

Starfall

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North Universalist Chapel Society

As I was turning the soil in the garden (so early in the morning that I can't say), I sang this song to myself. It was called Across the Bridge by Pharis and Jason Romero. Melody only. I had not yet learned the words. So, I looked them up and here's what they were.

Across the bridge, there's no more sorrow
Across the bridge, there's no more pain
The sun will shine across the river
And we'll never be unhappy again

...and then, the eastern star did shine...not across the river but across the brook. It climbed one step higher in the sky, falling upwards, it would seem, into the morning...and it's really true. I haven't been unhappy ever since. I think it's going to be a very beautiful, summer garden.

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister here, at North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) in Woodstock, VT. Today is Sunday, May 23rd and I am 56 years old this day at 3:30 in the morning! I guess that's why I love daybreak as much as I do.

Welcome to the morning and welcome to North Chapel. To all souls, I say, "Good morning." It is good to be together.

Sabra said that she would introduce me to the lovely people of East Barnard...Sabra Field, Vermont's own, well-known artist...lives not far from here. You've seen her work, I'm sure. She's wonderful. She is iconic...and she's famous. There's a

full-length documentary about her. It's easy to find online...and she even publishes calendars. So, you know, what else do I need to say, really?

I had just moved to town. [So, this was four years ago now.] I had just moved to town and I didn't know anybody...and I didn't really know where I was. I just felt happy, like I was home...except I didn't know where the post office was...or the grocery store...or the subway even...and it made me a little nervous at first. The sound of sirens and cell phones had been replaced with peepers and birdsong. It was all so still. I couldn't hear the street sounds—the cars and busses. I couldn't hear the rumblings of trains in tunnels beneath the surface. The subway...

I moved up to the Upper Valley from just outside of Washington D.C. There's a subway system. They call it the Metro. The trains run underground—from Shady Grove and New Carrollton on the Maryland side of things and from Falls Church and Foggy Bottom if you come in from Virginia. All roads lead to the heart of the city. The subway takes you underground and brings you right to the center—to all of the monuments (for Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Mason, the Roosevelts, Einstein and King). From the northwest and -east and from the southeast and -west, the subway takes you to the core—to Federal Center and Dupont Circle, to the Smithsonians and L'Enfant Plaza.

L'Enfant... He was famous—Pierre Charles L'Enfant from the 18th century. He was a military engineer...and obviously French but he enjoyed the dual citizenship of his day. He called himself Peter when he lived stateside. I suppose it was easier for him. L'Enfant was the designer, the architect (broadly speaking). He laid out plans for the District of Columbia—for Washington D.C. He's famous and now, there is a whole plaza named after him...honoring him—L'Enfant Plaza in the heart of the city. It is a lovely part of town. The Blue, Green, Yellow and

Orange Lines will get you there directly. The Red Line—the only line remaining—will get you close. It feeds all four other lines at stations that are only two or three stops away.

Arguably, L'Enfant Plaza is the heart of the city, the place where almost all of the 'roads' converge...and Pierre Charles (or Peter) L'Enfant is its namesake. So, he's pretty famous...but, you know, he doesn't have a calendar. He's no Sabra Field. You might think I'm being silly but I'll take him more seriously when he gets a calendar!

I moved to Vermont from a place called Hyattsville. It's a neighborhood on the Green Line. It's congested. More than 18,000 people lived in Hyattsville...and it's pretty small—less than three miles square. It's tiny, actually. By comparison, the shire of Woodstock, this farming community in which we live, is so much larger. It's almost 47 square miles. And there aren't 18,000 people living here. We're only 3,000 strong. So, we are fifteen times larger in size and we have one fifth of the population. So, needless to say, moving here was a bit of a shock to the system. That's why I was happy when Sabra Field said she'd introduce me to the neighbors.

I felt nervous...because I really didn't know where the post office was...and because I couldn't find the grocery store was and because I didn't see any subway station anywhere I looked. How was I supposed to find my way to the heart of things? Moving here was a real shock. In fact, I used to joke around. I used to say that there were more people living in my apartment building in the D.C. area than there are people living in all of East Barnard...which is also almost literally true.

There are a lot of people in D.C. but they don't always take time to talk to each other. So, I was a little nervous to meet everybody. I felt like I was out of practice, out of the sacred practice of simple kindness. I was nervous. So, as you can imagine, I was immensely comforted when Sabra Field said

that she would introduce me to everyone. I was very glad to have a guide.

The neighborly introductions would take place and the Community Center, in the heart of East Barnard...where all roads lead. Well, where two roads meet at a stop sign but you get my point, I think. There was going to be a gathering. Oyster Supper, I think it was. Sabra and I were going as a team. Relieved, I let it be known that I was planning to attend. So, I was expected by the neighbors that I was about to meet. Everything was set. I couldn't back out.

At the last minute, Sabra had a conflict and couldn't be my guide. I would have to go alone. She told me not to worry. [!] You know, these are the moments when I know that there really is a God...and that she's a trickster. Oh, my heart. The nervousness flooded back in...torrentially. I hid it as well as I could...which wasn't great. I braved it. I went to the neighborhood gathering by myself. I felt terribly out of place but I really wasn't. Everyone was friendly enough. And they all seemed to know each other. They all seemed close, like a really big family...and I knew no one. It felt like it was the first day of first grade and I had a bad haircut.

And then, a little miracle started to unfold. I heard the laughter of a little kid who was playing on the swings. I heard his voice. I heard him giggle. It reminded me of my own childhood. Laughter does that sometimes. Joy is universal.

So, this little, mystery kid and his giggle from a home nearby was on a holy mission—to shake me from the barren tree of loneliness and anxiety. And he did it...quite handily, actually. Time and time again. Laugh after giggling laugh. He was my shepherd that day. I just followed the call of his laughter and it led to good community.

My little shepherd wasn't alone. I noticed that a young woman was with him—his mother, I guessed. She was looking after him but she wasn't obsessing. She was pretty cool and kept

distance enough so that the child could experience some independence but not so much distance that the child would feel alone. It seems hard to strike that balance but parents do that all the time. She and I fell into conversation. I needed that. I thought that she said that her name was Ashley but I was a bit distracted by my nervousness...and by her height. She was shorter than most people that I know. I was psyched about that. It was my sense that she had a strong personality. She was easy to talk to. I can't remember what we talked about but I remember that it was fun...and I remember that our laughter joined so easily with her son's—overlapping and overflowing so gently. It was like the joining of separate waters from two gently flowing streams that intermix and become one and the same.

Very soon, her husband, a much taller man, came over to us. He had a warm and gentle smile. He had an easy way about him. He was twenty years younger than me (maybe more) but he seemed like an age-old friend. I felt like I had known him as a child...which was impossible. It really felt but I knew it couldn't be.

Are you familiar with the old Harry Chapin song to this effect? He sang about this feeling years ago...this feeling of meeting an age-old friend that you've known forever and newly met.

Chapin used to sing,

All my life's a circle, sunrise and sundown
The moon rose through the nighttime
until the daybreak rolls around
All my life's a circle and I can't tell you why
The season is spinning around again
and the years keep rolling by

Harry would sing,

I've met you a thousand times
I guess you've done the same

That was the line that stuck in my mind that day. That's how it felt to meet Ashley's tall husband. He felt like an age-old friend who was brand new.

The height difference between them was tremendous. It tickled me. It made me chuckle, just like their kid, only not quite right out loud. They were clearly used to the initial delights of other people, used to riding the lightness of others. Buoyed. It's a really good skill to have—riding that bubble of lightness, the easy laughter of other people. It's a really good skill to make regular and good use of.

We all talked together for a few minutes or so. Soon enough, it was time for us to eat. So, we got up to head inside, to pay for our tickets and to receive our meals. As we did, I saw someone who I truly recognized—truly, in the sense that we had had real-life conversations. I took the opportunity to do some introductions. I consulted with Ashley to make sure that I knew the names of the men in her life—her lovely laughter baby and her impossibly tall husband. She said that 'Mateo' was the name of the little laughter-baby and 'Nick' was the name of the super tall man and I delivered this new information to the one man that I really recognized that day. And he met me graciously, with his normative smile and his open-heartedness and I said, proudly (newly free of my anxiety), "David, may I introduce you to the three, new friends I've made? Have you met Ashley and her husband, Nick and their lovely son, Mateo?"

Ashley and Nick were laughing...and Mateo was riding the bubble. And David looked deeply into my eyes...into my heart but he didn't say anything...not right away. At first, he just stood there smiling and enjoying the moment. I felt strange, like I didn't understand the punch-line of my own joke. We all just stood there. No one said anything. I'm thinking to myself, "Awkward." I wanted to run away and go home. I got strangely

angry at my good friend, Sabra Field. “If only she was here, none of this would be happening!”

Then, David says, explaining and releasing the anxiety, “Yes, Leon. I’ve met these people. I have met Nick. He is my son.” My jaw hit the ground. Once again, I hid it as well as I could as David continued. “Ashley is my daughter-in-law and Mateo is my grandson.” Then, I started riding the bubble of lightness. We all went inside and found dinner together.

What are the chances? Astronomical, really...or maybe, it’s inevitable. It’s so mysterious to me. I mean, the mathematics alone...it’s enough to blow your mind. I used to think that math was boring—numbers and functions and matters of fact. But then, they became spectacular and magical.

There is a scene in an old movie where a character named Paul is trying his best to impress a lovely, young woman. He was a mathematician and he delivered a few lines that moved me.

Trying to explain his work, he said,

There is a number hidden in every act of life, in every aspect of the universe...in fractals, in matter... There's a number screaming to tell us something. [Numbers are a door, he says] to understanding a mystery that's bigger than us. How two people, strangers, come to meet. There's a poem by a Venezuelan writer that begins...

The earth turned to bring us closer
It turned on itself and in us
until it finally brought us together
in this dream

There's so many things that have to happen for two people to meet and... Anyway, that's what mathematics are.

Those lines impressed me. The woman that Paul was pursuing in the movie was slowly falling in love...and so was I, with love and life and laughter.

Falling in love... That’s what sometimes happens in good communities. We fall in love with one another. Not romantically but on a different level...on a level that is more

mundane, less dramatic but, in some ways, deeper and more profound. This kind of love is basic and grounding and gentle and clear and constantly amazing. It affects us all quite deeply and sometimes, in surprising ways. We fall in love without our knowing. There's no nervous period. There are no stilted tensions. Never once are we uncomfortable. There is no risk and no reward and yet, the whole earth turns and stars align...to bring us all one step closer in this dream we dream awake. And we don't always notice the magnitude, not until the day that someone dies.

David laughed. He sang in the choir. He made friends easily and he held us close. His eyes, his soul eyes, saw us without judgment...with only love, with only kindness and gratitude. He touched us. He held this community. We were within his strong embrace. We are within his strong embrace—even now...and especially now. We make good space for his kindness, his love, his laughter... He touched us all...uniquely. And we touched him back, each to our gift—in everyday and mundane ways that were once in a lifetime and spectacular. Sometimes, when we are present to the fullness of life (as present as David often was), the everyday things and the once in a lifetime things coalesce and coexist and they conjoin like flowing waters, like streams, like rivers. They intermix until they are inseparable and one and the same.

David laughed. He sang in the choir...and the choir will miss him so. The tenors admired the depth and the power of his voice. The altos and their inner-work harmony were musically grounded by him. And the sopranos—for their position in front of him—were beneficiaries, beneficiaries of his talents as a masseuse. And, of course, his fellow basses knew him deeply, as their own. He touched us. He touched our lives—soft and deep and resonant. We can still hear him. He anchored us so warmly and so well. It's our turn now, our turn to anchor David and his

spirit—star-bound and stellar as it is. We now anchor David—we, the choir of his angels...we, his living constellation...his community.

When I learned of David's passing, I just shut down a little bit. I knew David's parents—Al and Edith Doolittle. They were so dear. I knew them in the 1980s. We go way back to Star Island. I met them on Star Island. Edith ran the gift shop. It was named after her. And Al was a quiet teacher who just could not stop talking about the make-shift telescope that he'd set up on the front lawn to look at the heavens. On clear nights, he'd show us planets and their rings and their moons and everything. You could see nebulae and distant galaxies. You could see stars and constellations that are impossibly far away. Leo and Andromeda, Cassiopeia and Orion... The telescope brought them near enough to touch.

When someone that we love dies, it's like a star falls out of a constellation. A necessary star falls away and touches earth. What had once reached the sky, what had long been wished upon comes down—crashing through cathedrals, breaking through roofs and windows, busting through doorways and breaking our hearts. Stars that were so far away are suddenly close at hand. This is the nearness of loss, the preciousness of it. When loss strikes so near, so close...at the heart of us, it's just so hard, so sad...and also so beautiful...that he lived and loved so fully and so honestly and so well. For this, part of us dies along with him. That's just how it is...but, we live on. We are called by love to do so. When a star falls, we are called to live life more beautifully. Starfall. Have you ever seen such a thing? Can you imagine it?

There's a song from the 1970s that I loved when I was growing up. I thought of it when David died for some strange reason. It was called You Are the Woman That I've Always Dreamed Of by a band named Firefall.

You are the woman that I've always dreamed of
I knew it from the start
I saw your face and that's the last I've seen of my heart

So 70s.

Firefall took its name from a spectacular event that used to take place at Yosemite National Park in California. For nearly a hundred years, they would build a great big fire at the peak of Glacier Point. The sun would set and when all was safe, they'd push the fire down the mountainside. The drop was sheer—3,000 feet. It was like a burning waterfall. Many gathered to watch and were amazed as a river of fire and light came crashing down to earth.

We are starlight. We are all this brilliant and David reminded us of this. It's one of the reasons why we love him so. He just had so very much to give.

I can't remember who told me this story from the late stage of his life but I heard from someone that David was forgetting some things in life but he was remembering other things, things like the sacred practice of simple kindness. David saw someone that he recognized but he could not recall the details of this person's life. He smiled and said, "I don't remember who you are but I think that I am supposed to hug you." Blessings rarely get more beautiful.

You were a star. Thank you, friend. Thank you for burning so brightly and for being so brilliant. Thank you for seeing your light reflected in those who have looked up to you...which was difficult not to do because you were so tall, just like your son. A poet writes,

Me and you reach for the same stars in heaven, singing
And it's hard to choose when the Moon and Mars are
where they are tonight
In every midnight sky, I'll see you shining enough to hold
me tight
And I'll stop to find my higher moments in your light

However it is that we experience the nearness of this loss, this loss that comes at the end of this long, hard year, let's keep our eyes wide. Let's keep looking for the fire, for the brilliance of everyday miracles and for the once in a lifetime starlight that guides our way.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.