



Horsham Unitarian Church

Newsletter – June/July 2017



Rejection of dogma and a rigorous search for truth in religion and in ways of living with real integrity can justly be claimed as a defining feature of Unitarianism. In these days, when lies can masquerade as “alternative facts” and baseless information gets massive exposure on social media, our Minister’s 25th May address ‘On Truth’ had particular resonance. We print below key sections of that address:

Dear Friends

***Love is the doctrine of this church,
The quest for truth its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.***

(Affirmation of 20C Unitarian Universalist minister,
L Griswold Williams)

So, how do we apprehend our truth?

Unitarians ceased to regard the Bible as the ultimate authority in matters of faith during the 19C. Our strong emphasis on reason led us towards textual criticism and acceptance of evidence-based, scientific accounts of the nature of the world and our place in it.

For many Unitarians today, our quest for truth and insight stems from *personal experience*; while we respect and cherish our Judaeo-Christian heritage, we gain inspiration from other faith traditions and philosophies, from science, psychology and literature.

However, if we opt for *personal responsibility* in developing our spirituality, if we look within our *individual* selves, to our own personal experience, for authority, rather than to an external institution, or holy book, we run the risk of being deluded, lost or confused.

David Usher addresses this issue in his book, *Life Spirit*:

“For most people, meaningful participation in a spiritual community, even one which promotes individual authority, is essential to the health and growth of their personal spirituality.

A spiritual community provides interaction with others; the reassurance that although your paths

might diverge from time to time, you are each seeking after the same thing and can help each other in your journeys. To participate in such a community is not to endow it with ultimate authority to make decisions for you, but it is to use that community as a laboratory of faith in which you test ideas, and – just as important – live out those ideas in meaningful relationship with others.”

So membership of a spiritual community can temper our wilder/more errant beliefs and support us in honest exploration in matters of faith.

Because of its emphasis on rationality, Unitarianism can be seen as a somewhat cool faith, devoid of feeling and emotion. The charismatic fundamentalist churches are the ones which seem to be growing, while we most certainly are not.

In her book, *Humility, Anger and Grace: Thoughts on Education and Time*, Nancy Crumbine (UUA minister, farmer and poet) advocates bringing back the feeling, what she calls “Eros”, into our spirituality. Eros in Greek mythology is the god who was conceived out of an inebriated union between his mother Chaos and his father Resource. Eros represents the multi-faceted love of creativity.

The opening of her chapter *In which Eros is...* begins:

“Consider this worthy educational goal: To foster the affirmation and promotion of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This can be stated in a slightly livelier way: To affirm and promote a tireless and incessant wrestling with the unknown. Or better yet: To foster and celebrate the urgent, driving, consuming erotic desire to reach what is unreachable.”

She continues:

“Because eroticism is so often confused with its opposite, pornography – for pornography has to do with sensation, eros with feeling – eros has been divorced from the spiritual...”

“Living in a society – and, increasingly, in a world – that defines truth and meaning in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, robs our work of its erotic power and fulfilment. Work becomes necessity and the erotic spirit - by which our deepest knowledge is tapped, and by means of which we are able to scrutinise and determine our existence - is isolated to the bedroom, leaving politics to the unintentional, the spiritually lazy, those who would trade truth for certainty.”

“In a society that has reduced Love to sex and violence, on the one hand, and heart-shaped candy, on the other, how is it possible to bring eros to our work, to search out truth and meaning?”

“The love of creativity, the love of the search for truth and meaning, like the love of anything, has nothing to do with possession or accomplishment.... Eros is the participation in procreation – physical, psychic, emotional, intellectual – the intoxicated participation in the cycles of birth and death, the spiritual/erotic affirmation of the free and responsible search for meaning and truth.”

During a period of quiet reflection, we contemplated these words by Cliff Reed:

Aspects of God

*God of our inmost selves
and of the stars from which we came;
who is both the core of our being
and the transcendent mystery;
of whom there is no need of proof,
because we are here to ask the question;
to whom all religion points, but whom no religion
can ever truly comprehend;
who is the truth behind the sacred myths,
but whose whole truth no myth can capture,
however sacred;
who inspires the words of prophets and poets,
but who cannot be defined in words alone;
whose presence we sense where there is love,
but which we lose where there is hatred;*

*God of our hearts,
we turn to you in the communion of silence...*

*God of the silence –
in ourselves, in this sacred place,
and in the cosmic void,
bless us in our quietness and our tumult,
in our striving and our rest. Amen.*

It has been said that we are living in a Post-Truth era, a time of “alternative facts”, of contested realities. In a post-truth age, emotional narratives count for more than dry “facts”. Mendacity on the part of those with power is old hat; we are all familiar with totalitarian states manipulating the truth – (Orwell’s Ministry of Truth in 1984 was inspired by Stalinism) – sometimes with devastating results. (Eg, the grain harvest in China: during Mao’s Great Leap Forward, officials were instructed to lie, to exaggerate the grain harvest; people were forced to give up grain for export even though they were starving; between 20-40 million died of starvation.) Dissident voices are silenced. Lies and cover-ups will always be with us and not just in totalitarian states – think of Hillsborough - but perhaps something different is happening now. Are we in the presence of a different phenomenon?

Our faith grew out of Enlightenment thinking – a time when respect for evidence and expertise was developing. Scientific method became accepted as the legitimate route to knowledge, (although religious truth claims have always posed problems for philosophers...some wisely realising that religious language could not be treated as on a par with scientific language, that different criteria of truth apply...)

Then post-modernism reared up in the 20C – ideas about truth being a *relative* concept; that what counted as truth depended on who had the power; that some narratives were suppressed while others dominated. It had politically laudable elements, giving a boost to feminism and civil rights issues, eg, but post-modernism percolated down into general consciousness as a total relativity of truth; ultimately, to the feeling that “I’ve got a right to my opinion and I can believe what I like.”

This relativism of truth has been exacerbated by the digital revolution. The prime function of information technology is not to give us truth but to give us more of what we like. So, ironically, although in theory we have access to millions/billions of people, we end up communicating with just those individuals who are like us.

And there is no *benign community* to gently challenge or temper our more bizarre, or dangerous, beliefs. Someone out there agrees with us, and that is enough to confirm our views, or to normalise our deviance. (Paedophiles, political extremists, self-harmers, anorexics, etc, are all validated and encouraged in their aberrant beliefs and behaviours.)

Another way of putting this, in the words of Matthew D’Ancona from his book *Post Truth*, is that where a *hierarchy of institutions* used to manage what counts as truth, the structure of the world wide web is flat; we have moved “from the cathedral to the bazaar”. Everyone or no-one is an expert. Information sent to social media fields tends to be more of what we like already; it is not clear whether or not it is true. Who are the gatekeepers or referees? Who is judging the truth? Emotional resonance seems to have overtaken traditional verification mechanisms. Rather than the traditional claim and counter claim of post-Enlightenment thinking, we are being fed with stuff we already agree with or feel favourably towards.

I was shocked to hear of a hate campaign against families who had lost their children in a gun massacre at a primary school in USA. Apparently (according to BBC - long may it last!) a gun lobby group claimed on a social media platform that the whole thing was a conspiracy, set up by Barack Obama as part of his campaign to reform the gun laws in USA. Some of the victims’ families had even had death threats.

And the perpetrator behind this “disinformation” turns out to be a close associate of Donald Trump. Such disinformation can travel very quickly around the world, and many will believe it. We face a major challenge: How to introduce regulation on the part of *platforms* like Facebook and Twitter, who do not acknowledge their responsibilities as *publishers*.

In our spiritual community, we celebrate our capacity to doubt and question. There is such a thing as a healthy scepticism in the face of authority. Perhaps the collapse of trust in our political and economic institutions is a rational response to the cynical behaviour of politicians and bankers playing with our lives. Mistrust in itself is not a bad thing, but questioning well-researched evidence because it doesn’t fit into your world view *is*. Sometimes the truth is hard for us to accept. We must avoid turning away from it in *denial*.

Pluralism in Unitarianism - what some disparagingly call *pick and mix* – is tempered by being part of a faith tradition whose beliefs may have changed along with scientific developments, but whose *core values* remain firm. These core values provide the criteria by which we assess claims to the truth – are we in the presence of love, compassion, empathy, beauty, responsibility, justice? We respect others’ beliefs, if they are not harmful. Such *pluralism* is the essence of a free society but this is very different from a total *relativism* which says anything goes, you can believe what you like, including “alternative facts”.

Relativism in matters of truth is dangerous for society. It’s interesting to speculate on recent developments in the truth business: Perhaps hearing what we want to hear gives a sense of agency to those of us who feel disenfranchised, who have lost the dignity of work, who no longer trust institutions after the economic crash of 2008. Perhaps we are more willing to put our trust in “friends” instead, people like us who have suffered as we have suffered. Perhaps having a spurious enemy – a THEM – gives us the illusion of agency?

Emotional resonance seems to have overtaken traditional verification mechanisms. Orwell feared that control of reality would come from the State; he would have been surprised to see truth undermined by the cult of INDIVIDUALISM combined with a TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION.

We don’t want a Ministry of Truth; we have to be careful to get right balance between free speech and protecting the vulnerable. State censorship is not an answer. Education in its widest sense is crucial.

Being open to the truth is a spiritual exercise; we need to look within and acknowledge our prejudices. We all have a tendency to see what we want to see/hear what we want to hear. How do we hold onto our truth? We must learn to listen to our souls. This is about feeling, but it’s feeling and thought working together. It’s about understanding the limitations of our brains, how we are swayed by evidence that *confirms* our prejudices, how we must discipline ourselves to look for exceptions, to *accept the unexpected truth*. Notice the good Samaritans; not all Moslems are fundamentalist; some women are from Mars and some men are from Venus; foulmouthed Rochdale girls were victims of abuse, etc, etc. May we find the courage to be willing to change our minds, to change our perspectives in view of new evidence.

Let us give thanks for the support and gentle challenge of our community of open hearts and open minds.

Events –June/July 2017

Sunday 18th June

10.30 in the Church

“The Great Get Together”



Led by our Minister this unique non-denominational service will be part of a national day of remembrance celebrating the life of murdered MP Jo Cox.

The service will be followed by lunch in the Church Hall and the day's retiring collection will be contributed to the Jo Cox Foundation.



The social and political principles of inclusiveness, tolerance and compassion for which Jo Cox stood mirror our own most important Unitarian ideals. For all who embrace those ideals, this “Great Get Together” service is an opportunity to express our solidarity and an event not to be missed.

*"An act designed to drive communities apart has instead brought them together, an act designed to silence a voice has instead allowed millions of others to hear it. Although she is dead, the opinions and values she held so dear will live on." –
Brendan Cox, Jo's Husband*

The Jo Cox Foundation has been established to support Jo's friends, family and colleagues in their efforts to continue her work and to highlight the issues she cared about so deeply – from the plight of innocent civilians in Syria to the despair caused by loneliness and social isolation in the UK.

Sunday 30th July

12 Noon in Church Hall

Congregational “Feedback” Meeting following morning service, our minister will give feedback on ideas and proposals put forward at the Festival of Unitarians in the South-East (FUSE) held in February this year.



In addition, Maria and our delegate, Rev Richard Boeke will report to the congregation on April's General Assembly in Birmingham and the Rev Jopie Boeke and Richard will also report on the 20-25 June 2017 UUA General Assembly in New Orleans which they are attending. Please join us to hear all our news.

Services June 2017

SUNDAY	Service Leader	FLOWERS	COFFEE
18th	Rev Maria Curtis/ Mehrdad Kalani The Great Get Together	Eileen Wield	Lunch Provided
25th	Stephen Crowther	Brenda Soltysik	Janet Perkins

Services July 2017

SUNDAY	Service Leader	FLOWERS	COFFEE
2nd	Francis Clark-Lowes	Carol Chambers	Carol Chambers
9th	Martin Whitell	Barbara Meaghan	Barbara Meaghan
16th	Rev Maria Curtis	Ann Malloch	Julie Derry
23rd	Michael Allured	Brenda Soltysik	Wendy Wolmarans
30 th	Rev Maria Curtis	Eileen Wield	Eileen Wield

...and coming in September

Saturday 9th September

10.00am - 4.00pm

Heritage Open Day in the Church



visits by the general public on particular days and will organise special features or events to make those visits more interesting.

This year our historic Horsham church is participating in the National Open Days Programme sponsored by the National Trust. Within this programme hundreds of places of historic interest throughout the UK will make themselves open to



Our choice of Open Day coincides with 2017's annual "Ride and Stride" event, in which volunteers tour church locations in West Sussex to generate sponsorship funds for the maintenance of our regions' historic church buildings. "Ride and Stride" participants often



include our church in their itinerary and this year they will find their visit of unusual interest as on 9th September we plan to have welcoming guides on hand, to have put out on display a selection of our church's historic books and pictures, to offer drinks and snacks and to use projector and screen in the Church Hall to run a rolling sequence of images illustrating our church's varied history.

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Stories from our Congregation

This fourth in our series of inventive and touching stories presented by congregation members at our 19th February community service is the contribution made by the Rev Jopie Boeke.

Interrupting the Circle of Life

By Juliana Ludwig

(11 year old granddaughter of Richard and Jopie Boeke)

Racing across the grass, my bare feet landed on pebbles, sticks and roots, but that didn't stop me. Feet pounding, heart racing, I stopped abruptly. On the ground in front of me sat a tiny bunny. She wasn't moving, but I could see her fur moving, up and down, up and down, to the beat of her heart. Her left eye was frantically moving around, trying to get a glimpse of her mother, who sat by the fence. She wasn't moving either. I kneeled down, and that's when I saw it. Of course her right eye wasn't moving!



The fuzzy tan fur around her small, alert eye was red. Blood red. Her ear was gashed and dripping blood, staining the green grass.

The sight was so jarring that I wanted to run back into my room, bury myself under the covers, and never come out. But I couldn't. I had to help the bunny.

I held out my hands and, amazingly, the bunny uneasily stepped upon them. I gently stood up and slowly, carefully, walked to the shed. I gently placed the bunny down. Though still dazed, she scampered under, to her den. I walked back inside and again I could not feel the pain of being outside in my rocky backyard with no shoes. I was too busy trying to stop the tears running down my cheeks.

Flashbacks rang through my mind. How I thought the bunny and the crow were just playing. How my mom and brother thought the small brown blob in the crow's talons was just a rat. How I knew differently. How I didn't bother to close the screen door behind me as I ran screaming towards the crow who dropped the bunny and fled through the air in haste to distance himself from the lunatic girl fast approaching, arms waving.

I hope he never comes back, I thought. The door closed behind me and I collapsed in a heap, sobbing and crying. A shadow covered me, and I looked up. "Hi mom," I snivelled as she kneeled down beside me.



"It's going to be ok."

"How can you tell? Bunnies have a lot less blood than humans. How can you tell? She may be dead by now."

Death. The word echoed in my mind. I dropped my head onto my mom's shoulder for another round of tears.

"Juliana, think of it this way. If you hadn't run to help, the crow would have carried the bunny away. You gave the bunny a chance at life. If she turns out to be okay, then you helped her more than you can imagine.

This put a new spin on things.

"You really think so?"

"I know so," she replied, then walked off.

But I wasn't finished yet. I opened the refrigerator door, and amongst the leftover pasta and lemonade, I saw a carton of strawberries, ripe and glistening dark red. *Perfect.* I took them out and filled my cupped hands with the sweet fruit. I opened the screen door again and headed over to the shed. Silently, I placed the strawberries outside and went back inside. I grabbed a pair of shoes and slid them on, then sat on the wooden kitchen stool.



I waited and waited, then waited some more to make sure the crow never came back. He did though, and every time I would rush outside and throw pinecones at him, the brown, leafy shapes hurtling through the vibrant blue sky and dark green underbrush, never hitting him, but scaring him off each time, until he finally gave up.

Later, as I slipped under the covers that night, my last thought as I drifted off was: *I interrupted the circle of life, and I am so glad I did.*

