

NATIONAL UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP

NEWSLETTER

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New Year Poetry—Naomi Linnell
A Wedding in the NUF
Unitarians and Muslims
‘Singing for the Brain’

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

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I have friends who are a bit bemused by us Unitarians. We say we can believe what we like. We say we are on a spiritual pilgrimage to a destination of our own choosing. Our worship has no rituals, our hymns have mostly nature based words. Anyone of us can lead worship. We have a few trained ministers but not many can afford to employ them. 'It doesn't seem like a religion at all,' many of these friends say. 'How do your people deal with the deeper things of the spirit, the struggles within their own souls, sin, forgiveness and atonement?'

I answer that the Unitarian way is different. Of course people have the same dilemmas and the same experiences as anyone else. They have had the same spiritual agonies but Unitarians do not focus on the unworthiness of anyone but encourage the journey of self discovery and moving away from a sad past. Experiences are lessons for the present not anchors to the past. Worship is the celebration of change and opportunity. Most Unitarians will say that they know there is an unfathomable mystery about life. It is definitely a spiritual mystery but yet it is part of everything, not separate from it. They are connected to it. Some believe that is what God is, others say there is no name that is sufficient. So we go on our happy ways.

We enjoy our lives and the company of friends.

We try to help people whose lives are not good. We have a moral code. Because it can't be seen does not mean there is not a deep spiritual tap root to the Unitarian.

Thoughts for Worship

For those of us who spend ages chasing our tails, or chasing rabbits in our thoughts or have the worry of chattering monkeys in our minds, let us make a New Years resolution.

That every day we will give some of that time to silence and reflection.

It doesn't matter whether it is five minutes in the bath or five minutes after breakfast, or five minutes before bed, or any five minutes in be-

tween. Let it be five minutes to reflect on nothingness, just to connect our thoughts to an empty space, to breathe in the presence and the stillness of a silent now.

Maybe after that we can then ponder the problems that face us, or those of our loved ones and friends but let us give that time first for ourselves. Maybe after that we might feel a difference in our lives. Maybe there will be a calmness, a deepening of love, a revealed understanding.

In a racing world that does not stop, that feeds us with an insatiable appetite to want what is coming next, let us have our five minutes away from it.

Secretary's Notes

Ken Smith

This year marks an important anniversary for the NUF which reaches its 'biblical' three score years and ten of existence in July. Whether its founders expected the fellowship to last as long as it has we cannot know but the purpose of the NUF remains the same as that outlined by Rev. Leslie Belton in the first Newsletter :- " to provide a means of linking together people like ourselves (especially those who are isolated from a Unitarian or kindred congregation) into a fellowship for the strengthening of one another in a common purpose uniting freedom with faith ."

As this edition was being prepared, the NUF laptop on which it is usually composed decided to malfunction and refused to produce any output other than a blank screen ; hence the copy had to be transferred to another machine with an earlier version of the software installed, which accounts for the changes in appearance and size of this edition. It is hoped to return to the usual 20 pages in future editions.

I am told that the average life expectancy of a modern laptop computer is about 4 years ; fortunately , although our human faculties may decline with age, average human life expectancy is increasing as the years pass, even if the technology on which we increasingly rely seems to require ever more frequent replacement.

President's Ponderings

Joan Wilkinson

You will be reading this after the Christmas tree has been taken down, the decorations put away and the time of eating more modestly has arrived. But not everyone will have had a 'happy Christmas'. We anticipate Christmas, often in a state of anxiety that all will be ready in time. Some of you may have been a little apprehensive of facing a Christmas alone for the first time, suffering with poor health or worried about the bills that will arrive. For all those members who are struggling I send good wishes and along with other Unitarians pray for those everywhere who are lonely, sick, bereaved, depressed or anxious.

During the meeting of our Christmas Charnwood Fellowship, Christina Smith began by introducing us to the benefits of this dark season, in remembering the shadow side of this dark period of the year. Each of us lit a candle for the grief we may be experiencing now or have experienced through the year.

You may think that our Christmas gathering was not the place for darker thoughts and yet it was exactly right. We thought about the benefits of the dark and the deep growing that occurs deep within. We also heard about how in the dark we prepare for the light to come. In religions since the beginning of time, people have recognised the seasons, the sun, the light and the dark, building their religious ceremonies around them.

This reminded me of an old neighbour of ours, when we lived on the coast at North Devon, looking out to Hartland and Baggly Point on the left and Morte Point on the right. At the shortest day the sun set early over Morte Point but then it began its journey back towards the longer days with their lighter nights. Most of us don't have that visible confirmation of the change of the seasons in quite the same way, but for our old neighbours, looking out to sea, it was a time of anticipation as they waited for the sun to begin its annual cycle and head once again for Hartland Point.

I wonder what new direction we will make or whether we will return yet again to that which is eternal and that we recognise as new all over again. Whatever the New Year may bring, I wish all members light and happiness, in all that you do and everywhere you may go.

Singing for the Brain' ~ Women's League Appeal 2014-15

Every year the Unitarian Women's League raises money for a different charity. The Appeal Project for 2014-2015 is 'Singing for the Brain' which is one of The Alzheimer Society's initiatives, a stimulating group activity for people in the early to moderate stages of dementia.

Most people have heard of The Alzheimer's Society, and many will have seen the television programme 'Living with Dementia' and may also be aware of the 'Dementia Friends' campaign which was launched in 2014.

That most of us will be touched in one way or another by his terrible disease is certain – parent, partner or friend; but we all hope that it will not be ourselves.

The statistics are scary. Over 700,000 people in the UK have dementia; one in three people over 65 will die with some form of it.

It can also affect younger people; there are more than 17,000 under the age of 65 in the UK who have dementia.

There is currently no cure.

The Alzheimer's Society campaigns and funds research into the cause, cure, care and prevention.

Dementia sufferers often remember their youth with clarity whilst having severe short-term memory loss. Music is a great memory trigger; it also encourages communication and movement.

'Singing for the Brain' groups usually meet once a week, when dementia sufferers and their carers under a trained leader are joined by musi-

cal volunteers who lead them in a variety of activities encouraged by singing songs that they recall from younger years.

It is not just singing, it is breathing exercises, hand, arm, feet and leg movement, recognising your own name and responding.

The value to the carers of these gatherings also cannot be underestimated as they can share concerns and find friendship and support with others in a similar situation and some respite from their own isolated commitment.

NUF members who would like to support this year's Appeal should send their donation (cheques made out to 'Women's League Project Account') to the Project Treasurer, Mrs Eunice Smith, 39 Pegasus Court, Bury Road, Rochdale, OL11 4EA, mentioning their NUF membership. A cheque for the total amount collected will be presented to the charity at the Women's League AGM at the General Assembly Meetings next April.

Valerie Walker

Lorna, James and Maisie Barry –plus Reg the dog ! -See story opposite



Two NUF members marry in joyous celebration at Great Hucklow

On Friday 31st October, *The Nightingale Centre* welcomed the families of Lorna Hill and James Barry, in preparation for the great occasion the following day.

Andrew Hill, was marrying the couple, but how he managed to control proceedings, I will never know. Lorna, his daughter, knew exactly what she wanted and rightly so, this was her special time. Maisie, the three year old daughter of Lorna and James, plus Reg, the dog, also knew what they wanted. But in great goodwill a rehearsal prepared us for the following afternoon.

What a wonderful day it was; a bit chilly and breezy but the sun shone. The ceremony began with Lorna and James walking from the Centre to the Old Chapel. They were late but that is most certainly allowed at weddings. Besides which we were privileged to listen to the exquisite piano playing of the groom's sister Anna. There were many children, some in kilts but all beautifully decked out for this special day.

It seemed both a great family occasion as well as a great Unitarian one. Liz Shaw, the worship leader at the Old Chapel reminded us that it was Maisie, who had invited us all and brought us together. After the welcome she handed over to Andrew.

The unusual pattern of a regular wedding continued beginning with a hymn written by Andrew; *Play trumpet, 'cello, harp and flute*. Lorna's brother was asked to read the story of The Owl and the Pussy Cat being married by the Turkey – for free. Not only did the children sit at the reader's feet but Lorna and James joined them. It looked such a lovely picture, but wedding dresses being long getting up from the floor wasn't easy. Unlike most brides, Lorna didn't stress as help was at hand.

The Best Man, a young woman, who had come all the way from Australia, handed over the rings. But what can go wrong with

exchanging vows? Nothing you might think, but you would be wrong. Not far into the vows, the bride and groom disagreed with poor old father, as to whose turn it was. But with such wonderful families as these, it was eventually resolved amicably and James read out the vows he had prepared.

They were very funny, beginning by challenging some misconceptions that others might hold, of the reasons he had for marrying Lorna. He wasn't marrying her for her particular screw-driver, or her views on the Citroen C3, and many other bizarre reasons but then the contrast to the tender words explaining why he was marrying her, were quite wonderful.

During and after signing the Marriage Register we heard the beautiful singing voice of Sara Atkinson accompanied on the piano by Anna Barry. What a treat that was.

You would think that after the photographs were taken, the bride and groom would go back to The Centre to welcome their guests. But there was an important ritual that had to take place first; the blessing (dunking) of Lorna and James in 'The Trough', before we could return for tea and cakes. Bronwyn and Emma Lowe had been baking all week and had arrived early at The Centre so that the icing could be done.

In the evening we all sat down to dinner and to hear the speeches. Even though we were all full after the magnificent meal, we still had to get up and dance to the band and caller, who were waiting for us to make our way down to the Peach Room. The children had no problem though and for a while enjoyed having the floor to themselves.

Afterwards, many weary folk took themselves to bed but I suspect the youngsters kept celebrating for a good long while. A wonderful wedding for a very special couple, loved and supported by many family and friends. I send good wishes, on behalf of the NUF, for a happy and healthy future to Lorna, James, Maisie, Reg and family yet to be born.

At the Gate of the Year

‘Today’ said the Lord, ‘I offer you my children
a choice and I command that both
heaven and earth shall bear witness to it.
You may freely choose the gift of Life, or you may
choose the final sleep that comes in Death.
Life will bring you many blessings,
but to die untimely may be a barren curse.
My children, choose life.’

A man weeps and, distraught, shouts
to the lowering slate cold sky:
‘I am become weary of this earthly life,
of its sorrow and its deep unremitting pain,
its bleak injustice and its abject fear.
My wife is gone from me, my children lost,
my dreams vanished in the reality of a cold dawn.
I choose oblivion and Death.’

‘My nest was emptied’ softly croons a rock dove,
‘when thieving jackdaws took my nestlings,
and, like an angel banished from heaven, my mate
plummeted to earth as lightning struck the forest.
But I shall live to find another mate and build
another nest, to rear another brood
and feed another lay of helpless peeping chicks.
That is why I must choose Life.’

‘Consider’ said the Lord, ‘this bright glow
of winter aconites, more exquisite than any royal queen,
who strive neither for wealth nor for vain glory,
but who dying will accept the welcoming hand
of the dark angel and give to him their seeds,

that swelling buds may come to full term
to make lovely the hallowed land I have given you.
They have chosen Life renewed.'

'I am a no-thing,' murmurs the stream,
'I merely move in the stony bed of His appointing.

My part is to set free my sparkling waters
to flow for ever beneath the wide sky,
that there may be life for small fish, a mirror
to reflect the ravishing beauty of the kingfisher
and a safe haven for the dragonfly.

Always would I choose Life'

The man sits quiet in the silence of the cold night,
the longest and darkest of the year.

He turns his pallid face upwards to look
at the stars, a thousand gilded beacons
lit to welcome a new year, new hope, new life.
Anguish and exhaustion dropping away from eyes
once made bleak by misery, he whispers
'I pledge that I too will choose Life.'

Naomi Linnell



Epiphany Song - The bringing of gifts

Two thousand miles some had flown,
buffeted by cruel cold winds,
driven ever onwards across
high mountain and empty ocean,
seeking to find the baby.

They too had followed a star
until they came in the dawn time
to a quiet stable next to an inn
where ox and ass had knelt,
and there they found the baby.

Like silk drifting in the wind
they flowed into the stable,
peregrine, sparrow and magpie,
eagle, barn owl and swan,
bearing gifts for the baby.

The barn owl bestows her wisdom,
the magpie a beakful of silver,
while circling in the bright noon sky
the eagle dedicates his strength,
to do honour to the baby.

The sparrow brings her brave heart,
the peregrine his all seeing eye,
before the *old* wooden manger
the regal swan bows down low
to worship this precious baby.

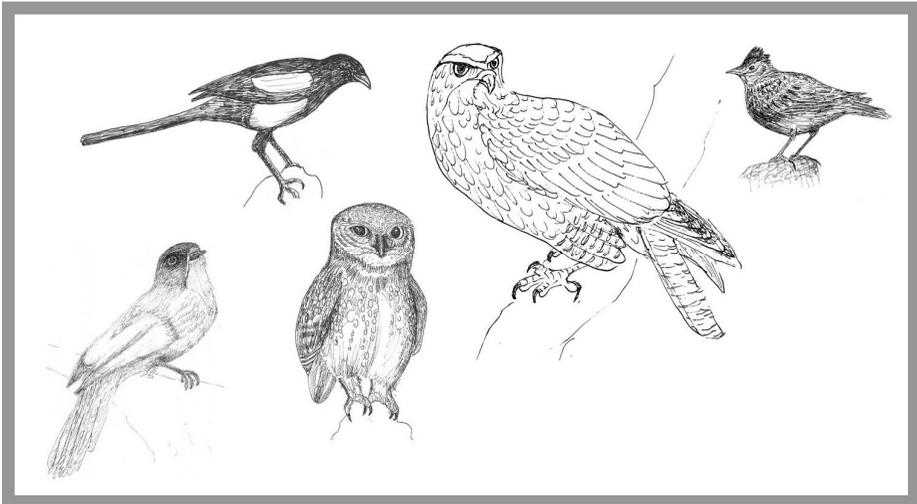
Last to arrive a little brown bird,
a nightingale self-effacing

and plain, sits in a gloomy corner
then opens his beak and sings,
come to serenade the baby.

Cantabile, like bubbling water,
becomes a bright trumpet call,
drops away into the silent dark,
soars again - sublime altissimo.
from birth - to death - to glory.

For seven nights they watched with
the baby until, rising again west
into the clear morning, they left
with no trace of their coming, save
an echo of their Epiphany Song.

Text of poems by Naomi Linnell ; Illustrations by Liz Foxbrook



Muslims and Unitarians are linked

The above was the striking title of a recent article in *The Inquirer* by Rev. Cliff Reed. Starting from descriptions of his personal experiences in meeting Muslims, he continues into a well written exposition of the main tenets of Islam ; in a short space he manages to encompass a potted history of the development of the Islamic faith, explain the two main divisions of Sunni and Shia Islam, outlines the position of the Qur'an, the Islamic view of Jesus, the position of women in the faith, the meaning of Shari'ah, jihad, and ijma (the consensus of Islamic scholars) .

As Cliff states Unitarian Christians and Muslims have similar views of the status of Jesus in regarding him as being fully human and a prophet of God. However Muslims are above all a 'people of the Book'- the Qur'an—which all Muslims , of whatever division, regard as of supreme authority and a direct revelation from God to the prophet Muhammed. Cliff Reed points to an unfortunate coincidence of terminology in that the ultra conservative Wahhabi Muslims of Saudi Arabia , Qatar and the UAE often call themselves Muwahhidun (in translation 'Unitarians !')

One of the difficulties in studying Islam from a Western context is that there is no hierarchy or central authority for the faith—there is no equivalent of the Pope or Archbishop of Canterbury to refer to . Each mosque is run by a committee of trustees– in organisation not unlike a Unitarian chapel, in that it is independent . Just as occasionally disputes arise in the running of chapels, there have been tensions in the management of mosques ; the long running dispute at Finsbury Park Mosque in London, once the 'power base' of Abu Hamza lasted for many years until it was closed in 2003 ; it was reopened with a new committee in 2005. The highly respected imam, Zaki Badawi , of Regent's Park Mosque, (who died in 2005) commented at the time : It's very difficult to reform mosques ...most of our people come from countries where elections are not regarded as one of the ways of conducting business .

There are reckoned to be 2.79 million Muslims in Britain—the second largest faith group in the country—47% were born in the UK and 53.9% are under the age of 19. The rapid emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) has seen about 500 British citizens travel to Syria and Iraq to join the group or its affiliates—many of these recruits would appear to have been solicited not through mosques but through various internet sites hosted outside the UK. The overwhelming majority of Muslims in the UK have no relation to these groups and are upset and distraught when they realise their children have been drawn into them.

Cliff Reed ends his article with these wise words ;-

We should do what we can to understand Islam and the concerns of Muslims in a society that, to them, seems threatening and hostile much of the time. We should not, of course, give up our own values and principles in dealing with Islam and with Muslims.... There is much common ground between Muslims and other people of faith...and beyond all differences—and there are differences ! - we remain one humanity. (The Inquirer January 3rd 2015)

Many of our chapels are to be found in areas of the UK with a large community of Muslims—Manchester, Yorkshire and the West Midlands ; it would be interesting to know what contacts the Unitarians there have with the Muslims in their area .

Further Reading

Islam—a short History by Karen Armstrong—see Amazon

The Qur'an—in translation—several listed on Amazon and on line

Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam—revised edition—Glasse and Smith

Website

Muslim Council of Britain : www.mcb.org.uk

Whilst writing this piece the attacks in Paris took place ; for that reason I have taken the opportunity to reprint part of a prayer written after the 2005 bombings in London by Rev Chris Goacher, former minister to the NUF .

A Prayer After Violence

Holy Spirit, Allah, God, known by many names and none;
At this time we stand in shock at our human capacity to embrace evil. .

We pray for compassion toward those who grieve and comfort and healing for those in pain. How can we make sense of this, how can we know the truth?

How can we forgive?

Humanity twists your inspired words to our own ends ... to justify the unjustifiable.

Forgive them for they know not what they do.

NUF Subscriptions 2015

A form for renewal of subscriptions to the NUF is enclosed with your mailing in the month when it becomes due, which is shown in brackets on your mailing label.

Several members have enquired if they can pay their subscription by bank transfer : here are the details :-

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Contributions for the next edition should be sent to the editor by February 20th at the latest.

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