

# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian  
and Free Christian Churches

# Viewpoint



## *My Faith as a Unitarian*

*by Naomi Linnell*

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## INTRODUCTION

What does it actually mean to be a Unitarian? Is it possible for a movement encompassing many diverse views to hold together at all? Depending on the answer to the second question, 'how do we move forward?'

In order to address the first question, the NUF invited six Unitarians to contribute to a document which would help us to reach and write a conclusion, which addresses the second and third questions. The material from the six contributors will be published in the six NUF *Viewpoints* to be published throughout 2016.

The six contributors represent the broadest spectrum of views possible in such a small sample of Unitarians, within the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches plus affiliated Societies. Clearly it would be impossible to be inclusive of every Unitarian but hopefully readers will find much that resonates with each of the contributions.

The contributors, all active Unitarians in various congregations, organisations and societies, were asked to write within a set of guidelines. They were asked not to address the questions asked in the conclusion. To avoid being polemic. The focus for their writing was to be their own faith and not what Unitarianism should or should not be. They should demonstrate how their faith is manifested in their Unitarian practice: ritual and worship, faith community and social responsibility. The word limit was to be 2,000 words.

Each of the six Unitarians willingly accepted the invitation to contribute, even though they were already very busy in other areas of Uni-

tarian life. For this I was very grateful. The resulting pieces were better than I could ever have hoped and perhaps they will be yet another contribution to a conversation that seems to be gathering pace across the movement. Thanks go to: Naomi Linnell, Jeff Jones, Jo Rogers, Simon Hardy, Catherine Robinson and Rev Jim Corrigan.

To help the writer of the Conclusion we need to hear your comments too as 2016 progresses. You may be encouraged to write your own piece using the same guidelines as our six writers. You may even wish to submit them to me, with the possibility of them being included in the proposed e-book or further *Viewpoints*. More than that we would like to encourage feedback from readers in response to what resonates with them in each of the pieces. To enable this to be as easy and accessible as possible there will a specific section set up on the NUF Internet Fellowship, for comments, which will be open to anyone who wishes to register. This can be done by visiting the NUF website: [www.nufonline.org.uk](http://www.nufonline.org.uk) and following the registration instructions on the front page. The NUF *Newsletter* Editor, Mattie Pugh: [rubber\\_boots@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:rubber_boots@hotmail.co.uk) will be happy to receive comments for publication. Tony McNeile, our regular *Viewpoint* Editor, who has kindly agreed for this project to take over the pages of the publication through 2016, will also be ready to receive comments: [tony.mcneile@virgin.net](mailto:tony.mcneile@virgin.net). Those Unitarians, who are not NUF members, will be advised, on various Unitarian Facebook pages, when the *Viewpoint* is available to read on the NUF website.

Naomi Linnell is our first contributor and is well known throughout the movement for her contributions to *The Inquirer*, *Viewpoint*, *Newsletter* plus various other Society publications and Unitarian Internet groups. She is a member of the NUF.

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*Joan Wilkinson*

## **IN MY END IS MY BEGINNING**

(T. S. Eliot: from 'East Coker')

I am a solitary, a country member, a congregation of one, a member of the Fellowship of Non-Subscribing Christians, and a Unitarian.

My youthful Anglo-Catholic Christian faith was the sum of many parts: environment, upbringing, church teaching, my early delight in the colour and the drama of the Parish Mass, the austere beauty of the Edwardian brick church on the hill, the confidence of the community who bowed their heads to the Creator God the Father, offered their hearts to the Saviour God the Son, and gave their thanks to God the Holy Spirit who had led them in safety along the age-old path that their fathers too had followed.

Aged 18, I left home and went up to Cambridge, at a time of great religious revival in the University. Charismatic preachers like the former Communist Father Michael Fisher SSF drew in the crowds, the Christian Union exhorted us to repent and throw ourselves at the foot of the Mercy Seat and accept Jesus as our saviour, while college chaplains reminded us that as Christians we must look to the needs of the sick, the poor, the dispossessed, the lonely, and the mad. My Director of Studies was a liberal convert to Roman Catholicism. My supervisor in medieval studies was a long-time supporter of the Mod-

ern Churchmen's Union, which had since its foundation in 1898 stirred up a hornets' nest of protest against its debunking of all manner of dodgy doctrines and illiberal practices within both the Anglican communion and the wider Christian church. Many Christians attended church twice every Sunday and sat up into the early hours of many mornings debating all these exciting but perturbing ideals and ideas. My bed-time reading was Eliot's *Four Quartets* and a book of the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore.

Writing now with the gift of the great god Hindsight, I realise that the saga of my drift from high Anglican Christianity to Unitarianism and the Fellowship of Non-Subscribing Christians originated 57 years ago in Cambridge. In the succeeding decades of my grown-up devotion to the teachings of the Church, the echoes of the intellectual and spiritual excitement of that amazing time, the words of wise men generally forgotten, and the purport of our often tortuous undergraduate discussions increasingly invaded my mind and disturbed the spiritual complacency of approaching middle age. Thus it was that, some 25 years ago, with conscience, credal doctrine, and dogma overcome at last by enquiry and reason, I slipped out of the Anglican Church. I sat on my lonely pillar like a Stylite in the desert, hoping that someone would come along and offer me a meal. In fact, before very long, several good folk did.

I was made wonderfully welcome by the National Unitarian Fellowship, where I found new email friends from a variety of other religious and spiritual backgrounds. I was encouraged to consider the wisdom and teaching of other religions, alternative ways to enlightenment, other perspectives on age-old spiritual problems, old doubts

and miseries, and to learn from other holy books and other holy souls. I embarked on a new journey, where I had to find my own path through a dark forest of strange ideas and new perceptions until I emerged into the light of understanding that each Unitarian person seeks their own unique path to God or to enlightenment and embraces their own faith, each choosing their own teacher, or guide. I began to understand that my attitude to my personal faith must achieve a new humility and openness in the face of such candid diversity.

For the first time in years, I looked again at the teachings of various of the world's religions and realised that many of the precepts of Jesus could be found in older religions or would be incorporated into later religions – love of God, hospitality to be offered to strangers and neighbours, care for the creatures of the natural world. These precepts, which I also followed, were so widely acknowledged throughout the whole world that the core of what was left of my old Christian faith seemed now to be but a part of a wider, older, deeper universal faith, and that was exciting. For too long I had embraced a Christian faith that had about it an imposed corporate certainty which could be reassuring, but could also suffocate the individual spirit and put down the free thinker as a child who, having once escaped the apron strings, is rounded up by the thought police and returned to its loving, smothering Mother. Armed with the Unitarian principles that I had learned from the NUF, I felt released into the custody of my own individual beliefs or non-beliefs, which could be as hazardous as it was exciting, but it seemed to work.

From the very beginning of my connection with my open-minded friends in the National Unitarian Fellowship and the Earth Spirit Net-

work, I found wonderful encouragement and support for my journey of faith – particularly from the two ladies with whom I have worked and shared such a long and treasured email correspondence. Many of the rest of those good Unitarian people can seem to be, in one sense, just names on an electronic page, images in a photo gallery, or characters who appear in a Unitarian TV video. But Joan and Liz are as real to me as my daughter downstairs and Chris my friend and carer in the flat above, while many of the ‘just names’ are as real as the kindly neighbours who live in our Square.

I began to write small fables for grown-ups and poems in which an emoting-by-proxy narrative would calm the ruffled feathers that I had tended to raise in the NUF’s own Internet Forum, (<http://nufonline.org.uk/index.php>) when first falling back into my old robust debating style. To write for a group of folk with whom I was becoming at ease, and whom I very much respected, was a precious and fulfilling occupation. Both the research and the actual process of writing not only emerged from the faith I already had but then, in their turn, reinforced that faith. Take, for example, the tale of the small brown Vogelkop bower bird, who searches the waste discarded by humans, to find objects vividly coloured and sparkingly beautiful with which to decorate the bower that he prepares each year to attract a new complement of wives. He is an energetic eco-warrior – a recycler of old rubbish tossed aside by folk who don’t care, and then he transforms a potential pollutant into a useful and decorative contribution to the lives of his families. Or read the story of the compassionate outcast fox who saved the lives of the Indian Running Duck ducklings. What lessons might these be for us, mere lords of creation?

Unitarian openness and tolerance is a safe raft upon which to sit while paddling as best one can across the torrent of a hundred conflicting waters. But where to paddle next, and who was the shadowy figure who sat beside me and accompanied me along my path, a stranger ethereal and without a name? Faith, God, the religious life, spiritual awareness are for me all part of the Circle that is the eternal renewing of life and death of humankind and of the natural world in which we have the privilege to live, and which is also at the heart of the Unitarian Earth Spirit Network. I am not a Pagan by conviction, but I have for nearly as long as I can remember found God mirrored in his creation, an indistinct image perhaps – but a window into eternity that the nine-year-old-I-once-was recognised one summer afternoon on an Exmoor hillside. Suddenly this window had been opened for me again, and every ride I took along the cliff showed me God – in the tiny purple vetch along the path, the red valerian at the edge of the shore, and the great herring gulls wheeling and dancing across the top of the lace-edged waves. The presence of God was literally everywhere; how could I not believe that my purpose on earth was to love God and my neighbour as myself, and to care for God’s wonderful creation?

As do so many Unitarians, I came to have faith in the inherent goodness of every person; in the necessity for free and truthful enquiry and freedom from the constriction of formal creeds; in the right of every individual’s opinion to be heard and honestly considered; in our obligation to seek to honour differences; in the worth and wisdom of every religion and spiritual path grounded in love; in justice and equity for all; in our commitment to respect and protect the world in which we are privileged to make our home; and the essen



tial equality due to everyone regardless of religion, race, sexual orientation, or gender.

As my confidence in my Unitarian journey of faith increased, so did my abiding respect for my Christian roots. I could see the possibility of my old-fashioned affection for the early dissenting Unitarians of the Protestant Reformation metamorphosing into a serviceable cloak to warm my spirit as it pursues its unfamiliar pilgrimage. Further encouraged by my membership of the Unitarian Christian Association and latterly by the Fellowship of Non-Subscribing Christians, I began to study seriously again the person and the personality of Jesus the teacher, prophet, and guide, the radical Rabbi from Galilee, concentrating now on his relationship with God whose children we all are, and his relationship with all those children of God for whom he urged the men and women who would follow him to care. His Sermon on the Mount, the message of the miracles, and his thirty or so Parables which present us with his ethical and social teaching, together with the two great commandments he gave us – to love God and to love our neighbours – are the abiding sources of my Free Christian faith.

My Non-Subscribing Christian faith, which has no truck with compulsory Creeds, is centred once more in the teaching and example of the life of Jesus, and the living out of his commandments. It is nurtured by the companionship of the welcoming Non-Subscribing Christians of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, whose hearts are open to all honest seekers. In the words of The Rev. Chris Wilson, the Minister of Moneyreagh Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland:

I believe my own calling to be to preach the Kingdom of God, not

as a millennial event, but as something realised in and through loving acts, the loving community, 'realised eschatology' as the theologians would have it. This means the imperative, to reach out to others, to love God and neighbour as self, in particular when our neighbour seems different. Liberal Christianity affirms all to be the children of God, of all faiths, of all creeds, of all we may differ from one another. [*Fellowship, issue 1*]

I see my life as a spiritual journey that I make through a constantly changing landscape, and as yet unfinished. But now the Circle would seem to be almost complete. The interwoven pattern of the Dance of Life and Love is ready to be taken from the loom, and my erstwhile shadowy companion Jesus is revealed in the clear light of day and is seen no longer through a glass darkly.

She walks now on that quiet path  
In a valley whose name is Content.  
The enervating heat of noon is past  
and the healing breezes of evening  
steal silently out of the shadows.  
The child she used to be takes  
her hand, and whispers to her  
that what there is, is all there is,  
and all there is, is gift enough  
to be made of, or not, as she wills.  
She feels the presence of the past,  
the high peaks, the bottomless pits,  
loving and loss, sadness and joy,

her young self, and her strong self,  
while a man whose yoke is easy  
leads her gently into the morning.

[from "*Child on the Hillside*" by Naomi Linnell, 2013]

**Naomi Linnell**  
**2015**

**Comments -**

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

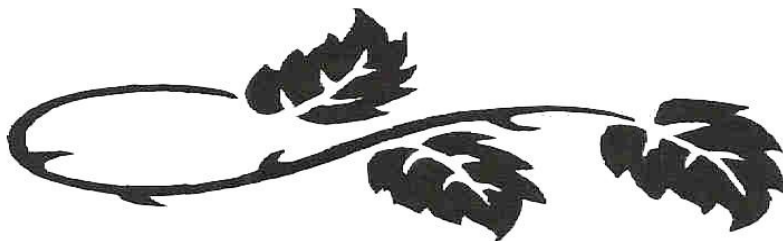
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Established 1945



Seeking information about the  
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