

National Unitarian Fellowship

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Viewpoint



My Faith as a Unitarian

by Joan Wilkinson

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Conclusion

This is the last in the *Viewpoint* series, *My Faith as a Unitarian*, where six Unitarians have shared what their faith as a Unitarian means to them. I would like to thank them all on behalf of NUF members and other Unitarians, who have been following the series. Each has offered readers a different and personal perspective on being a Unitarian, and all have given readers much to ponder on. Each contributor responded to the question posed at the outset: ‘What does it mean to be a Unitarian?’, from their own personal experience and understanding of being both an individual and part of a wider faith community.

The two questions, which will be addressed in this conclusion, based on what has been written by the six contributors are:

Can a religion with such a diversity of individual faiths hold together?

If so, how do we as a movement, and ourselves as individuals, move forward?

The thoughts in this conclusion are mine alone and readers may well think differently. Your comments will be very welcome.

Honouring difference has been something all the writers valued. It was what attracted them to Unitarianism in the first instance and what holds them. There is much that binds the Unitarian community together, even though there may be sharp differences in the under-

standing of faith. The larger community is made up of many smaller communities in the shape of autonomous congregations, societies, social media groups, action groups. How we live out our Unitarianism beyond one group is important, what we do, how we do it, what we say, how we say it and what we write and how we write it; all are of crucial importance. There are many metaphors we hear of Unitarianism being thought of as a patchwork quilt, weaving new patterns as the quilt grows, light through a prism, a kaleidoscope, and many more. Each of our writers eventually found a particular Unitarian community where they could both grow and express their faith. There was a sense of renewal as individuals committed to their congregations, societies, the local community and wider afield. The faith or their quest for a deeper understanding within a faith community, illustrated a wish to be involved, a wish to keep the uniqueness of our faith as Unitarians alive.

All but one of our writers belong to a congregation, with an appreciation of place and of building, with the continuity of faith through history which is important to them. This is a safe and sacred space, a space for worship and celebration. A place of relationships, friendships and all that binds us together. For one of our writers, no longer able to attend a congregation, the NUF led on to the two Christian Societies, which allowed relationships to be formed and spaces to share the gift of the written word. Another felt his ministry was to work towards a revival and renewal of our Free Christian Faith within the Unitarian and Free Christian tradition. This is an expansive, liberal and inclusive, faith, which, like another writer opens up the ancient, the mystical, the universal nature of faith. One writer finds another religious tradition best able to define her faith and yet appreciates

practising her faith alongside a Unitarian congregation and other Unitarian activities.

Although six is a very small number and on reflection is probably not as representative of the movement as an exercise such as this warrants, it is now clear that the age range is narrow and there are no voices from the active middle aged and younger. However, the writers continue to offer a vibrancy of faith, or understanding of what faith might mean. But without hearing from those from a younger selection it is very difficult to assess how we can hold together in the future, not because of the diversity of faith but rather a lack of numbers and active volunteers.

In the process of writing we also learned about their journeys and why they became, and remain Unitarian. This has been an unexpected bonus, and highlights the fact that each of our writers has chosen to be Unitarian, not having been born into a Unitarian family. Whilst this demonstrates a rather biased selection of writers it raises other questions and opportunities to build on that which will grow the movement. It would suggest that reaching out to the active, middle-aged and young elderly offers real opportunity for growth and engagement with matters of faith, and with Unitarian organisations, bringing to the movement experience and willingness to commit to assisting in those tasks that help groups to thrive. Perhaps we need to learn to celebrate all ages equally.

Whilst choice and diversity can cause difficulties, these are aspects of our movement that both attract and hold us together under the umbrella of Unitarianism. It is within this diversity, that our writers feel

able to relate with others in their chosen congregations and communities. Change happens, when minds are open to new concepts whether it be to a deeper understanding of a previously held faith, shorn of its dogmatism and creeds, or a move away to something totally new.

We can learn a lot from looking at why our writers chose to be part of the Unitarian Faith Community and remain within it. Why did they choose us? Because we offer something very different to what they have found elsewhere. There is no imposed corporate certainty, which suffocates the individual spirit, (Naomi Linnell). To follow a path whereby we define Unitarianism as only one aspect of the several groups under its umbrella, would risk losing that which attracted our six writers in the first place. There can be no 'corporate' definition of Unitarian faith. Our writers moved comfortably between groups, eg., being a member of The Earth Spirit Network didn't prevent a person being a member of The Unitarian Christian Association; groups are not mutually exclusive.

The writers covered a wide spectrum from Christian, Shintoism, Humanism, Paganism, Agnosticism and probably much besides. Each had given deep thought to what faith might or might not mean to them. Yet all appreciated learning, listening, questioning and being with other Unitarians. Each had identified a Unitarian space and group(s) which suited them.

Although as a movement we may not be many in number, we are more able to hold together and even flourish, but only for as long as we acknowledge, respect and even celebrate the choice, freedom

and diversity of individuals and communities under the Unitarian umbrella. Within the different Unitarian groups, those wishing to explore matters of faith will find a safe space, which is right for them.

The downside of being a movement of many groups is the confusion it can create for those seeking to find their place within the movement. Choice and difference shouldn't lead to too much fragmentation otherwise there is the danger of duplication or of 'trying to re-invent the wheel'. A fine balance may have to be found whereby choice, freedom and diversity is retained without dangerous fragmentation and repetition.

Freedom to continue asking questions and being open to change and to make choices allowed our writers to continue developing their faith as Unitarians. Nowhere is this made clearer than in Jim Corrigall's journey, into and within the Unitarian and Free Christian faith. As an individual within a Unitarian community, relationship and working together is important but ultimately the individual is free from an authority that dictates what they must believe or how much or how little they must do within that community. All our writers have found a space in which to flourish in the way that works for them and in so doing works well for the community to which they belong. It is not either individualism or community, but both. Freedom to choose, to question, to accept difference, to work together are just some of the key concepts which are important for holding together as a movement and moving forward.

That our writers had space to express and share their faith as Unitarians, would demonstrate that we can work together on a project of

value and that yes, they can feel integrated into the movement in the Unitarian spaces they have chosen. Simon Hardy lovingly writes of the people in his congregation and the diversity of their beliefs and the different skills they willingly share. However, readers are still left with some difficult questions raised by Jef Jones on Page 10 of the *April Viewpoint*, questions about our meaning as a movement and our set of values. In allowing freedom of choice the spectrum of Unitarian Faith has become challenging in its messiness. But Jef writes that Unitarianism ‘has encouraged [him] to be whole rather than tidy’.

Our writers were attracted to our movement because of the freedom and difference we offer as compared to secular or other religious communities and they continue to benefit from the diversity within the Unitarian community. It is this diversity and broad religious spectrum that attracts and holds them and paradoxically it is this that gives us the greatest challenge, or so it seems in the pages of our various Unitarian publications and groups using social media. However, one lesson we might take away from this project is that in allowing and encouraging individual Unitarians to share their personal experiences and understanding, we find something in each that resonates. We may have come closer to appreciating the sincerity and integrity of what is a coherent faith for six Unitarians today. There is an open-endedness in each piece, which allows for further growth. There are difficult questions which confront individuals about their personal understanding of faith as Unitarians as well as questions we need to ask as a community. Whether questions of identity or questions of structure, with a positive approach it should be within our ability to

enable constructive channels and spaces, which will decide whether we can hold together and celebrate all that is good about our movement and attract those like our writers to choose to be part of our Unitarian and Free Christian Community and remain within it.

Engagement is a concept, which helps to define ‘the way’ our writers live and express their faith. Their faith is grounded in experience and an existential journeying, which is transformative, whether it be in a deepening of spiritual understanding or just a commitment to join with other Unitarians on a regular basis. Care and commitment are shared values, whether it be to the Unitarian congregation or group, local environmental issues or contributing to those in need. All six demonstrate that which is good about present day Unitarian and Free Christian Faith. Age hasn’t been a block for continuing growth and change of our contributors, although how they continue to contribute may change with increasing years. Engagement, commitment, care and choice has been crucial in holding this project together and like similar undertakings in history and in the present, would suggest that we have held together in the past and can continue to do so today. Difference and diversity have always been a hallmark of our Unitarian and Free Christian Faith and with difference and diversity comes complexities to be both faced and celebrated.

How can we move forward in a climate of decreasing numbers, common to many religious faiths? This has been addressed by many Unitarian groups over recent years and the following thoughts are but part of an ongoing conversation, examining the challenge using faith as the springboard for holding together and fuelling the dynamics of growth.

Celebrating rather than criticising what we have and offer as a movement was something that I felt forcibly after reading each one of our accounts of a personal faith. This feeling of celebrating what we have has been augmented further by reading recent Lindsey Press and other publications by Unitarian groups and individuals. There is much religious material available to draw on as demonstrated in the contribution by Catherine Robinson, who included several quotations from: *The Unitarian Life – Voices from Past and Present*. Sharing our personal faiths without intimidation is something we should be able to accept and expect from each other.

Communicating between Unitarians what we have and what is working already would seem to be important. Each of our six writers were attracted by the freedom to choose their own path and found the place which was right for them within the Unitarian community of congregations, societies and organisations. Looking outwards and good communication between congregation and locality, group and other non-Unitarian groups with a similar purpose shows that we are a movement of people widely engaged with the environment and with those less fortunate than ourselves.

Commitment to deepening a personal faith is central to all religious traditions, and whatever understanding of faith held by our writers, there was this shared commitment to be open and free to understand what faith meant to them. There was also the commitment to the health of the groups to which they chose to be part of. In ensuring the spiritual health of the individual will in turn ensure the health of the group and from this will come growth.

Be prepared to **change**. Each of our writers illustrated an acceptance to change, be it in a small or big way. They made a big change in becoming a Unitarian. However, they were prepared to be changed and didn't set out to change the movement. However, in belonging to various congregations and groups, growing as people and as Unitarians, they continue to show a way forward for the movement alongside other Unitarians.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight the crucial nature of individual groups and congregations, in which some of our writers are active. Individual Unitarians are held together within these groups. Unitarians across the movement may belong to many different groups and congregations, which allows individuals to find the right path for them whilst facilitating healthy networking. Whatever structural changes that may be needed in the years to come, the highest priority for us all is to maintain our rich tradition of offering diverse spaces, physical and virtual, where individuals can grow in faith within autonomous Unitarian communities.

Catherine Robinson uses a quote by Frank Walker which sums up well the spirit of Unitarianism:

Most churches find their bond of union in scriptural or creedal affirmations. All who wish to be members are expected to profess exactly the same theological beliefs, and undergo the same rituals.

The Unitarian bond of union is different. Unitarians believe that people can covenant to work together for the deepening of spiritual life, the strengthening of moral character, and the improvement of society

without conforming to a set pattern of theological dogmas. Unitarians hold that differing theological views are natural and healthy, and that attempts to enforce conformity are deadening and potentially destructive. History is witness to the horrors of religious intolerance.

Unitarians wish their church to help them face together life's spiritual challenges. The church helps people to come to their own individual conclusions and forge their own personal faith.

From: *The Unitarian Life: Voices from the Past and Present*, ed. Stephen Lingwood, published by The Lindsey Press, 2008.

Joan Wilkinson

Comments -

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

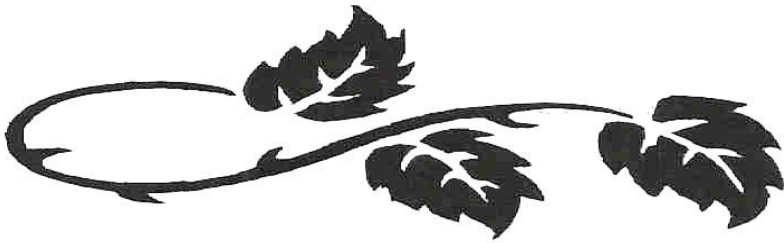
Please send your comments to the guest editor:

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

or email to joan@yorkshiregirl.org.uk

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or

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