

**From a Worthship service at Glasgow Unitarian Church
7 October 2012, led by Barry Bell**

Responding to our Spirituality

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 six years now.

We are an Inclusive Spirituality community - a religious and spiritual community in which a shared faith in the power of enabling spiritual growth free from the divisiveness of dogmatic belief is central, with all members both free to respond positively to their spirituality in their own way and respecting of others' right to do the same.

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 worthship – 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**.

My theme for today is “Responding to our Spirituality”. In this, the first of a number of services I intend to bring examining ways of responding to the various elements of human spirituality, I shall be focussing on responding to that part of our spirituality which is our sense of connectedness, of the divine, of “something greater than our individual selves”.

We have very little ritual here, but one is the Chalice lighting which I will shortly perform, and which helps us focus on the inner light we each bring to this worthship service as human beings responding, each in our own unique way, to our innate human spirituality.

Let's start with what at first sight might seem a less than mainstream way to respond to our sense of connectedness.

I recently attended a lecture where thoughts from a number of 19th and early 20th Century authors, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Carl Jung, and Ralph Waldo Trine were presented and added to.

This lecture was given by David Lorimer to the Scottish Society for Psychical Research – whose members include Tricia Robertson and our own Stephen Bostock – and was entitled “Synchronicity and a new science of Consciousness”.

David is a key part of the Wrekin Forum, which describes its purpose in this way -

“A new awareness of reality is emerging - a new opening of consciousness. In this time of major social change, the Wrekin Forum is part of a world-wide movement towards personal and planetary transformation.

We bring together, as Associates of the Forum, visionary individuals and organisations whose approach is based on holistic, spiritual and ecological principles, in order to act from a level of deeper connection.”

Coming from an enquiring perspective, I found that what was being said touched upon spirituality, religiosity, mysticism, and the value of an open-minded scientific approach much more than on specifically psychic phenomena.

In particular, I shared David's view of an important reality. This is that a purely rationalist approach - as perhaps suggested by Enlightenment thinking and the holding of faith that reason will eventually explain all – can never allow us to relate properly to that elusive but basic and wonderful part of being human which can be described as “mind”, “consciousness”, or “spirituality”.

What particularly intrigued me was the common ground demonstrated in the use by these people of terms like “the collective unconscious” and “the universal mind” and the use by religious people of terms like “the Great Unity” and “the ground of all being” ; in the use of terms like “something greater than the individual mind” and the use of terms like “something greater than the individual self”; and in the use of terms like “the omniscient and interventionist nature of Universal Mind” and “the omniscient and interventionist nature of God”.

I am in no doubt that these above-mentioned writers, as well as David and all those present at the lecture, were and are responding to their spirituality in their seeking of answers to the nature of our connectedness just as much as those who respond to their spirituality through religion.

And now a little light relief. Given the title of that lecture - Synchronicity and a new science of Consciousness - you may appreciate an interesting piece of unexpected synchronicity which has happened in relation to this very service.

I had already built in to the service a short reading by Prentice Mumford which you will shortly hear, so you will understand my enjoyment of the synchronicity when I discovered that one of the individuals quoted in David's lecture – Ralph Waldo Trine – was, just like Prentice Mumford, a significant member of the 19th century New Thought movement in the U.S.A.

I think I'll have to investigate them a little closer, but in the meantime here's something Prentice Mumford had to say, read for us today by Emily Bridger, partner of my stepson David. She is Australian but with an auntie who is a Unitarian Universalist over on the east coast of the USA, and who herself has a very Unitarian attitude to life.

Reading 1

"In the spiritual life, every person is his or her own discoverer, and you need not grieve if your discoveries are not believed by others. It is your business to push on, find more, and increase individual happiness."

Second thoughts

Let's now consider in a little more detail the most traditional way we can respond to our sense of connectedness, which is to invest personal faith in the answers provided within religions, answers which are nonetheless ultimately speculative.

Here in Western Europe this has, for more than a thousand years, primarily been through Christianity.

Christianity has traditionally depended upon buying in to a substantial amount of dogmatic and creedal belief about the nature of our connectedness and purpose, the nature of Jesus as God made human and as the one and only Christ, and the certain existence of his literal Father, a well-defined and interventionist higher power who is the Christian version (as opposed to the Jewish or Islamic version) of the God of Abraham.

Here's what Richard Rohr, a well-known Progressive Christian, has to say about this type of Christianity. His words are read today by Clive Briggs.

Reading 2

"The Christian tradition became so concerned with making Jesus into its God and making sure everybody believed that Jesus was God that it often ignored his very practical and clear teachings. (How many of us love our enemies?) Instead, we made the questions theological and metaphysical ones about the nature of God (which asked almost nothing of us!). Most of our church fights have been on that level, and no one ever really "wins," so it goes on for centuries.

"What Buddha made clear is that the questions are first of all psychological and personal and here and now. We created huge theories about how the world was saved by Jesus. I think what Jesus was primarily talking about was the human situation and describing liberation for us right now.

Clearly the Kingdom of God **is** here and now, as Jesus said. However, we turned Jesus' message into a reward or punishment contest that would come later, instead of a transformational experience that was verifiable here and now by the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

For Jesus and for the Buddha both rewards and punishments are first of all inherent to the action and in this world. Goodness is its own reward and evil is its own punishment, and then we must leave the future to the mercy and love of God, instead of thinking we are the umpires and judges of who goes where, when, and how."

I am already on record elsewhere as going a little further than Richard, and I will revisit this later. For now I simply assert that faith in a particular religion's view of the nature of our connectedness remains a valid, although often regrettably divisive, way to respond to the sense of connectedness which is for me simply a part of our innate spirituality.

Unusually for me, I am now going to lead you in a prayer.

You are of course allowed to encounter it as reflection or meditation if that is what works better for you.

I was pointed to this prayer via a recent posting on Facebook by a Unitarian Universalist minister. I was delighted both to find that the prayer can be found on the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA) website in the United States and that it is one of the prayers of the recently-retired Unitarian Minister Andrew McKean Hill, the long-serving former Minister to St Marks Unitarian Church in Edinburgh.

Prayer

Out of a troubled world of expediency and selfish strife, we come to this place set apart for the renewal of vision.

Great Unity beyond all differences, should our lives be narrowed by personal sorrow or tragedy, envision us with a sense of worth; should we be weary of the diminishing purposes of community and the persistence of global conflicts, envision us with your larger purpose; should we feel lost upon earth's lonely cosmic shore, envision us with joy and wonder.

Uphold us when weak. Embrace us when broken. Transform us when partial. Restore to us your great unity that we and the green earth and the cosmic law may become as one.

Great Unity, bless us now, in this moment of worship, with your commanding vision.

Amen.

Reflection

Let's take some time for personal reflection, silent prayer, meditation – whatever works for you – before continuing our intellectual and spiritual considerations of how we might respond to that part of our spirituality which is our sense of connectedness, of the divine, of “something greater than our individual selves”.

We will do this to music provided by Margaret, You are free to tune out of reflection and fully into the music at any point – after all, music can bypass intellect and speak directly to our spirituality.

Responding to our spirituality

In an earlier service, I laid out my personal belief that spirituality is primarily a part of “being human”, just as is intellect and emotion, and is a reality rather than a speculation, although we use different names to describe it.

In a manner so typical of Unitarians, the first question I was asked in the open part of that service came from one of our newest members, and was “How do you define spirituality?”

Thank you for the question, Stephen. I really should have answered it much more clearly.

Firstly I should have said that I am much less concerned about how we define spirituality, or even about what name we give to it, than in responding positively and non-divisively to this part of the wonder of being human.

Secondly, I should perhaps have pointed out my belief that I had just defined in that service what I believed comprises this part of us, and a little cheekily perhaps should have suggested that he read the service in the service archive on our website.

(<http://www.ukunitarians.org.uk/glasgow/pdfs/service260812.pdf>)

I should also perhaps have reinforced the point that the alternate worldview referred to in that service ascribes more importance to making positive responses to the reality of our human spirituality than to our various speculations of why it exists or of how, to what, and through what we are connected, and that I believe this to in no way insult or disrespect the importance of holding non-dogmatic personal faith in whatever we have come to see the nature of our connectedness as being, nor to mitigate against allowing such personal faith to drive us.

What it does do is both to take away the right to hurt, or think less of, others just because they do not share a particular personal faith, and to provide clear common ground for all to work together.

I would now ask you to recall the words of Richard Rohr, who took issue with Christianity's distancing of itself from the actions of Jesus in favour of building up the nature and authority of Jesus as the Christ, indeed as God, but who also went on to suggest that we must leave the future to the mercy and love of God instead of thinking we are the umpires and judges of who goes where, when, and how, demonstrating his personal faith in a God capable of direct intervention in the here and now.

I would also ask you to remember the words of Andrew Hill, whose prayer appears to regard the "Great Unity" as capable of direct intervention in the here and now.

There is a great deal of worth in what Richard said about the dangers of thinking any of us have the right to act as the umpires and judges of who goes where, when, and how on the "authority" of human constructions about Jesus as a God.

I am also delighted that Andrew is free to respond to his spirituality with personal faith in the existence of an interventionist "Great Unity" which he sees as being capable of enabling us in the way he describes.

I share a clear “sense of something greater than our individual selves” with all who are in touch with their spirituality, including Richard and Andrew. My response to this sense of connectedness is however different from theirs.

I extend Richard’s “human constructions” to include human constructions about possibly-existent higher powers or Gods, I reject acting as umpires and judges on the “authority” of the certain existence of any one of such higher powers as defined in such constructs, and I have no personal faith in the certain existence of an interventionist power or force, however defined.

My own current personal response to that part of my spirituality which relates to a sense of connectedness, of the divine, of “something greater than our individual selves” includes belief in human spirituality as a part of being human common to all humankind and which, amongst other things, generates spiritual questions which we are all compelled to seek answers to.

Although I do not hold personal faith in an interventionist God as defined in any one of the three Abrahamic traditions, I do hold non-dogmatic personal faith – faith which I freely accept is not necessary for others to share in order to properly respond to **their** spirituality - both in the existence of a force or entity linking us in a **non-interventionist** way and that engaging positively with this through our spirituality can enable both spiritual growth and healing through such connection with and through it.

I hold a worldview which is becoming ever better known and which sees human spirituality and the possibilities for personal and collective spiritual growth as a reality, and as ultimately much more important than our various speculations about how, and to what, we may be connected.

I suggest that it is both unsafe and divisive for us to act as if there is certainty that a particular “something” is looking after us and which we must all have faith in.

I suggest that it is time to focus on enabling spiritual growth, and to use our both our shared faith in the power of collective spirituality - in the good in humankind - and our various non-dogmatic personal faiths to drive us to take ever better care of ourselves and our planet.

For me, the greatest thing about Unitarianism is its openness. I think it is quite wonderful that individual Unitarians can be free to hold their own personal faiths about the nature of what higher powers or forces may or may not be surrounding us as we respond individually to our innate spirituality and in particular to that part of our spirituality which provides our sense of connectedness, of the divine, of something greater than our individual selves.

This appears to be a point which most UUs across the pond have reached.

Regrettably, it appears that here in the UK many Unitarians seem entirely happy, despite claiming to practice creedless religion, to **insist** that Unitarians must all still hold some level of shared faith in the Judeo-Christian speculations about the certain existence of an interventionist God, and to insist that the movement here identify itself as still lying **within** Christianity.

Indeed, our General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches still allows Unitarianism to be defined as a Christian denomination.

I was extremely disappointed recently to be told by others in the UK movement that they regarded the references in my previous service to “possibly-existent higher powers” as insulting to the beliefs of others, that I was insulting the faith **they** loved, and that perhaps Unitarianism was not for me.

I had believed Unitarianism in the UK to have moved on from mandatory shared belief in at least some parts of the religious speculations of Christianity to the primacy of shared positive response to our spirituality and the enabling of spiritual growth.

If it hasn't or can't, then perhaps we DO need to redefine Glasgow Unitarian Church in a new and less constricting way, as being open and enabling to all who want to respond positively to their spirituality and to become less selfish, more caring human beings, inclusive of but not limited to those who are happy to self-identify as Christian.

We could do much worse than to identify ourselves as I did at the start of today's service - as an Inclusive Spirituality community in which a shared faith in the power of enabling spiritual growth free from the divisiveness of dogmatic belief is central, with all members both free to respond positively to their spirituality in their own way and respecting of others' right to do the same.

Barry Bell