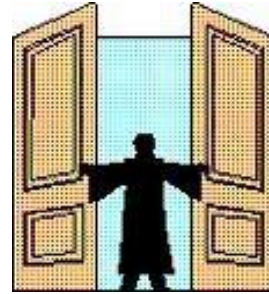


THE OPEN DOOR



NEWS AND VIEWS OF CROYDON UNITARIANS

FEBRUARY 2020

***Our minister Rev. Art Lester is pleased to
welcome you to worship every Sunday from
10:30am for the Service at 11:00am and
afterwards for fellowship and refreshments***



Is Your Life Sweet?

His name was Amos, and he and I were enrolled in a programme of subsistence level agriculture training for use in poor countries. On the first day we were assigned to work together hoeing a bean field on a hillside in Sussex. I was in my mid-thirties; Amos was ten years younger. Because he was from a Third World country, I expected him to be stronger and more skilful than I was. But as the day wore on and blisters appeared on my hands, I noticed that Amos was struggling with the work as much as I was. When the course trainer was out of sight, we leaned on our hoes and talked.

“I’m from Yaoundé,” he said apologetically. “The city. My hands are soft.”

“I’m from the USA,” I told him. “I bet mine are softer.”

As we learned how to make terraces on steep hillsides, plough with animals and make fuel-saving cookstoves, he and I bonded. I was only a recent arrival in Britain and he was just off the plane from Cameroon. He was my first real live African friend.

At first, Amos was popular with the other students in the small college. He was often seen with a crowd of admiring girls in the village tea shop. Everyone knew his name. But as the weather asserted itself, and the autumn sky laid gloom over everything like a big, grey blanket, Amos seemed to turn inward. His teeth seemed always to be chattering, and he wrapped himself in layers of clothing until he looked like the Michelin Tyre man. By January, after a Christmas spent nearly alone in a dormitory room, he started looking positively grey. He stopped attending classes. I

saw him one day, carrying his lunch back to his room to eat alone. I asked if anything was wrong.

“My life is not sweet,” he said. By March, he was gone.

Amos knew something that it took me a while to learn: life is about more than mere endurance. It is about more than achieving noble goals. If it does not contain a certain flavour—call it sweetness, if you like—it cannot ultimately be worth living. I say that knowing that some folks don’t have it easy, but I have learned a lot about happiness from those who have overcome their hardships and kept on smiling.

My instinct is to look for it the same way you detect *umami* in food. Use taste as a guide. Activate your inner sense of what makes life delicious and stay with that. Forget about enduring misery. That has its place, but it’s best reserved for emergencies, when there’s no choice. Meanwhile, I think becoming a life *umami* hunter may be the only game in town.

--Art Lester

Services

Date	Musicians	Service - Leaders
<i>2nd</i>	<i>Freda Lodge</i>	<i>Or Minister</i>
<i>9th</i>	<i>Gill Stone</i>	<i>Or Minister</i>
<i>16th</i>	<i>Freda Lodge</i>	<i>Or Minister</i>
<i>23rd</i>	<i>Gill Stone</i>	<i>Or Minister</i>
<i>Any changes to the above will be given in the notices</i>		

Events

Croydon's Civic Launch of LGBT History Month 2020 Thursday, 6th February 2020

The Civic Launch of LGBT History Month will this year shift from its previous venue, the Braithwaite Hall, and will be held in the Foyer of the recently renovated Fairfield Halls.

The main event will start at 6pm, with welcomes and introductions. This will be followed by a panel discussion and Q & A. The performances will start at 7:45pm, and finish at 10pm.

The Chorus: Rainbow Singers Across Borders will be the opening number.

The congregation will have observed that the chorus has been busy this month rehearsing at the church. This to ensure that they perform at their very best on Thursday, 6th February.

The Chorus will be followed by the talented songster Katie Rose. The Unitarian's will remember her memorable performance at last year's Peace Service.

The event is free, and it would be worth arriving early to ensure you get a seat.





It's beginning to look a bit like Christmas

A Bridge Not Too Far

I really love the work of Ben Okri. Have you read him? I think I've read *The Famished Road* twice. He's a half-Nigerian, half-British writer whose take on the modern world is flavoured by both cultures. Some of his stuff is what is called "magic realism", and some of it is harshly realistic. All of it seems to speak to some basic level of awareness that is shared by all humans.

One of his books, *Astonishing the Gods*, for instance, took me back more than fifty summers to the first time I actually considered jumping off the high diving board at the local swimming pool. I had watched the older boys diving and splashing, disappearing down what seemed like fathoms of water at the deep end, risking death and injury. I knew I had to take that plunge myself one day. After a while I couldn't see anything but that high board, which was constantly seducing and mocking me at the same time.

I now realise that it was probably a three-metre board. That's ten feet, the same height as a basketball net, something like two of me at that time. The ladder itself was frightening; each creaking rung under your wet foot was like another peal of a death bell. Worse, other people were looking, witnessing your courage, or, perhaps, your cowardice. From the platform you could see over the roof of the clubhouse. The kids at the shallow end were like ants. I am still convinced that the ten-foot board was high enough to create a climate change, because up there you got cold even in the sunshine.

After a small eternity, you walked the plank. It was springy and narrow. As you lined your toes up with the edge, the voice of reason spoke loudly in your ear: "Get the hell out of here!" The other voice in your head said, "What's the matter with you? Go ahead and jump." They quarrelled while you stood shaking on the board. A few thousand people were watching. The older boys were queuing up at the ladder. You found yourself perfectly poised between the two impulses. Your body would reveal this by making twitches in the direction of the water

and lurches toward the safety of the platform. You were locked in some terrible balancing act, a moral crisis that only looked like a kid about to jump off a perfectly safe diving board. You knew that you were at what is called the existential edge.

In the end, you were probably pushed off the board. The third ingredient—shame—made this happen. The Mexican stand-off between two equal forces was broken by peer pressure. Death was preferable to embarrassment. So, you fell through space with both elation and reluctance. When you hit the water, and it dragged you down toward the drain, the animal in you prevailed and you fought your way back to the surface. Maybe your father had been looking. Maybe the younger boys were in awe of you. So, you joined the queue again, as casual as can be.

You were a diver now.

The theologian Paul Tillich, a seminal voice in the middle part of last century, used to talk about something he called the “leap of faith.” This was a leap that had to be made by everyone at some point in his or her religious lives. After you have read all the books, heard all the sermons and sung all the hymns, there remained this one solitary act. If you had been looking for the proof of God and Heaven, you had struck out. If you had asked the minister, the rabbi or the priest a hundred times for assurance, you had received nothing but opinion. At this point you had a few options. You could go on attending church or synagogue, trying to auto-hypnotise yourself into a sense of security. You could, as so many do, shrug and forget about the whole religion thing until forced to consider it in some future crisis. Or you could listen to Tillich and take the leap of faith.

To make the leap of faith, it is first necessary to find the cliff edge. This isn't something you can do in your spare time. It involves a lot of thrashing about in the undergrowth of life, taking blind alleys and avoiding mirages in deserts. To reach Ben Okri's abyss takes a lot of living. It means being restless within your life, experiencing a feeling of incompleteness with the ordinary rewards of existence, a sense that there is something more than this. Often it will take the form of a life crisis, a bereavement, for example. The thing is, all roads lead to the

edge if you follow them long enough. There comes a time when it isn't enough to have blue chip stocks and deluxe insurance policies.

The cliff edge may just pop up out of nowhere. It may be composed of the ordinary events of life. It may come at breakfast time, as in the case of W. H. Auden's poem where he says, "The crack in the teacup leads on to the land of the dead." It may come gradually, with ageing. It may come as a result of the innocent questions asked by your children. It may be ignored for a time, maybe a long time, but when it appears you realise it has never been far away.

Standing on the cliff means coming to the end of theory and speculation. However lucid your theories of life have been, however firm your grasp of biology and physics, you are faced with the unknown and unknowable. The abyss of uncertainty is there, an undeniable fact. Belief is not very helpful, because you have the uneasy feeling that belief was born out of the limited mind. What makes pretty conversation in seminars isn't much use at the cliff edge. What you need is that most elusive thing of all: *faith*.

Faith isn't dependent upon theories and doctrine. That is just the wrapping we give it when we organise religions. Faith, we have good reason to think, is a kind of perception, a sensing organ like your nose and ears. Where belief proposes, calculates, speculates, faith *perceives*. A good explanation of this is found in the Book of Hebrews, often called the "Unitarian gospel." The writer, until the last century erroneously supposed to be Paul, says: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen." In other words, faith is not a concept but a perception. With it you have substance and evidence, not wishes and ideas.

Tillich seems to be saying that faith comes only after a leap. You can't have it sitting on the firm ground; it is only available when you launch yourself into space. It isn't a weekend activity at all. There is a kind of lock on the door to faith that goes like this: you can't have it unless you take the risk that you'll find nothing at all. A lovely cosmic joke with an unknown punchline. It's only available when nothing else will do.

Okri's bridge is composed of mist, of light, of feelings. It can sometimes be glimpsed, but it seems too insubstantial to stand on. Yet that is exactly, we are told, what you must do. This is only possible when there is no other route to take. You have to be desperate to cross the abyss, which means you have to be good and fed up with all the diversions and detours of your personal history. You have to become exhausted with false trails and red herrings. The longing to cross over has to become very great, even greater than your fear. When you glimpse the bridge, you have the opportunity to cross. This might happen many times or only once.

Okri treats us to a vision of what happens to you if you don't cross the bridge, if you bottle out at the crucial moment. He says you will become half-dead, half alive. Dustmen will collect you and use you as a negative example. These are harsh words, harsher even than the faith-by-gunpoint theology of the fundamentalists, who merely say you'll burn in hell. What Okri is talking about is the soul; the errands of the spiritual path must be met and accomplished or one has no life at all.

Okri and Tillich both seem to be saying that it is somehow possible to make faith. You have to keep the bridge intact by walking on it. At each step it may seem too insubstantial to bear your weight. With each footstep it may be that your little scheming brain wants to say, "What?" and give up the whole thing. But each stride builds more bridge to step upon; it is the act of walking that creates the struts and girders out of mist.

This is more than challenging. This is the most crucial undertaking of all. We are being asked to take our small store of inspiration and trust and put everything on it. We are asked to do that if we are Christian, Jew, Pagan or agnostic. We have to sift through the words of Jesus, Rumi and Marcus Aurelius and cobble together a bridge building kit. And we have to do it with no guarantees. None whatever, except for the inner whisper that grows louder as we get closer to the void. That still small voice has to grow until it overwhelms the great roar of conversation that is our individual psyche.

I believe that, as Hafiz said, “When the rider is ready, the horse appears.” What we will need to cross the chasm is already there within us. It needs to become ready for use, and that is what the ups and downs of life are for. That is also what places like this are for, moments like this one are for. Why else would we come to a place like this if we weren’t using it to get ready for our own tightrope walk across the abyss?

When we finally launch ourselves onto the bridge, we may find that it is not as insubstantial as we fear. Many people have told stories of the strength that can be found in sensing the presence of the infinite, as opposed to merely speculating about it. The weakness, says Okri, is in us, not in the bridge. Our job is to overcome the fear by walking.

When life grows flat and empty, have a good look around. When the world betrays you, see if you can’t spot a few beams and cables, made of air and feelings. When you despair, you may be a heartbeat away from the bridge. And tell yourself, loud and clear, that it’s time to move forward. That’s the only game in town. That’s why we’re here, after all.

--Art Lester

Getting to Know You

*This is an occasional feature (but with custom -tailored questions) for anyone willing to participate. Please let us know.
Unfortunately, we have no participant this time.*

Happy Birthday!

We wish

*Bill Higgins, John Boaler, Gill Stone, Marjorie Evans
and Debbie Adams
a very happy birthday.*

The law now requires us to ask you if you would like us to send you emails. If you do not wish to receive emails from us, could you please let us know? -- ed.

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**COULD YOU PLEASE SEND US ANY CONTRIBUTIONS FOR THE
MARCH NEWSLETTER
BY THE 17TH FEBRUARY 2020**