

Yes, Let's!

a response to Wayne Bergthor Arnason's "Gathering at the River"
by Khleber M. Van Zandt V

*"Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod,
with its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God?"*

Text and music: Robert Lowry; Tune: Hanson Place

Wayne's first draft came to me in an email time-stamped August 20, 1:42 p.m., impressively ahead of deadline by ten hours and eighteen minutes. Besides his timeliness, I appreciate his astute assembly of historical facts and theological ideas articulating the core of commonalities shared by ourselves and Pentecostals. Further, I value his personal insights sprinkled throughout his fine work.

For my own part, I intend what follows to be in the vein of personal reflection rather than reasoned and reasonable response. I believe Wayne has done the hard work already, leaving the rest of us to discern meaning as we may.

I. A-fear'd of the Water

When I received the homework assignment from our PG program committee to attend Pentecostal worship, I was intrigued. My experience of such things was shaped early on (in the 7th grade) by watching worshippers from the Apostolic Pentecostal church next door to my girlfriend's house climb out windows and march around the neighborhood singing Jesus songs. I left the mainline Protestant congregation of my childhood shortly after, vowing never to return, not simply because of the weirdness of the Pentecostals, but not helped by it, either.

When I began planning last summer for a Sunday morning visit to a Pentecostal congregation, I was daunted. Like anyone planning to visit a UU congregations for the first time, I went online to check possibilities. I found two that appeared interesting.

When it came time to go, I didn't. I couldn't. I sat frozen in place and allowed the difficulty of getting past my past to keep me anchored in my homely present.

Perhaps as a sign of God's saving grace, however, both churches offered live webcasts of their Sunday worship. Instead of leaving the safety of my comfortable home study, I opted to visit both by WiFi.

II. Dipping a Toe

The smaller of the two churches seemed to me an anomaly because its webpage included a column by the lead pastor talking of his path into ministry and including photos of his male partner and their child. Invalid preconception #1: only UU's are welcoming to variously-shaped families.

Beyond that pleasant surprise, I'm glad I opted to visit this congregation online: on each of my four Sundays with them, there were never more than seven people in evidence, including the

pastor, organist, and partner, who was always introduced as the Children's Minister, though no children ever wandered into the frame.

Music for this congregation was provided by an organist who sang as she accompanied herself on a keyboard with a full complement of electronic percussion and brass in sort of a Thomas-Kincade-ification of Taize-light hymns. While the organist played, the minister clapped and swayed in place, shouting 'Hallelujah!' over and over. There was one time in my four weeks of iParticipation that I saw one of the faithful raise her hand and sway in time to the music, but mostly it was the minister who showed outward evidence of feeling the power of God through the music.

When the preacher got down to sermonizing, the message seemed to be, "We are grateful to be God's people, give yourself to Jesus and come be one of us," which I personally found not quite compelling enough to get me up and moving.

III. Dipping Another

My other internet adventure was to a mega-church near the airport whose website trumpeted a grand new building. At this church, there were more people on the chancel than there had been in the sanctuary of the other: 7 or 8 song-leaders for every song and a minister jumping up and down at the pulpit as if on a pogo stick and given to hollering, "We serve a Great God!" almost in time to the music.

The message I heard preached from this pulpit was that there is no pain, there is no sorrow, there is no sadness because God is Good and God is in control, hallelujah. The faithful in the pews of this church were far more demonstrative and responsive than in the other, possibly feeling safety in numbers: dancing, calling out, swaying through music and spoken word alike. From where I sat at my computer, it appeared that the Spirit really moved in this place.

IV. Should I or Shouldn't I?

But I should confess a tension: In both my host congregations, prayers were said by the presiding minister. And in both congregations, it appeared that someone was designated to stand near the minister and speak loudly in gibberish during those prayers, to the rhythm of the spoken English when possible. Such glossolalia is beyond my experience and thus felt quite artificial. But then again, what makes any of our religious activities ever seem authentic to anyone?

On reflection, my inability to join my Pentecostal neighbors in worship had largely to do with a perceived social barrier any visitor might feel on entering a place filled with strangers who presumably know the conventions and language and currency of an ambient community. I found myself afraid of the unknown, intimidated by the unfamiliar, loath to enter a gathering where I would correctly be accounted an outsider. How many of our own first-time guests feel thus? How courageous are they who enter our sanctuaries against their better judgment, even at their peril?

V. Wading In

What I experienced during my virtual visits to my neighbor churches led me not so much to question my Pentecostal neighbors' love of God as to question my own ability to properly and

authentically signal my own submission to the Powers That Be. Perhaps I/we have forgotten how to “Gather at the River.” Perhaps for too many of us, the Love of God has been evinced in order, intellect, and reason rather than in exuberance and enthusiasm. Perhaps we've been for so long without an emotional connection to the dynamism of Creation that the movement of the spirit in ways other than discernible and - more so - controllable by the God of Reason seem to us questionable, inauthentic, ‘of the devil.’

VI. Preparing to Dive

A further exploration of this question of authenticity may have implications for my own life as well as for the lives of the congregants I serve. To wit: If I allow what I was afraid of in the seventh grade to continue to haunt me, then I may continue to see any outward and visible display of religious fervor as a sign of an inner and invisible disruption of the orderliness of life and, thus, a rift in the omnipresence of God. And if I continue to be controlled by such an adolescent fear, do I not stand the chance of shutting out some authentic manifestation of God in favor of remaining locked in an eternal half-life of stifling order, heartless intellect, and agonizing boredom?

It has seemed some days that we in our traditions have been fenced off from accessing the river, not by outside forces but by our own hearts, the supplying arteries calcified by a supposedly superior intellect and by a vision of God that tells us God will not ask any more of us than we can *think* our way out of. If this seems little different than “There is no pain or sorrow or sadness because God is Good and God is in control, hallelujah,” then I would do well to realize that I do sometimes hurt, that bad things do sometimes happen to good people, and that I will always have trouble thinking my way outta that.

VII. All Swim!

I appreciate the Program Committee’s invitation to visit other houses of worship, and I endorse Wayne’s suggestions that we have things to learn from our neighbors on the far shore of the Big Muddy. But in the end, I’m doubtful that the answers to the Big Questions will be learned on the shore at all but only by deep submersion in the currents of the river itself. How we shall be able to plumb those depths could depend on our ability, individually and communally, to get past our pasts and accept the prevenient grace of a good dunk in unfamiliar waters.

*“Yes, we’ll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river;
gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.”*