

“WHAT IF?”  
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August 27, 2006

In the July 3, 2006 issue of *The New Yorker*, Adam Gopnick profiles Benjamin Disraeli, the Victorian-era Prime Minister of Great Britain. Amazed that someone like Disraeli made it to the halls of power in such a pretentious age, Gopnick tells us that his subject was a terrible politician (Disraeli lost four campaigns before finally getting a seat in Parliament) and a worse fiction writer, save for such one-liners as, "Read no history, nothing but biography, for that is life without theory." Indeed, the article anticipates that the reader will wonder why anyone would bother with Disraeli at all, especially in retrospect:

*One reason that Disraeli is such an appealing subject is that, unlike other romantic adventurers, he had a successful career and happy life. Things worked out pretty much as he planned, even though the plan was one of the most improbable ever devised by [humankind]: a debt-scarred, overdressed, effeminate, literary Jew set himself to become Prime Minister of England, and the leader of its right-wing party, at the height of the British Empire. He is himself proof, in slightly comic form, of the principle he fabulized so passionately in his fiction. Any responsible historian can see that Disraeli couldn't have happened. But he did.*

Man, what a wonderful thing; to happen, even when nobody believes you can happen! (That sentence is as confusing as Yogi Berra on steroids, but I trust you can figure out what I'm trying to say.)

The cautionary moral of the story – the reason I’m beginning this sermon by referencing an unlikely British leader from the nineteenth-century – is that sometimes our plans actually work! For real! And *then* what do we do?

Last Sunday this room was filled as we celebrated a century-and-a-quarter of liberal religion. As three of Nora’s previous ministers spoke, I was uplifted just to be in this room, thinking about all that has taken place, right here. Couples have married in this room. Babies have been dedicated and loved ones have been memorialized in this room. Quarrels have erupted here. Some have ended here, too. Music, familiar and strange, has been heard in this room. Sermons, profound and mediocre, have been preached in this room. And the simplest of gestures, the lighting of a candle in response to the stuff of our lives, still graces our worship in this room. (As Ken Patton once observed, this room in which we worship is the “cradle of our endeavors, the workshop of our dreams.” How apropos for this sanctuary.)

This morning, as we gather in this room once again, we’re on the cusp of a new church year, our third together. For the past two years we’ve been making plans to grow our membership in hopes of filling this room on a regular basis. You’ve supported me at every turn as I’ve generated ideas for how to meet that mandate, not to mention your support for our leaders on the Board, Committee on Ministry and our various committees. In short, we’ve spent a great deal of time, money and effort just getting ready to grow numerically. And today is the day we begin to intentionally increase our numbers.

This day comes with one reminder: life being what it is, there's absolutely no way to guarantee that we'll reach our goals; not every Benjamin Disraeli makes it to the top. But, just suppose we did. What if our increased attention to attracting and integrating new folks actually worked? Sure, Unitarian Universalists know how to wring their hands and furrow their brows when their best-laid plans don't get the results they wanted. But what will we do if, like the quirky Benjamin Disraeli, our plans really do work? What will we do *then*?

My goal here is to make as clear as possible three points. First, I want to lift up what's already working. Second, I want to remind us all that growth is costly. And third, I want to imagine how Nora Church might be different when we begin to experience real growth.

From the Vision Statement of Nora Church, drafted and adopted in the spring of 2004:

*By 2009, Nora will be known in Southwest Minnesota*

- *As a place where people gather in a caring and accepting fellowship to explore spiritual growth and the challenging questions in life;*
- *For worship that beautiful and spiritually engaging;*
- *For its generous outreach of service and learning regardless of race, creed, age, gender or sexuality;*
- *For valuing and involving children and youth in its mission; and*

- *For being hospitable and fun loving.*

*As a result, Nora will grow in membership.*

As you surely must know by now, I'm not exactly given to rah-rah speeches or hyperbole, yet I can say that I honestly believe every one of these things is underway – some well before I came.

Not so sure about our progress? Let's revisit the raw responses that gave rise to our current mission and vision statements. When asked what assets and capabilities Nora Church might develop, the responses can be summarized as:

- *Social justice/social service programs*
- *Developing a strategy for growth*
- *Greater presence in the community*
- *More music, especially a choir*
- *More involvement in the work of the church*
- *More youth participation*

Friends, we've been working on each and every one of those goals: social justice work (Children of Iraq fundraiser, Food for All, cash donations); growth (active Membership Committee, greeters, better signage); higher profile in the community (I sit on a youth council board, am active in ecumenical events and work in the area of substance abuse); more music (thanks to Nita Gilbert and Gil Hanson

we now have a choir, and we're adding more styles of music to our worship all the time); broader participation (by getting our committees active we've doubled the number of people in leadership); and greater attention to our youth (Anne Rieke, Jeanie Hinsman, our parents and others have provided both structured and social opportunities). We've work yet to be done in all these areas – this is a pause to take stock of our efforts, not an awards ceremony – but I'm glad to say that we're focusing on the areas that were identified in that 2004 plan. The overarching goal was to do the spadework so that our visitors and guests would find us healthy, sane, active and committed to our mission. Speaking for myself, and allowing for our need to cultivate a deeper spirituality and adult education programs, I believe we're ready for numerical growth. Starting today.

That's the first point, namely, to celebrate our work to date. My second goal in this sermon is to remind us all that growth, be it personal or as a member of a group or people, is costly; that growth, by definition, means change. And change is often as not, difficult. (Witness my ongoing battle with white sugar – I've traded my dark chocolate for strawberry licorice, but it's not been easy!)

And, as if change wasn't hard enough, sometimes we're called to *change our thinking about change*! Folks, we're not seeking to grow just because we want a larger membership; at our best, we want to grow because we've convinced that this faith and this place have the potential to change lives! If I could tweak our shared thinking about numerical growth, it would be this: our efforts to grow are first and

foremost about *ministry*, not numbers, not money and not even the survival of this blessed community. For my part, I've no interest in numerical growth if it means that we've no time for personal growth; we're a *spiritual* community that cares about social justice, not a social justice agency that dabbles in spirituality. I've no interest in numerical growth if it means we have to compromise our message of religious freedom, religious community and religious activism; we stand in a line of religious liberals who understood that the face of Love sometimes takes on the mantle of reason, community and truth-telling – a tradition far too precious to hide under that bushel basket we sang about today. And I've no interest in numerical growth if it means we only want folks who are like the majority of us; God rue the day when our own prejudices, assumptions and personal baggage cause us to shrink our hearts and close our minds in response to those who come through these doors.

Permit me a bad joke from a good guy. Elba, my evangelical friend and source for all manner of raunchy humor, told me recently about a country hell raiser and a country preacher who sat next to each other on a plane. Once in the air, the attendants began offering beverages to the passengers.

The redneck fellow (remember my own redneck roots, eh?) upon being asked by the attendant what he'd like to drink, ordered a double shot of Jack Daniels. Leaning over the fellow, the attendant asked the preacher if he'd like soda, juice, water or an alcoholic beverage. Outraged that he, a man of the cloth, had been offered hooch, he

nearly screamed his response, “Alcohol! Alcohol! I’d rather be tempted by ten virgins than put that vile concoction in my body!” Nearly choking on his drink before he could press the remains of his whiskey into the palm of the attendant and said, “Heck, I didn’t know we had a choice!”

Folks, change is the only constant if we’re serious about these crazy and wonderful lives of ours. What if we really do grow? I didn’t know we had a choice! Unless, of course, we count fear as a choice.

My third and final goal here is to invite you to do some imagining about what Nora Church will be like when we begin experiencing that growth we seek. To prime your pump, I’ll walk you through my virtual tour of Nora Church in the year 2012, but let me preface my vision with these words from our denomination’s Commission on Appraisal study, completed just last year:

*What could our UU faith be like if our congregations truly became the safe and welcoming place we aspire to create? If we truly did honor and celebrate both our theological diversity and our sources of unity? If we were willing to commit to spiritual discipline as deeply as to spiritual freedom?*

*“Whether we now have the seeds of a liberating faith is not really a question. Deluding ourselves into thinking that admiring the seeds will make them grow is the issue at hand”, writes a contemporary UU prophet (the Rev. Gordon McKeemon), What marvels might be*

*possible if we took these seeds and planted and tended them? What wondrous blossoms might arise?*

It's a mild summer day here on the Hill. It's simultaneously easy and hard to imagine the Nora Church of 2006; easy, because the buildings and grounds continue to grace these beautiful grounds, hard, because the congregation's number and influence has nearly doubled since that time.

Take for example the new retirement center that now sits on the acreage just south of the driveway – the parcel that we purchased from John and Ingrid Bode. That center provides three levels of elder care, serves as a base of operation for our parish nurse and is grounded in Unitarian Universalist values.

Then there's our former parsonage, recently renovated to become the home of our church office and lifespan religious education program. It contains three classrooms – including a large space for our youth group – and office space for our full-time religious education coordinator and part-time adult programs director.

Our new outdoor amphitheatre was built into the side of the slope outside the fellowship doors. Mosquitoes and all, we've used that space for services, weddings and unions, memorial services and campfires. That addition has brought us an even greater appreciation of nature and the ecosystem here.



Started in the fall of 2006, our New Ulm-based mid-week service continues to grow. Both parish ministers are involved in the planning and delivery of that informal, interactive service. Designed to increase our presence in New Ulm, as well as meet the needs of those who can't or don't make it to Nora every Sunday, it features music, poetry, story, drama and the visual arts.

I mentioned our two parish ministers, but I forgot to note that while both ministers lead worship, they have different areas of expertise: one has a primarily internal ministry, focusing on administration and pastoral care and counseling, while the other is charged with a more external portfolio – community involvement and social justice. (We also became a teaching church a few years back, so we now host at least one ministerial intern per church year.)

As always, Nora Church benefits from strong and talented lay leaders. Attention is paid to leadership development throughout our organizational structure, resulting in seasoned members who find ways to serve the church according to their gifts and passions.

There's much more to point out – our two-service Sundays, our continued record of generous financial giving, our commitment to small group ministry, our social justice and social service programs, our decision to become a Welcoming Congregation (our denomination's program for ministry to and with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons) and our great music, under the direction of our part-time music director and paid musicians. But after all this

growth and all these changes, Nora Church has remained Nora Church – a place steeped in history, engaged in the present and anticipating the future. On the one hand, everything has changed. And on the other, nothing has changed. Nora is still Nora.

So there it is, my personal vision of the Nora Church to come. Sound like a pipe dream? To borrow from John Lennon, you may call me a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. Many here among us are thinking big when it comes to this old church on a hill. Will we ever become what we dream? No one can say for sure. But how will we know if don't try?

Let us be grateful for this community, just as we are; we can take stock and know that our efforts are paying off. Let us never, ever underestimate the price of change; we can be assured that not everything will be smooth and without struggle. And let us dare to do what those first Nora pioneers did in their time, let's forge some shared dreams; we can take small steps until they lead us to our vision for an even better servant congregation.

Lastly, if all of this doesn't connect with you, perhaps the notion that church is about the stranger – at least as much as about you and me. What I'm really asking of you this August morning – what the Board and I have our minds set on – is looking at Nora Church through the eyes of the stranger, not just the one who has already found a home here. What does Sunday morning look like through the eyes of the stranger? Our order of service? Our music? Our sermons? How

about our board and committees, are we organized and focused? What does the stranger see us doing to bind up broken hearts and stand on the side of the oppressed? Do we know how to play and have fun together? Do we know our own denominational history? Do we honor children and youth, as well as those who are parenting them? Does our financial support indicate that we see Nora as a place of value, where lives are changed?

Okay. To grow, we must have the stranger's eyes. But who is this stranger?

Author and lecturer, Parker Palmer, has written extensively on the stranger, even suggesting that she or he is our spiritual guide. From his book, *Company of Strangers*, comes this passage:

*The stranger is a central figure in the biblical stories of faith, and for good reason. The religious quest, the spiritual pilgrimage is always taking us to new lands where we are strange to others, and they are strange to us. Faith is a venture into the unknown, into realms of mystery, away from the comfortable and secure. When we remain in the security of familiar surroundings, we have no need of faith. The very idea suggests a movement away from our earthly securities into the distant, the unsettling and the strange.*

*Even if we stay home, even if we are not on a conscious pilgrimage, the stranger who comes our way may well be a pilgrim bearing news.*

*Through the stranger we may have something of the unsettling Spirit brought into our domesticated lives.*

*...We often need the stranger's line of vision to help us see straight...each of us has potentials and limitations which become invisible to us and those near us: we "cannot see the forest for the trees". But when the stranger comes along and looks at us afresh, without bias or preconception, those qualities may quickly become apparent...*

*The function of the stranger in our lives is grounded in a simple fact: truth is a very large matter, and requires various angles of vision to be seen in the round. It is not that our view is always wrong and the stranger's view is always right, but simply that the stranger's view is different, giving us the opportunity to look anew at familiar things.*

I invite you to think about growth as a means to minister to and with, the strangers who come our way. May we honor them. And so may we minister to them in love.