

NATIONAL UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP

NEWSLETTER



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NUF—Unitarianism's best kept secret !

*In the flow of religious thought and practice,
Unitarians represent openness and inquiry in the spiritual quest*

Reg. Charity No. 1040294

Secretary's Notes

Ken Smith

This edition of the Newsletter contains several reports from the recent General Assembly of Unitarians held at Whittlebury Hall near Towcester. It was pleasant to meet a good number of our members at the NUF Annual General Meeting (a full report later in this edition). We recognise that for about a third of our members who are not affiliated to any Unitarian congregation, the GA must seem a remote organisation, it obviously seems thus to the many congregations who did not bother to return any information to the recent congregational survey. As Derek McAuley remarked at the AGM , individualism is woven into the Unitarian DNA and that in itself presents obstacles to collective efforts to take the Unitarian movement forward.

Hugh Barlow has written a very well balanced summary of a difficult and unfortunate episode in this year's meetings . No one present will feel that the matter was resolved without upset to the person concerned and damage to the overall movement and no one will want that situation to arise again .

It was gratifying to receive several new NUF memberships at the Annual Meetings . Especially pleasing to receive was Carol Palfrey's quite unsolicited article printed on pages 8/9 of this edition, which reinforces my own convictions expressed at the AGM that we have much to congratulate ourselves upon in the work of the NUF .Roughly two– thirds of our members are affiliated to a Unitarian congregation and I would encourage them in particular to spread news of our existence at their place of worship and particularly to those of their community who are perhaps relocating to an area without a chapel or to those who for many reasons cannot often attend worship.

Good sermons are always welcome and could be used on either our website forum or be reprinted in the Viewpoint. Reports of any special initiatives by your congregation would also be of interest to our readers and reduce the editor's stress occasioned by the prospect of blank pages in forthcoming editions.

From the Minister

Rev. Tony McNeile

I was reading yet another article on how to change the world - and it doesn't seem to matter which one you read, they all seem to come up with a similar answer - 'To change the world, you have first to change yourself.' This usually makes me groan a bit because I am happy as I am, and don't want to try and become someone else.

This article was about Joseph Campbell. He wrote a book I use frequently 'The Hero has a thousand faces'. The book is about the myths and legends associated with the heroes of old, and how they had to face all sorts of challenges and setbacks on the road to becoming a hero. Often it involved mortal combat, but in winning and surviving it they emerge as a new better person.

His remedy for changing the world was to make yourself happy - not necessarily by having another chocolate (though it works for me!) but by reflection and meditation - focussing on inner happiness, learning to accept who we are, our strengths and weaknesses - and not seeing everyone else as either better or worse than ourselves. If we can learn to be content in our own skins, we are half way there. The next half is letting that happiness reflect onto other people, celebrating their gains and commiserating honestly with their losses. The next thing you know you are part of a group of happy people and you support one another.

I am going to try it and see if it works - otherwise I will have to go back to the bookshop.

Prayer

Let us pray for all the people we know who are not happy in their lives - and for the ones we don't about — who hide their unhappiness from the world. let us think of them and offer them our prayers.

Pray that whatever is making them unhappy can be taken away or relieved or diffused.

In our prayer let us acknowledge there are so many causes of unhappiness.

Let us pray that somewhere within the spirits of the people who

are unhappy a light will shine. A light that that leads the way out of the labyrinth and into the sunshine where the spirit can emerge and feel the love of life all around

Let us pray that we do not cause unhappiness for others - and if we have, let us say our regrets. If we are unhappy ourselves let us not fear to face whatever it is that causes it. And let us pray that we can find the courage to share our feelings when a listening ear offers give comfort. Let us not deceive ourselves into believing that friends do not want to help us, that friends are not concerned for us when we have our problems.

In our prayer let us not shun a plea for friendship.

This is our prayer.

Pilgrims' Prayer

Linda Haggerstone

O Spirit of the ages
who transcends all time and space,
we are pilgrims on the path of love,
seeking light and warmth to carry us on our journey.

Like our ancestors before us,
we ask for your strength and your guidance,
your protection and your care,
as we walk along this day.

O Spirit of the ages,
know that our hearts are uplifted
and our burdens are eased by your presence.
For this, we thank you.

Amen.

First of all a big thank you to those who responded to my last ponderings about 'walls', requesting also to be kept up-dated on Charnwood Fellowship.

Charnwood Fellowship was initially a group of four NUF members, who gathered together each month, which since has grown into a settled group, where all are welcome. We are not a big fellowship but fit nicely into our conservatory or a friend's home. We open with a lighting of the chalice, prayer and check in, before hearing a speaker or discussing a theme that members have worked on. We donate what we wish and regularly support a Unitarian charity or another chosen by the members.

At the recent meeting we all spoke about something that is presently taken for granted that in the future we would look back on and wonder how on earth we could have tolerated it for so long. The continuing condition of women around the world was the leaders theme and linked to another theme on sex-trafficking and female circumcision. We learned of ways in which we could make a difference by writing to the press, approaching our local MP, joining the many action groups and donating to their work.

I would like a total overhaul of the justice system. It seems wrong that justice can be 'bought' by the highest bidder, who can present the 'evidence' in a courtroom 'performance', even when guilty, often leaving the innocent unable to access justice at all. It appears that there doesn't seem to be a genuine concern to discover what is right or wrong sometimes.

Shortly after the Fellowship meeting the disaster of an aeroplane lost, most likely in the Indian Ocean, with a massive loss of life. This was reported insensitively, with cameras directly intruding into the pain and trauma of the relatives waiting for news. What have we become that this can be shown on television around the world; have the grieving to have no privacy in their pain? This I would like to see changed.

James Martineau's Beliefs: Our Inborn Conscience as the Seat of the Divine

James Martineau underwent an intense religious conversion in about 1821 and thereafter his faith was rooted in direct mystical experience. Whilst training for the Unitarian ministry, he developed a life-time concern with ethics and conscience; the late Dr Frank Schulman entitled his excellent biography: *James Martineau: "This Conscience-Intoxicated Unitarian"* (2002).

Contemporary Unitarianism was characterised by Joseph Priestley's rationalism and scientific 'necessitarianism'. Martineau asserted reason over scripture, but found determinism incompatible with ethical responsibility. He taught that God has freely bestowed free will on mankind, and has "foregone" foreknowledge to live in real time. The open future ever results from all our free choices, making it vital that these should accord with God's will.

During Martineau's 1848/50 Berlin sabbatical studying under Professor Trendelenburg he experienced "a new intellectual birth" which "was essentially the gift of fresh conceptions, the unsealing of hidden openings of self-consciousness, with unmeasured corridors and sacred halls behind; and, once gained, was more or less available throughout the history of philosophy, and lifted the darkness from the pages of Kant and even Hegel".

Martineau embraced Plato's idealism and Kant's emphasis on free will and duty, his position reflecting 'The Great Surmise' that a purposeful goodness lies at the heart of all creation (see Carl Scovel's recent article) that we can grasp and should act to further. He rejected the 'ancestral curse' of original sin, proposing instead a birthright original blessing of this knowledge of God's will, which grows into 'conscience', the internal imperative freely to do God's will for good. He rejected the obscurantist "witcheries" of Hegel's deterministic historicism.

Internal and External 'Imperatives to an End' in Kant and Hegel		
	Kant	Hegel
"External"	Cause and effect creates states of affairs; no possibility of transcendent or supernatural morally meaningful will to specific ordained ends	Can extend beyond all finite things, admits possibility of superior ideal 'will' to end, basis of theism and all determinisms e.g. Calvinist predestination, Marxism, historicist sociology, 'intelligent design', etc.
"Internal"	(Martineau asserts) admits possibility of transcendent or Divinely implanted will to end purposes, guiding free will. God is to be found here	'Immanent causality' is inescapably deterministic reaction to events and appetites and excludes possibility of innate superior morally meaningful will to end purposes.

Bentham and Mill (whom he befriended) sought a 'rational' empirical ethics, a utilitarian calculus of the greatest good of the greatest number. Martineau admired them, and the great socially beneficial projects Utilitarianism generated, but asserted that ethical goodness springs from right altruistic motivation, not (essentially deterministic) hedonistic hopes of benefits or avoidance of nemesis.

James Martineau the polymath and quondam engineer embraced science, even as it challenged revealed religion by showing the vast scale, age and diversity of 'creation'. Martineau approved of how Darwin's evolutionary theories included innate social instincts and behaviour, but when popularisers imposed the "survival of the fittest" ideology; he opposed this secularising idea just as he rejected Compté's positivism.

Martineau located God in His will for good, embedded from birth in our own wills like animals' instincts, melded with human sense of end purpose, reasoning, language and ancestral myths. He regarded millennia of direct mystical revelation as the original and strongest source of religion, which was our structured social response to it, more than 'Wordsworthian' awe of nature.

To Martineau, Jesus was a uniquely inspired human embodying the Divine *logos*, initially the lieutenant of John the Baptist before perforce assuming leadership, who physically died at Golgotha. Martineau sought in the Bible for: "the (personal) religion of Jesus, not some religion about the Christ", using German critical scholarship, editorial common sense, and the moral superiority of true texts to discount later forgeries, mistranslations, and myths including miracles breaking the natural order. He regarded Jesus's ethical teachings, particularly The Sermon on the Mount, as replacing the "old law".

Schulmann (2002) brilliantly expounds the lifelong working minister's pietistic theories of prayer and worship: both focus us on God and His will to goodness. If you found yourself unable to pray to God, he advised praying to the highest and best in yourself, the seat of the innate God-given conscience so central to his theology.

Martineau's beliefs changed over his long lifetime of study, he said not surprisingly, culminating in *The Seat of Authority in Religion (1890)*, his coherent overview of life and religion from its "Genesis" to an exquisite account of the *logos*.

Jim Stearn will conclude his study of Martineau in the next edition.

The NUF : Unitarianism's best kept secret !

I have a confession. I have been a Unitarian for five years but have only just discovered what NUF has to offer. Until I attended this year's GA, I was under the misapprehension that NUF was ONLY for Unitarians who were unable to attend a Chapel. As a member of a thriving congregation, I therefore took no interest in what was on offer. At the GA I looked at the options for the first workshop on Monday afternoon and decided that, on balance, the NUF session had the most interesting title so went along, but without great expectations.

The session started with the NUF prayer and I was hooked. It was my type of prayer with no invocation to a "Divine Other". As the meeting progressed, I realised that NUF is an invaluable resource for all Unitarians. I know that Unitarians don't go in for Revelation but this was truly a "Damascene moment". After the meeting, I made a commitment to the Chair that I would go at once to the NUF Stand and become a member. I paid my subscription and collected a copy of every publication on offer.

After the evening's activities I made my way to bed only to find myself spending a large part of the night browsing the NUF website and reading the Newsletters and copies of Viewpoint in a vain attempt to

catch up on all that I have missed during my five years within the Unitarian fold. I cannot praise the website and the Newsletters/Viewpoint too highly. They are treasure troves of information, inspiration and challenge.

As I drove back home on Wednesday afternoon, I resolved that one action I would take as a result of this year's GA would be to promote NUF within my own congregation at the Octagon in Norwich. For new Unitarians NUF is the movement's best kept secret!

Carol Palfrey is a member of Octagon chapel Norwich and the NUF.

Study at Yale !

One of my recent internet discoveries has been to experience the generosity of universities , mainly in USA (the Open University is a notable UK exception) who are posting a considerable number of their undergraduate and post-graduate lectures online , freely accessible to all ,often accompanied by the same supplementary handouts that registered students receive.

Currently there are two courses on the Hebrew and Greek scriptures (OT and NT) offered by Yale university ; although termed introductory they are comprehensive in scope and delivered by scholars of the first rank. There are over 24 lectures, each of 45 minutes ' duration in each course.

They can be accessed at: oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies

It is to be hoped that the GA might consider in the future recording something more substantial about Unitarianism than the current short videos recorded by David Usher that are available on You Tube, good though they are.

Constitutional Issues at the General Assembly

A report by Hugh Barlow and Peter Zone

Sadly, the formal debates began with a motion proposing that a particular minister, widely known and respected in the movement, should become this year's Vice-President and, by succession, next year's President of the General Assembly – thus overruling the decision of the Executive Committee not to endorse his nomination. This difficult situation would not have arisen if there had been more than the one nomination. To vote against the motion would represent a rejection of the man; to vote for the motion would represent a repudiation of the Executive Committee's decision and a rejection of their judgment.

Supporters emphasised the qualities of the man, and especially the fact that he had overcome a very serious breakdown early in his ministry. The No vote was formally led by the EC convenor, who said that they had agonised over their decision, but still felt, after a night's sleep, that there were significant doubts over whether he fulfilled two of the five criteria which they applied every year to their decision. A speaker from the floor unfortunately raised incidents from his past which, while they were known to many, most of us would rather not have known or had rehearsed. Perhaps the only relevant one was that he had previously actively sought the nomination, and many of us do not think that is appropriate,

Before the debate began it had already been decided, by the required two-thirds majority, to have a secret ballot on the substantive motion. In favour was the rather forlorn hope of avoiding excessive hurt or embarrassment; against was the oddity of having a secret ballot on opening up a confidential decision.

Regardless of who the single nominee was, and before their nomination was even considered, it might have been possible to seek further nominations, but it would still have looked suspicious. They did seek,

unsuccessfully, for further nominations as soon as they recognised the potential problem, but it was known by then that there was only one nomination, and ministers were probably reluctant to have their names put forward against that of their colleague.

The Executive's decision was then bound to look like a personal rejection. The issue is not whether they should have endorsed or rejected his nomination. They had been mandated to make the final decision, which they would normally be able to do in total confidence. The position of President is not simply an honour, a recognition which is that person's due; it is primarily a representative role, signifying that this person is recognised as a fit representative of the whole movement.

Some might prefer to have an open campaign on behalf of competing candidates. However, I note from my conversation with two visiting representatives of the Unitarian Universalists in the USA, that they are moving away from their present process of having an election campaign for their next President, to a system comparable to our own, whereby a representative committee or nominations panel is entrusted with the decision between the individuals who have been nominated.

It was a failure of the whole movement that there was only one nomination this year, and it needs to be built into the process that there will be no decision if there is not more than one nomination. The motion was very substantially rejected, after debate, and a secret ballot, by votes 27 for, 138 against and 18 abstentions. Many people commented afterwards saying the vote was not against the candidate but a protest against the procedure. All were agreed that the matter of personality should never have become a matter of public debate.

No automatic succession

A subsequent motion (Motion 5) proposed that the long-standing convention of alternating between a minister and a lay person as

also the balance between the genders and that between the regions. This motion was duly carried, but not without some discussion, from which it was clear that what was only a convention had become fixed in the minds of many.

This motion had been put forward, not as any sort of solution to this year's difficulty, but ahead of these events. I did actually speak to this motion, suggesting that this change of thinking might encourage districts to make a wider range of nominations, not narrowly focussed on maintaining the conventional succession of minister followed by lay person.

Catching up with the rules surrounding Charity status

Louise Rogers presented Motion 3, a constitutional amendment setting out how the GA's assets would be disposed if the charity was ever dissolved. Any new charity would have to have such a provision in its constitution, so we were both remedying a deficiency and allowing ourselves the possibility of changing our status from being simply a Charity to being some sort of Limited Company with Charitable Status. This last, and not our imminent dissolution, is under consideration. The motion, duly explained, was duly carried.

Louise is not only a current member of the GA Executive Committee but has also been a member of our NUF Committee, so some of our members play a part in the umbrella body to which the NUF is affiliated.

Hugh Barlow is a member of Sidmouth Unitarians

Peter Zone is a committee member of NUF

This year's General Assembly meetings took place in the luxurious surroundings of Whittlebury Hall near Towcester ; in contrast to recent Assemblies which have mostly been held on University campuses, Whittlebury Hall is a purpose built hotel, conference centre and spa ; accommodation was sold out several weeks before the meetings began so it seems to have been a popular choice of venue.

2014 - Rain in February



Illustration by Liz Foxbrook

I like the soft rain that gently bathes
my tired skin with liquid silk.
I like the full blown lazy rain softly emptying
its wide spaced drops into the pool
where six humped golden orfe wheel and play,
timid tadpoles hide amongst the reeds
and pale water lilies shimmer in the gentle shower.
I like the tough regimented squalls that beat
a brisk reveille on rusting tin roofs
of old allotment huts, summoning their owners away
to the comfort of the pub and their noon day pint.
I like the anxious hurrying rain
sweeping undeterred across the high moor,
flattening the purple heather into a deep carpet,
replenishing warm languorous streams
who sing through the summer
in an unique rustic chorus, with the watery trill
of the chic white and black Ring Ouzel

and the elegant grey Merlin's imperious screech.
I like the fine mizzle and the silent mists of Autumn
that caress the Fluted White camellia,
cloak with delicate liquid lace the purple crocus
and weave a glistening crown around the last red rose.

But ...

The meandering Jet Stream has plunged deep south,
and sharply swung north again, like a great cosmic ribbon
tacking madly above the ocean, bundling together
unending storms of bitter rain and cruel gales.

Today's icy downpour stings skin and eyes,
scythes through the sunshine gold japonica,
shatters the simple beauty of the gentle hellebore,
and pulps the ossified head of the blue hydrangea.
It brings flood and devastation to land and coast,
houses inundated, winter crops laid waste,
pastures six feet under water, stock drowned.

As rivers undredged burst through their crumbling banks
and old sea walls are swept away by wind and tide,
power lines fall victims to unremitting storms,
and thousands endure long cold and cheerless days.

While politicians and public servants wrangle,
men and women count the terrible cost
of homes destroyed, livelihoods and lives
lost to the inevitable coming of this
festival of unholy ruin.

And I begin to see how powerless
we have become in the face of this, our world's chaos,
which we ourselves have done so much to cause.

May God and our children forgive us.

and:

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The diagnosis of declining attendance and diminishing finances was such that the patient might not survive. With this ominous description Derek McAuley began his address to the NUF AGM at the General Assembly. Before gloom overcame the meeting, Derek revealed that he was reading from a report on the health of the Church of England!

Ever since the establishment of the GA in 1928 there had been a succession of reports and initiatives calling for greater mission, growth, publicity and regeneration – ‘task forces’ had been assembled but decline continued. As Chief Officer he was paid to think - about the nature of the GAUFCC especially. He thought that we needed to recognise boundaries to Unitarianism – individualism, although part of the DNA of the movement, could prove problematical. We had no grand narrative to present. There was an inherent distrust of giving the central body power but we could not expect volunteers to carry through large projects on their own.

We should emphasise solidarity and community – we are not a diverse movement in terms of people; overwhelmingly white, middle class, well-educated and over 55. We needed to emphasise the idea of oneness in our thinking to make our appeal more distinctive; possibly we should look more to the Seven Principles of the UUA for our identity. Freedom, Reason and Tolerance were no longer sufficiently distinctive to define our identity—David Usher had said the same in his sermon the previous evening.

Questioners raised the matter of advertising. The GA does not fund advertising as being too expensive for the likely return – the Quakers had greater funds for this. It was pointed out that advertising needed to be continuous if it was to be effective. The role of the NUF and UKUTV in reaching the un-churched was commended by questioners. The question of Unitarian chaplaincies in the universities was raised; although there were a few such posts, some contributors considered

it was more difficult to have a campus presence in recent years.

Overall it was what Unitarians did and were involved in that would define them to those outside the movement and co-operation with outside agencies that would express out ethos best. Our social action however needed to be underpinned with spiritual and theological depth ; Derek felt that the possibility of a university post in Unitarian studies should be explored; the Quakers have established a similar post at Birmingham University.

Unitarians needed to recapture the power of solidarity not only within congregations and districts but also globally ; one of the constituent bodies of the GA had been the British & Foreign Unitarian Association. Financial pressures would mean that the GA would have to do less in the future must try to do it better. Volunteers alone could not be expected to carry through large projects.

The future would involve holding in balance three types of power ; those of hierarchy, solidarity and individualism .There was no single approach that would solve our problems.

Ken Smith

An edited video of the meeting may be found by going to the NUF webpage :- <http://www.nufonline.org.uk/NewNUF09/index.php>

On the LH side menu click on [NUF AGM 2014](#).

Foot note

Derek's quotation at the start of his talk is taken from :-

Creating the Future of the Church: A Practical Guide to Addressing Whole-system Change by Rev Keith Elford, available through Amazon.

NUF members who were present at the meeting and wish to develop further some of the topics discussed are invited to send their thoughts to the editor.

My stay at the GA

Rev.Tony McNeile

I only went for a couple of days - but they were two days of luxury. It seemed a shame to have such a beautiful double room to myself. It was large. It had a chandelier. All the furniture was made of mirrors - tables, wardrobe doors, bedside lamps - everything. I waved good-night to myself and I met myself on the way to the bathroom in the morning. I loved the healthy food and the way it was presented - it was all very upmarket. I wished I hadn't gone in my Matalan pullover.

I went to the NUF meeting which was well attended. We were pleased to have the Chief Officer, Derek McAuley as our speaker. I came away thinking that if it doesn't pay to advertise using the media, we have to spruce up our silent advertising - web sites and gardens and notice boards. Do that and be a Unitarian and don't be afraid to invite people to join us or our worship - that is if we go to a Chapel.

I went to the Psychical Society meeting and there was some very comforting discussion about the spirit world. The Anniversary Service is always good - nearly four hundred people there. Rev David Usher is a bit of a Unitarian Evangelist - he wants us to be more positive and have a message for the present day.

One of the main meetings on the floor showed us at our worst - at least it made us realise how easy it is to be vindictive about another person. We left with an uneasy feeling about ourselves. I got over it by having a game of golf on the course which is part of the complex. What I enjoy more than anything is meeting up with friends - especially the NUF ones - Ken, Peter, Joan, John, Howard, Jo, Danny, Sue and on and on.

I always find the GA to be energising and I am sure the age profile is going down.

Is Britain a Christian country ?

Ken Smith

The controversy provoked by the Prime Minister's remarks about Britain as a 'Christian country' broke after the GA meetings but it has provoked a good deal of comment on the Unitarian Facebook pages since, as the Chief Officer, Derek McAuley, was a signatory to the open letter of criticism that was published in the Daily Telegraph. You can read Derek's reason for signature at :-<http://unitarianchiefofficer.blogspot.co.uk>

We shall follow up this discussion in a future issue of the Newsletter, as it is clear that in an era which a former Archbishop has characterised as 'post-Christian', at least in terms of formal religious affiliation, a significant and vocal proportion of Unitarians would like to distance the movement from its Christian roots; conversely there is an equally significant sector of the movement that cherishes the Christian title. Although there has been this tension within Unitarianism for decades, the rapid emergence of the Sunday Assembly with its radically different worship style has attracted support from that sector of the age range and population that most Unitarian congregations do not reach—the Manchester Assembly has reached a stable attendance of 80 in little over a year. Its strapline is *"Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More"*

In his Anniversary Sermon, Rev Dr David Usher asked the following question:-

"What is (our) faith? It is not faith in the weary, out-dated mantra of Freedom, Reason and Tolerance. Perhaps those words resonated and inspired in previous times, but they are weak virtues to-day...If we continue to proclaim Freedom, Reason and Tolerance as our banner cry, we should not be surprised if the world heaves a weary sigh.

I offer you a new Trinity, Personal Authenticity, Religious Community, Social Agency.....that is a meaningful and relevant new trinity of our faith for the present day."

Subscriptions

Many members now take delivery of the Viewpoint and Newsletter by e-mail ; thereby they miss seeing the renewal date for subscriptions which is printed on the address label of the envelope in the case of those who receive paper publications. There are currently quite a few subscriptions in arrears ; it is time consuming for the membership secretary to have to pursue these.

If you receive by e-mail only, *please* check when you last paid your subscription, and if necessary ,send your contribution to the Treasurer as soon as possible ;otherwise delivery may cease. Thank you.

Future Unitarian Events

A full list of events that may be of interest to members is found at:-
<http://www.unitarian.org.uk/info/events.shtml>

UK Unitarian TV

A very extensive range of videos of services, talks, meditations and interviews is now available to watch at :-

<http://www.ukunitarian.tv>

The quality of the videos has improved enormously over the past year ; the NUF has contributed to the purchase of extra equipment to facilitate this work.

New Members

We extend a very warm welcome to the following new members :-

Rev. Sue Woolley

Bernard Omar

Carol Palfrey

Kevin Lowe

Bronwyn Lowe

Dr. David Watmough

Articles for the next issue of the Newsletter should reach the editor by June 19th

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Linking others valuing Freedom, Reason and Tolerance in religion.*