

# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarians  
And Free Christian Churches

## News & Views

Issue 1



Summer 2019

**News from the G.A. Meetings**

**UNITARIANS AND THE CREATIVE ARTS**

**By Richard Varley**

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

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## **From your Editor**

Welcome to the first publication of *News and Views*. It may lack the artistic flair our last editor, Mattie Pugh brought to the task, but I hope that you will find the variety of articles just as interesting. A big thank-you to Mattie for all her hard work.

The first section of this publication consists of items from our regular contributors and shorter items, as you are used to reading in the old *Newsletter*, with the second section consisting of longer articles, usually on a theme which will continue through the year; this year the theme is 'Unitarians, the Arts and Human Creativity'. Richard Varley is our first member to give us a glimpse into his life and creativity in its many forms. He writes in an informal and life-affirming style and I'm sure much of what he says will resonate with members, as well as provide them with helpful information. I was amazed when he agreed to write 4,000 words but at the same time very grateful. However, if you wish to contribute on this theme, articles from 1,500 to 4,000 words would be equally welcome.

*News and Views* gives members the opportunity to hear from other members and get to know the interesting mix of members there are in the Fellowship. I would love to hear more from our readers in order to maintain the vibrancy of our Fellowship.

*News and Views* also offers the opportunity to learn what is going on in the wider Unitarian movement. In this edition are reports from the GA Meetings held in April.

If you wish to send articles from your congregation, society or personal news or views, please don't hesitate.

**The closing date for articles to be included in the Autumn edition of *News and Views* should be sent to the editor by 15<sup>th</sup> August.**

*Joan Wilkinson*

## Minister's Page

Unitarians in Lancashire were fortunate to have had a series of three lectures about faith in the modern world. I have been to two of them. The day consisted of a lecture before lunch and after lunch group discussions followed by a plenary where all the remarks were shared and discussed by a panel that included the lecturer.

The last lecture was by Alistair Macintosh, a writer and broadcaster who is also a Quaker. He spoke about social action and the Christian imperative. I was sufficiently impressed to buy the book he had brought to sell, 'A Poachers Pilgrimage'. In it he admits he is too Christian for the Pagans and too Pagan for the Christians. The way I heard it, he was saying that church dogma had changed from century to century. It is time to change again from wrath and punishments to a religion of forgiveness and caring for one another as practiced in the first gospels.

At a table over lunch I spoke to a person who had travelled quite a distance. I told him I was an earth-centred Unitarian and there was really too much 'God and Crucifix' language for me in the lecture. He was another Quaker and he told me that he had had a career in teaching English. He said that many years ago he had read the poem, 'The Table Turned' by William Wordsworth and one verse had so appealed to him and it had been his creed ever since. The verse was:

*One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.*

I was grateful for the reference and it speaks to me also. I do find divinity in nature and I struggle with the Christianity I was brought up

with. A God who is working his purpose out for every nation is not for me. I see two thousand years of failure in spite of the Easter sacrifice. My Christian imperative is for the worshippers to approach their God in a personal encounter rather than before a national or multinational God. Pray alone or stand before a vernal wood or immerse yourself in a sacred ritual to feel the mystical present. The church should be a gathering of like-minded individuals not a cohort of followers controlled and disciplined to an ancient dogma. Amongst all the words about God and the crucifix I sensed a sacred meaning. What do you think?

### **Prayer**

Let us pray for ourselves that we can live by a code that seeks to help and nurture rather than damage or destroy. Let us pray that we can live by a code that respects the world created by nature and live in harmony with it. Let us pray for ourselves that we can live by a code that treats all people as brother or sister and condemn none of them.

Let us pray for ourselves that we can live by a code that will rebuke those who harm either people or nature. Let us pray for ourselves that we can live by a code that holds a vision for the future that benefits the whole earth and all who inhabit it.

*Tony McNeile*

## **Secretary's Notes**

As I write this the weather is cool and is expected to be so for a few days. I hope by the time you are reading it, though, we will all be enjoying lovely summer weather. What would we do if we didn't have the weather to talk about?

The Chapel I attend is situated in a beautiful moorland area, with all kinds of wildlife, and lots of interesting paths to tread. I enjoy my visits and the feeling of being a part of the lovely surroundings, as well as the friendly and welcoming atmosphere at the Chapel. I feel very fortunate.

It is so important, though, for us to look after our surroundings and help preserve these beautiful areas for the generations to come. The moorlands are recovering well from devastating fires last year, and wildlife is starting to return. Long may it continue.

Enjoy your summer.

Janet Lythgoe

## **News from the GA**

### **A Report from Tony McNeile on training for the Ministry**

This year at the annual meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarians, the NUF invited Helen Mason and Rev Ant Howe to talk to our meeting about the change that has taken place in the training of Unitarian ministers. Helen has taken up the post of Director of the new Unitarian College and Ant Howe is the new ministry tutor.

We need a little history to understand things further. Unitarian Minis-

ters used to train at Manchester College but over the years the college moved location but still retained its name. When it arrived in Oxford it was known as Manchester College Oxford. Through benevolence it is now known as Harris Manchester College and is integrated into the university. While part of the University of Oxford it still has provision for training Unitarians for ministry.

Manchester College focused on the academic training of ministers. After its departure from Manchester a local minister, John Relly Beard felt a need for a more practical based evangelical approach to ministry training. It was a time of Unitarian growth in the North of England. He founded his own college and it became the Unitarian College Manchester.

In those times ministry students were young men with an expectation of a life-long career of service to a congregation. They were taught in college and then provided with a manse by their congregation. They could be flexible enough to move from congregation to congregation as experience and status grew. The College was a self-contained building and the students lived in. Today there are retired ministers who went through that process. As the type of candidate for training changed the Unitarian College Manchester gave up its building and joined with the Federation of Training for Ministry, situated in Luther King House in Manchester. Several different denominations also had their own colleges within the building, but the Federation offered common courses.

Ministry was changing and became a second career for both men and women and the age of entry was often around fifty. They still trained full time. Existing qualifications were recognised. There was an emphasis on training in placements as well as the practical rather than

academic needs of ministry. This too has become obsolescent. Many potential candidates were put off by the thought of being a full-time student on a two or three-year programme and no certain prospect of a settled ministry to follow. The cost of maintaining the college within the Federation was increasing beyond a break-even point. The decision was made to close the Unitarian College Manchester and start a new Unitarian College which would not be based anywhere. In fact, it would be a virtual college. Each student would be trained according to a contract between themselves and the new College and they would have to meet all the requirements set by the General Assembly. These would include academic requirements, practical experience through placements, seminar groups and supervisions.

This change took full effect at these annual meetings. The newly appointed Director and the Ministry Tutor gave a presentation the day before the NUF meeting.

They came to the NUF meeting the following day. We had asked them if they would flesh out the proposals a little more and give us their vision of how this new college would develop.

It was interesting to learn that Helen Mason whose career has been in education management is a direct descendant of John Relly Beard.

They explained that one immediate consequence of the change is that younger people are now offering themselves for ministry training because they can agree a contract that allows them to continue working whether they have a family or only themselves to support. They can do the practical training in the area where they live and attend local colleges or follow on-line courses. The seminars will be held around the country. The current ministry students are already working in the new system. Even though they are each on an individual

contract they agree they are a bonded group and feel they can develop both spiritually and practically through the interactions they share with each other and the placement ministers.

The new College expects to develop similar training packages for worship leaders and congregation leaders who are not on the ministry roll. This will also expand to cover adult religious education and young people's activities. Whereas now different types of training are set up independently by groups within the General Assembly.

Questions were asked whether the training was wholly in-house Unitarian, but we were told that where particular skill-sets were needed external resources would be funded. There was a question about the continuing Harris Manchester College in Oxford. It remains an option for students to choose. There were questions too about funding.

There is a guarantee on running costs but as the college becomes established it will have to look at sourcing its own funding.

The general feeling in the room of sixty or so people was positive and approving. We wished the New Unitarian College good luck and gave our encouragement to the four students presently training.

Usually at our meeting at the General Assembly we make space for the NUF AGM. This year our meeting time was curtailed to a single hour. The few NUF members who attended were vastly outnumbered by those who wished to hear the speakers that we dispensed with the formalities of proposals and seconding of accounts and reports. We did announce that every member had received by post a full report of the activities of the NUF and accounts for the year, and comments were invited but none received. Within the restraints of the changed meeting timetables we will ask our NUF committee to consider how

we manage a physical AGM for a virtual NUF community.

It will be possible to view the whole of this year's NUF meeting on line and we are grateful to UK Unitarian TV for coming along to film it.

[www.ukunitarian.tv?nuf-ga19](http://www.ukunitarian.tv?nuf-ga19)

## **Still I am One – Report from the GA**

**By Sue Woolley**

I've just spent four wonderful days at the Annual Meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches - one day at the Ministers' Pre-conference, and the other three at the Annual Meetings.

As usual, it was wonderful to catch up with friends, many of whom I have not seen since last GA (as the Annual Meetings are affectionately known).

The Ministers' Pre-conference included a gorgeous session about Metta meditation, led by Maud Robinson, which included a twenty-minute practice of this loving-kindness meditation. In retrospect, it set the scene for the whole GA, at least for me.

The AGM of the Unitarian Peace Fellowship was on the first afternoon of the Meeting proper. The Peace Fellowship was founded in 1916, the depths of World War I, and for the last few years, the theme of the gathering following the AGM has been connected to the centenary commemorations of this bloody, futile war.

But this year, 1919, our theme was "Where do we go next?" Nearly a hundred people turned up (twice as many as normal), and the discussion that followed was rich and fascinating. The hunger for peace, for Unitarians to be involved in social action related to peace, was palpable in the room.

Then later, it was time for Peace Vespers, led by the current ministry students. Again, the turn-out was greater than usual, and it was a gentle, peaceful end to the first day of the Meetings.

The following morning, I attended the morning meditation led by Richard Bober of the Meditation Fellowship, which grounded me for the busy day ahead.

In the evening, the Anniversary service was conducted by Maria Curtis and Andy Phillips, on the theme Knowing Our Place - an impassioned plea for humankind to take care of our world and each other.

On the final morning, the motion on knife crime was passed - more evidence of our desire for peace in our communities. At the end of the session, our Peace Fellowship Treasurer, Celia Cartwright, was inducted as President of the General Assembly.

I came home on Thursday afternoon feeling comforted and strengthened for the year ahead. I had experienced peace in our beloved community.

*The above piece by Sue Woolley was written in her weekly blog entitled 'Still I am One'. Sue's blog is well worth visiting: [sue-still-i-am-one.blogspot.com](http://sue-still-i-am-one.blogspot.com)*

*The Blogspot has a permanent verse included, which I find to be encouraging at the start of each week:*

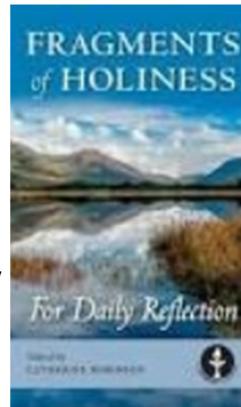
*"I am only one, but still I am one.  
I cannot do everything, but still I can do something.  
And because I cannot do everything,  
I will not refuse to do the something I can do."*

*By Edward Everett Hale*

## 'Fragments of Holiness, for Daily Reflection'

Edited by Catherine Robinson

Lindsey Press



I have only recently received my copy of this paperback, but already I am thoroughly enjoying it. It is a standard size paperback, but it has a nice shiny cover which will allow a wipe to clean it and that may well be needed as it is a book that is probably going to be a perpetual companion. The editor has chosen carefully to produce a book providing a 'thought for the day', and so has 365 items spaced at about two items per page and dated from the calendar. The extracts run from the Psalms to David Monk and so cover a wide spectrum. We have all of us, I am sure, seen many 'day books' during our time, but this one has a hidden value to us as Unitarians since, as far as I can tell, it contains no sayings with a pre-formed opinion behind them; no sudden springing surprises of orthodox beliefs. I currently use a day book that is an anthology of items by Martin Luther (*Faith Alone; A Daily Devotional*) since his works contain much clear and helpful guidance on the spiritual life even though I have to overlook/translate the overtly religious passages which reflect his Protestant beliefs. However, with this new book from Catherine Robinson I will now have two day-books and I know that the new one will allow me to read and enjoy wisdom without reservations.

*Peter Brown*

## India 2019 by Pat Caddick

India. An explosion of images, many in stark contrast. Sounds, smells; seething humanity, sacred cows, dogs, cats, monkeys; rubbish/ parks; posh hotels, colonial buildings/and shacks by railways, alongside busy streets; wealth and poverty; chaotic road systems, traffic weaving in and out, and noisy continuous beeping (but no road rage); Delhi Belly (me – aargh), flimsy toilet paper (thank goodness for some sheets of Kleenex in my rucksack); a part of old Delhi with lots of street food vendors called 'imodium corner'; above all colour and vibrant life. Lots of marigold garlands were placed around our necks (later fed to the monkeys) and red dots on our foreheads which tended to leak down our noses – curmudgeon that I managed to avoid later such palavers. No wonder I had crazy dreams each night.

India is also a total surprise in its modernity. The poorest of all have smart phones, and satellite dishes spring from even plastic tents. There is much construction going on in road and rail works. I had to completely revise my pre-conceptions and almost felt like a poor relation. We wondered why the poor did not rise against their conditions, but it is all down to the acceptance of Karma. You are where you are because of your past conduct in a previous life and you have to work towards achieving a better Karma for the next. This also explains the survival of the sacred animals – they are fed to achieve good Karma. The poor are also given aid by those better off for the same reason.

We were not exposed to much begging but had to harden our hearts because all children should be in school; education, school uniforms and food are paid for by the government. The problem is parents not sending their children to school but out on the streets to beg.

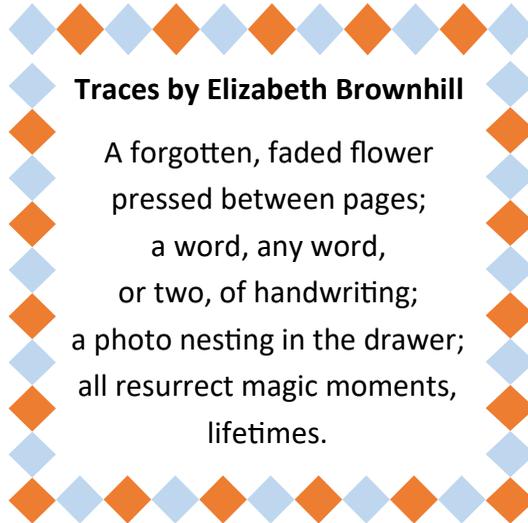
I was cheered to see many huge advertisements for educating girl

children and for placards denouncing violence to women. Also by the harmonious living side by side of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian. A lesson for today's warfare between differing faiths in other parts of our world.

Our trip started off by going from Delhi to Shimla (Himalayas) on the Toy Train – 5 hours unmitigated discomfort – to deep snow. A few days there, then back to Delhi to board the Palace on Wheels for a 7-day journey through Rajasthan. From the train each day we went off sight-seeing. It is all now a blur of palaces, forts, temples and mosques, all of different architectural style depending on the religious culture of the prevailing religion in the time of construction; of museums and craft centres – local artifacts, rugs (we succumbed and bought one), art (we bought a miniature) and jewellery. At this point my engagement ring (54 years old!) finally fractured at the thinnest point. When we showed it to our guide to see if it could be quickly repaired, he said to John 'Buy her another one'!! Cheek.

There were trips (very early morning starts) to a national park to catch a glimpse of tigers, and to a bird sanctuary. I stayed in bed those mornings! There were camel rides, and elephant rides; colourful parades; above all, vast stretches of desert/scrub land, with fields of brilliant green plants which we were told were mustard crops. But – where were the people? We saw only the odd dwelling with a few cows and labourers in the fields – so different from the cities (there are 26 million people in Delhi alone). This train journey ended in Agra, where of course we saw the famous Taj Mahal, before returning to Delhi to prepare for returning home for most of our group, and for us, to go on to Goa for a few days relaxation in a blissful paradise of palm trees, sun and sand, and amazing cuisine. I've never eaten, nor seen before, such huge, juicy king prawns.

Ah well. Back to real life, but with such memories, as the washing machine works over-time and I empty the suitcases, sort the mail, catch up with the Archers...



### **UKUnitarian TV Report**

Spring has been a busy time for the team. On the 24<sup>th</sup> March, the team travelled to Dean Row Chapel in Cheshire, to film the Sunday Service. This was a return visit and it was good to see this healthy congregation again. They always make us very welcome.

*Dean Row Chapel is said to be the oldest nonconformist place of worship in the district. The “Chapel” was founded in 1688. The Cheshire Record Office shows the “The New Meeting House” at Dean*



*Row was licensed by the magistrates at the Quarter Session held in January 1695. The Chapel was therefore built in the year 1694. (Dean Row Unitarian Chapel booklet).*

Of course, there have been repairs and alterations over the centuries but yet it still retains the peace and beauty of an ancient place of worship, both inside and in its quiet, leafy, situation. In order to access the balcony, one has to climb the exterior stone steps.

The service was led by Rev Jeff Gould, who took for his theme ‘The Mystery of Sin, Suffering and Hope’, the text set nationwide for the third Sunday in Lent. This was an example of Unitarian Christianity at its best. I always find it moving to hear the Lord’s Prayer sung well by a congregation comfortable with this custom. The full service can be viewed at: [www.ukunitarian.tv?deanrow-lent](http://www.ukunitarian.tv?deanrow-lent) .

**Video Reflection for March by Joan Wilkinson:**

[www.ukunitarian.tv?nuf-mar19](http://www.ukunitarian.tv?nuf-mar19)

### **Religion and the Arts**

In 1856, George Eliot, a great novelist of the nineteenth century, wrote the following words:

‘Art is the nearest thing to life: it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.’

I came across these words when studying within the Arts Faculty at the Open University some years ago now. What I liked about the OU was the way it lived up to its name – ‘Open’. The courses seemed fresh and opened my mind. I appreciated the opening up of knowledge, experience and understanding of myself and the wider world, through time and especially through the study of many inter-

disciplinary courses which rooted the arts in the culture of the times they were produced. Bringing together art, architecture, music, literature, philosophy, social history and religion revealed new connections, influences and meanings. And yes, I did meet other people, trying to create something better for themselves and others – to give meaning to their lives.

The Arts are also a way of exercising our imagination, opening us up to the unknown, whether it be through producing, or appreciating art. That is why I feel art and human creativity are integral to religion, which over the past few years have become stronger in the Unitarian community.

I may well have been studying still had I not felt that the National Unitarian Fellowship, and the wider Unitarian movement, shared so many of the same principles and values as the OU. It seemed important to share what I had learned and what I had become over many years of studying with the OU. But most importantly I wanted to share with others exploring the religious path in an open, inclusive and welcoming way. I have never regretted that decision.

When visiting Unitarian chapels, filming their Sunday Services of Worship, I have noted what may have been bare churches in the past, devoid of any artistic expression, now transformed, from the buildings to worship itself. Poetry, reading groups, music, creative dance, mosaics, imaginative banners, some depicting the chalice, crocheting, knitting, and I could include more. Those reflecting growing and creative communities are also working to provide suitable spaces for activities which complement our religious values but require more than a worshipping space alone.

What is central to the way we produce and appreciate artistic expres-

sion is its creativity, democratization and openness. As a movement we have grown to appreciate the poetry, music and heartbeat of the natural world in a way not experienced by earlier Unitarians within their chapels. Connection and community have become important but not just within Unitarianism but in the recognition that we live in an interconnected world and our aim is to nurture that world.

I wonder, where will our imaginations go in the future, what transformations will we see? What I do feel strongly about is that imagination, openness to the unknown, and creativity will remain important for Unitarians, alongside reason, freedom and tolerance.

### **Video Reflection for April by Tony McNeile:**

[www.ukunitarian.tv?nuf-apr19](http://www.ukunitarian.tv?nuf-apr19)

In my meditation for April I reflect on the power of the mind to heal the body and whether it is just the mind or something that is also more than the mind.

I gave a talk on healing and spirituality to a local group where I live. I asked what is at work when healing comes from somewhere other than the doctor's prescription? Some said it was all in the mind and the mind is part of the brain. Being happy and content opens pathways in the brain that send repair or overcome signals to parts of the body that are ill or hurting.

Others thought the power to heal came from beyond ourselves. Some religions say prayer can heal. Some therapists say they simply channel the energy of the universe into the patient.

I have known a lady who was a healer. She was a natural healer. She didn't claim any supernatural power. She simply said it was something she could do, and she could see pain in people. I used to think

sometimes that she must be an advanced soul who came on this Earth with extra gifts.

In our discussion after my talk, people spoke of examples of healing. A mother can calm a baby with pure love. A counsellor can heal a person's emotional hurt. One person mentioned a healing prayer group where they focussed their prayers on individuals in their group who wanted help. Another said the meditation group they attended was healing.

When I ran a meditation group, we used to say that each person had not one body but four. There was the physical body, the thinking body, the emotional body and the spiritual body. To be properly healthy and happy, all four of these bodies had to work together and be in harmony. The most vulnerable is the emotional body. The spiritual body protects it.

One lady spoke about the healing property of food. The body is a self-healing machine. Natural foods help but processed foods do not. The body needs to be alkaline not acidic. There are so many theories.

We have a natural power within ourselves which some call The Knowing. We just know what is right and what is wrong. It is more than the life force. It applies to health as easily as it applies to wisdom and it does seem to be a spiritual power. We are born with it. The ways of the modern world can suppress it with its customs and influences but never totally destroy it. If we are to lead healthy happy balanced lives that power to know has to be functioning properly.

If things don't feel right perhaps it is time to rebalance those four bodies physical, thinking, emotional and spiritual.

It is all in the mind and maybe beyond.

We at the National Unitarian Fellowship wish you a happy and healthy April.

**Video Reflection for May by Joan Wilkinson:**

[www.ukunitarian.tv?nuf-may19](http://www.ukunitarian.tv?nuf-may19)

## **Love**

What do we really mean when we say we love someone or something? Do we give ourselves to the subject or object of our love, denying ourselves in order to please or build up the other's welfare? Or do we seek to control the subject/object of our love? What is the cost of loving and how do we know that our behavior is actually loving or a means of control, a form of self-indulgence or an easy way out?

In this world of extremes, where everyone is expected to take a moral stance, often there seems to be love for diametrically opposed understanding. Does love of one's religion mean that there is not love for those of a different faith? Does love of one's country mean that we oppose another nation? Can we no longer work together in our personal relationships or in the way we live in the wider world?

These are all huge questions I'm sure we have all asked ourselves at times, and so we should. A life unexamined is a life not lived.

William Blake, a great poet, artist and mystic of the late eighteenth century sets before us such questions in his 'Songs of Innocence and of Experience'. He sets before us the full spectrum of human behavior, the stark extremes, leaving us to work out our own morality and way forward. Nowhere is this clearer than in his poem 'The Clod and the Pebble' from his book 'Songs of Innocence and Experience'.

*Love seeketh not itself to please,  
Nor for itself hath any care,  
But for another gives its ease,  
And builds a heaven in hell's despair.*

*So sung a little Clod of Clay  
Trodden with the cattle's feet,  
But a Pebble of the brook  
Warbled out these metres meet:*

*Love seeketh only itself to please,  
To bind another to its delight,  
Joys in another's loss of ease,  
And builds a hell in heaven's despite.'*

He begins by looking at the ideal love that we may have in our days of innocence, how we may begin with a vision of the other, whether it be a future 'lover' or 'believing' in an unquestioning way, the ideals of a group challenging the way we deal with the difficulties in the private and public sphere. Do we become 'downtrodden' as the 'clod of clay', or do we claim authority not only for ourselves or over those who may disagree with us. Does experience 'seeketh only itself to please' and in the process insist that anyone with a different point of view must be wrong.

I don't think we would want either extremes that Blake presents to us, but rather choose the middle way, a balance. We need to learn how to live in relationship, listen to each other, try and understand each other; but this middle way isn't easy, yet as we look at the world around us, it has to be the moral prompted by the poem. 'Reason, Freedom and Tolerance' are needed more now than ever before, but this middle way is the hardest love of all. Perhaps the biggest ques-

tion for us now, is how we do we love in this world so divided. Without love there can be no peace. 'Blessed be the peacemakers'.

### **Criggion**

Yes, I remember Criggion –  
the time; the place; a holiday  
of slow; we succeeded in our aim  
of quiet calm. It was late May.

The sun shone. Lilacs woke from sleep.  
Couples left and couples came  
to enjoy the Welsh air. What I liked  
at Criggion? Mainly the house  
and soaring fir-topped slopes and cows  
and bursting buds of fuchsia and  
geranium and sweet honey-  
suckle and roses fresh with scent.

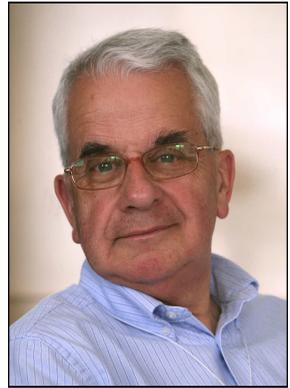
Blackbirds criss-crossed like shuttles on  
their looms, sparrows had their walk-on  
roles while darting swifts and swallows  
performed their airy song and dance.

Elizabeth Brownhill

# VIEWS

## UNITARIANS AND THE CREATIVE ARTS

By Richard Varley



NUF members will be aware of how my wife Lynne and I met Joan and John Wilkinson, by chance, whilst on holiday in the Scottish Highlands last June. Those who are also members of Foy, will have read my account of our meeting in my regular piece in Foy News, 'Ramblings from Room 10'. As I included a couple of photographs of Joan and John, I thought it only right that I should let them have sight of the article, and the images, before they appeared in print! It didn't take Joan long to start dropping gentle hints that perhaps I might like to write something for the NUF Newsletter or Viewpoint...

Our journeys to Hucklow tend to be leisurely affairs, stopping for morning coffee, often at Donington Services on the M1; lunch near Ashbourne, before visiting a relative in Monyash. On our last visit, we enjoyed Joan and John's hospitality for our morning refreshment stop; definitely a step up from the nearby motorway services! Picture us sitting comfortably in their lounge, with our drinks and facing an attractive selection of biscuits, taking in the delightful view from their lounge window, when Joan enquires if I would like to do her a favour. It took a very short time for the penny to drop! My reply was along the lines of "how many words and what's the subject"! "4000 on 'Unitarians and the Creative Arts'" came her reply. A discreet glance from Lynne seemed to suggest "are you sure?", based, no doubt, on the fact that my regular Foy News pieces are around 1600 words and are subtitled 'idle thoughts of a not very idle fellow'. In other words,

they are a linked collection of thoughts that have struck me over the previous few months. No doubt, Joan had also taken in the fact that I have been involved in amateur dramatics for the best part of forty years and, since I retired, I have found the time to pursue my interest in drawing and painting. Added to which, I enjoy a varied range of reading and have joined the book group, which Lynne coordinates. Somewhat different from my professional career that embraced commercial vehicle engineering and facilities management!

As a writer, it is always a challenge when someone else chooses your subject, particularly when it is a topic which you hadn't thought of writing about. It has certainly been occupying my thoughts as to how to approach it. Do I look at what it means to me as a Unitarian or explore the way in which Unitarians have contributed to creative arts over the centuries? Is there anything in the Unitarian psyche which particularly contributes to participation in creative arts? Who are examples of well know Unitarians, who work, or have worked, in this field? I make no apology for basing my thoughts on my own personal experiences and the way in which it has helped me: as a lifelong Unitarian; hence, I justify the title of this piece!

A good place to start is to look at a definition of creative arts. The Oxford dictionary defines the two words separately. It defines Art as "relating to, or involving the use of the imagination or original ideas to create something", and Creative as "the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power". The website: [www.reference.com](http://www.reference.com) suggests that "creative arts" include drama or theatre, music, film, creative writing, graphic design, photography and visual arts".

There are several references to the importance of creative arts in a variety of ways. Several sources of information highlight the role of the creative arts in early education. For example, the Child Development Institute in the USA, refers to a ten-year national study by Shirley Brice Heath of Stanford University, who says that “it was discovered that young people who are involved in highly effective non-school arts-based community programs in under-resourced communities, in comparison with a national sample of students were:

- Four times more likely to win an academic award, such as being on the honour roll.
- Eight times more likely to receive a community service award.
- Three times more likely to win a school attendance award.
- Four times more likely to participate in a maths or science fair.
- Likely to score higher on their SAT college admission test scores if they have been involved for more than four years of after-school arts study.

‘Arts and Minds’, a leading arts and mental health charity, has been running weekly art workshops for people experiencing depression, stress or anxiety in Cambridgeshire for the past seven years. Led by an artist and counsellor, its ‘Arts on Prescription’ project offers a chance to work with a range of materials and techniques, including printmaking and sculpture. The impact has been outstanding. An evaluation revealed a 71% decrease in feelings of anxiety and a 73% fall in depression; 76% of participants said that their wellbeing increased and 69% felt more socially included. As one participant says, “I feel so much better having had the time and space to do some art. It makes such a difference.” Gavin Clayton, executive director of the charity

and one of the founders of the National Alliance for Arts, Health and Wellbeing, says, “Our evidence shows that taking part in creative activities has a positive impact on people’s mental health”.

Looking back over the years, I looked for indications of how my interest in creative arts subjects came about. In my secondary school days, there were two indications of such. At the end of the first year, one was selected for either woodwork or art. Interestingly, I was directed towards the latter. At the same time, my move into the second form was either to the science or arts-based side. I guess I was on the borderline, as the initial decision to put me on the arts side was changed to a science bias. Perhaps the school knew something I didn’t?

Though I gained a GCE ‘O’ Level in art, my ‘A’ Level subjects were Maths, Physics and Chemistry. An underwhelming achievement in Chemistry ‘A’ Level, led me to engineering, rather than pursuing my father’s career in biochemistry. Tie that to my interest in transport, my subsequent career path led to Leyland and the National Bus Company and, for the last nineteen years before I retired, into facilities management, when the bus industry struck a very flat period, following privatization and deregulation. From that, you can see that an involvement in the creative arts has proved both a diversion and an education.

Whilst at school, I became involved in the annual school play, working backstage. After my school days, art took a back seat, remaining largely dormant, until I retired. Amateur dramatics was to play a much larger role. After a brief involvement with a drama group in Manchester, Unitarian Young Peoples’ League took over! It wasn’t until we moved to London in the late 1970s, did I resume my participation in amateur dramatics, with a group based in Ruislip. The group was run by a professional director/writer and gave me an excellent

grounding in the art, which has proved very useful in the years since. I had the opportunity to work back stage and on stage with a group of talented people. It coincided with my time as a Technical Officer with the National Bus Company: somewhat different!

Performing on the theatrical stage teaches you techniques that, for instance, are useful in business meetings. When acting, you not only have to remember your lines, and deliver them in the style of the character you are portraying, but you have to be conscious of your position on stage and the other actors and their roles. Added to which, you have to be ready for the unexpected: when another actor fluffs their lines or misses out part of the dialogue. You have to try and achieve this by making the appropriate adjustment without portraying, by facial expression, to the audience that anything is amiss! In business meetings, there can be occasions when the ability to hide your own particular feelings or emotions can be decidedly useful! There are times when you have to consider your strategy, whilst still listening to ongoing proceedings.

When directing a play, you learn the art of people management: how to give praise and criticism without causing upset or offence, bearing in mind you are often handling a variety of personalities, which may range from the timid to the prima donna. I'm sure that you can envisage other situations where such skills can come in use!

I've welcomed having the opportunity to have the time, since I retired, to resume my interest in drawing and painting, largely dormant since my school days. At the second attempt, I discovered a well-run class. Each ten-week course, prepared by our tutor, is carefully structured and invariably starts with an exercise in observation and she often finds some challenging objects to sketch. Sometimes we are en-

couraged to try a famous artist's particular style during the course. The beauty of trying a variety of techniques, and different media, is that you discover what you enjoy most. Just over two years ago, I was somewhat apprehensive at the prospect of trying oil painting: how ill-founded my thoughts proved to be! It has proved to me that, of all the painting mediums I have used, water colour, acrylic gouache and oils, oils have proved the most forgiving medium in which to work



*Richard's first oil painting*

and are now my first choice. Another challenge can be to restrict your colour pallet, which certainly teaches you the way in which to mix a restricted range to achieve a whole range of colours. I was fascinated to learn that L: S Lowry used just three colours, Prussian Blue, Yellow Ochre and Vermillion plus Ivory Black and Flake White. It is fascinating to see the range of colours that he achieves. In particular, I feel that his choices of relatively dark shades of blue and yellow help to achieve a gloomier image than is appropriate to the scenes he is portraying. For one painting, I chose to restrict myself to Lowry's range of colours and found it fascinating to see the range of colours that can be created.

I have found that I have improved my powers of observation. I particularly enjoy painting landscapes and, in so doing, learning how subtle changes in colours, and their tones, create distance: how hills and trees develop a blue hue. In evening or night scenes, where there are likely to be some very dark areas, there is no pure black: rather it is a very subdued tone or shade of a colour, achieved by adding black or

Payne's grey to the appropriate colour. It may take some determined squinting, through one eye, to determine what the underlying colour is. It helps if you know what the original colour was in daylight.

On a couple of occasions last year, I met Jack Russell, whom cricket followers will remember as a former England wicket keeper. He took up sketching and painting during an overseas tour when he knew he wasn't likely to feature in all that many games. He has developed into a professional artist with his own gallery in Chipping Sodbury. We met him, first, during a match at Northampton's County Ground, where he had a small display. I had a very interesting conversation about painting skies. I also learnt that he was the last batsman to be given out by the well-known umpire, 'Dickie' Bird in a test match. He had painted an image of 'Dickie' in his characteristic pose of communicating his decision to the unfortunate batsman! Whilst on holiday, later in the year, we visited his gallery, during which, whilst viewing a variety of his paintings (originals with slightly too many noughts in the prices!) we persuaded him to appear in order to sign one of his books. On this occasion, I had a useful conversation with him talking about various shades of greens. Whilst he has painted a variety of subjects, a number feature cricket grounds, which not surprisingly contain a variety of shades of green. What I also found interesting was, not only to view a painting at a distance, but to examine his brush strokes from close to. The mixing of various shades of yellow and blue, including, on occasions, the addition of black and white as well, is quite a challenge, which I continue to get my head round.

During the course of writing this piece, I started watching BBC One's 'Celebrity Painting Challenge'. The participants were actor Jane Seymour, musician and presenter George Shelley, cricketer and broadcaster Phil Tufnell, model and presenter DJ Amber Le Bon, presenter

Josie D'Arby and TV personality Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen. The BBC's objective was that "the series will put them through their paces as painters, and test whether they can achieve the levels of excellence on canvas that they have achieved on the stage, catwalk, screen and cricket pitch." I was particularly intrigued by the inclusion of former cricketer, Phil Tufnell, who I remember from his playing days, having read a couple of his books and seeing and hearing him as a broadcaster. He did not strike me like someone who would have taken up painting as a pastime. How wrong you can be! It was fascinating to see how they responded to the various challenges which they faced and to hear them talking about their reasons for painting: Invariably, it was a relaxation, and something quite different, from their professional lives. I was impressed with the standard and quality of the paintings they produced. Another aspect of the series was the way in which the two experts, who were there to advise the contestants, included a piece where they explained particular techniques that could be employed in painting a particular subject.

I enjoy writing the occasional article. Sometimes, it may be in the form of a report of a meeting or an event. Invariably, I have always written about non-fictional subjects: I have never attempted to write a fictional piece. I certainly admire the way in which some writers build a word picture, such that you are able to envisage a particular character or setting: it takes a particular skill to achieve it in the written word. I remember reading a book, where the storyline was set in a severe winter, just after the war, when we endured snow and hard frosts for weeks on end. The writer was so successful in creating the atmosphere that you almost felt as though you needed to wear gloves to read the novel! My articles for Foy News started when I was 'invited' to write a report on a Winter Walking Weekend. I decided to

put my own personal stamp on it by starting the report from the standpoint of imagining it as a dream before being awoken and returning to reality. It is probably, the only piece of fiction that I have written. It triggered my regular 'Ramblings from Room 10' pieces. As my first report was written, when we were regular inhabitants of Room 10, when we stayed at The Nightingale Centre, the title has stuck, even though we haven't stayed in that particular room for some time. My justification is that there is a guide to rail travel around the world, written by Mark Smith and titled 'The Man in Seat 61', simply because he thought of the idea whilst travelling by rail, on which occasion he was sitting in seat 61! I have a copy of his book and it is a source of very useful advice, particularly if you are planning to travel overseas. You can also carry out an internet search on the title to find out all about it. I recall an occasion when, during the course of a walk near home through a wooded area, I contemplated, in my mind, how I might build up a word picture if I was to write about it, rather than just saying that 'I walked through a wood'. I considered all the features and sounds that might contribute to a word picture.

Returning to the subject of cricket, I always admired the skill of the late John Arlott in creating a word picture of the scene, in a cricket match, upon which he was commentating. He was particularly skilled at creating an image by using similes. A small number of examples are where he says 'the umpire signals a leg bye with the eye of a weary stork' (a signal by an umpire to a scorer which involves raising and simultaneously tapping one leg), 'he played a cut so late as to be positively posthumous' (a shot played by a batsman when the ball has almost completely passed by in front of him) and he described a batsman playing a ball like 'a stroke of a man knocking a thistle top with a

walking stick’.

For me, the challenge in writing this piece has been to reach the target word count. I thought back to my schooldays, when we were taught how to write a composition: to plan a structure and build upon that. I did at least, in the beginning, set out a structure, albeit in my mind. I feel as though I have, to a degree, fallen into the pattern of my articles for ‘Foy News’, where I start on a particular topic and see where my thoughts lead me. Maybe, I am subconsciously developing my own style of writing? As a result, I have focussed, so far, on my experiences with the creative arts and the part they have played in my life.

I have meandered into quoting examples of people, whom one might consider do not fall into the remit of the title. I am not aware that L. S. Lowry, Jack Russell or John Arlott are, or were, Unitarians: they are, or were, very fine practitioners in the field of creative arts. I make no apology for making use of the internet to research well known artists, writers and actors who were Unitarians, either lifelong or became such during their lifetime. A passing observation, on the thirtieth anniversary of the World Wide Web, is that the founder, Tim Berners-Lee, was listed by the BBC as being a Unitarian. The BBC web page also lists writers Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Elizabeth Gaskell; poet Sylvia Plath; composers Béla Bartok and Edvard Greig; actor Christopher Reeve; and musician Pete Seeger as well-known Unitarians.

I did also look at Wikipedia to obtain some further ideas. I took the precaution of looking at cross references to check the veracity of any information. A second source, taken from a Church Times article published in December 2017, about Charles Dickens, who was baptised in

the Church of England, proved fascinating. I have paraphrased part of their article. Throughout his life, Dickens possessed a simple, sincere, and, above all, practical faith. He was not interested in matters of doctrine and petty sectarian squabbles, he passionately believed in living out the example of Christ, particularly with regard to social justice and the plight of the poor. As far as he was concerned, Christianity was not about ritual, rather a matter of individual conscience, manifesting itself in actions rather than words.

His personal beliefs were rooted in the teaching of the New Testament in general, and in the four Gospels in particular. He strongly urged his family to adopt his personal position: "My dear children, humbly try to guide yourselves by the teaching of the New Testament in its broad spirit, and to put no faith in any man's narrow construction of its letter here and there." Dickens's positive commitment to the efficacy of the New Testament did not extend to the Old. In corresponding with his friend Frank Stone, he wrote, "Half the misery and hypocrisy of the Christian world (as I take it) comes from a stubborn determination to refuse the New Testament as a sufficient guide in itself, and to force the Old Testament into alliance with it." His reliance upon the New Testament was in keeping with that of the Unitarians, at that time, one of only two denominations with whom he identified throughout his adult life. During a visit to Boston, Dickens found time to meet the city's leading influential Unitarian, Dr William Ellery Channing. The time they spent together was to have a profound effect on Dickens. It was not only his acquaintance with Channing which attracted him to Unitarianism. While he was in Boston, it became apparent that nearly all the cultivated men he met belonged to the denomination. He also discovered that a number of Harvard University professors were Unitarians, including the poet Henry

Wadsworth Longfellow, who became a friend of Dickens and stayed with him in London. Shortly after returning home in July 1842, Dickens, now 30, began attending Essex Street Chapel in the Strand. It was there in 1774 that the original Unitarian congregation first met, led by a former Church of England clergyman, Theophilus Lindsey. Just nine months after their meeting in Boston, Dr Channing died. Such was his reputation that a memorial service was arranged on 20 November at Little Portland Street Unitarian Chapel. Eager to pay his respects, Dickens went to the service and was so impressed by the Revd Edward Tagart's tribute, and sermon, that he decided, along with his wife Catherine and their five children, to join the church. He was to attend the chapel, situated in the West End of London, near his Devonshire Terrace home, regularly for almost two years.

On the other hand, Beatrix Potter was a lifelong Unitarian, being born into a Unitarian family. Her father, Rupert William Potter, was educated at Manchester College, by the Unitarian philosopher James Martineau, prior to training as a barrister in London. Rupert married Beatrix's mother, Helen Leech, on 8 August 1863 at Hyde Unitarian Chapel, Gee Cross.

Turning to a musician; Edvard Grieg lost faith in Christian dogma and in the Lutheran ministry. Though he rejected organised Christianity, Grieg retained his faith in its underlying spirit. Writing in 1880 he told a clergy friend that "even if I do not believe in the same literal details as you, I certainly do believe, without reservation, in the same great spirit of love" and that he wished "only for strength to struggle to possess just a little spark of that spirit of love which Christ radiated in his life.". During these years of religious and personal crisis, Grieg composed some of his most beautiful music. During a visit to England in 1888, he was attracted to Unitarian views, and in the nineteen

years that followed, he held to them. He said that all the sectarian forms of religion, that he had been exposed to since, had not succeeded in making any impression on him." In 1889, the Griegs were impressed by the ex-Anglican, Stopford Brooke, who preached at Unitarian pulpits in London. Grieg thought that some Unitarians were "some of the noblest people I know." Like them, he believed in separation of church and state and in a tolerant attitude towards others.

I have only referred to three famous people, associated with the creative arts, who were either lifelong Unitarians, or who were attracted to Unitarianism during their lives. I started further research, but I am rapidly running out of space. Maybe someone else might like to continue the subject: I'm sure Joan would be delighted to hear from you!

One question that I have not considered is whether Unitarians are more inclined than non-Unitarians, to be involved with the creative arts, either as a profession or recreational activity. I suggest that it would be a very difficult question which to answer, however interesting it might be to know the answer. I will leave it to others to ponder on that aspect!

## **Videos from the GA**

At the time of print three items filmed at the GA are in the process of editing. These should be available to view on [www.ukunitarian.tv](http://www.ukunitarian.tv) by the time you read this. You will be able to see the GA Anniversary Service, the NUF address as reported by Tony McNeile in his report, and also a film from the History Society.

**The closing date for articles to be included in the Autumn edition of *News and Views* should be sent to the editor by 15<sup>th</sup> August.**

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