

The Brilliance and Blessing of Gathering

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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

Years ago I watched and listened with amazement to an encounter between two apparent strangers on a subway car in Boston. One of the individuals was telling the other all about his church. Finally he said, and this was the amazing part, "Services are at 9:30. Give me your address and I'll pick you up at 9:00."

Now, maybe they weren't strangers. Maybe they were acquaintances or even friends. Maybe the second guy had asked the first guy some questions about his church. It doesn't matter. To a life long Unitarian Universalist it was amazing whatever the particulars. We are not known for evangelizing on the subway. We're not even much known for talking to our friends and neighbors about our church going habits. And when was the last time any of you offered anyone a ride to church, other than a close friend or family member, someone already well established as a Nora attendee? We simply don't do it. We don't want to proselytize. We don't want to annoy. We don't want to assume. We fear being obnoxious, so we hide our light under a bushel instead.

This is one story we tell about ourselves, as a liberal religious movement. We tell it sheepishly and we tell it proudly in turns. And it is a true story.

But there is another true story about us, about who we are and how we are in the world. In this second true story we sound something like a gracious, yet flamboyant Southern hostess, calling out to all we meet, "Y'all come!"

You're a Christian who just can't agree with some of the social positions of the church you were raised in? Welcome! You're a humanist craving community? Great! This is the place for you! You're looking for help raising your children in a mixed marriage--pagan and Jewish, that is, or Norwegian and German? Come on in! Four generations of your family have sat in these pews? Well, you better sit down, too. This is definitely your church. Atheist, social justice advocate, theist, deist, questioner--y'all come.

Both stories are true. Unitarian Universalists are prone to hiding our light under a bushel and simultaneously we cast a wide net. Today I celebrate the wide net.

Most of you know the history of Nora Church better than I, but just in case one or two of you don't, here's a very brief introduction to that story, taken from the church website.

"It is said that the people who started Nora church broke away from the Lake Hanska Lutheran church in 1881 because they could no longer tolerate the bitter dissension that characterized congregational meetings. Several issues were at stake, including the question of who could be buried in the church cemetery. But there is more to it than that. Many of the people had been influenced even in Norway by liberal reformers such as Henrik Wergeland, the poet, and Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson - men who were speaking against the absolutism in the Norwegian church."

The 100th anniversary booklet from 1981 tells the story with more depth and with a slightly different slant. According to the writers of that booklet, what was to become Nora Free Christian Church was not solely the result of a split in the Lake Hanska Lutheran church. It seems Nora Free Christian Church, now known as Nora Unitarian Universalist Church, was the result of a coming *together* of two groups--those who broke away from the Lake Hanska church and a second group whose primary motivating ideal was not so much dissatisfaction with the minutia of Lutheran church administration but rather a keen interest in a totally new kind of organization, influenced by liberal thinking Norwegians, such as those mentioned on the website.

There is a bit of church organization wisdom that says congregations that came into being through a split in an earlier congregation tend to bear the scar of that split in perpetuity, whether in grand or subtle ways. I don't know this congregation well enough yet to know whether that is true of Nora Church. But my guess is it's not. And here's why. Your sign, the one that welcomes all to this church yard, this holy place, proclaims "gathered in 1881." And, as I learned this week, there was a split, yes, but there was also a union, a gathering of minds and spirits and purposes. And this congregation has been gathering ever since.

A map over in the parsonage is marked with sticky-notes to show all the towns and villages and locations Nora members and friends live--18 sticky-notes! Nora Church gathers far and wide, geographically. Nora Church also gathers far and wide theologically. You've had liberal Christian ministers. You've had humanist ministers. And now you have a traditional, old school, middle of the road theistic Unitarian Universalist minister. And your members and friends reflect the same theological range. Nora Church also gathers far and wide vocationally--bringing together farmers and educators, professionals and civil servants, volunteers, homemakers and musicians.

Unitarian Universalism sometimes gets a bad rap--from others and from ourselves. We're overly white, overly educated, overly affluent. We're the Boston Brahmin of the nineteenth century flung westward across the continent, taking root primarily in university towns and other havens of liberalism. And, like the story of our reticence about evangelizing, this is all true, and like the story of our reticence about evangelizing, it is not the whole truth. For our history is just as much a history of the blue collar Universalists, the farmers and laborers, as it is the history of the Boston elite Unitarians. And it is only at our peril that we forget this part of our history--and our present and our future, too. When we buy into the half-story, the white, educated, affluent half-story, we easily slip into believing we're different, we're unique. We have a message and a way of being in community that only appeals to a very small group of others just like us. And believing that leads to narrowing our message, restraining our welcome, and shrinking our movement. There is nothing inherently white or white collar or higher education-dependent about our message of saving freedom, radical justice, reason enlivened by spirit.

Our country was once dotted with small, rural Unitarian and Universalist churches. Churches that served as community centers, adult education campuses, settlement houses as well as places of worship. Churches that said, “Y’all come, and together we’ll make the world a better place.” Most have disappeared. The reasons are myriad and a topic for another sermon. But Nora remains, here on the prairie, gathering still the mix of folks who once filled those churches now gone. Its very existence is both a blessing and a responsibility.

I don’t know what sort of group Christian writer C. S. Lewis had in mind when he wrote the following lines, but he might well have been describing the ideal religious community. Here, then are his words:

“...when the whole group is together, each bringing out all that is best, wisest, or funniest in all the others. Those are the golden sessions...when the whole world, and something beyond the world, opens itself to our minds as we talk; and no one has any claim on or any responsibility for another, but all are freedmen and equals as if we had first met an hour ago, while at the same time an Affection mellowed by the years enfolds us. Life-natural life-has no better gift to give.”

That’s the kind of religious community, the kind of church, I want to belong to. That’s the kind of religious community Nora Church strives to be.

Charles de Gaulle once said, “Only peril can bring the French together. One can’t impose unity out of the blue on a country that has 265 different kinds of cheese.” Lots of people have the same theory about Unitarian Universalism. How can we be one denomination without a creed, a prevailing doctrine, a book of discipline? How can our congregations maintain any sort of unity when everyone believes different things? But those are the wrong questions.

We come together as one denomination, as strong, unified congregations, because we *do* share a belief--not about God or the Bible or sin. We share a belief that church is a place where there should be one abiding message: “y’all come.”

I’m still really new here. I don’t even know what I don’t know about Nora Church, Hanska, the surrounding area, and all of you. But I do know a couple of things. I know there is some anxiety and a lot of conversation around here about what this congregation can do to grow and thrive into as long a future as you’ve had a past. I know that the best way to grow a thriving church is to be a good church, to do what churches do and to do it well. And, if, as I believe, what good churches do is to say, in every imaginable way, “y’all come”, then I know that you have what it takes to grow and thrive.

You’ve been saying, “y’all come” since that small group of disgruntled, adventurous Norwegian Lutherans asked Kristofer Janson to be their minister because they liked who he was and what he thought, and didn’t care what his label was--Unitarian instead of Lutheran. You were saying, “y’all come” when you built the Union Hall in Hanska.

You were saying, “y’all come” when you instituted the infamous (and I do mean infamous) curtain approach to the challenge/opportunity of the Jesus painting. You continue to say, “y’all come” each time you host Smorgasbord and then spend part of the proceeds on a variety of worthy causes. Each time you update your website. Each time--well, you get the idea.

Most of you probably aren’t going to abandon your Minnesota/German/Scandinavian reserve anytime soon. And even if you did, there are no subways running beneath the streets of Hanska, New Ulm, St. James, or Sleepy Eye on which you might evangelize to strangers. But it doesn’t matter. You’ve been gathering in all comers since 1881, and that’s what matters. That’s what blesses this community, week after week, year after year.

May it continue to be so, that all on this beautiful prairie, for many years to come, are offered that gift--the best that life, natural life, has to offer. Amen.