

# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian  
and Free Christian Churches

# Viewpoint



## *My Faith as a Unitarian* by *Simon Hardy*

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## INTRODUCTION

We are now on the fourth article in the series, *My Faith as a Unitarian* and can begin to see how broad a spectrum the term 'Unitarian' now is. Yet again, the following piece is written by a Unitarian, who has discovered and chosen to be part of this community.

The word community is important for all the four writers, who have so far contributed, whether that be in a gathered congregation or in the postal and internet National Unitarian Fellowship (NUF).

In the first three writers, we saw the importance of the spiritual and numinous, whereas in Simon's piece we see an emphasis on reason, questioning, reflection and the preparedness to be wrong, whilst recognizing that there is a beauty in the quest and to keep on asking difficult questions.

I think we are beginning to gain a sense of Unitarians with very different understandings of what faith means to them and yet each in their own way demonstrates a breadth of acceptance and appreciation of being part of this religious community we call Unitarianism as well as committed to the well-being of others in the wider community in day to day life.

Whilst our first three contributors find that the natural world is integral to their religious faith and experience, in spiritual terms, Simon expresses his understanding of this beautiful world, scientifically and with reason. That doesn't exclude his appreciation of the different ways of being and expression, which is part of an inclusive Unitarianism. This hon-

esty, self-scrutiny and love of life, in its widest sense, is refreshing.

Members of the NUF, who don't meet face to face, appreciate getting to know other Unitarians through our publications and will enjoy reading the following biography as well as the thoughtful piece which follows.

*Joan Wilkinson*

## **Simon's Personal Profile**

In 1941 Simon was born and lived in Trinidad, until being sent back to England to private school at the age of 10. His Secondary education, at Oundle School, saw him in the same year as Richard Dawkins, who strangely he didn't know, in spite of being secretary of the school science society. This seems amazing given the personality he now projects. In the gap of 8 months before being accepted by Cambridge Simon was fortunate to have the opportunity to teach Maths and Physics in a Mission school in Tanganyika. Simon hated Biology at Oundle and dropped it as soon as he could, but in Cambridge doing Natural Sciences he was persuaded to do a Biochemistry course and a door swung open for him.

Although thoroughly enjoying his undergraduate career he felt that Cambridge was a bit smug and self-satisfied, and decided to apply to a number of US universities, finally settling on the University of California Berkeley. He then made the best decision of his life whilst in New Jersey, where he stopped to visit a shirt tail relative (one connected to his family through marriage). He would go to California, by train, on which he met a young woman who he married about a year later. They will celebrate

their 52nd anniversary in August. Two days later he met his PhD supervisor. Those two people have been the greatest positive influences in his life, Marta of course more than Chuck. He received his PhD from Wisconsin. They returned to England with one son, had another in Leicester then after gaining a lectureship at York adopted a mixed race daughter followed a few years later by a mixed race son. Lecturing at York, in the Biology Department, Simon eventually became senior lecturer in the Biology department for 36 years, where he gained a reputation as an inspiring teacher, a fulfilling and important accomplishment.

One other person who has been a major influence is Professor Lin Randall, now at the University of Missouri, who was a post graduate student in the same lab as Simon in Wisconsin. She is an excellent scientist, a member of the National Academy of Science and has collaborated with Simon since 1974. Knowing what he was working on, she sent him a brilliant idea for a clever experiment, which together they worked on in Sweden, achieving beautiful results but clearly showing the idea was wrong. They have continued to spend a few weeks each year, as well as full and half sabbaticals, working together, until this year when Simon was successfully treated for Prostate cancer. Marta and family would accompany Simon although the children no longer accompany them as they are now adults. However, the travelling continues with a visit to Missouri planned for October.

Marta and Simon became Unitarians in 1989 at the same time as Sydney Knight was building up the York congregation. He was another influence on Simon, who feels very lucky to have known him. A most impressive man. Simon said: I love being a Unitarian!

## MY FAITH AS A UNITARIAN

Depending on how I define faith, this essay's title could be an oxymoron. One dictionary definition is 'belief in the truth of revealed religion', so that will not do as Unitarians do not claim to have a revealed religion. And a good thing too if the biblical Book of Revelation is to be taken as an example of revealed religion. A better definition that I found in one of the atheist books that I have read recently is 'belief in something for which there is no evidence.' But I must be careful here, because many religious people would claim that they have evidence of the internal kind, personal experiences, often emotional, that have convinced them of a deep truth of their religion, for example of the existence of God. An instance of this type of experience generated by the beauty of organ music in the setting of York Minster is described in a poem written by the late Brenda Jones, who was a member of our congregation. The last two verses of the poem are:

*Oh God I feel the breath of truth  
I am revived anew  
There is no fear in life or death  
In your great love ... I knew.*

*My soul does magnify the Lord  
My spirit refreshed and true,  
The wonder of both God and Man  
In this great church ... I knew.*

In spite of once, for several years, considering myself a Christian, I have not had a religious experience of this kind, and given the all too human facility for self deception it is hard to accept the testimony of others. Why doesn't God send ME a burning bush experience? Probably my nearest brush with one occurred when I was eighteen and taught maths and science for six months in a mission school in Tanganyika. What a wonderful interlude in my life! The setting was

extraordinarily beautiful, the people I worked with, staff and students alike, were appreciative, the very high church services with incense and bells and plainsong were enchanting, totally different from the muscular Christianity I was used to. Above all I felt that I was becoming a good teacher and thus achieving something positive. So *'To be young (there) was very heaven'*. For the three following years as an undergraduate I considered myself a Christian and even became the sacristan of my college chapel, but thereafter my Christianity drained slowly away and eventually became a general hostility towards all religion because of the stupidity, cruelty and power of fundamentalist belief that is responsible for so much human misery. Through the 1980s I was saying that I would never go to a church again, but then a beloved friend died, and we (my wife and I) organised his funeral in the local parish church. The vicar, in his sermon to a packed congregation, told Derek's three non-religious teenagers that they could not grieve properly for their father unless Jesus was the centre of their lives. I accept that he was only telling his truth, but to us it seemed cruel, so my wise wife started looking for a more compassionate source for Rites of Passage, and thus we became Unitarians, agnostic Unitarians.

But why agnostic (We cannot know) rather than atheist (It does not exist)? First, because absence of evidence is not evidence of absence; second, because if there is a sentient power that created everything there is, how could our small intellects encompass It in any meaningful way, given how much we really do not understand (I am thinking here, as a scientist, of dark matter, dark energy, the counter intuitive findings of quantum mechanics, human consciousness and behaviour) and presumably also how much we have no inkling of?; third, how can anyone be so certain that there is no such power?

As an agnostic then I do often wonder if there is a Supreme Being. If there is, then using the evidence we can gain from our limited observations of the world that It created, we can deduce something about Its nature. I am with Darwin in seeing It as neither

compassionate, nor merciful, nor fair. The triumphs and tragedies are dealt out seemingly at random. Within my extended family we have one person suffering from an almost Job-like series of disasters while others of us are virtually untouched. Surely a supreme loving power would at least be fair. So when I am in theistic mood I try to salvage some of the loving properties of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim God by imagining It as a kind of behavioural scientist with enormous creative power, supremely clever and well intentioned, but not omniscient, so that It doesn't actually know how the experiment of creation is going to turn out and can't control it, though It has laid down the laws that do control it. It is fascinated by life, particularly intelligent life, just because that is so unpredictable. It chuckles approvingly when astonished by the ingenuity of Its creatures. "Just look at what My people have got up to now. They are such smart little things. My idea of allowing them to evolve was brilliant. They have outstripped My wildest expectation". But It is horrified by the violence and cruelty that selfish competition for survival has generated, "Allowing them to evolve was a disaster. And they do those terrible acts in My Name! Why did I not foresee this?" But here I go arrogantly assuming, as all scriptures also do, that the Supreme Being's main focus is on humans rather than barnacles or earth worms.

Probably this arrogance is inevitable. Other forms of life do not seem to indulge in religion. We are probably the only animals in our patch of the universe that know they are going to die and that are self-conscious. I believe that these two qualities, two of many unique to *Homo sapiens* (I wish we were labelled without the *sapiens*), are responsible for the universal presence of religion throughout the species. Our self consciousness makes us feel that our essential personality is somehow independent of our bodies and we find it difficult to believe that we will simply cease to exist when our bodies die. And generally we fear death not only because it is often a painful experience but also because of this prospect of non-existence. Rationally this does seem a bit strange since before we actually existed it didn't seem so bad. But most religions that I know about

provide hope that death is not the end of our individual existences and some have added descriptions, often derived from revelations of 'holy' men and women, of what awaits us beyond death. These descriptions can be either comforting or terrifying and tend to involve God or gods made in our image. If, as I believe somewhat sadly, there is no afterlife, it is irritating to think that I will not find out that I was right, but worse much worse than that is that those people who commit ghastly atrocities in the name of their God and in the certainty of paradise, will never find out that they were terribly wrong.

What I have written above could mean that I would be better as a Humanist than a Unitarian. And maybe I am a Humanist. When for example we begin a prayer with 'Spirit of Life and Love' my interpretation is that we are addressing the abstract Spirit of human life and human love rather than some independent sentient Being. And I do occasionally attend Humanist meetings. Those are often interesting but always seem to me to be smug in a disturbingly superior, we have put away those childish things, kind of way. They seem so certain that their atheism is correct and consequently are dismissive of any form of religion. Probably all groups are smug in some way. For Unitarians it is a, we welcome everyone with well-intentioned beliefs, faiths and lifestyles here, kind of way, that does not disturb me at all. In fact I am very smug about it. I love being a Unitarian, so much so, that I do not like to miss a Sunday service. I even occasionally lead one. Unitarians have been described as 'noisy Quakers' but I like the noise. I like the services to be led and to have a theme.

My reasons for going to services are: first, that I like to spend an hour a week pondering the unanswerable questions in a beautiful historic building where those questions have been pondered for three centuries; second, that I really like, even love, the people who worship with me and the diversity of their beliefs (Christian, agnostic, atheist, Buddhist, Pagan) and skills (poetry, art, music, science, history, philosophy); third, that I am often fascinated by the content and ideas in the services taken by a variety of other leaders; fourth, that even though rather neutral about music generally I like roaring out the hymns



(tunelessly my wife says but we sit at the front so that no-one bears the full brunt of my attack) some of which are glorious poems, others too Christian for me, but I am happy to be hypocritical and sing them anyway; fifth, that we have a very good piano and some wonderful pianists whose voluntaries are often enthralling; sixth, that I enjoy welcoming people to the services and talking with them over coffee and cake after the services; seventh, that as treasurer I enjoy looking after the money; eighth, that attending services just makes me happy for reasons I do not understand, so that when I leave the chapel I feel a slightly better person for all of fifteen minutes.

Our congregation is diverse in the beliefs held. It contains Christians, agnostics, atheists, Buddhists, maybe a Pagan or two and once we had a Wiccan wedding.

I am not sure that my Unitarian practice has influenced my social responsibility. I do try to be socially responsible but I think I would have tried if I was a member of any other faith community or none. It was because we were Unitarians, that we heard, of a charity, Shared Interest, in which we invested some inherited money, and much later of a family of refugees who subsequently lived upstairs in our house for three months, but the other charities we support (except of course the chapel and the General Assembly), our rather limited volunteering in the community (I enjoyed being a Samaritan for ten years until I was fired) and our solar panels, have nothing to do with being Unitarian. Oh, I forgot one other thing I do, during market shopping on a Saturday. I take a few pounds worth of fruit into Carecent because I am so thankful to have a home and I would probably not have known about Carecent if I were not a Unitarian.

In conclusion if I have any spirituality (I do not really know what the word means) it is based on a sense of wonder and a feeling of gratitude that I have been so fortunate. The wonder is concerned with existence. It seems amazingly improbable that the total mass of the universe should suddenly appear at a point and expand to become what we now perceive, and I am overwhelmed by the cleverness of

evolution in building such intricate living systems. Sydney Knight's lovely hymn World of Wonder (247 Hymns for Living) sums it up for me.

The second source of any faith that I have, thankfulness, is difficult, since for me there is nothing to thank. Sometimes I get the spooky feeling that I have a Guardian Angel. How else can I rationalise the random decisions and errors that led to meeting my future wife on a transcontinental train. Moreover an additional special skill of my GA seems to be the alleviation of the possible consequences of my stupid errors and bad deeds. The most recent example was the terrible mistake when I allowed our car to run over the foot of an old friend and it was only BRUISED! Thank you, thank you GA. Maybe after all I do have a smattering of Faith.

*Simon Hardy*

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

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

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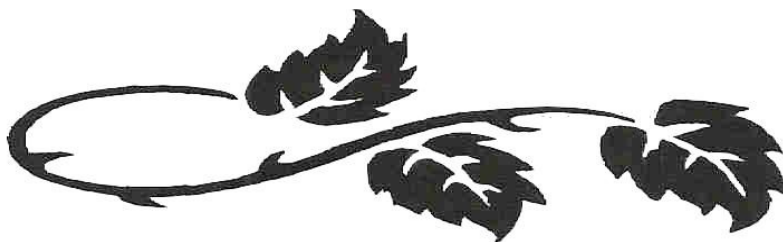
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