

National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
and Free Christian Churches

Viewpoint



'I am Tony McNeile a Unitarian'

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Introduction

It is Christmas, so I thought I would indulge myself and show off. Like all ministers, retired or not, I spend quite a lot of time writing. On the first Sunday of each month I take the service at Park Lane Chapel, Ashton in Makerfield. Hopefully I can take that sermon and the prayers I wrote to go with it, on my rounds for the rest of the month.

I am one of the contributors to 'It's the Thought that Counts' that is broadcast every day on our local radio station. I write five of these a month. They have to be exactly ninety seconds long which to me is 250 words.

Then there is the Minister's Page and Worship page in the NUF Newsletter

I also contribute articles to the Ministerial Fellowship's own journal and to the Unitarian Students 'Stirrings'.

It keeps me fully occupied sometimes but I enjoy it.

It's the Thought.

Feathers

I was invited to run a workshop for a group staying at our holiday centre in Derbyshire. Could you do something on feathers they said? You'll have two and a half hours. I told them some stories from the Native American traditions. How the Great Spirit had been displeased with the world so destroyed everything with a great flood. Then he built a new land on top of the waters and created man and woman and all the animals out of mud and scattered them on the earth. Once the Great Spirit took all the animals away and hid them because the people weren't respecting them. They were returned only when the people solemnly promised never to ill-treat any of them. We learned that wearing an eagle feather was a badge of bravery.

It was a prize not easily won.

A young man had to tell the assembled tribe the story of his bravery. They would award the feather if they believed he had been truly brave. In our workshop everyone was asked to consider what brave deed they had done in their lives that would be worthy of an eagle feather.

We remembered times we had done reckless things and thought they were brave but they weren't really.

But people had done brave things. One lady remembered schooldays and how she had taken on the class bully and faced her down and won.

Who would you give the eagle feather to?

I am Tony McNeile a Unitarian

The Activist

A long time ago I was a shift worker. On the night shift, life was a little easier. There were no daytime bosses around, as long as the jobs were done, we could take a little longer over tea breaks and talk more on the job. One night I came into work feeling frustrated. The government of the day had made some announcement which had annoyed my sense of justice and I was sounding off while the kettle boiled. No one else seemed to care and that made me feel angry. One of the old hands took me aside and said, 'it's no good just moaning about it in here. If that's how you feel do something about it'. So I did and I think they all-breathed a sigh of relief. I joined a political party. I campaigned at elections, I delivered leaflets, I attended meetings. I worked hard to try and change a system that didn't really want to change. Once I challenged for a seat on a council and lost but at least I gained a few hundred votes. I wasn't the only idealist in the town. And I learned how democracy works in this country. I learned too about frustration and anger. Out of control it can lead to violence. Under control it can be turned into positive energy.

The ripples I made might have been small, I admit. But at least I tried. And change may happen, one day, with you.
I am Tony McNeile a Unitarian.

Reflections in a glass

The other evening I had gone to the pub with my friend. We'd been reminiscing about the good old bad old days and then there was a pause. We were each staring into our beer and thinking. My friend looked up and said, 'if you could put the clock back, where would you go, what would you change? I took another sip. Maybe back to those important school days. This time I would stop looking out of the window and listen to what the teacher was saying. I would do my homework too. Or maybe I would go back to that first job interview which I didn't get and be a bit more confident and tell them I was definitely the man for them and was going to change the world. And what about that girlfriend. If I had remembered her birthday she might not have dumped me. So many might have beens. So many choices have been made along the way, some good, some bad. So many changes which weren't planned. Some regrets, some moments I wouldn't have missed for the world. Children I wouldn't like to have done without. So looking back, I take note of the mistakes but I really like being where I am now, with the friends I have now and the family. Maybe if I had done my homework at school I would still have ended up happy. In Bolton, talking on the radio. It might all be fate.

I am Tony McNeile a Unitarian

The Power of Twelve

One of the churches I visit to take services will only have twelve people there - on a good day. Why do you go someone once asked, it can't be worth it. But it is to them. Of course they would like to have more coming on a Sunday but the fact is they don't. Their type of church has fallen out of fashion. Sundays are for shopping or visiting or sport or catching up or

having time to yourself. Funnily enough my twelves still have time for all those things but they do like their hour together on Sunday morning. They have become good friends. They look after each other, share news of their families, sometimes go out for lunch together. They save for a local charity and give as a group to a food bank. One year they bought a goat for a poor family in Africa. But it is all based on that hour together in church. I'm not sure they all believe in God, but they all believe in something which connects their life with something greater and more inspirational than everyday life. It feels as if there really is a power of love that flows into them during their worship and they feel connected to it in that chapel. It is a bit of a journey to go and see them but it is always worth it. They have something which many do not. Twelves is a good number sometimes.

I am Tony McNeile a Unitarian.

Walking for Life

My taxi driver in Dublin talked about his son who is a medical student. The son had started a group called 'Walk for life'. His professor said to him, 'you will save more lives with this than you might as a doctor'. The walk for life is to help young people who are contemplating suicide, well for people of any age. It is so simple, you go for a walk with a trained listener and talk. Talk about anything. Feelings and fears. There is something about walking together that makes talking so much easier. Maybe because there is little eye contact. Maybe because it is non-confrontational. Maybe it helps just being outside in the natural world.

There is a programme on Dutch TV called the *Wanderling*. Ordinary people who have been victim or hero in some horrific event that made the headlines, walk and talk with a gentle interviewer about their experience. Talking is a post traumatic cure. People can talk if someone will listen - and listening is a skill. Our usual instinct when someone is talking is to jump in with our own story, not the right thing to do when that person needs to talk. The listener should basically just listen.

Talking becomes a safety valve that lifts the pressure on those locked up feelings and let's them flow freely. We can all help in the walk for life. When a time to talking and a time for listening can save a life.
I am Tony McNeile a Unitarian.

A Sermon

I am a socialist, well, sort of 'just about' socialist, there are one or two caveats. I was thinking about this after exchanging depressing emails with my brother after the election in May this year. But really I am more of the traditional Liberal that passed away when the LibDems arrived. It was the party that gave the old age pension but also encouraged enterprise.

I come from quite a traditional family. Swearing on the Bible meant something. Our family ancestry is peppered with the great and the good of different dimensions. There is a statue of our great great grandfather in St George's Hall in Liverpool. Uncle Cecil wrote stories under the name of Sapper and the hero of his books was Bulldog Drummond. There was a generation of admirals and generals, lots of vicars. My father was one of the first not to be ordained. Then there was us.

Mother had married into this family and was incredibly proud of them, almost in awe of their history. So we were fed endless tales about them and sometimes met some of them but not often. I became proud of them too but it never occurred to me that they should be an inspiration. They were stories. They were just trophies I had inherited without any effort. Probably the more I heard about them the more inferior I began to feel against them with just my five O' Levels.

We were traditional Christians too. Grandfather was a vicar in Tunbridge Wells, and had been a maths scholar at Cambridge while we in Liverpool attended a church that had been built for a fiery Preacher who lives on in stone in St George's Hall.

I was definitely a superior British Empire Christian. But the traditions and trappings of Christianity when my life came into the real world. I had been praying for a government I wanted to criticise and a royal family whose right to have me as their subject I questioned. But I had two missionary great aunts and was told of the good work they had done in Africa.

When I began to think about my Christian religion, I couldn't quite understand why I should have adopted the traditions of Jewish history as my own when I was English. Why I had to have their God who only looked after them anyway. They tried to help at school once by showing us a film about the lost tribe of Israel that seemed to infer it was us. What had Moses and Jeremiah to do with Jesus?

Then I discovered that Moses was a literary creation and not a real historical figure at all. The story of the book of Exodus was not written by him in 1400BCE but by the exiled priests in Babylon around 300BCE. They created this story as a new tradition. It was to bind the exiled people together, maintain their identity as a nation. They gave them an unseen God and not totems or statues. What they were doing was to create a living tradition, rather than a trophy tradition. Their religion would keep them together and it gave them an identity, an identity of superiority no matter what their present suffering, because their unseen God ordered all things, could lead them out of exile as it had been done before.

And that is the big difference. Why the Old Testament tradition does not inspire me as a living tradition now. It was a powerful religion of its time. Many in the modern age pine for it still.

It must be why setting the story of Jesus into that tradition doesn't really inspire me either. I suppose I should be an evangelical if I wanted to connect with it and feel myself one of the blessed elect and certain of heaven no matter what I did on earth. My British passport was evidence enough. But that didn't seem right.

It was quite different when eventually I joined the army. The army of course is heavy on tradition but it is a living tradition. Your life is part of it and the same standards and same level of commitment is expected from you. You cannot just enjoy its past. Of course they paraded the regimental colours in front of you, they told you the tales of the past and they had the old soldiers who had been there and had the T shirt. We were made to feel part of a long line of brave people, they told us we had to be as brave too, and would be. I believed it - never tested though I suppose my commitment to traditional Christianity was going to church, giving to Christian Aid and being a good sinner rather than a bad one. I didn't feel I belonged so I didn't stay.

What I was left with was a vacuum. Eventually I found the spiritual and mystical element in Religions. The spiritual is personal. You cannot be told what is spiritual and what isn't. You can be guided towards it but you cannot be made to obey rules about it. You have to know it for yourself, practice it for yourself.

I suppose the spiritual tradition is similar to the mystical and it is a tradition found in all faiths. The common denominator is experience. And the common denominator is union with the universal spirit, the divine. To some that spirit is external to others it is within. To me it is both. You can write about your own experience but not about anyone else's. You can be guided by what others have written but if you stop there and say that is what it is, it is your own journey that has actually stalled.

Engaging with the spiritual traditions felt more like belonging to a living tradition.

There is now a sense of involvement that is in the real world, not the exodus from Egypt nor Palm Sunday. Useful stories though they may be. So, I thought, if the priests in Babylon could reinvent God in a new form then so could I.

My God is not a deity acting supernaturally in the world but the collective spirit of goodness in us all. My God is not a third party making my life difficult or easy - or threatening me. My God is universal and within all things. I can tune into my God.

When all those years ago I chanced upon the Unitarians, they suited me well. I have come to realise that if I was having a dilemma about religion so were they. There was still a strong influence of that old Christianity but it felt obsolescent. There was also something new and dynamic, something that connected with my spirituality. There was a sense of independence but also interdependence - with everything.

The spiritual was becoming independent of the Christian tradition. I suppose that process is still going on, but for me it is complete. Moses is not my faith nor is Jesus but they are icons within it.

I can say that now I belong to a living movement but not quite a living tradition. The tradition of Unitarian Christianity, the Fatherhood of God, the humanity of Jesus is in my trophy cabinet and belongs to some bygone age, just like my family tradition.

And today there is a challenge for us Unitarians, as I see it. We are established as a group, a movement united by our spirituality, but without a tradition as such, without a definable religion as such. We are trying to free ourselves of the old Christian label but others are trying to write it in bigger letters. Spirituality though is growing everywhere, religion seems to be fading everywhere.

My question is :-

How do we the transient Unitarians establish a living tradition? A tradition that calls us together and identifies us?

Maybe like the old priests of the exile in Babylon we need to tell the tale of our own historical beginnings. and like them redefine our theology - our idea of God. I know it is modern jargon but like the priests in exile, we need to reinvent ourselves and our tradition. Perhaps we need to build our living tradition not on the Old Testament Bible stories but only take inspiration from them. Take inspiration from the New Testament too - but not to belong to it.

I want to build our tradition on the great deeds and the good works of our forebears in the 19th century. They who led the way in working for social justice, education for all, women as well as men, who built libraries and schools, maternity hospitals and teaching colleges. Their good works were inspired by their faith.

Not long ago we used to think the Unitarians work was done, that the changes had been successful and how the state had taken over those responsibilities that ensure everyone has the same opportunity to succeed in life. But those responsibilities are now being discarded. Then the Unitarians were concerned about their own country, now there is unfairness throughout the whole world. The challenges are global. Should we not revive that tradition of service and Good works and give it life once more? Can we not proclaim those ideals that inspire us? Let us be identified by them? Fairness, compassion, spiritual strength. Can we not say that we are a movement of spiritual individuals united by our social conscience and social action, inspired by faith that is a vision of how things could be?

Ours is a spiritual faith based on religious freedom and social action. That could be a living tradition. That could be the identity we are looking so earnestly for at present. We are not a Christian faith but we have Christians in our faith, Not Buddhist but we have Buddhists and we have Humanists and Hindus and Pagans in our faith too. We are not any of those but they are part of who we are. We worship the divinity within all existence. Our Living Tradition is a faith based on our spirituality and our good works.

Prayers

Let us open our hearts to prayer - in these moments bring our thoughts closer to our God. In quiet contemplation let us lay down our burdens and our sorrows at the shrine within our minds and present ourselves to be purified of all thoughts that are harmful. Let us pray in holiness for those we love - for all who are close to our lives. Let us be patient when they make us anxious. Let us be strong when they need courage. Let us love unconditionally but not weakly. Let us pray for those associated with this Chapel who have died recently. In our prayer we give them our peace and our prayers are with those who grieve. May they be comforted and may they find strength to journey through their grief. We pray too for those who are ill and in need of care - we pray for them and for those who care for them - may their families and loved ones be blessed at the shrine in our minds. And let us pray for ourselves - for the burdens must be picked up again - but may our prayers make them lighter - make our problems more understandable and solutions more obvious. May we affirm ourselves as able to deal with life - that we can be strong when needed - that we can help when called to help and not complain. May we feel the love of God in our hearts - and may we feel the wisdom of holiness within us.

One World Prayers This is our prayer - as an organisation that promotes understanding and co-operation between all people, no matter what their faith, no matter what their culture, we pray for peace in the world. The God of Love, we believe, looks upon the world and moves within it. The preachers of Peace bring a message of hope they have learned from the God of Love. We believe that those who fight in the name of religion shame the name of the God of Love. Those who persecute in the name of religion dishonour the God of Love. In the soul of every being there is a light from the God of Love. We pray that that light may shine within the hearts of the leaders of religions; shine in the hearts of those who govern; shine in the hearts of those who see no God but do care for the world. We pray that the darkness that enters violent and angry minds will one day be overcome by that Light of Love. May we, who gather together, be beacons of that light. For if we cannot love one another and love our neighbours;

how can we pray for others to change? May the God of Love inspire and guide each one of us.

Christmas Prayer

Let us give thanks in our prayer for the blessings we have received this Christmas time. For the companionship of family and friends - for the exchange of gifts; for making contact with old friends - for the mood of festivity. And if we have been disappointed, let us not have regrets or anger but find the courage and calm within ourselves to let disappointment go. If plans have gone wrong let us have the courage to shrug them off and concentrate on all that did go well. In our prayer let us think of those who were not able to be with us or share in our festivities. May our love for them continue to be strong. May our prayer be for them to be blessed and to have joy in their lives.

If we have regrets that we did not fully enter into the spirit of the days, let them float up to God and be extinguished and let us look to the future and feel burden free. In our prayer let us think of those for whom Christmas with its festivities is a distressing time - bringing back sad memories or opening old wounds. May their lives find blessings away from the sad times - and may the angels guard them. And now that the holiday is over and the world returns to work, let us keep in our minds that message of peace and goodwill towards mankind of which the angels sang. What the world quickly forgets may we continue to ponder in our hearts.

Time

The clock of time ticks away in our lives. We have watched the celebrations of the diamond jubilee; we watch pictures of the Olympic flame being carried around the country. We watch the news and we see pictures of bad weather; we see pictures of fighting in foreign lands - particularly Syria, but there are others too - Africa, Afghanistan. We watch the news and hear about the banking crisis in Greece and now in Spain - and no one knows what to do. The more they cut spending the worse the crisis becomes. We watch the kaleidoscope world from our chairs - and we wonder as the clock of time ticks away in our lives.

But there is a power beyond time. A power we call the God of Love. A power that gives the individual spirit strength to survive in this kaleidoscope world. Gives power to the oppressed to stand up against oppression. Gives power to the weary to carry on. Gives power to see a future where life seems hopeless and lost. The power we call the God of Love moves spirits to love humankind - to care for the wounded, to care for the sick, to teach the children, to support and champion the unloved and the unwanted refugees; The power of the God of Love moves the spirits of those who love humankind. They do not seek bonuses or rewards; they are not driven by the glamour and glitter of material wealth or station in life as a celebrity. They do not sing of their own achievements.

Their voices are rarely heard. To the God of Love we give our prayer of thanks to those who carry that power in their spirits. We pray that we too may find that power within ourselves. Whatever we do, however great or small our ability, let us show that the power of the God of Love is in our spirits. Let it shine in our eyes. Let it echo in the words we speak. Let it shine from the words we write.

So may that power grow in the world - touch every spirit where the clock of time ticks away in their lives.

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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