

Refugees on the American border



*David Usher reports on the
volunteers trying to bring comfort*

The INQUIRER

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*From the Object passed at the
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Inquiring Words

Advent Anticipation

Autumn's beauty has been blown away,
winter's darkness enfolds us
and spring seems a distant prospect;
but your light and hope have not abandoned
us, O God

— whom we abandon.

We give our thanks
for the great festival that now approaches,
as we give thanks for him whose birth it celebrates.

May your love in him
be bright before us and within us
in this time of anticipation.

— By Cliff Reed, from his book 'Carnival of Lamps'

A transformative week among refugees

David Usher, a Unitarian minister now living in the US, spent over a week helping Central American refugees at the Texas border. This is what he saw.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) had put out a call. Annunciation House, a Catholic charity on the Mexican border in El Paso which had been accustomed to welcoming perhaps 20 refugees from Central America each week had suddenly been inundated with more than 1000. Volunteers were urgently needed, particularly those who could speak Spanish. My Spanish is rudimentary at best but I have the gift of time and they were glad to have me, so on 10 November I flew to El Paso and was there until November 18. Carol, a Unitarian Universalist from Pennsylvania, and I were the first to answer the call.

Many people piously say they are not against immigrants but insist they come into the country legally. I entered the United States as a legal immigrant from the United Kingdom. The visa application process was protracted, frustrating, confusing and expensive, even for someone like me with all the advantages of resources, education, language, pro bono legal advice and people and a job waiting for me. And if the visa had been refused, I had a very comfortable life in England. The people coming from Central America want to enter legally, they do not want to be undocumented, but the system is stacked against them. And if they are deported, they are being sent back to face certain terror and economic deprivation, and probably death.

Would anyone take this journey lightly?

Try to imagine yourself in their situation. You are being terrorised by gang violence. You have been told that unless you join or cooperate with the local gang, you or your children will be kidnapped and murdered. Your livelihood has been destroyed by NAFTA, your small-holding on which you used to grow your own vegetables and food has been taken over by a multi-national (American) and you have been dispossessed. You decide you have to flee, to risk the perilous 3000-mile journey to the United States. Perhaps you have enough money for a bus ticket, or to bribe a coyote. Perhaps you have to hitch rides, along with your young children. Try to imagine yourself trying to get to somewhere thousands of miles away, even within the United States, with virtually no money and no contacts to help you along the way, and with young children. Do you think you would undertake such a journey lightly? Do you not think you would have to be desperate? These people are.

This is the situation at the border as best I understand it. El Paso is an officially approved border crossing, and people applying for asylum or refugee status are doing so in accordance with international law. They are *not* entering the country illegally, but are fleeing countries riven with violence, governmental corruption and economic desperation, much of which is the direct result of political, economic or military interference by the United States.

There is a long line of people waiting to cross the bridge into the United States, with temporary camps on the Mexican side of the border. Each day only a certain number are allowed over



David Usher with a Unitarian Universalist volunteer who had travelled from Michigan to help at Annunciation House, a centre for refugees in El Paso, Texas,

the bridge. While Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) processes the asylum applications the refugees are detained in what they refer to as 'The Ice box' because temperatures are deliberately kept very cold and they are forced to sleep on concrete floors with only a thin space blanket for warmth or comfort. They are denied showers. Toilet facilities are spartan. Food is minimal and of poor quality. The group which arrived on my final day had not been given anything significant to eat for three days. They are often held in these intentionally bleak conditions for up to a week, even though Federal law imposes a theoretical limit of 24 hours. All the forms are complicated and in English, which of course none of the applicants understand. Mostly it is one parent with children, because if both parents come together CBP might let in the mother and children but will separate the father and keep him in indefinite detention. When CBP has completed their registration process Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) takes over. Before Annunciation House stepped in, ICE was simply dumping people on the streets of El Paso with no food, no money, no possessions other than the clothes they were wearing, and nowhere to go.

Teens are sent to a tent city

Adolescents are separated and sent to Tornillo Juvenile Detention Centre on the desert outskirts of El Paso. Tornillo was supposed to be a temporary tent city for a few hundred juveniles. It is now housing more than five times the number for which it was originally intended and is being expanded. Detention is indefinite and those being held have no access to legal representation. I spent a morning at Tornillo outside the gates, standing in the biting wind with a protest sign and watching as ICE buses delivered more young people and trucks laden with more tents and equipment trundled into the base. Tornillo is sub-contracted by the Government to a Baptist (charitable!) organisation which is making a huge profit running this private prison for children.

Annunciation House was initially overwhelmed but in the past few weeks has done a remarkable job in organising itself at very short notice. It put out appeals to many local organisations for donations and volunteers. The local Unitarian Universalist Church has a vacant house which it made available and I

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ICE treats refugees without humanity

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was initially assigned to sleep there, as was Hannah Hafter, a UUSC staff person. I later transferred to a more conveniently located house owned by Annunciation.

I arrived on Saturday afternoon and was assigned to San Juan Diego Centre (SJDC), one of Annunciation House's several locations which had been made available by the SJDC congregation. This local Catholic congregation has been extraordinarily generous, turning over their three buildings for exclusive use by the refugees, cooking meals, rescheduling their own activities. Initially they had agreed to do so for two days. A month has passed, and there is no end in sight. There was no time for me to receive an orientation as there were about 80 people who had just been delivered and were in need of immediate care. It was a steep learning curve.

The process at SJDC is this. ICE makes a seemingly arbitrary decision about how many refugees will be sent to each reception centre. At SJDC during my time that number varied from zero to 86. Each day's intake arrives mid afternoon and is escorted into the dining room to be welcomed, given something immediately to eat, and told what to expect. They are assured that we are not part of the government, but are volunteers here to help them and they are free to leave if they wish.

Annunciation House gives practical support

They are then ushered into a large room to await being registered. Registration entails getting their details, who and where are their family members waiting to welcome them. When that is done they are taken to the rooms piled high with donated clothing. It was chaos when I first arrived. There had been little time to organise it and bags were piled high with stuff, much of it impractical. Trousers donated by six-foot-tall American men weighing 300 pounds are not much use to a five-foot-tall Honduran barely weighing 100 pounds. Frilly girls' party dresses are not what is needed. Each person is given a sturdy plastic bag and invited to choose whatever they can find and might want – trousers, shirts, sweaters or jacket, shoes, socks, and underwear. When they have chosen their new clothes they are given a towel and bathroom toiletries and invited to shower, perhaps their first for a month. After all of that they are given an evening meal. These meals, wholesome and suited to the Central American palate, are being provided by local volunteer groups – mostly Catholic congregations or the like. Sometimes it is food prepared on site, sometimes bought or donated from local fast food outlets. Many businesses have donated goods or services. For example, Uber has made \$20,000 worth of rides available for volunteers who need transportation in El Paso alone.

In the evening, people are allocated rooms in which to sleep. There are four large rooms, and as much as possible mothers are assigned with their young children, fathers with theirs. There are some cots, but many have to sleep on the floor. We give them blankets and pillows and try to make them as comfortable as possible.

The other part of the registration process is to contact families throughout the country who are waiting to receive their relatives and to arrange transport to get them there. This entails buying plane or bus tickets, being very careful to ensure that all identification details match those on the tickets. Also



Children separated by their parents are held in the Ursula detention centre in McAllen, Texas. US Government photo

that the ICE office to which they must report is near where they will be staying. (One person bound for New York was supposed to report to ICE in New Orleans.) Finally, people need to be taken either to the bus terminal or the airport. Local people have volunteered to be drivers and are coordinated to pick people up at all hours, from very early in the morning to late at night. Each person is sent on their way with a large bag filled with food: sandwiches prepared by volunteers, snack bars, fruit, candy and water donated by local businesses and individuals, a blanket for those with long bus journeys ahead of them. Toys and games for young children. Most people stay in the centre for only one night before they can move on. Some have to stay two nights. It is a remarkable logistical feat to care in this way for so many people, all done by volunteers who come and go.

ICE can take them at any time

One favourite ICE ploy, apparently, is to let refugees travel to their sponsors, often at considerable expense and inconvenience, and then detain and deport them the first time they report to an ICE office, perhaps for a minor infraction of the rules. Remember, these people are traumatised by what they have fled and endured, they are bewildered by a strange new environment, speak no English, and all the forms and verbal instructions they have been given are complicated and in a language they do not understand. ICE makes no allowances for any of this. It is without humanity or compassion.

The SJDC site supervisor is a volunteer in her 60s from Seattle. She had previously spent a year volunteering at Annunciation House but had returned for another six-month stint when the need had become so urgent. My first day was hers also. She was overwhelmed. A couple from upstate New York, both with good Spanish, had been there for just a few days, there was Hannah from the UUSC who had arrived the previous day, the other UU, one or two local people, and me. Volunteers come and go. Some like me, staying for a week or two; others for longer, locals offering a day or two. Some fluent in Spanish; some with basic or zero language skills. There is

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A great need for human compassion

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plenty to do even for someone with little or no Spanish. I spent most of my time in the clothing room. A week ago it was piled high with donations yet to be sorted. When not directly helping the refugees find suitable clothes I spent hours sorting through it all, arranging it in neat piles and discarding what is not likely to be taken. At the end of each day, previously neat piles are again a mess after people have sifted through them and need to be arranged again.

Drained physically and emotionally

That pretty much describes what has been happening here and my participation in it. It has been physically exhausting, and at the end of each day I have felt utterly spent. Several volunteers became sick because of the physical demands. It has also been emotionally challenging. Because of my inability to communicate verbally I have not learned the details of people's stories but have had to rely on visual clues.

My first day was the hardest, observing the faces of the new arrivals. Fearful, confused, exhausted, but also grateful that at least they had made it this far and were being welcomed by people who greeted them warmly. In even the 24 hours or less that I encountered each person, there seemed a visible relaxation of their anxieties. The mere fact that they were being cared for by others who were not part of officialdom, who recognised them as fellow human beings, who smiled or spoke with them warmly, who were giving freely of their time and energy, who wished them well in such stark contrast to the cold inhumanity of the system, seemed to touch them deeply.

They were keen to help where they could, mopping floors or moving donations. One of the hardest parts was bidding them farewell as they were taken by volunteer drivers to the airport or bus terminal, not knowing what their fate will be. Will they be sent back to the horrors they have fled? Will they be successful in their application for asylum? I will never know. I do know that only a tiny fraction of asylum applications are successful. Most will be deported, or will disappear into the shadows of the underground economy, always fearful of being brutally picked up by ICE.

None were in disguise

The refugees come from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. In spite of the absurd claims made by Trump, I did not see a single person from the Middle East masquerading as a Central American. All of them just want a better life. They want to work, pay taxes, be part of America, find safety and a reasonable life for themselves and their children. They are willing to do the work no-one else wants to do but upon which the national economy is based. Just like centuries of immigrants before them.

I am very grateful that, being retired, I have the gift of time



Adolescents at the Ursula Detention Centre in McAllen, Texas. It is one of the centres where children are kept in cages. US government photo.

and have been able to see for myself what is happening, to be a small part of a compassionate response to a humanitarian crisis in defiance of the barbarity of the Federal agencies. I have been deeply touched by the generosity of the city of El Paso. So many people who are responding with love and kindness, and not with the pre-election fear and hate shamelessly whipped up by Trump and his despicable ilk. I don't know when or how, but I would like to return. I want to become better able to communicate in Spanish. It has been a transformative experience for me. I hope it has been of some value to those in such need.

As a postscript, while waiting for my plane at El Paso airport I encountered a Honduran man and his 10-year-old daughter whom I had helped the previous day. She was wearing the red sweater I remembered giving her. They were bound for Los Angeles where his brother awaited him. I spent half an hour with them, making sure they were at the correct gate, giving her a simple English lesson, writing a sign for him to carry asking for help if he needed it. I was in tears as I finally bade them goodbye.

There is no likelihood of the need for help lessening in the immediate future. If you would like to volunteer, contact the UUSC or Annunciation House directly on-line. If you would like to donate, please go to Annunciation House online: <https://annunciationhouse.org/tag/donate/>

The need is urgent. And thank you in anticipation of the generosity of your hearts. Even if the United States has no room for more immigrants and they must be turned back at the border (an absurd claim I reject out of hand) is it really too much to expect that people in such desperate need be treated with even a modicum of human compassion by the US Federal agencies? And by us as fellow human beings? Are we really no better than that?

The Rev David Usher is a retired Unitarian minister, now living in California.

Finding beauty in bleak times

By Caroline Cormack

It is not always easy to think about beauty at this cold and dark time of year. There are times when it seems very hard to find.

I remember one night about this time two years ago, Dave, my husband, and I had gone to the cinema to watch the film 'I, Daniel Blake'. The film is a sad indictment of the harshness of our benefits system, and how we treat the poorest in our society. We came out feeling a bit down, into a murky, cold, grey Aberdeen night, only to find the police had closed the road we wanted to walk along as someone had jumped off the bridge by the theatre.

At moments like that, the bleakness and ugliness of life seems to stare us in the face and beauty seems very far away.

Yet the day after that I was walking my dogs surrounded by beautiful trees of amazing Autumn colours and wishing that everyone could connect with that spectacular scenery right in front of us, if we only look.

Seek beauty in the way we live

Beauty comes in many forms; there is the beauty we appreciate with our senses but also a deeper beauty we can seek in all of life, one we can carry with us in the way we live our lives. It is not an easy thing to define but when I looked in the dictionary the definition of beauty I found was something that delighted the senses and mind.

All of our senses are involved in the discovery of beauty. Sight seems the one most linked to appreciating the beauty of colour, nature and art.

There is much in Unitarian literature which expresses the beauty of nature. I noticed that the National Unitarian Fellowship's Viewpoint pamphlets, written by ordinary Unitarians, often connect their sense of faith to the beauty they experience in the landscapes they experience.

Jo Rogers for example describes her sense of faith:

'I live in a village with no streetlights; I look up at the sky at night and am overwhelmed by the immensity of both space and time.

'I live quite near to the Morecambe Bay estuary; I look at the high incoming tide and feel its tremendous power...

'I have a garden; I see the intense beauty and colour of an individual flower. I watch tiny creatures going about their business in their own small world.

I live halfway up an escarpment in Cumbria. From the top of the scar I can see a huge range of the Cumbrian Mountains, sometimes cloudy and misty, sometimes snow-topped, sometimes pink in the morning or evening sun; always magnificent and beautiful.

These are some of the things that inspire me and evoke my awe and worship.'

Another Unitarian, Naomi Linnell, writing her viewpoint of her faith says:

'I am not a pagan by conviction, but I have for nearly as long as I can remember found God mirrored in his creation ... a window into eternity that the 9-year-old-I-once-was recognised one summer afternoon on an Exmoor hillside.' She talks about how she rediscovered this faith from her landscape as she grew older:

'Suddenly this window had been opened for me again, and every ride I took along the cliff showed me God – in the tiny purple vetch along the path, the red valerian at the edge of the shore, and the great herring gulls wheeling and dancing across the top of the lace-edged waves.'

There is no shortage of descriptions of the beauties of nature and how, for some, they lead to a feeling of divinity at the heart of things.

The Unitarian John McLachlan echoed this in his anthology 'Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness' when he quotes Hugh Walpole:



“‘The beauties of Nature and the unexpected nobility of man under severe trial are sufficient justification for living’ said Mr Harness to Rogue Herries when the latter doubted the value of living.’

He includes a beautiful poem ‘This American Earth’ by Nancy Newhall:

You shall know the night ... its space, its light, its music.

You shall see a mountain rise in the transparent shadow before dawn.

You shall see...and feel ... first light, and hear a ripple in the stillness;

You shall enter the living shelter of the forest...

You shall top a rise and behold creation ...

Were all learning lost, all music stilled,

Man, if these resources still remained to him, could hear again the singing in himself

And rebuild anew the habitations of his thought.

Tenderly now – let all men, turn to the earth.

In his conclusion to this anthology John McLachlan goes on to advise us that ‘Beauty, Truth and Goodness reach mankind by indirection, by hard living, even forgetfulness, and especially sacrifice.’


Beauty, truth and goodness

With this quote he is expanding the meaning of beauty beyond the comforts of nature. He is defining beauty as spiritual goodness, the truth at the heart of things. This is also something that has to be sought out. In a cynical world with much negativity expressed in our media, it can be hard to notice the beauty in humanity itself.

But it is there, if we look hard enough. This is expressed well by Pierre Pradervand in his book *The Gentle Art of Blessing*. He has a section titled ‘When Beauty is Hard To See’ and says:

‘Deep inside the most hardened criminal, the most cruel tyrant, the most indifferent, cynical, disillusioned person resides infinite and hidden beauty – which that person is often the first to ignore.’ He tells the story from an English officer who directed a naval detention centre for rebellious conscripts and deserters during World War Two.

s: it's more than what we see



'If you live in this world with kindness, if you do not add to other people's burdens, but if you try to serve love, when the time comes for you to make the journey, you will receive a serenity, peace and a welcoming freedom that will enable you to go to the other world with great elegance, grace and acceptance.'

– John O'Donohue

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Lives full of reverence and gentleness

In particular, one of them was a wood craftsman and it was a joy to watch him working slowly to create these beautiful handmade items. It was really quite mesmerising to watch these men quietly going about their lives with reverence and gentleness.

So there is beauty in human activity if we take time to observe, especially in acts done kindly. I found an article by a woman who had undertaken 60 deliberate acts of kindness in 60 days as her 60th birthday challenge. She describes some of what she experienced when she did this:

I have seen the greatest acts of generosity performed by folks who seemingly have little in the way of practical possessions. I have been profoundly touched by watching a homeless man gently offer to share his meal with a friend when we ran out of lunches. We offered a meal to a homeless man sitting on a bench who had some packets of butter and jam. When we offered him lunch, he scooped up every package of butter and jam and offered them to me in kind. There is nothing you could have offered me that would have touched me as deeply as his gesture.

Some spiritual writers even suggest there is beauty in suffering. The author Mark Nepo says, 'I don't know if it is human nature or the way of life on earth, but we seldom become all of who we are until forced to it. Some say that something in us rises to the occasion, that there is, as Hemingway called it, "a grace under pressure" that comes forth in most of us when challenged.'

Keep dancing

I have seen that grace in hospital patients and in those who come to the Listening Service – the bereaved, and others who have been through hardships. Somehow these events have the potential to take people deeper into themselves and what really matters in life which can be a wonderful process to observe. As Nepo says: 'Now there's nothing left but to keep dancing.'

I think this is linked to the beauty of ageing and even death. John O' Donohue, the Celtic Christian spoke about ageing as our harvest time when we can become more aware of the sacredness that shelters us. He said 'Memory is one of the most beautiful realities of the soul' and went on to explain that 'the beauty and invitation of old age offers a time of silence and solitude for a visit to the house of your inner memory ... Your soul is the place where your memory lives.'

He points out that 'many people as they age get very worried and anxious. It is precisely in difficult and vulnerable times that you really have to mind yourself ... in difficult times you should always keep something beautiful in your heart. Perhaps, as a poet said, it is beauty that will save us in the end.'

I found a lovely short poem in a GA worship committee resource by Graeme Pilbrough called 'This Beautiful Lady':

Your eyes shine

As you tell me of tales past and present.

Your voice lifts with a passion,

free of old shackle and chains.

An enthusiasm for life, revitalising those who hear it.

So I ask –

how society can call you old,

for beneath the deep crevices on your skin,

I sense the beauty of youth in spirit.

And what of the end, death, that is often our biggest fear? Again, O' Donohue believes there can be beauty in this. He describes being with a friend as she was dying, a young mother of two children. A

(Continued on next page)

Believe that everyone has an inner beauty

Pierre Pradervand's explanation of this is, 'A man who had arrived spewing hatred and venom had been transformed into a new person because someone had cared enough to affirm and spiritually maintain with total conviction his hidden inner perfection.'

That certainly is an extreme example of believing that everyone has an inner beauty which can be found if we look hard enough. I think people who work with offenders and others who show disturbed behaviour would agree with that – I remember when I went to a talk by the prison chaplain who used to work in Aberdeen prison, I was really moved by how lovingly she talked about the offenders. She seemed to have an ability to see the best in them while not condoning their criminal behaviour.

So we may experience beauty in our surroundings and in the people we meet. We may even experience beauty just by observing people. The beauty of seeing connection, kindness and friendship. I used to observe this a lot when I did my hospital visiting and it was evident once when I took my aunt for medical treatment. The staff's gentle and caring treatment of her was really wonderful and moving to watch.

Watching people doing something they love has a beauty to it. I enjoyed watching a documentary called 'Retreat – Meditations from a Monastery'. It was incredibly relaxing and really lovely to watch the simplicity of the monks' lives and the care they took with each task they undertook, treating all they did as sacred work.

'Stirrings' opens up submissions to all

By Stephanie Bisby

Submissions are invited for this year's *Stirrings* anthology, on the theme of 'Prophetic Visions: Unitarian Style'. *Stirrings* is a collection of writings issued each year by the past and present Students Union of Unitarian College Manchester, and sold at the Annual Meetings of the Unitarian General Assembly to raise money to support future training and ministry.

This year, in celebration of the launch of the new non-geographic Unitarian College, the call for submissions is open to ministers, lay leaders, and members of our congregations. The wider call for submissions was launched from the inaugural session of the new Unitarian College, which took place at Woodbrooke Quaker Conference Centre in September.

As usual, the anthology aims to provide material for use in worship and small group gatherings, in a variety of formats. Prayer, reflection, meditation, addresses, poetry, personal testimonies, and stories (especially for children), on the theme of prophetic visions, are welcome.

Copies of the anthology will be on sale at the General Assembly meetings in April. This year the new editorial team also commits to making the material available in an online form after the meetings.

The editorial team for *Stirrings* 2019 consists of the Rev Mark Hutchinson (minister to the Cotswold Group Unitarians), Stephanie Bisby (ministry student) and Natasha Stanley (administrator). Please send your submissions to Mark Hutchinson at reverendhutch@gmail.com by Monday 21 January.

Suggestions for themes for the 2020 anthology are also welcome.

I talked to Mark Hutchinson about his experiences of editing *Stirrings* last year and his hopes for its future.

SB: What did you enjoy about editing *Stirrings* last year, and what was challenging?

MH: Editing *Stirrings* has traditionally been performed by a senior student at Unitarian College Manchester. As the only student for the last two years, that was me! The hard part is

that everybody has a time constraint, so it's difficult to get material in but we're happy to receive existing material which expresses hopes for the future even if it may not speak directly to the theme.

SB: Can people still obtain copies of last year's edition, and if so, how?

MH: Yes, I still have copies. They are £7 including postage and packing. You can request a copy by emailing reverendhutch@gmail.com.

SB: Can you tell us about the changes this year's editorial team is making?

MH: We are widening the call for submissions to reflect the fact that we would like *Stirrings* to express the vision of the whole movement – not just our ministers. We are also adding a new form of distribution, to reflect changing uses of technology and make it available to a wider audience as in the past it has mainly been limited to people who physically attend the General Assembly meetings.

SB: What inspired this year's theme, Prophetic Visions, and what ideas do you have about how it might be interpreted?

MH: It was inspired by a Unitarian College session on the role of preacher as prophet. I think we need to be clear that it is something we all do, whether ministers or lay people. We are all helping to shape the future of our movement. Unitarianism is a faith movement with many understandings of the divine or spiritual connection, and we invite you to offer future inspiration from a place or source of your understanding. We're very open to a broad interpretation of the theme. Many prayers and meditations have a prophetic element but we'd also love to see stories, poems, short narratives and personal reflections.

SB: What is your vision for the future of *Stirrings*?

MH: It would be great if we can continue the *Stirrings* name and format as the new college develops so that future students can continue to harness the inspirational thinking and hope across the diversity of our movement.

Stephanie Bisby is a Unitarian ministry student.

Beauty, grace, goodness in bleak times

priest was with her who was also her friend and he spent a long time talking to her, sharing his lovely memories of her and reassuring her. John O'Donohue noticed her becoming incredibly calm and serene and she then spent some time saying goodbye to each of her family who shared what she had meant to them. 'Smiling and serene, she went absolutely happily and beautifully on the journey that she had to make alone. It was a great privilege for me to be there. For the first time my own fear of death was transfigured. It showed me that if you live in this world with kindness, if you do not add to other people's burdens, but if you try to serve love, when the time comes for you to make the journey, you will receive a serenity, peace and a welcoming freedom that will enable you to go to the other world with great elegance, grace and acceptance.'

I was at a workshop on talking about death and dying and some people shared their experiences of witnessing 'beautiful deaths' and I think it shows the possibility that if we can let go of some of our own fear, dread and grief, we may be able to

help people end their lives with grace.

So appreciating beauty is not just about dividing life into negative or positive, attractive or unattractive but in seeing the deeper essence of things.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Zen Buddhist expresses this by comparing flowers and garbage, pointing out that at its freshest, a flower is very beautiful. Days later, it will become part of the compost which may smell and not seem very attractive. Then, over time, that same rotten rubbish will be transformed into lovely vegetables and beautiful flowers. It comes back to our attitude and our willingness to seek beauty, grace and goodness.

The Rev Caroline Cormack is an Interfaith minister who serves Aberdeen Unitarians.



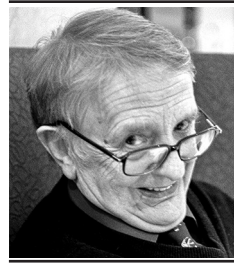
The NHS, Peterloo and a prince too

A short stay in hospital drew my attention to the changes that are constantly occurring in the NHS, mainly for the better. Along with some distinct signs of overstretched staff were experiences of amazing technology. For a brief procedure requiring the kind of anaesthetic that switches off only the necessary parts of the anatomy, I was wired up to several terminals linking me to a rank of hi-tech gadgetry with lights flashing and numbers adjusting. My heart-rate, pulse-rate, blood pressure and everything else constantly monitored. Nurses took my temperature with what looked like a TV remote. How that works bewilders me. Who researched, designed, adapted, developed and manufactured this hi-tech stuff I have no idea. I simply feel impressed and grateful.

A post-operative consolation came a few days later with a birthday treat visit to the cinema in city-centre Manchester. I dislike cinema multiplexes (dreadful word). This one has 16 screens to choose from. A hike along lengthy passageways and up two escalators finally got us to our chosen film, *The First Man*. This is about astronaut Neil Armstrong and the first moon landing. Beginning in 1961 it is successfully gripping, even though we all know the 1969 outcome. Armstrong undertook several years of physically demanding training. He also adopted the professionalism that bottles up emotions, even in the face of personal tragedy with the death of a small daughter at home, and the loss of colleagues in a Gemini rocket that exploded in flames. Meanwhile the arguments raged outside. We get a glimpse of Unitarian Universalist (?) Kurt Vonnegut railing about the morality of the vast expense. Then, a glimpse of President Kennedy praising the space travel adventure (without mentioning it was also a race against the USSR) and the 'demos' against President Johnson over the Vietnam War.

Not all the technology was impressive, especially when a Swiss army knife was needed for one last minute adjustment. (I'm glad I hadn't spotted one of those in the hospital operating theatre!) The reality of being inside the space suit, then inside the rocket ship and inside the capsule, evoked enough claustrophobia to grip us. Armstrong is also bottled up inside his professionalism, throwing a strain on his marriage. The task of telling his small sons what he was doing and that he might not come home, seemed more difficult to him than boarding the space vessel. The magic 'one small step – one giant leap' moment and Armstrong's stated reason for undertaking the adventure deliver much to think about and feel moved by. Highly recommended.

It saddens me to report a little disappointment with my next cinema visit (at my local picture house, just one screen). The film, *Peterloo*, left a lot to be desired. It depicts the events leading up to 16 August 1819, at what nowadays is called a pro-democracy demonstration in St Peter's Field, Manchester, which then, astonishingly, was a town without an MP. The northern accent and dialect are served up aplenty in contrast to the southern affluence and indifferent parliamentarians, topped off with the downright silliness of the Prince Regent and his 'lady friend'. It makes for caricature set-pieces and an over-long film, with continuous dialogue putting everyone's



Funny Old World

By John Midgley

point of view.

The starvation-level struggle and low wages inflicted by the Corn Laws made the rich richer. Who would speak, then, for the suffering poor, give them a voice and a vote? Without these, the hungry, frustrated, pathetic masses felt doomed and angry. Enter Henry 'Orator' Hunt, renowned Radical public speaker on behalf of the oppressed. At this point the film comes more to life. On a cart in front of a crowd of 100,000, Hunt tried to bring some hope in their darkness. But no, a room full of ridiculous local magistrates read the riot act out of a window. Then a band of boozed-up cavalry and yeomanry panicked and charged with sabres drawn into the mass of unarmed men, women and children, killing 18 and injuring hundreds more. The film ends, but ...

An appalling blot on English social history, the only hope was for some good to come out of it. It did in the form of better, more forthright newspaper reporting. Former Quaker, later Unitarian John Edward Taylor, with Unitarians and other Manchester businessmen, gathered in nearby Cross Street Chapel's meeting room to found, two years later, the (then *Manchester*) *Guardian*, to campaign for reform. The *Guardian* rightly boasts that its 'roots, and its enduring liberal, reformist character, lie in what happened there in 1819.' The link between the battle of Waterloo and the atrocity in St. Peter's Field produced the word 'Peterloo'. I would not discourage anyone from seeing the film but be prepared for a long wait for the brilliance of the drama to emerge.

I almost share my birthday with Prince Charles. His comes a day after mine and this year saw him reach 70 years. Much media chatter on whether he will change his ways when he becomes monarch, desist from political controversy, desist from writing letters with his views on current affairs and behave with political neutrality, as the Queen has successfully done all these years. This is to assume that the Queen does not outlive Prince Charles. One is entitled to wonder about that. Meanwhile, he recently presented an enjoyable TV programme on the life of 19th-century composer, Sir Hubert Parry. We know Parry for the unfailingly uplifting anthem, *I was Glad when they said unto me ...* sung at every coronation since Edward VII. Also, the hymn tune *Repton*, sung to *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*, which is in our *Hymns for Living*. The tune is also in *Sing Your Faith* (no. 190). If Prince Charles is pondering further TV work, he might consider taking over from David Dimbleby, who retires next year as chairperson of BBC's *Question Time*. He could do that quite well and it might give him practice in maintaining some neutrality. (Only joking, Sir!)

The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.

Laugh! (You know what she's like!)

'I'd like to start today with an observation: reflecting on Unitarian Universalist jokes is a hugely popular sermon topic.' Amanda Udis-Kessler, High Plains Church UU, May 25, 2014. In the States possibly, but not over here. I love Unitarian jokes. In fact, I love them so much I put a whole lot together into a service which I entitled: 'You can tell I'm serious because I'm laughing' which I have inflicted on quite a number of you. Some congregations liked it and invited me back, some smiled politely and didn't. One complained to the local district and was told: 'Well, you know what she's like.' One was so outraged that, though they could not refuse me coffee, *How do you excommunicate a Unitarian?*

You don't offer them coffee after the service.

None of them could look me in the eye or would speak to me, not even to say 'thank you and goodbye'.

Unitarian Universalists love jokes and if you go on the web you will find lots of UU joke websites.

The UUs recognise that, in the words of The First Unitarian Church of Toronto: 'There are many Unitarian Universalist jokes, stories we tell each other as a way of laughing at ourselves. All of these statements contain at least a grain of truth about who we are, but, as we say, if you take three Unitarians, you'll find five opinions; so some of the jokes below are not relevant (or funny) to all of us. We are proud to call ourselves "a community of misfits."'

Now some jokes can be difficult to decipher:

Being a Unitarian minister is like pushing a wheelbarrow full of frogs.

Which could, of course be the US equivalent of herding cats.

But some contain quite a fair quantity of truth:

A UU is told 'I hear you deny the divinity of Christ.' 'That's not true!' said the UU, 'We don't deny the divinity of anyone.' Unitarian Universalism – Where all your answers are questioned.

And possibly this:

You might be a UU if ... your idea of a guys' night out is going to a feminist rally.

Some get a little nearer the bone:

A Unitarian is just a Quaker with Attention Deficit Disorder.

Back in the day when I attended UU services and 'stuff', I always liked the 'you know you're a UU when' lists ...

You get mail from committees you didn't know you were on.

You know at least two people who are upset that trees had to die for your church to be built.

You find yourself rewriting a church survey, rather than taking it.

You call up your minister in the middle of the night, panicking because you are starting to believe in God.

To explain your personal theology, you have to use interpretive dance.

You think a Holy Day of Obligation is your turn to do coffee.

Endlessly quoted on the websites is a joke from *The Simpsons* which everyone else finds funny so I'll quote it:

(From an episode of The Simpsons, set at the church ice cream social)

Lisa: 'What flavours do you have?'

The Rev Lovejoy: 'Well, chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, and our new Unitarian flavour ice cream.'

Lisa: 'I'll have that.' (Rev hands her an empty bowl)



Lisa: 'But there's nothing in there.'

Rev: "Eeeexactly."

We get very chuffed if we are quoted by anyone else, especially if the quote seems to point at some supposedly 'Unitarian' virtue:

'I know my humour is outrageous when it makes the Unitarians so mad they burn a question mark on my front lawn.' – Lenny Bruce

'The General answers his own phone. Must be a Unitarian.' – Col Sherman Potter, M.A.S.H. 4077

Michael Moore, American Academy-Award-winning filmmaker and best-selling author was unexpectedly sharp when, speaking on radio, he insisted that audience members get out and do something for their communities. 'Do something' he said, 'don't just hold long meetings in the basement of the local Unitarian church.' However, later, at an Occupy Wall Street speech in Oakland he did say, 'God bless the Unitarians'.

I quite like these two:

If Unitarians were asked to form a firing squad, they'd arrange themselves in a circle.

Why are UU's the worst hymn singers?

Because they are always reading ahead to see if they agree with the next line.

In my joke service I quote that old favourite:

Arguing with a Unitarian is like wrestling with a pig in mud.

After a while you realise that the pig is enjoying it.

At one church a man came up to me after the service and told me very seriously that pigs can be harmed if you wrestle with them. I told him that I thought it was just a joke. He assured me that it was not and that it was really quite dangerous for the pigs. I promised him that no Unitarian would ever wrestle a pig in mud.

Don't let me down.

Notes and links

The Church Where People Laugh: A Treasury of Jokes, Quotations, Observations, and True Stories About Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists (UUs, UU Joke Book) (Paperback)

by Gwen Foss

<https://www.firstunitariantoronto.org/what-is-unitarianism/uu-humour>

The Unitarian Universalist Hysterical Society Coffee Hour: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/The-Unitarian-Universalist-Hysterical-Society-Coffee-Hour-281774051946677/>

<https://www.danielharper.org/yauu/tag/uu-jokes/>

<https://www.ucmtl.ca/sermons/2016/1/18/laughing-at-ourselves>

<https://uuwestside.org/category/cartoons/>

https://bertc.com/subtwo/uu_humour.htm

<https://matt.baya.net/unitarian-universalist-jokes/>

<https://findingmygrounduu.wordpress.com/2010/12/28/you-might-be-a-unitarian-universalist/>

<https://www.hpcuu.org/documents/sermons/LaughingMatters.pdf>

Four groups combine for a great event

By Celia Cartwright

With my apologies to 'English Country Garden'!

*How many acronyms did we get
All together in Great Hucklow?
I'll tell you of all of them that I know
For if I don't I'll get no pardon*

*UESN and UPF, URG and NUF
All turned up for a weekend of stuff
And at the end, we all agreed
To use full names the next time!*

So what happens when you mix up the Unitarian Renewal Group, the Unitarian Peace Fellowship, the National Unitarian Fellowship and the Unitarian Earth Spirit Network who all agreed to share a theme 'Beginnings and Endings' and gather together at the Nightingale Unitarian Conference Centre in Great Hucklow? You get delightful conversations. You get new insight and understanding. You get to know surprising things you never knew before. You have fun. You eat well. You get to know new people.

Earth Spirit Network (UESN) a group who lean gently into an ancient understanding of the wholeness of creation and seek spirituality through the cycles of nature, brought us gently into a sacred space, to share the meaning of Samhain (pronounced sow-en) with its links to Halloween. Creating a sacred circle into which we were gathered and protected they led us to share our stories of people we had loved now gone into death but not from our hearts. It was a precious sharing and a gentle end to the first evening.

The Unitarian Renewal Group (URG) established long before the UESN was even dreamed of, came prepared with a timeline of the Unitarian General Assembly (GA). It was fascinating to see how the emphasis in worship and in governance had altered since its formation 1928. We discussed the changing nature of Unitarianism, and a future which may be very different from the present.

The National Unitarian Fellowship (NUF), seek to share the Unitarian faith experience in ways other than belonging to a congregation. For many years this has been done by post, a regular newsletter with comments and sermons helped to feed those who could not get to church for whatever reason. These days they have got a lot more technical, not only email information but the spoken word on camera. Services filmed and online for anyone to look at, and they are watched by people across the globe. Ably backed up by Unitarian TV crew, they led us to explore the idea of speaking about our faith, our beliefs, our groups, into a camera. It is doubtful that any of our efforts this weekend will ever reach the dizzy heights of 'YouTube' but for many it was a close encounter of a very different kind. Many of us found it a bit of a 'zip-wire' experience, terrifying yet exhilarating.

The Unitarian Peace Fellowship (UPF) perhaps best known for rattling buckets at the GA meetings, supports peace initiatives across the globe, and brought the GA to be part



Some of the members of the four Unitarian groups who shared the Nightingale Unitarian Conference Centre, and some events, in a weekend. Here they are, gathered at Old Chapel, Great Hucklow. Photo by John Midgley

of the Charter for Compassion. They shared ideas of peace, encouraging all to consider what 'peace' means, and reminded us that good can come out of the most terrible episodes in history. In a talk on the last evening we learned that necessity really was the mother, not only of terrible inventions of destruction but also inventions of construction. Many of the things we take for granted now, have their roots in that terrible war. There are so many I'm just going to list a selection. Stainless steel was invented to make guns that did not distort through heat and overuse. Plastic surgery, to replace the faces of men ravaged by shrapnel and bullet wounds. Blood banks, unheard of before WWI. Antiseptics and wound care, long before antibiotics saved many lives and limbs. Mobile X-Ray machines, invented by Marie Curie herself to be used in the field of battle. Anaplasty and prosthetics, allowed men with terrible injuries to re-enter society with some shreds of dignity. Ultrasound, has emerged from the trials with hydrophones to detect U-boats. And lastly the work with cotton cellulose first used for wound dressings then sanitary towels, but when ironed gave us the humble paper hankie.

The next group gathering will be in 2020, watch out for the publicity and book your place.

The Rev Celia Cartwright is a member of the Peace Fellowship.

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Still 'Stand-ing' after all this time

By **Glennyce Eckersley**

On 27 October Stand Chapel, Whitefield, celebrated its 325th Anniversary. It is an amazing fact that there has been worship on this site for so many years. It was actually on this very site in 1688 that the famous Stand Grammar School was founded. Many leading figures went forth into the world from this school, including Clive of India. The chapel was destroyed by a German bomb in the second world war but was rebuilt and consecrated in 1952.

So many generations worshipped here and it was decided to hold a day of celebration on this auspicious occasion. More than 100 people attended from all over the UK and fortuitously one much-valued member found herself on a business trip from Hong Kong and able to join in the festivities.

We began with a service of thanksgiving conducted by the Rev Lynne Readett. Mindful that most Sundays we did not have 100 people attending, Lynne's inspiring address reminded us that small was beautiful! Other special guests included The Worshipful Mayor of Bury, Councillor Mrs Jane Black and her consort – plus, the President of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches Mrs Joan Cook. In addition to all this inspiration we had the beautiful music of our accomplished organist Mr Ian Southern. Last but by no means least how delighted we were to see our newly appointed minister joining us, having accepted our invitation that very week. Not only could we look back with respect and affection but the Rev Shammy Webster represented moving forward to another new chapter of worship.

At the conclusion of the service we were invited to partake in a buffet tea. This was to the delight of all especially my granddaughter, who asked, 'after the benediction, do we have cake?!' The congregation descended the stairs to the schoolroom



The Mayor of Bury, Councillor Jane Black and her consort on left, with president of the Unitarian GA Joan Cook and Geoff Weywell. Photo provided by Glennyce Eckersley.

(some with more haste than others) to find a wonderful spread awaited and the chance to find old friends for a good catch up. There followed much kissing and hugging and I was reminded of the wonderful story by Robert Fulghum entitled 'The great hugging plague'. This refers to his church at one period when it had been decided that everyone should display more affection to each other. It is a very funny story and it was being enacted at our celebration.

No one wanted the day to end, as it had been wonderful. Even the weather was glorious with sunshine and deep blue skies. Inevitably, however, we had to say our goodbyes and as I left the chapel I found the Elton John song running through my head, not only a great pun but so very true. Only slightly altered, you will recall it goes, 'We're "still standing" after all this time, Yeah, yeah, yeah'!

Glennyce Eckersley is a member of Stand Chapel, Whitefield.

Meditating where Wordsworth walked

By **Sue Walker-Stokes**

I had heard of the Unitarian retreats from a friend whose mother attends the Unitarian church in Bristol. Having experienced a difficult few years: caring for my mother in France for several months before she died, and with the recent deaths of my father and beloved brother, I was looking for space to calm my head and heart. These retreats sounded ideal, so I initially went to the one in Salisbury last November. It was a healing experience and I quickly signed up for this past summer's retreat in the Lake District where I had never been before.

I live in Bristol and my friend and I were travelling by car so it was a long journey. Coming off the main road it seemed as if we were immediately transported to another world: huge hills, deep, dark lakes with green trees and fields dotted with sheep around us. The whole place emanated peace and serenity.

Arriving at the guesthouse I was warmly welcomed by Kate Dean. During the evening session Kate invited us to set our intentions for the weekend. I settle into my seat, close my eyes and lay my hands on my lap. I breathe slowly and deeply. My busy brain begins to calm and I feel that my intentions are to let go and slow down.



Grasmere view photo by Sue Walker-Stokes

I went with the flow, attending some but not all of the meditations and activities offered that weekend, visiting the church and shops in Grasmere and making use of my National Trust membership at nearby Allan Bank House where William Wordsworth had lived. I climbed a hill and admired another beautiful valley and I walked alone to Grasmere Lake on Sunday morning. I was gentle with myself. Fiona's yoga session on Saturday morning was wonderful: slow

movements which were relaxing yet invigorating. The Deep Listening and Loving Speech session helped me to bond with the others and I found the Circle of Stories that evening very moving.

I very much enjoyed my weekend retreat at Grasmere. I only wish I had stayed longer in the company of these really lovely people and to experience more of the breath-taking landscape. Since returning to Bristol I have downloaded the app Insight Timer and am using it (fairly) regularly to help me meditate. I have also joined a local yoga class which focuses on the breath.

Future Retreats: 7 - 9 May in Salisbury, 13 - 14 July in Grasmere. Contact Alf for more information: alfwithington@gmail.com 01942 733553