



THE INQUIRER

£1 | Issue 7984 | 4 April 2020

The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians

Easter in isolation

Bob Janis-Dillon
on a holiday
like no other

Inside this issue...

Coping with Coronavirus

NUF creates connection

Faith in black and white

www.inquirer.org.uk



THE INQUIRER

The Unitarian and Free Christian Paper

Established in 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

The Inquirer is published fortnightly by The Inquirer Publishing Company (2004), Registered Charity 1101039.

Editor: M Colleen Burns MA
46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich
NR4 6UF **T:** 01603 505281
E: inquirer@btinternet.com
Proofreader: Sarah Reynolds
Cover: Shutterstock photo

Articles express the views of their writers. Submissions are welcome and may be edited for content and length. They should be emailed or typed and should be the writer's original work or be attributed appropriately.

Annual subscriptions are £38 with discounts for bulk orders. Cheques payable to 'The Inquirer'.
Write to: Steven Bisby
71 Earlesmere Avenue, Balby, Doncaster,
DN4 0QD **T:** 07764 486711
E: admin@inquirer.org.uk

Advertise for £6 per column cm, on 3-col page, plus VAT or £7.50 per col cm, on a 2-col page. A one-page supplement is £200. One column on a 2-col page is £100, on a 3-col page, £75. A5 fliers may be inserted for £95 plus VAT. Contact the editor for details.

Births, marriages and deaths: 50p a word + VAT.

Find out more about Unitarians
The General Assembly, Essex Hall
1-6 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY
T: 0207 2402384
E: info@unitarian.org.uk

www.unitarian.org.uk

Inquiring Words...

God has written the promise of the resurrection not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime.

Martin Luther

Finding virtue in the virtual

It's 26 March as I write, and much may have changed by the time you read this. But one certainty is that this Easter will be like no other. This is a strange time, when everything is very much the same – day after day spent at home – and completely different. At a time when we would take most comfort in community, in our faith, in being together, those are the very things we cannot do.

There are many opportunities for virtual worship. Members of the Octagon Chapel's meditation group are continuing their practice from their homes at their usual time, silently knowing others are joining in. Jane Blackall, ministry student, has organised Heart and Soul gatherings online. These services of prayer and contemplation, which also give participants the opportunity to share, are conducted on Zoom, an internet platform which allows participants to see each other and speak. Other people have volunteered to lead them, so the services are now offered through the week. Jane posts invitations on the UK Unitarians Facebook page so you may sign up here: <https://tinyurl.com/ut85yto> There is also a page dedicated to Heart and Soul here: <https://tinyurl.com/yx3vo4zd>

The Rev Cody Coyne at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, has begun offering his Wednesday lunchtime service online, posting a link on the UK Unitarians facebook page before it starts.

Other congregations are finding ways to use the internet to be together, and some ministers are delivering or posting their paper services to members. Danny Crosby, minister at Altrincham and Urmston, and his fiancée Sue Blackshaw spent the day before their wedding on 21 March delivering Mothering Sunday service packets to the congregations.

Ed Fordham, lay worship leader at the Chester congregation went one further. (He tells his story on page 9.) I'm sure there are many others.

This week we have another first. The Unitarian General Assembly meetings will go ahead online. Starting Tuesday, we are all invited to take part in the three-day gathering for spiritual nourishment.

The General Assembly is offering a space of togetherness, hope, inspiration and support. The Keynote Talk will be given, as planned, by writer, academic and activist, Dr Alastair McIntosh.

We hope *The Inquirer* can also continue to connect readers with your faith and your community. If you missed the last issue because of distribution problems, you may go online to www.inquirer.org.uk/pages/samples and download the issue. It's free to enjoy, so do pass along the link to anyone who might be interested. We will get through this. We have to keep the faith.

MC Burns

This is an opportunity to save the world writes **Bob Janis-Dillon**.

Easter in a time of privation

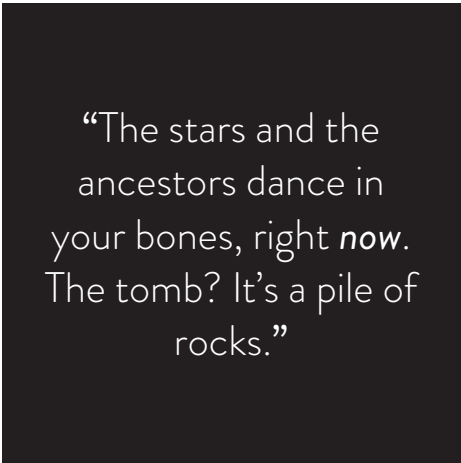
We may not all agree on the real meaning of Easter, but there's no denying that this year, we've had a shared experience of Lent. For weeks now, we've been affected by a global virus that has taken lives, stretched emergency rooms thin, closed schools, closed theatres, downed stock markets, and confined millions to their homes. We've experienced a different way of living – not just thought about it but lived it, imperfectly and bodily, been through strictures and adjustments.

We have lived in the 'in-between': a kind of life that is neither this nor that, a time of privation. Has it ever been a time of privation! 'Private', 'privation' and 'deprive' all come from the Latin root *privationem*, which means 'to take away'. In-person social contact has been taken away from us. As has any semblance of normalcy.

It's the 24th of March, the first bleak morning of government-enforced stay-in-your-homes, as I write this. There's no telling what will happen between now and Easter. We have just been through the most collectively surreal Mother's Day in living memory – or, at least, the living memory of those of us who have not known war. The death count is still relatively low, but even before the lockdown, the streets and parks are eerily quiet, and there is a tense awareness that things are going to get a good deal worse, especially in our hospitals, where NHS staff are gearing up for a massive influx of patients. It could be our loved ones, or ourselves.

A Sabbath quality to lent

That's not to say that there are not unexpected blessings, even in this dire time, this time of privation. For some of us a time of solitude is hardly a curse at all. In a society where, for many of us, life seems to move altogether too fast, and with little purpose, there was a Sabbath quality to this unexpected Lent. We have books to read, home projects to undertake. Parents of school-age kids wonder



“The stars and the ancestors dance in your bones, right *now*. The tomb? It's a pile of rocks.”

what they will do with them all day – and yet, we know we may, possibly, look back on this unreal time with a strange fondness, as a time of unasked-for togetherness. 'It wasn't the best of times for toilet paper, but hey, at least we had internet', as Charles Dickens famously wrote, in the opening to his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*.

I joke – we have been joking our way through it, together, with memes and wonderfully dark humour; we look on the bright side, keep a stiff upper lip, make the most of it. We

scan the statistics for good news; we mutter our gratitude that very few children seem fatally susceptible.

Any of us could be a killer

Let us acknowledge together though, and with honest hearts, just how *awful* this all is. This virus has kept us from being near our loved ones. It has made us unable to embrace our nearest and dearest, and to shake hands with old friends. We have been confined to our homes because of it, and worse, made to reflect that anyone of us could, unwittingly, be a potential killer. This is a virus that, if you catch it, makes it difficult to *breathe*. How horrible is that? It's a bit much to ascribe evil intention to a few strands of RNA in a protein coat. COVID-19 is just one of those things. Things happen in life; a few of them are awful. Like Job, we ask why. Various explanations are proffered. None satisfy. The suffering continues. On Good Friday, a cry is heard in the afternoon, and then silence.

Continued on page 3 >

“Death is a pathetic little side effect of the greatest and most sublime treasure our universe has to offer – a pittance paid to time. But life is so much more than a few hours on a clock.”

Continued from page 4 >

Good Friday – the day on which, according to Christian understanding, Jesus died, nailed to the cross – is not just an event that happened, reportedly, 2000 years ago. Good Friday is a lived reality in our experience. Often, in our own lives, we have been confronted by the blunt silence of the divine reply. Often we, too, have cried out for succour. We have known death, in our midst. We grieve lost loved ones with a holy fierceness. And we are not reconciled.

Easter is the joy of life abundant

Like Good Friday, Easter is very real, and it is still happening around us. Easter doesn't always happen tidily two days after Good Friday, whatever the calendar may tell you. Easter is the joy of life abundant overcoming the chains of death. That will happen when it will happen. The Rev Kate McKenna, minister at Bury Unitarian Church, suggested that since we will not be able to gather in our churches and chapels on Easter, that Easter will be when we first have the chance to be together, whenever that day may be. She is absolutely right. Jesus' followers didn't check their watches a couple days after Jesus died, and say to each other, 'OK, let's celebrate Easter'. The first Easter broke into their lives like a thunderclap – the appearance of the One they loved, walking with them, eating with them at table. Or even before that, to the first Christians, the women at the tomb: to these founders of Christianity, Easter came as an empty cave, and a voice saying, 'the one you love is not here'. The one you love is not at the tomb. Life is not, ultimately, a burial chamber. Life contains death in it, true, but life is so much larger and grander than the wan reality of death can ever hope to express. Death is a pathetic little side effect of the greatest and most sublime treasure our universe has to offer – a pittance paid to time. But life is so much more than a few hours on a clock. The kingdom of heaven, the majesty of the stars, is at your fingertips right at this very moment. Yours is the majesty. Yours to grow, to change, to struggle, to love. You have the keys to the kingdom, the life that connects to all other lives, here and gone, all the present and the past and the future. The stars and the ancestors dance in your bones, right now. The tomb? It's a pile of rocks.

United in this journey

Easter is not, ideally, meant to be experienced in isolation. It is, like Passover for Jewish people, a collective holiday. We experience rebirth, renewal, liberation together. Easter will be a collective holiday even if we are each in our own homes. We will know we are united in this journey, wherever we are in any given moment, towards the fullness of life immortal and omnipresent.

This is an opportune time for us to save the world. Actually, it is too late to save some of it: some wonderful species are already extinct, more will be soon. Some of the glory of the world has vanished, never to return. And yet. We know there is a better life out there. The good life is not being locked in our homes for hours on end – but it's also not cutting down massive swathes of rainforest every year, and throwing millions of plastic bottles into our oceans. There is a better life than this. When this particular crisis of COVID-19 has subsided enough for us to loosen the rules on being with one another – and that may be some time – I hope that we are able to come together in a long-awaited collective embrace, to gather together and sing and laugh and play. And when we do, let us say to one another: together we saved the world. We can discuss what that phrase actually means; we can try to guess at what proportion of the global population we rescued with our actions, and for how long; we can acknowledge the scientific fact that this particular strain of coronavirus was probably never a danger to wipe out every one of us. But like they do at the end of superhero movies, let us pat each other on the back and remind one another, this time we more or less saved the world.

Heartbreak is only part of the story

And we can do it again. We can save the world. Society is capable of incredible collective action, towards a future good. Telling ourselves this, on a rational level, won't fully convince us. But after this Lent, we'll have lived it, experienced it, known in our bones it is possible. We are headed towards Easter. Like Jesus' followers with him in Jerusalem, we don't know what's going to happen. There may be heartbreak in store for us. And yet the heartbreak is only part of the story. The holy river flows through a broken heart; it leads to an ocean of love. The life of ages finds its expression, and its ongoing and everyday redemption, in the way we live our lives. When you are able, stretch out those lovely arms of yours and give your neighbour a hug. It may not feel like it right now, but we are on our way to the good life. Let all things living now, sing alleluia.



Bob Janis-Dillon

The Rev Bob Janis-Dillon is minister with the Merseyside Unitarian Ministry Partnership.

EASTER 2020

“From midday a darkness fell over the whole land...” – Matthew 27: 45

“The angel spoke to the women: ‘You have nothing to fear. He has been raised.’ They hurried away in awe and great joy.” – Matthew 28: 5-6, 8

“There was another horse, sickly pale; its rider’s name was Death.” – Revelation 6:8

“A white horse appeared; its rider’s name was Faithful and True.” – Revelation 19:11

“Winter gray and falling rain. We’ll see summer come again.” – The Grateful Dead, ‘Weather Report’ (1973)

It was a time of failing hope;
a time of betrayal, despair and darkness at noon;
a time when fear and death seemed to triumph.

There have been many such times.
Times when it seemed that the pale horse and its
ghastly rider might drive life from the earth.

Maybe we live in such a blighted time,
even though we are surrounded by springtime
flowers and bursting buds.

There is a shadow over the world,
robbing us of the season’s joy,
mocking its beauty.

But though we must not diminish the
dangers we face, let us remember that
death never has the last word.

The faith of Easter is that beyond darkness
there is light, beyond sorrow there is joy,
beyond death there is life.

We are called to be messengers of hope
and compassion to each other, to our
neighbours and to the world.

When the crisis passes may each of us be able
to reflect that we didn’t altogether fail the test
of love, conscience and humanity.

We are living through a bitter, fearful spring,
but it will come to an end and we’ll see
summer come again.

Cliff Reed



Shutterstock photo

Coping with Corona

Helen Simpson gives tips rooted in therapy and spirituality.



We are living through something that none of us have ever seen before. Something that affects the whole of humanity. Something that we cannot even begin to understand or fully fathom. I am sure your mind – like mine – is full of the infinite number of ways this could all end. So during these strange and uncertain times, we need all the help we can get to keep us hopeful and level-headed.

In my work life I am a Cognitive Behavioural Therapist (CBT) in the NHS. My job is to help people who have depression and anxiety to recover and live a full life. CBT at its most basic is this; if you are depressed try to spend more time out of the house. If you have a fear of something, then expose yourself to the thing that you believe is dangerous until it no longer affects you. So, you can see that the usual advice is not applicable in the face of the Coronavirus. In fact, it explains why we are all feeling psychologically under the weather. We cannot connect with people and keep busy, so we slip into melancholy. It is hard for us to face our fears. We are not dealing with a simple fear of spiders or heights. We are faced with an enemy that is unseen and unknown. Our fear is often around uncertainty as much as real threat. Our brains have evolved to deal with physical danger such as predators we can flee. Our fight-and-flight response kicks in to help us, but as we cannot run away – or even leave the house – we are left with adrenalin running around our bodies, making us feel jittery and irritated. So, I was particularly interested to see an article by Russ Harris, author of *The Happiness Trap*, a book which explains how to use Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in everyday life. ACT could be described as CBT combined with all the wisdom of ancient traditions. It is a totally Unitarian therapy as it brings together science and faith to create a way of living that is based on what religion has taught us about dealing with the human condition. It is increasingly used with complex health problems such as chronic pain and addiction. But it can also help anyone deal with the pain of being human. I use it in my work and for myself to cope with my own mental and physical challenges.

One of the most quoted sayings in ACT is a version what's known as the Serenity prayer;

*Give us the courage to change the things we can
The patience to accept the things we cannot change
And the wisdom to know the difference*

This is the basis of the advice that Russ Harris gives. He tells us to focus on the things we have control over – such as socially distancing and disinfecting. We have no control over the virus or how our government chooses to deal with

it. We also have little control over the difficult emotions and thoughts that arise at a time like this. So, he suggests we shift our attention to our own behaviour and not that of others. Look for reliable sources of information rather than social media to make decisions. Stay in the now, be present and notice our emotions in our bodies with genuine empathy and kindness towards our difficult feelings. Be aware of our thoughts but do not take them too seriously. (Thinking we have the virus does not mean we have the virus.)

Harris describes a helpful idea he calls *dropping anchor*. We imagine we are a boat in a harbour in a storm. We cannot control the wind or waves, but we can anchor ourselves so we are less thrown around. Or, feel your feet on the ground. If you are sitting, you can push them downwards and feel the earth beneath you. Notice what is around you – five things you can see or hear. Or, fully engage with what you are doing. If you are washing up then notice the warmth of the water, the smell of the soap, the heaviness of the plate. This is a useful technique when your mind is obsessing or ruminating as it brings you back into the now. If you regularly pray or meditate then do this.

Lastly, do what matters. Whatever is important to you; focus on that. Whatever is going on and whatever restrictions we have, we can still do things that matter. Offer support to someone having a hard time. Create art or poetry. Write a sermon. Grow plants. Care for animals. During a group WhatsApp call, my friend Joan said, 'Covid-19 is God's way of telling us to go to our rooms and have a think about what we have done!' But, seriously, I believe we will come through this changed. And although there will be many hardships and tragedy, we will be more connected as a people and maybe we will learn what really matters, what it truly means to be a human.

Tomorrow I will get up, ring my patients, call my friends, meditate, wash door handles and plant courgette seeds. What will you do?

For the original article go to www.actmindfully.com.au

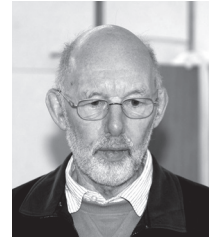
To find out more about ACT visit [www.](http://www.TheHappinessTrap.com)

[TheHappinessTrap.com](http://www.TheHappinessTrap.com) or download the free app

Helen Simpson is a member of the Octagon Unitarian Chapel, Norwich.

Connect to relieve isolation

Tony McNeile, NUF
chaplain,
is expert
in staying
in touch



For more than 50 years, the National Unitarian Fellowship (NUF) has helped foster faith and friendships across the country. Its leaders and members are experts in maintaining relationships while 'socially distant'. Here, NUF Chaplain Tony McNeile explains how it's done, and encourages us all to stay in touch.

'Don't Touch – Keep in Touch' – this is the mantra of these Coronavirus days. There is so much uncertainty about and it really feels like phoney war time. People have to travel on public transport but how can they keep the social distance rule? The 70+ and the vulnerable isolate themselves. How can they manage with their social routines of meeting up for church on a Sunday, going out for a meal or out on shopping trips? These are indeed difficult times!

This leaves the other important part of the statement to deal with, 'Keep in touch!'

We can learn the drills for being outside, but for many of us being isolated in the house is possibly a greater challenge. The spectre of this pandemic indoors is not the virus but loneliness.

The NUF was founded to overcome this very problem. The NUF was concerned for Unitarians who were isolated from a congregation. Some could no longer travel to their congregation. Some had become frail; others were long-term ill. Some wanted to be independent and some had no nearby congregation.

The NUF's purpose was to provide worship material and to link them together as a fellowship. We produced cassettes of recorded services and created a lending library. We also produced a monthly newsletter. We also produced a Viewpoint magazine which offered a longer paper on topics of Unitarian interest.

We started Books of Fellowship, a circle of people who wrote to one another on a round robin basis. They are still going and are an honest format for sharing news about each other's lives. Members of a book fellowship find their circle to be supportive friends. Lastly, we had an annual meet up, usually at Great Hucklow.

The NUF has moved into the digital age of course. Now we also have a website, nufonline.org.uk that offers more. And there is social media too. If you are on your own and you have WiFi why not have a look?

If you fancy reading back copies of the NUF newsletters they are all there. If you want to join in a discussion, go to the forum and mix it up with the regulars. You will find sermons, poems and readings there too. If you want to join a short meditation, there's a new one put on the website

almost every month. This month I recorded one, just as the threat of this virus calamity was dawning. My message was, and still is, 'Stay Spiritually Strong'.

So if you are isolated sitting on your own and you are online then visit the NUF website. It is free and is supported financially by the members. (So please join!) You could also watch a Sunday service. UKUnitarianTV (<http://www.ukunitarian.tv>) have posted a variety of Sunday services and special services on the website.

I feel we need to do more in these challenging times. My brother in Australia lost his wife last year and he is rattling around in a large house quite isolated. I ring him on WhatsApp (free) every other day. I speak to my daughter in Ireland using Facebook Messenger. It's like being a real part of her family.

It is great if you are online but what about those who aren't? Our 80-year-old near neighbour had an operation at Christmas and is currently housebound and very much at risk. We do her shopping. But what she really appreciates is the phone call from my wife. They discuss what is happening on the news and we can tell that sense of isolation is broken and how it lifts her spirits.

I believe the telephone can come into its own in these difficult and confusing days. I would suggest you pluck up courage and phone someone you know and ask them how they are managing. Is that easy, or a challenge? Be brave! Don't wade in initially with all your own worries but have a conversation and share concerns.

Kindness and care is going to make this long return to normality bearable, if we ever do return to it. Instead we might have resurrected that spirit of community that has become so patchy.

We can all do something. Offer help if you can. Telephone family members regularly. Telephone that isolated neighbour. Telephone each other. Stay spiritually strong. If you feel hesitant or nervous about phoning someone, you can always ring the minister of the NUF, that's me! I might tell you the story of my life and ask about yours. I might invite you to join a new Book of Fellowship. If you have a story to tell, write it down and send it to me, or your poem or meditation. If you are not yet a member of the NUF, never mind. These are difficult times. It is more important to keep in touch. Now that you have read all this, please pick up the phone and ring your friend and neighbour. Remember, 'Don't Touch – Keep in Touch' Tony McNeile can be reached on 01204 591 570. His postal address is: 102 Turton Road, Bolton, BL2 3DY Email: tony.mcneile@virgin.net

Rupert can keep up morale



100 years ago, a small strip cartoon appeared in the *Daily Express*. Every weekday since then it has taken children, and adults too, to the fictional English village of Nutwood, to find Rupert Bear, in his red sweater, yellow trousers and matching scarf. He has proved a most enduring character. Rupert Bear was created by Mary Tourtel. When she retired in 1935, Alfred Bestall a cartoonist, took over. For nearly 40 years, he drew the pictures and wrote the stories, earning an MBE. Rupert Annuals sold in millions; back issues are collectors' items. As a small boy I was a devoted reader.

Rupert appears with his chums: Bill Badger his best friend, Edward Trunk an elephant, Podgy Pig, Algy Pug, Tiger Lily a Japanese girl, the Old Professor and many more. About eight years old, he lives with his parents in a pretty cottage. He is an ideal son, obedient, considerate, warm-hearted, cherishes his friendships, has a natural curiosity, is anxious to please, is up for adventures and is always home again in time for tea. Adventures are to magical faraway lands, such as King Frost's Castle, the Kingdom of the Birds or to the bottom of the sea. From these Rupert returns safely to his parents who seem perfectly calm about his adventures, only anxious if he is a little late home for tea.

In Nutwood there is no distinction between humans and animals. Animals live in houses, wear clothes and talk and think like humans. For children, this presents no problems. These are fairy stories, myths, legends. These supernatural elements appear in adult literature too. In the book of *Genesis*, in the paradise of Eden, the serpent talked with Eve. There, Adam and Eve are no different from all the other animals: no clothes, no work, free food and no death. They live like animals, for as far as we can tell, animals are unaware that one day they will die, a significant difference between them and humans. We humans are aware of time and know that one day our time will come to an end. One 'old professor' taught me that awareness of time, that one day our lives will end, is the basis of religion. Animals are not religious. Nutwood resembles the Garden of Eden. In Nutwood,

FUNNY OLD WORLD

By John Midgley



for Rupert and his chums, humans and animals are all of a kind. The humans have kinship with the animals and the animals are just like human beings, even walking upright on two feet, and talking.

Children are quite comfortable with this, until they grow older. Many can remember the point in their childhood when they became aware of death. Perhaps a pet died, a goldfish, a hamster, a budgie or a cat. For Adam and Eve in Eden, none of this happened in the very beginning. It was only after the so-called Fall that they lost the state of bliss. They start to wear clothes, must work to get food, they become distanced from the animals and they know that one day they will die. They become human beings. In Nutwood, that doesn't happen. Rupert came into the world aged about 8 years, and 8 he has remained. He should by now be 108 years old. What might he look like had he aged, and what would the stories of him and his chums be about?

Rupert's world does include adventures. In one we meet a megalomaniac Lord of Silence who plans to replace all the green woodland of Nutwood with a dark, silent forest of pine. Rupert often gets lost – in a forest, in a crowd – a familiar child's anxiety. In stories, children like to be scared, as long as it all ends safely. It always does. Alas, at one point Bestall went astray. It concerned race. He used words to describe black children that we now know are unacceptable. And Rupert laughs at them as absurd because they don't speak English. Protests at this racial stereotyping and denigration, innocently done perhaps, meant that they soon disappeared and never returned.

For 100 years, Rupert in Nutwood has taught us that stories are important. In them we confront the mysteries of life and death; how to relate to the world, to animals and to each other. We learn that the world is not a perfect paradise and that we are here for a short time. And life is an adventure.

But wait! In the 1940s, the strip cartoon survived the paper shortages during WW2. Severe rationing reduced the size of the *Daily Express*, but Lord Beaverbrook, its owner, insisted Rupert must remain in, all through the war, to keep up the nation's morale! So, hang on in there Rupert, your country needs you *now*. Keep on telling us your stories, stay close to your chums, keep on with your adventures and *don't* be late home for tea.

Rupert Bear image via Wikimedia Commons.

Ed Fordham writes of his congregation's 'low-tech' response to self-isolation

Chalices all around



Shown above: Home chalices photo by Ed Fordham

Chesterfield Unitarians are a small congregation. We subscribe to the Facebook group Tiny Unitarian Congregations UK. We enjoy social media and operate a Facebook page, 'Elder Yard Unitarian Chapel' and have a fairly active twitter account @ElderYard. Despite this, when faced with the closure of the chapel due to social distancing, we opted for an entirely low tech response. As the Lay Worship Leader I saw the opportunity almost immediately.

Back in 2018 for the Anniversary Service I had commissioned a new chalice – a local potter Janine Mannion-Jones came to the chapel to understand our needs and came back with a lovely honeydew with dripped-glaze effect chalice. When I went to collect it I noticed some similar small goblets – or as I have now dubbed them – home chalices.

Our congregation only meets monthly, but with the uncertainty within society of social distancing and self-isolation, I saw this as a chance to move to weekly services – assuming there was an enhanced need for some assurance and support for those who have a faith.

I drafted a short service for people to lead themselves (the home service sheet) and printed it off, wrote cards to accompany the home chalice and using bottle-bags from accumulated presents I made my way around town delivering these to every Unitarian. As a failsafe, I emailed out the home service sheet as a PDF.

As I went door to door, I did joke to myself that in handing out the home chalices and providing home service sheets I was essentially making myself as worship leader redundant. The lit chalice reflects our hope and our fears and our heritage. In giving people the tool, some guidance, a sense of identity, I was giving everyone the chance to be together in our community at 11am on Sunday. The response from the congregation has been real, immediate and deeply beautiful. I have been astounded, delighted and proud at the depth of response from everyone. These are some responses I received:

'Thank you so much, I'm having my isolation service now as I was still queuing at the NHS priority checkout in Tesco at 11am this morning.'

'I would I would just like to take the opportunity of thanking you for the Home Service details. It was an excellent idea and one I took part in this morning. I am sure many people found it helpful too. We have already been self-isolating for two weeks so found the home service details very helpful.'

'Thanks for the service that you delivered to us. We have just finished ours, following what could have been our last Peak District walk for a while.'

So what have I learnt? The demand is high, the need is great, and the love is plenty. And if the only burden is for me to provide a weekly home service sheet then I reckon it's worth it. And, yes, our congregation now have a home chalice – and I reckon word will spread and we are onto something. I'm sat here imagining the chat after all this 'here is my Chalice, for I'm a Unitarian and this is what we do.' For the two baptisms I have conducted I used one of these home chalices and presented it to the family afterwards – let it be a keepsake, a testament and when lit, an expression of our faith, our love and our community.

Ed Fordham is the Lay Worship Leader for Chesterfield Unitarians working out of Elder Yard Chapel, Chesterfield, Derbyshire.

If you would like to be added to the email list for a weekly home service sheet, email ed.fordham@gmail.com and if you would like a home chalice then email the same address giving your name, address and phone number. There is no charge for a home chalice, but a donation is asked to cover costs and the surplus will go to Send a Child to Hucklow.

In part 2, **Winnie Gordon** removes her mask to express how race informs her Unitarian faith.



Faith in black and white

How is my theology embodied through race?

In old American films the slaves sing spiritual songs. They express their pain and their hope and belief in liberation. We Unitarians don't do that, despite so much pain in our world today – the knife crimes we hear of on our news; the homelessness we see on our streets; kids harming themselves, trying to rise above anxiety and depression – all results of pain in our world. Our earth bleeds and dies from pollution and global warming. So much pain. I feel denied the opportunity to express that pain in worship in ways that embrace my ethnicities. My ethnicity, my skin, feel excluded. So, I go into my room, put on some CDs, and weep and wail my pain. I connect with my God, release my pain. Yes, I sometimes feel alone and lonely within our inclusive faith.

Mother prayed everywhere

As a child I watched my mother pray everywhere. In the kitchen, in the supermarket, on the bus, at the school gate and in her sleep! Yes, she muttered prayers while asleep. Sometimes tears streamed down her face and her voice shook loudly in the passion and pain of her distress. Her body language evoked a belief that god was with her, *feeling* her pain, *sharing* her concerns and worries. I listened as my mum sang hymns in times of reflection and sadness – 'Rock of Ages', 'Old Rugged Cross', 'Abide with Me'. The theology of the cross, of being saved, of redemption is embedded in those hymns. The suffering of races of people, their hopes and dreams of salvation are in those hymns.

My mother's embodied theology was rooted in her experience of suffering, in the pain of childhood physical and sexual abuse; in the experience of abuse and manipulation in her marriage; in the discrimination she suffered at work, in housing and in life. From an early age, up to her 60s, her body was battered black, blue and red. On her shoulders were the experiences of her ancestors, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother who were also abused. My mother sang out her pain while living the purest and highest expression of herself in her actions – helping,

“My body holds the memory of my ancestors. The suffering and redemption of a people torn from their shores, transported across lands and oceans, through slavery.”

caring, educating and loving people. Her commitment to her God, her capacity to forgive, her compassion and love for the world, most shaped my spiritual understanding and my life.

Always Sunday best

For a long time after coming to Unitarianism, I wore my Sunday best for worship. My Caribbean background insisted I dress to bring my best self to God, just as Muslims perform ablutions to bring their clean selves to Allah. In the

black churches of my youth, those who didn't dress well were low in God's regard and held little power in religious organisations. In the power scale, the dog collar is highest, the suits come next, and so forth.

Mimi Thi Nguyen, scholar in women's and ethnic studies at Berkeley (2015) says clothing can 'transform and render a body into being-as or being-like some other thing'. A clergy collar transforms a person into a perceived messenger of God; a dog-collar with spikes represents punk or alternative lifestyles. In that same way, a hat on a woman's head in a black church signals respect.

Dress transfigures, points up the interplay of individual agency, religious transubstantiation and societal interpretation. But even individual agency is constrained by the construct of race, and the imposition of racial narratives. Women who choose to wear the hijab are subject to the societal interpretation of that choice – both positively and negatively. Hoodies or headwraps are also freighted with an array of stereotypes and myths. Dressing the body narrates a story imposed by others.

My dress marks my everyday practice of joy in being – the joy of embracing my freedom, the qualities of who I am, through my body. When I dress my hair in braids, locks, curly hair, black, blond or red, or with the tattoos I have, I embody individual agency but also cultural significance that goes back to Africa, India and Native America.

Because the world view has changed, I can now embrace what was viewed as primitive or negative.

I wear green to connect with our planet earth, red for joy and sensuality – although it is a symbol of death for some

Continued on page 11 >

*“Bringing the gifts that my
ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of
the slave.” – Maya Angelou*

Continued from page 10 >

tribes and fertility in others. Gold is for the sun, the giver of life energy. Colours help me to connect to my divine and imbue in me an energy of purpose. Colouring my hair makes me visible in a world where many people of colour have felt invisible. It reminds me I am not a cog in the machinery. I am not so dark that I am invisible in the dark.

Trying to find my voice

I am vibrant, and here, and me. I am the red of the sunset, or the yellow of the stars my ancestors worshipped. I am the brown of the soil that feeds and nurtures.

I am a black woman who has lived trying to find my voice. I have wrestled with trying to embody the god of my ancestors, the god that gave them the strength to endure. In the film, ‘Journey to Liberation: (The Legacy of Womanist Theology)’ Michael Angelo Roberson, a seminary student in New York said, ‘I have this belief that the *body* holds memory and that there is something ontological about being black and female, that is divine, that is healing and that is so necessary and vital for our community.’ (See: <https://bit.ly/2vbNbvH>)

The body *holds* memory. My body holds the memory of my ancestors. The suffering and redemption of a people torn from their shores, transported across lands and oceans, through slavery, colonialism, civil rights and fake news. My body *holds* the memory of the tears of my ancestors. Those ancestors that walked trails and were strong, resilient, determined, compassionate. Those ancestors that survived and thrived through all kinds of adversity and controversy. I embody the memory my body holds. I embrace my understanding of a Being higher than me. I embrace my blackness and my femininity. I live over and beyond the factors that try to distort the possibilities of this world, to be wonderful. I live out the idea of supreme strength and supreme purpose of my ancestors, as Maya Angelou embodies in her poetry, especially this excerpt from *Still I Rise*:

Out of the huts of history's shame

I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain

I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.

So I embody my body. The dressing of it, the movement of it. The sounds it makes in expression to a divine. On television you see people in black churches calling out their amens or hallelujahs or speaking aloud their prayers for the world. Why don't Unitarians do that? We should. My ancestors embraced the moment, the wind, the spirit, the space, the opportunity to connect their *lived* experience to their divine. Yet I wear the mask and I weep at my limitation.

Create a space I would be happy to worship in

Embodying my theology happens more in the quiet of listening for the spirit; listening to others and their struggles and joys as they navigate the world. I embody my theology by trying to understand the impact of race on the behaviour of others and my own. My world view – shaped by factors of race – means I embody protests such as Black Lives Matter and music that speaks of resistance. And in my work life, I practice being intentional in embodying diversity and encouraging multi-ethnic bodily responses in worship.

I strive to create a place I would wish to walk into and feel my skin tone and ethnicity represented in the style or structure of worship – even if I am the only person of colour. I want inclusivity to be at the heart of all our congregations, where the mask can be safely removed, and diversity celebrated. I do not want to hear that we are not happy-clap or praise-be congregations. Because each time we tell others what we are not, we are saying we are an exclusive community with limited welcome. I want us to say, ‘clap if you want’, say ‘amen’, dance, pray, sing, hold hands, wave arms, kiss. For who you are, whoever you are, no mask is needed here, for the whole of you is accepted and welcome here.

What has shifted the most for me on my journey of embracing God in personal experiences, is the understanding that factors of race do not define me, they enlighten me, embolden me, emancipate me. May my sharing of my experience free you too.



Winnie Gordon

The Rev Winnie Gordon is minister at Unitarian New Meeting Birmingham and Kidderminster New Meeting House. Part 1 of this article appeared in the 21 March *Inquirer*. Download it here for free: www.inquirer.org.uk/pages/samples

Pandemic

Lynn Ungar

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath –
the most sacred of times?

Cease from travel.

Cease from buying and selling.

Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.

Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.

Centre down.

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.

Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)

Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.

(Surely, that has come clear.)

Do not reach out your hands.

Reach out your heart.

Reach out your words.

Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love –
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

The Rev Lynn Ungar is minister with the Unitarian
Universalist Church of the Larger Fellowship. Her
latest book *Bread and Other Miracles* is available
through her website: lynnungar.com

