

**from a Worthship service at Glasgow Unitarian Church
on 8 January 2012, led by Barry Bell**

our Unitarian community

A Unitarian worthship service is a service focussed on the finding, valuing, and sharing of that which is of worth and meaning in life from within the entirety of human experience.

Unitarians are rightly proud of the non-dogmatic attitude they bring to the sometimes difficult things which arise from the wonder of being human, of beng a self-aware and spiritually-aware life-form which is unique on this planet, and perhaps unique in this universe.

I see our freedom from divisive dogmatic creedal certainty as a wonderful way both to learn from the expression of our diverse individual responses to our spirituality and to enable the spiritual growth of ourselves and others. I twould suggest that such enablement should be the primary purpose of our community.

Having recently celebrated the 200th anniversary of Glasgow Unitarian Church we have been much concerned with taking stock of what the Unitarian community we fund and run should be doing in the 21st Century. Today I am considering what our Unitarian community may need to be and to do if we are to still be here 200 years from now to provide the something special which we do, and which I believe to be so completely appropriate for our times.

What then are our Unitarian communities? What special things do we do which can "make a difference"?

Well, for a start we claim to practice "creedless religion".

This is far from being the "easy option" outsiders may imagine, and it is also far from easy to adequately represent the benefits to outsiders of our kind of religious and spiritual communities whilst being extremely easy for outsiders to mistake our inclusivity and diversity for weakness and lack of faith. I believe this may become easier in time as knowlege of ourselves, our world, and our universe grows, but see finding the answers to this challenge as central to our survival.

Most Christian denominations regard the Unitarian denomination as being outside of mainstream Christianity. I suggest that we should not be surprised that they should think this, since Christianity is at heart a very creedal religion.

It is one thing to be a liberal Christian denomination (such as the Church of England/Anglican Communion) which formally demands the holding of creedal beliefs – including the ones most central to Christianity regarding Jesus' divinity, Jesus' status as the Christ, Messiah and Saviour, and the nature of God - whilst tolerating church members, clergy, and even Bishops who do not hold such beliefs with any degree of certainty.

It is quite another to be an autonomous part of a denomination which traditionally claims to be liberal Christian but which not only makes no creedal demands regarding certainty of

belief, but openly welcomes as members those who declare their lack of such certain belief, those who do not define themselves as Christian, and even those such as myself who, at least as far as the interventionist Abrahamic God is concerned, are atheist.

The difference lies in the **declared** positions both of the denomination and of those it accepts as members.

Let's look at what some contemporary individuals from outside the movement think we are, through some readings. They show that we have much room for improvement in how we represent ourselves to others – and perhaps even how we think of ourselves.

The first reading is from Alice Nunn, an Anglican vicar whose parish is in Lincolnshire but who has significant links - through church music – with the Unitarian presence, and particularly that in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The piece quoted was printed in the October 2011 edition of a Viewpoint published by the National Unitarian Fellowship.

The second reading is very short, and is from a publication called "Pink News". The edition this short quote comes from also carried a publicity announcement concerning same-sex marriage put out in November 2011 by the Chief Officer of our General Assembly, Derek MacAuley.

The third reading is also a third-party view, but was quoted in an on-line blog by Rev Peter Boullata, the Minister of the First Parish Unitarian Universalist church in Lexington, Massachusetts.

Reading 1

".....it would be helpful to consider who the Unitarians are.

They have a long and interesting history in the liberal dissenting tradition going back to the late 1800s, and boldly claim to worship God without the shackles of dogma. They reject the notion of the Trinity and stand in the tradition of God-fearing folk who have been persecuted for their 'heresy' over the years.

Their message is one of inclusion and tolerance, so an unrepentant Trinitarian like myself (well I am an Anglican vicar!) is accepted even if they disagree with me. God is a unity and calls people to work towards unity themselves and to seek the truth in their lives. Like the Quakers they are sometimes pacifist, and have often spoken out against human rights abuses such as slavery at the time when it was not the done thing.

Jesus is seen as a significant, but not divine, teacher in the rabbinic and prophetic tradition. His central message was a call to love.

Unitarians value spiritual insights from all religious traditions."

Reading 2

"Under the new regulations set out by the Government, no venue is obliged to permit gay ceremonies, meaning the system is completely opt-in for more liberal faith groups including the Unitarian Church, so-called because it believes in God as one person."

Reading 3

"Recently, a fellow who does some work for my congregation was in the building. We had never met before, and so we introduced ourselves and chatted for a while in the church office. At one point he said to me, "You know, I should tell you this story. I have a thirteen-year-old son who has been asking a lot of religious questions lately. I was raised Catholic, but we're not involved at all, and haven't really given him a religious education. One day, my son was with me in the car when we drove by another Unitarian Universalist church. He asked me, because he knew that I had done some work for them, what kind of a church it was. When I told him, he asked what Unitarian Universalists believe. So I told him.

"Well they don't really believe anything specific. It's a religion where whatever you think or believe or feel is what the religion is all about." And my son said, "That's the kind of church I want to go to!"

The fellow chuckled and we had some pleasantries about his teenager being a Unitarian Universalist without knowing it.

But my pleasant façade betrayed the bomb that had just gone off in my head. It's true. We have institutionalised narcissism. Here was a person that was not involved in a Unitarian Universalist church, and yet knew something about us. As an outsider, the message he received about what we stand for is:

"It's about whatever you want it to be about. It's all about you."

This man did not invent this perception of Unitarian Universalism. He got it from somewhere. He got it from us. It could be posited that many thoughtful UUs talked to him about our creedless religion, our covenanted communities in which one is free to search for truth and meaning. It's likely that thoughtful UUs explained being gathered around basic principles and values rather than beliefs and doctrines. But what he heard was:

"We don't believe anything. We're just making this stuff up as we go along to suit ourselves."

It's even possible that this is precisely what he was told."

I have a lot to say whenever it becomes clear that "outsiders" view Unitarians as being a tiny dissenting non-conformist Protestant Christian denomination hung up on, and defined by, belief in the unity (as opposed to the trinity) of God, because I am aware that not only is this no longer what defines us, but it hides the wonderful openness of what we bring.

Rev Peter Boullata of First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church in Lexington, Massachusetts also has a lot to say in response to an "outsiders" view of Unitarian Universalism as being "all about you" because, in his own words, he is aware of the huge difference between "a free and disciplined search for truth and meaning, unencumbered by doctrine" and "a religion that's all about you and whatever you want."

Much of Peter's response is concerned with identifying both the challenges, and the solutions, of how Unitarian Universalist religious and spiritual communities can be effective and useful when they are made up of individuals with diverse personal faiths and beliefs and are united, not by shared personal faith, but by this free and disciplined search for

truth and meaning. Much must therefore be for another day, for today we are focussed on **what** our mission is to be rather than how to achieve it. However, some of his response is helpful to this task of identifying our mission, and becomes reading 4.

Reading 4

"There is a contradiction inherent in liberal religion. We are free, autonomous individuals in community with one another. Tension exists between freedom and connection, autonomy and community. There is no getting around it. Our calling is to live gracefully in that tension. Our capacity for being a transformative presence in the world is diminished when we neglect the communal, connected, covenanted aspect of our life together and when we focus primarily on the individual and their freedom.

Engaging one another in a spirit of curiosity, openness and humility, with the recognition that one might be mistaken, or one's own perspective might be partial, is however the opposite of institutionalised self-involvement.

It is telling, I think, that the 1961 principles of the newly formed Unitarian Universalist Association speak of a "free and disciplined search for truth and meaning" and the statement's revised 1980s version is, "a free and responsible search." I also find it telling how Unitarian Universalists like to speak, when they do at all, of "spiritual practices," but almost never "spiritual disciplines."

Being together in community takes discipline and effort. I think we have become lazy and simply tell each other, "You do your thing, and I'll do mine. You have your spiritual practice and I have my book discussion group. Whatever."

A group of like-minded individuals doing community service together with no theology, no discerned sense of vocation, is not a faith community; it's the Rotary Club.

A group of people dedicated to liberal ideals with no shared theology or shared sense of vocation is not a church. It's a political club.

The National Lesbian and Gay Task Force do a fine job of fighting for LGBT equality. Why would I join a church to do that?

The American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee is doing terrific work (as are other organizations) defending the rights and freedoms of immigrants. I support the ADC. Why would I join a church to do that?

Local service agencies alleviate suffering of all kinds and use my volunteer time. Why would I join a church for that?

Religious liberals, both within our movement and beyond it, dropped theology in favor of social action in the twentieth century. We are compelled to do social justice work, but we have little or no understanding of why this is religious. To base whole congregations around this kind of mission work without a clearly articulated theology is to reinvent the Rotary Club for the religiously inclined."

There is a key thing which Peter holds on to which I initially found myself at odds with, and that is his clear feeling that some sort of agreed theology is needed to make our communities work. I couldn't see how a movement which features a course called "build

your own theology" **could** have a shared theology. I have however come to see that I may have misunderstood his use of the term "theology".

My starting-point in thinking about Unitarian community are the three things which I believe to be central to current Unitarian thinking. I now see that these may actually amount to a theology, even though they make no effort to define God. They are certainly a way of looking at what makes we human beings think in terms of Gods and divinity.

First is the understanding that there are two things underlying the need every human being has to hold personal faith and personal beliefs. These are the reality that every human being is self-aware – which amongst some wonderful things also generates significant fearfulness and the **desire** for the security blanket of unseen powers to help us and to address the injustices all around us, and the reality that every human being is, to varying degrees, spiritually-aware – which generates, amongst other things, our **sense** of interconnection (often referred to as our sense of the divine).

Second are the related understandings that the holding of personal faith and personal beliefs are an individual's right, that they are a response to their spirituality, reason, emotions, knowledge, and experiences, that they are central to the manner in which they live, and that such personal faith requires to be held non-dogmatically – that is, without insistence that everyone else must hold the same faith - if we are to get along and progress.

Third is the belief that through enabling spiritual growth we will succeed in "making a difference" and improving our world.

So where does this take us?

I recently attempted to answer the question of a Kenyan facebook friend - "What are Unitarians?".

The attempt was then run past the Unitarians who form the UK Unitarians facebook group, and modified following some very helpful comments.

I offer it as a possible way of describing what Unitarians are about.

"For me, Unitarians do four key things.

We are aware that we are following a personal spiritual path in response to our innate spirituality, and hold our personal faith and beliefs in a non-dogmatic manner i.e. we do not insist that they are the only correct way.

We defend the right of others to similarly follow their spiritual path and to hold their own personal faith however much it may not align with our own, whilst engaging positively with diversity and difference.

We seek to enable the spiritual growth of ourselves and others through finding, valuing, and sharing that which we and others may find to be of worth and meaning in life from within the entirety of human experience. We call this "worthship".

We measure spiritual growth by the extent to which it enables us to care more for others and by the extent to which it increases our personal happiness."

In closing, let me remind you of something I said, and something I suggested, at the start of today's worship.

I said that our freedom from divisive dogmatic creedal certainty is a wonderful way both to learn from the expression of our diverse individual responses to our spirituality and to enable the spiritual growth of ourselves and others.

I suggested that such enablement should be the primary purpose of our community.