

NATIONAL UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP NEWSLETTER

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March 2015



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<http://www.nufonline.org.uk/NewNUF09/index.php>

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

Registered Charity No. 1040294

Secretary's Notes

Ken Smith

We are now approaching the end of the NUF Year which culminates with the AGM held during the Annual Meetings of the GA , which will be held this year at the Metropole Hotel Birmingham from 29th March to April 1st.. The meetings include not only the business side of the General Assembly of the Unitarian & Free Christian Churches but include the Anniversary Service and meetings held by the Affiliated Organisations within the GA such as the NUF. It is an opportunity for members of often very small congregations to meet together, make and renew friendships and to be invigorated when they return to their congregations.

This year the NUF have invited a speaker from outside the denomination to address us; he is Ben Whitney , a former Baptist minister who currently works in the field of child protection. He is also an author of a number of books on 'humanist spirituality ' - many of our congregations have members and ministers who would describe themselves as 'humanist' or 'agnostic' and we look forward to his address.

The NUF AGM is also an opportunity to thank those who keep the Fellowship going from month to month and at the AGM we shall bid farewell to our long-serving treasurer, Elizabeth Barlow. I have enjoyed an excellent working relationship with Elizabeth over the years that I have been Secretary and the healthy position of our finances is a testament to her faithful stewardship of the NUF over ten years in post.

Valerie Walker, a former treasurer to Oxford Unitarians , will take over the post on Elizabeth's retirement and we are pleased to welcome the experience she brings to the NUF .

I have posted a summary of the motions for debate at the GA meetings later in the Newsletter : there has recently been some discussion in *The Inquirer* about the value and purpose of these resolutions . Please feel free to share your views with other members in a future edition.

The other week we went into Manchester. My wife, Marijke, wanted to look for cookery books for two reasons. First of all as 'almost vegetarians' we want to enjoy variety in our diet. The days of 'nut roast only' have long since gone, but secondly because she believes our health very much depends on what we eat. Most vegetables and all fruit have health giving and illness curing properties. So we eat with an eye on our well being.

Could we also eat our way to happiness? I don't think so. Another dimension needs to come into play. We also need to feed that spiritual appetite. But how? I was browsing the 'Mind, Body, Spirit' section. Every book I opened emphasised that all the paths to enlightenment begin with 'changing yourself'.

One in particular said that happiness itself is the clue. Spiritual people tend to be happy in themselves. There are moments when we can feel quite ecstatic with happiness and times when we feel quite low and unhappy. When this happens the remedy is to recall those ecstatic memories, bring them to the front. The mood will lift like a bubble bursting upwards through water.

It is sad that over the years religions have tried to suppress the natural happiness in people and stop the upward flow of joy. How sad. We won't do that.

Let us tune into the cycle of the year. This is springtime, a time for growth and renewal.

May it fill us all with happiness and may the energy of life fill our spirits with joy and lift us upward as the days lengthen the sun shines more warmly.

May we all fill a gallery in our hearts with fond memories of yesterday and today, a gallery to enjoy especially on dark days.

Worship

My Hindu friend puts his hands together and bows towards me, 'Namaste' he says in greeting. That means, 'the spirit in me greets the spirit in you'. It is more than a greeting.

It is a spiritual connection and a statement of respect and equality. It reminds them that they speak in the name of their God and recognises the connection we have with our God.

I have been preparing a talk about the teacher George Gurdjieff. He urged that we should all become more spiritually aware of ourselves; we should wake up from spiritual sleep. That means being self aware day by day, week by week. Living our lives as spiritual beings on earth, connecting to that greater power around us that we are intuitively aware of.

I think it also means taking time each day to focus exclusively on our spiritual selves and that connection. It maybe a simple meditation or tending a tabletop shrine, or a special place outdoors. And when we worship, let us not only think about our own spirit but take time too to say 'Namaste' in a prayer to all our friends and loved ones.

Prayer

Let me be at peace with myself. Let me have a calm and spiritual place within me. Let me have within myself a doorway to the mystical divine world.

Let my inner self be the stronghold of my life. When I walk in the world let me aware of my inner fortress. Storms may range around but it will not fall. It may be stormed with words and looks but it's walls are high and wide and cannot be broken. Because I am a strong fortress I can be gentle with the world. I can use my strength to support others. May I take the time to make my fortress strong, work on it continually, make it a beacon and a haven for those who live around it.

On Saturday 7th February John and I drove over to Great Hucklow, to join with many Unitarian friends, to celebrate the life of Sheila Jones, who died on the 28th December.

Sheila was a big personality in a little package. Over her long life she encouraged young and not so young alike, to appreciate the value of education. Sheila, like me and many other Unitarians, had valued the contribution of The Open University in continuing education through life. Having recognised how important it was for OU students to experience a full week of study together each year, and that some courses lacked this vital component, she helped to initiate Summer Schools at the Wedgewood Memorial College, at Barlaston. Attendance was purely voluntary on the part of the student, but I can vouch for their value, having being a student at Barlaston. What I didn't know until the many memories of Sheila, shared by family and friends at Hucklow, was that her work there and elsewhere, to further the educational opportunities for others, continued until the end of her life.

My first encounter with Sheila was at a Religious Summer School, at Great Hucklow, several years ago. She had been a music teacher and was a wonderful pianist. Her emotions spoke through the words and music of songs and hymns. Each Summer School she would lead a popular optional workshop, when we would sing our favourite hymns and learn new ones. There were often tears of laughter as we struggled to live up to Sheila's strict time-keeping and also tears of sadness as we sang favourite hymns of those no longer with us. Sheila had many rich memories from her long years as a Unitarian, which she would share with us.

Whilst being a social being who enjoyed large gatherings she was at her best in her many one-to-one conversations that she so loved. She could often be seen in deep conversation with whoever she found

herself sitting next to. I am fortunate to have had many such conversations with her. She loved nothing better than to engage with a perspective other than her own. She talked a lot but she also listened a lot and was never anything other than encouraging for others to strive to learn and understand more about their faith, Unitarianism especially, history and literature and of course how we might best pursue ways that would benefit our community and society. She was sure that we must be life-long learners, not as a selfish pursuit, but for the purpose of creating a better world.

Sheila leaves behind two daughters and a son, who she was rightly proud of. Each have inherited that love of life and love of music so important to her. Our thoughts are with them at their loss. Sheila will be missed, but never forgotten by her many friends.

NUF Annual General Meeting

The AGM of the NUF will take place on March 30th at 1.45 p.m. at the Hilton Metropole Hotel Birmingham (in the grounds of the NEC).

The Annual Report of the NUF should be included with this Newsletter. Please let the Secretary know if yours gets missed .

After the conclusion of the formal business , Ben Whitney, former Baptist minister and published author will give an address :-

‘A Humanist looks at the Crucifixion’

There will be an opportunity for discussion following the talk. Ben will bring some copies of his publications for sale and it is hoped the meeting will be video recorded by UKUTV and his address may be published in print form in a future publication.

Book Review

Several years ago, three members of the Charnwood Unitarian Fellowship, decided to start a reading group in the village. Since then it has taken on a life of its own, separate from the Fellowship although several are members of both groups and on special occasions the two groups come together to hear a visiting speaker or at the Fellowship's Christmas evening. Members from both groups support the same social projects and are active in the local community.

The reading group meet once each month, first for a light lunch in the village, at which each person gives £2 towards the Padley Centre, working with the homeless, in Derby. Afterwards we walk round to an NUF member's house to discuss our book of the month. This is usually a novel, although we do occasionally read non-fiction and also poetry. Often I have heard NUF members apologise for reading novels, as if somehow this genre of literature is inferior to religious or spiritual material. How wrong they are. Belonging to a reading group obliges members to read books they may never have chosen to read otherwise. Each month I learn about how others with different perspectives, nationality or culture live. In discussion questions of morality, ethics, religion (or lack of it), and politics are brought to bear, in lively exchanges.

The most recent novel under discussion, demonstrated that through the novel form, life and voice can express and explain a political and religious situation in ways that other forms of expression and behaviour cannot. However, the reader, always has to bear in mind that this is just one side of a lived perspective.

Mornings in Jenin by Susan Abulhawa, is a powerful story of four generations of the Abulheja family's endurance through sixty years of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from 1941 until 2002. The upheaval from a settled, farming existence, they experience upheaval from their Ein Hod homeland, and in the process, the youngest child, Ismael, is snatched from his mother's arms by an Israeli soldier.

The remaining family along with other Palestinian refugees are chased even from their refugee home in Jenin. Wherever the innocent find themselves they find no answers to the bombs and force of the Israeli army. Even the United Nations are powerless to protect them.

I hope that readers of this piece will go on to read this wonderful, yet harrowing, book in spite of the dramatic portrayal of suffering, expressed in the most beautiful prose, which impresses the reader through the portrayal of unfairness of life on the weak and vulnerable. However, in the end one comes to recognise that the victory of the weak is in the strength of character they find in the face of death. To reveal more of this family's history would spoil your reading of this book.

The author succeeded in bringing to life and showing how an ordinary Palestinian family were hounded from place to place, fleshing out historical events and family history. The prose of the book and the plot moved me and the members of the reading group as it will move anyone who reads it.

If readers get the opportunity to join an existing reading group or even set one up of their own, I would certainly recommend it.

Joan Wilkinson

N.B :Front Page picture of Essex Hall, Headquarters of the GAUFCC

Here I Stand

Unitarians like to declare that they are ‘building their own theology’ and that their ultimate authority in matters of religion must be their own conscience ; this presents them with both a challenge and a difficulty - on the one hand to present a coherent statement of their personal faith and other hand to indicate some commonality of belief and outlook with their fellow Unitarians.

Over the last few issues, a number of members have contributed essays on this theme . I was pleased recently to receive a further contribution from our most distant members , Ross Howard, in Australia . He is still a lay preacher on the GA Roll and it is good to have news from him again after a break of a few years. Ross sees the British movement from a considerable geographical distance and, like our past President, Rev. Bill Darlison, in recent articles in *The Inquirer* , feels that the movement has ‘lost its way’ in recent years. He submitted his own ‘fundamentals’ for Unitarianism as follows :-

- The adoration of such living and available expressions of compassion and holiness as Jesus, Mary, the Buddha and Kuan-yin
- A respect for the Christian origins and traditions of the Unitarian movement.
- A scholarly and critical attitude towards the Biblical and associated texts
- A sympathetic appreciation of the beliefs and practices of other world religions.
- The absolute equality of men and women..
- Chastity, except when children are desired.
- The afterlife—that an individual’s life continues on after physical death and that psychical contact is possible.

If you read the contributions of other members to this theme, I think you will find more agreement in their thoughts than divergence .

Bill Darlison claims that current Unitarianism offers no answers to the ‘Big Questions- Who Am I, Why Am I Here, What’s the Point of It All ? Is he right ? Feel free to share your thoughts on this together .

Winter sun

I looked into the January sun
and I saw there only a blinding light,
not the face of God nor of his angels,
but a mysterious power I could not
comprehend - ineffable and divine.

I looked down at the sunlit dappled path
where crumpled leaves, discarded victims
of Autumn's shedding, every vein awash
with molten gold, lay beneath my feet
as if to make a carpet for a queen.

The bitumen blazed anew with minute
coloured stones, exquisitely enhanced
in that miracle of transmuted light;
delicate webs glistened on rusty iron,
frail witness to everlasting beauty.

Thus was the metamorphosis made clear,
mighty strength and simple loveliness now
become one along the path where I walked
beneath the burning celestial globe,
God immanent in all his creation.

My whole being, body and soul, suffused
with love and joy, to Him I gave my thanks,
not only for the sun's shimmering fire,
but for small things, delicate and humble,
made glorious at his gentle command.

God be praised Amen So may it be
Naomi Linnell

Charnwood Fellowship Learn about the Canaan Trust

At the February meeting our numbers swelled to seventeen as friends joined with Fellowship regulars to hear the visiting speaker, Kevin Curtis, from Canaan Trust in Long Eaton.

Canaan Trust seeks to provide safe, secure, non-judgemental and healthy temporary accommodation for twelve homeless men of any race or religion. Why are men more likely than women to become homeless you may wonder? Women are considered by society to be more vulnerable than men if they become homeless and therefore are usually found accommodation quickly.

The Trust is dedicated to enabling each client to rebuild his life. Twelve homeless men live in two houses. These are not hostels providing only a place to sleep and perhaps have breakfast. These houses provide a home within which they are safe and where they learn skills for living as well as basic maths and English. Over recent years there has been a rapidly increasing number of residents with mental health conditions, men who should be in treatment rather than living on the streets. We heard just how difficult it is to get the necessary treatment for the clients as both social services and mental health services have diminishing resources and feel after all that the clients from Canaan Trust do have a home.

The scheme began in 1995 following a disturbing incident in the town. Kenny, a well-known and well-liked homeless man had been sleeping rough for many years. During winter he felt better protected from the elements if he slept in a skip on an industrial estate on the edge of town. One night some young lads thought they would have 'a bit of a laugh' by setting light to the contents of the skip. Kenny was severely burnt but survived. A minister from one of the local churches gave Kenny a home with him. But this triggered of the idea amongst that congregation that they too were called on to 'feed the poor' and give respite to those who had lost everything. Thus the Canaan Trust was

born.

For several years the scheme was supported by an annual payment from the Government of £125,000 but was run totally by volunteers. However, when the recent Coalition came into power this ‘ring-fenced’ funding was withdrawn. It was felt by Government that it would be better to give that funding to the Councils, who would know where the money was most needed. In spite of this set-back, the project continued to grow with the generous support of the local communities in the area.

The Trust now employs a Counsellor and tutors for maths and English. It works closely with the local foodbank to supply food to clients recently re-housed and ‘sofa-surfers’, those who are without a home but who manage to sleep on the sofa of a friend until the friend gets tired of having a permanent visitor and asks them to leave. Clients are helped in securing work, either through work experience or as a volunteer until a more permanent position can be found. When the client is able they are encouraged and supported in finding a home. Often the client secures an unfurnished flat to rent, and the Trust, through their network of supporters and volunteers find items of furniture, plus all those small items necessary to set up home. These are all donated and transported to the client’s new home. This volunteer network continues to support those who they have helped, from a state homelessness and helplessness, towards being a fulfilled and contributing member of society.

We heard several stories of ordinary men, both young and not so young, who had found themselves without a home through no fault of their own. Any previously held stereotypical thoughts about the nature of homeless people were thoroughly dispelled.

The speaker read the following piece to us:

Homelessness is not an ‘IT’, it is a ‘They’

‘They’ are fathers, sons, and brothers;

‘They’ are human beings;

‘They’ are judged, misjudged, ignored.

and viewed with suspicion.

‘They’ have labels stuck to them –

loser, waster, and scrounger, deserve their lot!

‘They’ rarely experience the label that says,
fragile, handle with care, or the gentle approach
that comes with it.

If ‘They’ happen to pass your way remember

‘They’ have feelings too, and if misfortune should
strike then ‘They’ may become ‘You!’

Much of the success must go to the dynamic work of Kevin in particular and his volunteers generally. Charnwood Fellowship presented Kevin with a cheque of £50 from existing funds and £91.31 was donated on the evening as well. I’m sure if you have a homeless project in an area near you they would be very happy to come and talk to your congregation or fellowship.

Joan Wilkinson

WHY US? How Science Rediscovered the Mystery of Ourselves by James Le Fanu.

Reviewed by Rev Phil Silk

This is one of the most challenging books I have read in ages and I heartily recommend it. He spends most of the book raising questions, which I love. I do not, however, agree with the main thrust of his conclusions,; it may be that his convictions came before his study. What he believes is that materialist explanations of reality do not and cannot explain the wondrous variety and complexity of life, especially our unique consciousness . Instead, he is a dualist, finding the non-physical realm unaccounted for by physical processes. “We inhabit the spiritual domain of the self, the soul, the ‘I’, with its several interconnected parts which, being non-material, and thus not constrained by the material laws governing the brain, is free to choose one thought over another or one course of action over another. No one really knows why there is anything at all, let alone where we came from, how we can experience the external and internal worlds, or how much freedom individuals have.

(*continued on page 15*)

A Memorial for Tommy

Tommy, a well-known homeless man, was found dead in an open shelter on Sidmouth sea front after the coldest night of the year so far. An alcoholic, he had often spent the night in the porch of the Unitarian Church, and had been helped on many occasions by people connected with us, so it was only fitting for our congregation to host a 'memorial service' for him. Around seventy people from the Town attended. A number of the 'homeless community' were present (most of whom actually now have some sort of roof over their heads), together with several town councillors and representatives from other Churches and organisations in the town: the Food Bank, which operates from our premises, and often provided him with food; the local Christian cafe just over the road; and local people who had donated warm clothing and cared for him when he was ill.

A native of southern Ireland, Tommy had come to England over twenty years ago. He seemed to enjoy his life 'on the road' although his family had never really lost touch with him. He moved around a lot, but after several years in Exeter he came to Sidmouth, and was known to be sleeping in the Unitarian Church porch during the Folk Festival last August. More recently he had enjoyed listening to the Blues Band who use our premises for regular rehearsals. In the autumn of 2014 he told one of his many friends that he had decided to give up drinking and try to get some sort of permanent shelter – but there was nothing available at that time, so he started drinking again, although he knew it would eventually kill him.

The 'Memorial for Tommy' included music of many kinds, which he had apparently enjoyed, as well as poems and tributes from his many of his friends. We had prayers and a brief meditation too of course, and ended with the traditional funeral hymn 'Abide with me' (sung unaccompanied as none of the musicians present were happy to use our piano). Afterwards there were more memories over tea and cake in one of our halls, and then a discussion on how the Town could pre-

vent such a tragedy in the future. Inevitably voices were raised to begin with, but after half an hour or so, people were listening to what others were saying, and a plan of action was drawn up. We all hope that some permanent good can come of this meeting.

Meanwhile, Tommy's body has been released by the Coroner and taken home to Ireland, to be interred in his parents' grave. May he – at last – rest in peace.

Elizabeth Barlow

(continued from page 13)

He agrees, but scolds scientists for being too fact- minded, too limited to reason, and too dogmatic. He looks at the history of science and concludes the theory of evolution is both wrong and blocking our full development. He argues that there must be a Designer God, because the world is too clever to be accidental. He does not explore how this 'designer' functions after creation starts. So this is a mixture of knowledge and assumptions, very interestingly presented. In fact, I was loaned the book and was making so many notes I bought my own copy so I could mark it up and I look forward to re-reading it sometime. I do wish he had attempted to explore how the two halves of human experience connect. Typical of a Unitarian, I consider whatever exists is a unity, with plenty of diversity. I think we are bodies which can amazingly provide consciousness when working properly; but how it works, who knows.

Keep learning...

Rev Phil Silk has been a welcome contributor to our pages for many years . Many of his complete services with sermons are available on the Unitarian Internet Forum and they have been read by visitors to the site over a thousand times ! Do take a look at them—they are on the open part of the site which does not require registration.

Living with Hearing Loss

It is estimated that 1 in 7 of the population has reduced hearing to some degree. Some are born with no hearing, others find their hearing declines with age, some lose their hearing at a young age and for others it happens in later life. There are linked disabilities of tinnitus, a continuous or intermittent sound in the ears in the absence of sound stimulus and balance problems brought on by hearing loss.

I noticed increasing difficulty in hearing other people in social situations about five years ago; I was in denial about it for some time, blaming it on others' poor diction and bad acoustics of rooms. I finally gave in and had a hearing test. My loss is mild and is typical of age related hearing loss—I no longer hear the higher frequency sounds as having a clear pitch. The upper sounds of violins and flutes are often lost completely and consonant sounds in words are sometimes unclear as they are located in the same higher frequency part of the spectrum.

My wife has experienced increasing loss for many years and about three years ago her hearing declined markedly to the point where she was informed that she had reached the limits of what assistance could be supplied merely by stronger hearing aids. It was suggested that she consider having a cochlear implant, which involves having a series of electrodes on a thin wire inserted directly into the cochlear of the ear; to this is attached a digital processor which picks up the sounds of speech and the environment and converts them into digital signals which are sent directly through the implant to the brain. This involves surgery with the drilling a small hole in the skull through which the implant is inserted, attached just under the skin to a magnet to which the digital processor is fixed. Great care is taken by implant teams to make candidates for this treatment fully aware that it does not guarantee success and that a consequence is that any residual hearing in the ear to which the digital processor is attached will be lost as a result of the surgery.

It takes some time for the new implant wearer to become accustomed to the digitally presented sound but my wife is already hearing sounds that she has not heard naturally for many years.

Not everyone has hearing loss severe enough to be considered for cochlear implant treatment. Hearing aids are now more discreet and sophisticated than the cumbersome aids of a generation ago. Most aids now have a 'T' or 'loop' setting, which can be used in any public building which has been equipped with the necessary equipment. Many churches display a notice that a loop is available. Sound from microphones attached to the base unit of the loop, often wirelessly, enable those with hearing loss to hear directly through their hearing aids without environmental distractions.

If you are a member of a church which is not yet so equipped, please consider asking the committee to consider its installation. Particularly in Unitarian churches, which do not adhere to a fixed liturgy and do not follow a service book, it is very isolating for hearing impaired members if they cannot follow what is being said. An alternative would be to display the texts of the service on a screen; preachers seem increasingly to use digital devices for their service material. At the request of several members, the monthly NUF video meditation on our website is now accompanied by a pdf version of the text.

If you have hearing impaired members of your congregation who are good lip readers consider earmarking seats for them close to the worship leader, who needs to remember to speak slightly slower and enunciate clearly. I heard one preacher whose voice 'tailed off' at the end of sentences, which made it difficult to follow the sense of what was being said; even in a small meeting house speakers need to 'project' their voice above the conversational level.

The charity 'Hearing Link' can provide information about types of equipment both for individuals and also for churches. They also have a wealth of material about coping with hearing loss. Find them on the internet at: www.hearinglink.org.

Ken Smith

Motions for the General Assembly Meetings : Mar– April 2015

The tabling of motions for discussion at the GA meetings is a tradition of the occasion. They include discussion of internal matters of organisation, congratulations to various organisations and persons as well as matters of social concern.

In a very abbreviated form, I list the motions tabled for the 2015 meeting.

1. That...this GA believes that the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) ...would hand over ...power and influence ..to multi /trans– national corporations and would likely impact unfairly on many of the poorest in societies across the globe.
- 2, That ...we request the EC ...to develop a programme initially for three years ...with the aim of fostering stronger community cohesion between ethnic groups and Unitarians and different faiths on the local and national levels
3. That the GA recognises the contribution of Dawn Buckle to Unitarians in the UK by naming her an Honorary Member.
4. That the GA ..recognising the universal kinship of all sentient beings encourage Unitarians to support the Universal Kinship Fund of the Dr. Hadwen Trust...to advance non– animal medical research .
5. That the GA congratulates the International council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU) on its 20th Anniversary .
6. That the GA asks the EC to devise ...recommendations of payment for organists/directors of music in the same way that guidelines as it provides guidelines for worship leaders' remuneration.

If you have views on any of these topics that you would wish to contribute to the debates, please let me know by March 27th at the latest and preferably by e-mail ; I will also post these motions on the NUF Unitarian Internet Forum for comments ; I am acting as the NUF delegate this year ; although I have views on some of these topics, if I have the chance to contribute to the discussions at the GA I shall make clear whether I am speaking for myself or passing on the thoughts of NUF members.

Ken Smith

Future Events

A full listing of future Unitarian events may be found at :-
<http://www.unitarian.org.uk/get-involved/events>

If you are moving to a new area and want to find links with Unitarians there, your local District Association may be able to help . Contacts for all the District Associations can be found at :-
<http://www.unitarian.org.uk/pages/districts>

New Members

A warm welcome to members who have joined in recent months -

Terri Quaye
Nicholas Saunders
Robin Hume
Richard Beare

The next edition of the Newsletter will contain reports of some of the General Assembly meetings.

If you have wish to continue discussion of any of the topics in the Newsletter or Viewpoint publications , there is the Unitarian Internet Forum (UIF) and the NUF Facebook page available . The UIF is a slightly ‘slower’ form of discussion than Facebook—both require an e-mail address and a simple form of registration .

If you would like to submit an article for possible inclusion in a future edition of the Newsletter , please send it _ e-mail preferred—to the editor by 18th April . Submissions will be acknowledged.

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