

January 16, 2005

St. Luke's
The GARDEN
Philip Gulley

It is a pleasure to return to The GARDEN, after the hurry of the holidays. Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's and their attendant demands, coming right on the heels of our town's Corn and Sausage Days. I don't know how we keep up the pace.

We hadn't always had the Corn and Sausage Days. For years, we had a Green Bean Festival, but it's hard to get people enthusiastic about green beans, and that didn't work. Then there was the Kale Festival. Same problem. Then we tried the Sweet Corn Festival. People like sweet corn and things went well for a number of years with our Sweet Corn Festival, until the pig farmers got upset and wanted to know why we couldn't have a Pork Festival. So we compromised, like you have to do in small towns, and now we have the Corn and Sausage Days, and that's worked out pretty well.

The Corn and Sausage Days is held the second Saturday in October. We have a parade, which begins with the recitation of the town poem, written in 1898 by Miss Ora Crandell, who was our town's first librarian and poet laureate.

O' Harmony, sweet Harmony,

We lift our song of praise to thee.

Whether far or whether near,

In our hearts we hold you dear.

In 1964, Vernon Hodge wrote a second verse paying tribute to the corn plant, the modest pig and the Lord, which together have brought prosperity to our town and made it the Athens of the Midwest it is today.

O' mighty stalks and noble swine,

We celebrate and laud,

Making life so fair and fine,

With a little help from God.

We have the crowing of the Sausage Queen at noon, then tromp over to the Quaker church for the Friendly Women's Circle Annual Chicken and Noodle Dinner.

But the Sausage Queen Contest is the big event. Such an honor to be chosen the Sausage Queen, even though the burdens of that high office can weigh heavily. Once crowned, the Sausage Queen must be an enthusiastic sausage consumer, which leaves her, by the end of her reign, considerably broadened by her experiences.

There is no swimsuit competition in the Sausage Queen contest, ours being a Christian town opposed to the inflammation of male passions. Though to be truthful, most of the Sausage Queens could not have inflamed male passions in a prison, with the exception of the 1974 Sausage Queen, Nora Nagle, who was pure beauty and moved to Hollywood where she starred as a dancing grape in an underwear commercial. Perhaps you saw her.

In January, the Sausage Queen goes on to the state contest in the city, where she gives a speech on the benefits of pork consumption and talks about what an honor it would be represent the state in the national Sausage Queen contest, and how her faith in God has brought her this far, so no matter what happens, she is confident something good will come of it, and how, in meeting the other Sausage Queens, she's made friends she'll have the rest of her life and she just thanks God she lives in a country where they have the freedom to be Sausage Queens or anything at all they want to be. Then she gives a little curtsy and people clap and she cries, then steps aside so the other ninety-one Sausage Queens can say the exact same thing. Oratory is not their long suit.

Except for Nora Nagle, who went on to be crowned the state Sausage Queen in 1975, which she parlayed into a career on stage and screen. In addition to the underwear commercial she was hired as a stunt woman on the set of *Charlie's Angels* where she drove a car over a cliff, fell from a hotel balcony into a swimming pool and was struck over the head with a chair. When Farrah Fawcett left the show, Nora auditioned for the opening and would have gotten it, except for the permanently dazed expression on her face from being hit with the chair.

Regrettably, being hit in the head with the chair turned out to be the high point of Nora's career. It went downhill from there, which would have discouraged a lesser person, but Sausage Queens are resilient and

bounce back quickly from adversity.

She's working at Kivett's Five and Dime as a cashier, which she believes is only temporary. Her agent will be calling any day with news of her big break, but until then she's happy to be home where she can remember her roots and draw strength from the people who first believed in her. In 1975, when she won the state Sausage Queen contest, the town board voted to rename Main Street the Nora Nagle Boulevard, but the street department dawdled around and didn't change the street signs. Now that her career's gone belly-up, everyone is grateful for their inefficiency. It would have been awkward, a reminder of her fall.

All this came to mind when Nora Nagle's niece, Tiffany Nagle, was crowned the Sausage Queen this fall after a very close contest. She was running neck and neck with Amanda Hodge, right up until the essay portion of the contest when Amanda read her essay about the implications of Newtonian physics, while Tiffany wrote about how wonderful it would be if everyone loved one another, then pledged that if chosen as the Sausage Queen, she would devote her reign to working for world peace. As soon as she said that, Amanda was toast.

There has never been great interest in our town for Newtonian physics, though to be honest people aren't much for world peace either. It is the general consensus that there won't be peace until Jesus returns on the clouds in glory to ransom his elect. Therefore, any efforts to achieve world peace are viewed with suspicion, as a plot by the United Nations to usurp the sovereignty of God.

Life has never been easy for Tiffany Nagle, growing up in the shadow of her Aunt Nora's accomplishments, having to live up to that legacy all her life. An ordinary person would have broken under the strain, but it's only made Tiffany stronger and more determined than ever to continue the Nagle legacy.

But what has people scandalized is what Tiffany Nagle said when she stood to give her acceptance speech. She thanked the pork producers for the \$100 scholarship, then turned down the year's supply of free sausage on account of being a vegetarian. And the place went nuts. People began to boo, and Asa Peacock, who is ordinarily a nice guy, lost his mind and picked up a sausage patty and hurled it at Tiffany and would have hit her, if her grandfather, Clevis Nagle, hadn't jumped in front of her to take the sausage patty for her. It hit him right smack in the chest, on his brand new shirt, and down he went.

Asa, of course, felt terrible, and blamed it on cable television, which he'd had installed the month before to watch IU basketball, but had instead become enthralled with all the political shows and had been watching them and it had turned him into a monster, as only TV can. Well, that sobered up the crowd pretty quickly and we just went home. Didn't hold the parade, didn't go to Chicken Noodle Dinner at the meetinghouse. How could we eat chicken and noodles after that?

Asa went to church the next morning at the Quaker meetinghouse and though we Quakers are discreet repenters, we don't like to make a show of repentance, we do believe something must be done, some gesture which signals our remorse at having strayed. So Asa stood in church and volunteered to head up our church's spring fish fry, at which point we pronounced God's pardon and Asa sat down, soothed by the cooling balm of divine forgiveness. He also promised not to watch TV anymore, or listen to Rush Limbaugh on his tractor.

It's this war, I think, that has people on edge. And this political rancor. And the general uptightness of people right now. This spirit of division which would intrude even on our Corn and Sausage Days Festival, if we let it. We don't live with our differences like we used to.

It has always been the American way to look at those who differ from us, think them a little odd, but remind ourselves it's a free country, then go on about our business while others went about theirs. This bedrock belief that we should not compel someone to believe, just as they not insist we gosestep to their ideology.

When the Massachusetts Bay Colony was founded in the 1600's they passed a law that everyone had to worship in the local church. Then a boat load of Jewish people came and built a synagogue and the colonists looked at them, shrugged their shoulders, and said, "Hey, it's a free country." And they conveniently forgot that law, and that's how it should be. Though before they came to their senses, they did hang four Quakers on the Boston Commons, but felt bad about it afterwards and volunteered to head up the next fish fry and even erected a statue to one of the Quakers, Mary Dyer.

Unfortunately, tolerance is one of those things each generation has to learn for itself and every now and then someone comes along with a big microphone and a little power and would have us believe our differences are a sin and presume to tell us what to believe and how to think and what to say and when to pray. And because they seem so confident and wise, we listen to them, but it always ends up the same, sausage patties flying through the air.

It never ends in peace and understanding and a commitment to the basic freedoms stated so boldly in our Constitution. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights..."

What a statement that is. What a wonderfully audacious notion. And the sausage lobbers will tell you they believe it, but they are the first ones to shut down the newspapers or restrict our civil rights. Go ahead, take them, I wasn't using them anyway. That's why I live in a small town and why I write about it. Because there is a certain gentility, a custom of courtesy, a habit of judging others by their merits and not by their labels, a deep appreciation of freedom and its attendant blessings and responsibilities. The stereotype is that people in small towns are narrow, bigoted and provincial, but I've not found that to be the case. What I've discovered is a high regard for the middle ground; a willingness to let others be who God is calling them to be.

Yes, it's true that when the Sausage Queen told us she was a vegetarian, we were, at first, shocked. But by the next day we were over it, renamed her the Corn Queen and life went on. This spirit of compromise is, I think, the small town's greatest contribution to our national dialogue.

It's our capacity to live by side by side, work together for the common good, give here and take there, and when the fire department needs a new firetruck, to hold a pancake breakfast, where we pay exorbitant prices for cold, undercooked pancakes and are happy to do so.

You Methodists know about this welcoming spirit, or you would have invited this Quaker to be with you.

I was fortunate to grow up in a benevolent age, when pastors were less concerned about the end times and school in prayer imposing their will and more concerned about the Golden Rule. I grew up, and probably so did you, hearing this constant drumbeat of sympathy and grace that over time becomes a part of you. So that when you are an adult and are momentarily ungracious or small-minded, that little voice in your head won't let you get away with it. It sounds like your grandmother or your childhood pastor, reminding you to do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Let others denigrate women or blacks or gays or liberals, but we know better. The Golden Rule and my mother's favorite rule – if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. Do they even teach that rule anymore?

So Asa Peacock went home after the Sausage Queen contest and cancelled his cable television service, and you might give that a thought too. After all, you wouldn't pump raw sewage into your home, so why pump it into your minds.

And he went into his closet, where the Lord said we should pray, lest our prayer become a show of piety. And he asked God's forgiveness, and the Lord said, "Asa, words are important, but it's action that counts with me." So Asa went and bought Clevis Nagle a new shirt and told Tiffany Nagle he was sorry, then called around to all the men of the Odd Fellows Lodge who sponsor the Sausage Queen contest and said, "Hey, why don't we make her the Corn Queen," and so she is.

And even now Asa Peacock is planning the finest fish fry our town has ever seen. I invite you all to attend, and you can meet these people, and see that they're for real, that they're just like us, which on some days is scary, but on most days is very, very fine.