

National Unitarian Fellowship

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Viewpoint



The Unitarian Word by Peter Godfrey & Barry Thomas

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Introduction

This ViewPoint is a mixed bag!

Many of the Unitarian congregations do not have a full time minister who will preach every week to them. Most now have services led by visiting preachers. Some may be retired ministers, others are qualified preachers under the Unitarian training scheme. Members of the congregation will also take a service. What many congregations enjoy is the variety that different leaders can bring to their worship.

I have included a sermon preached this year to his own congregation by Barry Thomas who is a member at Newcastle upon Tyne, but first, it is not all about preaching to a congregation. The 'Unitarian Word' goes into the public domain through our newsletters, periodicals and books but there is also a presence on the World Wide Web with recorded meditations and services produced by UK Unitarian TV. Then there are the radio talks and reflections and articles written for local newspapers.

Peter Godfrey is never one to refuse an opportunity and he wrote a series of 'Thoughts' for his local newspaper. We begin with a selection of them.

CHILDREN ARE UNBEATABLE (Peter Godfrey)

Like many another grandparent I have anxiously waited for a grand-child's examination results. I sometimes think the wait for results is more worrying for parents and grandparents than it is for the children themselves – we know how much depends upon the results.

Having said that, I am only too aware that there is a great deal of pressure on children nowadays. It was very sad to read a report that mentally ill children are sometimes taken to police cells because there is nowhere else for them to be taken.

Fortunately we live in a society where such a report will mean that action will be taken to remedy this. The increase in child poverty is worrying and is perhaps partly why the government announced plans to increase help to 'troubled families' and vulnerable children from 120,000 families to 500,000 such families.

Generally speaking, I think life for children in this country is better than it has ever been, though not every one agrees. Not long ago I was sent a poem that included the words:

The children were seldom unhappy
And the wife was content with her lot.
The kids were a lot more contented,
They didn't need money for kicks,
Just a game with their mates in the road,
And sometimes the Saturday flicks.

Well, I was a teenager in the '50s and I can remember the girl next door having to go to a TB hospital and a boy suffering from polio. How I hate those poems or articles that look back through rose-tinted spectacles. Most of them say that hitting children was a good thing – 'It did me no harm'.

They fail to see the irony of that comment – being beaten led to them believing in the value of beating. I remember a campaigner against hitting children observing that 'Many grandparents I know who did hit their children would not dream of hitting their grandchildren'.

I once saw a poster in a church vestibule that was headed 'A hundred ways to praise a child'. At the bottom there was a PS – 'A hug is worth a hundred words'

May the love, care and thoughtfulness for children that was at the heart of the life and teaching of Jesus inspire us still.

THANK YOU MOTHER (Peter Godfrey)

Mothers suffer!

I was reminded of this when looking again at the references in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles to Jesus's mother.

Mary was warned that 'You too shall be pierced to the heart' and troubles began soon after Jesus was born when the family, fleeing from

Herod, became refugees in Egypt.

Twelve years later when the family made its annual trip to Jerusalem the parents, in a group of people travelling together, left Jerusalem to return home and did not realise for quite some time that the boy Jesus was not with them. When they returned they looked for Jesus 'in great anxiety' – typically worried parents. They were surprised to find Jesus in discussion with teachers in the temple. This was an incident that mother Mary treasured in her heart.

We can only wonder what Mary made of Jesus's teaching that he had come not to bring peace but a sword, and to set mother against daughter. Perhaps she was happier with his later teaching that those who take the sword perish by the sword, and happy are the peacemakers.

How must Mary have felt when Jesus seemed to disown her and his brothers when they tried to see him and heard that he described his followers as his mother and brothers? Jesus did think of her when he was dying and appointed a disciple to look after her.

How did Mary feel when, according to Acts, she saw the resurrected Jesus rise from the earth until he was hidden in a cloud, and was told that one day he would return in the same way?

Mary's suffering must remind us of the suffering of mothers today. Sadly, there are so very many examples: millions of refugees, mothers who lost sons in wars, mothers of murdered and missing children, mothers of youngsters killed in accidents...

How could Jesus say 'Happy are they that mourn'? He could only say it at the same time as adding the words – 'for they shall be comforted'. Mothers often need comfort but I hope we all know that mothers are very often comforters. So it is good that we have that special day when we can say – Thank you, Mother.

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE (Peter Godfrey)

The Methodist minister the late Lord Soper often preached from a soap box in Hyde Park. On one occasion he quoted Jesus' words about loving God 'with all one's heart'.

Someone in the crowd called out - 'The heart is only a pump!' Soper replied - 'You'd sound silly saying to your girlfriend 'I love you with all my pump'.'

When someone says 'My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky' we don't get a stethoscope to check that the statement is literally true. We know the heart does not actually move but the statement tells us vividly about the person's feelings.

Taking a person's religious expressions as literal truth can sometimes be very divisive. The Jesus depicted by John in his Gospel is very different from the Jesus in the first three Gospels. When John puts into Jesus' mouth the words 'No one comes to the Father except through me' he was expressing what Jesus meant to him. The words are no more literally true than when someone says 'My mother is the best mother in the world'. In the other Gospels Jesus' teaching is that we come to God by being forgiving and by building our lives on the rock of his teaching.

Father Laurence Freeman O.B. writes in his book 'Jesus the Teacher Within': 'No one comes to the Father except through me' could just as easily have been translated 'No one comes to the Father except like me'.

Central features of the Unitarian religious tradition are having no creeds that are compulsorily binding on any member and being encouraged to think for ourselves.

We know the tragedies that can be caused by saying the certain creeds must be believed 'or else...' The last two people burnt at the stake (in 1612) were 'heretics' who could not accept the creed about Jesus being God. Unitarians sometimes say that we believe in the comma in the creed between the words 'born of the Virgin Mary' and 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'.

In religious and poetic language we are all trying to describe what is so profound that it is ultimately indescribable. We are human so none of us has the whole truth and we can all learn things from one another. There's a thought!

A CELEBRATION OF NATURE AND THE ONE-NESS OF THINGS.

By Barry Thomas

A couple of weeks ago my wife and I got up early. We got up about quarter past four in the morning. Why? Well it was the day of the Summer Solstice and we wanted to see the sun rise.

It was one of those moments when sometimes we just want to pause and marvel at the universe. This was the moment when, at 4.28am, the sun appeared on the longest day. We saw the dull overcast sky lighten in the East and then get a hint of a pink glow, and as we watched the pale pink became stronger and began to spread a little and then within a few minutes took on a firmer orange colour and became more extensive as it spread higher and wider and before long all the clouds had bright orange light on their eastern side. The longest day had begun. A special moment.

People from many different cultures have held solstice celebrations for thousands of years.

And in different ways we all surely are captivated by the natural world from time to time. I doubt if any of us here have not experienced moments when we have been simply spellbound, by looking and the grandeur of nature – perhaps a starry night, or a spectacular seascape and sky, or sunset, or mountain range, or perhaps just stopping, as we visit the Farne islands to marvel at the colonies of puffins, or of the Arctic Terns which travel 6,000 miles every year from the Antarctic.

We have the capacity to be awestruck by the natural world. We all have experiences which are beyond words – experience which leave us speechless -but which have a powerful effect on us. These are moments of awe and wonder. There are moments when sometimes our experience might even be described as spiritual in the sense of feeling connected to something greater than ourselves.

It's not always the big and spectacular which can move us. We can experience good feelings about nature in small ways too. We can be enchanted when we gaze and reflect on a single flower as we can in the Flower Communion service or we can be transfixed when looking at some emerald green moss in the sunlight on the bark of a tree.

There's no doubt that nature can uplift us as we reflect on what a wonder is the universe.

But we must beware of double standards. If we want to praise nature it's illogical to pick and choose the parts we like (flowers in the meadow) and the parts we don't (mosquitos) . Nature isn't all primroses and dolphins. Illness is a manifestation of nature. Cancer is just as natural as the nightingale.

Cells send chemical signals to each other all the time. Normal cells, after they have created a normal tissue, stop multiplying because of signals that they receive that the tissue construction is now complete. Cells obey signals that tell them when they have reached their limit and will cause damage if they grow any further. But something in cancer cells overrides the normal signaling system.

Unlike normal cells, cancer cells don't stop growing and dividing when there are enough of them. So the cells keep doubling, forming a lump (tumour) that grows in size. Eventually a tumour forms that is made up of billions of copies of the original cancerous cell. Cancers of blood cells (leukaemias) don't form tumours but they make many abnormal blood cells build up in the blood. Cancer is simply nature.

Or consider what seems to us to be cruelty in nature. Like the case of the digger wasp. A female digger wasp lays her eggs in a caterpillar, or a grass hopper or a bee so that her larva can feed on it but, she carefully guides her sting into each ganglion of the prey's central nervous system, so as to paralyse it but not kill it. This way, the meat is kept fresh. The prey is eaten alive from the inside but unable to move a muscle to do anything about it. Nasty. Very nasty. This kind of manifestation of nature was what caused Charles Darwin to question his religious belief. He famously wrote to a friend I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have created the Ichneumonidae (digger wasps) with express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice”

The sort of universe we have is one where the beautiful and the cruel appear side by side. The good and the harmful co-exist. Perhaps evils that we observe in the world are the necessary cost of the good that we see. The science of evolution shows us that fruitful progress is a kind of package deal, with the beneficial and deleterious effects inextricably

cably intertwined. Genetic mutation is both a source of new life and biodiversity, and a source of malignancy. You can't have one without the other. The presence of cancer in the world is not something that a more competent creator could have easily eliminated – it is part of the shadow side of evolving fertility.

Thomas Aquinas argued that "if all evil were prevented, much good would be absent from the universe, A lion would cease to live if there were no slaying of animals." There is a balance of goods and harms.

Now here's a remarkable thing. We are not just observers of nature, good and bad, we are part of it. We are part of the very fabric of the universe.

The astrophysicists' account of how the universe was created shows that all things – the stars, the oceans, the trees is all the same matter. Our own bodies consist of the same elements that the universe is made of - our flesh and blood is a collection of atoms that were created billions of years ago in the interiors of stars. We are not set apart from nature. We're made of the very same stuff as the rest of the universe.

There is a one-ness of all things. To me that is spectacular, that is astounding, that is awesome.

And our universe is an ordered universe. The story of creation in Genesis tells of our being one element in the creation of the universe. The book is the story of the beginning of everything. It is not about factual information – it is not a text book of science. It tells of how humans were created along with everything else and how God created order out of chaos.

The first act of creation was when God created all matter (the heaven and the earth) out of nothing. But the earth was formless and empty so the narrative proceeds to relate how in six days God organised this chaos into the well-ordered world we now see.

Yes there is order in the universe. Many of the essential parameters of nature - the strengths of fundamental forces and the masses of fundamental particles are ridiculously, almost unbelievably fine-tuned for you and me. Take the electromagnetic force. It has a value that is perfect for getting stars to bind protons and neutrons to form carbon – the building block of life as we know it. Or the strong nuclear force which

binds the insides of protons and neutrons. If it were even a tiny bit stronger, the whole world would be made of hydrogen; if it were weaker, there would be no hydrogen at all. In either case life as we know it wouldn't be possible. There are several other parameters which are just right for life.

It's as if the universe were made for us.

We're part of nature but a very special part. We are not just apes with less hair and a bigger brain. Human beings have far surpassed all other species in our development of language and technology and intellect.

Language enables us to communicate and transmit memories, knowledge and ideas through stories and folk tales and scientific papers. Our great creativity in terms of art, and poetry, and dance, and music, and storytelling and drama makes us special. And in practical matters we have the means to bend the natural world to our needs. The natural state is for things to fall down – a pile of stones will just sit there, but engineers overcome the force of gravity and build bridges that stay up, and medical scientists develop medicines to alter nature and check the natural progress of disease. With our technology we can get computers all over the planet to talk to one another through the internet. We can explore space.

And perhaps more importantly we have powers of conjecture and we ask questions which are about more than how to survive – how to get enough food and shelter so that we can reproduce ourselves and sustain our species.

We have a bigger intellect than we need for survival. We ask questions about how the universe works. We enquire about the laws of physics which govern the universe, we enquire about distant galaxies and how life on earth began. And we engage in philosophical enquiries and ask questions such as 'does God exist?', 'what happened in history?', 'what is beauty?' I don't suppose the butterfly muses on these things. The point is we ask questions which are quite unnecessary for us to know in terms of our survival as one of the species on the planet.

We are certainly special. And this is the point the writer of Genesis was making. God created man in his own image so men and women are distinct from other animals. They have a place of honour having been made in the divine image. Psalm 8 offers a fine poetic comment on this

idea. It talks of humankind as the crown of creation, controlling the forces of nature. The Psalmist says

3 When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

4 What is man, that thou art mindful of him?

5 For thou hast ... crowned him with glory and honour.

6 Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet:

We have dominion over nature, but this entails responsibility. It is a privilege. It is not a licence to abuse creation. So when we pollute the great oceans by dumping thousands of tons of plastic into the sea, when we promote climate change by our reckless use of fossil fuels, whenever we trample on other species - we are working against God's creation rather than working in harmony with it.

It is a wonderful world – it is for us to enjoy and to use – if we treat it with respect and if we collaborate with nature we can celebrate the wonder of our being part of the oneness of everything.

This sermon drew on two readings

1. Genesis (1.1 - 2.3) as paraphrased in 'Creations Stories from around the world' University of Georgia. 4th ed 2000

2. 'Why are we here?' from Modern Astrophysics by Bradley W Carroll and Dale A Ostlie 2nd ed 2007

Editor's invitation.

If there are sufficient contributions I would like to use the December ViewPoint for world peace messages. They can be of any length and as tangential to the subject as you like. The only stipulation is that it must be your own original work, otherwise please submit previously published material with a copy of the author's permission.

God luck

Tony

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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