

Pat Weeks COTH History Talk

I love coming here every Sunday. It lifts my spirits. It helps me to connect to the Source—to the Oneness—to the Divine, I always leave feeling at a higher vibration than when I arrived. Almost all our speakers and musicians' comment on the palpable, positive energy in the room. Many of us feel that we have something very special and unique in this small church.

It didn't happen by accident.

Kathleen Healy is this month's coordinator for speakers. She was thinking about our next transition to the church facilities downtown—and she thought that it would be appropriate that we should have a Sunday service summing up our church's history. She asked Jane and me to lead this service for she knew that we were real old-timers. I look around me and I see some faces who have been with us through this long journey.

Percy Palmer is the congregant with the longest history. He began going to the Unity services in the early 1960s in the Homer Building on 13th Street in downtown Washington-near the Warner Theater. The minister was a woman named Ann Sanford. (I have been able to trace Unity of Washington D.C. back to 1951 when the minister was Rev. Roy Feldt.)

Rev. George Stone replaced Rev. Sanford and Unity met for years in the Y facilities. Rev Stone was a powerful speaker and attracted many congregants with his message, intellect, and dedication. (In fact, Lafayette told me that in the late sixties, when he was a principal in D.C., his wife had gone to hear George speak, was very impressed, and he went with her to a service to hear him speak once-but knew nothing about Unity at the time.)

The congregation found an old church building on 7th and A Street NE that was in bad shape. A former congregant, Berniece, told me that there were holes in the roof and a lot of subsequent water damage. Pigeons were roosting in the attic, and it needed a lot of work. But it was basically structurally sound and the congregation moved in and began the process of restoring it. Rev. Stone left in the early 1980s- and he was replaced by Rev. Amalie Frank in 1983, a dynamic, tiny woman who was an astonishing 73 years young.

Rev. Frank had a direct, simple message: Change your thoughts. Change your life. She knew what she was talking about— for being exposed to Unity had truly changed her life. She was a mother of 4 and felt trapped in an unhappy marriage to an alcoholic. Because of his drinking, they had financial problems. Her health was suffering. She felt she had nothing to live for. She has said, "Life for me changed for me in April of 1951 when three friends, who did not know each other, introduced me to the teachings of Unity." She stated listening to a Unity radio program called, "The Unity Viewpoint." She heard a lecture at the Washington D.C. Unity church by Rev. Roy Feldt. And a friend gave her a subscription to the Daily Word. She said, "The message was clear and forceful to me. NO ONE IS MAKING YOU UNHAPPY, YOU ARE MAKING YOU UNHAPPY."

She stopped trying to change her husband. She began to watch her thoughts, her words and her feelings. She began to affirm that there was good in every experience. She declared "Absolute

Good is in charge of me, my life and my affairs.” She started tithing faithfully. She immersed herself in Unity teachings and found a Unity church that she began attending.

Her life changed. There was a new peace in her marriage for she no longer criticized her husband. She began experiencing a new financial abundance. Her health improved and she enjoyed an increased vitality and energy. She realized that changing her thoughts truly did change her life. As time passed, the student became the teacher. Her Unity church, where she had first studied and where she began teaching classes, sent her to Unity Village to study further and, over time, she became a licensed Unity teacher.

Amalie was an effective teacher as she spoke simply and directly about using the power of the mind to change one's life and to direct one's thoughts toward that which one wants to see manifested in life rather than focused on worry or lack. She taught people how to release the negative thoughts that hampered them from claiming their good. Her effectiveness as an inspired teacher did not go unnoticed and Unity officials, in a special ceremony led by James Dillet Freeman, inducted her as a Unity minister. She served churches in Michigan and Indiana. People were able to relate to her honest sharing of her own past difficult experiences.

She was very happy to be invited to be the minister at Unity of Washington, D.C. She was a powerful force and transformed and grew the congregation into a vibrant, lively place with two Sunday services that filled the sanctuary and balcony—with people often sitting on the steps in the balcony when the pews and chairs all filled up. Amalie, who had been a music teacher with a master's degree from Peabody in Baltimore, convinced an amazing musician, Michael Patterson, to become the church's musical director. Music was important to her, and Michael, who had no intention of ever playing for a church again, could not say no to her. With her support and encouragement, he established a dynamic music program putting on several very polished musical productions a year—ranging from opera to gospel to Broadway shows.

Amalie taught many classes—new Unity members were required to take her consciousness raising classes for which she had written a small pamphlet. She also encouraged everyone to take the class on Eric Butterworth's *The Power Within You*." (which Oprah Winfrey has said was one of the most influential books in her life) Butch Moseby had been George Stone's Business Manager and he continued in that role. However, Amalie recognized that he was a gifted teacher and a serious Unity student—and soon he also began teaching classes which were incredibly dynamic and motivating. He began studying at Unity Village and Amalie promoted him to Assistant Pastor. I know that Jane, Curt, Carol, Phil, and I began our study of Unity principles in these classes including “Spiritual Economics” by Eric Butterworth, “The Road to Cosmic Power”, “Fundamentals of Unity” etc. Phil and I marveled when I was going through some of my old journals in gathering materials for this talk at how much time we spent at the church each week. Besides Sunday services, we usually attended two evenings of classes, a Wednesday night church service led by John someone, who was a serious Unity student and attended our church to be around Amalie. (Butch later took over the Wednesday night services.) I took an exercise class there. It was a dynamic, life-transforming experience to be a member of that church. I saw visible changes weekly in people and felt that we had found a beautiful oasis of spirituality. Often newcomers to the church would weep unashamedly at their first experience in our church and say simply, "I feel as if I have come home."

But here's the hard part of my talk.

I could not have envisioned that this wonderful organization could be splintered. But human egos entered the picture—and perhaps a power struggle. We all have to guard our precious assets and all of us struggle with our human tendencies despite our true belief in higher principles. Amalie's strengths were in her ability to teach a powerful and life-changing message. But she wasn't so interested in the administrative aspects of the church and she definitely was not a good Board leader and would not speak up when the situation warranted it. Thus, she had difficulties with Board decisions. When we first started going to the church, the congregation had dismissed an entire Board because they felt the individual members were not representing or respecting the wishes of Amalie or the congregation. Of course, it was difficult to know the wishes of Amalie because she didn't speak up in the meetings.

The musical director had difficulty with Butch making the salary that he made and he made his objections known to some of his friends on the Board and this created a lot of tension. The Board decided that they would handle this situation by agreeing to hire an ordained Unity Minister to assist Amalie—and remove Butch from his position and give Butch the title of Master Teacher. So his role was reduced and it was difficult but he felt it was the Universe telling him it was time to leave and establish his own church, which he subsequently did.

The Board established a search committee to look for the Assistant Unity Minister who was to balance out the areas in which Amalie was not strong or especially interested. Amalie was not really happy with this decision but again, she didn't speak up at least not to them. A young woman came from Unity Village to try out who seemed very disciplined and organized and the congregation reacted favorably to her tryout talk. Another candidate spoke subsequently—and then a long-time minister felt he had been given a message to call Amalie and he came and tried out to a very enthusiastic response. Amalie greatly respected him and would have very much have liked to have the Board hire him. But the Board felt the process that they had established, i.e. the Search Committee had been sidestepped. (Talk about the exchange of letters with Judy Reynolds) They went with hiring the first young woman.

Amalie was never happy about this decision. The young woman arrived, full of energy, good ideas, and anxious to make a real contribution. The first year went relatively smoothly and we had several effective programs that the new Assistant Minister put into effect. But there were underlying tensions. Amalie and our music director were not happy. When the assistant minister asked the Board for a very large raise, making her salary almost on the par with Amalie, saying that she was considering another offer in the midwest, the Board gave the considerable raise to her—and the congregation revolted.

Again, the move to remove the entire Board began. It was a period of meetings, of letters, of enormous effort to remove the Board. Somehow the church that had been our sanctuary became a building in which it was very uncomfortable to be present in. Anger and confusion moved in. We couldn't understand why the two ministers couldn't resolve everything peacefully. After all, we were Unity! After months of agonized negotiations, the whole thing culminated in a large congregation meeting on a Sunday afternoon, presided over by an outside mediator and attended by a Unity staff member from Unity headquarters. The meeting was long and rancorous and dragged on and on—and finally a vote was called. By this time, everyone was tired. Before we could vote, the Assistant Minister called for a validation of each person's membership and everyone had to line up so that the office people could check laboriously the records to verify membership. Hours went by and many people, without being able to register their vote, had to

leave. When the remaining members finally voted, the minority won out because the majority was 2 votes short of a 2/3 majority vote, as required by the bylaws.

I remember sitting in the pews, stunned and weeping, because I knew something very precious had ended. I wondered if we could ever recover.

Well—Amalie had become great friends with the minister of the Methodist church, Dick Stetler. He had been her good confidant and staunch spiritual supporter throughout all the difficulty. The next evening it was raining and Michael Patterson's doorbell rang. He told me later that there in the evening dusk, a tiny figure stood in the rain and smiled and said, "Michael, will you come with me? Dick Stetler said we could meet in his church until we found our own place." And so that next Sunday, the group that felt close to Amalie and her teachings met in the Methodist Church. She chose her own Board for this transition I think Curt and I were both on that Board. She never went back to the church on 7th and A. Because of her, that church had a substantial bank account, a paid off mortgage, and a restored and redecorated church. In retrospect, we should have negotiated for at least half of the assets but that was not Amalie's way. The past was the past. She shut the door and went forward. And she had the faith and courage to start anew.

We named our new church CommUnity on the Hill—loving the fact that the word Community contained the word Unity. We wrote new bylaws (making sure this time that actions could pass by a majority rather than the 2/3 vote) and received permission from Unity headquarters to establish ourselves. We worked to put the unpleasantness behind us, to forgive, and to begin again with a clean slate. Actually, after everything was put into place, Phil, Jane, and I took a few months off and went to the Institute of Spiritual Development just to step away and have some peace. But we found we really missed Unity and the warmth of our friends and came back.

Amalie retired on June 1, 1997, and we had a lovely church service honoring her that was absolutely packed, with many people from all around coming to honor the teacher who had helped them change their lives. A couple of months later, we had another gala celebration at a fancy club where people from all over the United States sent messages of congratulation and gratitude.

So there we were! We began having different speakers each Sunday and enjoyed the diversity. But at that time, we were used to the traditional structure of having a minister and so we formed a search committee to find one. In December of 1977, we hired Rev. Polly Dozier, who came to the church officially on February 8, 1998. Somehow, although she was a nice person, it just wasn't a good fit. Her energy was very different and we didn't attract new members. Our finances were suffering.

That October, the month I became President of the Board. I was unsure of my decision and kept asking Spirit to guide me because I felt inadequate for the task. One day, in my office, I received a sudden inspiration that we could individually raise money for our struggling church. I called it the "5,000 Club." I challenged each member of our congregation to become an individual fundraiser and raise money from any source they could think of: friends, relatives, ex-spouses, and I wrote a rather unorthodox fundraising letter that any member of the congregation could adapt and send out. I emphasized that the Unity Principles on prosperity worked—and we would manifest what we needed to survive and grow. Lois Taylor organized a Silent Auction for our church that brought in \$5,000. Chic and Cheryl in honor of their anniversary, held a dinner in

their home featuring a concert by a harpist, Mischa Hanlan, with all the proceeds going to the church. Money began to come in a couple of weeks after her fundraising letter came out, Sylvia Sturm brought in \$1,000. My relatives and friends came through big time—a friend in Denver contributed \$1,000—a friend in Japan gave almost \$600—my prosperous show biz nephews contributed hundreds of dollars. People would tell about other donations that had come in during our offering part of the service. The fund grew and grew.

We could sense a hope and optimism and new energy emerging. We all felt very sad when Michael Patterson, who didn't click with the new minister, decided to resign and go to the church in Bowie and many of his followers went with him. Again, led by Spirit, I asked Carol Maus to coordinate our music program. (She said she could do it for a few months she wasn't sure she was going to stay or go on to Bowie.) Soon we were graced by the presence of Barbara Wilkinson, whose talent as a pianist and choir director was a treasure. After a time, Harley came on board to direct the music program. For me, it was a dramatic illustration of the Unity principle of creating a vacuum and something good would come in to fill it.

The new minister was not comfortable in the Methodist church and we moved to a temporary home to the Southwest waterfront at the Channel Inn. We looked at many, many venues, but couldn't find anything suitable. Phil, who at the time was Executive Director of the Network of Light, had rented Hearst Hall for one of their workshops and suggested it as a roomy, light-filled place. We went to see it and liked it. It was a tough

sell for the National Cathedral Board to allow this group that they weren't sure of to rent the facilities for a short while. We finally were able to negotiate a month-by-month contract and moved in.

At that point, we could have, as in Omar Khayum's poem, folded up our tents and silently crept away. But there was a solid core of loyal congregants who felt that we had a wonderful spirit and didn't want to give up. (Cheryl and I laugh that we should write a book about this period in the church's history.) We continued to have new speakers each week and found that we really liked that arrangement. I asked each Board member to take one month as coordinator to make the arrangements for speakers and platform assistants. We reorganized the order of service. Through connecting with Spirit, I wrote the affirmation for our ministry and our offering blessing. I asked Cheryl to write our tithe checks first before paying any other bills. Our finances began to completely turn around and prosperity became evident with our bank account growing steadily.

When I was preparing this talk, I found old Board meeting notes, financial statements etc. I used to send out periodic letters to the congregation of gratitude for what we were establishing and for all their contributions and continuing support. In one of these letters, I said, "I am so grateful for your continued financial, physical, and spiritual support to our congregation. The group's optimistic, joyful spirit is present every Sunday in our services and I feel that power throughout my week. Every week I find myself saying, "Wasn't that a wonderful service?" I am lifted all week by the power and presence of Spirit that I feel in our worship service.

It was a difficult decision for me to run for the Board last year. In all candor, I had past experience in observing quarrelsome, unpleasant Board meetings, and it never seemed to me to

be something to which I wanted to commit my time and energy. In fact it seemed as if it were something that I wanted to avoid at all costs. But Polly persuaded me to run and so, as a way of supporting her, I did. I was a little nervous when I was elected Board President and certainly never expected that Michael and then Polly would resign. I suddenly found myself assuming more responsibilities than I bargained for. But Spirit was working in our congregation. I found the other Board members to be sincere, peaceful, and loving people. I experienced our congregation as warm, supportive, and committed to our spiritual goal of increasing our awareness of God and living our commitment to the Divine Presence within.

In another letter I wrote that Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, co-founders of Unity, believed that if you truly make God the focus of your life, you will be supplied with everything you need to sustain and support you. In accordance with their inspired guidance, the focus of CommUnity on the Hill is to offer a loving and sacred atmosphere in which people draw strength, inspiration, and love by experiencing the presence of Spirit. Our only reason for existence is to come together to deepen our experience of God's presence.

Perhaps, then we in COTH, have been led to a simplicity of service and structure that is serving our spiritual needs at the present time. For now, we will continue as we are, as a volunteer organization working together as a group with different speakers and different musicians every Sunday. The diversity of messages, the beauty of the music, and the love in our congregation have created a strong, thriving, financially stable church. We'll know when it's time to grow in a different direction. When it is time to change, we will go forward with confidence, knowing that the real leader of our church is the Supreme Power. We will release the past and embrace the further good that awaits us."

That was written 12 years ago. In the intervening years, we have had wonderful Board presidents and Board who have worked harmoniously together and have achieved a much-needed stability. We have been honored by large bequests that have given us a marvelous financial foundation. We have seen many new members join us who bring their individual gifts and services that so enrich us. We bade goodbye to Barbara Wilkinson and then were thrilled to welcome her back. We have been blessed by the presence and wisdom of Rev. Lafayette Seymour, who throughout this journey has always been of enormous support to this congregation.

Freed from the traditional church structure, we have been able to function with everyone pitching in when a need arises in a spirit of harmony and love. One time a young man came to perform a flute solo in our church and told me afterwards how much the service and congregation had inspired and moved him. He said, "I honestly believe this is the church of the future."

In some ways, I feel that CommUnity on the Hill is an example of the phoenix rising from the ashes. I have learned from this experience that as our church survived and thrived, any of us as individuals can rise from the trials and disappointments we face in life. Through our connection with Holy Spirit, we can take the small embers of awareness and from them raise up a blaze that will burn brightly and light up the darkness.

This, then, is a brief history of our church. We exist to be a sanctuary to help each other to connect with the God within. Let us be mindful of our holy purpose and never take it for granted. Let us, by our example, always open our hearts to those we encounter in our congregation. Remember the words of Lao Tzu

When you find the way
Others will find you
Passing by on the road.

They will be drawn to your door
The way that cannot be heard
Will be echoed in your voice
The way that cannot be seen will be reflected in your eyes.