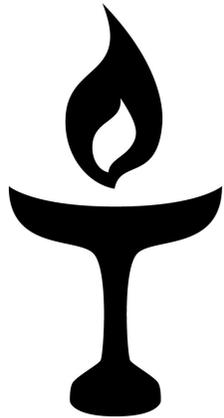


MU NOW



THE MAGAZINE OF
THE MIDLAND UNITARIAN
ASSOCIATION

ISSUE 70

WINTER/SPRING 2024

www.midland-unitarian-association.org.uk

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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 Winter / Spring 2024 issue of *MU Now*. It includes the normal District updates, plus a couple of thoughtful contributions on the theme of 'Spiritual Practices'.

It is the thinnest issue of *MU Now* I have ever edited – having only sixteen pages. Please, I beg you, send me articles for the next issue...

My thanks to the people 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 May 2024, is, "What do you want from your MUA?". The deadline for submissions is Friday 3rd May 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



As I write this, this region has been suffering the horror of flooding – the wettest ever period with 70% above average rainfall – bringing such misery and challenge. My thoughts and prayers go out to any of our congregations, Shrewsbury comes to mind, who have been affected... Here in Gloucestershire, our council base in Tewkesbury has become water bound again but flood defences after the 2007 events have protected our small town of Winchcombe this time. For this I give huge thanks.

As well as these issues, this is also the time of Epiphany – the travelling of the Magi to honour the infant Jesus, and in biblical terms their task of 'manifested Christ to the Gentiles'... bringing Christ's incarnation in human form to the wider world.

The term Magi is often 'translated' as the Wise Men – and many other terms used in this story need 'unpacking' or some form of translation into more understandable and meaningful language for modern day ears. This process of course has its own dangers and benefits, nuances that are both 'lost and found' in translation...

Last week I went orange label 'mad' in our local food Co-op...I can't resist a bargain!

A jar of French chestnut puree for 15p, it was still in date and a useful store cupboard item... and it makes a base for a delicious pudding.

Reading the directions in English on the label it instructs you to: "warm on very sweet fire" ??? Confused, I look at the French

instructions: “A rechauffer a feu tres doux” (doux=sweet) doux also means gentle...doucement... I like the idea of a sweet gentle fire...

I feel sometimes that an **inner faith**, an **inner hope**, is like an **inner ‘sweet gentle fire’**. So much can be learned and expanded by understanding words in different ways.

So I leave you with this thought...how do we keep this ‘sweet gentle fire’ of faith and hope burning in our congregations? Maybe the times we are living in hold a clue. One resident of Tewkesbury his house flooded, yet again, and despite this grim reality spoke warmly of the help and support he has had from his local community. In these challenging times we can still remember our common humanity, the vulnerable incarnation of Christ born into May we too give and receive gifts of time, hope, peace and sweet gentle kindness in the months ahead.

Cressida Pryor

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### **District Minister: Winter 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 (with a short break for some recuperation time following a minor operation in December). I look forward to being able to start leading worship in person again in April.

The **Autumn Taster Workshop**, on the topic of ‘Paths to Inner Peace’ went very well. I hope that all the participants went away with some ideas for possible spiritual practices they might implement. Details of the Spring Training Day will be finalised at the EC’s January meeting.

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 September and November 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 committee member: Rev Winnie Gordon, minister of Unitarian New Meeting in Birmingham, was welcomed back onto the committee.
- 2 Timings and Locations of EC meetings: it was agreed that while most of the EC’s meetings would continue to be on Zoom, one meeting a year (during May) would be in-person, at Unitarian New Meeting Church in Birmingham.
- 3 2024 AGM: this will be taking place at UNM on Saturday 30th March. Our Guest Speaker will be Dr Mark Fox.

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## Spiritual Practices

### What *are* spiritual practices?

When I read in the last issue of *MU Now* that the theme suggested for articles in the next issue would be ‘Spiritual Practices’ my first thought was, “Well, that lets me out – I don’t have any spiritual practices.”

As the weeks have flown past and the deadline rushes ever closer, I have kept thinking about the subject and wondering, what are spiritual practices? I have begun to think that my first reaction was perhaps because my idea of ‘spiritual practices’ consisted of happenings such as nuns and monks getting up at five in the morning for a couple of hours of prayer. Or at least setting aside half an hour a day for prayer and meditation, or going on a pilgrimage.

I am far from saying that such things are wrong, it is just that I personally don’t do any of them. BUT – is my initial thinking about what spiritual practices are too narrow?

I believe in the oneness of human nature. We may speak of spirit, mind, brain and so forth as separate things. It seems to me that we only separate them to try to talk about them, whereas in fact they are part of a unity – you and me as a person. In one of his last e-mails before he died, Rev. Len Smith, one time Principal of Unitarian College Manchester, wrote, “There is no dichotomy – body and spirit are one, not separate, and matter is the miracle underlying everything.”

From this point of view, a large vision and conception of spiritual practices is possible. I think it can include listening to enchanting music, walking in beautiful woodland, visiting a lovely building, reading an inspiring or eye-opening book, being in good company, a friendly chat with a neighbour, a letter of comfort to a bereaved person or to someone unwell. I hope we can all make our own list.

Terry Eagleton once wrote in a book review that, “When Jesus speaks of salvation in terms of feeding the hungry and visiting the sick, he speaks as a devout Jew, for whom the spiritual is in the first place a matter of how one behaves towards others.”

“God walks amongst the pots and pipkins.” These words of Saint Teresa are the subheading to Cecily Hallack’s poem *The Divine Office of the Kitchen*. The first verse reads:

*“Lord of the pots and pipkins, since I have no time to be  
A saint by doing lovely things and vigilling with Thee,  
By watching in the twilight dawn, and storming heaven’s gates,  
Make me a saint by getting meals, and washing up the plates!”*

### Rev Peter Godfrey

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Taking Time Out

Some words I read recently, by the 18th century German physicist, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, really hit me where I live. “You should never have so much to do, that you never have time to reflect / meditate.”

And I would guess that his words would resonate uneasily with many of us. It is only too easy to be always on the go, always

chasing the next item on the To Do list, and never taking time out to reflect, to meditate, to spend time with the Divine. It is ironic that, the more we love our jobs, the more we see them as a vocation rather than just a job, the less time we seem to have to simply do nothing. Do Nothing. Sit. Relax. Simply BE.

Yet I believe it is vitally important to *make* that time. Because if we just carry on beavering away, not looking after ourselves, we will eventually burn out. And then wonder why...

Time for spiritual reflection, time out of our everyday lives, is such an important thing. It brings us back into balance, helps us to take a long, reflective look at the matters which are concerning us, and hopefully allows us to move back into those same everyday lives with lower stress levels.



I honestly believe that it doesn't matter what form this time out takes, so long as we have the intention to step away completely. For me, a walk in the woods is a vital part of my life. As I walk, I notice the marvels of creation all around me – the trees, the bushes, the wild flowers, the birds singing in the trees – so loud and present, but so difficult to spot! The photo on the previous

page was a moment of grace – I really sensed God's presence at that moment. And I try to spend ten to twenty minutes in my bedroom, in front of my shrine, each morning, with my Unitarian prayer beads, which I made during Summer School in 2009, and have used ever since.

I know from experience that, if I lose the habit for a couple of weeks (which, if I am honest, happens only too easily) I am more wound-up, more easily irritated, less relaxed, less able to give myself to others.

Our spiritual practice / time out might be attending worship on a Sunday, or a Heart and Soul session during the week, or walking a labyrinth, or reading a spiritual / theological book and doing some quiet *lectio divina*. Or journalling. Or praying. Or yoga. Or simply choosing to do the present task mindfully. Or any of the things which Peter Godfrey mentioned in his article. It really doesn't matter, so long as we do it, preferably each day.



Our souls will love us for it.

Rev Sue Woolley

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 Cheltenham & Gloucester	Unitarian New Meeting Church	11.00 am
Evesham	Bayshill Unitarian Church	11.00 am
Kingswood	Oat Street Chapel	11.00 am ¹
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 ²
Stourbridge	Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel	11.00 am

Third Sunday of the Month:

Northampton	Unitarian Meeting House	11.00 am
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Fourth Sunday of the Month:

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

¹ No service on 5th Sundays ²currently in abeyance

MUA Congregations: Contact Details

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



The Spring 2024 issue will be published in May.

**Please may we have your contributions on local matters,
and on the theme of “What do you want from your MUA?”**

by Friday 3rd May 2024

Thank you!