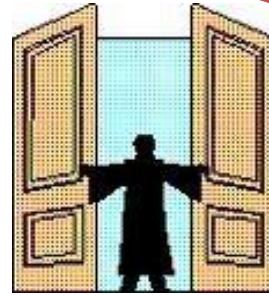


THE OPEN DOOR



NEWS AND VIEWS OF CROYDON UNITARIANS SEPTEMBER 2020

We are back! Our Sunday Services have been partially resumed along with the monthly Newsletter. The Services, however, will be in a different form during the pandemic. Please see page 2.

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



Hello, Croydon Unitarians.

Though we have officially been closed to the public since March 16th, we have been shooting video services in the sanctuary to put online. Steve, Lol, Gill and I have been doing it alone until recently, when we realised that some members and friends might enjoy being present during filming. A few have begun attending already, and we would enjoy having more. Technically, it's a filming session, so you'd have to put up with occasional pauses and equipment changes. Masks are a requirement, as well as physical distance. Nevertheless, it's a friendly hour on Sunday mornings at the regular time of 11 am. Afterwards, there's coffee, cakes and socially distancing chat. Get in touch if you'd like to come.

-- Art Lester

All of the available videos can be found online at <https://vimeo.com/showcase/croydonunitarians>

Here are some shots from the videos:



THE METAPHORICAL MASK



THE METAPHORICAL MASK



COMING UNSTUCK



PASSIN' THROUGH



BREATHE



THE HUNCH OF GOD

The Covid Crucible

I've been out a bit lately. For the first three months of lockdown, I did little more than walk my daily two miles around the neighbourhood, but since then I've been a few times to the little writing room I rent in Crystal Palace. I wear a mask, even when I don't get near anyone, and gloves for things like doorknobs.

There are some people on the street. A big queue at the Sainsbury's. A coffee shop selling hot drinks to people on the kerb. The window cleaner, who is as much a fixture of the place as the twin radio towers, looking wistfully at the closed shop fronts. It all feels eerie, like a scene from a zombie movie. Other shops are opening now, so maybe that will pass. But I don't think I will ever feel that I'm completely back. Things have changed, and everything seems different. Different, but nearly the same, like in a dream.

Our last full service here in the church was on March 15th. I can recall joking that we should "beware the ides of March." I felt then that something was about to change. It was like the moments before a storm, when the pressure of the air drops, and a kind of ominous silence appears. We knew about the virus, and playfully used elbow bumps instead of handshakes, but we couldn't have known what lay ahead. Since then, we have been moved by unpredictable forces, like leaves swept downstream in a flood.

We may have thought that what we were facing was a short-term medical emergency, nothing as serious as earlier generations have faced with wars and depressions. At first, the isolation wasn't too bad, because we thought things would get back to normal soon. It has taken us a while to begin to understand that something much more profound is happening. That things might never be the same again.

Unemployment has reared its unfamiliar head. Endemic racial injustice we have left unaddressed for centuries has popped up. Things we thought were disasters, like Brexit, hardly get a mention in the press. The faces of politicians that have bored us for years have taken over the airways, doling out unlikely prescriptions from temporary lecterns. Some people set fire to things. Others topple statues of yesterday's heroes, today's villains. If you see your friends at all, they are framed in little squares on

Zoom. Everything, everywhere is telling us the same thing: something big is happening.

But why is all this stuff happening at once? Unattended issues of familial abuse, the newly exposed plight of single mothers, people without gardens or even balconies on which to catch a few sun rays, food banks running out of stock, cancer treatment suspended. All this, and everyone having a bad hair day that lasts for months. It was as if something very basic, something fundamental, has changed. Something underneath everything is being altered.

It is as if our lives were in a big container. And then something set a fire under it, and life began to boil. You may have noticed that I look about for metaphors to address issues I can't grasp in detail. I hit upon the idea that we're all stuck in a giant pot, and something has turned up the heat.

A crucible is a pot in which you boil things in order to change them. It is a way to refine metal. You get the ore very hot, to melting point. The impurities are separated out, while the valuable stuff remains. It can be poured into moulds, cooled and made into ingots. The impurities are thrown away, onto slag heaps.

As you can see, I'm letting my taste for metaphors run a bit wild here. You can see that I'm saying that the long, insistent flame of the pandemic is beginning to separate what is important from what is not. In isolation, we have had time to see what is really valuable. We have watched as forces beyond our control have taken from us things, we thought we needed. People have lost jobs, homes and relationships. There has been real suffering. And death. But there has also been the loss of unimportant things, things that do belong on the slag heap. Things that we may not have noticed, have got used to. But also things that we simply have to discard if we are to have a future at all.

The crucible is ruthless. It heats up the true along with the false, the selfish along with the fair. Those who have been winners in the past have tasted failure. Those who have long brought up the rear in our competitive life game have suddenly got company. This levelling empowers the powerless even as it strips the powerful of their advantage. Just look in the streets of our cities. The phrase "We are all in this together" takes on a different tone. It is beginning to mean that the old

systems of control and privilege are fading. That's the reason why the statue of the slaveowner Edward Colston is now in Bristol Harbour.

The crucible has this function of purification. That's how gold was originally made pure enough to place value on its content. But there is a second function of the crucible, one used by alchemists in centuries past. A crucible is where you form an alloy, where you take things that are different, put them into a state at which both are equal, and let them combine. Copper and tin make bronze, nickel marries with silver. You can rub these discrete elements together all you like and not join them into something new. That takes the fiery element of the crucible.

The Sufi poet Rumi refers to this process in the spiritual path by talking about cooking chickpeas. When the chickpeas protest, Rumi tells them: "You think I'm torturing you. I'm giving you flavour, so that you can mix with spices and rice and become the lovely vitality of a human being. Remember when you drank rain in the garden? That was for this."

People used to joke that the only thing that would bring together all the nations of the world was a common enemy-meaning something like a Martian invasion. Astronomers have robbed us of this little fantasy. It now exists only in computer-generated films. Meanwhile, just such a common threat has sneaked up on us from behind. The links between environmental destruction and the emergence of new diseases has been made startlingly clear. If we needed a common threat, we've got it.

As the crucible cooks our familiar world, we can look forward to a leaner, more stripped-down and – hopefully-a more equitable outcome. That metal which is pure in us is being refined, and the slag discarded. But an even more hopeful result is possible. We may just be able to join the disparate elements of tribe, nation and race into a more cohesive whole. This isn't discredited alchemical foolishness, but something more closely akin to scientific reality.

Did you know that the United States has a motto? Or it did have until 1956, when "In God We Trust" started appearing on paper money. The old one comes from the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus. Translated into Latin, it's *e pluribus unum*. Out of many, one. The much-

vaunted melting pot that Americans have laid claim to for so long now has a chance of becoming real.

We won't have a chance of returning to normal life - or perhaps any chance of life at all - until the vision of becoming one is at least partially realised. The "new normal" we keep hearing about may have emphasis on the first word, instead of the second. What was normal is now winding up on the slag heap. What is "new" may be just beginning to show.

So, I send you blessings from here in the crucible. And wish you happy cooking!

--Art Lester

A Tale of Two Taxi Drivers

Len (not his real name) was a driver that has ferried us around for many years. We grew to rely on his cheerful presence when en route to a place where taking the car was difficult or impossible. He retired last summer, but continued to take Gilly to the hairdresser. He and his wife decided to spend the winter in southern Spain. Before he left, he brought us a bottle of good Spanish wine as a gift.

Last week, I got a phone call from his wife, whom I had never met. They had arrived back in Britain the week before. Len caught what he thought was a cold.

"Do you pray?" his wife asked me.

"Yes," I replied. I could tell that the moment was too serious for a quip like "...it's how I make a living."

"Len's dying," she said.

Within ten days of arriving home, the active 68-year-old had contracted CV-19 and died after two days in Mayday Hospital. It was the moment when I truly realised that something history-changing was happening. If Len, dear old Len, could be a victim of a voracious virus, then anyone could.

When I wasn't riding with Len, I was riding with Devan, a Shri Lankan who had immigrated with his family first to Denmark, then to the UK. He works non-stop. His wife has a good job in education. His eldest daughter is in law school. Devan is dedicated to his work. In ten years of being driven by him, he has only been late once.

When the lockdown started, just over two weeks ago, he appeared at my door. He told me that if I needed any help with shopping, to call him. I had already calculated adding the cost of cab fare to my Sainsbury's bill. I agreed, and he left.

When supplies started to get low, I made a list and rang him. He asked me to text him the list, which I did. It was surprisingly large for our two-member family—almost £70. About two hours later, he texted to say that he had left the groceries by the gate, respecting the social distancing rules. I caught a glimpse of his white Prius taxi and waved him over. I put the money on the offside seat and asked how much the fare was to be. “No fare,” he said. I started to argue with him, then realised that he was serious. He would not accept money for doing a favour for a ...yes, a friend. I realised that it is hard to accept favours, but sometimes it's the kindest thing to do.

Yesterday, he did it again. Not intending to be a hoarder, I now have enough loo rolls to last the lockdown.

That's how Gilly and I are getting by. I'm not stir crazy, but not to have a sermon to write and church to attend once a week has made me lose track of the days. I'm eager to know how you're getting on. So-called social distancing need not mean the loss of our sustaining relationships. At least, I hope not.

So, why not click on your “reply” button and send me a few lines about your lockdown days? Tell me if it's OK to share your news with the rest of us. If it needs to stay personal, I'll honour that as well.

Keep the faith,

--*Art Lester*

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.

John's short walk

Going for my usual(now) short local walk I came to the place where I have seen and said hello to a man who was once washing his car there, so we are nodding acquaintances. It was a bright and sunny morning, and as I passed (maintaining of course the obligatory 2 meters social distance) he called out "Going for walkies, then are we?".

Naturally I gave the friendly, if somewhat holier than thou response: "Yes, just once a day". The words had scarcely passed my lips when it suddenly dawned on me that he was talking to his dog.

--John Bower

The Guest House by Jalaluddin Rumi

This poem is cited in an article in The Inquirer by Stephanie Bisby who is a Unitarian ministry student as an invitation to recognise and accept every emotion every feeling as a gift

The Guest House by Jalaluddin Rumi

Translated by Coleman Barks

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honourably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent

as a guide from beyond.

Jalaluddin Rumi

from Rumi: Selected Poems, trans Coleman Barks
with John Moyncce, A. J. Arberry, Reynold Nicholson
(Penguin Books, 2004)

--Lol Benbow

Pauline Get's to Know David Wililiams

1 How many years now have you and Merryn been members of the church and what is it that you like about it?

I think it's around 14 year. When we lived in New York we visited the All Souls Unitarian in Manhattan with Merryn's mum and enjoyed the services. They were much more thoughtful than the CofE services I went to in Somerset when I was growing up. When we returned, we looked for a local Unitarian and found the Croydon church I can still remember being welcomed by Pauline when she read the notices at the end of the service. Elizabeth, the previous Minister, had a naming ceremony for Bryn on Christmas Eve in the round with candles which was very special. I like the people at the church, they are all interesting with views and stories of their own.

2 You have been treasurer for a few years, have you always worked in finance?

I have, I started work at a firm of Chartered Accountants in Yeovil when I was 19 and have practiced ever since, first in Somerset and now in London.

3 Do you have a favourite hymn?

In the bleak midwinter, shame we only sing it at Christmas.

3. Has there been a person or a piece of writing that has inspired you?

I have always read science fiction and fantasy but my favourite book is "To kill a mockingbird" which I studied at school.

4 I believe you are a vegetarian family and you like to cook, what is your favourite meal?

At the moment, it is Cerian's tofu curry, which she cooks from scratch with lots of different spices. We are lucky she has done a lot of cooking for us during the current lockdown.

5 You seem to be a widely traveled family which of the places you have been to, have you loved the most and why?

We have been to many wonderful places, including many National Parks in the USA, Finland in the winter, Kyoto in Japan but I think my favourite place is the Great Barrier Reef. stunning.

6 I believe you also love the theatre as does Carian, did you have any aspirations to be an actor.

I tried at school when I was younger but preferred singing. Unfortunately, I suffered badly with stage fright so now I just sing at church and in the car.

7 You seem very laid back and easy going, but who or what makes you angry or disappointed, in people.?

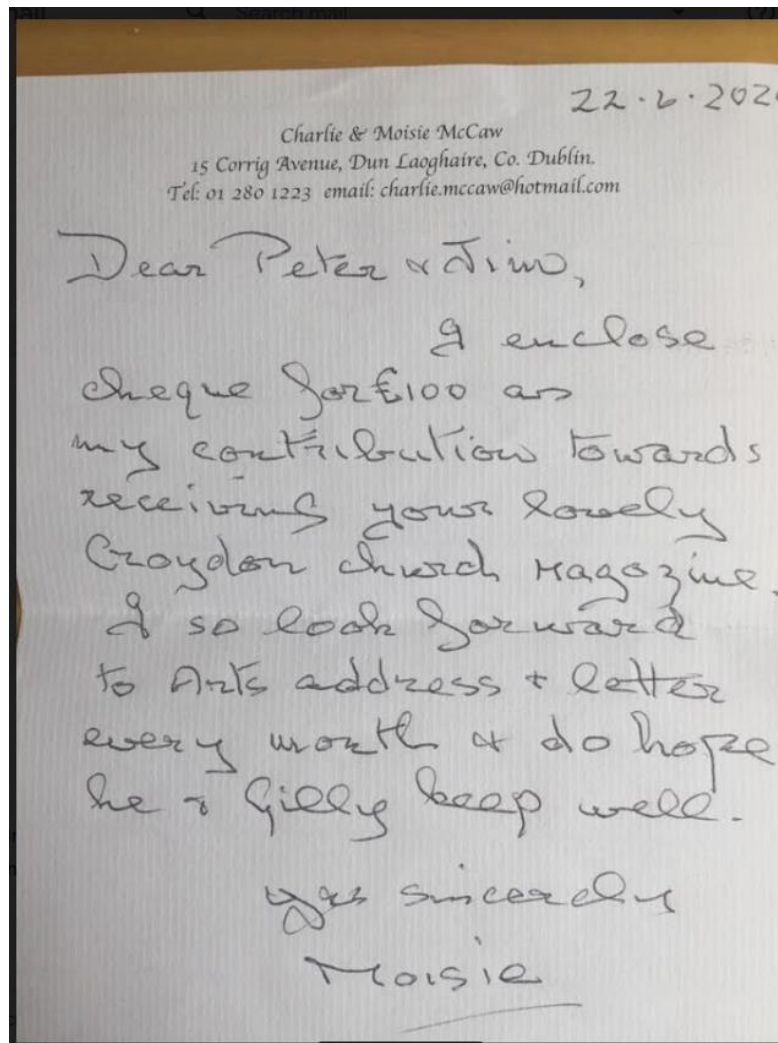
When people are thoughtless, for example leaving rubbish in the local parks.

8 In this time of lock down how have you filled your days, .

We have all still been working. Bryn has been receiving work every day from school, Cerian has been writing essays and having online meetings with tutors, Merryn has been working as hard as ever and I have been helping clients with the coronavirus grants etc. We have also been out most days with the dogs and have had several trips to see John and take food down for him. Have also spent time in the garden, putting in lots of new plants and also trying to grow vegetables.

--Pauline Peet

Many thanks, Moise
For your donation to the church funds



Happy Birthday!

We wish

*Elisa Tarr and John Boaler
a very happy birthday.*

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> 07899 985064 <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@googlemail.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 OCTOBER
NEWSLETTER BY THE 21ST SEPTEMBER 2020***