

Celebrating Community
Channing Memorial Church
Jim Freess
March 7, 2010

The Theme of this year's Canvass is "Celebrating Community".

Webster defines Community as follows: *people with common interests living in a particular area; a unified body of individuals; in interacting body of various kinds of individuals in a common location; a group linked by common policy; a body of persons or nations having a history or social, economic and political interests in common; society at large.*

Everyone at Channing is a member of several communities: the Channing community; the broader community of our towns; these within a larger community of our state, within the community of the United States, within a community of nations. When we say we are celebrating community, we are referring both to our Channing community, the people you see all around you, and to the larger community of which Channing is a vital and active part.

The Channing community has touched my life in many ways during the 29 years that I've been a part of this community. Amy suggested I tell you about some of them.

At the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service in 1984, our daughter Katie was just 5 days old, it was her first time we took her anywhere—so much joy and love, like Katie had 100 aunts and uncles. And before that, all during Sondra's pregnancy, it was like the entire congregation shared in having a baby....unbelievable support.

When my mom died, and when Sondra's dad died, we got so much love and support to help ease the pain of our loss. We felt blessed by the love and support we received.

About 1985, four other men and I donned Tyvex Hazmat suits, hoods, booties, and respirators, and shoveled 38 trash bags full of guano from the belfry, and hand-carried them down to the street. We estimated we took over 1500 pounds of bird guano out of the belfry. While this may not seem like much fun, it was filled with camaraderie, joking around, (lots of poop jokes), everyone helping together, and the knowledge that we were doing something few people will ever do. The fact that I still remember it clearly speaks to how unique it was.

In the late 80's at one of several Sock Hops, there was a lip-synch competition, and several groups entered. Five women, including my wife, dressed as pregnant brides and sang "Going to the Chapel". Several men and I (and you know who you are) dressed up as California raisins, a popular ad campaign at the time.....and sang and danced to "I heard it through the grapevine". We won second place that year, but we won first place the next year dressed as rabbits singing "At the Hop" My daughter says now that I had no shame.

Other fond memories include countless End of Summer Picnics at the Richter's home.

High Holy days—kite flying picnics at Brenton Point with lots of kids and families together for a great afternoon.

The Channing Music Series—seven years in which a dedicated group of us presented an amazing array of music, and earned a pretty wide reputation for high-quality concerts. I was at various times a booking agent, artist liaison, co-director, program designer, emcee, driver, and gofer. Went from searching for artists to having artists and agents seeking out us because they heard what a wonderful experience it was to perform here. In that time I met wonderful people at every turn.. And we presented some pretty darned good music, some of it by some amazing artists. People like

Odetta

Paul Stookey (the Paul in Peter Paul and Mary)

Paul Winter and the Winter Consort—outdoors in a mini-hurricane

Sally Rogers—wrote one of the hymns we often sing

Gordon Bok

Cheryl Wheeler

A 15-year violin prodigy, whose name I forget

Groups from South America, Russia, Ireland, Canada, Israel, Michigan, Virginia, California...and as close as Connecticut and Newport

Concert just for kids, by people like David Roth and John McCutcheon

Two-day Dulcimer festivals

Songwriting workshops

Then there was Teaching OWL—starting off not knowing diddly about sexuality education and not knowing how it would be received—then having it become one of my proudest accomplishments—touching young lives in an incredibly valuable way. And like so many things in life, getting more back from the experience that I gave to it

Coffeehouse concerts and a Musical Sunday service with John Burnham, in which we both shared our love of music and of course many wonderful Choir Sundays.

Dozens of Second Thanksgiving dinners, Seder meals, and other pot-luck meals that not only fed my stomach but my spirit too

Walking with other Channing members in fund raisers for the Bird Sanctuary and Crop walks

Watching Amy and Peter fall in love, get married here at Channing, and give birth to Liza....and this past summer enjoying having Amy preside over the marriage of my son and daughter in law.

The list could go on and on....

Even with all of the above, back in the mid- to late- 1990's, Sondra and I drifted away from Channing for several years. Our lives were busy with working hard, ferrying kids around, B&B guests on weekends that kept us from attending Sunday services much of the year; our kids were older and there wasn't much RE to involve them, and there was also some discontent in the church at the time. . . . Right around 2000, Sondra and I were talking. . . a few of our close friends had moved away, or had lost interest in being our friends, and we were complaining about being let-down by friends. . . when all of a sudden it hit us both, like finally seeing the forest instead of just the trees, that our best, most loyal and most valued friends were almost all at Channing, and it was us who had left them. We came back, were welcomed with open arms, like we never left, and well. . . . the rest is history.

Why am I telling you all this? My hope is that by sharing some of the hundreds of special moments that this community has given me, and my family. . . you will take just a minute or two and make your own list of special moments and favorite memories. . . and in doing so also come to a richer appreciation of what a wonderful and special community this has been for you. And if you're new to Channing and haven't yet been touched by our community, haven't yet collected a bunch of special memories, resolve to become active and involved. I promise, the special moments will come.

Celebrating Community is a slogan, but it's more than a slogan; it's an attitude. It's an appreciation. It's a willingness to give, and thereby receive. It's gratitude. It's affection and love. It's celebrating US. It's celebrating YOU!

READING

God Laughing Out Loud, Mary E. Hunt Summer

In the beginning God enjoyed herself. She laughed out loud and laughed some more because it was good. She sat back and smiled. She clapped her hands in glee and imagined her sisters dancing. She did nothing but enjoy and it was everything.

God knew that there was work to be done—a world to create, people to form and a whole cosmos to plan. She even glimpsed the fact that creation would include meetings and that there would be injustice to right, and still she laughed, knowing that in the end it was all about pleasure.

She explained to no one in particular that enjoyment is what she intended life to be about: pleasure is the first principle. She knew that other would-be divinities stressed work and obligation. She reasoned quite astutely that if joy were the goal, then everyone could rest and relax, at least some of the time. Just thinking about this made her grin.

Light years later, when creation came into being and people began to toil and sweat their way, she noticed that her first principle had been replaced by work and pain. So she sent a reminder of her legacy. She gave it several names: [celebration, recreation, fun, potluck dinners, fellowship]. Some thought it was a vestige of days gone by. But God knew that it was the real thing. She called it salvation.

READING: *Burnout – a Misnomer*, Ric Masten

burnout
 you've seen the results
 in the shop on the shelf
 row after row of grey empty faces
 with nothing happening in the glassy eyes
 except

a little surface reflection

burnout
 you know the symptoms
 a history of dependable service
 then suddenly for no reason things go dark
 and you're a dead piece of furniture
 waiting
 to be removed from the living room

burnout
 the psychological repairman said
 and shrugged and shook his head
 having checked everything
 except the cord
 which of course
 was disconnected
 in a word "unplugged"

and to think
 i nearly went to the dump myself
 because someone less than a poet
 trying to describe a condition
 came up with a misleading term
 clearly
 a case of burnout demands a second opinion
 and this is mine
 find an outlet
 and if the cord doesn't reach
 move the set

READING: *Prayer of Presence*, Margaret Keip

As we have each been blessed in our lives by the gifts
 and giving of others,
 let us reach out now.
 Reach out and touch those near you—
 clasp a hand,

touch a shoulder,
 link an arm.
 (You might have to move from your place to connect)
 Make this community of being, which we together *are*,
 now tangible.
 Feel it.
 It is real.
 We are real.
 We are here.
 We are now.
 We can never be anywhere else.
 So what we withhold from this moment,
 we withhold from ourselves and from the world.
 What we deny in this moment,
 we deny to ourselves and to Life.
 And only what we give do we ever get to keep.
 So, dear friends, let us live our dreams,
 and make them as real as we are.
 Let us *become* them,
 so that we ourselves are a gift and a giving.

Plugging In

Rev. Amy Bowden Freedman
 Channing Memorial Church
 March 7, 2010

You may be wondering why on earth I chose a poem about “Burnout” for Stewardship Sunday. After all, March is the time of year when we ask our members and friends to make a financial commitment to the church. The kick-off to the annual pledge drive is a time when traditionally we pat ourselves on the back for all the successes of the past year and dream of what is possible, *if only* we raise the money. In fact, since 2000 when I was called here as your minister and even before that when the congregation needed to double financial contributions in order to afford a full-time minister, this congregation has set forth ambitious financial goals each year.

Our shared vision has allowed us to grow in space and excellence. For example, we increased the church office hours, our Director of Religious Education position was increased, we reclaimed the back apartment of Channing House opening up more rooms for our own use. We ended the lease with Sea Rangers Nursery School and then transformed the Parish Hall from dingy gray to a bright inviting color allowing the space to be more welcoming for all ages.

And last year on top of the annual fund drive we launched a Capital Campaign that raised a third of the funds to reconstruct our steeple. Word has spread about our success and I have been contacted by other Unitarian Universalist congregations who want to learn from us. Over the phone, email, and even personal visits, ministers and

church leaders have asked me and lay leaders how a mid-sized congregation with a minimal endowment managed to be such faithful stewards of our historic buildings while at the same time growing in our outreach and membership during a recession. Indeed we have an incredible story to share and reason to be proud of our accomplishments.

The dedication and hard work of our leaders, members, friends, and staff made what often seemed like a distant dream a reality. I am not just talking about the steeple, although that was the most massive and expensive project. When I arrived here in the Fall of 2000, many people around town had no idea where Channing Church was located let alone what we stand for. Since then we have become leaders in the community for environmental issues, hunger awareness, peace, justice, as well as a place where followers of Eastern religions and seekers know they are welcome.

All this could not have happened without meetings, planning, and hard work. Quite simply, it takes dedication and skill to keep an organization like this running. However, instead of stretching and pushing and yearning and struggling, the time has come for us to celebrate together.

The Rev. Ric Masten rightly points out that “Burnout” is a misnomer. In his poem, he uses television sets as an analogy for that dead lifeless expression that folks can get.

burnout
 you know the symptoms
 a history of dependable service
 then suddenly for no reason things go dark
 and you're a dead piece of furniture
 waiting
 to be removed from the living room

Many of us experience burnout at various times in our lives. This can happen in employment that becomes unbearable; juggling personal responsibilities that seem endless; and burnout can happen in volunteer positions. Things that we originally agreed to do because we enjoyed the task or the people or the organization only later to be left feeling depleted, underappreciated, or trapped.

However, as the poem reminds us, burnout is not a terminal condition. As bleak as it may seem, quite simply you have become “unplugged”. In order for us to function well in our lives whether at home, at work, as a volunteer and here at church, we need to find an outlet—a source of energy beyond ourselves and plug back in.

The Protestant work ethic of pain and self-sacrifice is prevalent even in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. However on this Stewardship Sunday I want to remind you that having fun together is not extra, not a vestige of another time but what is most real. The pleasure of connecting with others is what gives us energy for the challenges we face. Belonging to a caring community is a way of plugging into our deepest values and bringing to light our highest aspirations. Attending a Sunday service

is the spiritual touchstone for the week, a time set aside from our hectic lives in order to connect to our most authentic selves and join with others in bringing more love and understanding into our minds, hearts, and the world.

If you feel drained in your professional or personal life, carve out more time for church. Attend Zen Meditation. Join an Adult Enrichment class. Believe it or not, this spring is your chance to attend the Prom of your dreams! Our Interweave Chapter is hosting a dance with Marriage Equality Rhode Island. I hope that you will join me in dressing up and dancing in support of civil rights for all couples in our state.

If you are doing a job in this church that you find draining, remember to plug back in to a source larger than yourself. Invite other people to share the job with you. If possible, bring food and music. If that is not possible, find time before or after your responsibility to share a meal together and tell stories.

If you do not recognize many faces here on Sunday morning or have yet to make Channing friends, sign-up for a Potluck or offer to host one yourself. In this morning's Creation story, God knows there is work to be done and justices to right, but what matters most is joy, laughter, delight, friendship, and the wonders of life. When I was in college, the minister of the Ann Arbor Unitarian church began each Sunday by exclaiming, "Welcome, welcome to our celebration of life!" Celebrating Community is not just the theme of the canvass. Channing Memorial Church itself is a celebrating community. I actually think "*Joy for all!*" is the perfect goal for Unitarian Universalists.

When a visiting steward asks you to make a financial contribution to this church, remember this is not a bill for you to pay or a guilt trip. Your pledge is a way of plugging into this community, an investment in the values of liberal religion. "What should you give? Give enough to stand by this church. Give enough so everything is possible."¹ Give until it feels good.

CENTERING IN MEDITATION AND PRAYER: O God of life, Richard Trudeau

O God of life, help us make this church a refuge from the world, a place where the rules are different.

May this be a place (for example) where no experience is necessary -- where people are encouraged to risk new things: where a university administrator can try her hand at plumbing, if she wants, or a plumber can help manage the finances, or a banker can teach five year-olds.

May this be a place where people always feel that their efforts have been worthwhile, and their energy well-spent. And may this be a place where, as in a children's baseball league, everyone gets to play.

O God, help us make this church a refuge from the world, a place where the rules are different.

May no one feel invisible here, or feel worried about what others might be thinking of them. May no one be bored here: if a person isn't interested in what the minister is talking about today, may he or she be excited by the music, or by a conversation at coffee hour.

May this be a place where people are touched -- if not by something said, then perhaps by something sung, or by the light coming through the windows, or by the sense that the people who come here support one another.

May this be a place where everyone feels safe: safe to follow their thoughts wherever they lead, safe to believe whatever they must, and safe to share whatever is on their minds and whatever is in their hearts.

O God, help us make this church a refuge from the world, a place where the rules are different -- a place where our wells can fill up again, where we can be refreshed and renewed, so that, when we return to the world with our batteries recharged, we can help transform the world into a place where the rules are different. Amen.

ⁱ Arlington Street Church Covenant Renewal Brochure