

## Minister's Board Report

August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

North Universalist Chapel Society



Ric Masten was one of the bravest ministers, one of the bravest men I've ever known. He had the courage to see things for himself. He lived with great joy, asked others to join him there. His was a brilliant request.

The Harper-Collins Dictionary of Religion refers to him as a righteous man...saved by God from the flood. The entry reads as follows:

**Noah,** in the Hebrew Bible, a righteous man, saved, along with his family, from the flood (Genesis 6-9). **See also** ark in the Hebrew Bible; B'nai Noah, flood stories.

**Islam:** Noah (Arab. *Nu*) is the first prophet bringing punishment for the sins of humankind, according to the Qur'an and Islam. Postquranic commentary establishes the story of *Nuh* and knows of a fourth son, Canaan or Yam, who is drowned. The quranic story of Nuh is often recited by Muslims when they are about to set out on a potentially perilous journey, such as the pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj). **See also** Messenger of Allah.

In these two Abrahamic stories, God saves Noah and then, Noah, in turn, saves us—be it the Noah from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament Noah) or Nu (aka Nuh) from the Qur'an. One wonders...how many different kinds of Noah are there?

Universalist preacher-poet Ric Masten wondered about this question. He wrote a poem about this, in fact. He wrote a poem that's just a little younger than me. In 1977, RIC MASTEN published a book of poetry called *dragonflies, codfish & frogs*. In it, there is a poem entitled ANOTHER KIND OF NOAH. It's not about the Bible. It's not about a righteous man. It's not about the crazy flooding of the whole wide world. It's about a crazy man who is really just like you or me. Ric Masten wrote:

and yet when my friend marvin  
the mad poet comes out of the zoo  
every six months  
    one shoe on  
    one shoe off  
i'm always glad to see he isn't cured  
that he still limps in his mind  
    old nutty marv  
because you know i really don't want  
to run the instant replay  
of yesterday's baseball game  
i need his insane rhymes  
like straws to clutch at  
not the box score - i watch him

    paul gauguin  
watching through his own window pain  
his crazy friend  
    vincent  
winding his head up in gauze

knowing the hurt to be the very ground  
in which art grows  
and far better for him at least  
than filling galleries with slick paintings  
of wet city streets - colors reflecting  
or of little kids with big sad eyes  
at fifty bucks a throw

and though it seems unfair of me  
i need him there - at sea  
    adrift  
    tending his mad menagerie  
    another kind of noah

i need him there - dropping me a line  
each time i fall  
into that awful  
    blue period of mine

Awful, blue periods are real. We tend to retreat when we're in them. I wonder if that is the only option available to us. I wonder if there's something else out there. If there is something else out there, how can North Chapel access it. How can we nurture it? How can the North Chapel be a place where we can go through these awful, blue periods together?

Old, nutty Marv knows the answer to this question. One shoe on, one shoe off and watching through his own window pain, old Marv took his own life seriously. He didn't hide it. He didn't pretend like he was other people. He acted like no one but himself, even though he was rather odd. Old, nutty Marv is another kind of Noah, charting his own way come hell or high water.

North Chapel is and can be a beacon for people like old, nutty Marv—which is to say, for people just like you and just like me. North Chapel is and can be a real beacon for courage and bravery...for these things first require acceptance and North Chapel does acceptance well. It takes real courage to accept oneself. It's actually very hard to do. In fact, many of us spend so very many of our days figuring out how to do it. And we do ok. I'm sure that we do. I can tell because of the quality of our laughter. If I could rewrite the story of the flood (I cannot but if I could rewrite it), I would replace the flooding waters with flooding laughter. Flooding laughter is hardly punishment of the sins of humankind but it just might lead to something beautiful. Martin Luther King believed that it was not possible to overcome evil directly. He believed that one can only go after it indirectly. One must try to "crowd it out" with good rather than try to drive it out with violence. The same just might be true for the 'awful, blue periods' that Ric Masten goes through sometimes, that you and I go through sometimes. It's a good thing to reflect on and speak openly about. When we do, we are often in good company. When we do, sometimes the good way forward becomes more clear.

Going through 'awful, blue periods' may not always mean that something is wrong. It may not often mean that something is wrong. That doesn't make it any easier to talk about. It's up to each of us to decide what's right for ourselves but it's good to remain open as a community. This is what we tried to teach at Brave Light.

## Brave Light

Because of the grants that North Chapel received from the Canaday Foundation, from the Unitarian Universalist Funding Panel and from private donors, Brave Light was able to take 12 young people from the Upper Valley to Star Island for a four-day retreat. It was unimaginably beautiful. I realize that our worship theme for July-August is Imagination. As the Worship Committee has put forward,

What is imagination? The practice of waking up to possibility. The healing practice of putting ourselves in other people's shoes. The practice of completing the world by conjuring up its missing parts. The practice of allowing hope to widen our view. We can come more alive when we look beyond the obvious, soften our stance, open ourselves to other dimensions.

These words describe Brave Light precisely but the lived experience was more than this. I don't want to romanticize it. I was absolutely filled with anxiety 100% of the time. 'Will everyone enjoy themselves?' 'Will anyone be hurt?' 'Will the younger folks connect with the older folks?' 'Will the older

folks connect with the young?' 'Does everyone have their respective medications?' 'Are all of the health forms completed?' 'Do we have all the permission slips and parental notification?' 'Have the dietary questions been answered?' 'Have all the housing concerns been addressed?' 'Will the bus be there on time?' 'Will the sandwiches be ready by lunchtime in Portsmouth?' 'Will it EVER stop raining?' For our health-checks, I counted



up to twelve twelve-hundred times a day. That said, the actual, lived experience was unimaginably beautiful.

Everyone got a Brave Light Packet containing our orientation letter, the daily schedule, a notebook, a nametag, a couple of pens, some flower petals and some creative-dream materials provided to us by the generosity of Sabra Field.

Everyone got a Brave Light Packet, no matter one's number of years on the planet. Everyone got a nametag as well. The nametag had first names but not last names, so that sibling (we had a set of brothers) were not always and necessarily connected with one another. The nametags also had pronoun preferences because issues of relatedness, of sexuality and gender expression have become so important over the years. We dealt with this as gracefully as we could.



As you know, the original plan for Brave Light was to partner with our sister church in Taunton, MA. This was our plan back in 2019 B.C.—before COVID. I learned December of 2020 that the Taunton Church was in transition. After a spectacularly successful, ten-year ministry, my beloved colleague, Rev. Christana Willie McKnight chose to complete her ministry and move on to another position. This put an obvious strain on our plans. Our original administrator, April Rosario, worked very closely with the church in Taunton and with Rev. Christana but was unable to continue in her role for reasons of ministerial polity. A church in transition must defer to the needs of the incoming minister and not the outgoing minister when it comes to new programs like Brave Light.

While I was happy for Christana and supportive of her choice, this was a calamity for Brave Light, requiring a great deal of effort on our part to adjust to the change. We reached out to another Boston colleague, an obvious choice—Rev. Elizabeth (Elka) Carrier-Ladd from Dorchester. She took over Rev. Christana’s on-island role. The Boston-area recruitment efforts, however, proved much more challenging. We did not have the time that we needed in order to establish trusting relationships. Brave Light was lucky twice, though. The group of Boston-based youth that we had hoped to enroll was going out to Star Island anyway. They were going under the auspices of the Building Bridges Conference, a conference created by leaders in Taunton—Rev. Christana McKnight and April Rosario, chief among them. So, fortunately for us, Brave Light was able to meet its stated goals while saving a significant amount of its resources in the process. What is more, Rev. Christana and April were both on-island during Brave Light—Rev. Christana, in her new capacity as the Beloved Community minister at Star Island and April, as the lead organizer for the Building Bridges Conference.

This challenge-come-change-of-events presents us with a wonderful opportunity. There is significant space available for growth during the Building Bridges Conference. Were North Chapel interested in spending a week at Star next summer (and beyond), this is the conference to join. It gives us a Boston-based partner and helps us to bring the young energy of the Upper Valley to North Chapel. I strongly encourage the Board to consider going to this conference and to endorse it consistently to the congregation. We should encourage them to come. Getting away together helps us to form bonds in powerful ways. It encourages us to deepen our

connection with our tradition of faith. And it's gorgeous and fun...and there's lobster.

April Rosario was Brave Light's first administrator. Logically, she and Rev. Christana stepped down at the same time. In her place, Brave Light hired Emily Swomley of Thetford (and a member of North Chapel). Emily's

mother became ill and died in the weeks before the Brave Light Conference at Star. Obviously, at the last minute, Emily was unable to attend. Rev. Robin Junker stepped up and assumed her responsibilities. She did a spectacular job.

I have been working with Robin on a longer-term plan that is "embargoed until it crosses the tape." In other words, I am not ready to talk about what is only in process now. If it falls together in a healthy way, we will discuss it then. For now, it is

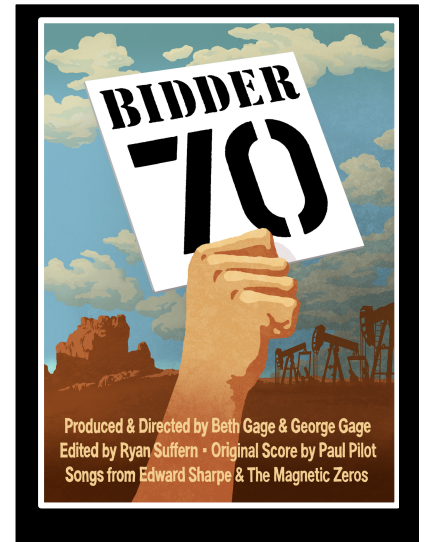


enough to say that Rev. Robin serves as the minister at First Congregational Church in Thetford. She is UCC (United Church of Christ). This is perfect for this project because Star Island is jointly owned by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ. Rev. Robin is a passionate, outgoing leader and she's absolutely great with youth.

Our featured speakers were wonderful. They gave everything they had of themselves. Sherri Mitchell and Tim DeChristopher honored Brave Light and Star Island with their presence. Sherri Mitchell is a member of the Penobscot Nation and the founding director of the Land Peace Foundation, an organization dedicated to the global protection of



Indigenous rights and the preservation of the Indigenous way of life. She speaks around the world on issues of Indigenous rights, environmental justice and spiritual change. Mitchell is the author of a highly acclaimed book, *Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change*. Timothy DeChristopher is an American climate activist and co-founder of the environmental group Peaceful Uprising. In December 2008, he protested a Bureau of Land Management oil and gas lease auction of 116 parcels of public land in Utah's redrock country by successfully bidding on 14 parcels of land (totaling 22,500 acres) for \$1.8 million with no intent to pay for them. This gesture came at a cost, a great, personal cost for Tim. A documentary film called Bidder 70 was produced about this experience. We should consider showing it to the



congregation and for the public in the fall. Maybe outside with pizza and a fire.

Ironically, the calamities that befell us ended up working in our favor. We kept our heads down and

we worked the problems to solution. Even though it seemed like things weren't working out, we pushed gently forward until we found success. In the end, the cause of the Brave Light Youth Exchange Project was served.

Both groups met and befriended one another in beautiful ways. Even though bonds of friendship were nurtured only for a few days, perhaps the depth of those bonds can unfold over a lifetime. I know that we have had a good beginning. Jess Stout wrote to North Chapel to express what she learned from her daughter, Jane, after she got back from the experience.

Jess wrote,

Dear Leon,

Many thanks to you, and everyone who brought brave light into being and provided such an incredible opportunity for Jane and that whole group this summer. I loved hearing, in church, your description of the multi-year process and I am just grateful for your vision and commitment to making it happen. Jane had such a wonderful experience, and for various reasons the timing felt so right. Your metaphor about something that allows the “flower of one’s life” to unfold feels apt—that seemed to be so true of her experience on Star Island. Thank you for the loving presence you have in both of our lives, and for the gift of your deep caring in this world.

With love and gratitude,

Jess

The Brave Light experience and its featured speakers challenged Jane and all of the other Brave Lighters, staff included. We asked ourselves tough questions—“What does it mean to be serious about the challenges that we face?” and “Who do we need to be in order to meet them?”

After performing the wedding for Joelle Seavey and Andy Wood on Saturday, July 8<sup>th</sup>, a week and a day before our planned departure, I contracted COVID from the groom. OMG!! I was bad but it was also brief. I was asymptomatic after four days. I had to mask for all days but the last day. It was still a wonderful experience.

It was wonderful but it was exhausting...for younger and older alike. It was good to be heading back home. In early September, I plan to meet with selected staff members to discuss the possibilities of 2024. After



reviewing our finances and evaluating what we saved, I will prepare a report for our funders and inform them of our plans.

Tatum Barnes was wonderful. He is a strong leader who also possesses the temperament to play a role in the backstage of things. So much of the work of youth ministry happens in the background of things. Youth ministry is a lot like music in this way, a lot like poetry. The work of art becomes real from a great deal of practice, a great deal of humility and a little bit of luck. The artists is to prepare and make ready for the magic to happen. Not everyone knows how to do this. I believe that Tatum Barnes does.

I understand that he has written a letter proposing things for the Board to consider. He makes a strong argument about his salary. This salary may challenge the Annual Budget. Yet, for aspirational programs like ours, we are wise to stretch. In this way, Brave Light can be helpful. I have not run the numbers yet but I have a great deal of confidence that Brave Light needs closely relate to Spiritual Exploration needs. Tatum and I have had a preliminary conversation about how that might happen and while we have not yet reached specifics, I am confident that things will work out, even at \$27 an hour which is \$2.00 over the \$25 that I was anticipating. Even at greater margins, I am sure that Brave Light can cover the

difference. An increase of \$2.00 times 6 hours times 52 weeks equals \$624. That's nothing, considering what he brings and may develop over time. Brave Light will require much more of him and will compensate accordingly. The \$500 of professional expenses is appropriate, especially considering his background and experience. Much more importantly, it gives North Chapel a chance to make our commitment to children real. That \$500 could mean OWL training, could mean harm prevention classes, could mean trauma-informed education. It brings Tatum into community with some of the best work going on in the Upper Valley.

I will sit down with Rob Schultz, formerly of Vital Communities. Together, we could put together some beautiful options to explore. Furthermore, because of his magnetic quality and his charisma, we can think more broadly about the needs of youth and young adults in this area (youth, being his endeavor and young adults, being mine). These two overlap in the Brave Light program. It is structurally elegant.

Lastly, with respect to time away, one weekend a month quite common, especially for someone with a young family. The stretch is good for us. Young parents (especially single parents) will read it as a blessing, will read it as the institutional welcome that makes it feel like they truly belong. Last Sunday, Danelle Sims had car trouble on Sunday morning. She called Monica Horowitz for help. Of course, Monica responded positively. They both arrived a few minutes late, after Michael Zsoldos's opening words. Not seeing Monica, he asked around for help and he got it. That kind of congregational strength and flexibility is a blessing that gets stronger, ironically, with one day off a month. It is expected among my colleagues, even as I do a horrible job of observing this myself.

North Chapel is staged for growth. What that growth means, we do not yet know but if we don't staff for it, it is sure to pass us by. I don't think that we are going to let that happen.

Just a few days ago, Rick Kuniholm invited me to town to meet his sister who was visiting from Florida. We all met up at the Woodstock Inn. Just as we were saying our hellos, Adi Alsup, one of the Braver Lighters, came around the corner with her work clothes on. She is part of the waitstaff at the Red Rooster. We both broke into a great, big smiles as soon as we saw one another. I leapt up and gave her a great, big hug!!! "Are we doing more with Brave Light?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, "in the fall but I'll need your help."

"I'll text you," she said. I look forward to that. I look forward to spending more time with Adi...and with Jane and with their parents and with all of the Brave Light folks. It feels like such good things are happening!

Kristen Rose has passed. I am planning a memorial service (and possibly, a reception) with her daughter, Rose Murphy. John and Donna Atwood have tragically lost the daughter, Leah. I am planning a memorial service with the family. Steve Rowe has lost Mary Keeler, his beloved wife of 25 years. Mary and Steve are newer to the church. They reached out to us months ago, when Mary's diagnosis became terminal.

We are holding a lot of grief these days...and we are holding the joy the gently surrounds it...holding us in loving community.

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