

## Now as Then

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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

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Well, so here we are! One week post-anniversary and installation. The celebrations concluded but the significance not forgotten. This morning, and at regular intervals throughout this one hundred thirtieth year I will preach on the theme, *Now as Then*.

Sometimes, when asked why Unitarian Universalism is such a tiny religious movement these days, why the churches that thrived in so many small towns and villages across the midwest in the late nineteenth century have all but vanished, I reply that for one thing, mainline Christianity has come to more closely resemble Unitarian and Universalist theologies as they existed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More love and acceptance; less hellfire and brimstone. More embracing of reason; less reliance on superstition alone. As the Methodists and liberal Lutherans and UCCs and Presbyterians and Episcopalians around us seemed to soften their edges and welcome a wider constellation of beliefs and even, in very recent years, a wider constellation of families, many who might previously have sought out Unitarian Universalist congregations have discovered that they may comfortably stay in the churches of their parents and grandparents. Or, in the case of the previously unchurched, that they could join a local Protestant congregation without making a long drive to a UU congregation or enduring the lingering social stigma of being a Unitarian Universalist. In other words, we have remained tiny, to a certain extent, because other denominations became more like us--in some ways.

There are other reasons we've not grown in sheer numbers and have in fact shrunk in the number of congregations. Important reasons--a handful of which I will address throughout the coming months. For today, it is true that one reason is the liberalization of mainline Protestantism. Sometimes, however, I am reminded that there yet remains a huge divide between the religious beliefs of Unitarian Universalists and the religious beliefs of the majority of Americans. After all, according to the most recent (2005) *Faith Matters* survey, mainline Protestantism is only the fourth largest umbrella religious tradition in America, following Evangelical Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Nones-- that is, *n-o-n-e-s*, those Americans identifying with no religious tradition whatsoever. So, even if Unitarian Universalism and mainline Protestantism have grown closer in some respects, the gap between UUism and the majority of religious Americans remains deep and wide.

One hundred and thirty years may have passed since Kristofer Janson told the soon-to-be-founding members of the not-yet-conceived Nora Free Christian Church that he

neither preached nor believed the gospel as they had heard it preached by other ministers. But the years have not diminished the differences between our beliefs, between our entire approach to the religious life, and the beliefs and practices of our neighbors, friends and family members. And those differences are significant matters. They set us apart and point to the unique offering we set before religious seekers.

From time to time I'm invited to give the spirituality lecture to the substance abuse treatment program at the New Ulm Medical Center. As you may know, the Twelve Steps that form the bedrock of most, though not all, substance abuse programs, have an intensely spiritual component. Clergy people, such as me and my area colleagues, comprise a logical, local, inexpensive pool of "experts" in the fields of spirituality. We are also, however, often viewed as representatives of God, simply by virtue of our ordination. Knowing from long experience that for some folks any clergy person--regardless of age, race, gender, theology, experience--represents a God of Judgement and Wrath. And knowing that for some folks any clergy person--regardless of age, race, gender, theology, experience--represents a God of Distance and Aloofness. And that for some folks any clergy person represents a God Who Plays Favorites. And so on. Knowing this, knowing that "God as we understood Him" is a God with infinite faces and infinite characters, and that at some time or another, to some person or another, whether I like it or not, I wear each of those faces and represent each of those characters, knowing all this, I start my spirituality lecture by reminding participants of the movie *Michael*, starring John Travolta, Jean Stapleton, Andie McDowell and William Hurt.

Perhaps you remember the scene, early in the film. Three tabloid reporters have been dispatched to rural Iowa in pursuit of an angel who smote a small town bank. As they sit in the living room of the elderly woman who claims the angel lives with her, they hear above them the thump of someone getting out of bed. Soon heavy footsteps descend the stairs. Hairy legs become visible. A white feather floats downward. Then he appears: John Travolta as the angel Michael, unshaven, dressed in boxer shorts and t-shirt, with big white feathered wings. He smokes cigarettes and devours sugar. When the reporters suggest he is not quite what they expected in an angel, he replies, "cute little baby? halo? harp? I'm not that kind of angel."

I tell the participants, "I'm not that kind of minister." Whatever minister they have in mind, I'm not that kind of minister. I'm unique. And I tell them, not one of them is "that kind of addict", whatever "that kind of addict is". And God, their High Power, isn't "that kind of God" either. Spirituality is no place for stereotypes or lazy imagery.

Each clergy person, each addict is fiercely unique and uniquely holy--with an H, holy. And God as we understand God is not the Sunday School God or the Left-Behind series

God or the vengeance seeking God or the divine clockmaker God or any other kind of God--except for the fiercely unique, uniquely holy kind of God who appears, welcome and relatable and powerful in the mind and heart of any individual believer. God as he/she/we understood God.

I'm convinced that the infinite images of God in the world, combined with importance of spirituality to the recovery process, make it imperative that I begin my spirituality presentation with this--or another--introduction to the idea that a Higher Power, God as we understood God, isn't *that kind of God*--that kind of narrow, exclusive God. Without such a discussion, I would forget that my expansive, mysterious, loving God is unknown to many people. Without such a discussion, I believe some of those seeking recovery would flounder in their attempt to benefit from turning their lives over to a High Power.

Recovering addicts are far from the only group of people whose lives may be transformed by God as they understand God--God not bound by the limits of someone else's theology or imagination. GBLTQ teenagers who believe that the taunting voices of their peers speak for God. GLBT couples who fear the wrath of God as mediated through a judging minister when they seek a church wedding. Children and adults who are enduring or have survived physical, emotion, or sexual abuse--abuse often ignored and seemingly excused by their church or temple or mosque. Men, women and child of all ages, all races, all nationalities who experience disfiguring accidents, life-changing illnesses, devastating job loss or political persecution. And regular, ordinary, everyday middle-Americans. Confirmed atheists, religious humanists, devout believers. We all have dark nights of the soul, times when life itself seems to have forsaken us and we wonder if it is indeed the will of something greater than ourselves that we suffer.

We are not the only religion to offer a resounding "no!" to such questions. Nevertheless, our all-encompassing vision of who or what or how the Divine might be is one of Unitarian Universalism's enduring gifts to religious seekers. It matters that we are here on this hill--yesterday, today and into tomorrow. It matters that we are in towns and cities across the country. It matters that we are online and in the mail and in podcasts.

In 1881 Kristofer Janson inspired our forebears to boldly claim and proclaim their belief in an image of Jesus (and God) that departed from that of their neighbors and that of their church. Now as then, our neighbors, our friends and sometimes we ourselves need to be inspired all over again. The Divine as we understand It, however we understand It, is at loose in the universe, ready to be welcomed into our hearts. Ready to transform our lives, with a power, a life-giving power beyond the limits of even our own imagining.