

# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian  
and Free Christian Churches

# Viewpoint



## *My Faith as a Unitarian*

*by Jef Jones*

Issue 246



April 2016

Registered Charity 1040294

## INTRODUCTION

Before moving on to the second article in the series: *My Faith as a Unitarian*, written by Jef Jones I would like to remind readers of the main questions behind the series before going on to pick up some interesting points arising from the first article of the series in the February *Viewpoint*, written by Naomi Linnell.

Through the examination of the individual faith of six Unitarians we are trying to answer the questions:

1. What does it actually mean to be a Unitarian?
2. Can a religion with such a diversity of individual faiths hold together?

Depending on what the answers to the above two question are, only then can we ask the question:

1. How do we as a movement, and ourselves as individuals, move forward?

Naomi, in her article, introduced us to some of her religious life as a child and as a young adult growing up. Her Anglo-Catholic background remains part of who she is and yet through her encounter with Unitarianism and Unitarians, she has been able to refine her understanding of her faith in an atmosphere of friendship and freedom from creeds and dogma. The lifelong nature of a developing faith may well be worth looking out for as we read about the faiths of the other contributors to the series. Present day Unitarians, who have discovered a religious space to live and grow their faith bring many different pasts into the growing diversity of what is Unitarianism to-

day.

The breadth that our movement offers has been important, through its many and various societies, groups and social media resources. Naomi speaks as a Unitarian, who practises her faith outside a congregational setting and finds space to express and share with other Unitarians through both electronic and paper publications. As we continue to read through the future articles in this series, it will be interesting to see just how important faith beyond the congregational setting has been and continues to be for our writers.

Naomi finds God mirrored in creation with care for neighbour and God's wonderful creation being paramount. It will be interesting to see how important the natural world is to our later writers and what similarities and differences they have in incorporating their understanding into faith. Does something specifically Unitarian emerge or will this be just one more area of difficulty in reconciling our diversity?

Christian ideals of equality of religion, race, sexual orientation or gender are also seen to be an important part of her faith. Now this would seem to be one area where Unitarians seem to be in agreement.

In finding her Unitarian home in the National Unitarian Fellowship, Unitarian Christian Association and more recently the Fellowship of Non-Subscribing Christians, having no truck with compulsory creeds remains the firm underpinning of her Unitarian Faith.

To summarise the points gleaned from Naomi's piece and to consider as you read further:

1. How important are personal histories and childhood?

2. What is the balance between congregational, societies and groups, social media, Unitarian publications and community?
3. What part does the natural world play in individual faith?
4. How are matters of equality and discrimination covered?

The following piece by Jef Jones continues the high standard of thought and expression but readers will find a very different faith story equally fascinating and leaving you wanting to read more.

Jef grew up in the North East of England and has lived in Leamington Spa, Sheffield, London and in Brighton since 1997. He worked as a youth-worker, then in Sexual Health Promotion for twenty-three years. He started attending Brighton Unitarian Church in 2000 and was invited by the Congregation to become its Lay Leader in 2010.

For further information or comments please contact me at any time:  
[joan@yorkshiregirl.org.uk](mailto:joan@yorkshiregirl.org.uk)

*Joan Wilkinson*

## **AN UNBOUND UNITARIAN FAITH**

As I look back at my 'faith journey', I see now that for a long time I lived with a kind of home-made, personal religion, cobbled together from landscape, music, and culture. I can also see that it led me, over the course of many years, to Unitarianism and to faith. Unitarianism has provided me with a framework in which I can practise my personal religion and travel from it, or through it, towards God. It

has given me a safe space full of mystical possibility and adventure. It has been an invitation to a rich array of conversations and silences. At its best, Unitarianism has been a loving, generous, and challenging gift in my life.

I have come to think of some aspects of my faith as being religious but not spiritual. I can't claim to use these terms with any kind of theological precision, but by naming some of the themes of my life 'religious', I mean that they are primal, cosmic, and impassioned. It is important to me to return to them often, and the act of returning is the religious frequency of my life, a private litany that has resonated across the years.

I grew up in a small industrial town on the north-east coast, and my God is intrinsically and poetically *northern* and *coastal*.

When I was a boy I used to go for long walks. I would walk and look and think and dream. The shapes and rhythms of those walks live within me. Sometimes I would tramp around the back streets, or I would go down to the marshes and marvel at the lights of the blast furnace and the chemical factories. Sometimes I would go to the places with the best views: of the dockyards, of the hills and moors to the west, or of the cliffs to the south-east. Mostly, though, I went to the beach.

I fell in love with the beach on a particular day when I was seven. I found two starfish in a rock pool and formally announced to my mother that it was the best day of my life!

The beach that I fell in love with is long and sandy, but there are stretches of Jurassic rock that reach from under the sand out into

the North Sea. There are shells and beautiful, pale grey fossils everywhere. I've collected these things all my life: arcs of ammonite, belemnites like little bullets, bits of sea-lily, vertebrae of ichthyosaurs and salt-water crocodiles. They are still wonderful to me. Approximately 190 million years ago these various creatures lived in a shallow, sunlit sea. Their habitat was the outer margins of a wide, subtropical delta. The moon was considerably nearer to the earth then, and bigger in the sky. The tides were more extreme.

So northern beaches are one of the places where I find God: alive and ancient, austere and lavish. The exquisite greys, dark greens, and muted blues are divine to me, and the biting cold too, and the handsome, desolate moors in the distance. This beauty fills me with wonder and makes me glad. It brings me perspective. For this beauty I give thanks to God.

Those fossils and that beach – their marvellous story – also instilled in me a love of science. The development of complex life on earth, in all its diversity and colour, fascinates me. The processes of evolution are so subtle and powerful, so intricate and creative that our current understanding always leads to more questions. Science is integral to my sense of wonder and gratitude. In fact, it is integral to my faith itself.

Heavy industry cast its sooty shadow over my childhood and adolescence. They were illuminated by the glow of refineries and factories, by the great stacks of electric lights that lit up 'the works'. I listened to the glittering, hysterical music of David Bowie, Iggy Pop, and Roxy Music. Even now there is a certain type of alien, fiery glamour that is religious to me. Those chimneys, those cooling towers, those white-

hot ingots: each one is reasonable enough, but together they make the land itself uncanny and curiously beautiful. Those jarring guitars and that imaginative, artful screeching seemed to fit the scenery. I was drawn to the mysterious energy of edges, to queerness .

Music has always mattered to me. At school assembly we sang a hymn each morning, and I am deeply thankful to Unitarianism for giving me the opportunity to sing again some of those great, soaring, magisterial songs. We also had a daily reading from the King James Bible, and as I have grown older, I have come to revere it and to enjoy, as I know so many people do, the grandeur and poetry of its cadences. But in addition to enjoying its musicality I find a reliable, weathered truth in its verses and stories. Freed from a requirement to believe in them, I find that I do. I do believe there are awesome powers that we will never understand; I do believe that God is born within us out of love; I do believe that we betray our divinity, and hurt it in ourselves and in others, and sometimes contrive to kill it off altogether; I believe it can be born again within us. I believe we can be re-born with love into wholeness, into our true power.

I was lucky enough to study Latin at A-level. A small group of us completed a close reading of Book 6 of Virgil's *Aeneid* over two years, and it left me with a sense of the beauty of language, and of poetry in particular.

I liked singing hymns, but a different kind of music has also shaped me. I believe in bass guitars, in the Sex Pistols, in Kevin Shields, in Mark E. Smith, in Siouxsie growling and in Frank Black howling. I believe in Patti Smith when she thrashes around with such extraordinary righteousness and artistry. To me these are the priests and po-

ets of our time: they conjure up something mythic and ancient, something sacrificial and ecstatic.

These passions might seem contradictory and indiscriminating, but one of the things I value about Unitarianism is that it has encouraged me to be whole, rather than tidy. I have never really found a place in my thinking for hygienic systems. There are some types of politics, religion, and atheism whose neatness does not suit me. To me, chaos, dirt, and darkness are the fertile soul of the cosmos. My God is graceful and rather wild.

Before I came to Unitarianism all of this was within me – a somewhat over-heated religious sensibility, instinctive and cultish. Then in my late thirties I became ill. I was struck with an auto-immune condition that took four years to be diagnosed. Those were difficult and often bewildering times for me. I could not have got through them without family, friends, work, poetry, and therapy. Even when the condition was diagnosed, it turned out to have no definitive cure, and I have lost significant parts of my life to it. I lost my capacity to go for the long walks that I used to love, and the ability to run and swim. But out of my loss I gained a series of questions. What does suffering mean? What is a life worth? What is a soul? And, as the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski puts it, *Why is there something rather than nothing?*

These questions led me to church. I needed a place where I could learn to be with God quietly and coolly, a place where I could think and ask and listen. My mind was crowded with questions and feelings, but I needed space, ideas, and stillness rather than specific

answers. I found Brighton Unitarian Church, and it guided me to a more committed, consistent relationship with God.

Today there are more aspects of my faith that I would describe as mystical rather than religious. I mean that they are my most transforming experiences of God, my close encounters, the kindest lessons I have been granted. They have come to me from the disciplines of meditation, prayer, and sacred reading.

I was on a bus once and I could 'see' the other people on the bus and myself in all our divine dignity. I could 'see' that, however ordinary or insignificant we might feel, we each have our own sacred nature and worth. It was like being granted – for only a few moments – an extra sense. This was not a thought or a feeling nor an opinion, but a blessing, a revelation. Every single one of us is a word of God, a sacred breath. In that moment I knew this as foundational and universal: the divine and radiant actuality of each person.

I contemplated some tulips once and experienced Oneness. In the moment of that experience I was part of something radically inclusive. There was no space and time. I did not exist separately. It was, of course, an experience beyond language. As these 'moments of eternity in time' tend to be, it was 'unthinkable'. I am sure there are neurobiologists who imagine that they can explain it and I am happy to let them try. What matters to me about that moment is that it does not need explanation.

Recently on retreat in a very beautiful part of the Esk Valley near Whitby, I meditated and prayed on my own for four days, and I experienced the embracing peace and joy of the Holy Spirit. It came to me as a kind of wry, enveloping smile, an awesome but amused still-

ness; potent, soft, and empowering.

So this is where I am now: leaning towards tradition, but not bound by it. The margins don't quite call me in the way they used to. I have travelled from Diamond Dogs and 'Heroes' to the Holy Paraclete!

I owe Unitarianism such a lot, and of course I have some questions about our meaning as a movement and as a set of values. For example, what are the problems inherent in reason and secularism? The perils of theocracy are clear – but what is lost in an 'atheocracy'? Is science inevitably and immaculately reasonable? What are the myths, superstitions, and prejudices of modern secularity? Who is defending religion itself? I don't mean the right to private religious choice (because it is not under threat), but the contribution of faith to the public sphere. If to defend it is one of our goals, we need not be embarrassed by it. We need to understand faith as being more than metaphor and 'meaning'.

We say that we don't have a creed, but is it possible for values such as freedom and inclusivity to become enshrined, or rigidified into unconsidered and unacknowledged rules, or hijacked? How relevant are we when we heroically proclaim these values in a culture which is substantially based on them? Is it possible that our romance of ourselves as Enlightenment rebels prevents us from perceiving our own dogma?

In no particular order, this is what I have learned for myself from my journey. Peace, intimacy, and beauty can be found in God's unconditional light. The darkness of God is generous, holy, and redeeming. Suffering can be held and sometimes healed in God's presence. Reason is useful, but passion and spirit in all their varieties are part of

the religious life. We are loved and held in grace without reason. The disciplines of prayer and meditation are paths of transformation. God's heart is the original home of justice and cosmic order. We are called to be whole, and to rejoice.

***Jef Jones***

***2015***

**Comments -**

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

Please send your comments to the guest editor:

Joan Wilkinson,  
10, Shirley Close,  
Castle Donington.  
DERBY  
DE74 2XB

*or email to [joan@yorkshiregirl.org.uk](mailto:joan@yorkshiregirl.org.uk)*

# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian  
and Free Christian Churches  
Established 1945



Seeking information about the  
National Unitarian Fellowship?

Web site: [www.nufonline.org.uk](http://www.nufonline.org.uk)

or

email: [nuf@nufonline.org.uk](mailto:nuf@nufonline.org.uk)