

Minister's Board Report

March 17th, 2023

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

Minister, North Universalist Chapel Society

We should smell delicious. This should be a goal of ours.

I made three lasagnas this morning. This was my commitment to Kathy Blanton...or to Mary Astemborski. I don't remember. They are merging into a single person these days. I offered 2 lasagnas that normally sell at \$100,000 a piece (it's good lasagna). I was willing to come down 50% for the Auction fee but, sadly, we did not make that goal. But I made lasagna anyway and it smells delicious in my home but that's not what I mean by "Smell Delicious." I should probably tell you what I mean.

I used to describe myself as non-competitive. I tried to convince myself that I was a non-competitive person but I didn't believe myself. I knew inside that it wasn't true. I thought that being competitive meant being selfish and opportunistic. I thought that was unattractive so I wanted to be the opposite of that. I wanted to be non-competitive. I



thought, somehow, that being non-competitive would make me a better person...better, as in 'better than other people.'

I learned very quickly that I am not a non-competitive person. I am a deeply competitive person who doesn't want to admit that to himself. In other words, I am truly and deeply competitive but "m also in denial about it. Finally, I can admit this to myself and to all of you.

I begin this Board Report in this way because I feel comfortable enough to do so. I feel comfortable enough to share how contradicted and shallow I can be. What has made me comfortable is a combination of things—feeling more settled and grounded with my family, feeling more settled and grounded and settled in life, feeling less anxious about the Brave Light Program, feeling healthy in body and soul, deeply engaged in my spiritual practice...and feeling relieved about fighting with the ones I love.

I realized a long while ago that I truly honored my rage. I cherished anger and ferociousness, so long as they are not being wielded t someone. I do not enjoy hostility. What this has come to mean is that I fight fiercely with those I love. It means that, as I explore my ministerial call (my deep reasons for choosing to become a minister), I must keep widening the circle of people who I love. I am deeply called by the work of justice and healing. They tend to happen in that order. After we skin our knee, we clean the wound and apply the bandages. Then, time can do the work of healing. After we break our leg, we set the bone and bind the body...with a splint or a sling or a cast of some kind to limit mobility. Then, time can do the work of healing.

Five months ago, I invited the Board to reflect of the subject of conflict. I suggested that we might read the wise words of Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley. She wrote the book on conflict...literally. Her book is called transforming CONFLICT—The Blessings of Congregational Turmoil. Unsurprisingly, no one really likes to talk about conflict. Almost everyone hates it. We avoid it like the plague (an expression that was much more believable BEFORE the global pandemic). transforming CONFLICT begins with an introduction by Gil Rendle. Gil Rendle Senior Consultant with the Texas Methodist Foundation in Austin. He used to serve as a senior consultant with the Alban Institute, and as senior pastor of two urban congregations in Pennsylvania. He is also the author of Quietly Courageous—Leading the Church in a Changing World. He is an insightful man. He writes,

This is a good book. It is an important book. That's why I have a problem. My problem is that people may not pick up this book unless they have a problem—or more specifically, a problem in the congregation.

As a lifetime inhabitant of congregations, I know the pattern. Differences both large and small, are a part of the very fabric of all congregations, of all communities. In addition, many--if not most--congregations (persons, families, communities) have experienced some level of trauma. When traumas intrude and when differences of preference, practice, or opinion rub up against one another sufficiently to create discomforting heat, the congregation turns to the leader(s) to "fix it." When the fix is not forthcoming, the differences deepen and people feel like they have to 'do something.' One of the things people do at such a time is search for resources to help them with their problem. That's my problem. That is the time people will most likely pick up this book.

So, here's the thing. We have a major budget issue before us. Much larger than the budget issue is our anxiety about money.

We don't like to talk about conflict and we don't like to talk about money. The combination, while seldom dangerous, rarely leads to joy and prosperity. It does lead to anxiety and anxiety leads to conflict. When that dynamic becomes a cycle, we skin our knee and we break our leg. That tends to happen when one plays the game of life...but injury is not the endgame. Insight is the endgame. Wisdom, love and laughter, deep compassion... These are the endgames.

Do you remember the scene in *Dead Poets Society* when Mr. Keating (Robin Williams) talks to his students about the value of poetry? Many of his students could not even begin to understand the value of poetry. Keating was aware of this and he said,

No matter what anyone tells you, words and ideas can change the world. I see that look in Mr. Pitts' eye...like 19th-century literature has nothing to do with going to business school or medical school. Right? Maybe. Mr. Hopkins, you may agree with him, thinking, "Yes, we should simply study [poetry blithely] and learn our rhyme and meter [while we] go quietly about the business of achieving other ambitions." I have a little secret for you. Huddle up. Huddle up! We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race and the human race is filled with passion. Medicine, law, business, engineering...these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life, but poetry, beauty, romance, love... These are what we stay alive for.

What do we stay alive for? As a Board, we should entertain this question...its fullness and in its enormity. We don't need to answer this question for anyone but ourselves but we have to imagine the question together, especially and leaders at North Chapel. When we

entertain the big questions and make room for others to do the same, we will smell delicious to the outside world.

Every one of us experiences conflict—healthy conflict and unhealthy conflict, constructive conflict and destructive conflict. We experience most of the combinations—healthy, constructive conflict (fostering a positive, spiritual community); healthy, destructive conflict (becoming sober, giving up addictions); unhealthy, destructive conflict (violence, abusive behaviors, oppression, etc.)... I don't know what unhealthy, constructive conflict is... (maybe eating Twinkies when you're trying to give up on a diet that really isn't working for you).

The point is this: When we avoid conflict, we are usually avoiding the unhealthy, destructive kind. I hate that kind of conflict. I think that it does no one any good. The other kinds of conflict actually improve our lives. When we engage in healthy conflict, we get better at stuff.

Two Sundays ago, Clara and Barbara and Chloe and I and the SE kids participated in a ritual in the sanctuary. We invited two, newer



members of the congregation (Melanie Gulde and Maryanne Postans) and two older members (Gayle Smith and Matthew Friedman). The ritual was about tying together the younger and the older energies of the church. The stole of my ministry that is

decorated with the art of Peggy Kannenstine was draped over all of their shoulders. All of them smiled. Then, they were showered in flower petals—four colors (lavender, yellow, red and orange) representing four spiritual skills (strength, hope, courage and safety). After each showering, one of the kids from the SE program was asked to shower someone in the congregation. The kids ended up being quite graceful, showering the congregation. Occasionally, they fired some petals at their parents with playful frustration. What can we say? There's conflict in life.

The four of them were smiling—Melanie, Mary Ann, Gayle and Matthew). Showered in petals of strength and hope and courage and safety, they were smiling. We are the trusted stewards of those smiles.

Gayle and Matthew almost left the church. They were in conflict with the masking policy. They were not naïve resisters and they were not misinformed. They simply felt differently about a policy and they considered moving on.

Conflict is an art and conflict resolution is an art. I will be reflecting on this deeply. In seventeen minutes, I will be getting into my car to make my second trip to North Chapel from my home in East Barnard today. I will be delivering a \$50,000 lasagna to Gayle and Matthew. I believe that they purchased it at 0.1% of the half-off asking price!!! I'm shattered. ☺

I won't be delivering a good lasagna. I will be delivering strength, hope, courage and safety as a steward of a deeper fellowship, a fellowship that transforms conflict. As our hymnal reads, "Look not afar for beauty. Lo, it glows in dew-wet grasses all around your feet."

Talking like this as leaders makes a good church smell delicious and people that we don't yet know will notice. They will drop in and say, 'hello.'



Brave Light is moving forward. Online application is live. Announcements are in in the WUHC "Opportunities" email. We will have to move to recruitment to get our numbers up. We are strategizing in Boston. Background check strategies are prepared through Star Island. We are moving into the program planning phase as Brave Lighters apply.

I will make a pastoral care report in person.

Sabbatical planning is underway and may begin as early as January of 2024, strategically a good time in the life the church.

North Chapel appeared on the front page of the Vermont Standard. The headline read: Church leaders offer prayer for Ukraine, student offer accounts. The phrase “church leaders” excludes Shir Shalom which isn’t a church. Not technically isn’t a church. It isn’t a church. It’s not a horrifying mistake but it’s not a small one. I didn’t notice at first but once I did...

We grow by inches.



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