

# Minister's Board Report

February 17, 2023

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North Universalist Chapel Society

**T**he Most Radical Thing We Can Do Is Introduce Ourselves To One Another

Four brothers, three of them living, approached the chancel to light candles in honor of their mother, Kay. With four, new, tapered candles, they took the old flame from the chalice and offered a few words of peace. They, then, jointly lit another pillar candle for their four lives are joined in hers. The casket was carried out of the Sanctuary toward the end of the service to realize her departure from us. Kathleen "Kay" Camp, lost to us on February the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Born Kathleen Vera Worth, born at home in Bridgewater Center, the daughter of Earl and Minnie...wife of Dwight Cabot Camp, her high school sweetheart. They married on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of July in 1959 and together they spent seventy years cherishing love and life. Mother to four sons. Grandmother to their beautiful



children. Second mother to many more. Kay touched many lives with joy.

Beautiful things happen at memorial services. During the Memorial Service for Kathleen “Kay” Camp, Dwight cried out, “She’s gone!!” in the most stunning and most courageous of ways. After the Memorial Service for David Donath had concluded, I fell into conversation with a woman who had driven down from Toronto, Ontario to be present that day. She had



come down with her husband and their two, brave sons. That family was among the twenty or so church members who had taken the eight-hour journey that weekend to support the man—the Christian-identified man—who they knew and loved so well.

Pleased with the service, impressed by North Chapel and aware of possible, theological differences, she said to me, smiling deeply from her heart, “The one thing that we all have in common is Jesus.”

I wanted to respond. My thoughts ran quickly. They spilled over each other in my mind. I wanted to share how rarely Jesus is mentioned from this free pulpit, even though I wasn’t particularly

proud of that fact. I was neither proud nor ashamed. I was frustrated...because the mood of the moment made it hard for me to express what I was thinking. I was in conflict. I was in disagreement. I was not at rest. She was.

I frowned. I snarled. I sighed. I smiled. I matched her joy and said, "Yes."

We have arguments and reactions in this faith, for sure, but we have real theology, too. We stand apart from that theology at our peril. As a Board, as leaders at North Chapel, you are stewards of this theology. You are the stewards of this shared ministry. How does that sit with you? According to my reading of our Bylaws, this is clearly the case. Our Bylaws state the following:

ARTICLE II. Purpose.

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 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.

We tend to cleave to the part about their being "no dogma" in this tradition but we tend to shy away from taking ourselves seriously as a "religious community." We tend to make an art of our discomfort with this language and this art of discomfort tends to disserve us when someone that we loved dearly passes away.

Unitarian Universalism appeals to those who seek a sense of spirit that is free. Expressing this free-spiritedness is intensely difficult. It is the challenge of a lifetime. It is among the bravest things we do but, of course, we fall short sometimes. And when we fall short, what do we do? What is our common practice? Our answers to these questions define our collective theology. Our answers to these questions are expressed each Sunday in our free pulpit, the limits of which are set by this community (not by the leaders of this community but by the community itself). The quality of leadership in communities such as this is determined by the quality of fellowship in communities like this. Following this, the quality of fellowship in communities like this is determined by how well and how honestly we know one another...and truly knowing one another is challenging.

Leaders in such communities are stewards of this challenge. In a limited sense, we raise money, we manage budgets, we evaluate employees, we schedule events and the like. In a more expansive sense, we pool resources, we balance energy, we nurture quality, we organize the life of the church and the wider community. Two different languages. Two different dreams. Two different senses of possibility. Same dollar but different values. Money spends better in the presence of powerful dreams.

Powerful dreams. This is the broader stewardship. For example, it is truly important to make sure that we do not mismanage the grant money that North Chapel has raised for its Brave Light project but, far more powerfully, it is truly important to care about the youth experience in the Upper Valley.

Ultimately, North Chapel is a values-based endeavor. It does not exist shorn of the good work that it does in the community. This good work is the deepest dream of the church. This is our mission:

Guided by Unitarian Universalist principles, the North Chapel aspires to be a congregation that nurtures the growth and supports the needs of its members, sustains a strong spiritual life within a loving church community, and seeks to have a positive impact on the world around us.

This is why we gather...and each of us knows this in our own way. So, what do we do when visitors from Canada say things like, “The one thing that we all have in common is Jesus”?

I suppose that we have a choice. We could respond in a narrow sense or we could respond in broader sense. It is not the job of stewardship and shared ministry to prescribe the proper response. That would be dogma. It is the job of stewardship and shared ministry to be aware of the choice that lies before us and to make this choice wisely and well. An artist writes,

Sometimes I'm happy but often times, not so  
Years and years of trying and not knowing where to go  
How do you do? It's good to know you  
May we find, in our togetherness, honest joy

This is not poetry. It's sage advice. We should take it...because in honest joy, great things are possible.

Now, a lot of people think that I am an abstract thinker—and I'm ok with that—but do you get how crazy it is to be strictly practical about the sacred? A church is the wild eye of inspiration...even though the wild part makes us nervous.

Lately, Brené Brown has become theological. Brené is the author of the best-selling book, Daring Greatly. She's become quite famous. She is a lecturer and a consultant who commonly speaks on the themes of shame, vulnerability, and leadership. She tells the story of being invited to a Fortune 500 company to talk to them about innovation, creativity and change. The provisos were that she was to abandon the shame work and was to avoid conversations about vulnerability. She responded that shame is often required for growth and that "vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change."

She started on the TEDTalk circuit but she is less secular these days. Just recently, she said,

Jesus comes and says, "Okay, I am love. I sit with the people that you're not allowed to talk to. I do all of the hard things. I make all that hard choices. I love the people who are unlovable. I feed the people who are not supposed to be taken care of. I don't tolerate shame. I don't tolerate attacks. I'm love. And it's hard and messy and dirty. And if you really love—I mean fierce, big love—you'll become dangerous to people.

I'm being this heavily theological because we need big, fierce love these days. I'm being this heavily theological because we just lost 42,000 people in Turkiye and Syria and, absent the theological realm, there is no public conversation large enough/strong enough to hold this magnitude of loss. This coming Sunday, seven-year-old kids might ask questions about this. What do you think we should say if and when they do? My friend and colleague Rev. Nadezhka Bolz-Weber just recently posted,

God took all of that sin upon God's own broken body and then, in response, gave us nothing but forgiveness and blessedness and resurrection. And something was accomplished... To me, something was accomplished there that is for all people and all things and all of Creation. I think it's God's nature to redeem us and all of Creation continually and God is working that out—even if we don't see it—all of the time. That's God's work and God's nature. That feels like good news to me.

This may or may not be consistent with your personal theology but it is a category of spirit that is large enough/strong enough to hold this magnitude of what we face these days.

It was enough, years ago, to be spiritually rebellious. It is still so fruitful today—in fact, I highly encourage it—but, it seems to me, this is no longer enough. Reasonable people can argue about this. Why mention it? Healthy churches don't foreclose on ideas as rich as these. Healthy churches magnify these values. What should North Chapel do with ideas and values as rich as these?

Twenty or so people drove to Woodstock from Canada. They drove to North Chapel but North Chapel was not their true destination. Their true destination was the sacrament, the gathering itself. They would have driven anywhere for the opportunity to profess their faith and to express their feelings for their beloved David Donath. They would have followed Cathy Donath anywhere.

Cathy Donath chose North Chapel because she knew her heart was safe and sound within our sanctuary. The Board is the steward of that possibility. This is the deeper stewardship of North Chapel.

Three times during our Annual Meeting, this deeper stewardship became visible:

1. When Francis expressed of the value of having an electric stove and oven in the kitchen
2. When David observed that by the time of the meeting, there were approximately 20% fewer pledge units contributing to the annual budget (which is spectacularly important)
3. When Sue asked about the line item allocation for Spiritual Exploration

There are practical responses and values-based responses in moment like these. We are highly skilled in the practical responses but these responses are not always adequate. They do not always serve us well.

Sue asked a question about the SE budget. She was asking a question about values. She received a practical response which did not satisfy. Fortunately, she did not allow that response to shut her down. She pressed on. What value was Sue driving at? What was the intent of what she was saying? As the Board prepares to search for a replacement for Chloe Powell, the major issue before the Board is: What is your vision for Spiritual Exploration at North Chapel?

This is the most beautiful question to raise at religious institutions. We could not possibly do better. How we answer it is of the highest importance.

### Brave Light

We are in the recruitment phase. Please review the application and offer what suggestions you may have. The applications will become



discrete Google docs to be filled out online. I made a second formal presentation at Sharon Academy and passed out fliers. I have already gotten several responses. We will be following up with them this week. Things are slower at Woodstock Union and we are trying very hard. We are working with Sumanth Krishna by way of Principal Garon Smail.

I met with Rev. Elizabeth Carrier-Ladd last week in Boston. Things are moving slowly forward with recruitment in Boston. We have entered into partnership with Rev. Robin Junker-Boyce from the First Congregational Church in Thetford.

We are in contract negotiation with the bus company.

### Pastoral Care Team

The Pastoral Care Team will be expanding. Anne Marinello, Laura Foley and I have entered into conversation with Judy Williamson. I will

keep the Board updated about how this goes.

### Social Justice

The Woodstock Clergy Group has planned an event to recognize the one-year of the war in Ukraine.

Ministry is extremely busy. I am beginning to plan for more release-time as Brave Light needs increase.

