

The Liberal Christian Herald



The Unitarian Christian Association seeks to strengthen and revitalise the liberal Christian tradition.

Harvest Edition

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Front Cover Image from Wikimedia Commons "Harvest Festival Flowers at Shrewsbury United Reformed Church"



Photograph of the late Dr Brian Hick, former editor of The Liberal Christian Herald (see obituary, pg 4)

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A corn of wheat

Judith Fantozzi

Buddhist philosopher, Daisaku Ikeda, says, "Opening the door to your own life is more difficult than opening the doors to the mysteries of the Universe". Life can be a riddle.

I have always loved acting and the theatre and when I was in my early twenties, I was cast in a production of T.S. Eliot's, "Murder in the Cathedral", about the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, in the twelfth century. I was given the role of Leader of the Dark Voices of The Womens' Chorus. I floundered through a sea of magnificent language which, at the first rehearsal, I delivered in a very grand and over-the-top style. "I have seen the rings of light coiling downwards, descending to the horror of the ape." I was AWFUL! I was immediately hauled up by the Director – "Speak naturally. Try to connect with what Eliot is seeking to convey!" I was a bit miffed! I had thought I was doing rather well! I was in my early twenties, a country kid with little experience of life. How could I hope to connect with this barrage of words? Now, decades later, I can look back and laugh at myself. But in the meantime I have lived.

It is said that the only mistake you ever make is the one you don't learn by. I've made my share of mistakes but what we perceive as mistakes need to be looked at in the context of all concerned. As my mistakes help you to learn and grow, so your mistakes do the same for me, as we co-operate with the operation of God within each of us. Jesus is recorded as saying, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone, but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit." John 12, v. 24. The silly messes I got myself into by my own ignorance and folly-filled enthusiasm were the means of 'death' to each phase of life and layer of myself. As one died and fell into the earth, symbolically, so another phase would come into being. Bigger, better and more fruitful than the last one. The 'time in the earth', in between, being a time of reflection and

renewal and the mother of increased wisdom.

It's harvest time. There is a sacrifice. The corn is cut down and reborn into a loaf of bread. This is the constant process of death and rebirth that we all pass through many times. The thing is, not to resist. It must be a willing sacrifice or there is no true resurrection, only an endless rehashing of old stuff, with no life in it. Transformation and transition from one state of being to the next, is all part of the human blueprint. For me, the personal knowledge of French philosopher Teilhard du Chardin's oft quoted saying, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience.", holds the key to the wonder and joy, the hardship and pain of being human for a season, in what is often an alien environment, the opposite of the Heaven from which we came; so we return with consciousness and understanding to our Source.

So, it's Harvest Time, and as I look back down my life, I can see the recurring pattern of Spring and the start of a new phase of life; Summer, where it ripens and bears fruit; Autumn where the harvest is gathered and brought home and Winter, a time for reflection by the fire. Whether it is the harvest of one phase of my life or my whole life, I can feed on the stored fruits and grains of my spiritual journey and share with those around me out of my store. After all the trials and troubles, victories and laughter I can genuinely say, connecting with those words of T.S. Eliot, that I have seen (metaphorically) those rings of light, coiling downwards to the horror of the ape. The cycles of life that take us, often, to where we don't want to be.

Above and among the thorns of life, roses grow. Thorns and roses are integral parts of the same plant. The thorns of life are there to spur us on to find the rose.

Dr Brian Hick BA(Hons) MA PHD

Stephen Page

Brian sadly died on 30th May 2021. He had been receiving care and treatment for cancer for some time but continued to be very active until shortly before his death. He was editor of *The Liberal Christian Herald* from 2013-2016 and a member of Hastings church for a number of years.

Brian was born in Shrewsbury in 1945, but the family soon moved to Fulham where he lived until he married Sally in 1966 and went to live in Camden Town. Then he was working in the BBC Music Department near Broadcasting House, and soon after starting with the BBC commenced an Hons English Degree at Birkbeck College which led to post-graduate training as a Director at The Drama Centre. He worked briefly in the theatre and then moved to Redhill and taught drama. In 1980 the family moved to Hastings. Brian held a number of senior educational posts, while becoming increasingly involved working with Special Education Needs Students. After work based in particular schools he started a long association with Russell Education Trust as their Senior Special Needs Consultant, travelling widely, covering schools across the South of England and into South Wales.

In 1992 he was invited to become Editor of *The Organ* which he happily took on – significantly updating and broadening the scope of the publication. He remained Editor for 15 years and then became *Editor Emeritus*. Over the years he contributed articles, and more recently, a weekly musical column in the local *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*. He founded larkreviews.co.uk website in 2012. Brian wrote and published a number of books – including a detailed account of the rebuilding of the 1763 Snetzler organ, in the Hastings Unitarian Meeting Place and several volumes of his poetry.

He was involved in a number of organisations, musical and otherwise. He was for a number of years a trustee of the Seaview Project, working with homeless and other vulnerable people in St Leonards-on-Sea. Brian would often speak to other organisations about the work of Seaview. He was more recently invited to become a trustee of the newly organised Hastings Philharmonic Orchestra. Locally he was a particular champion of the Hastings Philharmonic

Choir, Hastings Sinfonia and the Opus Theatre. He was also connected with Garsington Opera, English National Opera and the Oxford Lieder Festival.

He championed the restoration of the Hastings Snetzler organ and it was during this time that I met Brian and joined the church, soon becoming the organist. Brian was very active in other areas of the life of the church, taking on various behind-the-scenes and more upfront roles. He was a gifted leader of worship and preacher and his ability to write included a number of new hymn texts set to existing tunes, for some of which I have subsequently written new tunes. We collaborated together on services and concerts as well as presentations that lurked somewhere in between, blurring the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, the formal and the less so, something we were both keen to do.

Sadly there were turbulent times ahead in the congregation and it was during this time that we both valued the support and friendship from the UCA and Brian then became more directly involved. After a number of years he left the local Unitarian fold, as did I, and we later joined forces at a local Anglican church where we were able to continue doing things together in a similar vein for several more years.

Before joining the Unitarians in Hastings Brian had experienced a number of denominations. Childhood began in a Congregational church. Later he spent time as a Catholic, as a member of a new and radical house church, and as an active attender of the Quaker Meeting. His faith was very much concerned with action. He was not afraid to challenge and to stir up. He was always happy to get stuck in and to take on responsibility as well as to think outside the box and encourage others to do the same. He was a generous and supportive colleague and a loyal friend. I, and many others, miss him and we send our love, thoughts, prayers and best wishes to his widow, Sally, their children and the extended family.

Brian often quoted from James 2:14

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Brian certainly lived this throughout the time I knew him.

We need our own online space

From the UCA Officer Group

Over the past few months the UCA Officer Group has been making representations to the Unitarian leadership about what seems to have become a hostile online environment for Christians.

Our concern was focused initially on the GA's new website, which many of us felt was writing Christianity out of the picture. We've also made representations about anti-Christian hate speech and discrimination within the Facebook group, UK Unitarians, with particular reference to a highly offensive Easter Sunday post titled 'The Evil of Christianity: A False and Dangerous Religion.' Despite this post breaking four of UK Unitarians' seven rules the admins allowed this post to remain.

We felt that in allowing material like this within Unitarianism's de facto communication channel, the group's admins were failing to live up to a vital Unitarian principle: that all faiths are treated with respect. Unitarians have always acknowledged the diversity of teaching and behaviours found in any religion, so attacks on the whole of a religion because of the actions of some fundamentalists within it seemed against the spirit and traditions of Unitarianism. Sadly, some Unitarians, including one of the admins of this group, have since declared that it is not necessary to afford Christianity the same respect as other faiths, because of its 'privilege'.

And so the Officer Group has been looking to the GA leadership to make it clear that, at least as far as they are concerned, Christianity and Christians should be treated with the same respect as other faiths within Unitarianism. The posts and comments referred to above are two especially egregious examples of anti-Christian discrimination and prejudice, but they are, sadly, not the only instances in which we are spoken to and about in a way that would never happen to followers of any other faith.

Liz Slade has assured us of some additional wording shortly to go on the new website which may go some way to addressing our concerns. But we have to report that progress has been frustratingly slow thus far.

Throughout all this it has become clear that we UCA members need our own online space, and so the UCA will soon have a new website, with everything that is on the current website plus some exciting new features.

The new site will include a forum that is just for UCA members. This will allow us to build fellowship and understanding between UCA members, some of whom are isolated, and to do so away from Facebook. This will help those of us who are the only Christians in our congregation to feel like we are not so alone. There will, naturally, be different points of view among UCA members, but no one will have to endure heavy discussions about politics or deep theology unless they want to. There are, at present, four channels in the forum: Faith, Chit-chat, UCA & Unitarianism, and Politics, so hopefully there will be something for everyone and we can all enjoy online fellowship without someone popping up to blame us for what fundamentalists have said and done.

We've also addressed the deficit in Christian content in Unitarian services. Many Unitarian Christians and Free Christians find there is little to nourish them in the services at their local Unitarian church or chapel, and others don't have any Unitarian church to go to at all. So, each Sunday, from Advent (November 28th) there will be a 6pm service on Zoom, which can be reached via a page on the new site. We already have a good supply of UCA members ready and willing to lead online worship, with services arranged from Advent to Easter and be-

yond. Unitarian ministers and service leaders have a difficult job trying to be inclusive to such a wide range of beliefs and traditions so hopefully these online services will complement what happens in our churches. It is envisaged that the online services will be approximately 30 - 40 minutes. While the Forum will be for UCA members only, the services will be open to all.

Please support these ventures, especially if you are lucky enough to be in a UCA affiliated church. It is in all our interests to nourish and strengthen Christianity within Unitarianism but we need to be able to connect with each other to do this. Joining together for worship and fellowship will raise the spirits of current UCA members, but we can also attract new people this way. So many liberal Christians are dissatisfied with the mainstream church they are part of, but they either lack a Unitarian congregation to join, or find that their local Unitarian church has nothing to offer them as a Christian. This will be a way of reaching out to them. No doubt there will be some hiccups and stumbles as we find our way, but this is such a good opportunity for us to come together in one place where we can generate the ideas and energy with which to revitalise the Unitarian Christian and Free Christian voice within the denomination. Naturally the services will be varied - our worship leaders reflect the full diversity of beliefs, attitudes and traditions within UCA, but we can still find a common rhythm and pattern together within this. Although the services will be shorter than the usual Sunday service there will be an opportunity for fellowship afterwards.

The new site will be at the same address as before: unitarianchristian.org.uk. It will also be found at unitarianchristian.co.uk, freechristian.org.uk and freechristian.co.uk. See you there!

On Babel and Pentecost: Finding a Common Language for our Time

Sheena Gabriel

Extract from a Zoom talk given by Sheena Gabriel for Pentecost, organised by the Unitarian and Free Christian Bible Discussion Group. The recording of the full talk (including an exploration of the phenomena of speaking in tongues) is available on the group's Facebook page.

On 23rd May the Christian church celebrates Pentecost; a week before Jews observed their Pentecost, also called Shavuot (which began as an ancient grain harvest festival and over time became a commemoration of the giving of the Torah to Moses.) In the book of Acts we read how Jesus' followers gather in Jerusalem to mark the Jewish Pentecost and await the promise of the Holy Spirit - which shows up in wind and tongues of fire, let loose beyond race, class and gender - seen by Christians as the birthday of the church. I'd like to explore Pentecost through the lens of another story, from Hebrew scripture, 'the Tower of Babel.' What happened in Acts is seen by Christians as the reversal of the Tower of Babel. The stories *do* seem related, though I want to avoid using Hebrew scripture simply as a precursor to Christian scripture. Babel is a significant story in its own right. Let's hear it from Genesis Ch. 11 (New English Bible):

"Once upon a time all the world spoke a single language and used the same words. As men journeyed

in the east, they came up on a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, 'come let us make bricks and bake them hard'; they used bricks for stone and bitumen for mortar. "Come they said, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and make a name for ourselves or we shall be dispersed all over the earth." Then the Lord came down to see the city and tower which mortal men had built, and he said: "Here they are, one people with a single language, and now they have started to do this henceforth nothing they have a mind to do will be beyond their reach. Come, let us go down there and confuse their speech, so that they will not understand what they say to one another." So the Lord dispersed them from there all over the earth and they left off building the city. That is why it is called Babel, because the Lord there made a babble of the language of all the world; from that place the Lord scattered men all over the face of the earth."

Those opening words, 'Once upon a time' are startling, and remind us it is just *one* story among many, which attempt to explain how languages came about; we should read it as a myth, but as with the best myths, full of universal truths. "... *all the world spoke a single language and used the same words*" sounds like a recipe for unity and harmony. Surely to speak with one voice, stay together as one peo-

ple, is a good thing? Wouldn't life be so much easier with a common tongue? Let's hold that thought there... It is clear the tower displeased God, though the sin is not specified. The most common reading is hubris; the people want "to make a name" for themselves, trying to reach heaven through their own initiative. The divine being looks down to see what industrious humans are up to and seems threatened, anxious that humans will claim equality. But rather than a petulant response by a jealous deity, we *could* read it as God putting the brakes on human endeavour, knowing where unrestrained human ambition will end up (there are many examples where human ingenuity has led to our near destruction.)

Another interpretation suggests the sin of the builders is human exploitation. In Jewish lore it is said the tower took 40 years to build and reached so high it took a year to climb to the top. A brick became more precious than a human. If a person fell from the tower and died, none took notice; if a brick dropped, they wept, because it would take a year to replace it. A pregnant woman had to give birth to her child, tie her new-born round her in a sheet, and continue moulding bricks. What a shocking image of slave labour. What started as a common building enterprise, became an ego-driven monument to human folly, where the strong exploit the weak. The same legend says the builders shot arrows into the heavens. Then mutual misunderstanding drove them to war. Part of the tower was swallowed by the earth, part of it was burnt, part remained as a ruin. It's difficult to read Babel without thinking of modern skyscrapers and monuments to human pride, built on the suffering of others.

Whatever the sin of the people, their building project was frustrated; the unfinished tower called Babel - resembling the Hebrew verb "to confuse". Jewish legend describes the chaos: a man asked his neighbour for an axe, his neighbour not understanding, brought him a spade. In anger, the man struck his neighbour and split his skull. Then every man took up his sword - until half of the world fell. What a terrible outcome. No wonder most interpretations see the mythical tower of Babel and the scattering into different nations and languages as a disaster. And division and conflict caused by people not speaking the same language is played out in our own time, between nations, within nations, within communities, within families - amongst people who literally speak different languages, and those for

whom it's as *if* they speak a different language - so divided are they, politically, socially or religiously. Think of Brexit... the unrest in Northern Ireland... the violence unfolding in Israel-Palestine... there are no end of examples.

But a very different reason for the builder's plans being thwarted at Babel, has been suggested; The people's desire to remain together in one place was in direct conflict with the divine purpose - given to Noah and his sons after the flood, "Be fertile and increase and fill up the earth" (Gen. 9:7). Just as Adam and Eve had to be kicked out of the blissful garden of Eden after eating from the tree of knowledge, as part of humanity's growing up into consciousness, so too the dispersal of humanity at Babel is a necessary step in human evolution. The dream of unity enhanced by one language *seems* a good thing. But if in a desire for unity focused on one small space, humanity tries to obliterate the creative vision of diversity, then their scattering across the earth is not so much a punishment, as fulfilment of divine will.

John A. Buehrens, UU minister, in his book, 'Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals' writes: "*Why are human beings divided into different tribes, nations and linguistic groups? One approach is to see the question as part of a larger puzzle about Creation itself. I'm reminded of an old story that involves some inebriation. At a cocktail party a rationalist in his cups goes up to a woman who is a poet and theologian. "Why did God make so much of everything?" he demands. "There's just too much! Too many stars, too many species, too many people, too many languages and religions! Wouldn't just one language and religion have been better?" "Perhaps God was a little drunk" the woman replies. "Drunk?" said the rationalist. "What could get the Creator of the Universe inebriated?" "Perhaps it was love" she opines.*"

What if the divine being drunk on love, risks the discord resulting from human diversity - even as it breaks her God-sized heart - because only through difference can humans grow into full maturity? It is easy to get along with folk who speak the same language. The lesson is to get along with those who speak a *different* language. And throughout Hebrew scripture, amidst the bloodshed caused by warring tribes and nations, we glimpse hints of the divine initiative in gathering scattered peoples together again.

And so we fast forward to Acts Chapter 2 in the Christian Bible:

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house... Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared... and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven... And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.... “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed... But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: “... Indeed, these are not drunk...No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy...*

Perhaps as with Babel, we should add the preface ‘once upon a time’, to remind us this too is a universal story. None of the phenomena are unique: wind, fire and the ability to speak strange languages are signs of the divine presence in many religious traditions. *Something* happened which emboldened the early followers of Jesus, but for those who struggle with the miraculous aspects, we can read the story in a way that does not defy possibility. Perhaps mass ecstasy, as first one, then another, realised whilst their beloved teacher was no longer physically present, he was alive to them in a different way? As for speaking in tongues, David Christie-Murray in his book ‘Voices from the Gods’ suggests

this could be explained by *Cryptomnesia* - residues of a language once heard but forgotten. At Pentecost, Jews thronged to Jerusalem from all countries. The disciples would have been exposed to multiple languages, as pilgrims sang and recited prayers. Perhaps on this day of heightened expectation, they spilled out into the crowd. Foreigners hearing snatches of their own tongue, were astonished enough to gather round. Perhaps the communication continued - in a mix of languages *and* the common tongue - Greek?

Peter responding to accusations of being drunk, boldly proclaims the words of the prophet Joel as being fulfilled that day. Perhaps the real miracle is not wind, or fire, or strange tongues, but the fact a homogenous group of people are enabled to communicate across the divides of language, culture, gender and rank? The early followers of Jesus it seems, came to a transforming consciousness, where previous cultural and societal divisions dissolved. We read that 3000 were baptised that day. The believers ‘had all things in common’, sold their possessions, distributed to all in need. They worshipped, broke bread in each other’s homes, and ate ‘with gladness and generous’ hearts. A community of unity amidst diversity.

Taking the stories of Babel and Pentecost together (at the risk of over-simplification): At Babel, humankind attempts to storm the heavens by their own efforts; at Pentecost, the Spirit takes the initiative. At Babel the tongues get mixed up, so too at Pentecost, but with a different outcome. In the legends of Babel, people became slaves to the machine, just as in our own times people are treated as commodities - victims of political, social and religious oppression. In some artists’ depictions a dreadful fire consumes Babel - just as human passion and hubris can inflame and burn. At Pentecost, the flame of the Spirit warms and enlivens, but does not destroy. Diversity of languages and cultures need not of *itself* be the problem. It is human egos that make it a problem. Pentecost suggests if we surrender to something larger than ego - whether we call that God, or Spirit, or in Jungian terms, the Self - something new can manifest. The disciples gather in a condition of prayerful openness. They learn the outpouring of the Spirit that Joel foretold and the kin-dom of God which Jesus proclaimed, is to be for all people, regardless of race, age, status or gender.

Some Christians read Pentecost only through the

lens of missionizing; the gift of tongues enabled the disciples to convert Jews and Gentiles to the 'true' faith. I think the Spirit that showed up that day is larger than any one faith. In Hebrew, the word for spirit - 'ruach' - also means wind and breath and is 'feminine' in designation; the same Spirit of life that gives breath to every creature. At Babel, the people try to reach a God in the heavens 'up there'. They are brought down to earth, perhaps because they need to learn 'up there' is not where God lives. At Pentecost the spirit comes like a rushing wind - as breath - representing the divine who lives *within* us, *amongst* us, revealed in other human beings, not all like us.

Luke describes Pentecost as a sign of the last days. 2000 years later, some say we are living in the last days. It is not hard to see why, as so much unravels around us. With a babel of fake news and conspiracy theories, with conflicts spilling onto so many streets and cities, we can only pray that the same Spirit which moved at Pentecost will unite people of different faiths and political agendas. And in our own spiritual communities too. For the 25 years I've been a Unitarian there have been debates about religious language but the wrangling in recent times has got very heated - especially on Facebook. It can seem as if Christian Unitarians and Humanist Unitarians really *do* speak a different language. It feels like our Babel moment - we no longer speak a common tongue (if ever we did). Some want more God language, others want less. For all our talk of diversity, people on both sides of the debate, wish we could be more homogenous.

We are so divided there is even talk of separating. As at Babel, will we, because of our struggles to communicate, lay down our tools and abandon our common enterprise of building beloved community? That's one option; we could scatter and go our separate ways. But if diversity is a good thing - the way 'God' most fully expresses Godself - then surely the solution is to seek the miracle of Pentecost. Whether we are Christian or Humanist, theist or atheist, black or white, straight or gay, politically conservative or liberal - if we speak from arrogance, Babel results. If we listen with humility and seek to learn another's language, Pentecost results.

The Sufi mystic Rumi tells of a Persian, Turk, Arab and a Greek travelling to a distant land. They argue how to spend the single coin they have. The Persian wants something to refresh his thirst - he must have angur. The Turk needs something for his hunger

called uzum. The Arab wants more than one thing - he wants inab; and the Greek demands stafil. The argument becomes heated. A man who speaks many languages overhears their quarrel. "*Give me the coin*" he says. "*I'll satisfy all your desire.*" He goes to a market and comes back with 4 bunches of grapes. "*This is my angur!*" cries the Persian. "*This is what I call uzum,*" replies the Turk. "*You've bought me my inab,*" says the Arab. "*No! This is stafil*" cries the Greek. The men realise they each want the same thing - they just use different names for it. The four travellers represent human beings in search of spiritual food which expresses itself differently. The wise one knows what we seek, though called by different names, is in reality, one thing. What if Christians, Jews and Muslims could sit down in Jerusalem right now and agree that God, Yahweh and Allah are just different names for the same reality?

Our world is like Babel. Will we as Unitarians contribute to the noise and confusion, or will we offer a place of refuge? When the wind of the Spirit fell upon the disciples, people from many nations were astonished to hear them speak a language they could understand. Could this happen in our own denomination: Christian, Jewish, Humanist, Hindu, Buddhist, Theist, Pagan - united by something larger than our human egos - rooted in the only language that matters? Could it also happen across the world where there is conflict between different peoples? Dahlia Scheindlin ends her recent Guardian article (16th May 2021) exploring the outbreak of violence in Israel and Palestine, with these words: "*The landscape looks grim, especially as sirens continue to scream. I have been asked if Jews and Arabs can live together again. We can, but the first step is to face the causes. Ideally the next step is to heed W.H Auden: "We must love one another or die". We must love one another or die; what is literally true for warring peoples, is also true for our little denomination.*

The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians claimed to speak in tongues more than others, but realised this is not what is most important: "*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have all faith, to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing... Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end... now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest*

of these is love.” The language of love unites... not just our limited human concept of it - but the love that pours forth from the Creative spirit, the maker of galaxies - drunk on the wine of love that spills over into a diversity that dazzles the mind! “Why did God make so much of everything?” “Perhaps God was a little drunk”. “Drunk?” “What could get the Creator of the Universe inebriated?” “Perhaps it was love”.

Liberalism’s greatest weakness

Martin Camroux

I am a Trinitarian United Reformed Church minister but I have a sort of weakness for Unitarians! When I was at Oxford I went to lectures, used the library, and loved the chapel at Manchester College. I came to see that people like William Ellery Channing, Harriet Martineau, James Luther Adams, and Ralph Waldo Emerson mean that Unitarianism is an integral part of the rich kaleidoscope of Christian diversity. After all most of the christologies in the New Testament are Unitarian! My son even works for Peabody Housing Trust founded by a Unitarian philanthropist. And of course I love and share your liberalism with its commitment to criticality, inclusiveness, and tolerance. In Thomas Troeger’s words:

May our learning curb the error
which unthinking faith can breed
lest we justify some terror
with an antiquated creed.

But (there is always a but!) an unambiguous liberal needs to be self-critical. All religious traditions have their strengths and weaknesses and that is certainly true of liberalism which too often it forgets that, as G.K. Chesterton used to say, “Merely having an open mind is nothing. The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid”. Too easily openness to others’ beliefs comes with having none of one’s own. So liberalism ends up a kind of fuzzy blur – a lowest common denominator faith. If we are being honest which of us haven’t met those whose liberalism is essentially a list of what they don’t believe?

If I might be untactful, you can find a vivid example of this at Arlington Street Unitarian Church in Boston, Massachusetts, made famous by William Ellery Channing in the nineteenth century. Their website records that in 1959 they decided that “the cross no longer has meaning for most members and is taken down”. It is certainly true that making sense of the cross is not easy in our society and not helped by the incoherence of much of what passes for traditional Christian atonement theory. The idea that God is incapable of forgiveness without seeing an innocent person tortured to death is repellent and

makes God a monster. Or as Channing used to say, “For ourselves, we have not so learned Jesus”. But to say the cross has no meaning is something else. For two thousand years the cross has been one of the profoundest Christian symbols, delving into the depths of life’s good and evil and inspiring incomparable art, music, and poetry. In the *Isenheim Altarpiece* by Matthias Grunewald Christ’s body shows the marks of the whipping he has received, the crown of thorns has long spikes, his head sags lifelessly, while to his left Mary Magdalene raises her hands in agony while his mother swoons. This is Christ in the midst of desolate and seemingly hopeless suffering. Bach’s Passion Chorale immortalises it:

O sacred head, sore wounded,
With grief and shame weighed down;
O royal head, surrounded
With thorns, thy only crown.

The cross symbolises sacrificial love and the presence of God’s love even in life’s darkest moments. Any Christian tradition which loses the power of the cross as a religious symbol is one which is evacuating itself of meaning. When that goes it will not be surprising if any belief in God goes with it, and perhaps any sense of being a Christian at all.

At its best liberal Christianity is a dialectic between faith and modernity, tradition, and innovation. Today the knife-edge it walks between the religious tradition and the contemporary world has become more difficult as culture has become more secular. If it is going to survive liberal Christianity needs to match radical social commitment with a renewed spirituality and a renewed sense of God. You can ask questions about the Bible, but still honour it, you are not bound by the past but do not believe the present is always superior.

It is fine to have a list of things you don’t believe in – I have my own- but you need some convictions as well. There’s a nice story told about Heinrich Heine, the German, or if you prefer Jewish, poet, standing with a friend before the great cathedral of Amiens in France. The friend says “Heinrich, tell me why

people can't build piles like this anymore?" And Heine answers, "Cher ami, it's really very easy. In those days people had convictions, we moderns have opinions and it takes more than an opinion to build a cathedral".

Personally, I am not ready to surrender Christianity to a secular future. I have seen a wonder and a glory in life and for me the life of Jesus is where that is spelt out in human terms. I am part and parcel of that Christian faith community and I do not want to sacrifice that reality. My liberalism is about deepening faith not losing it. You take down the cross in my church over my dead body.

On hope and healing

Dr James Wilson

"A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, they gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left - some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them and because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on....."

The last year and half (or so) have shown us the reality of living in a global pandemic, something that many public health professionals (of which I was one many years' ago) have been warning of. The loss of life, the loss of health and well-being and the material impact on the economy (and environment given all the plastics involved in testing and PPE) have been tragic.

Of course, part of life is the prevalence of illness, suffering and pain and the topic of responding to this as Free Christians, Unitarians, or as members of other faith groups is a pertinent one. Even without pandemic disease, we will all invariably suffer from ill-health, or know someone who has, be it physical or mental. Thankfully, in recent years, issues surrounding mental health have received greater recognition both by the medical community and wider public consciousness and are increasingly viewed as not being uncommon or taboo.

All of the great faiths of the world talk about sickness and suffering, of finding healing and hope. The redacted version of verses from the Gospel of Mark quoted above on when Jesus heals the paralysed man is a common bible reading reflecting on an instance of healing performed by Jesus. Like much of scripture that could be read and reflected on from different perspectives, literal, metaphorical or symbolic. Perhaps one perspective on this is the symbolism of the sick man reflecting emotional or psychological paralysis, with the message of forgiveness allowing the 'paralysed' to get up, brush themselves off and carry on their spiritual journey through life. Even if this perspective is not for you, the message

is that healing is possible, that we may have some confidence that things can change for the better, that maybe we can still find the 'Kingdom of God' regardless.

In addition to our Christian heritage, other world faiths also talk much about suffering and ways to alleviate it. One of the most profound statements in Buddhism, is the "First Noble Truth" which is most simply expressed as "there is suffering". If you are unfamiliar with this tradition, the other Truths outline Lord Buddha's teaching on the causes of suffering (which are mostly related to the view one takes on life's challenges) and ways to alleviate or overcome them.

One of the clear insights throughout the Bible (and elsewhere) is that suffering is inevitable as a human being, but that the spiritual masters of ages past have been able to heal themselves and others, emotionally, or spiritually, if not physically.

"To suffer" means to "bear up", to put up with. One of things we might say to a poorly friend is: "how are you bearing up?" We might receive a reply of "I'm OK", or "I'm managing", even though the person is clearly distressed, but does not want to admit it, due to shame, or not wanting to burden others. In contrast, there often seems to be those who have a tendency to always look on the more negative side when they are facing difficult situations, which itself can reflect a form of mental dis-ease itself – clinical psychologists are well aware of the 'negativity bias' that often causes much distress. When we first face a difficult diagnosis, the pain of a serious injury or news of the suffering of a loved one we may start to feel our faith falter and ask God 'why me?', 'what did I do to deserve this?' Of course, this is not a new insight into the nature of being human, there are many famous examples of victims of illness (or their friends/family) trying to find reasons why 'the good' suffer, when many of 'the bad' seem to 'get away with it'. Perhaps the

most famous bible story is that of poor Job, who lost everything, family, property and health and ended up scraping his boils with a piece of broken pottery. The well-known story of Job includes his friends, who although probably well-intentioned, did probably not help Job when they question what he could have done to deserve such misfortune and Job himself was certainly not happy with his lot (but did not curse God). However, after hearing God speak, Job realises his somewhat limited perspective (compared to God's at least!) and his health and property is restored. Perhaps this story can be seen as a message that searching for reasons might not help us and that trying to find simple reasons for why bad things happen is unlikely to provide comfort.

Other scriptures also suggest that 'why me?' question might not be helpful. We might reflect on how Jesus did not provide a 'tit for tat' answer. In John (chapter 9), Jesus healed a man born blind: His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus replied, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; but this happened so that the work of God may be displayed in his life". Perhaps Jesus's instruction for repentance can be seen as a recommendation for changing one's view or to see things anew.

In more recent times, others have questioned why tragedy strikes. It is interesting to note that in his famous book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People", Rabbi Harold Kushner notes that "I meet a lot of people who tell me that they have read my book *why* do bad things happen to good people. I politely point out that it is not titled *why*, but *when*. If you are unfamiliar with this book, it is an interesting reflection on responding to tragedy, which in Rabbi Kushner's life, is the loss of his son to a premature aging disease. The main message of the book is looking at our response, rather than focussing on looking for reasons that may be beyond our ability to perceive.

So what can we do? How can we respond to our suffering or that of others? It is not always easy to answer this, but perhaps there are a few things we can keep in mind. One clear thing we can do for others, is to just listen. Anyone with pastoral responsibilities or that has worked as in chaplaincy or counselling, will tell you just how important being a good listener can be. Often in hospital Chaplaincy one hears apologies from those who feel that talking about their ailments is somehow a burden or to be

avoided. Clearly rumination may not help, but 'the stiff upper lip' approach can lead to all sort of emotions being bottled up which need to come out, and the least a good Chaplain can do is to be a 'neutral' person for the patient to speak too, especially if they have concerns relating to family or those treating them.

In addition to listening, there may be simple practical things (which may seem trivial) to help. Making someone a hot drink, helping someone with their shopping, or a quick 'check in' phone call or text message may seem like a small gesture, or perhaps an inadequate one, but it can be very profound for the person in need. This reminds me of a time when I helped a man on crutches hold on to his bags of groceries on the London Underground, a place where people often completely ignore their fellow commuters. The gratitude expressed by the man took me by surprise, as to me, it was a very small thing to do.

If practical actions (for ourselves or others) are not forthcoming, perhaps we can find comfort in the transcendent – however we understand it. Even if the physical aspects of the disease are not improved, can we be open to the possibility of healing of the spirit, of finding a sense of ease, even amongst the pain? Personally, I have found it useful in times of crisis to reflect on the temporary nature of our bodies, the feeling that we are not just our bodies, but rather than we are more than that: we know from both a traditional biblical perspective ('ashes to ashes') and a scientific perspective (conservation of mass) that the physical parts of us do not disappear into nothing. Perhaps we can reflect on the immaterial aspect of our being, Spirit, the Inner Light or the 'Christ within' that does not just disappear, and that is bigger than our limited ideas of ourselves. Can Spirit get sick, can it die? As the psalmist said (paraphrased) "even youths will faint and fall exhausted, but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength and soar like Eagles'. Perhaps we can take the advice offered by Jesus in the Sermon in the Mount to not worry about what tomorrow will bring.

Perhaps we can also take inspiration from those who have suffered great hardship and loss but manage to keep going. Maybe those of us with chronic health problems or disabilities can act as role models for others. There are countless examples of people achieving great things in the face of adversity: Beethoven continued to compose after he started

going deaf, Stephen Hawking becoming a world-renowned physicist despite loss of control of his body, Michael J Fox – the Hollywood actor - continues to act with Parkinson's Disease and undertakes much work to raise awareness of the disease and funds to help those afflicted by it.

Finally, a great comfort (and welcome distraction) for those in pain and those who are unable to take steps to mitigate it (medical or other), can be the practice of contemplative prayer, or meditation (be it Christian, secular or from another faith). Personal experience managing chronic pain, and much scientific/medical research has shown that meditation/contemplative practices can reduce pain perception and can help build resilience to chronic pain and physical limitations. There is a plethora of options for those who have never tried such techniques, including mindfulness, working with the breath, praying the psalms, centring prayer (using a sacred word or phrase as an object of meditation), even *lectio divina* (reflecting on sacred text). With practice and perseverance, these methods can also help us connect to Spirit, to find peace.

A short prayer is hereby offered:

O God, Holy Spirit, hear our prayer for healing and for hope.

We pray that during our time of pain and suffering, we find comfort in Your creation: be it in the beauty of nature, the kind heart of a friend or in the stillness in which the world appears.

May we receive the gift of compassion so that we can take skilful action to help ourselves and others and offer comfort to those that are afflicted.

We pray that we find acceptance during times of suffering. Let us not forget that even during the hard times we are loved and can share that love.

What news is there from God ?

Jeremy Goring

It was not until I was 11 that I began to go regularly to a Unitarian church. I had not done so previously because, although my mother was a 4th generation Unitarian, my father's family were disciples of Tolstoy, a profoundly spiritual man who had a strong aversion to churches. But when in 1941 my father went off to join the Army, my mother, left on her own for the first time and in need of moral and spiritual support, decided (on the first Sunday after his departure) to attend the service at the Old Meeting House at Ditchling, taking my brother and sister and me with her. Thereafter, for many years, we hardly ever missed a Sunday.

In those days many of the services were conducted by lay preachers. The congregation generally approved of them, but there was one whose sermons they found a bit too disturbing. I myself never listened to them very carefully, but I have never forgotten the occasion when he ended one with these words: 'When you wake up in the morning do not ask "How do I feel today?" but "What news is there from God?"' How did he think this news would be brought to us? I suspect that, since the question was asked on awakening, it might be via a dream. 'Dreams', a 4 year-old boy once said in my hearing,

'are God's television.' Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings! What he was saying sounded like a 20th century version of *Job*, 33. 15-16: 'In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, in slumbering upon the bed; then God openeth the ears of men, and sealeth their instruction.' The ancient Hebrews set great store by dreams, which were believed to contain messages from God. The Old Testament records instances of God using this medium to speak to Jacob, Laban, Samuel and others, while the New Testament tells how the Magi decided to take a safer way home after being 'warned of God in a dream'.

I myself never paid much attention to my dreams until the 1980s, when I was training as an analytical psychotherapist and got into the habit of writing them down. In analysing them I have come to learn much about myself and my relationships with others. It has also deepened my understanding of what is going on in the wider world. In recent months I have had a number of very vivid dreams, some of them of an apocalyptic nature. I have dreamed about upheavals, cataclysms, the breaking down of barriers and events that seem to presage the end of the world as we know it. A recent dream featured

two groups of people, a smaller one passing through a narrow gate and a larger one passing through a broad one – an exact visualisation of *Matthew*, 7. 13-14: ‘Enter ye in at the strait gate ...’ The passage about dreams in *Job*, quoted above, comes from the Authorised Version, but a different – and probably more accurate – translation of the Hebrew is to be found in the Revised Standard Version. Instead of ‘sealeth their instruction’ it says ‘terrifies them with warnings’. Don’t we all need to be terrified by warnings that, if we continue to behave so irresponsibly – guzzling too much gas, flying too frequently, eating too much meat, destroying rain forests, spraying crops with pesticides, and so forth – we shall be doing irreparable damage to the environment and jeopardising the future of the planet?

Something else for which the world is currently under judgment is the exploitation of animals. Although the Chinese government – not known for its truth-telling – strenuously denies it, the Covid-19 pandemic, which has brought the world to a standstill, seems to have had its origins in the wet markets of Wuhan, where a variety of wild animals are caged and slaughtered. And similar instances of what is termed ‘zoonotic spillover’ are believed to account for the genesis of HIV, Zika, Ebola, Sars, Mers and innumerable new strains of ‘flu. If humankind continues to contravene the laws of nature in this way, will there ever come an end to its troubles?

The onward march to catastrophe is led by men

Berlin comes to Cheshire

Jeff Gould

There has long been a connection between the Unitarian Church in Berlin, Germany and the congregation of Dean Row Chapel, Wilmslow, Cheshire. The minister of Dean Row Chapel, Jeff Gould, enjoyed two sabbaticals in the German capital—in 1997 and in 2017. In the course of both extended stays in Berlin he was able to become involved in the life of the Unitarian congregation and befriend the minister and his extended family. In the intervening years, Jeff often visited with the Reverend Martin Schröder, and was invited to preach on the occasion of the 50th and 70th anniversaries of the Berlin Church. The Schröder Family has also travelled to Wilmslow for extended visits.

The Unitarian Church in Berlin was founded amidst

(and it usually is the male of the species) who, in an astonishing display of hubris, think they are in total control of everything and are subject to no higher power. An earlier generation knew differently. In my boyhood most people in this country went to church and, although some may have gone merely out of habit, the majority probably did so because they were believers. The congregation of our Old Meeting House sang their hymns from *Hymns of Worship*, which had 20 hymns in the section called ‘Divine Guidance’ and 34 in one called ‘Trust and Submission’, and it is likely that most believed the words they were singing and felt strengthened spiritually by them

If today you ask people, anxious about the rapid spread of the pandemic, what should be done about it, some may simply exclaim ‘God knows!’ They are right. He does know; and if we, in the depths of our hearts and souls, come to believe this, we shall find ourselves gaining a deeper understanding of what is happening in the world and more courage and strength to face it. And when we wake up in the morning we shall not ask, ‘What are the headlines in the papers’, but ‘What news is there from God?’ *Jeremy Goring is a retired university teacher and a former Unitarian minister*

the challenges of the Berlin Airlift in 1948 by the former Lutheran pastor, Hans-Georg Remus. Martin Schröder succeeded Pastor Remus on his death in 1977. In February of 2020, Martin died following a long illness. Jeff was honoured to officiate at his funeral service in Berlin, shortly before the global Coronavirus pandemic prevented foreign travel. The congregation has maintained its work and witness in the face of the pandemic and with the loss of its minister, largely thanks to the efforts of his widow, Gisela Schröder-Fink.

In October 2018, sixteen members of the Dean Row Chapel congregation accompanied their minister, Jeff Gould, to Berlin in order to mark the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the congregation in

that city. The week-long visit established deep personal bonds between the two congregations. It was as a result of those friendships and connections that Gisela visited Wilmslow in the middle of September this year in order to attend a wedding at Dean Row Chapel and to attend the Sunday morning service on 5 September. She began the time of worship by lighting the chalice, which took the form of an embossed candle that had been the gift of the Berlin Church. All four hymns that were sung that morning were set to German hymn tunes. One hymn was sung completely in German. It is sung each time the Berlin congregation meets for worship. The service benefitted from the contributions of the chapel's organist, Alan Myerscough, who accompanied the Alto, Andrea Murray, in the offering of three German Lieder. It is hoped that the two congregations will benefit from future exchange visits, and that support may be given to the Berliners as they plan for their future.



Jeff Gould, Gisela Schröder-Fink

Send an **article** or **story** to
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Alan Myerscough, Andrea Murray

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On Sunday 5th September, The Rev. Dr. Rory Castle Jones was ordained a minister at Gellionnen Unitarian Chapel in Pontardawe, South Wales, where he was also officially inducted as minister having served as minister-elect since May this year. The service was led by The Rev. Ant Howe, the tutor of Unitarian College, with contributions from #Blessed (the chapel's youth group), Côt Gellionnen (the chapel choir), The Rev. Melda Grantham (Llwynrhydowen Chapel) and The Rev. Canon Timothy Hewitt, a local Anglican priest, as well as the chapel's officers, GA President Anne Mills and Chief Officer Liz Slade. Over 100 people attended from the congregation, local area and Unitarians from across Wales and beyond. It was a thoroughly joyful occasion and Rory and the congregation are very excited about what the future may hold.

Photographs by Angela Hewitt



Rory with his husband, Rhys, their parents and dog, Edna