

National Unitarian Fellowship

*Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarians
And Free Christian Churches*

News & Views

Issue 6



Autumn 2020



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

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TALKING TO STRANGERS

**“Don’t talk to strangers.” Mum used to say.
“If they approach, walk the other way.”
As to why I should, she didn’t say
but I followed the rule day by day.
On buses and trains commuting in town
I always kept my head and eyes down.
Then passing by, some would smile at me;
nothing wrong there that I could see.
As the years went by I began to let go;
Strangers’ smiles cheered me when I felt low.
The occasional cheery ‘Morning’ was good
so often brightening up my mood.
We’re living now through a worrying time.
Each day I wake up worrying that I’m
going to struggle to get through each day.
But life’s getting easier, I’m glad to say.
A stranger with much dedication
now promptly delivers my medication.
Another delivers my weekly shop;
they don’t rush off; they’re happy to stop.
We have a chat about this and that;
They take the time to stroke the cat.
They’re always asking what else I need.
No longer strangers but friends indeed.**

Bernice Lashbrook

News & Views Autumn 2020

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Correction

At the end of the piece by Bob Pounder in the Summer issue of *News & Views (History, page 42)* we incorrectly referred to Bob as a retired Unitarian minister. We confirm that Bob is not retired and continues as Minister of Oldham Unitarian Chapel.

Update on new Secretary

The Committee of NUF has appointed Nick Saunders as Secretary in succession to Janet Lythgoe. Nick has agreed to serve until April 2021, when the situation will be reviewed. Nick's contact details appear on the back cover.

Copyright Notice

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Zoom – a way to grow during lockdown?

One of the contributors to this issue, Indra Sikdar, has proposed that while face to face gatherings are still difficult because of the pandemic there may be a role for virtual meetings of NUF members using Zoom video-conferencing technology. Some NUF members may already have experienced Zoom through chapel services, or meetings of friends or family. Although it has its limitations (singing is not a good idea!) as a way of meeting old friends and new when face to face meeting is impossible it is invaluable. The technology is pretty straightforward. The Committee is considering the proposal and

would value your views. Please contact Tony McNeile or Nick Saunders if you have any comments. Their contact details are on the back cover.

Needless to say, the Committee feel that as many Unitarians cannot meet others at the present time the NUF has more to offer than ever before. Do tell your friends about NUF and what it has to offer.

Editorial

“...And as she spoke the Count had had to acknowledge once again the virtues of withholding judgment.

After all, what can a first impression tell us about someone we’ve just met in the lobby of a hotel? For that matter, what can a first impression tell us about anyone? Why, no more than a chord can tell us about Beethoven, or a brushstroke about Botticelli? By their very nature, human beings are so capricious, so complex, so delightfully contradictory, that they deserve not only our consideration but our reconsideration – and our unwavering determination to withhold our opinion until we have engaged with them in every possible setting at every possible hour.”

Amor Towls in *A Gentleman in Moscow*

It was a happy coincidence that I came across this passage just as a number of members of the Plymouth congregation found Malcolm Gladwell’s book, *Talking to Strangers* (a brief review of which appears later in this issue). In turn Gladwell’s book provided the impetus for Ann Kader’s service, the text of which appears in the Views section. Ann interprets the theme rather differently from Gladwell, addressing the importance of talking to strangers to combat isolation – essential, particularly during lockdown. Indra Sikar brings yet another perspective, from his personal experience. So does Ian Martin, who

reminds us that we can be strangers even to ourselves.

We are fortunate in having a bumper crop of book reviews in this issue. It is clear how many NUF members have been using the enforced inactivity of lockdown!

I hope some of these pieces help you in your search for meaning. As always we at NUF value your thoughts, whether in the form of letters or longer articles. If you would like to contribute to future issues of *News & Views* please do not hesitate to contact me. The theme of the Winter issue will be leadership, but pieces on other topics will also be welcome.

Nick Saunders, Editor email:rnssaunders@outlook.com

Minister's Page

On August 9th I took the service at our local Unitarian chapel. It was the first service since the national lockdown began in March. The Management Committee of the Chapel had mugged up on the rules. The chapel had been deep cleaned, the hymn books had been removed (hymns couldn't be sung anyway), there was a one way system, pews were used in a way that conformed to social distancing. There was sanitiser everywhere. Only twenty people were allowed to attend and they had to be signed in and out. Everyone had to wear a mask or visor. Was it worth it?

To the twenty who signed up, yes it was! Everyone had missed their chapel and the life that went with it. Afterwards, outside the building, they talked about what they had missed. They had missed meeting their friends. They had missed caring for the building and doing the flowers. They had missed the routine of Sunday worship, the ritual of hymns and prayers and readings. They had missed the atmosphere of

the pews and the walls, the history that is embedded in the pulpit and table. I called all that the communion of worship in that chapel. It was the spiritual connection with the building, with each other and with the sacred that the soul seeks to reach. It made all of us realise how important that communion is.

We in the National Unitarian Fellowship are still a communion. We may not be based in a building. We may not see each other regularly but we are still a communion of Unitarians. We share similar values about freedom, reason and tolerance. We unite around those values, knowing that we are all in the same tribe. The NUF links us together through this News and Views, through all the activity on our website and through the filmed worship services. I am also in a Book of Fellowship, where we discuss our thoughts and beliefs.

In the NUF we are all on a spiritual journey. We are all pilgrims. Some like the communion of fellow pilgrims, some like the communion of solitude. It is only when we are deprived of our communion that we appreciate its value and the strength it gives us.

Prayer

May prayer help us to overcome the dark times. May prayer bring our minds back to the light. May prayer give us confidence to shake off doubts and worries. May prayer guide us through times of indecision. May prayer help us to be joyful and help us to celebrate. May prayer be part of our daily lives.

Let us not be afraid to pray. May we always feel that prayer connects us to the spiritual realm, prayer takes the activity of the mind to a higher level, to a realm of consciousness we do not normally per-

ceive. Let us imagine our prayers open a gateway to a new world where there is peace and comfort and understanding, a place where our voice is heard and we are listened to and we are given help. If times are uncertain, if times are difficult let us keep to our prayers. When we are happy and ready to celebrate, let us keep to our prayers.

Tony McNeille

Tel: 07769895396

UKUTV – UKUnitarian TV

UKUTV is still a relatively new group of enthusiasts who came together in 2014. The NUF had already been filming on a small scale but with the newly formed UKUTV we were able to do so much more. With backing from a generous donor plus others a Steering Group moved the new project along. A website: www.ukunitarian.tv was set up, which now holds a wealth of material for Unitarians and those exploring Unitarianism. The NUF continues to add monthly video reflections, presented chiefly by our Minister, Tony McNeille, with occasional supporting Unitarians contributing their reflections. These can be viewed on YouTube, on UKUTV's own site and also on the NUF website's front page. This is one thing that has been able to continue throughout the pandemic restrictions.

The team have filmed many services but sadly have had to take this year to plan their way forward into the future. However, leaders of worship have successfully filled the gap using Zoom and filming from home. This adds another aspect to include in our forward planning. UKUTV has filmed as requested at the GA Annual Meetings, Theological Conferences, and Poetry Lectures with readings. It has covered

Youth Weekends at Great Hucklow as well as filming interviews with Unitarians and presentations of 'Understanding Unitarianism'. Working with the Unitarian Music Society, during their August Conference at Great Hucklow, to record a DVD/video of Christmas Carols presented challenges. A decorated Christmas Tree was brought indoors, and the choir wore hot winter jumpers. The authentic atmosphere was emphasized as the curled-up dog lying in front of the choir, dozed contentedly in the summer heat. No one watching would have known that we were filming on a hot summer's day.

The group is now ready to take the next steps and import new ideas and people into the wider project of networking as modern technology has been moving rapidly in a very few years. All will be used to make spiritual resources easily available for Unitarians and beyond.

Joan Wilkinson

August Meditation

(Available in video on the NUF website.)

Welcome to this meditation for August from the National Unitarian Fellowship.

'Is nothing sacred?' Said my friend when his football was interrupted by the adverts. Not quite the meaning of sacred I was used to! Sacred means having a religious or spiritual atmosphere.

The sacred seems to move us to a different awareness of how we are as a person. As if the sacred place or sacred atmosphere has a spiritual quality of its own and we tune into it, or maybe it tunes into us. If you visit an empty church or chapel and just stand there for some moments you can sometimes sense the sacred. Maybe it is the history of the place and you feel in your bones the centuries of prayers

and hymns that have been absorbed into the walls. Every pew has its history. Generation after generation have taken place there. Joy and grief have been seated in equal measure. The joy of weddings and celebrations. The hopes that go with baptisms are followed by the tears of grief that are led by a coffin.

The church sacred is found in the rituals of worship. Standing, kneeling, sitting all follow a defined path, the words fall on receptive ears and the responses are automatic. The priest exhorts the deity in one direction and the people in the other. The priests perform those sacred rituals before the altar and the congregation endorse with Amen. To worship is to participate in these sacred rituals. They lift the spirit and fortify it against the everyday cares that were brought through the church door. When the sacred of the church touches the sacred of the spirit the soul rises and expands with love into the conscious realm.

A church can be a focal point for the sacred but the sacred is everywhere. The sea shore and the lapping tide hold it, the countryside of trees and hedges and wild moorlands hold it too. A work of art or a performance can reveal a sacred presence.

Any moment in the day can spark the sacred light into being. It might be the look of love on the child's face when they catch your eye and smile. Or the care from a friend who goes the extra mile for you unasked.

In the great outdoors when all seems still and the light has softened. time stands still to remind you this is only a segment of time in the long flow of creation.

We never quite know if it is the sacred that has woken our spirit or whether our spirit has projected something of itself into what we see.

The secret, they say, is to look and celebrate what you see, or hear or feel. In life we better remember the good things and often bury what is not good somewhere out of sight as a dark unconscious memory.

Memories of sacred moments in sacred places stay close to the surface and are easily recalled. The spirit thrives on good memories. Those memories warm the soul, but not only that, they affect the physical and emotional wellbeing too. The physical body seems to thrive when the spirit is happy. Negative thoughts are found to be of no value, they only weave illness and sadness into unhealthy knots within the body and these can close down the spiritual receptors that sense the sacred.

Those who teach meditation encourage their classes to develop those memories and store them as internal sanctuaries to visit at any time. Let them be refuges in the busy world to visit when the going is getting rough and there is a need for some solitude to revive the soul. The calm strength of those with the sacred in their soul will radiate outwards and touch those who are near with wellbeing. It has been known that the positive vibrations of the spirit can reach anyone who is brought into the light of prayer no matter where in the world they may be.

So let us be aware of the sacred, seek it wherever we go, discover it more often in ourselves and celebrate the good things we have in our lives.

Stay spiritually strong.

The National Unitarian Fellowship is open to all who seek the spiritual path.

I am Tony McNeile, the minister to the National Unitarian Fellowship.

NUF Internet Fellowship (Forum)

The Forum was set up some while before Facebook came on the scene and continues to support a small group. Unlike Facebook, it goes at the pace whereby this small group have time to establish friendships that have continued to grow over the years. It could be likened to another resource the NUF provides for its members – the Books of Fellowship. Being a small group, we have found that over time we become concerned on not hearing from a member for a while. Events in each other’s lives are of interest and we learn more about the world in which we live. We are able to give support and encouragement to each other.

This Internet Fellowship has many sections but only one is open to anyone, and that is ‘Sermons and Addresses’. Only a registered member can reply to what they read or add an item themselves. They can of course submit an item to someone already a registered member. The statistics show that in fact many people do visit and revisit this resource.

For those who wish to join the group the information and directions are on the front page of the NUF website: www.nufonline.org.uk.

NUF Facebook Group

The National Unitarian Fellowship Facebook group can also be accessed through the website. This is a closed group but both members or anyone interested in joining the NUF or just learning about the NUF and the wider movement, are welcome to apply to join this group.

The material on this page links us to the wider movement, with a small number of ministers sharing material on a weekly basis and sometimes more regularly than that, especially during the restrictions due to COVID19. From time to time a particular topic attracts a good deal of discussion, often highlighting the breadth of understanding and experience of Unitarians. As with any other group, we make every effort to negotiate our way through to enable each person to give and receive respect for divergence of opinions. But in all instances, we hope to learn and grow as a group.

We are always pleased to welcome new members and friends to either of the above.

Joan Wilkinson

Naomi Anne Linnell 11th January 1939 - 3rd July 2020

Most of you will remember Naomi for the poetry and short stories she wrote, initially for the NUF *Newsletter*, and then for *The Inquirer* and other Unitarian publications.

Her life was built on a firm foundation of Christian and later in life Unitarian Christian faith, with intellect and mind being open and sensitive to all around her.

Naomi had an illustrious career, first studying history at Cambridge and later at Leicester to become a teacher. However, her career was spent first as Cathedral Librarian at Lincoln followed by Keeper of Printed Books for the Cathedral at Canterbury for half a week and the other half in the library of the University of Kent.

Her passion was for medieval books, ancient documents, poetry, music, especially early baroque, photography. This partly explains her style of writing which drew on sacred texts, parables, legends myths

and sagas in a style rich in metaphor and grounded in faith and her surroundings at the time of writing.

Sadly, her career was struck short with the onset of ME, but she drew on that also and began writing short stories and poetry, which she had always wanted to do.

She became a Unitarian later in life and although never meeting any other Unitarians, she delighted in getting to know Unitarians in the NUF and other societies. Her contributions were made through her writing.

Naomi also met the love of her life in later life, Oliver Postgate, and they lived together in Broadstairs, where much of her poetry is set. Sadly, Oliver died in 2008 and it was then that her Unitarian friends became important to her. Naomi was courageous in all that she had to face. Through all the above, Jo her daughter was Naomi's joy and delight, as well as being her closest friend, sharing houses and homes until almost the end of her life. Our thoughts are with Jo at this sad time.

Joan Wilkinson

The Face of God

We may not see the face of God nor hear his voice,
but we can delight in the wonders of this our world,
our living mirror of a sacred beauty that alone is his.
His voice is heard in the song of ten thousand birds
and in a roaring waterfall; silent he moves in a breeze
that ripples through the beach tree's bronzed leaves.
In his almighty power he rides the skies in the eye
of the storm, yet like new kittens lying secure within
the circle of their mother's paws, we may safely rest
in the promise of his tenderness and silken strength.

God's face invisible, God's voice unknown, but
Jesus becomes our paradigm of the loving God,
his teachings marking out our path to paradise,
for he brought to us God's great commandment:
that we love Him and our neighbour as ourselves.

Tonight the magical stillness of a summer evening
Is broken only by the whispering of lazy waves
and the distant high pitched hoot of a tawny owl.
Above the bay the full moon hangs softly bright
spreading a delicate path of silver across smoke
blue water, inviting us to look into a far horizon
which, with Jesus as our guide, will some day
be the end of our journey. There, face to face
at last with God, we may recognize the glorious
ineffable Mystery that is the essence of his Love.

Taken from: *More Poems from the Island* 2014 by Naomi Linnell

The Unitarian Societies Weekend

The Unitarian Societies Weekend was due to take place at the Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow, Derbyshire from 20-22 November 2020. However, while the Centre is expected to re-open in September, numbers of residents will be restricted due to social distancing measures arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. It has therefore been decided to defer the Weekend until 19-21 November 2021. For full information see: <https://thesocietiesweekend.wordpress.com/>
Meanwhile discussions are taking place between the Societies as to the feasibility of holding a virtual gathering using Zoom software. The date proposed is 21 November 2020. Many of us will now be familiar

with this technology through use by our church, or with friends and family. Details of this event will be posted on the NUF website, www.nufonline.org.uk. Alternatively contact Tony McNeile, whose contact details appear on the outside back cover.

Report from the Findhorn Foundation



The Findhorn Foundation has been growing and adapting for many years, and the unusual recent few months are no exception. Located on Scotland's Moray peninsula (east of Inverness), the Findhorn community was unintentionally started in November 1962 by Eileen and Peter Caddy and their good friend Dorothy Maclean. The three founders had a strong spiritual practice and had meditated together for over ten years. After being left homeless following dismissal from their jobs managing a hotel in the Highlands, Eileen received guidance to take their car and caravan to the Findhorn Bay Holiday Park. There the Findhorn community was born. The Findhorn Foundation is now an educational charity at the heart of that community.

Eileen's inner listening to the voice of God is one of the principles of the Foundation, along with demonstrating love through work and cooperation with nature.

In pre-COVID-19 times the Foundation welcomed up to 2000 guests each year from over 40 countries for a rich programme of workshops, conferences and courses. We were delighted to welcome several

groups from Unitarian Churches led by Unitarian Minister and Findhorn Fellow Ralph Catts.

The theme of 'talking to strangers' chimes with the many ways the Foundation communicates its ideas to the world. Eileen Caddy's gift of receiving guidance from a 'still, small voice' inside herself, a source she called the 'God within', led more than a million people to read her perennial diary *Opening Doors Within*, sampling this guidance every day. This simple little book has sold 5 million copies and has been translated into over 20 languages. This along with many other books written by our three founders are available from Findhorn Press.

Many people connect with the energy of the Findhorn Foundation through our website and social media, an aspect which the lockdown has intensified. From meditations streamed from our sanctuaries via Facebook and the website to the *Voices of Findhorn* video series, the Findhorn Foundation reaches many strangers each week - people who have never visited us and may never do so, but who want to reach out and connect with our values and transformational presence.

Lockdown has led to the creation of online courses. We have just held our first online summit *Roots of Tomorrow*, which was attended by over 300 guests. The deep feeling of community created during this mass coming-together on Zoom was a surprise to some, as friends and strangers became deeply connected. Replays are available here. We have other online events coming soon including our next summit, based around the consciousness of money, on 22-26 October.

As we start to reopen to small groups of people visiting 'in person', our signature programme *Experience Week* starts again on 24 October 2020. This week gives our guests the chance to experience life here in a unique spiritual community and ecovillage. Some guests describe this week as life-changing.

We welcome and value these connections, in whatever form, to communicate our mission of 'transforming human consciousness in everyday life'.

Janet Limb

The Foy Society

The Foy Society is, in the words of our website, "a fellowship of women and men who, in a spirit of free inquiry, seek to understand the nature of present issues and problems - political, social and religious." We are a national society without local branches, and our major activity is holding an annual conference each year. The society is some 95 years young, having been founded as the Fellowship of Youth in 1924. We have a small council of elected officers.

Foy is organised as a simple small society, not a charity. We do not have buildings or property - the Barn at Flagg, which has been a focus of Foy social events and youth meetings for many years, is actually owned by a charitable trust affiliated to Foy, not by us. As a result we are very free of the necessary but real burdens involved in charitable objects, trustee duties, or the upkeep and renewal of buildings. We can spend our small funds how we like, too. We think that this allows us space to think broadly about social, political and spiritual issues. On occasion it also allows us to think about how the Unitarian movement can evolve and progress. I should also note that members do not actually need to be Unitarians at all!

Our conferences run over four days, normally in May and normally at The Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow. Conference is open to non-members, and single day attendance is possible as well. They are organised and led by volunteers from our members, but we are often able to book external speakers and leaders to speak to us, teach us, and challenge us. Some of our recent conference themes were "Grief and Bereavement"; "Inequality in society"; "Storytelling and the stories we tell"; and "Let us Pray". (Conference in 2020 was cancelled; we currently plan to hold our next conference in May 2021.) Confer-

ence is invariably a social event as well, since many of our members are also long-standing friends, and we include both a morning worship and evening epilogue in our timetable. The society's AGM and council elections are also held during conference each year.

As an affiliated society to the GA, we have frequently used our right to lay motions before GA that ask the movement to react to political and social issues. We are proud that many of our motions have passed and become policy. Often these result from our conference themes - following the 2017 conference on inequality in society, in 2018 we proposed a motion that the GA should affiliate as a supporter of the Equality Trust; this motion passed. In 2019 we proposed a motion regarding knife crime and the Glasgow model of multi-agency approach to violence reduction, which again passed. In drafting and supporting motions we are always keen that they should be outward looking and involve Unitarianism in practical responses to live social issues, ideally with real action as a result.

Further into the past, Foy has sometimes been able to act as a focus for reconsidering and renewing the structures of Unitarianism in Britain and Ireland, including publications and presentations at GA in the years before the formation of an Executive. We also provide resources and reproduction equipment to the annual GAZette newsletter published during the GA meetings - we think the reporting and free comment of GAZette lies perfectly at the intersection of supporting the Unitarian movement and being free to criticise it in the hope of improvement.

As a long standing society our membership has naturally renewed many times and I am pleased to say we are still attracting new attendees to conference and attracting new members to join, both young and old. Many of our members are the second or third generation to be in the society (both of my parents were Presidents of Foy in their day!), but many have no such connection, and new members are always welcome.

John Rowland, President, the Foy Society

INTERNATIONAL REPORT

The Far East

Unitarianism is not a missionary religion and as such has a limited presence in many parts of the world. Thailand is a case in point. I remember reading on an internet message board a question of where the Unitarian Universalist Church was in Chiang Mai. Of course, there was never one in Chiang Mai or anywhere else in Thailand for that matter. I think the questioner felt that Unitarian Churches must be similar to American fast food restaurants whose presence is everywhere. The question drew angry responses about missionaries operating in Thailand which showed a fundamental ignorance as to what Unitarianism really is.



The first bringers of Christianity to Thailand were the Portuguese who set up a church in Ayutthaya, an ancient capital of Thailand. To this day there is a catholic church on the banks of the Chao Phraya river In Bangkok which has a “Portuguese” community around it. Don’t expect anyone to speak Portuguese there, however, you might see kids with a slightly farang (western) appearance. In fact, I have been to Kudi Jeen on several occasions as I once had a relative living there. Have you ever seen a Christmas tree with a picture of Jesus Christ on it? I can forgive the occupants of that house thinking I was a member of the Church of Latter Day saints. My step mother-in-law now lives in northern Thailand.

The Catholics are known in Thai as Kristaan as opposed to Kristian who are Protestants. The first American Protestant missionaries came to Thailand at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Despite great missionary efforts not many Thais are Christian. Most converts were in fact made among the hill tribes in the north of the country.

What links if any are there if any between Unitarians and Thailand? One thing I did note in my first days in Thailand years ago was the

word Unitarian was indeed in Thai-English dictionaries which helped considerably in explaining what it was. Other than that, not much.

One famous Unitarian who did come to Thailand is still remembered here to this day, John Bowring. On my visits to England I always like to attend a Unitarian Church. One is Hastings Unitarian Church. A number of years ago on one such visit I was surprised to find out Sir John Bowring's name is on the foundation stone of that church.

He was of course the fourth governor of Hong Kong. He came to Siam as it was then known to complete a new trade treaty between the British Empire and Siam. As a Liberal, he was a strong believer in free trade. However, he came with two warships so there was an element of force. The Thai king of course realized he needed to have good relations with Britain to resist the predatory French and maintain the independence of Siam.

The question of British imperial history is one that has raised its head with recent events in Bristol with the pulling down of a statue. Sir John Bowring has no statue as far as I am aware but there is a bust of him at the Devon and Exeter Institution in Exeter. Sir John did speak out about the abolition of slavery.

It was his order to open fire on Qing forts as a result of the Arrow incident that started the Second Opium war. The Arrow was a British flagged Chinese vessel. To enable Chinese merchant ships to trade around the Treaty ports on the same terms as the Merchant Navy, the British granted flag rights to Chinese vessels at Hong Kong. Theoretically, a British-flagged Chinese vessel now came under British protection. So, when one such vessel, the Arrow, was seized by the Chinese authorities and its crew detained, Britain opened hostilities.

Bowring saw the war as further opening China, to achieve the objects that the First Opium War had failed to achieve. This blatant display of British power did not please Bowring's progressive friends in Britain among them the prominent Jeremy Bentham who did not speak to him again.

In my school days I remember a Cambridge Press history book which I bought that rightly described the Opium Wars as a black spot on British history. Certainly, they shaped Chinese foreign policy in the twentieth century and today Hong Kong is very much in the news. Democratic freedoms are being curtailed there. Some of those democratic reforms were in fact first suggested by Sir John during his time as Governor. While they weren't initially accepted, they later came to be adopted. Sir John was not liked by the Europeans in Hong Kong with whom he had frequent conflicts. He was however liked by the Chinese who gave him lavish gifts on his departure.

One thing that caught my attention was the fact Sir John caught Hong Kong fever during his time there. Hong Kong was not a healthy place. It leads me to think this Covid-19 virus is nothing new and has been about for a long time. Indeed, I read a South China Morning Post article which suggested exactly that.

Sir John was certainly not liked by China, his experience in Siam was different. He was welcomed there as a royal and became firm friends with King Rama IV, known as King Mongkut. Sir John in fact published a book about Siam, *The Kingdom and People of Siam* 1857. The book is a diary of his mission and contains a lot of information from Bishop Pallegoix and other missionary and trade sources. As such the book contains inaccuracies. Sir John later wrote to the King saying he wished to make corrections, but the King said he didn't have time to help rectify the book. Nevertheless, the book provided insight to those in the United Kingdom about the Kingdom of Siam.

The Bowring Treaty 1855 opened Siam to free trade, however, it is regarded as an unequal treaty.

Sir John was well regarded in Siam and later went on to become an ambassador for Siam to the courts of Europe. While Unitarians need to remember their history, we need to reappraise it in the light of events as they occurred.

Further reading: *Free Trade's First Missionary: Sir John Bowring in Europe and Asia* by Philip Bowring. Hong Kong University Press 2014.

Ian Martin, NUF Committee member

Talking with strangers

We all do it now, don't we?

We chat to people we meet on our daily walk;
we donate the small change of our words
to the man, woman or child who widens the berth
so we can continue, unhurried, on our way.

We writers have always done that:
addressing strangers is in our blood.
We launch our words like messages in bottles,
toss them onto a paper ocean;
to be washed up on foreign shores;
to be read, digested, considered
by everyone or no one

Is the world catching on; catching up?
Is it agreeing that exchanges of words,
face to face, now,
are vital in saving humanity from itself.

Liz Brownhill

VIEWS

Talking to strangers

An Address to Plymouth Unitarian Church, Sunday 23rd February 2020

I thought about doing this Service sometime ago when I was with a friend having lunch. Two women and a young woman in a wheelchair came along. As we were on the end table we moved, as the end table was easier to accommodate a large wheelchair. The young lady's mother said she had cerebral palsy, among other disabilities. We had not asked about this. She also said that the girl had been to drama class. I spoke to the young lady and asked if she liked drama class and what did she learn there. She smiled and said "bird" and started waving her arms like a bird's wings. The two women were delighted that my friend and I were interested and had spoken directly to the young girl and not just to the two women.

That encounter with those strangers, although short, made all of us happy. So from that encounter came this Service. Both friends and strangers equally want happiness, just like us, and talking to strangers can be a life enhancing process. Before going any further, as your safeguarding officer, I must stress that safety is crucial, boundaries need to be set for children and adults, particularly vulnerable adults. Who they can talk to, who they can't. This needs constant and vigilant attention. This is why there are books like Little Red Riding Hood and more modern day stories.

Now on to more pleasant aspects of talking to strangers. It is now known that small talk makes a big difference to lonely people, particularly elderly people. There is ongoing research about the value of short encounters, mainly being done in the United States. People walk around with their phones or headphones or just rushing hither

and you, but this bypasses the increased happiness which occurs with even the shortest encounter. The research being done is to do with the happiness correlation. Michigan University has looked at the heart and has found that neighbourly acts like chatting over the fence, borrowing a cup of sugar, just smiling (all things which were commonplace years back), increase what the researchers call cardiac prosperity - meaning it helps your heart.

In these short conversations with strangers we usually start on more of an upbeat note than if we were talking to people we know. I was waiting for a bus one day, there was me, a lady with a walking stick, a grandma and grandad with a baby in a buggy and a little boy and his mum who had a big birthday box. I asked if it was the boy's birthday and the mother said it was the next day. The boy then turned to me and held up six fingers and told me he was going to be six and because of that he could have six of his friends to his party. He then said I was invited too. He then turned to the lady with the walking stick and said "How did you break your leg, does it hurt?" She explained that she didn't have a broken leg but her leg was painful and using the walking stick helped her. Finally he turned to the couple with the baby and asked if they were the baby's nana and grandad, they told him they were. We were then all allowed on the bus. We all told the little boy to have a lovely birthday. There was no more conversation as we all sat in different places, but for that short time everybody was listened to and felt valued and I'm sure it left us all in a happy frame of mind, I know it did me.

Another friend told me of someone in their community who had recently got a dog, she said she had lived there for 25 years and nobody really spoke to her but directly she got the dog, everyone now speaks to her. You have probably heard of the woman dog walker who saw a man sitting alone on a park bench. She didn't approach him in case

he thought she was weird. She didn't leave it there, she wrote "Happy to chat" on cards and attached them to benches. These cards are now to be found right across the UK and also in other countries. Allison Owen Jones, the dog walker, said "All of a sudden, people are not invisible anymore". Talking can be good for the sharer as well as the listener, as those of you who work in the hospital have found. It helps to listen to their story and recharges your soul. For me, it always makes me realise how rich this world is with all the interesting people in it.

I end with a quote from the Quaker spiritual counsellor Parker Palmer: "We humans are essentially communal beings".

Ann Kader, President, Plymouth Unitarian Church

Some thoughts on strangers

I was asked recently if I would like to contribute one of my poems to a service entitled "Talking to Strangers". I couldn't find one to fit the bill, so I had a little think about strangers in our midst.

The first thought that came to mind was the lovely verse from Hebrew's ch.13: " Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware." With a daughter in America and a son in New Zealand I have had cause to travel many times on my own, long haul flights, airport lounges and trains and coaches. Being a friendly and definitely curious person it's been my pleasure to have had some interesting and sometimes fascinating conversations with people whom one could label strangers.

One particular one sticks in my mind. I was on the last leg of a long

journey finishing on the coach to Plymouth on a dark rainy night. A smartly dressed man of Middle Eastern appearance got on at Bristol. The coach was quite full and he sat next to me. After about 20 minutes we started to speak. He was a cardiac specialist heading for a conference at Derriford Hospital and had come from Egypt. We had a wonderful conversation about Neuro Linguistic Programming, a therapy in which my niece had just qualified. She had given me a book to read about it called "My Voice Will Go With You". The "stranger" had read the book and admired the therapy. The journey flew past as we talked about Psychology and Religion.

As we said our goodbyes at Plymouth I thanked him for his company and insight. He thanked me in return and said, quoting the Koran, "It is not always for us to know who are the soldiers of our God". It struck such a cord and I felt blessed and strangely energised as I walked home.

I am a volunteer chaplaincy visitor at Derriford Hospital and every week I meet wonderful and often inspiring people at difficult times in their life, like the 93 year old lady who, mourning her failing health, said indignantly "I was surfing until I was 80!"
I'm going to conclude by saying that no one is a stranger, just someone we may not know yet.

Caroline Earl, Plymouth Unitarian Church

Talking to Strangers

It is interesting to note that as children we are encouraged to "not speak" to strangers by our parents. However, in life often our successes come from doing just that.

In *Indian English* by Jillian Haslam we learn about Jillian's British father who stayed back in Independent India. The family was so poor that she was only able to keep her siblings alive by begging for left over milk from the Indian tea sellers. A similar scenario is played out in *The Railway Children* by E.Nesbit, where, by reaching out to the stranger in the train the children were able to get much needed money for their mother at home.

In *The Laws of Success* by Napoleon Hill we hear of a young clergyman, Gunsaulus, who preached on the question "What I would do if I had a million dollars?". He went on to say that he would open a school of technology and teach students how to succeed in life by developing the ability to think. The next day one of his Congregants, Philip D Armour, gave one million dollars to the preacher and this was the foundation of Armour Institute of Technology.

In my own life I found that it was imperative to suppress the fear of strangers and to learn to speak in public. In fact, being shy often gave the wrong impression at work – that of not liking the work or not fitting in.

To move from being shy to a person who can speak freely requires enthusiasm, wide reading and practice and in 1999 after reading some self-help books, I joined an organisation called Toastmasters International. This is a communication and leadership organisation and over the next twenty years I was able to rise through the ranks and achieve the Distinguished Toastmasters Award.

During this journey I gave speeches at London Metropolitan University, Harrow Council, Harrow Radio Station, Speakers' Corner, and lead Sunday Services at a Unitarian Church and at a synagogue.

At work I have been responsible for several initiatives, such as the regular monthly staff breakfast and Christmas lunch. I always aim to bring people together regardless of race, age, grade or background.

On occasion by speaking to strangers I have enjoyed great friendship and received very valuable help. At one of my evenings at Toastmasters I forgot my speech and a fellow member called Bob asked me if I would like some help with my public speaking. I put my hand on Bob's shoulders and said "Bob, I don't need help with my public speaking, I need help with my life!" From that action Bob agreed to mentor me once a month, which I found very helpful.

My enthusiasm for talking, listening and bringing people together has enabled me to invest in Zoom Pro and to arrange a family get together between three continents (USA, UK and India) and family members of all ages have enjoyed this regular event and it has led to information exchange, sharing of stories and generally a deepening of family relationships.

Through Zoom I have made new friends at the Ipswich Lodge of the Oddfellows where I have enjoyed games such as "Play Your Cards Right" and enjoyed the narration of an illustrated talk about a cruise to Greenland.

Thinking back, my interest in hearing strangers talk started at the age of 16 when I started (or to be more accurate) revived an organisation at school called Les Philosophes, which invited subject matter experts to speak to the students. Later on in life I have been involved in Harrovian Speakers Club and Harrow Writers' Circle. I have also listened to You Tube (TED Talks) and Mirthy Talks (where I heard the life story of a retired Policeman and talks on Victorian Poisons and Penguins in the Antarctic).

Talking to strangers (as mentioned in the film *Forrest Gump*) "is like a box of chocolate – you never know what you're gonna get".

Unfortunately, not talking to strangers can lead to misunderstandings such as "you only like to talk to people who are like you".

However, talking to strangers (within reason) can lead to wonderfully diverse friendships and can break down barriers.

It was wonderful that when the lockdown came one of the first people who enquired about my welfare was a Pakistani Muslim (a group normally seen as antipathetic towards people from a Hindu / Indian background).

For those in work it might be an idea to become a “diversity champion”. This might include organising team lunches and maybe attending events which include a diverse group of people.

Indra Sikdar, a member of NUF, the Earth Spirit Network and USPS.

BOOK REVIEWS

All books reviewed are available through Amazon or other booksellers.

Talking to Strangers, Malcolm Gladwell, Penguin £9.99

Talking to Strangers, recently issued in paperback, is not a religious book but an example of popular psychology at its best. It made such an impact on members of Plymouth Unitarians that a whole service was provoked by it – see Ann Kader’s contribution in this issue. And now it has inspired the theme of this issue of *News & Views*. As with all good books, the issues it raises go beyond the book’s specific aim, which is to tell us “what we should know about the people we don’t know”. Central to that claim is the social science research which shows that we are better at identifying when people are telling the truth than when they are lying. The reason for that apparent paradox is that people seem to be hard wired to think the best of others – a refreshing attribute in many ways but one that can lead to disastrous results when, for example, a parole board needs to decide whether a prisoner has been rehabilitated and is safe to be released.

A particularly disturbing finding is that those, such as police officers,

who have been trained to identify situations where suspects are concealing the truth, are no more likely to make correct judgments than lay people with no such training. Indeed, artificial intelligence is more likely to get it right. This opens up the prospect of juries being replaced by computers – one that, as a retired lawyer, I find pretty awful. The whole idea of a jury is that a person charged with a serious offence should be tried by their peers. Yet during the pandemic there have been calls for the number of jurors to be reduced perhaps to as few as 7 people, or for the suspension of jury trial altogether.

Although Gladwell is based in the United States he quotes examples from countries outside the US, including the UK. And the opening chapter is particularly relevant at present because it considers the case of Sandra Bland. This was another case of white police officers insisting on a black woman getting out of her car, in this case on the flimsy pretext that she had failed to indicate that she was about to change lanes. Bland was arrested and jailed. Three days later she committed suicide. The incident came in the midst of a series of similar cases leading to the death of black Americans. The public revulsion had led to the establishment of the Black Lives Matter movement.

If I have a criticism of the book it is that it is long on describing the problem of understanding strangers but short on offering possible solutions. Indeed, I would suggest that the problem of failure of understanding goes beyond people whom we do not know (or think we know). People we know at one stage in life can change so that we no longer know them. This was superbly illustrated by the 1960s television drama *Talking to a Stranger*, starring Judy Dench and Maurice Denham (still available on the internet at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0060031/>). The series plots the decline of a once close and loving family under the pressure of life events.

Gladwell rightly points out that abandoning the “default to truth” and routinely disbelieving others would be worse than retaining our inclination to trust. He also sensibly points out that those who are tasked with identifying untruths should do so with “restraint and humility”, being aware that there is no guarantee of doing so correctly. There are clues, such as the difficulty of reading others when they are under the influence of drink (or drugs). And the chances of misreading can be enhanced by poorly devised training based on assumptions and prejudice about categories of people, rather than evidence. Such assumptions can easily become internalised within an organisation, leading to institutional racism, sexism etc. All of us, especially if we are members of relatively privileged social groups, must come to terms with the fact that we have probably inherited some such assumptions from our upbringing. We need to question them if we are to treat everyone with equal concern and respect.

Nick Saunders

Seeking Paradise – A Unitarian Mission for our time
By Stephen Lingwood

The above book, published this year by the Lindsey Press, makes a valuable contribution to the questing nature of Unitarians. It is a brave book which will make the reader examine terms with which contemporary Unitarians are uncomfortable: Paradise, Mission/Missiology, Salvation, Evangelism, Faith, God. Added to this is the challenge to the motion passed at the 2006 GA meetings, of concentrating on growing our congregations, as a priority. The book asks if that is our sole purpose of being Unitarians; to ensure the survival of the Unitarian religious organization? What is it that we give to the wider society beyond the vague individualist message of ‘here you can think for yourself’?

Stephen, previous Minister at Bank Street Chapel Bolton, was an outward looking Minister before he moved to Cardiff, becoming a Pioneering Minister. In Bolton he initiated the Bolton Street Angels. The Chapel was opened late into the night when youngsters spilled out of the clubs and pubs, often requiring help. They would be offered space and what they needed until they were fit to go home. There was no proselytizing, just help where and when it was required. In the book he states the religious position which has informed his life from the outset. He looks to the Classical Unitarian Christian position we have inherited and illustrates how this has always differed radically from mainstream Christianity out of which it grew. God was a personal God, a God of love, not the fearsome God, who promised to those who sinned the fire and brimstone of Hell unless they had repented and had been saved by the blood of Christ, who died on the Cross and had risen to Heaven. Unitarianism looked to how Jesus lived and what he taught through parable and story, and how that way of living still applies as we seek to build a better world.

However, this is a book for all Unitarians at this juncture in our history, whether atheist, agnostic, Unitarian Christian, Earth Spirit or those who see themselves unable to or wish not to be labelled: ie all seekers together.

Stephen states even more clearly what the book is intended to address in the Introduction 'What is the mission of Unitarianism':

This is a work of practical theology, so I am attempting to be thoroughly theological and also thoroughly practical. My attempt here is to build both a language and a practice that will be useful for Unitarians, and indeed other religious liberals, in doing the work of a religious community, (p4).

This would be an excellent book for small groups to read together as at the end of each chapter there are discussion questions, contributed by Jane Blackall, one of the early pioneers of the Engagement Group practice in the UK.

That the Foreword, so positively endorsing the book, is written, by the new Chief Officer of the General Assembly and Free Christian Churches speaks volumes as she found religious words an obstacle and entered a Unitarian chapel for the first time, only because she knew the minister was an atheist.

This book can be purchased from Essex Hall: 020 7240 2384 or Amazon. The price is £10.

Joan Wilkinson

Life's Journey – Creating Unitarian Rites of Passage

By Daniel Costley Published by The Lindsey Press 2020

This is a book that should be essential reading, not only for those who wish to conduct Rites of Passage but also to those who are planning an event to mark one.

Child naming ceremonies; Marriage ceremonies; Funerals; Induction of Ministers or Lay Leaders; Ordination of Ministers; Membership Services; are all covered in detail, showing how the Celebrant works closely with the people involved to create a ceremony personally significant to them. Added to this are extra words for each ceremony, and suitable music. Further resources for both the Celebrant and those celebrating are listed. All is well structured and easy to follow, making it a book to have on one's shelf and read as needed, in preparation for a specific ceremony.

Daniel acknowledges his gratitude to Ministers and other Unitarians for their input.

It is available from Essex Hall and from Amazon at a price of £10

Joan Wilkinson

Phil's Book Notes: August 2020

1. THE HOMELESS MIND: Modernization and Consciousness by Peter L Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner; 1973; 208 pages plus Notes and Bibliography.

Being interested in consciousness, I chose to read this dated book, which turned out to be a work of the sociology of knowledge. New to me, it was an interesting study of the ways technology and bureaucracy influence what populations think; in other words it is the contents of consciousness, not actual consciousness being explored. Very complicated. The Introduction explores approaches to 'modernism', concluding that "Modernity is not inexorable or inevitable...There is no such thing as a 'modern society' plain and simple; there are only societies more or less advanced in a continuum of modernization. Modernization, then, consists of the growth and diffusion of a set of institutions rooted in the transformation of the economy by means of technology.

There is much food for thought, even about Unitarian issues, as the readers follow their exploration of early cultures and the development of the modern world. Then Part III looks at the prospects for post-modernism, which leads me to wish we had a 21st century follow up; but I do not see one -on Amazon, at least.

2. REALITY HUNGER by David Shields;2010; 205 pages, plus appendices.

This is more memoir and literary polemic than philosophy, though it does raise some interesting questions. “Every artistic movement from the beginning of time is an attempt to figure out a way to smuggle more of what the artist thinks is reality into the work of art...My intent is to write an 'ars poetica' for a burgeoning group of interrelated but unconnected artists in a multitude of forms and media... who are breaking larger and larger chunks of 'reality' into their work...At once desperate for authenticity and in love with artifice, I know all the moments are 'moments': staged and theatrical, shaped and thematized”. He favours “a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real” The book is organised in a series of numbered paragraphs of varying lengths. He includes material from many other writers without naming sources as he believes we all incorporate ideas from the past into our own meanings. His publisher has required him to list most of them at the end, but he insists “Reality cannot be copyrighted.”

3. FREE WILL by Sam Harris; 2012; 65 pages plus Notes and Index.

His thesis is that “Free will is an illusion. Our wills are simply not of our own making. Thoughts and intentions emerge from background causes of which we are unaware and over which we exert no control.” In my opinion, he assumes a form of causation which is unjustified; causation is complex. Furthermore, he ignores one of the functions of consciousness, which is to manage what arises from impulses, sensations and imagination.. Our evolving self is itself a part of the emergence of behaviour. If you do not believe in your power to influence your own life, then you take less responsibility and therefore have less influence. We do indeed have many biological and environ-

mental influences on our lives, but as Bonaro Overstreet put it, “I shall use my stubborn ounces for the good”. He writes well and it is interesting to explore his ideas.

4. A UNIVERSE FROM NOTHING: why is there something rather than nothing by Lawrence M Krauss; Afterword by Richard Dawkins; 2012; 191 pages plus Index.

This is a very difficult, but interesting book. As I have not studied physics or astronomy and he is one of the world's leading experts, that is not surprising. Let me quote from the Preface to show what he is exploring: “We may never have enough empirical information to resolve this question unambiguously. But the fact that a universe from nothing is even plausible is certainly significant, at least to me.” One of the key issues, actually, is the definition of 'nothing'. Scientific experiments have challenged our ideas of nothingness. For example, empty space contains energy from which can emerge matter, spontaneously. Even “time and space can themselves spontaneously appear. Perhaps even the laws themselves also arose spontaneously.” All of these processes are natural and the book explores theories and evidence in support of these mind-boggling claims.

His conclusions are: “One person's dream is another person's nightmare. A universe without purpose or guidance may seem, for some, to make life itself meaningless. For others, including me, such a universe is invigorating. It makes the fact of our existence even more amazing, and it motivates us to draw meaning from our own actions and to make the most of our brief existence in the sun, simply because we are here...It could be that there is an infinite set of different combinations of laws and varieties of particles and substances and forces and even distinct universes that may arise in such a multiverse. It may be that only a certain very restricted combination, one that

results in a universe of the type in which we live or one very much like it, can support the evolution of beings who can ask such a question.”

5. 11TH MONTH,11TH DAY,11TH HOUR: Armistice Day 1918, World War 1 and its Violent Climax by Joseph E Persico; 2003;390 plus Epilogue, Acknowledgements, Notes and Bibliography.

I first came across this disturbing book last November, when it was the main source of material for the Newcastle-under-Lyme Unitarian Armistice Day service. Led by a friend who does not usually attend services-indeed it was his first as leader-, the memorial of the unnecessary violence of the last day, reflects the character of the war itself. In his introduction he tells us it was a global war including 20 countries from five continents, over 1,560 days. “It is futile to argue that one conflict is more horrific than another. The imperative of war is to kill, thus all wars are exercises in sanctioned murder...Dead is dead.

But the First World War's bleak distinction is that it took opposing armies to the outermost limits of man's inhumanity to man.”What is worse is that it was unnecessary, as it could have been avoided; and it was very badly managed, as well. He based his brief account of the war and detailed coverage of the final hours on actual Allied and German military records as well as many private communications. This should be required reading in schools around the world; adults also would benefit.

Phil Silk

Relative Silence

It's
the slish of snowflakes on glass,
the swish of a bridal gown.

It's
the whisper of shifting leaves,
the sifting of soft flour.

It's
the raindrop landing on a rose petal,
the sleeping breaths of a baby.

It's
water moving from root to tip,
conquering the Everest of its tree.

It's
the poem before it is spoken,
the song about to be sung.

It's
the truculent teenager,
in absentia,
incommunicado,
sans famille,
toute seule.

Liz Brownhill

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