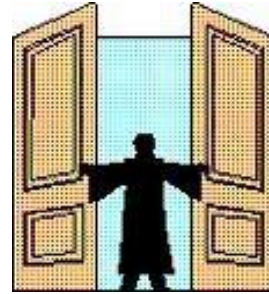


THE OPEN DOOR



NEWS AND VIEWS OF CROYDON UNITARIANS

MARCH 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***



The Other Side of the Fence

I get it all the time. A taxi driver will look at me and say, “Where’s that accent from, then?”

I tell him that I’m American by birth. “Really?” he says. “I thought you might be Canadian, because your accent isn’t so... strong, like.”

“Thank you,” I say, keeping irony out of my voice.

“What are you doing over here?” he usually asks. He means, why would I want to be in a place like this?

“I’m here for the weather,” I say.

Despite all the absurdities of recent times, it seems that lots of British people would still like to live in the States. When they talk of it, it’s usually Disney World they’re describing, from a years-ago visit to Orlando. The sun always shines, or else there’s an exciting hurricane. The houses are big, the cars, ditto. You can afford to get fat if you want. Everyone goes around with a cheery smile on their face, unless they’re an armed robber in the 7-Eleven.

When I say that this is my home, and that I prefer to live here, head-scratching follows. Everybody knows that if you got a chance to live in America, you’d jump at it. I must be crazy. Or maybe I’m not really an American after all.

The “home across the road” has a very strong lure for nearly everyone. For some, it’s the south of France. For others, one of the Costas. There are periodic exoduses to the promised land. They don’t usually last. When my wife and I lived in Spain, half the talk by British ex-pats was about how good the UK is, and to prove it, shops that specialise in the very foodstuffs they were all running away from sprang up every few weeks. One was called “Spainsbury’s”.

Having lived and worked in six countries, I’m not so easily deluded these days. The grass over there is *always* greener. Except that when you get there, it isn’t. I think that learning to be content with what you have is an overlooked spiritual discipline. It’s something that gets buried in a profit and growth-driven culture, but it’s no less true. And, yes, I say that even though I do live in Croydon, which is so often the brunt of jokes.

“*Croydon!*” say people I meet. “You live in *Croydon?*”

“Somebody’s got to,” I say. And I mean it.

Like the verse says, uttered in irony, “East, west—Croydon’s best.”

--Art Lester

Services

Date	Musicians	Service Leaders
<i>1st</i>	<i>Freda Lodge</i>	<i>Our Minister</i>
<i>8th</i>	<i>Gill Stone</i>	<i>Our Minister</i>
<i>15th</i>	<i>Freda Lodge</i>	<i>Our Minister</i>
<i>22nd</i>	<i>Gill Stone</i>	<i>Jane Blackhall</i>
<i>29th</i>	<i>Gill Stone</i>	<i>Our Minister</i>
<i>Any changes to the above will be given in the notices</i>		

Events

Church anniversary

November this year sees the **150th anniversary of our Croydon Unitarian Church!**

It is planned to celebrate this momentous occasion with a party at the Church on Sat 14th November, followed by a special service on the Sunday. Just watch this space for further details.

Committee Meeting

There will be a Croydon Unitarian Church Committee meeting on 12th March. Non-Committee members may attend the meeting but not vote.

Music Exams

Music Exams will take place in March on various dates in the month

LPDA

AGM of the LPDA (London District and Provincial Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches), to be held on Sat 14th March at our Croydon Church. You are invited to arrive for tea and coffee from 1.30pm for a 2pm start.

Rev Celia Cartwright, the General Assembly President, will lead a short service. There will also be a presentation by the Colchester Fellowship on Camp JO LO that aims to give outdoor holidays to children with disabilities and their families.

This will then be followed by the formal business.

The business of the AGM will include the election of members of Council, who are the LPDA's Trustees and your elected representatives for governance of the LPDA's activities. Members are normally elected for three-year terms. The AGM will also elect the Honorary President.

ALL ARE VERY WELCOME TO ATTEND – however, only delegates may vote.

The afternoon will conclude with tea and refreshments.

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

The Civic Launch of LGBT History Month was this year moved from its previous venue in the Braithwaite Hall to the Foyer of the recently renovated Fairfield Halls.

The main event started with welcomes and introductions, followed by a panel discussion with Q&As. The main performances then started with the opening number by our own Rainbows Across Borders singers.

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

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



RABs performing at The Fairfield Halls for History Month

By Zak Waqas



RABs Leader, Daniel Iga, performing at The Fairfield Halls for History Month



God for Grownups

It's 11.30 in the morning. Does your family know where you are? Never mind your family; do all those people with whom you have some sort of contact, like the next-door neighbour, know where you are?

If they do know, they probably think you're a bit weird. For one thing, only one person in 25 in this country goes to any sort of regular religious meeting. That includes mosques, synagogues and *gudwaras*, too. That makes you weird. For another, you fall into a small and vanishing number of people who seek some sort of truth or rescue or comfort in religious experiences. People who either believe in some sort of God, or—at least—try to live as if they did. Weird people, for whom gigs at the O2 Dome or visits to the Emirates Stadium or suntans acquired in the Maldives aren't enough to get by on.

I'm weird. I admit it. Even if I didn't have a role here, I'd still be somewhere where I could look for something that would fill what feels like a hole in my soul. I have friends, a fair number of them, for whom this seems crazy. They are people who like me despite the fact that I'm weird. I don't talk much about God and all that with them, though. Not because I'm ashamed or embarrassed about what I believe, but because the whole idea of believing anything on that level has gone out of contemporary life. And after thinking about it nearly all of my adult life, I think I understand why. It has to do with stories.

In the old times, when most of the world's religions were born, things were different. The Earth was the centre of the universe, for one thing. The world wasn't yet even thought to be round. There was so much that people didn't understand that the world was full of spirits and terrifying forces with no explanations. That gave rise to stories.

Stories about God started out with Him being a king. Very powerful, boss of the world. Not necessarily cruel, but jealous and a bit capricious, so that he required a lot of flattery and sacrifices—sometimes human ones. He was the biggest, baddest god of the lot, and being one of his followers ensured victory, give or take a few setbacks. This made perfect sense to a people dominated by powerful figures and empires. Some of that way of thinking is still around today, if you listen to the Old Testament language used in military prayers and in some fundamentalist churches.

But things went wrong a couple thousand years ago, when the Jews were subjugated and then scattered by the Romans and the Greeks. The young men of Israel were slaughtered during the Maccabean revolt. The temple at Jerusalem was burnt and then torn down. About that time, Jesus put new spin on religion: God wasn't a king; He was a loving father. If you suffered on Earth, that was ultimately

OK, because heaven awaited you. This was the perfect story to give rise to a feudal epoch, where almost everybody experienced hard times and died young. You don't have to look very far to see the remains of that world view in what's left of mainstream Christianity.

We began to lose the thread of that story when science and technology made their appearance. Machines shredded the youth of both sides during the Great War. The fresh air of rural farming became the smog of overcrowded cities. People noticed that the Earth went around the Sun, not vice-versa. Darwin found fossils. The holy book began to lose its authority, despite the rear-guard philosophising of the loyal believers.

A new story had emerged. That's the one we're in now. Science can explain everything—just give it time. Life is limited to the regeneration sequence of organs. Death has become a medical condition, not the subject of poetry and philosophical reflection. Lifespans are predictable. That means it's good to be young—near the beginning—and bad to be old—near the end. Forget the accumulation of wisdom that had always been attributed to elders; what was needed was information, available with a few touches on a flat screen.

And God? He took the last train for the Coast. We don't need Him anymore.

That's why, if people suspect you're religious, they think you're weird or retarded. It's as if you've not been paying attention. It's only natural for the non-religious to think that you're still stuck in one of those vanished stories, where God is a king who lives in heaven, or a loving father who somehow, inexplicably, allows things like cancer and infant suicide.

All too often, I hear the same remark from people trying to reconcile my status as a religious person to what seems to be an intelligent mind: "I'm all for religion, if the faith gives people comfort." This isn't meant to be condescending, but it is. They might as well be saying, "I'm all for drugs, if they take the pain away."

It seems that the story we now inhabit demands a scientific and logical approach to everything. Which would be fine if people just used one part of their brains, weren't troubled with dreams and fantasies, intuitions and hunches, deep emotions and great fears. In other words, if we were a kind of organic machine, which—I hate to break this to you—the prevailing world view says that we are.

But alongside the stories we have lived in, both ancient and modern, there has always existed another train of thought. This is most often referred to as mystical or esoteric thought. It has had voices in literally every culture throughout history: Christian, Jewish, Muslim and all the Eastern religions. This form of thought has very little to do with theology—opinions about God. Instead of interpreting life in terms of the prevailing stories, it relies on experiences and then tries to express those experiences in words. And instead of being something dreamy

and cloud-like, it is often very down to earth. If you listen to the words of the Zen master who has found a state of clarity—satori, in Japanese—you hear the most practical sort of wisdom, expressed in everyday terms. Like the saying about organised religion: “The finger may point towards the moon, but the finger is not the moon.”

This way of looking at things is a shortcut to truth. It leaves behind theory and doctrine and dogma and cuts to the chase. That’s probably why the deep thinkers from every religious tradition wind up sounding remarkably alike, despite distance from each other in time and space.

Mystical thinkers live within their own times, of course, and so sometimes fall afoul of local traditions and laws. One of my favourite sayings is by Hafiz, a Sufi Muslim venerated by Hindus, who said, “Before setting foot on the path of truth, it may be necessary to be chased out of town as a madman.” That makes me feel better about the occasional slantwise look from somebody who has just found out I’m a minister.

I’m not a madman. Neither are you. But I’m going to tell you something shocking: you’re all mystics.

Yes, that’s what I said. If you don’t believe me, listen to this definition of mysticism from the unimpeachable Wikipedia:

“...the pursuit of communion with, identity with, or conscious awareness of an ultimate reality, divinity, spiritual truth, or God through direct experience, intuition, instinct or insight. Mysticism usually centres on practices intended to nurture those experiences.”

You’re mystics, because you come here and open your ears and your hearts, even though you know all too well that I can’t give you the one and only truth. You’re here knowing that the holy books—take your pick—can’t do that either. If I had to name a single reason why you’re sitting out there today, I would say that you’re operating on a hunch. Something that defies ordinary logic. Something that flies in the face of convention, because you’re in the four per cent of British people who go to church. Something that reaches you on a level either above or below mere logic.

And if you ever wonder why new people will appear here for a while, sit among you and share chat and coffee with you afterwards and then disappear for good, then I can tell you. It’s because they didn’t share your hunch. Maybe they wanted us to pass out certainty along with the biscuits, or unlock some secret formula for happiness, long life and healing. Instead, what they got was an invitation to open their ears and minds, to peer hopefully into the unknowable mystery we call life, and to follow their own unique paths. As to why we can’t fill this place every Sunday like the fundamentalists can, the answer is simple: weird people like us have always been in short supply.

You're not bothered by the claims that religion is a form of delusory comfort-seeking. The barely restrained sneers of the new atheists, who claim that they only want humanity to grow up, have no more influence on us than the foolish repeating of the old Christian myths. That speaks of a tendency toward balance, treading a line between the opposites. Meher Baba said that "spirituality is poise". I take that to mean that neither the steely logic of the rationalist nor the hyper-emotional states of the "born again" attract us enough to tip us over. I think it also means that truth, hard enough to find in any case, cannot be expressed in formulae or creeds.

The second part of the definition of mysticism I just gave you is interesting. The bit about "centring on practices intended to nurture those experiences." People often ask me what we do in our services. For years now, I've had to answer, a bit lamely, that we sing and pray and endure sermons. Aware that I'm making it sound just like any Methodist or Anglican service, I haven't been able to say what the differences are. Then I began to realise that things I've noticed over the years answer the question. People hear things in my sermons that I didn't say, things I'm not wise enough to say. People ask me after the service for a copy of a reading I did, then look puzzled when they have it, because the reading they heard came from somewhere else, somewhere inside themselves. And I've noticed that a stray word picked up over coffee seems to have conveyed a meaning and significance that trumped the sermon, anyway.

It's as if we come already tuned to another channel. And that channel is a special wavelength broadcast exclusively for the solitary listener. If your reception is good, the message is clear. All that noise about whether God exists or not, and in what form, and known by what name, is nothing but a distraction. What I know, maybe all I know, is that the signal is always there, waiting for me to tune in.

If I were God, planning a universe, here's what I'd do. I'd fill up history with amazing stories and astonishing facts. I'd pop up here and there with a bit of world-changing revelation and allow religions and kingdoms to come and go. I'd let myself be called King, and later, Dad, and then Science. I'd let people confuse information with wisdom and dogma with truth and sit back and wait and watch the story unfold. But because I loved everything about my creation—the great dream from which I drew my existence -- I'd do something lovely for every creature in it. I'd whisper to them constantly, and wait for them to clear their ears of distractions and learn to listen.

And I'd keep the doors of places like this open, so that weird people have someplace to go.

--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!

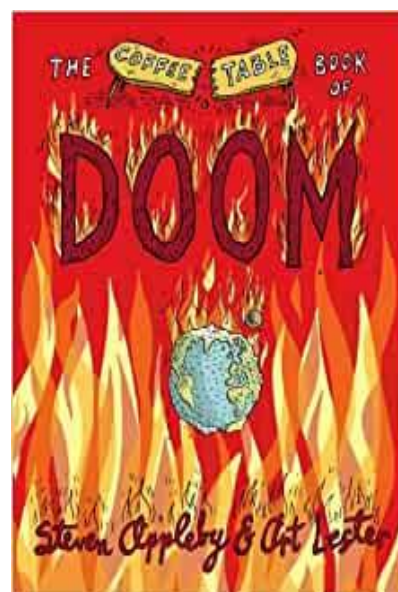
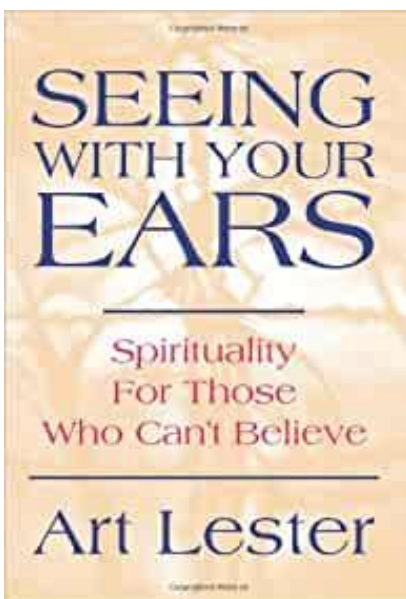
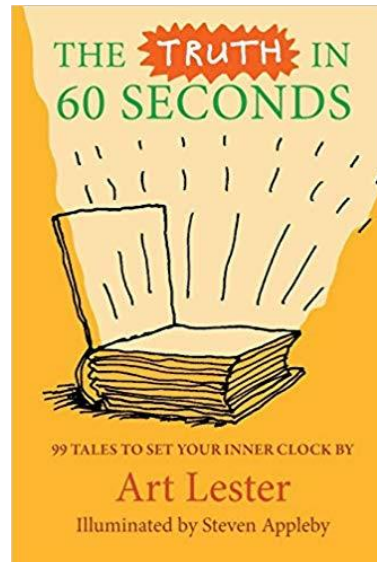
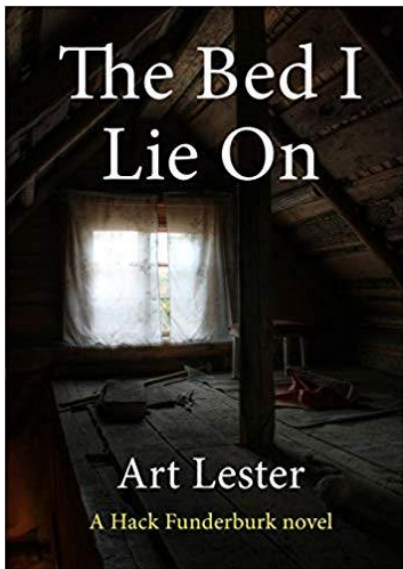
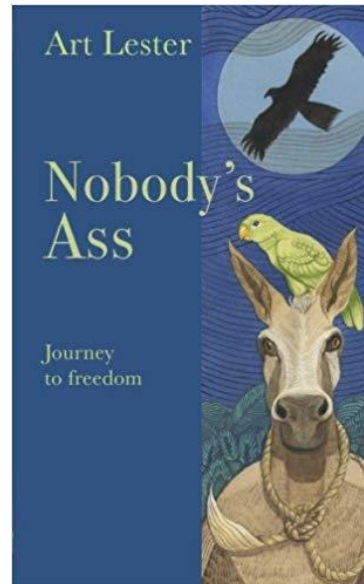
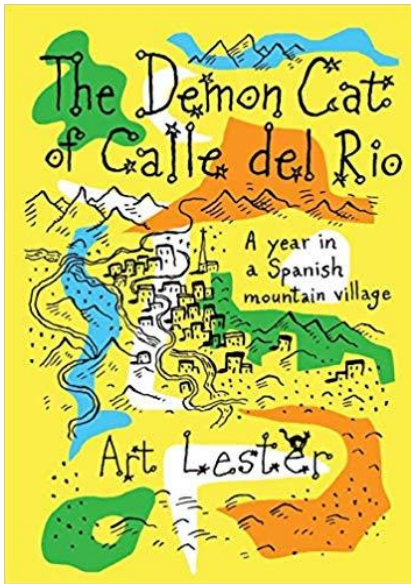
We wish

*Katie Dent, Euan White, Katie White, Irmí Martin, Myrddin Thames Adair-Stirling and Gilly Lester
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.

Art's Books

Art has written several books, all highly recommended and available, inexpensively, from Amazon. Here's a list:



The Croydon Unitarian and Free Christian Church

1 The Croydon Flyover, Croydon, Surrey CR0 1ER,
Email croydonunitarian@hotmail.com,
www.croydonunitarians.org.uk
Tel 020 8667 1681

Contact Information

Minister	Rev. Art Lester	<i>Manse:</i> 020 8656 3996 <i>Email:</i> artlester@hotmail.com
Chairman & President	John Craske	<i>Tel:</i> 01342 604770 <i>Mobile:</i> 0798 274333 <i>Email:</i> rjohncraske@gmail.com
Secretary	Pauline Peet (Pro Tem)	<i>Tel:</i> 020 8603 7394 <i>Email:</i> paulinepeet@hotmail.co.uk
Treasurer	David Williams	<i>Tel:</i> 020 8661 2489 <i>Email:</i> davidmwilliams@hotmail.co.uk
Webmaster	Ross Burgess	<i>Tel:</i> 020 8645 0943 <i>Email:</i> ross@foxearth.net www.foxearth.net

General information from

Warden	Lol Benbow	<i>Tel:</i> 01689 841592 <i>Mobile:</i> 07932 154408 <i>Email:</i> lolbow@gmail.com
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For Church bookings, contact Lol Benbow.

The Open - Door Newsletter

Editors:	Peter & Jim
Email:	petertaylor1123@gmail.com
Tel:	020 8681 6675 Mobile: 07758 943517

**COULD YOU PLEASE SEND US ANY CONTRIBUTIONS FOR THE
APRIL NEWSLETTER
BY THE 19TH MARCH 2020**