

Prisoners of Hope (crisis)
February 19th, 2023
Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley
North Universalist Chapel Society

Songs of praises, songs of praises I will ever sing to thee. First among the many is this:

The Lord bless you and keep you
The Lord lift His countenance upon you
And give you peace
The Lord make his face to shine upon you
To shine upon you and be gracious
And be gracious, unto you
Amen

Preparing for the most powerful and most beautiful and most human of journeys, gathering practical supplies for the long road home, packing up like all of life depended on the luggage—the suitcases and the backpacks and the travel boxes sent in advance...and the duffle bags and the leaving trunks of carved cedar with iron hinges and leather ribbon lashes on the inside, weighted down a bit too heavily with books along the bottom... Preparing with every passion and pretending like the preparation matters more than it does...more than it can. Knowing otherwise but not behaving any differently... Packing up so well and so very carefully...it's good for us. It gives my mind something warm to hold.

Something warm to hold... That used to be my most accurate description of coffee...from the time before I grew to like the taste. I'm sure I heard that line in poetry. I'm sure that I've been repeating it ever since. I'm sure that I've been distorting it ever since...in this life, the one I cherish, making it more and more beautiful in the retelling.

I hated it when my father did this to me. I pretended to hate it. He'd misremember stories of my life, the life he gave me, distorting it more and more with each repetition...and I thought I hated that...until he died...and then, I missed it. I miss being annoyed by what my father misremembers.

Loss is one of the deepest and one of the most important exercises of the heart. It requires a great deal of practice but one never gets good at it. We all just do our best and our best is always good enough before the heavens. We know this as an aspect of our theology in this tradition.

This beloved community, the circle of bravest souls...so dear and strong... We just lost a lion... We just lost a friend and I, for one, am broken and am shattered by it. Chris Lloyd. I just saw you, brother. I just spent time with him this past week. We just held one another—arm in arm, man to man. All love and no pretenses. I am not ready and here it is. We are unprepared and here we are. Life is sometimes like this, we know. Life is always like this...and even when we make ready...even when we prepare ourselves for the hard days to coming...and especially when we know these days are near at hand.

Sometimes in the luggage...somewhere in the suitcases and the backpacks, in the travel boxes and the duffle bags...somewhere in the leaving trunks of cedar, iron and leather are the prayers we hope will guide us. And we recall them in these times of deepest sorrow.

The lord is my shepherd
I have all I need
She makes me lie down in green meadows
Beside the still waters she will lead
She restores soul
She rights my wrongs
She leads me in the path of god things
She fills my heart with song

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, February the 19th and the title of this morning's reflection had been Prisoners of Hope but I will depart from this for now.

What I would like to do instead is move us over and call us forward into a consideration of what I will call a deeper stewardship. This isn't anything new at North Chapel but it is something that we don't often talk about. We may not even know how to talk about it. In order to do this (and this might sound funny to you because it is a bit unorthodox), I want to share with you a conversation that I'm having with the Board. As I think on it now, it is a conversation that really should be shared with the congregation...and it dovetails gently with the news that we've received this morning. So, here it is.

Minister's Board Report
February 17, 2023
Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley
North Universalist Chapel Society

"The 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 2nd. 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 18th 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?

I brought these two guitars to see our friend, Chris Lloyd, because he asked me to. We read through an old songbook of his and came across one the I could play on the acoustic. Guide Me, Oh, Though Great Jehovah. It’s in our hymnal as God of Grace and God of Glory, hymn #115 in *Singing the Living Tradition*. We sang the original words.

And when I tread the verge of Jordan
Bid my anxious fears subside
Death of death and hell’s destruction
Lands me safe on Canaan’s side
Songs of praises, songs of praises I will ever sing to thee

We cannot adequately prepare for the many losses we suffer in life. We cannot adequately prepare for the loss of life. We can make ready, though, the spaciousness in our spirit and the strength inside our heart for a love that knows no end, not even now. We can prepare the sacred passageway that is as beautiful now as at life's beginning, embracing that end (and its brand new day, as well), ennobling them as one for they are linked...and inviting them to boldly enter in. So, welcome, to the dreamers and the seekers of spirit, bold or ever bashful in the quest. Welcome, to the wanderers and the worshipers, here so give their souls a rest. Welcome to the open ones and to the broken ones among us, to every blissfully imperfect soul who is just like me, blessed and beloved beneath the lucky stars of heaven, given in care and compassion for one another, given...as we all are with and forever for one another in compassion soul-level deep...in good times and in tempest, in conflict and consensus...held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds...

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.