

National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
and Free Christian Churches

Viewpoint



Unitarians on the Radio

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Introduction

The Unitarians are small in number. Many of our congregations have fewer than twenty who attend a service. Most Unitarians are modest about their faith. They do not see themselves as evangelists for the faith. Many of our buildings are hidden away down side streets or behind something bigger.

Yet we all acknowledge though that our faith is what the world needs. We offer a place where people can explore their own religious feelings. We do not force creeds on our members; we welcome all who come through our doors and we accept that we are all in a different place when it comes to belief. So how is our voice heard out in the big wide world? We put posters and wayside pulpits outside our buildings, we advertise our events in the local press, we let our rooms to other community groups and hope there will be some cross over to us. We offer rites of passage without precondition and hope those who attend will pick up our leaflets and mull them over. We get a mention in the press if the press think there is a human interest story to be exploited - and it is not always in our favour. But there is always radio - with its reach right into the community. Last year we were lucky because the BBC had invited Tim Berners-Lee to produce the Radio Four 'Today' programme for Boxing Day and he gave an opportunity to two of our ministers to speak their 'Thoughts for the Day' to the whole nation. As well as that there are others who regularly broadcast similar 'Thoughts' on their local radio stations. In this ViewPoint are the transcripts of the two BBC 'Thoughts for the Day' and we are grateful for their permission to reproduce them here. Stephen Lingwood broadcasts on the Bolton Community Radio Station, Bolton FM, and so does Tony McNeile. Dorothy Houghton broadcasts on Radio Shropshire and we are grateful to both these stations for being able to publish transcripts.

Rev Jim Corrigan. 'Thought for Day', for 26.12.2013. BBC Radio Four

Good morning.

Today's guest editor, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, must be one of the best-known Unitarians in the world; more correctly, Unitarian Universalists, their name in the United States.

One of the principles of Unitarian Universalism is 'respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part' – a phrase that embodies our connection to each other, to the world, to all that is.

Nine years ago today, what became known as the Boxing Day Tsunami caused devastation in 14 countries around the Indian Ocean. Right round the world though, people responded generously to appeals for help – it was a powerful example of how we are all part of this 'interdependent web'.

And the thousands of people caught up in the severe weather in Britain today will be in need of the same social solidarity and help.

Unitarians in Britain have historically reached out to others and have a long tradition of being champions of Reform – against the slave trade, and in promoting religious freedom.

We respect difference, both within our own ranks and without. And that includes a tradition of bringing different faiths together. Our Unitarian Meeting House in Ipswich, where I minister, helped found the annual multi-faith celebration of community there more than 30 years ago, and we hosted it for many years.

In recent months our Unitarian and Free Christian denomination has been prominent in the campaign for equality in marriage, which has now passed into law. Together with Quakers and Liberal Jews, we showed there are religious organisations who want to carry out same-sex marriage ceremonies in their places of worship, believing, as we do, that love

between two people is a gift of God – a gift to be celebrated.

We well understand that many mainstream religious bodies don't share our understanding of marriage. But the world we live in, and our understanding of it, is ever-changing.

Change is hard - we cling to old ways of doing things, including, of course, to our much loved Christmas traditions. But this festive inheritance, rooted in the Nativity story, points to something deeper – to love within family, love for others.

This is what we ask in my own congregation – can we allow the Spirit of love to come into our hearts this Christmas, the Spirit that demands change -- and help for those most in need.

Rev Andy Pakula - An Alternative Thought for the Day - BBC Radio Four, 26.12.2013

Sir Tim Berners-Lee (the inventor of the World Wide Web and a Unitarian Universalist) invited me to present the Thought for the Day, on the BBC's Today Programme for Boxing Day 2013. The BBC overruled Sir Tim's invitation and selected an avowedly theist Unitarian minister instead. The following is the "alternative Thought for the Day" that BBC permitted me to present.

Like millions of others, here and elsewhere, my family and I celebrated Christmas yesterday. We exchanged gifts around a Christmas tree and later enjoyed a traditional feast. On Tuesday, I led a Christmas Eve service at my chapel in north London. We sang Christmas carols and we spoke of love, peace, justice, and hope.

For many listeners, my rather traditional sounding Christmas will come as something of a surprise. After all, I describe myself as an atheist, a label that disqualified me from presenting Thought for the Day.

To me though, there is no inconsistency in being an atheist and celebrating Christmas. While I don't literally believe the stories underlying Christmas, I do very much believe in its most important messages. Christmas reminds us that hope can come at the darkest times. It reminds us of the sacredness and innocence and possibility of children - that any child - however humble their circumstances - could change the world for the better.

Christmas reminds us of the guidance of Jesus of Nazareth - who taught about accepting and loving one another despite our differences and who offered a vision of a world of economic and social justice. These are lessons that people needed to hear 2000 years ago. They are lessons we still need to hear today.

No tradition has all the answers or has a monopoly on truth and wisdom. I celebrated Christmas, and a few days ago, I looked to the winter solstice and Yule for its wisdom about connection with the natural world and its cycles. Just a few days before that, I turned to Hanukkah to raise up the lesson that oppression can be overthrown and that all people everywhere should have the chance to live in freedom.

As an atheist, I don't believe that there is a omnipotent other who will intervene in earthly life to save us from natural dangers or to save us from our own worst impulses. It is thus because I am an atheist that I firmly believe we all need to learn and be reminded of lessons like those that come with Christmas, Hanukkah, Yule, Ramadan, Yom Kippur, Lent, Diwali, and many religious and nonreligious occasions. Without divine assistance, it is we who are tasked with creating an earthly paradise ourselves. Bearing such great responsibility, we need these teachings all the more.

And so, today, as many of us admire our gifts, and bask in the warmth of yesterday's celebrations, I hope that whatever our beliefs or perspectives, we will all hear and incorporate the best of Christmas: Let us learn to love others more fully and more deeply. Let us learn to include the excluded and expand our circles of love to include them as well. And let

us begin the true work of Christmas - to create a world of love, of justice and of peace for everyone.

Rev Stephen Lingwood - Bolton Fm

Here is a good fact for a pub quiz: Which two books of the Bible don't mention God at all?

The answer is Esther and the Song of Songs.

The Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon is a love poem, and it doesn't feature God. It is however, utterly beautiful, with such phrases as "love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."

But you have to wonder how a love poem, an unashamed celebration of romantic, erotic love and passion made its way into the Bible. Someone, at one point said: yes, this is worth keeping, it says something important. And I agree with them.

Religion hasn't always been very good at dealing with sexuality. And yet the Song of Songs suggests that there is something innately wonderful and powerful about sexuality and passion, maybe even something holy.

Certainly sexuality can be abused, misused and cause us pain. But I think it's about time religion stopped getting it's knickers in a twist about sex, understood its power and promise, and offered real wisdom in living with our sexuality, not fighting against it.

I'm Stephen Lingwood. Minister of Bank Street Unitarian Chapel, in Bolton Town Centre. Our purpose is to inspire spiritual journeys, engaging with the world with open hearts and open minds.

Dorothy Haughton - Radio Shropshire

I was chatting with a friend the other day - and the subject of Hope came up. My friend said she doesn't like the story of Pandora's box.

The story goes that Pandora has a box she's forbidden to touch..... but she can't resist... and opens it - releasing all the troubles and evils into the world.

But then - there at the bottom - she finds Hope.

"Too wimpish," said my friend scornfully. "Hope is more powerful than that."

'Well', I countered with a quote from Jo Bannister: 'Hope is a hawk with sharp talons. Just sitting quietly on your wrist it can draw blood.'

Not to be outdone, my friend came back with a story told by Gervaise Phinn, that well-known raconteur, who tells the story of a visit to a primary school.

Looking over a child's shoulder he reads:

today today today
sorrow sorrow sorrow
tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow
hope hope hope

"That's a lovely poem," he says encouragingly. The child looks at him scornfully. "Those are my spelling corrections."

Gervaise is right, spelling or not, that was a lovely poem. We need hope. Hope is above and beyond setbacks, disappointments and interruptions.

In this game of stories - I trumped my friend with this tale: A woman woke up one night to find an angel sitting at the foot of her bed. "You have lived a good life and have tried to help others and for a reward God

has said that you may visit his market." The woman was thrilled and got up straight away. "No, no," said the angel. "I'll come for you tomorrow night."

The next night came and the woman waited impatiently by her bed, in her hat and coat and clutching an enormous shopping bag. The angel arrived, suddenly and without any warning, in a pool of light behind her. "Let's go," said the angel and took hold of her hand. Instantly they were in the middle of a busy, bustling, noisy market. The angel gave the woman two gold coins and agreed to meet her in an hour.

When they met again the woman was despondent. "I couldn't buy anything. I couldn't buy any of the things I wanted."

"What were you looking for?" the angel asked.

"I wanted world peace, freedom from hunger, freedom from disease," said the woman sadly. "Ah, no," said the angel. "You want the fruits, and here we only sell the seeds." and he held out packets marked 'hard work', 'struggle', 'determination', 'compassion', 'understanding', and of course, 'a big, big bag of hope'.

If you are struggling at the moment, if life is dark, don't give up hope.

Stephen Lingwood - Bolton Fm

We're in the season of Epiphany – meaning revelation – when Christians remember (amongst other things) the revelation Jesus experienced at his baptism when he heard the voice of God saying “you are my beloved son.”

Nearly every religion starts with a similar moment of revelation or insight whether Mohammad on Mount Hira or the Buddha under the Bodhi tree of Guru Nanak praying by the river.

These stories are remarkably similar – the religious prophet (in a moment of personal prayer or meditation) receives a dramatic revelation that changes their lives. The world is spiritually richer because of the revelations these people experienced. It is this power and insight that is the foundation of the great religions.

I believe in the reality of such experiences – but I also believe that such experiences are always filtered through particular human culture and language. Some people will tell you to believe one of these means disbelieving the rest. But why limit yourself when you could receive wisdom and spiritual insight from many different sources? I want to listen, and to learn from, all these stories of epiphanies.

I'm Stephen Lingwood, Minister of Bank Street Unitarian Chapel in Bolton town centre, our purpose is to inspire spiritual journeys, engaging with the world with open hearts and open minds.

Dorothy Haughton - Radio Shropshire

Later on this morning I shall be going to church, the Unitarian church next to Rackhams on the High Street in Shrewsbury. And during the service we shall pray as will all the other church goers. And the people who pray say that it makes them focused, or calm, or peaceful, or engaged ... So, if it is so good, why doesn't everybody do it?

One problem may be the churchy language – which is not the slightest bit necessary. If thinking 'prayer' makes you feel you have to say "O Lord of all we beseech thee" then change the word, consider 'thinking prayerfully' instead.

The other problem is "what good does it do?" There are two possible responses to this. For the first, remember the words of Lon Ray Call – "Prayer doesn't change things, prayer changes people. People change things."

Perhaps you could find five minutes to spend quietly thinking about some situation, a person, a group of people. It can be good to spend time thinking about other people. And perhaps your quiet time of thinking prayerfully will make a course of action clear.

For the second, consider the words of Bishop John Spong: "I pray because I believe it will make a difference." But will it make a difference? There are those who believe that it does.

I was chatting about this to a friend who referred me to a site on the internet. It concerned a therapist called Dr Len who was appointed to the Hawaii State Hospital to a ward where they kept the criminally insane. He transformed a violent ward where few people wanted to work to a ward which was calm and pleasant to work in. How? by reading the files. "I just kept saying, 'I'm sorry' and 'I love you' over and over again," he explained.

Another friend referred me to John O'Donohue's book *Benedictus* in which he talks of a circle of prayer being created around the city of Washington. He writes that during the days of prayer: the statistics showed a remarkable and unprecedented decrease in violence and crime.

Perhaps these stories are not true, perhaps they're exaggerated. But, perhaps, it is worthwhile, during your period of quiet, prayerful thinking, sending out a message in thoughts of love and comfort and strength - and believe it will make a difference - whether you have a faith or not.

Rev Tony McNeile - Bolton Fm

One year at my church we decided to run an advertising campaign to boost our numbers. We printed leaflets, posted them through letter boxes by the thousand, sat back and waited for the church to fill up. We didn't understand advertising. We didn't know that for every thousand leaflets we might receive just one enquiry; and for every twenty enquiries, one person might actually turn up. That is exactly what happened. He arrived one Sunday morning.

He stayed with us for a number of years. He was a quiet patient man with much wisdom. He enjoyed running and had had a go at a couple of marathons. He also enjoyed gardening. Running gives time to think he used to say but gardening was his real love. He said that when you had your hands in the soil all the negative feelings in your mind drained away into the earth. Working in his garden gave him peace. Sowing and planting, weeding and harvesting took his spirit to a different place. To see the colours, the patterns filled his soul with contentment, he said.

I used to glance sometimes on a Sunday morning. He was sitting there with a contented smile on his face and I knew his mind had wandered away into his garden.

I don't know what he learned from us but we learned a lot from him. Church was not the only place. God is in the garden too.

I am tony mcneile. I am a Unitarian

Dorothy Haughton - Radio Shropshire

Good morning and a very happy New Year. It's that time of year when many of us make resolutions for the coming twelve months...

So often it's about weight loss, and pledges to take more exercise.. and how often do you run out of steam by the end of the spring?

It's actually a Lent leaflet that's made me decide on my resolution this year. A few years ago. Bishop John Sentamu advised people in Lent not only to give things up but also to think about small things they could do to make other people happy. One of the things suggested was leaving a pound coin in one of those horrible supermarket trolleys to brighten someone else's day. A small thing - but small acts of kindness like this can make a big difference.

The day after we moved to Shropshire I learnt that my father had been taken into hospital. I drove to Bury panicking and worrying so when someone

flagged me down in the car park I was ready to scream at him. He smiled and gave me his car park ticket. The tickets were very expensive but lasted all day. That little act of kindness from a stranger transformed me from a wreck into a calm, composed and hopeful person.

At a meeting about homeless people (a couple of years ago), someone remarked grumpily that they didn't like giving money to beggars in case they spent it on drugs. One of our ministers, Anne Latham, said crisply: "Give them a Mars bar." And why not? Acknowledge that this dishevelled person sitting on the street is your neighbour and show them your love by giving them a little gift of love. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote: "Give what you have. To someone - it may be better than you dare to think."

So this morning, on New Year's Day - I'd like to suggest that you make a New Year's Resolution to carry out some random acts of kindness, in fact, to act prayerfully. If you are on the internet you can put 'random acts of kindness' into your search engine and see how many heart warming stories you find. A Sunday school teacher said to me once: "Money you have to pay back, kindness you have to pass on." Let's create a golden chain of kindnesses in this New Year. Happy New Year to you.

Rev Tony McNeile - Bolton Fm

They both came to the church. He was a wheeler dealer who became chairman of the congregation and ruffled feathers with his abrupt manner. She wrote poetry and articles about the countryside around their home. She ran a meditation group at the church.

Then one of his great ideas for making a fortune collapsed on him and put everything they owned at risk. He was at his wits ends looking for ways out of his misfortune but he was chasing rabbits and nothing came out.

So she insisted that every morning at the breakfast table they would start with a fifteen minute meditation. He objected at first but then relented.

She knew that meditation calms the mind and with practice is able to ignore all the distracting thoughts and focus on just one. The knowledge in the deep well of the unconscious mind can flow without hindrance into the conscious mind.

He did apply his mind to this meditation and she guided him. With a new found clarity he was able to deal with the problems he faced one by one and he was also able to create new schemes in a more thoughtful way.

These daily sessions at the breakfast table were a turning point in his life and he went on to prosper.

The religious teachers of old - the mystics knew of these meditation techniques. They called it contemplation a positive form of prayer that takes a tortured soul out of the wilderness.

I am tony mcneile - a Unitarian.

Rev Tony McNeile - Bolton Fm

When it comes to reading books, I can't resist turning to the end to see what happens.

This Christmas I was given a book on how to become a calm enlightened person - in easy steps. I went straight to the end.

All I had to do was be balanced in my thoughts, treat everyone with respect, stay calm always, eat healthily.

I can do that, I thought. So I gave it a try.

I smiled as I sat in the traffic jam. I gave way to someone and let them into the queue. I slowed down when the traffic lights went amber - instead of speeding up to get through before it was too late.

The taxi driver who cut in on me spoiled everything I really shouted at him -

from the safety of the car, but I was cross.

A few days later I went back to the book - page one, step one.

Spend a few minutes every morning sitting on a chair and relaxing, eyes closed - your mind will race - but let it. Breathe gently and evenly. After a few mornings you will begin to relax more; the chattering thoughts will begin to slow. Eventually you can focus more clearly on jobs you have to do, the problems you have to sort out.

Listen more, it says, try not to dominate a conversation.
Impatience is controllable.
Happiness will blossom.
It is a long slow process - but worthwhile.
It said that at the back of the book.

I am tony mcneile, a Unitarian

Rev Stephen Lingwood - Bolton Fm

Anthony de Mello tells this story: Brother Bruno was trying to pray one night, but was disturbed by the sound of a bullfrog croaking. He got so annoyed he shouted out of his window "Shut up!"

At once the whole forest went silent. Bruno continued with his prayers but found he could not concentrate. A niggling voice at the back of his mind was saying "Maybe God is as pleased with the croaking of a frog as with your prayers." He couldn't get rid of that thought so he shouted out of his window "Sing!"

The frog and all the creatures of the forest began their cacophony.

As Bruno listened to the sound, he discovered there was something amazing about it. And for the first time in his life he knew what it meant to pray.

So often we think nature is just something for us to dominate, manipulate and use up. But if we listen, we will discover the physical and spiritual harmony that we are a part of.

The Hindu writer Rabindranath Tagore wrote, "The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures." May we understand that we are all part of that same stream of life.

I'm Stephen Lingwood. Minister of Bank Street Unitarian Chapel.

Comments -

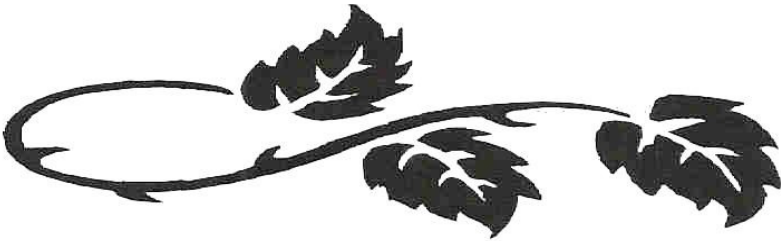
We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

Please send your comments to the editor,

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Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
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