

from the Worthship service at Glasgow Unitarian Church
2 November 2014, led by Barry Bell -

The importance of engaging with our spiritual questions

What binds Unitarians?

The essential **difference** between modern Unitarian communities such as ours and most other spiritual or religious communities is the nature of a key part of that what binds us as a community.

We are of course bound in enabling the spiritual growth of ourselves and others – the increased engagement with the “good” or “God” **within** us which enables us to become more decent, more caring, more compassionate human beings.

This however is a bond we share with many others, since this is surely a primary purpose of **all** spiritual or religious communities, regardless of how such communities may view the nature of what it **is** to “be” human and our relationship with, and the nature of, the possibly-existent higher forces which our spirituality encourages us to consider.

Rather more uniquely, we reject the divisive **certainty** about the existence and nature of such forces which is inherent in the traditional “shared faith community” model, and are free to hold our personal faith **without** that level of certainty.

Instead, we are **bound** by valuing an inherently **inclusive** and **enquiring** approach to the nature of humanity and the nature of our connectedness with each other, with other life forms, with our planet, with the universe, and with “God” or other higher forces (however we may see these) **rather** than bound by subscribing to an inherently **divisive** shared creedal belief in the **certain truth** of only one particular view of these things.

Unitarians are free to hold their own personal faith about these things and to follow their own spiritual path. I would suggest that a good way of describing one thing common to all Unitarians is that **we know that we believe rather than believe that we know.**

Naturally, we allow our personal faith to drive us, but **without** the divisive comfort of dogmatic certainty about things which are likely to **remain** ultimately unknowable despite continually improving scientific knowledge.

I am aware that this view of what Unitarian community is all about depends very much upon that which attracted **me** to Unitarianism in the first place.

There are, of course, Unitarians whose reasons for being members of a Unitarian community lie elsewhere.

I maintain however that it is **this** part of Unitarian community which is more inclusive than that which is on offer from other spiritual and religious communities, and which is much needed by humanity. This makes me a very evangelical Unitarian.

I feel that we have had very limited success in fully understanding or communicating the importance of this **inclusive** part of Unitarianism – the part we have always called “creedless religion”.

In addition, I feel that the time has simply not been right before for more than a very small and intellectually-skewed part of the general population to engage with what we offer – indeed, the term “creedless religion” remains as much of an oxymoron to most as was “atheist spirituality” - but that this is changing.

I believe that the “inclusive spirituality” part of what Unitarian communities offer is more in tune with 21st Century collective consciousness and scientific knowledge than the divisive “mandatory shared faith” part of traditional religious communities, and that we are therefore in an excellent position to grow.

This is surely good news for us **and** for humanity, and food both for thought **and** action.

Introduction to singing

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I am now going to invite you sing a hymn which may prove a little challenging for some here, and which some of you may be surprised that I bring today, since it appears to put a type of God who does **not** feature in my personal faith pretty much centre stage.

It is a hymn which I would have chosen **not** to sing along with when I first joined this community. However, the words are by a Unitarian whom I respect greatly, Rev. Andrew Hill, the former Minister to Unitarians in Edinburgh at St Marks church, the tune is (I think) well-known, and some of us here will engage very positively with the words.

I too can now happily engage with it and sing joyfully, because I now understand that since we claim to allow **all** of our members the right to hold their own personal faith we therefore owe **all** the engaged respect of including singing which may be particularly meaningful to them but challenging to others.

I hope that those of you who may be challenged can join with me in singing joyfully – albeit with some mental re-interpretation of the words – in the understanding that this is not a betrayal of our own personal faith but is instead an **affirmation** of our diverse and spiritually inclusive community.

Let's sing

hymn 17 in the violet book, "

er us"

Engaging with our spiritual questions

I would like now to talk about the importance of engaging with our spiritual questions as **part** of our engagement with that part of “being human” which is our spirituality, and to bring to you an interesting take on the benefit of so doing.

What **are** spiritual questions, you may ask?

They are the questions which lower life-forms almost certainly do **not** ask but which human beings do.

It is part of my personal faith that we do so **because** we have become spiritually-aware. It is also part of my personal faith that simply **engaging** with this reality is more important than the truth or otherwise of our conjectures about why or how we have become so.

The big four spiritual questions are -

“Why are we here?”

the related “How did we get here?”

“What happens to us when we die?”

“What is the nature of our connection with each other, with other life on earth, with the planet, with the Cosmos, **and with the possibly-existent higher powers which our spirituality, humility, and desire for ultimate justice encourage us to believe in?**”

For the last 4,000 years or so we have generally looked to our man-made religious institutions to provide - amongst many beneficial things - possible answers to all four of these questions, “answers” which they have been happy to provide.

For the last 1,500 years or so we have increasingly looked also to science and reason to provide answers – or at least to provide sound hypotheses based upon evidential fact - to all but the first question. We also look for these answers to shed light on the likely validity (or otherwise) of our religions' various “answers” to that first question which our spirituality forces us to ask– **why** are we here?

Science has, particularly in the last 150 years, greatly increased our knowledge of ourselves, of other life on earth, of our planet, of our universe, even of the possible existence of a multiverse of universes.

Inevitably, engagement with reason and new knowledge often casts doubt upon, or even flatly contradicts, earlier “answers” to each of these spiritual questions.

It has always been a key part of the Unitarian way to engage fully with new knowledge, and to modify our personal faith in the light of reason, current evidential fact, and what we believe to be sound scientific hypotheses.

The combination of **trust** in reason and science with legitimate discrediting of some of the long-held “answers” as provided by traditional religion has however regrettably led **many** – and I used to be one of them - not only to disengage completely with traditional religion but also to become somewhat fundamentalist rationalists who would dismiss all engagement with what I now call “human spirituality” or “the spiritual part of being human” as both valueless **and** an unacceptable throwback to a superstitious past.

This, I now believe, is to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

I now believe that there is no such thing as “a person of no faith”, since spirituality – the “good” or “God” part of us – is a part of every human being and demands the holding of some sort of personal faith in answers to these questions.

I also believe that it is **important** to engage with our spiritual questions - as part of engagement with our spirituality - and that such engagement can and should be made by **everyone**, whatever their personal faith may or may not include.

“Decent” human beings – the majority of humankind – have already achieved strong engagement, regardless of whether they see themselves as religious, as spiritual, as both, or as neither.

“Saintly” human beings – and we all know people we would apply this term to - have, quite simply, been able to achieve better engagement.

I recently encountered, and will bring to you as a reading, something from a Pulitzer-prize-winning novel which contained a fascinating take on the benefits of engagement with the spiritual question “Why are we here?”

A little background will aid understanding.

It comes from Alice Walker’s 1983 novel “The Color Purple”, which addressed vividly the challenges of life in the Deep South of the United States of America during the 1920s and 1930s for a black teenager growing into a woman.

I am indebted to Janet Briggs for bringing the quotation to our “exploring spirituality” workshop **and** for subsequently lending me a copy of the book.

I hope you may find it as enlightening as I did.

The reading is a conversation, taking place near the end of the book, between the main character and the husband whom she had left years before after significant abuse, behaviour which was portrayed very clearly as being rooted both in his selfishness and in accepted behaviours of the culture within which they lived.

It is an uplifting exchange, with a message of hope, since he appears to have come to appreciate the level of his selfishness and to be trying to improve. It also carries, as I have said, a revealing insight into the way in which engaging with spirituality benefits everyone.

Barry Bell

Appendix 1

“But still, look like she come out better than me. A lot of people love Shug, but nobody but Shug love me.”

“Hard not to love Shug,” I say. “She know how to love somebody back.”

“I tried to do something about my children after you left me. But by that time it was too late. Near ‘bout broke my sorry heart.”

“If you know your heart sorry,” I say, “that mean it not quite as spoilt as you think.”

“Anyway,” he say. “You know how it is. You ask yourself one question, it lead to fifteen. I start to wonder why us needs love. Why us suffer. Why us black. Why us men and women. Where do children really come from. It didn’t take long to realise I didn’t hardly know nothing. And that if you ask yourself why you black or a man or a woman or a bush it don’t mean **nothing** if you don’t ask why you are here, period.”

“So what you think?” I asked.

“I think us here to wonder, myself. To wonder, to ask. And in wondering ‘bout the big things, and asking about the big things, you learn about the little ones, almost by accident. But you never **know** nothing more about the big things than you start out with. The more I wonder, the more I love.”

“And people start to love you back, I bet”, I say.

“They do” he say, surprised.

Appendix 2 - words for Chalice Lighting

by Dawn Buckle, whom I and some others here know well from Unitarian events such as Hucklow Summer Schools and General Assembly Annual Meetings.

We open ourselves to worship today.

May the peace of this house bring us calm,

May the joy of this hour make our hearts glad,

May the challenge of this hour awaken our courage,

May the communion of this hour confirm our togetherness.

Appendix 3 - Led meditation

Something old but at the same time timeless, something translated from the Sanskrit, the liturgical language of Hinduism.

You can engage with it as a prayer, as a reflection, or as a led meditation – the choice is yours.

Look to this day –

For it is life, the very life of life.

In its brief course lie all the verities

And realities of your existence:

The bliss of growth,

The glory of action, the splendour of beauty.

For yesterday is but a dream,

And tomorrow is only a vision,

But today well-lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness

And every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well, therefore, to this day.