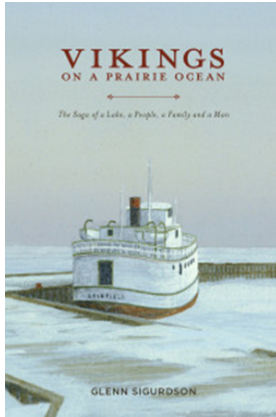


Differences are okay; Differences are who we are

P293 in *Vikings On A Prairie Ocean* by Glenn Sigurdson



Differences are at the heart of knowing who we are. Father Lou Menez gave me that lesson in 1971 as his guest in the mission home while I was working in Fort Resolution. Lou had found his way to Canada's North from France after spending the war years as a prisoner in a massive German armaments facility that he was astonished had not been blown to smithereens by Allied bombs. The priesthood followed, and then he became an Oblate Father. The Canadian North quickly became his home.

Every afternoon at five, I saw Lou pulling the cord on the bell at the front of the small church, and a few old ladies tottering in to join him in evening prayers. On Sunday afternoon the old ladies and some kids would pile into the back of his truck and he would ferry them into the bush for an afternoon of berry picking.

One night over rabbit stew and a beer, Lou was waxing eloquent about people, about his life, about the community. Suddenly, he fixed his gaze on me and said, "You know Glenn, without the French, the English would be nothing." I thought he might be opening a discussion about Quebec separatism and the dynamic leadership of René Lévesque. "What do you mean?" I asked hesitantly.

"Without the French, the English would not know who they are." Lou had given me a penetrating insight, a seed that has continued to grow with experience. Becoming one while remaining different has the ring of paradox, but if that is so, then life is nothing but paradox. That night, Lou Menez taught me that difference is the essence of identity.

Toward the end of my stay Lou came into the house perplexed. An evangelical minister had arrived in the community about a year earlier to proselytise the Christian message with more determination and fervour than Lou's brand of faith prescribed. That day, he had decided to leave town, and his last act was to say goodbye to Lou and to give Lou his Bible. Lou was bewildered. The meaning came readily to me, but Lou struggled. Lou accepted people for who they were and how they lived within the community. The evangelist was trying to remake the community in his own image. The day he realized this, he had the courage to acknowledge that Lou possessed the wisdom he lacked. Lou was once more the sole cleric in town.

Lou's wisdom buried deep within me. He allowed himself to sink into a place and a people. Lou absorbed their truth. When others saw difference, he saw identity. He understood and accepted who and what they were, and respected them and their way of looking at the world. Making a difference is not about making differences go away, but dealing with differences. Differences are okay.

Seeing Canada through the lens of my Icelandic Canadian roots has enabled me to see Canada in my own way, and I think it is the way that most Canadians see it. That I bring my own point of different point of departure to my citizenship does not detract from Canada; it enhances it. “Multiculturalism “does no justice to the magic chemistry that is Canada, and becomes all too readily the playpen of politicians for or against it. Canada is the nesting ground of diversity—geographically, historically, ethnically, culturally, socially and politically—holding in its arms a prototype of global complexity. The elasticity of accommodation is what has held the country together. It is a country that does not work well when hard lines are drawn. The genius of Canada is strength through diversity, a point made eloquently by our current governor general, David Johnston, with almost 150 years of history in his wake:

On whether there should be more uniformity among those taking the citizenship oath, or a greater expression of diversity: If I had to make a choice it would be the latter. I think it’s quite appropriate in Canada that we can be hyphenated Canadians. If you ask me what kind of Canadian [I am], I’m Scottish-Canadian. I think it’s attractive that we don’t discourage but we encourage people to keep their language and their heritage, and to teach it to their children and their grandchildren. The great gift of this nation is that we respect diversity, and somehow we’ve been able to make a nation out of diversity and allow people their expression of their identity—as long as they don’t hurt somebody else. That’s John Stuart Mill, I’m on safe ground there.¹

The saga of the Icelanders stands in testimony to the wisdom of the governor general. The Icelandic-Canadians became one with Canada, adding texture to what it means to be Canadian while preserving their sense of “us-ness.” This duality provided a place from which to interpret the Canadian reality and to make a unique contribution to Canadian life. How could a people leave and become different, but somehow remain the same? Something was inside them, something invisible on the surface, something that came with them from Iceland that they continued to protect and nourish, as so many other Canadians from other backgrounds have done.

¹ *Globe and Mail*, Saturday December 24, 2011 “David Johnston, unplugged.”