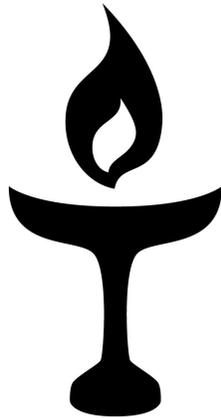


MU NOW



THE MAGAZINE OF
THE MIDLAND UNITARIAN
ASSOCIATION

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AIMS OF THE MUA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

- Support congregations
- Make things happen by providing leadership and initiating projects
- Find resourceful solutions
- Connect Unitarians in the Midlands

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From the Editor

Welcome to the Summer/Autumn 2023 issue of *MU Now*. It includes a challenging reflection by Dorothy Haughton, some interesting news from around the District, and a bumper crop of thoughtful and fascinating contributions on the theme of ‘The Environment’.

My thanks 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.

The theme for the next issue, due out in January 2024, is “Spiritual Practices” to follow up our Autumn Taster Workshop. The deadline for submissions is Friday 5th January 2024.

Please send your contributions to me at revsuewoolley@gmail.com or to 5, Martins Road, Piddington, Northampton NN7 2DN.

THANK YOU!

Sue Woolley

President's Piece



This is that time of year when our shops are full of the ‘starting a new term’ merchandise for children... you might be starting a new project or course too... and on the ‘other side of the table’ teachers are getting into gear for the new term: new students, new curricula, new demands.

Last week I was standing at one particular new threshold... at the start of my grandson’s third birthday party in the local village hall. There I was, ready to greet newcomers – the bouncy castle was inflated, the ride-on bikes were already whizzing about, driven by excited children and noise levels were high.

I turned around to see a mum approaching the hall holding the hand of a reluctant little boy; hiding in the folds of her skirt... he hovered, seeming unsure as he approached the door to the main hall, doubting if this was where he really wanted to be. He dragged his feet... and then stopped very still.

How many of us have also had that reaction approaching a room full of noise, other people’s voices raised above the hubbub? How many of us have also thought, “Is this where I really want to be?” It takes a lot of courage to cross a new threshold...

This little fellow had his mum’s hand to hold – and he did, tightly! After a few whispered words of encouragement, they did enter the main hall together. A little while later I was nearly run over by this same boy hurtling around the hall on a trike, his mum sitting at the side chatting to other parents.

He did step into new ground... He had a hand to hold, and was rewarded by friendship and many companions.

How can we make our chapels and churches, meeting houses and rooms safe places to enter for the very first, and subsequent times? For the newcomer, there may not be a hand to hold, or words of whispered encouragement to make the difference.

John O'Donohue has written a blessing for courage... for we need courage to welcome the stranger as much as the stranger needs courage to enter, he writes of a trust that:

“A new confidence will come alive
To urge you toward higher ground
Where your imagination
Will learn to engage difficulty
As its most rewarding threshold!”

May we too in the MUA encourage ourselves and our companions to see difficulties as our most rewarding threshold...

Cressida Pryor

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### **District Minister: Summer/Autumn Update**

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

**Leading worship around the Midland Unitarian Association:** Since March 2020, I have been producing an online service for the District each week, which has been posted around by e-mail and also on the MUA website and am continuing to do so. But now that I am no longer President of the General Assembly, I am very

much enjoying leading worship around the District as I did before.

By the time you read this, the **Autumn Taster Workshop**, on the topic of 'Paths to Inner Peace' will be imminent. Participants will be able to have a go at various spiritual practices and Rev Sheena Gabriel and I, who are co-facilitating it, hope that it will be rich and rewarding day for everyone.

I am a fully qualified **spiritual director**. I offer direction sessions, on a one-to-one basis. Please contact me if you are interested.

**And if you are feeling alone and would like to hear another human voice, please feel free to give me a call on 01604 870746 or 0785 325 3880...**

**Sue Woolley, District Minister, Midland Unitarian Association**

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MUA Executive Committee Key Messages

The Key Messages from our May and July meetings have already been shared in the relevant issue of *Bits & Pieces*, the monthly news-sheet sent to all congregations. Those which are still current are reproduced below.

1 New Treasurer: Kieren Mardle-Moss of Coventry Unitarians was welcomed as our new Treasurer.

2 MUA Inc Investment Policy: it was unanimously agreed that our investments should be in more environmental and greener companies and should be switched to the Newtons Sustainable Growth and Income Fund for Charities, which is used by the Unitarian General Assembly.

3 Training Days: It was agreed that in future, one of the two annual training days offered by the District should continue to be learning based, but the second one should be more of a spiritual retreat day.

4 MUA Annual Lunch: It was agreed not to put on another Annual Lunch in the present format, as take-up has been so low.

5 Dot Hewerdine nomination: It was agreed that the District would support the Sheffield District's nomination for Dot Hewerdine to become an Honorary Member of the General Assembly.

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### **Rev Winnie Gordon joins staff at Unitarian College**



*In July, the following press release appeared on Facebook, and I have Unitarian College's permission to share it here.*

Unitarian College is delighted to announce that, due to our expanded workload as we 'grow our faith from the inside', we have appointed two new members to our growing team. Rev Winnie Gordon and Rev Melda Grantham are joining the College staff team this summer to deliver training, observe students working in the field and support our growing number of Ministry and Lay students. Both Winnie and Melda have strong

backgrounds in teaching and learning as well as in Unitarian Ministry.

College Director, Helen Mason, said, "We are delighted to have Winnie and Melda join the UC team. They bring with them such valuable talent and experience. Their input will benefit Unitarians all over the UK and more widely as they work alongside existing team members Ant Howe, Michael Dadson and Jenifer Brenner to scale the College's activities."

Winnie said "It's great to be part of the team at Unitarian College! Working to support our denomination in its training needs, and support individuals in developing their spirituality and gifts, as Helen says, to "grow our faith from the inside," is spiritual and humbling work. A believer in lifelong learning, I am grateful to share my passion for education, and my experience and skills in this field in a progressive, caring institution with a wonderful team. I look forward to being out in the field, supporting our Lay students and congregations as they enrich our faith communities with their willingness, enthusiasm, and belief in growing our Unitarian faith." ...

Winnie and Melda will be working part time for the College alongside their current roles. For more information about Unitarian College or to get involved in our courses, make a donation or find out more about how we can help you please visit [www.unitarian-college.org.uk](http://www.unitarian-college.org.uk)

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Reflection on Sue Woolley's inclusivity service by Dorothy Haughton

I have endlessly whined on about restarting the Whit Walks, an annual feature of my membership as a teenager of Bury Unitarian Church. All the Christian Churches, except the Catholics but

including us, walked with our banners and baskets of flowers through the town to a brief service in the square and then we went off to a local park for a picnic and games for the younger children. Us big ones sneaked off to the fair.

I think it would be great if all churches, mosques, temples, and any other congregation of a faith all walked together through their town on Whit Sunday to demonstrate clearly that we are all separate but joined together as peoples of faith. Many towns and cities now have multi-ethnic carnival processions, I can see no reason why we should not have a multi-faith procession.

It is all very well talking about inclusivity but we should do something to show this. Shrewsbury got one new member by displaying the LGBT rainbow outside the church. But are we all accessible to disabled people and do we display notices to that effect? We say inside the church that all are welcome here but do we say it clearly enough outside?

During the GA's Anniversary Service, Rev Winnie Gordon was very clear about why we get so few BAME people in church. In some cases we speak to them in a way which shows that we consider them to be 'outsiders'. Also our worship is still so rigidly 19th century. You come to church, you sit in your pew, you listen, you drink coffee (being very careful not to discuss the service – but do thank the preacher).

We have circle services at Shrewsbury which are more interactive but it is still impossible to get people out of their seats. Our church designs make dancing in the aisles difficult, but is this a reason not to do it? All but the most infirm could at least stand and wave their arms about. Let's have some music we could dance to. Winnie suggested more hymns by BAME writers are composers but these are difficult to find. There are some great spirituals.

Forget the theology and lets have a rip-roaring sing. Let's get out of our seats and DANCE!

Or more tamely, we could leave our pews and go and sit in a different pew. We have a congregation of between 12 and 20 and yet we sit scattered all over the church. I have fond memories of attending a church in the Midlands that was so cold we all sat in one pew together for warmth with our feet on an old air raid shelter heater. We can say 'All are welcome here' but if you walk into a Unitarian church where do you sit? My mum was great at this. She would tell newcomers that they could sit anywhere they liked, but if they wanted they could next to her and her husband - pointing. And she would find out their name and invite them to stay for coffee. It is easier to stay if you have someone to stay with. People who prefer to sit on their own can be personally invited. We should all have disabled access to the church and to the toilet and microphones tuned to earphones. Do we all have large print hymn books and are they clearly visible? We all have to be more pro-active in making our churches, chapels and meeting houses more accessible and welcoming.

I'm currently in discussion with some church members about outreach which will include putting up information on the noticeboards about how and why and what we worship. I am hoping that the preparation for this will encourage some interesting discussion.

Sorry to go on and on about this but so many people at the GA complained of falling numbers and yet no one seemed to have tried anything to do anything about this.

Do you know if anyone has tried changing the service day and time? If so, let us know how it works. Sunday is now often seen as

the day we all go to the garden centre or a stately home. How do we compete with that?

Where and how do you advertise your services? Do you remember me telling you about a lay preacher who made his local funeral directors aware that the Unitarian church could provide a religious or entirely secular service? It may be that your local library will accept an advert. Certainly your local newspaper or free paper will.

If you have any young people then pay for them to go to the Greenbelt Festival or your local county show.

It is certainly true that many people are not attracted to any form of organised religion or worship and it may be that religion via social media may be the way forward.

If you find something that works, let us know

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### District Round Up

#### Shropshire Council's Human Library visits Shrewsbury Unitarian Church

The Human Library™ is a collection of individual human beings, drawn from different minority or marginalised groups in our community, that have somehow been exposed to stigma, misunderstanding or discrimination. Each Human Library™ event is designed to facilitate interactions that challenge stereotypes and prejudice through conversation. During each 30 minute conversation, members of the public as ‘readers’ can access, encounter and engage with the life stories of each human ‘book’, by asking questions and by listening to the answers. Seven ‘books’ visited the church whose ‘titles’ ranged from:

- Dyslexia/Bahai
- Dyslexia/Bahai
- Disability/Bahai
- Grief
- Bahai
- Grief/Gay
- Grief/Union Rep (inc. Dyslexia)
- Gay/Non-binary • Gay/Non-binary (Queer)
- Disabled/Non-binary (Queer)

Attendees very much enjoyed the experience saying they appreciated:

- The invitation & permission from both books to take elements of what they shared and apply it to my own life and situation.
- The openness. Moving the stories of people who have made a choice in their life much challenged ‘norms’ and expectations.
- Loads of insights to process!
- Warmth/personality of book!
- That we all share the same basic experience of grief.

#### From Shrewsbury Unitarian Church’s June 2023 newsletter

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Memorial Service for Audrey Green

On Sunday 23rd July, approximately 20 people attended the Memorial Service for Stourbridge congregation member Audrey Green. Friends, neighbours and work colleagues came to celebrate her life. The day was her birthday, and she would have been 93. A few days before, on the Friday, members of the congregation met to scatter Audrey’s ashes at the local crematorium.



Gavin Lloyd conducted a lovely, thoughtful service, with some of Audrey's favourite hymns. A string quartet, organised by our organist David Mearman, played during the service, which gave the whole celebration a calming and reflective feel.

The memorial service was followed by refreshments in the Vestry, where people mingled to share their memories of Audrey.

Everyone agreed that it was a wonderful way to remember and honour Audrey.

David Taylor (Stourbridge)



SUC's Summer Trip

One morning in early June, 13 of the congregation from Shrewsbury Unitarian Church assembled in a car park near to Shrewsbury Abbey. It was a little chilly and we wondered if we had dressed warmly enough but as the day progressed we were okay. The coach driver was very pleasant and we all enjoyed his commentary and chit chat along the journey to Bodnant Gardens via the Welsh country roads. After a short comfort stop we reached the National Trust gardens in the early afternoon.

We all managed to negotiate the entrance fee and headed for the renowned Laburnum Arch. Even though it was close to 'going over' it was a splendid sight to behold. Slowly, our party split up and wandered around the grounds, up hill and down dale marvelling at the superb plant displays – all looking glorious in the warm, June sunshine. I found the roses particularly stunning. Some of us partook of an ice cream or snack as we slowly made

our way back to the coach and one or two of us could not resist a bargain from the plants for sale!



Photographer unknown

As it was only a few miles down the road to the coast, our next stop was Llandudno seafront. Once again we split up and 'did our own thing' – maybe a stroll along the promenade and pier or to find a friendly café/hostelry for refreshment. With all that fresh, warm sea air we had a quieter journey back to Shrewsbury. All could agree that we had a lovely time the day we went to Bodnant.

Debra Burbery (Shrewsbury)



Northampton Pride 2023

The main highlight of the summer for many of us was the now annual Northampton Pride celebration which this year was held at the University of Northampton Campus. The Threads group made a banner which was a combination of embroidered and felted squares in the colours inspired by the original Gilbert Baker Pride Flag.



Aleks with her rainbow-coloured hair, holding the banner.
Photo by Sue Woolley

This made a very colourful addition to our decorations. Sue and I chose a significant spot in Beckett's Park to stand and greet the returning mass of Pride marchers (partly because of the showery weather and partly because of the distance to get to the start of the parade). It was a great snap decision since everyone in the parade saw our hard work and several people stopped to take pictures of us and with us.

It is a privilege to hear people's stories as part of being at the Pride stands and for the first time we put on a special celebration on Sunday evening where we were joined by local friends and some Unitarian friends from Coventry as a gentle celebration of our commitment to the LGBTQ+ community, to equal marriage and to the recognition of the place spiritual wellbeing and faith has in the lives of all people.

It is important to recognise we are not alone in this endeavour, at Pride we were happy to see our friends from Northampton Interfaith Forum (NIFF) and it was great to talk to those of other faiths about their inclusive welcome, but our commitment alongside these other offerings still really matters especially in a time when there is increased hostility to LGBTQ+ folk around the world, even in places like the UK and the USA where there had been so much progress previously. We can be reminded that as a dissenting faith the right to worship in the way we see fit was a countercultural move by our forebears and we continue to stand with those whose ability to live their truth may be threatened by those with greater influence and power.

Aleks Zglinska (Northampton)



Ministers' Meeting Summer Trip

On a lovely warm Wednesday in July, five of us met at Christ Church College, Oxford, to visit Christ Church Cathedral. Rev Peter Hewis had managed to arrange discounted tickets for us, and we thoroughly enjoyed the guided tour around the Cathedral, which is dedicated to St Frideswide, the patron saint of Oxford. The tour guide showed us some of their Burne Jones windows, which were beautiful, but both Peter and I agreed later that they weren't a patch on the ones at Harris Manchester College.

At the end of the tour, we went for lunch at a pub called 'The Head of the River' and my husband kindly took this photo of us.



Photo by Maz Woolley

Sue Woolley

The Environment

A bumper crop of contributions this time – both personal and thought provoking. thank you all!

The Environment - Individuals and Chapels

Starting with individuals, almost forty years ago the Open University ran a short course, "Energy in the Home" and I did the online course. As a result, we insulated our roof space and bought thermal lined curtains, we already had a large compost heap, and we probably did more but I can't remember! Sadly, the OU no longer run that course, but today we make sure our garden has plenty of bee-friendly plants and recycle most of our domestic waste. Our radiators all have thermostats, reflective foil behind them and all our bulbs are eco-friendly. We have had modest shares in a co-operative wind turbine scheme for almost twenty years and has saved us a large amount on our electricity bills.

What about our Chapel buildings? When I was Secretary of the then North Midlands District, we sold the Narborough Road Church in Leicester and, following the Charity Commission's advice, it was to the highest bidder. It was at a time of high inflation and our Finance Committee had a special meeting to create a policy. The policy was to allocate the income in the following proportions:

10% for promotional work like better newsletters, new notice boards and publicity schemes.

20% for re-investment to cope with high inflation.

30% for Ministries.

40% for buildings which led to surveys of every building and energy surveys. In Hinckley's case it led to roof insulation of the 18th century Meeting House and more efficient use of the heating

system. From memory our Lincoln Chapel had their rather dirty lampshades cleaned, installed energy saving bulbs and had a new boiler.

What about today? Sadly, the GA, District Associations and individual chapels seem to have done little, despite a GA Resolution inspired by current Vice-President Geoff Levermore in 2016. The resolution included these words, the bold font is my emphasis!

“Calls upon all Unitarians and Free Christians to respond by:

- a) making rational **changes to personal lifestyle** by measuring as necessary and reducing personal carbon footprints—including in the areas of domestic energy consumption and supply, transport and travel choices, and diet.
- b) initiating and supporting **actions at congregational level** to reduce energy usage and promote energy efficiency - including by recording premises' energy consumption to establish a baseline carbon footprint, and through involvement where possible in local community projects around energy efficiency, seeking advice from the GA's Buildings Advisory Panel as appropriate.

In conclusion I have two questions: What are you doing for the environment? What are the District Association and individual congregations doing?

Peter Hewis (Life Member)

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**Malvern Transformers**

Last term, Malvern Transformers, a group for 5 to 10 year olds who want to make a difference in the world, were learning about biodiversity and how important it is for the future of our planet.

Although it is less talked about, biodiversity loss is as important an issue for our future as climate change. Biodiversity is simply the variety of life on this planet – the variety of species, ecosystems and also the variation within a species. If we do not keep this variation, then when disaster strikes, there will be fewer individuals who survive and the services we receive from nature, like pollination and water filtration, may no longer be available.

Transformers looked at the different factors affecting biodiversity – climate change, pollution, habitat loss, hunting and invasive species and the impact of each. We also visited a local biodiversity garden, which was encouraging native species like newts and hedgehogs.

As this was our Service Ray, we considered how we as Transformers might do something for the planet. One of the ways we did this was to send card starfish to an MP, with the names of organisms on them being harmed by bottom dredging around our shores.

To find out about Malvern Transformers visit our website [www.malverntransformers.org.uk](http://www.malverntransformers.org.uk)

**Rosemary Webb (Evesham)**

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Stourbridge’s Environmental Policy

At Stourbridge we have an environmental policy of not using any harsh chemicals in our churchyard, and actively encouraging wildlife and wild flowers. The hot and sunny weather in June encouraged our wild flowers, putting on a lovely display. We also have a policy of using eco cleaning products from local packaging

free shops, we recycle and never use single use plastic disposable items.

Environmental issues and the care of nature are very close to our hearts. Trustee Chair, Carolyn Taylor founded the Aston University Campus Wildlife Group, and works for the RSPB. Her husband David was a founder (in his teens) of Stourbridge Greenpeace, and Pulpit Secretary Pam Archer is a Green Party candidate with a history of involvement in issues such as CND and Greenham Common.

Carolyn Taylor (Chair of Trustees, Stourbridge)

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**The Environment**

**Our Editor has asked us to write on the topic of “the environment”. But what is the environment?** The online Oxford Dictionary tells us:

**The environment**

1. **“the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates”**. It goes on to give similar words including *‘habitat’, ‘territory’, ‘domain’, ‘home’, ‘abode’, ‘surroundings’, ‘conditions’, ‘environs’, ‘circumstances’*.

It then offers a second definition:

2. **“the natural world, as a whole or in a particular geographical area, especially as affected by human activity”**. and gives as an example: *“the impact of pesticides on the environment”*

For me, as I was growing up, the first definition was what I understood the environment to be, but in recent years the reference to “the natural world” seems to be more relevant. And there are now, at long last, many concerns for the environment, alongside which is the realisation that it is damaged, and we are the ones to blame for making it so. As individuals we might not have been directly involved in causing the damage, but so-called civilised societies, especially in the Western world as a whole, are the greatest culprits in creating this damage. We are part of the Western world and, on the whole, we like modern life with all its conveniences.

Concern for the environment may seem like a new idea but for thousands of years there have been people doing their best to raise awareness of it. Too often they were dismissed as crackpots.

To quote from <https://www.europeana.eu/en/blog/green-through-time-four-historical-figures-who-raised-awareness-of-the-environment> :

“Environmental awareness is nothing new. A 2018 Greenpeace article on the history of environmentalism mentions that the first human recording of ecological awareness appears 5,000 years ago. An ancient city around that time in modern day Pakistan called Mohenjo Daro, was known to practice waste management and already recognised the effects of pollution on health.”

The article goes on to highlight Hippocrates who was born in about 460 BC and lived until about 370 BC. In his time, ordinary people thought that the gods brought illness about, but he wrote that human health was affected by what people ate, but also by the environment in which they lived.

Then there was John Evelyn (1620 – 1702), who was an English writer and a gardener. In 1661 he wrote to King Charles II

reporting that sea-coal burning caused air pollution. He suggested that large gardens could improve air quality and identified several industries including soap production and brewing as causing pollution

George Catlin, an American artist in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, campaigned for the creation of national parks in an effort to preserve the wildernesses that Native American communities depended upon.

But it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that environmental issues became a more serious concern, beginning with the publication of a book in 1962, called *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. In it, she claimed that chemical pesticides were having an adverse effect on biodiversity. Finally more people began to take notice.

But even that was more than sixty years ago; only now are most human beings becoming aware of the dangers that modern life is causing. Even now there still seem to be many people who don't think it has anything to do with them, that there is nothing they can do. And in a way perhaps they are right. It seems to be major organisations, such as multinational corporations who wield a great deal of power in the interest, it seems, of making themselves rich, with little thought of the impact on the rest of the world.

But there is some hope. I subscribe to a website called "Only Good News Daily" (<https://www.onlygoodnewsdaily.com/>) which is exactly what it is. I believe it came about because most news providers seem to concentrate on bad news. This week the following have all been featured in OGN Daily:

- Tero Mustonen is an environmental hero; he has just won a Goldman Prize - also known as a 'Green Nobel' for his work on restoring and rewilding around 130,000 acres across 80 sites across Finland. It's a truly great story of ecological restoration and demonstrates what the will and determination of just one person can achieve.

- Sweden's Husqvarna has added a new "rewilding mode" feature to its robotic lawn mowers. They say "Rewilding Mode uses GPS wizardry to set aside 10 percent of your lawn for biodiversity,"
- Malaysia, one of the ten biggest plastic polluters in the world, is ramping up its campaign to ban the use of all plastic bags.
- Sea otters help ecosystems capture carbon from the atmosphere and store it as biomass and deep-sea detritus, preventing it from being converted back to carbon dioxide and contributing to climate change. Scientists have made several important discoveries that help put these perpetually hungry, furry creatures in the climate super-hero category.
- Lawmakers in the Caribbean island of Aruba have taken the first steps toward amending its constitution to include a recognition that nature possesses inherent legal rights to exist and regenerate. If the process is successful, Aruba will become the world's second country, after Ecuador, to constitutionally recognise the rights of nature.
- Barcelona's Superilla (Superblocks) project began in 2013, when the city created a cluster of low-traffic mini-neighbourhoods with more space for planting and play areas. A subsequent survey found that nitrogen dioxide levels in the neighbourhoods had dropped by up to 25 percent, while residents reported "better rest, less perceived noise and air pollution and increased socialisation".
- Last year, the world built more new solar capacity than every other power source combined. Solar is now growing much faster than any other energy technology in history. How fast? Fast enough to completely displace fossil fuels

from the entire global economy before 2050, says Andrew Blakers, Professor of Engineering, Australian National University.

At last, an organisation that really cares about our environment, enough to publish “Only Good News” every single day. I recommend it to you.

**Pam Archer (Stourbridge)**



**The Environment**

One evening in October, when I was one-third sober,  
An’ taking home a loaf with manly pride:  
My feet began to stutter, so I lay down in the gutter,  
An’ a pig came up an’ lay down by my side;  
Then we sang “It’s all fair weather when good fellows get  
together,”  
Till a lady passing by was heard to say:  
“You can tell a man who boozes by the company he  
chooses”  
And the pig got up and slowly walked away.

This jingle of the 1930s was occasionally sung by my father. Was it a warning for me and my brother? Something to remind us to be careful about the environment we chose? It sprang to my mind as soon as I read Sue’s suggested theme for this issue of *MU Now*.

It is certainly a reminder of how important the environment is for a child. Who knows what parental advice – and behaviour – will remain with the child and become part of her or his character.

Something else that came to my mind was the words of Rev. J.P. Chalk, who was a minister at Croydon in the 1950s. Whilst

training for the ministry I was fortunate in being asked to work with him during my vacations from college. One of the things he advised me was, “Always write your sermons sitting in a comfortable armchair.” I am not sure if I ever managed that and wonder if it would have made a difference!

Good environment has determined great happenings. Adam Nicholson in *How to Be: Life Lessons from the Early Greeks*, has the lovely phrase, “Places give access to minds.” He makes the point that the early Greek philosophers arose from the environment of the “sea-and-city world in which, in the western tradition, the great and everlasting questions of existence were first explored.”

I don’t suppose anyone denies the importance of the environment in which one lives. What we also need to remember is that we, each of us, is a part of the environment of the people with whom we live and meet during our daily lives.

From time to time we each need to ask ourselves – “Am I a good environment?”

**Peter Godfrey (Stroud)**



**The Environment**

What a massive topic! I prefer to think of “My Environment” because that is where I can have an influence – albeit small. Years ago I was with a group of students peering into the oily water of Bristol Docks. The Lecturer with us remarked meditatively, “Everywhere is someone’s home” – a phrase which has become a mantra in my life.

My garden is my environment and my influence is limited because that allows life to proceed more naturally than if I interfered! I realise this could be seen as an excuse to do less as I grow older – but it has had positive results! My mower is set to “high” allowing the grass to grow longer; I don’t use weed killers, pesticides or slug pellets; leaves are left on beds to form a natural mulch in autumn; and I try to grow native plants which provide shelter and a food source all the year round.

In the overall scheme of life my efforts are minimal, but I am getting inordinate pleasure from the results! My putative lawn is a “green sward” where primroses, cowslips, clover, bedstraw, yarrow (and moss!) grow, together with four species of native orchids – so I must have the right mycorrhiza too. Thank you, birds, for bringing them to my garden!

My latest joy comes from hedgehogs! Early in August there was one trotting down the garden path investigating beds on either side (they like slugs.....!). More recently there was activity in a bed of hellebores and I watched a hedgehog collect dry leaves which it built into a mound against the wall. This one looked smaller than the previous one, so have I got two? And what is the mound for? It seems early to hibernate. Be sure I will keep watching.....

There are aspects of my environment I can’t influence – the reduced numbers of insect life (almost no ladybirds) so almost no swallows and house martins which used to be plentiful. Butterflies seem scarce and I haven’t seen a yaffle this year. I hope and pray that these return, but I know that their environment is beyond my control. The rest of the world must play its part and “every little helps”.

**Alison Thursfield (Cheltenham)**

### **One Autumn Morning**

The Autumn colours were glorious last year – the leaves every possible shade of red-russet-copper-brown-gold-yellow-green that the eye could see or the heart could imagine. The sheer beauty of it all took my breath away, especially when the multifarious colours were backlit by sunshine against a vivid blue sky.

Which is why I count myself so blessed to live within walking distance of it all, on the outskirts of Salcey Forest. Although the wonderful, wonder-full displays of colour were everywhere last year, not least in the trees lining the roads I drive along every day.

One particular bright Autumn morning sticks in my mind. When I awoke, I sat for a while in my bedroom’s armchair, gazing out of the window as the sky turned from deepest navy blue, through dark purple, to pinks, reds and oranges as the morning sun rose in the east. At this time of year, it is a regular treat to watch it. I dressed quickly, went downstairs and ate an early breakfast – I could not wait to get out into the glory of the day, to be one with the natural world.

I was out of the front door by seven a.m. – there was a sense of urgency in my mind – I wanted to have the forest to myself that morning. I strode briskly up the lane, passed the gate which led to the forest and up the short rise to the old railway bridge, its ruddy-brown bricks still in the shade.

Before me was the path which led to the forest. I paused for a moment, to breathe in the beauty of it all. Then, walking more slowly, I began to immerse myself in the experience. The trees in all their Autumn glory on each side of the path, linked by hedges

bright with purple-blue sloes and orange-red rosehips – wonderful food for the birds. Who were clamouring their joy in the bright morning. Sparrows were twittering in the hedgerows and a female blackbird swooped across my eyeline.

The path was littered with spent leaves of all colours, as well as with acorns, hazelnuts and sycamore seeds. In the verges on either side, spent grasses waved in the breeze. I breathed deeply, filling my eyes and ears with the forest around me.

A glint of golden-brown. I stopped dead, holding my breath, as a large hare with black-tipped ears bounded across the path in front of me from one side to the other. Unbidden, words arose in my mind and I thanked God for my habit of bringing a small notebook and pen with me on these walks.

As I was walking down the path  
towards the wood, a golden hare  
with black-tipped ears jumped into view –  
so full of grace and majesty.  
I felt as though I had been blessed  
to share the space with one so fair  
and rarely seen, by clumsy folk  
like you and me. But there she was –  
a sharp delight pierced through my heart.  
A moment later, she was gone,  
the awe remained – I feel it still.

Moments later, I was in the forest proper. I turned right and set off down a wide earthen path, weaving around the puddles, revelling in the experience of having seen the hare. I often saw

squirrels – there was one now, zipping up a tree trunk with a whisk of its tail. But I had never seen a hare. It felt magical.

Fifteen minutes passed. I knew where I was aiming for – a crossroads deep in the forest. At one corner of it a special tree stood. I'm not sure why I consider it special, I only knew it has deep meaning for me. I walk this route regularly to pay homage to it. I have seen it in the bright, white snows of Winter, the yellow-green foliage of new leaves in Spring, and in the deep green of high Summer. Now I would see it in Autumn.



There it was. Perfect in its autumnal beauty. At that moment, the sun filtered through a cloud, lighting it up with God-rays. I fumbled for my phone, took a picture. Then bowed my head and gave thanks.

**Sue Woolley**

## **Everything that lives is Holy: A Blakean view of environmentalism**

What could be more natural than nature? Yet 'nature' is a construct of human thought. The main characteristic of Western hegemony is the assumption that there is only one way to see the world. In the medieval period nature equated to the whole of God's creation, with the human world being rather fluidly differentiated from the rest of the natural world. By the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, 'Reason' was diametrically opposed to 'Nature'. The mechanistic Newtonian view of nature had been born.

When considering how many of us have a spiritual response to nature and the environment, I began to look to the great poets. Unusually I found myself not turning to the poets most often associated with nature such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, but to the great, often misunderstood poet, painter and printmaker, William Blake.

William Blake was born in 1757, at the height of the Enlightenment, and died in 1827, when the Romantic movement was on the wane. Largely unrecognised during his life, Blake is now considered a seminal figure in the history of the poetry and visual art of the Romantic Age. His art and poetry, based on his own system of mythology and symbolism, can make Blake a difficult poet to get to grips with. Most people will know him, if they know of him at all, from perhaps learning his most famous poem, *Tyger* at school, or from his most famous poem/hymn *Jerusalem* (And did those feet...). In 2002, Blake was placed at number 38 in the BBC's poll of the 100 Greatest Britons.

Blake saw himself as a prophet battling the tyranny of nations and the tyranny of thought. The same chains that rulers and generals placed on people could be linked to the chains of mental oppression. His task was to enlighten people up and free them from what he so perfectly called their "mind-forg'd manacles."

What then does this all have to do with the literature of climate change? On the surface, Blake says little that can help us in our time of environmental crisis. However, it is Blake's tireless insistence to bring forth new forms, reinvent old systems and imaginatively confront the events of his time that can be a model for activists. Like Blake, we live in unprecedented times, and I don't think we know how to honestly confront our environmental situation. The moral and existential problems we face cannot be adequately addressed through traditional modes of thought or expression.

For instance, the scientific and humanitarian advances that have led to the eradication of diseases, the enormous reduction of infant mortality, and doubling of the lifespan for much of the world, seem like unequivocal moral goods that should be expanded. Anything that makes life less short, nasty and brutish is good. However, our success in this area has resulted in a global population of over seven billion. More than coal, plastic bags or fossil fuels, the sheer number of people on the planet is the primary contributor to our present environmental catastrophe.

Yet overpopulation is an issue that is rarely discussed. One reason is that it is a topic that ruptures our basic moral beliefs, and presents a situation that pits ecological responsibility against long-standing moral imperatives to elongate and save lives. It's easier to dismiss this as alarmist rhetoric and insist that the modern

Peaceable Kingdom, where technology and proper policy will allow for 9.7 billion people (the projected number by 2050) to live in harmony with the natural world, is within reach.

I don't know what the solution is, or if there is one. However, whether it's philosophers, politicians, poets, policy makers, or novelists, there is a great need to imaginatively push through our mental habits and patterns of thought in order to confront the nature of our situation. I see Blake as an individual who faced similar questions and anxieties. He took an imaginatively erratic route, and as we now face an environmental situation that has no precedent, Blake's radical imagination is a fascinating example of how a literary artist can forge new modes of expression in order to confront the contours of the shifting reality in which they live.

Blake's concept of nature follows from his dialectical and idealist position. On the one hand, he stresses that nature teaches us nothing of Spiritual Life. The science which only studies nature leads to a spiritual dead end. But here Blake is only talking of Newton's nature. If we go beyond our five senses, if the doors of perception are cleansed, then we will see that "everything that lives is Holy."

What Blake is telling us is that we humans are not separate from nature, but are an integral part of it. Unfortunately, man has interfered with the beneficial course of nature; "The Bible says that God formed Nature perfect", Blake wrote in his annotations to Richard Watson's *An Apology for the Bible* (1797), "but that Man perverted the order of Nature, since which time the Elements are fill'd with the Prince of Evil." Man, in his fallen state has therefore introduced self-interest and cruelty into the originally pure natural order. Blake referred to the material world in its most

fallen state as *Ulro*. It has been pointed out that *Ulro* goes by other names—Hebrew *Gehenna* or Islamic *Jahannam*. *Ulro* is called *Samsāra* in Buddhism—the realm of "dukkha", the land of illusion that creates pain and suffering, due to our illusory attachments.

Blake's rejection of materialism was summed up by his famous saying: "May God us keep / From Single vision & Newton's sleep." Newton, to Blake, was the arch materialist. Here Blake refers to those who live in the realm of low consciousness, who are consumed in a single-minded way with control, power and domination. I was reminded of an example of this from my Greenpeace days in the 1980s. I had placed some Greenpeace leaflets in my local library. A few weeks later a letter appeared in the local press about them! The leaflets had dared to point out that on the great 'Universal Clock', humankind had only been in existence for the last few minutes, in which time it had created a hole in the ozone, wiped entire species off the face of the planet and generally destroyed and polluted the natural world. The writer of the letter wanted to point out that these were not things we needed to concern ourselves with, because God had put us in charge of the planet as part of some 'Great Plan' and that He would sort it all out, so we didn't have to bother! As laughable as this now seems, unfortunately there are still people of this mindset out there!

Blake opposed the Newtonian view of a mechanical, unfeeling, dreary universe, as well as those who would seek to drown out the voices of compassion and wisdom. This is a vision cut off from nature and from the soul, and is one we should strive to transcend.

**David Taylor (Stourbridge)**

## MUA Congregations: Times of Services

This list shows when our Unitarian congregations in the Midlands meet for worship. But please contact the congregation before travelling, in case they are no longer accurate.

### Every Sunday:

|                                          |                              |                       |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Birmingham<br>Cheltenham &<br>Gloucester | Unitarian New Meeting Church | 11.00 am              |
| Evesham                                  | Bayshill Unitarian Church    | 11.00 am              |
| Kingswood                                | Oat Street Chapel            | 11.00 am <sup>1</sup> |
| Shrewsbury                               | Meeting House                | 11.00 am              |
| Warwick                                  | Unitarian Church             | 11.00 am              |
|                                          | High Street Chapel           | 4.30 pm               |

### First Sunday of the Month:

|                   |                         |          |
|-------------------|-------------------------|----------|
| Northampton       | Unitarian Meeting House | 11.00 am |
| Stroud Fellowship | The Exchange, Stroud    | 3.00 pm  |

### Second Sunday of the Month:

|             |                                   |                      |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|
| Coventry    | Gt Meeting House Unitarian Church | 11 am                |
| Cradley     | Park Lane Unitarian Chapel        | 6.30 pm <sup>2</sup> |
| Stourbridge | Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel   | 11.00 am             |

### Third Sunday of the Month:

|             |                         |          |
|-------------|-------------------------|----------|
| Northampton | Unitarian Meeting House | 11.00 am |
|-------------|-------------------------|----------|

### Fourth Sunday of the Month:

|             |                                   |          |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|----------|
| Coventry    | Gt Meeting House Unitarian Church | 11 am    |
| Stourbridge | Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel   | 11.00 am |

<sup>1</sup> No service on 5<sup>th</sup> Sundays <sup>2</sup>currently in abeyance

## MUA Congregations: Contact Details

| Name                    | Contact           | Details                                         |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Birmingham              |                   | unitariannewmeetingbirmingham@yahoo.co.uk       |
| Cheltenham & Gloucester | Alison Thursfield | 01242 254825<br>thursfieldalison@gmail.com      |
| Coventry                | Francesca Rogers  | info@coventryunitarians.org.uk                  |
| Cradley                 | Sheila Powell     | perconicous24@yahoo.co.uk<br>01384 480784       |
| Evesham                 | Jane Couper       | 01386-839458<br>janecouper@outlook.com          |
| Kingswood               | Maria Govier      | 07816-159199<br>maria.heath@icloud.com          |
| Northampton             | Aleks Zglinska    | 07970-785159<br>aleks.zglinska@gmail.com        |
| Shrewsbury              | Fiona Checkley    | 07487 531 913<br>shrewsburyunitarians@gmail.com |
| Stourbridge             | David Mearman     | 01384 376478<br>davidmearman@hotmail.com        |
| Stroud                  | Pam Jenkinson     | 07776 276276<br>pam.jenkinson58@gmail.com       |
| Warwick                 | Elaine Nomura     | 01926 611964<br>emtnomura@aol.com               |



**The Winter 2023/24 issue will be published in January.**

**Please may we have your contributions on local matters,  
and on the theme of “Spiritual Practices”**

**by Friday 5<sup>th</sup> January 2024**

**Thank you!**