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Elizabeth Gaskell
Writing Unitarian values

The INQUIRER

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Inquiring Words

The cloud never comes in that quarter of the horizon from which we watch for it.

– Elizabeth Gaskell

Facing anger at Cross Street

As a girl, Elizabeth Gaskell experienced the shock of the new. In her late teens, after boarding school in Warwickshire, she spent several months in Newcastle, and in 1832 she married William Gaskell, the young junior minister of Cross Street Chapel, Manchester. William's congregation included rich manufacturers and professionals, but he also worked with the poor, serving on relief committees that went into the darkest cellars, where families clustered in squalor. This was the world that Gaskell described in her first novel, *Mary Barton*, in 1848. She had embarked on this partly at William's suggestion that it might help her conquer her grief at the death of their 10 month-old son Willie, from scarlet fever. She identified with the poor, who had to watch their children starve.

Her authorship soon leaked out and the Cross Street congregation were furious at the harsh picture of the mill owners painted by their minister's wife, but Gaskell stuck to the Unitarian belief that it was one's duty to bear witness, to speak out against social injustice (other notable Unitarian women included Florence Nightingale and the feminists Harriet Martineau and Barbara Bodichon). Her book made her name known and Charles Dickens soon invited her to write for his new family periodical, *Household Words*. He immediately recognised her storytelling gift, calling her 'my dear Scheherazade' because, he said, 'I am sure your powers of narrative can never be exhausted in a single night, but must be good for at least a thousand nights and one.' (She stoutly resisted his editing, however, and in one fight over the serialisation of *North and South* he exclaimed: 'Oh, Mrs Gaskell fearful fearful! If I were Mr G, O Heaven how I would beat her.')

– Jenny Uglow, writing in the *Guardian*, 3 November 2007

Faith in Words

The annual summer issue of worship material, stories and meditations is coming up. Please send in prayers, addresses, meditations, art work, photographs – anything which is an expression of your faith – to *The Inquirer*.

For more information or to submit material, email: Inquirer@btinternet.com Or, use the editor's postal address at left.

Material is due by 10 July

twitter 

Follow **@The__Inquirer** (two underscores) on Twitter. A little shot of Unitarian news and faith in 140 characters. <https://twitter.com/>

Risking scorn from fellow Unitarians

Elizabeth Gaskell never used the word 'Unitarian', but her deeply held faith suffuses her novels says **Cliff Reed**

The middle decades of the 19th century saw a remarkable flowering of English literature, especially of novelists. There has probably never been a time quite like it, before or since.

A growing reading public eagerly consumed the output of Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, and the like – usually in much anticipated serialised parts. And perhaps even more remarkable than the general flowering of novelists – given the restrictive social mores of the time – was that of women writers, such as the Brontë sisters and Mary Ann Evans. Significantly, though, because of those social mores, women writing anything more challenging than safely 'feminine' novels (like those of Jane Austen) often concealed their identities behind male nom-de-plumes.

To this day, Mary Ann Evans is called 'George Eliot', while Emily, Ann and Charlotte Brontë were known to their readers as 'Ellis', 'Acton', and 'Currer Bell'. Of these three sisters, only Charlotte lived long enough to see her true identity to become publicly known. But Charlotte had a friend, fellow novelist, and biographer who never actually used a male disguise. Initially, she published anonymously but later she wrote openly as a woman. This was a more courageous step than we can possibly imagine today.

Elizabeth Gaskell was, I think it is fair to say, one of the greatest novelists writing during what might be seen as a golden age. And she is of particular interest to us because she was not only the daughter and the wife of Unitarian ministers she was also a deeply committed and avowed Unitarian in her own right. And her faith suffuses, but never intrudes upon, her work.

'Cranford' has unfailing charm

Her best-known book is probably 'Cranford', a beautifully observed study of life in a Cheshire country town. It is modelled on Knutsford, where Elizabeth Gaskell grew up (she was born in London) and attended the delightful little Unitarian Chapel, in whose burial ground she now lies. This is the most likely model for the chapel described in her novel, 'Ruth'. 'Cranford' first appeared in serial form in Charles Dickens's magazine, 'Household Words', although her personal relationship with Dickens was not an easy one.

'Cranford' has an unfailing charm and probably remains her most popular book. The darker side of mid-19th-century life is present, though, as a shadow on the edge of the tale, such as when Miss Matty's Manchester bank fails. She is left in penury, but the love and generosity of her friends come to save her from disaster. Others of Gaskell's novels confront more controversial issues.

Her first novel was 'Mary Barton'. It is set in Manchester in the 'hungry forties', a city beset by industrial unrest, unemployment, radical – sometimes violent- politics, and grinding poverty. The novel came as an unwelcome shock to comfortable middle class readers, many of whom preferred not to know about such things. And among those it upset were people she knew well and met every Sunday in Manchester's oldest



'Miss Matty with Peter' a sketch by Sybil Tawse (1900-1940) Miss Matty Jenkyns, was the 'Cranford' character much loved for her kindness. Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

and most prestigious Unitarian place of worship, Cross Street Chapel. In 1832, Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson had married its minister, William Gaskell, one of the 19th century's most distinguished and well-respected Unitarian ministers.

Cross Street Chapel's congregation was a 'who's who' of Manchester's mercantile, political and industrial elite, and not all of them appreciated their minister's wife writing a book that championed the poor and the working class while portraying the mill-owners in a less than favourable light. Publishing anonymously didn't long conceal the author's identity. Those Unitarian mill-owners may not have been the worst of their class, but they saw the radicalism of 'Mary Barton' as an affront and as a judgment on the autocratic paternalism which they regarded as both benevolent and the best way of securing their prosperity.

The industrial turmoil of a thinly-disguised Manchester was a theme to which she returned in, 'North and South', and in both books there is a message of redemption which might not altogether have allayed the disquiet of the city's 'cotton princes'. At the end of 'Mary Barton', the chastened mill-owner, Mr Carson, is made aware,

...that a perfect understanding and complete confidence

(Continued on page 6)



Judy Dench as Miss Matty in the BBC's 'Cranford'

EC appoints two new members

Executive Committee Key Messages

15 and 16 May 2015

1. Co-option of Two Executive Committee Members



Philip Colfox

Lynne Readett

Following the open application process, we are pleased to announce that Philip Colfox and the Rev Lynne Readett have been co-opted onto the Executive Committee with immediate effect. They will serve until the close of the Annual Meetings in April 2017. Philip has led the resurgence of Bridport congregation and has served on the Western Union Council. Lynne recently retired from full-time ministry with the Merseyside District.

2. Millennium Fund Grants

Three grants were awarded by the Executive Committee:

- Brighton Unitarian Church was awarded £780 towards the cost of architectural survey fees in connection with repairs to the Portico of the church.
- Simple Gifts Unitarian Centre for Social Action was awarded £5,540 to take forward "The Road Ahead" initiative with local Unitarian congregations to promote social action.
- York Unitarians were awarded £2,000 towards the cost of an upgrade of the chapel's audio equipment.

3. Red Cross Appeal for Nepal

The Executive Committee was pleased to learn that over £6,000 had already been raised for the Red Cross Appeal for Nepal via the Unitarian Clara Barton Fund.

4. Safeguarding Audit – Follow-up

The Chief Officer was disappointed to report that only 63 congregations had so far returned the completed safeguarding audit form to Essex Hall. Eighty per cent of those congregations which responded had an agreed safeguarding policy. The Executive Committee wishes to remind all congregations forcefully of the key requirement of the Charity Commission that the failure of a charity – and all our congregations are charities in law – to adopt and implement rigorous safeguarding arrangements is now considered to be a serious regulatory issue. This includes not having current and robust safeguarding policies and procedures in place, including appropriate DBS vetting procedures and trustees taking no, or inadequate, steps to address safeguarding weaknesses.

Audit forms can still be returned to Essex Hall and advice is also available on what action congregations must take on safeguarding.

5. Vision Document Follow-Up

The Vision Document which was launched at the Annual Meetings and subsequently circulated to all congregations and Ministers, has been well-received and provoked lots of discussion and debate throughout the denomination. Comments are still welcome from individuals or congregations and should be sent through the website at: www.unitarian.org.uk/news/vision-our-future

The Executive Committee has already started work on the task of translating the Vision into practical steps that will enable us to take the key issues forward and to grow our movement as effectively as possible.

6. Nightingale Centre – Living Wage

The Nightingale Centre was commended for agreeing to register as a "Living Wage" employer; an excellent example of the ethical standards we seek to promote.

7. Copyright

Following the review of a recent incident involving one of our congregations, the legal implications of not complying with copyright law were highlighted. This is a complex issue and advice on relevant licences for various activities is available from Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI).

8. Convenor

Robert Ince was re-appointed Executive Committee Convenor for a further year.

9. EC District Links

Link representatives:

Robert Ince
Joan Cook
James Barry
Philip Colfox
Lynne Readett

Gwynn Pritchard

Marion Baker

Jacky Woodman

Districts:

Sheffield and Yorkshire
Scotland and Northern
London and Eastern
Western and Southern
Manchester and
Merseyside
South and South East
Wales

East Cheshire and East
Midlands

North and East Lancashire
and Midlands

10. Financial Review Group

The Terms of Reference for a Financial Review Group, consisting of Robert Ince (Convenor), Peter Hanley (Hon. Treasurer) and Derek McAuley (Chief Officer), were agreed as follows:

- To understand the current pattern of activities and the financial implications for income and expenditure underpinning the work of the General Assembly.
- In particular, to explore the implications of the ending of financial support for the General Assembly from the Bowland Trust in September 2025.
- To consider the changing landscape for charities, particularly religious organisations, which may impact upon the finances of the General Assembly.
- To prepare proposals for the financial sustainability of the General Assembly.

Executive Committee
24 May 2015

EC Convenor: Our vision needs you

By Robert Ince

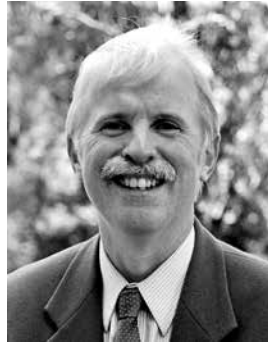
I hope that everybody is now aware of the book 'A Vision for Our Future' – those who attended the Annual Meetings all received a copy; copies have been sent to all congregations and many people have downloaded a copy from the national website. It is, as Rev Sue Woolley pointed out in *The Inquirer* issue published on 6 June, a really, really rich document.

It was compiled to encourage debate and ultimately to inform Unitarian members of our plans for the next five years. As it has turned out, *Robert Ince* it has become so much more than that! Not only will it help us plan at a national level, but it is now clear that it will allow congregations and Districts to think clearly about their own future by providing new insights and a framework for local discussion.

The book does not provide all the answers to our future; that was never our intention. But in true Unitarian fashion, it explores the questions that ultimately determine our future. It is up to all of us to now think deeply about these questions and to discuss them with one another.

The book, however, does provide considerable food for thought. If there is no obvious place that you want to start – no subject that immediately demands a response, then think about those things you as a congregation are doing well at the moment and those that you really need to get to grips with. Think what you could share with others and what you would like them to share with you.

The one thing I really ask you to do is to let your thoughts and ideas be known – individually and collectively so that we



may all benefit. If you think something is wrong – say so!

Time and again we have let good pieces of work about our future slip by without turning them into real action. We now have an opportunity to collectively gather our thoughts and share and utilise our experiences. Let's not waste it!

Our challenge, as always, is how to communicate our thoughts and ideas to each other. How will we manage to capture all this in one place so everybody can read it?

The simplest way to contribute is to go directly to the national website (www.unitarian.org.uk) and express your thoughts and ideas there, which you can do against any of the 19 different themes from the book. Alternatively, there is Facebook where the chat is already lively and we hope to combine the various threads with those on the national website. For those who find this technology difficult, write to our Chief Officer, Derek McAuley at Essex Hall. The General Assembly is there to help; to help organise; to help share; to help those in need. This will be our great opportunity to understand where things are going well and where we are struggling ... and to take on board new ideas to tackle our problems. We cannot do it without you!

I can assure that the Executive Committee will take time to read and consider all the comments as they develop the plans for the next five years. This is an opportunity that we cannot afford to miss.

– Robert Ince is the convenor of the Executive Committee of the Unitarian General Assembly.

Protest message spread by social media

By Ann Howell

In the middle of April, more than 1200 migrants lost their lives in four separate shipwrecks in the Mediterranean. Among the lost were men, women and children from Syria, Eritrea, Somalia and other beleaguered and war-ravaged nations. The response to this tragedy by the affected countries sparked controversy, but to most peace-loving people around the world the main reaction was that of deep sadness. The discussion in UK Unitarian circles certainly was focused on compassion for the survivors and the families of the lost migrants.

Given the extreme nature of the tragedy and the powerlessness we all felt, it seemed like a good opportunity for a coordinated Unitarian response to display our solidarity to our local communities and give us an outlet for our complex emotions around the tragedy – despair, anger, outrage, compassion, etc.

On 25 April, SimpleGifts issued a request to Unitarian congregations via email and Facebook to take a stand. We asked congregations to print out supplied posters (or create their own) and gather outside their meeting spaces holding their signs, showing their neighbours that they stood in solidarity with all those affected. Although it was last minute, six UK congregations – Lewisham, Kensington, Hampstead, York, Cheltenham and Glasgow – took part in the protest. Some used social media to further spread their message (for example, the Lewisham congregation put a photograph of the participants on the social media platform Twitter. It was picked up and re-tweeted by their local councillor, so was visible to all of their followers) and there were many interesting interactions by passers-by and road traffic (it's always encouraging to get a

Migrant lives matter



toot of solidarity from a double-decker bus!).

It was a good exercise in using social media and direct contacts to mobilise an action quickly and it made me very proud to be Unitarian to see the pictures of my fellow travellers standing in solidarity against this horrible tragedy and sending messages of peace and compassion out to the universe. Well done to all who participated!

– Ann Howell is with SimpleGifts, the Unitarian Centre for Social Action. She's on the left of photo above, with Lewisham Unitarians

Mrs Gaskell stood up for the



Elizabeth Gaskell's house, 84 Plymouth Grove (left) had fallen into disrepair and is now a centre for events. Photo left by Mike Peel; right by E Dempsey. Gaskell

(Continued from page 3)

and love, might exist between masters and men; that the truth might be recognised that the interests of one were the interests of all; that hence it was most desirable to have educated workers, capable of judging, not mere machines of ignorant men; and to have them bound to their employers by ties of affection, not by mere money bargains alone.

This was pretty radical stuff for 1848, when 'Mary Barton' was published, but in that year of revolutions throughout Europe, Elizabeth Gaskell saw it as the best hope for heading off chaos and bloodshed. And she made it clear that her inspiration had spiritual foundations: "...in short," she adds to this passage, "to acknowledge the Spirit of Christ as the regulating law between both parties."

But industrial relations wasn't the only subject on which Elizabeth Gaskell upset the 'respectable' middle classes, including some in her husband's congregation. In 'Ruth' she challenged conventional notions of morality by making the tragic heroine of her tale an unmarried teenage mother. It is not the 'fallen woman' who Gaskell holds morally responsible but the wealthy young man who seduces and then abandons her. This was shocking and offensive to many readers at the time and marks Gaskell out as a pioneer of more humane and less hypocritical moral standards.

The heavily-pregnant Ruth is given shelter by a Dissenting minister (Gaskell never identifies anyone in her novels as Unitarian), which gives rise to much agonising in his household. At one point, the minister, Mr Benson, is accused of, "rejoicing over the birth of an illegitimate child." In his reply we may well hear Elizabeth Gaskell's own faith speaking:

I do not rejoice, I have been all this afternoon mourning over the sin which has blighted this young creature...I have been thinking of every holy word, every promise to

the penitent – of the tenderness which led the Magdalen aright...Oh! do not accuse me of questionable morality, when I am trying more than ever I did in my life to act as my blessed Lord would have done.

Elizabeth Gaskell's contempt for narrow-minded, judgemental, religious bigotry also finds expression in one of her lesser-known, shorter, stories, 'Lois the Witch'. It is set in Salem, Massachusetts, at the time of the notorious witch trials of the late 17th century. Gaskell never visited Massachusetts (or any part of the United States), but she had a number of Unitarian friends and contacts there. They included the novelist, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who she knew when he was the American consul in Liverpool.

Lois is an orphaned English girl who has been sent to live with relatives in Salem. As the witch hysteria overwhelms the town, Lois finds herself accused and arrested. Among those she was supposed to have bewitched is her cousin, a deranged religious fanatic. At her trial she is given the chance to confess and save her life, but this is her response:

Sirs, I must choose death with a quiet conscience, rather than life to be gained by a lie. I am not a witch. I know not hardly what you mean when you say I am. I have done, many, many things wrong in my life; but I think God will forgive them for my Saviour's sake.

Honesty, and loyalty to truth and conscience in the face of cruel, irrational and false religion is the message here. In Gaskell's use of the Salem witch trials to make a point about the cynical manipulation of hysteria, fear and prejudice in furtherance of an intolerant ideology, 'Lois the Witch' anticipates Arthur Miller's great play, 'The Crucible' (which has the same setting, of course) a century later.

'Lois the Witch' makes another point too, about true compassion transcending the barriers of race, class and colour. Awaiting execution, Lois finds herself sharing a cell with another victim of the witch-hunt, an old Indian (i.e. Native American) woman who had been a servant in the household where she had lived. Gaskell writes:

...it was Nattee – dirty, filthy indeed, mud-pelted, stone-bruised, beaten, and all astray in her wits with the treatment she had received from the mob outside. Lois held her in her arms, and softly wiped the old brown wrinkled

e downtrodden



House
hair but was restored and re-opened last year. It is open to the public and
ell painting (left) by William John Thomson. All via Wikimedia Commons

face...For hours she tended the old Indian woman – tend-
ed her bodily woes.

Such intimacy, never mind such love, across racial lines was
another example of Gaskell's willingness to take on popular
prejudice.

Elizabeth Gaskell's novels, and her shorter works too, are
good stories well told. They are full of interesting characters in
a wide variety of settings and situations. Gaskell was no mere
polemicist. But nevertheless we can find in her work evidence
of a profoundly spiritual woman with values that challenged
convention and inhumanity, and which still speak to us today.

The human condition in all its facets was her subject, and
this included exploration of the inner life. She and her friend,
Charlotte Brontë, shared an interest in the writings of Francis
William Newman, the Unitarian academic and theologian. In
her biography of Brontë, Gaskell recalled time they spent to-
gether in the Lake District:

*After breakfast, we...went out on the lake, and Miss Bron-
te agreed with me in liking Mr. Newman's, 'Soul'...*

'The Soul, Its Sorrows and Its Aspirations', was one of
Newman's most important religious works. He was one of
those Unitarians who advocated a faith founded on intuition,
imagination and conscience, rather than narrow Biblicism or
cold reason. But Gaskell's view of him mingled amusement
and affection with respect for his ideas. She wrote to a friend:

*Yes, I do know Mr. Newman, we all reverence him with
true reverence as you would if you know him. He is so
holy!*

I think we can hear something of her characteristic playfulness
and humour in that remark. We can be proud that she was
a member of our household of faith, but not in any sectarian
sense – which would have been foreign to her generous per-
sonality. I will close with some words from 'Ruth' that reveal
another aspect of Elizabeth Gaskell, her sense of the Divine in
the natural world:

*Just above the horizon...the mist became a silvery grey
cloud hanging on the edge of the world; presently it turned
shimmering white; and then, in an instant, it flushed into
rose and the mountain tops sprang into heaven, and
bathed in the presence of the shadow of God.*

The Rev Cliff Reed is minister emeritus at Ipswich.

Restored house welcomes visitors, support

The Elizabeth Gaskell Society is delighted to have
played its part in the beautiful restoration of 84
Plymouth Grove, the Manchester home of the Gaskell
family from 1850 until Meta Gaskell's death in 1913. It
was here that Elizabeth wrote most of her novels (at a
small table in the dining room) and received celebrated
personalities (including Charles Dickens, Charlotte
Brontë, John Ruskin and Sir Charles Hallé). This was a
happy and welcoming family home and we'd like to think
the restoration upholds that same spirit.

Last October, after a £2.5M restoration, 84 Plymouth
Grove was formally opened by Sarah Prince, the great-
great-granddaughter of Elizabeth and William
Gaskell. In the North West, outside the Lake District, it
is a building of literary significance second only to the
Brontë Parsonage at Haworth.

Built in the 1830s, the house is a Grade II* detached
Regency-style villa. It is a rare survivor of its type, being
complete in nearly all its internal features in the main
rooms, with an exterior which has seen few changes.
Every object's place in the house – from the teaspoons
to the books in the study – is the result of careful
research. The main reception rooms – Morning Room,
Drawing Room, Dining Room and William's study and
library – have been fully restored to how they would
have looked when the Gaskell family was in residence.
One upstairs bedroom is used as an exhibition room,
another is a room for lectures and other events, and
the remaining rooms may be let. The old kitchen in the
basement houses a tearoom, and the former Servants'
Hall, also in the basement, can be used as a meeting
room or for lectures and other events. The garden has
also been lovingly restored by a team of volunteers
to reflect what would have been grown in Victorian
Manchester.

Volunteers

Now that the house is open three days a week,
volunteers are needed to help in the tearoom, talk to
visitors in the period rooms and help with many other
backstage tasks. If you can help, email: [enquiries@
elizabethgaskellhouse.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@elizabethgaskellhouse.co.uk) call 0161 273 2215.

Donations

Supporters are still actively fundraising to secure the
future of Elizabeth Gaskell's House. One way to do that
is to join the Friends of Plymouth Grove. Contact 0161
273 2215 or [enquiries@
elizabethgaskellhouse.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@elizabethgaskellhouse.co.uk)
The house welcomes donations of any size to help
continue to develop the beautifully restored house.
The house is open to visitors on Wednesdays,
Thursdays and Sundays and hosts a series of regular
talks, concerts and community events. For further
information about the House and to find out about
events there see: www.elizabethgaskellhouse.co.uk
The address is: 84 Plymouth Grove, Manchester, M13
9LW

– Drawn from the websites of The Gaskell Society and
Elizabeth Gaskell's House.

Of blackberries, Magna Carta and Puritans

Without revealing too much of my political leanings, I am among those who were seriously shocked by the May 7th General Election result. For some consolation, as the media's post-election analysis became intolerable, I was glad of a holiday which included a stroll in 'the most famous meadow in the world'. Runnymede meadow, alongside the Thames, is where Magna Carta was signed just 800 years ago.

A distant Unitarian connection here: The meadow was rescued and gifted to the National Trust in 1931 by Cara, the first Lady Fairhaven. Who's she? The daughter of self-made millionaire industrialist Henry Huttleston Rogers, described as a principal in the Esso Empire. Among numerous benefactions, he funded the fabulous Fairhaven Unitarian Universalist church in Massachusetts, where I had the delight of a ministerial exchange in 1987. The Magna Carta Memorial in Runnymede resembles a small classical Greek temple. Alas, it was covered with scaffold, undergoing cleaning ready for the great anniversary day in June, but the inscription was clear: Symbol of Freedom Under Law.

I chatted with a couple of folk on a nearby bench. The man told me that when he was a boy, all of this area was overgrown with brambles. He and his pals used to come blackberrying.

"All pretty wild, then?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, "though there was always a Warden on duty."

"To chase you away from the blackberries?"

He said, "One time, we came and put a little tent up here, and the Warden came along and said, 'You can take that down!'" "Spoilsport!" I said.

"Well," he grinned. "We just waited until he'd gone away and then we put it back up again!"

Exercising their freedom under law, perhaps. Cheered me up, no end.

The American presence at Runnymede is strong. The American Bar Association funded the Memorial, and close by stands an oak tree planted by the Queen in soil from Jamestown Virginia, the first permanent English settlement in the New World. It commemorates the bicentenary of the US Constitution, as historians are sure that the freedoms proclaimed in Magna Carta resonate through to that founding US document.

Higher up a nearby hill stands a memorial to John F Kennedy, on a plot of land actually given to the USA, and is therefore officially American soil. It has some words from JFK's inaugural address: "Let every nation know... that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and success of liberty."

Stirring words, though on reflection perhaps raising a slightly niggling question: *Any price?* Really?

Good to spot a news item with another American connection, and a sort of Unitarian first. British-born Sir Tim Berners-Lee, creator of the World Wide Web, lives in the US, but his fame has now been recognised by the National Portrait Gallery, London, in the form of a bronze statue. Apart from photographs, it is the first commissioned portrait, and depicts him striding purposefully forward, with his leather rucksack in

Funny Old World

By
John Midgley



which he carries his laptop. He won't be alone. The Gallery is always worth a visit and has plenty of other Unitarians, though not all on display. I have seen James Martineau and Charles Dickens there, and their website catalogue mentions Florence Nightingale, Joseph Priestley, Adrian Boult and many more.

I'm grateful for feedback. Annette Percy writes: "Your item about the new edition of the Oxford Junior Dictionary and the things that had been deleted worries me."

I was recently standing at the bus stop outside a wild bit of Clissold Park when a child said to her mother, 'Look at the flowers!' Her Mum said disparagingly, 'They're only dandelions.' It always pleases me to remember that Primary school children in the Czech Republic spend a week each year with their class at 'a School in Nature'. Those youngsters would be able to identify masses of trees and their fruits and lots of wild flowers as well as numerous birds."

Two responses to the saying or refrain, 'From Hell, Hull and Halifax, good Lord deliver us!' quoted last month. The Rev Phillip Hewett writes from Canada: "I was always under the impression that what you quoted was an old seamen's saying, reflecting the view that going to port in Hull or Halifax, Nova Scotia, was tantamount to going to hell!" Michael Tracey from Hull UK writes that historically there may well be a sort of Unitarian link. "Apparently the refrain refers to the severe measures adopted by the leading citizens in the treatment of beggars and vagrants and the control of vice. Vice in this context meant anything to which the Puritans objected. The majority of the leading citizens were Puritans. Leonard Chamberlain was one of them. In the latter years of the 17th century he, along with the other members of the Bowl Alley Lane Chapel and other leading citizens of the town founded the 'Society for the Reformation of Manners' because of: 'The abounding Sin and Wickedness of the present Age and Place in which we live'. The minute book still survives today. It records a long list of prosecutions, the majority relatively trivial such as drinking at unreasonable hours, swearing an oath, travelling on the Lord's Day with fish. Swearing was the most common offence for which one could be fined one shilling."

Puritans not only felt the responsibility for keeping themselves unstained from the world but also for controlling moral behaviour in society at large." Michael chairs the Leonard Chamberlain Trust, which funds the Unitarian congregation and other worthy causes. I have no thoughts of becoming a seaman but wouldn't mind a visit to Nova Scotia. And on future visits to Hull I must remember not to carry fish on a Sunday, and always keep a few shillings handy to pay any fines. I certainly would have needed them on the day after the General Election.

The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.

Develop multicultural competency

This is a summary of her Keynote Speech presented at the General Assembly drafted by the Rev Jill McAllister.

In the past 20 years, as the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU) has developed into an effective global network of mutual support among U's and U's, we have emphasised values and practices that seem to be commonly held among us.

We have discovered and deepened our appreciation of each other around the premise that we are more alike than we are different. And yet we have known all along that we are also very different. Former ICUU President Brian Kiely put it this way: 'There is no uniform Unitarian movement in the world – there are instead many local and culturally specific varieties of Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism.'

This may sound strange, or overly simplistic – the fact that we are different. Yet, this understanding is essential, I think, for our forward movement.

Diversity is a fact, of course. It is a biological fact, and a fact of human expression. Human ways of approaching diversity historically have not been admirable – often quite abominable. For are not racism, sexism, homophobia, nationalism, and all other 'ism's' at the heart of war, oppression, and cruelty basically expressions of intolerance for difference, and the destructive use of power over those who are not like ourselves?

It is my conviction that we are called as liberal religious people to practise the embrace of diversity and the ability to work *with* our differences.

We have moved beyond a privileged place of wasting time debating and arguing small ideas. The world needs so much more that is real and practical and effective. How do we think

GA Keynote: Living in the whole world

By Alan Ruston

Most years at some stage in the GA meetings something international is included. In 2015 it was provided by the Rev Jill McAllister, a UU minister in Corvallis, Oregon, who is also Senior Programme Consultant for the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU), an organisation 20 years old this year. She has been ICUU president. The Rev Cliff Reed, who like Jill has been involved with the ICUU since its inception, introduced Jill.

Jill travels extensively and works tirelessly for the ICUU. I've met her several times but never in the UK. She is, however, a regular visitor to Britain and was a student for a time at Bath. What came over was her infectious enthusiasm for international Unitarianism, be it in Europe, Africa, Asia or wherever. The ICUU has developed into a real network, as increasingly we recognise each other and the unique contribution each can make to the whole. The content of belief in different countries varies greatly, but a similar attitude towards religious freedom makes for fellow feeling. The social and religious contexts in which we operate are different, and like any family we have to work at that.

In some parts of East Africa for example, Unitarianism has emerged from a Christian evangelist background. Their theological perspectives are different from our historically liberal Christianity and there's not much point in arguing all

(Continued on next page)



GA keynote speaker, the Rev Jill McAllister, in a photo from the Corvallis, Oregon Unitarian Universalist website.

about and treat those who are different from us? Multi-cultural awareness and competency require that we see more clearly our own biases and practices which we regard as 'normal', and at the same time become much more aware of the biases and practices of others which they regard as 'normal'. It requires us to become comfortable with the fact that there are many 'normals' – not just our own – and to learn how to be first respectful of difference, and finally, competent in working with differences instead of demanding conformity to our own understanding.

Good intentions are not enough; this is work that requires skills which are both teachable and learnable. According to Milton J Bennett, (who developed the Bennett scale, a Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity) we can all learn skills which move us away from avoidance of cultural difference (assuming or needing conformity) and toward seeking cultural difference (intentionally looking at different perspectives and practices.)

So, what can motivate us to embrace diversity with more skill and more intention? Real peace and real justice come to mind. The high stakes of global environmental and social systems, and the realisation that life itself is too complex for any one perspective to suffice. As UU minister Mark Morrison-Reed has said, '...alone our vision is too narrow and our strength is too limited to see all that must be seen and do all that must be done.'

The fact is we need each other. Unitarian and Universalist groups are small in every country where we exist. Our religious values encourage us to make the world a better place, which is no easy undertaking. We need to know that we are not alone. We need to learn from each other about not only how to solve problems, but also how to find motivation and courage and strength to keep going when it is a struggle to do so.

We live in this one world, together with all other lives, and it is imperative that we help each other and work together, to join our thinking, our practice and our living in ways that can truly make a difference.

The Rev Jill McAllister is Senior Programme Consultant for the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists.

Letters to the Editor

Inquirer offered much to think about

To the Editor:

I wanted to say how much I enjoyed reading the 23 May edition. Quite some variety in there, including Dr Jane Blackall's in depth article on 'Our Authentic Self', which gives us a lot to think about.

Also, I found the articles on Jo Clifford's play 'The Gospel According to Jesus Queen of Heaven' of particular interest. One of these articles was by Jo Clifford herself. I saw the film version of the play at the General Assembly meetings, and I was completely absorbed by it, something which does not always happen at the beginning of our busy meetings.

I note that there were protesters in Glasgow about the staging of the play. How can anyone object to this? Such a fascinating application of the gospel stories, which are, as Jo says, about learning to love each other. I would certainly watch it again. (Jo Clifford: 'And so maybe the most important

thing we can all do is learn to love each other in the face of death. As Jesus did in the stories.')

The Rev June Pettitt

Minister of Underbank Chapel
Sheffield

Tribute to Sheila Jones from her first soloist

To the Editor:

Following the tributes to Sheila Jones (*Inquirer*, 23 May) may I add mine? It goes back some 75 years, when Sheila was starting to play the piano. She would be about 8. I was 18 months younger. Every afternoon, after school, she would rush home to do her practising. There was no one else in – mother and father still at work – alone she could concentrate.

Quite often I would sit on the bench outside, listening.

One day, I was sat waiting for her to begin, when the door opened, and 'Hey. You. Come in here.' I was ushered in and told to sit beside her at the piano. 'Right. I'm going to play this and you are going to sing that, OK.' She was

Dropping the mask

Leading an authentic life



The INQUIRER £1

The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7867 23 May 2015

referring to her practice piece. It was the first that had words to accompany the music.

However, my reading skills weren't up to the task. I had to rote learn them – Sheila being the teacher. The practice session took at least an hour, but we managed.

I claim, to myself, (I've never told this story until now.) that I'm the first soloist to be accompanied by Sheila, and I can sing the words and the music, if asked.

This experience showed her determination, her compassion and her skills that she was to use and share in her life in the future.

Peter Whitham

Stockton Unitarians

GA keynote: World community

(Continued from previous page)

of that. Images were shown of African Unitarians meeting together – it's the attitude and emphasising aspects we have in common that is important, not specific beliefs. It's necessary to avoid a form of imperialism, suggesting that we, the established organisations of Western Unitarians, know the right way to do things. Leadership training including for ministry, has to be done locally. Jill made the point that she had spent 20 years trying to persuade many colleagues at home and abroad that they/we don't know everything!

Our aim should be to create a global fund to support local initiatives rather than relying on grants provided by the five large concentrations of Unitarians in the world (and we in the UK are one of that five) which often have strings attached. Our effort should be to work across our differences and learn from each other. This aspect of our religion is part of a continuous process, for we are not separate and are necessarily related. This is not an intellectual activity but is a constant process of developing relationships. There is no right answer, no one correct way to do things - we

can only feel our way through local problems, like the impact of Ebola in parts of Africa, by becoming part of a global community. The ICUU is creating coalitions between struggling groups – Jill quoted fellow UU minister John Gibbons who said that the most radical thing you can do is to introduce people to each other!

Some Unitarian groups in parts of the world including Europe are struggling to survive while others are growing. All however are part of the Unitarian community, and everyone can contribute something internationally. Jill closed by showing a film from Transylvania with a Hungarian commentary explaining the ICUU story (though David Usher, its first President, and Steve Dick, the Executive Secretary spoke of course in English). Jill's point was that while we could not understand the language we could comprehend the message being put across and that is part of the meaning and justification of the ICUU. A refreshing and engaging keynote presentation.

*Alan Ruston is a member of the
Watford Fellowship.*

Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to inquirer@btinternet.com Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes. Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only.

Believing in freedom, respect, humility

A young woman who occasionally attends worship at one of the congregations I serve, recently told me that a friend had asked her what church was like and what happened and what we believed. She said, 'Oh they believe in everything,' and then she said she tried to articulate what she meant by that and struggled. I remember thinking, 'well at least she did say you can believe anything that you want'. I have much sympathy with my friend's struggle. I have identified as a Unitarian now for the best part of 10 years, been a minister for getting on for five years and I still find it hard to articulate exactly what it means to be a Unitarian. In fact, in some ways, I find it harder today than I did eight years ago. I sometimes wonder if I am a very good Unitarian. It got me asking myself what it means to me to be a Unitarian and why I found and continue to find a home amongst these free religionists.

I have identified three things.

One is authority. We say that authority lays within the enlightened conscience of the individual, that we are not only free, but are also encouraged to seek our own truth in matters of faith. That personal experience and reflection upon these experiences is our final authority that no one can tell us what we ought to believe. That does not mean that we can believe what we want, more what we must. We believe what our experiences teach us.

The second is respect and celebration of difference. Now some describe this as tolerance, but I don't think that is enough. I'm not decrying tolerance, if only we human beings could be more tolerant of one another. That said, I still hear judgement in the word 'tolerant'. As if, in claiming this word, what people are saying is, 'I am tolerating you and your view, but I still think you are a crank.' I don't see respect and celebration in this. If I accept that I have freedom to reach my own conclusions and believe that this is a wonderful thing, then to judge or merely tolerate another for the conclusions they reach is neither truly respecting or celebrating this approach. Also such judgement seems to lack humility.

This leads me to the third aspect, which I see as humility, and the openness that this breeds. This stems from the idea that whatever conclusions I have reached today, I have not sealed this truth. Again this is something to celebrate, the openness that true humility brings. That by rejoicing in the truth that others may reach I can myself experience a deeper revelation if I listen with an open mind, heart and soul. Truth is always subjective. I know myself that my view on faith and many things has shifted at times in my life. This is because my experiences have changed, as have my reflections upon them and my ability to listen to others' experiences and their honest reflections upon them too.

I see these three 'freedom, respect and humility' as being the key components to my understanding of my chosen Unitarian and Free Christian faith.

One of the great blessings of my work is that people, often complete strangers, tell me about experiences that they do not understand; often experiences that their rational minds don't believe in and yet they have experienced them all the same – experiences that have changed them forever.

From nothing
to Everything
by
Danny Crosby



There seem to be two common themes to these experiences. One has been the transformative nature of them and the second that they have never dared tell another soul about them, for fear of ridicule. It truly is a humbling blessing that they feel that they can speak to me about them.

I remember one such occasion last year when I went to buy a new laptop computer. I explained to the shop assistant that I needed something that was mobile and suitable for a lot of writing, as I often like to write in coffee shops. During the conversation I revealed what I do for a living. As I did, it took a completely different direction. He began to recount an experience that happened many years ago, which had totally transformed him and his experience of life. He made me smile as he insisted he wasn't a religious man, as he couldn't get along with dogma and the like. But he experienced something that day that had transformed him and that he was now able to experience this in every aspect of his life. As he spoke I just smiled and listened and told him how many people have had similar experiences – including myself – and how the two characteristics he described were common, the fear of speaking about them and their transformative nature.

Now while there have been these two themes – the fear of speaking about them and the transformative nature of them – prevalent in many of the conversations I have had, I have also noticed many differences too.

I suspect that this is due to each individual's religious background, which must influence the conclusions they have come to. What has struck me, though, has been the honesty and integrity in which what has been described has been recounted. I have never spoken to many of these people again and yet what they have said has been permanently etched on the soul of me. I have also noticed that each time I have listened to others and shared my own experiences, something in me has opened up to something more than myself. How many times have I smiled and been warmed and yet shivered at the same time? God only knows. What I do know is that these and many other encounters with the amazing and beautiful people I meet through my daily interactions have confirmed my faith in 'freedom, respect and humility'. It has also enhanced my faith in the language of the heart to bring about transformation in each and every one of us. All we have to do is dwell, 'listen with the ears of our hearts.' For the language of the heart is Universal it breaks down any and every barrier and touches and transforms all who have ears to hear...

The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Altrincham and Urmston.

German meetings similar and different

By John Clifford

German Unitarians have biennial rather than annual meetings, always over the May Whit-weekend to facilitate broader participation. Spread over four days, there are many similarities and some differences to our Unitarian General Assembly. This year, approximately 120 adults and 40 youth met at a hotel in Worms, with youngsters staying in tents erected next to the hotel. A very nice chapel associated with the hotel's period as American army barracks was used for plenary sessions and some meetings. The German Unitarians are a lay-led democratic community so there was no ministers' day.

This year's theme was 'Read the signs/tracks ... build paths' and most of the events were closely based on some aspect of the theme. For example, at the opening session, each seat had a picture of a shoe, one of a pair, and after the session we then had to find the owner of the matching shoe and do a short exercise on the theme of the conference. This was an excellent ice-breaker and a good excuse to approach strangers. The themed exercise asked us to consider our spiritual path and the tools (shoes) we use to tread that path. Were the shoes just a symbol of personal experience or could they also stand for our religious community? Where did our shoes pinch? That is, what were our dissatisfactions with our current path/community?

There were workshops, displays, music galore, and a bookshop – all similar to our meetings – along with quiet opportunities to chat over a drink. A social evening was held, when the youth programme was displayed, and everyone who worked on the meetings was thanked, followed by a cabaret-disco.

Inga Brandes a young German Unitarian visited our Unitarian GA in Birmingham. She is a board member for the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU) and the German Unitarians. She and other young(ish) adults had prominent roles in the programme.

Worms, of course, is closely connected with the German Nibelungen saga and Wagner's Opera based on the first half of the saga, so outings were arranged with these in mind. Inga led a workshop on the 20th birthday of ICUU and there was also a workshop on the International Association for



John Clifford (centre, back) attended the German Unitarian meetings with his wife, Barbara Clifford, on his right.

Religious Freedom. The Germans take their international connections seriously. This year's visitors came from Austria, the Czech Republic, Netherlands, Transylvania, the UK, and the European Unitarian Universalists.

One difference in the business sessions: In Germany they take place on the first day after lunch and continue until business is done (with a short break for dinner). They made two important decisions this year: their name was changed from German Unitarian Religious Community [Deutsche Unitarier Religionsgemeinschaft] to Unitarian Religious Community of Free Beliefs [Unitarier Religionsgemeinschaft freien Glaubens]. And they decided that, in future, voting at their business session will not be restricted to official delegates but will be open to all Unitarian participants. Their board has three designated presidents who take different roles in turn. It was also decided that the presiding officer role will alternate between male and female.

In 2017 (2-5 June) they are jointly organising (with European Unitarian Universalists) a pan-European Unitarian gathering in Ulm (birthplace of Einstein) and they hope to have several British delegates. The working languages will be English and German. Mark your diaries now.

The Rev John Clifford is president of the Unitarian General Assembly.



YUP news available

YUP News (Young Unitarian People) is a quarterly e-newsletter with the latest news and events from the Unitarian Youth Programme. You can sign up at <http://tinyurl.com/yupnews>, or join the Facebook group at www.facebook.com/groups/YoungUnitarianPeople/

Religious Experience findings now online

Those who have taken *The Inquirer* over many years may recall Sir Alister Hardy's creation of the Religious Experience Unit at Manchester College Oxford in 1969. Sir Alister, a world-

famous zoologist and university professor, was a member of the Unitarian congregation. He felt the numerous examples of personal religious and spiritual perceptions he'd heard, so varied in their nature and content, should be collected and analysed. Unitarians were encouraged to send their experiences to the unit as anyone could whether connected to a church or not. He published an analysis of some accounts in his book *The Spiritual Nature of Man* in 1979.

The unit developed away from Oxford – Sir Alister handed it over in 1976 – and in subsequent years a large number of accounts were assembled. The Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, as it is now called, is located at the University of Wales, Trinity St David. The RERC has recently made available a searchable online archive database of 6,000 accounts of spiritual experiences. Access is available to those who join the Alister Hardy Society. Contact the RERC at Trinity St David, Lampeter, Wales, SA48 7ED, or make contact through its website at: <http://bit.ly/1GsySzV>.

– Alan Ruston