

Giving Voice

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Helping Margaret's Haven

By Linda A. Woodard

Perhaps with so many voices singing in efforts to raise funds for Margaret's Haven, the melodies and rhythm will move people to get involved and help turn a dream into reality.

It's worth singing about, the fact that after nearly 10 years there is still hope and a renewed vision amongst supporters to bring affordable housing for women with psychiatric illnesses to London.

"The significance of the concert is that the people behind the concept of Margaret's Haven have made a commitment to move forward," said Katherine Turner, past executive director for Margaret's Haven, and current volunteer with the organization.

A total of six choirs – WomenSpiritSong, the Unitarian Fellowship of London Choir, the Sudanese Blessing Group (Dinka's Women), Laudamus Bells, the Men of Accord Choir and the All City Choir – will participate in this fund raising event.

It started many years ago; a group of people involved with Life Spin, an organization that advocated for low income housing, identified a need for affordable housing for homeless women who were psychiatric survivors, explained Katherine Turner, past executive director for Margaret's Haven, and current volunteer with the organization. She said Janet Kreda, who now lives in Ottawa, spearheaded the movement.

At that time there were no government programs to support such housing. The federal government had pulled out in 1990 and the provincial government followed suit in 1995.

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Pamela McKane, executive director of Margaret's Haven and community director for the Community University Research Alliance (CURA) in mental health and housing.



In So Many Words...

Welcome to the first edition of *Giving Voice*, a newsletter for women celebrating the lives, the work and accomplishments of women.

The desire to create a publication for women came from my own journey of self-discovery. Through conversations with other women, I realized so much of what we do every single day is unacknowledged and uncelebrated. The word "heroine" kept coming to mind, and it was then I decided to create a space where women could tell their stories and be heard.

Giving Voice will be just that. A space that will resonate with the richness of our voices, stories about our lives, illustrated with diversity, courage, triumph, knowledge, wisdom and humor.

Every single day women are making differences in the lives of others by listening, helping, doing, laughing, crying, and talking; and often by just being the incredible women that we are!

I invite readers to participate in this celebration of women and rejoice in all that we are. Allow *Giving Voice* to be your voice!

Enjoy, and thank you for reading *Giving Voice*.

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Giving Voice...What Does It Mean?

By Rev. Leaf Seligman
Unitarian Fellowship of London

This inaugural issue of *Giving Voice* invites us to consider what it means to give voice. The great poet activist Audre Lorde wrote that her silences had not protected her, nor would ours protect us. It is our willingness to speak, not just with our words, but our lives, to give voice to what moves us, to what matters—that insures our wholeness as women, as human beings.

Giving voice makes our presence an offering. When we speak our truths with love, not a sentimental or saccharine love, but an authentic and demanding love, we give a distillation of ourselves that allows us to make such an offering without ever giving ourselves away.

Giving voice means we do not leave others to intuit or infer what we need, what we dream, what we envision. The vocalizations of our creativity—be they poetry, visual art, dance, mothering, teaching, engineering—act as our voice in concert with our words. Throughout time, women have spoken up and spoken out, declared truths, identified mis-truths, challenged the status quo and claimed a rightful place in this complex web of existence.

Giving voice suggests the gift inherent in listening—giving others the space and time to speak. This interchange of listening on the deepest levels—not just to humans but to all being—allows us to participate fully in the myriad processes we call life.

Each day invites us into the center of paradox. Once again, we find ourselves in a world that calls out for healing, that groans with the weight of sorrow, and sings to us its mysteries and its joy.

The extraordinary poet Mary Oliver writes in her newest volume, *Long Life*, “On this day as on so many others, a little song runs through my mind...What does it mean, say the words, that the earth is so beautiful? And what shall I do about it? What is the gift that I should bring to the world?”

Let us bring the gift of *giving voice*.



Ardath Finnbogason-Hill

Weaving Yarns and Tales

Written by Linda A. Woodard

Her creations are as unique and diverse as the multitudes of fibres and other unusual materials she uses to entwine stories and memories into distinctive and wearable works of art.

Perhaps the reason she does what she does is because her mother was an avid knitter, and as a young girl, Finnbogason-Hill would watch her and even tried her hand at it. It wasn't until she got married and moved with husband Kerry to the middle of the woods in Alberta – away from everything and everybody familiar – that she began to knit. “I knitted many sweaters which were quite complicated. My first attempt was like a cartoon,” she laughed.

“I made it for Kerry when we were students and we still wear it. It's a wonderful reminder of many things.”

Finnbogason-Hill remembers many of her mother's clothes were handmade. “She was fussy about her clothes and would often make her own or have them made by a dressmaker.” She wears certain pieces of her mother's clothes even today. “Some of them I had made for her and others I have re-designed,” she said. Many of her creations today contain fibers and remnants from pieces of clothing that her mother used to wear.

“She's still with me in a different way,” Finnbogason-Hill said.

Her work is done primarily with fiber through knitting and weaving. “With each piece, I'm creating a tapestry of fiber, telling stories through the weaving of the materials. I don't use a pattern, the whole process is unstructured. It's like painting with yarn,” Finnbogason-Hill said.

For some women attending her workshops, the concept of creating something from an unstructured approach is what attracts them. “We already have so much structure and patterned ways of living,” Finnbogason-Hill said. “When I see the transformation from a restrictive way of being to one that flows, I am delighted.”

“What's happening,” she explained, “is that they are in fact, learning a different way of seeing themselves.” (Continued on page 7)

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“There was no mechanism for the creation of affordable housing,” said Turner. “It wasn’t profitable for the private sector to be involved. It was a huge challenge.” A broad based advisory was pulled together and included people from the housing sector, mental health organizations and psychiatric survivors. Around the same time, many focus groups were held to determine what types of housing people preferred and what this type of housing might look like. A desire to have individual apartments as opposed to communal living was clearly indicated. The availability of green space, having a women only populated building and security/safety issues were identified. For the most part, isn’t this something we all want in our lives? To have a place we can call our own that is safe and secure, a place where we can be who we are, to maintain ourselves and function within society,” Turner said.

The next several years were spent working on a plan. In 2000, property was purchased at the corner of Dundas and Ontario streets. Renovations were done with the financial cooperation of the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC). Several funding partners – governments, other Foundations, private donors and other individuals – got on board and Margaret’s Haven became a corporation of its own.

“We were flooded with applications,” said Turner. “We had over 100 applications from people seeking affordable housing. The demand was so high. We had to look at most urgent needs of the applicants to determine who would move in first.” “For a few years we struggled through. There were some successes but we needed to be better resourced to do the work more appropriately,” Turner said.

Part of the problem is getting people to recognize that there is problem and secondly, obtaining the necessary funding for on-going supports in the form of life skills.

“Studies have shown that people can’t live independently without having the necessary life skills to maintain living arrangements on their own,” Pamela McKane, executive director of Margaret’s Haven and community director for the Community University Research Alliance (CURA) in mental health and housing. Life skills include housekeeping, time management, social interactions and budgeting, to name a few. In order to maintain a certain level of independent living, certain elements need to be in place. Access to mental health support, social integration and peer interaction is vitally important.

In May 2003 the site for the original housing project was turned over to its owner and the tenants were moved to the Western Ontario Therapeutic Community Hostel (WOTCH) housing. Work in research and public education continued through CURA, and staff and Board members of Margaret’s Haven also focused their attention toward development of a new housing project. Margaret’s Haven was approved by the City of London as a pilot project for the new federal/provincial housing program.

“There was an intention for 50/50 matching under the federal program,” Turner said. The province of Ontario chose to provide a GST rebate, leaving the balance of the required matching funds to be obtained through municipal and community funds. “The need is still out there,” Turner said. “How can we as a community come together to meet those needs and do the work that must be done.”

Right now there are plans for strategic planning and organizational development while the important work of CURA continues. Simultaneously, people are waiting to see what will happen with the new federal and provincial government programs for housing. “All of this will impact on what Margaret’s Haven will be able to do in the future for affordable housing,” said McKane. The fundraiser is one way to help those involved with Margaret’s Haven to further research the needs and issues associated with affordable housing while continuing to advocate for on-going financial support.

“A Gathering of Choirs” will take place on Saturday February 5th at St. Andrew’s United Church, located at Queen’s Avenue and Waterloo Street. The concert will begin at 7:00 p.m. Tickets are \$12 and can be purchased at The Grand Theatre or at the Village Idiot in Wortley Village (cash only please), or you can call 453-7166.



Katherine Turner, past executive director of Margaret’s Haven, and current volunteer with the organization.

Your ad can appear here:

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Financial Strategies for RRSP Season

By Kathleen Holland

With the Registered Retirement Savings Plan (RRSP) season upon us (January 1st – March 1st), our thoughts often turn to making that last minute contribution to our RRSP. But is this the best place to invest our money for our retirement? Often times, it may not be if you are not in a high marginal tax bracket to benefit from the tax refund. If your tax refund represents more than 25 percent of your contribution, it may be worth considering. For example, if you earn \$30,000 and contribute about \$5000 to an RRSP – not considering other tax credits or deductions you may have – you may get a tax refund of about \$1000. However, if you earn \$80,000, that same \$5000 RRSP contribution may earn you a tax refund of more than double that amount.

An important benefit to investing in an RRSP is that your investment grows tax-deferred until you need to use it in retirement. But because you will receive a tax refund each year you contribute to your RRSP, the flip side is that you will pay income tax on every dollar you receive from your RRSP when it provides your retirement income as a Registered Retirement Income Fund (RRIF) plan. So you might consider where else you could invest that \$5000 today. What about in a non-registered account? The reason you might consider that strategy is because you'll pay far less income tax on your investments, down the road when you need them. As well, you'll pay less income tax today your portfolio makes use of investments which earn tax-preferred income like dividends and capital gains. If you're unsure about whether you'd benefit more from an investment in an RRSP as opposed to a non-registered account, consult a financial planner who will help you to see the pros and cons of your choices.

If you don't have \$5000 to invest but would like to benefit from that kind of contribution, consider taking out an RRSP loan – at prime (currently 4.25 percent). Don't take more than two years to pay it off (ever) since the interest you're being charged is not deductible and a large RRSP contribution amount deducted all in one year will not likely give you the best tax refund results because of our graduated taxation system (ie. a 43 percent marginal tax bracket may not earn an across-the-board tax refund of 43 percent of your entire contribution). Consider using the tax refund to pay down your loan which shortens up the time it takes you to pay it off. It's as though the government is then helping you to invest in your retirement. Or you might consider using that tax refund to make your next contribution for the 2006 tax year. Again, enlist the government's help to finance your retirement and consult a financial planner who will run these various scenarios to help you make the best decision on how to invest your hard-earned dollars. Take the time to plan well in advance of the March 1st deadline. You could have a lot (\$\$) to gain!



Kathleen Holland, CFP, has been a Financial Consultant with Investors Group Financial Services since 1998 and is licensed to sell mutual funds, GICs, life/disability/critical illness insurance products.

To reach her, call 519-679-8993 or e-mail Kathleen.Holland@investorsgroup.com

Bank employees make community deposits

Written by Linda Woodard

Last December a group of women at the Cherryhill branch of the Bank of Nova Scotia decided they were going to give something back to the community. Marilyn Bryant, Sharon Fenwick, Heather O'Leary and Ritika Paul have been busy ever since collecting cash and other items.

"Often we don't realize how different the lives of others are when we are so wrapped up in our own little world," said Sharon Fenwick, one of the organizers. Every month a different charity is chosen. There are teams for each month and it's up to each team to determine how they will raise money and obtain goods.

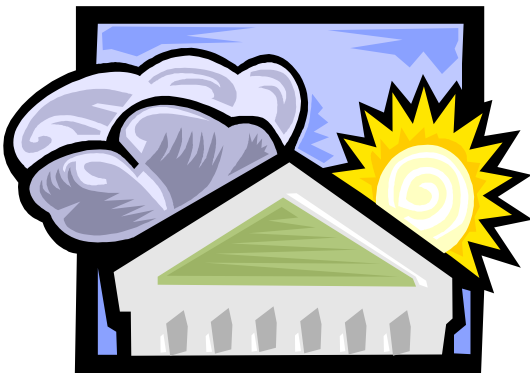
"Any money raised through bake sales and other means will be matched dollar for dollar by the bank," Fenwick said. "When we contacted Women's Community House we asked them to send us a list of most urgent needs," she said. The biggest need is for baby items, linens, and sleepwear.

Fenwick says they have had great support and described the mall merchants, bank clients and other folks that have helped out as "very generous."

"We are very grateful for all of their support," said Kate Wiggins, executive director of Women's Community House.

"They really are unsung heroes. They just see what needs to be done and they do it."

There will be a box in the Cherryhill branch of The Bank of Nova Scotia if anyone wishes to donate items.



Singing For Their Heart's Content

By Linda A. Woodard

Women and Spirit and Song. Three simple words that embrace the passion and clarity of a gathering of women; whose voices resonate from within their own deeper sacred places to deliver melodious messages to celebrate their connections with feminine spirituality.

A common chord was struck between Mary Magni and Eleanor Westgate when Magni enrolled in music lessons taught by Westgate. It was after several years had passed when Magni approached Westgate with the idea to form a women's choir that would sing about female spirituality in a non-Christian way. Westgate has been choral director for WomenSpiritSong (WSS) ever since, and last year the group celebrated its 10th anniversary. "From the first, I wanted the choir to be a choir that worked and planned together," Westgate said. "The other thing we wanted was the understanding that we were women searching through various spiritual paths we were taking." "We started with five women and over a few years grew to eight, where we stayed for three years, and then we started to grow," Westgate said.

At age six, Westgate began learning how to play the piano up until Grade 10. At 40 years of age, Westgate enrolled in the Music Degree program with the Faculty of Music at the University of Western Ontario (UWO). She trained as a choral director, and in order to make a living for herself through university, she began teaching piano in 1981. Both a delight and a surprise, Westgate discovered she enjoyed teaching. In 1982 she opened a studio in her home where she still teaches music to little folks through the program Music for Young Children ®. It's not too hard to tell she teaches little people for there are colorful wall plaques everywhere, and stacks of music books occupy the shelves. In a corner on a rack is a musical assortment of cymbals, bells, shakers, tambourines, rhythm sticks, sand blocks, guiros, triangles and jingle taps. "Music is fundamental to our humanity," Westgate said. "Good music touches our souls, and yet it is the first thing to be eliminated whenever there are cuts."

Through her years of teaching music, it has been her observation that the teaching of music is undervalued in society. "Teachers of music are poorly paid," she added, "and often music is treated as a form of enjoyment, without any real sense of it touching your very depths," Westgate explained. "It's one of the most beautiful places you can reach inside yourself."

What she gives to the choir through guidance and directorship is but a mere whisper to the crescendo of energy that comes back to her through the voices and spirit of the choir. "I can walk in there some nights feeling pretty low key but by the time we leave, I can't believe how uplifted I feel."

In its early beginnings, the choir performed at a special naming ceremony for an adopted child. Wanting a unique celebration, the mother composed a beautiful poem which Westgate put to music. "It was our very first public performance," Westgate said. "We're interested in singing for other special occasions, like women's rituals and cronings," she added.

Last year during a goddess exploration conference in London, the choir performed an hour long program of singing to the group of women and then led them in a variety of "post conference" chants that Westgate described as absolutely fabulous. "Our singing comes from a feminine perspective. We welcome contact with other centres and groups that are working in areas of feminine spirituality," Westgate said. Several of the pieces sung at concerts have been written and set to music by the talented Westgate. Choir members include Carolyn Corcoran, Donovan Grace, Daisy Oliver, Mary Flanagan, Judith Warren, Mary Lou Jones, Sandi Caplan, Sheila Horrell, Madeline Campbell, Dana Libby, Donna Gray, Kelly Austin, Linda Lincoln, Mary Starnaman, Linda Woodard, and piano accompanist Janis Wallace. There are five first sopranos, five second sopranos and five altos.

Last year was the first time the choir had a paid accompanist. Jan Earnshaw, harpist, is almost part of the choir, and flutist Janice Hill accompanies as well. Daisy Oliver sings alto and is one of the two original members of the choir. The other original member is Carolyn Corcoran who sings second soprano. Oliver learned of the desire to create a women's choir from a friend and she recalls how the small group of interested women got together one fall night and formed WWS.

"When we first got together, we took it very slowly the first several years in terms of performance," Oliver said. "That was not our primary aim. We wanted just to enjoy the music and explore our voices." Oliver describes membership of the choir as "fluid," in that people come and go and sometimes come back again. "Sometimes we have had close to 20 members and other times we get as low as ten members," Oliver said, and added, "but we always just keep singing away."

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Eleanor Westgate
in her home studio.

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Kathleen Holland BSc., CFP®
Investors Group Financial Services Inc.

254 Pall Mall St., Suite 300, London, ON N6A 5P6
email: Kathleen.Holland@investorsgroup.com

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To reach her, please call (519)679-8993 or email:

Kathleen.Holland@investorsgroup.com

And ‘singing away’ she does. Donovan Grace, first soprano, sings solo at some of the performances. A choir member since its second year, Grace composes songs and arranges music when she’s not working as a librarian for London Public Library. “WomenSpiritSong appealed to me because it embraced the non-traditional,” Grace said. “Singing is a deeply personal activity to me and I only wanted to sing what I could also believe in.” Grace says she feels lucky that she’s been able to contribute to the choir through a number of arrangements and compositions over the years. “Work on these pieces is one of the great passions of my life. I enjoy facilitating original and unique musical sounds for our choir of voices. It feels very special. I’ve been able to grow creatively and have the satisfaction of having my pieces performed,” she smiled.

Singing in the choir is fundamental to Grace. She’s sung in choirs since she was a young person and has always sought to have a musical outlet in her life. With a constant desire to sing, Grace says doing so provides a comfort through the creation of sound and the development of her abilities. “I’ve been able to sing solos for many of our concerts and these have been such an opportunity for expression and growth,” she said. “I’ve also enjoyed associating with such fine women through the choir. Although we don’t always

agree, we all respect the process of airing our disagreements with a spirit of peace, friendship, and laughter, which to me seems very healthy. Just being in the company of these women adds a great dimension to my life.”

Describing herself as “having found her place” with WSS, Judith Warren, second soprano, has been with the choir for five years. A nurse with two nearly grown daughters, Warren has always done a lot of community work. “I feel a need to give back to a life that has been good,” Warren said. “I love the positive energy and feeling of belonging I get from the choir.”

During the completion of a graduate school internship at Family Services London, Dana Libby, second soprano, learned of the choir through choir member Mary Lou Jones. With just over a year with the choir, Libby says the group saved her at a time when she was soul searching and looking for a connection. “There is real power in connection,” Libby said.

She referenced an Oprah show when Gloria Steinem appeared as a guest. There was a woman in the audience who shared her fears and expressed feeling overwhelmed with all the pressures of life. At that point, Steinem replied, “There is nothing wrong with you. You simply need to find a group of woman you love and admire and be with them.”

“The choir has really proven that notion to be true for me,” Libby said. “I love music and singing, but the



Front row pictured left to right: Eleanor Westgate, choral director, Sheila Horrell, Mary Flanagan, Donna Gray, Donovan Grace, Kelly Austin and Mary Starnaman,

Back row left to right: Janis Wallace, Judith Warren, Mary Lou Jones, Dana Libby, Madeline Campbell and Linda Lincoln.

Absent from photo is Carolyn Corcoran, Daisy Oliver, Sandi Caplan and Linda Woodard.

coming together of voices is what really powers me.” A social worker with the Early Years Team at Madame Vanier, Libby is also involved in groups working to end violence against women.

Mary Flanagan who sings alto has been with the choir for the past six years. Her daughter once sang with the group and encouraged her mother to join. “I’ve always enjoyed singing. As children, my three sisters and I sang together at community functions and I belonged to a church choir during my teens,” Flanagan said. “I enjoy the fellowship of the choir and the satisfaction derived from singing with a diverse group of women.”

Four years ago Flanagan retired from teaching Family Studies at the high school level. In her spare time she enjoys decorating and gardening. As a volunteer she helps out at St. Joseph’s Hospitality Centre (Soup Kitchen) and the Knights of Columbus with their food service and bingos. Plenty of time is spent with her three grown children and other family members, plus her beautiful nine-month-old granddaughter, Kiera.

A three-year member, Sheila Horrell, alto, used to sing with a group called Women Rise Up Singing. After the group dissolved, Horrell said she missed the energy of singing with other women. When a friend asked her if she wanted to join WSS, Horrell said she jumped at the chance. “I have always had music of some sort in my life, but I especially like singing because it expands my spirit,” Horrell said. “I love being around other singers. I find they have a generosity of spirit and love of life and that is what enriches me.” When she isn’t singing, you might find her supply teaching for elementary grades, or contributing to Heart-Links, social justice/community development/awareness organization in Peru. Also an avid drummer, she volunteers at the Grand Theatre and is on the planning circle at Brescia.

And speaking of planning; one day Westgate will retire and if she has anything to say about the future of WSS, she wants them to keep on singing. “I want them to recognize how good they are, and to realize they are talented enough to afford a good conductor and to not satisfy themselves with having a director who simply keeps time,” Westgate said. In the meantime, she would like the group to be open and continue to develop. “Someday I would love it if we made a CD,” Westgate admitted. (Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 2) Ardath Finnboganson-Hill has been telling stories with her creations for many years. Having completed several commissioned pieces for women, she literally creates them as she goes. During the process, if she sees a rock, a particular shape, a line, a tree, or a painting, she explained, something will resonate inside her and she will integrate whatever it was into her work.

“I’m influenced by many things all the time,” she smiled. “Usually what catches my attention are very simple things.” She remembers a time when at church, she saw an angle up on the wall created from sun shining in from a window behind her. From the light and shadows, she saw a Goddess formation on the wall.

“For me that day, that’s where the spirituality came from,” Finnboganson-Hill said.

She attributes a two-year residence in Trinidad for her re-awakening. That’s where she found herself deeply affected by color, through the natural beauty of the people and the landscape. “Creativity was so prevalent there,” she said. It’s so much a part of who you are, and how you walk in the world.” Retrospectively, she’ll often go back to those years.

Lately, the most predominant works Finnboganson-Hill is creating are her shawls. Previously named Glamour Wraps, these specially made shawls are now called Wisdom Wraps. Women have wrapped themselves in shawls and wisdom for centuries, she explained. Finnboganson-Hill says these shawls are made for warmth and protection. “You’re putting yourself into them literally, through the creative process; cocooned and wrapped within your own wisdom,” she adds. Each Wisdom Wrap could contain up to 32 different pieces.

Prior to her creative curvature, Finnboganson-Hill worked at the University of Western Ontario as a nurse educator with first year students in preventable health issues, a program that is now widely used across Canada. It was here where students taught her so much about the creative process. It was during this time she began having dreams about what she described as “something in my gut that wanted to get out.”

“Looking back, I know now that it meant I had to be creative.” Invited to participate in an art show with other artisans, she tested a few of her pieces. “People were interested. I found a completely different way of being, standing there watching people viewing my creations. I marveled at people’s reactions to my work,” Finnboganson-Hill said. She recalls what fascinated people about her work is the complete absence of structure because her pieces can be worn upside down, inside out, or backwards.

When women come to her workshops they aren’t just coming to knit, but are finding a way to tell their story. “They will learn from each other; the learning will be done amongst all of us,” Finnboganson-Hill said. “I love to hear people’s stories, it’s a significant part of who we are; it’s fascinating.” Incorporated into each shawl are garments from close family members, and could even include things like laces, jewelry and buttons.

As a young girl she remembers a particular pendant – a crocodile – that her mother kept in a drawer. She was fascinated with it and often wondered how it came to be, or why her mother would keep such a thing.

“My mother was very conservative. The pendant was always something that stood out; something that didn’t quite fit the persona of my mother,” said Finnboganson-Hill. A mystery even to this day as her mother died eleven years ago. And now, that same crocodile pendant occupies a space on the front panel of a blue suede vest she is creating. From each of her works, she is led to the next place of her creative development with a clear understanding of her origins and of those who have taught her along the way.

Highlights in her artistic path include the making and presentation of a Glamour Wrap for the president of Iceland that depicted Mother Sea, Fire and Ice, and the making and distribution of special Women of Distinction pins, created specifically for International Women’s Day. Made with various combinations of stones and feathers, the pins are to honor significant women.

Significant women indeed. Her mother, Emily, a wise woman who named her child from a Victorian novel entitled ‘Ardath,’ written by Marie Corelli, about a women’s journey of finding herself. How apropos, considering Ardath’s own unravelments of old structured ways and disentanglements of past patterns to create tapestries of self discovery through the weaving of personal enlightenment.

To learn more about Unicreations and upcoming workshops, call 657-3000.



(Continued from page 6)

Several years ago the choir participated in the making of ‘Mosaic,’ a compact disk created by Jan Earnshaw. The group sang on tracks 5, 6, 19 and 20 with an uplifting and powerful version of the song entitled ‘We All Come From the Goddess.’

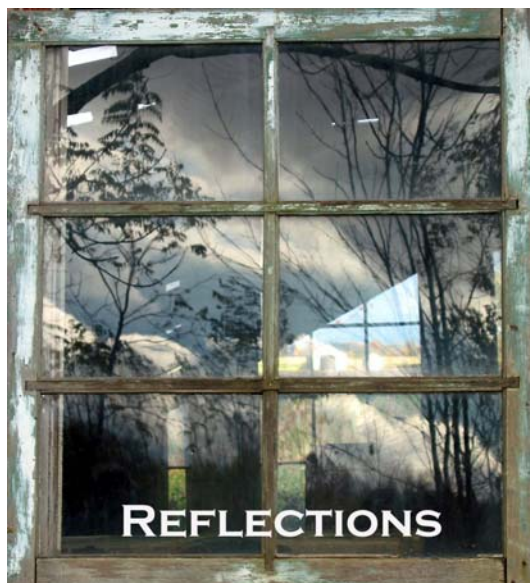
And just like those who came from the Goddess, the choir too has evolved. “This choir has come an awfully long way,” Westgate says. In the beginning they were hesitant to participate in public concerts and “had to be pushed gently,” she added.

“If there isn’t any pressure to improve, you tend to get a little sloppy.”

From a choir that started off singing simple chants, they have grown musically and spiritually from their experiences and sometimes difficult repertoires into a multi-faceted and talented group of women songsters.

The choir’s next concert will be at St. Andrew’s United Church as part of the ‘Gathering of Choirs’ event to help raise money for Margaret’s Haven.





Is Marriage Changing – Or Am I?

Our society is definitely changing and our ideas about marriage are changing right along with it – or are they? Sure, same-sex marriage is now legal in Ontario. Young people are waiting longer to get married. Marriage no longer has a connotation of property and ownership but of commitment and love. “Really,” the Doubting Thomas in my mind exclaims.

When I talked to my daughter about marriage, she said many of her young women friends want a return to the traditional marriage. They dream of staying home to keep house and raise children while their male partners earn the income. In their own words, they want to be “kept women”. This scares me. Don’t get me wrong. I think being a house manager and a mother is the most important and undervalued job in the world but I lived this lifestyle back in the early 70’s. What these women don’t realize is that there’s a price to be paid for this kind of pseudo-security. Not only is it mind-numbing to be in a house all day with children, but you could lose your ability to talk about anything other than baby talk, plus lose your decision-making power. My ex-husband used to think that because he earned the income, he had more rights to decide how it would be spent. I had to argue for every penny I wanted to spend. Tell me this doesn’t happen in today’s liberated households.

After a painful divorce in the early 90’s, I swore at the time that I would never get married again. So if I don’t believe in the traditional concept of marriage, why am I a chaplain? Why do I want to be the person actually marrying people? Obviously, I had to examine very closely my beliefs about marriage before taking on this responsibility. In spite of the Doubting Thomas in my head and in spite of the problems inherent in marriage, I do think we are on the cusp of re-defining the whole concept of what marriage means and I want to be part of that impetus. Especially as gays and lesbians, we have a unique opportunity to really change the face of marriage in a diverse society. Once people see that two men or two women, perhaps with their children, can build solid, strong, committed relationships, hopefully some the homophobia will dissipate.

I guess what I want to say to people, gay or straight, who are contemplating marriage, is think about why you want to make this huge step in your life – and it is huge! Just because it’s now legal, do you want to jump on the bandwagon? Are you serious about making a commitment to love, honor and respect another person? Do you really want to make a public and official declaration of that commitment? People get so caught up in all the wedding plans, the dress (or the tuxedo), the party, the flowers, the cake, all the other details that they forget to think about the important questions: Why do you want to marry this person? What does marriage mean to you? What exactly do you want to promise this other person? I want my role as a chaplain to be the one who reminds people of these questions. I want to help couples plan a ceremony that truly reflects their beliefs and values, who they are as individuals and as a couple. I want to be part of creating a new concept of marriage, one truly based on equity and commitment to the self and the other. Who knows? If I meet the right partner, I might get married again!

Pat Stockwell
Chaplain, Unitarian Fellowship of London

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Giving Voice

Editor: Linda A. Woodard
Telephone: 519.435.0972
Email: givingvoice@sympatico.ca

Layout & Design
Linda A. Woodard

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