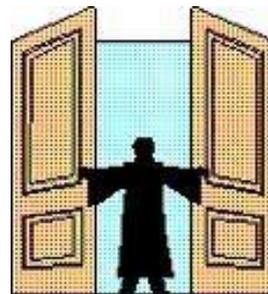




THE OPEN DOOR



NEWS AND VIEWS OF

***CROYDON
UNITARIANS***

CHRISTMAS 2020

Sunday Services, except for the last Sunday of the month, have been partially resumed. The Services, however, will be in a different form during the pandemic. Please see page 2.

Merry Christmas!



Church Restrictions

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we have been required to hold virtual Church services, where members of the congregation have not been allowed to attend services. The current government restrictions require the Church to continue with these for the immediate future.

However, all the available virtual-service-videos can be found online at <https://vimeo.com/showcase/croydonunitarians>



CHRISTMAS SERVICE

At this writing, we are planning to hold a service on December 20th, our version of the annual celebration. We will be following the guidelines (soon to be law!) issued by the government, but we will strive to make it fulfilling, anyway. This assumes that no new draconian legislation intervenes.

For up-to-date information, contact Art or Steve.

We would also like to hold a Carol Service, but this seems impossible at this time, unless the legislation changes.

Cats and Pigeons

A joke Unitarian ministers often tell about themselves is that their job is like herding cats.

This speaks to the variety of opinions held within any congregation. Not all of these are theological. In fact, the matter of personal belief rarely comes up in conversation. It's more about the fact that those who find their way into a Unitarian milieu are, more or less by definition, nonconformists.

Now the pandemic has added a new complication to the job. It's not cats any more, but pigeons; the virus has separated and dispersed us like startled birds in the park. We have been warned against gathering, which is another way of saying, "Every man (or woman) for themselves." Isolation, normally seen as something to avoid, has become the right thing to do.

Government, in an effort to throw breadcrumbs to churchgoers, has made it technically possible to hold services of worship. But the new restrictions forbid the familiar elements of our church life. Things like meeting for conversation with fellow worshippers, enjoying coffee and snacks, even singing.

American Unitarian Universalists joke about themselves that the symbol of the movement is not the chalice, but the coffee pot. That's because the gathering of people who otherwise would be a dispersed group of solitary pilgrims is central to our form of worship. I have often claimed, in all seriousness, that the hour after church is as important as the formal service. It is the time when we discover how each other is doing, and give an opportunity for doing what the closing words of our services demand - looking after one another.

The restrictions imposed by well-meaning politicians may be appropriate for, say, Roman Catholic services, where consuming the host is an individual act. Something is sought from the priest by the congregant, after which he or she is free to go. In our services, the presence of each other is paramount. We follow the idea expressed by Richard S Gilbert, who pointed out that God is not a noun, but a verb. In this view, we practise "godding." Or, springing from a biblical idea, "Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, there I will be also." The key word, of course, is "gathered."

Those few of us who have run and attended the "filming sessions" of our online services have kept a bit of our gathering function intact. But we miss you, all of you. So, this year's version of a Christmas service will be

an attempt to un-scatter us pigeons, and give a taste of what life may hold for us when the plague has lifted. We may find that we have not been weakened by it. In fact, we may find that new practices and new opportunities have emerged.

See you in the New Normal.

--Art Lester

CHRISTMAS GREETINGS

With the Christmas holiday close upon us it is an unusual feeling for me to think I will not be seeing family and friends in the accustomed way. I am thinking of happy faces and warm feelings to accompany the cosy fireside gatherings alongside of the locked down restrictions which we must all share now. So, I send my best love to one and all in whatever situation they may be in to make others happy and share thoughts, food, music and joy despite the restrictions. May happiness be yours this Christmas



Service - Leaders

Art Lester (Our Minister), or Rev Steve Dick.

Musicians

Current musicians: Gill Stone and Bill Higgins

Spiral of Violence

One summer afternoon, while lockdown restrictions were temporarily halted, I ran up against an old problem. A problem which has bedeviled humanity from the days in caves to the chaotic time we inhabit now.

One glance at the headlines will demonstrate that we are living in a divided culture. Especially so in the US, where what is happening in politics has been described as a “cold civil war”, but also right here, where the heating up of the COVID crisis has revealed some of the inequities we have thus far chosen to ignore. Poor people, especially minority populations, are getting poorer. They’re getting sicker from the virus, too. And—it’s obvious - they’re getting angrier. This can be seen as something abstract, safely removed from our lives, or it can raise its head suddenly, as it did for me.

That afternoon, driving home, I turned through a stream of traffic onto a shortcut. In the middle of the road were three teenage boys on bicycles, not moving. I had to step hard on my brakes. Two of them wheeled away with exaggerated ease, but one stayed in front of me, looking at me with what I can only call defiance. I waved my hand to indicate that he should move to the curb, but he just kept a hard gaze on me. Cars were piling up behind me, and one of them honked his horn. I honked back, my blood pressure rising.

The kid turned his bike and drove directly at my front bumper, swerved at the last minute and, when he was beside my window, spat. The window was rolled up, luckily. He said a few things I couldn’t hear. I swerved around him and went on, pulling in at the nearest safe stopping point to get calm. My legs were trembling a bit. I looked at the boy’s saliva dripping down my window and wondered for a moment if I should call the police, or get out and walk over to the lad and grab him by the hoodie and give him a proper talking to.

But I didn’t. It wasn’t just the real possibility that he might pull a kitchen knife out of his pocket and stab me, though that did cross my mind. It was more a feeling that any reaction on my part would only make things worse. So, I sat for a moment and then drove on, aware that - like it or not

- I was going to have to eat the feelings of outrage and fear that the boy had released into me.

I know that many people wouldn't have done exactly what I wound up doing. I know people who would have slammed on their brakes, jumped out of the car and confronted the boy. The image has a certain delicious lure to it: righteous anger at someone's wrongdoing. A sense of being entirely justified. Being able to say, "Go on, boy. Make my day."

But what would that have done? If the lad had been humiliated in front of his mates, you can bet that some other, perhaps even more violent act would have followed with yet another innocent stranger down the line. I would only have had the pleasure of telling everyone how I had achieved a small victory on Manor Road. My rush of blood would have brought with it a temporary feeling of triumphant virtue.

Two competing voices want my attention. One is that of a London cabbie, from whom I once got a tale of how "the coppers used to be able to bash hoodlum boys "about the ear hole." We grew up knowing right from wrong." That voice, for all that it is crude and somewhat violent, is about enforcing a pattern of group morality that springs from the wisdom of the tribe. Bashing a kid about the ear hole is punitive. It relies upon an idea of society in which right and wrong are unchallenged and absolute. It hands back to the members of society the authority to judge and act. Simple and satisfying.

But the wisdom of the tribe is limited. It wants order and discipline, and scoffs at liberal arguments that would blame a poor background and abusive parenting, for the kid's bad behaviour. It also would have - just a few years ago - insisted on jail terms for gay people caught having sex. It would have as its highest virtue a controlled world, where things that don't fit in are condemned and punished.

The other voice, perhaps surprisingly, comes from the New Testament. People like us don't pay all that much attention to Jesus and the Bible and all that. When we read that the young rabbi told people things like "turn the other cheek", we imagine that it was some sort of prescription for holiness. That if you did those apparently crazy things, like giving your shirt away with your coat when someone asked for it, that you would somehow be earning brownie points with God, and that your

payoff would come when you got to heaven. Those bits of advice, especially for those of us who don't believe in an attentive God, are so impractical that no one short of a saint could be expected to comply.

But what if Jesus wasn't talking about rewards in the sweet bye and bye? What if he was giving us clues about a very practical way of ending the vicious circle of violence, a method for making life better now, even in this pandemic-ridden world? I don't think the radical young rabbi has been given enough credit for his methodology.

The advice of the London cabbie - the ear hole basher - is to punish and control, and thereby to make things better. The advice of Jesus, you might say, is also to make things better. Not through discipline and punishment, but through stopping the wave of anger, recrimination, and violence as it flows through us.

Years ago, I was moved by the work of the Brazilian theologian and priest, Dom Helder Camara. He was part of the liberation theology movement of the 1970s and 80s. He wrote about something he called the "spiral of violence". In explaining why oppressed people rise-up and attack their regimes, he pointed out that the rioting was actually not the first act of violence, but the second - that the violence had begun before the first stone was ever thrown. He was speaking of the violence that poverty and disempowerment wreak against poor people. America's recent experience of thousands of Black Lives Matter protesters in the streets is testimony to just this.

What I take from this is that violence is not a one-off act, limited to the moment, but part of a wave that travels through history and affects us all. The poison of the act the boy committed, and the poison of the anger and hatred that must afflict him every day, flowed from him into me. It has sat around for months in my head, fermenting, and now I'm sending it to you. You can help me now. Think about it. Did I do the right thing?

My own answer to that question is yes and no. Yes, to the idea that I should simply accept the anger and pain of the moment, without acting in revenge dressed up as justified citizen outrage. I can afford it. It only hurts for a little while. That's not being Christ-like; that's being sensible. I might even get a sermon out of it, after all.

But also, no - it wasn't quite the right thing to do. For the ripples of violence and anger to really stop flowing, there was something else I could have done.

My face must have borne the signs of the emotions I was feeling. I don't know what I said to him through the window. Something like "You can be arrested for that. It's assault." That not only had no effect on him; it might even have made him laugh. What I could have done was to respond in a way that would surprise him. I could have rolled down the window, spit or no spit, and spoken softly. Now I wish I had.

That's because I think it's not enough simply to let the event go unchallenged. I think the real value would come from what we might have to call a teaching function. By trying to show the boy that I had no feelings of anger toward him, I might have been able to drain a little of the swamp of pain where he no doubt lives.

Yes, of course you must act differently if you come across a bully attacking someone else. And of course, we can't go around being little pocket editions of Mahatma Gandhi all day long. But, having realised what ultimately must be done, can't we remember the little cliché about a butterfly's wingbeat causing a hurricane in Europe, and just donate a little personal discomfort to the world? While we wonder what we can do to make things better, can't we at least try to say, "It stops here?"

I will if you will.

--Art Lester

The Church in 2020

Hello, it's Lol, the Church warden here. It has been a busy year at our Unitarian Church this year. Most of the goings on have been sort of stop start and some very unexpected. I will list a few of the activities which have occupied my time and concern.

There have been problem after problem with our drains, which are old and badly in need of attention. The drain expert who has helped us out over the past few years explained that one of the drain pipes had not been flushed out for probably 20

to 30 years, and initially he could not lift the inspection panels as they were so firmly embedded into the tarmac. Eventually, we got past this and together with repairs, the drainage systems are now in really good shape. It took 5 or 6 visits over a period of 3 months and with regular maintenance, should see this state from now on. Well done Peter.

The Happy Little Angels nursery has had its difficulties, which included recently the failure of their heating system. This entailed replacing their central heating boiler and we found a man who was willing to work at the week end to accommodate the nursery hours and both replace and substantially update the old boiler there. Again, a happy conclusion after a difficult few weeks of uncertainty and struggle to get it right.

The ceiling fell in over the stairs in the vestibule; this was a terrible shock and everyone was thankful that the place was empty at the time. Through the contact we had with Michael the decorator, a complete project went ahead to renew the water supply to the Church and then redecorate the damaged paintwork and ceiling structure. So here again a more modern system has been brought in without the risk of a repeat failure in future.

--Lol

Social Media (love it or hate it) and my lockdown, by Pauline Peet.

Social Media does have a lot to answer for with scams, unwanted mailings etc., we just have to be very wary and delete everything that looks just not right.

But for me it has certainly been a godsend a lifeline during this Pandemic as I'm sure it has for many people.

Just before complete lock down my son in law died of a brain tumour, it was a dreadful time for my daughter Fiona and her family. I spent 10 weeks with her, in her home which wasn't easy.

She was very sad and angry, as this tumour had been missed, despite MRI scans.

Through Facebook we were able to be in touch with our family who live in the States and Canada to talk face to face, to see the grandchildren and the progress of a great grandchild. We had many birthdays during this time, so presents were able to be bought on line, books for my kindle, games, etc.

I spent many hours browsing the net and searching for friends. I found one from school days and it's been great to catch up with him and reminisce about those times. I have caught up with long lost cousins through email and I am now often in touch with them. On my phone I kept in touch with friends on 'WhatsApp' (messaging) and as things eased a little, we have met up in gardens and the garden centre for coffee.

I also spent time knitting sewing, made birthday cards and now into Christmas cards.

Saying all this, I do miss the normality of my everyday life The WI, Wives Group, The Women's Guild, Shopping and Church. And meeting up with all my friends again ... One day soon I hope.

Since penning the above, things are beginning to look more hopeful for the coming months.

I am looking forward to a new great grandchild due in February, and to my grandson's wedding in August which was cancelled this year. Also, to meeting up with friends and family not seen since March. God Willing



Some of the things Pauline has made during lockdown: Xmas cards and Dickensian mice carol singers.

Christmas Eve

Christmas has a darkness
Brighter than the blazing noon.
Christmas has a stillness
Warmer than the heat of June.
Christmas has a beauty
Lovelier than the world can show.
For Christmas bringeth Jesus
Brought for us so low.

Bells that sing and Bells that ring,
Heaven has awakening music
For all the Angel's soon to sing.
Earth put on your whitest bridle robe
Of spotless snow
For Christmas bringeth Jesus
Brought for us so low.

--Christina Rossetti

Submitted by Pauline

Christmas is a time of happiness

Christmas is a time of happiness: a time of simple joys, open hearts and laughing children; a time of colourful greeting cards and gaily wrapped presents; a time for pleasant surprises, family reunions, renewed friendships, and shared sentiments.

Christmas is a time of magic; a time of carols sung with friends and neighbours; when colourful lights on Christmas trees send friendly greetings from every porch or window to brighten the darkness of the long winter nights with the magic of hope.

Christmas is a time of memories; memories of still nights and Christmas bells in the mist; of childhood joys and laughter, of faces and places that are now part of our life.

Christmas is a time of high resolve. Let us resolve anew to create happiness and goodwill around us. Let us resolve to add a touch of magic in the lives of the people we meet.

And let us remember. Let us open the floodgates of memory, that the true and the beautiful and the good from our past may flow through our lives with a transforming power, and new hope and love be born in our hearts.

**--Gabor Kereki
Submitted by David W.**

Christmas crackers

*What do vampires sing on New Year's Eve?
Auld fang syne*

*I got my partner a wooden leg for Christmas.
It's not the main present, it's just a stocking filler.*

*Why is it getting harder to buy advent calendars?
Because their days are numbered.*

*What did the snowman say to the aggressive carrot?
Get out of my face!*

*What do Eskimos sing when they got their Christmas dinner?
"Whalemeat again, don't know where, don't know when!"*

*Why did the elf push his bed into the fireplace?
He wanted to sleep like a log.*

*What carol is heard in the desert?
O camel ye faithful!*

*What do you get if you cross mistletoe and a duck?
A Christmas Quacker*

*What do you call Santa when he stops moving?
Santa Pause!*

*What do you call people who are afraid of Santa
Claus?
Claustrophobic*

*Where does a snowman keep his money?
In a snow bank.*

*What do you get when you cross a snowman with a
vampire?
Frostbite.*

--David W.

FUSE 2021

Festival of Unitarians in the South East– is launched!

*From Helen White, LDPA administrator, www.ldpaunitarians.org
(I work part time on Thursdays and Fridays)*



FESTIVAL OF UNITARIANS
IN THE SOUTH EAST



Holding the Centre *resilience for the journey*

We are delighted to announce that **FUSE** will be back in 2021. Whilst it is impossible to plan for a weekend away physically, we are creating an online version of **FUSE** which will refresh, restore and inspire you as the winter draws to a close.



Our theme, “Holding the Centre – *resilience for the journey*” will be developed by the world-famous Irish poet, theologian, public speaker and broadcaster **Pádraig Ó Tuama**.

Programme: Online Zoom Gathering + Themed Talk + Workshops + Break Out Groups + Worship + Fun Quiz

For booking and further details visit:

www.ldpaunitarians.org/fuse2021

At a cost of £25 we hope Unitarian friends and seekers will join us for this event.

From Pauline Peet (Secretary)

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

*Rev John Carter, Sajid Cheema, Lol Benbow and
Adam Downing*

a very happy birthday:

Christmas greetings

- **Wishing all friends in the congregation and the wider Unitarian community, a peaceful and happy Christmas. Pauline**
- **Have a great Christmas and a happy and healthy New Year, to all at the Church, from Peter and Jim.**
- **Have a lovely Christmas and a very happy New Year! Merryn, David, Cerian, Bryn and John.**
- **A very happy Christmas to one and all, wherever you are, whoever you're with. Best wishes from Warden LOL**

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The Open - Door Newsletter

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**COULD YOU PLEASE SEND US ANY CONTRIBUTIONS FOR
FUTURE NEWSLETTERS**