

# Choosing the Better Club

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North Universalist Chapel Society

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, Vermont. Today is Independence Day. Today is Sunday, Fourth of July and the title of this morning's reflection is Choosing the Better Club. It's about choosing the right tool for the right job and it picks up on a story that we talked about last week. To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is good to be together."

I took pictures of the marks that the storm had left on the healing path leading up to the chapel...the sanctuary of wood and stone where I first learned how to pray. I took pictures of the places where the rainwater had pooled and puddled, blocking the path entirely where my feet had intended to step.

Once upon a long time ago, I wrote a song...about photography and life and its lesson that leads us where we grow. not a boundary. That's what I called it. No capital letters. I used to think that was unassuming and more hip. "For some reason I've taken you picture." That was the first line of the verse. I was trying to capture the fading image of an old love.

For some reason, I've taken you picture  
Focused my light on your frame to strike a balance  
Later on, friend, when your gone again  
Somehow, I'll still have you

For some reason, I've kept all your letters  
All in one place and each in cases slightly damaged  
Sometimes, I can still pretend  
I try to read the over for the very first time again

The refrain preceded the verses. It set them up in a way. It allowed the song to blossom over time...because the refrain changes slightly. I'd felt trapped at that time in my life...trapped in the desperate dramas of my early twenties. At the time, I'm sure I thought I'd never survive and now I can remember what they were exactly.

Bonnie Raitt writes about this feeling in a beautiful song called *Used to Rule the World*.

Doctor Feelgood  
Sleepin' on a concrete bench  
Can I get a witness?  
Miss South Carolina 1975,  
Somebody stole your crown...  
You were wrapped up  
In your daily grind,  
The cost of living  
It didn't even cross your mind.  
Now you're mystified,  
Standing with the rest of us  
Who used to rule the world.

All us has beens, just watching as the time goes by. Bonnie Raitt sings,

Mr. Blueprint,  
You used to have it figured out  
Now you can't find your car.

Time passes...and get a little grey...

Did I ever tell you that I once met Bonnie Raitt? I was in New Orleans visiting a dearest friend, life-long companion of mine. Artist. Excellent. I have quoted her often to you. Dayna Kurtz. I'm hoping that she will come and visit us one of these days. So, Dayna says, "Hey, there's a party tonight. Do you want to go. Bonnie's gonna be there."

My heart jumped out of my chest. I was thrilled. But I betrayed my feelings when I answered this terribly exciting question from my life-long friend. I said, “I guess. Do you want to go? Do you think it will be any fun?”

She saw right through me, of course. She always does. She always has. I hope that she always will, despite how uncomfortable it can be to be seen so clearly by someone who is dear to you.

So, off to the party we went. I started practicing my lines, what I would say to Bonnie Raitt if, on the outside chance, I actually got a chance to talk with her. I decided immediately not to be a silly and naïve, adoring fan, start-struck in the presence of one of my musical heroes in life. I decided right then not to say something obvious like, “It’s such an honor to meet you” or “I’ve loved your music my whole life.”

Bonnie and Dayna know each other, know each other’s music, know the challenges and the tragedies of making a living as a performing artist. And because I know Dayna as well as I do, I figured I could say something more engaging.

We got to the party. It was upstairs, in the private residential part of an old music studio, still active. There was a lot of food—gumbo, red beans and rice. It smelled amazing. It was pretty dark and close. Comfortable. Casual. I loved being there. I met tons of lovely people from all over the country. I fell into conversation with a couple from NJ. That happens sometimes.

And then the moment came. Dayna touched my shoulder and said, “Hey, Lee! Let me introduce you to Bonnie Riatt!” She was beautiful. She’s gorgeous...and her energy is amazing. She’s disarmingly kind and quite short. I was prepared for that. But her kindness just knocked me off my feet.

She said, “Hello. It’s an honor to meet you” and my heart jumped out of my chest. I shook her hand and thought to myself, ‘My God, the music that this hand has made, the souls

that your music has touched, the lives that you've saved, the joy the beauty that you return to this sacred world.' That's what I was feeling but that's not what I said. I betrayed my feelings when I returned the greeting of my hero, Bonnie Raitt and I said, "It's such an honor to meet you! I've loved your music my whole life." And I winced and she laughed because she knew I blew it.

She's so gracious, though, She pivot to our shared love of the music of Dayna Kurtz. Like I said, "I'm hoping that she will join us sometime. She lives not too far away. I'll work on that.

Anyway, the refrain preceded the verses in the song about photography that I wrote in my twenties was about feeling caught between a rock and a hard place. It was about moving beyond that feeling, breaking free from that feeling into something new and more authentic. The words of the first refrain are these:

I'm not in the middle  
I'm not in between hard sides moving in  
I'm out on the edge and there's a line before me  
It's a border line and not a boundary

And this is where we may be find ourselves right now, newly arrived at a place that had just before been beyond our reach, at a place that is familiar to us but yet, we do not recognize.

I took pictures of the marks that the storm had left on the healing path leading up to my heart...the sanctuary of blood and bone where I first learned how to sing. I took pictures of the places where the rainwater had pooled and puddled, blocking the path entirely where my feet had intended to stride. I took pictures of the places where the water had rushed and raced, where it had coursed and streamed, carving paths and riverways and crevasses and tiny canyons in the sand beneath our feet...

Hurricane Elsa marked us...with its winds and with its waters. It carved its good way right passed our defenses and

pretenses. We've been swept so far off course. We were adrift but, then, we landed. After the bewilderment, we landed and here we are—a little stranded, a little shipwrecked after the rains but safe and sound.

Hurricanes stir things up. They blow things down and away. They often bring such strangeness to the world...and they devastate us...when they blow like they did ten years ago, in August of 2011. Irene left its marks on us. Elsa did, too, but it wasn't as bad. Not nearly. In fact, only days after its rains tapped on the rooftops of Woodstock, VT...a strange and courageous group of beloved friends and family gathered in the backyard, behind a church they called North Chapel. Because of very different type of hurricane, they had not seen each other for a long, long while. Their lives had been blown off-course by wind and weathering.

Don't look now, but all around us stands a noble sanctuary. From where we are right, we can see the bedrock of its foundation, the timbers of its structure, the pitch of its roof. From where we are, we can hear its bell and the rushing of its river...the flow of its waters, slowly carving the watercourse way to the open sea...not trapped between hard sides moving in but newly free. Not caught between a rock and a hard place.

Hurricane Elsa was pretty powerful. It stirred things up a bit. Its winds blew birds many miles off their flight paths. I saw petrels where I had never seen them before. Such small birds and so light. How could they fight winds of such magnitude? ...winds that lifted them, tearing away the earth was beneath their feet? Throwing their lives into chaos with abandon...and effortlessly. I saw a wind-blown great blue heron where it stood...impossible—utterly exposed and right out in the open for all to see. Tussled and rustled and no longer elegant, it clung to the highest branch at the top of the tree. Safe, shocked and deliriously surprised to be alive...and happy

for it, happy to be in the here and now, after such a stormy night.

And we've been threw it too. We, too, are as windswept, are as rain-soaked and blown off course. So, perhaps, it is wise to ask ourselves: "What decisions do wind-blown birds make at such points in life, when we find ourselves in a new and different place?"

Last Sunday, we shared the story of the golfer. Do you remember that? Briefly, there was a semi-pro golf tournament with a \$500 prize. It took place every autumn. One year, the dark horse won and surprised everyone. He was ranked 12<sup>th</sup> of the fifteen players. He was not a big contender. He didn't play the game with tact and subtlety. While the more sophisticated players argued with their caddies about choosing the proper club, this guy carried his own golf bag. If he argued at all, it was with himself, but not about choosing the proper club but about choosing the better one. The day after he was victorious, they put his picture in the local paper.

Before that happened, though, in the golf course parking lot, he was approached by a woman who was desperately concerned for the health of her only child, her daughter. She suffered mysterious seizures. She was in the hospital. The doctors were running series of expensive tests. The woman, her mother, had no means to pay for the tests that her daughter needed. So, the dark horse golfer who was newly victorious gave the woman the \$500 prize that he'd just won.

Later, he learned—a local journalist told him—that the woman that he encountered, the mother with a child in the hospital, was a known swindler. She was a thief and she had run her game before.

Although the dark horse golfer had been duped, he had an interesting reaction—an insightful one, I think. The golfer said, "Oh, my God. I can't believe what you are telling me. Do you mean to say that there is no baby in the hospital? ...no child at

risk from life-threatening seizures of any kind?

“I’m afraid not,” the local journalist said with regret.

And the golfer said, “That, my friend, is the best news that I have heard all day!” While his competitors, women and men alike, had worried about choosing the club with which to move the golf ball down the fairway, onto the green and into the hole, the dark horse golfer had worried about choosing the better club in life, the club that has known the storms of life and has been softened by them...softened into compassion and into grace.

I took pictures of the marks that the storm had left on the healing path leading up to the chapel...the sanctuary of wood and stone and blood and bone where I learned how to pray. And I took pictures of the marks that the storm had left on me. I developed them and showed them to my friends and family. And I sang a refrain to myself...from an old song that I once wrote about photography. Its words were these:

I’m not in the middle

I’m not in between hard sides moving in

I’m out on the edge and there’s a line before me

It’s a border line and not a boundary

I’m not in the middle

I’m not in between hard sides moving in

I’m not in the middle

Somehow, I’ve been recently unsurrounded, newly found

And somewhat less afraid of my border lines

We’ve been going through something powerful, something that has stirred things up and blown things down and brought such strangeness to the world. We’ve been going through something that is washing us clean and making is new. So, what are going to do about? Who will we become in this fresh, new phase of life that we are in?

I want to move toward closing right now with a responsive reading the was written by my good friend and colleague, Chris Buice in Knoxville. Chris serves the Tennessee Valley Unitarian



Universalist Church which, as you may know, was the site of terrible violence in 2008. Tennessee Valley responded with such profound courage and grace. They remain a leader in our movement for their strength, their resilience and their humility. I've gotten to know Chris over the years and I call him friend.

He wrote this responsive reading called *We are North Chapel* recently, as the Tennessee Valley church was beginning to meet in person again. So, in solidarity, I thought we might close our service with it, drawing our circle wide enough to include all of us in this community and the church community down in Tennessee as well. I will say a line and I will ask that you respond, if you are so moved. The response is the title of the reading. It's simply, "We are the church" which Chris asks us to adapt to our setting. So, maybe we could say, "We are North Chapel" and by 'North Chapel' we mean the broader community as well. The reading is about a vision of inclusiveness that suits us now. I invite you part participate as you feel moved to do so. Are you ready? Here we go.

We are the young mother with a high risk pregnancy who cannot get the vaccine.

*We are North Chapel!*

We are the single person who has been living in isolation for over a year.

*We are North Chapel!*

We are the parents whose children are too young to receive the medicine.

*We are North Chapel!*

We are the empty nesters longing for companionship.

*We are North Chapel!*

We are the newly vaccinated teenagers eager for youth groups.



*We are North Chapel!*  
We are the teens who aren't old enough yet.

*We are North Chapel!*  
We are the elderly in nursing homes who yearn for visitors.

*We are North Chapel!*  
We are the health care professionals and frontline workers, weary and in need of rest.

*We are North Chapel!*  
We are the ones who have been resting in place and are bursting with energy

*We are North Chapel!*  
We are the ones who want to be able to sing together again.

*We are North Chapel!*  
We are the members of the small group ministries longing to reunite.

*We are North Chapel!*  
We are immunocompromised.

*We are North Chapel!*  
We are the infants born this year.

*We are North Chapel!*  
We are the memories of those who died this year.

*We are North Chapel!*  
We are those celebrating new freedoms.

*We are North Chapel!*  
We are those grieving our losses.

*We are North Chapel!*

We are the ones who are together in congregation at this moment.

*We are North Chapel!*

We are the ones watching online.

*We are North Chapel!*

We are the ones committed to building a free faith where all souls are welcome.

*We are North Chapel!*

Welcome to the dreamers and the seekers of spirit, to the soft-spoken and to singers of life. Welcome to the wanderers and to the worshipers, to the darkness and the light. 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... To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is so good to be together again." Let's keep doing this.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.