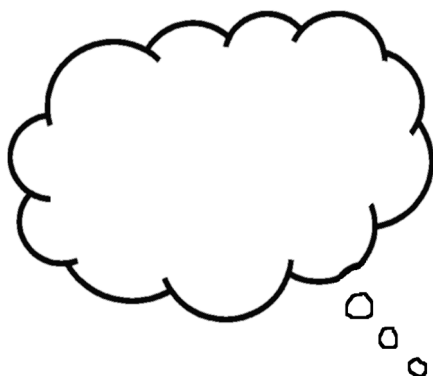


National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
and Free Christian Churches

Viewpoint



The Thought That Counts

Issue 239



Feb 2015

Registered Charity 1040294

Introduction

A couple of years ago I was invited by the local community radio station to join a team of ministers to present a daily 'It's The Thought That Counts'. This would go out twice a day, once in the breakfast show and once in the lunchtime show. The rules were that the pieces should not be political nor evangelising. Each piece must be timed to last exactly ninety seconds. They are recorded in one of the studios and we are told what date they will be broadcast, usually two or three weeks later and usually in blocks of three or five.

I thought I would share a selection from the ones I have done.

I would like to publish some short thoughts from our NUF members towards the end of 2015. If I receive enough contributions I will. There are only two rules - it must be original work and should be no longer than 250 words.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Ourselves

People have their outer selves, the one we see, the one they show, but they also have an inner self - the sensitive core of their being. Within this inner self, there are many layers and many temperatures.

Times when it is calm and placid and times when it is disturbed and angry. Times when it feels vulnerable. There are times when it is in conflict, when the outer world invades and there is no defence against it. Within that inner self there is a spiritual part. It can make a connection with powers and forces greater than ourselves. There are higher layers that by contemplation and meditation we can reach into - and enrich our lives, enrich our understanding of the world, enrich the spiritual essence of our being.

There are layers of love, love for oneself, love for others, love for the animal world, love for the physical world. Reaching into these layers colours our lives, brings a sense of peace, a sense of strength and understanding the world itself. Reaching into these layers can reveal a purpose for ourselves and for the world. Take time each day to reflect on those inner layers: feel

them healing and comforting and explaining - then the strengths and the insights gained in our inner worlds will reflect from us as we live in the outer world. Let us find peace and make peace - both inwardly and outwardly and travel in the world with confidence.

Jacob

Of all the characters in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible as it is known, I find Jacob the most interesting. He has the weaknesses and strengths as any other man, maybe more so.

When he dreams of the stairway to heaven and sees the angels, he is devout and inspired.

Confronted by his God he becomes doubting and distrusting and wrestles him off.

He cheats his brother Esau. He deceives his father into passing the family inheritance to himself and not his elder brother - then runs away.

He has no feeling for his first wife Leah because he was tricked into marrying her, he adores Rachel though and had to work for her father for fourteen years before he could marry her.

He favours his two youngest children above all the others. When his only daughter is taken away by a gentile prince she is dropped from the story, her feelings are never considered.

The prince offers nomadic Jacob a settlement, 'Let our tribes co-exist', he says, 'Intermarry'. 'Settle in the area, you are welcome'

'No chance' says Jacob and moves on - after first destroying the prince's city and all the towns around.

Why study such a character as Jacob? Because we can read his story and learn more about what is right and what is wrong if the hero has faults and weaknesses as well as strengths and virtues.

We might ask are we as good or as bad as Jacob?

Love

In tennis love is nothing, in life love is everything. But Love has a dark side. The dark side of love is possessive, selfish and controlling. The dark side of love lives only for itself and is blind.

Love that lives in the light is gentle and strong. Gentle as the hurt voice of the Apostle admonishing his church. Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; love is not irritable or resentful; love does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth.

Gentle love nurses the child, touches a hand, smiles in greeting.

Strong is the love of the Gospels that drove out evil spirits, cured the sick, lifted the lame to walk, restored sight to the blind. Strong love drove the money changers out of the holy temple.

Love cannot be weak. Love is the quiet fire that has long burned in a partnership of trust.

Love is the raging fire in the heart passionate against suffering; driven by love to help and heal, console and comfort.

Selfless Love that walks amongst the broken bringing hope.

Love is sacrifice. Stands back when it could go forward; gives when it could take; stays when it could go.

Love is the food of the spirit, the energy of life - and in the possession of us all. Let us use it well.

A memorable sermon

People who go to church often say one sermon in particular spoke to them. For me it was one about planting trees. The preacher said planting trees is an

act of love for future generations because you will never live long enough to see them fully grown.

Planting trees is a symbolic act. We often plant trees as a memorial. My church planted a tree when we christened a baby.

Four years ago the Bolton Interfaith Council planted a tree in Bolton that was a cutting from one in Japan. It was from the Kaki tree that had survived the atomic bomb dropped on the city of Nagasaki.

Ten such cuttings are sent around the world each year to celebrate that new life could come from that awful moment.

We had an art project at one of the schools in Bolton and a ceremony in the Town Hall when the kaki tree was officially handed over; then it was planted by the Mayor into a peace garden at the school and everyone there and those involved in the project are invited back for a reunion when it is ten years old because that is when the tree will give its first fruit.

Ours won't because someone damaged our tree and it is dead - but you don't have to be put off by such misfortune. We will plant another one.

It is an act of love for future generations and a hope for peace in the world.

The Butterfly

A few weeks ago we were on the allotment making a start. The sun was out and it was warmer. A butterfly was taking a rest near the fruit bushes. It was one of those beautiful ones with eyes painted on its wings.

'Nice to see you', I said and it flew off beating its beautiful wings. Did it know I wondered when it was a caterpillar chewing away on our leaves and never looking up. Did it know then what it would become? Did it eat with a dream of flying away one day - for certain.

One day it would stop eating and start to spin the silk to make itself a cocoon and then sleep in it - until the warmth of the sun woke it up and it wasn't a caterpillar any more. Was it one life or three lives? How did it recognise the

turning points when it had to change?

‘Well’, I thought, ‘I have had my caterpillar days - we all have. And I suppose I have had my chrysalis days as well’.

Looking back I can see them but at the time I couldn’t. Turning points came as opportunities. It was a matter of daring to take them - and sometimes it was a mistake.

Life for us is unpredictable - we have to make choices - big choices sometimes - and sometimes they are made for us.

I like to think the caterpillar chewed knowing what it could become and dreamed of a life beyond.

Holocaust Memorial Day

Humanity can have two faces - care - or cruelty.

After the First World War Germany had to make punishment payments. That meant austerity. People living in absolute poverty, the country ruined.

It led to right wing extremism. It led to cruelty. Popular politicians said ‘Blame the Jews for being different - blame the Roma - blame the disabled - blame anyone who’s different.’

These were all made scapegoats for the terrible austerity.

‘Get rid of them’, said the politicians who gained power - and they did - transported in cattle trucks to Concentration camps and exterminated in gas chambers or worked to death in labour camps. More than six million perished - mostly Jewish people.

The world went to war against the horrors of that regime.

After this war Germany was rebuilt with care, American aid, and not thrust into poverty again.

And on one day every year we remember those millions killed in the camps - Holocaust Memorial Day - January 27th.

The Bolton Interfaith Council have organised a ceremony for Wednesday afternoon in the Town Hall.

It must never happen again, we say - but so often we say it in vain. Around the world there is still cruelty. People are still being killed because of their race or religion.

We have refugees in our town from all these conflicts. We hear their stories of suffering. We offer them care.

We know from that history how easy it is to whip up feelings of cruelty against particular groups. May we all care and not become cruel.

It's Nice to be Important

My old regiment the Lancashire Fusiliers is to go the way of the mills - into the oblivion of 'used to be'.

Memories of square bashing rise up as our bus from Bolton passes what used to be Wellington Barracks on its way to Bury Market.

Looking back I had a good time with the LFs as we were called. Those memories of shouting drill sergeants and cold wet nights on manoeuvres soon evaporated.

I suppose I joined with the dream that one day I would get a VC but as soon as they designated me an adjutant's clerk, it was unlikely to happen.

Instead I tried for glory on the playing fields. It was wonderful. I could play cricket, hockey and rugby for the Regiment and throw discus and javelin for them and it was all part of what I called a hard day's work.

One year we went on a rugby tour to Berlin and played matches in the Old Olympic stadium. We saw the wall and were taken on a trip to East Berlin

through Check Point Charlie. Exciting days.

And we listened to the American Broadcasting Network.

Every morning at eight o'clock the presenter said, We are going to pause now to change transmitters.

'In the pause just remember, It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice'

I brought that home with those LF memories. Better than wanting a VC.

It's nice to be important but it's more important to be nice

The Whitmanites

When Bolton was a cotton town belching smoke and pouring grime on to its terraced cobbled streets, a group of young men used to meet at Unitarian Chapels and took walks on the hillside in the fresh air.

They read poetry to one another and talked about life and the future and what was the meaning of it all.

There are messages in the poems they said, of religious things and philosophical things. Messages of how life should be and how life could be.

One day one of them came to the group with the poem - 'Leaves of Grass' by an American poet, Walt Whitman.

This poetry astounded them, moved them so completely that they abandoned all others and from then on read only from Whitman and his 'Leaves of Grass'.

Whitman wrote about the beauty of life and the spiritual beauty in everything - hold a book in your hands and feel its beauty. Look at the street, look at the ocean, look at the blossom on the apple tree.

And he wrote about God. Don't look up for God, look out for God - for God is

in everything you see. Look at one another to see God and look at the grass.

The young men became known as Whitmanites. And the Whitmanite tradition continues, every year gathering to read the poems, drink from a loving cup that the old poet sent them and salute his memory and his spiritual values.

Trees Walking

What can you see? 'I can see people but they look like trees walking'. This is a person blind since birth whose sight was miraculously restored. A second touch and he saw clearly.

A story, but I thought of a young man who was given the gift of sight last month by a lady who had died and donated her eyes.

I wondered what this young man saw when those new eyes revealed the world to him. Did he see people and did they seem like trees walking?

'Look at this', they used to say in our art classes, 'What can you see?', and we would tell them. 'Now look again, try to see clearly'. A second look revealed so much more about the picture. It was not just the centrepiece which had first attracted the eye. There was a wealth of detail and it was a code for the message the artist was trying to convey. We had only seen trees walking.

It moves me on from not just looking again at what I see in the world - what is really before my eyes. I think too of other forms of sight - like second sight, seeing what is hidden and insight, understanding. It is the difference between seeing people but they look like trees walking and seeing people who are real and more than just the picture at first sight.

Sometimes our eyes need to be touched again and then we can really see.

The God Orak

Back in 1950 I read the Eagle comic, stories set in the 21st century.

Dan Dare's adventures were set in 2012.

It seemed such a long way ahead. I used to find waiting a week for the next

issue extremely difficult.

I was against the baddies of course, particularly the evil Mekon, leader of the Treens who planned to conquer Earth.

The Eagle did reflect a world that has hardly changed in some ways. There were giant space rafts filled with displaced people after their planet had been made uninhabitable.

Then there was the computer generated Orak of the planet Phantos. He was created as the only God . But he took control of his own programme and so control of everything. He became the only authority on the planet about everything. Orak's computer base was always up to date. He was always ahead of the game.

Orak predicted all the ethical and moral problems that might arise and he sorted them out for the benefit of all.

What a peaceful and progressive planet Phantos must have been. I wish I could remember what happened to it. Maybe the Mekon invaded and took it over. Or maybe the people realised it was better to make their own decisions about what was right and wrong and rebelled. To give them control over their own lives and the world. They did not want to be the slaves of a computer.

Is it always better to make our own decisions?

Meditations Power

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.

Beatrice

I finished my training as a minister and spent some time in Cheshire before moving to Bolton. I remember being so nervous when I had to conduct my first funeral. Luckily for me it was for a wonderful old gentleman who had had a very interesting life. His family were so proud of him and spoke eloquently about his life and achievements.

A few months later I had to visit the same family as the old gentleman's wife, their mother had died. What a contrast ! When I asked about her they said, ' Well there's nothing really. It was dad who was so special!'

I felt stunned.

Their Mum's name was Beatrice - and her name means 'Making Happy' and that is what she had done over all those years, quietly getting on with life, looking after her family, making them happy.

She had cared for her wonderful husband, she had cared for the children and

brought them all up without any fuss or bother. She had been that person in the background who had quietly been the mainstay of the family.

When we next met, the family remembered their Mum in a different way. Yes she had indeed spent her life making sure they had been happy children and that they had lived in a happy home. She had devoted her life to making them happy.

It was a lesson to me too - never to say of anyone's life that it was 'nothing really'.

Shaking Hands

I once landed a job working overseas in the oil industry. The culture of work there surprised me. I had been used to the hierarchy of working in this country. Always someone in charge of you and someone in charge of them and someone in charge of them and so on up the ladder. We at the bottom were expected just to get on with what we had to do.

Overseas, it was a different set up. You have your own hand on the wheel one of my new colleagues said, the buck mostly stops with you.

And there was the daily rituals of greeting. You went into work and first everyone shook hands and we asked each other how we were.

Whatever might have happened before, shaking hands started each day afresh, asking how we were meant we acknowledged and knew one another. Everyone was included.

The Garden Man

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, all with life, 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 much from him. Church was not the only place. God is in the garden too. We shook hands with the cleaner and we shook hands with the managing chief. All visitors were met with a handshake.

I brought the practice home with me. It begins to cement us a community when we acknowledge one another whether it is out at work or meeting a neighbour on the way to the shops.

Let us shake hands more often, speak more often to those whose work makes our lives more comfortable. Even though we might all have different jobs and different interests, we are all in this life together. We all have a hand on the wheel.

The Temple in the market

It all began when I was walking through Leigh and my shoelace broke.

I had passed the market so hobbled back to look for a shoe lace stall. They pointed me to one run by a young Asian lady. Yes, she sold shoe laces. What length would I like, what colour etc. She sorted me out.

I love browsing hardware shops - and kitchen shops - really to see what they don't sell.

This stall was very well stocked and it was so tidy - not a thing out of place nor a speck of dust anywhere.

I said it was a pretty impressive stall.

Well, she said, it is my business - but it is also my temple.

I have little time to go to the proper temple so this is mine. Because it is my temple, I keep it very clean and I care for all the products I sell - that they are neatly arranged. I care very much for my customers too and try to be helpful. Because this is my temple I try to be very courteous too. If I did not do my best, I would be offending the gods I worship and letting down my religion.

That was years ago - but often when I look at my untidy desk or the shambles in the boot of the car, a little picture comes into my mind of that hardware temple and the young lady who was its priestess.

A Normal Person

I had a lift home from a conference with the most normal man I knew. He ticked all the boxes - job, house, family, car, holidays - all normal.

He pulled in to a lay-by next to a field. Anything wrong? I asked. No he said, I have to find some crickets and post them back to my son for his pet salamander.

So we spent the next thirty minutes in our best suits trying to catch crickets in the long grass and make them jump into a jiffy bag.

Take him off the normal list. Now I realise that no one is normal - There is no such thing as normal because we are all individuals and we are all different.

We each have our own DNA and we each have our own fingerprint and iris pattern and voice pattern, personalities, funny ways - and so it goes on.

But somewhere in some corporate back office someone decides there is a normal - so we all have to squash into the same sized aeroplane seat whether we are six foot four and thirty stone or a five foot eight and nine stone.

Clothes shops tell us what normal people are wearing this season and what shape their shoes should be.

Of course we have to give up some things or society won't work. We have to drive within the speed limits; we have to pay for what we buy.

Who do you know who's normal?

Comments -

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

Please send your comments to the editor,

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

or email to nuf@nufonline.org.uk

National Unitarian Fellowship

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



Articles for the Viewpoint to:

Rev. Tony McNeile
102 Turton Road
BOLTON
BL2 3DY

or

Seeking information about the
National Unitarian Fellowship?

Web site: www.nufonline.org.uk

or

E-mail: nuf@nufonline.org.uk