

National Unitarian Fellowship

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Viewpoint



my work, my belief, and my chapel
with
Tony Cann, Maurice Large & Ian Lowe

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Introduction

I asked three people that I know to write about themselves reflecting on the way belonging to a Unitarian congregation influenced what they did in their work or their lives.

Tony Cann is a member of the Padiham congregation. I always think of him as the state of the arts gadget man. When he has run seminars at the annual meetings whether on penal reform or growth in our Movement, he has arrived with electronic voting machines and we have been treated to seeing everything displayed on the big screen.

Maurice Large is a member at Newcastle Unitarians. He is an eloquent man and when I ask him if he will do a reading in the service the words come out like a line of bunting - each word clear and its meaning obvious.

Ian Lowe has been a school teacher. He is a member at the Chapel at Ashton in Makerfield, Wigan. He writes a regular humorous piece for the Chapel Newsletter and is involved in the management of the Chapel.

All these three are key figures in their congregations. They are always supportive of me as a visiting minister and willingly agree to do things like this.

Tony Cann

I come from a manufacturing background. My father owned and ran a weaving business as did his father and his father's father and his father's father's father! On my mother's side her grandfather owned and ran a weaving and clothing company.

My parents escaped from Austria when Hitler took over and continued in the family tradition establishing a weaving business in Lancashire – the place for textile manufacturing. I have continued in business as a manufacturer.

I like to create value. I like to create work for people in manufacturing. I feel good investing the surplus I create in the community in which I live and I continue to do so though not today in the textile industry.

I have continued the family tradition of innovation always looking for improved ways of working. I seem to always be looking for new methods and ideas. I want to do things in better ways. I also particularly enjoy making useful things, improving them and making them in a better way. It is fun and interesting.

There is particular pleasure in helping people. It is a fact that whatever manufacturing we might be involved in (and this applies to many other areas) it requires the effort of many people working together. Good enterprises need more than investment and ideas, they need the effort of many people working to the same objectives. Indifferent teams create indifferent enterprises. People only give of their best to an enterprise if they are respected for who they are and they are listened to. Here in the North we consider it ignorant not to listen to people and their ideas. Then everybody contributes to their best and are appreciated.

Ideas for improvement can come from those at the bottom of the chain who actually do the work and are closest to the machines and who sometimes have the time to think about the processes. We need to remember that often the big improvements come from a large number of small improvements.

The Japanese encourage suggestion schemes to which everyone contributes and in some companies the workers do contribute tens,

sometimes hundreds of suggestions. It emphasises the worth of all the individuals in companies.

I no longer work in textiles. My consuming interest is the education technology used in classrooms. This helps teachers teach and reduces their enormous work load. It helps students to realize their potential, which for many is much more than we actually imagine. It is a wonderful job and explains why I still 'work'. I am consumed to produce ideas and equipment that improve the potential of students and help them develop and live more satisfying lives. I am so lucky.

My belief - I am amazed how my beliefs reflect in my work. Or is it my work reflecting my beliefs. At the core in my enterprises is a belief in the potential of everyone. People may not have the opportunity to develop. At the core of each person, however, there is that divine spark. It is in me too but my spark is no greater than that of others even if I have led the enterprise. So everybody is worth listening to. Everyone can have ideas. We are from God and our talents are God given. No need to be proud of one's efforts and abilities. (We should be ashamed if we do not develop our potential). We do though need to listen to everybody – really listen and appreciate them. We are listening to others who are equally God blessed.

I have had to make people redundant and sometimes ask people to leave as they are holding back the organisation. I find this difficult but I find that I can manage it in a way that makes it easy if I undertake this difficult task 'with love'. That is I acknowledge the basic worth and value of the individual and remain in contact with them and try to help them maintain their sense of worth after the event.

I find 'forgiveness' is an important element in my work. Everybody makes mistakes. If we do not make any mistakes we are not trying. If we make a mistake the key is to learn from the mistake. As a manager I find that if we take this attitude people will really try the new ideas

that make things better.

This applies to my religious beliefs. I expect my ideas and beliefs to change. It seems to me the only way to develop as a person. One thing though is important. I do not believe something because I am told to believe it but because I really do believe after having thought about it. These are the beliefs to live for.

When I was confirmed at school (everybody was) it meant very little as I did not really believe. Sure I said the creed but in my heart and head there was nothing. So when I came across Unitarianism I found the opportunity to develop beliefs that I really could commit to. Having trained as a scientist I could apply the test of reason to what I read and heard. Heaven and Hell mean very little to me. I focus on the here and now. Eternal damnation means nothing. I believe that we justify ourselves by our actions in this life and our challenge is to take steps to play our part in God's works. For me it is justification by works - and that is what I try to do.

Jesus is of enormous importance to me but not as God but as a supreme example to me. God is a spirit but this is not as separate from God, and Jesus has that same spark of the divine as do we all. I have no truck with the notion of original sin – I believe in the potential of all human beings. Often this potential is destroyed by actions or simply not developed.

My chapel - Unitarianism has been amazing importance to me in my life. It has enabled me to be close to my own God with honesty and enthusiasm. It has allowed me to face up to issues of life, death and suffering in an open and relaxed manner. It has allowed me to get the material elements of the world in proportion and to work out what is important. This has partly come as I have grown older but stems from my faith. The attitude towards others particularly those with whom I work has been reinforced by the idea that everyone possesses that

inner divine spark. I have been kept in place by the idea that we are blessed with skills and abilities – all from God.

The enjoyment I get by doing things better and by helping others results too from my faith. I owe a lot to my Unitarianism and I believe it can help a lot of other people. So I strive to keep it alive and share it with others. I support the movement and some specific activities. The Penal Affairs Panel in particular with its wider reach to reform our revengeful and unforgiving penal system.

However it all starts from my local chapel. Here we have a group of many different people all looking in the same religious direction (or similar direction). It is a group that offers, as do other church groups, love and community. Unitarians are oblivious to material differences and it is as people that we are accepted – and this is so refreshing. So I support my local chapel and its community. Rituals and ideas mean a lot to me and can mean a lot to others too. So I support my chapel enthusiastically. I benefit from membership and I want others to be able to benefit too.

Finally I believe the world needs more honesty, toleration and rationality and we need to be closer to our own God. I want Unitarianism to prosper, so I support it.

Maurice Large

I have been a Unitarian all my life. I first went as a child aged three to our Sunday School in Newcastle upon Tyne and it has been my church ever since. It is a beautiful art deco building, a maintenance burden and I share in the responsibility of caring for it.

I don't suppose I thought much about my religion or philosophy of

life. But as I got older and through the Unitarian Young Peoples League, UYPL, left school and thought what I was going to do with my life, I am sure that this Unitarian upbringing influenced my decision making and the way I did my job.

Don't get me wrong, I was no genius. My first intention was to read History at University and probably then teach. Insufficiently good 'A' level results put paid to that. During a spell on the dole I discovered that it was possible to qualify as a Solicitor (this is a long time ago!) without having a degree, and that is what I decided to do. There was no high moral purpose in that decision – my father knew lawyers and I spoke to them and it sounded like a good job – interesting and, more importantly, well paid. I found a firm which offered me five years articles (as the Solicitors' apprenticeship was called) and I was on my way. Five years later and a handshake from Lord Denning, who was Master of the Rolls at the time, I was qualified.

I found myself doing what most Solicitors in the provinces did in those days – everything. Very few Solicitors in the '70s specialised. So I did wills, probate, conveyancing and the host of other types of work which traditionally was done by Solicitors. But I also did crime and civil litigation and found that I had both a talent and a taste for that kind of work. It was never anything major, just the sort of work involving local people which finished up in the local criminal and civil courts, and mostly representing people on Legal Aid.

18 years on and in the midst of a professional bust-up I met a former partner who was a County Court Registrar (as they were called in those days). It was he who put my name forward for appointment as a Deputy Registrar, and after an interview at the Lord Chancellor's office I was duly appointed, sitting part-time and still continuing with my practice.

When Lord Mackay became Lord Chancellor he introduced the ap-

pointments system which still exists in more developed form, that of competition. .Until then, appointment to the full-time judiciary was by secret and arcane processes leading to a tap on the shoulder for the successful candidate. All that was swept aside and a system of open competition was introduced. I applied in 1994 and was lucky enough to be appointed to what was now the office of District Judge. I took up my appointment in October 1995 and was assigned to North Shields County Court, a single judge court in a town at the mouth of the River Tyne severely hit by the closure of coal mining and shipbuilding in the north-east of England and, by good fortune, the town in which I had practiced for 15 of my 25 years as a Solicitor.

My working life fell into a pattern. Every four weeks I sat at Newcastle upon Tyne, where all the big local cases were heard and District Judges were involved in case management of such cases. During the other weeks I had possession cases on a Monday (defaulting tenants in the morning and defaulting mortgagors in the afternoon). Tuesday was family day, dealing with problems about where children would live and arrangements for contact with the non-residential parent in the morning and sorting out family money after divorce in the afternoon. On a Wednesday we had all sorts of general County Court work and on Thursdays we did small claims and trials, including family money and children disputes which had not been solved by negotiation with a bit of Judicial steer on the Tuesday hearings. On Fridays we did not have a Judge at North Shields, so I sat at Morpeth (Northumberland's County town) doing family and small claims on alternate weeks.

In between times there were piles of paperwork to do, dealing with a host of different matters – certifying divorces for decree to be pronounced; attachments of earnings to make sure a judgment debt was paid and many other simple or sometimes complicated little problems which required a judicial decision. Then there were always the urgent applications, maybe to suspend a warrant of possession

or to make an Order to protect someone from domestic violence. (I should make it clear that District Judges do not try criminal cases. When you hear of a District Judge trying a criminal case he is properly a District Judge (Magistrates Courts) or what we used to call a Stipendiary Magistrate.)

My routine altered very little until I retired in 2010. Yes, there were changes in the law and significant changes in procedures, some designed to improve the system; some merely to save money. But by and large it was a settled routine and a satisfying job, so much so that I still continue to sit part-time as a Deputy District Judge.

The job involves dealing with people who may have money troubles or matrimonial problems, people who are trying to recover money, or deny that they are liable to pay money. Small claims are my jurisdiction (there is no such thing as the Small Claims Court) as are a host of other types of case. Divorce, consumer problems, insolvency, they all come into my court, as do boundary disputes, accidents at work or car crashes. In Newcastle, where there is Admiralty jurisdiction I've been known to arrest the odd ship!

But the serious point about that wide-ranging jurisdiction is that it all involves people who have problems. And that makes it much easier to identify how your personal philosophy or your religious outlook is applied as you go about your daily work. My Judicial oath, taken when I was sworn in requires me to "do right to all manner of people after the laws and usages of this realm, without fear or favour, affection or ill will."

In other words I have to apply the law and treat everyone fairly.

Treating everyone fairly sounds like a very Unitarian approach to life. As a religious movement we embrace a huge range of personal philosophies of life – Christian, humanist, pagan, agnostic, atheist – the

list is only shortened by the brain's failure to remember all the words, but in all those philosophies I have never met a Unitarian who did not believe in treating people fairly. And it's particularly apt for a lawyer of my generation, because I was trained that a lawyer always acted in the best interests of the client, even if that were inimical to the lawyer's best interest.

But there's another peculiarly Unitarian feature of being a Judge, and it applies to Judges of all ranks.

All Judges have to weigh evidence. If, for example, I have to decide who was responsible for a Road Traffic accident, I have to hear the witnesses, very often only the two drivers, and decide who is in the wrong. That involves listening to the evidence, hearing it tested by cross-examination, perhaps asking a few questions of my own, and deciding the answer. It's not an objective search for the truth – even God (whoever or whatever He, She or It may be) might struggle with that one – it's a search to decide who has provided the most convincing version of what, to the two parties, is their individual truth. Put simply, it's possible for them both to hold their version of what happened to be the truth and yet one of them must be wrong.

As a Unitarian, the same process is involved in teasing out my personal philosophy of life – my own theology. My theology is personal to me, but it informs my religion, which is how I relate to, react to, and respond to others. My theology is arrived at by teasing out my truth from all the various sources available to me, not excluding sitting in front of the fire and gazing into the flames. It may not be the same truth as anyone else's; in fact I'd be surprised if it was.

My *religion* is how I apply that theology to the way I live my life, which must include how I do my job, and I suspect my religion, in the sense in which I have used the word, would find common cause with all of us.

Dealing with people who are facing debt problems, possible eviction or even domestic violence, and on the other hand people who want debts paid, their property back from non-rent payers, or who are accused of domestic violence involves an even-handed approach. I must not prejudice, not assume the worst, not believe one argument against the other without hearing both arguments and weighing in the balance. Only when I have been through that process can I make a decision. Even at that stage it is important to treat the losing party with respect and to explain why the result is as it is.

Ian Lowe

I first attended Park Lane Chapel about 70 years ago when I was christened but I wasn't seen there again until I was almost 50.

Although I wasn't brought up as a Unitarian, my father was. He came from a family who attended the chapel and he too was a regular attendee up until the time when he was young man. It must be said though that when he spoke of the chapel it was largely about the football teams which he was a member of. He was a very good sportsman and the chapel had a very active social side including sport. Nevertheless I know now although it wasn't always obvious that his beliefs were Unitarian. I remember when I was young and our conversations sometimes turned to religion, his views came through clearly. Without quite realising it I was becoming a Unitarian. Towards the end of his life he returned to the chapel and attended with my brother. When he died in 1991 the funeral was held there.

I had never been a serious church goer but had at times gone along with friends to a number of churches of different denominations, though never feeling entirely comfortable. Park Lane however felt

quite different and following the funeral I went back and became a regular attender.

I felt there was something special about the old building and the warmth of the congregation and about the beliefs of this branch of religion

Twenty odd years later and I'm still there. In the meantime as so often happens to so many who join organisations, I have been drawn more and more into the workings of it.

They let me settle in then I was approached and asked if I'd like to join the committee. Naïvely I agreed and then when I was firmly settled in, I was asked if I would be a trustee. Again I agreed. Admittedly these are not particularly onerous positions and it is a good thing to be involved. However I was soon trustee chairman and had been asked if I would join a sub group of the trustees, the estate trustees, whose duty it is to oversee an endowment made to the chapel in the eighteenth century. My involvement grew and next I was attending district meeting on behalf of the chapel and one year I find myself district president but this was for one year only.

This is not to suggest that others do nothing. At the heart of Park Lane Chapel there is a group of extremely hard-working people. They work hard each week but particularly so on fundraising occasions. Ours has never been a wealthy chapel and there are no secret funds hidden away. Because of this we need to hold regular events to raise money. We have spring and winter fairs interspersed with attic sales.

In addition the annual heritage open day is an important occasion when we celebrate what we have been as a chapel and also our contribution to local life in the form of the school which once served the

area but has now become our Hall. This event sees former pupils coming back to both the building as well as the chapel.

The chapel does not open only on Sundays. During the week on Monday and Thursday morning members may be seen either working or socialising. On Mondays in particular there is a working party made up of the members and non members, the latter simply want to help maintain our buildings and they contribute enormously to the wider life of the chapel. Thursday morning is largely a social event which we advertise with posters outside the chapel, inviting anyone who wishes to drop in for a coffee.

In this way we have gained some new members but the important thing is the image which we project.

Of course we also draw an income from Thursday morning and the importance of this should not be underestimated.

If I had thought that I was settling into a quiet time when I retired from my job as a teacher I was soon to learn otherwise. Those of us who have responsibility for buildings know that although they may be beautiful and filled with atmosphere these features come at a price. The buildings bring with them worry and expense. Park Lane is such a building. It is a small chapel built in 1697 in what was then a rural area close to Wigan, Lancashire. With the industrial revolution came immense change: coal mining was the great industry of the area and a mine was sunk almost directly opposite. Unfortunately this led to subsidence which affected both the chapel and school building - but we have overcome this problem.

More recently we have gone through trying times when the chapel needed to be reroofed. Then the school buildings were found to be

riddled with dry rot. Both involved great expense. The congregation and friends responded magnificently. There have been other times when similar responses have been called for. Adversity though does seem to have a positive affect on Park Lane and we have been strengthened by these experiences.

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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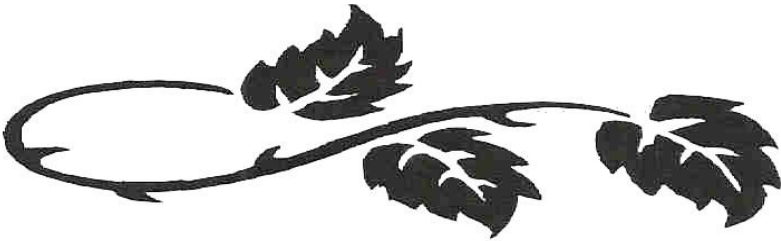
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