

ECHOS OF DRUDE

By Rev. David Danielson

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I don't know how to tell you this, but of course I must. The truth is I'm in love with your minister's wife. No, not your present minister's wife, I don't even know if he has one. I'm in love with your first minister's wife, the wife of your minister when you began as a congregation in the early 1880s. I'm in love with Drude Krog. I met her here a few years ago, and from that time I needed to know all there was to know about her.

Nels Oas told me about her one morning as we were slurping coffee following services at the UUs of Minnetonka. You know Nels. He's spoken here a number of times. He's a retired UU minister from California but he began as a Lutheran. Because we had our Lutheran and Scandinavian roots as a common heritage he urged me to come down to Hanska and see for myself this miracle atop Mount Pisquah. Well I did just that and became enamored with the history of Nora Free Church. I also discovered that wonderful history, *Kristofer Janson in America* by Nina Braxten, and immediately ordered my own copy.

Certainly I was impressed by Kristofer Janson that noted Norwegian theologian turned poet and novelist who helped to establish five Unitarian congregations in Minnesota, but I became increasingly interested in his wife, Drude Krog Janson. Actually, I'm a bit suspicious of ministers likely because I am one, and I've long felt that their wives have had more to do with their success than they did.

Drude was a minister's daughter from Fleckefjord, Norway, a midsize town on Norway's southern tip. She lived a privileged life, because Norway's pastors were among the elite, well to do, educated, and appointed by the king. She took her catechetical instruction seriously so began to doubt the Lutheran doctrines. She came to feel that dogmas are more harmful than helpful. She said, "*Dogmas, like swords, are better kept sheathed.*" They are harmful only when taken out and given serious consideration.

One of the most central doctrines in Lutheranism is "*We are saved by grace through faith.*" Lutherans have, however, been at somewhat of a loss to define what they mean by faith. When queried they might answer that it's believing the Bible is God's Word, or it's believing that Jesus was conceived by a virgin, and that he rose from the dead after three days. Maybe it's believing that God is three persons, a Father, a Son, and A Holy Ghost, in other words, a Trinity. All of this came about through a need to rationalize the Church's role in providing salvation, a payment to satisfy the devil or at least an angry God, in the sacrifice of the Mass. Drude came to doubt all of that. She knew herself to be an outspoken secular humanist. To Drude faith was simply about living, about working and loving and giving.

Drude wanted to BE somebody. She was not at all inclined to hide her light under a barrel. She would sneak down the spiral stairs of her father's large residence to eavesdrop at the large dinner parties he often hosted. She heard that women would be heard as important if they were married to men of significance. The importance of their husbands bestowed upon them their credentials. There was no other significant role for women in the 1850s.

She did aspire to be an actress, because her mother who had died when she was very young had been an actress of sorts. Drude spent much time up in the attic dressing in her mother's costumes and performing roles of some of Norway's leading playwrights. Her father took her to Bergin to see Norway's National Theater which had been started by Ibsen but was now run by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. They also drove by Damsgaard, the Rocco style palace where the Jansons lived, reputedly Norway's richest family.

Drude's father recognized his daughter's inquisitive mind and encouraged her to continue her education at the university, an almost unheard of ambition for a woman of that era. She attended Christiania University which is now Oslo University. She was regarded with curiosity simply because she was a female student. Drude, however, was a most beautiful young woman and attracted the attention of many of the male students despite her intelligence.

She attended many lectures and learned about the Haugeans, a group of enthusiastic charismatics who objected to Lutherans' formalism and intellectualism. As they immigrated to America they formed their own low church brand of Lutheranism. They affirmed education as long as they controlled what the students could read. Thus it was that Augsburg College in Minneapolis was established. It has modified its anti-intellectualism over the years and is now intellectually respectable.

Drude met Kristofer Janson, a noted poet and nobelist, who was lecturing at Christiania. Kristofer, impulsive as always, realized it was time for him to marry and proposed to Drude. She imposed a couple of conditions. The first was that she was to retain her own name; she would continue to be known as Drude Krog. If someone wanted to tack a 'Janson' unto that, well, that was all right too. The other requirement was that each of them be allowed to continue any relationships they might have. She did not want marriage to restrict a person's social life.

They seemed satisfied with this until Drude danced past a room in the arms of George Brandes, the famous critic, philosopher, and writer, and saw Kristofer in a room with his long and flowing beard wrapped about the throat of Sara Bull. Sara was Ole Bull's wife, forty years younger than Ole and obviously in need of more virility than Ole was able to provide. Kristofer's beard seemed promising to her. Drude asked Kristofer about this a few days later and was told that Sara had been chilled, and he was providing a wrap. We don't know how long the atmosphere in Kristofer's and Drude's home was likewise chilly.

Drude and Kristofer taught at Vonheim, a landsmaal school in Gausdahl, Norway. Landsmaal was a movement to use the common Norsk of the street in government, education, and in church. Drude established a theater group at the school, so the students could perform plays in the language that people heard on the street. It became enormously successful. The Jansons built a large house as neighbors to the Bjørnsons, and a deep artistic relationship began between Drude and Bjørnstjerne. He would receive a Noble Prize in Literature. The contact enabled the Jansons to have a rich social life with Norwegian intellectuals, Edvard Grieg, Ole Bull, Bjørnson, Henrik Ibsen, and Georg Brandes. They wintered together in Rome, and that's where Drude was when her son, Sigmund, died. Drude felt extremely guilty about this, a guilt which haunted her for years.

One of Drude's students whom she had greatly influenced with her anti-religious views moved to America and wrote to Drude that surprisingly he and his wife had become involved in a church, and this had become most meaningful to them both. He told her they still agreed with what Drude and Kristofer told them but discovered that what the church taught wasn't all that mysterious. Faith was simply a matter of working hard with others; hope was having the confidence to save for another cow and a few more after that; and charity was simply a matter of doing a good turn for the neighbor.

That's exactly what your great grandparents discovered here on these farms about Hanska. They needed to come together and celebrate this faith, hope, and charity that built their community. You have kept their vision alive and revealed it to your children. A few of your ancestors went down to Madelia to hear this great lecturer, Kristofer Janson, speak. They approached him and asked if he could come and be their preacher in a new church they were forming, one where the people wouldn't be fighting over who gets buried in their cemetery.

Janson said he'd do that, but it might be better if they eliminated the creeds. He said it was all right with him if the people wanted to worship Jesus, but he didn't think it was a good idea to make that mandatory. So, Nora Free Church came to be, a fellowship where the folks were free to believe what they wanted to believe as long as they practiced faith, hope, and charity to all.

Kristofer, upon graduating from Christiania as a theologian, said he could not be ordained as a Lutheran. Nels Oas was ordained a Lutheran, but left the Lutheran Church to be a Unitarian. I had many doubts about what I was taught at seminary, and was accused of being Unitarian, but I was ordained and served thirty-five years as a Lutheran pastor. That suggests to me that I was the worst of hypocrites. I used those words which gave people hope and confidence even though I did not subscribe to them myself. Maybe that's not so bad. Maybe in many ways we all play roles in life in our teaching, farming, selling, or whatever. Maybe that's also what it is to live in community, to play those roles demanded of us. Like Drude we're still in the attic play-acting, but if we're helping people not hurting them, maybe that's part of what it is to be human.

Drude played her role as a minister's wife, as the mother of seven children. It was playing that role which caused her to feel like a kept woman. Her novel, *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter*, was an autobiographical expose` of her state of mind in that role.

Kristofer was less than much help to her. He was remote much of the time, absent a lot. He was certainly an egotist and even eccentric. When he became interested in spiritualism it was too much for Drude. When he showed even more interest in the medium who tried to make contact with those who had gone before, Louise Bentzen, it was more than Drude could take.

She didn't have to go far to be tempted. Kristofer had hired Knut Hamsun to be his personal secretary. Knut was a rugged handsome sort, immensely talented. He also became a Nobel Prize winner in literature. Eventually Knut even did the preaching when Kristofer was out of town. Knut and Drude were left alone. It was almost inevitable that they should have an affair. Drude asked Kristofer to be released from the vows of their marriage. When she told Knut what she had done, Knut hopped a train and got out of town. Kristofer ignored Drude's letter asking release from the marriage, but his affair with Louise continued.

Drude was asked to accompany the promising young violinist, Claude Madden in a concert in Minneapolis. They received rave reviews from the Minneapolis press and celebrated their success as two romantics are inclined to do. He was as young as her sons, but that was hardly a deterrent to either of them. Again Drude wrote to Kristofer for a divorce, but Claude left town without her. Drude and Kristofer separated, and Drude moved to Dresden, Germany so Arne, her youngest, could study violin.

Drude is hardly an idealistic heroine. She is better than that. She is a real woman in her own right, passionate, loving, talented, outspoken, compassionate, immensely human, and her heritage lives on at Nora Free Church. Her spirit still roams the land. I definitely hear her here.