



Dec. 21, 2007

'To Gather From the Air a Live Tradition'

By Robert J. O'Hara (rjohara@post.harvard.edu)

At three in the afternoon on Christmas Eve, the voice of a lone chorister will rise from a small college chapel in the Ouse Valley of England, and from there it will encircle the globe. It will climb into the foothills of the Himalayas, skim across islands in the far South Seas, enter the equatorial villages of Africa, and emerge in hundreds of towns and cities across the United States.

This solitary voice will open the [Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols](#), held each year in the [chapel of King's College](#) at Cambridge University. The King's Festival was first organized in 1918 by the chapel's then-dean Eric Milner-White, and since the 1930s it has been broadcast annually by BBC radio and [its international affiliates](#).

Millions of people now listen every year, and visitors to Cambridge "from all over the world are heard to identify the Chapel as '[the place where the carols are sung.](#)'"

I have a special interest in the King's Festival because I am an advocate for [decentralized residential college systems](#) like those at Oxford and Cambridge. Collegiate systems of the Oxbridge kind provide students and faculty alike with a wealth of opportunities for learning and service, and they can multiply the strengths that already exist within any university. The creation of residential college systems within larger institutions is [a growing international trend](#).

But independent of its origins in a Cambridge residential college, the Festival of Lessons and Carols from King's is an example of the kind of rich cultural tradition that any college or university can aspire to develop and maintain, not only for its own members, but also for its city, its country, and the world. And it is young people in their teens and 20s who are especially strengthened by traditions, because traditions give them not only something to stand upon but also something to push against as they seek to define their own lives.

Do successful traditions require lots of money? They do not. It's true that few of us will have the resources of King's College available to us — their chapel did take more than 100 years to build, after all. But successful traditions are about people and about social cohesion, they are not about money. If you begin by asking how you can use a tradition to make money, you'll never establish a great tradition.

Think first about what you can do for the members of your college or university in

themselves, and forget about the outside world. If you do a good job, the outside world will eventually notice.

But how to do a good job? If we anatomize the King's College Festival, we can identify a number of structural features that can be replicated anywhere by people seeking to develop and maintain strong traditions within an educational environment.

First and foremost, a successful tradition must be regular and must never fail. If it follows the full moon, it must always follow the full moon. If it settles into Sundays at three, [like tea in the college master's house](#), it must always settle into Sundays at three, even when people are few, the weather is bad, or the usual host is away. And if it's on Christmas Eve it must always be on Christmas Eve, at the same time, year after year.

The regularity of the King's Festival and its Christmas Eve broadcast was not even interrupted, [the college tells us](#), "during the Second World War, when the ancient glass (and also all heat) had been removed from the Chapel and the name of King's could not be broadcast for security reasons." Regularity inspires confidence and strengthens the desire of people to participate.

A successful tradition must also exhibit structural stability, and within that stability, variety. Stability gives comfort, variety gives delight. Something that is continually reinvented cannot, by definition, be a tradition — a thing handed down. But if a tradition is to remain vital it cannot be wholly static either: it must adapt, like a gradually changing species, to its local environment.

The overall structure of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols has remained stable for more than eighty years now, and people who heard it as children would recognize it today. In particular, it always begins in exactly the same way, with a solitary chorister singing the first verse of "Once in Royal David's City."

But within this pattern of stability the Festival exhibits annual variety. Most of the elements are carried over from year to year, but not all are, and original hymns and anthems are often commissioned specially for a given year's service. Each year we know how it will begin, and how it will proceed, but each year we also know there will be a few surprises in store for us to make the experience ever green.

Finally, a successful tradition must bind the members of the community together in all their diversity, and link them to other groups with which they have historical connections. This is the most important function of every tradition, and it deserves particular attention in educational environments today, environments that are often subject to terrible social fragmentation. One of our central obligations to the young people in our care should be to connect them with those who came before and those who will come after, and well-crafted traditions like the Festival of Lessons and Carols can do just that.

The scriptural lessons in the King's Festival are read by a range of people of different ages who are purposely chosen each year to bring the college and the local community together: a member of the choir, an undergraduate, a fellow of the college, a member of the college staff, the dean, the provost, a representative of the city of Cambridge, a representative of King's sister society at Eton, and several others. This conscious structure not only ties the college itself together, but links the college with its neighbors and its educational relatives as well. Through the act of participation, these many individual groups become one.

The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols is a Christian religious service, of course, and the older colleges of Oxford and Cambridge were all originally Christian religious foundations. But the general social principles that are manifest here — the regularity of the service, its stability and variety, and the way it binds the community together — apply with great generality. And they apply not only to [Oxbridge-style colleges](#) founded within other religious traditions (Shalom College at the University of New South Wales and Mandelbaum House at the University of Sydney are Jewish foundations, and the colleges of the Universiti Putra Malaysia follow Islamic traditions), but also to fully secular colleges and universities across the United States and around the world.

So please join me in tracking down a local radio station to listen to on Christmas Eve, and we can all spend an hour together as virtual members of that ancient collegiate society along the Cam. As we listen we will have to concede that the chapel's magnificent stained glass windows are unlikely to be replicated elsewhere, and that its soaring Gothic architecture may never be surpassed. But we should also hold fast to the most important lesson the King's Festival teaches: that a college is built of men and women, and that the glory of every college resides not in its material fabric, but in the way it brings its members together and illuminates their lives.

Robert J. O'Hara is an evolutionary biologist and the author of "[The Collegiate Way: Residential Colleges and the Renewal of University Life](#)" (collegiateway.org).

The original story can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/views/2007/12/21/ohara>.

© Copyright 2007 *Inside Higher Ed*

Recommended citation:

O'Hara, Robert J. 2007. 'To gather from the air a live tradition.' *Inside Higher Ed* (insidehighered.com), 21 December 2007.