

SPIRITUAL NOURISHMENT - GUC Sunday 13th May 2012

Lyanne Mitchell

Chalice lighting -"Far more indispensable than food for the physical body is spiritual nourishment for the soul. One can do without food for a considerable time, but a person of the spirit cannot exist for a single second without spiritual nourishment. Poetry and art nourish the soul of the world with the flavours of beauty, wisdom and truth."

Gandhi

My theme this morning is - 'Spiritual Nourishment' and it was triggered by an article clipped from the Times, sent by my good friend and dedicated Unitarian, Brenda Knopf in Southampton.

' Why we flock to our new secular temples'

Edited extract from The Times 18th Feb by James Fox, Art Historian and Researcher.

'Blockbusting Art exhibitions are drawing huge devotional crowds in London. They may not find God but they are seeking spiritual nourishment.

London is not quite itself at the moment. Middle-aged couples from the Home Counties are queuing through the city's streets. The Underground is awash with unusually thoughtful debate. And every other person seems to be brandishing some kind of tote bag. No, Wimbledon hasn't arrived early this year...these are the unmistakable symptoms of exhibition fever.

The current outbreak is reaching epidemic proportions. Half a dozen blockbuster shows have been raging simultaneously. It all kicked off in Nov last year when the National gallery opened a little exhibition about Leonardo, featuring a mere 9 paintings by him. But that didn't stop it hitting Britain like a tsunami. All kinds of attendance records were smashed and even those with no previously discernible interest in Art queued for hours every morning in a desperate search for tickets.

But that was just the start. In January, The Royal Academy entered the fray by launching a vast retrospective of the works of the nation's most dearly loved painter, David Hockney. There were chaotic scenes in the entrance hall : think - the fall of Saigon, with more postcards.

In Feb the National Portrait Gallery opened a long-awaited expo of paintings by Lucian Freud. Six days later, an even bigger name hit the listings - Pablo 'Box-office gold' Picasso was doing a star turn at Tate Britain, followed by Mondrian and Ben Nicholson, Degas and the Richter Retrospective at Tate Modern.

This list of big-name expos pose two nagging questions - why in this new age of austerity are so many blockbusters being organised? and why, against the odds, are they doing so unbelievably well? When times are hard, museums become increasingly dependent on income from admission and merchandise sales. One possible answer for their commercial success could be good press and publicity. But something much deeper is going on here. It's not just a matter of luck, timing and savvy public relations ; this spate of exhibitions reveals a lot more about us than it does about the institutions staging them.

It's partly a matter of entertainment. In difficult times, people always turn to the arts in search of relief, solace and escape. But it is still more than this. The arts are not just purveyors of disposable amusement. Like it or not, they have come to appropriate and disseminate some of the only spiritual values left in an increasingly secular world. This process has been unfolding for some time but all the evidence suggests that the new aesthetic creeds converting hordes of heathens by the day.

The phenomenon is nowhere more apparent than on our art galleries. After all, they are often explicitly modeled on religious precedents. The temple front of the British Museum. The huge nave of Tate Modern. The elegant side chapels of the National Gallery. All of them inform their visitors that while they may not find God inside, they will certainly get something sacred.

This winter, thousands of worshippers have made pilgrimages to London's many secular temples. Inside, they have processed silently and reverently through their chambers. They have venerated the artistic relics on the walls. They have obeyed the oracle that is the audio guide in their ears. And they have done it all in the hope that they will emerge a few hours later, feeling enlightened. And if for some reason they don't emerge enlightened....they can at least pop into the gift shop.'

ADDRESS

A few weeks ago, my daughter Claire and I made our own pilgrimage to London by Virgin train - partly to stay with our son Mark and his partner Camille, but also to see 'the Bigger Picture' David Hockney exhibition at the Royal Academy.

I've had a soft spot for David Hockney ever since he came to talk to us when I was an art student at Glasgow School of Art in the late 60's. That dates me! At that stage, he was an up-and-coming artist. He had not yet moved to California to create his famous 'splash' and 'swimming pool' paintings. He turned up in a long white coat down to his red shoes; his hair was peroxide

white and spikey ; he wore gigantic red-framed specs ; he was very cool man! He dragged out lots of his canvasses and talked to us without a hint of patronisation, artist to artist, about what he was trying to achieve, where he had failed, and how he had tried to repair or correct his mistakes. We loved him - and I've been a fan ever since and watched his career with interest. I respect his drive and exploring spirit, always trying out new technologies and mediums.....photography, ipad, poloroid montages and even photocopies. And I read recently that he is hugely supportive of the Arts in Britain and donates his work generously to charity.

The Bigger Picture is a retrospective of his work from roughly the last 10 years, since he returned to live in Britain. It's a huge exhibition - and it was stunning. The colour, scale and energy of his work took our breath away. This was an artist in his prime, passionately reunited and in love with his native landscape - West Yorkshire, in all its moods and seasons. There were several rooms which had themes - 3 trees depicted in 4 seasons - Winter, Spring, Summer and Autumn ; other landscape details where he had gone back and painted the same scene at different times of the year ; a room full of tree stumps, standing like gravestones or standing stones; gigantic composite stylized paintings made up of 50 canvasses; there was a whole wall of film screens taking us for a walk in the woods or through wind-blown grasses - or looking down on his mustard yellow studio floor, while dancers performed in a relaxed way. The composite screens were deliberately slightly out of 'synch' with moving images bleeding through them; there were also huge pictures enlarged from ipad sketches.

At one point, Claire was moved to tears, saying 'He's worshipping nature'. We both found the experience moving and inspiring. Through David Hockney's commitment and energy, we could share his sense of awe and his sheer joy in capturing the beauty of his native countryside.

Was this a spiritual experience in the 'secular temple' of the Royal Academy as suggested by James Fox in his Times article? Yes, I think so.

Art and religion have, of course, been linked for centuries. The Church was the first main sponsor of the arts. Architecture, stain glass, paintings, and sculptures - the Church has always understood the power of images to inspire and educate the masses. Artists, poets, musicians, sculptors can unlock our spiritual awareness of beauty. Is the Bible itself not a great work of poetry? Although the great Gothic cathedrals can still command coach loads of visitors, and remain places of pilgrimage and awe.....increasingly, churches at a more everyday level are either being abandoned and neglected or being developed into commercial ventures. As the population becomes increasingly secular, local churches cannot afford to remain open and fewer and fewer can claim to be centres for spiritual nourishment.

It has been said that psychotherapists and therapists are nowadays fulfilling the roles of ministers and priests to more and more of the population to whom church and religious counselling is no longer relevant. Carl Jung believed that addicted drinkers who seek the spirit in bottles, are on a deeper level yearning and thirsting for Spirit or God in a deeper sense. Yoga classes and meditation retreats now offer nourishment to those who are hungry for the spirit.

The thought struck me as I stood in the Royal Academy galleries, that perhaps through these exhibitions, classical and contemporary artists could now be sharing the role of priests or ministers by acting as interpreters, translators or bridges to the Mystery - God - Spirit (whatever name for it we choose) providing a secular audience with a lost sense of awe, inspiration or just at some deep level, connecting them with something bigger than themselves?

David Hockney works outside mainly and paints on location - in all weathers - and he chooses very ordinary views of trees, or pathways through woodland, returning in every season to paint the same scene as it evolves through the year. You can feel the spontaneity. Only the large composite canvases were painted in his studio. His energetic, confident brush strokes made us look afresh at seemingly unremarkable, every day details of natural landscape. "He's worshipping Nature" said Claireand through his talent and energy, we were moved to worship too.

Isn't that what a good minister or priest or worship leader can do for us?

This leads me to wonder about Unitarian worship or 'worth-ship'. We are all enjoying our new worship space. It is bright and modern but it cannot inspire awe like the architecture of splendid cathedrals. When I was a younger, more naive Unitarian, I thought I would be happy to worship in a field, or outside in a park, or in a wood. The building meant not a lot to me. Of course, this is thoroughly impractical. Our building is our main asset and our security for the future and provides the necessary base for our worship and activities. But now that we have had the courage to refurbish and modernise it, please let us not make its maintenance and upkeep our sole 'raison d'être'!

What are folk seeking or yearning for within our services? We shall be meeting together on the evening of 22nd May to discuss our identity. We are searching for a clear definition of Unitarianism so that we can more effectively attract more members. This is all well and good. But perhaps our starting point could also be to become clear about why we come to this church fellowship?

I suspect there's a wide variety of reasons for finding and attending a Unitarian Fellowship. Some are seeking the freedom to explore their deepest values and to be allowed to come to terms with their doubts and questions ; some are seeking enlightenment in the form of intellectual challenge, food for thought; some are seeking to become more aware of social justice issues ; some are weeding out truth from fiction; some are re-evaluating beliefs from childhood and shedding old baggage ; some may be looking for courage to face personal problems in their lives ; some may wish to be reassured, cheered, comforted, perhaps even entertained; some may just come out of habit ; some enjoy a quiet hour, away from everyday life, to think and reflect...to sing and to be uplifted ; and I think all are seeking the fellowship of like-minds and the warmth of good company.

Speaking for myself, I am definitely seeking spiritual nourishment - hoping to be inspired - to have my vision expanded - to have my energy levels shifted and raised ; to help me to become the best human being I can possibly be - to be kinder, more understanding, more useful in the world. Inspiration can come from more than one source - from hymns, readings, stories, hearing about fine human examples of faith in action, or from a prayer or just some words of encouragement from friends old and new.

Let's take a few quiet minutes now to reflect on what you are seeking hereand, if you would like to, please share.

Thank you for sharing.

Together, we can create an atmosphere here which, like an exhibition of fine paintings, allows us to step back from our ordinary lives and to see them afresh and more clearly; to appreciate how very fortunate we are and to be really grateful ; to focus on what we can offer to each other and to our visitors.

I was impressed by some of the contributions to recent issues of our newsletter, News &Views and want to thank you all sincerely for responding to my requests, as your new Editor, for items like 'In My View' and book & film reviews. In the current May issue Dorothy Moodie reviewed '*Bringing God Back to Earth*' by John Hunt . She ends her page by quoting the author's words about religion - and comments that she feels this is a fine definition of a worthwhile religion and a way to a meaningful life. I whole heartedly agree and would like to end my service with it :-

'The religion we need, has as its defining characteristics the search for truth, the appreciation of beauty, and the practice of love'.

Thank you for listening.