

Minister's Board Report

April 17, 2023

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

North Universalist Chapel Society

Women, they have minds and they have souls as well as just hearts...and they've got ambition and they've got talent as well as just beauty. I am so sick of people saying that love is just all a woman is fit for. I'm so sick of it!!

—Saoirse Ronan as “Jo March”

Little Women (1868 and 12019)

I was relieved to hear Gloria Steinem say, “Hope is form of planning.” It was during a laborious 3-hour interview that I was reviewing for possible spiritual themes for spring and summer. “Hope is a form of planning.” This idea give people like me a cause to celebrate, especially coming from her. How many people (how many men) told Gloria Steinem the she was impractical, that she was a dreamer, that want she wanted to see in the world was simply impossible? I wonder how quickly she developed a set of strategies to defend herself? How can we develop such a set of defensive strategies? ...not self-defensive strategies but those that best protect the fragile dream we call North Chapel?

I blew the punch line on Sunday morning. I defined risk as “vulnerability and intimacy in the presence of community.” That was what I had in my notes. That was my interpretation. Her actual words didn't define risk but, rather, vulnerability. And it wasn't Gloria Steinem that said them. It was Brené Brown. Brené defines

vulnerability as the overlapping realm of “uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure.” I hope to circle back at some point and talk about the nuances that I lost and gained.

In a way, Brené Brown the spiritual daughter of Gloria Steinem. Both women might take issue with that but neither would deny an obvious truth. Brené (like so many of us) receives Gloria’s living inheritance. She is one of Steinem’s leading beneficiaries and there are hundreds or there are hundreds of thousands of these.

Gloria Steinem says that, “Feminism is memory.” She reminds us of a time that preceded us when things were not this way. Boastful men did not always sit atop great fortunes making laws and proclamations—like Anthony Comstock in Connecticut during the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant and like Matthew Kacsmaryk in Texas driven by the presidency of Donald Trump. Comstock authored an anti-obscenity bill in 1873 (the Comstock Act) making birth control a federal crime. Kacsmaryk is currently “trying to resuscitate the ghost of [this] man who wanted to ban contraception and boasted of driving his targets to suicide with his anti-obscenity crusades.”

Women resisted. Churches resisted. What powers supported them—these women, these churches. When the Comstock Act passed, North Chapel was thirty-nine years old.

In 1873, a woman named Louisa May Alcott wrote a short story that was called “Transcendental Wild Oats.” It is a fictionalized tale of failed utopia—an intentional community in New England, a “prospective Eden” on a farm in Harvard, Massachusetts. It was a paradise-dream in

the mind of a man named Abel Lamb but it didn't turn out very well. Her story ended tragically with these words:

Some thought him mad, some unprincipled. Even th most kindly thought him a visionary, whom it was useless to help till he took more practical views of life. All stood aloof, saying: "Let him work out his own ideas, and see what they're worth."

He tried but it was a failure. The world was not ready for Utopia yet.

The world was not yet ready for Abel's dream but he tried anyway, despite the dismissals. We fail our way forward in life. Surely, the theme was familiar to Louisa May Alcott. Five years earlier, she had published *Little Women*.

It's in this context that I hear the words of Gloria Steinem when she says, "Hope is a form of planning" and when she says, "Feminism is memory." But nowadays, it is the paradise-dream of Gloria Steinem that is under attack with the striking down of *Roe v. Wade* and the ritual assaults on a woman's right to choose.

A colleague of mine, the Reverend Tom Belote, put it most gracefully. He said that in time so of great struggle our churches become either "beacons or bunkers." How will North Chapel respond? How will we cast our vision?

FYI, the paradise-dream of Abel Lamb refers to an actual experiment—an intentional community in New England, a real-life "prospective Eden" on a farm in Harvard, Massachusetts. Fruitlands. It was started by a group of people who chose to actualize their dream. And it's really not as rare as we imagine. Woodstock's Jeff Kahn did it. He told the story in his TEDx Talk at Hartland Hill. He called it "From

Commune to Community: One Man's Journey” (see below).¹ Feast and Field in Barnard is such an effort. North Chapel is as well.

It is so important that we speak about our dreams—the practical ones and the impractical ones, the possible ones and the impossible ones. If Louisa May Alcott thought otherwise, where would Gloria Steinem be? Do you think that this would make for a good Community Conversation? Do you think that something miraculous can come of it?

What can help to inspire that dream?

At the Thompson Center Board Meeting last year, a consultant met with us for a few hours—Sarah Carlan. She was wonderful. Quoting from her website, I will allow Sarah to introduce herself.

Hi, I'm Sarah, and I'm a therapist, leadership coach, and career satisfaction mentor. Essentially, I help people rediscover an internal sense of power, that cannot be shaken by external circumstances. While I don't offer a cookie-cutter approach to making it all feel great, nor will we be finding ways to flatten the landscape, but we will find you some great hiking boots and poles so you can climb the mountains



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https://www.ted.com/talks/jeffrey_kahn_from_commune_to_community_one_mans_journey

of life more effectively and joyfully. Interested in how we could work together?

If you are interested in pursuing this, Sarah can be reached at <https://www.sarahcarlan.com/>. I do not know her personally but she was fabulous at the Thompson.

This year we have had two New Members Recognition Ceremonies—one with six participant and another with 10 participants. That's a lot of people and there are more in the wings. How shall we set the table for them and for their children?

I know full well that we are up against serious financial challenges but I don't think that we can overcome them through anxiety...and even if we can, there are more joyful ways of going about it. How do we celebrate the Good News? How do we live into the purposes of faith?

What are we ready for today?

When we meet, I will share pastoral concerns. I will also update you on the unfolding plans of the Worship Committee. I will not be updating you and The Brave Light Youth Exchange Project. Rather, I will be inviting you into conversation about our project. I have included the Children and Youth Task Force Report and our subsequent grant proposal as a refresher. I look forward to our time together.