

Home Talk

An Oneida Community Story

BOSTON, 1904

The old man had been something of a pack rat, and it was late afternoon by the time they got to the back of his closet, where secrets go to be hidden or forgotten.

Why did he keep all this stuff? Elizabeth mused, thinking again of her grandfather as she inhaled the faint tang of pipe smoke from a pile of piled sweaters. She could hear her grandmother still out in the garage, sorting through the gardening equipment, trying to reduce a couple's life to that of a single, sensible widow. Elizabeth pulled bags and boxes from the closet, dividing the clearly useless from what could be passed on and what her grandmother might want for its sentimental value. She's never been sentimental, she thought. But still ...

Beneath a dusty sack of old shoes, her hand bumped against a rough wooden picture frame. Held to the afternoon's fading light, it revealed a handsome young man, in the flush of youth and yet with the unsmiling concentration of photos from the last century. The *past* century, thought Elizabeth, who above all considered herself a creation of this new century, the modern one, where people weren't so hidebound by tradition and religion.

She took the photo to the garage. Her grandmother, Sarah, looked up, panting a little from her exertions.

"Grandmother," said Elizabeth, "who's this?"

Sarah took the photograph in one hand; the other went to her mouth.

"Where did you find this?"

"In the closet. That's not Grandfather."

"I'd forgotten I had this," Sarah said. "It's from a long time ago. A lifetime ago."

"But who?"

Sarah paused and took a long, slow breath. She seemed far away. And then:

"What time is it, dear?"

"Nearly 5."

"This is a rather long story. Shall we go inside? It's time enough for a glass of wine."

ONEIDA, 1866

Thinking back to what had brought him there, Richard Perry remembered the long year he had spent on the west side of Chicago. He had finished college – literature – without any clear idea of what to do next. The Great War was over, so he had no glory to run to. He had been working odd jobs, fixing porches, shoveling snow, to keep body and soul together until he figured it out. It was at the public library, where he whiled away great stretches of time on the pretense of a self-administered graduate school, that he ran across the *Circular*. He began reading, and found he couldn't stop.

In the newspaper's narrow columns he found what he hadn't known he had been searching for: an idea of an ordered life built on Christ, to be sure, but built also on the notion that a man could improve himself continuously and not always be apologizing for being a human being. While the preacher at his somber Presbyterian church was reminding them weekly that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," this fellow Noyes – for that was the editor of the *Circular* – had an idea that true Christian perfection was within a man's grasp. Not in Chicago, of course. Too many temptations, too much opportunity for backsliding. Along with John Humphrey Noyes, Richard imagined that one day the whole world could become the

earthly paradise that the Scriptures foretold. Until then, there was only one place he knew of where it was truly happening: a place in northern New York called the Oneida Community.

As he had seen others do in the thrice-weekly *Circular*, Richard posted a letter of inquiry. Back came the reply from the Great Man himself, along with some pamphlets. Noyes urged him to study the materials, think about it, pray about it, then write back in six months. Six months! For a man of twenty-one, it might as well have been six years.

But study he did, and pray, and wait; six months to the day, he wrote a seven-page letter detailing his understanding of Bible Communism. Noyes wrote back promptly with a detailed critique. "I sense in your approach something approaching desperation," came the words. "I find great earnestness in your letter, but also a fearfulness that the world is too corrupt. I do not need refugees at Oneida. I need workers – the Lord's workers. If this does not dissuade you, I suggest you spend some more time in prayer and contemplation of the ideals I have set forth." Write again in three months, was the counsel.

He waited. He wrote again. And in three months, Richard Perry, just a few days into his twenty-second year, packed his meager belongings, stowed in its case the viola with which he amused his friends, and set out for Union Station. He changed in Syracuse for the Midland Railroad, and when the locomotive clanged to a stop, he considered it a good sign that the placard read ONEIDA COMMUNITY. He stepped briskly off the platform, put down his things, and looked around for a cart to take him toward utopia.

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For Sarah Thayer, coming to Oneida was less an affirmation than a concession. She was only twenty when her one and only true love had come to a bad end – a love she was sure would be her last as well as her first. He was a pale and serious young man, a boy really, and he had gone off to seek his fortune and never returned. Sarah lived with her father, her mother having passed early from the diphtheria. She knew that wasn't the end of things, but she also knew that in small-town Manlius the choices of a husband were slim. Nor was she entirely certain that wifehood was her calling, at least immediately. It was an era of experimentation; bold ideas were being proposed. She tried hard to image what would come next.

It was in that frame of mind that she heard Father Noyes preach for the first time, in a Methodist church in town. She knew something of the odd, insular community a few miles up the road, but like most everyone in town, she knew nothing but dark rumors of its workings and its philosophies. Listening to the Great Man talk, she moved swiftly from skepticism to a general understanding to, by sermon's end, enthusiasm. He spoke of Scripture and his idea that Christ's Second Coming had already happened, back at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. St. Paul, he said, was a perfect man, and so could we all work toward being perfect. The early church started out in that spirit, but degenerated into hierarchy and dissension. Our Lord's earthly reign, Father Noyes said, can be right here, right now.

He didn't speak of it in church, but she had heard talk of another aspect of the perfectible life: There were no marriages at Oneida. Or rather, there was one "complex" marriage among the two hundred or so adults there. She had guarded her virtue with all the vigor required of a proper young woman, but those early fumbleings had left her curious. She wasn't ready to commit herself to one man, but perhaps, she thought, she could commit herself to many.

Within a month, she was settling into her tiny bedroom in the grand Mansion House.

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When he first saw her, she was at work. Of course. Work was most of the day, whether in the clay-riddled fields of spinach and peas outside the Community or in the printing shop or the

trap factory. Work built the soul, the Great Man often said, rather loosely quoting Scripture. It also kept food on the table.

This day, though, was devoted to the Community's first economy, agriculture.

The last frost had broken; it was spring, and they were planting corn, using an ingenious pole-handled device that someone in the trap shop had invented. One plugged it four inches deep, threw a lever, and precisely three kernels were parceled into the good earth.

Like so many big projects, this one was accompanied by the Community band, a kind of fife-and-drum corps that played to keep spirits up. A planting bee, the day was called, and pretty much everyone in the Community was there. One thing that had struck Richard in his sort time at Oneida: Unlike the laborers he had known in his former life, no one complained much about working. The organizers took care to spread the work around, so that no one toiled too long at any one thing, and the biggest jobs, like this one, were approached almost as a party or an outing. Many hands made light work.

He also had found that the complex marriage for which Oneida was so famous (or infamous) created an almost continuous air of courting. Actual courting, of course, was not allowed. Approaches were done only through intermediaries now, though that hadn't always been the case. But so charged with possibility was each encounter that everyone was on best behavior; the women kept their short hair brushed and their simple clothes neat; the men avoided tobacco, for its effect on the breath.

She was backing around a hedge at the corner of the far field when he quite nearly bowled her over, he was moving so quickly He reached out to steady her. She drew her breath in sharply.

"I beg your pardon."

"Please don't think me forward. I was afraid you'd fall."

They looked each other full in the face. They stood twenty paces from the nearest other people.

"Richard Perry, at your service," he said, doffing his cap.

She laughed and made a mock curtsy. "Sarah Thayer, milord."

"And how does your corn grow today?"

"With the sun the way it is, we'll be canning by June."

"Didn't I see you in the audience at the orchestra concert on Thursday?"

"Whether you saw me or not, I cannot say. But I was there."

He waited.

"Perhaps you'd like some criticism on your playing," she ventured.

"All right."

"Technically, it was fine. The Mozart especially – very neatly done. But I do wish you would put more *fire* into your playing. It left me cold. ... Now, to my work."

She left for more seed. And Richard Perry thought, you, milady, are next.

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It was at orchestra practice the following week that he thought again of her words. Mutual criticism was deeply ingrained in the Community; without it, Father Noyes said, no one would climb the ladder of ascending fellowship toward perfection. But Richard had enough stubbornness left in him to resist. Silently, of course. One could not reply except to recognize that a criticism was well taken.

He had not yet been through a formal criticism, which was generally conducted by four or five members chosen by Noyes and trained in the art of correction. But there had been a few

instances of private conversations, criticisms-in-passing. They hurt, he had to admit it. He had prayed about it, and tried to take good advice to heart, but he knew he must be a long way from enlightenment, because his spirit was rebellious.

And now Sarah's words. Fire. If she wanted fire, he could burn with the best of them. As the orchestra launched into a Beethoven piece, he hit the strings hard, turning his wounded heart toward the notes and the bow. His fingers ached for gripping the viola's neck so tightly. But he played beautifully, powerfully. He knew it.

"Diotrephiasis."

"What?"

"That's what Father Noyes calls it," said the cellist to his left, whose name was Earl Miller. "When you try to play better than other people, I mean. You play beautifully, Richard. But remember: Father Noyes plays violin, and he's not very good. You don't want to show him up. Did you ever hear of Frank Wayland-Smith? He was a tremendous violinist. He loved that instrument. So much so that Father Noyes called him in and said his playing was interfering with his other obligation to the Community. He made him hand over his violin, his music books, his sheet music – everything. Noyes put them away in his closet."

Richard thought about this. He spoke carefully: "But is it not the goal to improve in all ways, including one's art?"

"Improve, yes. Excel, maybe not," Earl said. "I just think you might want to be careful. I couldn't imagine life without playing my music. I have to limit my practice time to be sure. Moderation in all things, you know. My impression is that Father Noyes would rather have a mediocre orchestra that doesn't provoke the members to jealousy, than the New York Philharmonic there in Mansion Hall."

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Despite the prohibition against courting, Sarah and Richard courted. They did it with a glance across three rows of benches at the Nightly Meeting. He sat across from her in the incessant self-improvement classes that were organized around studying French, or phrenology, or Scripture. He waltzed with her at the Friday evening dances, being careful also to give the older women a whirl on the dance floor as well; alliances among the young, at the expense of their assumedly spiritually superior elders, were frowned upon. She chose him as a partner in the endless games of croquet that formed on the South Lawn.

It was all quite proper, and it was all quite exciting. He knew he shouldn't, but he thought of her, and her alone, late at night before falling into an exhausted sleep. Selfish, such thoughts were called. Contrary to the good of the Community.

He couldn't help it. He loved the Community and its people, he loved Sarah. He could not make them mean the same thing.

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My dear Harriet Skinner,

I humbly beseech your assistance in arranging a social encounter with Miss Sarah Thayer. I believe that she and I both would benefit from the practice of pleasure-giving such an encounter would afford, and you are aware of my efforts toward improving my skills in this area. Miss Thayer is my spiritual superior, by virtue of her longer tenure here in the Community and her being my senior of eight years, and assuredly this represents an opportunity for improvement on my part which I solemnly desire.

I await your decision, and Sarah's, and I give you my thanks.
Your servant in Christ Jesus,
Richard Perry

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He waited: three days, four days. An agony. Five days, six. Finally, on a Monday evening after a day in the trap shop, a typical meatless dinner and a chess game at which he lost badly, he went into his bedroom to find a small piece of paper, folded, on the nightstand. He opened it. It was Harriet Skinner's personal stationery, and on it was a single word: Yes.

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They sat together the next night at Evening Meeting. It was Tuesday, so that meant a lecture from Mr. Noyes. On this occasion it was a reading from *The Berean*, Noyes' pamphlet setting out his principles for the Community; they studied it seriously as the Scriptures, and hearing Noyes discuss its intricacies was like hearing St. Paul himself talking about the writing of his epistles. But on this night, Richard could hardly hear the Great Man. Blood was rushing in his ears. He concentrated on Father Noyes' great white beard; he studied the figures painted on the high ceiling to represent Justice, Music, Astronomy and History. He looked at Sarah's hands, trailed across them with his own once or twice only to be brushed aside. He waited.

Finally the Home Talk ended. Sarah announced to the woman on her other side – special friendships weren't allowed, of course, but Richard knew that this woman, whose name was Mary, was Sarah's frequent companion – that she would be skipping the games tonight and going to her bedroom. She left. He waited a few minutes, then climbed the stairs to the second floor.

She had left the door open a crack, and when he knocked it swung in. She was sitting on her narrow bed, her legs bare, still in the knee-length skirt all the women wore. He closed the door behind him. There was no lock.

“Sarah.”

Father Noyes' rules for social intercourse specified that one wasn't to talk much. It took away from the spirituality of the moment. She looked up at him.

“I knew you would apply for me. There's something that's rather funny, Richard. I applied for you as well. Harriet received our notes on the same day. All this time she's held them.”

“ ‘Anticipation sweetens the appetite.’ Didn't I read that somewhere?”

“You read too much.”

Trembling, he went to her, knelt like a supplicant, and began.

* * *

The next month was the happiest he had known, in a Community where happiness was expected and the deep sadness of “hypo” was considered the Devil's work. They saw each other daily, even to the point where Richard, who generally considered children more pests than people, volunteered to help in the Children's House because Sarah had been assigned there for a few days. They met in her room twice a week, on Wednesdays and, scandalously, Sundays; they joked about being “like an old married couple.” But of course they had little knowledge of what married couples did; they knew only the one marriage in which they all lived in Oneida, and which had come to seem the only possible arrangement.

Among the tourists from outside the Community who made sightseeing at Oneida their weekend outing, they saw couples their own age, hand in hand, laughing at each other's jokes and knowing that they would return home that night to their own bedroom and sleep the night

beside each other. For Sarah, so deeply enmeshed in the communal spirit, this seemed almost an affront. She looked at these women visitors, yoked in obedience to one man for better or worse, and thought: One choice, and then no more choices. One pleasure, or set of pleasures, for a lifetime. What kind of love would bring one to enlist in such a life? How could these women see the perfectible pleasures of Oneida – yes, including the social ones – and not despair over their choices?

Then she would see Richard looking at the same couples, and an uneasy feeling would come over her, because she was coming to know that there was trouble here. He looked at the young marrieds, and she knew what he was thinking: A whole lifetime of nights to worship one perfect woman. Where else could one find such a lifetime's happiness?

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He tried to control his feelings, both loving and dark. Had he become a better man through Sarah? He thought yes. But he knew his commitment had gone too far. He knew it because he felt bile rise in him when she walked in the gardens with another, or smiled when one of the older members looked her way. She had other social engagements, of course. Everyone did. And everyone knew who was with whom. By design of the buildings and by practice of philosophy, there was no privacy in the Community. He was tormented, when not with Sarah, by thoughts of her in another's arms. He tried not to be nearby when her door closed behind her.

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One Sunday, the social engagement went wrong.

He had, of course, practiced male continence, Father Noyes' technique for separating the amative and the procreative purposes of the act. Like all male members in their early stages, he had been introduced to complex marriage through the older women in the Community. He had erred a few times in the early going, but soon mastered the rhythms and dangers of the technique. Like rowing near the edge of a waterfall, as Noyes was wont to describe it. Richard hadn't gone over the brink in months and months.

Perhaps it was possessiveness; perhaps it was the curve of her shoulders seen in a light he had never noticed before; perhaps it was something inside him giving way to the Devil. This time, passion won out. He had failed the Community; he had failed her.

Sarah was furious. "How could you?" she hissed. She was curled into a ball in the room's one chair, a rocker. "You knew, and you didn't stop."

"I couldn't." Richard knelt at her feet, near tears. "I am sorry. I meant no disrespect. It's just ... This happens between men and women."

"Not here," she snapped back. "Here it's by design, not by brute force and happenstance."

"I was wrong," he said miserably. "I'm weak, I'm not perfect."

"Nor am I," she said, seeming to soften. "Nor is any of us. But to give in – not to try – Richard, that is sin. You've made me the Devil's handmaiden."

"I *can't* be perfect," he said. "Maybe you can get there. I cannot. What's more, I don't suppose I *want* to be perfect. Isn't it an affront to God, to imagine ourselves sinless?"

"Not according to Father Noyes. He says it's our duty. If we live with Christ in our soul, we won't be tempted."

"Christ was perfect. Look what it got him."

"Richard!"

He stood. "I'm sorry. That was wrong. God help me, I'm not trying to be base and evil and contrary. It's not that I'm trying to sin. It's just against human nature to be perfect."

“But its God’s nature. You’re not trusting God enough.”
He stood. “I’ll do better next time.”
“We’ll see.”

* * *

Two days hence, at Evening Meeting, they were called up for mutual criticism. Before the assembled members, they sat in hard wooden chairs facing Mr. Noyes’ committee of four men. Henry Seymour began, as was the custom, directly.

“Sarah, Richard, you are both honorable people and fine members of the Community. Sarah, we are especially glad of your work with the children; you show great empathy for them. And Richard, I know you’ve been working hard to conquer your musical ambitions, and the others in the orchestra tell me that you’ve become less likely to disrupt its harmony by intruding your own playing to the fore.”

Abram Smith: “We are concerned about the claiming spirit in your social relations. We have seen much closeness between you. Of course, this is a good thing. But we think that it may be interfering with your other obligations to the Community, especially to the other members whom you do not choose to favor with your pleasures.”

Otis Miller: “Selfish love is not love, brethren. It is misdirection of God’s gifts for one’s own sake and not for another’s pleasure. It is wrong.”

“Do you have any response?” Seymour asked.

Sarah shook her head, her eyes downcast. She knew they were right. Perhaps the most fearful aspect of the criticism is that they were always right. It was as if they had special insight into the soul.

“And you, Richard?”

He gathered his thoughts and looked hard at Seymour. “It may be true that I have seen too much of Sarah,” he said carefully. “But I have done my share of the work in the Community, and that includes the amative work. For that it is, brethren, when one’s appetite is not there: work.

“And why must we persist in the idea that a particular love is dangerous when a general love is ideal? I fail to understand why God’s greatest gift is called selfishness.”

“God’s greatest gift,” roared the last inquisitor, John Hutchins, “is his people living in community. Forget not Jesus’ words, ‘Where two or more of you are gathered in his name, there am I also.’ ”

“Two or more,” Richard said. “Or just two.”

“More faithful, more of God’s love. He did not give you talents to squander them on one person among a billion.” Sarah winced. *Squander*.

“In the Community, we are not to have close friendships even of our own sex. Does this promote intimacy – God’s intimacy? Does not the Lord wish us to love each other fully? And how can we do so without the freedom to form attachments? Is yours a God at arm’s length?”

Smith took for himself the last word. “Brother, we sympathize with your feelings. But you should know by now that what matters is all of us, not some of us. God gave us this land, these orchards, these buildings, to use for his glory. They are not playthings. Nor are his people to be playthings. We must cherish each one, and practice pleasure for all. The criticism is finished. Richard, study *The Berean* this week.”

* * *

Two weeks into a halfway knowledge, she had to be sure. She borrowed a traveling suit of clothes from the tailor shop – kept there for journeys out of the Community, though these

were rare – and rode by train all the way to Syracuse. There she walked into the first doctor’s office she saw and asked for an appointment. She rode back to Oneida pale, and frightened, and somehow filled with joy.

* * *

They sat in one of the smaller common rooms, dubbed the Plant Room because one of the members who fancied himself a horticulturist had furnished it with greenery ordered from Connecticut. Or rather, Sarah sat. Richard paced.

“This isn’t supposed to happen at Oneida,” he said. “Father Noyes won’t like it. He won’t like a real child among the stirps.”

“It happens,” she said. “And what do you mean, a real child? Every child is real.”

“I mean a child whose birth is chosen by God and not by John Humphrey Noyes,” he said grimly. “It’s not natural that he should do the choosing.”

“Father Noyes has studied it,” Sarah replied. “He knows what traits to combine, what personalities can produce a better kind of person ...”

“A child who will grow up to be perfect? Like Mr. Noyes?”

“That’s the idea, I suppose.”

“So what was it that produced Mr. John Humphrey Noyes, the perfect man?” Richard said bitterly. “Stirpiculture? Or just our dumb luck?”

“God’s hand,” she replied. “But that’s no reason man cannot intercede on God’s behalf. God didn’t create Bible Communism, did he? He created the Bible, and it took a man to interpret it and understand that Perfectionism was his will for us.”

Richard paced some more. Through the small window, they heard the merriment of the croquet players.

“I cannot go on at arm’s length,” he said finally. “I love you. I need to be by your side, without apology. I need to be this child’s father.”

“Richard,” she said, and thought how to say what she knew she must. “I feel it, too. Being with you has been like looking over the far hill into the great world. But that world is not my world. I am not so strong as you. I cannot make the choices you make and not feel regret. If I were to marry you and leave Oneida, I would always regret what I would leave behind here. The people. The lovers. Father Noyes. The sense that this experiment, this Community, could be the thing that will make Christ’s rule on earth real and true and present. I must stay here. It’s God’s call for me. I’ve felt it from the first, and nothing – not even you, not even this child – changes that.”

“And me?”

“Remember when Jesus met the rich young man? ‘Sell all you have and give the money to the poor,’ he said. He couldn’t, but you can. You have to be able to give up the thing you hold dearest. It’s what our Lord asks of you, Richard. You daren’t disobey.”

* * *

ONEIDA COMMUNITY. A solitary figure stood waiting as the westbound train pulled into the station. So much hope, he thought, concentrated into so few souls. Could their plan for a little piece of New York indeed be God’s plan for the world? They would all know soon enough, he figured. In the meantime, he would spend some time thinking, maybe studying, maybe traveling. There was a lot to see beyond that far hill. The locomotive screeched and huffed to a halt. The doors opened. Richard stepped up into the first car, out into an imperfect world.

BOSTON, 1904

The heat of the afternoon had given way to the gentle glow of an early September evening. A bottle stood empty; another was on its way there.

“Richard,” Elizabeth said. “That’s him in the picture?”

“Yes, dear,” said Sarah. “Father Noyes had a photographer come ’round once a year, and I had someone in the darkroom make me one. For a while, I couldn’t bear not looking at it; then I couldn’t bear looking. I put it away.”

“Grandmother ... the child?”

“Your mother.” She sipped. “Your grandfather, God rest his soul, adopted her when she was a year old. She never knew any different, and still doesn’t to this day.” She looked sharply, meaningfully, at Elizabeth.

“But Oneida – what happened?”

“I left when the baby was still at my breast. It was the practice to take children, once they were weaned, and put them in the Children’s House. Their mothers and fathers would see them specially for only a couple of hours a week. I couldn’t bear the thought of that.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You wouldn’t – or won’t, until you become a mother. Then you’ll know. That child was a part of me. She had been inside me, and in a sense she still was. Before she was born, I was sure that Father Noyes had the right idea, about children as well as about most other things. Share the work of bringing them up, and they’ll grow into stronger parts of the Community. But I just couldn’t. I couldn’t let go of her.”

Tears glistened in two sets of eyes.

“Did you ever see Richard again?”

“Never. When I resigned from the Community, I left no forwarding address. And within a year I had taken your grandfather’s name. There was no way for Richard to know I would be in Boston, no way for him to find me.”

She paused.

“It was a different time. We were sure we were God’s best hope on earth. And it didn’t go wrong, exactly, but it just didn’t turn out to be exactly right.”

She took the picture. “I have no regrets, Lizzie. Live so you can say the same. Now I want to see if you can keep a secret. Let’s walk over and visit your mother.”