

# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian  
and Free Christian Churches

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# Viewpoint



**Unitarians & Social Responsibility**

**Sue MacFarlane & Valerie Walker**

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## Introduction

The following two articles are the last in our series of *Unitarians and Social Responsibility*. They have demonstrated the depth of commitment to a wide spectrum of social action in which some Unitarians are involved. I would like to thank all those who have contributed to this series giving readers ideas they may not have considered to be 'social action' (the family), to action deeply embedded in the Unitarian movement and community.

The following two articles are written by two very busy women. Sue MacFarlane looks at how her motivation for action is just part of being a Unitarian fully living out a life of commitment to the planet and to people. She refers to the Seven Principles of the Unitarian Universalists of America (UUA) as a guide to understanding her faith and action in the community. Valerie Walker illustrates how volunteering cuts across people of faith and those of none and binds those involved in a community of 'Friends'; not to be confused, in the local community they serve, with The Quakers often known as The Friends.

The theme for the coming year will be; *Unitarians and the Arts*, interpreted in the widest sense, to include anything which we would consider to be human creativity in art, sculpture crafts, music, poetry, dance, drama, creative writing and worship etc. Please send your contributions to me (details inside the back cover).

*Joan Wilkinson*

## **My Faith in Action**

### **By Sue MacFarlane**

2018 was a real roller coaster of a year. So many things happened that were not even thought about at the start of the year.



In April, I represented the Unitarian Women's Group as their delegate to the General Assembly meetings. We proposed a motion asking that the movement as a whole, as well as our chief officer, took steps to learn about how the negative effects of the current austerity measures fall disproportionately on women – and to do what they could to support these women. And change policy. The motion was passed, and we are lobbying for the government to measure the impact of any new policy to see how it will affect women in particular, as well as any other particular demographic.

In May, I became chair of 'sharing not wasting' in Belper where I live; 'sharing not wasting' is an environmental project that aims to reduce the amount of food waste going to landfill by distributing it to people who can use it. Every Thursday, we have a delivery of around 250 kgs of food that would otherwise go to landfill. Every Friday, we set up and run a 'pop up shop' from the Early Years Fun Centre in the town. People come, fill a bag with food that they can use and, if they can, they leave a donation. The project is run on a 'pay as you

feel' (PAYF) basis. This means that, whether or not people can make a donation, they can be part of the solution to food waste. Sometimes, people don't take any food, but still want to make a donation to the project – which is great. We use the donations to pay for the food deliveries, the rent for the room, and any other expenses that we have like bags/paper/printing/etc. Whilst the project is an environmental initiative, it is having a huge social impact too. There are no referral or eligibility criteria in order to participate in the project. We positively encourage *everyone* to use the project, whatever their circumstances, and stress that we need people who can make donations in order for the project to be self-sustaining. However, and this is really heartening, we have seen a 30% reduction in food bank usage in Belper since the project has been operating. Some of the people using the project say that it is a lifeline for them, that they would not be able to buy as much fresh food as they can get from us, and that being able to 'shop' for what they can use is much more empowering than needing to use a food bank. As we don't know what will come each week, people use the project to supplement their shopping or to try new things. The vice chair and the Treasurer of the project are also Unitarians, as is the person who designed the logo!

Lastly, since September last year, I am a shopkeeper. There, I've said it. I've never been a shopkeeper before, in fact I've never worked in a shop before - unless you count Saturdays in my Auntie's wool shop as a child (when I don't think I was actually helping). I have a shop because I wanted a local, physical shop

that sells things which help people to live more sustainably, a shop where you can buy things that help you to reduce your impact on the planet. I wanted a shop like this in my town. I tried to persuade a few other people to do it, but then fell back on the old saying 'if you want something doing...'. And so, 'Sue's Sustainables' opened for business on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2018. I sell loose food; refills for washing up liquid, laundry liquid, fabric conditioner, etc; shampoo and hair conditioner refills; bar soap and shampoos; bamboo toothbrushes; bamboo nappies; stainless steel and bamboo drinking straws; safety razors; cotton dishcloths; coconut scourers and brushes for cleaning; etc. In fact, anything that helps people to move towards living in a more 'low impact' and sustainable way.

As well as these things, I was involved in Peace Week in Derby; raising money for 'The Basic Idea', Belper's Food Bank; and celebrations around the Representation of the People Act 1918; and lots of other similar community initiatives. I cooked a vegan, fully inclusive, community meal, in Belper and Wirksworth, a couple of times, nourishing our community and raising money for community projects. I was vice chair of Accessible Belper for the past few years, a group that campaigns to inform people and businesses on disability issues. I run a skills Share group that meets once a month to share skills and nurture creativity. Until I opened the shop, I used to volunteer regularly at 'Women's Work', a project in Derby that supports women who are at a vulnerable time of their lives and who have complex needs. I attended Trans Pride in Brighton, which I can honestly say was

one of the most joyful weekends of my year. I am secretary/ treasurer to the Trustees of Belper Chapel, and also lead worship there occasionally – as well as in other Unitarian places of worship. I do this all alongside work, personal and family commitments.

I am not telling you all of this to make you think that I am some sort of ‘Superwoman’ – I am definitely not. I am telling you because I have been asked to write about how my Unitarian faith influences my life.

So, what has this got to do with my Unitarian faith? Well, everything. I believe that everyone and everything is connected, and this is my faith system. I believe in human rights, animal rights, living lightly on our home planet, and I believe in nourishing and supporting each other. I strongly believe in ‘faith in action’; that what we ‘do’ matters more than what we ‘believe’. This is the reason I get involved with initiatives that support the things that I believe in. I get nourishment and support for my journey from my Unitarian communities – both in Belper, nationally, and within the groups that I belong to within the movement.

I attend Belper Unitarian Chapel and, when I can, Derby Unity. Both of these places nourish me, and help me to remember to be the best me that I can be. For me, that means ‘faith in action’. Doing stuff. So, let’s take each of my beliefs individually.

## **Human Rights**

As the 1<sup>st</sup> principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) says, I believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That's it. Full stop. Because I believe this, I feel that I have to do everything I can to make sure that I help as many people as I can have a healthy and happy life. This includes helping people to make sure they have a safe place to be, and enough food to eat – at the very least. A lot of the projects that I am, and have been, involved with are working towards this. Sometimes I do as little as turn up and sing a few songs at a fundraiser – The Basic Idea Foodbank in Belper, for example. Sometimes, I actually set up and chair the organisation itself – sharing not wasting food share project in Belper, for example. I do this because I know it needs doing, because what I can do will make a difference to people's lives, and because it makes me feel better knowing that I am contributing.

## **Animal Rights**

Jumping to the 7<sup>th</sup> UUA principle, this says 'Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.' For me, that means not exploiting animals for any reason at all. Not for food, not for clothes, not for experiments, not for any reason. We don't need to, it's really as simple as that. There are lots of good things to eat/wear/etc that do not involve killing or exploiting animals. I don't understand why people who love dogs eat pigs. I just don't get it. All research shows that pigs are as intelligent as dogs, they feel pain, can love us and each other,

etc. I don't know where the line is. Which animals are ok to live in our house, be part of our family, and deserve our love and affection; and which animals are we ok to exploit, kill and eat? I could go so much further into this, but I think most of you get the picture. If you want to find out more, there are lots of things to read and watch. I can recommend 'What the Health', 'Earthlings', and cowspiracy. Obviously, The Vegan Society website is also a good resource for information.

### **Environmental Rights**

Or, put another way, living lightly on our planet. Again, I could quote the 7<sup>th</sup> principle of the UUA. This is my third point but, unless we do what is needed to ensure that our planet remains habitable for us, none of the other stuff will be relevant. Put simply, we have made a right mess! To a great extent, we continue to do so. It is such a sadness to me that this planet has the capacity to care for all human and animal life on it, and yet people and animals die daily from lack of shelter, food and water. This is pure will and logistics. If there was a will to solve these challenges, and logistics in place to ensure a good life for all, our planet could be a happy and healthy place for everyone who lives on it – and many more. Instead, we fight about borders, and try to push people back to where they don't have the safety or resources for a good life. This will only get worse as our planet gets hotter and less habitable on and either side of the equator. We grow enough food to feed everybody on our planet multiple times, then we feed huge amounts of it to ani-

mals and eat them instead. We continue our love affair with carbon in all its forms, even though we know it is finite, needs to be kept in the earth if we are to avoid further global warming, and the plastic we make from it (oil) is killing our home. We allow water to be used to make fizzy drinks that we don't need, and to grow cotton for the fast fashion industry, when around 70 million people don't have access to clean drinking water. We are wilfully destroying our own home.

### **Nourishing and Supporting Each Other**

This pretty much covers all the other principles of the UUA. Here's a link in case anyone wants to read more <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles> We need to do this on all levels, from making sure that everyone has the basics of a good life, to nourishing people with art, music, etc. I particularly include physical touch in this category. I'm a big hugger and am known for it. I try to make sure there is consent, by actually asking, or by holding my arms open and inviting a hug – but giving the other person the opportunity not to if that's their preference. I also run craft sessions regularly and irregularly. Up until this summer, I was joint coordinator of a quilting group and also ran a twice monthly craft group in Belper where the projects were made from things that would normally get thrown away.

None of the things I do, or have done, have been 'in addition' to my life. These things ARE my life. It's normal and natural for me to see a need and want to do something about it. My Unitarian-

ism is also like this. Being a Unitarian is not something I do sometimes, it's something I am – all the time. Going to my home chapel in Belper, or visiting other Unitarian chapels and gatherings, reminds me to be the best me that I can be. It gives me time and space to think about things and bring myself back to a calm place where I can consider what I can do to help myself and others. It gives me the opportunity to learn from others, to listen and connect with them, and to work with them to make the world a better place.

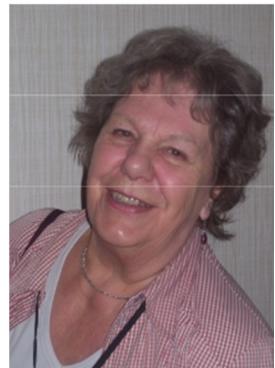
I do a lot of things, but I am a very ordinary person. I am also an extraordinary person. I think these two descriptions apply, without exception, to everybody – and my Unitarian faith helps me to remember this.

## **Volunteering**

**By Valerie Walker**

Tony Cann wrote recently in Viewpoint about 'social action'. It set me thinking about how different individuals and groups give their time, their compassion, and also their expertise, to help others, particularly in their local community; it would be interesting to learn of the different ways we are involved.

Unlike Tony I do not live in a close Unitarian community, nor am I within easy reach of one, certainly it would be impossible to attend a service or fellowship meeting without the use of a car.



However, that car does make something else possible. Although at present I hold two Unitarian 'posts' - as Chair of the Unitarian Music Society and as a member of the board of The Inquirer – and I have over the many years of my Unitarianism held other 'volunteer' positions, including chairing the first Executive Committee Electoral Panel and being Treasurer of NUF, as well as being the Chapel Society Treasurer in Oxford for five years - now in my retirement, living in a Buckinghamshire village, something very local is an important part of my life. Just donating money to charities has never felt sufficient, although I do this to my limited financial ability and supporting a particular local charity, The Chiltern MS Centre (as my lovely daughter has multiple sclerosis) is of course an ongoing commitment.

However, for 52 weeks of the year I am one of a group of volunteer drivers for our local Health Centre. Volunteering, giving one's time. (After all, in retirement one is supposed to have lots of spare time!) This involves, collecting mainly elderly and frail people, but sometimes others who either temporarily or permanently are unable to travel without assistance, from their homes and driving them for appointments at the Health Centre or to local hospitals; we even go to hospitals in Oxford and London. This also includes dental appointments, special clinics, therapy sessions, anything with a medical connection. We also deliver prescriptions to the housebound. Sometimes the commitment is for an hour, sometimes a day, sometimes it means leaving home at a very early hour, or perhaps even on a Sunday, sometimes it

is an emergency request after a doctor has triaged a caller that day.

In the eight years or so that I have been involved I have driven around 9,000 miles on these trips, in the same little car, now 17 years old. The majority of journeys are fairly short, local ones; over the years one gets to know the 'regulars' and on longer journeys some interesting conversations can take place.

This is not just being a chauffeur; patients can be worried, frightened, in pain or discomfort, they may need assistance with mobility, sometimes they need to be accompanied during their appointment.

Of course, one never asks the purpose of the visit - although sometimes I am told much more than I need to know! - I am an 'ear', not just about medical issues and sometimes family problems (and of course we have a confidentiality commitment) but also, living as we do in the HS2 area, I understand the resigned attitude, the reason for the uncared-for house or chaotic farm-yard where generations of a family have lived, '...this will all be gone soon'. We are not just a transport system, we are human contact for many isolated individuals.

My fellow drivers, and the 'desk' people - we have other volunteers who 'man' a desk, for personal and telephone inquiries, in the Reception area of the Health Centre - are almost all retired and many have their own health or mobility concerns, but they commit their time as they feel able. This is not a Unitarian initia-

tive. I have yet to meet anyone locally who knows who or what we are - there are some very amusing comments and queries if I mention the word (are you the 'happy clappy' lot? or, do you meet in that place down X Lane?' – Jehovah's Witnesses!) - nor is any other denomination connected in any way. Neither is it political, there are no labels – except we are known as the 'Friends' (and no-one confuses us with the Quakers either). I have no idea of the religious or political inclinations, of the majority of my fellow volunteers; I do know – as one garners things over years of snatches of conversation – that many would differ from me over one or both, but the common purpose is our happiness at being able to help local people.

### **So how did this all start?**

About 25 years ago, a lady saw a letter in the village news-sheet from someone writing about the difficulty getting to medical appointments if you and/or your partner did not, or were unable for health reasons, no longer be able to, drive. There was no bus route to the nearest hospital let alone the specialist ones in the region, even getting to the local Health Centre could be a problem. The Centre covers three main villages and miles of Chiltern countryside, with many hamlets, remote houses and farms, so any journey could be complicated and difficult, particularly as taxis in rural areas were not easily available and could also be very expensive.

This lady and her husband offered to help, and then in discussion with friends, and with advice from the local doctors, they

asked for other volunteers and a simple call for help system was set up from their home. Word got around about this 'service' very quickly and demand increased so it soon became unmanageable just using their home telephone and with a desk in the corner of their living room. A committee was set up and as there was already a small 'patient comfort' fund in operation at the Health Centre it was agreed to combine the two and so the 'Friends' was established. It became a registered charity and for many years it has been established as a 'desk' in the Reception area at the Health Centre.

Everything is run in a business-like way with a very detailed diary of each day's commitments, computer records and a busy Treasurer; we have a Co-ordinator who oversees the operation and there are meetings for drivers and desk people to keep in touch with current needs, and with each other.

We all give our time, and nowadays drivers can claim mileage costs. Patients are not charged, however there is a list of suggested donations which go into the charity funds, these are so 'healthy' that we are able to provide (and have done over the years) equipment for medical use as well as furniture and facilities for the patients' waiting areas. Most people are very appreciative and give as suggested – sometimes even more generously – but of course there are the few who treat it as a free service, or a cheap way of getting to town on Market Day! Goodness, what has grown from that first simple act of kindness.

Not only do many hundreds of people receive help and support at times when they are more vulnerable, but the volunteers get pleasure from helping them; we meet people we would never have encountered at other times, have many interesting conversations and I am sure most of my fellow volunteers would agree that it provides us with a feeling of satisfaction and purpose.

I also am a great believer that Classic FM on the car radio is part of the therapy when patients travel with me!

### **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 editor:

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## **National Unitarian Fellowship**

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