

GLASGOW UNITARIAN CHURCH, GLASGOW
Service for Sunday 19 June 2011, led by Barry Bell

The Importance of Personal Experience

Personal experience is of great importance to Unitarians. Our differing spiritual paths all involve the seeking of spiritual truth without blind submission to any of the various “truths” which are presented by others. For me, bringing a spiritually enlightened attitude to my personal experience is central to this search, as is the freedom to take full account of my own reason and conscience.

A Unitarian’s personal experience will usually include not only secular knowledge but also sought-out knowledge of, and insights from, the teachings and practices of many religions, spiritual communities, and secular groups, and of and from the words and actions of a very broad range of spiritually-inspired people.

All spiritual and religious communities try to provide a safe environment which enables spiritual growth and increased enlightenment. Most, however, insist upon a shared belief in creed, dogma, and meta-narrative which provide a particular, and often divisive, set of “answers” to our big spiritually-inspired questions.

We Unitarians seek such growth and enlightenment without the requirements of such enforced belief, sharing instead in an open search for answers to these same questions.

We also choose to share our experiences within this safe environment so as to create new experience for everyone. When I engage in sharing experiences, my hope is always that we will find some new things of worth and meaning which we can each carry forward.

Today I will be speaking with you about some new ways of finding and sharing experiences. In particular, I want you to consider the potential for this contained within the various technologies of mass media, of the internet, of cyber-space and the very popular social networking opportunities contained within it.

To help you focus, let me ask you a question. Do you think it would be wise for an individual who was seeking to gain, or to pass on, spiritual enlightenment to deliberately refrain from reading, or from writing, books?

This question was prompted by something which was brought to the Annual Meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches just a few months ago. I however only experienced it by courtesy of a “facebook” posting from Kay Millard, the secretary of the Hibbert Trust, who is one of many I interact with through this internet-based social media site.

I ask you to ponder the fact that without my engagement with this form of interaction I would not have experienced it, I would not have been able to share it with you, and I would not have been inspired by it to bring you this service.

Here’s the description of what I experienced - entitled “Tomorrow’s Ministry” – which is available on its originator’s website.

“Even the Unitarian Ministers of Great Britain are thinking about how they can utilise technology and social media to amplify the good they are doing in the world. Zan from Mixtape Communications was honoured to present to them on how our culture and communications are changing while they met in Swansea, Wales for their annual meeting. Sadly, he didn’t get to join them in his homeland, but thanks to the Internet he was able to be there virtually.”

I can't beat that description, but I can supplement it. The presentation uses a stills slideshow to accompany Zan's spoken word. He of course provides some "nuts and bolts" about the use of internet technology and social media, and some suggestions of how he thinks they might be used to help Ministers and their congregations.

He also talks about how the barriers of time and geography are evaporating, and likens the scale of this communication revolution to that brought about by the printing press. He points out that, just as with the printing press, it will take us a considerable time to realise that barriers have actually come down and to embrace the potential that this brings.

Because this is so crucial to the thinking behind this service, I'll say that again –

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So now the question I asked - "Do you think it would be wise for an individual who was seeking to gain, or to pass on, spiritual enlightenment to deliberately refrain from reading, or from writing, printed books?" – can be seen in context.

I am pretty sure that every Unitarian in the country would answer "No". More importantly, however, I am also pretty sure that in thirty years time every Unitarian in the country, if asked a similar question about the wisdom of deliberately refraining from engagement with cyber-space, would also answer "No".

This would be because by then there is likely to be almost universal understanding that the benefits from so engaging far outweigh any risks.

We have, then, identified the importance both of new experience, and of the attitude we bring to it.

We have been told that cyber-space offers new ways of accessing and sharing new experience. We have considered one person's likening of the scale of this new opportunity as being similar to - and perhaps far exceeding - that presented by the printing press. We have also been shown one example of its use – a presentation over cyberspace at the Annual Meetings of our General Assembly.

The rest of this address will in large part be four other pieces of new experience which I would like to share with you, each one of which I only found through engagement with this new technology.

The first reading came to me from someone in my email address book, and is one of the myriad of hopefully-funny emails which circulate within the email system. In addition to finding it funny however, I also found it to hold a pretty real truth about something most of us will have experienced at some time in our working lives – someone exhorting us to give more than 100%.

See appendix 1

That was really just a bit of fun, but I did manage to find something of real value within it which I hope you will agree made it worth taking the risk of sharing it with you!

The next reading comes from the facebook page of the “I am UU” organisation, which is directly linked with the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, over in the USA.

It had been posted by an American facebook friend, and I doubt if I would have encountered it otherwise. I have since added “I am UU” to my list of facebook contacts.

It pretty accurately reflects the feelings I had about the importance of the Unitarian message immediately upon encountering Unitarianism. I believe such feelings are shared by many at the first point of contact with us. I also happen to believe that it is to our detriment that we are so poor at encouraging the holding of such feelings, and so good at discouraging them.

See appendix 2

The next reading also comes from facebook, and was contributed by Danny Crosby, the young Unitarian minister for Altrincham and Urmston.

It was made available within a contribution by Danny to a posting by a mutual facebook friend who is undertaking training for Unitarian ministry, and who had expressed her struggle with a part of her ministerial training in which she was required to provide a 2,500-word essay on the subject of the Jewish book of Psalms. Danny had sympathised, advised that he had been inspired by consideration of Jewish psalms as part of his training to write a new Psalm, and had provided a link to this.

I found this only through my interaction with her, but am pleased that as a result Danny is now another of my facebook friends.

See appendix 3

I found the final reading today through the internet forum of the National Unitarian Fellowship (which I access and contribute to), via a link put up there by a fellow N.U.F. committee member. I found the same link (albeit later) in the General Assembly's online Newsletter.

The link was to BBC I-player, where for a strictly limited period access was available to a radio interview, given to a local radio station serving the Manchester L.G.B.T. community, by lesbian and Unitarian minister Rev. Dr Ann Peart, the newly-elected President of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

It would be fair to say that I was a little overawed by Ann when I worked with her some years ago while still very new to Unitarianism – she was after all a very significant Unitarian, very intellectual, and at that time in charge of Unitarian ministerial training in Manchester. I am delighted to be able to say that this interview has given me a much better insight into both her and her approach to Unitarianism.

See appendix 4

I hope you might come to see what you have just read as the proof of the pudding – you have now heard from five sources, none of which would have been available to me, far less you, had it not been for the involvement with cyber-space of myself and each of the individuals who had flagged them up.

And we are only just beginning to discover the positive ways in which cyber-space can be used.

Appendix 1

This comes from 2 math teachers with a combined total of 70 yrs. teaching experience. It has an indisputable mathematical logic, and is from a strictly mathematical viewpoint. It goes like this:

What Makes 100%?

Ever wonder about those people who say they are giving more than 100%?

We have all been to those meetings where someone wants you to go over the top and give more than 100%.

How about achieving 103%?

Here's a little mathematical formula that might help you answer these questions:

With the letters of the alphabet represented as the numbers 1 to 26, then

H-A-R-D-W-O-R-K adds up to 98%,
and K-N-O-W-L-E-D-G-E adds up to 96%.

A-T-T-I-T-U-D-E adds up to 100%,.

But B-U-L-L-S-H-I-T adds up to 103%
and A-S-S-K-I-S-S-I-N-G adds up to 118% !

So one can conclude with mathematical certainty that while Hard Work and Knowledge get you close, and Attitude get's you there, it's Bullshit and Ass Kissing that put you over the top.

So now you know something new about those people who ask you to give more than 100%!

Appendix 2

“UU-Vangelism isn't unprecedented. It has been proven effective. Are we willing to be mocked in order to share our Principles? Do we care as much about the world as the Watch Tower Society or the Latter Day Saints? Because I think OUR message has a better chance to save it than theirs.”

Appendix 3

“Real Freedom?”

A Twenty First Century Psalm
By Danny Crosby

I am bound, hopelessly trapped, by a self imposed crisis.
Tied down, vulnerable and constrained, in this reality I have created.
My eyes are closed, my mind is shut, I touch nothing.
I see darker than darkness, thoughts emptier than emptiness, feelings
numbed beyond numbness.

Why have you abandoned me in this lonely exile?
For what reason have I been left to face life all alone?

The world is frightening, I am awed by its enormity,
and it offers too many potentials.
It is terrifying, I am overwhelmed by its immensity,
and there is so much to choose from.
Crowds of faceless people, deafening in the silence, moving in endless circles.
One of the millions, one of the voiceless, walking the treadmill to nowhere.

God, how do I break from the chains of life?
Wise One, is there release from the slavery of reality?

The way to freedom, is the way of courage, retorts the Source of All.
The path of liberation, is path of endeavour, answers the Divine Mystery.
Can you hear my call, oh child of creation, are you tuned into this frequency?
Have you seen my words, human reality, or are you distracted
by another channel?

Real Freedom is possessed by every one of you, listen to its call.
Self liberation shines out from within, so be its flaming torch.

Appendix 4

“what are Unitarian and Free Christian churches?”

“Unitarian churches come from the liberal or radical end of Christianity, but because we put more emphasis on conscience and reason in working out our beliefs according to our experience we don't have any creeds and so we now include people who believe things which would not necessarily be Christian. We have people who have been influenced by Buddhist thought, and humanists, and also people much influenced by Earth Spirit spirituality, as well as people with (more mainstream) liberal Christian views”

“what about the barriers experienced by LGBT people seeking to engage with religion?”

“because we recognise the inherent worth and potential worth of every human being, we really don't discriminate on grounds of sexual orientation or gender”

“I've heard of civil partnership ceremonies within Unitarian churches”

“We think that any couple who are sincere about their love for each other and their commitment to each other ought to be able to express that and make that commitment in church. I have been conducting gay blessing services throughout the whole of my 25 years of Ministry, and recently we have been campaigning, together with the Quakers and the liberal Jews, for equal rights to do marriages for same-sex couples”

“what are the differences between Unitarians and Quakers?”

“(it is) largely a matter of practice and tradition –I would say our actual beliefs probably overlap enormously, both have a considerable range. But our ways of doing business and conducting worship are quite distinct”

“It is unusual to have women (in positions of authority) within any religious organisation, even more so for lesbians”

“We’ve had women Ministers since 1904, although it used to be a comparatively small minority. Now about one third of our Ministers are women. Sexuality has just never been an issue – people have known me for who I am, and nobody has ever questioned that as making me suitable or unsuitable to do anything”

“what would people get in a Unitarian worship service?”

“(you get) the opportunity to explore and to express spirituality in an environment which encourages diversity, which encourages each to think for themselves. Congregations do vary enormously but traditionally we’ve had what you might call a “hymn sandwich” pattern with an addressyou really need to shop around to find one that feels comfortable”.

“has the way you believe changed?”

“Oh yes, enormously! I started off as a sort of liberal Christian..... but with Jesus being a prophet and a teacher to follow rather than part of God. I then went through a very Humanist phase, when it seemed to me that the important thing were the values of love and justice, which were not necessarily embodied in any sort of divinity. Then I came across the writings of Don Cupitt and the Sea of Faith movement, and the “non-realist” approach to religious language, which really regards it as an orientation towards that which is worthy rather than using God (and) God language to mean a supreme being, so that allowed me to start using religious language again, albeit not in the same way that many mainstream Christians would (mean it).