

LYNDON JOHNSON, PETER BENCHLEY & NORA CHURCH
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INTRODUCTION

My adoptive father was a piece of work: hard-working, hard-drinking, hard-living and hard to love. And while his formal education stopped after the eighth grade, more than a few of his drinking buddies marveled at his use of language. Me, too. Some ten years after his death, I continue to begin sentences with, "My old man used to say...". It's not that he was a barnyard philosopher; quite the contrary. It's just that he grew up in a colorful part of the country with colorful friends who used colorful language to give voice to everything from poverty and hardship to sex and hell raising. And he was not what we'd call politically correct...

"Rougher than a cob" probably had its origins in pre-indoor plumbing, if you know what I mean. It meant that something was difficult. "Hotter than a June bride" was a sexist, but nonetheless poignant way of saying the heat was stifling. "Busier than a one-armed fiddler in 'skeeter season", demeaning as it was to anyone with less than four limbs, indicated that my electrical linesman Old Man had been taking too many early morning calls to repair transformers knocked out by summer storms. And, "They've got more money than Carter has liver pills", captured his Depression generation's disdain for men who profited while a nation cowered and suffered.

The Old Man wasn't much on rich folks, especially if they were Republican. In his populist mind, even an alcoholic who drank away his troubles and money was "good people". One of his favorite sayings was, "We all come into this old world naked and screaming, and that's how we're going out. We're all on our own."

Two weeks ago I talked about grief, using as my theme the idea that when we lose someone or something precious, we're reminded of at least two harsh realities: 1. We do not control nearly as much as we tell ourselves, and, 2. No matter the sacred bonds we make in these short lives of ours, we are, in an existential sense, on our own. My point was that grief exposes our relative powerlessness as well as our pervading aloneness. As to our limitations, any human being worth her or his salt is engaged with the most fundamental spiritual question of all: What do I control, what do I not control? More important than the existence of a transcendent God or the deity of Jesus, life is a constant lesson in

chaos until we make the distinction between what we can and cannot legitimately influence.

And regarding our aloneness (note than I'm not talking about loneliness here), I'm convinced that human beings are souls in physical and mental isolation, desperate for spiritual connection with one another. It's this overarching quest for connection despite aloneness that I'll use as my theme today.

ON OUR OWN

Recall the story of the late author, Peter Benchley, and his resignation as a speech writer for our 36th president, Lyndon Johnson? It went something like this. Benchley served on Johnson's staff in a very limited and short-lived role. On his last day of his job, Benchley was to write a brief and informal text for a Rose Garden press conference.

Johnson rarely looked at such low-level speeches, so he was not at all suspicious when Benchley handed him a few 3x5 cards. The President didn't look at the cards before beginning his speech.

He picked up the first card: "You have heard it said that we cannot balance the Federal budget and maintain expanded defense expenditures. But I believe we can, and I'm going to tell you how we can do it."

Slightly taken aback at such a grandiose promise, he went on to the second card: "You have heard it said that we cannot enforce law and order in the streets and at the same time guarantee individual rights, but I believe we can, and I'm going to tell you how we can do it."

Shaken, but too far into the speech to ad lib, Johnson picked up the third card: "You have heard it said that we cannot fight a war abroad and continue the war on poverty in this generation, but I believe we can, and I'm going to tell you how we can do it."

With trembling hand, the President decided enough was enough, and so he read the final card in silence: "So long, Lyndon. You're on your own now. Signed, Peter Benchley."

I sometimes envy the Catholics and mainline Protestants their systems of congregational support; Catholic churches can seek help from the Diocese, the Lutherans, from the Synod and the Methodists from the Conference. There's something to be said for the funding assistance

and organizational structure (polity) that exists to aid congregations, especially those with declining membership.

But congregational polity – the form of church organization we took with us when we left the Congregational Church in the late 1700s – charges *the local church or fellowship* with most of the responsibility for its own health. The good news is that we are relatively free from interference from “Headquarters” in Boston. The bad news is that, as my dad and Peter Benchley said, we’re on our own. No single creed, holy book, theology or social position is required to become a Unitarian Universalist, so radical is our trust in people to chart their own course. But this radical trust comes with a price tag: our fellowships and churches must (with some important exceptions) rely on their own time, talent, resources and vision.

Nora friends, this church on The Hill was born of a vision. The vision became reality. The reality became the beacon of liberal religion I celebrate every time we begin our worship. And, unless you wish to factor for transcendent intervention, nearly all of this was done by the people and the ministers of Nora Church. The words, we’re on our own, would sound as relevant in the ears of our forefathers and foremothers as they do in ours. It’s the congregational polity way. It’s the Unitarian Universalist way. It’s the *Nora way*.

So, to be alive is to make choices. Even if the choice is to do nothing at all, the spiritually mature and responsible thing to do is assume accountability for the gift of free will. Nora friends, there is no UU cavalry on its way from Boston or Minneapolis. Sure, we can contract with consultants, attend trainings and access the best practices out there, but at the end of the day the present and future health of this beacon for liberal religion is in *our* hands. Ultimately, we’re on our own.

CROSSROADS

Why all the talk about being on our own? Because it’s up to us to discern who we are and how to live out our identity.

If you like early African American blues musicians, you recognize the name, Robert Johnson. Born into turn-of-the-century, sharecropping Mississippi poverty and racism, legend has it that Johnson received a message to take his beat-up guitar and go down to a rural crossroads. According to the story, Johnson made a deal with the Devil, trading his eternal soul for the ability to play the blues like nobody ever had. I

don't think I'm overanalyzing when I tell you that the image of the crossroads looms large in the legend; to come to a crossroads is to be faced with new choices.

Every so often, people, groups, corporations, governments and whole nations come to a crossroads experience. Often as not, those experiences come in the form of a pending or immediate crisis – some set of circumstances that overwhelm the status quo, business-as-usual. *Every so often, everybody comes to a crossroads. Everybody.*

I believe Nora Church is at such a crossroads. Even a cursory look at this church's history tells us that this is by no means the first time Nora's people and ministers have had to make some decisions about which way to proceed; you faced a crossroads and made some tough decisions between Sarah's ministry and mine, witness the work done on the parsonage and the return to full-time ministry. If I've heard correctly, not everyone agreed with those decisions, and even among those who did there were issues over when and how to do things.

As Niels Bohr famously said, predictions are hard, especially about the future. So how do we know that Nora's at a crossroads? Given the sophistication of modern research, it's not as difficult to read the organizational tea leaves as some may think. This, despite the natural impulse within congregations to believe that research either has nothing to do with running a church, or, that whatever the research reveals doesn't apply to them. (Before coming to Nora, I consulted with at least five congregations where leadership, lay and ordained, resisted the idea that their situation was common and fixable. Looking back, each time a steering committee member came back with more information he or she was given polite attention before discounting valuable clues as to how to grow. Resistance to facts is costly.)

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

So, what do the experts say about social influences on church life? Here is a list of trends given in Alice Mann's book, "Can Our Church Live? Redeveloping Congregations in Decline":

- Increasing diversity due to immigration
- Increased diversity in behavior and lifestyle
- Increased separation of age groups
- Gains in racial equity and economic well-being
- Impact of conservative religion in politics and social issues
- Increasing globalization/increasing localism

- Possible shift from individualism toward community
- Overall perception that we live in an “uncivil society”

Mann also lists some economic factors that affect churches:

- The market economy dominates wages, health care, etc.
- Justice has become a commodity, not a basic right
- In the U.S., the gap between rich and poor continues to grow
- Religion has become a commodity (“shopping” to fill needs)
- Technology has made education a commodity
- Population explosion (resources decrease, waste/pollution rise)

Finally, Mann gives a list of what she calls “religious realities”:

- Average age of mainline churches is rising
- Newer, younger members have different expectations
- Teens and young adults are underrepresented
- Increased conflict (finances and authority)
- More likely to have members relocate elsewhere
- Denominations and denominational identity less important
- More ecumenical and interfaith cooperation
- Role of “middle judicatory” is changing
- Clergy roles shift: pastor to administrator and representative
- More women in ministry
- Seminary education and continuing education have changed
- Demand among laity for more spiritual resources

I bring these things to your attention because these are some of things that affect church folk, yet are beyond their control. (As an aside, experts estimate that we control only 40% of the factors that affect church attendance; the other 60% has to do with economics, population, political conditions, regional religious options and a number of other external variables.) What we are advised to do with these external influences is to keep them in mind when doing long-range planning, but *focus ourselves on what we do control*.

I can’t overestimate how important it is to identify the various influences on our little church on the Minnesota prairie. Our challenges are nowhere near as unique as one might think, nor are they beyond addressing. We don’t need magic wands. We *do* need open minds.

LOCAL INFLUENCES

But what about the local factors affecting us? After three years with you, here’s what I know:

- Population in the immediate area continues its longstanding downward trend, and, as Custer famously said after defeating the first wave of Sitting Bull's warriors, chances are they ain't comin' back
- Hanska is a shadow of its former self, reflecting in commercial terms the same exodus and leaving little to attract newcomers save a Sunday morning service in a distant place
- Liberal religion in these parts is about as welcome as Michael Vick at the Westchester Kennel Club Dog Show – overall, freethinkers in our area are relatively few and far between
- Nora's identity as a Norwegian, immigrant congregation is of little importance to most newcomers, raising the question of our identity for today
- After three years with you we've seen a significant increase in attendance but a decrease in membership (I've welcomed 8 new members, five of whom have since left the area; I've officiated at 10 funerals or memorial services)
- New Ulm is the closest population center, but it's some 12 miles away; many of you drive further than that, but as much as I appreciate your humbling commitment to Nora, that means little to the two dozen or so people who've told me that they would come were it not for the drive (Nora Church is not the Field of Dreams – we can build it but it doesn't mean they'll come)
- Fewer and fewer children are attending our religious education program despite Anne Rieke's excellent work
- We've yet to make inroads in places besides New Ulm, leaving us still guessing as to what we might do in Sleepy Eye or other within-driving-distance towns

SOME GOOD NEWS

But hold on just a minute. Before you schedule a shrink for the clinical depression I just induced (or, worse yet, decide to shoot, stuff and hang me out in the foyer between Ibsen and Bjornsen) let me tell you a few things that more than balance out the challenges we face:

1. The good things about this church, its people and its setting outnumber by far the threats to its long-term future. You're the sanest, most committed, forgiving, authentic gaggle of UUs I've ever encountered. Our resources for change are many!
2. You pay me to offer the best ideas and counsel I have, even if neither you nor I care for them. Ministry is more than preaching, visiting the sick and dying and attending church meetings; ministry is also about strengthening the *institutional* present and

- future, fully aware that we won't all agree on what that looks like. And you understand this function of my ministry.
3. The search committee that interviewed me, the Board that met with me and the congregation that called me were of one mind about their foremost priority for this chapter of Nora's history: a partner for growth, individually, institutionally and numerically. I'm suggesting that it's time to begin the second phase of realizing the mission and vision you crafted during the interim between Sarah's ministry and mine. As I see it, my primary job has been and, until I'm told differently, will be, to facilitate your plan for growth. I consider growth a major part of my job description, so you have that partner for growth in me.

CHANGING THE CONVERSATIONS

All right, you say. So, what do we do next? It was the feminist, Gloria Steinem, who told us that the first problem for all of us is not to learn, but to *unlearn*. Perhaps we don't know all that we think we know about church. Maybe you and I will need to *unlearn* in order to learn.

Next weekend, the Board and Committee on Ministry have scheduled a 3- or 4-hour workshop with Lyn Burton, a newly minted UU minister and part-time consultant recommended by our Prairie Star District Executive, Nancy Heege. If there is sufficient support for working with Lyn on a long-range plan, you will be asked to get involved early and often. There's no secret agenda, no conspiracy; the consensus on the part of our elected leaders was that it's time to become more proactive in our efforts to minister to ourselves and others. Although my conversations with Lyn have been brief, I think she's going to ask us to unlearn some things in order to learn.

Before you get your hackles up on that one, let me tell you what I mean by quoting from pastor and consultant, Tony Robinson. Although that open mind I mentioned earlier is called for (keep in mind that most of the material in the field of church studies is information-based, not mere whims) I think the unlearning is not as off-putting as some may think. From Tony Robinson's article in the Summer 2007 issue of *Congregations*:

Changing the culture of organizations, institutions or a society is about changing the conversation. Different topics are introduced, new language is employed (or old language recovered) and alternative ways of framing the situation are offered...

I'll break in to suggest that Robinson is telling us about what he calls a "third way" of talking about church. No right and wrong ideas, no left/right, either/or thinking. Back to Tony Robinson's article:

For congregations that seek such a third way, there are perhaps 10 important conversations that need to be deepened and sustained in their ongoing life. These conversations are all contributions to and different takes on the overall effort to change the conversation in ways that nurture an emerging third way...

Very quickly, let me give you a taste of the world of church studies as seen in Robinson's 10 Conversations:

Conversation 1: It's not about you – We're just one among millions of congregations that is struggling to find its identity in this country's religious sea change.

Conversation 2: And yet...it is about you – Without a sense of deep urgency about our way of religion, we're unlikely to find that identity.

Conversation 3: A new heart – We're asked to "deprofessionalize" ministry, meaning that liberal religion belongs to laypeople as much as to clergy. In short, find what stirs your heart in our way of religion and look for ways to make that part of this church.

Conversation 4: Who will lead them? – The role of the parish minister must change despite the minister's personal preferences or the protest of those who resist those changes. More and more, clergy are called on to train others to minister, leaving them to engage the greater community on behalf of their churches' core values and identified mission. The third-way minister is not the chaplain to the people who are already part of the church.

Conversation 5: Why are we here? When the spoken or unspoken mission of a church is to maintain itself, it's fair to ask for what are we maintaining ourselves? Growing churches more or less adhere to a single, simple mission: to change lives.

Do you hear the difference that research on growing and declining congregations is making? More importantly, can you get your mind around the changes in American religion that the church studies crowd is describing? Fascinating stuff.

I say again, there is less mystery to church growth than many people think. Perhaps the real mystery is, why do so many churches and their ministers ignore or discount the very information needed to make important decisions?

Given time (and the very real possibility that I've stirred up enough of a hornet's nest with those first five) I'm going to move toward my conclusion, which is really about promises.

PROMISES

It was St. Francis de Sales who said, "While I am busy with little things, I am not required to do greater things." My first three years as your minister have been rich, personally and professionally. Together we've produced some good ideas and some not so good. Such is life. Speaking for myself, I've matured, but only in the wake of mistakes and even a little heartache. Yet, rich as this time has been, it's but the framework for this year and beyond; the greater things of one year can be the lesser one of another, so steep is the learning curve and the possibilities for ministry here.

Folks, not so long ago you, too, began a new journey. You took calculated risks. You trusted your elected leaders to know what they were doing, and, they, in turn, respected that trust. As a result, I live in a remodeled parsonage and get to serve you on a full-time basis. But I would be lying if I told you that I know exactly where we're going from here; to trust the Hand of Life and our best selves is to take some more calculated risks.

And so it is that as we enter a new phase of our shared journey, I offer you these promises:

- 1. I will remember that Nora Church is not *my* church; I will offer the best guidance I have, make the best case for why I believe what I believe, then shut my mouth. Nora Church is not "my" church.**
- 2. I will not play head games as we work together to strengthen our shared ministry and presence; I will communicate directly, own my mistakes and tell my truth with respect.**
- 3. I will keep in mind that pace and patience are as important as enthusiasm and conviction; every minister tries to walk the edge of what is without losing sight of what can be. Sometimes the answer is to take the long but prudent way.**

4. I will keep in mind the counsel of Theodore Roethke: I learn by going where I have to go. I will cut myself slack when my best is not what you expected, for a spineless minister is not minister at all. I will strive to be the minister Nora Church needs right now.

Folks, we're on our own; nobody will rescue us from making decisions that are ours alone to make. So, whatever else we do, let's decide that our purpose is to change lives. Flat-out, help folks change their lives.

NOT THAT KIND OF UU!

Once upon a time a few churches planned an amateur stand-up comic event as a fundraiser for a local homeless shelter. The ministers from all the churches volunteered to perform, taking as their theme a light-hearted riff on one other faith tradition: How many _____ does it take to change a light bulb?

As the pastors and religious educators reached into a hat to draw which church each would use for a spoof, the Southern Baptist and the UU minister were surprised to find that they had drawn one another's church.

When the night of the fundraiser finally arrived, there was true caution and care exercised by the group of ministerial colleagues. The Catholic priest was gentle with his light bulb joke on the Lutherans, the Anglican was likewise appropriately humorous with the Methodists and the Unitarian Universalist minister made sure her jabs were in keeping with the ecumenical spirit of the evening.

But something in the UU minister's routine must have put a wrinkle in the shorts of the Baptist, for he took to scribbling madly on his notes before finally taking the microphone.

He began, "How many Unitarians does it take to change a light bulb? Here's the answer I think they'd give:

We choose not to make a statement either in favor of, or against the need for a light bulb. However, if, in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your personal relationship with your light bulb. Present it next month at our annual Light Bulb Sunday service, in which we'll be exploring a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-life

and tinted, all of which we believe to be equally valid paths to luminescence."

To be alive is to make decisions. The people who created this room were not the kind of soft-soled ("souled"?) Unitarians the Baptist preacher mentioned that night.

Neither are we.