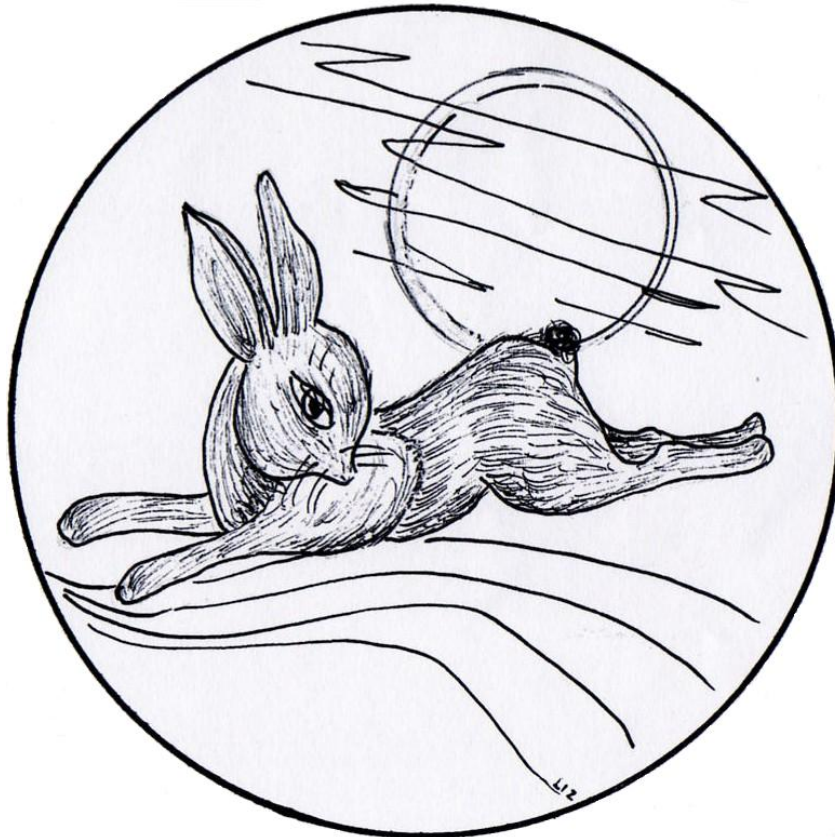


NATIONAL UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

NEWSLETTER



Linking others valuing Freedom, Reason and Tolerance in Religion.

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Issue 387

Jan/Feb 2010

JOHN'S JOTTINGS

New Year Greetings 'Twenty ten' is upon us – the start of a new decade (although one might argue that the decade doesn't actually start until 2011). Until the second half of the 1600s, the year began in April (and the tax year still does). So dates are as much symbolic as real. Nevertheless, a new year begins. The NUF is now in its 66th year (which actually began on 1st October last). That means that if it were a person the NUF would be beyond retirement age! However, an organisation can continue its working life as long as its members' needs are being met.

In changing times there are no guarantees but whilst many traditional church-based congregations struggle, the NUF's provision would appear to be well suited to the contemporary 'modus operandi' of our modern world with its postal and internet means of delivering spiritual insights and inspiration.

Frank Hytch Sadly, one of our number is no longer with us. Frank Hytch, former NUF secretary and editor of the Unitarian, passed away in November. We owe him a debt of gratitude for his efforts. Joan Wilkinson who knew Frank personally pays tribute to him later in the pages of the newsletter.

The Newsletter I said in my last Jottings that I would include an article on Joseph Priestley who I role played at the NUF weekend last September in Hucklow alongside Theophilus Lindsay and Anna Laetitia Barbould who were described by their fellow role players in the last issue. Well, Mark tells me that he has already filled the space in this issue so this will be carried over to the next one. What this shows is that the newsletter is in rude health. As I write this I don't know what the articles in this issue will be but I am confident that they will provide you with a stimulating and thought provoking read. Don't forget to visit the website at www.nufonline.org.uk as well if you have internet access.

NUF AGM and GA Meetings As usual the NUF AGM will take place at the GA Annual meetings which this year will take place in Nottingham from Thursday 8th to Sunday 11th April in the week following the Easter weekend. This time the AGM will take place on the Saturday morning at 10.45 a.m. which should enable NUF members to attend who might not otherwise. As at Chester last year, we are also using our slot to host a 'Question Time' style session when Derek McCauley and Alex Knutsford will be put 'On the Spot'. Tony McNeile will be the independent chair. Last year's session proved to be very popular and one hopes for another such NUF 'inspired' event! Look out for more on this from Tony.

As always, feel free to contact me at any time with your suggestions or concerns by letter, email or telephone.

John Greenwood

Cover picture: 'Rabbit' by Liz Egebäck Foxbrook (Reflections p.4)

THE PRESIDENT'S PAGE

Last Spring two old friends, both retired, one an ex-policeman, set off for a tramp on the moor. They did this every Thursday afternoon. In flat caps, waterproofs and walking boots they looked perhaps as if they had strayed off the set of 'Last of the Summer Wine' which is indeed filmed a few miles away on the other, gentler, side of the Pennines.

Saddleworth Moor is crossed by many old tracks and trails. Often they are worn deep with usage and many are bounded by dry stone walls of varying heights. Many early people came along these trails including the Romans who left behind the remains of a station now known as Castleshaw. Over the centuries solitary herders, pedlars and other travellers passed along them.

When the present day walkers reached a high point they turned to look back and admire the view. They noticed, some way off a lone cyclist whose head and helmet could just be glimpsed as he peddled on a track between two high stone walls. The track dipped and they momentarily lost sight of him so waited for him to reappear. He did not. They waited. No cyclist. They set off to see what had happened to him and found him semi-conscious lying on the ground beside his wrecked bicycle and his helmet.

The ex-policeman remembered his first aid and help was sent for. The para-medics, the police and the ever-ready local mountain rescue arrived. Soon the hospital helicopter appeared and the mountain rescue team carried the injured man to a flat spot where it could land.

A man's life had been saved by coincidence and observation. The odds were stacked against it but it happened. Do you know of such a coincidence? If so it would be good to hear from you.

This episode made me think of the good work done by volunteers. The local mountain rescue team turned out several dozen times last year. They had two helicopter and a light aircraft crashes to cope with and are specialists in moving casualties over steep and rocky terrain. The more I thought the longer the list of local volunteers grew. The Beaver Scouts had been 'Balsam bashing' to help get rid of this troublesome weed, adults had worked in hospices, ironed clothes for Oxfam shops, collected and driven handicapped children to nursery whilst others performed all sorts of sponsored feats from parachuting, to pony trekking and walking marathons. The list is endless, but probably repeated in every town and village in the country.

Let us start the New Year by thanking and giving thanks for the huge army of volunteers. We read and hear a great deal about miserable, cruel and unhappy events and we should remember the many kindly, loving and even sacrificial deeds happening all the time around us which are not lauded.

A Happy New Year to you all. May you see and perform many acts of kindness and love in 2010. 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

Dorothy Archer

THE MINISTER'S MUSINGS

I am staring at the glass. Is it half full or half empty? Actually it is both! That's what we have to live with. We try to achieve things in our lives and more often than not can find ourselves either encouraged or thwarted in what we are trying to do. That's when we start thinking about people and the glass. Years ago I worked in a chemical plant that made polyethylene. In modern plants the worker has no physical contact with the product but not so then. The 'polythene' came to us in a continuous stream as if out of a letter box and we had to catch the molten end which was at 400 degrees Celsius and drag it through cooling water baths to solidify it and then pass it through rollers that did the pulling for us. It was pretty hot work and sometimes the process was always going wrong so then we did a lot of catching and a lot of pulling through water baths. In recognition of our working conditions we earned three old pence an hour more than the workers in other sections. There was always a big debate at worker-management meetings about what to do with this section of our plant. It wasn't so much sympathy for us but because it was a bottle neck area that would slow down production. The glass half empty people would say there was nothing that could be done and we would just have to work harder while the glass half full argued that there must be better technology around and modernisation might be a good idea. Eventually the plant was closed down because competitors were running a far more modern process. I was pleased to have moved to the competitor who had introduced the 'no contact' process.

One of my 'golden rules' is 'that there I a solution to every problem'. Sometimes doing nothing is the right option but not often. My best wishes to you all for the coming year.

Tony Mcneile

REFLECTIONS

DANCING DRAGONS

... not faith by fable lives,

But from the faith the fable springs

Robert Penn Warren: Love's Voice

The Rabbit, perched on the Dragon's ophidian neck and hanging tightly onto his bovine ears, was tired from the long cold flight, but his eyes burned with excitement. In the grey chill of a mid-February Mancunian morning they had at last come to the end of their journey. "What, Jitù, in the name of the Nine Emperors, are we doing here?" demanded the Dragon. "Come to see the Dancing Dragons, Yinglóng," replied the Rabbit. "You didn't have to come, although I am very grateful for the ride," he added hastily. "Come on, let's wait over there," he said, and pointed to the corner of the square in which they had landed. "No one can see us, but we shall have a wonderful view of them. Don't you find all this very exciting?"

"No," responded the Dragon. "I find it all rather depressing. In this real world, you and I don't actually exist - we are part of a myth, a corporate figment, a story men tell sitting round a fireside. Doesn't that worry you?" He laid his camel shaped head on his ten great claws and sighed. "We are make-believe answers to unanswerable questions, asked by rational beings who live as best they can until they die. Why are they so enthralled to these stories? Can we honestly claim we make any essential difference to their lives?"

As was his wont when thinking, the Rabbit slowly scratched the back of his right ear, leaving his left ear stuck up in the air like some eccentric furry flag pole. "I think," he said quietly, "that without that storytelling, New Year for the folk of China Town would be a sad festival. For them you are the symbol of a benevolent power, of wisdom and of strength; you are their model of excellence and success. When they see your effigy they remember



that there is an eternal force that keeps them safe from danger. They cannot see that strength, they do not hear it call, they can neither touch it nor taste it, but in the pantomime of the dance the spirit of the dragon brings them hope of good things.”

The noise around them swelled into an approaching crescendo of gongs and cymbals, firecrackers and drums. Round the corner into the square where the Dragon and the Rabbit stood came a crowd of excited laughing people following the dancing dragon - twenty joyous undulating metres of yellow and orange shimmering silken scales, and a vast horned mask of red and green and gold, its cavernous mouth stretching after the great scarlet pearl of wisdom carried on a long pole before it.

The Rabbit laughed, thumped the cold pavement in time to the beating of the drums and, invisible to the dancers, he loped around and about them. “Oh, Gold Moon-Rabbit,” sighed the Dragon as he scooped up his little friend from under the feet of the Pearl Carrier, “do you really believe in all this?” “Yes, I think I probably do,” replied the Rabbit. “I believe in that power, of which all this hope and joy is but a shadow dancing on a wall. Be happy Old Dragon. Today we are a piece of that shadow, and it points us all to the stars.”

Naomi Linnell

MY CENTRAL EUROPEAN SOJOURN PART 2

In a previous NUF Newsletter back in the Spring of 2009 (May/June, Issue No383), I described my visit to Theresienstadt in Bohemia, north of Prague and its harrowing history. Having gone on to write Part 2 of this particular travelogue, albeit some time ago, I thought it might merit publishing as, from the feedback I have had, NUF members seem to enjoy reading of my ‘Michael Palinesque’ peregrinations. If you are reading this then NUF Newsletter editor, Mark Allaby, must have had space available and thought so too!

Leaving Theresienstadt, I drove north in the opposite direction from Hitler’s troops invading the Sudetenland back in 1938. I crossed over a mountain range where the road traverses the border between the Czech Republic and Germany just as it did then. The border was patrolled but the concern of the German customs was to ensure I wasn’t bringing in cheap alcohol or cigarettes. I don’t smoke and whilst Czech beer is exceptional, German beer is pretty good too so a cursory inspection showed that I had stocks of neither. Once across, my route took me through ‘Little Switzerland’ with its alpine style chalets and scenery. It was early April and, although thawing, there was still snow on the ground. I could see how attractive it would be in the summer with Germans escaping what one imagines to have been the rather grim industrial towns of the former East Germany such as Zwickau and Chemnitz for a breath of fresh air.

My next destination was Dresden in Upper Saxony. This city will forever be remembered for the bombing that it was subjected to towards the end of WWI. Two Russian armies were competing to be the first to reach Berlin and Dresden was in the way of the southernmost of the two. **Dresden was full of refugees at the time, swelling its population to twice the normal level, as they sought to escape the Russian onslaught.** Given the atrocities perpetrated by the Germans when they invaded Russia earlier on the war, it isn’t surprising that the Germans feared the worst.

Dresden was a major rail hub/bottleneck. However, there weren’t strategic military targets in the city. Nevertheless, acceding to the Russians’ request, Bomber Harris who was in charge of Bomber Command despatched wave after wave of heavy bombs to target the centre of Dresden (which must have had Churchill’s sanction when he was asked for this by Stalin at Yalta). Although there was a fear that Germany was developing weapons of mass destruction, nothing can justify what transpired. Doesn’t that ‘threat’ sound familiar by the way? At this point, the outcome of the war was not in doubt. The result was a colossal fire storm which was unleashed on Dresden with a deluge of incendiary bombs. This ordnance was intended to create uncontrollable fires. The conflagration led to the agonising deaths of over 100,000 men, women and children in the inferno that was unleashed.

Dresden had been a beautiful city state with magnificent civic buildings built in the 18th century, matching anything in Paris or Vienna. After the war up until the mid 1990s, painstaking restoration of the Baroque styled ruined church, palace, opera house, library and museum on the banks of the Elbe has reinstated Dresden’s former glory. Think of Sir Christopher Wren and how he changed the London skyline. Well, something of similar grandeur but on a larger scale was built here. All the buildings complement each other in a co-ordinated, classically inspired cityscape which the Elector of the Palatinate commissioned with architecture to rival the best to be found anywhere. It is breathtaking to stand and survey the cobbled, traffic free concourses and the panoply of beautiful classically inspired buildings. It is both a monument not only to the those that built the original constructions but

also those craftsmen who toiled to regenerate this masterpiece from the destruction that was inflicted on it. It serves as a memorial to all those who perished there. One hopes that such an appalling act will never be repeated.

We are blessed that this part of Europe now enjoys peace and harmony. One hopes that this tranquil situation will prevail and that we will be able to visit and appreciate the rich cultural heritage across the European continent now that the iron curtain has been drawn back and the horrors of two world wars and the ostracism of the Cold War have been consigned to history.

Elsewhere in Europe, the former Yugoslavia (formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian empire which was the flashpoint for WWI) still has its tensions but, thankfully, those are no longer resulting in bloodshed and atrocities as they did in the 1990s and a *modus vivendi* seems to have been reached.

John Greenwood

Unitarian Women Who Made a Difference Part 2 **Mary Wollstonecraft 1759-1797**

The question being asked, in this article, when considering the Unitarian credentials of the women in this series is: 'by what criteria do we judge someone to be a Unitarian?' Is it by their contribution to a Unitarian group or movement or by a particular way of thinking?

Unlike Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Mary Wollstonecraft was a church going Anglican until the age of 28. Their lives could not have been more different. Mary's childhood did not have the stability of Barbauld's. Her father frittered away his inheritance, moving around the country to follow his dream of being a gentleman farmer and failing dismally. He was a bully and her mother spoiled Mary's older brother. Yet it fell to Mary, in her young life, to take the family's finances in hand. By the time she was 29, the age at which Barbauld, from the comfort of her family home, published her first edition of poetry, Mary had been a lady's companion, opened a school in Newington Green with her two sisters, closed it in 1786 due to financial troubles and written *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, which Joseph Johnson, a crucial link in the Dissenting network, agreed to publish. In need of money she became a governess but was dismissed, taken in for a short while by Joseph Johnson and wrote a novel, at the same time learning languages in order to work on translations, particularly theological works. By this time she had already been drawn to the preaching of Richard Price, the Unitarian minister from Newington Green.

In the next ten years she worked for Johnson on the *Analytical Review* as well as writing her major works, including *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (VRW)* for which she is probably most well remembered. She travelled to France during the French Revolution, met Gilbert Imlay, an American adventurer, to whom she had a daughter Fanny, was deserted, followed him to London to find he had a mistress, made a first suicide attempt, travelled to Scandinavia to sort out a business problem for Imlay, returned, found him once more with another woman, made a second suicide attempt, was finally disillusioned with Imlay, became William Godwin's lover and was quickly pregnant, married, gave birth to Mary (who later became Mary Shelley) and died eleven days later. During this time she continually wrote for publication and died before completing her second novel *Maria*. This was an amazingly frenetic life whilst maintaining a prolific output of published work.

All too often it is the feminist aspect of the *VRW* that is remembered but on further examination it can be seen that this, as well as her other writing, has a theistic framework. From being a firm Anglican and dismissing the rational dissenters of the day she completely reversed her beliefs, denying the divinity of Jesus and the utility of the Christian system. In 1784 when opening a school for girls in Newington Green she met Richard Price, philosopher and minister at the Newington Green Unitarian Chapel. He impressed her, so much that she began to go to his chapel to hear him preach. Instead of a deity breathing hellfire, here was a benign supreme being. The vision of mankind as essentially good and inherently perfectible sat well with rational morality and reform politics. Price preached that no earthly power has authority over our private judgement and that liberty and reason constitute the capacity of virtue. We love God because He deserves our love, not because he demands it. Universal benevolence, public spirit, with love being God's agent of human liberation is beyond that of country and monarch. Here was an ethical vigour that underpinned what was considered to be a revolutionary Unitarian programme at a time when France was on the brink of revolution. In response to Edmund Burke's attack on Richard Price in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) Wollstonecraft quickly responded in print, writing *A Vindication of the Rights of Men (VRM)* (1790), a public letter addressed to Burke in support of Price's views that there was a greater authority than monarchy and country to which the free and rational individual should bow in matters of morality. In *VRW* she would write that 'Price was one of the best of men'.

Whilst continuing to translate articles for the Analytical Review she managed to write *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) in just a few weeks. As she wrote each page the printer was waiting for it, hence it could not be considered to be a well written book, containing several contradictions. However, from the theological standpoint it is telling. Wollstonecraft continually strove to define an authentic religious subjectivity. She asked what shape a woman's inner life took when forged in right relationship to her Maker? She wrote, '... it is not philosophical to speak of sex when the soul is mentioned.' (VRW) She considered Genesis to be a poetical story justifying man's subjugation of woman but was also critical of women, particularly the aristocratic class, where values were superficial with little thought for those considered beneath them. The emphasis was on the democracy of God's grace rather than a hierarchical context and rational criticism considered essential when reading the Bible. An overhaul of the educational system was necessary. However, she had belittled the strength of women's sexual attraction and passion for the opposite sex, which reflected her own development at that stage.

Nevertheless, she was to learn all too soon the strength and folly of understanding it so little when she was to travel to France later in 1792. Meeting Gilbert Imlay, an American looking to make money from the French situation, she fell passionately in love, moved in with him for a short while, and for her safety as an English woman, took his name. He moved on soon after Mary became pregnant and from that time she trailed after him, hoping to demonstrate her high ideal of what a true partnership should be. Even after a suicide attempt and before daughter Fanny was a year old, she agreed to go to Scandinavia to sort out a failed business transaction for him. Trailing the young Fanny with her she experienced a different country and culture writing *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*. (1796) Here she experienced what we would call a lyrical pantheism as she opened herself to nature writing. '...she gazed again, losing my breath through my eyes – my very soul diffused itself in the scene' then 'turning my humid eyes from the expanse below to the vault above, my sight pierced the fleecy clouds that softened the azure brightness, and ... I bowed before the awful throne of my Creator, whilst I rested on its footstool'. (Quoted in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* by Barbara Taylor, Cambridge University Press 2003, P.126) Her individualism and religious imagination had taken her beyond Unitarianism of that time. She considered their chapels to be too homely, their sectarianism too narrow and their reason too cold. Imaginative inspiration and adoration was crucial in the devotion given to God.

Sadly, she found happiness with William Godwin but it was all too short. Religious observance each Sunday was now a thing of the past but whilst writing her unfinished novel she also wrote the article 'On Poetry' for *The Monthly Magazine*: '...grand sublime images strike the imagination - God is seen in every floating cloud, and comes from the misty mountain to receive the noblest homage of an intelligent creature ... How solemn is the moment, when all affections and remembrances fade before the sublime admiration which the wisdom and goodness of God inspires... and the world seems to contain only the mind that formed, and the mind that contemplates it'. (Quoted in: *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* by Barbara Taylor, P.140)

Following her death Godwin published the unfinished novel and his memoir revealed her 'warts and all'. She was condemned by many as an immoral wanton woman and her work went unread for a long time. However, she had influenced the rising generation of radical Unitarians and others teaching freedom, reason and tolerance. She also left a legacy of an individualist theological subjectivity that embraced imagination and lyrical pantheism that was influential in the next generation of Romantic poets.

So was Mary Wollstonecraft a Unitarian? This surely remains with us as individuals to learn from the material she has left and how we ourselves decide what it means to be a Unitarian. However, we can say that her writing was an expression of her own moral and religious journey, with her religious understanding fitting comfortably the spectrum of what many today consider Unitarianism to be.

Joan Wilkinson

'Friendly counsel cuts off many foes.' *Henry IV, part I, Act III, Sc. I*

THE LAST CHILD IN THE WOODS

Saving our children from Nature-deficit Disorder

This book by Richard Louv (a recipient of the 2008 Audubon Medal) who is greatly involved in many organisations with the theme of children and Nature, abounds in accounts of the his own experiences and those of others, as well as describing the efforts of many to bring children closer to Nature. Richard Louv grew up in America but the experiences of other countries are also recorded.

The book gives some alarming figures for anti-depressant prescriptions. Between 1998 and 2003 the rate at which American children were prescribed such drugs had doubled, the steepest increase being 66% for pre-school

children. Pharmacological companies are not interested in promoting Nature cure, yet Nature can, in many cases, provides the greatest healing balm. Some instances are recounted: One girl liked to go to the woods, appreciating the peacefulness and solitude as an antidote to the pressures upon her. A boy uncomfortably explained that when they cut the woods down it was as though they had cut down a part of him. Another girl was overwhelmed, when camping, to see the stars so clearly for the first time. Nature has the remarkable quality of benefiting our physical and emotional health. Some recent studies indicate that exposure to Nature may reduce the symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Also unstructured play in reasonably safe areas can encourage imagination and resourcefulness.

Of course, there can be dangers in wild uncultivated areas and Nature herself can turn nasty. Land development reduces the area left to Nature. Also, attitudes have changed. In the current 'compensation culture', an accident will be the signal to call in the law. There is a greater concern nowadays with paedophilia resulting in many people who have contact with children having to undergo the indignity of vetting. There are more regulations and lots of outdoor play is banned. In one area, 137 schools had 'No Running' notices; merry-go-rounds and swings were out for fear of injuries followed by lawsuits. To achieve that commonsense balance between protecting the child and avoiding excessive legislation is a difficult task for legislators. The book makes a plea for bad law to be rewritten.

All these developments head the child in the direction of the TV, computers and other electronic forms of play. Then, surprise, surprise, it is noticed that there is a growth in the numbers of children who are obese!

The author makes use of the thesis of the great American historian, Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) about the frontier as being of significance in the development of the individualism, energy, self-reliance, etc. of the American character. The First frontier, continually advancing westwards to the Pacific, closed when all the 'free' land was taken up, in 1890. The dwindling of the farm population in the latter part of the next hundred years brought an end to the government's annual survey of farm residents and so to the closure of the Second frontier in 1990. The present generation are shaping the Third frontier. Some of its features are: lack of awareness of how food is produced; a more intellectual approach to understanding animals rather than direct experience of them; the invasion of cities by wild animals; the development of shopping malls, etc., which offer fewer outlets for natural play.

For the Fourth frontier, the author engages in some futuristic thinking based on trends and developments that are already appearing as possible solutions to current problems of how to order our affairs in ways beneficial to children, wildlife and the environment. One solution is the 'zoopolis' (rhymes with 'metropolis') where there is room for wildlife in the cities and where there are not only parks and preserves, but natural corridors of wildlife extending into urban settings. Green architecture is getting more popular. In Ohio, the Oberlin building with its rooftop voltaics and other green features replicates the functioning of a tree. Also the many advantages of rooftop gardens are listed. In this area, the city of Chicago is amongst the leaders. Challenges and opportunities are presented by demographic change – some large areas of the U.S.A. have lost population due to the emergence of mega-farms and to small-farmer bankruptcies. So there is a lot going on, but a lot of it is piecemeal rather than coming from central government.

The book has no illustrations but is an easy read even though it does contain some American expressions unfamiliar to me. In places the writing is quite descriptive and beautiful. At the end of the book there is a section suggesting '100 Actions We Can Take', also a section of 'Discussion Points'.

George Cope

(Workman Publishing Company, Inc. 225 Varick Street, New York, 10014.)

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Following Judy Hague's letter in the Sept/October Newsletter, I would like to add the following:

Unitarian Women's League members have always supported Margaret Barr's work in India, and the Rev. Jean Bradley (née McNeile) is Treasurer of the India Fund Account for the Women's League

With advice from John Hewerdine, the Unitarian Women's League Project for 2010/11 will be 'Annie Margaret Barr's Children's Village, Kharang, India'.

Donations can be sent to Mrs. Eunice Smith, National Secretary, UWL, 14 Lynnwood Drive, Rochdale, Lancs. OL11 5YX - cheques should be made payable to 'Unitarian Women's League Project'.

Thank you

Ann Hughes (National Secretary)

'ON THE SPOT' AT THE UNITARIAN ANNUAL MEETING

The NUF have invited the newly appointed Chief Officer of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches to be 'on the spot' in our meeting slot. Rev Alex Bradley who has just taken over as Principal of the Unitarian College Manchester will also be on the same spot.

We hope to hear their plans for the future of our Movement and the training of ministers and lay leaders and to answer questions put by NUF members and from the audience. Questions should be sent to Tony McNeile either by email or in writing.

ETERNAL LIFE: A NEW VISION

By John Shelby Spong

Imagine my delight to receive through the post this latest and almost certainly last book from the pen of John Shelby Spong. I am always happy to see the arrival of a book but when it is an unexpected gift there is an added appreciation of the book (gift) and (of) the giver. For many years I had admitted that this was an author I wanted to read as I had heard so many reports of his gifts as a writer and believe me, this book is not a disappointment and I would have been sorry never to have made the effort to look it out for myself.

Here is a man, and a Bishop in the USA, looking back on his life's journey, a life of learning and experience as a 'religious' being and finally going through and beyond religion to a new understanding of the nature and meaning of human life in the context of eternity.

In many ways the interpretation of the evolution of life and the self-conscious nature of being human is forged from his own understanding of the role of religion for humanity and more specifically Christianity and the question of who Jesus was, as understanding has evolved in his own life. Starting out as an evangelical Christian in the South of the USA he moved through learning and questioning profoundly the Bible and particularly the words and context of who and what Jesus was. Added to this has been his constant questioning and gradual opening up to other disciplines and especially that which science has to teach us.

Each new stage of life's experience is and always has been challenging before the next stage is understood. Birth itself is frightening and we are fearful to leave the safety, first of the womb and progressively from the protection of the mother and so on. Once we become self-conscious something unique to human life is encountered - awareness of past and present and then the recognition of death and what that will mean to each of us as individuals. For that reason religion came into being - to give us a sense of security. In the end, though, this security is no more than a self-created protection before taking the next step as we move on and truly recognise what it is to be fully human. The gods we create out there are not the ultimate, whether we choose to use the word God or The Holy or some other name. Rather, we are already in God and God is in us.

So how does Jesus fit into the new paradigm. It is in this figure that we see what it is to be truly human and truly divine. We are already eternal and the next step along our human evolution is to go deeper into ourselves. We are forever inter-related with all that is. Being human we can look back and forward. In fact it is impossible to be in the present as that is already in the past or in the future - in other words it is eternal. Our humanity is a gift to be lived in the interrelatedness of eternity and recognise this and fully live without fearing the next step. We are already part of the one.

As I wrote at the beginning, Spong goes into and through religion learning this 'I am' and his own being through religious experience and learning but as it interconnects with the evolution of who we are as human beings. He sees Jesus Christ as a person who displayed this understanding in his own life and reads quite a different messages of his meaning of 'God and I are one' - yes he was claiming his own divinity but not with a transcendental God out there but only as the divinity of God understood as what he was as already in the eternal and with God the Holy in a fully human life. This life is to be fully celebrated without the fear of death. The epilogue is particularly relevant in terms of owning this life for ourselves and thus becoming central to the issue of not abrogating the decision of whether we end it when no longer able to appreciate the love of life itself - neither being able to express or receive the love that is God within ourselves. It enables each of us to give our life for others, not because we expect some sort of paradise or resurrection or continuation of what we have now only better, but as an affirmation of our humanity in relationship with humanity. The specialness of human life is heightened, we have the opportunity to take the next step in understanding now, if we are but brave enough. There is nothing to fear. Death loses its sting.

I believe this book will be far easier to read for Unitarians who are more prepared perhaps than those steeped in faiths that prescribe the parameters in which earthly human life can only be understood in stepped terms of birth, life, and finally heaven and immortality. It affirms what we have learned through intellectual pursuits both scientific and religious and whatever the author of the book believes. Many or most readers will find this a deeply

religious book but religion considered as fully human, embedded in and an expression of the oneness and holiness of life fully and humanely lived. The spectre of death no longer need hover over us as a dark threat but rather our human life is a precious gift when we have the chance to recognise the eternal nature of all that has existed and will exist. Whatever the next step in our human life or the life to come, we cannot step away or out of the divinity of the Whole – alienation can be overcome now.

(First posted on the NUF Forum)

With love

Joan Wilkinson

There was a note accompanying the book to say that he wanted me to know that he would be very happy for me to pass on the book to anyone who wished to read it. For those who would like to borrow this copy, please let me know and I will make up a circulation list and pass it on. However, if you wish to buy it, it is available from Amazon and other good booksellers. It is published by Harper One, 2009, and is by John Shelby Spong, £10.39 from Amazon.

A PAGAN'S PERSPECTIVE

We are almost certainly trespassing, my dog and I. The rough, rutted track is suddenly crossed by a stretch of neat sward that conjures up visions of college lawns and the closes of mighty cathedrals. Rehearsing my excuse should I come face to face with the owner – ‘the track gate had no lock on it, there was no notice’ – I pass through a thick, hawthorn hedge and immediately I am in a wild flower meadow of incredible beauty; butterflies, blue, white, yellow and tawny gold, flutter between meadowsweet, rose-bay willow herb and huge clumps of purple thistles. The scent is exquisite. The path curves on invitingly and now I can hear the unmistakable honks of geese. I will just go on as far as the next bend where a slim poplar stands sentinel. The dog, nose held high, is at my heels.

We round the curve and there is the lake I had hoped for, not huge but big enough to hold a flock of Canada geese with another just landing and sending up tiny clouds of spray as they break the surface. And there, idling beneath a clump of willow is a pair of swans, mirror-imaged on the smooth, dark water.

Then, as if all this wasn't enough to fill me with delight, a hare suddenly appears ahead of me, no more than five feet away and sits there, motionless, for at least a minute, huge ears upright, whiskers quivering and that one almost pellucid blue eye – he is sitting sideways on to me – staring straight at me.

But the dog, who has been nosing at something in the grass, suddenly sees him too and immediately the chase is on with the hare bounding in huge leaps down the path and the dog not overtaking but certainly keeping up.

But there is no real competition. Within minutes he is back but with a certain cockiness in his step. ‘It's not every dog,’ he seems to say, ‘that can keep up with a hare!’

Enough is enough, I decide. I shan't ‘chance my arm’ any further. But two things are now certain in my mind as I turn back towards the track – if that gate stays unlocked, I shall be back in the autumn and – what I have long suspected – I am definitely a pagan!

Pat McLernon

SAMHAIN IN AUSTRIA

I have always felt that the natural world is key to understanding the purpose of our human existence. We may learn at least as much from the ebbs and flows of the natural environment, as from the pulpit. Previously, I had grappled with various denominations of organised religion (Roman Catholic, CoE and Welsh Congregationalist, depending on my circumstances). It therefore came as something of a relief when my son sent me an NUF article entitled ‘A Pagan Unitarian Path’ by the Rev. Peter Roberts (Viewpoint, Feb. 2008). This article provided a ‘respectable’ outlet for my instinct that our spirituality is, to a great extent, bound up with the seasonal rhythms of nature. Although I do not attend a Unitarian church, I gain much enjoyment and fresh insights from the NUF, in the form of the regular publications and the internet forum.

Returning to the Pagan link: what better time to have a massive morale-boosting festival than at the Winter Solstice, about 21st December, when the passing of the shortest day promises hope and anticipation of warmer, brighter times to come (I suffer no compunction about waiting another four days to synchronise my personal festivities with my family and friends!). Moreover, the Pagan annual cycle allows no fewer than eight festival days (the solstices, equinoxes and quarter days between) in which to indulge in a little merry-making.

Samhain is a beautiful, but rather wistful, time that falls midway between the Autumn Equinox (Mabon) and the Winter Solstice (Yule), and is traditionally celebrated on 31st October. Samhain is deep into Autumn, a bounteous time of fruits and berries and the harvest home. The first frosts may have already nipped the golden leaves of the deciduous trees, most of which now lie on the ground after a buffeting from the Autumnal gales. Of the summer migrant birds, only a few stragglers linger and the first winter visitors from the Arctic tundra are already advancing well south. Certainly, there are still mild, mellow days of sunshine to relish but the sun is lower in the sky and the radiation is weak. To imagine there is any remnant of summer is to kid oneself; a slight shift in the wind direction sends us scampering for scarves and gloves, and where did I put away those Long-Johns? Summer is well and truly behind us.

I celebrated Samhain this year in Austria and experienced the extremes. I had two glorious days counting waterfowl in the Seewinkel National Park close to the border with Hungary. I found a few lingering summer birds like Chiffchaff and Black Redstart, but they were greatly outnumbered by the geese and Fieldfares that had arrived from the north. The sun shined brightly in a cotton-wool cumulus sky and in the afternoon it was mild enough to be down to shirt sleeves. Clouded Yellow butterflies (a migrant butterfly that often makes it to Britain in late summer) were dancing over the grape vines seeking the last drops of energising nectar before hibernating,

Three days later I was wearing all the jumpers I could find, hiking a City Hiking Trail (Staatwanderweg) starting from a tram terminus at the edge of the city, up through the vineyards into the Vienna Woods. The temperature was hovering at the wrong end of single figures and I was soon high enough in the hills to be enveloped by the damp grey windless November penetrating dankness. Visibility from the viewpoints was negligible but, nevertheless, the woods were ablaze with the colours of oak, birch and beech leaves that remained on the trees and those that littered the tracks giving underfoot scunching.

A calm, quiet, wistful time of solitude; a time of dramatic seasonal change; a time for reflection.

And what am I listening to as I dot the i's and cross the t's of this note? Well, Strauss' eponymous waltz 'Tales from the Vienna Woods', of course!

Jim Fowler

HINDUISM IN BRIEF

Hinduism is one of the world's major religions. It is also the oldest and the end product of a long process of interaction between various cultures, cults and creeds. This gives it its unique complexity, breadth and depth. There are some 800 million Hindus. The majority live in India though sizeable populations are now found in many countries throughout the world.



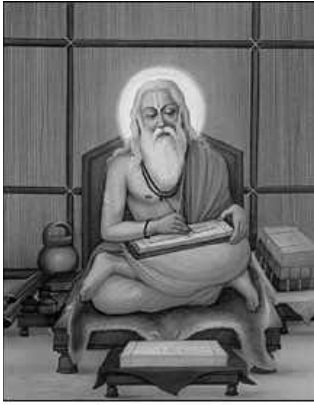
The ancestors of the Hindus were known as Indo-Aryans and they spoke Sanskrit, the ancient and sacred language of India. They called their religion Arya-Dharma: the religion of the Aryas. Dharma in this context means 'religious duties'. Another name for it was Sanatana Dharma, meaning 'The Eternal Religion', implying that it was based on eternal truths.

The word 'Hinduism' came much later. The river Indus formed a common border between India and one of its neighbours, Persia. The Sanskrit word for the river was Sindhu. The Persians, however, incorrectly pronounced it as Hindu – thus the religion of the Aryas became known as Hinduism.

A distinctive feature of the religion is that there is no founder. This gives Hinduism a flexibility and therefore an advantage over other religions. During its very long history many saints and sages have revitalised the teachings making them relevant to the age. Hinduism is thus shown to be a living religion for no evolution would have been possible had its authority depended on the life and utterances of one person. Eternal Truth is its only authority revealed down the ages through the spiritual experiences of the saints or sages – the Rishis. Their revelations are not written but heard and are then handed over to successive students. The sacred books are called the Vedas, meaning 'knowledge' or, literally, 'anything heard'. Hindu philosophy is, therefore, known as Vedanta. The Vedas claim to teach the highest truths which will lead the aspirant to the highest good. There are four Vedas each having four parts and Hindu life, personally and socially, is regulated by them.

The religion allows many avenues of thought and tolerates many grades of culture. Hinduism explains its position and absorbs willing followers but will never denounce any other religion as false or evil. A Hindu is expected to view the world as a joint family.

Hinduism aims to bring all men to a 'perfect spirit' and considers life on earth as a journey towards 'divine perfection'. This journey begins with the turning away from all evil. Rites and ceremonies are a means to an end because they are conducive to moral qualities. Offerings to God and alms-giving to the poor lead to self-sacrifice



Hindu Saint with Vedas

and generosity while fasting leads to self-control. Such qualities are virtuous and give strength to mind and soul.

Where did the universe come from, how, when and why? If there is a Creator, then the same questions may be asked about that. What happens when we die? Do we live on in another form? Did we live before in another life on earth? These questions have challenged the human mind since the dawn of civilisation.

The most intelligent minds among us are unable to find definite answers. We can only speculate for we cannot reach beyond the limitations of our sense. But there have always been certain 'spiritually illumined saints' who have developed 'special purified minds'. These people, the Rishis, have discovered answers which can satisfy us. An important belief in Hinduism is belief in the Rishis as Incarnations of God. They appear whenever it is judged necessary. Their function is for such purposes as to: re-establish moral order, faith, etc.; re-interpret the scriptures according to the need of the time; affirm the reality of God and scriptural truth; establish new ideals; bestow grace on devotees; show a new form of God for worship and practice.

Hinduism is based on metaphysical truths and the cardinal virtues are: Purity, Self-control, Detachment, Truth and Non-violence.

Purity implies cleanliness of mind and body and of that which we eat and drink. It also includes such things as freedom from envy, from pride and from malice. Self-control refers to offences like gluttony, sensuality and drunkenness. Also included are patience, modesty and humility. A person's cravings are regulated by self-control for then the difference between need and want is known. Detachment means freedom from earthly ties. We all have possessions, family, friends and opinions – in fact, whatever we refer to as 'ours'. To be detached is to understand that those things which we desire and hold dear remain so for only a short period of time. Everything that is tangible is finite, our opinions change, friends come and go, death takes away those close to us, age and sickness inhibits our abilities. We must learn not to be blindly attached and to extend concern and affection in our hearts to all the world. Truth in Hinduism means more than that which is not false. It implies morality, but morality with reference to the age in which we live because customs and opinions are always changing. There is no opposition to science or to speculation in either ethics or metaphysics.

Non-violence is perhaps the highest law. It is for the brave and the strong, for those who can strike but will not. To flee from a bully and call it non-violence is self-deception. The ideal is to substitute spiritual strength for brute strength, not cowardice for valour. Restraint is obligatory although retaliation is permissible when necessary in order to defend ourselves and that which we hold dear or is rightfully ours. Vegetarianism is exalted above the eating of meat but it is not insisted on. Each person must reach the 'ideal' in his own time. The promptings of a 'pure heart' are a sure guide in matters of doubt. True non-violence implies gentleness, courtesy, kindness, hospitality and love. Generally in India, the idea of non-violence, which in Sanskrit is Ahimsa, has considerably influenced the Hindu community as a whole. Hindus are found to be mild-mannered, hospitable and humane towards their fellow-man and towards animals. Indians as a nation are, despite the stress caused by widespread poverty, far less brutal than the mass of people in other countries.

Sin, or rather ignorance as Hindus prefer to call it, is classified as being of thought, word and deed. Included here are the emotions of sensuality, hate and greed. Hinduism considers all divisions to be somewhat artificial for, although its forms are numberless, there is only one sin and that is self-centred desire.

Eastern philosophy uses the Sanskrit word Karma. This refers to action, deeds or work and is the result or effect of a person's actions accumulated during his successive earthly lives. Good actions produce good effects and bad actions cause bad effects. In life we perform countless actions the effects of which may be immediate or deferred until later in this life or in a future life. Hinduism teaches that we must pay the price for our wrong actions and reap the benefits of our good actions. Thus we are born each time into either good or bad circumstances according to our Karma. The Sanskrit word Samsara means going through the cycle of repeated births and deaths. Hinduism teaches that the goal of human life is to be free from this. In Sanskrit, this is called Moksha and it is attainable through following the path to God-realisation.



Lord Brahma

As we sow, so shall we reap for every thought, word and deed is weighed on the scales of eternal justice. It is a moral law which corresponds to the physical law of causation. As nature is subject to unalterable laws, so it is with our moral nature. This law is one of hope and an inspiration to us all because to understand it is to realise that we are the architects of our own fortunes.

Hindu philosophy recognises many paths for mankind in his search for perfection. All are equally valid and lead to the same goal. The seeker chooses the particular path according to his needs and temperament.

Our view of God is, at first, necessarily anthropomorphic. Then, as we improve our minds, our conception of Him becomes elevated to the point where He is understood to be infinite – that is, beyond Time and Space. When we are able to overcome the limitations of our soul, that is the physical, mental and moral conditions under which we live, then we too will become divine and know the ‘Divine Being’. The individual soul is then seen to be identical with the universal soul. This is the highest teaching of the Vedas.

All Hindu religious teachers agree on the following, that: 1) the spiritual experience embodied in the Vedas is the ultimate authority; 2) God is One, though He has many names and forms and that He is ineffably perfect; 3) all men are in this life in accordance with their own past deeds; 4) these paths require the seeker to cultivate the virtues of Purity, Self-control, Detachment, Truth and Non-violence in all their various forms; 5) the seeker must worship God and acquire His grace by every means in his power; 6) the seeker must worship God and acquire His grace by every means in his power; 7) salvation consists in freedom from the repeated cycle of births and deaths, so to gain entry to the world of the spirit. These are the things which really matter to us while we are here on earth. The teachings fill our lives with hope and give meaning and content to our struggles against ignorance and sin.

The foregoing is a necessarily brief exposition of Hinduism. The reader may well be interested in delving deeper into the subject. Local libraries usually hold books while books and good advice are available from: Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Bourne End, Buckinghamshire, SL8 5LF Tel: 01628 526464

Michael Ablett

NUF Committee Election – Request for Nominations

Given the NUF’s ‘remote’ nature (i.e. post and internet communication), it only meets formally at the AGM at the General Assembly meetings. However, the NUF does have an Executive Committee which is a requirement of the NUF’s constitution and is essential for its administration. The committee consists of four Honorary Officers and eight ordinary members. The current committee has two individuals who have served their period of office and are standing down. We are grateful to Lucy Harris and Mike Killingworth. Nominations for one of the two vacant ordinary member positions, each to serve for a period of three years, are to be sent to the Returning Officer no later than the 12th of February, 2010. The proposer must ensure that the candidate is willing to stand. The proposer and the seconder are to advise the Returning Officer (John Greenwood) in writing of their proposal and seconding. By the same date, candidates are to submit to the Newsletter Editor a personal profile of no more than 250 words. The contact details of the Returning Officer and Newsletter Editor can be found on the back of the Newsletter.

KAKI TREE REVIVAL PROJECT

I heard through a friend that when the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, one tree survived that terrible devastation. Seeds from it have been propagated and they are sent round the world to be planted in peace gardens. The project involves community arts and children. Here in Bolton we have been successful in an application to grow one of these Kaki trees. It will be planted in a local primary school and there will be a ceremony for the children in the Town Hall to receive the cutting. Bolton ‘Green Spaces’ management have promised to help the school care for the tree and will also build a Japanese garden to plant it in. ‘Arts in Schools’ are going to run drama and painting workshops related to the tree. The local church is heading a wider community involvement around the tree. Everyone involved will be on a group photograph and will receive an invitation to come back in ten years time for the first fruiting of the tree.

Tony Mcneile

FRANK HYTCH REMEMBERED

Joining the NUF back in the early 1990s, Frank was someone who nurtured me, introducing the various activities in which I could participate. I had no idea at that point of just how much he had done and was still doing for

the NUF. He unstintingly gave of his time and was totally reliable. Later, I would refer often to the booklet he produced to celebrate fifty years of the NUF and which has since been up-dated to celebrate sixty.

As well as being the NUF Secretary at that time, although I was unaware of this then, he was also involved in all the various activities. Of course I joined the Books of Fellowship, which continue still and also the cassette interchange, of which Frank was one of the four contributors. Each member recorded a fifteen minute piece before sending it on to the next person. I can remember clearly that from time to time Frank would record them sitting in his garden, with birdsong accompanying his greetings to the group. I wondered just how many other such new NUF members he had nurtured through their first years of encountering Unitarianism and our fellowship in particular. We will probably never know the full extent of his generosity of friendship.

That friendship was long-lasting and later we would keep in touch over the phone when the cassette interchange ceased and circumstances changed. As editor of the *Unitarian* he never forgot the NUF and encouraged us to submit items for publication. Perhaps only Frank could have persuaded me to write the monthly 'Thought' when the NUF celebrated their sixtieth anniversary. It seemed appropriate that when it was decided that the longest serving member of the NUF should receive some sort of token of appreciation during that year, it turned out to be Frank and a special service was arranged at Great Meeting in Birmingham where Rev Tony McNeile, as our President, was able to express the Fellowship's appreciation of all that Frank had done over the years.

The value of having a Frank Hytch never diminished, enabling us to access information from many years before most of us joined the NUF. He was always willing to put himself out for others and share what he had and what he could do. There are many more organisations in the movement with whom we share the loss of Frank but this should come as no surprise, his kindness and willingness to help was a special gift he was happy to give to us all.

Joan Wilkinson

NUF WORSHIP ON THE INTERNET

On **Saturday, 20th February** three short services are to be filmed at the Old Chapel, Great Hucklow, to be added to the NUF website especially for NUF members who do not or cannot attend Sunday services with a congregation. We would encourage as many NUF members as possible to join us in the filming as part of the congregation. Please contact Joan Wilkinson if you would like further details about the Saturday or about the UCCN Weekend which runs from 19th-21st September at The Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow.

WEB NEWS

The following new pages have been defined to www.unitarian.org.uk

<http://www.unitarian.org.uk/info/online.shtml> - listing Unitarian online forums.

<http://www.unitarian.org.uk/info/growth.shtml> - giving details of the Growth and Renewal project.

James Barry jbarry@unitarian.org.uk

THE UNITARIAN

Please send news, articles, photos etc. that you may like to be considered for publication to the new editor: Jim Corrigan, 80 Holly Park Road, Frien Barnet, London N11 3HB. Tel: 020 8361 1843. Email: jim@corrigan.myzen.co.uk

DIARY DATES

The **National Unitarian Youth programme** has been enjoyed by hundreds of children over the years. Many as adults, are still firm friends with people they met at these events. The content of the programmes and perhaps a little of the Nightingale Centre's 'magic' has left them with treasured memories of their visits to 'Hucklow'. Themes in 2009 such as 'What a load of rubbish', 'This I believe' and 'Colour me Happy' were very enjoyable. A variety of themes for 2010, which will no doubt be just as interesting, are yet to be announced. Here are the dates:

5th-7th February Junior Weekend (age 7-11 years)

26th-28th February Inter and Senior Weekend (age 11-17 years)

6th-8th April Pre-GA Youth Workshop (12-17years). For those who will be attending Nottingham GA

14th -16th May Bridging Weekend (16-21 years)

7th -13th August Five Days Away (age 12-17years)

1st-3rd October Junior Weekend (age 7-11years)

19th-21st November Inter and Senior Weekend (age 11-17 years)

For more information about any of the above events please contact

John Harley Tel. no. 07985 900 935 or e-mail jharley@unitarian.org.uk

NEXT ISSUE

The deadline for the next issue is Monday 15th February 2010. Contributions on any theme and responses to any item in the newsletter are always welcome.

All contributions are acknowledged.