

National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
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Viewpoint



My Story

by

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INTRODUCTION

People often ask, 'What made you become a minister?' Some ministers can point to a specific moment in their lives when the decision was made, for others it was a calling they felt within themselves and for some it was simply part of a process of personal development.

In this 'Viewpoint' Danny Crosby tells us about himself and the journey that led to him becoming the minister to two congregations in Greater Manchester - Altrincham and Urmston. As he admits in his blog, each arrival heralds a new journey ahead.

My Story

I did not have a particularly religious upbringing. As a teenager I cannot claim to have been anti-religious either, I just didn't see its relevance. I have always been interested in ideas, religious ones being one of many. That said from the age of 11, until my late twenties, I was more interested in political and perhaps philosophical ideas than anything else. Religion just seemed old hat, something from the past.

I grew up in the village of Birstall, in West Yorkshire. In the market square is a statue of Joseph Priestley. Priestley is one of the two founding fathers of British Unitarianism. He was also a major figure in its development in America. I attended the same school that he did, Batley Grammar. Of course we all knew about him but as a scientist, but not as a radical minister of religion. I never once remember any mention of this, as we were growing up. Although perhaps it was mentioned and the reason that it failed to register with me was because I just was not interested. We knew of Priestley the scientist, the man who discovered oxygen and invented soda water...or as we would often say "The man who in-

vented oxygen”.

Throughout most of my life I had very little interest in religion. I was an agnostic who was verging on atheism, although I never quite took the leap of absolute disbelief. My late teens and early twenties were a mixture of hedonism, dark music and left wing politics. I was in a band and we thought we were going to change the world, oh the arrogance of youth. Meanwhile I worked in the civil service. In my mid twenties I came to Manchester and gained a degree in Politics and Modern History and soon after started work as a free-lance historian. It was during this time that Mr Priestley reared his head once again, due to his political radicalism. I hasten to add that even then I paid no attention to his religion.

This all began to change between the years 2002 and 2004 as things changed within me and my experiences of life external to me. This was brought on by my acceptance of and recovery from alcoholism. It was around this time that I began to experience what I know today as God. I had a life changing spiritual experience, I can think of no better way of describing what happened. As a result I began to explore different religions and spiritual groups. I discovered Unitarianism, almost by accident really, but became immediately interested. I soon discovered that there were congregations locally and after a bit more research I began attending Cross Street Chapel, in Manchester.

I can still remember the first service I attended, led by Rev John Midgley, it spoke powerfully to me. I also remember the warmth of the greeting that the handful of folk in attendance extended to me. I can still feel Peter Sampson's handshake as he passed me the hymn book, and gently spoke to me.

I enjoyed every aspect of congregational life; getting to know people first within the congregation and eventually further afield. I spent months bending John's ear about everything, as I did with most people. I joined the choir and an R.E. group and just be-

came part of the place. I felt cared for, I felt loved and I felt welcomed.

Hospitality has to be the key to true religion, in practice. One of my favourite hymns is "All Are Welcome Here" it reads "All are welcome here...all are welcome to seek in spite of fear...to open wide to all our hearts...for all are welcome here." To me this is the whole point of religion, to build communities of love that encourage that search for understanding and meaning, that search beyond the confines of our limited individual selves. I have certainly found that to be true of my chosen Unitarian faith, at its best at least; it encourages each of us as individuals to continue that search but to do so together, unconstrained. I felt welcomed and I was listened to during my time at Cross Street. I found a religious community where I could be myself, but not in isolation; I am certain I would not, could not have discovered so much alone. I did not realise then just how much I would need that community...

I was at work on Thursday morning, November 2nd 2006 to be precise, when I received a phone call from my dearest friend Claire. She told me her son Ethan had been killed on his way to school. I immediately left and went to Manchester Royal Infirmary. I loved Claire and Ethan more than anybody in the world, but today is not a time to talk about that. John my minister came to the hospital to be with us and the family and held us in prayer over Ethan's broken little body. He was there for us over the next few months. I will never forget all that he did.

I left the hospital later that day and felt utterly alone and lost. Claire had gone with her family, and Luke (Ethan's dad) had gone with his family. John also had to go. So what did I do? Well the first thing I did was pray. That was not enough though I needed to be with people. So I rang up some of the Cross Street folk. Well several of them just happened to be up at our Oldham Chapel, I made my way there and spent the rest of the day with these people. They listened to me, fed me and looked after me.

This continued over the next months and year really as I came to terms with everything, while attempting to be there for Claire. The people of my community were able to be there, in an unobtrusive manner while I came to terms with the horrors of all that had happened. I took some time off work and spent a lot of time with these different people. They loved me when I really needed it. I do not believe I would have come through it on my own. I am sure I would have survived I am just not so sure I would have done so without hardening my heart. They helped me keep my heart open.

It was coming to terms with all of this that drew me into ministry. I wanted to be part of and to attempt to build a community of loving compassion, of true hospitality that attempts to hold people and allow them to be who they really are in every aspect of life. At least that was and is my ambition.

“Listen with the ear of your heart”, has become one of my mantras over the last few months. It comes from “The Rule of Benedict” a set of ancient principles for monastic orders, followed by many Christian and some Buddhist communities today. The foundation of the rule is listening, deep attentive listening. It begins, “listen carefully, my child, to the instructions...and attend to them with the ear of your heart “. What is required is deep listening, a concept proposed, in contemporary times, by the Dalai Lama.

This has become the foundation of my ministry, to “listen with the ear of my heart” and to encourage that in others. Of course I often fall short of this mark as I get wrapped up in many things, some important but many trivial. That is ok though, one of my other mantras is “progress not perfection”.

The reason I came into ministry is to keep open my own heart and to encourage others to do likewise. My journey into ministry has been about finding and refinding my voice.

I now look back fondly on my early days of training, but at the time it was a struggle. I was thrown into several unfamiliar environments, while at the same time I had lost the security of my

home congregation at Cross Street. The first few months were very painful as I struggled with my identity. I felt quite exposed and vulnerable at times. Everything I said and did seemed to be under scrutiny. It was tough, but then again so it should be. Thank God for prayer. It held me and it sustained me throughout this period, has it has for many years.

I had to go through this in order to discover and rediscover who I was. I had to examine and re-examine my faith and learn to articulate it. I also had to really listen to what others were saying, to know where they were coming from, to respect them as they were and to learn how to communicate with them. I had to find ways to walk in their shoes, while still remaining true to me.

The first few months were the most challenging, but by the Christmas of my first year things began to change. I found my voice. I was able to be myself and was able to begin to communicate this to others with more confidence. I felt increasingly at ease and less nervous and was able to speak my truth in love. I became less defensive and precious about my personal religious convictions. Put simply I began to loosen up. I found my voice.

The Unitarian tradition lays great emphasis on the word and the preaching of it. Ok today we may not place authority at the door of scripture, this has been replaced by the conscience of the individual. That said the preached word, articulated correctly is still central to our worship. Is this though the most important element?

Many people can speak well and articulately. I myself have had some training, but I know I will never be perfect and absolutely clear. I do not wish to be. I need to remain true to who I am, to speak my truth in love and in a language that hopefully others will understand. To truly minister people need to hear what my heart and soul has to say. I need to speak the language of the heart, but not from someone else's book of life and experiences. No! These experiences must come from my own; otherwise how can I expect others to relate to what I have to say.

I hope that by continually finding my voice I am able to encourage others to do likewise and that they in turn continue to speak their truth in love. Isn't that what ministry is all about?

Although I am a Unitarian minister I find myself being increasingly drawn to Universalism, in both its traditional and modern incarnations. I have fallen in love with the writing of Forrest Church. His "Cathedral of the World" metaphor speaks powerfully to me about how we experience the Divine.

Forrest asks us to imagine the whole of humanity standing under the ceiling of the cathedral of the world. Around this cathedral are millions of stained glass windows. There is a light outside of the cathedral shining through all of the windows; this is the light of truth, the light of God. No one inside is able to stare at the light directly, we all see it passing through a stained glass window. Each of the windows distorts the light in some way; they only allow some of the light to pass through. Sometimes the light is refracted, by the tinted windows and occasionally it is blocked by the opaque aspects of each window. In some places the light is almost completely obscured.

This metaphor is an attempt to describe a 21st century Universalist theology, one that speaks powerfully to me. There is one light outside of the window but there are many windows through which we can get a glimpse of the light. Each window is unique in its own way; each window is different; but none gives us a perfect image of the light. Each window is representing different religions, different ideologies, different philosophies, different dogmas, different views about life, the universe, everything. The key is to understand that each window has been fashioned by human hands, often with great skill, imagination, beauty, intelligence and artfulness that said through no one window is the light seen perfectly.

I think it is important to accept that none of us ever glimpses the whole truth, no matter which window we are looking

through. What is required is humility; genuine humility that teaches that we humans cannot know and understand everything. This is a good thing, because by genuinely accepting this we are opened up to a myriad of possibility that we probably believed were way beyond our capacity to experience.

The epistle Paul hints at this in his letter to the Corinthians (1ch 13), those beautiful words on love and charity. Here Paul gets to the very nature of humility when he says, “for now we see through a glass darkly”. He is making the point that even when our knowledge and understanding is not perfect, which I suspect, it never can be, we cannot go wrong if we follow love and charity as a guide.

The light of Universalism continues to speak powerfully to me. The concept of one light and many windows that my great hero Forrest Church spoke so beautifully about, keeps me humble and therefore open. I accept that I will never know the absolute truth about everything or even anything and that this enables me to experience life in a way I could never have imagined. The one light of God or truth is reflected through a variety of windows, which none of us can see directly or perfectly.

Universalism’s message of hope, of the everlasting love of God, also speaks to me. It brings Psalm 139 powerfully to the fore of my thinking, nothing and no one is beyond the reach of this eternal love. The dark and the light are both the same to this eternal love. We cannot escape it completely; we cannot flee from the range and reach of this eternal and universal love.

It is so easy to look at our world and just despair and give in and say we are doomed and lost in our own darkness. It is so easy to see life this way. Is this true though are we lost in despair? Is there no hope?

Tom Owen-Towle’s “The Gospel of Universalism: Hope, Courage and the Love of God” has helped me to understand that hope and despair share the same root, that they are joined to-

gether like Siamese twins. In the French language they share the same linguistic root; hope (espoir) and despair (desespoir).

To live in hope, to live in faith that we all have that light etched into our DNA, is not to deny life's difficulties and pain. Instead it is to see the realities of who and what we are and what our true potential can be, if we just nurture it correctly. All we have to do is let that light shine that is there within us all. This sounds simple, but it is far from easy. It requires consistent effort to allow that natural compassion to grow, develop and nurture. We have to do it though because otherwise the other parts of ourselves take over and we turn with indifference from life. The opposite of hope is not despair, it is indifference.

Last Autumn I was invited to participate in the 16th anniversary celebration of the Unitarian church of Maros St George, in Romania which is linked to Dunham road Unitarian Chapel Altrincham. During my visit there were three moments that touched my heart, which I would like to share with you here.

The first moment came towards the end of a day visiting several Unitarian communities in the region. It was in a small village called Iceland - there is no other settlement in region whose name ends in land, the story goes that it was originally settled by people from Ireland or England – I walked up the hill towards the parish house and settled into a little schoolroom with a few adults and two teenage girls. For some reason images of Thomas Hardy novels came to mind as my eyes passed over the scene, none of the houses had running water, everyone had a well. The minister led a short religious education class; I was deeply moved by the conversation which followed, translated by my co-host Anna Maria. They talked about their struggles with the current economic climate and the importance of letting go of control and not becoming blocked off from God. The words of the serenity prayer came to my mind "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the

difference” – if only we could all find the wisdom the know the difference. I was able to participate in the conversation; we spoke deep into one another's hearts. I left these people with the thought that I will probably never see them again, but also knowing that this dialogue would be etched on my soul for a long time to come. During the discussion I had I felt the presence of the spirit that I call God powerfully. I can picture the woman Elizabeth in my mind's eye as she talked openly and eloquently of her struggles with life and faith...I had ears that could hear the language that she spoke, the language of the heart.

On the Saturday I was invited to preach and participate in Maros St George's anniversary service. Press had been invited. There was apparently a great deal of talk about mine and Carolyn's visit. By now I was feeling a part of everything. I had got a real feel for the spirit of the place. It was beginning to really speak to me. I had learnt an important phrase for the Transylvanian's this is Isten Aldjo, which means God bless. It is both a greeting and a farewell. I decided as people arrived I would greet them at the door, with these words. I was told afterwards that they thought that they had been greeted by a Hungarian and not an Englishman, as I spoke like a Hungarian. This meant a lot to me as I felt that I had now got truly into the spirit of the place. It was wonderful to participate in the service, to sing hymns in Hungarian and to be invited to preach, with Tamas, the minister, translating. I opened up my heart and I felt their love too. I also felt and witnessed the spirit that I know as God, flowing through all of this...less than a whisper, but somehow more than silence.

It was a wonderful and wonder filled trip, one I will reflect on for a long time to come. The language of the heart is a universal language that can break through any barrier, even fear and self protection. All that it requires is a little bit of faith and a whole lotta love; all that is required are ears that can listen and the wisdom to know the difference...I've had a wonderful reminder of this

during my time with Unitarian brothers and sisters in Transylvania.

It still amazes me how I am constantly discovering meaning, seemingly from nothing.

A few months ago Rev Jane Barraclough asked me to lead the Wednesday lunchtime service at Cross Street Chapel, seemingly no meaning there. A few days before the service it dawned on me that it was exactly seven years ago to the day that I had first entered Cross street chapel on a cold Wednesday lunch-time. Just a beautiful bit of synchronicity, or at least I saw it that way.

It was a wonderful and wonder filled day that seemed so rich in meaning. I loved listening to the little conversations on the tram on my way to Manchester. I enjoyed my walk around the city, watching all the people going about their business. I felt so connected, so in harmony with what was going on. Every snippet of conversation I overheard seemed to be addressed directly to me.

After the service I met a friend for coffee and shared what I'd been experiencing. I told her how I felt so excited and alive and that I seemed to be seeing meaning in everything. She looked at me and said "really, I see little meaning in anything; I'm pretty much sceptical about everything." It made me pause and it also reminded me of the man I was just a few years ago. I saw little meaning in anything; I was pretty much sceptical about everything.

The conversation has been on my mind ever since. I saw no meaning because I was asleep to meaning it would seem. I was suffering from a kind of colour blindness and tone deafness. Something inside was locked in and therefore I could not experience all that I can today and as a result I denied the possibility that there could be a deeper richer meaning. My rational reflection on my experiences back then revealed nothingness and yet my rational reflections, on my current experiences, reveal a life that is rich in meaning. I hear music where I could not before; I see a myriad of colour that in the past was only grey; I experience that underlying

meaning that was just an empty void in the past.

But what is meaning? And can it be discovered in what many see as the emptiness of life?

In “Man’s Search For Meaning” Viktor Frankl gives an account of his struggle to hold on to meaning while imprisoned in the Nazi death camps of the Second World War. He lost most of his family and friends in the camps and yet he never lost hope in humanity.

Frankl saw a spiritual dimension to human lives that went beyond the biological and psychological. He observed that the suppression of this transcendental quality was the root cause of our human malady. While imprisoned he developed what he named as “Logotherapy”. He believed that if we could unlock our “unconscious religiousness”, that we would liberate the spiritual dimensions of our lives and that this would enable us to recover the capacity to choose those values which give our lives worth and meaning.

Frankl claimed that meaning is discovered through creative and worthwhile activities and that even in the most horrific and terrifyingly hopeless situations we still have the capacity to choose our attitude towards whatever circumstances we are faced with. It is our response to life’s events that shapes our souls. As he himself said “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.”

I recently went to see the performance poet “Rodney Chris Paradox” during the show he told the story “Mr Pain”, which described a journey he had been on in search of meaning. It took him all over the world and came to an end in Mexico where he had an accident which led to him having half a leg amputated.

The poem describes how he developed immunity to pain killers. He is assigned a “pain team” who try every form of western medicine to fight off the excruciating agony, every attempt

failed. He then called upon all he had learnt from all the eastern traditions, which again failed. Finally he screams out to God and enters the emptiness. Here in this place of nothingness he surrenders to the pain and accepts his lot. In this moment he was liberated from the agony, it no longer seemed to matter. By surrendering to it, it lost its power.

Everyone suffers pain in their lives and often there seems no justifiable reason for it. It just seems so unfair. None of us gets to choose our pain and suffering and none of us can avoid it. That said we can choose how we respond to it and pass those lessons on to one another. No one can take that away from us. It is perhaps our one and only true freedom. How we respond to life's circumstances.

I have discovered that the real meaning in life emerges by trying to help others find meaning in their lives. This is why I became a minister of religion.

As a student minister I spent a year at our chapel in Oldham. Outside the chapel is a sign. It reads, "open to all who wish to worship with an open mind, in a spirit of freedom, reason and tolerance. We do not hold the same beliefs; rather each person is encouraged to develop his or her faith in a continuing search for truth."

The Unitarian faith is ever evolving as we are evolving. It has its roots in the Liberal Christian Tradition, inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus. Our symbol, the chalice exemplifies this perfectly. It is a kind of cross, but an evolving one, with the flames reaching out much further to a place way beyond our imaginations.

My personal faith is firmly grounded in the concept of self giving love. This is found in the liberal Christian tradition, but it is not exclusive to it. It is a universal principle found in most of the faith traditions. A flame burning in the cup of love is deeply symbolic of the roots from which we were formed, but the flames seem to indicate something more, something eternal, something

way beyond the limits of human vision. There is freedom in the flames, there is wisdom yet to be unearthed in those flames and they reach beyond the limits of our human imagination. All of this is held the solid foundation of the cup of love; the solid base that sustains us as we reach further, to who knows where.

Comments -

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

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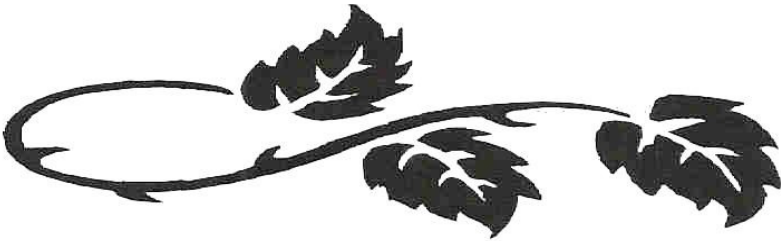
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