

Minister's Board Report—The New, Old Display Case

June 19th, 2023

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

North Universalist Chapel Society

Two young men from Enfield, New Hampshire have been attending North Chapel services for last two years. No one at North Chapel had seen either of them until the Serenity service because these two young men have been watching services online.

Two lovely men. They introduced themselves during the service. Anne Marinello invited them to do so. They took her up on it. It was a beautiful moment. I turned to Diane who was seated at the organ before playing the opening hymn. I pointed to her gently and said, "Thank you." I thanked her for the intense partnership that she and I shared during the COVID years.

The story of the church became visible to us.

Moments later, Peter Rousmaniere approached the chancel during Joys and Concerns and expressed his gratitude to a community that had the courage to bring an unlikely idea into being. He told the brief history of Bookstock and thanked Akankha Perkins personally. After the service, Peter made a bee-line over to me and said, "If this is what is happening at North Chapel, the church is going to grow." Peter knew nothing about the 20 new members that North Chapel has attracted. And frankly, I was too touched at the time by what he said to deliver that news myself.

And Jen Belton was visiting. She and I met for the first time and that was beautiful. The service was wonderful and the energy was high and the

choir sounded fantastic!! I don't mean for this Report to sound like the greeting from Lake Wobegon—"Where the women are strong, the men are good looking, and all the children are above average"—but it's true. North Chapel is doing very well.

Of course, we face real financial concerns and we need to keep facing them squarely. At the same and more importantly, we need to remain good steward of the beautiful story of the church. To that end, we have an opportunity.

As some of you may remember, the Board and an array of church leaders have been in conversation about a kiosk, about an "old, external display case" with an interesting history. I wrote about all of this in my Minister's Board Report a year and a half ago. I went back and retrieved what I wrote to refresh our memories.

Minister's Board Report—The Old Display Case

December 20th, 2021

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

North Universalist Chapel Society

MMonths ago, I was playing guitar at Silver Lake, my spiritual practice on fair-weather mornings. I was approached by a woman from the community named Hope Haviland. She needed my contact information. She wanted to send me pictures of something that she discovered on the back of an old barn in Strafford. It was an old, external display case that used to be part of the building here at North Chapel. The details of how it got there were not clear but, because they were doing some work on the barn, they

reached out. They didn't want the display case to get further damaged or destroyed.

Time had taken down its finishes, rusted its hinges and broken its glass, but it has a haunting spirit that endures, a spirit that is made better by the wind and weather. Randy Leavitt and I retrieved the case and I have



reached out to Gina to talk about what we might do with it after it is restored to working condition. She's already on board. We'll be meeting to discuss this further in January. This case carried the old words of the church and that is valuable. It carries a history that resisted being torn down and discarded for many years.

In short, I need to learn from this old case. I need the skills that it embodies. Maybe many of us do. I wonder how it might guide leadership

conversation, particularly during the COVID resurgence. We need lessons in endurance these days. I will bring this idea to Worship Committee and also to Buildings and Grounds. I also invite each of you, as stewards of North Chapel, to reflect on the active ways that this project might contribute to our culture. I will also reach out to Chloe Powell to find out what insights she might offer. This old display case was a part of us and is becoming a part of us again—after separation of many years. [end quote]

Well, this display case has been restored. Randy Leavitt has done a masterful job. The opportunity before is this: We can use this kiosk to strengthen the ministry of North Chapel. As you may know from the 12/20 Board

Report above, I have already consulted with the Worship Committee and with Building and Grounds. I did this to see if it was worth getting the project started. The restoration project took several months to do and it came out beautifully. We further discussed what I (and then, we) consider to be its best and highest use and, therefore, its most strategic placement. The more centrally and prominently the kiosk is located, the more powerfully it will register of the spiritual imaginations of the membership. For this reason, I believe that the best and highest uses of the newly restored kiosk are historic and spiritual.

If the kiosk were mounted on the wall of the former front office, opposite the front door, its sense of history would resonate with all who enter in through that door. It would provide a unique space for deep expression. This is new for North Chapel. We already have bulletin boards in the community hall and in the alcove area. The kiosk offers something that is new, something that could provide a sense of real identity. These opportunities are rare.

I think that it is important to resist naming (and, thereby, limiting) what this is and what it might become. We don't know these things. I think that it



is important to step back, take a breath and allow the congregation and the energies of the church to come into an awareness of the unique opportunity that is unfolding before us, an opportunity that even we know little about at this point. This kind of mystery is not new to us.

Four years ago, North Chapel leadership began to dream about this church becoming a beacon for youth and young adults. It is important that North Chapel (and all places of worship) think intentionally and strategically about serving the needs of this population of people. They may or may not join the church. This is not the objective. Church objectives, when they are healthiest, are not means to an end. "If we build it, they will come" is an interesting sentiment but Unitarian Universalism asks and that powerfully insists that we follow our own spiritual paths in life. If we try to "draw people in" with programs that are less than healthy, they may come but they will not stay. This will not be their best option. If we strive to become the best possible expression of ourselves, we will continue to be surprised, like we were last Sunday.

This kind of forward thinking is clearly the tradition of North Chapel and Chris Bartlett and others been championing this for years. This tradition is what Peter Rousmaniere held up in the example of Bookstock. Sustainable Woodstock and the Twin Pines Housing Project fall right in line with this.

Michael Zsoldos told me about this history on the way to the Imagine Zero Concert that Kate Johnson, Cliff Johnson and Ben Kogan dreamed up and brought into being recently. Imagine Zero was an outdoor musical gathering that brought together hundreds and hundreds of people. They came from all over the State of Vermont and beyond BY ELECTRIC

VEHICLES whenever possible. In the middle of the concert, Ben Kogan delivered a space appropriate message about sustainability. The planning team saw to it that the vendors were all on board, that “zero waste” was the order of the day and it really worked. I am in the process of developing a relationship with ideas as beautiful as theirs. We can be wise stewards of such processes by making highest and best use of the kiosk.

Peter is right. North Chapel is a community that has the courage to bring unlikely ideas into being. These things move steadily forward and they move forward at the speed of trust. They grow where they are lovingly nurtured. In the past, in BC times (read: Before COVID-19), these unlikely ideas were things like Bookstock, Sustainable Woodstock and the Twin Pines Housing Project. North Chapel was the steward of these. Now, the unlikely ideas are things like Window Dressers, the Blood Drive, Brave Light, the return of the Classical Music Series under that direction of Margaret Edwards and the June 4th dramatic reading from Woodstock Anthology by Kyran Mcgrath, an event that was organized by Sherry Belisle. As the InTouch newsletter read,

A book was compiled in 1980 of the stories of the settlers in Woodstock the first 100 years. It's called Woodstock Anthology and the author gave the characters voices. We are inviting you to read a one-page tale - no memorization, no rehearsal! This fun and interesting event will be a fundraiser for North Chapel... The library has a copy to check out or you may borrow one of Sherry's two copies. Choose someone's tale, then let her know your choice so we don't have duplicates. She will print out your page for you. Invite a friend!

It was fun. It was a galloping success. It was enticing to the media. The Upper Valley Papparazzi was there. 😊!

We commonly use the word “stewardship” when we are talking about the Annual Budget Drive. Yet, there is a deeper stewardship about which we must remain continually aware. We are stewards of a brave light that brings unlike ideas into being. Most commonly, this unlikely idea looks like community.

I can briefly report that Brave Light remains on track. Contracts to Sherrí Mitchell and Tim DeChristopher have been sent out. I expect to hear back from them this week. We are coordinating with Star Island about health and safety issues. Permission slips to families just went out. The new bus contract has been proposed. They have been SO gracious with us over the years. Their staff is being assembled and the programming is taking shape.

By hook and by crook, Brave Light is maintaining relationship with our partner in Taunton after a great deal of *sturm und drang*. As an unlikely benefit, the Brave Light Youth Exchange Project is like to save significant resources and remains in conversation with major funders about the possibility of continuing next summer.

Prior to closing, I want to thank the Yeager family and Forrest, in particular, for his commitment his musical dreams and for his creative drive with his guitar. I knew I like him when I showed him my Martin and he didn't want to give it back. Congratulations on your graduation, my friend. We will miss you but we look forward to hearing what unfolds for you in college.

The arc of the story of our lives and the lives of those we love can be told centrally and gracefully. This is why it would be wise for North Chapel to gently widen the conversation about how best to tell it. To this end, I would like to consult the Worship Team, Welcoming and Engagement, the nascent Spiritual Exploration Committee and with the History Committee that does not yet exist. I would also like to reach out wise leaders like Chris Bartlett, Don and Susan, Cookie, Pru, V and others for their thoughts on

how best to make use of the display case that Randy Leavitt has so beautifully restored. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the statements of beliefs by members new and old could help us to tell our story? It would provide North Chapel with something historic, something unique and something new. I have many ideas about how to do this and I look forward to exploring them.

In closing, I was pleased and excited when I learned that Kathy Astemborski and asked Pati Hernandez to speak at North Chapel. As you may already know, Pati Hernandez leads a group process of intuitive storytelling. Telling My Story is as much a theatrical event as it is a religious one. Here, I use the word "religion" in its ancient meaning—"to bind" and "to connect."

I have known and felt connected to Pati for several years now. I am always inspired by her, always delighted and always surprised. Kathy offered a beautiful introduction. She said,

Good morning. I first met Patty Hernandez when I was working at Southeast State Correctional Facility and she came in to do a program called Telling My Story. The premise of the program is Pati would work with both incarcerated women and Dartmouth students within the walls of the Correctional Facility. They would create a storyline based on their



own experience and create a play that would be performed for the other incarcerated women and guests invited from the community. Sounds like a great idea, right? It certainly was from this social justice perspective and from the point of view of the incarcerated women who were able to participate in such an innovative program. From the perspective of security and operations, it was a nightmare it was unheard of at that time to allow students from outside work side by side with the incarcerated population and then invite community members. Some staff thought it was crazy but we did it.

Kathy and Pati were being stewards of the courage that brings unlikely ideas into being.

After assumed the pulpit following Kathy's introduction, Pati broke immediately into tears. She was touched by the grace and the beauty of this community. She said, "Hello, everybody. I'm speechless." Through unhidden tears, she said, "This will you pass, I promise." I let her know that her tears were welcome in the Sanctuary. How could it be otherwise, no matter how old we are. And she said,

That's true. That's also true. That's how we deal, right? [] I have to say I was moved from the beginning. I'm always moved when I see people together, when humanity shows its best, when I see the beauty and the strength of humanity. And the desire, also, right?

We're very tired right now. I'm very tired and it's painful what we see. It's painful what experience but...having these spaces lift me up all the time. It gives me hope and strength...

Clearly, we are witness to a deeper stewardship. How is it that North Chapel can be serve its needs? ld