

National Unitarian Fellowship

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

News & Views

Issue 12



Spring 2022



Green & Growing

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

Registered Charity No. 1040294

Into the Light

Green shoots nose
from bare brown earth,
lured from Winter's tundra
by warmth detected,
warmth desired;
raised from the dead lands
by strong but unseen hands.

Green shoots gulp the sunshine.
Like love that's been grounded,
that grows under significant snows,
they seize the day,
bloom and blossom,
stretch to Heaven,
live in the light.

Liz Brownhill

GREEN & GROWING

Contents

NEWS

Liz Brownhill – Poem to welcome Spring	Inside Cover
Editorial	p 4
Indra Sikdar - Secretary's Notes	p 5
Tony McNeile – Minister's Page	p 6
Nick Saunders – Reflection	p 9
Joan Wilkinson – Blended Worship	p 10
Karen Gazley – Loving the Land	p 12
Sue Woolley – Every Little Makes a Difference	p 16

BOOK REVIEWS

Joan Wilkinson – No More Plastic	p 18
The Four Elements: Spring Journal	p 20
Nick Saunders – More Honest to God	p 21

VIEWS

Roslyn Connolly - the Findhorn Unitarian Network	p 23
Tony McNeile - the Unitarian Earth Spirit Network	p 28
Sheila Evans - Plymouth Unitarian Church	p 32
Naomi Keir — Poem 'Forest Prayer'	Inside Back

Editorial

The theme of this edition of *News & Views*, is 'Green and Growing'. Readers may find useful tips on what we can do to work more closely with our environment, and also about the integral nature of this topic within the organization of lives and groups represented.

Editor of News & Views

We are still looking for a new editor as the present situation is only temporary. Please get in touch with me if you would like more information. Full support will be given to someone taking on this role.

Membership Subscription Renewals

A big thank you to all those of you who have responded to the request for renewals in the December issue. For those who may have lost or misplaced the Renewal Form over the busy Christmas period, you will find a replacement form included with your *News & Views* delivery.

Theme for the Summer edition of N&V

Drawing on material which the discussion group are addressing in the book *Living with Integrity – Unitarian Values and Beliefs in Practice*, edited by Kate Whyman, and a recent GA Resolution to develop a code of ethics, proposed by the Findhorn Unitarian Network, the theme for the summer issue of *News & Views* is **Conscience, Ethical Values, and Behaviour**. A small working group are seeking interested members to join them in carrying out background work to framework a template for a code of conduct, as the GA Executive take the Resolution forward.

Please remember that we welcome correspondence on any of the issues raised in the publication.

The closing date for submissions, to the summer issue of *News & Views*, is **9th May 2022**.

Joan Wilkinson

joan@yorkshiregirl.org.uk

SECRETARY'S REPORT

It has been a good time to be Secretary and Treasurer for the National Unitarian Fellowship.

We have had a revamp of the web site to give a contemporary feel.

We have changed banks to NatWest and this has allowed for easy payment to the account and to pay bills electronically to printers and for web site upkeep.

We have appointed a company of bookkeepers to look after our accounts.

One new idea we had was to explore World Religions and to that effect we have had a speaker from the Zoroastrian Faith and Chinese religions, and we are to have a speaker from the Sufi faith.

We have introduced a book discussion group which meets regularly on-line and is currently discussing the book: *Living with Integrity*.

New and Views has come out regularly although the editor had to step down due to health reasons and we have a temporary editor.

We received £150 pounds from the Norman Duncan Trust.

We ran the Dorothy Archer Prize and had numerous entrants for different categories such as visual images and poetry. Prize money

was distributed to the winners.

The Secretary responded to an idea to set up a Unitarian – Hindu Connections and that group has been running monthly meetings, bringing together Unitarians and Hindus.

We have donated some money to Send A Child To Hucklow and to the *Inquirer*.

Call for nominations. There will be three vacant positions on the committee as from the NUF's AGM. We would welcome nominations. Please contact me via nuf@nufonline.org.uk for further information and nomination form. Please ask the person to be nominated if they are willing to stand, before submitting the nomination form.

Indra Sikdar

Ministers Page

'Are you the United Reformed Church?' a family asked when I went to see them about a funeral. I said we were Unitarians, and it was obvious they hadn't a clue what either stood for. I thought I had better explain. I said to them that the Unitarians come out of the Christian tradition but no longer use the Christian creed, or its rituals, or its prayer book. The Unitarian religion is engaging with the high principles of a spiritual life together with service towards our fellow beings and the world.

I felt proud of this definition because it does not mean we have disengaged from the original teachings that came out of the Gospels. We can read them with an open mind and delve into the layers of meaning they contain. In my view we can find more value in the Bible than if its meanings are dictated to us from the archives of an ancient church. Those archives can help in our understanding, but they cannot be the sole authority for our faith.

In addition, the high principles of a spiritual life are found in all religions and in what can be defined as non-religious groups, such as meditation groups or study groups.

It is often said that there are as many definitions of Unitarianism as there are Unitarians.

This only goes to show that the essence of Unitarianism is freedom to explore faith and religion and build up a personal statement of belief. What makes us a church is that this exploration is easier when we meet and discuss with people who have similar views to our own. Friendships develop and so does a support structure. As a group we are more effective in our role of support and service to others and the world.

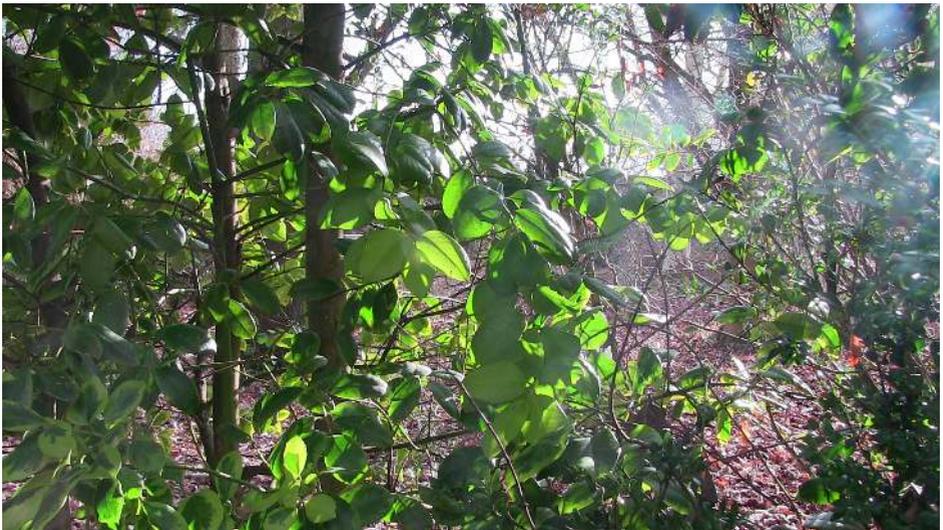
The hub around which the group gathers, becomes a place of worship. We have a structure for worship that includes celebration through music, engaging our thoughts with those high spiritual principles and reflecting on the words of wisdom found in literature.

Tony McNeile

Prayer

As the New Year turns into Spring, may we open our hearts to welcome the changing world around us. Let us seek inspiration from it. Let us accept our minds as the fertile soil in which ideas can germinate and develop. While the world around us might seem set and unchanging, let us remember how the new green shoot can grow forcing its way through the barriers of tarmac and concrete to reach the light and properly grow. So may it be for us. We may not be able to step in and prevent a world war, but we can bring peace to the few who matter in our lives, our family, our friendship circles, our community. If we can be at peace with ourselves, that peace will flourish around us. May the cherry tree of spring inspire us to be as loving and colourful within our own souls.

Amen



A House through Time

Have you been watching David Olusoga's brilliant television series 'A House through Time'? He shows how the history of a house's residents over a period of years can vividly illustrate the social history of the period, including much that never appears in conventional history books.

Considering the changing fortunes of the residents of one house puts a new perspective on the significance of the bricks and mortar in which we seek shelter from the elements. Is a house merely a "machine for living" as the modernist architect Le Corbusier would have it, or is it a "home", so important that the new system of funding social care should be based on the assumption that the "family" home should not have to be sold to pay for it? What is a home anyway? Why is it so important that residents should own it rather than rent it? Why should it be seen in Britain as a major, perhaps in many cases, the major source of wealth, while in other European countries it is accepted that most people will only acquire their homes in later life and renting is common-place and accepted? And why can't there be a wider range of tenures and not just outright ownership? Can the planning and tax systems be used to deter excessive growth of second homes and encourage more genuinely affordable housing for local people?

Meanwhile we have a housing crisis where the rental sector has more or less collapsed in many areas. An increasing number of people are living on the streets or "sofa surfing" now the emergency measures provided during lockdown have been removed.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the nostalgic idea of the "ancestral home" surviving for generations of the same family is just

that, a pipe dream for most people and the prerogative of the very wealthy. Despite the pathos of novels such as E.M. Forster's *Howard's End*, the idea that "An Englishman's home is his castle" is a fantasy. For most families, even if they have struggled to buy their home, there will come a time where it is time to downsize for something more manageable in later life, or to sell to pay for care, or on the death of the surviving parent, to sell to pay out the beneficiaries. Yes of course family members will mourn the loss of their childhood home, but life moves on. The same house will play a similar role for another family with different priorities, as Olusoga so well illustrates. Indeed, many of us will positively prefer to buy a house with history to one straight off the drawing board. We will not be the first to occupy these rooms, nor the last. Hopefully, we will have contributed something which the next owner(s) will continue, but that is always subject to the vagaries of future needs and tastes. Perhaps Le Corbusier was right after all. What point a home if it is not a useful "machine for living"?

Nick Saunders

Blended Communities

One positive step that has come out of the pandemic is the innovative ways in which we can communicate and gain a greater sense of green and growing relationships within the Unitarian community.

The sheer variety of what is now on offer is staggering. In previous editions of 'News & Views' we have reported on just a few: eg: Uni-sing: NUF discussion group: World Religious lectures: Meditations: and the list goes on. We would be very happy to receive other reports and links to share with our members in this publication.

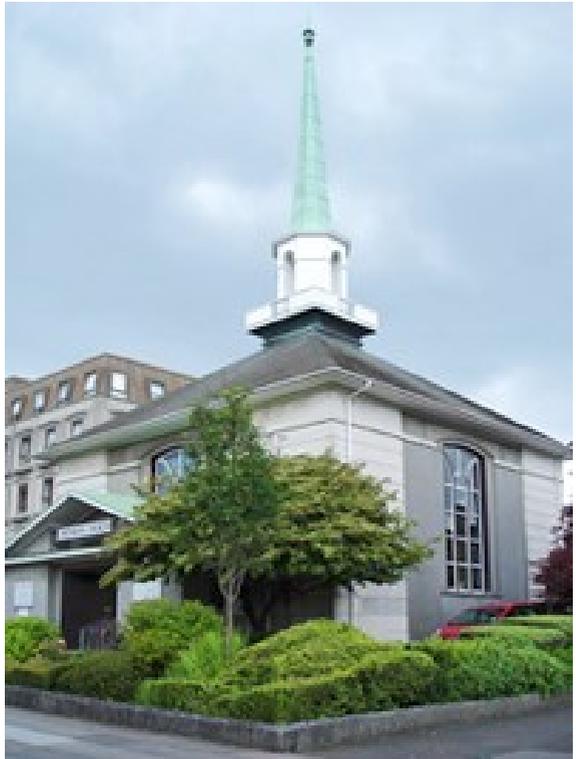
Many congregations have used Zoom for Sunday worship during the pandemic. Some are still using Zoom with plans to continue doing so. In their various ways several are working towards blended worship, with others already having established this form of worship, continually refining their methods of delivery.

Having heard of the work being done by the vibrant Unitarian community at Plymouth, from our previous editor, Nick, when the opportunity came to Zoom in to

their Sunday services, I did just that back in the early stages of the pandemic.

The services were filmed by the dedicated Myron, livestreamed to Facebook, and later made available on youtube and the websites for Plymouth and the NUF. The services were also on Zoom so visitors could feel part of a worshipping congregation.

Rev Kate Whyman and her very able worship leaders' team offer enriching Services, which hold the community together, enabling growth of ideas and the will to learn and live with integrity.



Of course, the development of filming techniques has grown. As the congregation moved back into the chapel those on Zoom could see the worshipping space and those in it. Zoom members can now take part in the service, reading occasionally, and having candles of joy and concern lit on their behalf, by the worship leader.

Blending doesn't stop at that point. Other congregational gatherings are offered on Zoom during the week: participatory congregational gatherings on a theme and heart and soul sessions.

It is also appreciated when another invited congregation joins those of us on Zoom, swelling our ranks, and providing opportunities to meet other Unitarians.

October 24th of 2021 was a very special day for those of us on Zoom who had begun to feel part of the Plymouth congregation. We were accepted into full church membership in a truly blended Sunday service. Those of us who could join the congregation in the building did so and some of us continued to be fully blended on Zoom.

I feel fortunate to have Zoomed into the Plymouth Unitarian community (www.ukunitarians.org.uk/plymouth). My life has been enriched beyond measure. If you wish to pop in to see for yourself, do go to the 'Services' page and simply register to get the Zoom details. Alternatively, you could sample other Unitarian Chapels before deciding on which one may suit you best.

Joan Wilkinson

A horizon is something towards which we move, but it's also something that moves along with us.

The Four Elements by John O'Donohue

Loving the Land

During this era of ecological consciousness raising, re-greening, re-wilding, and re-connecting with nature, largely in response to the threat of an ecological crisis which will damage human health and well-being, what I hope for most of all is a growth, not just in plant and other species populations, but in human acts of love.

The growing movements of spiritual ecology and reverential ecology recognise the giving quality of nature and that nature, even if not directly useful to humans, is in itself divine. When love, and a reverence for life becomes the basis of our environmental thinking, then we avoid the tendency towards a human-centred ecology and the separation that this brings – a separation that stunts our ability to humbly accept what we have yet to learn and thereby become open to being taught by the natural world.

Acts of love, when it comes to the natural world, are still sometimes considered strange. A friend of mine going through a lengthy local council appeal process in support of a Tree Protection Order to prevent the felling of a 100-year-old oak is laughingly branded ‘Joan of Bark’ by people in her local pub. In my own case, I often get awkward and embarrassed looks when I speak to my neighbours with a passion about the wildlife living in a field behind my house as if I’m someone who talks to the fairies.

Out the back of my house is a strip of land designated as communal for all the residents of the estate which, when I first moved in, was an unwelcoming field long gone to weeds. Given that no one used it, a neighbour’s daughter grazed two of her horses on it through one winter. By the end of that winter not only was the grass short enough for residents to venture in, but the horses had worn down a path which

perfectly followed the contours of the slope of the field from the top to the bottom.

This proved something of a turning point for this previously unloved



piece of land. The following spring a resident on a permaculture course used the land for her fieldwork and a few others, including myself, helped her lay beds of fruit and vegetables, introduce a water source, and create compost heaps. We talked to curious residents about the permaculture principles we had adopted including the designation of 'wild zones' suitable for habitat. By talking to others, we hoped to encourage them to join us but also, with slight apprehension, were explaining what we feared would be deemed as 'untidiness'. The trepidation was warranted in that some of the residents, who much preferred well-ordered and manicured surrounds,

took to their trimmers and trimmed the sections of the field nearest to their houses.

The following year I undertook a scything course and started to engage with residents about using scything as a method of keeping the land tidy in a manner less disruptive to wildlife. There wasn't much interest but facing no resistance I scythed through the summer and autumn months.



As I did so, I found I could see individual spiders and beetles moving through the grass and would pause in my swing to allow them to run out of range as I went along. My tutor had said to me that in the absence of the noise of machinery she could hear where mice had made their nests in meadows and work around them. What grew in me during those months was a loving connection for all the living beings in the field, and I hadn't realised there were so many - voles, field mice, bats, birds, insects and toads.

Just as I was ready to stop scything and let the field rest through the winter, it transpired that the Residents Association had arranged maintenance of the field by a contractor. Although I tried to stop this, it was to no avail and was left with the shock of watching people with no connection to the land, much less love for its inhabitants, convert the entire field into the model of a municipal park using ride-on mow-

ers and strimmers. Many of the insects and small mammals that I had loved would have been injured, killed by blades, or left without habitat.

My campaign to protect this strip of land continues, but what has surprised me most of all is the extent to which my level of intimacy with it grew. Having worked as an Environmental Scientist I thought I was already a certified 'greenie' but I now question whether any environmental movement holds all the answers, and rather it is a growth in our capacity to love that will heal us and the natural world.

Karen Gazley Plymouth Unitarians

Every Little Makes A Difference

The 17th century French polymath, Blaise Pascal, once wrote, "The whole sea changes when a stone is thrown into it."

The mind may boggle at that thought - how could something as enormous as the sea, which covers more than 70% of the blue-green planet we live on, be affected by a single stone? And that may be true. But that is a single stone. The problem is, an awful lot of us are pouring and throwing far more damaging things than a single stone into our world's seas. I'm sure many of us will have seen or read distressing news of beaches strewn with plastic, animals tortured by plastic they have become entangled with, birds with their feathers caked with oil, whole coral reefs dying, the entire marine ecosystem being damaged by our carelessness, or worse, willful vandalism.

So, we have a duty of care towards our oceans, not to add a single thing to them, that could harm them, and to try to clean up the immense damage that has already been done.

But back in the 17th century, our seas were still relatively unpolluted. I think the point Pascal was trying to make is that each one of us can make a difference, through our smallest actions. Each time we do something kind or good, or helpful, the ripples spread out into the wider community. Conversely, each time, we do something unkind, bad, or malicious, the same thing applies.

When I was a teenager, I came across the following quote:

"There is a large grey rock:
One thousand miles long,
One thousand miles wide,
One thousand miles high.
Once every thousand years,
A bird comes and sharpens its beak on the rock.
And when the rock has crumbled away,
Only one moment of eternity
will have passed."

Which puts our little lives into a very large, very long perspective. But my point is, even a little bird, coming along once every thousand years, can make an enormous rock crumble into nothing. We live in the world and our every action has an impact on the world around us and on other living beings.

May we strive to have a positive impact on our world - knowing that every little makes a difference.

Rev Sue Woolley

BOOK REVIEWS

***No More Plastic – What you can do to make a difference* by Martin Dorey, Ebury Press 2018 ISBN 978-1-78503-987-4**

This book was kindly and unexpectedly given to me by a good friend. On reading this 'guide' book, on ways to cut down on plastics, I was grateful for many useful tips which can make a real difference.



In 2009 Martin Dorey founded the Beach Clean Network and the #2minutebeachclean hashtag in 2013. There was an excellent response to this with the movement being adopted by many other countries. This has developed beyond the beaches with a #2minutesolution for everyone.

The book is informative, backed by evidence of the results, lists plastic pollutants, and goes on to list the worst of those pollutants. We are presented with short sections showing how each of us can easily and without too much time and effort, adapt our lives to using less plastic and recycling what we can. There are important and helpful links ending with checklist to monitor our progress.

This book is easy to read, clear and helpful with a percentage of each sale going to The Beach Clean Network. I can't recommend it highly enough.

The Four Elements – Reflections on Nature, John O’Donohue,
Transworld Ireland 2012 ISBN 978-1-848-27102-9

Few Unitarians can be unfamiliar with the writings of John O’Donohue (Theologian, Philosopher, Poet, Mystic 1956-2008). Some of us will return to both his poetry and prose, many, many times. Several of the groups and congregations I know, turn to him for quotations and ideas as well as for the sheer the beauty of his writing.

This edition of the book was received as a Christmas gift. Hints had been dropped, yet that hasn’t detracted from my appreciation of it. Much of the material in the book had been published years earlier. This edition of 2012 including, a lengthy Foreword by a surviving brother, Pat O’Donohue, who includes John’s poems on the themes of the four elements: Air – The Breath of God: Water – The Tears of the Earth: Fire – At Home at the Hearth of Spirit: Stone – As the Tabernacle of Memory. The Foreword also gives insights into John O’Donohue’s life and understanding, which only someone very close to him could know.

John O’Donohue writes of both inner and outer landscape. We get a sense of place, in which he had his roots; Connemara and County Clare in the west of Ireland. But there is a universality in his writing, that speaks to the soul. Pat writes:

Our days of childhood here in this valley seemed long. There weren’t any of the modern technological distractions to kidnap us from our days. Nights would bring neighbours to our hearth where talk would fill the air as stories told their news and allowed memories to dance...

...Landscape was so alive for John and the wilder and more untamed it was, the more he rejoiced in it.

John returns to landscape again and again, it is something to which we should listen. Landscape can 'bring you deeper into the mystery of why and how you are here. He is mediator between the reader and the four elements within which we live.

The four elements, air, water, fire and stone, are essential for growth and sustenance of both inner and outer landscapes.

*Air, source of breath
That enables flowers to flourish
And calls the dark-rooted trees
To ascend into blossom...*

*...In the name of the air,
The breeze
And the wind,
May our souls
Stay in rhythm
With eternal
Breath.*

***Spring Journal – after Louis MacNeice, Jonathan Gibbs, CB editions
2020 ISBN 978-1-909585-37-9***

Louise MacNeice wrote *Autumn Journal** between the August and December of 1938, charting the author's emotional and intellectual experience during those chaotic months between the slow and messy ending of the Spanish Civil War and the rumblings and nervousness of a Second World War.

Jonathan Gibbs followed the style of Louis MacNeice and echoes of the early poem occur throughout *Spring Journal*, the first Canto written from 19th March to early April 2020, and the final Canto 24,

written between 22nd-28th August 2020, cover the months of the first pandemic restrictions.

We are given insights into the author's emotional turmoil as well as a commentary on the everyday occurrences we saw reported on the media. This is the best sustained writing about the pandemic restrictions, which I have read. It was originally written as regular blog items of just a few lines each time and eventually brought together in this very readable book of poetry.

Autumn Journal Louis MacNeice, Faber and Faber 1939 (2012) ISBN 978-0-571-23438-7

Joan Wilkinson

More Honest to God, Grenville C Gilbert, GCG Books 2019 ISBN 978-1-5262-0797-5

I came across this book by accident when browsing in the window of the bookshop in Ottery St Mary, a small East Devon town. Having been much influenced in my teenage years by Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God*, I was struck that a longstanding member and churchwarden of the parish church of a small country town should want to re-visit – and largely adopt – the thinking of a radical theologian active in the nineteen sixties. I was eager to buy the book but being privately published I was unable to buy it from Amazon. Fortunately, Devon libraries hold a copy.

The book's format is unusual. After the Preface, the book consists of 55 poems written between 1978 and 2018. The poems are followed in each case by a short discussion of how they came to be written and how they reflect his thinking. The poems vary considerably, not all are

overtly religious in tone, but are all based on the theme that the “God up there” is dead (if he ever existed), science having made the concept of an objective supreme being and prime mover of existence superfluous. Instead, Gilbert sees love as being, in Robinson’s words, the ground of our being, and religion the flow of love in action. The book ends with a brief concluding section, with some striking phrases, for example: “Life itself is about uncertainty; if everything was certain and predictable it would be boring. There has got to be room for love to work...The more we give, the more we live. Christians are for giveness.”

You might ask where this leaves Christ. Gilbert rejects the idea of original sin, and the need for vicarious atonement for the sins of the world. For Gilbert, religion is not about creeds or beliefs but about actions. Indeed, he prays in aid quantum mechanics and the idea that there is no such thing as matter but only relationships between what we think of as objective “things”. I do not have enough scientific knowledge to say whether this analogy is a valid one. For Gilbert, Jesus Christ is the supreme example of love in action. Here I part company with him as he does not consider to what extent the founders of the other great world religions might be considered as exemplars.

There is much in the book that will resonate with many Unitarians. The bibliography and list of further reading are valuable. It is a pity that Gilbert could not find a commercial publisher, the copy I borrowed had some of the final pages printed out of order.

I finished the book feeling pleased to see a committed Anglican setting out views that would be commonly found in a Unitarian congregation. Would it be right to try to persuade Gilbert to join us Unitarians? Not, I think, at the price of giving up his Anglican commit-

ments. There must be many other Anglicans – and perhaps members of other Christian denominations – who have similar views but find it inconvenient to admit to them. The theological current since the 1960s and 70s has been flowing strongly towards more traditional views of Christian faith, despite, or perhaps because, of the strident calls of the atheists such as Richard Dawkins. It would be good to hear a wider range of views from lay people such as Gilbert.

Nick Saunders

Green and Growing – Findhorn Unitarian Network

The Findhorn Unitarian Network with its appropriate acronym *FUN* (if



it isn't fun, it isn't worth doing is an important maxim) certainly reverberates with both aspects of 'Green and Growing'; their nature centred and 'green' spirituality has attracted a growth in interest and engagement in the last 18 months or so, aided significantly by social media platforms.

What or where is Findhorn anyway and moreover what has it got to do with us as Unitarians? Findhorn is a small Scottish village on the beautiful Moray Coast where the Findhorn Foundation, a spiritual ecovillage community, is located in a former caravan park. Many people associated with the Foundation, but not actually members live in nearby Forres, a short rail journey from Inverness. The Foundation has charitable status and is a centre for global transformative learning having welcomed many thousands of people over the last 60 years including, of course, a number of Unitarians. The Unitarian connection was fostered by the Reverend Dr. Ralph Catts who had drawn spiritual awareness from the foundation over many years by both living within and by frequent visits to the community. Ralph's return to the community in 2014 whilst awaiting appointment to a Unitarian pulpit on completion of ministerial training coincided with the publication of the GA (General Assembly) Executive document '*Next Steps*'. This document highlighted the importance of Unitarian connections with those organisations sharing a similar ethos and values to Unitarians. Ralph proposed a Unitarian Experience Week, the primary tool for introducing people to Findhorn's ethos and way of life. In January 2017 Ralph was joined by fellow Unitarians Mathew Smith, and Jim Corrigan; in January 2018 Val Chamberlain facilitated a second Unitarian Experience Week along with Louise Reeve and Maria Curtis and the rest is history as they say. The relationship of Findhorn with Unitarians and exposure to our values inspired the formation of a Forres Unitarian Fellowship which Lesley McKeown attended. Sadly, the pandemic put an end to its meetings, but there is potential for it to rise, phoenix-like from the ashes.

FUN now has 50 members supported by a small committee; membership has been drawn from those who have direct experience of im-

mersion in the Findhorn community ie attendance at Experience Weeks and those who have engaged with FUN-sponsored events. These events include the monthly meditation sessions, participation in the Transformation Game and the Unitarian Small Societies' Days. FUN events are underpinned by the three principles of the Findhorn Foundation, **Inner listening, Co-creation with the Intelligence of Nature and Work as Love in Action** offering inspiration for further spiritual development within our respective chapels and networks. The FUN meditation sessions on zoom have been held monthly on Tuesday and Saturday mornings throughout 2021 under various leaders, attracting around 20 people per session. Although sessions are free, donations will be used to offer financial support enabling UK Unitarians to attend a future Findhorn Experience Week. Here, Unitarians can attune to nature in a beautiful environment where spiritual renewal and connection is enabled. Findhorn offers the option of working in the gardens which produce 70% of the food eaten there in the growing season; there may even be an opportunity to cultivate and co-create giant cabbages (a prime example of green and growing) in the same way as Peter Caddy its founder had done – (photograph sourced <http://sanda-halcyondays.blogspot.com/2014/07/what-happened-at-findhorn.html>)



Here Work as Love in Action can be witnessed as Findhorn leads the way in sustainable development, playing a role as a research and development centre for carbon-constrained lifestyles. Incidentally the Trees for Life campaign was initiated in Findhorn, an ambitious programme to restore the Caledonian Forest by 2058. A short BBC film describes the experience of a young woman growing up in Findhorn.

www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m00118sc/growing-up-green

The climate crisis has perhaps galvanised us in a practical sense in the context of being more aware of the impact of our lifestyles and behaviours upon the environment and our 'green' awareness has perhaps extended increasingly into our spiritual being, indeed many Unitarians articulate their perception of a divine presence exemplified within nature. The notion of nature as central to our spirituality and personal philosophy however is not a new phenomenon and the very survival of our ancestors was dependent upon their understanding, respect, and veneration of nature's cyclical changes. There is a plethora of writings which focus on the significance of nature many of whom are Scottish writers or who have a focus on Scotland which arguably help guide us in our reflection in a world which extends beyond us as humans. Nan Shepard who lived at not a great distance from Findhorn reflected upon her experience and description of the Cairngorm mountains within a spiritual context in *'The Living Mountain'* (written during WW2 and published posthumously in 1977). Significantly Alastair McIntosh a Quaker, ecologist, and environmental activist whose contemplative works include *'Soil and Soul; People versus Corporate Power'* (2004) and more recently *'Poacher's Pilgrimage'* (2016) describes a Celtic spirituality to which nature and community are fundamental, two central elements of the Findhorn Foundation. It will perhaps be of no great surprise that Alastair McIntosh is a

Findhorn Fellow and will be a keynote speaker and facilitator at this year's FUSE (Festival of Unitarians in the South-East) event in February. Our recent NUF reading group focussing on '*Living with Integrity; Unitarian Values and Beliefs in Practice*' edited by Kate Whyman dedicates two whole chapters to nature and environmental issues with the theme evident in most of the remaining ten chapters. The chapter entitled 'Championing the Environment and greening the spirit' offers Alex Brianson's reflection on how his Unitarian principles support his environmental and green convictions.

Some of you reading this will have visited the Findhorn community and some may plan to, and FUN are in the process of arranging Unitarian participation in a Findhorn Experience Week (date to be agreed with those interested in participating) and an Erraid retreat in September; updates will be available in 'Uni-news' and the FUN Facebook page. The motion proposed to the General Assembly by FUN in respect of a Code of Conduct was carried and it is hoped Unitarians will join the conversation and work together with FUN and fellow Unitarians to outline recommendations to develop a framework which can work for us all. Those of you who have personal experience of Findhorn will be in a privileged position to participate. Not having visited Findhorn, my personal experience is limited but Findhorn I believe has visited me with its spirit of love and compassion exemplified by the FUN committee and the wider membership, by participation in the Transformation Game and more recently through an online course which focussed on new stories and myths, magic, and miracles. The experience of sharing spiritual connection with fellow Unitarians both within our Findhorn and other networks can only encourage our growth as human beings, helping our spirits to grow a little greener together.

Roslyn Connolly

Spirituality in Nature

‘The Unitarian Earth Spirit Network is for those who find spirituality in nature’ This is the strap line on our website.

There must be times when we catch our breath at the beauty of the world around us. It may be that first view of the snow-capped mountain or the setting sun sinking below the horizon turning the sky to shining shades of crimson. It is in these moments that the heart is touched with questions. Perhaps then we might wonder whether any purpose or spirit might lie within such beauty. Perhaps we turn to faith as did the naturalist John Muir living for seven years as a shepherd in what became the Yosemite National Park. He wrote that he needed no Bible to teach him about God, because he felt the mystery and wonder of divinity all around him.

The more closely nature is studied, whether it is the emerging seedling, the hatching egg or the telescope’s view of a distant constellation, the more complex it seems. Everything is connected, the tides by the moon, the seasons by the sun, the flower by the rain drop and the foraging bee.

In the pre-Christian days of the old religions people lived in a mostly rural world. The land was worked by peasants, and they would have a small plot that the family could manage together. This was known as a ‘pagus’. The people who worked it were known as ‘pagans’ or country dwellers. Their lives were totally involved in the natural world. They were part of it and not separate from it. They depended on favourable weather and healthy animals and crops. They knew too that though the seasons were reasonably constant their lives were filled with uncertainty. Nature could destroy their crops and bring disease to the animals. Their children might die. Death was part of life and life

had unpredictable moments. The three certainties were land, family, and season. They were spiritual people too. They were superstitious people too. The dark was very dark and the stars very bright. When something went wrong, it wouldn't be shrugged off as fate. Maybe it was a malicious spirit, maybe it was a local spirit that lived in a tree that had not received an offering. There was a reason for everything, and all seemed connected to that uncertain unseen world the spirits and the fairies inhabited. These same spirits did good things too. They brought success and happiness. They brought love and they cared for the spirits of ancestors.

The natural year that the pagans worked through had definite marker posts. They knew the summer solstice and built sacred circles like Stone Henge for ceremonies and worship. They knew the winter solstice and lit fires to encourage the sun to begin its return journey bringing warmth and light back home. At those two points the sun appears to be standing still, which is what the word solstice means. Then there were the equinox, the half way points between the two and these marked the change of seasons. The spring equinox heralded the beginning of summer, and the autumn equinox was the beginning of autumn. Equidistant between these four festivals were another four, associated with the land. They each have names. Imbolc (the b is not pronounced) comes at the beginning of February. The returning sun has warmed the earth enough for seeds in the soil to germinate, and the ewes will start to lactate in preparation for the birth of their lambs. It is the beginning of Spring. Birds are pairing off and beginning to build nests. There is a feeling of new life returning. The trees which have stood black and skeletal seem to be loosening from their winter stiffness. The human spirit feels to be breaking free of winter's grip. May Day is a time of rejoicing and celebration. The

crops are growing, and it is the beginning of summer. In August the grain harvest is gathered in. The first sheaf cut was brought into the house and hung over the fireplace and would be ploughed back into the ground next Spring. The last sheaf cut would be used to make corn dollies or a Brigid cross. And the last before Winter was Samhain (pronounced 'Sowen'). This was the time to tidy up for winter, the last harvest of nuts would be gathered in. Decisions had to be made about how to get through the coming winter, what could be kept, what could be sold. Most important was the annual celebration of ancestors. Family members who had died during the year would be remembered. The family would have a special meal and lay a place for the ones who had passed on. And during the meal they would remember. Remember the personality, remember what they had contributed to the life of the family, remember the gifts they had given, maybe a thing they had made, maybe a skill such as knitting or sharpening blades. So, they went through the eight points of the year. Every one of these festivals brought a celebration. They were also a time for reflection on what had been and to look forward to what was coming next. The superstitions, the gods, sprites, and fairies were all part of it. There was the Green Man and the maiden who lived a full life through the year, ending as the wise crone.

When Christianity arrived, they wanted none of the old religion and gave it the derogatory term, 'Paganism'. But this Paganism was deep rooted. The church compromised and put the Christian Festivals on top of them. Christmas covered the winter solstice, Imbolc became Candlemass, the equinox became Easter and so on. The old traditions could linger on, like bringing greenery into the house at Christmas, eggs at Easter, All Souls' Day at Samhain.

Over time the Pagan was simply a heathen who would not be a Christian. The rural world became much more an urban world. More recently, unless you look, the seasons too have disappeared. We can go to the supermarket and buy anything we want at any time of day and at any time of the year. Darkness, real darkness with bright stars, is polluted by light. There are only two areas in the UK which are truly dark.

Paganism as the old religion had a revival in the 1930s led by Gerald Gardiner who had worked in the Far East and studied local customs and religious rituals. He basically recreated the old religion from his own ideas. It became Wicca. He invented ceremonies, costumes and rituals and created an order of priestesses. Wicca spread around the world and revived an interest in folklore, herbalism, and magic. What all had in common was a connection to the spirituality of the natural world and an affinity with it.

In the early 1990s a group who called themselves, 'Neopagans', developed within the Unitarian Movement. They were the seed of what is now the Unitarian Earth Spirit Network. In the United States, the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans, CUUPS, was established. Unlike CUUPS, the Earth Spirit Network has no formal structure and remains a Network outside the congregations. There is a membership fee which pays for the annual magazine, *The File*, and for a presence at the Unitarian annual meetings.

I belong to a group in Bolton. We meet at each of the eight festivals to share news and food. We share readings and a meditation. Often, we will visit an ancient stone circle. You can feel the energy and history there. At our meetings we set a sacred circle ' by calling the elements of earth, air, fire and water and we close it at the end. We have pro-

duced an illustrated set of 'Wheel of the Year' cards which explain each of the eight festivals. They can be purchased for £5, plus p&p. By following the Wheel of the Year, we reconnect with the rhythms of the natural world and see ourselves as part of, rather than apart from, the



miracle of life that is all around us. We understand how moods can change with the seasons. We learn from the experiences of the past, plan for the future and rejoice in the wonderful present. If we feel there are spirits and sprites, well there probably are.

Tony McNeile

www.earthspiritnetwork.uk

'Green and Growing' at Plymouth Unitarian Church

Spring has arrived early in our church garden at Plymouth. It is the last week in January, and already we have snowdrops, crocuses, primroses, quince and two daffodils in bloom, all welcome harbingers of lighter and better days ahead. One of our members who is a keen gardener, carefully trimmed the tall grasses, at just the right time, to make way for new growth later in the year. The old stalks went into our compost bin, to break down and be recycled, and will eventually provide nourishment to a new generation of plants.

Spring is traditionally a time to take stock of our lives as well as our gardens. The brighter light shining into every nook and cranny, enables us to see, like our gardening friend, what to discard to make way

for new growth. Like her, we should examine everything carefully, reusing and recycling what is useful in the old.

This spring, as we emerge from the difficulties of the past two years, congregations will be taking stock of the consequences. Some may notice a drop in the number of people returning to church as the doors re-open after months of forced closure. The medically vulnerable and the elderly afraid of mixing in larger groups may be reluctant to return. Some people may simply have lost the habit of coming to church; a few sadly, will have died. Congregations, hiring out their premises, will have lost a large chunk of their income along with their tenants. In the words of the song, how do we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down and start all over again?

Joan Wilkinson invited me to share some of Plymouth's experiences and ideas. I hope these may help your own groups or congregations grow and prosper.

Plymouth Unitarians have an attractive Grade II Listed modern building and garden within a few minutes' walk from the town centre in one direction, and the historic waterside Barbican in the other. We hold an Arocha Eco-Church Bronze Award. We were described by one of our members as 'the inner city church by the sea' and by Plymouth's Arocha representative as 'a small compact oasis in the Plymouth city centre'.*

www.theclimatecoalition.org/showthelove

February was "Love our Planet Month" The Climate Coalition invited everyone who cares about the Climate and Nature Crisis to make green



hearts and give to friends and send to local councillors and MP's to show our concern.

We feel blessed to have Rev Kate Whyman as our Minister, and this beautiful home, with all it offers, physically and spiritually, and want to ensure that it is here for many generations of Unitarians to come.

Before the pandemic, we were thriving. We enjoyed weekly Sunday services, mostly by our Minister, and occasionally by church members or visiting preachers. Services were advertised on the noticeboard in our front garden, visible to all passers-by. Our minister also offered less formal monthly evening services and quarterly Socinian Communion. We produced a printed monthly newsletter, 'The Open Road' ('TOR') for members and copies were displayed in the church and hall. We were represented on the local Council of Faiths and had links with several citywide networks.

Our activities included a monthly poetry group, and our Wednesday morning café serving Fair Trade coffee in the hall, welcomed anyone from the local community. A friendly staff member from the local housing provider arranged extra events open to all in the church. Some of them started attending our Services. On Wednesday lunchtimes, we opened the church for 'Oasis of Calm' sessions of tranquil music and silence. We raised income by hiring our building to many groups including self-help groups, like AA, yoga and Tai Chi classes, Weight Watchers, etc. and to Hindus and Sikhs for their worship. We also hired out most of our car parking spaces during the week. We held annual Summer and Christmas fayres and monthly bookstalls in the garden to raise money for different chosen charities each year. Our formal membership was growing under Rev Kate's Ministry, and several non-members attended services regularly. In January 2015,



soon after she became our Minister, Rev Kate was instrumental in setting up a church 'Green Team' with members of the congregation to encourage better environmental practice within the whole congregation, and the hiring groups. We use recycled loo paper, have twinned all our toilets with partners in central Africa. We were the first church in Plymouth to become a 'plastic pioneer' by pledging to reduce our use of plastic items. 'Green Team' also developed a more environmentally friendly garden. 'Bug Life' an environmental charity, donated many plants attractive to pollinators, and two 'bee hotels' for an outside wall. We put up explanatory notices in the garden, inviting interested passers-by to join us. One did and is now an active GT member, and regularly attends our services. We achieved the Arocha's bronze Eco-church award in December 2017 and are working towards our Silver.

Everything came to an abrupt halt in March 2020! A new viral illness was spreading quickly in the UK. At our AGM, a member, a medical doctor, expressed his concerns so we decided to close 'for a couple of weeks' to await developments. We were ahead of the government

and didn't reopen the building until late summer. Two more lockdowns followed, during which we lost our hiring and car park income – a bitter financial blow, but we wisely decided not to furlough our minister. Thanks to our resourceful new Treasurer Sandra, for procuring various grants, to enable this. In such troubled times, a congregation needs a minister like Rev Kate at the helm!

Within a very short time, Rev Kate was offering Sunday services from her kitchen via Zoom and sending printed copies to those not online. It was very hard work, preparing all to arrive by Saturday post every week. The newsletter now went out every 2 weeks, by post, and also online. Committee meetings were conducted via zoom. There was much relief and when we could finally reopen our building in late summer 2020, only to close again a few months later. The situation was rescued by Myron, a largely self-taught technology wizard who obtained and set up Zoom equipment in the church, so that Kate could go in on her own, while he, socially distanced operated the equipment. When we re-opened again, with people sitting in church, Myron had developed a system for hybrid services, with a 2-way connection, allowing those unable to attend in person due to personal circumstance or distance, to join in, see Kate in the pulpit and even do a reading and be seen by everyone in church.

We hope that the days of lockdowns are behind us permanently. While we are still adapting to changed circumstances, there is a silver lining. In late 2020 we developed a Church Strategy, with the Mission of Exploring spiritual life together, and with Goals for the next few years. These include opening up access to many more people by live-streaming all Sunday services and 50% of all other events; creating opportunities for younger and BAME people to join in. We hope to form more creative partnerships with hirers, café, faiths groups and

others. This and the development of our new website integrating it with social media platforms, should improve quality and scope of what we offer. In order to secure income, financial strategy and governance we have recently updated our charity status to Charitable Incorporated Organisation. This together with the technical developments, should encourage more of our members and associates to become more actively involved.

This has already borne fruit. Thanks to the technology, we have actually increased our membership, because where one lives geographically is no longer a barrier to joining in worship or any other form of group activity. In the past year, we have welcomed 7 new members, three of them on-line, including Joan Wilkinson, who lives several hundred miles from Plymouth, but hopes to visit in person one day.

While some of the old ways we did things have had to be let go, pruned if you like, many of the ideas can be used, maybe adapted for these new times. As Rev Kate said in a recent service, “We do have difficulties to overcome, but there is also much hope and promise and potential, and some green shoots are already coming through. We are at the beginning again, in many ways. As, truly, life is always a process of beginning again. Always a new day, always a new moment, always a new opportunity. Always we are taking stock of where we are, listening with our hearts as well as our ears, seeing with our intuition as well as our eyes, and feeling and sensing our way forward. Reaching towards Beloved Community. Again”

It would be wonderful if any of these ideas help your congregation to develop more and, like Plymouth Unitarians, continue to be 'Green and Growing'.

Sheila Evans, a member of Plymouth Unitarian church

*<https://ecochurch.arochoa.org.uk/>

**GA Annual Meetings
19th – 21st April 2022
Hilton Metropole, NEC Birmingham**

NUF Speaker: Lizzie Kingston Harrison,
'Congregational Lead' of the General assembly
and member of the Framlingham congregation.
Lizzie came to Unitarianism after writing her
PhD thesis on Joseph Priestley. She is to talk
about her role and her vision. which includes
organising congregations and worship leaders
to share and learn from each other drawing on
developing technologies on-line.

NUF delegate and chair for this meeting is Indra
Sikdar. Please visit Indra at the NUF stand.

FOREST PRAYER

**We stand together in open air,
Asking nature, hear our prayer.
Music twists between the trees,
As gentle wind brushes the leaves.**

**Escorted by the mingled sound,
Of birdsong, bugs and life abound.
Stop and take the time to breathe,
What a wonderful thing to heed.**

**Earthen moss and lichens grow,
Fragrant essence through us flow.
Reach out hands and let them touch,
The gift of textures grant so much.**

**Toughened bark of ancient trees,
Contrasts the softened flowers and breeze.
Berries burst with tasteful splendour,
Rosemary, mint, thyme, coriander.**

**The forest offers these as well,
And yet she's not fulfilled her spell.
Painted pallets of green and gold,
Are also ours to behold.**

**How blessed we are to come and see,
The morphean meadows and luscious leaves.
So here we stand, all together,
Breathing in the fragrant heather.
Thanking all the spirits around,
For the heaven here that we have found.**

Naomi Keir

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

News & Views Editor: Joan Wilkinson, 10 Shirley Close,
(Temporary) Castle Donington, Derby DE74 2XB
Tel: 01332 814055 email: 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

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

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

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

Charity Reference No 1040294