

**Worship service at Glasgow Unitarian Church
7 July 2013, led by Barry Bell**

The Purpose of Spiritual Community

Musical prologue and Introduction

Thank you, Stephen, and good morning to you all.

For any here for the first time or who do not know me, my name is Barry Bell, and I have been a member of this creedless spiritual and religious community for seven years now. I am also a member of this community's recently-created ministry leadership team.

We here are an Inclusive Spirituality community. A religious and spiritual community central to which is shared faith in the power of enabling personal spiritual growth free from the divisiveness of dogmatic belief in the absolute truth of only one way of viewing the wonderful mystery which is the cosmos and life within it, and in which we are both free to respond positively to our spirituality in our own way and respecting of others' right to do the same.

In today's service as I will be trying to address more generally that which I believe the purpose of spiritual community to be. As always, you are entirely free to agree or disagree with anything that is said in this service, which I bring to you in the Unitarian tradition of worship – the finding, valuing and sharing of that which may be found to be of worth and meaning from within the entirety of human experience.

It is quite simply my hope that you may be able to take away and value – maybe even share with others - something you find in this service to be of worth and meaning to **you**.

Let me start with a little tale.

His request approved, the CNN News photographer quickly used a cell phone to call the local airport to charter a flight, and was told that a twin-engine plane would be waiting for him at the airport. Arriving at the airfield, he spotted a plane warming up outside a hanger. He jumped in with his bag, slammed the door shut, and shouted, 'Let's go'. The pilot taxied out, swung the plane into the wind and took off.

Once in the air, the photographer instructed the pilot, 'Fly over the valley and make low passes so I can take pictures of the fires on the hillsides.' 'Why?' asked the pilot. 'Because I'm a photographer for CNN', he responded, 'and I need to get some close up shots.'

The pilot was strangely silent for a moment, then finally he stammered - 'So, what you're telling me, is . . . You're NOT my flight instructor?'

The moral? – NEVER ASSUME.

I learned this at quite an early age, when the letters of the word “ASSUME” were actually physically separated in front of me and I was **shown** that to “ASSUME” makes an “ASS” of “U” and “ME”.

Chalice Lighting

Let's now have our chalice lighting, which I see as helping us focus on the inner light we each bring to this worship service as human beings responding each in our own unique way to that part of being human which is our innate human spirituality, and rejoicing in the diversity of our personal beliefs about why we may be here and the nature of what we may be connected to and through.

Communal singing

Let's now join in singing our first hymn,
hymn 25 in the violet book, "Conscience guide our footsteps"

Intimations, followed by offertory with music

We will now have our community intimations, followed by an opportunity to contribute to the Religious Society and Scottish charity which runs this community, Glasgow Unitarian Church.

First thoughts

It may be of help to you if I first explain that I believe the name used to describe the activity which I choose to call “responding to our spirituality” is really pretty much irrelevant. It is the **outcome** of such activity - helping us to become less selfish human beings - which counts.

I (and many others) call this outcome “**spiritual growth**”.

As I see it, people who use the term “spirituality” in describing this activity – activity which may or may not incorporate daily rituals and practices - are doing pretty much the same thing as many of those who use different terms - such as “religiosity”, “consciousness”, “conscience”, or “ethics” – to describe what they are doing when engaging in the **activity** of trying to get closer to that part of “being human” which allows us to become less selfish, more caring human beings and **through** this to become increasingly better able to do what we feel we should be doing as human beings.

Such spiritual growth is dependent on sustained personal effort and activity, but many find the support and nurture available within a religious, spiritual, or even a secular community very helpful. Amongst other things, providing this support and nurture is something which **we** need to doing as a spiritual community.

I would now like to invite **Janet Briggs** to read parts taken from the document “The Origins, Recent History and Current Trajectory of the *Future ministry* Project”. This document was prepared last year by our own Iain Brown, and gives a helpful perspective on the creation of our own community’s “ministry leadership team”, and on its role within our spiritual community.

Reading 1

When, in 2007, Jeff Teagle ended a 13 year-long distinguished career as General Secretary, he gave the John Reilly Beard Lecture under the title 'Considerations for the future of Unitarian Ministry in Great Britain'. He called it his swansong but it is still echoing with us today and will be with us for many years more. I quote from it:

“An age analysis reveals that 48 (74%) of our 65 ministers (now) in post are over 50 years old. Only 17 ministers (26%) are 50 years old or younger. Nine ministers (14%) have or will retire this year....

I conclude that the present shortage of full-time professional ministers will continue. This shortage is matched by a decreasing ability of congregations to fund professional ministry. We need to find out how best to support and improve the spiritual leadership of churches in the absence of sufficient funded full time professional ministers”. End quote.

Accordingly, a “Future ministry” Panel was formed with the sub-title “enabling Spiritual Leadership for all our communities”. Allocated a modest sum of money, it has the following remit –

“Given that professional ministry will almost certainly decline numerically during the next decade, both ministers and lay-folk need to examine how we can encourage and develop lay ministry in all its forms. A stronger empathy and alliance needs to be developed between professional ministers and those involved in lay ministry. Excessive pride of status needs to give way to a more collaborative approach. Congregations need to be educated to become more aware of the realities and hence the options that exist. Ultra-independence needs to give way to greater interdependence.

The Panel will quite deliberately work within the wider concept of ministry. It will seek to find ways to resource appropriate forms of ministry to congregations, whether they worship in their own buildings, or, as in the case of a fellowship, within someone else's. It will seek to break down some of the barriers between professional and lay worship leaders. It will seek to explore the barriers to progress, such as excessive independence, inequality of funding and poor human resource management.”

Thank you, Janet

I am fully engaged with the activity contained in the sub-title for the Future ministry Panel - “enabling Spiritual Leadership for all our communities” - because I strongly believe that good leadership is essential for the success of any spiritual community.

On a slightly different tack again, I would now like to present our second reading, which comes from a book entitled “Thank God for Evolution” by Rev. Michael Dowd, a US Minister (not UU) who has been described as a religious naturalist, an evidential mystic, and a big history evangelist.

]Reading 2

"God is not a person; God is a mythic personification of reality. If we miss this, we miss everything.

Birth, life, death, the cycles and rhythms of Nature, the elemental forces of the Universe—these are undeniably real.

Like it or not, we humans have always been in an inescapable relationship with a Reality that we could neither fully predict nor control. And given the nature of our brains, there's one thing that people in every culture and throughout history have instinctually done: we've used metaphors, stories and analogies to understand and relate to that which is unavoidably, undeniably real and mysterious.

We can't “not” do this. Consciously or unconsciously, we will always interpret via metaphors. "

Wow! How powerful is that?

When I first encountered it - in a Unitarian-oriented Facebook group of course – I regarded it as exceptional, being both concise **and** comprehensive.

It certainly speaks to me, and will, I hope, prove very helpful in healing the divisions we have created for ourselves with the dogmatic upholding of the “truth” of our differing views of “God” and of what is, and what is not, “supernatural”.

Silent reflection

We’ll now have a short period of silent reflection.

Second thoughts

Let’s now hear what two other people – Ralph Catts (a former member of this community who is currently undergoing training as a Unitarian Minister) and Julian Baggini (an atheist writing in the Guardian last year) – have to say about religious/spiritual community.

Ralph’s piece was given to us as a kind of “parting gift” in 2012, and will be read by **Stephen Bostock**.

Julian’s article – which seems to me to be one of many following the line of Alain de Botton’s “Religion for Atheists” book – appeared in January 2012, and will be read for us today by **Douglas Brown**.

Reading 3

Spiritual Identity and some Implications for GUC

A contribution from Ralph Catts

Keisling et al (2008) proposed three broad categories of spiritual identity supported by evidence from a study in which they asked about the structure and content of adults' sense of spiritual identity. I want to now look more closely at this idea of spiritual identity.

The first group Keisling termed foreclosed individuals.

'The people with who foreclosed persons shared their spiritual commitments tended to be family and friends who affirmed their sense of self and ensured continuity in the transmission of spiritual tradition across generations. As models for their sense of spirituality, foreclosed respondents looked to parents and/or grandparents, the originator of the religion (e.g., Mohammed), or other recognized carriers of the tradition (teachers, professors, priests, or preachers).'

The second group they termed 'individuals in moratorium'.

'For individuals in moratorium, the painfully sacrificed fit into the familial or societal ideal or the neglect of a previously valued parental tradition was accompanied by less ease in relating to the deity..... When asked about specific practices, they answered the question by reporting what they avoided. Their respective answers included the following statements: "I don't really go to church anymore," "I try to avoid 'rigid thinking'," and "My spirituality is private because I don't have to be accountable."...

'In marked contrast to the foreclosed respondents, individuals in moratorium had serious doubts and unanswered questions. Factors contributing to their situation included the traumatic experiences of losing a parent to death or divorce prior to the teenage years, or either the lack of religious participation on the part of their family, or a particularly liberal spiritual family background. Individuals in moratorium had made changes to what they believe, that were self-initiated, in contrast to patterns of normative, expected sociological change found among the foreclosed respondents.'

I find the term 'moratorium' limiting. I suggest that some are in transition – in the sense that they are waiting for the right opportunity to come along, even if this is not a conscious decision.

The third group were termed 'achieved persons'. They noticed how for this group interaction with others was central to their spiritual practice. When asked what was important about their spirituality, the majority of achieved persons cited enhanced interrelating: "sitting with" others in focused meditation, "going up" when engaged in spiritual conversation, not having to put on a face and still being accepted, celebrating feminine rites of passage, or writing poetry to bridge cultures and religions. Less frequent but recurring themes included disciplined efforts to be directed by and pliable to the will of God; attaining a sense of healing, well-being, and/or inner peace; avoiding alienation from themselves; and finding ways to be more in touch with their deepest personal truths.'

The role of the Unitarian Church

My notion is that some people make the journey through their lives from being foreclosed as young people, then denying the rigid prescribed beliefs and becoming 'in transit' (or moratorium) and finally in some cases developing 'achieved spirituality'. Some lucky lifelong Unitarians have the good fortune to have grown up in an environment that supported and achieved spirituality.

I suggest that the Unitarian Church will appeal to those who are either in transition or have achieved an individual spiritual identity – not bound by dogma.

To be open to achieving personal spiritual growth we need:

- Spiritual salience by which I mean the importance of spirituality to our sense of identity, and
- Spiritual flexibility, by which I mean the extent to which we are willing to considered changes in our spiritual identity

However, while our Sunday services may be a useful mechanism for the maintenance of our fellowship and our spiritual existence I believe we need more to facilitate growth and change. We might consider workshops (e.g. daily spiritual practice) and retreats (e.g. a meditation weekend), and spiritual experiences (e.g. a Taize workshop). I feel that as a religious community we need each year a few shared activities that allow us to share and support our growth in a more sustaining way. Perhaps we could make some of these events open to the public and perhaps attract some new members through these avenues.

Reading 4

You don't have to be religious to pray ... but it helps.

Religious rituals can provide real benefits, but try to separate them from the beliefs and they lose their potency and grip.

I've recently started praying. Well, not exactly praying, but doing something that fulfils what I think are its main function - providing an opportunity to remind oneself of how one should be living, our responsibilities to others, our own failings, and our relative good fortune, should we have it. This is, I think, a pretty worthwhile practice and it is not something you can only do if you believe you are talking to an unseen creator. Many stoics did something similar and some forms of meditation serve the same kind of purpose. My version is simply a few minutes of quiet reflection on such matters each morning.

In some ways, the secular versions are better than the religious ones, both because prayers can become empty words on repetition and because when they are directed at someone you believe can answer them, the function of reminding oneself of what one can and should do get's diluted. It's often said that prayer is meant to be in the spirit of JFK: ask not what your God can do for you, but what you can do for your God, yourself and others. But still, whenever I am in a church, I find there's a lot of asking going on, and not just of the "help us to ..." variety.

Nevertheless, I do think that prayer, like many rituals, is something that the religious get some real benefits from that are just lost to us heathens. One reason is that many of these rituals are performed communally, as part of a regular meeting or worship. This means there is social reinforcement. But the main one is that the religious context transforms them from something optional and arbitrary into something necessary and grounded, and with strong reason to keep them up. You pray every day because you sense you really ought to, and it will be noticed if you don't. In contrast, the belief that daily meditation is beneficial motivates in much the same way as the thought that eating more vegetables or exercising is. Inclination comes and goes and needs to be constantly renewed.

Unfortunately, practices that are created *ex nihilo* can fail to have the same purchase as those which have a long history and are validated by tradition and doctrine. The trouble is that an invented ritual can feel artificial or even whimsical. Rituals can have real benefits whether you buy into the belief system behind them or not. However, if you try to separate them from the beliefs, they lose some of their potency and grip.

It is as though in order to get the praxic benefit you need to pay the doxic cost: belief is the price you have to pay to get the benefit of the practice. And that's why, I think, attempts to create doctrine-free versions - of Christianity, at least - only ever result in small, fringe movements. Much as I appreciate the non-realist Sea of Faith movement, and the non-creedal Unitarian Church, there just isn't a strong enough reason for most people to join such groups.

I think this is a useful way of thinking about the relationship between belief and practice, and to understand another reason why belief is so resilient to rationalist critiques. Over this series I think we've seen enough to conclude that the neat distinction some wish to make between religion as belief or practice doesn't hold. But it could still be the case that practice is why people believe, and not vice versa, even though that is surely not usually how it is consciously conceived by practising believers. Seeing belief as the doxic cost of praxic benefit also offers atheists a richer credible error theory for why people persist with religious belief. Putting it down to just human stupidity or wishful thinking won't do.

We heathens may be proud that we have refused to sell off our reason to pay the unacceptably high price of faith. But we should admit that as a consequence, others are enjoying the rewards of their purchase while we have to make and mend do with alternatives that are adequate, better in some ways, but very possibly inferior overall.

Thank you, Stephen and Douglas

Wow – there's an awful lot there to take in and consider, and I agree with much of what was said in both.

I certainly would require to add to Julian's article in order to make it clear that I see potentially broad appeal in the effective doctrine-free way to respond to our spirituality which the Unitarian movement is capable of, whilst broadly accepting his assertion that any non-doctrinal movement specifically tied to Christianity is likely to be only ever a small fringe movement.

Let's take a short pause before going on to sing our next hymn.

Communal singing

And now we'll sing **hymn 1 in the violet book, "A Core of Silence"**

Enabling Spiritual Growth

I am going to keep this final part of what I have to bring to you extremely short.

You may remember that I described “spiritual growth” as being the **outcome** of activity which helps us to become less selfish, more caring human beings – you may like to think of this as gaining in humility.

You may also remember that I said that it is through such spiritual growth that we individually become better able to do what we feel we should be doing as decent human beings.

I suggest to you that the primary purpose of spiritual, religious, and ethical communities is to enable spiritual growth.

I suggest further that this enablement is much more important than the absolute truth - or otherwise - of any dogma which may be subscribed to by any of these communities.

Your thoughts

We now enter the open part of this service, where we can hear from anyone present who would like to contribute, and where we can engage in further personal reflection. We do so whilst remaining in spiritual communion with each other, a practice I borrow from our close religious relatives, the Society of Friends

Communal singing

Let's now sing our final hymn, which will be followed immediately by a musical epilogue and formal closure of our time of worship together. It's **hymn 68 in the violet book, "I Dream of a Church"**

Closure of service

extinguish candle during musical epilogue

Musical epilogue

Thank you, Stephen.

You are all welcome to join us downstairs now for tea and chat.