

Minister's Board Report

December 19, 2022

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

North Universalist Chapel Society

Birthday Day at The Thompson Center is a day of quiet celebration. I have been serving on the Board at The Thompson Center for a few years now but November 30th was my first time hosting Birthday Day. All Board members are encouraged to do it. It keeps the Board in touch with the people who utilize The Thompson Center.

The Birthday Day celebrants get lunch for free and the Board member gets a chance to greet them. Hopefully, over time, the greeting turns into something more personal. As familiarity grows, as anxiety lessens and as relationships become tender and real, we learn of the births of grandchildren and the passings of dearly beloved ones. We learn about the longing for the way things used to be. We learn about who is gifted at BINGO (which requires no real skill) and we learn about who just turned another year older. One proud and lovely man had just turned 90 years old—which would have been pretty impressive—but another proud and lovely woman was turning 100! It was really such a lovely thing to see.

Eighteen months earlier, the Board of the Thompson went on retreat. Several hours were set aside and an external consultant was hired to prompt and to poke and to tickle the Board until it sat up and giggled and grew. We were challenged to express our vision for what The Thompson could be in the world. That experience helped us to figure out who we were as a Board and who we want to be.

Would it be helpful for us to do this wondering? I know that money is tight but there are ways around that. COVID-19 has

powerfully impacted us. We are in a different phase of it now. Phase One was about defiance and adaptation.

1. How can we push forward without missing a step?
2. How can we transform ourselves to meet the challenges that a global pandemic can present?

So we got a sound system for outside and we got air filters for inside and we gave up in-person coffee hour and went online. We made adjustments. We adapted and we moved on to Phase Two. Phase Two was about disillusionment and endurance.

1. How long will this crisis last?
2. How much political strife can we put up with from Washington?
3. How can we find ways to deal with our fear as the health threat persisted and with our grief as the losses set in?

Returning to an online format at Christmas last year was wise and crushing. No matter how innovative we are, there is no replacement for in-person community.

Everyone is feeling this. As the COVID-19 Task Force is well aware, the North Chapel experience is not unique. Every Unitarian Universalist church in the Upper Valley is going through the same thing. Despite our policy difference (which are slight, considering), we have all traveled the same path to get to where we are today. So, after the defiance and adaptation phase and after disillusionment and endurance phase, we enter Phase Three.

Phase Three is emergent. It is in the process of coming into being. It is not entirely visible but, for sure, it is about rebuilding. On November 13th and November 20th, our Sunday services were about sacred conversation. A sacred conversation in this sense is one in which we stand powerfully in community with our differences on full display.

The church-makes-up-for-COVID model of ministry may not completely work. Traditional problem-solving methods with familiar metrics are not the only things we need. I am not watching the budget with an eagle's eye but I see two things quite clearly. Despite our truly valiant efforts to combat the health crisis-related challenges, our annual budget drive is feeling the effect of the pandemic. The North Chapel budget has COVID-19. There are two, obvious symptoms—pledges are fewer-and-lower-and-slow and the pledge-drive does not have a champion.

We are exhausted, my beloveds. Each and all of us have just about had it. Please forgive my language-by-implication but I am personally furious at this [expletive] disease. And there needs to be a place to express this. According to The New York Times, the United States has suffered 1.1 million deaths in 2 years and nine months of counting. That's roughly 1,100 deaths a day.

I bring this up because our theology and our leadership are affected by it. They need to be affected by it. The congregation is not likely to notice the need, particularly on the theological level. The congregation is likely to feel the effects as loneliness, isolation and anxiety. We will personalize it. We will internalize it. We will start to believe that there is something wrong with us and our need for community will increase without the easy ability to create what we need and against a cocktail of habits—habits of humility, shyness and pride—that used to serve us well. Less so now.

The congregation is not likely to notice the theological need but the Worship Team certainly has. The administrative team certainly has. The small ministry teams certainly have. There is not template for contending with this other than the love that have for one another and the audacity to dare greatly in the face of challenge. Here, I am

inspired by Brené Brown who was, herself, inspired by Teddy Roosevelt who said,

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again... who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.

The great dare before the Board is not the budget. The great dare before the Board is made possible by the budget but it is not sustained by it. Our leadership message from the pulpit about money is as exhausted as we are.

Of course, it is! We have not been acknowledging how institutionally difficult that last three years have been. We have a ritual for joy. We have a ritual for concern. We have a ritual for sorrow. These rituals came into being after we were sorely in need of them. Expressing this sore need without apology or praise, without shame or blame or guilt, without purpose and transaction and without power and authority was and remains the goal of November's sacred conversations and can be the goal of leadership moving forward.

What this goal needs in earnest is a driver. It needs a courageous, Board-level conversation about how we might address the magnitude of what we face right now. We don't need answers. We just need courage to start the conversation and see where it goes from there.

There are several, different models that are useful in understanding Board-level leadership. According to a recent blog article, there are three, common styles—Operational, Strategic and Generative. According to the University of Arizona, there are four,

common styles of leadership—Autocratic, Democratic, Laissez-faire and Transformational. According to American Express, there are seven, common styles—Autocratic, Pacesetter, Transformational, Coaching, Democratic, Affiliative and Delegative. Where does North Chapel rest within these different models? How is it best positioned moving forward? Without judgment and without blame, what are our strengths and weaknesses? Who are we today and, more powerfully, who do we want to be tomorrow? Let's not think about how we get there. There are different strategies to elicit those possibilities (open-space strategy models, emergent strategy models, etc.).

These are the days of deepest darkness. What will we do with the coming light?

Rev. Pratima Dharm, the minister with whom North Chapel entered into the realm of community ministry has experienced a change in direction. If you recall, Rev. Dharm is the founder and director of the Spirit of Love Café in California. She reached out to North Chapel because our ministry was consistent with the goals of her organization. Kathy and I had been connecting with her in advisory and mentorship capacities. As Pratima expressed it years ago,

I started a café in March 2020. It quickly became known for its refined Mexican and Indian American themed dishes—



coffees and teas, cookies, etc. During COVID and other challenges, business suffered. For the 9 months that the café remained open, free meals and coffee/tea was provided to all homeless people daily as well as a meal was prepared and served for about 100-150 homeless people at a local shelter each month. We began to offer Vespers gathering with masks and appropriate social distancing where they also prepared and cooked the meal for the homeless.

I simultaneously started a non-profit organization called: 'Spirit of Love' Fellowship & Outreach with the same group of people I met at the café in the early part of 2020. Though we all hold varied and unique theologies, we share a common understanding and vision of what being open and aware of our differences and individualities means in practice!

Rev. Dharm has experienced a change. She is considering "leaving the ministry." The challenges of COVID-19 were critical for her endeavor and she is in the process of choosing a new direction. I know a little about that new direction but not enough to report just yet. It is an unfolding process for her. We have a meeting coming up on Friday, the 23rd. I will know more at that point. Kathy, I am assuming that your meetings with here have ended. Is that true?

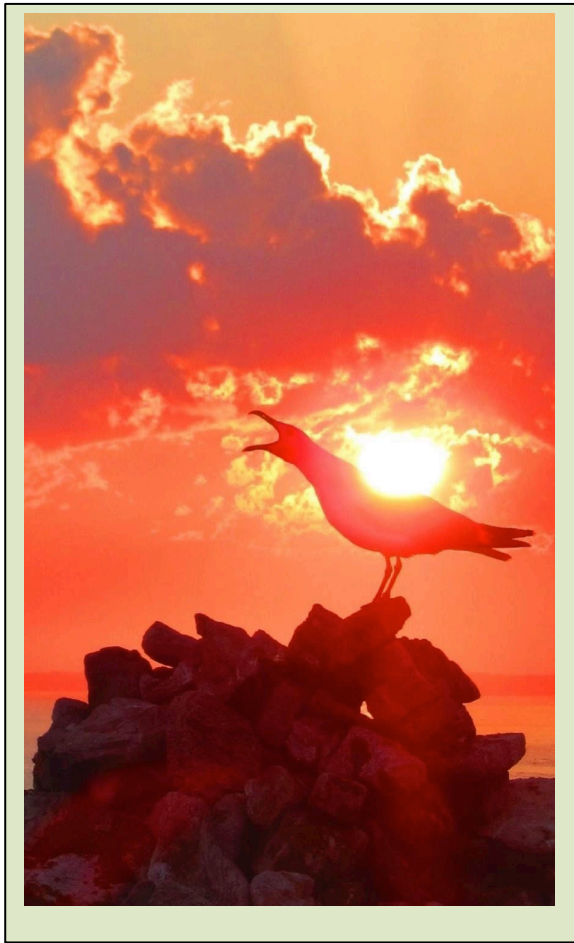
Brave Light Update

I am so pleased that the Board had a chance to meet Emily Swomley last week. She has created an application that will be quite useful for us. She is so nervous/excited to do a good job.

Rev. Elizabeth Carrier-Ladd has had COVID. The mother of three (or four) active and gregarious children, I am hardly surprised.

Over the next two or three weeks, we will update the website with their information and pictures.

Brave Light is an iterative process. In politics, they say, "We campaign in poetry and we govern in prose." This applies to ground-



breaking programs like Brave Light. There are many hurdles in the process of making this project real. The hurdle that presented itself this month was that of housing.

Last year, with the economy and inflation down, we were able to negotiate favorable housing deals for the VT and Star Island conferences. The deals that were available for the summer of 2022 are not available for the summer of 2023. When we submitted our original grant, we were counting on homestays in Vermont and Boston. The feasibility of this has waned because of COVID. This puts considerable pressure on the budget.

There is a considerable contingency line-item built into the budget but that contingency money was budgeted to address unforeseen, minor issues. It was not designed to address a COVID-sized challenge like this.

So, Chloe and I (with the help of Elizabeth in Boston and Emily in Thetford) are reworking the Brave Light model to stay within our means. This has meant lowering the number of Brave Light participants and shifting our conference schedule to more favorable times. The original conference schedule was:

2022 Conference Schedule

Con One in Woodstock, VT on **May 27-29**

Con Two in Boston, MA on **July 1-3**

Con Three on Star Island (Portsmouth, NH) on **August 3-5**

The new schedule is:

2023 Conference Schedule (tentative)

Con One in Woodstock, VT on **June 16-18**

Con Two on Star Island (Portsmouth, NH) on **July 16-19**

Con Three on in Boston, MA on **August 11-13**

These changes are already renegotiated with Star Island and are presently being reworked in Boston. One by one, the details are falling into place. Most importantly, we remain securely within our budget parameters.

Lastly, following up on the October Youth Leadership Summit in Killington, I have continued to work closely with Sumanth Krishna at Woodstock Union. I met with approximately 25 students (including three North Chapel kids) on Thursday, December 15th. The Brave Light Youth Exchange Project was met with enthusiasm. Students were given preliminary information about the program (including logistical information such as the Brave Light website, the charter bus company website, the Star Island website, etc.) and were informed that there would be a January informational meeting planned for parents and their questions. I will invite Chloe and Emily to join me for that meeting. I am also reaching out to Sharon Academy, just I did last year. Our contact is still Christa Wurm.

Pastoral Care

There have been ten, new and acute pastoral concerns. Pru's health challenges and transportation needs are public now. So, too, is Tisha Ellis's recent fall (from which she is recovering at home), Akanka's move from Melishwood to the Homestead west of town and the untimely death of Rodney Emerson Croft of East Barnard. Rodney was the patriarch of one of the pillar families in East

Barnard, Having married and created a family with Mary (Van Alstyne) Croft. Rodney was a Marine and proudly served his country in Vietnam. He was a dedicated family man and served as the Commander of the American Legion Post #24 in Woodstock, as the Cemetery Commissioner in Barnard was a leader in the Broad Brook Volunteer Fire Department for many years. He was not a member of North Chapel but was central in our broader community.

Lastly, I have asked Kathy to consider a question: What is the Board's vision for social justice? As with the leadership model discussion, I don't expect that we will generate answers at the December Board meeting but I think tht it is important to raise the question, to start the conversation and to begin to dream about possibilities. There is no other way to make the dreams come true. To that end, I have begun a conversation with Michael Zsoldos that might provide a means, moving forward, to position North Chapel to take advantage of its greatest strengths (joy, chief among them) and be of service to the larger community.

Watching the SE kids, under Chloe's singing "This Little Light of Mine" was one of the highpoints of my ministerial year. They sang,
Hide it under a bushel?
NO!
I'm gonna let it shine!

The SE kids sang, supported my the beautiful music of Low Lily. It doesn't get much more beautiful than that.

Thank you all for leading in this most challenging time.

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