

The Cross Street Rag

Cross Street Unitarian Chapel Newsletter, May/June 2017

Edited by Catherine Coyne – newsletter@cross-street-chapel.org.uk



Charity no. 1080836

View from the Vestry

As I find myself more often these days, I write this whilst looking out the window of a moving vehicle. This was the first successful catch of the morning. I ran after another, but it was “the train that got away”. A bit of anger and frustration swelled over me like a disturbance on a calm river - “Always happening!”. Then I let myself come to a rest, as I remembered a conversation the previous Sunday: when viewing life's pains and challenges, the lesser issues become more like pebbles, whose disruption fades away.

This is more than simply thinking about the negatives in life: for when I thought "it's no big a deal, there will be another train in 30 minutes" I was both affirming my strength and showing gratitude for my life. How blessed I was that morning that I could catch another train! What a gift life is, that even difficulties and sorrows can lead us to reflect on joy and wonder.

And in that reflection – of the gratitudes I have experienced – I have no end. I am thankful for the returning spring, the warm sun and gentle wind. I am thankful for the trees and spots of green that greet me on my walks. And I am grateful for Cross Street – a chapel that has supported me in challenging times, filled with people who have been generous and compassionate with their words.

I hope this month can lead you to unexpected joys, which may smooth the ripples of sadness. May you find some greenery – even the tiniest flower exudes life and passion. May we all learn from it.

Love and Blessings,

Cody

Services

Wednesdays ~ 1.00-1.30 pm

Sundays ~ 10.45-11.45 am

All are Welcome

Events & Groups #CrossStEvents

- **Friday Recital Series** ~ 26th May
& 30th Jun - 1pm

- **Introduction to Unitarianism** ~
11th Jun 12:30 – 2

For further information about
Events & Groups email
[events@cross-street-
chapel.org.uk](mailto:events@cross-street-chapel.org.uk) or call **0161 834
0019**

The French philosopher Voltaire is said to have remarked that In England, there were sixty different religions and only one sauce, whereas in France it was of course the other way round.

My own family has illustrated this rather well. Way back on my father's side they were middle-of-the-road Scottish Presbyterians, but my three times great grandfather took his congregation from Glasgow to the coastal town of Girvan, and set up the Church of The Future, who were later joined by the Christian Universalists.

His son, also a clergyman, was strongly influenced by the remarkable scientific advances of that century, and promoted a variety of Natural Theology, the creation of the material universe being seen as direct evidence of a purposeful incorporeal creator. Perhaps not dissimilar to the ideas of today's Unitarians ?

Two generations on, my grandfather though nominally Presbyterian, had lapsed into atheism, though his wife-to-be was very high-church Anglican, having at the age of 19 secretly eloped from Glasgow to London's East End to be baptised into the Church of England by an evangelical clergyman who practised a life of apostolic poverty.

My father was pretty much of his father's opinion, but in early adulthood became very interested in the then-popular mysticism of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, which invoked ideas of higher dimensionality, well in advance of cosmologists in this era. In his later years, my father became almost obsessively interested in Manichean history and theology, and the tragic fate of the Cathars, who in fact believed that this world was intrinsically evil, the work not of God but his antithesis.

He had two sisters, one of whom was happy to convert to Catholicism after marrying in middle age, and the other who married at the age of seventy, spent twelve years learning Gaelic and took to the Celtic tradition of St Columba rather than the Roman one of St Augustine (though I'm pretty hazy about the fine distinctions !). She loved the weekly Gaelic choral evening at her church in Victoria BC.

My mother's family had their roots in industrial Birmingham, and belonged to the Congregational church, though later moving south to the Middlesex area. Her parents actually first met at a church choir practice, and her father (who was a book-binder by trade) bound two copies of Handel's *Messiah* in leather, his and hers. In her middle years, however my grandmother took to Christian Science, with its emphasis on illness being a symptom of spiritual maladjustment, and I think this had a persistent negative effect on the family.

I think this is probably way too long already but, reverting to Voltaire, there was certainly no evidence in the very unimaginative meals I remember from childhood, whether at home or staying with relatives, of any intrusive flavour, whether or not the result of anything other than gravy !

Robin Waddell

The word Unitarianism probably means different things to different people. I *think* my beliefs are compatible with Unitarianism but I'm not totally sure. Here they are, anyway - and you be the judge!

I believe that all of creation has a spark of the Creator within it; from which it follows that we are all part of one big family. As the Bhagavad Gita puts it: When a man sees that the God in him is the same God in all that is, he hurts not himself by hurting others. And Teilhard de Chardin in his book *The Phenomenon of Man*, showed that every single thing, animate and inanimate, had a form of consciousness (even if, in the case of a lowly stone, it is a pretty dozy sort of consciousness!).

Another take on this idea is in Chief Seattle's speech. The story goes that in 1855, when President Franklin Pierce stated that he would buy the land of Chief Seattle's tribe, the Chief replied in part as follows. "This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself. The earth is precious to God, and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator."

This thinking has become more and more a part of me as the years have passed - which is probably why, fifty-six years ago when I attended a weekend of Psychic and Spiritual Thought in London and heard a talk on vegetarianism, I had no difficulty in giving up all meat from that very moment. (I have to admit, however, that it took another thirty or so years before I fully considered the anguish of the poor mother cow, who has her young ones constantly taken away from her so that her milk can be utilised by human beings, and then I went vegan.)

When I was about eleven years old I remember my father driving me to hospital for an operation. The roads weren't very good and it was a five or six hour journey so we did a lot of talking, and in particular my father told me about his beliefs. Before the war he had spent a lot of time in Tibet, and he told me about Buddhism and about the concepts of Reincarnation and Karma. This latter is the law of cause and effect, whereby a person's actions in one life determine their conditions in another. These two ideas made absolute sense to me. I had always wondered how it was possible for a person to become perfect and all-knowing in one lifetime - and it was wonderful to realise that the soul's journey towards perfection could be spread over many lives. (Further reading when I became adult showed me that, due to the machinations of the Emperor Justinian and the Empress Theodora in the sixth century, the doctrine of reincarnation was thrown out of the early Catholic Church - although some references to it do still exist in The Bible.)

It has been said that reincarnation is a lazy doctrine, in that it encourages people to see injustice or cruelty and to say, I need not interfere, that is just their karma. But that is nonsense. How do we know when, for instance, we see someone struggling in a fast-flowing river, that it is their karma to drown? Maybe it is merely their karma to get an unpleasant soaking!

The subject of reincarnation has been touched on by very many poets down the ages, including William Wordsworth, Robert Browning, John Milton, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Matthew Arnold. Here is part of a poem by John Masefield:

I hold that when a person dies
His soul returns again to earth;
Arrayed in some new flesh-disguise,
Another mother gives him birth.
With sturdier limbs and brighter brain
The old soul takes the road again.

And Khalil Gibran said much the same thing in the words:
"A little while, a moment of rest upon the wind,
and another mother shall bear me".

I am very much enjoying being a part of the community at
Cross Street Chapel, and thank you all for being so welcoming
to Robin and myself!

Sonia Waddell

Grace to flower by Peter Sampson

How undeviating the horse-chestnut grows towards the
light!
What a natural inevitable swelling of the bud!
Such a simple, perfect climax!
The flower tower amazes the sky.

And since there's no knowing what'll be what,
No poking into nature's process, I pray for grace,
Grace to flower inevitably, naturally swell into that
confident tower ...
Not in pride, arrogantly asserting myself, my will,
But in gladness, spontaneously reaching out to all
I can understand,
Trustingly embracing the mystery of what eludes my
grasp.

A Report on the 2017 General Assembly by John Earnshaw

I was honoured this year to be the Delegate for Cross Street Chapel at the 2017 General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches (G.A.), which was held in Birmingham at the Hilton Metropole Hotel. As it was my first time at a G.A. when I arrived I attended the newcomer's welcome. Here I met other first timers and listened to short talks about how best to deal with the whole of the G.A. event. My arrival also included a Plenary with speeches on the Unitarian Youth Programme, safeguarding, international Unitarianism and also how we should welcome people with disabilities or dementia within our congregation.

Other meetings I attended included a workshop held by Lindsey Press on how to publish your own written work. This included tips for both E-Publishing and more traditional hard copy formats. The Visibility Workshop was also very interesting and gave guidance on developing your own website. Plenary speeches covered such topics as Inequality, Religious Education and Unitarian support for both Red Cross Aid and Animal Free Testing U.K. A very important report was given on the current state, and possible future, of the Unitarian residential Nightingale centre, which acts as the venue for the "Send a child to Hucklow" events.

I had a great time at the G.A. and would recommend it to anyone wanting to delve deeper into the Unitarian faith or for those wanting to meet lots of other Unitarians.