

## Reflections on the East Barnard Church

Mark Oettinger

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These remarks were presented in connection with the summer-long 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of The East Barnard Church. My wife, Becky Levasseur, and I were asked to present on the same day, but we prepared and delivered our remarks separately. The service was officiated by Reverend Jane Huber, and included other lay presentations by Paige Gibbs, Bill Badger, Josh Powers and Jennifer Lingelbach. It was a warm and sunny day.

I first set foot in East Barnard in 1966, at the age of 11. At the time, my parents and I were living in Ghana, in West Africa, almost on the equator. I am told that I was known around East Barnard, for a time, as “the kid from Africa.” We bought our house as a “home leave” house, and returned to Ghana after a 3-month leave.

It was during our next home leave, in the Summer of 1968, that I have my first memory of the Church. That year, due to visa problems, we spent six months, not three, living in East Barnard. This gave me enough time to become better acquainted with my contemporaries in the village. Young teenagers at the time, we were learning the complex choreography of interacting with members of the opposite sex, and we would get together in the evening, in the center of the village, to talk about the issues of the day.

We had just lost Martin Luther King on April 4, and Bobby Kennedy on June 6. The Vietnam War was already five years old, and remarkably in retrospect, had another seven years to run. Under these circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that quite a few of our late evening discussions took place on the Church steps. Sitting there for extended periods was quite uncomfortable, but there was something satisfyingly symbolic about it. It did feel a little impertinent, but our intentions were good, and we figured that God didn't mind. It also kept us far enough away from the Wesbrooks that we didn't have them peeking out through their curtains to see what was going on at the Grange Hall porch. It was in this way, and during this period, that I got to know Becky Levasseur, whom I married, at the Church, on August 9, 2009, 41 years later. More about that in a bit.

After one more year in Ghana, I returned to Vermont for good, as my parents felt that I should finish my last two years of high school in the US. For complicated reasons, my parents decided that it would be best for me to attend Hanover High School, and so my mother and I rented an apartment in Hanover for those two years, while my father worked in Algeria. Although we lived in Hanover during the school week, we spent every weekend and every vacation in East Barnard, and once she could drive, Becky spent quite a bit of time in Hanover on school evenings, so we could study together.

During this period, Reverend Stanley Nelson lived in East Barnard, and served as minister of the Church. “The Rev,” as he was known quite universally, had a knack for connecting with the local youth, even though he was probably seventy years old. He was a remarkable man who had been a Vaudevillian before “coming to the cloth.” As a young clergyman, during the Great Depression, he had been assigned to ride the rails in Texas, and to minister to the homeless men who lived in abandoned boxcars along the tracks. He therefore knew theater, and from the pulpit, he would turn the podium light toward himself, so when he raised his arms in an inevitable dramatic gesture, his robed figure would cast an enormous shadow of an angel on the wall behind him.

The Rev also knew his way around a nontraditional congregation, and he made a point of spending time with the young people of the village. He once brought us a bag of his old white button-down shirts, and spent an afternoon with us on the Grange Hall lawn tie-dying them. I had mine until it finally fell apart just recently. I also remember when one of the local kids ran away from home. We decided to consult with The Rev. Through his intercession, our friend came home.

We found out that we had been redeemed from our cheekiness in sitting on the Church steps when The Rev asked us to conduct a “kids' service” while he was to be away attended his son's wedding. We nervously agreed. This was the Summer of 1970. The previous summer had been Woodstock, the Summer of Love. The assassinations of 1968 were no longer as vivid, but Vietnam War, which had been the first story on the evening news for as long as we kids could remember, raged on. Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin were still in their prime...but both would die in the fall. Perhaps not surprisingly, the theme of my “sermon” was escapism and we punctuated the service with music from the rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar.

Jump ahead 23 years, through a blur of summer Sundays and Christmas Eve services. In 1993, both Dudley Leavitt and my father died, roughly a month apart. Dudley was unquestionably the anchor of the East Barnard community, most of whose residents are descended from him. I attended his memorial service and listened as tribute after tribute was presented, including a very moving poem, which had been written by his granddaughter, Becky, my Becky, whom I probably had not seen in 13 years at that point, and who is now my wife. A booklet entitled, "Remembering Dudley" was produced from this event. I still have a copy. Becky re-read that poem as part of her remarks today.

My father's death afforded me my second pulpit, telling the story of his life, with my mother, his wife of 47 years, in the front row. My relationship with my father had been complex, but then again, whose isn't? My then-law partner, roughly 20 years my senior, told me that he hoped that some day someone would eulogize him as well. That meant a lot to me.

Fast forward again, this time 11 years, to 2004. Josephine Leavitt and my mother died within a month of each other, just as had Dudley and my father. Jo was 100 years old. My mother wanted to go, but she wasn't feeling quite up to it. She was still driving, albeit rarely, and she was still doing her own tax returns, although she had gotten to the point of wanting me to check them. Again, I saw Becky, this time for the first time in 7 years. She told me that she wanted to visit my mother. They were always extremely close, both being nurses, and with our families so intertwined.

Five days later, totally unexpectedly, my mother died. Jacob, my ten year old son took the call. From the sound of the voice on the other side, he knew something was terribly wrong. Stunned, and after brief consideration, I told him, and I gave him the choice of going to see Grandma before they moved her. We chose to go...which was the right choice. A month later, we had her service at the Church. Again, Becky was there, and the die was cast. We did not know it at the time...but it was.

This time, the pulpit was different. At the age of 49, I was an orphan...and an only child. Who could be ready for this? This time, the key member of the audience was my son, also an only child. I did another historical review, this time with slides. From my perspective, it was beautiful, but it's not for me to judge. This was a much bigger deal, since I was now "in charge." In addition, I was also in the midst of a divorce which at that point seemed to be nearly over, but which ended up lasting an additional two and a half years.

So many weddings. I have actually gotten married twice in the East Barnard Church. How many can claim that?

So many funerals. Aside from the ones that I have mentioned, some that spring to mind are Clive Maynard, Beth Wesbrook and Mary Wesbrook. An event which beautifully blends the traditions of the East Barnard Church is Christmas Eve of a year that I cannot retrieve from memory. What I do remember is that Beth, at the age of 97, died on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. At Christmas Eve service, we were stunned to receive the news, and yet it was a moment of celebration, not grief, and Mary and Peggy were there. After all, where else would they be?

There is no other place in which I have experienced so many life changing events.

All of the life changing events aside, however, my favorite time in the East Barnard Church is a regular summer Sunday service. A day like today...a hazy morning promising a blistering East Barnard afternoon. The usual peaceful surroundings, without a sound outside. The sound of the clock ticking loudly on the wall. On a day like that...like today...I long for the call for a moment of silence, for a period of quiet contemplation. So let's have such a moment of silence. I invite you to think back to some of the important moments that you have experienced in this church...in this village...with these people.

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For me, the Church is a constant in the midst of change  
It is a thread which runs through history  
It is a lens to the past

It is a string to which we, the kindergarten class, cling tight  
To prevent us from getting lost  
And to keep us on a shared path