SAR (Romanian Academic Society).

Francis Fukuyama Recommendation

Renowned social capital scholar Dr. Francis Fukuyama (author of *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*) became aware of our work and kindly wrote us a recommendation letter. Check it out on our Romanian website: www.comtrust.ro/viata under the section "Recomendare."

Viata featured in "Capital"

The Viata program was featured in, of all things, the finance section of Romania's top-tier business weeklies—"Capital". This has led to some great connections all over the country. Also at www.comtrust.ro/viata, but in Romanian.

End in View for Court Case

It looks like we may be in the final stages of our 2-year court case against a local official. The judge, who is supposed to be impartial, said at one point to George's [the public official who was our former "partner"] lawyer that he was shocked that anyone after reading the file would even defend the case. Basically the judge said that George was stealing from the kids. The State of Romania recommended prison for the accused for his impersonation of the Romanian IRS to embezzle money from the Viata Program.

State-side Volunteer Committee Formed

We are thrilled to have what we've needed all along...a dedicated team of volunteers meeting monthly in the States to help us with fundraising and other tasks. Thank you committee members. We're grateful!

Easter in Romania

In the stairwell of our communist-style block apartment we hear a surprising greeting extended to us by our neighbors: Hristos a inviat! (Christ is Risen!) And we respond: Adeverat a inviat! (He is risen indeed!) It is the Orthodox Easter and we, the inhabitants of Lupeni, will exchange this refrain hundreds of times over the Easter holiday. The exchange is surprising on a couple of levels. That such a celebratory religious proclamation would be the lingua franca of an entire nation for a weekend is shocking to our American ears. But even more so we are stunned to be smiled upon by neighbors who normally struggle to muster any response to our passing salutations. For these few days smiles are easily come by, sidewalk grumblings about the high cost of food or the latest government scandal are shushed, grudges within and without the family are put on hold...it is a cease fire of relational apathy and enmity, as people extend good will and generosity far beyond their immediate circle.

We just saw a documentary on the Discovery Channel about the holiday cease fire in WWII, when the Germans and the Allies called off fighting for Christmas day, sang carols to each other and scurried gifts of pastries back and forth across the cratered and barb-wired landscape. And we can't help but feel here, too, how the Easter spirit breaks down, at least temporarily, the walls of suspicion and unfriendliness. It is wonderful to see the Orthodox faith at work, causing people to reach for a better version of themselves, and enacting a better vision of their community. Despite decades of training and implementing mistrust, there is the understanding that this is not the way things ought to be. The tradition of Easter faith provides the community with the moral imagination and inspiration to extend words and deeds of compassion far and wide. Easter hope gives **the moral courage** to develop and then walk across bridges of interpersonal trust.

Easter in the springtime provides many metaphors for the renewal of creation and moral courage. Brandi wrote after a hike on the still snow-bespeckled mountaintops:

Hiking high up in the hills, we've watched purple crocuses be the first color to poke their heads out of the hard brown ground. They are so brave. Often they pierce through a crusty layer of snow. These crocuses are a symbol for moral courage. A few days later – the air having warmed increasingly each day – I noticed other flowers and leaves and grasses coming forth, and where were the crocuses? Many had withered and bowed over already. It's as if they mustered all their resources to fearlessly step out first, lending their bravery for the others to follow. As soon as the spring parade was up and going, they were gone.

Kaizen Kudos

As most of you know, Kaizen (Japanese for “continuous improvement”) is our year-round follow-up program to the Viata Program and its' principle goal is to help young people develop their God-given capacities, especially the development of social virtues that were so devastated by several generations of communism. Kaizen is our attempt to create what Kohlberg called “just communities in which the behavior of individuals is raised to a higher level by virtue of their

affiliation.” Recently, we had a feedback session to see how Kaizen was working. In the process, we learned about the amazing life of Anca Zilia, a true example of moral courage that we felt compelled to share (with her permission). Anca, who is one of the younger members of the Kaizen Club (with 15 members in this particular group), is the *acknowledged* leader of her Kaizen Club and is involved in several other exciting projects.

Anca Zilai, 14 Years of age, lives in a Baptist orphanage in Lupeni, Romania.

From the age of 10, I lived in an orphanage in town. But before that, when I was 5 months old, my mother abandoned me, and I have never seen her since. After my mother left, I stayed with my father until I was 10. But I cannot really say I “lived” with my father. My father was tom-cattin around and I grew up in many different houses and with many different “mothers”. He was a drunk. At age of 5, I was not very well taken care of. I was trying to go to a park to play and I was run over by a car. At about the age of 8, my father lived with a woman with another two kids, and my father would go into drunken fits of rage and beat me and the woman and I ran away from home. This was about the age of 8. I then started to hate my father.

At 10, my father went to jail because he was not “cu minte.” [Romanian for “nice” or “obedient”]. I heard, but am not sure, that the reason is that he and his friends were drunk and broke into someone’s house. A note came from the police saying that it will be best for me to go to an orphanage (my mother having abandoned me when I was 5 months old). I actually ended up in a nice, privately funded orphanage through a local Baptist church. [We asked Anca: “How did you not end up in a state orphanage?”] I remember that my father threatened to kill the policeman if I did not end up in a good place—which means keeping me out of the state orphanages. Now my father lives in Bucharest and works for a construction company. I guess my father was running low on money, because he came to visit me in the orphanage to ask for money to buy cigarettes and booze.

[We then asked her about life at the orphanage, trying to gain clues as to what gives her such energy, insight and commitment to community service]

The church taught me values. I remember they had us do a Bible study in the Gospels, and there was a contest involved. And the big winner was to receive a “high performance Bible”. I did not win the high performance Bible, but was in runner up category, and received 2 lesser books. [We learned that a “high performance Bible” means ones with maps and cross-references. ☺]

At a meeting with one of the social workers, he told me to write down my wishes in order of importance. 1) Find my mom, 2) Get good grades - which I did, 3) to ride on some roller skates—I did get some but someone stole them, and 4) to have a bicycle—I did not get one for myself, but I am pretty much able to use one when I want. And the social worker said, “If they (your wishes) are good for you, then God will give them to you!”

At 10 when I arrived at the church orphanage, I wanted to write a letter to try and find my mother but I could barely write. I wanted to ask my mother if she ever loved me. The people from the church did not want to let me. They encouraged me to forget about my

mother. [Anca says this was wise of them.] But I was so stubborn that I threatened to go on television on “Surprisa Surprisa”, [a Romanian show that reunites long lost relatives and friends]. And at 14 years, when the government makes us do the “identity papers” I found an address for my mother. I don’t know if it is any good yet.

I don’t even want to see my father now. I learned that my father said bad words about my mother. I know some people from the church who knew my mother a little bit. I now know the fault was not only my mother’s, and that my father lied and tricked me into hating my mother—and that the issue was not so simple as my mother abandoning me, but that my mother had to get away from the beatings.

I think I may have found my mom about a year ago in Alba County. I wrote her a letter, and sent her a form to fill with her signature to verify that it is her. I want to find my mom because I believe I have 8 siblings I have never met. I am waiting to hear back to see if this woman is my mother. I wrote her two weeks ago and am waiting to hear back!

When Anca is not interacting with someone, you can see gravity, a deep heaviness in her eyes. But in a flash of interaction with someone, the brow un-furrows and a precious smile broadcasts across her face. We’re highlighting Anca because she is one of the most involved young people we have ever met anywhere, and this is all the more exceptional because of her life story and the fact that our region is blanketed with a stupor of civic apathy.

Anca is fully involved with, and is the recognized leader and energy in our Kaizen Club. She also works with another fine organization, the Lupeni Youth Council. Anca is also organizing a project for children in Iraq—to collect gifts from every kid in the Jiu Valley to be given to children in Iraq. She wants to increase the image of the Jiu Valley and to help other Romanians understand that the coal mining people have good hearts too. She also works with Asociatia Humanitara Foster Care. She plays games with foster children, takes them on excursions, helps them with preparing homework, hygiene etc. We asked Anca what motivates her...

I want to prove that the fact that I lived in an orphanage...it does not really have to be a disadvantage. I want to show that I can do everything that even a doctor’s kid can. I also believe that God has a plan for me. Growing up in the Baptist orphanage, I know I was influenced in a good way. I am convinced that God takes care of me. And about everything I ask for, God has given, except a bicycle but I can use one—and to see my mom.

Here are Anca’s comments about the effect of the Kaizen Club on her:

*I was really happy when I got into the club. I wanted to make new friends...beyond the people from the church and the people from the school. What changed me from Kaizen? It changed my way of treating people. Before if people bothered me I’d respond rudely: “What do **you** want?” I was indifferent to others. (But the church group also helped with this too.) Kaizen changed my way of thinking...now I am able to try and help people and commit myself to helping others 100%. An example is the people from the orphanage. Now if they ask me to go buy something, or to wash clothes, I do it. Before, I would not. My patience developed regarding the people right around me.*

Livia – one of Anca’s Kaizen teammates - asked her if she has more trust in others now. Anca answered, *Yes, especially in this group...but also in others in general not in the*

group. What are the reasons for trusting? Anca answered, *Because of the experiences I've had in Kaizen. I am able to transfer the learning and experiences from Kaizen to my other relationships.*

Moral Courage and Development

The philosopher Hannah Arendt is fascinated by the question, “How do new things come about?” How do we go from suspicious, uncooperative and corrupt communities to vibrant, participatory ones? How has history transitioned from situations of utter injustice and oppression to a more relatively just state of affairs? The philosopher John Rawls argued optimistically at one point that people will in fact develop the values that facilitate cooperation and a commitment to the common good, IF people are on equal social standing. But this begs the obvious question—how does one achieve what many now take for granted (and have come to see as the natural state of affairs, but which historically is not)—equal social standing? The fishhook of this question becomes catchier when we realize that in concrete situations, individuals, families, and regimes profit financially and socially from corrupt and unjust arrangements—and they will and do resist change. William Wilberforce, the great crusader against slavery, dedicated his formidable energy and talents to one issue: the eradication of slavery in the British Empire. This empire was built upon the economic benefits of slave trade—and Wilberforce took this moral issue head on. Vilified as a traitor to his country his entire life, three days before his death in July 1833, the British Parliament outlawed slavery. Wilberforce, like the crocuses pushing through the hard crust of snow, lent his courage for others to follow. The answer to Hannah Arendt’s question—“How do new things come about?”—inevitably at some point involves tremendous surges and outpourings of moral courage from the human spirit.

In Romania, the problem of development—this problem of “how do new things come about”—is largely a moral one involving the fight against corruption, public and private. Everyone knows that corruption (a culture of bribery) leads to poverty and social degradation by denying fair opportunities for common people and rigging the game for often incompetent (which is why they want the game rigged to begin with) insiders. Why then is corruption so hard to fight, not only in Romania but also across the world in developing countries? The reason does not seem to be that a majority do not see it as wrong and unproductive and would not change it if they could. It is rather that on the day-to-day pinches and pulls of life, **foregoing and fighting corruption seems too risky a bet** in the game of survival. We from the more economically developed West might ask how in the world development and economic growth can seem too risky. What is risky about better standards of living on all fronts—social, environmental, and economic? The fight against corruption is risky for two reasons.

The **first** risk is that cooperative, honest and transparent behavior will *in fact* have a greater economic payoff than taking bribes, buying from the black market and the like. Most Romanians have little experienced the lauded benefits of a fair and equitable market system. The rich have received their wealth through corruption, and the poor can only survive through corruption. And the rich will not risk losing their wealth and their strategies for achieving it, and neither will the poor forego survival for a “virtue”. The rich customs official must all of a sudden give up the bribes that made he and his family the envy of town. He must also simultaneously embrace a “faith” that by not taking a bribe in order to help someone’s imported load enter the country will *eventually* redound to his (and others’) greater economic benefit. (This is the social capital thesis—that the social/moral virtues that generate trust are the preconditions to *broad-based* economic prosperity.) For the poor, the situation is equally risky. Many of the poor feel compelled to engage in corruption, buying stolen or off-market/tax-free goods on the “black

market”, if they are to have much of anything at all! The poverty of the poor makes the official market price virtually impossible. (We as Americans can afford to pay more to not buy on the black market. But many who live on two dollars a day, with the most expensive food prices in all of Eastern Europe, can ill afford such “virtue.”) So for rich or poor, whether it is taking bribes, tricking someone through deception, or getting a better price through the buying of black market goods, the *short-term* economic benefits of corruption outweigh the risks of fighting and foregoing corruption and the status quo is preserved.

And this points to the **second** major risk. Even if people well understand the moral underpinnings of economic development (the virtues such as transparency and accountability which generate trust), it seems that a majority think it is utterly utopian and that it would be economic suicide to act upon these virtues. **Basically, there is next to no faith, and even outright cynicism, that others will do their part—that enough others to change the system will forego the immediate short-term gain for some distant and hypothetical greater good.** The leap of faith is perceived as a leap of stupidity, and a leap into the pit of poverty. It is as if everyone stands next to the pool, counting 1, 2, 3...and everyone knows good and well the only person to jump in—to take the leap of faith—will be a fool and will drown. To commit to virtue when you *know* everyone else will not is seen rightly as economic suicide. This gives rise to the following economic values: **Maximize short-term profits without regard for future consequences—knowing that everyone else is doing the same.** Employees steal from employers (an oft quoted saying is “not to steal from your work-place is to steal from your family”) and employers treat employees like chattel—driving the latest Mercedes “Kompressor”, owning several villas, and living opulent lifestyles, while paying their workers \$75 a month. For the most part, whatever profits are made by an individual or company are rarely invested back in the company but are wasted as conspicuous consumption by the *nouveau riche*. And all too often, this buccaneer attitude is celebrated rather than condemned.

So to fight corruption—to forego short-term economic benefit in exchange for some future “possible” benefit, knowing that others will not do their part—is not *economically* rational for the majority. The ensconced wealthy have too much to lose in terms of privilege and lifestyle, and those already poor cannot afford to give up the luxury of the reduced prices of the black market and thievery. In a dog-eat-dog world, patient discipline (incremental investment in an uncertain and unstable future) is literal economic *nonsense*. Take the money and run—as so many do. And as you can imagine, interpersonal trust can hardly take root in sands that are so shifty.

We have written this overly simplified description of economic life here to try and convey at least a dim sense of why the ruts of corruption are so hard to steer out of for so many. And as with real ruts, the more you drive in them, the deeper the pattern is cut, and the more energy and risk it takes to get out. The risk of the call to life outside the ruts of corruption reminds us of the famous advertisement by the great polar explorer, Ernest Shackleton:

Men wanted for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness—constant danger, safe return doubtful—honor and recognition in case of success.

Ad in the London Times on December 29, 1913.

This seems to relate very well to the experience of many Romanians. The fight against corruption means a hazardous journey fighting against friends and foes alike, attendant with small wages. Honor and recognition are iffy, success seems unlikely.

It is our conviction and experience that the moral courage necessary to fight corruption does not come primarily from the economic realm. Economic logic concludes that it is just too risky.

Instead, moral courage is developed through tradition, repetition/practice, and example (Francis Fukuyama). This is the mission of the Viata and Kaizen Programs. In the Viata and Kaizen Programs, teenagers are learning that honesty, compassion, responsibility and trust have their own far-reaching returns that extend into and even develop the economic realm. In these programs, young people are immersed in a setting where it is easier to be morally courageous. Here they are receiving some of the “perks” that they might normally receive through less noble means (i.e. stealing). **"Without commonly shared and widely entrenched moral values and obligations, neither the law, nor the democratic government, nor even the market economy will function properly."** (Vaclav Havel)

Thank you for helping us develop the moral courage of this next generation of Romania’s leaders.

The Viata and Kaizen Programs in Lupeni, Romania

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Please send contributions to: Account x248, Young Life, P.O. Box 520, Colorado Springs, CO, 80901 (Checks should be made out to Young Life, with Account x248 written in the memo line.)

