

# National Unitarian Fellowship

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

# News & Views

Issue 9



Summer 2021



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

Registered Charity No. 1040294

## **And the Desert flowered, by Dennis Evans FRSA ©**

**In the beginning was the Desert.  
Hot, endless, arid.  
Round as an orange,  
reflecting the Sun.  
There were caves in the centre of the Desert,  
latticed, reaching upwards.  
Full of water,  
waiting...  
The Sun who liked his own reflection  
felt it was permanent.  
Knew nothing of the caves,  
could not have comprehended.  
At night,  
Moon showed her cool face.  
Turned a blind eye to cracks in the Desert.  
Smiled, as water seeped through.  
Laughed, as torrents surged forward.  
And in the morning, Earth appeared.  
Sun, perplexed, shone harder  
wanting his own reflection.  
Dormant seeds flourished,  
and the Desert flowered.**



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*Cover Photo courtesy of Mike Harvey*

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## Copyright Notice

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## Editorial

Welcome to the Summer edition of *News & Views*. At the time of writing, we have passed the third stage of the Government's Road Map out of lockdown and the end of social distancing, planned for 21 June, is tantalisingly near. Many scientists are, however, calling for caution in the light of the spread of the so called "Indian" variant of Covid-19. So the themes of this issue – Resolution, Perseverance and Fortitude – remain highly relevant.

Until recently these three qualities would have been described by many as hopelessly out of date. Looking to borrow a copy of *Brown on Resolution*, by C.S.Forester, I found it was unobtainable in my public library and Amazon and other second hand book-sellers could only offer me copies many years old at highly inflated prices. But the pandemic seems to have led to a return to respect for perseverance and the "war time spirit". The esteem shown to the late Sir Tom Moore and his fund raising for the NHS are the obvious example but it is heartening that young people too have undertaken sterling work over prolonged periods. I think of Max Woosey, aged 10, camping put in his garden every night for a year to raise funds for a hospice in memory of a friend, and Ahmed, a blind 9 year old boy teaching other children in the midst of the fighting in Yemen.

So I hope you will find encouragement in the poems and articles in this issue. As always, I want to thank our contributors who have

found the time in their busy lives to write for us. I am always keen to receive items from new contributors – both news and views pieces. Do tell us about events or activities you think NUF members would be interested in. With the increasing use of technology such as Zoom the location is less and less relevant – it could be anywhere in the world! If you are thinking of writing a Views piece note that the theme of the Autumn issue will be “Healing the Nation”. Articles should be with me by 15 August. See the back cover for my contact details.

*Nick Saunders*

## **Letter to the Editor**

Thank you very much for the Spring issue of the newsletter. I enjoyed it all, but I found Monika Strell's article particularly interesting - please pass on my thanks to her.

I wonder if you would consider publishing the author's name at the TOP of the article - it would make it more enjoyable when you read online to know who you are hearing from!!

I was also particularly interested to note that a new NUF website is being developed, and that it will provide a resource for other Unitarian Societies to advertise their activities. I think this would be hugely helpful and would encourage co-operation and networking among members of different societies. I am sure you are aware that many of us belong to several societies and enjoy supporting them all.

I look forward to using the new website.

Best wishes,

Adrienne Wilson

*Editor's note – the name of the author now appears at the top of Views articles.*

## **Back copies of News & Views**

A limited number of copies of the following issues are still available:

Spring 2020  
Autumn 2020  
Winter 2020

If you would like a copy, please contact the Editor. There is no charge but we would appreciate a small donation to cover the cost of p&p.

### **Minister's Page**

I am a fan of The Inquirer, the newspaper of the Unitarian Movement which is produced twice a month. There is always a mix of articles, some newsy, some reflective and some urging social and environmental action. There are times when it makes me wonder what is the main point of being a Unitarian. Are we focussed on exploring and building our faith or are we simply a reflective group who are sad and angry about the world we live in? At the back of my mind is the thought that if I am committed to social action and saving the planet, I might be better off joining Greenpeace or Amnesty, or I might go into politics. We seem to accept that Unitarians do not have the numbers to be seen as an influential group on the national or world stage. Of course, many Unitarians are active in such groups but they are part of them more than campaigning in the name of the Unitarians.

Are we exploring and building our faith? Yes and No! We are not a definable faith any more, even though the Object of our Charity says we uphold the liberal Christian tradition because it assumes at least a worship of God. One version of liberal Christianity is to recognise Jesus as an exemplar of the good person, or an historical rabbi with a profound teaching. But everything read or connected with the Christian tradition has to pass the truth test applied by reason. Another version of our Christianity is still based on the fatherhood of God and the humanity of Jesus. There are inevitably tensions when it comes

to exploring our Unitarian faith, so sometimes it is better not to explore them.

I tend to settle for saying we are a reflective group, or many reflective groups or reflective individuals. I end up feeling I don't want to be defined as this that or the other type of Unitarian. I want to reflect on who I am as a person, discover my strengths and overcome my weaknesses. I want to explore my feelings of connection to the whole thread of existence. And I want to do that in the company of like-minded people. Then hopefully my attitude and my values will make me feel comfortable with myself and uncomfortable in the world as it is.

*Tony McNeile*

## **Prayer**

Let us celebrate the arrival of summer. The trees are green, the crops are growing in the fields, all the livestock are grazing on fresh growing grass. For the natural world summer is a time of fulfilment after the promise of spring. So let us celebrate the earth and the message it gives to our hearts. May we too find fulfilment of the promises we made ourselves as winter gave way to spring. Look back at the past and see what we have survived and what we have achieved. Life is about life growing on life and old life giving way to the new, but leaving its mark. May we give thanks for life, give thanks for summer. Celebrate with joy. Love the world and the ones who need our love.

*Tony McNeile*

## Video Reflection

“How does Felix help you?” said the lady at the bus stop on my way home after a morning in Dartmouth. “Well”, I said, fumbling for words, “he keeps me cheered up. He’s not a working dog though.” I had thought the aim of the trip was to accustom my dog Felix to buses, which he does sometimes lunge at – as he used to lunge at any vehicle larger than the average. He had indeed been anxious and needed lots of cuddles during the thirty-minute bus ride.



But on thinking it over, I think the lady was at least half right. Who was helping whom, not just on the bus ride but more generally? Yes, Felix is a rescue dog, saved from cruelty by the Dogs Trust and entrusted by them to the care of my wife and me. But despite all his issues – with which he will continue to need help for the rest of his life – he gives back in love at least as much as we give him. The great increase in pet ownership during the pandemic shows that many other people feel the same.

And, of course, the same is true of many relationships between people. What may start as an apparently unequal relationship of giver and receiver of care may evolve into a more equal sharing of concern. But some of us would much prefer to be giving (or receiving). However, we need to do both to be fully alive and fully human. To receive may mean coming down from our high horse and admitting openly



that we cannot manage without others' help. To give may be difficult - some of us may be cash rich but time poor, others time rich but cash poor. Sometimes practical help may be needed, at other times the need may be time and attention rather than money. So there is a role for everyone, the trick is to find the one that suits you (and me).

Holy Spirit, may we realise better when it is time to give and when to receive. May we know better our strengths and weaknesses and value them both. May we make the most of the opportunities that come our way, both to give and to receive. And may we appreciate those who help us to spot those opportunities.

May it be so.

*Nick Saunders*

## **Pen portraits – new NUF Committee members**

### **Indra Sikdar**



I feel honoured to have recently been appointed to the Committee of NUF as its Secretary and Treasurer.

I have over twenty years' experience in the Civil Service as an administrator. Also, I have held various positions within local voluntary groups such as Harrovians Speakers Club and

Harrow Writers Circle.

My religious background is Hinduism. My education was in schools which were from a Christian background.

I am interested in many things including current affairs, walking, cycling, history, geography, art, music and religion.

I do enjoy meeting people from different backgrounds, hearing their stories and learning from each other.

I am a member of Rosslyn Hill Chapel and am involved in several Unitarian societies.

### **Monika Strell**



As a relatively new Unitarian living in a very remote part of the UK it has been a real honour to get involved with the work of the National Unitarian Fellowship over the last few months and now support the work of the Committee as a new member. I live with my family in a woodland croft in the North West Highlands of Scotland and have been ordained as an Interfaith

Minister in July 2020. I am currently developing my own 'wild Interfaith' church of the North at

<http://www.allthecoloursofthenorth.co.uk>, which I hope will have a distinctly Unitarian angle too. Hopefully my own story of looking for a Unitarian connection will be of value in growing the NUF further and make it a place that people like to relate to. Having worked in a remote role in social media for the last 15 years I have a special passion for virtual connections. While I appreciate for many there is a real longing for coming together in person I hope my experience in developing new and engaging ways to meet and share by other means will be of real value to the Fellowship.

## **PAYING YOUR SUBSCRIPTION**

This is an important notice for those members who have not yet paid their subscriptions (which were due on 1 January.) As we mentioned in the Spring issue, the NUF is moving its bank account to NatWest but at the time of going to press the transfer of accounts had not yet been completed. If you pay your subscription by standing order, direct debit or by transfer over the internet please contact Tony McNeile, who will confirm the relevant account details.

If you have any queries regarding your subscription, please contact John Wilkinson.

*Tony's and John's contact details are on the back cover.*

## **Report from the 2021 General Assembly Annual Meeting**

Tony McNeile (Minister to the NUF) and Indra Sikdar (NUF Secretary) attended the GA Annual Meeting on April 24. This year because of the pandemic the Annual Meeting was again held via Zoom and consisted only of business sessions. There will be a separate opportunity for members of Unitarian Societies to meet (again via Zoom this year) at the Societies Meetings in June – see the flyer sent out with this issue of News & Views.

Thanks were given to Celia Cartwright for her extended term of two years as President. Celia handed over the badge of office to Anne Mills who was appointed President for 2021-2022. Sue Woolley was appointed Vice President.

The following four motions were passed:

- That consultation be undertaken on a code of ethics, a draft be produced and legal review obtained, with the draft being brought back to the 2022 GA meeting (Findhorn Unitarian Network).

- That the GA divest from companies engaged with fossil fuels. (Cardiff Unitarians)
- That support be given to the GA's youth programme and the Youth Officer, Gavin Howell. (Stockton Unitarians)

To welcome the foundation of the interfaith Red Cross Memorial Peace Appeal in aid of the Global Coronavirus Emergency Appeal and other humanitarian appeals. (London District and Provincial Assembly, Peace Fellowship and 12 full members.)

Further details of the Meeting are set out in The Inquirer 15/05/2021.

## **World Religions Talks Get Underway!**

### **Hinduism**

This series of talks opened on 19 April with a talk on Hinduism given by Ramana Devi of the Shiva Trust. Ramana described the basic tenets of Hinduism, including the belief that despite the many deities worshipped by Hindus all were simply aspects of the one God, Brahman. Hindus believed that their destiny was to seek absorption with Brahman and until they had achieved that they were bound to continue with a cycle of birth and rebirth after death through reincarnation. However, absorption with God could only be achieved through one's actions, not just by faith – a view similar to that of many Unitarians. Indeed Ramana confirmed that members of the Trust had had a number of constructive encounters with Unitarians in the North West of England (the Trust is based at the farm and animal sanctuary Ramana and her family run in the Lancashire hills.)

However, for me the highlight of Ramana's talk was her explanation of how, although brought up as a Roman Catholic, she had converted to Hinduism as a young woman. She had not felt that a male celibate

priest could fully understand the issues of the real world. Roman Catholicism did not offer her, as a woman, opportunities to provide faith leadership and practical help with peoples' needs. She had studied with gurus in India and been received into the Hindu faith. She had then, with her husband, set up the Shiva Trust to act as a vehicle for disseminating understanding of Hinduism and providing practical support for needy people. The Trust had contacts with other Hindu organisations in India, Switzerland, Britain and elsewhere. For more details go to [www.shivatrust.org/](http://www.shivatrust.org/) . She had had time to have four children, three of whom are Hindu. The whole family had lived the Trust, she had no personal life of her own. One was left amazed at Rama-na's dedication – and her obvious enjoyment of a full life devoted to helping meet others' needs.

### **Zoroastrianism**

The second talk was given by Malcolm Deboo, of the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe, on 17 May. Malcolm explained that his faith originated in Iran and Afghanistan in approximately 1500 BCE. The faith was based on the teachings of the prophet Zarathushtra (Zoroaster is the Greek name). Zoroastrianism was one of the first single god religions. The Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazdā created the world to entrap evil, thus the world is a battle ground between the forces of good and evil. It was the role of creation, especially humans, to help Ahura Mazdā, who is not responsible for any evil.

Zoroastrians do not believe in reincarnation. The soul is immortal as it is gifted by God, and therefore lives on after death but is only reunited with the body at the end of time, when all the souls will be reunited with their bodies in their best form and will be cleansed of evil by undergoing the ordeal of passing through [molten], thus bringing about paradise on earth and hell. [as it is in heaven].

Malcolm pointed out that Zoroastrianism had been the state religion of three Iranian empires between 560 BCE and 651 CE, the Achaemenid Empire (560 BCE to 330 BCE) had been the biggest in the ancient world. It had allowed other religions to be practised as long as they did not threaten the Achaemenid Dynasty. It had influenced both Judaism and Christianity – the Magi were Zoroastrian priests. Zoroastrian refugees from Iran had taken the faith to India in the 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century CE. There had been Zoroastrians in the UK since the mid- 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In answer to questions Malcolm described his faith's pattern of private and public worship. Worship is first and foremost living by the mantra 'To always think good thoughts, say good words and do good deeds.'

The next talk in this series, provisionally set to cover Chinese religions, is in the planning stage. Please look out for details on the NUF website or contact Tony McNeil or Indra Sikdar – their contact details are on the back cover.

*Nick Saunders*

## **Dorothy Archer Memorial Prizes**

The National Unitarian Fellowship is delighted to announce the establishment of these prizes in memory of the late Dorothy Archer, member, past President and tireless worker for the NUF over many years. The prizes have been made possible by a generous bequest from Dorothy's estate.

There will be an annual round of awards but the categories of award will change each year. The awards for 2021 will be as follows:

Best address or sermon by a Unitarian ministry student or a student on a GA recognised worship leaders' course (£200);

Best poem or prayer – separate prizes for those aged under 18 and those aged 18 or more (£200 to be allocated between winners);

Best visual image - separate prizes for those aged under 18 and those aged 18 or more (£200 to be allocated between winners).

The theme for all the 2021 competitions will be “Freedom”.

The opening date for the competitions is 1 July 2021 and the closing date 30 September 2021. For further details and an application form please contact:

Indra Sikdar, Secretary, NUF [isikdar@aol.com](mailto:isikdar@aol.com) tel. 07952 569097 stating which prize competition you wish to enter. The names of winners will be announced by Christmas 2021.

## **New NUF Website – Update**

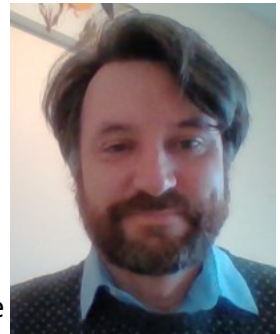
The NUF website, [nufonline.org.uk](http://nufonline.org.uk), has been redesigned. The existing site had been running for at least ten years and was set up and managed by John Wilkinson. John not only managed our website but also set up and managed sites for many Unitarian congregations and societies. John has been wanting to retire from his web master duties and suggested that it would be an opportunity to rebuild and present the NUF in a modern way. The NUF committee chose Limelight Design to take on the task. It is quite a new company. As well as offering a good value package it is a company with an adventurous spirit. John Wilkinson has been more than helpful in managing the transi-

tion to a new account on the server and it has been achieved with minimum loss of material. Please do have a look and let us have your comments. We will be continuing to improve the site. Finally, many thanks to John for all that he has done in making the NUF an online presence in the world.

*Tony McNeile*

## **Introducing... Bob Janis-Dillon**

Hello, everyone! I serve as Congregational Connections Lead at your General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. This is a new role, a part-time position, starting in December 2020.



The purpose of my role is to help our congregations, societies and groups strengthen and inspire each other. I try to find new ways to connect leaders to the resources and support that they need. I help to arrange conversations between people on a variety of topics, from worship to finance to spiritual development.

I freely admit I'm still figuring out what I'm doing. I'm only human, and I'm sure I've made a few mistakes along the way, but nevertheless I think this role is a very good development for our movement. We are not a "top-down" organisation. Congregations are the heart and soul of our movement, as well as the authority of individual conscience. The Congregational Connections Lead acknowledges that Essex Hall does not have all the answers (I doubt anyone ever thought that it did). Rather, it helps to support congregations to learn togeth-



er, and grow together. Already, we're starting to see the fruits of this initiative – lay leaders and ministers are reporting how they value an opportunity to get ideas, wisdom and counsel from many other brilliant Unitarians throughout our countries.

One of the great privileges of this job is that in talking with leaders across the country I get a little window into so many different congregations, societies, districts, and groups. I want to share a few of the things I'm hearing from people. These "trends" may not apply equally to every congregation, and this is by no means a scientific study. That said, a few notes:

- Congregations – and Unitarians in general – have had a hard year. Some have appreciated the unexpected retreat time, but for so many it has been quite brutally difficult, and for just about everyone there has been moments of strain. But congregations have adapted brilliantly. They found ways to care for and check in on each other, whether by phone, online, or dropping by when allowed to do so. Many – though by no means all – experimented with online services for the first time. Many congregational leaders felt like "they weren't doing anything" or weren't doing enough. I really feel that people have done what they can through extraordinarily difficult circumstances. And fellow congregants and friends were such a balm to people struggling in this lockdown. We learned how important it is to be together, in whatever way we can.
- Congregations who did have online services often had people coming who would not have attended in person. This could be geographically isolated individuals, visitors from other areas, members confined to nursing homes, and young families who find Sunday mornings excursions far from easy. A few have swelled in worship

attendance size considerably. Now as we begin to meet together inside of buildings, there is a desire to not lose the very real connection new online attenders have felt to the congregation.

- Sadly, a few congregations have folded. Several more are reporting they are in trouble. The strain on congregations was already felt in the decline of interest in organised religion over the last several decades. This year has been an extra burden on top of that.
- More people are attending online functions that are offered nationwide – for instance the Earth Spirit Networks cycle of the year, Uni-Sing carol sing, and Unitarian Bible Study. It's very likely many of these groups will continue to hold these offerings online. I expect that many Unitarians, whether or not they are members of congregations, will continue to attend these excellent opportunities online. Congregations may continue to be a hub for an individual's spiritual development, but they are not the only one. Many people will continue to cherish *both* the chance to be in a local setting for some events and activities, while able to attend others online from the comfort their home.

I say more about this in my other essay, but a silver lining of this grisly pandemic is that it has caused us to reflect on what really matters in life. Probably in the next couple of years we will continue to think about what it means to be Unitarian and free Christian, as well as how our shared, global society can improve in the wake of Covid. This will be a time of deep reflection. It's also a very emotional time, as we have all dealt with so much – let us be kind with ourselves and each other.

I'm very grateful for the opportunity to be the first Congregational Connection Lead at our Unitarian and Free Christian General Assem-

bly. Feel free to get in touch at [BJanisDillon@unitarian.org.uk](mailto:BJanisDillon@unitarian.org.uk) or by phone on 07946 187265, I'm always happy for a chat. Blessings!  
*Bob Janis-Dillon*

## **Report from Manchester District Association of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.**

These last 12 months have brought with it many unexpected restrictions to the way in which we worshipped. When we first went into lockdown fear and uncertainty faced our congregations, and we did not know what lay ahead.

We were suddenly faced with new technology, and for most of us, Zoom became a part of our daily routine. Not only as a part of our working lives, but it became a way in which our congregations could worship together. For some people, the speed in which the use of technology progressed was initially overwhelming, but many were surprised just how adept they became. For others, they seized the opportunity to offer Sunday worship and create YouTube reflections. From there developed online spiritual gatherings at various times during the day and night, and there was a real sense of community about being able to gather.

Whilst many included technologies to reach their congregations, traditional ways of keeping in touch still took place. Our Ministers and Worship Leaders kept regular contact via phone, email, in person through an open window, and some even posted out their sermons. All efforts were made to include those without an internet connection, to remain a part of the congregation.

As we have started to come out of lockdown, it has been made clear that some people still want the option to worship and gather online, so we are looking at the many ways in which this can happen. I have personally enjoyed watching Sunday worship from congregations within and outside of my District, and a lot of people have enjoyed the variety and flexibility to join in not only their regular Sunday worship, but that of congregations far and wide. Most of our congregations have re-opened their doors, and some of them only closed when the restrictions were imposed, and they have been serving their members every week. They have even gained members from other denominations who sought the solace of in-person worship and guidance. The remaining few are planning to re-open within the next couple of months.

It has been a challenging year, but one that in some ways has divided us in the physical sense, but in others it has united us.

As a District, we are looking to arrange a social gathering in the late summer for us all to come together once again. We have supported each other in sharing our knowledge, sharing our highs and lows and it has been great to see everyone pulling together.

*Natasha Stanley, MDA Administrator and Development Officer*

### **Irish Churches in Lockdown**

At the time of writing, we have been in varying degrees of lockdown for almost one year. This is really the third period of lockdown for churches in Northern Ireland and at the time of writing no services of worship are being held in any churches of any denomination. It's been that way since the second week of January and may change just before Easter. Time will tell.

The rules and restrictions in Northern Ireland have not run in tandem with those implemented in the different parts of the United Kingdom. At the moment you can get married or hold a funeral but the maximum attendance in both cases is 25 and you can have no form of reception afterwards in either case. It's worth noting too that the sole crematorium in Northern Ireland has been in operation throughout the crisis but totally closed to mourners. These kinds of restrictions have a heavy impact in a place that traditionally lays great stress on the communal nature of mourning where large numbers are expected at funerals and most families would hold a wake in their home for their deceased relative. This additional restriction adds considerably to the sense of loss and bereavement people here feel around funerals.

So as with everywhere else the lockdown has placed a heavy burden on a population which has also been denied the opportunity to meet in their places of worship for much of the time. The main response, as elsewhere, is to move as much as possible to online platforms. In the case of my own churches we established our own YouTube channel (Downpatrick, Ballee & Clough NSP Churches) in March 2020 and have continued to upload a service of worship on every Sunday since, plus other items including 'Time for a Story' videos for children. This has proved a great success and, so far, we have had over 21,000 views of our videos. It has been an unexpected bonus of this miserable time of lockdown to be able to reach out to a much wider audience bringing with it a lot of positive interaction and even some new members.

In our online services we try to replicate acts of worship from our churches, our organists record hymns, members record readings at

home and send them in and other members send in other contributions, including one young member who records bagpipe solos for us. My favourite service was the harvest service – as rural congregations this is an incredibly important time of the year and our members sent in videos of themselves working at the harvest together with some film from the 1960s so we had a wonderful mixture of the old and new stretching from a pre-war baler at work to a modern combine harvester. Another popular video concerned communion – still an important occasion in all churches here. In May 2020 it was impossible to hold any services, let alone communion, so I recorded a communion service, probably the first time this has ever been done, and members were able to watch and join in at home, well over 700 people doing so. Creating a service on YouTube gives the editor the chance to include musical and visual elements that often would not work effectively in a church setting.

One of the curious things is that very little use is made of Zoom for worship services by our churches here. A number of churches use YouTube as their prime method of continuing worship but probably more use Facebook. One of the most effective Facebook sites within the churches here is that of Dunmurry which shows how an imaginatively curated Facebook page can be used in terms of its interactivity and interest. The denomination in Ireland has its own Facebook page too which contains links to most of the churches online whether created for Facebook or YouTube.

In terms of church life Zoom is used for meetings by different churches and church bodies and again, as many have found elsewhere, this has sometimes proved a tremendous benefit. Of course, not everyone has adapted to it but for some groups it is a more appropriate

way to meet than in person – late last year I was at one small but important meeting of just six people. It took us just 35 minutes to transact our business and I calculated that we would have travelled a total of 300 miles between us to be there. How much better to do something like that online.

From the start we have asserted that though the building is closed the church is open, and despite the obvious challenges we have, in most cases, been able to continue our witness quite well. It has created new opportunities and even attracted a wider audience, but still we look forward to the time when we can meet together again in our churches.

*David Steers*

## **PEACE MEANS.....**

Peace means not-war

Peace means no violence

Peace means we will have learned not to fight over disagreements

Peace means humanity will have finally grown up

Peace means kindness without limits

Peace means there will be enough plough shares to go round

Peace means equity between all people

Peace means trust and respect

Peace means heroes without guns

Peace means no more corruption

Peace means we will have embraced honesty

Peace means no more poppy petals needed

Peace means no war heroes to be mourned

Peace means no war widows, widowers and orphans

Peace means no more poppy petals needed.

*Celia Cartwright*

## PEACE PRAYER

Oh you to whom we pray  
And to whom we give many names and none,  
May our prayer be heard.  
In our world there is so much conflict,  
So much division,  
So much hatred over so little;  
The colour of skin,  
The name of the divine,  
The manner of dress,  
Whether we are man or woman  
Or neither of both.  
Whether we are rich or poor  
In wealth or spirit.  
Whether we are healthy or sick  
In body of mind.  
Whether we are strong or weak  
Or perceived as such.  
In all these, anger and bitterness set us apart.  
Help us, you, to whom we pray  
Whether we pray inwardly or outwardly,  
In word or deed,  
In hope or despair,  
Together or alone,  
Openly or in secret.  
Help us to see that such divisions are nought but our striving to understand our own humanity.  
May we not grasp blindly to one fragile realisation, fearful of another's wisdom,  
But open our hearts to the ineffability of the Divine,  
A Divine too great to be expressed or described in mere words,  
And accepting our limitations  
Humbly accept that we each hold but a strand of the great whole  
The inexpressible wonder of the Divine  
And weave together our humble understanding  
Into a tapestry of love and peace. Amen



## VIEWS



### PERSEVERANCE

“If at first you don’t succeed try, try again”

As sayings go, wise words we know  
but to ensure the words aren’t hollow,  
we have to do what they tell us to  
and then good results will follow.  
But you know full well, and so do I,  
that’s better said than done.

The endless efforts to get somewhere  
often mean more pain than fun.

Whatever it is we try to achieve  
it so often ends up with loads of grief.  
But still we must try and soldier on  
and just when we feel all hope has gone  
a glimmer of light begins to appear  
as we tackle the latest chore.

Suddenly success is here  
and we’ve finally learned what patience is for.  
Hooray! By seeing something through to the end  
“Perseverance” the enemy has become a friend!

*Bernice Lashbrook*

## Order and method

Does Poirot like sudoku?  
Bien sur, mon cher Hastings!  
I will populate the little squares,  
impose order.  
My little grey cells, they cogitate;  
joust with possibilities.

Resolving the puzzle: *c'est très difficile*;  
it taxes even Poirot's magnificent brain.  
Observe, Hastings: all the possibilities,  
they are so hard to juggle,  
to get into line.

But me, I am highly disciplined.  
I question severely, with method:  
'Are you one, or two, or three .....?'  
I note down suspects,  
eliminate rogues.  
Voila, the truth.

*Liz Brownhill*

## Wishes as Bridge Builders

Eflriede Hablé, the Austrian singer, wrote, "Wishes are the most remarkable bridge builders and the most courageous committers."



I think that what she meant was that if we wish for something passionately enough, we will be willing to do the work required to make that wish come true. It is about being sufficiently committed to a goal to not be cast down by setbacks, but to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down and try again.

I can understand this from my own sobriety journey, which started over seven years ago. I knew I wanted to quit drinking and knew it was going to be really hard. So I started my journey by sitting down and really thinking through all the reasons why I wanted to quit, to be free of the poison (for me and many others) that is alcohol. I knew that moderation (for me and for many others) did not work, that sooner or later, I would slip back into my normal drinking habits, which weren't good for me. Armed with those reasons (or wishes) I was able to remain committed to my goal, even in the difficult early

days and months. Day by day, week by week, month by month, I built my bridge of sobriety. And I have never regretted it.

Sometimes, of course, however much we wish for something, even pray for something, it *\*doesn't\** come true. How many of us have wished for health for our loved ones, only to have to witness them becoming more and more sick, before eventually dying? This can be a real test of faith in a benevolent God - why did He/She let X die? In these circumstances, our wishes and prayers are not enough.

But I have learned that they may help us to endure what has to be endured. I do not believe that God has the power to directly intervene in the world, except through us, the imperfect human beings He/She has imbued with His/Her presence. And a sense of this Presence may help us to endure, give us the courage to bear what must be borne, and to eventually come through to the other side, not heart-whole, perhaps, but in one piece, when our wishes and prayers have not come true, when the event we dreaded has come to pass.

So yes, wishes can be bridge-builders, so long as what we wish for is able to be influenced by our actions.

**Posted by Still I Am One at 09:19 on [https://sue-still-i-am-one.blogspot.com/2021/02/wishes-as-bridge-builders.html?spref=fb&fbclid=IwAR3nBxLgJrYIR-FRBDUWKXsFMtINID\\_Al\\_euEKqbfYzC5JQLrjZGnp-KJil](https://sue-still-i-am-one.blogspot.com/2021/02/wishes-as-bridge-builders.html?spref=fb&fbclid=IwAR3nBxLgJrYIR-FRBDUWKXsFMtINID_Al_euEKqbfYzC5JQLrjZGnp-KJil)**

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## Persistence

### ***Bob Janis-Dillon, Congregational Connections Lead, General Assembly***

I don't know how you made it through this year-plus of lockdowns and pandemic. Me, I did what I could. Perseverance, right? I kept on going. Made it through the day, until the next. While trying to keep to the various guidelines that would help ensure my own and others' survival (wearing a mask, staying at home, and so on), I also tried to attend to my own mental health. I called on old friends; we had long chats. I'm not at all ashamed to say I benefit from regular contact with both a spiritual director and a therapist. I played board games, which are a delight to me, whether played with my kids or on my own. I went for walks on most days. I watched a fair share of telly. It wasn't always easy – and not having caught Covid, that I know of, I had it much easier than others. But it wasn't easy, all the same. Nevertheless, we all learned a thing about perseverance, didn't we?

It is natural, I think, to apply many of the same lessons to our congregations and organisations (including NUF). We have been learning perseverance in our Unitarian and free Christian congregations for decades. Many of our congregations have been in numerical decline over the years, a decline which mirrors trends in organised religion generally. Congregational leaders have faced challenges aplenty just keeping the lights on – and that was before Covid struck. We have learned perseverance well. We have needed to learn it.

What I want to suggest, however, is that perseverance alone, is not enough of a goal to be really useful in the long-term. Congregations need a bigger reason to exist, than their mere survival.

Viktor Frankl lived through times that were – can you imagine – even tougher than 2020. A concentration camp survivor, he wrote the

book *Man's Search for Meaning* to insist upon the importance of purpose to human existence. Sometimes, purpose is hard to find – Frankl believed it was up to us to determine for ourselves the meaning of our lives. But it was essential that we find a meaning, any meaning, in order to survive and thrive. He learned this in the concentration camps, witnessing how victims of the Holocaust succumbed to a loss of purpose soon before they gave in to physical death:

“The prisoner who had lost his faith in the future — his future — was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay. Usually this happened quite suddenly, in the form of a crisis, the symptoms of which were familiar to the experienced camp inmate. . . .”

By contrast, those who survived the Holocaust were somehow able to take an active attitude to life, even in the face of the worst of life's terrors.

What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude towards life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life — daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfil the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.

These tasks, and therefore the meaning of life, differ from man to man, and from moment to moment. Thus it is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way. Questions about the meaning of life can never be answered by sweeping statements. “Life” does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete, just as

life's tasks are also very real and concrete. They form man's destiny, which is different and unique for each individual. No man and no destiny can be compared with any other man or any other destiny. No situation repeats itself, and each situation calls for a different response. Sometimes the situation in which a man finds himself may require him to shape his own fate by action. At other times it is more advantageous for him to make use of an opportunity for contemplation and to realize assets in this way. Sometimes man may be required simply to accept fate, to bear his cross. Every situation is distinguished by its uniqueness, and there is always only one right answer to the problem posed by the situation at hand.

For our congregations and fellowships, I would argue that it is less important whether we grow or decline, survive or die, than that we live meaningfully in the time we have together. What a meaningful life means will vary from congregation to congregation. Just as with individuals, there is no single right answer. But it is vital that congregations do the discernment of reflecting on how each congregation wishes to respond to life's call.

As Frankl says, this discernment does not need to involve too much navel-gazing and philosophical discussions. It can be as simple as asking questions like:

- What does this congregation like to do?
- What are its values? (Truth, beauty, kindness, justice – all of these, I know, but is there one that really stands out at the moment?)
- What are people excited about? Where is the energy in the congregation?
- What in the world is so heart-breaking, you feel you simply have to do something about it, even if you're not sure exactly what you can do?
- What gave this congregation joy and meaning in the last few years? Where do you hope to find joy and meaning in future?

For me personally, the harder days in lockdown were the ones where I just had to get through the day, and had nothing really to look forward to. I could do that for a day or two – even a few weeks, I learned – but it was heavy sledding. The easy days? When I had some project I was working on which I enjoyed, or a book I couldn't wait to read, or had some meaningful errand to do out in the world. Even if the world news was grim, when I felt like my little life was meaningful, it was enough to make me excited about life. Perhaps it is the same for you?

Whether you agree or not with this little essay, I want to close by saying I have been so impressed with how our congregations and organisations were there for our people over the last year-and-a-bit. People have checked in on each other, shared a kind word, worshipped together, learned new things, grieved our considerable losses together, and generally got through this period admirably. We've shown how vital – how meaningful – our movement is, in these times in which we live. Thanks and blessings!

## **Perseverance**

### **Helen Mason, Director of Unitarian College**

Last March, when we first went into lockdown, the Board, Staff Team and Students of Unitarian College had little idea how swiftly and enduringly we would have to adapt to running our college in the time of a pandemic.

Unitarian College, established two years ago, and therefore still really in our infancy as an organisation, runs programmes for all Unitarians to help them learn and develop, with the ultimate aim of 'growing our faith from the inside'.

The flagship of our curriculum is the training of students for Unitarian Ministry. We currently have seven Ministry students learning with us; six for the General Assembly and one for the Non Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. Our Ministry training programme consists of several elements:



- Academic Theology
- Unitarian College residentials
- Two congregational or project placements
- Online learning
- Ministry in the Making (delivered by the Hibbert Trust)

Perhaps the cornerstone of the programme are the residential elements where students and staff join together to cover the 32 Ministerial competences laid down by the General Assembly. There are three such residentials each year and they are both hard work and a complete joy to be part of. We work the students hard, starting with devotions at 0830 in the morning and closing with an epilogue at 9pm at night. The activities include workshops, practice preaching, input from visiting experts, immersion in worship, student led sessions and a range of other exciting things. Most residentials last for at least four days. So, you can imagine, when the 'stay at home' message came through loud and clear we wrestled with how to carry on the work even though we were unable to meet.

I am very pleased to say that we rose to the challenge and the College's activities have continued, uninterrupted, to the point where our first Ministry student has now graduated and taken up a pulpit and we expect five more students to finish this year, as well as some more students to join us.

Working through the medium of Zoom, we were able to make sure that the students didn't miss out on these immersive 'residential' experiences. Now, Zoom is a wonderful communications tool, but it has its shortcomings in relation to high quality teaching and learning. Only allowing one person to speak at once means that the natural hubbub of the learning space, quiet asides, chit chat in breaks, the wonderful collegiality developed over refreshments or in the bar – all these things are diminished.

Having said that, as we grappled with the capacity of the technology – using breakout rooms, sharing videos, music, slide shows and documents, using polling and reactions, there were also a few benefits as

colleagues joined us from the USA and other parts of the UK for our activities.

Once we had mastered using online learning with Ministry students, we then expanded our reach to offering a Worship Studies Foundation Step course online. We were surprised and delighted by the take-up. Currently 16 students are about to complete the first round of courses and we have another course planned and nearly full already for June. It is also our intention to offer an enhanced intermediate step for the Worship Studies course later this year.

We are also pleased to be working with Evesham Unitarians on their Transformers Project, generously funded by the Wood Green Trust, which takes a lot of the denomination's pandemic learning and aims to consolidate this as we move Unitarianism forward into a post-Covid world.

We are also working with Unitarians in the North East India Unitarian Union with a view to delivering some online Ministry training to some of their leaders in the next year or so.

Of course, we have asked the question, could Unitarian education and training move online forever? And our answer is – no, probably not. Although we will almost certainly continue to gather with students online for all sorts of good reasons – geography, inclusiveness, convenience – our overriding view is that the importance of establishing collegiality and mutual support and respect through 'real world' meetups and actual human interaction will be an important part of the 'new normal'.

We remain extremely grateful to the generosity and dedication of our important group of Associates – Districts, clusters, congregations and individuals who continue to give generously to the College so that we can continue to expand and grow.

If you would like to find out more about the work of Unitarian College, and how you can get involved and support us, please visit our website which is [www.unitarian-college.org.uk](http://www.unitarian-college.org.uk).

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Thomas Hardy: the Guarded Life, Ralph Pite.**

Picador, 2006

Why should a Unitarian read Hardy? Indeed when I re-visited Dorset last summer for the first time for many years I wondered whether the county still cherished one of its most famous sons. The statue of Hardy in Dorchester, on the corner of a side street, seemed forlorn and unloved. Members of the reading group to which I belong were mixed in their views of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, some members finding it slow moving and wordy. In particular, some Unitarians may be put off by the common view that Hardy was an atheist. However, many of these preconceptions are questioned by Ralph Pite's balanced, scholarly but readable account of Hardy's life and work.

It is difficult in 2021 to appreciate how radical Hardy's novels were when they were published in the late Victorian period. Pite shows how Hardy constantly pushed the boundaries set by publishers set on selling large numbers of the weekly instalments by which most novels in those days were published. Hardy's own motivation was certainly not entirely altruistic. He was determined to escape the architectural profession his father, a successful builder, had marked out for him. One side of Hardy's character sought constantly to improve his social position. Hardy also had a soft spot for cultured and attractive women and ultimately his roving eye would poison his relationship with his first wife, a relationship which had started so well and was the background to his first successful novel, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, and with his second wife too.

Pite shows how engaging and retaining his readers was a fundamental driver to Hardy's writing. Ultimately this resulted in the enormous success of *Tess*. However, when Hardy sought to move on readers'

taste with the dramatic and still shocking ending to *Jude the Obscure* he hit the buffers and never got over the pain of rejection by critics and ordinary readers alike. He never wrote another novel but focused on short stories and, towards the end of his life, poetry. It is significant that nearly a hundred years after his death Hardy is now more critically acclaimed for *Jude* and for his poems; his earlier novels are no longer the mainstay of school examination syllabuses. I do hope that this may change as the pandemic has brought so many people back into contact with nature. More of us may once again appreciate the power of Hardy's descriptions of the natural world and of nineteenth century rural life, fast disappearing even in Hardy's lifetime.

Hardy was not an atheist, but an agnostic. Moving away from established religion was for Hardy part of his rejection of his parents' plans for him and his aspiration to a more cultured life which would bring him into the centre of Victorian and Edwardian society. He fell out particularly with his mother, for whom the Church of England was so important. However, he became reconciled to his mother late in her life, seeing in her an important element of continuity. Elements of traditional faith, such as the central place of the church in traditional rural life, remained important to him. A Wordsworthian appreciation of the power of nature and its omnipresence is a constant theme in his writing, though as Pite puts it in his conclusion, "Hardy had a strong sense of humanity as anomalous within nature, that consciousness and sensitivity had not been intended by the Creator and set people at odds with the rest of creation". Some readers may find that Hardy's pessimism and at times apparent belief in malevolent fate are too depressing. However, for this reader more optimistic novels such as *The Woodlanders* are a good antidote. I was very grateful to Pite

for unravelling the complexities of an author who both craved the limelight and yet realised he could only be true to his craft by shunning it.

*Nick Saunders*

## James and Sue Elliot – two powerful memoirs

Lockdown has been a challenge for us all. People have adapted in different ways. (I started producing our main meal at mid-day, largely to give some focus to the mornings!) Some people have been very creative by writing and then publishing their memoirs. I



wonder if you have family archives – diaries, photos, letters – that tell a story you think is worth sharing? Or perhaps you have noticed the many courses offered online: “How to write a powerful memoir in 5 simple steps”. I would like to tell you about two people who have done just this; I hope you will find my account inspirational.

James Elliot has written *Troubled Times: an Englishman in Northern Ireland* about his time studying Geography at Queen’s University Belfast from 1970-74, and subsequently working in Belfast City Library. I was personally intrigued to read his story because I arrived in the UK in 1970 from British Columbia. I found the currency and even the language a bit strange (what was an ironmonger?). But the Irish “troubles” were indeed very difficult to understand. James provides some helpful background without trying to analyse the politics. It is a

vivid account (and reminder – did we really drink so often and so much?) of university student days that will resonate with many readers. It is extremely well written, and nicely illustrated with personal photographs. It certainly gave me an appreciation for the continuing appeal to the British psyche of Ireland and all things Irish – how tragic it is that issues we thought had been addressed by the Good Friday Agreement are now again in the news.

Susan Elliot is a gifted poet. She was brought up as an only child in South Wales after the untimely death of her father, nurtured by a large family of aunts and uncles. One particular aunt, Gwyneth Thomas, 1908 - 2001, became a nurse specialising in the treatment of fevers. Before antibiotics there were hospitals devoted to the treatment of, for example diphtheria, and Gwyneth left home aged 18 to start training at Chippenham Fever Hospital in January 1927. “One less mouth to feed, Mrs Thomas,” a thoughtless neighbour remarked, which made her mother cry. She had lost two children to diphtheria many years previously, and didn’t think her daughter would persevere in the profession, despite having wanted to be a nurse since the age of 12.

Gwyneth did persevere, despite homesickness, spartan accommodation, and strict discipline dished out by a succession of stern Matrons. Her memoir, *Nurse: A Life in Service 1927-1969*, transcribed here by Susan, vividly brings to life the ardours of nurse training – the endless cleaning, the challenge of night duty alone with sick and dying patients (often children). She eventually moved to London for formal training as a State Registered Nurse and Midwife at St Mary Abbot’s Hospital, Kensington. Further training as a Fever Nurse followed. Before vaccination, fevers were still prevalent in the 1930s and there was an epidemic of smallpox in 1933.

When the pandemic started you may recall that people spoke about wartime experiences, comparing our sense of isolation and deprivation with what people must have experienced during the blitz. Gwyneth's diary of her wartime experiences in London (August 1939 onwards) makes sobering reading, as the reality of bombs and endless casualties is so much more frightening than most of our lockdown experiences. But Susan makes the valid point that, for frontline NHS staff, there are real hardships resulting from COVID 19 that do bear comparison. She dedicates her book to them, and to the memory of her aunt.

Gwyneth became engaged to a Dutch officer during the war, but they were never to marry. I won't spoil her story by telling you the reason. She continued in her distinguished nursing career, retiring from the South London Hospital for Women and Children (Clapham) in 1969. She continued to provide support and care for family members, including her niece Susan whom she introduced to ballet at the Festival Hall and treated to dining out at a Lyons Corner House. Susan has repaid her well by publishing this enlightening memoir and adding her own research and reflections at a time when the nation's health is a concern to us all.

To order either book contact [jandselliot@waitrose.com](mailto:jandselliot@waitrose.com) or telephone 01904 412406. The cost of £20 includes p&p.

*Adrienne Wilson*

## Phil's Book Notes

Here are a few more books to consider. Please share your responses with me. I promise to reply.

**WHAT DEMENTIA TEACHES US ABOUT LOVE** by Nicci Gerard; Penguin Books, 2020. 255p.

“As well as being a novelist, [she] is a journalist, a campaigner and a humanist celebrant...

“Following her father's terrible final year and his death in November 2014, she and her friend Julia Jones founded John's Campaign, which insists that carers of people with dementia have the same rights as parents of sick children to accompany them when in hospital.” Thus, she writes from personal experience – and communicates very well. Having lived with the gradual decline of her father, she wrote this book to explore the nature of this somewhat mysterious disease in which people lose their sense of self, trying to share a sense of what it means to the patients and their loved ones. “What we wouldn't do to a dog we do to ourselves.”

Despite the suffering and rebellion felt, she also finds hope and kindness - and love.

I found this an honest, powerful, helpful book and I do recommend it - to everyone, not just those directly involved.



**THE NAME OF THE ROSE** by Umberto Eco; Picador, 1987. 502p.

A popular film, it is a very difficult book. Indeed, I struggled with it and wondered if I should mention this one to you. Set in the Middle Ages, it presents a story within a story. As a monk tries to discover what is in a partially lost document and how accurate its contents are. He and his young assistant become involved in murders and competition between religious and political leaders, centred on one Abbey. There are mystery, history, psychology, theology and a range of characters. It is confusing, challenging and very different from life today. Yet the nature of literature and of life - and language -are explored too. Difficult to cover the book in the film, which would at least be dramatic.

**THE WATER HORSE** by Julia Gregson; Orion Paperbacks; 2004;455p.

Named after a Welsh myth, this novel provides a historical mixture of fact and fiction set in the time of the Crimean War in the 1850s. Following the complex and dramatic relationship between Deio and Catherine, the story features an unusual coverage of Florence Nightingale and the most vivid presentation of life in a war zone I have ever read.

**DON'T EXPECT A STANDING OVATION:** and 58 Other Pieces of Helpful Advice by Richard Winter; Austin Macauley Publishers;2020. 122 pages.

Written by the brother of one of our Newcastle-under-Lyme congregation, "this book is a re-working in contemporary terms of the classical Tibetan teachings on meditation practice called 'Seven Points of

Mind Training...My purpose was to create a version of the slogans which in the style, vocabulary and cultural references would feel natural to readers of any 'faith' or none; anyone who is open to some sort of meditation practice as a possibly helpful response to a sense of unease....” As an adult full of unanswered questions, he encountered this approach, found it transforming and wants to share it with others.

Readers will find interesting comments on Buddhism (including one warning us not to believe something just because someone else says so, but to judge for yourself), on life and especially on meditation. He stresses the importance of practice as opposed to reflection and helps us to use the 59 separate but integrated, personalised guidelines' to develop a state of mind that is more 'positive', eg. more relaxed, kinder, less irritable, more 'in control' of our feelings, more energetically involved with people etc...' Paradoxically, we are not to 'strive' for this, but to 'let go'; to focus on exploring and enjoying our concentration on the present.'

This little book provides much more and lays down a real challenge. I can appreciate the stimulation of careful study but have some reservations about the system. I agree that the overall goal is to live well all the time, but find the method somewhat unbalanced: too 'other-directed'; too structured. But people vary. I am glad he has taken the trouble to share it and to have been able to engage with it. I personally particularly enjoyed exploring the 59 steps and related notes; my copy is full of my own responses. Everyone could find something of value in this book, even if not committing to putting the system into their daily routine for a while: the real test.

**THE ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS** by Erich Neumann, Foreward by C.G.Jung; Translated by R.F.C.Hall ; Princeton University Press, 2014. 444p text,14p Bibliography, 31p Index.

I love the title, despite knowing it was an impossible task. But I found the book very difficult, though interesting. The first part is based on a review of mythology, mostly western, which I do not find very attractive. The second part is based on a psychoanalytic approach to human development and behaviour, which I do not fully comprehend or find convincing. I do see the sense in comparing the evolution of the species with the growth of the individual: How do we become self-aware and how do we cope with life? We still have much to learn. Do I recommend this book? Not for most to read, but at least to know it is part of the search.

*Phil Silk*

## **Some thoughts on reading and books**

Many Unitarians are great readers, with some going on to be excellent writers. However, many times I have heard members of the NUF express that they love reading but qualify that with the statement, 'but I only read novels'. What can be wrong with novels I wonder? I have learned a lot from reading many forms of fictional literature and my life would be much poorer without fiction.

Presently I am reading ***Selected Stories*** by Katherine Mansfield, edited by Angela Smith, published by Oxford World Classics in 2002. Katherine Mansfield wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century,

breaking new ground, which influenced the writing of Virginia Woolf amongst others. Her stories are beautifully written and leave the reader with space to use their own imagination. Sadly, she died when young, but not before leaving us a glimpse of illuminating stories which can be read repeatedly. I would highly recommend this book.

***Walking in Wonder***, by one of my favourite authors, John O'Donohue in conversation with John Quinn, and ***The Way of Paradox – Spiritual Life as Taught by Meister Eckhart*** by Cyprian Smith have helped me as I have been watching and reading the different perspectives within the Unitarian movement and the difficulties which can arise.

Both authors are from the Catholic tradition and yet their writing speaks to those of other traditions too. When studying in Germany O'Donohue had written a thesis on Meister Eckhart and reading the two books a couple of times since Christmas I can see why they resonate with me. Both speak of finding a balance in our lives and recognizing that we can only find that when we speak and listen to each other deeply and work within the paradox of life. We are only living half a life if we persist in 'listening only to ourselves'. O'Donohue writes about those who listen only to themselves:

*They have little sense of the otherness that surrounds them. Thus, they can allow themselves all kinds of moral judgements of others. It is lonely sometimes to hear them talk because, in their certainty, you can hear the hollow echo of a life only half-lived.*

John O'Donohue also has a great love of Landscape, especially the Connemara mountains. He writes of the memory and echo within the Earth in a religious way. The peat bogs hold the life of many years and

the forest which has nourished the earth. He speaks of Landscape as 'the firstborn of creation'. Unitarians recognize the need to respect the Earth but for many other Unitarians creation, place and Landscape is integral to their spiritual and religious lives. Landscape speaks to them in a profound way. During the recent restrictions many have spent more time in their gardens. For me, reading O'Donohue has taught me to experience gardening and growing plants from seed, watching the life cycle of plants in a deeply religious and spiritual way. Even though I haven't had the wonder of looking at mountains and Landscape in the usual sense of the word, the importance of place and a feeling of balance in life have grown whilst tending the plants and the garden.

The topics covered in the book, are broad and include a section on ageing and another on dying. Reading these has brought balance to my understanding too. The book also includes a section on Meister Eckhart, which prompted me to explore further.

Where O'Donohue is accessible to all in the prose and poetry of his writing, it is a joy to read over and over again. ***The way of Paradox*** by Cyprian Smith is denser, but if readers are prepared to read and re-read, new insights will illuminate their understanding.

*We might sum up the path of Eckhart by saying that it has two aspects: one of movement and one of repose. On the one hand there is development, growth, process, change and transformation. There is energy, too and dynamism. On the other hand, there is stillness, a sense of eternity, and of conditions which are not subject to change or transformation but remain everlastingly the same.*

This paradox surely reflects the reality of our lives as Unitarians. On one hand there seems so much to do, leaving too short a time for stillness. Eckhart doesn't advocate one or the other way of life but a life which recognizes the two contrasting paths, finding that middle way – balance.

His life as a monk and as a renowned religious teacher, didn't save him from charges of heresy. He died whilst the decision of the Church as to his future was made. He has become a writer which many Unitarians now value.

Unitarians are very willing to share their tips on reading and books which may be helpful, and I would recommend visiting the National Unitarian Fellowship Facebook Page to share with others and ask for direction as to what may be helpful in their own reading journey. It has worked for me.

*Joan Wilkinson*



## Season

**Trees are heavy with leaf;  
insects buzz;  
planes rumble;  
cars growl and creep,  
growl, creep.**

**Temperatures soar;  
bodies roast;  
waves come and go,  
come, go,  
destroying castles.**

*Liz Brownhill*

# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of  
Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

*Linking those who value Freedom, Reason and Tolerance in Religion*

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Charity Reference No 1040294