

We Gather Together
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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

We haven't worshipped together for three months, so naturally I decided to start this morning with a grammar lesson.

To gather can be a transitive verb or an intransitive verb.

"Let's *gather* old photographs for the birthday surprise." Transitive. The photographs are the objects of the gathering.

"Family members from fourteen states will *gather* next month for Great-Grandpa's 100th birthday party." Intransitive. There is no object. Everyone and everything involved in this action is a subject.

If we make it a gerund, adding 'ing,' "to gather" can function as a noun, too.

"The festive *gathering* went on for a day and a half." Gerund. *Gathering* in this sentence is a synonym for party and functions as a noun.

Our Sunday morning gatherings (noun) are unquestionably the solid and sacred core of our congregational life. Yet I want to focus on the verbs. On who and how and what and why we gather.

When I was a Unitarian Universalist youth, 35 years ago, a standard activity at cons (short for *conference* and the preferred LRY/YRUU slang for such) was Amoeba, a roving, growing blob of teen humanity that gathered mass as it incorporated any person it encountered into itself until the room was empty but for that single giggling, shuffling, sweating, probably groping, group hug. Amoeba was (may still be) group building of the "take all prisoners" variety. No invitation, no consent, no escape. It was, like so much of Unitarian Universalist youth con culture of those years, a nightmare for the introverts and socially anxious among the teens and a favorite among the more extroverted con veterans who ran the show.

In contrast, Al-Anon (and perhaps other 12 Step Groups) operates according to the dictum "attraction not promotion". Meetings are listed online and in public announcements in newspapers or bulletin boards but there is no marketing or advertising. Newcomers are both welcome and warmly welcomed. And participation is

always strictly voluntary. One *opts in* to Al-Anon—at one’s own pace and frequency and longevity, and prompted only by one’s own inclination to seek such a fellowship.

Church ideally operates somewhere along the gathering spectrum between Amoeba and Al-Anon, closer perhaps to the “opt in” end than the ‘take all prisoners’ end—though sometimes it’s a finer line than it should be. Many church membership lists and/or telephone directories carry names of members or even one-time visitors for years after the last time the member (or friend or visitor) in question darkened the doors, filled a pew or accepted an invitation to participate in a church event. Such persistent inclusion of folks who have clearly opted out is a vestige of an adolescent Amoeba sense of what it is to be a faith community. Everyone is included, goldarn it! How could anyone not want to be?

Amoeba and churches that refuse to regretfully yet respectfully relinquish those who have moved on or declined the invitation for further involvement practice gathering of the transitive kind. That is to say, the group, the Amoeba or the church, is the active subject in the equation, and the one-time visitors, the former members, the passers-through-on-their-way-to-somewhere-else are the *objects* of the Amoeba’s or church’s gathering. The driving forces in such churches say things like, “We can’t give up on her.” Or, “Continuing to list him as a member is a loving thing to do.” Or, “We don’t want them to think we’ve forgotten them or don’t like them anymore.” Such sentiments sound noble and churchy—and are likely to be genuine expressions of caring and affection. That’s why I’m turning to grammar to make my point: this type of insistent gathering in makes those who are gathered the *objects* of those who do the gathering. And who wants to be treated as an object, however well intentioned such treatment maybe? We prefer to be active, autonomous subjects—and have every right to expect to be treated as such, particularly by our faith communities.

We here at Nora, like that much older Massachusetts congregation from this morning’s reading, describe our church as having been gathered. It says it right there on the sign at the entrance to the churchyard, “Gathered in 1881”. Unlike an Amoeba, ours was (and remains) an intransitive gathering. Kristofer Jansen, beloved first minister of Nora, didn’t ride down from Minneapolis, searching the countryside for a bunch of stray dissatisfied Norwegian Lutherans he could gather up, gather in, gather around himself as the founding minister of a brand new Unitarian congregation of his own creation. He was not an active subject in search of objects. Rather our church came about this way (more or less):

Some folks at Lake Hanska Church and some folks at Linden Church, influenced by Ibsen and other radical Norwegian thinkers of the time, were chaffing under the

authoritarian theology and polity of their Lutheran churches. They gathered *themselves* together (intransitive—all subjects, no objects), determined to start their own church, a freer church, one they called, in fact, Nora Free Christian Church—intending it to remain independent of denominational affiliation. The Unitarians (and Jansen himself) became involved only when that little group heard Jansen speak (as poet, not preacher) and liked him and *asked him* to be their minister. I suppose there was a bit of transitive gathering going on, as the congregation gathered Jansen in, but I trust they treated him well and kindly and fairly and not at all as an object!

The point is, for 134 years this month, Nora members have been *gathering themselves* here on this hill, as a beloved faith community of memory and hope and freedom. Hundreds of individuals and families, over the years, have opted in. Drawn by familial ties or theological affinity or questioning companionship, and in all the ways and conditions and attitudes described by our litany and dozens more, still we gather ourselves as Nora Church—each according to the dictates of our mind and soul, at our own pace, to our own degree of involvement and for our own span of weeks or months or decades.

I chose this morning's story as a substitute for a book I couldn't find—long out of print, I suppose. I was fascinated by it when I was kid. Called *June 7!*, it was by the famed one named author/illustrator Aki Kaurismäki, and was reviewed thusly in *Kirkus* at the time (1972):

Anyone who has attended a family reunion will recognize what's going on at this increasingly crowded and chaotic birthday party. From the time that "my father's parents, who are my mother's parents-in-law, who are my grandparents, whose granddaughter I am, walked in," the fated child gamely explicates the relationships while the black and white pages (with touches of green for the household plants) become more and more crowded with a mix of mod to feebly hobbling in-laws, great-aunts and third cousins ("Who is my great-aunt's and great-uncle's grandson, who is my mother's second cousin. . ."). In the end "We didn't fit at the table so we went to the park and had a picnic," and it will be a picnic for everyone, from reading aloud grown-ups on down, to follow the unadvertised visual subplots: the silent drama at the bathroom door, the young cousins' romps and rivalries, the adults' continuing one-way conversations. Circle June 7th!

Spaghetti and Meatballs for All more than fulfills the task set out for it in the context of this worship service. It depicts some of the joys and some of the tribulations of a big and happy family gathering—light-heartedly and amusingly—and makes a subtle point about well-laid plans and things coming around right in the end. It even offers one thing *June 7!* didn't—a math lesson that is best revealed through the pictures of the seating chart Mrs. Comfort waves around in increasing frustration.

What *Spaghetti and Meatballs for All* lacks, and why I read you the review of *June 7th*, is the repeated recitation of ever more complicated familial relationships: "my father's parents, who are my mother's parents-in-law, who are my grandparents, whose granddaughter I am, walked in,". As someone who was mutually gathered in by you and gathered herself to you a mere six years ago, I'm still learning the familial relationships within this congregation. "Who is my great-aunt's and great-uncle's grandson, who is my mother's second cousin. . .".

It can be daunting, for we who are not born and bred in Nora's embrace, to navigate through familial relationships stretching back to the original gathering families and spreading through the pews yet today. But here's where *Spaghetti and Meatballs for All* beats out *June 7th*! The Comforts include in their family dinner "the next-door neighbors, who [are] almost like family". It may seem at times that everyone at Nora is related to someone else at Nora except me, or perhaps you. And it is true that some of us don't have a single blood relation or in-law here in the congregation. But it is also true that not one of us is uniquely without family here. And more importantly, it is also true that, related to one another or not, we all belong here if we choose to belong here. We're all almost like family. We're better than family, in fact. We're a voluntary, devoted gathering.

Let's get back to the math for a minute—the way 32 people fit easily and exactly at eight tables for four but not at a single long table made by pushing those eight tables into a line. Or two large tables made by pushing the eight tables into groups of four. Or even four medium size tables made by pushing the eight tables into groups of two. At first glance, as well as seeming like everyone is related to everyone else, it may seem like participation at Nora Church requires rudimentary Norwegian language skills, chef level Norwegian culinary skills, and three generations of membership at the Hanska Farmers' Co-op. But that's a long narrow table we can't all fit around easily and naturally anymore, and shouldn't try to force ourselves to squeeze around. There is room at the table, in the congregation, room to breath and communicate and move and question and deepen and shift and become, when we don't try to fit ourselves all at the same table or into the same national heritage or the same political view or the same theological school. The Comforts' party was no less a party when they finally got the

tables split back up according to Mrs. Comfort's careful chart (though there is perhaps a lesson in the fact that they had to try all the other arrangements first, before they hit upon the solution themselves). Being at eight tables didn't mean any less food, any less love, any less belonging.

So, too, the gathering in of a city woman, one quarter English with a mispronounced German name as your minister didn't dilute Nora's proud prairie, Norwegian heritage but instead, I trust, enriched Nora's searching free church heritage. We who gather together week after week, year after year as Nora Church sit at more tables than may at first be easily visible. Tables where there is room for humanism and Christianity, where there is room for agriculture and industry, where there is room for gay and straight, where there is room for Norwegian and Swedish and German and Czech and Mexican, where there is room for families and couples and widows and singles. Not each at a separate small table with permanent place tags but all mixed up together at lots of small tables, with plenty of space for movement between them.

We gather together. Not within parish boundaries, drawn by geography. Not called by missionaries knocking on our doors. Not compelled by traditions or gate-keepers who will not let us go. We gather ourselves together, because we are stronger, less lonely, more imaginative and honest and justice-seeking than any one of us could be alone. We gather ourselves together to receive and bestow the blessings that arise only out of such a gathering.

We gather together. And for a time we are we - *this* we. This gathered body of souls on the edge of becoming... ***It is good to be us, here, now, together.***