

The Montague Reporter

also serving Irving, Gill, Everett and Wendell

75¢

YEAR 11 – NO. 7

REPORTER@MONTAGUEMA.NET

THE VOICE OF THE VILLAGES

NOVEMBER 8, 2012

Ideas Are the Idea of Area's First TED Talk



©JOHN MAUSHAMMER PHOTOGRAPHY

*Ezekiel Heter-Wegscheider at the TEDx event in Shelburne Falls***BY JONATHAN VON RANSON –**

Ten original thinkers and doers from Franklin and Hampshire counties made presentations of their fervent interests in a nutshell last Saturday at Memorial Hall in Shelburne Falls. To the 100 or more who attended, the event amounted to a topical storm precipitated by warming attention to what we're doing here, and what we might be doing better.

The TEDx event was a licensed, localized version of the TED Conferences, global gatherings held since 1984 in Europe and California, and the first ever in Western Massachusetts. TED stands for technology-entertainment-design, parameters that the conference has since moved beyond. The "x"

denotes local, and excellence.

Organized by Stacy Kontrabecki, a forestry consultant in West County, TEDx Shelburne Falls was hosted by storyteller Rona Leventhal of Northampton at both morning and afternoon sessions, and included a free simulcast shown at Frontier Regional High School. The speakers each had 18 minutes – and fine video/sound capability – to stand in front of the audience and present the crux of their obsession. The format suits the broadly curious, and the ideas offered on Saturday, whether "tweaks" or radical visions, will likely continue to provoke thought and change among the attendees.

Speakers stood on the stage, some

see **TED TALK** page 6

TED TALKS from pg 1

reading at a lectern, others speaking without visible notes, always with a monitor at the footlights and an invisible means (to this non-techie) of controlling the slides on the giant screen behind them. With five speakers for the morning session and five in the afternoon, the ten worlds the audience got whisked into included: the confidence-builder that is music improvisation for girls; the character-balancing effect of social dance for both sexes – said to be especially needed for boys; and vocal choirs that attend the dying. And more: the fun and therapy of improvisational theater by phone; the down-to-earth, Mount Holyoke connections with Mars, alien life, and the NASA rover; and business carried out from conscious mindfulness, or sheer humanity, as a tool of cultural recovery. One speaker offered fractals as a doorway to an all-encompassing sort of learning and peace. Another reported suppressed facts of the cultural achievements of pre-colonial Native Americans and of the exhumation of skeletons that show some of them were physical giants.

The talk given by Keith Harmon Snow – a former aerospace and defense professional, genocide investigator for the U.N., lecturer in law and society, and now a Williamsburg small farmer, war correspondent and photographer – zig-zagged as suddenly and widely as his life experience would suggest. It conveyed the vastness of human culture and experience... and how restricted our American experience and comfort zone are, in contrast. Wearing pants made of the skins of camel and yak, he showed a slide of the place where he almost froze – from fear – alone in a surprise snow-storm in Mongolia. Why, he asked, aren't American children taught to trust themselves more, to know their inner resources better? "Have you ever eaten a marmot?" he suddenly inquired. The worst part, he said, is seeing the boiled animal's fierce-looking mouthful of teeth looking at you from the pot.

He once spent days and months sitting with a silent man named Felix who lived in a chaotic, run-down house. Once Felix started talking, he shared secrets he'd never spoken: that he'd "never had a birthday, never had a wife or lover." "We need to start questioning ourselves on our arrogance," Snow said. "We've lost touch with reality," accepting "propaganda" instead. The position of truth-teller, he said, is difficult. "I struggle with my urge to be a teacher because I want you to love me. What's important is having the confidence to feel – and modeling it for young people. Our heroes," he concluded, "are the people who have the courage to make the changes that they know they need to make."

It might seem paradoxical, but silences were stitched into the talk. "Learn to move into the silence," he said, as a metaphor, it seemed, for facing fear.

June Millington, a former member of Fanny, one of the first big all-female rock-and-roll bands, offered her discovery that safe, encouraged music-making and improvisation in groups changes girls by introducing them to collaboration and helping them to master the fear that holds them back. The photos on the screen of her Institute of the Musical Arts in Goshen – a kind of musical summer camp for girls, with recording, performance and teaching facilities – conveyed those thrilling, freeing collaborative opportunities.

Daniel Trenner, a dance teacher at Smith, Amherst and Mount Holyoke colleges who lives in Florence, read a highly poetic proposal to an imaginary dean for a training program for elementary, middle and high school dance teachers – not performing dance, but social dance. These teachers, by the nature of the medium and their training, will also help young people learn "body awareness, boundary-keeping, relationship-building, consensual democracy, leadership and followership, community building." Trenner described social dancing as a space "where alphas are obliged to rotate to betas, where the group is only as strong as

its weakest member, making the talented the teachers of the less so.

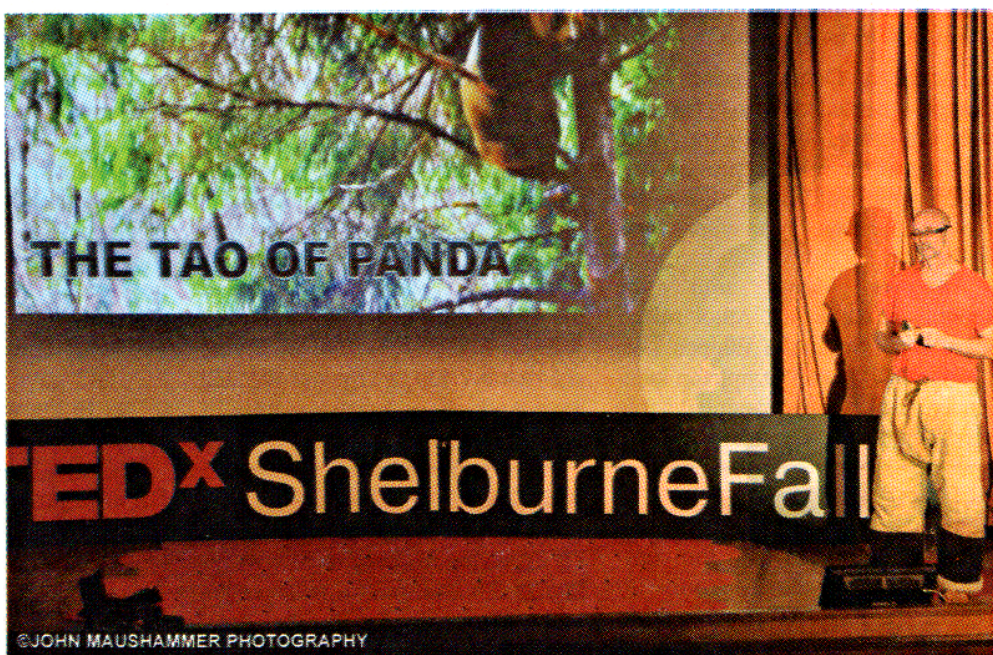
"These are the fundamental building blocks of empathy," he continued, which are "a fundamental building block of civilized society."

His proposal, he added, would help fulfill "our social commitment for involving men in these more somatic — that is body-oriented — disciplines," saying that men "do need these 'feminine' experiential physical disciplines — ones measured in feelings and not scores."

Social dance teachers, he said, are ones "whose nuanced skill set can help bring the wisdom of human touch, human contact, back into the classroom, and, it would follow, back into our civic discourse and civic life."

"47% of the time your mind is wandering," said Shaladeen Bahl, a mindfulness consultant from Amherst, "and 90% of decisions are made by the unconscious mind, limiting and narrowing your lens." She said mindfulness makes you more conscious of your mental patterns and improves your unconscious processes as well.

Dean Cycon illustrated the course of his personal discovery that "corporations are not people — but they can behave as if they were." The founder of Dean's Beans, he described how he learned to counter exploitive business practices against the sort of indigenous cultures coffee-growing depends on by going to a village, listening ("maybe for a year"), developing a relationship, and at some point asking, "How would you like to see your children's lives different than yours?" The New Salem resident called it "co-creating



Keith Harmon Snow at TEDx

a way of dealing with the issues they come up with." Ultimately, these people are the managers of the businesses that result.

The correction of the history of Native American culture came from Jim Viera of Ashfield, a stonemason whose investigations into New England's ancient stone structures have convinced him that the cultural belittlement happened "because the facts didn't fit the colonial context" — i.e., they contradicted the Europeans' sense of manifest destiny. In a more specific cover-up, he cited a number of separate reports of human "skeletons seven to eight feet in size with double rows of teeth" — skeletons unearthed in New England native burial sites. He claimed the Smithsonian denies they exist, suspecting the ultraconservative Koch family, whose money has been reported to be used to influence scientific reporting.

Fractals, shapes that repeat themselves in a pattern, excite Ezekiel Herter-Wegscheider, a young Buckland poet and artist. As the screen behind him showed the "camera" moving closer and more deeply into an organic pattern, revealing similar patterns within, he charmingly explained that fractals describe

"an infinite amount of infinity" in which "everything contains all possibilities." He wondered aloud about their ability to "not necessarily change our perspective if it's working for us," but potentially to offer a way of understanding relationships that would "transcend the differences and blockages between and within us."

John Bos is a founder of Eventide, a choral group that "provides a bed of music on which a terminally ill person may rest in harmony" while dying. In some cases the patient may ask for specific songs, he said. Sometimes the music they want is quiet, sometimes joyful. "People invite us to be present," said the Shelburne resident and a former director of performance programs for NPR, "at probably the most sacred moment of a person's life."

"Are we alone?" asked Darby Dyer, Mount Holyoke College professor of astronomy and a planetary scientist on the team that sent the new rover that's now moving about on the surface of Mars. Instruments to carry out tests she designed were built by machinists in this area.

At the program's end, one left convinced that we are definitely *not* alone.

