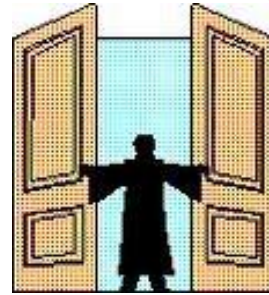


THE OPEN DOOR



CROYDON UNITARIANS

AUTUMN 2020 UPDATE

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 below.



Hello, Croydon Unitarians

Keeping the Faith

As I write, it's exactly six months since we had our last open service. The date was March 15th, also known as the Ides of March, and I recall saying - half in jest - that something ominous seemed to be waiting in the wings. But we couldn't have known that Lockdown was looming, and that we may be kept from seeing each other for many months.

To compensate, I've tried to keep in touch with mailings and telephone calls. This summer, we began our virtual (online) services, shortened versions of the familiar service, without hymns. I hope you've tuned in occasionally. Because what worries me, what haunts ministers in all our churches, is the fear that we will grow apart, leaving our beloved 150-year project to wither on the vine.

As of now, we have decided to continue the online services. For the last couple of months, we have invited members and friends to come along and watch as we film, wearing masks and staying 'socially distanced' (how I dislike that term!). The most recent guidelines from the government seem to conflate the coffee after the service with 'social gatherings' and cast doubt on whether we can continue serving refreshments. I have always believed that the coffee time was one of the most important things we do to reinforce community, and that has been shown to be true during this difficult time. We think we may have found a small loophole, through, which we can wriggle and keep the practice going. I'll let you know.

Gill Stone, the pianist, and Bill Higgins (aka Will) have been providing a rich diet of music, as has Lol. But even stalwarts like these get weary, so we have decided to offer three services a month going forward, to give everyone a rest. Steve Dick has been doing the technical stuff, and he could use a break as well. If you log on one Sunday and don't find us, why not browse the extensive list of services we have posted this summer? (Present count: 17).

Through all of this confusion, I hope we will not forget what it's like when we're all together at No 1, The Flyover. We will be there again.

Keep the faith.

-- Art Lester

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

Beautiful Losers

I just took a big risk just now.

Maybe you didn't notice, but I walked a mile across this carpet and then climbed the two highest steps in Croydon. Never mind that I've climbed up here more than five hundred times in the last 14 years. Every time you stand up here and peer over the parapet wall, you're taking a risk.

That's because nobody is so wise that pearls of wisdom come easily. Nobody is so eloquent that they can't trip over their tongues and talk nonsense. Nobody has such perfect pitch that they don't sometimes sing a little flat. Everybody, from street cleaners to cabinet ministers, gets it wrong sometimes.

Then why are we so guarded about our small failures and lack of ability? Why is the fear of failure the main thing that sends people to the GP for tranquillizers and turns families to war zones around the time of school exams? And at its most macabre limits, why does Japan have dozens of what are called "infant suicides" every year at the time of competitive examinations for good school places? What is it about failure that so terrifies us and makes such good reading when it happens to somebody important?

No one wants to be a loser. We may approve of competition, extol the virtues of the competitive marketplace as a provider of wealth, spend a great deal of our time watching athletes run faster, jump higher and catch more balls, but we avoid thinking about running slower, jumping not so high - losing, in short. Even if we aren't high flyers, we may lose sleep over someone preferring

a neighbour's scones to our own, or someone else's slightly more beautiful grandchild. If we were able to write the script of our lives - as so many of us foolishly believe we do - we would always win. We'd be magnanimous in victory, charming and generous with the losers, but still winners.

It's a cliché but it's true: the first thing people want to know about you after they learn your name is what you do for a living. He's "something in the City," she's a deputy head teacher, little Nigel won first place in the butterfly stroke in his division. This confusion of what we do with who we are is natural in a competitive environment, but it's misleading. Where are the ones who aren't something in the City - who are unemployed following a nervous breakdown? The ones who failed their exams and never went to college, the child who isn't good at sports or studies, either? We know they're around; our winning is dependent, after all, on their losing out.

The best-known loser in history, of course, was Jesus of Nazareth. After disappointing his mother and refusing the honest trade of his father, young Jesus became an itinerant preacher, sleeping rough with a few lower-class pals and never doing a lick of honest work. Not only did he keep the company of losers - a supposed prostitute, a publican, a despised tax collector, to name a few - he even preached about "the least of these" and said that coming in last was a good thing. He proved it by being sold out by his best friends and dying an ignominious death between two common criminals. What had happened to all that promise shown by the twelve-year-old whiz kid at the temple? All that ability with words, turning the questions of the Pharisees inside out, the knack of drawing big crowds for his sermons?

Those who most wished to promote him engaged in denial. After his early death they claimed that he hadn't really died at all. The stories range from the official versions of resurrection in the New Testament to apocryphal accounts of his being spirited away at the last minute to India, but the effect is the same: Jesus couldn't have been a loser because losing is bad. Even after hearing him say things like: "To gain your life you must lose it."

Losing is bad. We feel this in our bones. We ward it off with jogging, diet, extra courses. We practice positive thinking, doing affirmations and even keeping little bits of magic about us - crystals, holy water, and so on. But you know what? All that stuff doesn't really work, because in our deepest hearts we know that losing is inevitable. We can run as fast as we wish, empty the health food store of vitamins, psychically numb ourselves until we are more like machines than people, but the loss we are avoiding is as near as our own shadow. We can feel its clammy breath on our necks even at the height of our success.

Have you ever known a really good loser? I've known several, and their influence on my life is greater than that of the winners. There is a certain quality of serenity about those whose paths have taken them through a great fall from which they have lived to tell the tale.

One such beautiful loser was a colleague, a fellow minister. I am anxious to conceal his identity, not because I think he would mind you knowing who he was, but because he was always a modest man. I will call him Mike.

Mike was from a London working class family. He was born during the Blitz and was too young to be sent away to Somerset for safety. He grew up during the optimistic days after the war, and began to have ambitions beyond working in a factory. He studied and became a minister in the Congregationalist church, and did very well. He was a Christian, but he was also a career man; I think being a minister was more important to him than ministering, if you know what I mean.

He married a little late in life, finally yielding to the expectations of society about a clergyman needing a family. He had two children. He had a church and a life and everything was okay. Except for one thing: Mike was gay. He said later that he thought anyone could have told him this except his closest friends and family, but he didn't even know it himself. He was living in a thick cocoon

of denial. In those dark days, it just wasn't on for a Congregationalist minister to be gay, and so he had to lie. Not just to his church, his wife and family: to himself.

This lie made Mike keep secrets. These secrets hurt the people who loved him by depriving them of the truth. And these secrets, banished into the cellar of his consciousness, began to take on a life of their own. They led him one day to a public men's room, where he was entrapped by a policeman and charged with public indecency. He was ruined, in the sense that we use the term. He was dismissed from his church, evicted from the roll of ministers and unemployed. His marriage quickly collapsed, and so did his self-esteem. As a result of self-hatred, he wasn't careful, and he contracted the HIV virus. For years he lived a marginal life, working at low-paying jobs and living on the dole. As he once told me, he went all the way down.

He later said that when he reached rock bottom, there was nothing left but his religion, and his identification with Jesus grew. He found that he was acquiring a sense of vocation that he hadn't had when he was a "winner." One day he went into a Unitarian chapel in east London, and he stayed. Later, he began to take services, and finally - three years later, he became a Unitarian minister.

When I met Mike, he had advanced into full-blown AIDS. He was pale and thin and used a walking stick. He had a dense Cockney accent and sometimes annoyed me with his too-Christian language. My first impression was that the denomination had made a mistake: this guy was too orthodox in his beliefs, he was no intellectual, and was clearly too ill to be effective.

But Mike was very easy to be around. He had a certain quality I've known before in beautiful losers. He was not self-abasing or mock modest; he could give you a pretty good argument if he disagreed with you. But he was genuine and calm, and when he spoke, you knew he was giving you the whole truth as he understood it - not editing it for your consumption, not putting any extra spin on it. It made him a superb pastoral minister, as I've heard many people say. As a preacher, he was able to communicate with everybody, even though his voice was unlovely and his ideas a bit outmoded. People loved him; he loved them back. He was in his own church for just ten months, during which time the numbers doubled. When he died, his funeral was packed.

Mike was one of those people who have come through the fire. He was a loser in nearly every method of keeping score. He never recovered his family, his lost friends, his income. He never had a miracle recovery from AIDS. Hardly anybody will remember him for long. But I knew something about him as soon as I saw him, and he helped me learn something I might rather have been ignorant of for the rest of my life: it is in losing that we really grow.

Meher Baba once described a condition known to Hindus as satyanashi. Satyanashi means in Sanskrit, "destruction of power." About this, Baba said, "It is not spirituality, but a precursor to the spiritual path." "The ravaging of the garden of your heart," he said, leads a soul toward real spiritual growth. When I talked about it to some Hindu friends, they reacted in shock. If they had been Catholics, they would have crossed themselves. "Don't even talk about it," they'd say. As if ruin, the big time of losing, was contagious. The Evil Eye.

I've been lucky enough to have known some beautiful losers in my life. And I've had the opportunity of losing out a few times myself. Not enough to represent "ravaging of the garden of my heart," but enough so that for a while my life became an open book and any chance of subterfuge vanished. It is a strange experience. If you've never had it, let me recommend it to you. When you find yourself in a situation where no excuses or spin doctoring can get you off the hook, you find that the pain of embarrassment is more than made up for by the sheer pleasure of being known.

That's worth repeating: being known. Many think - and I am one of them - that this being known is the nearest desire to the human heart. Perhaps that's why we have this craving for fame and

reputation that substitutes for the real thing. And if we think we can only be known through great achievements or beauty or position in society, perhaps that's why we so hate to fail.

What are we afraid of, really? Being discovered to be weak, vulnerable, corruptible, insecure? Of being found out? Well, that's just three letters away from the heartfelt desire of us all: being found. Being found to be human. Being ourselves, being known. Don't take this to mean that we need to get stuck into dangerous balancing acts and feats of dare-devilry to enhance our chances of failing. We are doing enough of that already. What I would recommend is that we make it a little easier for people not to succeed, not to win all the time, especially the children. There are better ways of becoming known than having to fall from a very great height. We need to start at the bottom, in our relationships inside and out of the family. The way we do that is to show others a little bit of our own weakness and inadequacy. It empowers them, and that's a good thing.

And - as we all somehow discover - it feels like the truth. It hurts good.

--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.***

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ARE MOST WELCOME***