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Walking
the
mindful
path

The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

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“To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.”

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Inquiring Words

Blessing for a Flower Communion

Blessed be the flower that triumphs at last
Over the snows, over the centuries,
over the heavy feet of cattle and of soldiers
treading down the fragile plawces of the earth.
Blessed be the flower that triumphs at last
Over the tangled branches, over the withered stem,
over the tearing thorns of roses and of barbed wire.
Blessed be the flower that triumphs at last
Even over the hand that gathers it,
cuts it off from life, from roots,
from the memory and taste of iron and tears in the soil.
Blessed be the flower that triumphs at last
Over the closed rooms that are not its home,
over efforts to domesticate its wild truth,
over the vain words of priests and poets.
Blessed be the flower that triumphs at last
Over us, over pasts and futures, over words and silences,
over deaths and lives, placing them all in their proper place,
restoring to all things their joyful smallness.
Blessed be the flower that triumphs at last.

– Michael DeVernon Boblett
Photo by 'Frank' via RGB-stock

With thanks

The colour cover for this issue was sponsored by the congregation of Dunham Road Unitarian Chapel, Altrincham.

Correction

An apology published in the 25 April 'Inquirer' was made to the wrong artist. In the caption below an illustration inspired by the 'Creation of the Sun and Moon' by Michelangelo Buonarroti, the editor apologised to Leonardo da Vinci. It was, of course, Michelangelo to whom the apology should have been made.

A Unitarian approach to mindfulness



It's not essential to embrace Buddhism to lead a more mindful life.

Mindfulness is a sacred practice encouraged by Unitarian luminaries says **Daniel Costley**. 'To be human is to witness the divine.'

'I come in the little things, saith the Lord. Not borne on the Morning Wings of majesty'

I love these words.

They are from the poem 'Immanence' by Evelyn Underhill, an English Anglo-Catholic writer and pacifist known for her numerous works on religion and spiritual practice, in particular Christian mysticism. Evelyn Underhill was born in Wolverhampton in 1875, and died in 1941. (See the full text of the poem on page 4. – Ed.)

Although a Christian Mystic, Evelyn Underhill was well known to Unitarians, and gave lectures at our then Manchester College in Oxford. The mystic ideas that Evelyn Underhill sought to write about, and to explore actively as part of her own spiritual life were often about the mystery of life as we know it and its interaction with those things unseen, yet sensed all around.

To some, that mystery, the strangeness of our connection to the wholeness of this world is something that can be all too easily forgotten. In the busyness and chaos of our daily blur, we can risk focusing on ourselves, on the immediate, on the latest thing, without that opportunity to see the world in its glorious connectedness.

Part of the glorious creation

We are all guilty of it to some degree, I'm sure. I am.

When I'm in a rush to get to the station, I walk down through woods alongside the school, out across a hilly landscape. Head focused on everything and nothing. I miss the world around me. I see it all, and yet I see nothing.

As Unitarians, we recognise ourselves to be part of this glorious act of creation. We are not just on this world; we are part of it. We have a connectedness to the ground upon which we walk. The world is a sacred place, and we are part of its whole-

ness. We are part of its holiness.

Our actions in this world are part of a bigger picture too. Yet they are, in most cases, just a selection of little things. Of actions taken to help make our world move on. And these actions are part of the wholeness of humanity and the web of life too. And can be part of the mystical experience of life.

Forging a connection to the Divine

Mysticism, in its simplest form, is the recognition of our link to God, in whatever form that might be, or by whatever name you might know that which others call God. A connection to the Divine, a recognition that everything is part of God. And since we are part of everything, and God is in everything and part of everything, then all we do, we do in God.

But that can appear confusing. We can break it down a little:

In his book, *The God we Never Knew*, Marcus J Borg, an American theologian talks of Pantheism. Pantheism is a way of thinking about God that affirms both the transcendence of God and the immanence of God: God's transcendence, that sense of otherness, and God's immanence, that sense that God is here, within and around us. Pantheism, from the Greek 'pan' meaning everything, 'en', meaning in, and theos meaning God. It thus reads as everything is in God. God is more than everything and yet everything is in God. For me, this works.

Although Borg considers himself a liberal Christian, he shows through his books that the heart of his belief is the transforming effect of a personal God, enabling each individual to live our own lives in whatever way we might choose, but with a personal strength to support should you so wish it. As a constituent part of God however, whatever we do, can be seen as an action of the divine.

This is not so very different from the great Unitarian thinkers. The 19th Century American Unitarian, William Ellery Channing said, 'I can and I must reverence human nature. In its vast potential lie all the attributes of the godlike we may ever know.'

To be human is to be witness to the divine. All our actions,
(Continued on next page)

All our actions, expressions of love

(Continued from previous page)

our emotions, our daily activities are, in this way of thinking, an expression of the Divine, an expression of God if you like, through us. Each of us is holy – everyone is. And each action is therefore an act of God.

But, perhaps not in the Insurance Company definition of such Acts. Strange, isn't it, that Insurance Companies see 'Acts of God' as things that destroy. So what might this mean for us? To say that our actions are part of the Divine? Does it mean we are suddenly all powerful Gods?

I doubt it. Rather, I see this union with God, and the sense of immanence as being a reminder of the importance of everything we do.

Are our actions worthy?

If we begin to consider all our activities as expressions of God, or perhaps 'expressions of Love' is a better description, are we sure our actions are worthy of such consideration? Evelyn Underhill and many others have considered each action we undertake – and I mean each and everything we do – as being carried out as if it were a prayer.



Daniel Costley

In religions this focus on the activities we are undertaking has a long history. In Buddhism, this notion is considered as part of 'sati', or mindfulness. Mindfulness is, at its core, an awareness of all that is around, and all that is happening. In Buddhism, this can often be best experienced or focused upon during meditation, where an awareness of breath, or people nearby, of birds in the trees, can bring a connectedness to those meditating and focusing.

Yet mindfulness need not be focused solely in those moments set aside for meditation and contemplation. Mindfulness, this awareness of who we are and where we are can, if practised regularly or, ultimately, all the time, can bring us an awareness of our movements, our feelings, our perceptions and our actions.

If we act mindfully, then we become aware of what we are doing and *why* we are doing it. Bodily functions are usually quite easy to explain – I'm breathing because my body will collapse if I don't. I'm scratching my nose because it itches. I'm eating another chocolate because ... well, why am I eating another chocolate? 'Because I want to,' is a perfectly good answer here.

But then this notion of mindfulness can begin to extend to other things. Being aware of your feelings at different times of the day, in response to different activities.

How does that make you feel?

And then to the activities themselves. Becoming aware of what we are doing. The actions, the associated feelings, the accompanying body movements – even if it's just the eyes and ears. What are you doing? How does that make you feel? Are you happy you are doing it? Were you aware you were doing it? It is this focus on the 'little things', our daily activities and

Immanence

I come in the little things,
Saith the Lord:
Not borne on morning wings
Of majesty, but I have set my feet
Amidst the delicate and bladed wheat
That springs triumphant in the furrowed sod.
There do I dwell in weakness and in power;
Not broken or divided, saith our God!
Is your strait garden plot I come to flower:
About your porch my vine
Meek, fruitful, doth entwine;
Waits, at the threshold, Love's appointed hour.

I come in the little things,
Saith the Lord:
Yes! on the glancing wings
Of eager birds, the softly pattering feet
Of furred and gentle beasts, I come to meet
Your hard and wayward heart. In brown bright eyes
That peep from out the brake, I stand confessed.
On every nest
Where feathery patience is content to brood
And leaves her pleasure for the high emprise
Of motherhood—
There doth my Godhead rest.

I come in the little things,
Saith the Lord:
My starry wings
I do forsake,
Love's highway of humility to take:
Meekly I fit my stature to your need.
In beggar's part
About your gates I shall not cease to plead—
As man, to speak with man—
Till by such art
I shall achieve my immemorial plan,
Pass the low lintel of the human heart.

– Evelyn Underhill

actions in life. It is the application of a mindful approach to everything we do that will lead us to becoming more aware and capable of making each action a prayer.

I don't want this to sound sanctimonious or in some way super human. It isn't. It is a simple reflection on the impact our activities have in this world, and how, as part of the world, as part of the wholeness and holiness of this planet and, of the Divine spark that mysteriously keeps it all rolling along and connected, we have a part to play in bringing love to all we do.

So, if I conduct my dashed walk to the station in a more mindful way, I will become more aware of the beauty of nature around me. I will also become aware of the not so beautiful effect that the cars and lorries around me have on the natural world, and the ambience of my walk. I will be more aware of my part in this world, my connection to this place, and the good and bad elements of human progress.

(Continued on next page)

Input sought for future of Unitarianism

Think about where we're going

By Sue Woolley

This year, on arrival at the General Assembly meetings we were given a 48-page book called *A Vision for Our Future*. There had been a Vision Day at Cross Street Unitarian Chapel back in September 2014, which I had attended, and which had produced some exciting ideas. Robert Ince, who is Convenor of the Executive Committee, presented this document to the Assembly, as part of the Executive Committee's Annual Report. (Download the book here: <http://bit.ly/1Fgd8TL>)

And it is really, really rich. The ideas of the Vision Day participants have been collated under three headings: 'We want to be ...', 'We must ...', and 'To do this, we need to ...'. They are included below. And then the Executive Committee commissioned 19 articles, by various Unitarian luminaries, both ministerial and lay, giving their 'takes' on these ideas. Many of these have already been published, in either *The Inquirer* or *The Unitarian*. But seeing them altogether in one place really adds to their impact, in my opinion. Each one of them is inspirational. Together, they are a clarion call for action.

We want to be ...

- A faith that matters
- A reflection of the world's complexity, bound together by our many different views
- A spiritual feast for each person to bring and share ideas and experience
- A promoter of social justice for all, listening and responding to the needs of others
- There for everyone

We must ...

- Tell the world we're here
- Be understood by the public
- Connect to people everywhere
- Serve our communities
- Develop personal leadership
- Be religiously literate
- Provide Ministry that enables ministry
- Prepare for our children's future



Detail of cover illustration of 'A Vision for Our Future'

To do this, we need to ...

- Harness our energy
- Use our resources to the full
- Embrace new technology
- Acknowledge contribution and success
- Empower individuals
- Make change happen

In the introduction to the document, Robert Ince writes: 'This vision, though created with a view to the Unitarian Movement nationally, applies just as easily to Districts and congregations. ... It can become a unifying factor in our search for a better future. We all hope that it will serve to inspire those many individuals who love our Movement so deeply to join together in serving by whatever means they are able.'

Let us, in the District Associations and the congregations, resolve to not just read this document and nod our heads approvingly, and then do nothing. Let us Do Something about this. Read the articles, discuss them amongst ourselves, and then decide what we can do to make the ideas in them a reality.

The Rev Sue Woolley is the Midland Unitarian Association District Minister. To comment on the Vision for the future, go to: <http://unitarianandfreechristianvision.blogspot.co.uk>

Becoming aware of the world around us

(Continued from previous page)

Breakfast as a prayer

If I eat my breakfast as a prayer, in a mindful way, I focus on the taste, the texture of the food. How it was prepared and brought to the shop. Where it was grown. The people that grew and harvested it, and the conditions they live and work in.

Such an approach to life, to real actions rather than some separate religious meditation, might make me more aware of the world in which I live, and the world in which I can act in a positive way – expressing love to my neighbours.

This, of course, can extend to all the actions we undertake each and every day. Love comes in the little things. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the big things: to focus on the main event, to see the obvious. But so much more can be found in the little things. A Unitarian perspective on the world, the perspective that takes on board our part of the wholeness of creation, our

connection to one other and the world around us. Our hopes for social justice and for loving community. The realisation of these things can only start from within us. And perhaps a mindful approach to all that we do, a mindful awareness of our actions and of the world around us, will take us toward those goals.

Every journey starts with a single step. The little things of life are those small steps which will eventually complete the journey. By living our lives as prayers, as treating our every action as a sacred action, our every action as worthy as a prayer to the Divine, to God, we must surely help to make the world a better place. It is by our actions that goodness comes to the world.

I come in the Little Things, saith the Lord.

The Rev Daniel Costley is minister at Sevenoaks.

It's all over bar the shouting

By Celia Midgley

Well, it's all over bar the shouting, as the saying goes. I looked up that saying in the dictionary. 'The result of a contest appears to be uncertain.' Well, it is less uncertain than was predicted, but there is still much to be sorted out, not least in terms of leadership.

There was actually not much shouting during the election. I do miss the politicians on the stump giving it their all, or touring the streets in a car fitted with a loud hailer, its message more or less discernible. And good-natured banter, and witty heckling which livens up face-to-face debate. We didn't have much of that, possibly with the staged TV performances being somewhat anodyne. There were some good exchanges, but there was also name-calling and rudeness, and members of a *Question Time* audience making accusations of 'Liar!' and 'How can we trust you?!' and not waiting for an answer. Where has all the nastiness come from?

Of course, there have been clashes in the past, there has been confrontation in politics and suspicion, and yes, lack of trust of those in power. Extreme examples in history would include events that involved King John and the barons, leading to the signing of the Magna Carta, 800 years ago. Then there was the century of revolution, the 17th century, in the middle of which an arrogant king was executed. In the 20th century the campaign for votes for women involved much anger and shouting, sometimes by seemingly genteel women such as Christabel Pankhurst, ejected from Manchester's Free Trade Hall for interrupting a large Liberal Party meeting, and later arrested for spitting at a policeman. In more recent times, the Iraq war, tuition fees and MPs' expenses have been the focus of anger, sometimes very nasty. The anger may be justified but the ugly side of it is something else. So what is going on? Do we really think that most politicians have an easy time of it, with their second homes and high salaries? Yet there is no such anger against Premier League footballers, high-flying celebrities or even lawyers, head teachers and others whose earnings are high compared with most ordinary folk. The heat is even off bankers, at least for the present.

Perhaps the anger is that those who make the tax laws are expected to demonstrate that they especially should operate not only within the law but within the spirit of the law. After all, do we not call them 'honourable members'? There are, I feel sure, many honourable MPs. My personal experience is limited to a few. A dear friend of mine lives still in a modest 'semi' on a NW London estate that she occupied before and during her 2-term period as a Westminster MP for an East London constituency, which ended when she was 73 years old. She would battle her way to Westminster through clogged-up roads and after late-night sittings give a lift home to at least one other MP. No second home for her, and few luxuries. She was a very hard-working, dedicated MP and a person of integrity. And she is not the only one. Without excusing any who are corrupt or even a little shady, we may ask ourselves, 'Why do MPs set themselves up for such negative criticism as they so often receive?' Perhaps it is because ordering the affairs of a country, surely one of the most difficult and challenging jobs of all, is crucially important if we are to avoid chaos, and if we regard as important the protecting of the weak and vulnerable. To become an MP was almost my own choice at one time. I



Lower Weston, Bath, church as 2015 polling station. Photo by 'Rwendland' via Wikimedia Commons

regarded it as honourable then and I still do.

But people do get angry, and perhaps, in many cases, it is justified. It is interesting that issues around money, and who earns and claims what, do arouse anger and condemnation. It has been so since ancient times. There were strict rules regarding weights and measures and not cheating and having a care for those in society whose means were few. Amos, the prophet of social justice, had things to say about that.

When we barrack those in the public light, it may be seen as what they deserve and even entertaining, as on TV, but let us remember that as human beings we are fallible too. Let those without sin cast the first stone.

I cannot deny the anger nor excuse corruption or abuses of power. But it would be a pity to allow our anger regarding some people to sour our faith in people generally, come to believe that all MPs are 'on the take', not to be trusted, or give up voting because we do not see the point. Let us not condemn the whole institution. We do not want to risk losing our parliamentary democracy, however fallible, however fragile. There are good people in parliament, and there are those who do good by channelling their anger against injustice. I knew a woman who once wrote to the Pope. She just mentioned it quietly in a meeting. As a member of an Amnesty International writing circle she was opposing the Pope's ban on Roman Catholics' support of Amnesty, or even receiving its newsletter, because AI supported the availability of abortions for women who had been raped in civil wars. "He didn't write back," she said. Then, after a pause, "but Nelson Mandela did." She is a gentlewoman, warm and kind and full of energy and smiles, and proof that anger can be used. It helps her to continue to help others, in many ways.

However angry, however powerless we feel, there is always a positive contribution we can make to the human good. And feel the better for it.

So, for now, it's all over bar the shouting. But though the shouts may well be of understandable, righteous anger where it is deserved, let them not be ugly or cruel. And let us also look for the good in people, and be glad of those leaders who do show vision and integrity and an honest desire to serve.

The Rev Celia Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.

Unitarian approach supports many views

By Jane Howarth

An article written by Stephen Lingwood gained much attention when it was published in *The Inquirer*. In, 'Theological commitments of Unitarianism', Stephen, who is minister at Bolton, spelt out 11 points which he described as theological and to which we Unitarians are committed. (*Inquirer*, 2 August) The first point – 'There is a spiritual dimension to reality' – is the one that can prove the hardest. It raises questions about the nature of that spiritual dimension. I have found such explorations fascinating. But they are of no real use unless they strengthen the principles and values that I believe in and that I share with other Unitarians (and I'm sure, with many others of various religious persuasions and none).

It is easy to say that there is a 'deeper, fuller, better, more mysterious, more alive way to live', and that this is what the religions have been wrestling with for thousands of years. But as Aldous Huxley wrote in his book *Ends and Means*, if someone used to the strong, clear image of a traditional God loses that belief they may at the same time find it hard to see the spiritual – there is a visibility issue.

When I lost belief in the reality of a traditional God, ideas of how we live and what we make of life and its meaning had to be based on other touchstones. This kind of loss of belief can leave you feeling all at sea, and the temptation is to find something else to hold on to that feels as solid. The great value of the Unitarian approach is that whatever our personal theology at any time, provided it is compatible with Unitarian principles and values we can offer one another the support that difference is acceptable.

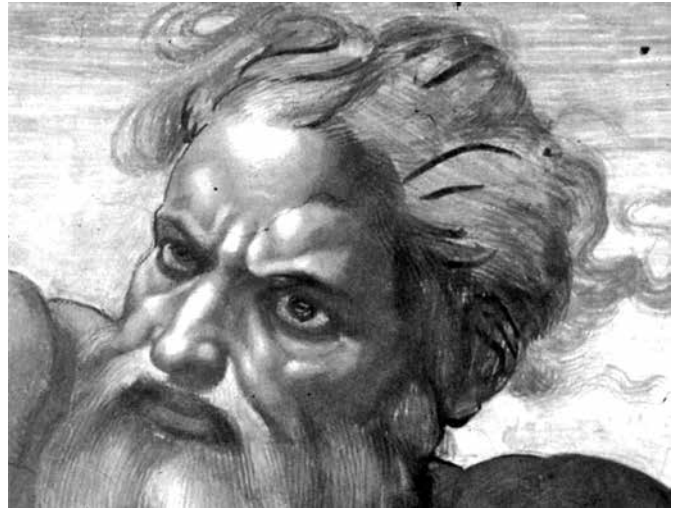
Expressing theology in non-traditional ways is an art, and in my experience many Unitarian ministers with different personal theologies are skilled artists, drawing from the seemingly mundane the spiritual aspects and truths of our human condition. For those of us who no longer find meaning in traditional worship, such ministry is helpful and makes us feel we are included.

There are many examples, but here are three:

The Rev Frank Walker in a meditation in 'Vital Stream' (*Echoes* p10) writes of the cruelty of this world. Traditional Christian theology would typically bring this to God's feet and pray that he would act. Many Christians, mainstream or Unitarian, now translate this into metaphor or suggest that God acts through us. To acknowledge that there is, and can be, no divine intervention in a literal sense when we are faced with humankind's inhumanity, is frightening.

Lack of belief in the reality of God brings no comfort. Frank, however, points to a different reality, the reality that despite the bleakness of existence we experience positives. We all have joyful moments, days when Life, capital L, seems to be 'on our side' (as opposed to the 'all-red-traffic-light days'). Strangers are helpful or friendly. These kinds of events, and many others, can warm our hearts and make us feel that life is good. And Frank suggests this by writing 'O God, make us to know that through the cold ocean of what seems incomprehensible and indifferent there flows a warm stream of your love.'

His reference is not to a traditional God figure, although if that works for you, fine. His reference is to our experience of the mysterious gift of consciousness, through which we can, if only we appreciate them, recognise blessings. We have the ability to recognise these moments and be uplifted by them,



It can be difficult when we give up the idea of a traditional God. Detail from the 'Creation of the Sun and Moon' by Michelangelo Buonarroti

and we should not take them for granted. They give us a sense of somehow being supported and help to redeem our lives. So even though we may not feel gratitude to a God figure, we nevertheless need to feel the warmth, to notice and be thankful that life has good moments. Importantly, too, appreciating helpful-stranger moments offsets feelings of helplessness when faced with worldly horrors – we can at least do likewise.

Loss of belief in a traditional God can also result in us developing an unhelpful sense of our own importance, unchecked by deference to a Creator. The Rev John McLachlan, rather than appealing to the traditional prayers for humility, appealed again to our experience. A keen hill walker he recounted how, when faced with the need to cross a narrow, high, ridge in a gale, he was forced to crawl, pushing his rucksack ahead of him, in order not to be blown off the ridge. 'There is nothing like the shock of exposure to the elements. It assigns a person to his/her place in the hierarchy of being. Puny human beings cannot compete with the Power behind the throne of Nature. In the brooding silence of a lonely valley or in the teeth of a gale on a fell-side or mountaintop, one is driven to confess one's comparative helplessness and insignificance. The wilderness that fascinates and attracts can also repel and demote. In any event, we learn humility, and realise that we are not "lords of creation". After all; we too are children of Nature and have to admit that "we do not know all the answers".' I can imagine Jesus saying 'All ye who have ears to hear, let them hear.'

I see great value in many children's fables from various traditions which teach life lessons in similar ways to parables. They, and more modern stories, are frequently used in services but directed to children. Some of the most powerful moral teaching I have encountered was from a Church of England Canon when I was a child. He built his preaching on the back of parables – no great emphasis on theology, simply an exploration of our relationship to one another and to our life. Regardless of our individual understanding of the Divine these stories ring true in our experience. They are vivid and memorable. They examine bite-sized moments of life and stress aspects that can help us towards Stephen's 'deeper, fuller, better, more mysterious, more alive way to live'.

(Continued on next page)

Lost chapel of the Miner's Lamp

By Maurice Large

A conversation recently with the Rev Alex Bradley sparked off my inquisitive nature. He was interested in something I had said about our former church in Choppington, a mining village about 15 miles north of Newcastle upon Tyne. There was a story that Choppington church used to be known as 'The Chapel of the Miner's Lamp', from their custom of lighting a miner's lamp to hang in the church during services, in memory of the members of the church who had died in mining accidents over the years.

Further investigation, particularly into the records of our late Secretary Ron Coulson, revealed a reference to an *Inquirer* article in October 1951. Through the good grace of Dr David Wykes, director at Dr Williams' Library, London, I obtained a copy of the article. It was written by the brother of the last survivor of Choppington church who worshipped with us at Newcastle after Choppington closed and was a most generous benefactor to us in her will.

The article describes the efforts being made to maintain and renovate the fabric of the building, but also gives a fascinating insight into the beginnings of Unitarian worship in a small mining community in the North-East of England:

'The founders of the church were Sir J Baxter Ellis, the Rev JC Street, and the brothers John and Robert Elliot, of Choppington. Prior to the erection of the church open air services were held on a "little green hill" skirted by a little brook where, it is recorded, over 1,000 people used to attend.

'The Right Hon Thomas Glassey, one of the members of the first government of Queensland, was an active worker in this little church, where he used to teach the miners to read and write in those days. The Right Hon Thomas Burt, known as 'the father of the House of Commons' was also a frequent worshipper. Both of these men in their younger days worked at Choppington Colliery.'

Sir Joseph Baxter-Ellis was the first Lord Mayor of the City of Newcastle upon Tyne and a member of the congregation at the Church of the Divine Unity in Newcastle. The Rev JC Street was minister to that congregation from 1864 to 1870. Thomas (Tommy) Burt was a miner and one of the first working-class MPs. The Northumberland Miners' Association named their Trade Union Offices building Burt Hall. The building – in Northumberland Road, Newcastle upon Tyne and now used by Northumbria University – was opened in 1895 and bears a plaque stating the hall 'was built by the miners' in recognition of valuable service rendered by Thomas Burt MP as general secretary for 27 years, and to commemorate his appointment as secretary of Board of Trade in 1892.'

The article makes reference to the lamp as follows:

'In front and above the reredos and altar table (which I had the pleasure of carving in oak many years ago), we will hang a miner's lamp – ever-burning – symbolical of the industry of the district and the light of Unitarianism which still glows at Choppington.'

There was a rumour that the lamp had been recovered from a mining disaster, that of the Hartley pit in 1862, which resulted in the deaths of 204 men. The beam of the pit's pumping engine broke and fell down the single shaft, trapping the men below. The disaster prompted a change in UK law to require all collieries to have at least two independent means of escape.

The belief that the lamp had been recovered from the pit was



Choppington Chapel centenary, held in 1964. Photo provided by Maurice Large

discounted when the lamp was found to date from the turn of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the close connection between the congregation and the mining community is graphically described in a poignant paragraph:

'Many a miner's child has received baptism here, and many have come to the Sunday School barefooted in the dark days of not so long ago. The crushed and broken body of the breadwinner sacrificed on the altar of the eternal fight for coal has been brought to this sanctuary to receive a farewell panegyric.'

Sadly the Choppington church is no more, as indeed Choppington Colliery is no more. I have a memory of participating in a Unitarian Young People's League (UYPL) service there in the early 1960s, and the photograph (taken at the centenary in 1964) shows it to be typical of many nonconformist chapels seen in small villages around the country. Today it is a patch of grass, and those who worshipped there would be hard-pressed to find anything of Choppington to recognise. Yet there is a recognisable shape to the gnarled tree shown in this recent photograph.

Maurice Large is a member of the Church of the Divine Unity, Newcastle upon Tyne.

What is a religious service?

(Continued from previous page)

We do indeed share principles and values that are a bedrock. And from our services we seek the spiritual, according to our own, individual theology. This is a challenge for ministers and service-takers, who need to consider the diversity of theologies amongst us. But it is also a challenge for us, in the congregation, as we try to relate to elements of a service that are expressed in traditional language, or that are non traditional. I leave the last word to the Rev Ashley Hills:

'What is a religious service?'

To join in a meeting is to so focus attention upon the Eternal, that through the reading of inspired and helpful writing; through the quiet of meditation, and the speaking of the truth in today's situation, each done in an atmosphere of reverence and expectation, our minds become sensitive to the Greater Presence, our hearts filled with wonder and adoration and our lives shaped to serve in the days to come.'

Jane Howarth is a member of the Cirencester Unitarian Fellowship.

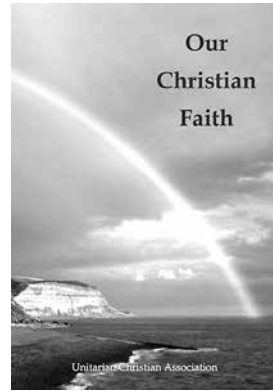
'Our Christian Faith' reflects diversity

By Denise Birks

I was at a wedding recently, when another guest approached me and asked, 'You're a Christian, aren't you?' When I answered 'yes', a number of other questions quickly followed – 'you must believe in Adam and Eve then', 'what about Noah's ark', 'chariots in the sky'? When I answered no to all of the questions, there was the inevitable (and puzzled) follow up question – 'so what do you believe in'? The bridegroom's mother, (a close friend), answered for me – 'Denise believes in a God of love', which I was more than happy to accept, and the conversation moved on. No doubt many of you have had similar experiences, and I understand from minister friends that such questions are inevitable for them at any social gathering.

What it highlights is the general misconception that anyone calling themselves a Christian *must* believe certain precepts, including a literal interpretation of the Bible. Discovering Unitarianism, and realising that I was free to explore and develop my own faith, alongside other Christians and people of different beliefs, has been a hugely positive experience. I find that the more we listen to, and learn from each other, the more we find that we have in common.

Our Christian Faith is a collection of individual essays, written by members of the Unitarian Christian Association, which beautifully illustrates how the experiences of life help us to shape and develop our ideas of faith.



Within the UCA, it is liberating to be able to hold different opinions on what our faith means to us as individuals, as well as being open to further developing that faith. This book wonderfully expresses the rainbow of opinions and beliefs held by our members.

In the preface of the book, our Moderator, the Rev Jean Bradley says 'I have found each author's words extremely interesting as well as discovering a Christian commonality with everyone. Each article offers different perspectives, yet they are all joined together by one loving faith'.

If you are interested in purchasing a copy, the price is £8 plus £1 p&p. Cheques should be made payable to 'Unitarian Christian Association', and should be sent to Catherine Fozard, 20 Handforth Dean Road, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 2LU. Catherine can be contacted on 01625 533110, or email: cathy@fozard.com.

Denise Birks is secretary of the Unitarian Christian Association.

Congratulations to NCUSSU winners

By Margaret Barber

The 85th North Cheshire Unitarian Sunday School Union Arts & Crafts Exhibition was one where we needed to think outside the box, as the saying goes. Owing to the problems with their Chapel building at Dukinfield, we had to concentrate our efforts on using the space in Sunday School to its maximum potential. The entire exhibition took place in every nook and cranny available for use, setting up the various spaces on Friday evening, and exhibitors bringing their cookery, flowers and collectors items on Saturday morning. At just gone 11am competition for the day began.

Play Reading got the programme underway, followed by Recitation, Reading at Sight, Choral Verse, and finishing off with the musical items – Solo Musical Instrument, Solo Singing, Duets and Choir. The audience seemed to appreciate all the efforts the competitors had put in, especially the fact they were all brave enough to stand in front of an audience made up of people they knew (always a tricky thing to do), plus an adjudicator, all of whom were not too far away from them in a quite compact room – usually we are in Chapel for this. Well done everyone!

Our refreshment area was kept very busy in between the performances, with a bit of a lull when things got back into swing. Nevertheless our stalwart brewers-up kept the drinks and cake flowing – a grateful thanks from us all.

We had 505 entries in total, slightly more than last year, just the Browsing Table category with no entry.

Stalybridge were overall winners once more, with 200 points, the runners-up, Denton, pushed them hard, scoring 195. Stalybridge also won the Primary Award with 109 points, the runners-up, Flowery Field scoring 74.5 points.

Flowery Field also won the Challenge Trophy for the highest

average mark, with 79.25%, but this was close too, with all schools scoring in the high 70's. This shows the quality of the work produced by our talented members.

Frances Brookfield from Denton won the Teenage Award once again, with 55 points, and Jodie Oatway, also from Denton, won the Jubilee Award again, with 56 points. What a massive number of points these 2 scored for their school – well done both of you. Come on you others – give them a fright/fight next year!!

Adam and Keira Lambe from Stalybridge won the Spotlight Award for Solo Singing, both showing improving potential in the eyes of the adjudicator, and will have to share the award – shouldn't be too difficult hopefully!

Jodie Oatway won the Jack Hinds Award for Solo Musical Instrument (novice), Frances Brookfield won the John Taylor Award for the experienced section of the instrumentalists. Gary Brookfield and Jean Clements will have to share the Alice M Kelsall Award for the highest points in Solo Singing in Class F, Gary being very magnanimous, allowing Jean to have first dibs on it, then realising he'd have the job of cleaning it for next year! Just as well he's got a new supply of Duraglit then!

Denton retained the Centenary Award for their Choir, as well as the Albert Slater Award for their Senior Play Reading. The Junior Play Reading Trophy was retained by Stalybridge.

Thanks to all our adjudicators for their unstinting goodwill in returning to us every year, and seemingly enjoying their task, and to everyone involved in any of the preparations for, and the events of, the day, especially to all friends at Dukinfield Old Chapel, for helping to make it possible to continue with our annual Exhibition, despite all the constraints they are working under for the foreseeable future – we all wish them well.

Margaret Barber is secretary of the NCUSSU.

Letters to the Editor

Billingshurst celebrated re-opening of Chapel

To the Editor:

What a glorious afternoon heralded the re-opening of the lovely old Chapel in the centre of Billingshurst after its complete refit. The little chapel was full to bursting. I have never seen it so well attended in all my 97 years. My father, the Rev Harry Maguire was minister there in 1920, a year before I was born so we have always kept an eye on it in memory of him.

Stuart Coupe has been in charge and the local Unitarian congregation meet on the first and third Sunday of each month. Their website can be accessed at: <http://www.thechapelatbillingshurst.com/>. Hundreds of pounds have been raised for the project some by voluntary contributions, some by various charities, and much hard work by the members. Many local artistic and musical groups use the Chapel in order to keep the finances viable. After the 'opening' in April we were treated to coffee and tea and a wealth of beautiful refreshments.

Stuart in his address paid tribute to many people who have kept the chapel going and have contributed both assistance and financial backing. We were to have been addressed by our District Minister, but with a hitch in a change of time he arrived in time for the coffee. A lovely musical group called 'The Classical Folk' played and sang and the garden was taking shape after many years of neglect. We will, I am sure, wish them all success in the future.

Betty Calderara

Member John Pounds, Portsmouth

Inclusive language makes a difference

To the Editor:

Re: Phil Silk's article 'Being a conscious human is a miracle' (*Inquirer*, 25th April).

I remember when I was a young woman watching the opening credits of Carl Sagan's series *Cosmos*. There was a series of images of creatures evolving from ape to human. At the end of the process the human that stood up was a woman. This was illuminating,

thrilling and unexpected.

I found the cover of the 25 April *Inquirer* 'Becoming Human' compelling. The image had a mystical feel, for me – suggesting the stardust we are made of, humanity's mysterious magnificent evolution. Then I turned to the article and read 'man', 'he', 'mankind', 'men'.

Until it shows in our language, how can change come?

If authors knew the difference it could make to a girl or young woman to see herself depicted as the eternal human subject, would they be prepared to change their language? Why should I have remembered all my life the credits of a long forgotten TV show? Maybe because it's hard to forget the truth.

Language is part of evolution.

I send this in appreciation and hope, and not wishing to cause divisiveness.

Julie Wolstenholme

Chorlton Unitarian Church
Manchester

Don't search for perfection in faith

To the Editor:

I write in response to an article in your issue of 28 February, entitled "Disillusioned Anglican defector departs".

I feel extremely sorry for the author of this piece because I really don't think that he will find perfection in religion until he (possibly) gains heaven itself. I have always been under the impression that Unitarianism is a faith for the free thinker. Therefore I have to say that I feel that he has 'missed the point'.

I too have been an Anglican and in some respects perhaps I still am but I also find a great deal of comfort in attending the Unitarian Church (as I have done for a large part of my 66 years) because I can come to terms with my own beliefs and thoughts and no-one else tries to tell me that what I think is wrong or misguided.

Talking of 'sinking ships' what about the Catholic Church, which has recently closed a number of its churches. Sadly, also they have found the need to come to terms with some of their members – horror of horrors – actually getting divorced!

Go into any church or chapel and I think that you will find differing

opinions in any of the mainstream religious groups. I have worked on Equality matters for a good part of this century and at a gathering of the Faith Forum which I once attended there was a great variety of differing opinions from those present who were from seven or eight of the world's religions. So – if you all belong to one church or there are seven or eight different faiths there will always be opposite opinions on all sorts of things and this can only be good as it promotes freedom of speech, tolerance and respecting the other person's point of view. Sound familiar?

'Patent, unquestionable solidarity among the grass roots' and 'administrative infrastructure' are not phrases which come immediately to mind in connection with church. I know of several churches where there is a spiritual leader – vicar, priest, minister (call them what you will) and there is disharmony so perhaps it's as well that there is a committee to make the decisions?!

I wish the author good hunting in his quest for all of the above and perhaps when he has found it he will kindly let the rest of us know where this oasis of perfection can be found.

I add here that I have attended several churches in my time for various reasons but I can honestly say that I have found more Christianity in that the people follow the example of Jesus in 'the little church with the big heart' which welcomes, cares for and values its members – otherwise known as Ansdell Unitarian Church!

Christine Dawson-Brown (Mrs)

Blackpool

What's in a service-taker's title?

What's in a name?

I used to use the term 'officiant', as someone official who does officiate. I was uncomfortable with this title, however. Then I found one which seems better: 'celebrant', one who conducts the celebrations. I was reminded of this choice by a recent item in *The Inquirer*.

What do readers think?

Phil Silk

Cheadle



Anthony Gormley's installation, 'Another Place' is 100 figures on the (aptly named, in this case) Crosby Beach. Photo by Chris Howells via Wikimedia Commons

Grateful for Danny Crosby's column

By **Stephanie Ramage**

A Response to Danny Crosby's piece: 'Live and be unafraid to bare your scars.' (*Inquirer*, 23 May)

At present I find myself 'between congregations' and so I am attending to my own spiritual journey without the company of a spiritual community. As part of my spiritual practice I am currently revisiting a book recommended, many years ago, by the Rev David Monk: Jack Kornfield's *A Path With Heart – A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*. When I read Danny's piece in *The Inquirer*, it reminded me of the basic philosophy of Kornfield's book. Kornfield suggests that spiritual transformation is a profound process that doesn't happen by accident.

He talks about "taking the one seat" by which he means that we sit quietly in a compassionate space that allows for the rising of all things: sorrows, loneliness, shame, desire, regret,

frustration and happiness. He talks about the need to allow our lions to roar – to persevere with unshakable courage when faced with all manner of doubts and sorrows and fears. We need, he suggests, to do as the Buddha did, and completely face what is true about this life and our lives.

Standing beside Gormley's statues – as Danny does – strikes me as an excellent place in which to 'let our lions roar'!

I was comforted by Danny's piece which also reminded me of the words of John O'Donohue, who says in his book *Eternal Echoes – Exploring our Hunger to Belong* that wounds are not sent to make us small and frightened; they are sent to open us up and to help graciousness, compassion and beauty root within us.

Thank you, Danny.

Stephanie Ramage is a member of the Unitarian Women's Group.

Service of uniting and welcoming in Bolton

On Sunday 19 April a special service of Uniting and Welcoming was held in Chapel, to formally join together our Bank Street congregation with our friends from Halliwell Road Free Church.

The children had been busy making colourful paper chains, and during the service the chain was passed through the congregation linking us all together. With the words, spoken by Jean Longworth and Janet Poole, 'Our two journeys have become one, as one community we join together in love and welcoming and fellowship', they joined the final link which was sealed by Bank Street minister, Stephen Lingwood.

The newly united congregation responded by saying, 'We join together as one community to walk together in our spiritual journeys, to engage with the world, building Beloved Community, and we pledge to do so with love, an open heart and an open mind'.

Photographs were taken to record the historic occasion, and Unitarian chalice badges were presented to our new members. This very happy service was followed by a delicious buffet lunch in the hall, and enjoyed by everyone. Many thanks to Jean Longworth, for preparing such a wonderful feast.

– Janet Poole



The joined congregations of Bank Street and Halliwell Road, Bolton celebrated together. Photo by Gordon Walker

Burundi Unitarians caught up in crisis

By John Midgley

For years I have harboured a dream, in fact two dreams. One is to visit Burundi and attend, or better still, conduct worship at our Unitarian Church there. It began when I was attending International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU) events. I learned of the growth of the Unitarian movement in Burundi, and I had to laugh at myself as I asked, with some embarrassment, 'Where is Burundi exactly?' The answer came as if to a child. 'Start in North Africa, travel down the centre of the continent and Burundi is half way down, first on the left past Zaire, at the tip of Lake Tanganyika.'

When I actually met the Rev Fulgence Ndagijimana, the minister from the church there, I was immediately struck by this tall, impressive-looking African. When I heard him preach in our church in Cape Town, South Africa, my response was definite. This sermon must be published in *The Inquirer*; a wonderful Unitarian story from this former trainee Dominican. At seminary he had begun to ask questions. Serious questions. 'Aha!' I thought, 'The familiar slippery slope!' Having struck out on his own, he now has an active, growing congregation.

A conversation over afternoon tea in the garden of former Cape Town Minister Gordon Oliver gave me my chance. With a smile he taught me how to pronounce his surname: 'Unda-giji-marna. It means, "Under the guidance of God,"' he added. Without effort I became convinced he was an authentic

Padiham presents TS Eliot Festival

The only TS Eliot poetry festival in the North of England is being held at the Unitarian Chapel in Padiham. Three Saturday evenings of lectures, readings and music, make up the *TS Eliot Festival of the North* – celebrating this great Anglo-American poet, in the 50th anniversary year of his death. Thomas Stearns Eliot was born and brought up in the heart of American Unitarianism, and although he later rejected his home faith, strains of it remain in his work.

Saturday, 6 June, 7-9 pm: Renowned broadcaster Graham Fawcett, a lecturer, poetry teacher, performer, and President of the UK TS Eliot Society will deliver an illustrated lecture, '*TS Eliot*'.

Saturday 13 June, 7-9 pm: The Rev Jim Corrigan (Unitarian minister in Padiham) will give an illustrated lecture: 'Religion and Poetry in TS Eliot', focusing on *Four Quartets* (including a look at the influence of Eliot's Unitarian background).

Saturday, 20 June, 7-9 pm: Poet and theologian Christopher Southgate will read his acclaimed verse biography of Eliot, *A Love and its Sounding*, together with his wife Sandy (accompanied by cello music). Christopher Southgate, who is a theology teacher, will also lead a short discussion on Eliot as contemplative poet.

The festival is organised by the Lancashire Collaborative Ministry. Tickets to include glass of wine and light refreshments: £10 for Fawcett night; £7 each for other two nights. Combined ticket: £20.

Venue: Padiham Unitarian Chapel, Knight Hill, Church Street, Padiham, Lancashire BB12 8EW. Enquiries and tickets: Contact Jim Corrigan on 07909 572 279 or: corriganjim@gmail.com

– Jim Corrigan



Fulgence Ndagijimana told his story at an ICUU conference last year. Photo by Mina Carson, ICUU

Unitarian, a man with a strong sense of ministry, a deep caring for people, and a mission to build Unitarianism in his home country. International contacts across Africa, in Europe and ICUU, were an enormous help. He was soon elected onto the ICUU Executive committee.

In May 2014, the *Inquirer* published his sermon and this prompted my second dream. If it is not possible to visit him and his church in Burundi, perhaps the GA would invite him to our Annual Meetings. He would make a wonderful international guest.

Now, alas, both dreams seem to be in tatters. The news from Burundi is dreadful. Political turmoil rising from Presidential elections has brought street fighting and riots, some of it close by the church. There are blocked roads, shootings, breakdown in communications and people fearful for their lives, desperate to escape. The ICUU Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/icuu>) has regular bulletins from Fulgence, including news that fearful members of his congregation have fled. From his church office he hears gunfire and explosions in the distance, and wonders what each day will bring. Despite international interventions, there is no sign of calm.

Fulgence writes, 'Fear and uncertainty are what we can read in people's faces. The church is seeking to arrange a temporary shelter in a place where it is relatively safer for people to stay. The church will provide food, water, medicines for members in the shelter and those in other places. The church is appealing for funds to cover these needs and the needs that will come up in the next few days and weeks. We know we are not alone and thank you very much for your support. Thank you.'

Can we help? ICUU is running an appeal for donations. Our sisters and brothers in this unique congregation need our support. To donate online, go to www.icuu.net and click on the 'Donate' button to give with a credit card or PayPal account. If you wish to donate by cheque, bank transfer or other means, email development@icuu.net for more information. A statement on the ICUU website says: 'It is expected all donations will be needed for this emergency effort, but any funds not needed for this purpose will be applied to the ICUU Global Fund for Unitarian Universalism for ICUU work in Africa.'

John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister and member of ICUU