

The Old North Church  
By Miriam Lerner

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I've never been comfortable with all of the attention. Never gotten used to it, strange as that may seem. That being said, recognizing unearned adulation and reverence hasn't stopped me from taking what I consider to be my right by default. After all, if I am to be trusted with so much, why not watch, why not listen in, why not ponder? Anyone would, and so I do.

I can't remember the beginning, just an awakening. One day nothing, then sounds of shuffling feet, murmuring voices, pages turning, books falling, the banking up of wood in a stove. Tears. Laughter. Babies crying. Singing.

They come and go, the people of this town, in and out every day. Some days there is a crowd, others just a few. Some stay longer than others, sitting, staring. There is something about entering me that they trust and revere, when I've done nothing to earn it. All I've ever done is just... been here.

They all believe something, to greater or lesser degrees. As for me, I just don't know. I've had a long time to think about it.

I listen to some of them speak of doctrine and faith, and I puzzle over this. From years of eavesdropping it seems to me that there are two strains of believer: One type has reasons, tenets, points to discuss and refute, very intellectual, and there are so many words for it all! Words like doctrine, agnosticism, transubstantiation, gospel, heresy, orthodoxy, syncretism, liturgy...it would make my head spin, if I had a head! All very cerebral, well-considered, and although they sometimes become impassioned during this social intercourse, the flames in their eyes are hard and clear-edged, like words cutting meat into uniform bite-sized pieces. I am intrigued, yet unsure where this all leads.

The other group has fewer words, but their faces – oh, my, is it the meanings of those words manifestly etched in lines around the eyes of the older ones, or in the musical softness of lips almost soundlessly moving in prayer? Their eyes either wet and spilling, or lit with joy, or softly turned inwards. Faces looking upward past the rafters, or downward to the book pages, or buried into hands. No flames burn in their eyes, but instead, soft glowing embers. I am, again, intrigued, yet unsure where this all leads.

Over the years there have been so many children too – and who knows what they think about it all? They are interesting, I will say that for them. Often they sneak around, or sit and surreptitiously play games. Sometimes a sermon from a commanding voice will catch their attention, wide-eyed they will listen. Some of them squirm in fear. Some of them cry. Some roll their eyes, pass notes, pass gas. They say things to make each other laugh. I heard this the other day – “Look under there!” one boy said to another. “Under where?” the other one asked.

“Ha Ha! I made you say ‘underwear’!” the first one chortled. Something about that is funny, because they laughed hard and had to be shushed right away.

I wish I had more to offer, more than just my structure given to this great work. It seems somehow duplicitous that I would be as stoic as a tree, sturdy as a boulder, possessing no fervor of my own to add to the sometimes roiling churn that transpires in my guts. My guilt lies in symbolizing so much, yet feeling so little. But I am as I am.

When I turn my attention from the serious contemplations within, and choose to assay what lies outside, from the top of my spire there is a grand view of other parts of town, as well as the countryside. There are trees, hills, a slow river flowing just past the village outskirts. Seasons, weather, births and deaths. Change out there is constant, yet here I am, always the same, a man-made mountain, with generations of breaths, prayers, sweat, and wood smoke hardened into geological layers on my walls.

People age and depart, just as water in the river meanders and Time takes the twigs and leaves flowing past. Rivers and streams in my apse (ha ha! Like “a pain in the apse!” I heard two boys say that the other day... I suppose it was funny.)

Once a traveler shuffled in on a quiet day and put a piece of paper in one of the books. It lay folded among the pages for a hundred years until someone opened to that spot, and the yellowed note fell onto the floor. It said, “My Dearest North Church, I left my home some time ago, lost, alone, and longing. Upon seeing once more your blessed tower rising from the floor of this town, I realized from whence I had come and to which place I belonged. And now truly I am returned home.”

I am intrigued, yet unsure where this all leads. However, I had a new thought recently that I am considering as I continue to watch and listen. As I said, I’ve been doing this a very long time now, and I realize that perhaps it’s not what I *think* I do, or what I think I *should* do, but what I *DO* do, that is enough. Whether or not I ever realize the point of it all, perhaps just my being here is enough. It may be possible. (haha! I said “do-do!” I suppose it is funny...)