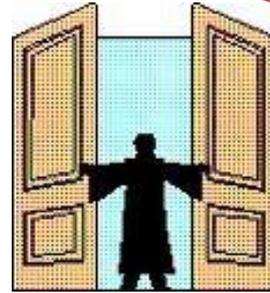


THE OPEN DOOR



NEWS AND VIEWS OF CROYDON UNITARIANS

APRIL 2020

Due to the Corona Virus, our Sunday Services have been suspended from 22 March until further notice.

Also, there will be no Monthly Newsletter during this period. However, there may be an occasional news update by email.

Please see page 2.



Art's comments

Dear Everybody,

I hate writing this. I hate writing it because what I'm about to say is the thing I've most hoped to avoid. But here it is: we're suspending services at our church.

We don't know for how long, so we don't know when we can all see each other again. The information that trickles from the lips of experts, when it is not contradictory, is incomplete. Yesterday, all was well; today we're hunkered down as if we really were in some kind of war.

One thing hasn't changed: we need each other. A few weeks of "self-isolation" will teach us that, even if we have never realised it before. All the talk we hear about the importance of community is true. So, we must seek out ways to keep the sense of belonging intact, virus or no virus.

We may record some worship and distribute it to those who want it. For my part, that would be a poor substitute. Not because the words wouldn't be the same, but because our being together is most of what we do. As a well-known American Unitarian Universalist says, when we are together in worship, God is "Godding." If you remember, Jesus said something very similar.

Please feel free - no, encouraged, to get in touch regularly. Not just with me, but with everybody.

Meanwhile, remember that things which are true stay true, even in a Pandemic.

God bless us, everyone.

--Art Lester

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.

LPDA

The AGM of the LPDA (London District and Provincial Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches), was held on Sat 14th March at our Croydon Church.

The business of the AGM includes the election of members of Council, who are the LPDA's Trustees and your elected representatives for governance of the LPDA's activities. The AGM also elects the Honorary President.

The afternoon was concluded with tea and refreshments.

Here are some pictures of some members present:





Small Miracles

I'm here today in the witness box to testify to a miracle. No, I haven't been drinking, and I haven't signed on to an evangelical church since I last saw you. The miracle I'm talking about wasn't exactly the parting of the Red Sea. This miracle was so slight that I am sure no one else even noticed it. So slight that I might not have noticed it myself if I hadn't been trying to train my attention toward things that pass by us all the time without our noticing it.

Here's my little miracle. You will have similar experiences of your own, so give that a little thought this morning.

I had opened a Mexican restaurant in my old college town in North Carolina. In those days, nobody much had even heard of Mexican food. My partner and I were under-funded, and the bills and other problems were mounting up. I was doing all the cooking and trying to manage the till at the same time. I was flat broke. Things got so bad that I was actually sleeping on the floor of the restaurant on a rolled-up mattress.

At that time, I was very keen to visit an ashram in India, that of the teacher, Meher Baba. A friend had already booked his ticket and made all the arrangements, but I was surviving on my own Mexican food and little else. There was a window of time, open only in the few weeks before the heat of April and May, when the ashram was closed to visitors. If I couldn't find the money, I couldn't go. I feared I might never be able to go.

The air fare from my hometown was a cool \$454, which seemed like an impossible sum. I had worried about it so much that I was exhausted. Finally, one night, before I unrolled my mattress, I decided to leave it in the hands of something bigger, older and wiser than myself. I was prepared to go or stay. It felt as if I had arrived at a place where I had no preferred outcome. I felt peaceful, as if something had been lifted from my shoulders. I fell instantly asleep.

I awoke when something tickled my nose. I brushed it away, thinking it was a fly, then opened my eyes to see that it was an envelope that had been shoved through the letterbox, wafted about like a paper airplane and stopped when it hit my face. Barely awake, I opened the envelope. It was from the US Internal Revenue Service, which is never good news. But this time it was.

Inside was one of those cheques that used to have little computer slots punched in them. The note said it was a tax refund. The amount? \$454 and no cents.

Now that's a little anecdotal story. You could probably see it coming. Almost too corny to report here. But-- was it a miracle? And if it was, did it have anything to do with my little interior act of surrender to something bigger, older and wiser than I am? You might have trouble believing it, but I don't. I have no trouble believing it because so many incidents in my own life have happened in a similar way. You know

what I mean: those little co-incidences that happen that make sense in the moment and then are quickly forgotten.

A seemingly meaningless event, such as missing a train, causes you to meet the love of your life. A low score in a certain exam due to a head cold changes your life's work, for better or worse. A classified advert glimpsed in a newspaper left on a bus leads to a beloved home. Our lives are full of these things, whether we notice them or not. I am willing to bet that any of us could come up with a half-dozen examples this morning if we really thought about it.

I think it's time to consult the experts. Let's start with Lao Tze, the founder of Taoism. His classic series of poems or reflections, the Tao Te Ching, forms the heart of the religion or philosophy -- there is debate about which it is as well. Lao Tze was what he was known as, but it was not his real name. The words translate as "Old Boy." This is an appropriate paradox, because his writings about the ultimate reality, or Tao, are a series of paradoxes.

Weakness is strength, for example: the supple and yielding willow is better able to survive winds than the mighty oak. Humility is power: the sea is the "king of all waters" because it lies below the others. Mindlessness, or wu wei, is knowledge, because the Tao, or life force, is unknowable. Shot through the teachings of Taoism is the idea that all things are part of Tao, yet Tao is more than the sum of all things. Wisdom lies in leaving behind the notion that the limited mind is in control, and beginning to accommodate the flow of this force. In other words, getting out of the way.

To us Westerners—maybe especially us Unitarians -- mind" is a wholly wonderful thing. We are often described as the religion where you do not have to leave your mind at the door. We associate the mind with the gift of rational thought and inventiveness, and in that we are correct. What we don't often address in the West is the other face of the mind -- the seat of the limited ego, the "little self" that makes such claims on reality and on all other life forms.

The ego is the centre of the world, as far as it is concerned. Meher Baba once pointed out the three main statements of the limited self as: "I am unique," "I am preferred," and "I have a right to live." This represents a disconnected self, bouncing around in a universe of foreign objects,

competing for resources, struggling for control and trying to evade death. Satisfaction results from a series of temporary small victories: wealth, power and the attention of others, all of which the larger self knows are fleeting and ultimately insignificant.

But we are not just our egos, despite its insistent clamouring for supremacy. There is love, that entirely irrational force that seems to soften the hard edges of our personalities. There is hope, which has its whole existence in proclaiming the logically improbable, and there is something else. Call it a hunch or an intuition. Call it chi or prana or the Holy Spirit -- it has lots of names. Lao Tze called it the Tao. The Tao Te Ching, or The Way of Life is about this thing, whatever it is.

Let's put it something like this: before we were, while we are, after we have ceased to be is this something. We can't name it, so we'll call it the Tao. It is not just bigger than we are, it is who we really are. The Tao has its own way of working, and it is not just unknown to us, it is unknowable. It blows like a fresh wind through every tiny event, every formation of suns and planets and can be heard in every bird's song and urban squeal of brakes. It is beyond any conception we may have of good or evil; its existence is sufficient. It cannot be blocked, nor can it be enhanced by our actions. It is not foreign to our souls, because it is our soul. What happens does so because it must; it always would have happened, whatever we may have thought about it. Wisdom lies in the identification with Tao, not with our small concerns. Real happiness lies in giving permission -- no, more -- in giving blessing to the inevitable. That is the way of life.

I don't know if you're like me, but that idea fills me with mixed emotions. On the one hand, I can feel the hissing of my ego -- the one supreme and important Art Lester -- denying and simultaneously fearing the concept. On the other -- can you feel it, too? -- a delicious forming intuition, a kind of irrational joy. I get the same when I hear Jesus saying, "Take no heed of the morrow," and "Don't concern yourself with what you will have to eat;" and "the father knows when even a sparrow falls." Or when the great Rumi says, "Give up to grace. The Ocean takes care of each wave till it gets to shore."

It comes back again and again to that elusive word "faith," doesn't it? Defined in the Books of Hebrews as "the substance of things hoped

for, the evidence of things unseen.” You either have it or you don’t. It can comfort you in times of affliction and make you optimistic when things are all right. It doesn’t matter much to the Tao, though. It just goes on wending its way through eternity, like the wind “listing where it will.” Your wave will be carried to shore in its own time, with or without your consent.

But maybe you’re like me. Maybe that idea of giving blessing to the Tao or spirit really begins to grab you. Maybe there’s a hunch that the way things work out is a cause for celebration, even worship. Maybe you want to do more than grudgingly assent; you want to sing about it too. Maybe you want to make this fledgling faith or hunch work its way through into your daily life.

Because faith is meaningless if it doesn’t enliven the way you spend your days. It might get you through the “night sweats” but not do what it’s intended for, really -- to unite the eternal and the temporary. If you are coming to believe that something is working itself out through the universe, then it is working its way out in your life, too. If there is a bigger “plan” or whatever, aiding it is not just sensible, but joyous. There’s a definition of practical faith for you.

Here’s the thing I’m telling myself to remember: You either do have faith in the Universe, or that name, God, if you happen to feel particularly religious one day, or else you don’t. What is demanding my attention is that I can’t “sort of” believe that the Universe is shot full of purpose and meaning. It’s like trying to be “sort of” pregnant.

And if you want to live meaningfully, you have to get off that fence. If you go one way, and decide that the cosmos is empty and that everything is the result of random happenstance, then you need to do that thoroughly, to let go of childish hopes of rescue or future revelation. Bite down on the bitter pill, and live that way. Oh -- and keep on calling small miracles “co-incidences”.

But if you’re like me, you will have had inklings of an intelligence so far beyond our understanding that it can only appear in brief glimpses and tiny miracles, then it’s time to live that way, too. Make a deposit account of the small blessings that have mysteriously come your way, and draw on it in those hours when the demons of anxiety come for you.

You have a right to your own small miracles: the bad things that turn out good and the good things that wind up teaching you a hard lesson, too. It's your birth-right. You're from here, and the hands that caught you at birth are holding you still.

--Art Lester

Pauline's thoughts on SOCIAL MEDIA

You either love it or hate it. I admit to being a 'fan' of Facebook and FaceTime and Instagram, the reason being with three of my children and their families living in North America these sites really help to keep us close and involved with each other even though we are thousands of miles apart.

When they first moved 'over the pond' in the 80s communication was by expensive telephone calls about every 2 weeks, when my grandchildren were born, I had to wait around 10 days to get a photo of them, now on Facebook I receive pictures of great grandchildren shortly after they are born.

With Face time at the push of a button I can have a face to face conversation with them, enjoy talking to and seeing my grandchildren/great-grandchildren as they grow and journey through life, you feel closer more included whereas years ago you were just a voice through a phone line. Of course, nothing beats being together 'in the flesh' so to speak but at least these sites lessen the feeling of the distance a little.

Recently through Facebook an old school friend found me and we have enjoyed reminiscing about our school days. As he still lives close to where we both lived, he was able to bring me up to date on other school friends too.

Social Media has its pitfalls, and we need to be wary of scams and also keep an eye on the children's activities, but for me and I'm sure for many who's families are scattered around the world it keeps us all more closely connected.

--Pauline Peet

UU Handwashing*

1. Wash your hands with water and turn off the tap.
2. Apply soap. Rub hands together. Don't forget between the fingers and under the nails!
3. Hum or sing this song:

*Come wash your hands with me.
Come wash your hands with me.
Come wash your hands with me.
So we can have peace of mind.*

*And I'll bring you soap
When soap is hard to find!
And I'll sing this song for you
As we protect humankind!*

4. Rinse!
5. Dry with paper towel.

*Inspiration by the CDC and by hymn no. 24 in the purple book. From the UK Unitarian Facebook page, and received from Dani.

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

*David Scott, Nia Griffiths, Yasmin, and
Maggie Downing
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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The Open - Door Newsletter

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