

Kyiv

Let me be honest here. On the bucket list of places I'd like to visit in my lifetime, Ukraine was never near the top. Actually, it wasn't even in the top 100. Absolutely no offense intended, but there was never a real curiosity, and after the unrest in 2015 any chances it had were pretty much extinguished. Now that I am here in the city, I've spent considerable time wondering why this was true. Why have I felt an undercurrent of unease since heading farther east?

I discovered the answer easily when I considered some old stories. I'm a child of the Cold War era and a product of Catholic Schools. I am certain there was not a day of my childhood that we didn't pray for those forced to live behind the 'Iron Curtain." According to Sister Mary Julius, bless her soul, I should never take for granted my freedom to pray and go to church, because there were frightening parts of the world where that was not allowed. And, she continued, children who did go to church would just disappear. For six-year-old Lauren, who already had her own suitcase full of fears, this was really too much to handle. I am pretty sure, along with a host of other vows, I took one then to never to travel beyond that "curtain," whatever that meant!

So here I am, 59 years old and seriously trying to reconcile the beautiful, bustling city of Kyiv and its friendly residents with the ridiculously scary stories from my childhood. Along with that comes a practical question: Why Kyiv, and why now?

Remaining open to invitations that speak to my heart is a skill I've learned over time. It is a middle path that presents itself when you grow beyond the story of your experiences and connect with your true identity or soul. There you can develop the skill of discernment. This is the skill that protects you from impulsively jumping at every offer, as

well as its polar opposite: living on the sidelines of life as a doubting skeptic. Both extremes result in their own kind of regrets.

If either of these paths sound familiar to you, know that the balance between them is an art. And it is exactly where you can live out your fullest life. This middle path requires giving yourself permission to *fail* (*although there are no real failures*) and then evolve, embracing the lessons from each experience. Accepting your failures requires self-compassion and an open heart, one that opens wider with time. This opening is growth and will deepen your trust in your innate wisdom.

So, how does this all relate to Kyiv and the fact I am here? The story actually began last September, when Lena appeared online in my Foundations of Gemmotherapy course. My curiosity getting the best of me, I wrote her to ask how someone in Kyiv found my practice. You can read about her answer here. From the start, her determination and grasp of the topics matched her enthusiasm. I recognized Lena's passion as it was similar to what I felt seven years ago. If my travel could support a movement in Kyiv, with Lena at the lead, then it would be well served.

I can now say our mission was successful. Lena has rallied some powerful individuals who I know will each do their part to establish Gemmotherapy in Kyiv and Ukraine. I feel honored to play my part in what will unfold.

My days in Kyiv have been primarily about teaching. Each morning, we packed our bags, picking up fresh juice on the way to a homeopathic clinic in the city center. There, we met the most remarkably enthusiastic group of students, which included medical doctors, a dentist, osteopath and interested mothers. And when on July 4 this sweet group threw an impromptu celebration for me, my heart was won. They said, "We will take every opportunity to celebrate independence, yours or ours."

These are words I will remember each Fourth of July to come.

Each day, we returned home spent from working in two languages, and after some tea and quiet, we would walk. Lena graciously shared her majestic home city with me. I have especially enjoyed my time with Lena's beautiful family in their flat. On the fourth floor of their historic brick building, we were at eye level with the gorgeous, starred domes of St. Volodymyr's Orthodox Cathedral. If I ever forget I am in Kyiv, those domes quickly help me place myself. In fact, I had a magical view of the center golden dome, glistening against the night sky, as I fell asleep each night.

If I consider which European city Kyiv reminds me of, the closest would be Frankfurt. It is also a busy commercial and administrative center with tree-lined boulevards, but that is where the similarity stops. In central Kyiv, there are over 30 unique styles of buildings alone, from art nouveau and Ukrainian baroque to Soviet modernism. Experiencing so many different eras of history within a single block can be a bit mind-blowing. Known for its beautiful domed churches, Kyiv is home to over 950, many of those dating back to the 11th century. St. Sophia's, the UNESCO treasure, is just one example and a short walk from Lena's flat. There you can't help but connect to Kyiv's rich historical past. Commissioned by Vladimir the Great, St. Sophia's foundation was laid in 1011. Thankfully, historians rallied to save it during the Russian Revolution of 1917.

And because no travel story would be complete without a bit about the food, let me just say I've been in veggie paradise, much to my great surprise. Even though my arrival in Kyiv pushed midnight, I was still greeted with a bowl of soup. Soup, I've been told, is the national dish of Ukraine. And what better soup to mark my first day than Borscht. Here you can find Lena's vegan recipe. Since then I've had an opportunity to experience outstanding meals in restaurants

featuring Israeli, Georgian and Odessa cuisine. Nothing makes me happier than an array of vegetable sides, uniquely seasoned and simply prepared from local produce.

I think I was most surprised by the offerings at the Georgian restaurant. Given the scant knowledge I had of Georgia, I am now intrigued. Sondro, Lena's husband, is Georgian and he has proudly shared photos and stories that certainly have me considering a visit. This week I share one of my favorite dishes.

So, Kyiv? It certainly isn't the scary place 6-year-old Lauren pictured. It is cosmopolitan yet traditional, modern yet historical, bustling yet peaceful. And remaining open to this opportunity has left me with not a single regret, but rather a heart full of joy.