

Minister's Annual Report

January 14, 2023

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Minister, North Universalist Chapel Society

Manchester, England, England
Across the Atlantic Sea
And I'm a genius, genius!!
I believe in God.
And I believe that God believes in Claude
and that's me!!

—Hair, 1967

Join the fun of life. Sing with courage and great passion from the mountaintop!! Take station beneath the clouds of heaven and make your joyful noise!!

If you are thinking to yourself while your reading this, "There goes Rev. Leon again," I am truly delighted. I hope you think that I'm being a little bit crazy these days. Look what we're going through. For many of us, these have been among the most trying years of our lives. So, go tell it on the mountain already! What are you waiting for? It's ok if we celebrate ourselves a little bit.

The pandemic has been devastating. There's war in Ukraine and Russia. American political reality is in a state of chaos and disarray... Even here inside the bubble of the Upper Valley, we've seen more than our share of hardships. Health challenges have landed many of us in the hospital over the last few months. There was a murderous rage back in June that forced the town of Woodstock to "Shelter In Place" until the killer was apprehended by the police. We are struggling to recover from the lock-downs of heart and spirit that

have changed our lives so markedly since March of 2020. It's probably wise by now to be a little bit crazy these days. It's probably good for us. Just look what we've all been going through.

So, when Claude sings about believing in God and sings about God believing in Claude, it's probably healthy—healthy that Claude is faithful and so fully self-expressed...even if he's being a little crazy.

Probably, we are all a little bit crazy these days. How could one expect it to be otherwise? Life is crazy now. We are out of the common practices of fellowship and we need to recover. We're operating outside of the basic assumptions about how life should be. And normal breathing in-and-out has become dangerous. The normal parts of life have been stripped away. That's why I quoted *Hair* at the beginning of the Annual Report. In *Hair*, tragic and unimaginable things happen...and then, the play ends. In life right now, we are not spared. There is no merciful ending at which point we take stock of our lives and move on. We are experiencing a crisis that is unending.

So, what should we do now? What does it mean to recover from such a crisis? How do we go about the hard work of rebuilding? Claude made a joyful noise. He sang. That was his brave answer in this world that has lost its mind. Long before him, the poet Walt Whitman reached the same conclusion. In "Song of Myself," Whitman wrote,

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab
and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

Is it now time for us to be tameless and untranslatable? In other words, it is time for us to imagine newer ways of doing things? How will North Chapel emerge from the challenges of COVID-19?

Since March of 2020, North Chapel has been in emergency response mode. We set out to weather the storm that we assumed would subside over time. As the reality sets in that we are in a new world now, how will we move forward with grace and gratitude?

It is fair to say that crafters of the By-Laws did not compensate that challenge of COVID-19. Yet, they can still guide us moving forward, if we appeal to them insightfully. They will not always provide us with answers but they will not fail to articulate that values that have been important for North Chapel in the past, are important to North Chapel in the present and will remain important to North Chapel in the future. ARTICLE II clearly states that,

The purpose of this Society is to provide a free pulpit and voice for liberal religion and to nurture a religious community bound by no dogma and restricted by no creed. This Society is a fellowship of seekers after truth, beauty, and goodness. We strive to be tolerant of the ideas and behavior of others. We rely on reason, individual freedom, and democracy as our methods.

We can ask ourselves, ‘How are the methods of reason, individual freedom, and democracy of value to us today?’ Article II concludes with these words:

We join together for an understanding of our world, for cooperation with our fellow human beings and for the enrichment of the community. We seek spiritual and intellectual growth in the individual and in the church.

How are these things meaningful for us today?

When we want to know how things are done around here, it is wise to consult the By-Laws. They provide a great deal of helpful

insight. When we want to know how things are meaningful around here, the By-Laws are a very good place to start. They will not always provide us with answers but they will not fail to prepare us for the journey ahead.

We need to have a sober conversation about our intentions. We need to speak freely and compassionately about our vision, our mission and our values. And most of all, we need to cherish, honor, nurture and strengthen our community. We need to agree upon what drives us as we look to the days ahead.

Under normal circumstances, Annual Reports are retrospective. They tend to look back on the accomplishments of a church year well spent. And we had a tremendous year, thematically reflecting on the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism.

January Theme

The First Principle—The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person

1/2 All

1/9 Transformation and Transcendence (Rev. Pratima Dharm)

1/16 Tutu, King and the Roaring Engine of Delight

1/23 Epiphanes (Gwen Groff)

1/30 Thich Nhat Hanh and the Native Tongue of Loving Speech

February Theme

The Second Principle—Justice, Equity and Compassion in Human Relations

2/8 Freeing My Mind

2/13 On Truths and Love (Marta Ceroni)

2/20 A Foundation of Courage

2/27 “Who Is She?” (Messengers of War and Peace)

March Theme

The Third Principle—Acceptance of One Another and Encouragement to Spiritual Growth in Our Congregations

- 3/6 We Begin Again in Love
- 3/13 Hero Always Wears the Sign of Hope
- 3/20 A Way of Saying Yes
- 3/27 How Can We Respond to These Troubled Times (Richard Schramm, Polly Forcier and Anne Macksoud)

April Theme

The Fourth Principle—Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning

- 4/3 Letting Our Life's Work Reinvent the World (Rev. Dr. Nancy Jay Crumbine)
- 4/10 The Measure of Our Days
- 4/17 Seven Holy Words—An Easter Reflection
- 4/24 Forever This Earth Beneath My Feet

May Theme

The Fifth Principle—The Right of Conscience and the Use of the Democratic Process Within Our Congregations and in Society at Large

- 5/1 Change the World Kids (with Anne Macksoud)
- 5/8 Some People Just Can't Tell a Joke
- 5/15 "Oh, Mercy" (Upper Valley Pulpit Exchange with Rev. Paul Sawyer, Rev. Jan was in Hartland and Rev. Leon was in Norwich)
- 5/22 Shall We Save or Savor the World
- 5/29 The Processes and the Purposes of Goodness

June Theme

The Sixth Principle—The Goal of World Community with Peace, Liberty and Justice for All

- 6/5 "When I Breathe In," said the forests of Vermont (Leon Dunkley and Lynn Peterson)
- 6/12 The Ghost Pepper Papers
- 6/19 Fifty Years of WISE (Peggy O'Neil)
- 6/26 The Common Sense of Sadness (Melinda Haas)

July Theme

The Seventh Principle—Respect for the Interdependent Web of All Existence of Which We Are a Part

7/3 Patience Has Hopeful Eyes

7/10 Mundane or Miraculous?—The Age-old Argument Between Average and Impressive Tomatoes

7/17 Grace—Part One

7/24 Does My Cup Really Runeth Over? (James Marmar)

7/31 Meditations on a Lawn: One More Small Way to Combat Climate Change

August Theme

The Eighth Principle

8/7 Grace—Part Free

8/14 What We Learn From Others (Delia Clark)

8/21 An American Peace of Mind

8/28 Upper Valley UU Congregations Joint Service (Barnard, Hartland, Norwich, Strafford, Woodstock)

September Theme

Togetherness

9/4 Stories of Waters

9/11 Clouds of Our Unknowing

9/18 When Justice Has Been Served With Help, Can People Change (Kitty O'Hara)

9/25 Preaching to the Corn: Perfection or Possibility...choose one (Rev. Jordinn Nelson Long)

October Theme

Transforming Conflict

10/2 Seeking Balance With Earth and Sky (Michael Caduto)

10/9 The Shift That Has To Happen Sometimes

10/16 Laughter, Courage and Joy—Reflections on Forty Years of Friendship in Unitarian Universalism

- 10/23 Have Faith (A.K.A. Don't Bite the Mailman)
10/30 The Beautiful Masks of Fellowship

November Theme

Resilience

- 11/6 Being Non-Binary in a Binary World (Scottie Taylor)
11/13 Sacred Conversation
11/20 Sacred Conversations (cont.)
11/27 Care

December Theme

Into Great Darkness

- 12/4 Joy at the Top and Joy at the Very Bottom of the Well
12/11 Receive
12/18 Approaching Deepest Darkness (Low Lily)
12/24 Christmas Eve Service—6:00pm (North Chapel Choir,
Children's Choir, Sophia Shackleton)
12/24 Christmas Eve Service—8:00pm

More than this, we faced a great challenge together as a community and we learned how to adapt. We learned how to create community different ways. As we move into 2023, we would be wise to think about and plan on expanding these new ways of creating community. When the warm weather returns, we can take advantage of this opportunity. We can rebuild our community safely by being outdoors with one another. This is one among many ways that we can begin to rebuild our community.

The Pastoral Care Team is thriving. Anne Marinello, Laura Foley and myself are keeping very busy with the pastoral needs of our community.

Brave Light is in full stride. These are the active canvassing days. As you know, the Brave Light Youth Exchange Project is like a

varsity traveling team for joy and justice. It is a grant-funded project that is open to a small group of high school students. Apart from the registration fee, the Brave Light Project is free.

Brave Light brings together two groups of students, one group comes from central Vermont and the other group comes from Boston. Each group will have 15 participants. We will gather once a month—in June, July and August—to have fun, to work on interesting projects as a team and to develop the leadership skills that we need to meet the challenges of the future.

Rural life in Vermont and urban life in Boston will provide the backdrop as we engage with challenging issues—climate change and sustainability, race and justice. We ask, “Who are we today?” and “Who can we become tomorrow?” We explore the answers together.

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

Bus travel between Woodstock, Boston and Portsmouth will be provided by USA Bus Charter (www.usabuscharter.com). The ferry to and from Star Island (<https://starisland.org>) will be provided by that Isles of Shoals Steamship Company (<https://islesofshoals.com>). All food, lodging, program and supervision will be provided by Brave Light.

Closing

There was a lovely gift in my office. I discovered it on an icy Saturday morning, as the Shambala Yoga class was ending and right before my meeting with Mary and Kathy, as they step into the leadership of the Board of Trustees here at North Chapel. The gift was wrapped in a

beautiful way. When I opened it, I found a gift. It was a book the Matthew Friedman had given to me after one of our conversations about how we might best respond in these difficult days. And what was the title of this book that I was gifted? Resilience—The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges (ten key ways to weather and bounce back from stress and trauma). It was written by Stephen Southwick and Dennis Charney, both medical doctors. According to them, there are ten elements of resilience:

1. Optimism
2. Facing Fear
3. Moral Compass
4. Religion & Spirituality
5. Social Support
6. Role Models
7. Physical Fitness
8. Brain Fitness
9. Cognitive and Emotional Flexibility
10. Meaning, Purpose and Growth

As I learned from my follow-up conversation with Matthew, collective resilience is a different animal, one that may or may not require these ten elements as a prerequisite. We will have to see how things unfold over time but at this point, I am excited to get started on these ten things. It is my observation that resilience is a much stronger foundation than righteousness. As Joelle Seavey and I enter more intentionally into the outward work of racial justice, we will be driven by the inward work of resilience. Thank you, Matthew. I look forward to the next part of our ongoing conversation.

Until then, may we all join the real fun of life. May we sing with courage and passion from the rooftops of the world!! May we be tameless and untranslatable in our love for this world in which we live. And may we take station beneath the heavens and make a joyful noise!!

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