

LIFE PATTERNS

Today's theme was suggested by my recent work on the GUC new website. This lovely wall-hanging was designed by Jefferson Barnes, who was Director of the Glasgow School of Art when I was a design student there, back in the late 60's early 70's. It was sewn by his wife, Alice Barnes, a quilter of some reputation....and it was donated to our church by their daughter Jan. It is called 'Four Seasons' and I used it as the background for our new web pages almost as our Corporate Identity - not only because it is very beautiful but also because I think it could be seen as a symbol of US - a patchwork of different individuals with varied views and ideas, coming together to make up a liberal Unitarian fellowship. Jan Barnes once commented that her whole family life is here in this patchwork because her mother used her old summer dresses, old curtains, table cloths etc....stitching together the fabric of her entire childhood! And now, on our PEOPLE page, some of us are stitched together into this patchwork too.

On the opposite wall, we have a selection of textile pictures by our late dear friend, Christine Mackenzie - who was a talented artist and a much loved member of our group. She was a gifted weaver of pattern and design, and was inspired by the primal patterns in nature - the circle and the spiral. Her work is a lovely collage of colour, pattern and texture.

It is human nature to want patterns, standards, and a structure of behavior. A pattern is a kind of shelter. From the time we wake up in the morning to the time we bed down for the night, our lives are filled with patterns, giving our lives structure. Having recently retired, I have discovered how much I miss the 'structure' of FE teaching in my life - and the need to replace it with a new one. This is the challenge of retirement. I am still in the process of creating this and it is not always easy.

Like me, many of you will have experienced the exercise 'LIFE-LINE' which is popular in group eventsyou are asked to draw a horizontal line, marking your birth at one end and your death at the other...and then encouraged to create a graph of your life's highs and lows at various ages and stages in between. I have done it several times and was alarmed to see my graph soaring and dipping dramatically, above the line representing positive events - and below for negative events. Lots of ups and downs! This can be a useful exercise to gain an overview on one's life journey, but every instinct tells me that our lives are not a straight line but a circle. As one becomes older, the experience of 'coming full circle' begins to ring very true.

Albert Einstein indirectly spoke of the *circle of life* when he said that energy cannot be created or destroyed; it merely *changes form*.

The "Circle of Life" often refers to an animal either becoming food for another or simply decomposing into fertilization for plant life. Everything in existence participates in this

great cycle, including Earth itself.....death is not really the end but the seed and beginning of some other life. This is certainly true in the physical world and I believe, also true on a spiritual level, known as reincarnation. But that's a subject for another day!

In my own life, I am rediscovering things I either took for granted or completely forgot about over the years - two prime examples are the joys of cycling and singing in a choir.

Alastair Moodie's recent service on '*Liberating Jesus from Dogma and Creed*' was an excellent introduction to our latest initiative here at GUC to hold '**Saturday Sessions**' - forums or debates on our current Unitarian ideas and beliefs about Jesus and liberal Christianity - followed by other themes. I very much welcome this. For me - it is coming at a very good time and will be another valuable 'Full Circle' experience.....'*to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time*'.

When I took the decision to leave the Church of Scotland many years ago, and to go exploring and searching for a spiritual path that I could more whole-heartedly follow, my minister at the time, was kind enough to spend several hours trying to persuade me to stay with my childhood faith. In the end, he could see my mind was made up - so *he* gave up, but he made a prophecy that at the end of all my exploring I would come right back to where I started. Well, in a way, he was rightI have come round in a wide circle, but the stimulating journey and the Unitarian perspectives I have embraced, have allowed me to see and value old wisdoms in a fresh and much more meaningful light.

Wisdom is expressed in many different ways - while I was researching for this service, I came across the following quotation, which is rather facetious but no less true.... written by that prolific author 'Anonymous':-

Life Comes a Full Circle

At age 4, success is.....not wetting your pants.

At age 12, success is... having friends.

At age 16, success is... having a driver's license.

At age 20, success is... having sex.

At age 35, success is... having money.

At age 50, success is... having money.

At age 60, success is... having sex.

At age 70, success is... having a driver's license.

At age 75, success is... having friends.

At age 80, success is... not wetting your pants.

Did you realise that the roundabout is a uniquely European road system? It doesn't exist in the USA. Whether you like them or loathe them, when you think about it, the roundabout is kind of special, as far as traffic control goes. It uses no mechanical lights or devices - it operates on CO-OPERATION alone. Everyone must understand and embrace the system and give the proper right of way. My husband Hugh becomes infuriated by drivers who fail to indicate, so many don't! - we are all expected to indicate when we are taking an exit.

If we are lost or unsure, we can go around several times until we find the right exit or direction for us.

'Going around in circles' is often quoted as a negative thing - getting nowhere fast....but it can also be seen in a positive light. It can be a process of reflection, learning and repair.

I believe that the circle of life is not only a powerful , primal pattern but also essentially *hopeful*. In essence, it is the original 'repeating pattern' in its simplest form. Repeating patterns of human behaviour is how we learn. Like recurring dreams, our repeating patterns should be ignored at our peril! The wonderful poem I read earlier, 'Autobiography in 5 short Chapters' is all about learning from our our repeat patterns of behaviour, and taking personal responsibility for changing them. Of course, many of our repeating patterns have their origins in our childhoods - our early scripts ...and it can take a long time for us even to recognise them cropping up again and again. Awareness is the first and most important stage - I have recently become aware of yet another one of my own - to join the collection! Just when I feel I've fixed one, another one pops up.

Putting all this into a Unitarian context - if we think of ourselves as being the draughtsmen or designers of our own lives, and drawing them as circles....Unitarians have chosen to draw them FREE-HAND. We have largely rejected the compasses and templates of the mainstream religions - in other words, their creeds. This is a challenging choice to make.

Drawing a circle FREE HAND is very tricky...it is almost impossible to draw a perfect circle without the help of tools. There's a wonderful clip - graphic video on U tube, showing a man called Elliot Black demonstrating the drawing of a free-hand perfect circle in chalk on a blackboard. It is worth having a look - google 'Freehand Circle Drawing' and play the short video on **Youtube**.

Of course, no human life is a perfect circle, whether drawn with mechanical help or freehand - it is full of lumps and bumps and smudges and sometimes breaks and gaps. But as we travel full circle, we can become aware of repeating blemishes and spot where we need to repair or amend something.

I came across the following definitions of Unitarians on the Internet -

Q: What is a Unitarian?

A: Someone who believes in life before death.

A: A Quaker with Attention Deficit Disorder.

A: Someone who approaches every question with an open mouth.

Q: Why did the Unitarian cross the road?

A: To support the chicken in its search for its own path

The nature of Unitarianism is such that it can never be fully defined, at least not for all time - since it is a faith that is both open to individual interpretation and one that is free to change over time. I feel enormously priviledged to belong to a faith that values people so

much that it insists upon the freedom to think for ourselves, that demands justice, equality, and peace ; that calls us to accept one another and assist each other in community toward spiritual growth....a faith that calls us to know and respect the greater fabric of life in which we partake....learning from our repeating patterns, taking responsibility for our actions and mistakes , drawing our own conclusions..... and repairing our freehand circles!

Maynard James Keenan wrote -

*'A circle is the reflection of eternity. It has no beginning and it has no end - and if you put several circles over each other, then you get a **spiral**.'* The spiral is an extremely ancient symbol with mystical and esoteric associations. As a Reiki practitioner, it has a very deep and special meaning for me.

Spirals can wind upwards or downwards. My own personal hope is that the CIRCLE of my life's energy can evolve into a *spiral* which reaches upward and in a positive direction as I learn from my mistakes and to become more aware of the lessons revealed by my repeating patterns of behaviour.

Joni Mitchell (no relation) sang :-

"The seasons, they go round and round

And the painted ponies go up and down,

We're captured on the Carrousel of Time

We can't return, we can only look behind from where we came,

And go round and round and round

In the CIRCLE GAME.'

Today's service has been full of visual metaphors - patchwork, collage, a life-line graph, roundabouts, circles, spirals and carrouseles! Hope you're not feeling dizzy?

Glasgow Unitarians are very fortunate in having a team of Worship Leaders who have a rich variety of backgrounds... the team includes - academics, educationalists, historians, theologians and scientists. My background is art & design. I draw from my own experience and perspectives which I suppose are predominantly visual and creative. I hope there has been something meaningful for you this morning.