

National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
and Free Christian Churches
Established 1945

Viewpoint



The interior of Octagon Unitarian Chapel, Norwich
Photo courtesy of James Rouse (www.jamesrouse.com)

Three Sermons

by

Rev Charles Vanden Broeder
Rev Celia Cartwright Rev Art Lester

Issue 215



Feb 2011

Registered Charity 1040294

Three Sermons

It is a pleasure to introduce sermons from three Unitarian ministers. Each is actively serving a congregation in the United Kingdom. Each comes from a different background and with different shades of Unitarian belief. Quite often a very good sermon will only be heard by a small congregation and then left to gather dust in the minister's computer or filing cabinet. These days many ministers (and lay preachers) preserve their work on a personal or chapel web site or on a Blog. The NUF also has a 'sermons' section on its web site. I hope you enjoy these three varied contributions. Don't forget when you read them that they were written to be preached!

tony mcneile, editor

A Sermon by Rev Charles Vanden Broeder

All of us, at one time or another, have given some thought to what happens to us after we die. Early on, I rejected the more traditional concepts of heaven and hell. Heaven always seemed too boring to be true and hell too ghastly. I just couldn't imagine a loving God condemning anyone to an eternity of pain. This left me with what I call the "divine recycling" concept.

This entails a ceasing of consciousness after death. Our individual personality is lost but not the divine spark in each of us. This goes back to God to be reused. But this has never been completely satisfying to me, as it gives no real purpose to life. It also gives no value to suffering or an impetus to be good or seek spiritual growth. The inadequacy of the "divine recycling" theory has led me to continue my search for a better explanation.

One of the pathways, which I am exploring, is the concept of reincarnation. Of particular interest to me is what happens to your spirit or soul at the time of death and the period between lives. To gain knowledge about this from a Western perspective I read "Life after Life" by Dr Raymond Moody and "Life between Life" by Dr Joel Whitton and Joe Fisher. I would like to share what I have found.

Dr Moody relates the experiences of people who were thought to be dead. This is called a 'near death' experience. Moody's subjects spoke of seeing their bodies and being immersed in a variety of sensations, which removed their fear of death. This experience is wide spread and Unitarians in this country have related to me having undergone such experiences.

Patients of both Drs Moody and Whitton told of being drawn through a tunnel towards a bright light. Deceased relatives or a spirit they identify with. Christ often meets them. Each undergoes intense feelings of love, joy, and peace. They all have a vision, which is unique to them. Perhaps the reason it is so different for everyone is because the inter-life period is not a place in a material sense so they attempt to describe it using the only frame of reference they know.

Dr Whitton is a Canadian physician who uses regression therapy when conventional medicine and psychotherapy fail to work. This involves encouraging patients while under hypnosis to regress not only backward in this life but to what all intents and purposes are past lives. Whether or not these are real past lives is debateable but the process has been shown to have therapeutical effects. I foolishly underwent a session of regression therapy out of curiosity, which Dr Whitton and others advise against, I experienced something that even now I am unable to entirely explain.

During a regression therapy session, Dr Whitton stumbled upon a state which occurred between past lives. A belief in some in-between state is common to those cultures, which accept the idea of reincarnation as is an enforced amnesia in regards to previous lives and what happened during the in-between-time. Dr Whitton's patients, however, were all Westerners raised in a Judeo-Christian culture.

Some people describe the initial state as becoming one with a blinding light. An all-powerful rapture obliterates fear and negativity as the soul is reabsorbed into the undifferentiated oneness. This sounds a lot like heaven to me. Others see visions of colours and light or choirs of angels and Jesus with open arms. Could it be that we get the heaven we want?

This initial state of bliss doesn't last forever, however. Sooner or later, according to both Dr Moody and Dr Whitton's subjects, all are called before a panel of wise spirits or judges. It is interesting to note that the numbers is usually three. Could this be where the idea of the Trinity really comes from?

Each soul is confronted with a flashback of their entire life. They then feel any suffering they had inflicted on others. If there is a hell this is probably it. In addition to feeling the pain you caused others, great waves of remorse, guilt and self-recrimination engulf you. But the purpose of coming before the board is not to punish but to heal.

The board of judgement expresses encouragement pointing out where the life has been positive and progressive. The panel also points out how even the most horrible experiences can be used to one's advantage. Their aim is to encourage and help the soul learn from its mistakes so that it can further develop spiritually.

One of the most interesting discoveries Dr Whitton made during his research was that many use the inter-life period to plan their next life. The knowledge gained from previous lives enables the soul to make vital decisions about what they want to happen in the next one.

The judgement panel acts in an advisory capacity in this instance. They advise what the soul needs for its further development, which isn't always what it wants to hear. The advice they give usually involves a high degree of difficulty and challenge. Apparently, as the soul evolves, each incarnation becomes progressively more challenging and difficult.

The detail in which each life is planned is determined on an individual basis. Less developed souls seem to require more detail while the more evolved ones provide themselves with a general outline. They can use their creative abilities to meet the more challenging situations. Those who fail to meet the challenges they set for themselves are urged to continue placing themselves in similar situations in each successive life until they get it right. Those who fail to plan at all (there are some) often find in retrospect that their life had been confusing and wasteful.

Suicide becomes only a temporary escape as in the next life you will find yourself in a similar situation. This particular phenomenon I have run across in other sources. In a way, it is a two-edged sword, as it can give consolation to those who have lost someone through suicide but it points out the utter futility of committing the act.

Those who are concerned with their development spend much of the inter-life period in study and planning for the next life. Those who are materialistic inclined will rush into reincarnation while those devoid of ambition spend their time in "sleep" until they are pushed into it.

There is no predetermined outcome for those who plan. Things can go horribly wrong. But those who fail to plan are playing Russian roulette with their souls. After the crucial decisions have been made all that remains is to proceed to the next life.

Death is seen as a true homecoming, a welcome respite from strife and struggle. Birth is seen as the first day of a tough new project. While some eagerly look forward to the challenge of earthly existence many are reluctant to surrender the inter-life state.

Before beginning a new life each soul must pass through a barrier—symbolised in Greco-Roman mythology as the River of Forgetfulness—and memory of the inter-life fades. This is to prevent the soul from longing for the inter-life and to repress any knowledge of the plans it may have made. You can't learn something, if you already have the answers in front of you.

I found it interesting that there were so many similarities in the stories people told of the inter-life stage. But what is most important to me is the message they all brought back. We are completely responsible for who we are and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We are the ones who do the choosing. Is this all true or a figment of people's imaginations?

To tell the truth, I'm not sure. But one thing is for certain, there is too much to dismiss it as nonsense, so I'll continue to keep an open mind about it. What are your thoughts?

A Sermon by Rev Celia Cartwright

Another New Year, another challenge to do, to be.....more

Another New Year, another year older, it may be a good year, it may be a bad year, it may be just another year, another year for living. In some ways we are flotsam . We will float on through the year, buffeted by winds over which we have no control. We will complain about the rise in VAT and the subsequent shrinking of our purses and wallets. We will catch colds, have falls, injure ourselves a little or a lot and we will be changed a little or a lot by our sufferings. We will take holidays, vacations or (I love the modern imagery) STAYcations, in which we stay home and enjoy our own area – these will be successful or not. We will celebrate the seasons and festivals of the year, we will celebrate birthdays (trying perhaps not to count the years, but rather just enjoy the limelight for a moment). We will watch, listen or read 'news' local, national and global and we will be touched, moved, horrified, relieved, joyous. Our experiences this year will change us by degrees, and our understanding of these experiences will add to the sum of our knowledge. We will choose to let this new knowledge change us or we will resist and remain in the same place in our understanding of life. And for all of these things, this time next year, some or all of us will gather here together to scratch another notch on the door frame of human existence.

All of the above will be so, it is what everyday life is about, life continues from cradle to grave and for much of it we have no option but to simply go along with it. But, also, along the way, we are sometimes offered chances to choose different paths, to grasp life differently and make something more of it. Isn't that what we do when we fall in love, marry, have children, change jobs or careers? We take a leap of faith and hope; not knowing where our path will lead, but taking it anyway.

All of us have the opportunity to exist or live. All of us have the opportunity to make a differ-

ence to our own life and to the life of others. Many of the good people in my congregation do this on a regular basis – working in the voluntary sector for the good of people with less opportunity or ability or skill than they have, Vera works for those who have severe hearing loss, Marilyn works for those born with cerebral palsy, Michael, Sally, Marjorie, Muriel and many others, working to serve the community of Kendal and this chapel every week, making and serving tea and coffee, baking scones, arranging flowers and so on; John and Katie, use their skills and love of this faith to stretch the boundaries of understanding Unitarianism, not just in Kendal, with its mural, and posters on our walls and wayside pulpit, but throughout Britain and beyond.

As we stand on the threshold of a new year, I suspect we might all be wondering what we might make of this New Year in our lives – and wondering too if there is actually anything of any real substance we might be able to do to make a difference to either our lives or the lives of others. The answer is that there is always something we can do, something we can offer, and I suggest that finding that something is the fuel that makes our life worthwhile. The things we find to offer may be small or large, but when we come across opportunities to be useful I believe we owe it to ourselves and each other to find out where they will lead us. It matters not whether we are strong or weak, young or old, just that we make the very most of each day offered to us. I want to share with you the stories of two men, each in their way took what was offered in life – the road so very little travelled – and made the best of their gifts.

I wonder if any of you have read the book “The Diving Bell and the Butterfly” by Jean-Dominique Bauby a man who, through injury, suffers what is known as ‘locked-in’ syndrome. He lies in a hospital bed, unable to do anything for himself, he is given breath through a ventilator, he is fed through a tube, the only part of his body he is able to move is one eye-lid. A pretty dire circumstance, no one can doubt, very little in the way of opportunity one might think. But with this one eyelid, he dictates a book, a book that tells of his experience in that state and it is not a tale of misery, self-pity and woe, on the contrary, it is one of humour and great insight, a voice to leave his precious children and the world.

Jean-Dominique is only able to live in his mind and rather than give in to terror, he creates delight; on page 36 he writes: “Once, I was a master of recycling leftovers. Now I cultivate the art of simmering memories. You can sit down to a meal at any hour, with no fuss or ceremony. If it's a restaurant, no need to call ahead. If I do the cooking, it is always a success.” He goes on to comment: “Best part is indigestion is never a problem.”

I could not find my copy of the book as I sat to write this and was grateful for the miracle of the internet – where I found a delightful review of the book by Bobby Matherne, written in 1999 – as I agree with all he says so I decided to borrow his words and share them with you:

In his room (Matherne writes) he receives mail and his nurses hold the letters spread out before him so he can read them. He takes notice of a curious phenomenon that others would do well to notice: if one is superficial in conversation about one's thoughts, others will not reveal the depths of their thoughts.

Some of them are serious in tone, discussing the meaning of life, invoking the supremacy of the soul, the mystery of every existence. And by a curious reversal, the people who focus most closely on these fundamental questions tend to be people I had known only superficially.

Near the end of the book, Bauby is reduced to examining the contents of the half-opened purse of his stenographic assistant, Claude. Napkins, folded franc notes, metro tickets, keys,

"keys" he thinks:

Does the cosmos contain keys for opening up my diving bell? A subway line with no terminus? A currency strong enough to buy my freedom back? We must keep looking. I'll be off now.

Thus he ends the book. On the book jacket it says, "Jean-Dominique Bauby died two days after the French publication of his book. *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is a lasting testament to life."

A lasting testament to a life that did not possess obvious opportunities to give something to the world. What about those who are not locked in their mind but into a situation that seems beyond hope?

I met a man a few years ago, whose work I think I can without doubt say is a testament to life. He was a member of the Dublin congregation when Bill Darlison was minister there. It was during a UALL conference (UALL stood for Unitarian Association for Lay Leaders) back in the late nineteen nineties, when the subject for thought was 'Conflict Resolution' and the man I met was Chris Hudson; who we learned was something of an expert in the field.

You may have read in the Guardian newspaper during the first week in January, about the Ulster Volunteer Force in Northern Ireland plans to end Paramilitary activity. Whereas the headline is disappointing, it says such plans are unlikely – the article goes on to talk of the officers of the UVF now forging the will to end the armed nature of its being. There is still a long way to go before the generations long fear within the tight communities lets go its hold, but here is a glimmer of hope. Such beginnings are brought about by brave men and women I dare say (I only know of Chris personally) who have since the early nineteen nineties and before acted as go-betweens between the warring factions, gently listening, talking, mediating. Chris Hudson was born and brought up in Dublin, raised as a Catholic and influenced by the politics of his youth, the 'troubles' that beset Ireland and Northern Ireland for so long. He took a difficult and dangerous decision to work as a peacemaker between north and south, Catholic and Protestant, Loyalist and Republican, UVF and IRA. Chris is now a Unitarian minister in Northern Ireland where such liberal Christians are known as 'Non-Subscribing Presbyterians'. Chris, having helped to bring about the "Good Friday Agreement" the "Northern Ireland Peace Agreement" (much of his often dangerous work he talked to us of during that UALL conference) is still involved with bringing about peace between divided communities speaks on behalf of the current discussions, is now also the unofficial Christian Chaplain to the Gay community in Ulster – a fact I find most unsurprising! For all his upbringing, Chris became a person so trusted that he could move between the factions – always a dangerous journey, but so necessary to the bringing of peace.

Much of the work of people like Chris is unknown, it is a slow and gentle listening and informing, one side of the equation and then the other, slowly bringing entrenched people out of their trenches to meet on common ground. Such work is life affirming, it is progressive, it is a life bent to opening the diving bell and letting those trapped within out; and it reminds me of the last words of Jean-Dominique:

Does the cosmos contain keys for opening up my diving bell? A subway line with no terminus? A currency strong enough to buy my freedom back? We must keep looking.

Whatever our skills, our interests, our abilities, it seems we owe it to humanity, to the universe to keep searching for the keys, to keep looking for ways to enable humanity's journey onward. The new year always feels like a new opportunity to start over and so many of us talk of turning over new leaves, making resolutions to change; true most of us falter at the first hurdle, but we have to go on trying; we are all capable of making life better for someone, for ourselves, for others; not necessarily with grand actions, but mostly with gentle thoughts and actions – with small things. This year offers us another year of life, and though we may never be asked, expected, or impelled to do the great things done by the Chris Hudsons and Jean-Dominique Baubys of this world; each day we are offered the opportunity to make the most of life. Let me end with the words of another person who achieved great things in her life, who once said "I expected to be free, but God had other plans!" Mother Teresa of Calcutta who said:

Life is an opportunity, benefit from it. Life is beauty, admire it. Life is bliss, taste it. Life is a dream, realize it. Life is a challenge, meet it. Life is a duty, complete it. Life is a game, play it. Life is a promise, fulfill it. Life is sorrow, overcome it. Life is a song, sing it. Life is a struggle, accept it. Life is a tragedy, confront it. Life is an adventure, dare it. Life is luck, make it. Life is too precious, do not destroy it. Life is life, fight for it.

Happy New Year of Life to us all.

Rev Celia Cartwright is the minister at the Unitarian Chapel in Kendal

A Sermon by Rev Art Lester

Up Close and Personal

Just before we moved back to London four years ago, my wife Gilly and I were on a bus one day. You're supposed to get on at the front and exit at the back. The bus was crowded, and we were crawling along through dense traffic in West London. Several people came forward at stops and asked the driver if they could exit from the front door. He obligingly opened the door for them.

At another stop, a woman came forward just like the others. She was a black woman in her forties. The driver was a white man. When she asked him to open the front door, he shook his head. The woman started to plead with him, but he just looked out the windscreen and paid no attention. In the end she had to scramble to the back doors to get off. I saw her walking along the pavement as we crept slowly toward Ealing. She was muttering, and, I believe, cursing. Two streets farther along, she was still there, glaring at the driver and talking to herself.

The incident left me with a sick feeling. It had clearly been a case of discrimination, but the driver hadn't actually done anything improper, according to the rules. But he knew, and she knew, and Gilly and I-- sitting embarrassedly near the front-- all knew that something ugly had taken place. And it seemed to me, watching the woman's face, that a small homeopathic dose of poison had been released into the flowing current of the city. The waters in which we all swim had become a little darker, and—it may be—a little more dangerous.

It reminded me of a story one of the members of the Dublin congregation told me, about a

black woman arriving late for a bus, burdened with packages, and holding up the coach's departure by a few minutes. She was politely treated, and when she finally got on board, she was smiling and saying, "I feel blessed. I am blessed."

This corollary, it seems to me is exact: if the woman felt blessed, then the other must have felt cursed. In two routine incidents, repeated millions of times each day, the curse or blessing was released into the world. In each case, they were results that spread beyond the confines of the moment. In the latter, I'm sure everyone aboard the bus felt the warmth of the woman's blessing; on the mean streets of London, I'm sure that others felt the pain of the other woman's curse. These incidents are minor; they don't lend themselves to treatment of law and sanctions. And yet they affect our lives in ways we can't measure. Like the butterfly's wing beats in the Amazon, they may create a hurricane in Europe.

It isn't a giant leap from that incident to another bus five years ago, when the fanatical kid from Leeds blew himself and 14 others up in Tavistock Square. Poison collected over time, nursed in alienation and then carefully cultivated by those who can find a use for it, is ultimately capable of grave acts of violence. Anecdote piled on rumour and cooked in isolation becomes a new and deadly form of abstraction. The years of lynching in my native American South, the so-called "peaceful demonstrations" of the English defence league are examples of this. The banner may read "racial purity" or patriotic fervour. It may also be named "jihad."

Once the anecdotal becomes the abstract, and murder is done under one banner or another, then simple killings become acts of heroism, and mere suicide becomes "martyrdom." It has ceased to be a personal phenomenon at all. That is why I am convinced that people who commit mass murder would probably say, in a chilling echo of the Mafia, "Nothing personal. Just business."

We have all heard of what is called the law of karma. It basically says that all human experience is a result of cause and effect. A parallel to the Newtonian law of physics that states "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." The Californian jargon is a bit more understandable: "What goes around comes around."

This is a wise half-truth. I call it a half-truth because it doesn't usually get beyond the concerns of the individual life. At its most basic, it says that if you are violent then you will be the victim of violence.

If you are greedy you will be the victim of greed. It is a kind of moral code to keep people in line, a version of the so-called "Golden Rule": "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Like any moral prescription, it has its selfish undercurrents. You might as well say, "Be nice to people and you will get a nice reward." That's different from the idea that being nice to people for its own sake is the way to live.

Jesus and other masters seem to have had a different take on the subject. When being asked about this odd thing called the "kingdom of heaven", Jesus is reported to have said that it was "at hand." That means nearby, by the way—I looked it up. It makes me think that he was saying that the kingdom of heaven was where he was already living, that he was, in fact, the first citizen of a new and different kind of world.

In this world he was living in, things seem to be irrational. You love your enemies. You bless those who curse you. If someone importunes you for your coat, you give him your shirt as well. If he pops you one, you offer up the other cheek for him to hit. He didn't seem to be say-

ing that this would store up good karma for you, or that, after being hit any number of times that you would, say, win the lottery. He seemed to be saying that the kingdom of heaven works that way. And I get from that that the kingdom of heaven, or the better world we hope for, is acquired just this way—in the forgoing of personal reward for the sake of something much more important. Something frustratingly hard to define, and invisible. By living according to the rules of this kingdom, it seems to say, you are actually helping to bring it about.

But surely we can't actually live as Jesus seemed to be suggesting! We have to look after our own interests. Everything in creation follows that pattern. The lion doesn't avoid eating a kudu calf out of pity any more than a big business lion avoids the sad necessity of asset-stripping a small family business. The trees themselves struggle to gain the most light and leave the others in shadow, so of course we compete for jobs and money, sometimes doing things that maybe we shouldn't in order to gain the sunlight of success. It is our biological mandate, that nouveau-Darwinian idea that so excites the prophets of meaninglessness like our friend Richard Dawkins.

And yet the stories of the great souls are there to disturb our merry competing. The man who sacrifices his life to save a drowning boy. The leader of a liberation struggle making himself a target for assassins. The market investor, like my friend, a former member at Kensington, who has given over a billion pounds to a charity to save children in Africa. Like sacrificing mothers and grandfathers in all ages, like St Francis of Assisi the leper kisser, and like the unknown millions who have let slide their own advantages in order to bring about something that feels right. So we have this inbuilt value too, and the tug-of-war between the two poles of our natures could be said to define us.

More than anything, I think that is what the tantalising injunctions of the young rabbi Jesus were about. Put simply, if we can learn to hear the far-off anthem of a coming kingdom and let our selfish advantage slip, we may find a way to survive. Maybe not the kingdom of heaven, but certainly a world in which fairness, not dollar-and-cents morality sets the programme.

In very recent times I seem to sense that things have turned a bit uglier. Gilly and I talk about this often. It sometimes seems that there is a kind of tide of goodwill that has surrounded us without our noticing it for most of our years on earth. Not that the harsh realities of the past were not painful and severe, but that there were certain—call them “core values” if you like—that went without analysis because they were always there.

This could be the ranting of a grumpy old man—it wouldn't surprise me if it were. It's not as if teenagers have never gone around stabbing each other. As a recent Guardian article pointed out, that's what Romeo and Juliet is all about. It's not as if fanaticism has never before gained the upper hand in political life; there have always been those who were willing to sacrifice their humanity for the sake of an idea. What I am talking about comes in the form of a hunch. I think that a kind of chaos lurks just outside the periphery of our normal lives.

It probably has a lot to do with the gradual working through into everyday perception of the relativity factor unleashed by Einstein and other geniuses. There is no absolute to which we can now cling. Instead of moral certainty, we have the droll slogan of the Beat Generation: “compared to what?” Or as teenagers say it nowadays: “Whatever.” Matthew Arnold lamented the ebb tide of faith in his poem “Dover Beach”, even as he gave a subtle mark of approval to the process. We have lost faith, and what is worse, we cannot even imagine how it might be reclaimed. There is no wise God, we fear, who will reward the virtuous and punish the wicked,

no court of last resort for the lost and helpless. "In God we trust," emblazoned on every American coin, might well read, "trust the market."

But I think there is something more than the rubbishing of traditional theology at work here. My feeling is that there are things for which we have no name, perhaps things inscribed in our genes that have kept an invisible medium of good will within reach. These are root ideas and feelings, so deep that they could hardly even be observed, that made up the field in which we humans have our being. Some things simply are not done. Some things are sacred. Some things will cause pain in the shrivelled conscience of a sociopath. These are the ideas that seem now to be at risk.

People often ask—I do myself—what a purely individual act has to do with the greater sum of human experience. I was nearly stung by a bee on a train one day not long ago. I flung the insect to the floor and was about to crush him when a man who looked as if he had been sleeping rough put his hand on my arm and said, "Don't kill him." It brought me back to myself, and I was grateful. He was exhibiting one of these mysterious hidden ideas that bind us together.

I believe that this tide that can sustain us or wash us away lives in the macro-world of everyday behaviour. That is solely and exclusively where it has its existence. No laws, government programmes, miracle insights can help this. Every one of us, in a very real sense, is responsible for the well-being of the world. That's what the young rabbi was talking about 2,000 years ago. If we can find a way to bless when everything screams at us to curse, we are moving partway into his invisible kingdom. If we can swallow our bile and frustration by acquitting an individual person of another race, an immigrant, a Tory, a prostitute, from disdain for the whole of their class, we are slopping a little mortar onto a new set of foundations.

That may just save us, you know.

Rev Art Lester is the minister to the Unitarian congregation in Croydon

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,

Tony McNeile, 102 Turton Rd, BOLTON, BL2 3DY

or E-mail to nuf@nufonline.org.uk

*Cover photo: The interior of Octagon Unitarian Chapel, Norwich
Photography by James Rouse Photography
www.jamesrouse.com*