

National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
and Free Christian Churches

Viewpoint



An Olympic Volunteer

by

Louise Rogers

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Introduction.

The Olympic Games is going to leave a legacy of sporting enthusiasm we have been told. It has left more than that as this article by Louise Rogers tells us. From her experience as an Olympic volunteer she drew lessons for all who are involved in the Unitarian Movement.

This piece is a reflection on my experience of the Olympics and the Paralympics. I won't be saying much about generalities but will focus on my experiences. We start on 6th July 2005 – lunchtime. I was in my car driving to Morrison's and had the news on the radio, waiting for the announcement about where the 2012 Olympics & Paralympics would be. I parked and sat listening. When they read out 'London' I started to cry. I am a bit of a cry-y person. And I love events and pageant and enjoy watching sport. I am also moved by excellence. It isn't often that I remember where I am when I hear of certain events but this was one of those times.

I wrote this little poem in haiku form

A capital achievement

London's won the bid.

Cry! "Citius, Fortius,

Altius". Bravo!

And cry I did – on many occasions.

The next day four bombs were detonated on three tube trains and one bus in the London rush-hour. 52 people were killed and the four bombers themselves died, and over 700 more were injured. People of all faiths and of none: people going about their business in our capital city. Just two days apart – jubilation and horror; joy and sadness; expectation and fear.

So now roll on a few years and the dream of London 2012 is becoming real – venues are being built and completed, mascots have been designed, logos created and plenty of opportunity to be a prophet of doom. The motto for the whole of 2012 – the Olympics and the Paralympics was presented to us ... and it was 'Inspire a Generation'. I was always going to see the positive side, I got irritated by the nay-sayers and the critics. I knew that this was not just about the

bottom line of a balance sheet but about much bigger issues – the coming together of nations, the commitment to striving for excellence, the role of host nation – the need for our nation to open its collective heart to the world.

So I decided to volunteer. I put my application in early in 2011. Working from home I had flexibility. Summer is often a quiet period for me as others go on holiday and don't want my support. My daughter Zoe was going to be 19+ so would be perfectly capable of looking after herself. And my beloved dog Sadie had died. Then having friends and family in and around London I knew that I would have several places that I could stay. It just seemed like an opportunity which I was ready for.

I got an interview at Warwick University in July 2011. It was all very well organised – no rush and not much waiting around. They asked questions which seemed to be set by young people – can you think of a time when you have a lot to do and you have had to prioritise what you do well that's my life! I had no idea how I had come across but figured that as they'd interviewed me unless I was totally unsuitable I'd get something.

Then just before last Christmas I got an email offering me volunteering opportunities in both the Olympics and Paralympics as part of the customer services team. To cut a long story short because we'd got Olympic tickets I decided not to take the Olympic offer but just to do the Paralympic volunteering. I went to London on four occasions – for an orientation, a basic training, a role specific training and to pick up my uniform. I didn't need all that training for what I was doing and some of the most important things they left out but they were training a lot of us with varying degrees of experience and skill.

The uniform was a tangible reminder that this was it – I was volunteering – and I was part of the team. I remember being pregnant with my daughter, ironing the clothes that she would wear, feeling that this made it feel much more real – that my bump would soon deliver a real baby. In both cases the clothes gave the expectation more solidity.

I remember sitting at my desk on a wet and windy May day at about 10.00 a.m. thinking that I should check again when the Olympic torch was coming through Newcastle-under-Lyme – it had just left that morning. Which reinforces what I say to everyone – if I don't put something in my diary it doesn't get done. I was disappointed not to have seen the torch because I think that this was an inspired

idea which reached out to the whole nation and included so many people as torch bearers – 8,000 in all.

Here is the story of one of our local Staffordshire Torchbearers, Zahraa Bangee, written by her Mum.

On 5th October 2010, aged 14, Zahraa suffered a brain haemorrhage whilst at school. It was so severe that local doctors transferred her to Alderhey hospital, Liverpool. It's been a long journey; and when she did wake up she couldn't breathe for herself and had lost movement of the left hand side of her body. She also underwent a tracheotomy, and was unable to talk. We were told that she would die; be trapped in her own body; be mentally and physically disabled or most importantly we would never have her back the way that she was. She began to communicate through gestures and by writing on a whiteboard. Zahraa showed great determination and drive to get herself back to normal, astounding all those who had encountered her, by walking out of hospital less than 3 months after falling ill. Staff at Alderhey called her, their 'Christmas miracle'.

Zahraa was back in school just four weeks later, catching up with her friends and teachers who have all shown steadfast love and support. In March, we returned to Alderhey, so that doctors could remove the area that had bled. After a 14 hour operation and 32 staples in her head, Zahraa once again began her journey of recovery. It has been an amazing journey, Zahraa's strength, courage and determined spirit has left us all in awe of her. She has never given up, and dealt with every new challenge that has been thrown at her. I, as her mother, am incredibly proud of what a truly inspirational young woman, my daughter has become.

I think that we need to find ways to recognise achievement and courage, this shows how much we value achievement and it also inspires us all to rise to challenges when they come along. Very ordinary people can be quite extraordinary.

Then came the Olympics itself and the amazing and quirky opening ceremony. Who can forget the Queen parachuting into the stadium or Mr Bean playing with a full orchestra who played the theme tune of Chariots of Fire? I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The lighting of the Olympic Cauldron was the highlight for me – it was beautifully designed and those lighting it were young people who had received their flames from established sportspeople. The symbolism worked so well. We do need ritual in our lives and we do need symbolism.



I watched a lot of Olympic sport on TV. My daughter, Zoe, and I had tickets to watch all four of the Women's volleyball quarter finals so we stayed with my Mum just outside London. This may be the only time for many years that the UK gets its volleyball teams playing at the Olympics or Paralympics – as host nation it had reserved places. The atmosphere was something that I had never felt in London – and I am a Londoner - everyone was friendly and welcoming, everyone had a smile on their face and were ready to chat or to have a joke. There were Transport for London staff with special pink bibs at the major train stations welcoming people to London offering them choc ices.

Watching the volleyball I just couldn't believe that I was sitting watching the Olympics. I felt a little giddy! To be able to watch that standard of volleyball in this country was fantastic. Watching the spectators was almost as much fun as watching the sport – the Russians were intense, the Brazilians were at a party. Sometimes we do fit our national stereotypes. I had worried that getting home we'd be waiting for hours for trains but the journey was perfect.

I think it's watching people from so many countries who spend a lot of time, energy and money trying to be good at something. Many of us do the same in our jobs and our hobbies but for us it goes unnoticed. There is something inspiring about observing excellence – personally and in terms of how teams work. I knew that whether it was one person or a team there was a team of people who had made this performance possible. I was often reminded of the opening ceremony and the tunnel lined with construction workers as the flame was carried through. I watched the proud parents and families of competitors. I watched with tears in my eyes at every medal ceremony.

Finally I watched the closing ceremony – it was like a big party – which I suspect I would have enjoyed more if I'd been there.

And now to the Paralympics. I thought that the opening ceremony was brilliant – it had a much more spiritual feel. There were twin themes of enlightenment and the fight for equality. Stephen Hawking started proceedings emerging from ‘the big bang’ with these words

“Ever since the dawn of civilisation, people have craved for an understanding of the underlying order of the world, and why it exists at all. Look up at the stars and not down at your feet and wonder about what makes the universe exist. Be curious.”

Stephen Hawking linked the themes wonderfully. He also said

“The Paralympic Games is about transforming our perception of the world. We are all different - there is no such thing as a standard or run-of-the-mill human being - but we all share the same human spirit.”

We then saw Ian McKellen playing Prospero talking with his daughter Miranda, played by Nicola Miles-Wildin, encouraging her to “discover new worlds”, and “shine your light on the beautiful diversity of humanity”. Prospero finished by telling Miranda to “look up and fly. Break that glass ceiling.”

We also had the athletes parade narrated by Jon Snow, as Channel 4 had won the contract to broadcast the Paralympics. I found it much more interesting to hear a political journalist telling us about the countries that the athletes were from than for the usual sports journalist. although the adverts did get a bit irritating.

The Paralympic motto is ‘Spirit in Motion’ which I think the opening ceremony encapsulated and set the scene for the next eleven days. Spirit in Motion has a sort of religious ring to it. Funnily enough one of the team leaders saw my chalice necklace and asked if it was an Olympic Torch? There was a marketing opportunity missed.

I was one of the Gamesmakers with the big pink foam finger. I was at Excel where they had Powerlifting, Wheelchair Fencing, Boccia, Table Tennis, Judo and Sitting Volleyball. I was with a team of people who were directing people from the transport hubs (essentially stations) to the venue. On my first day standing on a tube train in my uniform a man passed me to get off and thanked me for everything that I had done. I beamed for the rest of the journey. One thing that I

was really looking forward to was doing a job and being told what to do – most of my life I'm the boss or at least on a board where I am directing things. The sweet joy of only having the responsibility to get there on time and be jolly.

We met every day in the car park under the venue for our team talk and to be allocated our pitch. After a few days we got to know where we liked to be and who with. Most of the team leaders were happy for us to get on with it. My pal was George, a vicar from Essex. We didn't talk about religion much, we just nattered away about this and that. We had a Canadian team leader and her son was a shift leader. She taught events management and spent her summers volunteering at sporting events around the world. Her son was hoping to stay in the UK when the Games had finished. They were excellent at team-building. We had our own songs which often had actions which most of us sang enthusiastically. It gave us a smile on our faces before we even started.

The work was easy – as long as we knew the area and what was happening with the trains. When it was quiet we almost fought to provide advice and assistance. I met so many people of different countries and ages. There were school parties, families, singles and relatives of competitors. Someone I know has a son who is in the Sitting Volleyball team. It was lovely that I was on duty as she arrived. I was also there when my brother and his family came with a day pass just to see what was on. This was the Games for those who had been unable to afford tickets for the Olympics – some were as little as £5 for a whole day - and spectators gave us their spare tickets to give away to people who had been unable to buy tickets. People got to see sports that they knew nothing about just to feel part of it all. 2.7 million tickets were sold for the Paralympics – 50% more than Beijing.

Meeting two people stood out. The first was a woman who used a wheelchair and controlled it with her mouth. I couldn't understand what she said so talked with her Dad. He said that she had just missed out as she was the first reserve for the boccia team. It was amazing to be with someone who could hardly move, who could not communicate with spoken words and yet she played competitive sport. The human spirit is indeed inspiring.

The second was a trans woman who I had quite a long conversation with. We did not talk about her gender and associated issues but about sport and life in general. A timely reminder that as humans it is so much better to be bound together by what we share rather than being divided by our differences. As Stephen Hawking said, '*We all share the same human spirit*'. It was also a timely reminder

that struggles can be hidden or unspoken but no less difficult. This woman who was able to come along to this event knowing that people may not accept her caused me to pause and admire this simple act of courage. It also made me grateful that my life's difficulties are fairly minor.

And then there are the minor triumphs that often keep us going. I managed to tell a French woman where the station was in French, which I'd learnt over 40 years ago. Which may spur us on to work with our young people – what we learn as children often stays with us the rest of our lives. And an abiding memory of the Dutch supporters – head to toe in orange including orange clogs and cowboy hats, with big smiles, intent on having a good time.

I got to watch some of the sport when I was not volunteering although when there were finals there were few, if any, seats available. I watched lots of Sitting Volleyball and was fortunate to be able to see the UK women's and men's teams in action. I was entranced by the speed and the strength displayed by all the players. All types of volleyball - standing, sitting and beach – have audience participation as a key element. We all know how to sing Queen's 'We will rock you' and clap our hands above our heads. When you go to a volleyball match it is the whole experience and not just the sport which brings enjoyment. It is possible to have a good time even if the team that you support loses. This approach engages with the audience.

Our team leaders had organised a thank-you lunch after the Excel events had finished – I'm not sure that many other teams got this. My friend who was a volunteer driver just finished her last shift and went home. It was lovely to feel recognised and appreciated: to chat about our experiences and to bask in our own little bit of London 2012 glory. The closing ceremony that evening was another party which I watched on TV – again I think that you needed to be there. I was very sad when the flame got passed to the Mayor of Rio. Life would now have to return to normal and I would have to put my uniform away – only to be got out when I led a service at our Meeting House on London 2012 last September.

So what did I take away from London 2012?

1. That it's OK to support our country – we need to understand that not all nationalism is bad.

'Civic nationalism (also known as liberal nationalism) defines the nation as an

association of people who identify themselves as belonging to the nation, who have equal and shared political rights, and allegiance to similar political procedures. According to the principles of civic nationalism, the nation is not based on common ethnic ancestry, but is a political entity whose core identity is not ethnicity. This civic concept of nationalism is exemplified by Ernest Renan in his lecture in 1882 "What is a Nation?", where he defined the nation as a "daily referendum" (frequently translated 'daily plebiscite') dependent on the will of its people to continue living together"

'Civic Nationalism is a kind of non-xenophobic nationalism compatible with liberal values of freedom, tolerance, equality, and individual rights.'

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nationalism#Civic_nationalism

... it's OK to be proud of our country and to wave the Union Flag.

Belonging matters. It's OK to be proud of being Unitarian. We are not saying that we are better than you. We are saying, 'We like who we are'.

2. We are a diverse nation. Whoever saw the opening ceremony of the Olympics could not forget the quirkiness that we know to be British but that the outside world perhaps did not appreciate. Ours is a rich and diverse culture and a coherent one. I was so pleased to hear Mo Farah say when asked whether he would rather have run for Somali

"Look, mate, this is my country. This is where I grew up, this is where I started life. This is my country and when I put on my Great Britain vest I'm proud. I'm very proud."

I think just hearing him say, 'Look mate' would have been enough.

Similarly as Unitarians we are made up of a diversity of people but we maintain one rich culture – one religious language which we share and values which underpin our behaviour. As Britons we have the Union Flag and as Unitarians we have the Flaming Chalice. We must welcome the change that newcomers bring and not insist that ours is a faith community with beliefs set in stone. I believe that we are very much like the Olympic Opening ceremony in that we are a bit quirky but very British – steeped in our history but not bound by it. I think that we also reflect the themes of the Paralympic Opening Ceremony –enlightenment and valuing diversity.

3. Organisation, good people, training, talent and a good message work wonders. You really don't get much unless you make the effort – and it has to be from everyone. London 2012 worked because everyone knew what they were supposed to be doing and they did that to the best of their ability. It also worked because they invested in having more than enough people (staff and volunteers) and then some. They fed and watered us, they gave us treats and we always knew who we could ring if we had a problem. It was a joyful experience being a Gamesmaker.

We as a community locally and nationally depend on people being committed to doing their bit. Not everyone can be an athlete – or a minister – but everyone's effort makes it all happen. We need to ensure that we have more than enough people so that those who do, don't get utterly exhausted. We need to look after our volunteers – feed them and water them – we need to make sure that they all have support. It should be a joyful experience volunteering for any Unitarian organisation.

4. Appreciation is the oil that makes the wheels turn – from the Olympic torch which gave people an opportunity to be thanked for what they have contributed to this country to the opening ceremony when the workers on the Olympic Park were thanked to the person thanking me on the tube. I have never been thanked so much in my life. I even have a letter from David Cameron. Being thanked makes you want to do more and to do better – it is a bit like a drug.

In our community we should always be ready to praise and express gratitude. No one's contribution is too small – the story of the widow's mite comes to mind.

5. Excellence is inspiring. Sometimes it is enough just to participate – certainly getting to be an Olympic or Paralympic competitor is a great achievement. But the rather scrummy icing on the cake is watching excellent performances. The whole-hearted commitment to being the best – not just for yourself, but for your family, for your nation, for those who have had to struggle as you have had to. Purpose makes a life worth living.

We need to support each other in finding purpose and in becoming the best we can be at whatever we have chosen to do. We need to be examples for each other as well as to the wider world.

6. Together we can make a difference. The Olympics and Paralympics are inter-

national stages which can make a difference to people in individual nations. This was the first Olympics when all teams had at least one woman as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei all fielded their first women competitors at London 2012. We often take our own rights for granted. It is a salutary lesson to see what others have to do to even get into a national team. Sporting events are built on a foundation of values. Sport is about fairness and fairness has far-reaching implications outside of sport.

There was scant publicity for the Peace Legacy campaign which was set up by Catholic dioceses in London.

The word used most often to describe the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games was “amazing”. Wouldn’t it be truly amazing to bring that experience of peace, happiness and security to all those parts of the world that still lack it?

Prayer for the London 2012 Games

For all those nations attending the Games, for dignity and respect for all cultures and differences.

For the 2012 30th *Olympiad and Paralympics*,
the athletes and visitors.

For peace for London, for the host cities and for all cities.

For people of all faiths.

For young people, their health, happiness and future.

For one world of justice and compassion.

For international peace from conflict.

For the flourishing of international art, culture and music.

We pray for peace.

www.peacelegacy.org.uk/prayer.html

We may be a faith community but just like the Olympics and the Paralympics were more than just sport so we are more than just religion. We need to look at our values and ideals and take a broader view.

With marriage equality we have made a difference but we need to do more. We can stay rooted in the national faith scene or we can branch out by engaging with arts and culture to name but two. How are we encouraging our writers and

performers to bring Unitarian values to the wider world through avenues not directly related to religion? Do we actually want to influence the wider world?

7. Equalities matter: We were given information about equalities issues in our Gamesmaker file – it was made clear to us that the customer experience was paramount to us as volunteers and for us to be better able to do this we needed to inform ourselves of the needs of our customers.

As the Paralympics went on the tickets got sold. I was unable to get a ticket to view the Olympic Park. I thought that I would be able to get there just to see the venue but there were no more tickets when I tried just before I started my volunteering. People went to see sport – to see the spectacle – the spectacle of people with disabilities doing things that those of us watching would not be able to do.

Equality is about providing the opportunities for talents and potential to be developed. For support to be given when it is needed. It is about all of us being committed to this ideal.

This is a message to us about inclusion. Do we know the range of need that exists within our community? How do we ensure that everyone gets a say? How do we ensure that those who want to contribute can? Do we know what stops people from contributing? Can we offer support to those with additional needs? Do we feel able to ask for support?

8. Legacy – much of the talk of London 2012 was about legacy. There are organisations now to make sure that there is a lasting legacy. The London Legacy Development Corporation (www.londonlegacy.co.uk) is focused on the sites and surrounding communities. The Legacy Trust (www.legacytrustuk.org) is a charity set up to support arts, educational and sports activities across the UK.

Do we care about the legacy that we leave? When we hold our Heritage Open Days and focus on our history, do we also ask, 'What legacy are we leaving for the generations to come? And also, 'Will future generations be proud of us and our achievements?' We have opportunities to make a real difference to the world and the means to record this – we should ensure that we do both.

9. Sometimes it is enough just to be part of something – to have a £5 ticket, to be able to just enjoy an hour or two of sport and spectacle, and to be able to say that I was there.

Our annual meetings happen in spring each year but they cost a fair amount to attend. Is there anything that we can do to let people have a '£5 ticket'? Everyone should be offered the opportunity to be there, to experience the joy of being with a lot of other Unitarians, celebrating that fact, and having a bit of fun.

At least shouldn't we be thinking about broadcasting what we do so people can get a feel for our gatherings, to be able to feel part of something bigger?

10. And last but not least – the 'can do' attitude – so very obvious in the Paralympics. People went to watch the Paralympics to watch sporting excellence not to watch disabled people and think, 'Poor lambs' but to watch sports people and think. 'How do they do that?' Martine Wright – the woman who brought together the joy of 6 July 2005 and the horror of 7 July 2005 - is truly inspirational. She showed how to make the very best out of the very worst (or close to). She proudly wears the number 7 vest for GB.

Likewise in our Unitarian community may we focus on what we can do and not on what we can't. May we be inspired by those Olympians and Paralympians who moved our hearts and enriched our souls. Life can take unexpected and un hoped for turns but may we support each other to make the best of our circumstances. *May we look up and fly.*

So what now? I have signed up with Glasgow 2014 – they have just started to ask for volunteer applications. (<http://volunteering.glasgow2014.com>) I may even take a leaf out of my team leader's book and look abroad for volunteering opportunities.

Louise Rogers

Staffordshire Unitarians, NUF Committee Member and GA Trustee Elect

Louise adds:

I have just started a blog inspired by the Paralympics about Inclusion and Equality issues for local Unitarian communities – you can find it here:

<http://inclusion4uku.blogspot.co.uk/>

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,

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