

# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian  
and Free Christian Churches  
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# Viewpoint



## My Old School

By

Rev Tony McNeile  
NUF Minister & Viewpoint Editor

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## Introduction

Sometimes when you edit a journal, a gap appears. There is nothing available to print and yet the printer is calling for copy. Here is such a moment, rather than have two late editions of the Viewpoint I have rummaged in my old words locker and looked in my blog and found a few things to keep us going. Hope I don't have to do it again too soon!

Tony Mcneile (editor)

## My Old School

My old school held an open day and exhibition in honour of one of its old boys, Albert Ball, who won a posthumous VC in the first world war and for being the face of a 70p stamp that honoured the highest medal for valour that the country has. Albert Ball is not really my kind of hero but he was the only one the school had for a long time until they taught Prince Obelensky to play rugby and he then performed for England.

In my day, the school was not really a fount of academic excellence - anyone who gained more than three 'O' levels was garlanded with the metaphorical laurel. We were certainly short of heroes but the grounds were beautiful and we played games every afternoon. We had no alternative to the monastic way of life of a boys boarding school but we all seemed to survive it and could honestly say that what life offered afterwards - even in the army - was not as demanding as it had been there. Going back there after nearly fifty years, was quite an experience. Now it is a good school catering for boys and girls and only a few of them board. Most start their schooling there in the Nursery which takes children from the age of three - no more Common Entrance exam at thirteen! There are new buildings everywhere and it is more like a University campus than a school. Notice boards are digital flat screen monitors posted all around the buildings. 'McNeile report to the Head' would be a very public written request and not a sniggering message from a fag.

The grounds are still there - all forty acres of them with cricket fields and arboreta that haven't changed a dot since I was last bowled out for a duck and lost the match for the school. The splendid fascia of the main building at the end of the long drive hasn't changed either though inside it is full of fire doors

I suppose that is what keeps me so attached to the old place. It hasn't changed and yet it has. The school is modern and successful and it has moved with the times and improved as it went along - and yet for me it was almost the same with all the old memories and the corridors filled with the ghosts of familiar friends and times. I used to look back at those days with a healthy contempt but I realise now how important they were to me - and if I had looked at my books instead of out of the window, who knows?

I realise too that the school was more than a physical place in the days of my childhood - I have carried it and its value patterns with me ever since. It has made me a survivor in one way or another.

Maybe I developed there a spiritual independence too. Sometimes it takes a long time to realise these things but then it is never too late.

## Talking to Nature

Strange, sitting under this old oak tree just looking at the world. It is hot but I am enjoying the shade and I have the place to myself - except there is a fly buzzing round my head and a wasp is inspecting the sandwich I am about to eat. The wasp is supposed to eat the fly!

How many times over the centuries has this spot been enjoyed like this? I wonder where their spirits are now or if they are still here, sitting beside me.

Below is the lake and I can make out people slowly walking round it and nearby there are groups enjoying their picnics. Who wouldn't on a day like this? It is so beautiful and I love it dearly. Alone I feel part of it all but also separate and it makes me sad. I take it all in - the green fields, the distant farms and the moorland. There is a stillness about me - as if I am locked in an eternal moment and not just on this earth but above me as well in the blue sky and past that wisp of a white cloud towards the eternal universe. I am part of all that too.

The fly buzzes and reminds me of reality so I swat at it. We are in a sad little universe, the wasp, the fly and I. It is not a permanent one and how quickly it might change - especially for the fly.

The wispy cloud is a universe like the big one I can't see. Never still for a moment, it gathers in tendrils and pushes forwards and spreads out little billows. Soon it might be gone - absorbed into nothing.

Was this peaceful scene really created for my enjoyment - so that I could enjoy it all without fear of being snatched out of life by a predator - like the fly might be or the worm that has just been hauled out of the earth by a blackbird?

It is strange this sense of violent nature hiding within such a beautiful world. I just can't put a Creator God at the heart of it. It seems permanent but it is terribly impermanent. One universe? I don't think so for I have travelled through many. Each love has created a new universe to live in. Each nearly love could have created others. I loved the ones with radiant souls

Down by the lake the walkers are enjoying their own separate universes and so are the picnickers. Universes are created. They collapse, they implode and sometimes finally explode and disappear just like the little cloud.

Under the tree and watching the wasp, I review my universes. It is like flicking through the pages of a notebook. Where is she and where are those friends? In their own universes and I am here in mine. Three of us and the tree - and all those spirits who have been here before and the ones who are always about - the radiant ones who make me think there must be a god with me in my universe.

## Looking for God

I have been looking for God all my life. Where is God to be found? Some will say that God created the world and then left it to develop all on its own. If there was a plan it was to leave the human race to finish off the work of creation until it was a place that God could return to.

Or was God not quite that efficient - there were 't's not crossed, 'i's not dotted and the creation has run out of control. God is not omnipotent - not all powerful and not all seeing.

Or maybe creation was never complete. We have a part to play with God who is still active and guides it along a certain course - making adjustments as the failures of the human race take it in the wrong direction.

Or maybe there never was a God and never a moment of creation - that it is a process that happened because the conditions were right. In those far off early days, when the rain first fell on the earth - a difference of one degree centigrade would have meant no rain and no life. The truth could be that there never was a first cause - a particular moment.

I never thought about it once. When I was young going to church was part of life. Sunday was a special day -- including a Sunday lunch when we came home. It was unheard of not to go to church - whatever the weather - and childhood excuses of headaches and tummy aches just did not wash - off we were dragged and in our Sunday best too.

There was something about church - the atmosphere - the space - and even then the empty pews; the stained glass windows - the organ playing and the moment when the long procession of choir and acolytes with their crosses and rods of office and vicar slowly walking behind them up the aisle. We learnt the ritual of the prayers and the responses - the sing song voice that called on God to save us the people and save the Queen and the Government and its ministers.

I knew that God was in that place. The stories from the Bible were mostly beyond my childish mind but I loved the adventures of Samson and David and Goliath, David and Saul - and of all the sermons I heard in that Liverpool church, I remember only one - about Abraham planting oaks and how confident that was because he would never live to see them grow into mature trees - but he had the confidence in his God that all would be well.

I liked the story of Jacob and his stairway to heaven - but in those days never thought it any more than a story of magic. The God of the old Testament was securely rooted in my mind.

I thought of him like the king in his palace and I the simple subject living my life, getting on with my life - wary of the king but only of his power to punish. And God was a king - very male.

I never thought of receiving any favours from this King but was aware of the consequences of breaking the laws - well except when I was really stuck.

As I grew older my life began to experience the ups and downs that come to all who step out from childhood into adulthood. Plans might not work out; events just happened or just did not happen. People were not all the same - some were cruel deceivers, some were real helpers. The horizons of life broadened out and more of the world came into view. I began to see that the world was not a fair place. God the king did not save all the people - did not punish the wrong doers and did allow the innocent to suffer - often the innocent were punished for nothing - why should someone die young or be born with difficulties that would make their life so hard?

The world was a chaotic place. Life was like living in a city of strangers - where nothing was totally real - where it was easy to sink beneath the waves of anonymity - being invisible amongst a multitude - part of the drab column of comings and goings that were the daily grind.

Somewhere, walking along the grey streets a glance behind revealed - nothing. God in his palace was no longer there. The city was a God forsaken place. The churches were grimy, uninviting and vacant.

Beyond the city, there was a new experience - amongst the hills and beside the streams there was a new presence - a new God. Not the God of the Old Testament - not even a God - but a feeling - a feeling of peace - of serenity - of eternity - of aeons of time gone by undisturbed and aeons of time waiting ahead and nothing need change. footfalls fell where feet had never trod before. The pebble in the stream was a million years old.

What does such a place speak about God? That this is what was intended? That this is the deep soft resonant milestone of eternity? That here the heart is tuned to the timeless song of the universe? This is the permanent now of a God saying - before Abraham was, I am. Of the king Melchisadek who blessed Abraham being a priest before time and of time.

To this God there is no movement at all. No involvement in the clamour of the multitude - no directing of paths but a place to be found.

It is not a place for the Old Testament with its anger and punishments and sacrifices. Of columns of fire and Elijah calling flames from heaven to light the sodden stones in a contest with the priests of Baal.

Neither is this sacred place a place to stay. It is an experience and not a physical refuge to escape into forever.

I have known people who have experienced such moments of eternity but when they return to the city, the experience fades and is forgotten. What use is that.?

The mystic Christians of the middle ages spent years in prayer and contemplation seeking that wonderful moment they called union with God - but it was always a temporary moment - there had to be a consequence.

The God of the mystics was far beyond the light of the god the ordinary mortals worshipped. Their god was the light beyond the darkness.

Such perhaps was the God of Jesus - the God far beyond the light of the early followers who only knew the God of Judgement - who only knew about sacrifices and rituals and the holiness code of Moses. Not even like the mystic Cabalists who performed the rituals to keep the universe solid and God from slowly fading away.

And how sad that the God who was the god of Jesus also seems to have faded away - faded away behind the darkness and become an image. In the Christian church God has become an image in the likeness of the God of Israel, of the Old Testament ; taking sides, blessing the poor but giving them nothing, blessing the tanks that go to war; a god of fire and punishment and privilege.

I do not want that God.

I am looking for the God that arose out of the quiet hillside by the streams of time. I am looking for the God that touches the life force when a child is created in the womb. A God that is a blessing to those who stumble in the ruins of their cities and gives them courage and gives them hope; a God who is calm and constant and unchanging when there is chaos everywhere - when the bombs fall and the crops fail and love of life collapses in despair.

I am looking for the God who is reflected in the dirty faces of the rescuers and the calm assurance of the doctors. I am looking for the God who walks silently behind the Good Samaritan in the streets of shame. I am looking for the God who dares to feed the starving

I am looking for God in the creators of peace and I am looking for God amongst those who have the vision of a kingdom of God.

I am looking for God in the conscience of every human being - who walks beside you without footsteps and inspires you to live in the nameless presence that is the true God.

Amen

## **Easter Sermon**

Why did Jesus rise from the dead? But then no one is sure that he actually did rise from the dead. When Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome went to the tomb with spices to anoint the body, the stone in front of it had been rolled away and the tomb was empty - except for a young man dressed in white. We assume he was an angel - but it doesn't say so. He tells the women that Jesus has been raised. They were to tell the Apostle Peter that Jesus had gone to Galilee ahead of them. In one version of Mark's Gospel that is it. It finishes by saying that Jesus sent out through them the imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

There has always been debate about this ending of the story of Jesus. Was he taken down alive? Was it all a plot and that someone else died in his place? One question asked was any of it true? Was any of the story of Jesus true. It is quite amazing that no evidence exists for the life of Jesus. There is a single sentence in the history written by Josephus some years later but by that time the story had already taken hold.

It seems so strange that a generation would go by before anyone began to write the story down. They say that it was an oral tradition, passing from one person to another before any of it was committed to writing.

That is not unique but compare the oral tradition of Buddhism which came into existence at least five hundred years earlier. The teachings of the Buddha were passed on in the form of ballads, with constant repetition of phrases and with choruses. They were easier to learn and they remained accurate for longer. And every so many years there would be a great gathering of the monks and teachers when all the teachings would be recited. Then they would note where there were differences caused by mistakes or changes and they would make decisions about which was the most accurate and which had gone wrong - and bring everyone back to the original. Nothing like that in Christianity.

There is to be yet another programme on television looking for evidence for the life of Jesus. You can be sure they won't find any. They can only point out what might have been and what could have been - but nothing with certainty. Seeking the historical Jesus has been going on for years.

But supposing something was found. His slipper or his crown of thorns. Would that change anything today? Probably the church would soon be saying that people were being cured of all manner of diseases who touched these relics. That they had miraculous powers.

Supposing they found categorical proof that Jesus never did exist. That it was all just a story that was going round and was based on some other character who lived long before. Would that make such a difference? Would everyone stop coming to Church. Would everyone stop believing? I doubt it. I prefer to call it the legend of Jesus rather than the history of Jesus.

Legends are stories about times and peoples that may or may not have existed long long ago, in far away places - but they are stories that never die - because they have in them truths that are eternal. They have moral teachings and spiritual teachings. They are stories about heroes who have to battle against all odds but who win in the end because they are good and they never give up. And good will always triumph over wrong. Truth and Justice will always triumph over evil and the wickedness of the world. In every legend there is a hero - a role model we all aspire to but cannot emulate because the hero is too strong.

The heroes of my time have been Jason of the Argonauts and Achilles, James Bond and Indiana Jones - and Yul Brynner in the Magnificent Seven - but that too is an old legend from Japan.

My heroes were action heroes - most were.

In the days when Israel was occupied by the Romans and before that by the Syrians and before that by the Persians, people were looking for a hero to save them and set them free. A few hundred years before they did have a hero, Johannes Maccabeus - the Hammer - who threw out all the occupying armies and extended the borders of Israel as they had never been before - but that was a long time ago. People wanted a warrior. They believed that the warrior king would be supported by the heavenly warrior St Michael and the armies of Heaven and Israel would restore the country and make it great.

In the middle of all that - or perhaps from long before that came the story of Jesus - the hero based on humility, the hero based on peace and not conflict. He was an anti hero - exactly what people didn't want - but there was something very different about this hero. He was humble, came from nowhere and had no wealthy backers but he was never a hero of passive resistance; he was never the leader of a silent protest or a hunger strike.

His power lay in his words and the words were backed up with healing and miracles. His words had power to challenge the mind sets of the day. His words challenged the old teachings and challenged the religion the people practiced. Religions do not like to be challenged. They tend to react with violence.

That has not changed. Both Christianity and Islam react violently to challenge. They react violently when they are mocked. Religions are dangerous beasts when they are disturbed or annoyed.

Great crowds gathered around him but then they melted away back to where they came from. Without the support of the crowds he was never going to be a threat to the establishment. Tyrants know that when they lose control of the crowds their days are numbered. We have seen that happening all over the Middle East recently. We see in Libya that the crowd is not strong enough.

So Jesus the hero of words, the hero of miracles and the hero of healing lost out because the crowds had gone. The story of his entry into Jerusalem is the story of a bubble bursting.

So they put him to death and that should have been the end.

But heroes always win in the end. This hero overcame death itself. Even though the body was put in a cave and a massive stone used to seal it shut, the stone was moved and the body disappeared. There was only the young man in white clothing to say that he was not dead - he had gone to Galilee.

And so the story was not dead. If you believed in what he taught then you accepted that the body had gone and Jesus the man had become a spirit form of God that people did not recognise. Those who did not believe the story looked for a body - and so did many people who did believe. It is a hard story to believe - but then it is only a story - a legend about a teacher who was a holy man - and was taken up into heaven to be with God.

We make such a lot about this day. This day that is called Easter Sunday, named after a Pagan Goddess who celebrated the rebirth of spring and the renewal of life. We make a lot of it because we say it is the day that Jesus was not dead after all but had survived and gone ahead to Galilee.

We use this day to say that we should believe that life triumphs over death in the end, that God does not forsake us after all - especially when we think it is all over for us. We use this day to celebrate the renewal of all life in the spring time when the flowers are blooming again and the trees are dressed in green again. And we use this day to say that like the spring and like the story, we too can triumph over the adversities and setbacks of our lives; we can be knocked down by life but we have the power within us to rise up and live again.

Like the hero, we can hold on to a God of Love who does not forsake us - even when we think we have been forsaken.

And how do we find the strength to conquer the pitfalls of life? And how do we find the power to conquer the pitfalls and bear traps in our own minds and character? Well, we read the stories about the hero of peace - and when we read them deeply they are all stories of conquest; conquest of weakness, conquest of prejudice, conquest of fear, conquest of doubt. If we read them well and learn, we too become heroes and find life has indeed become new.

## **Walt Whitman and the Bolton Socialist Club**

Bolton's main thoroughfare through the town is Bradshawgate and off this there is a side street which is closed to traffic. This is Wood Street, the home of solicitors' offices, an upmarket Pizza restaurant and the Bolton Socialist Club. The club moved to these premises, the birthplace of Lord Leverhulme, in 1905 and today is probably one of the oldest surviving socialist clubs in the country. I joined the club soon after coming to Bolton to take up a ministry in the town centre.

Over the recent years, the club has revived many of its former activities and overcome its reputation as a licentious afternoon drinking club. It has become home to groups who help the unemployed and those who campaign for refugee families in Bolton who have had benefits stopped and are threatened with deportation; 'Bolton Against Racism' was founded by club members who campaign and leaflet against incursions by far right political parties. The Clarion Cycle Club has been revived, there are walking groups, play reading groups, a choir, a debating group, a cinema club and 'The Whitmanites'.

About the same time as the club was founded, a young man called JJ Wallace had a group of friends who met to read poetry at his home in Eagle Street, Bolton. Wallace claimed to have had a spiritual experience influenced by his reading of Walt Whitman's poetry. He became a kind of guru to his friends and their gatherings to read Whitman's poetry became known as the Eagle Street College. They corresponded with Whitman and for two years delegations went to America to meet Whitman. Whitman in turn sent them signed copies of his books and other mementoes - including a stuffed canary and a 'loving cup'. On the closest weekend to his birth-

day, the Eagle Street College used to walk up Winter Hill which dominates the town, pausing frequently to read from the great man's poems and to pass round the loving cup.

The Whitmanites are still going strong and are mostly members of the Socialist Club on Wood Street. There are plaques on buildings around Bolton that were associated with the Eagle Street College and these include two Unitarian chapels - Bank Street and Rivington. This year 30 followers gathered with sprigs of lilac in their lapels to remember the poet's birthday in the traditional way and to pass round the loving cup - now a replica since the Bolton Museum no longer allows us to borrow the original.

The poetry of Whitman expresses the comradeship that should exist between all people, the glory of nature and the spirituality of life which is beyond all religious labels. It goes well with the ethos of the Bolton Socialist Club.

Tony Mcneile

### **Garden of the spirit**

Welcome to the Garden of the Spirit. Here is your special place - a haven inside the heart that is your place of peace. It is a garden of tranquillity where you can go whenever you like - whether in moments of great joy and exuberance or when you are feeling lonely and full of tears. It waits for you as a magic land that contains all you want and need at the moment you push open the door in its high wall and let yourself in.

There are rivers to walk by with grassy banks for weary limbs to rest on. There are still lakes surrounded by hills that reflect the blue sky and the wandering clouds. There are meadows filled with flowers and orchards filled with fruiting trees. Everything is there - even the sea shore with its long silver beach for you alone to wander on. Your bench is there to sit on.

Seasons wait for you. If you need the springtime it is there. If you need the cold crisp snow and misty breath of a winter morning that too is there. It is your paradise.

Into the garden of the spirit take those you love. They may sit with you and talk with you or just be there to watch. They are spirits too. Here in this special place you can tell them the secrets of your heart because you cannot be hurt and they cannot hurt you. You can speak to the spirits of those who have hurt you and be stronger than them.

There are moments in the daytime and there are long silences in the night when the door of the garden beckons - do not pass it by if you would be peaceful and content.

### **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 E-mail to [nuf@nufonline.org.uk](mailto:nuf@nufonline.org.uk)*

# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches  
Essex Hall, London

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Articles for the Viewpoint to:

Rev. Tony McNeile  
102 Turton Road  
BOLTON  
BL2 3DY

or

Seeking information about the  
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Web site: [www.nufonline.org.uk](http://www.nufonline.org.uk)

or

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