

Star Island

By Jane Elkin and Bill Gimple

Presented at Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

April 3, 2011

History and Background

The Isles of Shoals are a group of small islands and tidal ledges approximately 10 miles off the coasts of New Hampshire and Maine. Our friend, Captain John Smith named Star Island for the shoaling, or schooling of fish. The 34-acre Star Island around 1651, because the island's "points stretch out in all directions like flashes of a distant star." In 1715, the township of Gosport was established by New Hampshire on Star Island. The Gosport community was prosperous until about 1778, when the islanders were ordered to leave the island and evacuated to New Hampshire, in order to prevent them from sheltering the enemy during the Revolutionary War.

The islands were largely abandoned until the mid 19th century, when Thomas Loughton and Levi Thaxter opened a summer hotel on Appledore Island. Loughton's daughter, Celia Thaxter, became one of

the most popular American female poets of the 19th century. She hosted an arts community on the island, attracting among others, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Childe Hassam and William Morris Hunt. Since 1915, the Oceanic Hotel on Star Island has been owned and operated by The Star Island Corporation as a religious conference center, affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ. Cornell University leases neighboring Appledore Island for their Shoals Marine lab, a joint project with the University of New Hampshire.

My visit to LOAS last summer

Last summer, I took my two boys, Jack and Jefferson, to Star Island, on a vacation without my dear husband, John. We three had a great time. I last spent a week at Star Island in the mid-1970s, when my parents began going. My parents and several of my siblings--I have five siblings--have returned every year since the 1970s.

Why visit Star Island when you live on the water?

Living on the water, as many of us do, gives us a unique outlook when we visit other water-oriented resort areas. Why would anyone who lives on the water spend a week on a remote 34-acre island? Well, the water is bigger. It's the ocean on all sides, not the Rappahannock on one side. And I can enjoy being on a dock which is not my financial responsibility. And where can you spend time with creative people and talk about ideas, while on a vacation, without spending an arm and a leg?

The Art Barn

One afternoon last summer on Star Island, I wandered into the Art Barn, a whole building dedicated to visual arts. I saw a painting of the stone chapel, which actually had some technical problems. A few minutes later, its painter exclaimed to me, "How do you like my painting? I spent all day on it. Isn't this art barn a great place?"

"Absolutely! I said."

The music scene on Star Island is also great. If you like to play or listen to music, you can always find somebody playing, or someone who

will listen to you play, especially at the late-night coffeehouse. I can't stay up late, even on vacation, but my brother-in-law, Scotty, stays up late every night and never makes it to breakfast. He's the All Star I conference chair this year, and he's supposed to read the morning announcements. At breakfast.

Legends of Star Island

Star Island has plenty of legends and lore. Jefferson and I found the cave where, in the 18th or 19th century, a mother and her small children hid, while enemies raided the island. Across Gosport Harbor, we could see Smutty Nose, the site of an 1873 double ax murder. We sat in Miss Underhill's Chair, a rock formation on the south end of the island overlooking the ocean where the Gosport village schoolteacher went to watch a storm and was washed out to sea by a rogue wave. We imagined what Gosport Harbor would look like if Aristotle Onassis had succeeded in his 1974 quest to buy the shoals and turned them into an offshore oil terminal for supertankers.

The most romantic spot on Star Island

What is the most romantic spot on the island? Where would one go with your long-term partner or somebody that you just met on the island that evening? You would go out on the rocks, of course, to watch the ocean. At night. Under the stars and the moonlight. It's usually a little chilly and windy, and it's not even that private, because there are a lot of other couples out there. To this day, my family gauges a relationship by the whether the couple went out on the rocks together. I remember I had some problems with my sister during that 1977 visit when we realized that we had both been out on the rocks with the same fellow. To take your relationship to the next level, you might skinny dip in the tidal pool by the breakwater.

The Grand March

The breakwater protects Gosport Harbor, the harbor between Appledore Island and Star Island. Gosport Harbor is a popular overnight harbor for pleasure vessels cruising up the New England

Coast. From the front porch of the Oceanic hotel, my new friends and I kept track of the large, expensive sailing and motor yachts: some staying overnight, some staying a few days. Although the larger boats had electronic entertainment on board, I believe that they found the native UU species on Star Island to be quite interesting.

It is banquet night, the last evening on the island. For the Grand March, we gather at the Stone Chapel, hold hands in a long line, and begin singing:

I'm with you and you're with me,

And so we are all together,

So we are all together,

So we are all together.

Sing with me, I'll sing with you,

And so we'll sing together,

As we march along.

Star Island is our spirit's home.

WOO! WOO!

Our spirit's home,

WOO! WOO!

Our spirit's home.

WOO! WOO!

Star Island is our spirit's home.

WOO! WOO!

Star Is—land, Hoo—rah!

As the *Grand March* moves along the porches of the hotel and approach the lawn, our excitement rises. The long line of people, young, old, very young and very old, slowly spirals into a circle, until we are spiraling smaller and smaller and we are scrunched together and we can't spiral anymore, and we are breathless and singing at the top of our lungs with the blue water and blue sky all around us. It is a moment when we are one with the world and the sky and the ocean and the

waves, and our 260-odd fellow UU conferees. A spiritual moment. Did I mention that we are decked out in our finest attire: one guy in head-to-toe tie-die, another in a white dinner jacket, evening dresses and beach wear and everything in between? Somehow, the line of people manages to reverse direction and we begin to spiral out again. At that moment, I caught a glimpse of one of the sailing yachts, and there was a guy standing on the deck, watching us, through a pair of binoculars.

My Siblings

A few months ago, I asked a few of my grown siblings what they like to do on Star Island.

Here's my Brother Bobby's typical day at Star Island:

"Wake up, eat breakfast, hang out with Joy and Calvin, take Calvin to class, read on the porch, pick Calvin up from class, eat lunch, take Calvin to class, read on the porch, pick Calvin up from class, go play on the rocks with Calvin, go to social hour, eat dinner, hang out in the lobby, consider participating in evening activities, skip chapel, eat at

the snack bar, play board games into the wee hours of the morning."

(My bother named his child after Cal Ripken, Jr.)

My sister Louise stated, "Bobby mentions 'skipping chapel.' I usually skip chapel, too, but I regret that. Larry Yermack once took me aside and said something to the effect of, "Louise, you really ought to go to chapel, every night, because you never know what you will find there.

People put themselves out there in the weirdest, most excruciating, or most touching ways. One night, a woman may wax endlessly on about her many regrets in life. The next night, there may be a pleasant and interesting discussion of environmental issues. Maybe someone will sing his heart out (while everyone else attempts to conceal their cringes.)

The most memorable Star Island experiences take place at chapel."

(Sound familiar?)

My sister, Annie, likes to get up early to go bird watching. She likes to go to the speaker although she rarely make all five sessions. After lunch, she goes to the "talks-on-the-rocks." For meals, she likes the

luck of the draw of sitting down at a table with people she doesn't know. Her favorite speaker was Alfi Kohn, but she also liked a speaker on Japan, and one on insects.

My brother, Bobby says that he returns year after year, "Because it's nice to go to a place where everybody knows your name."

What I will do at LOAS II 2011 this summer?

- I hope to join the group that writes and acts in the closing night comedy skit
- I might sign up for talent night. I might do a standup comedy routine about yoga, or what it is like to be a life-long UU.
- I really should do at least one of the 6 AM polar bear dips.
- I'm really looking forward to lobster night, where the lobsters are delivered straight from the lobster cage, to the boat, to the dock, to the kitchen, to the table. The price will be right, and I won't be doing the cooking.
- I will really, really try to go to Chapel this time, at least once.

- I've also volunteered for the job of organizing people to babysit the kiddos during happy hour. Since I had to give up three happy hours last summer, I am going to make sure that everybody with kids takes a turn.
- I am going to plan a great outfit for the Grand March.

Theme of LOAS II

The theme speaker for the Life on a Star II (LOAS II) conference, August 20-27, which we will attend is Peter Phipps, who teaches a course on media and culture at the University of Rhode Island and is the Managing Editor for New Media at *The Providence Journal*, "one of those endangered, old-fashioned things called a newspaper."

Theme of All Star I

My sister, Annie, and my brother-in-law, Scotty, are the All Star I Conference leaders this year (July 2-9). Their conference theme is: "*Rejuvenating America, What will it take?*" They have decided not to depend on one speaker, since some speakers sometimes show up

substantially unprepared (*sound familiar?*). Scotty once noticed the theme speaker reading his own book and taking notes on the boat ride to the island, and he wasn't impressed with that approach to preparation. Annie and Scotty's plan is to have a different speaker every day, including my sister Louise who is an expert on legal issues of developing countries: David Yermack--Annie, and Louise's' childhood friend--now on the faculty of Columbia University--and Ned Tilman, (*you know, Tilman Island?*) an environmental writer.

I asked Jack and Jefferson if they wanted to change weeks and be with their cousins, aunts, and uncles this year at All Star I, but they actually said "No thank you." In recent years, the Elkin family with my husband's daughter and grandchildren has been entering our boat in the Urbanna Boat parade. Our boat never wins, not even the "most creative" or "most patriotic" categories, but we have had some outrageous boats. Urbanna Harbor on the Fourth of July is magical small-town experience. Although last July 4th we were on the water

when the firefighter from Richmond crashed his boat full of people into the lighted buoy at Water View.

Financial Aid and costs

How much does it cost to go to Star Island? Our costs this year for three people will be about \$2020 for room, board, transportation, and conference fees. Financial aid is available. You can take a day trip to the island, for no more than the cost of the boat ride. You can also take a "personal retreat" at Star Island, without attending a conference. Round trip adult boat fair is \$39. Parking on the mainland is \$10 per day. I've been to both The Mountain and Star Island. The Mountain is about 500 miles from here. Star Island is about 600 miles from here.