

Not by sausage alone: An open Bible in a farmer's rough hand

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [August 9, 2005](#) issue

When I was in Croatia this past May I went on a hunt for a sausage. Not just for any kind of sausage, mind you, but for *kulen*, a specialty from a region of Northeast Croatia called Slavonia. If *kulen* could think and feel, it would be insulted by being counted among mere sausages. You can't buy it in any store, of course. To get it you've got to have friends in very high places—in backwater villages of Slavonia where people raise their own pigs and prepare *kulen* according to recipes passed on in families for generations.

A former student of mine has such a friend, and so we got into a car and drove some 20 miles to visit *Djeda* (or Grandpa) Gjordje, whose *kulen* is supposed to be the best in the region. His was one of those nondescript houses on a nondescript village street with ditches dug along the road as a sewage system. On his house there was no TV antenna, let alone a satellite dish—otherwise ubiquitous in many Croatian towns. As we entered the kitchen, which also functioned as a living room, I saw on the table an open Bible. He was obviously reading it before we came in. As he sat down after welcoming us, he placed his right hand on the table next to the Bible. It was a rough farmer's hand. Just as farm work has left indelible traces on that hand, so that hand has left its mark on the Bible. Its pages, each carefully handled, had obviously been read and reread many times.

After he offered us wine—his product, too!—we started talking. Not about *kulen*, though he knew why we had come, but about Christian life.

“Always choose a more difficult path,” *djeda* Gjordje offered as a nugget of wisdom at one point in the conversation.

“What do you mean?” responded his neighbor who happened to be there. “If I want to dig a hole in the ground, should I use a dull shovel rather than a sharp one?”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” said Djeda Gjordje, irritated a bit that his neighbor didn’t get what he was after. “It’s easier for us to be served than to serve and to take than to give. Serving is the harder path, giving is the harder path. Because we are selfish, the path of love is always more difficult.”

I wanted to chime in with reference to Robert Frost and his road “less traveled by,” but I restrained myself, aware that none of the others would have heard of the poet. And Frost seemed to have been making a different point—one about the possibilities of discovery and the virtues of difference rather than about the nobility of service. So I just listened—and marveled.

I didn’t marvel that Djeda Gjordje was wise enough to come up with the idea. That would have been condescending. People aren’t any less wise or virtuous because they live in what from a Western standpoint look like primitive surroundings. Rather, I was amazed that we were having that kind of a conversation rather than just exchanging a few pleasantries about the weather or sports, or even complaining about corrupt politics and an inefficient economy. But if the Bible is the book you read, your conversations will likely concern the deep questions of life rather than skirt them. Compared with the way most of us spend our evenings in the West, the true marvel was that Djeda Gjordje was the man of one Book. Instead of sinking down in front of a TV or going to the village pub to drink down the hardship and sorrow of his dreary existence with his buddies, evening after evening he read the Bible and meditated on it.

On our way home my driver told me about his friend’s grandfather. After the old man retired at the age of 70, he spent most of his time glued to the TV watching sports, soap operas or just channel surfing. The flickering box offered mostly mindless entertainment. It helped him pass time, but it left him empty. There was little to prod him to seek truth, goodness and beauty. Instead of elevating him, with its glitzy drama that trades on our desire for power, money, sex and glory, TV pulled him down into the banality of everyday existence. Rather than feasting on delicious and nutritious specialties like kulen, he was feeding on junk food’s empty calories.

As I was thinking about Djeda Gjordje and his well-worn Bible, I remembered having heard that in any village in Mauritania, one of the poorest nations in the world, you could find a dozen men able to recite the whole Qur’an by heart. True, unlike most of the Bible, the Qur’an is written in verse, which is easier to remember than prose. But still it takes time to commit such a large book to memory and to keep it there.

On the fringes of what we call civilization, many people take a great deal of time to read texts about great questions of human existence and the challenges of a life worth living.

Over the past decades cultural critics have bemoaned the loss of biblical literacy in the West. Even educated people are unable to understand great classics of Western literature because they are unfamiliar with the Bible, which forms its indispensable background. That's a major cultural loss. But that loss is small compared to the moral, spiritual and intellectual impoverishment that comes from letting our lives be saturated by the superficial instead of being immersed into the profound.

I went away from Djeda Gjordje's home with two large and superb kulens—more than six pounds' worth. His culinary skills were formidable. But as I think of him, I am even more impressed by that open Bible and the conversation it elicited in that remote corner of Croatia.