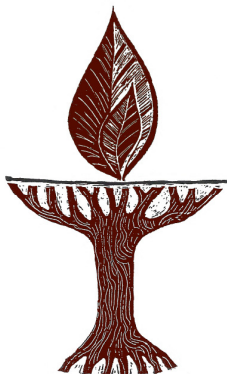


National Unitarian Fellowship

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Viewpoint



My Faith as a Unitarian

by Jo Rogers

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INTRODUCTION

Jocelyn Rogers, known to most of us as Jo, is the third contributor to the series, *My Faith as a Unitarian*. We can see from the title she has chosen to use, 'I am a Pagan Unitarian', that this will be a very different account of Unitarian Faith to that of our first two contributors, Naomi Linnell and Jef Jones. However, it is very much part of Unitarianism in this country today and indicates that contemporary Unitarianism has a dialogical relationship with itself.

All three writers show that childhood curiosity and openness influence our ongoing growth as individuals in relationship with landscape, nature, cultural and religious experience. The tapping into something mystical, non-judgemental, and ancient, or as Jef expresses it, 'primal', be it in ancient human religious history, ancient natural history, music, literature or perhaps a coming together of each, is important.

None of our three writers were born into a Unitarian community, making the choice to join a Unitarian community in adulthood. Connection and relationship within a religious community is important for all three and yet all three can be seen to have developed much of their faith beyond the confines of a specific Unitarian congregation. A choice has been made by all three to share space with a society or congregation that allows individual questing within a Unitarian, welcoming and non-judgemental religious community.

There is a basic human need for all three writers, which calls for more than the rational in religion in order for them to thrive and grow. Emotion and passion have an acknowledged space for all our three writers, the need to tap into the numinous nature of religion that feeds the human spirit. This doesn't mean that philosophy, science and logical reasoning is put aside. All three ask the big questions of life within the context of the whole of their lives and individual experiences, resulting in diversity of views and unique individuals. However, nature is important in all three writings and is integral to their religious experience and understanding. Religion and spiritual experience is beyond just the human

interactions of daily life, giving a sense of relationship beyond and yet including religious community. Perhaps we have here good examples of 'integrated religion' at an individual level.

However, the permission to question and dissent is at the very heart of our Unitarian tradition. This is a lifelong religious way of being within our community which allows the freedom to change and keep on changing. Jef 'leans towards tradition but is not bound by it' acknowledging that for him this means asking 'challenging questions of perceiving our own Unitarian dogma'. It is this open space that allowed Naomi freedom to explore and find once more all that was right for her in a Unitarian Liberal Christianity, which affirms difference and love of all within and without our own chosen faith. It was this permission to be free in our questioning that resulted in quite a different understanding for Jo, a difference that has resulted in an enhancement of her religious life as a Unitarian.

Worship, understood as meditation, prayer, ritual or reflection has a transformative effect for all our writers. It is within these practices, whether it be with a group, or alone, where '...we are... held in grace'.

(An Unbound Faith P 11 Jeff Jones).

Joan Wilkinson

A Short Personal Profile

I was brought up in a non-religious household, my parents being agnostic/atheist, but I picked up Christianity in primary school from assemblies and biblical stories. By the age of about ten I was very interested and took myself off to the local Methodist church Sunday School. I remained a Methodist well into my twenties, until my husband and I discovered the Unitarians. The particular Unitarian church we went to at that

time was not much different from the Methodists! - but we stayed with it and began to develop our own separate belief systems. A stay at a Shinto shrine in Japan in the '80s had a profound effect on my thinking and sowed the seeds of what is now my essentially Pagan outlook. This in turn has changed and developed over the years, and my article reflects where I am now.

Jocelyn Rogers

I AM A PAGAN UNITARIAN

'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.' I believe in this God. But already for me there are pitfalls: was there ever a beginning, or is everything somehow inexplicably cyclical? Is 'God' the right word to use? It has so many connotations for us in the West, suggesting the old man with a beard looking down on us. And 'heaven'? I have to take this to mean 'the sky' in the minds of the ancients and, for us, to mean everything that is outside and beyond our planet Earth.

I have been interested in religion for as long as I can remember. My parents were agnostic or atheist, but I heard bible stories at school and started (voluntarily) attending a Methodist Sunday School when I was about nine or ten. Throughout my teens I saw myself as Christian, and I read and studied the Bible extensively. However, as an adult when life became more complicated I found that the Christian God to whom I had always looked did not work for me any longer. As a woman and now a mother, I could no longer relate to the God whom I had believed in, and who tended to be male. That God could not solve or even understand my difficulties as a woman. Also much of the Christian belief in a 'good God' did not make sense to me either, when I realised how much injustice prevailed – bad things hap-

pening to good people, and vice-versa. The result was that for many years I was a 'watered-down Christian' – hanging on to what I could, but rejecting more and more of traditional Christian teachings as the years went by.

My early Christian moral teachings and philosophy have remained with me. However, having rejected the supernatural teachings of Christianity, I am left only with the philosophy. I think the difference between a philosophy and a religion is emotion. One cannot get emotional about a philosophy, but personally I need a religion with which I can identify emotionally.

In my late twenties I discovered the Unitarian movement, which allowed me to worship Whatever-It-Is, but did not supply me with answers. Then in 1984 I visited Japan with a few other Unitarians from this country and spent five or six days at a Shinto Shrine, hearing lectures about Shinto and participating in various Shinto ceremonies and acts of worship. Shinto is a pagan religion, and this was my first brush with any form of Paganism. Shinto worships Gods, or Spirits, which inhabit every part of the natural world. When I first came across all this, my Western Protestant mind thought, 'What a load of old superstition'. At the same time I was fascinated by it, and very moved and impressed by some of the worship rituals.

I continued to read and think about Shinto after my return home and gradually, over a period of years, I assimilated the general ideas behind Shinto and found myself more and more moving towards the idea that Nature is God; Nature is omnipresent and omnipotent. As with Shinto followers, I now feel that 'the good life' is achieved by living as far as possible in harmony with Nature and in accord with the natural rhythms of our existence.

I see Nature as neither 'good' nor 'bad', but as a balance of the two. It is easy to sentimentalise Nature, especially as she is so often

referred to as Mother Nature, conjuring up ideas of a caring, loving mother representing calm and beauty. But one has only to think of floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanoes, fires, and droughts to know that Nature is not always benign. Natural disasters occur indiscriminately and can wipe out or ruin the lives of thousands of people regardless of their religion, morals, ethics, age, and social standing, along with the lives of countless animals. Disasters are not sent as a punishment for wrongdoing; rather, whether one is in the wrong place at the wrong time seems to be a matter of relative chance. Because of this, I see Nature as an impersonal force, both creative and destructive. To me, the God Nature does not represent 'good', or 'love', but it represents everything that IS, in this world, in other worlds and the entire universe or universes. This is so huge that I cannot even begin to imagine it, but it is all part of the physical 'mechanics' of life, all necessarily adhering to rules of physics and chemistry which keep the whole amazing, mind-boggling, magic universe(s) together. Occasionally accidents happen in this well-run mechanism – for example, bits drop off and cannon through space into other stars and planets – but the mysterious Principle remains. It is this Principle that commands my huge admiration, respect, awe, and worship.

In the animal world there is no good and bad. It is easy for us to anthropomorphise animal behaviour. A friend of mine who is an ardent and knowledgeable birdwatcher dislikes magpies, cuckoos, pigeons, and some other large birds because they do unpleasant things like eating or raiding other birds' eggs, or stealing their food. However, they are simply being themselves, and thereby a balance is achieved which enables their overall survival; they are not doing it out of spite! This sense of balance is important, I think, and, as far as we humans are concerned, not necessarily a comfortable idea to live with; it follows that within human existence there needs to be a balance in our terms between right and wrong, war and peace, relaxation and work,

anger and serenity, and so on, for our species to continue.

I think that concepts of 'good' and 'bad' are often culturally imposed and may differ according to where we live or whatever is 'politically correct'. Humans have the capacity to choose their lines of action; we choose whether to make this world a better or a worse place. We have the capacity to be emotionally as well as physically hurt, and to hurt others, and it is our choice whether to inflict hurt or well-being. But whatever we choose, Nature will survive – even though the human race may not. We are part of Nature's cycles of life and death, light and dark, harmony and strife, and are interconnected with the whole of the rest of creation. Pagans generally accept and recognise problems and suffering as being part of the interplay between light and dark. The less desirable attributes of, say, anger, stupidity, and ruthlessness are seen as part of this balance and wholeness.

I want to be on the side of 'good' as my life stance and philosophy. I try to live the Unitarian values of freedom, reason, tolerance, respect, and responsibility; and it helps me in this philosophy to belong to a Unitarian church where other people are striving for the same ends, even though their motivations may differ from my own. I would like these values to prevail in our world, but my current *religious Pagan* thinking tells me that these aspirations never will prevail, and that somehow the balance of good and evil is an essential part of existence, as with light and dark, cold and heat, movement and stillness, wet and dry, and so on.

Along with balance, there also seems to be a theme of recurring circles: the shape of the planets themselves, the linear circles of the days, of the seasons, of life and death ... Again this seems, in some way, key to the whole pattern of existence, and cyclical existence leads in turn to questions of life after death and/or reincarnation. If we look at nature, we see that plants and animals die and eventually

become part of some new life, usually of a different form. At this stage in my spiritual life I have an open mind about this: I am still thinking this one through and trying to get to the bottom of it!

I have never belonged to a pagan community such as Wicca or Druidry, but I have been a member of the Unitarian Earth Spirit Network ever since its inception in 1991. With this organisation I have enjoyed and benefitted from many rituals and ceremonies, celebrating the main festivals of the year (the solstices and equinoxes) as well as the smaller events of Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane, and Lammass in the Northern European and Celtic ancient traditions. I have also found the accompanying colours and symbols uplifting and inspiring. In my most recent years these are less essential and important to me. My pagan outlook on the one hand has simplified; on the other, it has become almost too huge to handle!

I live in a village with no street lights; I look up at the sky at night and am overwhelmed by the immensity of both space and time.

I live quite near to the Morecambe Bay estuary; I look at the high incoming tide and feel its tremendous power, which could so easily engulf us all.

I have a garden; I see the intense beauty and colour of an individual flower. I watch tiny creatures going about their business in their own small world.

I live halfway up an escarpment in Cumbria. From the top of the scar I can see a huge range of the Cumbrian mountains, sometimes cloudy and misty, sometimes snow-topped, sometimes pink in the morning or evening sun; always magnificent and beautiful.

These are some of the things that inspire me and evoke my awe and worship.

Because of my huge respect for Creation, it follows that I will do my best for the whole living organism, of which I am such a tiny part. 'Love your neighbour as yourself', or 'do unto others as you would be done by', are maxims which are essential companions to my beliefs. I try not to hurt other people; I also try not to hurt any creature which is part of this world. It also follows that I try to be as 'green' as possible, and to do what I can to 'save the planet' for the sake of every living thing on it. At the same time, as I mentioned earlier, even if humankind destroys itself or otherwise ceases to exist, Nature will carry on: we need Nature, but Nature does not need humankind.

This religion is not a comforting one, because I cannot believe in a God which will pick me up and carry me along when the going gets rough; nor can I believe in a God who can be persuaded to answer my prayers. In my experience this doesn't happen. Instead I take the responsibility for myself and have to have faith in my own strength or ability to deal with my own life. And yet, the knowledge that Nature is there, all around and all-enveloping, and has been there for millennia, forging everything on this earth and everything outside it, has a certainty and a satisfying calm which underpins my existence. I also mentioned earlier that I have not reached any firm opinion about life after death or reincarnation. In a way it doesn't matter: Nature governs this, as well as all other aspects of life and death.

I have come a long way from my early beliefs in Jesus' God. Even so, this completely different belief system of mine leads to very similar aspirations and intentions. But I try to do 'good' things now, not for the sake of a place in heaven, or in the hope that God will look after me if I do good things on his behalf, but because everything in nature is of value – humankind and everything in the natural world on this planet and outside it – and so in my respect for all of this I do what I can to help it along.

Being a Unitarian helps me because our rituals, services, and inclusive attitude mean that I can apply my own interpretation to what is said, and have my own motivation for what is done.

Jocelyn (Jo) Rogers
2015

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