

National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarians
and Free Christian Churches

News & Views

Issue 4



Spring 2020



*'In the flow of religious thought and practice, Unitarians represent
openness and inquiry in the spiritual quest'*

Registered Charity No. 1040294



NUF at the GA

Where are we going as a spiritual community?

Louise Rogers will lead a workshop addressing the above question and engage with suggestions you may bring to the meeting.

Venue: Hilton Metropole, Birmingham B40 1PP. **Date:** Thursday 9th April. **Time:** 8.45 am.



THE SOCIETIES WEEKEND

20th-22nd November 2020

The Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow

Come join with members of the National Unitarian Fellowship (NUF) the Psychical Society, the Peace Fellowship, the Findhorn Network, the Earth Spirit Network and the Unitarian Renewal Group for a weekend of social and learning experience.

Register with tony.mcneile@virgin.net or 01204 591570 and book accommodation with the Nightingale Centre 01298 871218—see pages 30 & 31 for details.

Editorial

Welcome to 2020 and welcome to Nick Saunders, who has worked on this edition in preparation to becoming our new Editor as from the Summer edition. You will find Nick's details on the back cover. I would like to thank Nick for working with me on this edition and also like to thank all the contributors who have responded to my requests for articles over the time I have edited, first the *Viewpoint* and latterly *News & Views*. I can't leave out my husband John, who prepares the publication for the printers, and who will continue to do the same for Nick.

Sadly, the NUF lost a good friend just before Christmas. Dorothy Archer was our Publication Officer for many years, before the Internet arrived. She carried out a survey of possibilities for outreach in our universities, also producing a new publicity leaflet annually, which, over the years, brought in many new members. When she finally became President of the NUF she gave unstinting support and encouragement to her fellow Officers. The Eulogy given by Rev Bob Pounder at her funeral can be found on page 9.

In the 'Views' section you will find two very different approaches to the theme: 'Religion/Tradition and Technology'. The first by your new Editor, Nick, (p 19) and the second by Bob Pounder (p 23)

In the last edition of *News & Views* a Renewal Form was included. There are still many members who have not returned the form. It would be helpful if you could either return your subscription to our Treasurer Ken Smith or let him know that you no longer wish to continue with your membership. We hope that it will be the former. If you have lost your form it can be printed off from the NUF website or see page 29 :

<https://www.nufonline.org.uk/NUF2015/membership.htm>

Items for submission to the Summer edition of *News & Views* should be sent to the Editor by 12th May 2020

Joan Wilkinson

Secretary's Notes

This will be my last Secretary's Notes as I will be moving on after our 2020 AGM. Being the NUF secretary has been a most interesting experience and I have learnt a lot, helped enormously by present committee members who have displayed unlimited patience and given their time willingly whenever I needed to learn something new.

The NUF is an extremely valuable and worthwhile organisation and I am sure that with your continuing support it will go from strength to strength. There will always be a need for such an organisation, both from people who have no nearby congregation, people unwilling to join a congregation or people who just want to be a member of the organisation. It caters for all.

Many thanks for all the help I have received. I have enjoyed being your secretary and would like to wish you all a very happy Easter.

Janet Lythgoe

**WANTED: Secretary for the NUF.
If you are interested, please contact
Rev. Tony McNeile, 01204 591 570
email: tony.mcneile@virgin.net .**

Minister's Page

The preacher on my Sunday radio was talking about God's purpose for the world and the world's use of free-will that prevents it happening. 'There is a sermon in that!' I thought, 'but it would have to be a bit technical'.

There are times when I move to the view that God created humanity, told them what the purpose was and then left. Humanity then behaved like the classroom of kids when the teacher has been called away and started wrecking the place.

If we didn't have free-will, we would be like the Marmonites from Ulysses, clones of a prototype without individual personalities. As individuals we are unique and we each have gifts and talents at our disposal. We can create great things from nothing.

Some in the class can wreck the room and others can restore order. That is free-will in action. It seems to be a simple choice. Do they act for the pleasure of themselves or do they feel responsible for the well-being of the whole class?

Some people in the world do work hard for the well-being of the group. They feel that friendship, peace and love between all people should be the ultimate ambition of the world. Others work hard for the well-being of themselves as individuals, working for power and control over others without regard for the consequences.

We have to guess at what the absent God's purpose was. My guess is that the purpose was to create one family of people. Starting with the family group, the free-will of each individual should be directed to the love and care for each member of their family. This would travel from the nuclear family to the extended family, to the tribe, to the nation and on. The free will of the individual should be

directed with all its creativity to support the group and not to separating their self from it and so eventually wrecking it.

So, in following this line of thought I dreamed of a Utopia and quite forgot to listen to any more of the preacher or the radio.

Tony McNeile

PRAYER

Let us take some moments to remember when we helped someone, whether in a small way or a big way. Let us reflect on the feelings that memory evokes.

Let us also take some moments to remember when we hurt someone, whether in a small way or a big way. Let us reflect on the feelings that memory evokes.

Let us reflect on our feelings from times when we were helped and feelings from times when we were hurt.

Personal Profile – Nick Saunders, Editor Designate

Unlike the current Editor, Joan Wilkinson, who needs no introduction, readers may well ask “Nick who?”! I have been a member of NUF for only three years so I am a relative new boy. But I have been a member of the NUF Committee for the last two years and have the great advantage of having been shown the ropes for this issue by Joan.

I joined the NUF because, having retired from legal practice as a solicitor in Birmingham, I was preparing to move down to South



*Nick cleansing himself
at a Shinto shrine*

Devon with my wife Jane, who had already retired. I was used to the luxury of having a thriving Unitarian chapel (Kingswood) only ten minutes drive away from our home. We were moving to a small coastal village over an hour's drive from the nearest Unitarian chapels in Plymouth and Torquay. The NUF offered fellowship regardless of distance and I believe this is still its key role today. As a latecomer to Unitarianism (having finally moved away from Methodism some six years ago), I have found the Newsletter and Viewpoint invaluable in helping me appreciate Unitarian

ways of looking at things. Meanwhile I have found that the journeys to Plymouth and Torquay are less difficult than I feared, but from Torcross the only means of transport to either place on a Sunday is the car so in time getting to a chapel may be impossible. I do feel for NUF members in this situation.

In my last job I edited my law firm's magazine for client education institutions so I do have experience of ensuring articles are readable and hopefully interesting! No doubt once I am in post readers will tell me if they think I am not getting it right.

Dandelions take over the world

An April arrival of unseasonable heat
and the dandelions flock to the verge.
Yellow-bereted, they polka-dot the lawn.
Unwelcomed, they spread their seed
without discrimination. Fairy clocks,
they float on airy currents and
moor on a suspicion of soil.

Like rabbits they multiply.
Unlike rabbits, they provide no food,
just an apology for coffee.
Like ours,
their purpose on Earth is unknown.

Elizabeth Brownhill
(Castle Donington Fellowship)

Two Haikus

huge hanging grapefruit
shrinks to a silver sliver:
arched eyebrow of moon.

language in orbit,
giddy alliteration:
poem's silent dance.

Elizabeth Brownhill

Dorothy May Archer 1929 – 2019

Dorothy May Archer was born in Batley, West Yorkshire on the 10th May 1929 to Amy and Harold Lane. Dorothy was an only child who, by all accounts, and from what she said to me, got on better with her father than she did with her mother. At four years of age she began to attend the Park Road Junior and Infants School in Batley, a school that is still going strong today.



Dorothy said, “I went to school aged four years. At two years, both parents went to work and disappeared before I got up. My grandmother came to look after me. Then at four years I went to school – Oh bliss! At Christmas we had a post box and there was a girl who was postman. Handwriting and grammar were very important. We made lanterns for Christmas.”

Looking back on those early school days, Dorothy said that they had been the “happiest days of her life”. She said “they had superb teachers, it was the best school I’ve ever been in”. The enthusiasm reflected in this statement is borne out by her subsequent academic success, leading to her being awarded a scholarship to Batley Girls Grammar School commencing September 9th, 1940.

I’ve learned a little more about Dorothy’s early life from her life-long school friend Margaret Barraclough. Dorothy in later life became a Unitarian but her early Church life, thanks to Margaret Barraclough’s mother, began at the Zion Methodist Church in Batley, which Dorothy attended until she was about eighteen, when she then left home to go to college in London.

Margaret wrote: "On a topical note we both joined the Young Conservatives and once went to a conference at a Butlins Holiday camp on the south coast, Brighton, I think. It was an experience not to be repeated ever but we managed to enjoy ourselves. And we attended meetings where Marcus Fox was holding forth and who later became a fairly prominent M.P."

"At school, pen friends were all the rage and Dorothy acquired a young student living in Accra, Gold Coast as it was then. His name was Joseph and he came to London for further education at the same time as Dorothy was living in Tooting. They met and became friends for many years until, I think, he died sometime in the late eighties."

"We spoke of her relationship with her mother, which wasn't good, but she was very close to her paternal grandmother, Mrs Lane, who ran a sweet shop from her cottage. Being house bound, we often called to see her - no doubt she handed us a sweet or two."

In 1947, her grammar school days behind her, Dorothy moved to Tooting where she began her teacher training at the Institute of Education and in 1949 obtained her diploma. Recalling those early days, Dorothy said, "The Methodist Minister tried to persuade me to go to college in Cambridge, but I wanted to go to London." As a newly qualified teacher, Dorothy returned to Batley to live with her mother and was employed as an English teacher at Earlsheaton County Secondary School in Dewsbury. It was there that she met her husband to be, Simon Archer, who was teaching geography there. She knew that he was the man for her, she told her best friend so. And so, it came to pass that they married at St Thomas' Church, Batley in 1954. By this time, Simon had become an Industrial Education Officer for a company known as TMM textiles.

This change in Simon's employment necessitated a move to the other side of the Pennines, living in a flat in Oldham, saving hard, with not much money. However, hard work and thrift paid off and by 1957 Dorothy and Simon moved into their first and last house, their home together at 116 Carr Lane, Uppermill. There were to be no children, but Dorothy and Simon found love and happiness with each other. Dorothy worked as a teacher at Roundthorn Primary School before ill health forced her retirement some thirteen years later. However, she enjoyed being at home, and being a housewife, she loved dogs and walking, reading, and spending time with Simon. She told me that one of the happiest times of her life was when Simon, a keen golfer, won the Saddleworth Cup.

In 2003, I received a Christmas card from Dorothy in which she said, "2003 seems to have been, for both us, a chaotic year. Simon died of a heart attack in the Spring. He had been ill since his first stroke in 1988 and had a further nine minor strokes, spending three years in bed before he passed away. Am learning how to live solo, very hard after fifty years in tandem. However, I have bought a computer and am raking up new interests and I'm busy with the NUF" (The National Unitarian Fellowship).

On a personal note, I could say so much about Dorothy, a lovely woman, a very good friend. Someone I have known ever since I first walked into the Unitarian Church at Mossley, where Dorothy attended, almost 27 years ago. In the past eight years since Dorothy went into a care home, I've been closely involved with all the ups and downs of her life. I have tried to look after her welfare in the various care homes in which she has lived since Christmas 2011. Last Friday, I wrote a thank you note to the manager and all the staff at Stamford Court Nursing Home where she spent the last two years of her life. In that note I wrote that Dorothy could com-

bine forthrightness with a gentleness of spirit, and I believe that forthrightness and gentleness in some way may describe the Dorothy we all knew and loved. But of course, no individual's life can be completely summed up in one sentence or even a few sentences. Dorothy had a dry sense of humour, she was fun to be with and she was passionate about her beliefs and no more so than when it came to her Unitarian faith, a faith, she had embraced in her later adult years. In particular, she gave her energies to the National Unitarian Fellowship, she served as its publicity officer for a number of years before finally becoming the NUF President, a position she held until 2012. As a matter of fact, Dorothy was still writing the president's piece for the NUF Newsletter whilst she was in residential care.

Not only that, but she always took an active interest in the affairs of Oldham Unitarian Chapel, and was our most enthusiastic supporter when it came to the refurbishments we were undertaking at that time, and she was particularly keen on our plan to create the One World Café which we opened on the occasion of our two hundredth anniversary in 2013. And although she never attended this particular Unitarian place of worship because of physical impairment, she was counted and considered as a member of the congregation. And it was of course, Dorothy's wish that her funeral service should take place here. This brings me back to her passing away peacefully on Monday, 2nd December after a long decline. She had once told me that she wasn't afraid of dying alone. She had no need to worry. She died in the caring presence of those who had nursed her dutifully and lovingly at Stamford Court. I think we have cause to be forever thankful to all the staff there, at Stamford Court, who looked after her so well in these past two years.

I would also like to thank everyone who visited Dorothy through-

out these past few years of her life. But rather than list all her visitors, please forgive me for mentioning only two and they are Sylvia and Alan Cooper. Alan brought Dorothy fresh flowers nearly every week, and even visited Dorothy when through spates of ill-health, I wasn't able to visit her myself. Thank you, Sylvia and Alan.

And so, as we have given thanks for Dorothy's life and paid tribute to a life well spent, a life of faith, often given to the service of others, we are faced with the loss of a unique and special woman, and we are brought face to face with the mystery of life and death. In our searching out of this mystery, we may seek solace and consolation but more than that we are offered certainty in the words of St Paul who wrote that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God.

Rev Bob Pounder

UKUTV News and video reflection

UKUTV NEWS

The camera team had a quiet Autumn but on 13th December met at Great Hucklow Old Chapel to film the Christmas Service led by the Student Ministers. A quick turnaround time by our video editor meant that it was available just in time for Christmas. It was reassuring to see the quality of presentation and content. We wish them all well in their future ministries. This is a video to save and share when Christmas comes around again.

www.ukunitarian.tv?carol19-service

January Video Reflection by Tony McNeile

www.ukunitarian.tv?nuf-jan20

Welcome to January. The month is named after the Roman God Janus, who was the guardian of doorways and passages. There was usually a statue or bust of him, looking both ways, ahead and behind. We don't have statues or masks over our doors but at New Year we do tend look back at the year gone by and with hope to the year ahead.

I know that many people are glad to see the back of the year that has ended, and they wonder what other calamities are waiting in the year to come. They worry about the direction the world is going in. They worry too about the mishaps and misadventures of their grown-up children and the prospects for their grandchildren.

My generation say that there was always a distance between ourselves and our parents. The problems we had we had to sort out ourselves. In today's generation that distance has gone and the different generations are more involved in each other's lives. Their worries become our worries and of course they worry about us.

Which way is better?

People say to me that all the turmoil in life is because we live in an age where there is no religion. The days of the preacher chastising the congregation about the Ten Commandments and putting the fear of God into them have long since gone.

I say that there is still wisdom. We are all able to be wise, young and old, but particularly the old because they have the years of experience.

And wisdom has a spiritual dimension. It is experience and something else that comes into our hearts and minds.

In the slow-moving world of yesteryear there was time enough for the seeds of wisdom to grow. People could stand and stare at what they saw around them. They could chew over the events of the day and the challenges their children faced.

Today's world seems to lack that space which was stillness. The pace is faster, the pressure is agitating. There are too many options, too many choices, and life becomes a treadmill and you can't stop and you can't look up and it is easy to fall off and then you feel you have failed.

The God Janus didn't just look both ways, seeing the past and looking to the future, guarding the passageway or door. He was also the god of new beginnings, the encourager of change.

If you have made a New Year resolution you can think of the gaze of Janus following you, reminding you and keeping you on track. And reminding us that wisdom is still there, part of our psyche and part of something else that is spiritual.

To hear the voice of wisdom we often have to pause and be still. Then, experience and that something else come together and give an answer to the questions that were ignored as they rattled along on the treadmill with you.

In still moments wisdom grows. With wisdom, young and old journeying together, the love and respect between them becomes a bridge that bonds them.

As you pass through the doorway to the New Year, may you travel with those moments of silence and build the bridges that are built on love and wisdom.

Tony McNeile

**Report from the European Unitarian Universalists (EUU) Fall
Retreat Friday 15- Sunday 17 November, Bad Homburg,
Frankfurt, Germany
Peter Zone**

The Retreat was held in the Deutsche Jugend Herberge (German Youth Hostel) in Bad Homburg, a town easily accessed by train from Frankfurt and Frankfurt airport.



Nowadays many rich bankers who work in Frankfurt live in the expensive houses in Bad Homburg. In historical times German Emperors used the castle, which was built by Frederick II of Hesse-Homburg in the 1680's and re-built/expanded by Frederick III in the 1780-90's as a "summer cottage" for the Royal family to enable family members to use the thermal bath in the town. (Bad is bath in German.) Since 1945, the castle and its beautiful park are owned by the Federal State of Hessen and used as a museum /art gallery and recreation area open to the general public.

The retreat attracted about 120 participants. Most were US expats living in different parts of Europe. I met some of them at the fall retreat in Cologne last year but I also had the pleasure of meeting many new faces. Some of the participants I met had not been able to attend an EUU retreat for several years.

The opening service was conducted by the Rev. Dr.Thandeka. Her theme was "Discover Love Beyond Belief". This initiative is perhaps best described as a powerful and innovative spiritual approach that encourages deep personal connections, mindful presence, caring support and acts of loving kindness within small

groups, fellowships, churches and the communities they serve. See Dr. Thandeka's website www.revthandeka.org for further information.

The schedule for the weekend contained something for everybody, RE for the children and fun activities but also serious matters, such as the EUU General Meeting where the 2020 officers were appointed. Whenever Unitarians meet, there is always a lot of talking. I



Labyrinth Electric Candles

I guess anybody attending a retreat organised by the General Assembly in the UK would feel at home in an EUU Retreat. There was a fantastic labyrinth “walking meditation” created by John Keating in the quiet room.

Workshops during Saturday

afternoon covered a wide variety of items including “Zoroastrianism”, “Life Café” (sharing life experiences/thoughts), “Tikkun Olam” (repair/completion/perfecting the World/creation) with reference to the first creation story in the Old Testament, “Poetry for Healing”, “Storytelling for Change”, “Eating as a Spiritual Practice” and yoga, The German association of the IARF (International Association for Religious Freedom) held a workshop about their work during 100 years of promoting religious freedom.

Some retreat participants came to my small workshop “Fake news”, where I tried to explore the use/misuse of social media and to get people to think about the good and bad consequences of using the internet, including IT safety and other associated topics.

Friday and Saturday evenings were set aside for fun events. A bar

was open during those hours. We were offered a fantastic theatre show by the children, who performed the play “The Lion and the Rat”. I really enjoyed the “variety show” on Saturday night which contained a great variety of music, from traditional Scottish and Irish folksongs to “modern day” country and rock music on. I am amazed at how many talented singers and musicians take part in these events.

Almost one week after leaving Bad Homburg I remain struck by how fast time flies during this type of event. I arrived early on Friday afternoon and before I knew it we had come to the end of page 2 of the massive weekend schedule and it was time for checking out of our rooms, the closing ceremony and good-byes. The next EUU Retreat will be in Prague 3-5 April 2020, and the Retreat ended by listening to Czech folksongs, and trying to pronounce the tongue twisting phrase “Strc prst skrz krk” (Stick your finger down your throat). The Czech participants assured us that the Czech alphabet does have vowels!!!

I will remember the enjoyable 2019 Fall Retreat, the town of Bad Homburg and the Old Town’s beautiful houses and streets. Much as I would love to attend the next retreat, I do not know if I can. But I would warmly encourage any reader of News and Views to attend if they can. Details are available at www.europeanuu.org.

Technology – master or servant? The case of Japan

Nick Saunders

Last November I spent a fortnight in Japan. I was struck by the contradictions in Japanese society. I have written briefly elsewhere about these¹ and asked whether a divided Britain could learn something from Japan. Here I consider in more depth one of the contradictions I identified previously, namely the contrast between the omnipresence of advanced technology in Japan and the continuing importance of traditional religious ritual and practice. How is such an apparent contradiction sustainable? How does it impact on Japanese society? And can we learn from this to reverse the tide of materialism that has so surged within the UK since World War II?

In Japan, as in the UK, the products of Japanese technology are everywhere. On every street corner are vending machines where you can buy almost anything. Robots are not confined to the factory but may be found in the home. But in Japan the new and scientific sit next to the old and irrational. Shinto shrines are everywhere. Much of their income comes from the sale of lucky charms. Our Japanese guide, who had visited the UK, suggested that the Japanese were superstitious but not religious. But I found the shrines remarkably spiritual, especially as in the enclosed areas at their centre there were no images of gods, indeed nothing! The shrines are often used by parents who take their children to them at key points in their childhood to celebrate their growth, not just soon after birth as in the Christian tradition.

Zen temples, on the other hand, house often large and elaborate statues of the Buddha, very different from the minimalist style we think of when we in the West think of Zen. The ethos is quite different in the gardens often surrounding the temples. The Japanese

love nature and I visited some wonderful palace and temple gardens. However, Japanese gardens are very different from British ones. Zen stone gardens are made entirely from rocks and raked gravel. The rocks are placed so that it is impossible to see all of them from any one location, in accordance with Zen teaching that no-one has complete wisdom. Such stylisation is also found in the traditional tea ceremony and the minimalist construction and layout of traditional wooden houses. These remain valued parts of the Japanese way of life and are not just appreciated by tourists, even though in the cities most people live in high rise apartments. It seems that fundamental values remain unchanged in Japanese society despite technological advances. Despite the growth of on line shopping and vending machines, shops, many of them small, proliferate in towns and cities. The Japanese love the *experience* of looking at and where appropriate handling the goods before deciding whether to buy them. Going round the vibrant markets to see the range of fish and fruit and vegetables is an education in itself as well as being sociable and fun. Robots may be used to undertake routine tasks or even to provide entertainment but there seems no concern that they will deprive workers of their jobs – they are thought of as creating the potential for new applications and so more jobs.

Of course Japan has social problems, some caused by or at least contributed to by other social traditions. While the wisdom of the old is respected more than in the UK those at the top in government and commerce tend to be from the older generation and this contributes to a reluctance to accept rapid social change. I arrived in Japan just after the enthronement of the new Emperor, Naruhito. The emperor and imperial system seem still to be generally respected, even though the emperor has since 1945 rejected the status of a god. However, the suggestion that the title might descend

down the female as well as the male line is one that the government thinks unlikely to be accepted for at least the next forty years.² Japanese society, government and business remain male dominated. Japanese companies have a paternalistic tradition of looking after their workforce but management style remains authoritarian, reflecting the traditional highly status based society of the shoguns. The stress that this can cause workers is widely cited as a reason for the very high rate of suicide in Japan.³

However, there is an acceptance that change must come, though preferably slowly. The nuclear family is still widely seen as the norm, though the birth rate has reduced so much that the burden of a growing older, non-working group is a major concern.⁴ While marriage is still the usual social structure, cohabitation without marriage is becoming more common, at least where no children are involved. There is currently no sign of the social fragmentation that has occurred in the UK as the result of the change in social values since the 1960s.

Perhaps a good test of the strength of Japan's commitment to appropriately paced social and technological change is its policy on the environment. Its substantial manufacturing base and high usage of technology (think of all those computers and neon advertising signs!) give it a substantial carbon footprint. It has a commitment to reduce this in line with the Paris Accord and it has invested heavily in greener forms of power generation, including nuclear. However, Japan is still a significant user of fossil fuels⁵ and when power generating capacity was lost in the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactor accident in 2011 greater use had to be made of coal powered power stations to bridge the gap. Nevertheless, Japan has a practical approach to the transition away from fossil fuels through widespread use of hybrid vehicles and its highly developed public transport system, using bullet trains, metros and

hybrid powered buses. This is consistent with the Japanese approach to life, which our guide expressed as “don’t rush, just hurry”. It remains to be seen whether this will be enough to address the accelerating climate emergency.

Japan is no nirvana. While internally the country is very safe by western standards, friction with China and North Korea remains a concern. Japan has no military nuclear capacity and does not intend to acquire it, yet it remains dependent on the US for its security should a major international conflict develop. However, Japan has been able to balance its economic development, largely based on technological change, with its social development better than has the UK. Its social institutions, including its religions, have shown themselves more able to cope with change and so more durable than ours. We in the UK can, I think, profit from the Japanese example as we attempt to rebuild social institutions after the internal strife of recent years.

Footnotes:

¹See Living with contradiction, Japanese style, *The Open Road*, Plymouth Unitarian Church, February 2020

²The Japan Times 26 November 2019

³The Japan Times 19 November 2019

⁴The Japan Times on Sunday 17 November 2019

⁵See the Yale Environmental Performance Index 2018, Japan is 20th, the UK 6th https://epi.envirocenter.yale.edu/epi-topline?country&order=field_epi_rank_new&sort=asc and The Japan Times 13 November 2019

Nick Saunders

Religion, Tradition and Technology

Bob Pounder



Past NUF President Dorothy Archer and I first met when I began to attend the Sunday services at Mossley Unitarian Church in 1993, we became good friends and I can tell you, she wasted no time in introducing me to the National Unitarian Fellowship (NUF), and was delighted when a couple of years later I accepted my new role as the editor of the NUF *Viewpoint* magazine, a role by the way, for which I really had little or no experience to carry out, save for my various attempts at

producing left wing leaflets that had little effect really, apart from getting me into a bit of bother now and again.

Someone once said that one of my leaflets looked like it had been produced using a John Bull printing outfit. You may remember those kits from childhood, you inserted rubber letters into a holder, pressing the letters onto an inkpad and then on to paper to print. The low-tech pleasures of yesteryears children! My career as a propagandist was probably as amateurish as my technical resources, that consisted of a literal 'cut and paste' on the kitchen table, a portable typewriter and of course a bottle of correction fluid: Tippex or Snopake. Happy days!

With these highly doubtful qualifications (little did they know) I committed myself not only to producing an A5 size journal, the *Viewpoint*, on a bimonthly basis for the National Unitarian Fellowship, but also, to an additional responsibility for seeking written contributions throughout the Unitarian movement. My job would only be complet-

ed after the magazine was printed and collated and then I'd have to drive up to Gee Cross to deliver a cardboard box of about three hundred copies to Margaret Edwards who would in turn, ensure distribution. Margaret was a member of Hyde Chapel and as I recall, a member of the Unitarian Psychological Society, as was Frank Hytch, who I would eventually meet through another medium of technology:

Tapes of Fellowship. As an aside, these tapes of fellowship were merely an audio cassette, that were passed from member to member by post, each member adding a point of view, or saying what they wanted, to the recorded discussion and then posting it on. The tapes were always interesting and a delight to listen to, but they were very slow in circulation and sometimes the last person to receive the cassette had to be 'gently reminded' to post it on.

Fortunately, just before, my editorial duties to the *Viewpoint* began, it so happened that I came into possession of a second-hand Amstrad word processor. The word processor during the mid-1980s was seen at the time as the only practical reason why most people should want to buy a home computer. Alan Sugar, the founder of Amstrad, realised that a cheap and easy solution to word processing and the replacement of the typewriter would be a market winner. He was right, and thus the Amstrad PCW, was born. It was initially going to be called a WPC (Word Processing Computer) but it was pointed out that the acronym had the potential to inspire jokes about Women Police Constables. Thus, I became the proud owner in 1995 of an already obsolete, AMSTRAD PCW 9512. Its Daisy Wheel printer making a dramatic noise as it hammered out the text for forthcoming issues of the *Viewpoint*, on the kitchen table.

Nevertheless, this to me was cutting edge stuff at the time. I little realised how quickly things would change. When the media began to

talk up the advent of the internet few of us would realise the impact that the new digital age would have on our lives. Now, a quarter of a century later, notwithstanding Windows 10, and the smart phone, we can confidently say that the current generation is standing at the threshold of an even greater technological leap forward. Artificial intelligence and robotics will bring almost unimaginable change.

Arguably, technology has always been with us. Perhaps it's just part of who we are as human beings. The beautifully carved weapons and implements of the Stone Age are without question technology. This older technology enhanced human ability to survive, to make life more bearable, and also when required, was used to kill and destroy. Whether one is wielding a flint knife or transferring cash from one continent to another via the Internet the consequences are ultimately a result of human thought and action whether in error or not. We are still in control; it always comes down to human agency. Even if we hand decision making over to algorithms or artificial intelligence, someone, somewhere, will have made a decision to do so.

On a personal note, I would like to think that the blessings of technology far outweigh its curses. Since the days of the portable typewriter and the Amstrad PCW 9512, I have been empowered with new skills such as desktop publishing, and as a minister, to use digital media through Power Point to enhance worship. The internet can become our university, a place of discovery for the spiritual seeker, whereby history, and the figures of the past may come alive for us, where I've enjoyed listening to lectures from Ivy League Biblical scholars or where I may become the invisible audience in the presence of other great teachers like, Thomas Keating, Thomas Merton, Richard Rohr and Eckhart Tolle. What a tremendous privilege we all have in the availability of YouTube and Facebook. All of these resources are gen-

erally free, and one does not have to travel miles to hear what these sages have to say. How much the internet has informed me and enriched my life, I cannot possibly say, but again, what privileges and gifts the new world of information technology has conferred upon all of us!

I think it's pretty obvious to any religious organisation, these days, that the digital age, and access to the internet are an essential prerequisite for the propagation and dissemination of their particular religious selling points. Of course, we shouldn't overlook the fact that there is a downside to this gift of the World Wide Web, this mighty river with its constant flow of news and views and its myriad of lines of communication on social media. The downside of course is well known and include the obsessiveness and the dangers of social media, the 'click bait' and the pressures and mental distress that may be visited upon its more vulnerable or younger users. As a counter, we are often advised to ration our 'screen time' and social commentators warn that the internet, rather than making us more connected can lead to a sense atomisation and isolation. You may for example, have observed a 'family meal' in a restaurant where they are all communicating, not with those sat at the same table but rather, are engrossed with some other activity through their iPhones.

Karl Marx once said of religion that, 'It is the *fantastic realisation* of the human essence since the *human essence* has not acquired any true reality.' We could say the same thing about the obsessive use of social media. No matter how important or how compelling that social media may be, it's usually about as realistic, trivial or short lasting as the collective imagination from which it springs. You can count your Facebook friends in hundreds, even thousands, but in reality, our true friends are counted in much smaller numbers than that.

But we don't need social media, the tools of modern technology to become strangers in our own world, to become estranged from each other and from who we really are. Sadly, as all great scripture reveals, we were already caught up in the illusions of this world, so much so that the biggest religious spiritual journey we must take, *is* the journey to discover who we really are. Hence, we have that ancient injunction to 'Know thyself'. This is the reason why prayer and meditation are so essential to the spiritual life. We live so much at the level of the false self and the chattering voice in our heads. I heard it described as the 'cocktail party in the head'. Social media and still today, the radio and television with all its banal commentary, spewing out the soap operas and the 'drama' of life. Yet, in spite of the accepted Marxist assertion that 'religion is the opium of the people' wisdom and experience show us that true religion may lead us to the deeper reality. The twentieth century mystic, Simone Weil, wrote that day-dreaming, that is the lack of presence in the moment, is the denial of love, whereas, 'Love is real'. The psalmist says, 'Be still and know that I am God'. In the silence and the stillness, we can be led home to know who we really are; to know what is real and what is worthless. Then we will know that we are truly blessed.

Bob Pounder

Book Suggestion

Some few years ago, Ben Whitney was the speaker at the NUF AGM session at the GA Meetings in Birmingham. He spoke about a new book he had just written: *Updating the Map – A Humanist Journey Through the Bible*, published in 6459. The book looks at how believers and non-believers can find some truths that emphasize our common humanity through stories in the Bible. As the NUF meeting was just before Easter, his examination of the Easter story was particularly topical and helpful to many in the room. Ben very kindly gave the NUF many copies of this book, which those at the meeting happily took away with them, proceeds being donated to NUF funds.

Ben's new book: *The Apostate's Creed*, incorporates an update on the talk he gave. It is now available from: www.ydpbooks.com at £10. For more information about the author and his thinking behind the book can be found at: www.ben-whitney.org.uk

It is also interesting to learn that he is very happy to visit groups to speak about his work and writing.

Joan Wilkinson

History is more or less bunk. It is tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's dam is the history we make today.

Henry Ford (1916)

Theme for the Summer issue **Learning from History.**

Closing date for contributions: 12th May 2020.

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Charity Reference No 1040294