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Viewpoint



My Faith as a Unitarian *by Catherine Robinson*

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Introduction

This fifth article, by Catherine Robinson, a member of the beautiful Unitarian chapel at Harris Manchester College, Oxford, introduces us to another contributor to the series, who discovered Unitarianism as an adult. When inviting the writers to share an understanding of their personal faith, the coming to Unitarianism in adulthood hadn't been considered, but it might be something we should take into account as we near the end of the series.

We are now beginning to get a wider sense of how individual Unitarians find a safe space to discover new ways of thinking about faith and questioning what may have been oppressive beliefs of their earlier life, whilst retaining and refining that which feels true for them, that which informs the way they live their lives and the way in which they worship together with others who may offer other perspectives.

For four of the five writers we have considered so far we can begin to see the importance of the gathered community and a love of the place of worship. Whilst Unitarianism encourages individuals to work out their own individual understandings and beliefs we can see from the contributors that it is done in community. The words written, read and shared with other enrich and inform each of our contributors without enforcing a rigid or dogmatic creed that all must sign up to.

The writers show that religion at its best is an exploration of their lives and how best they may live in peace with others and the environment where they live. There is an openness to the

non-religious in that lives of integrity are seen not to be limited to those of religious faith.

Whilst all contributors are committed to their religious communities, their faith is put into practice in connection with the world around them in their day to day lives. They all work to make this world a kinder, caring and more environmentally aware place in which to live. There is an openness beyond an individual's 'credo' that is universal in its inclusiveness. Not only do our writers question the society in which they live, they also at times find they challenge accepted norms in order to achieve a more inclusive and equitable society.

That our five contributors so far have been very different and yet are all part of what makes up their own Unitarian chapels and societies, goes some way to seeing how important it may be to recognize that living with difference, acceptance of difference and celebrating difference are the greatest tasks before us, as well as being the greatest gift we can offer in a world which is torn apart by an inability to live together in peace in a world of rapid change and complexity.

Joan Wilkinson

Catherine's Personal Profile

I was born on a council estate in Nottingham in 1946. From my parents, who somehow managed to raise three children on £10 a week in the 1950s, I learned to appreciate simple things. But I rebelled against their working-class fatalism, which taught that individuals can't change The System – which was how I eventually served a sentence in Holloway Prison during the CND campaign against US nuclear bases on British soil in the 1980s; and fought all the way to the House of Lords to claim a local wildlife site as a Town Green in 2006. But I digress ...

Having won a scholarship to an elite girls' school in Nottingham, and then a place at Oxford University to read English Language and Literature, I aspired to become a front-line journalist; but (finding myself unexpectedly in the role of single mother) I resorted to teaching English to foreign students for several years, after which I had to be content with back-room editing, a trade that I learned during eight years at Oxford University Press and honed during 18 years at the head office of Oxfam (where the sign on my office door read "Paid to be pedantic" – although I did persuade them to send me to Nicaragua to report on the impact of the Contra War). I commissioned and edited everything from sanitation manuals for refugee camps to briefings for government ministers on issues of social development and humanitarian aid. I officially retired ten years ago at the age of 60 but – to keep the wolf from several doors – I still do freelance editing for humanitarian agencies. In my spare time I have the privilege of editing Unitarian books for the Lindsey Press, and also the newsletter of the Oxford Unitarian congregation. I am a besotted grandmother to my 9-year-old grandson and the two small children of my foster-daughter.

Catherine Robinson

September 2016

A UNITARIAN CREDO

In the luminous stained-glass windows of the Unitarian chapel in Oxford, a quotation from the eighteenth-century French philosopher Diderot is emblazoned six times: *Elargissez Dieu ... Elargissez Dieu*. It means *Set God free!* Every Sunday I glance up at the words, to remind myself that I no longer have to believe in the paternalistic, judgmental figure in the clouds for whom William Blake coined the name 'Old Nobodaddy' – a figure who has haunted me ever since my Anglican Sunday School days more than 60 years ago.

Actually, so impressionable is the imagination of childhood that I doubt if I shall ever be entirely free of this oppressive image of the divine; but attendance at Unitarian services of worship, week by week and year by year since 1993, has helped me to face up to it and gradually see it for the human construct that it really is. '*There is no god in the sky. God is in the hearts of those who love the sky's blueness*', averred A. Powell Davies (a Unitarian Universalist minister in the first half of the twentieth century). '*Liberate God: see Him where he actually is, or otherwise say that He does not exist*', urged Diderot (*Pensées philosophiques*, 1746). And it is Unitarianism that has helped me to do just that.

I would still call myself a Christian, in that I try to apply the teachings of Jesus – so simple, yet so demanding – to my daily life. But I don't believe that he was the only-begotten Son of God who was required by Old Nobodaddy to die on a cross for my sins. I alone am responsible for my sins, and for their consequences. And anyway, who is to say that the crucifixion was not a terrible mistake? Perhaps Jesus believed that he would be rescued (by divine or human power) at the last minute; or that by dying he would bring about the end of the world (which he and his followers were expecting to happen in their lifetime)? This iconoclastic suggestion, offered by the Revd Dudley Richards from the pulpit in the chapel of Harris Manchester College in Oxford on Easter Sunday 1993, was my first-ever encounter with

Unitarian thought. A minister of religion, daring to say the unthinkable in public: I knew at that moment that I had come to the right place.

I have now reached the stage where I don't believe in a personal god. But I still pray (at bus stops, on hill tops, anywhere really) – to the spirit of Peace, Truth, and Love. That sounds very vague. But I believe that this spirit is an active force in the world. It is available to anyone who wants to draw on it. And when someone chooses to act peacefully rather than violently ... or to tell the truth rather than tell a lie ... or to act lovingly rather than selfishly ... then the spirit becomes stronger.

The values of Peace, Truth, and Love are taught by all the major religions. I don't believe that Christianity has a monopoly on the truth. Through regular attendance at Unitarian services, I have been introduced to insights from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Sufism, and other faiths, by which my spiritual life has been immeasurably enriched. At present it is Hinduism that is helping me to comprehend the divine creative spirit, that which the ancient Upanishads scriptures name as the *Brahman*: God in many different forms and God the formless, the Universal Spirit, spaceless, all-pervading, infinitely great and infinitely small, the sum total of all that ever is, was, or shall be.

Such a vision found more down-to-earth expression in a book published in 1920 called *Accepting the Universe* by the American naturalist John Burroughs (who was not a Unitarian, but who was influenced by the Transcendentalist ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson). The following extract from his book is often used during our services in the Oxford chapel, and I have grown to love it:

God is the fact of the fact, the life of the life, the soul of the soul, the incomprehensible, the sum of all contradictions, the unity of all diversity. God cannot be seen, but by God all seeing comes; cannot be heard, but by God all hearing comes.

Turn your back upon God and you turn your back upon gravity, upon air, upon light. God is not a being, yet apart from God there is no being – there is no apart from God.

Burroughs expressed – far better than I myself ever could – my vision of the divine. But fine words butter no parsnips, don't help one to live one's daily life, negotiate the moral minefields into which one occasionally strays, or even decide how to use each day as it presents itself. Does my Unitarian faith actually influence my life, day in and day out? I find it hard to answer this question, because it is almost impossible to disentangle one's religious ethics from the values of the social and cultural context in which one lives. And of course it is perfectly possible to be an atheist and live a life of integrity and compassionate service to the world. But in terms of how my life is structured now (in semi-retirement after a career spent first in teaching, then in publishing, and finally in communications work for Oxfam), Unitarianism undoubtedly plays a big part.

For one thing, I serve the minister-less Oxford congregation as the Pulpit Secretary. It is my job to book, brief, and support visiting preachers from the wider denomination, or from other faith communities, Sunday by Sunday; and if no guest preacher is available, I persuade one or more members of the congregation to lead the service. It is a time-consuming and occasionally challenging task, but I rejoice in the freedom of belonging to a creedless, self-governing religious community, which means that (subject to the approval of my congregation) I can book preachers with unorthodox views, to conduct services not constrained by a rigid format. Every service is different in content and structure, but every service is underpinned by a fundamental reverence for life. We come together on Sundays to celebrate the beauty of the earth and the human potential for goodness; to open our minds to new insights from philosophers, poets, and all the great world faiths; to share our joys and concerns with each other; and to seek inspiration to lead better lives. For me it is a privilege to be in a position to make it happen.

'Reverence for life' (the phrase originates with the philosopher and physician Albert Schweitzer, an honorary member of the UU Church of the Larger Fellowship) motivates my other principal preoccupation, which is the redemption of a green space between the canal and the railway line near my house. Abandoned by the local council after many years' use as a rubbish dump, it became a haven for badgers, foxes, glow-worms, and lizards – and a destination for local people in search of peace and quiet and fresh air. When the council decided to build a road across it, I challenged the decision in a four-year journey which began at a public inquiry, moved on to the High Court in London, continued in the Court of Appeal, and ended in success at the House of Lords. The site, now declared to be a Town Green, was saved from destruction, and legal history was made. As a non-lawyer, I found the whole experience intimidating. The scariest thing was having to engage with powerful judges and lawyers and court officials (all male, all representing a ruling elite far removed from the realities of everyday life). But I drew inspiration from the traditional Unitarian insistence on the democratic rights of the individual and the fundamental equality of all people – and it paid off (thank you, Mary Wollstonecraft). Now I co-ordinate volunteers who work in partnership with the council to conserve the site for wildlife, recreation, and education. We create ponds, plant trees, and clear paths; local schoolchildren enjoy nature-study and story-telling sessions in the glades; and kingfishers and water voles have made the reed beds and ponds their home. Recently a visitor left a note tied to a tree, declaring 'This place is a patch of paradise'. I feel guilty that I am not doing anything in global terms to prevent the degradation of the natural environment, but at a local level I am proud of what has been achieved. And I am learning the truth of these words of the late UU minister Jacob Trapp:

To worship is to be silent, receptive, before a tree astir with the wind, or the passing shadow of a cloud. ... to worship is to sing with the singing beauty of the earth.

Beautiful as this vision is, if it constituted the whole of one's religious faith one could be accused of being a complacent escapist. The same could be said of a religious faith that consisted entirely of high-minded political and social rhetoric. A. Powell Davies affirmed in a sermon

the religion that says humankind is not divided – except by ignorance and prejudice and hate; the religion that sees humankind as naturally one and waiting to be spiritually united; the religion that proclaims an end to all exclusions

but went on to ask his hearers:

Have you thought perchance that this is your religion? Then do not congratulate yourself ... ask yourself this question: 'what are you doing with it?'

As old age approaches, I find my physical energy dwindling, and my days of involvement in marches and demonstrations and non-violent direct action for causes such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament are long gone. But there are more sedentary ways of expressing a commitment to peace and justice. So, inspired by Unitarian affirmations of the inherent worth and dignity of every person (and aware of irrational prejudices lurking in the darkest corners of my own mind), I made a pledge several years ago to challenge expressions of casual, unthinking racism whenever I encounter them – in conversations with friends and acquaintances, or with taxi drivers or the builder mending my roof. It happens every day, and it is all too easy to let bigoted opinions slide by unchecked. There is no need to get into a heated argument – it is almost certainly counter-productive to do so – but unaggressive probing can sometimes yield results. 'When you were in hospital last month, I wonder how many porters and nurses and doctors from ethnic minorities were involved in your treatment. Shall we send them all back home?' ... 'The family next door came to Britain three generations ago. If that doesn't make them British, how many

generations do you want to go back?' It's surprising where such mild-mannered questioning can lead – sometimes exposing half-buried insecurities in the mind of the other person, but at the very least perhaps setting off a new train of thought.

We are all capable of change. I am a Unitarian because I believe in human perfectibility, but without conceiving of the human species as the apex of creation. We are a small part of a complex and wondrous universe. We have great potential for living creatively and in harmony with that universe. Worshipping with members of my congregation on Sundays helps me in a small way to realise that potential.

Catherine Robinson

2015

(Quotations from the writings of A. Powell Davies and Jacob Trapp are taken from *The Unitarian Life: Voices from the Past and Present*, ed. Stephen Lingwood, published by The Lindsey Press, 2008.)

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