

# National Unitarian Fellowship

*Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarians*

*And Free Christian Churches*

# News & Views

**Issue 11**



**Winter 2021**



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

Registered Charity No. 1040294

## **Singular Christmas**

**My gift to me? Time -----  
to walk, to look, to pay heed;  
time to be not do.**

**Sun; frosted byways  
no one about; stroll down the  
middle of the road.**

**Postponed luxury -----  
anticipated novel:  
devoured this day.**

## **Grasmere in winter**

**Helm Crag: midnight hill,  
moonlit, bonneted in snow,  
scarved in green firs; growing  
secrets under winter's blanket.**

*Liz Brownhill*

# CELEBRATION?

## CONTENTS

### NEWS

Editorial	Page 4
Tony McNeile - Minister's Page	Page 5
Nick Saunders - Reflection	Page 6
Thoughts from Sweden	Page 9
Members celebrate a Blessing	Page 10

### SOCIETIES

Jean Bradley - Celebrating Christmas	Page 12
Louise Rogers - Uni-Sing celebrate on Zoom	Page 17

### VIEWS

Alan Ruston – Unitarians & Christmas over Time	Page 21
Indra Sikdar - Celebrating Diwali & Christmas	Page 24
Monika Strell – Monika's Eclectic Christmas Journey	Page 27

### Book Review

<i>Upstream</i> by Mary Oliver – Nick Saunders	Page 31
--	---------

<b>Dorothy Archer Memorial Awards</b>	Page 33
---------------------------------------	---------

*Inside the front cover – poems by Liz Brownhill*

## Editorial

Welcome to old and new members, plus friends of the NUF, to this Winter edition of *News & Views* based appropriately on the theme of 'Celebration?', however you may celebrate at this time of the year. For some it may feel hard to be in celebratory mood, through illness, loss or loneliness. For those who find this time of year difficult, our thoughts are with you.

We announce the winners of the **Dorothy Archer Memorial Award on Page33**. A warm congratulations to the winners.

**Payment of Subscriptions** for 2022 are now due. Please see the form enclosed with this posting noting details of the new account given there, the Fellowship having transferred their account to the National Westminster Bank. A new Standing Order or Direct Debit will need to be set up using the new account, for those who renew in this way.

An urgent plea is being made for someone who may consider becoming the NUF's editor or guest editor. Having returned to the role temporarily, I have found that members have been very supportive in providing material, as you can see in this edition. Please get in touch with me or anyone on the NUF Committee if you would like to discuss this further: [joan@yorkshiregirl.org.uk](mailto:joan@yorkshiregirl.org.uk)

I'm sure I speak for all of us in sending our good wishes to our Minister, Tony McNeile and Nick Saunders, who do so much to keep this Fellowship alive and moving forward.

The theme for our Spring edition of *News & Views*, will be '**Green and Growing**'. Submissions to be sent to your editor by 10<sup>th</sup> February.

*Joan Wilkinson – Acting Editor*

## Minister's Page

I had a brush with my own mortality recently. What frustrated me more was that at the time I never felt better. I was playing my golf at every opportunity and generally running around without a care in the world. Then I was told that I needed part of my lung removed which contained a possible cancer. The news came out of the blue. I sat in the midden for a couple of days and bemoaned my fate. But life has to go on even though we were facing the unknown, in as much how I would feel afterwards and how damaged I might be. While I had the thoughts of what was going to happen, Marijke had the added turmoil of being on the emotional journey with me. We needed each other. In a matter of weeks, I was catapulted through the NHS system, scanned at every turn, and picking up dedicated cancer nurses as I went, until finally I arrived at Wythenshawe Hospital in Manchester and the operation was done. The efficiency and speed of the system has been awesome. I am being followed up by the MacMillan nurses and will start a twelve-week rehab course in the gym, when the trainers says I am recovered enough to start. (I am so pleased my mum and dad voted Labour in 1945 to give me all this treatment at no cost to myself.)

This experience has obviously caused some reflection on life. We ask ourselves what is important and what is not. I have started to de-clutter my office. There were boxes of papers that had been there for years, and the truth was they were never going to get looked at again. So, they have gone.

I realise there is no point in sitting in the midden and complaining because it achieves nothing. There is nothing on the Bucket List. We have had a good run for our money. I have seen the world, much of it

anyway and loved what I have seen. The family are grown up and doing better at dealing with their own problems.

One of the questions MacMillan ask is about spiritual feelings. I am fortunate because I do not feel betrayed by any God. I believe that life on this earth is basically chaotic and unpredictable. Spiritual strength comes from believing that there is a power for good in the universe and we have to train our minds and lives to connect with it. With training we feel that power and it carries us through life with a sense of connection to all that is beautiful in this world.

### **Prayer**

*I give thanks when around me I feel the world is beautiful, whether it be the colour of the skies or the trees and the hills sparkling beneath them. I give thanks for the people I know who exude kindness and understanding, who care about people and the world we all have to share. I must try to be more like them. When life brings the unexpected, may I be positive and courageous in facing the challenges and not lose heart. May the way I deal with the world and people be a beacon to support and influence others to move on the path that is love.*

*Tony McNeile*

### **Reflection**

#### **Hot under the collar**

“Alex is never quite sure what to wear when we visit you”, my daughter Hannah said to me when she visited us a little while ago. “He feels more comfortable wearing T shirts, but you always wear a shirt with a collar.”

“That’s to prevent the sun burning my neck” I replied, a little unconvincedly – after all, I could always apply sun cream. So, I did dig out some aged T shirts and made a point of wearing them when she visited recently. And yes, I did feel more relaxed, indeed I made a point of buying a new T shirt when Jane and I went on holiday.

This episode made me think about how we present ourselves to the outside world, and how the clothes we choose to wear is part of this. My extensive collection of short sleeve collared shirts is in part a legacy of my working life – though wearing a short-sleeved shirt to the office ten years ago was regarded as rather radically informal. Of course, with the advent of extensive home working and Zoom meetings during the pandemic this is now old hat – almost anything goes.

But I think the key word here is “almost”. There are still times and places where most people would say that abiding by a particular dress code is important. Weddings, funerals, and court cases are obvious examples. We put our personal preferences on one side to have regard to the feelings of others or to the institution central to the event. Of course, those dress codes themselves can change – for example it is now quite common to ask those attending a funeral to wear bright colours in order to focus on giving thanks for the deceased’s life rather than their death.

In this context I wondered whether Unitarian ministers had ever worn dog collars. As I understand that clerical collars only became standard dress for Roman Catholic and Anglican clergy in the latter part of the nineteenth century, as the result of the Anglo-Catholic revival, this seems unlikely, although ministers from the larger non-conformist denominations did adopt them. One justification offered for such col-

lars is that they make clergy immediately identifiable in an emergency – although by the same token clergy are allowed not to wear them if they may put the wearer at risk of harm. It would seem highly unlikely that a Unitarian minister would wear a dog collar now, but my inquiries are continuing\*. Unitarians are such a diverse lot that there may be a dog collar wearing minister out there. If so, I would love to hear from you!

Meanwhile, I am pleased to have abandoned my collar, at least during the summer months. With global warming intensifying all the time perhaps the end of the clerical collar might be round the corner too!

*Nick Saunders*

\*Unitarian historian Alan Ruston helpfully writes:

“(The dog collar) spread amongst Unitarian ministers in the late 19th century, others wore a form of white stock. In the 1920s it was commonly used amongst Unitarian ministers, particularly on a Sunday. There was a significant minority who never wore them, but there were others who wore them all the time. Walter Long was one of these; some wondered if he even took it off in bed. About 50/60 years ago it was a distinct minority who wore them all the time, but there was a greater number who wore them on a Sunday or like occasion. Others justified their use as the most effective means of getting into hospitals etc. without a problem to visit people. Some men on a Sunday wore a white tie to take a service; I did this sometimes as did others so not just ministers. As views of theology developed and there was less emphasis on the Christian ethic, the use of dog collars tended to disappear and it’s a rarity today; I’ve not seen it on a Unitarian for years, perhaps they may be used on a Sunday in parts of Lancashire etc. Some younger ministers starting out wear them to mark them out, but I sense that that has also declined.”



## Thoughts from Sweden

### Celebration?

Events can be celebrated by different countries and cultures and different families in a region. In some cases the same event can give both joy to some and pain to others. The reasons for celebration, or not, can also differ.

In some cultures, the leap from being a boy or girl into becoming a man or woman is a big festive event, not only for the immediate family but also for the entire village and neighbourhood. In other countries this time of transition from childhood to adulthood passes more or less unnoticed.

On the 1st of July next year, it will be 25 years since Great Britain handed the Crown Colony of Hong Kong back to China. Probably The People's Republic of China will celebrate this in a massive way, perhaps using it to "promote" their ambitions to take-over the democratic Taiwan. But the people of Hong Kong might not be in such a festive mood, after all China has not kept to their part of the deal, "two systems, one country". Hong Kong was supposed to be a self-governing part of China, with their own Parliament, legal systems etc. Now Beijing has taken over everything, and the previous freedom of speech and freedom of the news media in Hong Kong have been curbed.

Wars never have any winners. I am an active member of a theatre organizing group, who recently set up a play about the children sent to Sweden from Finland immediately after WW2. Finland was completely smashed and battered first by Nazi Germany, then by the Soviet Red Army, but the Finns fought so fiercely that they could keep Finland an independent country (after giving 10% of their land area to

Stalin). The play was based on a book, by Anna Takanen, a daughter to one of the so called “War children” and Anna wrote it takes 4 generations to “get the war out of the family”

There are long term effects of wars, that show themselves in different ways. People die decades after the cease-fire, due to wounds and injuries, caused directly or indirectly, by the war. Also, memories linger on through the decades and are passed from generation to generation. These memories of unjustifiable, and/or cruel acts, have caused and are causing social unrest, or new conflicts or wars. So, I think wars should never be celebrated, but of course those who lost their lives, should be remembered. Of course, the history of the wars, which has changed the World map, and countries, societies, communities, even the daily life of individuals, should not be forgotten. However, wars and events during wars should never be glorified.

*Peter Zoné*

### **Celebration of Our civil partnership**

**By Nick Morrice**

It was a fine summer’s day, Thursday, July 1 2021, when Adrienne and I celebrated our 16 years of being together by entering into a civil partnership. As the ceremony was not until after 3:00pm we wanted to savour every moment and make it a long and special day. In the morning we had a leisurely walk by the River Foss, enjoying the warmth of the air, the gentle breeze and the sights and sounds of the riverside. We returned for a



light lunch before dressing up in our “glad rags” for the trip into York. This was not going to be a grand affair. We had kept very quiet about our plans, and in fact it had been rather problematic trying to organise the ceremony with Covid regulations. The Registry Office was firmly closed, and possible dates were months away. The date we were finally offered was fortuitous – not only was 1 July Canada Day, it was also the wedding anniversary of Adrienne’s parents, and of her older sister. A memorable date for a celebration!

We were only having two witnesses and we were going to travel by bus. It was fun travelling together on the top of the local double-decker, and because we were in plenty of time we enjoyed a short ramble through some city gardens on the way to the Registry Office.

The ceremony was pleasantly informal and personal. And instead of exchanging rings we exchanged corsages (red roses), but more importantly we exchanged vows we had said to each other 16 years before when Unitarian minister David Usher had conducted a service of Commitment to Lifetime Companionship for us at our previous home in Godalming, Surrey.



We were allowed two readings. Our first witness Priscilla, a new friend and fellow resident in our community, had been delighted to be part of our “secret” plans. It gave her something to look forward to during lockdown. She chose a poem by Rupert Brooke and recommended the hotel in Bootham for our celebration tea where she had had her wedding breakfast many years before. Our second witness was Myrna Michell, retired Unitarian Minister who had recently returned to York, and whom we had visited when she was living in New Zealand. Myrna read the passage from Ann Morrow Lindbergh’s ‘A

Gift from the Sea’ which we had used at our previous blessing service. No hymns were allowed but we were permitted to play a piece of music while we signed the register. We chose “To a Wild Rose” by Edward MacDowell, a piece that had been played at our previous service. We were grateful to Spotify and to smart phone technology, and to be able to remove our masks for the ceremony!

And so, we were now civil partners! To complete the celebrations, we went out to tea. We walked a few yards down Bootham to the Grange Hotel. And what a tea it was! Sparkling drinks, beautifully cut sandwiches, small cakes, scones with cream and jam, plenty of tea and coffee. We lingered over it for an hour or more in the comfortable lounge armchairs before heading home.

In a year which will probably not be remembered as one to celebrate, this day was a highlight for us and I think for our two close friends. The picture shows us relaxed and happy, and looking at it makes me realise how fortunate I am to have such a loving friend and loyal pal as Adrienne - my civil partner for life!

## **CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS**

***by Rev Jean Bradley, Chair of the Unitarian Christian Association***

As the Chair of the Unitarian Christian Association, Christmas is a special and important time for our calendar and for me personally. Those who do not view the season as a religious time will still be celebrating the festival, not because of the birth of Jesus, but as a break from work, a time to see family and a time to give each other gifts. And that is fine, as it is still a time of loving



and sharing with friends and family.

However, I do celebrate the birth of Jesus. I see it as another year to hope for better, another promise of peace on earth, another chance for us to find wonder in our lives. The nativity story speaks of our own frail humanity: it speaks of our concerns, our needs, our spiritual life, and our ability to feel joy and to celebrate.

At the very beginning of the story, I feel for the character of Mary, when she is told of her pregnancy. She is unmarried, living in a very male dominated society, one that would see her as a fallen woman: she would suffer the consequences as a result. How many people in our world find themselves to be outcasts often through no fault of their own? Christmas can remind us of those on the edge of society.

Mary is protected by Joseph, who marries her. Later they take a long journey to complete a census. The journey is difficult and when they arrive in Bethlehem, as we all know from our childhood stories, there is 'no room at the inn'.

We must ask ourselves to consider the thousands of people who have no shelter: perhaps because they are refugees, or those who become homeless through debt or those who have escaped an abusive situation.

Christmas can remind us of those people in the world who have nowhere to shelter in safety.

Mary and Joseph, are helped by the innkeeper who gives them a stable to sleep in. So, in this basic shelter, their child is born, the child who grows up to be a great prophet whose task it is to teach us to live in peace with God and each other.

This is the part of the story which shows the best of humanity; we see

the compassion of the inn keeper, and we realise that many charities and individuals are now acting as the inn keeper, finding places of shelter for strangers. We see the shepherds who have been told by the angels of this king about to be born, they had to visit the holy child even though they were uneducated people and risked losing their livelihood by leaving their sheep. Despite that concern they realised the importance of the message. Then along came the Wise Men, well-educated and wealthy, who found the child through studying the prophecies in the stars. Gifts were given and love and respect were shown. And within that stable there was peace and now there is peace for us too.

Christmas is an opportunity to be part of that scene: the stable that became a place of equality where everyone celebrated the new life together: a life that has altered the lives of billions or even trillions of people for the better.

It's a great story. Now over two thousand years later we have Father Christmas and elves, Christmas trees, fashionable decorations, huge amounts of foods and drink, television, new technology and lots more. I have to accept that we all live in a secular society, so what are most people actually celebrating now? Not the birth of a saviour, not the gift of Christmas, but perhaps just the chance to have just a few days off to celebrate the joy of life. I like to think that everyone, whether they have a faith or not, needs a time to celebrate, a time to show their family and friends how much they love them, a chance to have a rest from their usual routine.

And as a member of the UCA I feel that Christmas offers us all a chance to make our celebrations even more positive. For a crucial part of Christmas is the giving of gifts, gifts to family and friends but

also to strangers too.

Thinking of the Nativity story I mentioned earlier, there are so many in need, so many people who need support and acceptance in society. Two thousand years have gone by and yet there are still the same number if not more who are hoping for better days and begging for help.

Perhaps we can think to celebrate Christmas even more by giving. It may be by way of calling on someone who lives alone, take small gift or some food, perhaps we can think to make a few extra phone calls to those you seem to have not spoken to for a while, or perhaps give to a local or national charity.

The Unitarian Christian Association believes in giving all the year round: we see it as part of our Free Christian faith in action. Over the years the members of the UCA have given to, and supported, various groups and charitable endeavours:

‘Embrace the Middle East’ (formerly known as ‘Bible Lands’), supporting educational needs in that region.

Christian Aid’s role in specifically working towards creating maternal health units in Sierra Leone.

A Rochia, a Christian environmental charity.

Supporting refugees and asylum seekers at the Conversation Club at Mill Hill Unitarian Chapel, Leeds.

Ullet Road Chapel, Liverpool – ‘Ullet Road Rebels’, a team for asylum seekers in Liverpool.

MaaChild, a British based charity that works in Southern Kenya working to provide sustainable secondary education for Massai children.

All the money that has been donated from our members has given a real cause for celebration, for their giving has created knowledge, healing, a sense of belonging and a greener world.

The words of Proverbs Chapter 3 verse 27 tell us: ' Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act.'

I believe that it is in our power to act, so that we can help others, our brothers, and sisters within the human race. We can all give something, even if it only a smile.

I wish all readers a very happy Christmas and I hope you can celebrate the joy of Christmas: acknowledge the love that we have for each other, celebrate the talents we have, the capacity we have for kindness and our natural sense of fun. What joy we can give to each other! Let us think of the potential we all have to offer peace to each other, the gift of imagination that we can all use to have happy times together. The Christmas story offers us a chance of a better future, a chance to be more loving and helpful, a chance to really appreciate the joy of life and an optimism that we have such a great potential for goodness.

Christmas is a time of celebration: long may it continue to be so!





## Uni-Sing!-Celebrate on Zoom

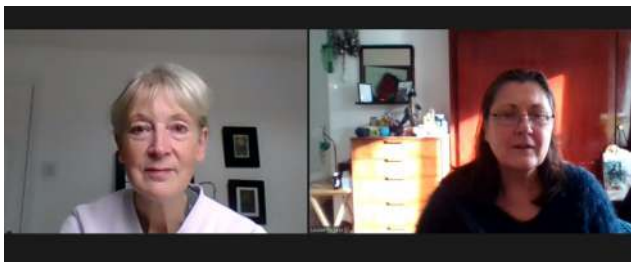
*By Louise Rogers*



Uni-Sing! started as an idea pinched from my London-based choir, the Mixed Up Chorus. On Thursday 4th June 2020, I wrote on the UK Unitarians Facebook Group:

*I have been thinking about having a virtual hymn sing - my choir does this. ... So first, is anyone interested? ... If anyone could offer to lead by playing the piano or a guitar or ... that would be great... Once I know if anyone is interested, I could set up a group just to discuss dates, times, and systems to use. ... Anyway, just a thought.*

Several people responded, one of whom was Myrna Michell who replied, "I can offer to play the piano if you decide to go in that direction". We quickly got together via Zoom the next day and decided to start the following Saturday – our first session was Saturday 13th June 2020.



*Myrna and Louise –  
200 miles away from each other - co-creating Uni-Sing!*

Our first celebration must be for the vision and tenacity of the leaders of the Mixed Up Chorus, who were, and continue to be, committed to keeping going – changing and adapting to circumstances. It is wonderful to be a small part of a group which is positive; committed to social justice as this choir is; with some extraordinary connections; and with the confidence to change to circumstances whatever they may be. Often when I'm asked about my heroes, I think about groups of people rather than individuals. A point I will return to later.

My next celebration is for the Internet. Being able to use Facebook, send emails, create electronic newsletters and use Zoom has been key to connecting, singing and building community. Our first session was a bit of a disaster sound-wise, and for about six months I had trouble with my screen freezing. As I did most of the introducing it created a few stutters in the running of sessions. But we made it through, sorted out the problems and kept the faith that we could do it and do it well.

I know that for some people, especially perhaps older people, there has been reticence to make use of computers, tablets and smart phones but our wonderful Uni-Singers of every age have engaged, learnt and made good use of our virtual world. Let us celebrate openness to learning new things and sticking with things when the technology doesn't work very well.

To add to this our format has changed over time – we've changed days; occasionally times to allow people to attend other events; we've added readings; we've added chat times and changed when that item is; we've used UUA hymn books and other hymns, some written by UK Unitarians (often hot off the press); we've introduced warm-ups, part of which has morphed into a popular tune being played with wild

(or sedate) dancing encouraged; we have had special celebrations and a bit of dressing up at Easter and Christmas; and we've created a team of collaborators who now lead the sessions, working together on themes and content.

We have become a self-organising group of people. Not only do we celebrate this, but we are enormously grateful and appreciative. Everyone has different tastes, and we have been introduced to many new hymns and some wonderful readings.

The one thing that has remained constant is our focus on UK Unitarian and Free Christian hymn books – the Green Book (Hymns for Living) and the Purple Book (Sing Your Faith – I always want to call it Sing Our Faith!). With singing ten hymns a week, we've sung about 600 hymns since starting. Some of course are favourites and get sung many times, and I'm sure we haven't sung them all. I think that everyone would say that they have gained more appreciation of both the beauty and depth of the words and of the music.

So let us celebrate our hymn books – our hymn-writers and composers, and those who have spent a lot of time creating the collections within each book. I would like to especially mention David Dawson, who very sadly died last year. Our first two sessions were dedicated to him, and his inspiring body of work included in these two hymn books. He composed 28 tunes and did arrangements of 50. Let us celebrate his gift to us all.

I would like to celebrate the inclusivity which can accompany our virtual activities. There are at least three full-time carers in Uni-Sing! I for one am grateful that I can still meet other Unitarians to share: in music-making and celebration; in quiet times and reflection; in silliness and dancing; in chatting together during break-out time when

we share little bits about our lives; and in simply being together. As congregations return to in-person services I am very grateful to those people who continue to offer online worship, and spaces for spiritual growth and reflection. This may be simply online or, as so many are now developing, hybrid models where those of us at home can participate in real life services and events.

And now to write about the people I have spent so many happy hours with. I must first mention Myrna who so quickly responded to my request for a musician – she will never know how comforting it is to have someone musical take on the musical director's role. I will also mention Lesley Hartley from Edinburgh who very early on stepped in to help with keyboard playing. I love music but the technicalities are a bit of a mystery to me. So, I would like to celebrate musicianship, in all its guises.

I now return to the point that I made at the beginning about inspiring groups of people. Uni-Singers are an inspiring group of people. People choose hymns, play instruments, find and read words of inspiration, and generally turn up. Their presence is a constant delight. The wonderful thing about Zoom over being in a chapel with pews, is that you get to look each other in the face, rather than seeing the back of people's heads. Seeing people singing hymns with a variety of emotions, even though I cannot hear them, is indeed something to celebrate. We have become a worshipping and worshipful community because that was what we, as a body of people, wanted to become.

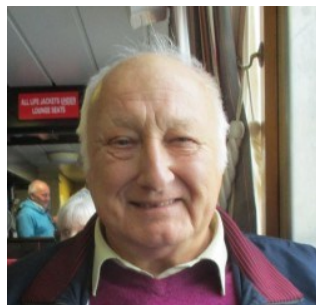
Some groups and congregations do collaborative leadership very well and some don't. It can be especially difficult if you have started something yourself. Loosening hold of the reins and letting something go can be anxiety-provoking. To my mind we are a community of able

and competent enthusiasts, with so much knowledge, so many interests and so much spirit. Why not let go and see where these wonderful people take your baby? I would like to celebrate Unitarians and Free Christians, whether Uni-Singers or not, for everything they bring to share at our communal table.

## **Unitarians and Christmas over time.**

### **Alan Ruston**

I sometimes wonder how Unitarians looked at Christmas in the past. Have we consistently looked at the annual feast and religious festival in the same way? To get an idea of how it has been viewed in the past I want to take what the Inquirer thought about it in former years extracted from the issues which appeared generally on the Saturday before Christmas.



The Inquirer was first published in July 1842, and the appropriate issue in December that year was the 24th December. The weekly broadsheet then presented itself as more of a newspaper that just reported on a few events and opinions specific to the Unitarian community. This meant there was much on stock exchange listings, reports of court cases, and the latest matters being discussed in Parliament. The only reference to the time of the year appeared in the miscellaneous section: 'Last week, a drove of geese amounting to 5000, passed through Cambridge on the way to Epping in readiness for the London market. Where they rested for the night, they were fed with 10 coombs of oats and 20 bushels of potatoes, cut up for the occasion.' I can't think that was all that Christmas meant to the readers then, after all Charles Dickens had only written 'A Christmas Carol' a

few years before, and he was on his way to becoming a Unitarian for a time in the 1840's after a visit to the USA. He surely would not have wanted to join a church with such a restricted view of the transformative impact of Christmas festivities, so it shouldn't be taken as representative.

The Inquirer's religious tone had improved a bit by 1878. It was a sizeable newspaper by then that would take some time to read, but there was still just one main piece on Christmas in the 21 December issue. Its criticism of how it was celebrated has a ring that we'd recognise, but has a moralistic tone that is very Victorian: 'Even now, in this sordid, money-seeking, materialistic age, estranged from natural sensibility and simplicity of life there is a voice crying in the wilderness...Would that the festival might throw off a coarse saturnalia and that without losing one iota of its lawful gaiety, it could add thereto a little refinement and purity.' Morally superior stuff but it concluded with a more timeless aspiration: ' would that all the music and dancing, the feasting and fun were only the natural expression of that peace on earth and goodwill amongst men which the great origin of the festival endeavoured to promote!'

The 21 December 1912 had more content about Christmas than hitherto, seeing the spiritual aspect represented by the season as a reflection of the eternal: 'on Christmas day the veil that lies upon our hearts is done away; the Eternal Life is manifested; the sordid values of the world lose their meaning; and for a few moments, almost timeless in their happiness, we find it possible to live in the presence of God.'

If we go on to 1932, the issue of 24 December, contains a much bleaker view. The First World War, and the widespread economic depres-

sion, led Unitarian thought to the poor and disadvantaged in society at a time that should mean plenty of Christmas fare for all: 'The harsh facts of existence confront us at many a street corner and in every slum. Man, woman and child challenge our goodwill and call for aid... It is an appalling thought we are not to evade, that thousands of families and thousands of desolate men and women in Britain this day need more than our sympathy, they need food and clothing, a share in the bounty our tables provide – the workless, the underpaid and the improvident too, ask in words unspoken, for our charity this Christmastide,' There is a real change here, as in earlier times Unitarians wouldn't have been asked to extend their charitable giving to the improvident.

Let's advance to 23 December 1967, when nearly the whole issue of the Inquirer is about Christmas, this time inviting Unitarian reactions to the cycle of the year. There are six pages under the theme of the Magic of Christmas, with no less than twelve contributors, eight of them Unitarian ministers. The whole emphasis is on celebration, but it echoes a long-repeated theme that Christmas is 'going to pot', and not as it was in the current age. However, it does report that the LDPA Christmas Social held on 19 December at Essex Hall, which I almost certainly attended with its 'games, refreshments, music and an epilogue.' A quote is included by Rev Eric Shirvell Price, a well-known figure to older Unitarians, from Henry Van Dyke, that 'there is something better than observing Christmas, and that is keeping Christmas in one's heart, and not just observing the traditional formalities.'

And what of modern times? The Inquirer for Christmas 2020 was a double issue covering the period 12-26 December. It was all about Christmas and if it had a theme, that was 'Christmas this year is not cancelled', referring the bleakness brought by the Covid pandemic,

then at one of its highs. John Harley asked, 'Can we welcome the spirit of Christmas into our hearts despite the restrictions and Covid rules of these strange times?' The answer was a solid 'yes, we must make it doubly welcome and not let our vision of Christmas time disappear'. , Cliff Reed reminded us that, 'For us, Christmas comes again. Constrained it may be this year but the star still shines in the darkness as it has shone in many a deep darkness before. The divine is still being born within us and among us, so let us join with all the voices of hope – the voices of the angels who heralded the world's hope over Bethlehem.'

Let us hope in 2021 that we can make the same claim, and not be put out of kilter by the problems and issues around us, be they pandemic related or not. Christmas can always come into our hearts; it's for us to make it real in our hearts. Our attitude towards the season may change over time, but at its heart the message must be positive and affirming, whatever the bleakness that a particular year may bring forth. This surely is what Unitarians over time have consistently tried to affirm.

## **Celebrating Diwali and Christmas**

**By Indra Sikdar**

For many Hindus the main festival that they celebrate is called **Diwali**. Also, known as the Festival of Lights. The story of this festival originates from a book called the Ramayan. and features a King called Dasaratha who had two wives Kaushalya (Ram's mother) and Kaikeyi (Bharat's mother).

Because Kaikeyi helped her husband King Dasaratha during a war he granted her two wishes. But before Rama was crowned the new King



of Ayodhya, Kaikeyi asked that King Dasaratha grant her two wishes which were to banish the King's eldest son Ram to the forest for fourteen years and for her son Bharat to become the new King instead of Ram.

As Ram was an honourable man, he felt that he should fulfil his father's wishes (otherwise one could accuse King Dasaratha of not honouring his pledge to fulfil his wife Kaikeyi's two wishes).

Ram's wife also followed her husband into the forest – this seems to have parallels with the Christian marriage vow of maintaining marriage in all circumstances for example “for richer or poorer”.

Ram and his wife Sita had many adventures in the forest (including one where Sita was kidnapped and taken to Lanka by Lord Ravana but Lord Ram and his followers were able to rescue Sita).

After fourteen years Lord Ram and Sita were welcomed back to rule the Kingdom of Ayodhya and their path from the forest to Ayodhya were lit by “Diyas / Deepas” or lamps – from where we get the word “Divali or Deepa Vali”. Bharat (King Dasaratha's younger son) had ruled the Kingdom in Ram's name to the extent of even putting Ram's sandals on the throne to show that he had not formally taken the throne.

The festival commemorates the victory of good over evil and is celebrated with music, sweets, food, plays, religious lectures and gatherings (both at home and at work).

Our family did not celebrate **Christmas**, so it was a great surprise to be gifted my first Christmas present which I was given at the age of five. It was a mug and was presented to me by Aunty Ruki a Ugandan Christian. As you can imagine I opened the present quite quickly not

knowing the custom of keeping presents under a Christmas tree till Christmas day.

As it is celebrated widely the Christmas experience can “grow on you”. The Christmas carols and programmes both on TV and radio plus the displays at the shops makes you feel that perhaps you are missing out if you do not take part.

I think children of non-Christians can exert some pressure on parents particularly when their friends are receiving presents!

Pretty soon we as a family started to take part in Christmas by putting up a Christmas tree, buying and receiving presents, exchanging cards and even going to at least one Christmas carol service and a pantomime to cheer up our spirits! Also, we used to cook Turkey with all the trimmings and ate Christmas pudding with custard!

Our present routine is celebrating Christmas in Finchley with my mother’s school friends one of their children has married an English wife and so the young couple celebrate Christmas with lots of enthusiasm including preparing the Christmas meal, wearing festive jumpers, exchanging presents and even organising family games after the meal.

I normally take on the challenge of organising the office Christmas meal for about 40 people each year. It’s quite a military operation and involves choosing the restaurant with the help of one of the senior managers, then collecting the money from the participants, depositing the money at the restaurant, and arranging the email notifications to participants including a map of how to get to the venue. It’s a lot of work but it is really rewarding to see how people enjoy and appreciate the effort.

A lot of the local clubs and societies also organise Christmas meals such as the local Toastmasters Clubs, and you are almost guaranteed a large turn out and hearty conversation as Toastmasters is a public speaking organisation.

I appreciate Christmas mainly as a time to get together with friends and family. The Christmas story is also quite emotional as it is about a family whose child is born in meagre circumstances. I guess we can all identify with this scenario as we all have to suffer in different ways at various times in our lives.

Incidentally the Christmas story (birth of Christ) and the birth of the Hindu God Krishna have parallels not only in the similarly sounding of the names but also in the fact that both stories feature an evil king who decreed that those babies born in a certain time should be destroyed to prevent the birth of the saviour (and potential rival).

However, today Christmas means to me: eating a hearty meal, enjoying Christmas carols and other Christmas programmes such as films, plays and pantomimes, exchanging presents and simply being and enjoying the company of those nearest and dearest.

### **Monika's Eclectic Christmas Journey**

I am completing this article on the evening of 31st October, Halloween, Samhain, and the day when the clocks have changed and it's suddenly properly dark at 5pm in the North of Scotland. My initial idea was to write about Christmas with an Interfaith angle, and then it became something that was about my own Christmas journey from a Catholic childhood in Austria to the life of an Interfaith Minister in Scotland, but after weeks of going round and round the subject it has

grown into something slightly different. I will be sharing musings about how the weeks ahead, the time leading up to and merging with what I now call the 'festive season', are for me all about the celebration of light.

Let's travel back to the beginnings, 1970s Advent in my native Austria, a predominantly Catholic country, growing up with the tradition of an advent wreath. I'm sure as a child I was told it was an old Catholic tradition but later read it apparently originated in Lutheran Germany where in 1839 a pastor wanted to help the children in his school counting down to Christmas by adding candles to a cartwheel. Or maybe it also has roots in pre-Christian Scandinavia, where it is said that people placed candles on a wheel, offering prayers to their god of light. Whatever the origins, the wreath with four or five candles became a tradition in Germany and Austria and lighting the first candle on the first Sunday in Advent, and then adding another one every week was special, even in my non-practicing Catholic family. It was a time to gather in a circle and be together, even just briefly on a Sunday evening, and then build up the joy of the increasing lights every week. It had to be done mindfully, because you needed to be aware that the first candle(s) had to last three, two, one more weeks; an exercise in being prudent rather than greedy with light. Advent led to Christmas Eve and the unveiling of the Christmas tree with all its lights, a true event indeed, because the tradition was to not put up the tree until that evening. Celebrated shortly after the Winter Solstice for me it was also a celebration of the return of light and longer days.

Fast forward to my time in Norway and Finland in my mid-twenties, two consecutive winters spent at the peak of darkness when the days were distinctly shorter than what I was used to even in Central Europe. The Nordic festive season felt more pagan than Christian to me,

understated rather than garish and boisterous, but full of lights still, with the key highlight being Lucia's Day on 13 December, celebrated everywhere, in honour of St. Lucia, a Christian martyr. It centers around a procession of girls, led by Lucia, with a white robe, a crown of lights on their heads. Lucia, meaning 'light', evokes a strong sense of hope and emergence out of the darkness, and during winter's darkest days, it's a celebration that truly lightened my heart.

Jump ahead, another ten years and more, to my life in Scotland, part of a multi-cultural, multi-faith, international Austrian-Scottish family, and my involvement with a British charity called HOST UK which has a 30 year track record of organising weekend and day visits for international students at British universities. I had found them after meeting a Chinese student during the summer and realising she had nowhere to go for Christmas. Not a celebration that meant a lot to her culturally, but she would have been stranded alone in a hall of residence and so we spent our own Christmas with her, enriched by her interest in what and why we celebrated, and eternally curious about everything we shared. I was delighted to find an organisation that had this very concept of making international students part of their family for a day or more at the very centre of its mission, especially around Christmas. Over the years many late autumn and Christmas visits by international students followed, celebrating with Asian students of different faiths and none, and during our last pre-pandemic Christmas in 2019 with a Muslim student from Indonesia. As a volunteer Regional Organiser for this charity I had more than just our own hosting experience to go by for getting an insight into multi-faith and interfaith Christmases and festive seasons as I matched many students and hosts over the years. The autumn, after students settle into their British life, has always been the busiest season for visits and it happens to coincide with lots of celebrations which have light at its cen-

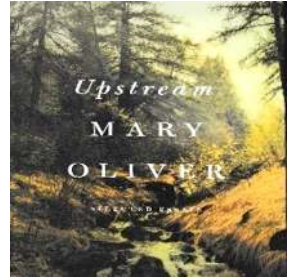
tre, across different cultures and faith paths. I witnessed Christian families being introduced to Diwali, the festival of light, in November, and vice versa students staying with families in communities where Diwali is very important. I saw Jewish hosts making Muslim, Hindu and Atheist students part of their Hanukkah celebrations and I heard the story of an African student lighting a candle and delivering a reading at a Christian church service in the North of Scotland, in a community known for struggling with racism and intolerance. It was being able to witness such joint celebrations, across differences in culture and differences in faith that actually inspired me to become an Interfaith Minister.

And of course, we introduced our students to our somewhat eclectic festive season, which features some traditions from my Christian childhood (we still have an Advent wreath), a love for Christmas carols, and elements of Yule and my wider affinity with nature spirituality, and there are lights, lots of them and everywhere. I have grown to love the British way of putting the tree up early and bringing extra light and sparkle into the house. We have lights on the outside, which brightens our little corner of Scottish wilderness, where the dark of the night arrives early and leaves late. Since the start of the pandemic I have started to have late night candle-lit tea ceremonies during the darker months, which are a time to reflect on darkness and light at this time of the year.

*Rev Monika Strell is an Interfaith Minister based in the NW Highlands of Scotland, and a member and trustee of St Mark's Unitarian Church, Edinburgh and the NUF.*

You can find out more about HOST UK at <https://www.hostuk.org/>

**Upstream – Mary Oliver, Selected Essays,  
Penguin Press New York, 2016**



I offer these comments with some trepidation, knowing how much Mary Oliver’s work, especially her poetry, is admired by many Unitarians. However, it was with delight that I found a pristine copy of the book in a charity shop while having a short break in North Devon. A very unlikely find!

The author introduces the collection by stressing that over her life she has found the most effective way to lose herself is through literature and the observation of the natural world. A key figure has been Walt Whitman, whose work of course embraces both perspectives in a specifically US context. Oliver’s short overviews of Whitman, Emerson, Poe and Wordsworth are masterly. Though I do not find Poe’s conception of the horror of the world at all attractive, when you know the devastating losses he suffered in his short life his view becomes understandable.

Some of the nature pieces are equally memorable. I particularly liked *Sister Turtle*, with its detailed description of the enormous efforts the female snapping turtle will go to lay and bury its eggs securely, safe from predators – though she found it in her heart to collect and cook some eggs for breakfast! Even more impressive is *Swoon*, a minutely observed description of a common spider spinning a web and catching her prey and feeding them to her young. She found the whole adventure “astonishing” – and she would not allow cleaners to sweep away the web when her tenancy of the house ended.

Some of the other pieces are much slighter and seem perhaps included to fill out what is still a slender volume. But if you are a Mary Oliver fan you will want to add this book to your collection, if you can find a copy!

*Nick Saunders*

## **Reflections on the completion of *Life Spirit* Celebration ?**

In October 2020 a small group began a trial of fortnightly meetings on Zoom, using the book *Life Spirit – for groups and individuals exploring deep questions* by David Usher and published in 2015 by The Lindsey Press. I had read this some years before, but it didn't have the impact it had when discussing key questions of our spirituality and religion within a small group. This group became even smaller by the time we completed the course due to illness, bereavement, and difficulties with the format of the course on Zoom. The ones left felt saddened by the loss of each person as they had offered a great deal to the understanding and experience of the whole group.

Those that completed the course had a feeling of great celebration at what we had learned, how our spirituality had deepened and the long-lasting friendships we had made. But this was tinged with a note of sadness that three of the originals were no longer with us.

The group wished to stay together and welcome other Unitarians to explore another publication by The Lindsey Press: *Living with Integrity – Unitarian Values and Beliefs in Practice*. Kate Whyman, editor of the book, was invited to speak to us on Zoom about the book. Other Unitarians were invited. In her talk Kate included helpful suggestions on how it might be used in a group setting.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> October we celebrated the first Zoom *Living with Integrity*, group, welcoming new members. We remain a small group recognizing, that in this case small is indeed beautiful. Life Spirit work will continue as we hopefully grow in understanding, integrity and love in action.

*Joan Wilkinson*



# The Dorothy Archer Memorial Awards

## FREEDOM

We are pleased to announce the winners of this first Dorothy Archer Memorial Awards on the theme of 'Freedom'. The judges had a difficult task deciding on the winners of the poetry/prayer category for the adult section. But all were agreed that Stephen Jackson from Newcastle-upon-Tyne Unitarian Church should receive £100 for the best poem *To an Open Space*. The poem is printed below. As the standard in this section was high it was decided to award a second prize of £50 to Diana Bebbly also from Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Diana's poem will be published in the Spring edition of *News & Views*. Having received only one submission in the under 18 age category there could be no competition. However, the judges felt that quality of the poem submitted by Ebony Mills, aged 14 from Mansfield Old Meeting House was very good and that £50 should be sent to Ebony. Ebony's poem is also printed here.

Congratulations to our winners and I hope that we will see more of their writing in the forthcoming *News & Views*.

## **The Dorothy Archer Memorial Awards**

### **To an Open Space – Poetry/Prayer Award**

Once, as I was lining up to shoot  
the parish church of All Saints, Evesham, Worcestershire,  
a grinning fool strode out to me,  
wrapped round in gold embroidery.  
Then sitting down too close to me,  
in candy voice with threats of hell,  
he asked if I'd stop working for  
the jigsaw company.  
I blurted "No!", as I could see  
twee pictures, full of filigree,  
in ancient, sunset-honey stone.  
And I could also not ignore  
the cracks I'd made between the pieces,  
crazing through the masonry,  
the graveyard and the sky.  
For then, that rarely bothered me,  
as heedlessly from that same seat,  
I sighted telescopically  
the outside of the edifice -  
or ventured in occasionally,





## **Dorothy Archer Memorial Award**

### **Under 18 years— Poetry / Prayer category**

#### **FREEDOM**

She loved him  
so she set him free  
but he came back  
hoping to reunite  
for his freedom  
in this lonely world  
was his solid place  
in the universe  
I want your love  
she said  
not your sorrow

*by Ebony Mills aged - 14 Mansfield Old Meeting House*

# Dorothy Archer Memorial Award

## Visual Image Category

It was a disappointing response to the Visual Image category. Only one submission was received. Therefore, there can be no competition this year. However, the image submitted, and which can be seen on the inside of the back cover, was considered to be of a very high standard and Oliver Robinson, from the Lewisham New Meeting will receive £50 for this entry. Oliver outlines below how the image depicts the theme of 'Freedom' giving the piece the title of:

### ***Natural Rhythms, Freedom and Renewal***

*The image symbolically represents transition and renewal. It also captures the freedom and liberation that is felt as part of transitioning from an old way of being to a new one. The image contains a range of motifs. It is set at night, with the stars and moon shining down on a scene that is both past and future together. The farmer tilling the earth represents renewal and also the freedom found in working with the rhythms of nature. The bird represents the observing eye of Spirit, the deep mystery of which is often experienced through an I-Thou encounter with an animal. The burning city is similar to the symbol of the burning phoenix, which represents demise but also rebirth. It symbolises the impermanence of human civilization and the importance of constant renewal. The message of the painting is – be calm, don't panic. Despite the sense that our current human world is unstable and proverbially combustible, natural freedom is bigger than our attachments and the deep peace of Nature will outlast us all.*



## Natural Rhythms Freedom and Renewal

# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of  
Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

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

## Contacts

**President:** Mr. Howard Wilkins, 46 Brookside,  
Burbage, Hinckley, Leics, LE10 2TL  
Tel: 01455 635 043

**Secretary & Treasurer :** Indra Sikdar, 40 Drummond Drive,  
Stanmore, LONDON HA7 3PD  
Tel: 07952 569097 email: [nuf@nufonline.org.uk](mailto:nuf@nufonline.org.uk)

**News & Views Editor:** Joan Wilkinson,  
(Temporary) 10 Shirley Close,  
Castle Donington, Derby DE74 2XB  
Tel: 01332 814055 email: [joan@yorkshiregirl.org.uk](mailto:joan@yorkshiregirl.org.uk)

**Membership Sec:** Joan & John Wilkinson,  
10 Shirley Close,  
Castle Donington, Derby, DE74 2XB  
Tel: 01332 814055 email: [membership@nufonline.org.uk](mailto:membership@nufonline.org.uk)

**Minister:** Rev. Tony McNeile, 102 Turton Road,  
Bradshaw, Bolton, BL2 3DY  
Tel: 01204 591 570 email: [tony.mcneile@virgin.net](mailto:tony.mcneile@virgin.net)

**Books of Fellowship:** Mrs. Pat Caddick, 10 Park Lane,  
Castle Donington, Derby, DE74 2JF  
email: [lj.caddick@btinternet.com](mailto:lj.caddick@btinternet.com)

**Distributor:** Mr. Derek Harvey, Flat 2, 34 Broomsgrove Road,  
Sheffield, South Yorkshire, S10 2LR