



The INQUIRER

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hope spirit sacred meditate
pray flame see dance joy
be speak listen create lead
inherit grow chalice soul give
learn **Faith** persist depend
awaken wait light express love
believe **in** support thank
explore journey allow darkness
sing bless **Words** heal
follow praise weave sit open
support aspire stand awe
divine seek reflect radiance
melody promise mystery teach
commit **discuss** develop help

The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

“To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.”

From the Object passed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches 2001

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Silos Apocalypse shows the seven-headed dragon attacked with spears by St Michael and his angels, late 11th or early 12th Century. Produced at Silos when part of Spain was under Moorish rule. A wonderfully dramatic example of Christian book illustration from Spain. Courtesy of the exhibit 'Sacred', at the British Library until 23 September.

Editor's View

Love and words on display

I did a course in American Indian History at Cornell University several years ago. In the professor's first lecture, he recounted the state of the world at contact – the moment at which Europeans lost their way and landed in the Americas.

He made a startling statement, one that a journalist like me had a hard time accepting. He said the printing press at Guttenberg represented a birth of intolerance. He contended that until the Guttenberg Bible, most matters of importance – including faith – were reliant on community standards and were decided within the context of cultural values, of priorities set by local history and traditions. But after Guttenberg, it was possible for matters of faith to be set down in type, made concrete. It gave the faithful a place on which to stand and judge everybody else. It created what must be an illusory certainty about God in relationship to humans.

(Continued on next page)

Faith in Words

Do we have faith in words?

Words can get in the way..

Throughout my life I looked for meaning in words. Words used in study, to connect to someone, calm my fears, explain myself.

Time and again words leave me in limbo...

Seldom have I felt that words convey where I am, what I feel, where I want to be, really connect me with those people with whom I want to share my essence, my being, their essence, their being.

Words enable us to explain, ask questions, clarify, reassure, show empathy, express our humanity.

Words can be misunderstood.

Words could be defining, often they are divisive.

But, *a gentle but*, sometimes the right word, hits home with unexpected force, striking us at the core of our being, speaks to where we are at, at that time. What then?

Do we have faith in words?

By Marion Baker, a member of the Sheffield congregation.

Unitarians inherit a love of words

(Continued from previous page)

The eventual effect of that printing-press intolerance slammed the native people of the Americas in the form of extreme religious prejudice and standards which did not take into account their cultures and their own spiritual traditions.

Because native people held non-Christian beliefs, they were not viewed as spiritual beings or, worse, as human. And that made it much easier to distribute small-pox infected blankets, which killed indiscriminately; to drive women and children from their homes and to initiate the practise of scalping – an indignity previously unknown in the Americas.

Once my professor explained it in those terms, I understood what he meant. It is hard to know how faiths might have grown without the mass-printed word. Would they be more tolerant today? I don't know.

That idea sat in the back of my mind when I went to see the exhibit 'Sacred' at the British Library. It is up until 23 September. It's free and well worth a visit. The exhibit's motto is 'Discover what we share.' It is a beautifully mounted display of sacred Hebrew Bibles, Christian testaments and Qur'ans. They are surrounded by some of the most exquisite symbols of the three Abrahamic faiths: A tapestry that hung during hajj, covering the Ka'bah, the cube-shaped structure inside the mosque at Mecca, Islam's holiest place; An oak crucifix created in the 15th century in France, a portrait of beauty and of pain; A Torah, spectacularly dressed in precious silver and silk.

But the stars of the show are the manuscripts – the tattered

fragments of the Dead Sea scrolls, dated 50CE sit under dim lights, defying the natural forces that might have rendered them dust. The stunning illuminated Bibles, with pictures that bring the stories to life – both those of the Old Testament and the New. And there is the intricate, curling calligraphy of the Muslim artists with golden lettering adapted to their various cultures. The pre-Gutenberg manuscripts reflect the cultures in which they were created. An Asian illuminated Bible features the Apostles' profiles painted in the Indian style. An Ethiopian New Testament shows the Gospel writer Luke with African features. The Holkham Bible Picture Book, created in the 14th century, shows the people of the Bible in contemporary English dress.

Standing among the books and fragments – survivors of so many years, so much strife – what comes across is the deep love the artists must have had for their God. Nothing was too beautiful, too intricate, too difficult to create to offer praise and to teach. And that is what all have in common.

We Unitarians are inheritors of that love of words, of expression, of using all we can summon to express what the Divine means to us, means to our lives. There are some wonderful examples of that love in this *Inquirer* issue of 'Faith in Words'. Enjoy.

MC Burns is editor of 'The Inquirer'

For more information on 'Sacred' see www.bl.uk/sacred
After this double issue, *The Inquirer* goes on a short, summer hiatus, skipping one issue. The next *Inquirer* will be dated 9 September 2007.

Humphrys seeks proof of God

By Fergus O'Connor

Recently Radio 4's John Humphrys, that tenacious interviewer of evasive politicians, asked the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Chief Rabbi and Professor Tariq Ramadan, a leading Muslim scholar, to try to convince him that God did in fact exist. Humphrys is an agonised agnostic, troubled by all the evil and random suffering he sees around him. He was searching throughout these interviews for convincing answers that would give him the sense of certainty seemingly possessed by his three interviewees. At the end of the series, he expressed disappointment that there had been, in his words, "no blinding flash ... no road to Damascus ... no great revelation that says to me 'Ah, this will open the door for you to accepting faith'".

So if we had an equivalent Unitarian representative being interviewed by John Humphrys, what might that Unitarian say? Of course it would be a very brave Unitarian who would attempt to speak on behalf of all of us, because there are as many different Unitarian opinions as there are Unitarians. This, in itself, might leave Humphrys feeling equally dissatisfied and frustrated because we do not have a fixed creed or one theological party line to defend.

So how would we try to answer some of the questions Humphrys might pose about the Unitarian conception of God or to answer the accusation that, for us, "anything goes"? He might even argue that at least the others provided people with certainty; whereas we offer only more questions. Were I in the hot seat, I would plead guilty as charged.

Asked whether he believes and knows there is a God, Rowan Williams answers: "I don't know if there is a God, or a God in the simple sense that I can tick that off as an item I am familiar with. Believing is a matter of being committed to the reality of God... Knowledge, well yes, of a certain kind... but not acquaintance with a particular fact or a particular state of affairs..."

This is an answer many Unitarians might not feel uncomfortable with but, as a defender of Anglican orthodoxy, Dr Williams must go beyond what can be established by the facts. He must accept dogmas for which there is no persuasive and convincing evidence. Honest doubt is always better than false certainty for Unitarians.

Humphrys pursues his search for faith in God within the paradigms of these three orthodox Abrahamic traditions. As a Universalist, I would encourage him, to quote Paul Tillich, to "...forget everything traditional that you have ever learned about God, perhaps even the word itself". My personal conception of God is of a Universal Mind, the ultimate First Cause of the philosopher Aristotle, responsible for the existence and sustaining of the entire Cosmos. Think of all the astounding, profuse variety of life and physical forms all around us and of the unimaginable vastness of space...

I would show Humphrys two articles by Stephen Nuttall and Richard Boeke, on Pantheism, published in *The Inquirer*. Karl Krause, who first coined the term, wrote: "Everything is in God and God is in everything but God is more than everything". I personally agree with Sally McFague, a North American theologian, who says that science "is describing the process of creation while theology is suggesting the meaning of creation ... God is seen not only as the agent that started the Big Bang, but rather as the continuing creator who is the source and power of life and love in the Universe".

This conception of God and the Cosmos is surely more consonant with modern science and rational philosophic thought than that of the strictly orthodox and surely is one with which Unitarians can be truly comfortable?

Instead of trying to convince Humphrys that modern scien-

tific discoveries can be compatible with outmoded religious dogmas and ancient texts, I would echo the words of the American Unitarian Universalist thinker and campaigner for social justice John Haynes Holmes. He said, "But when I say 'God', it is poetry and not theology. Nothing that any theologian ever wrote about God has helped me much, but everything that the poets have written about flowers, and birds, and skies,



Radio 4 Journalist John Humphrys
Photo courtesy of the BBC

and seas, and the saviours of the race, and God...has at one time or another reached my soul. More and more, as I grow older, I live in the lovely thought of these seers and prophets. The theologians gather dust on the shelves of my library, but the poets are stained with my fingers and blotted with my tears. I never seem so near truth as when I care not what I think or believe, but only with these masters of inner vision would live forever."

Why, John Humphrys repeatedly asks, does God not intervene to prevent random suffering and unspeakable evil? He does not get any satisfactory answers. The Chief Rabbi, Dr Sacks, tells Humphrys that we do not live in the "age of God the strategic intervener", even to prevent such horrendous evils as Auschwitz. But the rabbi clearly believes in the literal truth of the Hebrew Bible. He tells Humphrys that "at the very childhood of the Jewish people, God intervenes to rescue them ... from slavery; he takes them out of Egypt; He leads them across the Red Sea; He does miracles ... He is a very protective father". But Humphrys wonders why the God of Israel then let the Holocaust happen.

The answers of Rowan Williams are equally unconvincing. Humphrys asks him why God creates a world in which intolerable, unbearable suffering exists and Dr Williams can only answer that we have to stand alongside those who are suffering and offer hopes of ultimate healing. Even he admits that, in the Gospels, Jesus of Nazareth heals only a few people among very many. Yet, like the Chief Rabbi, he has to publicly uphold Biblical teachings about an intervening God who randomly performs miracles.

Would my answer as a Unitarian be any more convincing and comforting, I wonder? I personally believe we have to see the larger picture, the cosmic perspective, the cycle of life and rebirth we see throughout Nature. Evil and suffering do exist and we have no wholly adequate answer, but we can at least dispense with comforting supernatural illusions.

Like William Ellery Channing and other great thinkers in our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we see the potential for good in human nature.

Good may not always triumph in this life but we must continue to struggle for the realisation of the humane values which we hold dear and which alone will save the world from chaos and destruction. All that is required for the triumph of evil, the Irish orator Burke proclaimed, is for good people to do

(Continued on next page)

Certainty in faith is a trap

By Cliff Reed

The most dangerous thing in religion is certainty. It is certainty that causes you to despise people with beliefs different from your own. It is certainty that you are right that leads you to conclude, not only that those who disagree with you are wrong, but that they are ‘heretics’ and ‘infidels’. It is certainty that you are right that motivates you to censor, silence and persecute other people in religion’s name. It is certainty that leads you to initiate war in God’s name. It is certainty that leads you to murder people – and to kill yourself – in the mistaken belief that this will guarantee you a place in Paradise.

Certainty in religion – the arrogant and foolish delusion that you have penetrated all the mysteries of the Divine – is the monopoly of no single faith tradition and has infected all at some point. And neither are the anti-religions of atheism and secularism free of this infection either, as the record of Stalin’s Soviet Union, Hoxha’s Albania, Mao’s China and Pol Pot’s Cambodia illustrate all too clearly. Any faith or ideology, even if it is not intrinsically evil – like Fascism – can be corrupted and turned bad by a certainty that is unquestioning and unquestioned.

I do not mean by ‘certainty’ the deep spiritual assurance that faith can give, but rather the superficial intellectual delusion that a particular set of arbitrary ideas and propositions constitutes absolute and infallible ‘Truth’.

In fact, the most profound religious faith is accompanied by a radical uncertainty, the awareness that between ourselves and God there is a ‘cloud of unknowing’, as an anonymous 14th century English Christian mystic put it. Doubt, it has been said, is the handmaiden of faith, whereas certainty is its nemesis. In Christianity, the words of Jesus on the cross, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mark 15: 34; Psalm 22: 1), illustrate the uncertainty that co-exists in tension with faith at the very heart of the tradition.

Within Islam, we find the same insight in the work of the 12th century Sufi poet, Farid ud-Din Attar. His ‘Conference of the Birds’ (‘Manteq at-Tair’) is an epic poem about the soul’s search for God, and the perils, obstacles and challenges along the way. At one point the band of pilgrims enter the Valley of Bewilderment, where they learn that uncertainty, confusion and unknowing are necessary stages of the Way:

‘The pilgrim suffers endless discontentment,
Crying: “How long must I endure delay,
Uncertainty? When shall I see the Way?
When shall I know? O, when?”’ But knowledge here

Is turned to indecisive fear...

In short, in the Valley of Bewilderment, our conventional ideas about knowledge and certainty are turned on their heads and seen to be hindrances on the spiritual path, the Way. But when we come to understand – or at least, accept – this, then a radical re-evaluation liberates us to continue on the pilgrimage:

‘Complaints become a grateful eulogy
And blasphemy is faith, faith blasphemy.’

The faith that is blasphemy is the faith that is certain, and thus no faith at all. Faith in God is not certainty about God, knowledge about God or a set of rational constructs about God. The author of ‘The Cloud of Unknowing’ said that only through love can we even approach the Divine Mystery, never with our intellects. The 20th century Hungarian Unitarian minister, Ferenc Balazs, expressed his fervent yet gloriously uncertain faith in this credo:

‘And I believe in God: Oh! This world is wonderful, enormous, full of miracles, leading to a happy ending, astonishing and mysterious; and when I am filled with it to the brim, when infinity overwhelms me, its immediacy lifts me up, its joyousness elates me, then it bubbles up in me: GOD.

Don’t ask me what this word means to me.

To me it is like the sigh of the sufferers; like the “Oh!” of the astounded, the merry laughter of happy people; it expresses everything because it says nothing. I don’t get into arguments. I don’t declare, I don’t attest; I am not consistent, I don’t cite reasons: I just keep sighing, crying, rejoicing, keep burning with fervour: GOD.’

Keep the faith, my friends, but with the uncertainty that keeps it human. Enjoy your stay in the Valley of Bewilderment!

The Rev Cliff Reed is minister at Ipswich.

Sources: Farid ud-Din Attar, ‘The Conference of the Birds’, translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis (Penguin, 1984). ‘The Cloud of Unknowing’, translated by Clifton Wolters (Penguin, 1961). Ferenc Balazs, ‘This Philosophy is the Foundation of my Religion’. (The credo statement, from which the above extract was taken, was used in a service during the 2006 ICUU Theological Symposium in Transylvania. I am indebted to my colleague, the Rev. Jozsef Kaszoni of Budapest, for sending me the full text. It will appear in the forthcoming book of proceedings, ‘The Home We Share: Globalization, Post-Modernism and Unitarian/Universalist Theology’, eds. Clifford M. Reed & Jill K. McAllister (ICUU, 2007).

How would Unitarians answer?

(Continued from previous page)
nothing.

As Albert Camus wrote: “There are more things in men to admire than despise”. The Jewish concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl expressed his faith in the potential for good in our common human nature: “Man could be defined as the being who invented the gas chambers for human extermination. But man can also be defined as the being who entered those gas chambers with the stirring tune of the *Marseillaise* or the Lord’s Prayer on his lips”.

Many of the greatest religious thinkers, East and West, see this life as but one stage in the evolving journey of the human soul. Eastern religious wisdom, as you know, holds fast to a belief in karma and rebirth. Many Western thinkers, from Pla-

to onwards, have been convinced that some form of continued life after death alone can satisfy our instinctive yearning for compensation for the many injustices suffered in this life.

The fact that many contemporary Unitarians, unlike our forebears, no longer believe this should make us reflect on the perils of religious fashion. The only important question is this: “Is it true?” Each of us alone has to answer.

I hope that this Unitarian Universalist perspective will prove more emotionally and intellectually satisfying to John Humphrys. It could adequately answer his deeply felt concerns and longings for a religious faith he could hold with integrity and compelling inner conviction.

The Rev Feargus O’Connor is minister at Golders Green in London.

Musing on the skating minister

By John Midgley

I enjoyed attending the end of session proceedings at Unitarian College in June, to offer congratulations to the courageous souls who have completed their training for our ministry. It was a chance to contemplate what sort of minister each might become.

As part of this two-day event, a group of us went on a visit nearby to The Gaskell's House, dedicated not only to the novelist Elizabeth, but also to her husband the Rev William Gaskell. The house is in need of major renovation, but nonetheless we sensed the presence of this giant among highly regarded ministers of the 19th century – the minister's minister, in my view.

This set a train of thought in my mind as to what is, or what makes, a typical minister. Among our party was a colleague who, a few years ago, had sent me a Christmas card bearing a famous picture: *Rev. Robert Walker, Skating on Duddingston Loch*. I was glad to be reminded of this because of something I recently learned about the subject of this intriguing portrait.

It is a very attractive picture, regarded now as iconic in Scotland, but also something of a mystery. It is generally regarded as having been painted by Sir Henry Raeburn, but in recent times, there have been articles in newspapers and magazines saying that it was not by Raeburn at all. Then there have been rebuttals, saying that it most certainly was by him, as he was a friend of the skating minister.

The picture is iconic, in the sense that it is the one that everyone who visits the National Gallery of Scotland wants to see. Just as everyone who goes to the Louvre in Paris wants to see the *Mona Lisa*, so everyone that goes to the gallery in Edinburgh wants to see *The Skating Minister*, as it is popularly known. And just as nobody is quite sure why the *Mona Lisa* is smiling, nobody really knows why the minister should be skating. The painting does not quite fit in with the traditional image of 18th century Scottish Presbyterianism, with a minister depicted as a skater. Yet the picture is strangely atmospheric, in that the black figure, which is the centrepiece, is perfectly poised. He is dressed very respectably in black with a cravat, and a large black hat. But *skating*? Is this an activity for a decent Christian minister? And how is it that he is all alone on the loch? Is this a form of meditation? Could it be on the Sabbath?

Exploring a little further, I discovered that the Rev Robert Walker was a member of the Ice Skating Society of Edinburgh. That set my imagination running too. What did the respectable members of Canongate Kirk think of their minister doing this? Did he preach sermons about it? And what did the members of the Ice Skating Society *do*? Just go skating now and then? Or did they campaign for it and promote it as a healthy sport? Did they supervise its rules and regulations?

I wonder also if this is soon to become a thing of the past. Is global warming going to eliminate skating on the lochs of Scotland, or the lakes and tarns of the Lake District, something I enjoyed with my children when they were small? If such outdoor pleasures are at risk, that would be a loss, I feel sure. Did William Gaskell ever go skating? I have been wondering whether I should recommend this activity to the student ministers at the College, as they may well find themselves often trying to keep a balance, and, in a different sense, find themselves on thin ice.



The Rev Robert Walker (1755 - 1808) Skating on Duddingston Loch about 1795. Painting by Sir Henry Raeburn

Two other things I recently learned about the Rev Robert Walker, though the evidence is a little uncertain for the first one. He spent some later periods of his life in a mental hospital. I have no idea what that was all about. But more importantly, perhaps, and here the evidence is clearer, the Rev Robert Walker was an outspoken abolitionist. So in the year in which we are marking the 200th anniversary of the act of parliament that abolished the slave trade, when it came to the campaign in Scotland, let's commend to our student ministers the Rev Robert Walker, the skating minister of religion, campaigning abolitionist.

I'll bet that felt like skating on thin ice too.

The Rev John Midgley is minister at Cross Street, Manchester. A news story about the End of Session proceedings appears on the next page.

A meditation

Only love can cure anxiety

By Eila Forrester

Anxiety is a killer. It is contagious. It destroys hope and order and in their place feeds the irrational into all-demanding power. It leaves a small space for love to creep in to comfort for a moment but never to heal. It eats into the lift of joy in knowing the beyond in the here and now.

Anxiety crushes trust. For how can we trust when the world is full of dangerous uncertainty? How can we trust those we love when we can no longer be certain they will be faithful to our needs? Only deeply entrenched humour and hope live through the pain, the gifts of enduring wisdom within us.

Eila Forrester is from Macclesfield.

UCM ends session with joy, courage

By Liz Shaw

The close of the 2006/7 academic year at Unitarian College, Manchester this year saw many of the College's Governors and friends gather for what is traditionally called the, 'End of Session Proceedings' on Tuesday 12 June 2007. Although the weather was not up to its usual standard and despite the building work taking place at Luther King House, it was once again a splendid occasion.

After receiving the annual report from the Rev Dr Ann Peart, the College Principal, guest speaker the Rev Steve Dick, denominational Chief Executive spoke about the denomination and the role of the College but with a twist.

The twist was that 2007 was looked at from way in the future and the presentation asked minds to ponder and 'remember when'. Some discussion followed and, despite a concern about the future of Unitarianism and ministerial training, there was certainly an up-beat feel and view of our Unitarian future which, it was felt, lay in our own hands.

Following the traditional buffet tea, we were joined by more guests who were present for the celebratory Vaedictory Service which is held each year to acknowledge the close of studies and achievements gained by the outgoing students. The guest preacher, the Rev Sarah Tinker, spoke of 'Wounded Healers, Fallen Angels' in giving her best wishes to the departing Students, Lynne Readett and David Shaw qualifying as ministers and Myra Michell as lay pastor.

After the congregation had read the words, "May you go on your way with joy and courage and may the God of love



Front row, the Rev Dr Ann Peart, college principal, the Rev Lynne Readett, the Rev David Shaw, Myrna Michell and the Rev Celia Midgley GA President. Back row, the Rev Sarah Tinker, guest preacher, the Rev Andrew Hill, college president and the Rev Geoffrey Usher, chairman of college committee. Photo by John Hewerdine

sustain you and go with you," the departing students gathered with friends, families and members of their placement congregations amid the pleasant surroundings of the courtyard to continue the celebrations in a more informal manner.

Liz Shaw is administrator at Unitarian College, Manchester.



Photo by Jesuino Souza

Chalice Lighting

By June Pettit

This chalice lighting was written for a service at Underbank Chapel at which a Christening was celebrated. It was also the Sunday after which devastating floods hit the area.

May the light of our chalice flame today remind us of the light of love and compassion which shines in our lives. May love ever continue in us and around us, for ourselves and for others, in all our joys and also in our times of sorrow.

The Rev June Pettitt is minister of Fulwood Old Chapel and Underbank Chapel

A responsive reading

We give you welcome

Group A

We give you welcome

Group B

We accept your welcome

We give you nurturing

Group A

We accept your nurturing

We give you growth

Group B

We accept your growth

We give you reason

Group A

We accept your reason

We give you understanding

Group B

We accept your understanding

We give you freedom

Group A

We accept your freedom

We give you respect

Group B

We accept your respect

We give you acceptance

Group A

We accept your acceptance

We give you inclusion

Group B

We accept your inclusion

We give you harmony

Group A

We accept your harmony

We give you justice

Group B

We accept your justice

Created by Salli Ward, a member of the Macclesfield congregation. It is based on the Macclesfield congregational covenant, their shared statement of vision and commitment.

Everyday experiences of faith teaching

By Penny Johnson

One of the beauties of Unitarian religion is that we can start with what we actually know and build on it. Experience is the great teacher. It might be experience of our everyday world: the experience of lifting each other up, attributing worth to each other, oiling the wheels of life. Making life a little brighter, and a little more worthwhile, creating happiness. Or, on the other hand, it might be of “being bashed by life” and coping alone with problems or again being supported in them by people who give their time and their skills to ensure that we are enabled to go forward – when going forward seems almost impossible. And we are thankful. And surprise and serendipity might come our way: there is no knowing when this might happen: it is when the everyday and ordinary are lifted up on to a different plane: Some years ago, while shopping in Wilmslow, a voice in my ear asked: “Are you happily married?” I turned to see a smartly dressed man of about 80. I often used to see him although not for some little time now ... he was always pleasant ... “I’ve missed my chance then” he went on. “You remind me of Sabrina.” He was one of Wilmslow’s characters. My mind now turns to a Saturday morning in Shipton-on-Stour, a small town near Oxford. Almost from nowhere sprang a man with flowers in his hand. He pressed a flower into mine, and then proceeded to give a flower to other women shoppers. A nicety! I smiled, and accepted the flower. It was a pleasant act of unexpected generosity.

Cast bread upon the water

There is a certain type of charm about these two stories. Not everyone would welcome being identified with Sabrina, but there was a delightful innocence, and as for the second example, how many times does a complete stranger give you flowers while you are shopping and not expect any payment? He wasn’t selling flowers to encourage us to a flower stall. There was no market. It was a simple act. It made my morning! These tiny acts of courtesy make the world go round, and also cause a wave of similar activity. I well remember someone offering me my bus fare when I had left home without any money, and when, some time later, the same thing happened to another complete stranger, I did the same thing. We might identify it with casting bread upon the water, doing something helpful without any expectation of reward, but somehow one thing leads to another, and there is a spin off. And the kindness and generosity returns from a different quarter altogether.

Theologically we could call these small events “sermons in stones” – everyday experience is responsible for so much of what we know to be true, and makes life for ourselves and for others more joyful, and lifts our spirits.

A member of the Dean Row Chapel congregation once asked me, “What helps us most to make us stronger and more equipped to live our lives, the acquisition of knowledge, or experience? I have never found it helpful to live by other people’s certainties, friends, it has to be the hard way, by experience: and good experiences enlarge our minds. Here is a beautiful quotation by Henry James: “Experience is never limited, and it is never complete, it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of the consciousness, and catching every earth-born particle of tissue.

We acquire knowledge through our experience all through

life. For instance, it might come as a surprise to you to realise that you are a theologian. Once you wonder about aspects of God, holiness and spirituality, the world and the universe, and explore new avenues to truth: YOU ARE A THEOLOGIAN. We who exercise our sense of wonder, who sense that “something other” (call it what we will) who recognise that there is still so much to learn, so much more to understand, and so much that we shall never ever understand, we are theologians.

Seek first-hand holiness

We are very different from the theologians who try to wring from scripture every grain of truth, or are part of a team of people who translate the bible yet again and produce a new version. I have on my library shelves hundreds of books on theology: most of them were accumulated during my college days and have presumably influenced my thinking. Most of these books need a lot of concentration, and most of them are purely academic and make very heavy reading, and – I would suggest – do not lead us any nearer to a first hand experience of holiness. So when I say, “we are theologians” I mean that we can begin with our own experiences of God and work from there. What we read may help us to make sense of what we actually experience, but experience and an openness and sense of wonder about all that is come first. I maintain that we all know more than we think we know, and that what we read, and what we hear in sermons, supports what we already know to be true or helps us to challenge and question it for ourselves.

When William Wordsworth wrote: “I have felt a presence which disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean and the living air, and the blue sky and in the mind of man,” he was making a religious statement. He was saying, “I have sensed that something other which gives my life a religious dimension.

Some time ago now I was out with my mother, driving towards home, and I said, “In a few week’s time it will be spring, and we shall have the daffodils out again, and crocuses and leaves on the trees” and added, “I know you love the spring.” She said, “It’s funny you should say that Penny, I was just thinking that when I see new growth, I know that God has not forgotten us.” I said, “I think that is quite profound.”

God is all around us

When Kahlil Gibran wrote: “And if you would know God, be not therefore a solver of riddles. Rather look about you and you shall see him playing with your children, and look into space; you shall see him walking in the cloud, outstretching his arms in the lightning and descending in rain, you shall see him smiling in flowers, then rising and waving his hands in trees,” he was making a religious statement. God is about us, around us, in the familiar, in the everyday experiences of life. We do not need to look far to sense God’s presence. As the hymn writer Minot J. Savage so eloquently expressed it: “In wonder workings, or some bush aflame, we look for God and fancy him concealed, but in earth’s common things he stands revealed, while grass and flowers and stars spell out his name.”

“Some bush aflame” refers, of course, to Moses, who was enchanted by a bush which burned with fire but was not consumed. To me this is poetry. Here was Moses absolutely en-

(Continued on next page)

Bring us the kingdom of God is within

(Continued from previous page)

franced by this brightly and beautifully coloured bush. If we imagine autumn colours at their brightest, we shall come near to seeing the bush with Moses' eyes. He was stunned by its radiance and he knew that God was right in the middle of it, so he took off his shoes because he knew that he was standing on holy ground. You may want to interpret the story more literally, but whether literal or poetic, Moses felt he was in the presence of holiness. And so holiness is something we know about. We might not understand it, but we can feel it and sense it. It is only when it is lived out that it is made real. Holiness is a quality which draws out a response. I well remember watching the television series based on Anthony Trollope's "Barchester Towers", which features Mr. Harding, the Warden and Dr. Grantley, the Archdeacon. Both are men of the cloth. Mr. Harding can always see everyone else's point of view and makes considerable efforts to do so. He is the archetype of a clergyman acting from the best motives, with Jesus as his guide, and possessing a sense of humility and modesty in equal proportions. By contrast, the Archdeacon represents everything that is unholy and impure, with a foul temper and a disregard for everyone's feelings but his own. Jesus doesn't feature in his thinking. Mr. Harding senses that his time as Warden of the hospital has come to a natural end, and asks Dr. Grantley, "What do you think Jesus would have done?" to which Dr. Grantley replies: "What has Jesus to do with the Church of England?" If we need a tangible vision of what is holy and what is most unholy, here are two marvellous examples. If holiness can radiate from us, it can also be blatantly absent.

Experiencing God in the unexpected

My own personal experience of God, which has informed my faith in a power beyond myself, came in 1977 when I was a student for the ministry, and was working with Andrew Hill at Ullet Road in Liverpool during the Christmas vacation. I was due to conduct a service at Gateacre Chapel, and knew no one there at all. I had previously discovered that the niece of one of the chapel officers had been killed in a hijacking of a Pan Am Airline when terrorists had shot randomly around on the plane. The chapel officer explained to me that she was awaiting news of the niece's husband, the pilot of the plane. He was missing. Had I decided to mention any of this to the congregation, I would have done so through prayer, but this was not my news to share. I was a visitor. At that time, I could not liberate myself from notes. Every word of the sermon had to be read. Extempore preaching was not an option!

Very suddenly and quite unexpectedly in the middle of the Christmas sermon, I found myself speaking about tragedy at Christmas time. It was as though I had been taken over by a power which was not my own, and enabled to speak more eloquently than I have done before or since, and to this day I have no idea what I said. I do remember coming back to earth and finding the last page of the sermon and finishing it off in the usual way. At the door, while greeting the congregation, a man came up to me and said: "Thank you for the sermon this morning. I found it enormously helpful. You see I lost my wife this week in an aeroplane disaster. I am the pilot of the plane." From that day, the words, "Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace" have taken on a more profound and personal mean-

ing. We can all be instruments of God,

Knowing what God is

Have you heard these words before? They are printed in "Orders of Worship" which were printed at Upper Chapel Sheffield. If you know who wrote them, I would be delighted to know.

I have seen a mother at a crib, so I know what love is.

I have looked into the eyes of a child, so I know what faith is.

I have seen a rainbow, so I know what beauty is.

I have felt the pounding of the sea, so I know what power is.

I have planted a tree, so I know what hope is.

I have heard a wild bird sing, so I know what freedom is.

I have seen a chrysalis burst into life, so I know what a mystery is.

I have lost a friend, so I know what hell is.

I have seen a star-decked sky, so I know what the infinite is.

I have seen and felt all these things, so I know what God is.

These words convey a truth; if we are to have any idea of what love, faith, beauty, power, hope, freedom, mystery, hell, the infinite, and God are, we have to see them in action. We have to find an example of what they are like. Yes, I know the more discerning amongst us will say: "But this is surely only the beginning. We cannot know what the infinite is by looking up at the stars. We cannot fathom the mystery of God by reflecting on a few poignant experiences, which we treasure. I say, we will never understand God if we do not link him* with our experiences. If we are to have any idea of what God is like we must find him* in ourselves and in one another.

When the crowds gathered to see Jesus as he visited their towns and villages with his disciples, they were full of expectation: they knew holiness when they saw it; for instance, the woman who had been haemorrhaging for 12 years. She knew that even if she could touch the hem of Jesus' cloak she would be healed. So she did it. Yes, of course that story is about faith, a belief that something remarkable would happen, and it did. This is the sort of faith that moves mountains, overrides obstacles, but it also about seeing holiness embodied and knowing beyond doubt that God was present.

If all that Jesus said about the Kingdom of God being within us is not directly related to holiness which radiates to those around us, then I don't understand the concept of the Kingdom at all. When we speak about being lights in our community and letting our light so shine that we and others will glorify God, we are surely speaking of holiness to which we can see and relate. Picture language is vital to our understanding.

That is why Jesus spoke in parables of course. He spoke about the aspects of nature in which God revealed himself.* He spoke to the senses, and in his life and ministry he showed us what God is like. He showed that God is not far removed from any one of us. Whether we look to the hillside, the sky, the world of nature, or art, music, or machinery and its intricate movement, and sense that there is a spiritual connection, we can find the holy, even when we are not looking for it, and often, particularly when we are not looking for it. There in the midst there is something which inspires us, and we realise we are on holy ground, and we take off our shoes.

**Him and himself can be translated as her and herself, as required. The Rev Penny Johnson is a retired Unitarian minister.*

The Hebrews' tower of Babel

By Richard S Gilbert

Philosophy has been described as a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there. Theology has been described as a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there – but finding it!

What have we found? We Unitarians pride ourselves on our theological diversity. But when does diversity so dilute us that we cease to become a cohesive, coherent religious community? I speak in the context of the lively theological discussion in the US and also in recent issues of *The Inquirer*. What does hold us together theologically – if anything?

I resort to the biblical tradition to respond. The Tower of Babel narrative in the Book of Genesis is one of those myths from the Hebrew Scriptures that has a ring of truth in it. The Lord was worried about the excessive pride of people. They were building a tower to the heavens – “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves” (Genesis 11:4). Not appreciating that arrogance, the Lord confused the people by giving them different languages so they could not converse – could not cooperate – thus could not build the tower. It was an ancient explanation for the intriguing variety of human languages.

Humanity has been worrying about words ever since. Words are powerful. Words are power. Words unite and words divide. In no area is that more true than in religion. One cannot understand a religious community unless one understands their words, how they use them and what they mean. And so I will move from the Tower of Babel to the Power of Babble – conversation in pursuit of reverential language.

A few years ago, the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Bill Sinkford, stirred controversy with his call for a language of reverence. Our Association's Purposes and Principles he felt lacked religious language. He urged a reconsideration of the place of God in our collective life.

Do Unitarians here miss this “language of reverence” in your celebrations? If so, what would it be? Can we find a common language that stirs our minds and hearts, yet does not offend the theological and liturgical sensibilities of others?

Our problem, as Unitarians in a non-creedal church, is that each of us wants our own language of reverence. If we are a religious humanist, we are probably not keen on hearing “God” in our hymns; if we are a theist, we do want to hear about the Transcendent in our services; if we are a Unitarian Christian, we are disappointed if Jesus is not central to worship. If we are mystically inclined, we are often disappointed at what seems to be an arid intellectualism. And if we are pagan, we would like to hear words that relate us more intimately to the earth and its seasons.

While we may have different theological languages to express where we are religiously, I believe there is common purpose in our pluralism. And so, I will give a thumbnail sketch of five theological perspectives which might define most Unitarians, followed by a liturgical reading which illustrates a language of reverence. Ultimately I will illustrate why we are bound together in community.

Liberal Christianity: Unitarian Christians believe that we are inheritors of a rich tradition based on the Jewish/Christian Bible and the life, teachings and death of Jesus of Nazareth. This view grounds us in a powerful heritage which we are called upon both to live out and improve upon. It provides a meaningful common language of discourse which addresses the basic issues of human existence. Consider:

I Hope He'll Be Remembered

*I hope he'll be remembered -
Obscured by centuries of violence,
Clouded by countless creeds,
Dissected by a thousand scholars,*

*Preached from a million pulpits,
Mouthed by a billion lips,
Crucified by willful distortion
And innocent ignorance.
I hope he'll be remembered
In simple, unadorned humanity.
Jesus: the man for others.*

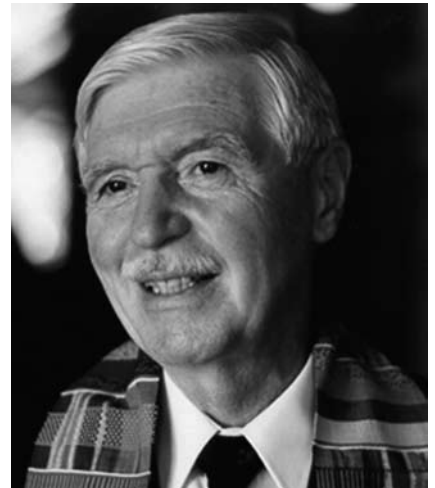
Theism: Theists believe in a power, both transcendent and immanent, which we call God. The divine is a cosmic process with which we cooperate to advance the cause of humanity. This meditation hints at some meanings of the divine.

*God is – a three-letter-word,
Partner in profanity – companion of the sublime
The deepest down darkness in me
The rainbow wrapped around my shoulder
The mystery beyond all knowing or wanting to know
The poet's literary friend
The justifier of a thousand horrible deeds and the why of a million-billion acts of love
The question as inescapable as it is unanswerable
The macro-cosmic mystery and the micro-cosmic explanation
The word when there is a desert with nothing to say
And the subject of a jungle of books
The without which nothing and with which what?
God is the theist's joy,
The atheist's foil,
The agnostic's doubt.
God is a simple, deep, dark, light, bright, up-tight - three-letter word.*

Mysticism: Unitarian mystics, in the tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson or your own James Martineau, believe in a faith which affords a direct experience of union with the All – both with cosmic powers and with universal humanity. Mysticism becomes an important avenue to truth which reason alone cannot travel.

And so, “The Anonymous String” – (after Dom Elder Camara)
*We are held together by an invisible link with the earth
on which we live and move and have our being.
We are part of a mystic oneness with all who have gone before,
of prophets and poets, father and mothers, saints and sages.
We are members one of another, in religious community,
sharing our joys and sorrows, victories and defeats.
We are citizens of humanity,
nestled together to strive for the common good.
We are actors on the stage of history,
bound to one another by a common destiny of weal and woe.
We are sparks of divinity,
glowing in a cosmos whose origin and destiny we do not know,
but whose mystery we celebrate.
We rejoice in that which binds us to one another,
to the world of nature, to the cosmic mysteries.*

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The Rev Dr Richard Gilbert

The Unitarians' power of babble

(Continued from previous page)

We rejoice and will rejoice forevermore.

Earth-Centered Spirituality: Earth-centered Unitarians – most would call themselves pagans – believe liberal religion is grounded in the natural rhythms of earth. We need to recognize and celebrate nature and draw from it lessons for living. I came upon this passage about our intimate relationship with nature.

In the bare promise of morning light

Arising unaccountably early,

I stood peering at the horizon.

My gaze fixed on two luminous dots.

One aglitter, blinking its response across the vastness,

The other a steady star.

Transfixed, I stood before such beauty.

A voice seemed to ask:

“Where were you when the foundations of the earth were laid?

Where were you when the morning stars sang together?”

Indeed, where was I?

I was not even a thought in the great cosmic mind,

Not a glimpse of the eternal eye.

Perhaps I was pre-figured in the dust of the earth,

Perhaps just a trifling cosmic accident.

But now, earth and I are one.

Long after I die will I be one with earth.

Together we shall be transported across the measureless void of heaven.

Together. Together. Together.

Healing universe/Power beyond my belief,

Make me whole again/Healing rain descend.

Wash the dust from my eyes/ That I may behold.

Blessed burning sun/Fire my soul with life desire.

Bring me warming love.

Religious humanism: Religious humanists believe religion is based in fundamental human nature, and that appeals to any kind of deity do not satisfy the religious impulse. We should not arrogate to ourselves a sense of knowledge of the divine, but should undertake, in community, to create meanings and values for this life on this earth.

This passage, “Life Is a Drama with no Rehearsals,” suggests a language of reverence for religious humanists. It begins with words from American humorist Mel Brooks:

“Hope for the best; expect the worst. Life is a play. We’re unrehearsed.”

We enter this house of worship as actors and actresses

Coming to the theater to put on a play.

We have our parts – know them rather well,

Though sometimes we forget the lines of our own lives,

Sometimes we stammer; sometimes we falter; sometimes we fail.

Here we remember that the play is real –

There are real beginnings – the curtain has gone up;

There are real endings – someday it will fall.

It is not easy to present this drama of the soul,

This play of the spirit;

There are no rehearsals and no prompters to feed us our lines

And no voice coaches or directors to tell us what to do.

It requires courage to take on the task of writing the play –

Getting just the right feelings in just the right dialogue –

Presenting the plot so that we may understand its meaning,

That others might enjoy being in the theater with us.

There is comedy and tragedy in our play and all that lies between.

May we come to understand we are much more than drama critics;

We are the actors and actresses;

We are the prompters and the coaches

And the director of the drama. We are the play.

By this time you may have guessed that I am the author of each of these attempts at a language of reverence for each theological position. I wrote those reflections because I found something to respect – even revere – in each of those five theological perspectives. The point is this: while there are those who may believe we need a single language of reverence on which all Unitarians will agree, I do not think it can be done. It would be neat, and orderly to have a Unitarian lectionary, but, given our cherished freedom of belief and radical pluralism, it is just not going to happen. I am led to conclude that the good faith is messy – very theologically messy.

But messiness is not all bad. There is creativity in the tension of experiencing these different languages of reverence – something to learn from doing so. A friend of mine, the late Grace Martin, wrote this: “A properly prepared liberal church is crystal clear, with the individual qualities of all the odd ingredients preserved; the soft things soft, the tough things tough, the green things green and the yellow things yellow. From this kind of heterogeneity it is possible to learn something.”

I call myself a mystical religious humanist, but I enjoy the challenge of hearing words that move theists and pagans, Unitarian Christians and those of other perspectives.

But in the last analysis, despite all our attempts at articulating our theological vision, I conclude that our common language of reverence is narrative – the way we tell our stories of our religious pilgrimage to each other. And what are we but our stories?

The Chinese ideogram for truth is two people talking. For Unitarians covenanted in religious community, it is even richer than that – it is a whole congregational conversation – troubling at times – hard at times – crazy-making at times – but immensely satisfying and meaningful IF we lighten up a little. If we realize there is merit in a language of reverence that may challenge us. IF we open ourselves to words which may be hard to hear.

How do we demonstrate that? Let me conclude with a story which I think is indicative of the spiritual glue, the religious duct tape that binds us together in one religious body.

The Rev Carl Scovel, Minister Emeritus of Kings Chapel Church in Boston, a devout Unitarian Universalist Christian, once delivered an important lecture on “The Great Surmise At the heart of creation lies a good intent, a purposeful goodness, from which we come, by which we live our fullest, and to which we shall at last return. . . . Our work on earth is to explore, enjoy, and share this goodness. ‘Too much of a good thing,’ said Mae West, ‘is wonderful.’ Sound doctrine.”^a

Responding to this discourse was the Rev Deane Starr, a good friend of Carl’s for 30 years, an agnostic and iconoclast. He disputed Carl’s confidence in this “good intent,” saying he found conflict and a cosmic indifference to humanity at the heart of creation. He was puzzled at Carl’s sense of loneliness, a gap filled for Carl by a loving concern at the heart of creation. Deane found his sense of ultimate community with a benignly indifferent nature.

His third son, Paul Michael, died of AIDS on December 31, 1992. “I was positive that never again could I experience joy; I would have been content simply to find some release from anguish. I wondered whether I could find that relief by a return to the religion of my youth . . . in the arms of Jesus.” He attended a little fundamentalist church in Naples, Florida but it didn’t work.

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Letters to the Editor

Historical Society address not quite as advertised

To the Editor:

The Unitarian Historical Society address to be given at the 2008 GA meetings by Professor David Bebbington of the University of Stirling could, on the basis described on the GA News page on page 4 of *The Inquirer* 28 July, be rather a disappointment to some. He is doing similar work on the nonconformist backgrounds of MPs across the denominations (he is a Baptist). David is recognised as one of the leading historians of British religious dissent – he has already listed the Baptist MPs with around 22, the Congregationalists with over 130, both up to 1900. On the same basis, he told me a month or so ago that for the Unitarians he already is at about 150. Andrew Hill feels there could well be more; both he and I have contributed to David's research. Unfortunately, his cut off date is 1900 or there about, so we won't be hearing about Chuter Ede or Sorensen, or even the last Secretary of State for India in the Labour cabinet of 1945, Lord Pethick Lawrence, and several more notable parliamentarians in the 20th century. I asked David if he could take the story to a later date but he said he couldn't, the task would be too large though he may get around to it in the future.

However, we will no doubt hear about John Bowring, the Unitarian hymn writer, Governor of Hong Kong, with his gunship threats to the King of Siam along with his rather dubious financial background; Joseph Chamberlain, a giant of 19th century politics, and James Stansfeld amongst the first Unitarian Cabinet ministers in the 1880s, who was also known as the Unitarian brewer. So there will be much of interest. Those who are members of the society will be able to read Dr Bebbington's research in a special supplement to the Transactions the following year.

Alan Ruston

Editor, Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society

Strangers should not become Citizens

To the Editor:

Re Strangers into Citizens

Why should the UK – overloaded, over-

governed, overburdened, turn illegal immigrants into acceptable people, in other words (*persona grata*), when they have entered the UK in a serruptitious and deceitful cowardly way? By doing so, they have shown a total lack of respect for this country and are only using us as a convenience. Taking advantage of our weak laws' morals. To turn these illegal immigrants into bona fide residents will be a national disgrace. Our infrastructure is already at breaking point – these recent floods and congested roads have proved the point beyond contradiction. These greedy selfish people should be returned to their countries of origin. Will *The Inquirer* print an opposing view to the headlines?

R. Willecroft

Manchester

Don't embrace religious bigots

To the Editor:

The Rev Cliff Reed deserves full marks for tact and diplomacy (*Inquirer* 14 July) but let's not bend over backwards to placate religious bullies whether they call themselves Christian, Jewish or Muslim. As a Unitarian, I would much rather seek to embrace a secular atheist – however she or he might flinch.

Should we not recognise that when a philosopher like AC Grayling puts his finger on the cruder aspects of religion, he speaks a language Unitarians recognise and can surely welcome. Secularism is the only context in which the freedom, reason and tolerance in religion we Unitarians embrace can ever flourish. It is as important to distance ourselves from the cruder wing of political correctness as it is to stand aside when bigots fight.

Above all, let's live in our own times, not the Middle Ages.

Peter Sampson

Lancaster

History plays a significant role in radical Islam

To the Editor:

Paradigms shift. Tolerance must not morph into indifferentism.

Do most of us see Unitarianism as a home for the robust analysis of religious traditions and the honest recounting of what we learn as we develop? Do most of us recognise that our search,

if it is honest, will have to include the courage to actually mention much that is deeply distasteful in the world's religious traditions? Do most of us recognise that refusing to denounce the negative elements of religions espoused by those with different skin colours is a form of racism?

Cliff Reed's article, which appeared in the 14 July *Inquirer*, was deeply flawed.

To examine just one instance, mention is made of Muslim sensitivity to the use of the word 'crusade'. How should we regard this word? We must always tread carefully when tackling the belief systems of others, but we must also, as best we can, try to tell the full truth.

Pope Urban II, partly in response to the Byzantine Emperor's request for help against the Seljuk Turks, declared the First Crusade at the Council of Clermont in 1095.

That is not when things began. He was calling the Crusade because without this action 'the (Christian) faithful of God will be much more widely attacked.'

In 634 the adherents of the new religion of Islam invaded Syria – 4,000 Jews, Christians and Samaritans were massacred, defending their land. Between 635 and 642 the monasteries of Mesopotamia were sacked, the monks murdered and the Christian Arabs forced to choose Islam or death. Armenian chroniclers of this time tell us that the population of Assyria was decimated and numbers were forcibly converted to Islam.

The assault continued west through North Africa. In the Egyptian town of Behnesa, '...whoever gave himself up to (the Muslims) was massacred, they spared neither the old nor the women or children.' In 643, Tripoli was pillaged, Carthage was razed and most of its inhabitants killed.

At the beginning of the 8th century, the Caliph Walid I gathered the Armenian nobility in the Church of St Gregory in Naxcawan and the church of Xram in the Araxis and burned them to death. In the 9th century, the Armenians suffered again and Christians in Seville were massacred.

In the 11th century, 4000 Jews were massacred in Islamic Grenada. Grenada

(Continued on next page)

Babble is a Unitarian reward

(Continued from page 11)

That evening he took a sunset cruise out into the Gulf of Mexico. "The sunset was unbelievable! The entire sky, from horizon to horizon, was aglow with color, reds, and purples, and pinks, and golds. Then the colors faded and that indescribable deep, deep indigo of late twilight filled the sky. The boat turned around to head back to Naples. There on the eastern horizon was a full and glorious golden moon. With the tears streaming down my face, I realized that even though my son's being had been scattered, he remained a part of this awesome beauty.

"We can never contain the beauty in which we live and move and have our beings, but whether we live or whether we die, we are contained within this beauty."^b

Then he stunned the assembled audience by leading a very sentimental song which had been part of his rather pietistic upbringing, the feeling for which remained. "In the Garden:" "I come to the garden alone when the dew is still on the roses. . . . and he walks with me and he talks to me." He led the astounded ministers in singing it – most of us knew it! It was a strange but powerful moment.

Carl Scovel, ruminating on the experience, wrote: "That gave me a new angle on Unitarian Universalism. It's a community where Christians give the lectures and humanists lead the hymns."^c

That is our genius, being radically open to human experience and to each other. That is the way we create unity of spirit

among diversity of belief. Where else could you have found such a story – of a devout Christian and a passionate humanist, whose very understanding of the nature of ultimate reality differs so sharply, who can share such a common depth of human experience? A highest common denominator?

And so I am convinced that our theological core is experiential, not ideological. It is that highest common denominator of building our own theology out of the tough and tender experiences of life. Our clear religious message is that we can create religious community without doctrinal conformity. We build the road as we go. The journey is our home. We are the meaning makers.

In short, we enjoy the power of babble – the sheer joy of engaging in conversation about matters of ultimate importance – the satisfaction of walking together in religious community – telling our stories to one another.

The Tower of Babel was the Lord's punishment for human arrogance.

The Power of Babble is our reward for being Unitarians.

The Rev Dr Richard S Gilbert has been a Unitarian Universalist minister for more than 40 years. Dr Gilbert is best known among British Unitarians for his authorship of the series of Building Your Own Theology books. He gave this sermon at Golders Green church in July.

Notes: a *Ibid.*, 95-6. b Deane Starr, "Response to the Berry Street Lecture," *Unitarian Universalism Selected Essays 1995*, (Boston: UUMA, 1995), 15-16. c *Ibid.*, Scovel, 100.

Letters to the Editor

(Continued from previous page)

is the south eastern strip of Spain that was controlled by Muslims for nearly 800 years. At about the same time there was a massacre of roughly the same number of Jews in the Rhineland – we commonly know of the latter but not of the former. Why is this?

Equivalent things were happening in India. It is no coincidence that, at about this time, Buddhism disappeared from the land of its birth, but that need not concern us here.

What else should be mentioned?

The Christians were not pacifists, they had indeed been fighting back and regaining land that the Muslims had taken. They did not all convert to Islam. Egypt remained mainly Coptic for centuries until they were persecuted into the minority they now are. The Christians of Spain and Portugal never gave up, bit by bit they regained their peninsula, the last portion, the above-mentioned Grenada, being eventually re-conquered in 1492.

I used to celebrate affirmative works on Islam, such as Karen Armstrong's 'Muhammad', and indeed such writing has a serious part to play in this debate, a debate from which we cannot shirk.; As a religious liberal, I used to gloss over such things as the Battle of the

Trench (if you do not know about it, look it up) but as a teacher of Religious Studies it began to dawn on me that we must tell the truth about all religions no matter how that truth might distress us. None of this is meant to excuse the evil acts of Christians, but all events have contexts and these contexts must be acknowledged.

If I'm allowed to quote a letter to one journal within a letter to another, I suggested, in *The Scotsman* on 4 July, a process that we as Unitarians might well initiate, after the attack on Glasgow Airport.

"Religion is an innate and intimate part of the human experience, and is open to rational discussion.

The rational discussion of religion can trigger immature and violent responses in those who see the opinions they cherish as truth, challenged. In these islands, we have been coming to terms with religious bigotry amongst Christians: it is time for Muslims to join in this discussion as both victims and perpetrators. Islam will be cogently challenged and must respond with reason and through reason.

We all feel pain when the thoughts and traditions that have formed us are recognised as open to doubt: we are worthy of being taken seriously when we

respond with honesty rather than guile; we honour our common humanity when we respond with calm and diligent thought rather than fear and anger."

Ibn Warraq, in his pseudonymous book, *Why I am not a Muslim*, (which provided much of the information above) quotes Acton's telling saw, 'Every villain is followed by a sophist with a sponge.'

The dead of past centuries, and the children of the future, deserve more than sophistry.

Michael Bartlett

Isle of Lewis

Essex Hall staff are very efficient

In the press today, we always read of things that have 'gone wrong'. Well here's something that hasn't!

May I congratulate Essex Hall staff members on their efficiency. I phoned on Friday afternoon, 27 July, and asked them to send me some leaflets.

There was no post on Saturday, due to industrial action. To my surprise, this morning Monday 30 July, I received the requested leaflets from Essex Hall! Long may this excellent service continue.

Mary Rae

Chair, The Octagon, Norwich



The Dalai Lama Photo by Martin Louis

Inner Peace

This Inner Peace Meditation was written by Sarah Tinker and used at Essex Church, Kensington, as part of a service entitled 'Tough Times' Hymn number 189 in *Hymns for Living* is based on words from the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism. This meditation stems from these words of his:

'In the face of life's inevitable disappointments, struggles and failures all one can do is to cultivate a sense of inner peace.'

As we enter a time of meditation together, now let us cultivate a sense of peace in this place of worship and a sense of peace within ourselves, in our hearts and in our minds.... As we perhaps soften our gaze or close our eyes ... and turn our attention inwards, aware of the sounds outside, aware of the sounds within this room, yet with our attention focused inwards ... aware of our breathing, ... aware of our feet upon the ground, ... aware of the chair on which we sit...

We can imagine that deep within us is a central point where all is still and calm. ... Whatever is happening elsewhere, we have within us a calm place to which we can go, a place where we can experience an inner peace, an inner peace that is ours and which can never be disturbed. By focusing on this inner peace regularly, we strengthen it so that it is there for us as a place of refuge in times of trouble. That inner peace is ours, it has always been and always will be, and we can turn to it whenever we wish.

As we sit together in silence for a few minutes now, we can further develop our awareness of that inner peace. (Two minutes' silence)

May the peace that we create here radiate out into our everyday lives and into the wider world so that all beings may know peace. Amen.

The Rev Sarah Tinker is minister at Essex Church, Kensington.

How do you see?

By Kath Riley

How do you see?

Do you see with your eyes?

Do you notice the world that surrounds you?

Observe nature's grandeur in sea, earth and sky,

Look well at the beauty around you.

How do you see?

Do you see with your mind?

Can you picture a dream that dumbfounds you?

Then make that dream known to the whole of mankind,

The outcome may truly astound you.

How do you see?

Do you see with your heart?

Can you sense all the love that surrounds you?

Then feel all the kindness that others impart,

And pass it to people around you.

However you see,

With your heart, mind or eye,

Let your vision form part of the rainbow

Whose colours one day will become unified,

And truth will emerge from the shadow.

White truth will come out from the shadow.

Kath Riley is a member of Bayshill congregation, in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. © 2007 The last verse was inspired by the work of John Andrew Storey. One of the ideas he wrote about – a 'rainbow of faith' – also inspired her meditation which follows.

Meditation

Close your eyes, and imagine a stormy sky. Thick black clouds are massing overhead, and the rain is sheeting down. There appears to be nowhere to shelter...

But you look closer, and you notice a small break in the clouds. Soon, the rain eases a little and a weak, watery sun peeps through... It gets stronger and when you look back at the clouds, a beautiful rainbow is arching over them...

In that rainbow, you can see all the shades of colour – red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. But they don't really form clearly separated stripes, they merge gradually into each other... Look carefully – there are thousands of colours in that rainbow. Examine each hue...

Now you can make out people, millions of people, each holding on to one or more of the threads of colour. And you realise that each strand of colour represents a belief, whether that belief is a faith followed by millions, or an idea personal to one individual.

Your eye is attracted by something sparkling in the distance. It is a crystal prism, the Prism of Understanding, and it is softly calling the rainbow hues. One by one, each colour turns and moves slowly towards it...

You watch the dazzling spectacle as each streak of colour, each ray of light in turn reaches the prism and is absorbed by it...

And finally, when every one of the thousands of hues has been caught and held by the prism, you see the pure white Light of Truth appearing from its other side. Bathe in that clear light for a while...

Let us remember that each person, every faith, holds some of the Light of Truth; may we reach out to that truth in everyone we meet. Amen.

One minister's words to live by

My Credo

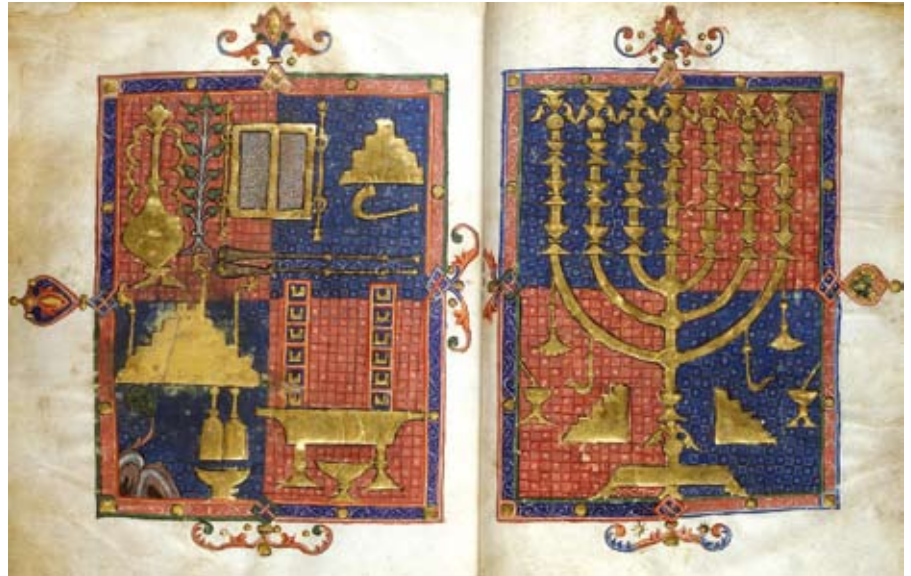
By Ernest Baker

Eternal God

Spirit of our spirit, Life of our life
Love within and beyond our loving
You, whom Jesus taught us to see
as loving Father,
that we might know our closeness
to the reality that is you.
May that closeness be ours now
We rejoice in the glory of the world
in which we live,
our sharing with our fellow men and
women,
the gracious mystery of our own
being.

We delight in the glories of this
earthly home,
and in the creativity of our human
spirit:
we are encouraged by beauty and
truth,
and moved by compassion finding
expression.

But we are chastened too:
To realise the hardness of heart
of which we human beings are
capable,
To recognise the depths of self-
hate,
To acknowledge misuse of our
heritage of bounty
O God, we are here together in
blessed sharing;
we are here on account of our
concern and our wish
that we may gain in our wisdom.



The Duke of Sussex's Spanish Bible is one of the finest illustrated Hebrew Bibles, dating from the middle of the 14th century, produced in Catalonia, Spain, under Christian rule. The illustrations in this manuscript powerfully express the theme of messianic hope, the longing to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Photo courtesy of the exhibit 'Sacred' at the British Library through 23 September.

We are here, concerned for the
dangers of this world in which we
must live,
concerned for the future of our
loved ones, our children, our
grandchildren,
and all our future generations.
Sometimes we feel overburdened
by our powerlessness,
our ignorance, our inadequacy,
our lack of understanding, and that
of others:
we know the need to forgive -
others and ourselves.

And yet we persist in hoping for, in
seeking to work for,
that better world of immemorial
promise,
transcending the bounds of Time.
In our being together
may there be rekindled within us
that renewal which makes for our
eternal living,
now and always.

May we be still and know
that thou art God.

*The Rev Ernest Baker is retired
after more than 30 years' ministry in
Yorkshire congregations.*

Chalice lighting and prayer of thanksgiving



*This new chalice was
created for the Kingswood
congregation by Ian Coalter -
a member of the congregation.*

By Tony McNeile

We gather together before the flame of our
chalice - the light of truth, the cup of wisdom.
Around the world, free thinkers and people
of faith share this moment with us. We are
one body of people. May we open our eyes
to the light of truth and our minds to the
quest for wisdom - about ourselves and in
what we believe.

Prayer

In our prayer let us give thanks or ourselves
- that there is a need to gather here in
the fellowship of this chapel. That we
are prepared to seek meaning from our
experience together; that we are prepared
to give comfort and prepared to receive the

words and the touch of comfort; that we are
prepared to be challenged in this hour and
that we are prepared not just to satisfy our
own spiritual needs but to reach out in prayer
and love to one another.

And let us give thanks for all the positive
aspects of our lives; the great and the small
- especially the small - those little things that
day by day bring us joy and certainty.
And let us give thanks for the love and
friendship that is part of our life - the near and
the far - and let us be thankful that all around
us and all within is a great power of love that
can support us wherever we go. Amen

*The Rev Tony McNeile is president of the
National Unitarian Fellowship.*

Stalybridge hosts UCA



The Stalybridge Unitarian Church played host to the second annual Lance Garrard Memorial Lecture of the Unitarian Christian Association on Saturday, 14 July. The speaker was the Rev Nigel Playfair, minister of the First Presbyterian Church, Rosemary Street, Belfast, who addressed the gathering on current liberalising developments within the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. Pictured in the front row, left to right: Jeff Gould; Sue Pounder; Mr and Mrs Playfair; Catherine Fozard; Alex Bradley. Photo by Bob Pounder

Heritage Days at Dover church

Unitarian Church Dover will open their Grade II listed chapel and vestry (1820) for Heritage Open Days 2007 on Saturday 8 September from 11 am until 4 pm. There will be self-guided tours with stewards available to answer questions, music on the Holdich pipe organ (1855) throughout the day, an exhibition of Church history and registers of baptisms and burials.

Also, Chairman David Embry, an accomplished artist and art lecturer, will be displaying an extensive range of art work in the hall. Refreshments will be available.

The premises are accessible for the disabled. Enquiries: please telephone 01303 276916.

— Jean Durban



The peace of a quiet Sunday at Cross Street Chapel Manchester was shattered in July, but not until the morning service was over. The occasion was the 10th anniversary of the Rev John Midgley's ministry. A congregational lunch had been arranged and a surprise feature was the presence of the Silver Bell Jazz Band, who serenaded a happy congregation. John, a lifelong jazz enthusiast, was delighted!

Padiham concert series starts soon

The 4th series of 'Musical Extravanzas', begins on 8 September at Nazareth Unitarian Chapel Padiham. There are 5 concerts spread from September until April. All are on Saturday evenings and begin at 7.30pm followed by refreshments. Admission is £6 but 'The Houghton Weavers', planned for 26 January 2008 are £7.

People can pay on the door but tickets will need to be purchased in advance for the Houghton Weavers as last year it was completely sold out. Please contact Barry Brown on 01282 77335 or call the chapel on 01282 773184

At the first concert a donation will be presented to NWAir Ambulance, from part of the proceeds of the 3rd Series. Concert dates are: 8 September Chris Powell, organist; 17 November, Castleford Salvation Army Brass Band and Soloists; 26 January 2008, The Houghton Weavers, a folk group; 8 March 2008, CRGS Swing Band; 19 April 2008, Nelson Arion Male Voice Choir. The concerts are well supported by people from a wide geographical area, but it would be nice to be able to welcome fellow Unitarians to these splendid evenings also.

— Barry R Brown

Launch dates for 'Help is at Hand'

For the last year or so the Support for Organisational Leadership Panel (part of the Education & Training Commission) has been working on the details of the new training handbook aimed at church officers and trustees. It will be called Help is at Hand and will be in loose-leaf format to enable pages to be added or changed, as necessary. It will be launched in London and Manchester:

Saturday 22 September 2007 at Essex Hall, London

Saturday 27 October 2007 at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester

The handbook will cover such topics as the role of trustees, premises, the role of officers, the payment of ministers, guidelines for partnership between congregations and ministers, useful Unitarian information and contacts.

Thinking of training for the Unitarian ministry?

The interview panel will meet on 3&4 January 2008 at Manchester Academy & Harris College Oxford.

Completed applications must be received by the GA Chief Executive by Monday 1 October 2007.

Candidates called for an interview will receive at least 14 days' notice in writing. They will be expected to meet their own travelling expenses but meals and overnight accommodation will be provided for the interview period.

For further information, please write to the Rev Steve Dick, Unitarian Headquarters, Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex street, London WC2R 3HY