

# MU NOW

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THE MAGAZINE OF  
THE MIDLAND UNITARIAN  
ASSOCIATION

ISSUE 48

AUTUMN 2016

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[www.midland-unitarian-association.org.uk](http://www.midland-unitarian-association.org.uk)

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## From the Editor

Welcome to the Autumn 2016 issue of *MU Now*. This issue contains some fascinating contributions.

First there is a stop-the-press report of the District visit to Quarry Bank Mill and Norcliffe Chapel, Styal (see page 7). Then there is a paper given by Rev. Peter Hewis to the Ministers' Meeting meeting, about the life and religion of Beatrix Potter, in this, the 150th anniversary of her birth. (see page 12), and there is much other interesting District news.

But what I have enjoyed reading most while putting together this issue are the contributions on our theme "Where do You Encounter the Divine?", which really seems to have struck a chord. I have been most taken by the thoughtful and fascinating pieces submitted (see pages 19-27). Thank you to everyone who contributed.

### Submissions to *MU Now*

We are particularly looking for stories on local activities, or with a local interest, in addition to articles on the theme. Please send your contributions to me at [revsuewoolley@gmail.com](mailto:revsuewoolley@gmail.com) or to 5, Martins Road, Piddington, Northampton NN7 2DN. THANK YOU!

**The theme for the next issue is "Is Unitarianism a faith?" and the deadline for submissions will be Friday 20th January 2017.**

*sue woolley*

## President's Piece



Welcome to our Autumn edition of *MU Now*. I hope that during this season you will find time to read through it and feel the District is alive and well after the Summer slowdown. Nevertheless, I guess I'm not alone in hoping for an Indian Summer before the glories of autumn leaves come upon us.

The essential background work of supporting the District has been quietly ticking along and will gather pace as we resume the autumn programme. By the time you read this, many of us will have enjoyed the Sesquicentenary trip to Styal and Quarry Bank Mill, and be anticipating the Autumn Training session on Engagement Groups led by Alison Thursfield and Sue Woolley and, at the end of the same month, the MUA Lunch. We hope to welcome strong contingents of Unitarians at both the October events, so do try to join us, since these occasions combine some learning of new ideas with fellowship and, who knows, something of the divine may surprise us!

**Jane Couper:** tel: 01386-839458; [janecouper@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:janecouper@hotmail.co.uk)

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### MUA District Minister: Autumn Update

Hello again. Here's a summary of what I've been doing, around the Midland Unitarian Association, and elsewhere.

I am now well into my fifth year as **Minister of the Banbury Unitarian Fellowship**. We are ticking along nicely, and were pleased to welcome two visitors from London at our last service.

**Leading worship around the Midland Unitarian Association:**

My diary for 2016 is now full - I am leading worship somewhere near you practically most Sundays between now and the end of this year. My preaching plans for 2017 are now nearly complete; I am just waiting to hear from a couple of congregations. I look forward to seeing you in your churches and chapels as and when.

Our **Autumn Training Day**, on the topic *Engaging with Unitarianism: A Workshop on Engagement Groups and Sharing Our Ethos* will be taking place on Saturday 15th October. By the time you read this, I hope that quite a few folk will have booked up for what looks like being a very interesting day.

The **Worship Studies Course Foundation Step** went really well, with guest speakers Dr. Jane Russell, Rev. Winnie Gordon, Rev. Ant Howe, and Rev. Stephen Lingwood. It is a GA-recognised qualification, and really helps people to lead worship in our churches and chapels confidently and well. In 2017, we will once again be offering the **Rites of Passage Course**. Watch this space!

I'm just about to start my final year on the **Encounter** course, which is a three-year training course, leading to a qualification in spiritual direction. I have also started to offer direction sessions, on a one-to-one basis. Please contact me if you are interested.

Finally, I have now settled in as **Minister of Northampton Unitarians**, in addition to my District ministry. Our other-than-Sunday activities are going well, even if they haven't yet translated into many new Sunday attenders.

**Sue Woolley, District Minister, Midland Unitarian Association**  
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**MUA Executive Committee Key Messages**

The Key Messages below, from our May and July meetings have already been shared in the relevant issues of *Bits & Pieces*, the monthly news-sheet sent to all congregations. Only the messages which have not been overtaken by events are included here:

1. Sesquicentennial Celebrations: The commemorative publication, *Celebrating Our Community: A Short History of the Midland Unitarian Association, and Original Words by Midlands Unitarians* is still available from Rev. Sue Woolley, at a cost of £8 + £1.50 P+P.

2. The MUA Annual Lunch will be taking place on Saturday 29th October, at Kingswood, with guest speaker Patricia Earle, Midlands representative of the Women's Federation for World Peace. All are welcome. Notices have gone out to Secretaries of congregations next month, and Sue Woolley would love to hear numbers soon.

3. The Autumn Training Day, on the topic **Engaging with Unitarianism: A Workshop on Engagement Groups and Sharing Our Ethos** will be taking place on Saturday 15th October, at Kingswood, from 10.00 am to 4.15 pm. It will be facilitated by Rev. Sue Woolley, and MUA Past President Mrs. Alison Thursfield. All are welcome. The flyer went out with August *Bits & Pieces*, and again with the September issue.

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e-mails: janecouper@hotmail.co.uk; revsuewoolley@gmail.com  
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## MUA Visit to Quarry Bank Mill and Norcliffe Chapel, Styal

On Saturday 24th September, about 50 Unitarians from congregations around the Midlands made their various ways up to Quarry Bank Mill, in Cheshire. The traffic on the way up was atrocious, which meant the whole party did not meet up until later on.

My husband and I arrived about quarter to twelve, and found a few hardy souls waiting for us. Having heard that the coach containing most of the other visitors was going to be delayed, we decided to go ahead with the tour of the Mill.

It was fascinating - we were able to see how every stage of the cloth making process had worked, from the arrival of the bales of raw cotton, to the production of the finished, machine-woven cloth. Also, the changes that mechanisation had brought. The National Trust guides who were doing the demonstrations were very knowledgeable, and Michaela Heppingstall from Banbury, who has much experience of the textile industry, was able to tell us many interesting things about the current situation, all over the world.



Loom & mechanised spinning (images by David Heppingstall)

After a very hasty refreshment break, we met up with the rest of the party at the beautiful little chapel which Unitarian Samuel Greg had built for his workers in Styal village in 1823. We were not surprised to hear that it is a very popular venue for weddings - they have about forty a year.



(stock image: [geograph.org.uk](http://geograph.org.uk))

We were warmly welcomed by Rev. Alex Bradley, and several of the Styal congregation, who had all kindly given up their Saturday afternoons to be our hosts. Alex led a short worship service about building community and helping each other out, which was very well received. Then we adjourned to the church hall, to enjoy the warm hospitality of the Styal congregation. Not only was there tea and coffee, but also a delicious array of home-baked cakes - Styal member Beryl had been busy all week.

The visit concluded with a short tour of Styal village, which had been built for the workers by the Greg family. This was led by Ruth Taylor, another member of the congregation, who is also one of the official Mill guides. MUA Treasurer Sandy Ellis was thrilled to see a row of cottages, one of which had been the birthplace of his grandmother, Fanny Henshall.

Fortunately, the journey home was rather less arduous, and we were able to reflect on a most interesting & enjoyable day. **SW**

## District Round-up

**Cotswold Group appoints new Minister,  
Rev. Dr. Rob Whiteman**



The Cotswold Group of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches are delighted to announce that Rev. Dr. Rob Whiteman has been appointed to be our Minister with effect from 1st October 2016. We feel very fortunate and are looking forward to having Rob with us.

It always takes time to build new relationships, but I hope we will embrace change and enthusiastically work with Rob as he steers our Congregations into the future.

**Alison Thursfield**

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### **A Good Use for Odds and Ends**

Whilst roaming around on the internet on a wet summer's afternoon (we seem to have plenty of those this year!), I came across the website for '**Knit for Peace**'. This might be something

you could contemplate contributing to if you enjoy knitting and have lots of oddments of wool from other projects. See: [www.knitforpeace.org.uk](http://www.knitforpeace.org.uk)

It is a charity that provides free knitting patterns for all sorts of garments that might be welcomed in different parts of the world. If the finished garment is sent to them, they will distribute it to where it is needed.

Knit for Peace grew out of projects developed in Rwanda and India, which brought together women of traditionally hostile communities (Hutu & Tutsi war widows in Rwanda, and Muslim and Hindu women in the slums of Delhi) to knit clothes for street children and orphans. They paid the knitters and distributed the clothes through local NGOs.

As well as being fun and therapeutic, knitting brings people together and gives a way of helping others in need, providing benefits both to the knitter and the recipient. Based on their experience of developing Knit for Peace over the last few years, they have learned that knitting is extremely important as an activity that can be carried out right into extreme old age and helps improve long-term health. (I have some details of Knit and Natter groups in the Shropshire area if you are interested too!)

They now distribute regularly to over 80 outlets, including hospitals, women's refuges, refugee drop in centres, prisons, community groups, and hospices as well as to developing countries. They never sell the clothes; they send them where they are needed. They also send on donations of yarn and needles to enable people on low income to knit.

I have printed out a few copies of the pattern for Blanket squares and will be happy to co-ordinate any contributions that you'd like to knit and send them off from the congregation & friends.

**Debra Burbery, Shrewsbury**

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**Congregational Weekend at Great Hucklow, July 2016**

Eighteen happy and excited people gathered at the Unitarians' lovely Nightingale Centre in Great Hucklow, Derbyshire for our first joint congregational weekend. That is, the congregations of Shrewsbury, Kidderminster and Birmingham New Meeting. Five came from Shrewsbury, five from Kidderminster and the remainder from Birmingham, including two under sixteens, who brought their own breath of fresh air to the proceedings.

Our Minister, Rev Winnie Gordon, had as usual put her all into the planning of the weekend and we had several thought provoking sessions, one about the story of the Good Samaritan and how we related to the characters within it. We also had Check-In sessions each day when we spoke of our own thoughts and feelings and a final Check-Out at the end in summary.

Meal times were the usual Hucklow mix of good food and good conversation and we had plenty of time to relax together in the lounges too.

We also had a choice of activities on Saturday afternoon, from a singing workshop with Aleks Zglinska from Kidderminster, to an artwork workshop with Winnie. Or walking in the countryside (in the rain), or driving out to explore further afield. I was tired and had forty winks in my room! (I did sing first though)

One unplanned but highly enjoyable part of the weekend was Peter Markey from Kidderminster giving us a session of Shamanic drumming, which is used as a form of therapy, being both relaxing and invigorating.

This is a very brief account of the weekend, but I think it fair to say that many of us came as strangers and left as friends. We are grateful to Winnie for organizing this successful event and I for one hope it will be repeated next year.

**Jill Hudson, Birmingham New Meeting**

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**Beatrix Potter – her life and religion:  
paper delivered to a meeting of the Ministers' Meeting**

Today, 28<sup>th</sup> July 2016 is the 150th Anniversary of Beatrix Potter's birth and it is amazing how her influence lives on. BBC TV's *Countryfile* last Sunday paid tribute to her and only yesterday in the Guardian, Alex Jackson wrote an article headed, "Let's celebrate 150 years of Beatrix Potter: author, scientist and fungus lover". Attached to the article was a recently discovered illustration, "A dream of toasted cheese", the illustration was found amongst a collection of unpublished artwork and toys and they are on display near Romsey in Hampshire this month. Beatrix continues to influence lives today, her books still sell over two million copies a year and one is sold every fifteen seconds across the world. In our own home we have versions of her books in English and Welsh and when our daughter Bethan was quite small she sat on my knee enthralled at the ballet on television, *Tales of Beatrix Potter* choreographed by Frederick Ashton. In our kitchen we have plaster of Paris models of her animal characters that my wife and daughter made from moulds. I have a slight claim to fame in that a young woman, Akiko Nakamura, whose marriage I conducted some years ago in Oxford edited a Japanese

## Guide to the Lake District and Beatrix Potter!



As a child I never had any Beatrix Potter books but the surname was familiar to me. Every time I went on the bus from Horwich to Bolton we passed the Edmund Potter hospital, a small convalescent hospital for women and children, given to the town of Bolton just after the First World War by a cousin of Beatrix. That gift was in the true spirit of the Potter family. Years later whilst on honeymoon in the Lake District we visited the home of Beatrix at Hill Top Farm and as we were signing the visitors' book an American said to the National Trust volunteer, "*Gee, why don't you have electric lights in here, we would see so much better.*" The lady replied, "*Sir, if candles and oil lamps were good enough for Beatrix Potter then they are good enough for you.*" Prior to that visit I had read the biography by Margaret Lane and was disappointed with three things. Firstly there was no index, secondly she painted a poor picture of Rupert Potter, the father of Beatrix and thirdly she hardly mentioned the Unitarian faith of the Potter family. (*The*

*more recent versions do contain an index.*)

In taking a look at her religion and life we need to look at her roots and then at her books. Looking at her roots, although I know a great deal about them I have relied for some actual quotations on a wonderful book published in 2007, *Beatrix Potter, A life in nature* by the American writer Linda Lear who makes many references to our faith.

The father of Beatrix, Rupert, came from a Glossop family, her grandfather Edmund belonged to Cross Street Chapel in Manchester and "remained a humble man, dedicated to the well-being and improvement of his countrymen." (J Mordaunt Crook. "The rise of the Nouveau Riches"). Linda Lear writes of the grandfather Edmund, "His attitudes, passions and talents are important because Beatrix resembled him more than any other family member. She inherited much of his artistic talent, entrepreneurial ability and intellectual curiosity." Grandfather provided a dining room in his mill and they served hot meals to 350 people each day – that was in the 1840s & 50s. Part of a nearby mill was converted to provide lessons in reading, writing and basic hygiene. A reading room and library was provided. Edmund believed that Art should be part of a good education and supported the building of art galleries. A good employer, yes, but with no time for trade unions!

Her mother's family the Leeches were from Stalybridge and Hyde in Cheshire and Beatrix was also related to the Crompton family of Rivington and to the Roscoes of Liverpool and London. In writing of her roots to an American friend this is what we read, "I am descended from generations of Lancashire yeomen and weavers; obstinate, hard headed, matter of fact folk... As far back as I can go, they were Puritans... (Nonjurors) Nonconformists, Dissenters. Your Mayflower ancestors sailed to America; mine at

the same date were sticking it out a home, probably rather enjoying persecution.”

Her father Rupert and her uncle attended Manchester College during its days in Manchester and London. When it moved to London, Rupert took a law degree through London University. (Queen Victoria gave Manchester College students the right to obtain degrees from London University and that lasted until the college became a full Oxford College in 1996). Although he was a barrister, Rupert eventually inherited enough money to live the life of a gentleman and didn't need to work. His main hobby became photography and he was also a good artist, obviously having an excellent influence on his daughter.

Marriage saw her father and mother living in London and attending Essex Street Chapel and Little Portland Street Chapel where James Taylor and James Martineau co-ministered, then when it moved to Kensington, it was re-named Essex Church. Beatrix and her brother Walter, who was born six years later, were raised in London, at Bolton Gardens in Kensington. Her education was at home with a governess and whilst some think it was severe, Beatrix herself once said that she was grateful because a traditional school would have been too stifling. Of the house itself she described it as an “unloved birthplace”. For forty-seven years that was her home and she carried out the role of a dutiful daughter as many women did in those days. She inherited a talent for drawing and painting from both father and mother. It was in London that she drew frogs, rabbits, birds and newts, so I doubt if her parents were as severe as some make out because the children were always allowed to have pets. Her talent expanded when the family spent the summer months in Scotland and then in the Lake District.

Just before leaving her roots here are two quotes that show her in

an interesting light. At the age of 20 this appears in her journal, following a march of the unemployed.

“They are being treated with every consideration. Counsel, adjournment, it is scandalous. Why, they ought to be hung like dogs. I consider they are the most dangerous kind of criminals in existence...they, if unchecked, will cause wholesale slaughter and ruin society.”

Ten years later in the journal she wrote of London Unitarians,

“Their total want of independence and backbone is shown by the way in which they call their chapels churches, and drag in the word Christian. We are not Christians in the commonly accepted sense of the term, neither are the Jews, but they are neither ashamed nor shamed.”

Now I turn to some of her books. When Noel Moore, the son of a former governess, was ill, Beatrix Potter sent him a series of picture letters based on a rabbit called Peter. He loved them so much that she thought of publishing them as a small book. No publisher was interested and so she funded the printing herself and insisted on the size and format - small enough for a child to handle and to fit into a pocket. The book was a success and gradually led to Frederick Warne publishing all of them. Amazingly her literary output amounts only to 23 small books but the effect on children all over the world has been amazing.

Her motive was simple: it was to entertain children and to use her talent for painting the things of nature. I don't know if it was her intention but the books relate to human experience. Peter Rabbit being a bit more adventurous than his brothers and sisters and getting into Mr. McGregor's garden because the lettuce look good; then being terrified when he's almost caught, escaping and

finding the security of home. We have probably all had a time when we got into a scrape and home provided security. Her own favourite was the Tailor of Gloucester who is absolutely worn out making a new coat and whilst he's asleep the mice finish off the button holes. Don't we all need help from time to time? The tale of Johnny Town-Mouse who visits his country cousin reminds us that what suits one person doesn't suit another. That story reminds me of the people who bought an expensive house in the country then complained about the farm smells and the church bells! The story of Jeremy Fisher tells of a frog who went to catch minnows so that his friends could come for a meal, he's caught by a trout who spits him out and so Jeremy ends up giving them roasted grasshopper and lady bird sauce. Our own plans don't always work out and we have to adapt.



What of her religion? There isn't the time or space to speak of her Lake District life and marriage to William Heelis in detail, but Beatrix found fulfillment in her late marriage, in farming, breeding Herdwick Sheep and working with the National Trust. In a BBC TV programme the chef Rick Stein sang the praises of the breed for cooking.

Her religious outlook shines through her work by treating the people well who worked for her and who lived in her properties; through leaving more land than anyone had ever left to the National Trust; through joining in the local activities and trying to ensure that after her death the tenants of her farms would not be thrown out by the National Trust nor have their homes purchased by wealthy incomers.

In writing of Beatrix's teenage Linda Lear comments on Unitarian churches in London,

“At all these churches Beatrix would have heard both good and bad preaching and fair-minded debate of the major social issues of the day... The Dissenting tradition of Unitarianism did, however, have certain advantages. From it Beatrix acquired an inner self-reliance, a distinctly pragmatic approach to life, and a tendency towards rebelliousness. From childhood on she exhibited a reticence towards dogma and an aversion to creeds of any sort.”

That broad independent outlook remained with her throughout life and just after her eighteenth birthday she wrote this in her journal. “All outward forms of religion are useless, and are the cause of endless strife. What do Creeds matter, what possible difference does it make to anyone today whether the doctrine of the resurrection is correct or incorrect, or the miracles, they don't happen nowadays, but very queer things do that concern us more.

**Believe there is a great power silently working all things for good, behave yourself and never mind the rest.**” (The bold emphasis is mine.)

There you are, listen to Beatrix Potter – **behave yourself and never mind the rest!**

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On her web pages, Linda Lear, the author of “Beatrix Potter: A life in Nature” writes,

"Although Beatrix Potter is a household name around the world, her personal life and her significant achievements remain largely unknown. Potter's life was inspired and enriched by nature. She was first an artist and scientific illustrator, who found fame as the creator of "Peter Rabbit" and twenty-three other famous little books for children. But after the tragic death of her fiancé, Potter reinvented herself as a successful landowner and country farmer. She became a conservationist in order to preserve the landscape that inspired her art, and through her bequests to the National Trust, she saved whole areas of the Lake District of England for posterity."

**Rev. Peter Hewis**

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### **Where do you Encounter the Divine?**

This edition's theme, “Where do you encounter the Divine?” is a tricky one, but hopefully our contributors will rise to the challenge.

The use of the word “Divine”, given its primary meaning, may render the question pointless in the eyes of some of our readership. If there is no Deity, then one is unlikely to spend much time thinking about encountering it. This lovely ancient

word, begun here with a capital letter, derives its sense (via the Latin divus, French and Middle English) from the pre-supposed existence of a deity. Yet, beyond this, the word has other uses and extended meanings. When written with a lower case initial character, it can be an adjective, verb and adverb as well as a noun. Most of its uses have been traditionally associated with religion. We’ve heard of divine order, service, liturgy, law, right, guidance and intervention. “A divine” refers to a person who was a theologian or scholar, a cleric or priest, or who combined both functions. Divinity was until quite recently a subject of study, even on the school curriculum, and was most definitely purely Christian in nature. It may feel right to describe something as divine because it is especially lovely and good, perhaps sharing in the imagined ultimate qualities and virtues of heaven, something celestially wonderful. Interestingly, divine is also used to describe deep appreciation of something very earthly, say a meal or a dress, as well as something more ethereal like a musical performance. Here, divine could be substituted by “out of this world” or “sublime” to indicate the experience of excellence and perfection.

We also use it in the sense of discovering and discerning by divination, which in turn can be linked to prophecy and perhaps magic. What is divined may be esoteric knowledge and power - or a source of water. It can refer to intuitive insight and maybe the skill of a particular type of person, often a woman, who may be given special titles in recognition of some mysterious capacity. By association, something divine (lower case) is commonly assumed to be spiritual (another word which may bear a great deal of discussion) and be rather more heterodox than conventional. Many may find freer, more fluid definitions of the word are the ones which sit most comfortably. For these people, the divine may be discovered by intuition or insight rather than by a programme of training or practice. Of course, for others, the

dedication to the process of practice is the key to achieving the experience, which may come through meditation, prayer, study, fasting, yoga, or practical engagement in the world. For many, a balanced combination of such elements will be sought.



The word encounter, again a perfectly common one we use easily, also bears a moment's scrutiny. An encounter is obviously a meeting, but usually an unexpected one, a sense clearly implied within the question. The old derivations contain a suggestion that it is a meeting of adversaries. This interests me. I suppose in medieval times any unexpected encounter could prove confrontational, but how does this fit with our question? Many well-known stories of encounters with the Divine have included elements of surprising hostility. In my imagination, an encounter with the Divine would be welcomed by the recipient, but frequently they are perceived as frightening, surprising or conflictual. Often we learn that the encounter is mediated through another being, commonly an angelic intermediary, whose purpose seems to be to separate the dangerous fullness of the divine from the fragility of the human person receiving it. Several of the

biblical experiences fit this, and others from different traditions also have prominent elements of fear and wonder. Even though Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* was protected by the god Krishna, his much desired encounter was so intensely overwhelming that he begged for it to end.

Here the complex descriptions of the numinous, the holy and wholly other make us rethink the language we use. Encounters with the divine must often feel bruising, overwhelming and antagonistic, whereas my mind's eye tends to see them as gentle, confirming and encouraging. Pondering the difference makes me realise the enfeeblement I have unwittingly imposed by limiting my concept of the encounter to a rather sentimental, golden sunset in a garden, an "all shall be well" kind of experience, instead of thinking more clearly about what I already know, that such events can come with shock and awe as well as the still quiet voice after the storm.

If the divine is encountered, the experience is probably individual and necessarily subjective. Its interpretation and analysis may be immediate or take place much more gradually and slowly. Indeed, in some accounts the subject finds it unwelcome and flinches from examining it, trying to deny it. Why? Because its effect may be to require radical change, perhaps too cataclysmic to bear. Conversely, it may be a strengthening and deepening extension of the already known or half known.

So, where do we encounter the Divine? Are we sure we could recognise it? Would we describe and account for it in different terms? And, if we did, would it be a case of a rose by any other name? Do we think it may be purely a matter of brain chemistry? We can all hazard imaginative suggestions as to where the divine is most likely to be met, but my speculations are that for many it will be found in the natural world (but not in the "red in tooth and

claw” department), gardens and other places of created or uncreated beauty, in love, or in music. In most of these, the self is in a secondary position. It is the engaged receiver, not the initiator, of an experience in which it is temporarily absorbed into union with something greater. Maybe it’s not so much found in the midst of times of great difficulty and hardship, nor in grief, sorrow, pain or anguish, but perhaps after the intense moments have passed. And, here I hesitate, I do wonder if we should expect to meet it in religious services.

This editor’s theme set a question to ponder. For me, it leads to more questions. If you think you have encountered the Divine/divine, how did you know (yet another word to unpack) that’s what it was? Did the experience correspond with any preconception you had? Did you doubt it? How long did the encounter last and what effect did it have on you? Was it repeated? I recall that J. Estlin Carpenter (principal of Manchester College, Oxford) recounted one intense encounter with the Divine (during a holiday in the Lake District) and for him it was all that was needed during his whole life.

We may be wise to separate the great encounters in religious history - Moses and the Burning Bush, Jacob’s ladder to heaven, the visions of Isaiah, Paul and Muhammad, the Buddha’s Enlightenment - from the more private ones of our experience. Many of us will have some understanding of the former and see elements of themes and motifs repeated within these stories. Dreams, visions, altered states of consciousness, being alone, being in a special place, being hungry, fearful and desperate: are any of these elements similar to our own brushes with the divine?

In the end, wherever or whenever it is encountered, I suspect that for most of us, contact with the divine is an unexpected case of being surprised by a joy sufficient to move and sustain us in our

mundane lives. To be lifted away from our necessary commonplace concerns, for even the briefest of moments, is to glimpse something unifying which is wholly other and transcendent yet paradoxically particular and immanent.

**Jane Couper, Evesham**

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The joy of a fresh Spring morning; new buds sprouting from the hedgerows; the cooing of doves; a thrush merrily singing; three green woodpeckers feeding on the lawn whilst a nuthatch swoops on the seed-basket, startling a visiting squirrel; the scent of a rose; the smile on the face of a friend; the laugh of a child; Just concentrate on the simplest things in life and one doesn’t need complex theological arguments to experience the Divine.

**Sandy Ellis, Evesham**

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Where do I encounter the divine? Sometimes, but not regularly, in church, often in the countryside surrounded by the beauties of nature, frequently when listening to music (particularly by Mozart), in my reading of texts by some of our foremost Unitarian writers and, surprisingly, in my dealings with my fellow men and women, many of whom have never been near a church except to get married or attend a funeral.

This it is what particularly astounds me. How is it that some people who have little knowledge of Jesus and his teachings can behave in a way that puts some regular churchgoers to shame?

Where does this goodness come from? Is it simply something they have inherited from their parents, who have clearly given them an

excellent upbringing, or is it something God-given, and if it is the latter, why are some denied this gift?

All we can do when we encounter it, is to marvel at the experience and hope a bit of it rubs off on us, so that we, too, may affect those with whom we come into contact in our daily lives.

Unless a bit of that divine is evident in our own lives, I would go as far as to say that our religion is meaningless.

**Graham Williams, Kidderminster**

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The Divine or divinity is, I find, one of the most difficult words to categorise; we know the meaning – something that pertains to, or comes from a god or a deity. Yet it is used very carelessly sometimes to describe earthly things of exceptional beauty – an absolutely *divine* dress or bouquet.

I find a good description of how I feel about the Divine in Sophia Fahs' lovely hymn 'Divinity is round us – never gone from Earth or star...'.

As to where I encounter it-that's easily answered; - everywhere! I am more conscious of when I think of life itself, whatever form it takes – in fact I have seen life described 'the Divine Spark' and that is something I can understand.

Having a garden, it is easy to find and wonder at the many forms that rise from the Divine Spark - ants disturbed by Pauline's weeding carrying their Divine Sparks –cocoon nearly as big as they –to safety. At that level they are wired to know how precious life is.

But life, wonderful though it is, does not stand alone. Truly, divinity is all round us – in the pebbles I collect - for the joy of seeing their diversity - there are millions of molecules bound together by forces that are not really understood, in spite of the £17 billion LHC.

If we think of the other meaning of 'divine', to seek or find out, then divine is truly boundless. Just think of what we know about this world of ours, every branch of science has gained by hours of patient research, often by people who will have no truck with God, yet God, for our betterment, has given freely of his divine knowledge. Pray God it is always used well.

It is easy enough to speak of the divine while watching a near divine evening, dark trees against a yellow and purple sky. Harder to think of it among ruined cities, broken bodies, hordes of frightened and homeless people. It is there, though, and we must not forget it.

**Barbara Russell, Dudley & Wolverhampton**

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Immediately questions pose themselves in my mind: What is the Divine? Is 'encounter' the word I would use?

I find it hard to think in terms of an 'encounter' as that implies a face-to-face meeting, but what I may experience is more an "awareness" of something enhancing the 'ordinary' which *might* be the Divine.

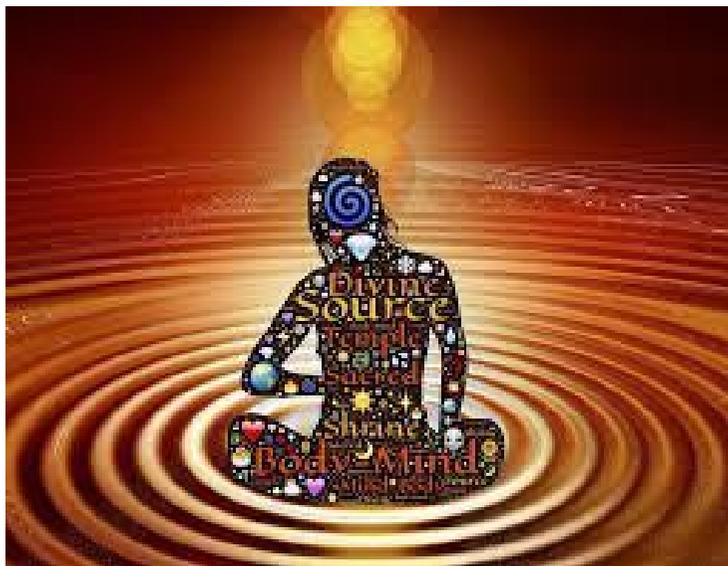
At times I may have a heightened awareness of the things around me. Perhaps I have been 'opening' myself in some way by really engaging with my surroundings, and occasionally I am aware of some presence enveloping me: a beautiful scene, or scents, some

music or birdsong, or the company of a friend. I become more attuned to my surroundings and accepted, maybe embraced, by them. Is this the Divine?

Occasionally this awareness is of something that I am enveloping, a life-force bubbling up from deep within me. Perhaps I sense this as quiet contentment, or it may come as an overflowing sense of joy. Is this the Divine?

Whatever the Divine may be, I know that it is present everywhere and at all times – I am just not aware enough to experience being at one with the presence except in special moments. I am grateful, when they come, for such moments of awareness.

**Alison Thursfield, Cheltenham & Gloucester**



## District Events

**MUA of Lay Preachers & Worship Leaders  
Autumn Training Day  
Engaging with Unitarianism: A Workshop  
on Engagement Groups & Sharing Our Ethos**

**Workshop Leaders:** Rev. Sue Woolley & Mrs. Alison Thursfield

**Where:** Kingswood Meeting House, Packhorse Lane, Hollywood, Worcs B47 5DQ

**When:** Saturday 15th October 2016

**Times:** 10.00 am - 4.15 pm (coffee/tea from 9.30 am)

**Cost:** FREE to MUA participants; £10 a head to others

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**MUA Annual Lunch**

**Guest Speaker:** Patricia Earle, Midland representative, Women's Federation for World Peace

**Where:** Kingswood Meeting House, Packhorse Lane, Hollywood, Worcs B47 5DQ

**When:** Saturday 29th October 2016

**Times:** 11.00 for 11.30 am - c.3.00 pm

**Cost:** £10.00 a head

Secretaries have been sent menus and booking forms

### MUA Congregations: Times of Services

**Every Sunday:**

Birmingham Cheltenham & Gloucester	Unitarian New Meeting Church	11.00 am
Evesham	Bayshill Unitarian Church	11.00 am
Kidderminster	Oat Street Chapel	11.00 am
Kingswood	New Meeting House	11.00 am
Northampton	Meeting House	11.00 am
Shrewsbury	Unitarian Meeting House	10.30 am
Stourbridge	Unitarian Church	10.30 am
Warwick	Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel	11.00 am
	High Street Chapel	4.30 pm

**First Sunday of the Month:**

Dudley	Old Meeting House	3.00 pm
Oldbury	at Dudley	3.00 pm
Wolverhampton	at Dudley	3.00 pm

**Second Sunday of the Month:**

Coventry	Gt Meeting House Unitarian Church	11 am
Cradley	Park Lane Unitarian Chapel	6.30 pm

**Third Sunday of the Month:**

Dudley	Old Meeting House	3.00 pm
Herefordshire Unitarians		3.00 pm
Oldbury	at Dudley	3.00 pm
Wolverhampton	at Dudley	3.00 pm

**Fourth Sunday of the Month:**

Coventry	Gt Meeting House Unitarian Church	11 am
Cradley	Park Lane Unitarian Chapel	6.30 pm

**Last Sunday of the Month:**

Banbury	Unitarian Fellowship	11.00 am
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### MUA Congregations: Contact Details

Name	Contact	Details
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***Approaching by Celia Midgley***

God of a thousand names,  
 How shall I describe you  
 who are awesome, fascinating mystery?  
 Shall we call you power, force, creator  
 and sustainer of the world?  
 Are you tenderness, mercy,  
 and compassion?  
 Are you also justice, wisdom  
 and all knowledge?  
 You are all of these.

And if you are our friend, our guide and comforter,  
 our father and our mother,  
 you are also formless, bodiless,  
 that which cannot be described,  
 can never be known until we truly  
 know ourselves,  
 as we cannot know ourselves until we  
 know you.

*(from Echoes: A second anthology of prayers, meditations & poems by contemporary Unitarians)*



**The Winter 2016/17 issue will be published in January.**

**Please may we have your contributions on local matters,  
 & on the theme of "Is Unitarianism a Faith?"**

**by Friday 20th January 2017**

*Thank you!*