

# MU NOW

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## From the Editor

Welcome to the Spring 2017 issue of *MU Now*, number 50! This bumper issue contains some very interesting contributions.

We have our first President's Piece from our new President, Diane Rutter, as well as her address from the District AGM. We also have the full text of Rev. Danny Crosby's address from the AGM, starting on page 11.

Then some beautiful blessings, written by participants in the Spring Training day, and an update on how the Rites of Passage course is going.

It is good to hear some news from Stourbridge – see page 30, and also, in our theme section, we have the wonderfully inspirational address which Rev. Ant Howe delivered at the Asparagus Lunch on 10<sup>th</sup> May – see page 32. Finally, we have a new hymn, penned by Bronwen Taylor, on page 43.

### 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 "Living in an era of change" and the deadline for submissions will be Friday 1<sup>st</sup> September 2017.**

*Sue Woolley*

## President's Piece



A very warm hello from Hollywood! For those of you who do not know me my name is Diane Rutter and I am your new MUA President. I was admitted to office at the AGM in March, which was held at Kingswood Meeting House where I work with Rev. Ant Howe. I have been Lay Assistant there since September 2010. I am involved with the social and children's groups that meet at KMH, am Captain of their Boy's Brigade Company (32<sup>nd</sup> Birmingham), conduct rites of passage, take services, make pastoral visits and am to be seen generally about the village wherever there is a cup of tea and a piece of cake!

I hail from Salford in Greater Manchester and was latterly connected with the Chorlton congregation before I took up my post in the Midlands.

It has been a privilege getting to know many of you in this District and before my term of office is up in two years' time, I hope to get around all those congregations I have not visited as yet. My first 'official' assignment was at the splendid Asparagus Lunch held at the Evesham Church on 10<sup>th</sup> May, and in the same week I also took my first service at the Bayshill congregation in Cheltenham.

Please do read and enjoy this magazine, it's amazing what can grow from it. Because of the article by Debra Burbery of the Shrewsbury congregation about 'Knit for Peace', we started a group ourselves this year. We meet once a month and average about 15 people at each session. Our knitters are most prolific and we hope to send our first consignment of jumpers, cardigans, hats,

scarves, gloves and toys very shortly. At least half of those who attend the group had never come to something at the Chapel before and we are still getting 'new' people over the doorstep.

Following a recent conversation with Pamela Rose of the Oldbury congregation, I wonder how many of you were May Queens or May attendants? Or similar. It would be lovely if you could send in photographs of these evocative bygone occasions to share with the District. If you could write about some of these traditions that would be even better. I myself served as a May attendant to my aunt, Penny Rutter as was, at Pendleton Church on Cross Lane in Salford. And when I can lay my hands on the photographs I shall share them with you. It was a really big tradition in the North West and I can remember joining parades around the area and visiting other churches in my beautiful mint green frock that my Nana Violet Rutter made.

I hope you all find something of value within these pages and wish you all joy and spirit filled summer months.

Yours in friendship, Diane.

**Diane Rutter** Tel: 0787-1215-920 e-mail:dianerutter2004@yahoo.co.uk



Irene Parkinson (later Barlow, mother of the late Rev. Simon John Barlow) on the day she was crowned May Queen

## MUA District Minister: Spring Update

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

I am now half way through my sixth year as **Minister of the Banbury Unitarian Fellowship**. We are ticking along nicely, in spite of the poor health of many of our members.

**Leading worship around the Midland Unitarian Association:** My diary for **2017** is now full - I am leading worship somewhere near you practically every Sunday between now and the end of this year, except for the months of my Sabbatical. I look forward to seeing you in your churches and chapels as and when.

Our **Spring Training Day**, on the topic *How Unitarians Do Communion* took place on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> March, and attracted no less than 17 people from seven congregations. It was a really interesting day.

An early heads-up for the **Autumn Training Day**, on the important topic of *Safeguarding*. This is a Local Leadership Strategy Group training day, led by Rev. John Harley and Liz Hills, and it is important that someone from EVERY MUA congregation comes along. It is on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> November, at Unitarian New Meeting Church in Birmingham, from 12 noon.

We are now half-way through running the national **Rites of Passage Course**, with just the June and July dates to go. In June, Ant will be teaching us how to lead Funerals, and in July we will be putting it all into practice. See page 28 for story.

I'm now most of the way through 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 regretfully inform you that I have resigned from the post of **Minister of Northampton Unitarians**, with effect from 7th July. I wish them every success in the future.

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

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## MUA Executive Committee Key Messages

The Key Messages below, from our January meeting 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 here:

1. Sabbatical: Rev. Sue Woolley had circulated a paper, requesting that she be granted a 10-week sabbatical from July - September 2017. This was approved unanimously by the Committee, subject to the addition of a week 11, because she is intending to work during week 8. Her last day of work will be Friday 7<sup>th</sup> July, and she will be back in circulation on Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> September.

2. Inviting User Groups to Services: the congregation at Coventry have invited groups using their building to special services, such as Harvest and Christmas. They commend the idea to other congregations, as it improves the relationship between congregation and users.

3. The Northampton congregation is *\*still\** waiting to hear that it has been registered for weddings and same-sex weddings.

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e-mails: dianerutter2004@yahoo.co.uk; revsuewoolley@gmail.com

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## MUA Annual General Meeting

Saturday 25th March saw nearly 40 Unitarians from across the District meeting at Kingswood Meeting House to take part in the 151st Annual General Meeting of the Midland Unitarian Association.

The business meeting was over in just under an hour, and included a special presentation to our dedicated Treasurer, Mr. Sandy Ellis, to mark the start of his 35<sup>th</sup> year of service to the District. Our new President is Ms. Diane Rutter, of Kingswood, and our new Vice-President is Ms. Angela Maher, of Birmingham UNM. We also gave thanks to outgoing President, Mrs. Jane Couper of Evesham.

Business over, we came together in the Kingswood schoolroom to enjoy an excellent buffet lunch, laid on by Jill Bowie and her helpers. Then it was time to re-convene, for the new President's service, and to listen to our Guest Speaker, Rev. Danny Crosby, minister of the Altrincham and Urmston congregations in the North West.

Diane spoke about life in terms of high tides and low tides, varying between times of activity and involvement, and times of quietness and reflection. Life and ministry are sometimes brilliant, sometimes the reverse, but mostly about getting through the ordinary days every day. She shared a time of stillness and reflection by Simon John Barlow, (reproduced below) which was about the holiness of ordinary days, and concluded with a hymn which she said could be the anthem for Unitarianism in the

Midlands: no. 42 in the purple book *Remember the past, work in the present to ensure the future*.

Danny's talk was about how Love changes everything, and is published on page 11 below. His theme was that impermanence is the energy and beauty of life, and that the spiritual life is about being awake to the wonders of life. There are both wonderful and painful moments, and everything is in change.

He commented that we seem to be living in more fearful times at present, to have lost faith with each other. But lots of people still look at life with loving eyes. He said that Love was equally as strong as fear. Taking up Diane's metaphor of tides, he explained that love and fear are like two forces pushing and pulling at our lives, and that we as Unitarians need to have faith in life, and try to live it in love. He concluded by asking those present to keep journeying on to new awakenings, and to live out of love, rather than fear.

All in all, it was a rich and enjoyable day.

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## **The President's Address at the MUA AGM**

Gary E. Smith wrote: "When ministers are charged with spiritually nurturing congregations, congregations should be charged, as well, to the mutual ministry. Today, I am eloquent in the pulpit and brilliant in the church school, and you are spiritually intoxicated with my wisdom; next week I stumble and bumble through my uncertainty and need your forgiveness. Today I am a great rock of comfort in a weary land; tomorrow I am blown about as the sands of the desert and I need the oasis of your strength. Today I dazzle you with my perspicacity; tomorrow I forget our appointment.

Blessed are they who minister and blessed are they who are ministered unto. Blessed be the task of the minister. Blessed be the task of the minister. Blessed be the task of the congregation – for ultimately they are the one and the same."

When Presidents of the MUA are charged with conducting district business and bringing meetings to order. . . .

Other people's thoughts and meditations seem so much wiser than my own. All three readings culminate in the following short bursts of insight for me:

Sometimes there will be highs and busyness; sometimes there will be lows and quietness. Use your brain, think, challenge and be challenged; just rest, allow yourself to be, in the presence of God and you'll get through life. And sometimes I will be brilliant and sometimes I will land spectacularly on my derriere, but mostly there will be what seems to be a lot of the ordinary day to day stuff.

The MUA is full of those who minister daily, who are called to believe, to support, to do, to be. All of us making time for God. I don't know how many of you sometimes think to yourselves as Eddie Askew's minister when asked if God helps, "Yes, but don't ask me how".

When I reflect on why I believe whatever I believe and does God make a difference in my life, I think 'yes, but don't ask me how'. I just hang out and be religious in my own fashion.

And I give thanks for Unitarianism, which allows me the freedom to think so. I give thanks for the MUA which supports our congregations, and I give thanks for the members of those congregations whose commitment and hard work, both past and present, means there is a future for Unitarianism in the Midlands.

**Prayer – Simon John Barlow**

God of all compassion, we bring you the tears of our lives. Tears formed in the sorrow of loss and grief; tears of pain and disability; tears of failure, anger and frustration; tears of worry and concern; tears for all that was and will not be again. In calling out, in remembering before the eternal we sanctify our tears and cries, for they are holy.

God of all Joy, we offer you the laughter of our lives. We give thanks; for the strength of smiles of greeting and of parting; for twinkling eyes and faces wrinkled in recognition; for jokes and chuckle; for belly laughs and whoops of joy; for quiet elation and inner cheer. In sharing our laughter, in happy acknowledgement before the infinite we sanctify our smiles and giggles, for they are holy.

Yes, we give thanks for the laughter and tears of life, we delight in sharing them with all creation, for they are holy, for our joys and sorrows have formed our lives.

In the busy-ness of our lives, may we attend to the ordinariness of our days, to know that they are holy and so make our lives whole. Amen. Blessed Be.

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## Everything Changes by Danny Crosby

“Nothing Gold Can Stay” by Robert Frost

*Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold,  
Her early leaf's a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.*

“Nothing gold can stay”, or as Echo and the Bunnymen sang “Nothing ever last for ever.” I know this to be true, impermanence is the energy of life, I know this to be true for am an ever-changing man, or so it seems.

Now please do not get me wrong I am not suggesting that I am somehow a different man. What I have discovered is that it's not so much I'm an ever-changing man as a man who has at different stages of his life I have been waking up or falling asleep. For me the essence of the spiritual life is not necessarily one of transformation, although it does feel like this at times. Instead what I have experienced and continue to experience is more a journey of awakening. Waking up and opening up in so many, many ways...The spiritual life is a journey of becoming...

It is said that when the Buddha started to wander around India, shortly after his enlightenment, he encountered several men who recognized him to be a very extraordinary being. They asked him: "Are you a god?" "No," he replied. "Are you a reincarnation of god?" "No," he replied. "Are you a wizard, then?" "No." "Well, are you a man?" "No." "So what are you?" They asked, being very perplexed. Buddha simply replied: "I am awake."

Buddha means “the awakened one.” How to awaken is all he taught.

Before you wake up, you must first go to sleep...

As I look back at much of the first half of my life I kind of did the opposite of what most people do, instead of waking up I found myself falling deeper into sleep, withdrawing inwardly. Now while there were good reasons for this, to protect myself in what were difficult and sometimes frightening times it was not the way to live.

For a variety reasons, none of which make sense today, I grew up with a sense of being wrong; I grew up feeling that I was wrong, that the world was wrong; that life was wrong. Ok I could blame it on my home life, which was pretty terrifying; I could blame it on how messed up the adults in my life who were troubled too; I could put it down to some physical difficulties I was born with, which meant for periods of my childhood I had to go for weekly physiotherapy and couldn't do the things that other children could do. The truth is though that I do not believe that these were the reasons. They were merely the alibis that I used for later struggles. I just felt wrong, deep down in the core of me and as a result life looked wrong to me and thus frightened me, so I slowly withdrew. As I look back now I was a man ruled by fear and not by love.

Things got worse through my teenage years and early adulthood which led to alcoholism. I see the beginning of my recovery from this 15 years ago as the time I began to wake up. Not that this has been an easy journey, quite the opposite if truth be told.

It began slowly at first and then moments that were dramatic and transformative. I was a man who believed in nothing. I didn't even believe in people. I had for a while been a humanist, a member of the British Humanist Association, but had rejected that. It is hard to be a humanist if you have no faith in humanity. I certainly rejected any kind of spiritual beliefs too and had a contempt for religion. Not that I had a particularly religious background.

That said things began to change. Or should I say my experience of life changed. I had what can only be described as transformative spiritual experiences which opened my senses up to experiences beyond mine or anyone else's understanding. I found a peace that certainly passeth all understanding as my mind

came to rest and a sense of love and belonging like I had never experienced before filled my heart. In this Love I found a courage, never before experienced that opened me up to the world in which I lived. I went from a person who believed in nothing to someone who began to believe in everything, even people. And of course that little bit more than everything.

Over a period of about a year between 2003 and 2004 I went through experiences that changed everything. I have never been the same man since. Something inside me woke up. I woke up. The power of love awakened me to life.

This was a significant turning point for me, as I turned or perhaps more acutely returned to love. It is worth noting that *convertir*, from which comes the word conversion, meant to turn or to return. So to convert is a beginning, yes a kind of re-birth. It is a starting point, not an end, not a completion point...A beginning...

Now being a man of reasonable intelligence, after a while, I wanted to make sense of what had happened to me. This led me to explore all kinds of forms of religion and spirituality, which eventually led me to Cross Street Chapel in Manchester, in early 2004 and the Unitarians. Here I did not find the answers I was looking for, I now accept that I never will. I'm cool with that, some things are beyond we earth bound humans, but what I did find was a community, which I hadn't realised I'd been looking for. Another turning point if you like, another return to Love.

Life continued on, as I got better and continued to open up, to wake up in all areas of my life. Reconnecting and making new connections and bringing a great deal of healing to my wider family. Life was amazing, like it had never been before.

Then all of a sudden on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, All Souls Day 2006, I received a phone call that broke my heart. I heard the news that the little boy, Ethan, who had become the greatest love in my life, had been killed on his way to school. I had a deep and powerful loving connection to this little boy. That very moment, on the way to work, I had felt violently sick in my stomach, like I had never done before. I have never known such a violent experience before or since. I learnt later that this was the exact moment that they had turned the life support system off in the hospital. The moment he breathed his final breath. I felt that violent sensation because that physical connection between us had been severed.

Now while this moment changed everything in so many ways, it did not do so in a negative sense. It was an agony coming to terms with the loss and it was tough keeping his mother alive. That said in many ways it increased my faith in the love I had found, the God of my limited understanding. This experience grew in these dark hours. The love lived on.

Meaning began to emerge too as I was drawn into ministry as I questioned what I was doing with my life. Although I suffered I never fell into despair as meaning emerged as I forged something from this suffering. I took the step into ministry. In many ways my ministry is a legacy of the love this little boy helped bring alive in me.

In many ways knowing him changed everything, both his life and his death. The love he showed me, by simply being himself reawakened the love within me.

Nothing ever stays quite the same. Everything is always changing in some way or other, even if it isn't always obvious. Or at least it appears that way.

Sometimes the changes are big and obvious. Sometimes things happen that change everything for ever. Some of those are close and personal and others are on a more global scale. There are moments in life that change everything for ever. Or so it seems. Now over the last couple of years there have been some bodily changes in my life as I have awoken to myself on a physical level. Now the journey actually began at the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015. During the Watch Night service I led, I wrote on my piece of paper, that I burnt in the ceremony with others, that one thing I wanted to let go of was my excess weight. I had over the last few years grown heavier and heavier and I knew that something needed to be done about it. I was obese. It had begun on trip to Alton Towers with some friends. I had become embarrassed during the day as every time I went on a ride I couldn't fit into the safety harness and had to be put in the special seat for the very large. I left that day full of shame, but said nothing about it at the time. For months I made small attempts to change but could not bring it about myself. I also suffered a bout of bad health at the beginning of the year. I became quite ill, twice, and became increasingly concerned about my physical well-being. I also noticed how this was impacting on my mental, emotional and spiritual health. Other people were noticing too and making comments. Well this all came to head that summer, particularly over the weekend of my nephew Joe's wedding, when my car broke down in Devon and I experienced a kind of emotional and spiritual rock bottom. During this moment of surrender something changed within me. This opened me up to the possibility of seeking help and on returning home I began my weight loss journey, through Slimming World. I surrendered absolutely to the way of life and over the next 8 months I lost 8 stone in weight. My life has changed immeasurable since. I have never felt better physically, mentally, emotionally and above all else spiritually.



Since the weight loss I've been on another physical journey too as I have come to terms with physical problems I have all my life. As I lost the weight I began to exercise too, just walking to begin with, which was very painful. I could only walk for 15 minutes at first, but within a fortnight I could walk for over an hour and within a month for four hours.

After I had lost the weight I realised that there was more that needed to be done. I had all my life lived with a great deal of shame about my physical being. I was born with back problems, the nerve endings in the base of my spine were underdeveloped. This meant I couldn't do a lot of things that other children could do. There was a time when I had to have physiotherapy at primary school and wasn't allowed to do sport. I remember powerfully the feeling of shame and exclusion I felt as I couldn't join in. I also walked funny and was called penguin and cripple along with other things. I also grew up with a sense of being small and weak. So as I grew up I developed a phobia towards exercise etc.

After losing the weight I felt it was time to face up to these problems that were holding me back and keeping me closed in, stopping me from being the man I was born to be.

I began receiving massage therapy and this was another turning point, another awakening to love. Through the massage therapy I began to face up to some of these problems and eventually joined a gym. I just plucked up the courage one day and began. I've been working with a trainer there and eventually a physiotherapist and am finally dealing with all these things that once held me back. It is amazing the progress I have made over the last year. How I have disproved so many beliefs I have held about myself that have held me back. I am loving this new relationship I'm enjoying with my physical self. I am loving it and feel excited about what the future hold. I feel ready now for the second half of my life.

As Slimming World's Man of the Year I have become an ambassador. I talk about my experiences and what is at the core of my life these days. I have found a love that casts out the fear that for so long bound me. I experienced an example of this only a week or so ago.

Well actually it began a little before this.

People kept on saying to me "I bet you feel nervous don't you?" "No not really," I said "I feel ok about it. I know why I'm going and it's a real honour to be asked. Anyway I won't be travelling alone." "Who are travelling with?" I was asked "Oh I am travelling with love all the way. I only travel first class these days." Several people asked me this question or similar ones during the weeks leading up to my attendance at the Slimming World Policy Workshop and Parliamentary Reception exploring ways to tackle obesity that I would be taking part in and given a speech at the Houses of Parliament. The truth is I wasn't feeling nervous about it at all. I felt good. I knew why I was going and do you know what I knew I belonged there, I knew I had something to offer from my own lived experience. I knew what had got me to where I am and that I could trust in this loving power to guide me through the day. I knew why I was going and I knew it wasn't about me, it was about being of service to others who struggle with shame about their own physical being. It was about being in love.

Even on the morning as I set off, really early, there was no fear. I felt at ease, I knew why I was going and I knew I wasn't alone. I was travelling with love flowing through my veins. I arrived at the House of Parliament early and walked around the square looking at the statues of the great and the good, David Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln rising from his chair, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and others. I thought about the history

of the place and the people who had spoken there in some form or another. Yes, these are great figures but they were no more human than any of us. It was strange there was no fear, love held me through it all. I then went through security and to the round table discussions on obesity, something I know much about. Again, I passed statues of the great and the good and took in the immensity of the place. The only time I felt any fear at all was when I passed through security and I got that weird guilt feeling so many feel at airports and also as I passed the armed police with their automatic weapons, sad signs of the time. The horrible reality of which we have witnessed only this week. I have, as we all have, been deeply sickened and saddened as we witnessed the horror that has taken place there this week, a horror we witness far too often these days as hate casts its viscous spell. Love will prevail I know this to be true if we live in and through it though. A love I have awakened to and leads me in every moment of my life.

That day I joined in the discussion at the table exploring ways to tackle male obesity with a variety of health experts from many fields and Lord's and M.P.'s from all the parties. I spoke my truth in love and I listened with the ears of my heart, in the room named after the great orator Winston Churchill. Later was the reception when again I listened to speeches first from Baroness Benjamin, Floella Benjamin from my childhood, what an amazing woman, even more amazing in real life, then politicians and a young weight loss champion and then it was my time to speak. I stood at the podium I opened my mouth and I just let my truth come out. When I had finished speaking the response was amazing and Floella held out her arms to me and hugged me like no one has ever hugged me before. She then spoke so lovingly and glowingly responding to what I said, saying that she wants me back and telling me that I need to keep on sharing my story. I then mixed with many others and photos were taken and

arrangements were made to speak again and join in the efforts to help so many people out there who are suffering with obesity and shame. I know the truth that love can help anyone overcome whatever it is that is holding them back and stopping them living the life that they are born to live.

I had travelled, spoken and been in love all day, there had been no fear. Perfect love had truly cast out all fear that day...

Fear haunts so many lives. It has certainly done so with mine over the years. We seem to be living in ever more fearful times. Actually, I think it is the biggest epidemic that is crippling humanity. I suspect it is at the root of virtually all our human troubles. Fear is on the increase, humanity seems to be increasingly losing faith in itself. This troubles me, because I know it doesn't have to be this way. I know the power of love can and does overcome crippling fear. The last third of my life is proof of that.

Thankfully I'm not alone in this. I know others who see the world through similar eyes, through the lens of love. It was very clear that Baroness Benjamin is one of them and so are many others I spent my time with that day. If I could have one wish it would be to encourage everyone I meet to look at the world, at one another, and themselves, through such lenses.

Fear is a powerful force and it comes in many forms. There are of course phobias such as of spiders, or heights or people we can perceive as different. There are internal fears such as commitment and loneliness, the sort of fears that shut us down and close us in. There is fright a healthy kind of fear that kicks in if we nearly get run over or a brick falls from a building being worked on from above. Then there is dread, the worst kind of fear, the kind that stops us living at all.

Love is as equally a powerful force, in fact perhaps even more powerful than fear. It too comes in many forms, there is not just the romantic kind that we talk about on Valentine's Day. There is also a deep sense of happiness that comes from a love for life itself, the opposite of dread. There's the love we feel for friends and family and community too. There is also another kind of love, the type that David Whyte talked about extensively in his book, "The Three Marriages," this is a deep engaged love of life whether that be with our inner selves, others, life itself, a work or calling, for nature and of course a love for God. There are many forms of love.

These two forces "Love" and "Fear" pull and push at us constantly, like the great tides and whichever one we feed is the one that consumes us. Fear can stop us functioning as it shuts us down completely or perhaps even worse it can lead to terrible destruction as we make wrong choices about life and take wrong action. Fear can block us from experiencing the one thing we all need to live happily in this world, it can stop us from knowing love.

Love though drives out fear, it does so by nourishing our souls. As John wrote (1 John Ch 4 vv 18)

"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."

To know love and to share it with others will always overcome fear. It has always done so. I know this from personal experience. By constantly turning to love fear is overcome and cannot take hold and by living in love we become beacons of hope to others, of what living in and through love can do. Love gives us the courage to overcome fear, to face whatever is causing us fear and

to walk through it and as we do the fear diminishes; as we do we can feel the love flowing again. All we have to do is turn in love and the tide can begin to change direction. Hard to believe I know, but true. It's up to us, by simply choosing love we can cast out fear and be of service to ourselves and the whole world around us. Fear and cynicism are the easy lazy choices. Love is harder, well actually it's tougher, but it is most certainly worth it.

So as I set off that morning I did so in faith. I knew what I was engaging in was an act of love. An act not only for the good of myself, but for the good of many. It was an act worthy of engaging in, for at the core of what I was doing was love. A love for self, a love for others, a love for life and a love for God. Ever since I have known this love any fear I have known has been easily cast out. This love is at the core of all that I do in life these days. Who knows what adventure it will lead me on next? God only knows.

My life these last 14 years or so has been one of being opened up to new experiences, new awakenings, new beginnings. The changes never seem to come to an end. I have heard it said that the only thing permanent in life is change.

This brings to mind a favourite poem of mine, "The Layers" by Stanley Kunitz.

*I have walked through many lives,  
some of them my own,  
and I am not who I was,  
though some principle of being  
abides, from which I struggle  
not to stray.  
When I look behind,  
as I am compelled to look  
before I can gather strength*

*to proceed on my journey,  
 I see the milestones dwindling  
 toward the horizon  
 and the slow fires trailing  
 from the abandoned camp-sites,  
 over which scavenger angels  
 wheel on heavy wings.  
 Oh, I have made myself a tribe  
 out of my true affections,  
 and my tribe is scattered!  
 How shall the heart be reconciled  
 to its feast of losses?  
 In a rising wind  
 the manic dust of my friends,  
 those who fell along the way,  
 bitterly stings my face.  
 Yet I turn, I turn,  
 exulting somewhat,  
 with my will intact to go  
 wherever I need to go,  
 and every stone on the road  
 precious to me.  
 In my darkest night,  
 when the moon was covered  
 and I roamed through wreckage,  
 a nimbus-clouded voice  
 directed me:  
 "Live in the layers,  
 not on the litter."  
 Though I lack the art  
 to decipher it,  
 no doubt the next chapter  
 in my book of transformations  
 is already written.*

*I am not done with my changes.*  
 I am not done with my changes either, are any of us?  
 Yes it does seem true that the only thing permanent in life is  
 change. Life itself is impermanent.

Impermanence is the beauty and the energy of life. Life is forever  
 changing and transforming and turning into something new. Life  
 is either opening up and or closing in. Breathing in and breathing  
 out.

Jesus captured this idea in a gorgeous way when he described  
 wheat as a metaphor for the resurrected life. He taught that all  
 must die before new life can rise again. In the same way that seeds  
 must die and cease being seeds in order to become life giving  
 food, so must we in order to be transformed into something new.  
 This can happen at many stages of our lives if we allow the  
 natural cycle to just be and don't get in the way. Nothing ever  
 stays exactly the same and nothing is ever repeated in exactly the  
 same way again. This was wonderfully expressed by the ancient  
 Greek philosopher Heraclitus some 2,500 years ago. Who said,  
 among many other things, "Everything flows, nothing stands still."  
 "No one ever steps into the same river twice." And "Nothing  
 endures but change." He was saying that the only constant in  
 life was and is change, that life was constantly in flux and that  
 everything is impermanent. In more contemporary times The  
 Buddhist Pema Chodron has said "Impermanence is the goodness  
 of reality...it's the essence of everything." So often in life we  
 try to cling to things, to hold on to things to maintain things  
 exactly as they are. This is living in fear and not love. It is  
 going against life and the nature of things. Nothing stays exactly  
 as it is in its current nature, everything changes from moment  
 to moment and to resist this is to resist life. Yes everything  
 changes but life goes on.

As I look back at my life I can bear witness to many changes. As I look back at the last couple of years I can recount how much has changed in me and yet so much is just as it was before. As I look back at my life in some ways I am the very same man I have always been. As I look back at my life what I see is not so much a man who has kept on changing as a man who keeps on awakening. Awakening to what? You might well ask. Well to the love present in life, the love we are all formed by, the love desperately waiting to be expressed. I suspect it's the same for all of us and all life itself. In many ways this is the true essence of spiritual living. It's not so much that we keep on changing, on and on and on. It's more that we awaken to something new. That new layers are revealed and we continue to open up more and more. To me this is the whole point and meaning of living faithfully, because in so doing we keep on awakening to something new and suddenly everything seems to have changed again and yet everything is still the same. To me this is what it means to truly live in love.

What I've really learnt is that it's not so much that I'm not done with my changes as I am not done with my awakenings. I suspect that it's the same for all of us, for everyone and for all created life. So let's keep on journeying to new awakenings...for everything changes and yet everything somehow stays the same.

Let's keep on awakening to love... Amen

~~~~~

## Spring Training Day Blessings

At the recent Spring Training Day, *How Unitarians Do Communion*, participants were asked to write a blessing for a Pagan / Earth Spirit Communion ritual. The quality of the result was of such a high standard that I asked their permission to share them with a wider audience, in *MU Now*. Here they are:

We return to the earth, that which the earth has given.  
We give thanks to the Divine for blessings received.  
With love and fellowship received and exchanged,  
We leave this sacred circle.

*Let this mead be a symbol of our thankfulness  
for the earth, the sun and rain that sustain life.  
As its warmth and sweetness enter our bodies,  
May our minds and hearts also be filled  
With warmth and sweetness.*

Bless those who care for others.  
Bless all other fellow creatures who serve us.

*Spirit of Life and Love,  
We thank you for the bounty of the earth.  
For the trees and flowers, which share their beauty;  
For the crops which sustain us;  
For the birds and insects which help the process;  
For the people who plant, tend, harvest, and distribute  
The food we eat, and the liquid we drink.  
For all these things,  
We give grateful thanks. Amen*

For this food and this fellowship,  
We give thanks.

*May my soul and brain be nourished  
By the food of the earth.  
May the waters of life  
Flow in my blood.  
May I always be mindful  
And bless these gifts of creation.*

Bless this food / drink  
The generous gift of Mother Earth.  
We thank those who grew its components,  
Harvested them,  
Used them to create this food / drink,  
That we may live.

*For all the wondrous bounty and delight,  
Both of mind and body,  
Make us truly thankful  
Amen*

We bless and charge this offering –  
Representing for us life-giving nature  
And the care of human toil.  
We celebrate our coming together  
To share and nourish each other.

*Let us be grateful to the earth  
And the people who have produced this sustenance,  
As we share it in fellowship together.*

Here we honour the ancients,  
And their energy passed on to us,  
As we pass it on  
To our children, and their children.

*Spirit of Earth and living things,  
Thank you for your bounty  
That you've given up to us  
In food and drink.*

Bless the Earth, our provider,  
Thank you for breathing life

Into the world.  
We are all one with you.

*Bless this food,  
That it may nourish the hearts and souls  
Of all who eat it.*

Oh generous love  
Breathe your warmth in me;  
Feed my soul.

~~~~~

## Rites of Passage Course: the story so far

On Saturday 1st April, eight participants came together from the Midlands and farther afield, to learn how to conduct a Unitarian Wedding. The day was led by Rev. Martin Whitell, District Minister of the London & South East District & Provincial Assembly. The handouts were marvellous – so very useful for the future – but the best bit came in the afternoon, when we all got to practice “marrying” each other, both as men and women, and as same-sex couples. Martin took the photo below, in which Gavin Lloyd is “marrying” Rev. Sue Woolley to Debra Burbery of Shrewsbury. By the time we had all had a go at being celebrant, we felt much more confident about the whole process.



Seven Unitarian lay worship leaders and trainee celebrants gathered at Kingswood Meeting House on Saturday 6th May, to learn the do's and don'ts about conducting Naming Ceremonies and Baptisms. Following two sessions in the morning, about the practicalities, and how to put a service together, led by Rev. Sue Woolley, and the early afternoon session, on Unitarian Baptisms, led by Rev. Ant Howe, the group proceeded to the practical – and got the chance to go through the central part of a naming / baptism, complete with “baby”, kindly loaned for the occasion by Cressida Pryor of Cheltenham & Gloucester Unitarians.

Participants took it in turns to be celebrant, parents, and godparents, and a good time was had by all. And nobody dropped the baby ...



In a month's time, we will be back at Kingswood for the session on Funerals, and will then have our final meeting on 1st July, when each participant will deliver their own rite of passage, for assessment.

## District Round-up

### Stourbridge Unitarians - The Journey Continues

In 1788, the same year as the German philosopher Immanuel Kant published his influential 'Critique of Practical Reason' and the poet Lord Byron was born and the painter Thomas Gainsborough died, Stourbridge Presbyterian (Unitarian) chapel was built.

That is nearly 230 years of worship and history. And like most other congregations around the country, regardless of denomination, Stourbridge has a small but loyal and determined congregation.

The chapel is fortunate in retaining many of its original features, some of which may even pre-date the current building of 1788 by coming from the previous dissenters' chapel in the town.

We have decided that 2017 will be our chance to turn things around at the chapel. In January we undertook a big clean. We have converted the vestry into a light and airy place for hospitality, refreshments and meetings after the service. The vestry has also become something of a gallery, proudly displaying historic portraits of figures from the history of the chapel. Pride of place goes to the portrait of the Reverend Emma Rosalind Lee (1884-1959). She was a member of the first committee of the British League of Unitarian Women in 1908 and took an active



role in its development, becoming its National Secretary in 1929.



Lee served on the Unitarian General Assembly Council and was elected President in 1940, the second woman to do so. She held a number of influential positions with the Unitarian movement and worked with refugees throughout her lifetime. She became a minister at Stourbridge Unitarian Chapel in 1946 until 1953.

The chapel also boasts new information banners, promotional leaflets and a booklet outlining the history of the building. We hope that 2017 will see the chapel opening its doors for history days, coffee mornings and other events.

In February and March, we held two 'Midweek Lights' services, a contemplative candle service with accompanying music by Taizé and harp music by Lavinia Meijer. The chapel was atmospherically lit by candles, and with the beautiful serene music playing, the evenings were truly magical. A big thank you to everyone who attended, especially members of Kidderminster & Kingswood Unitarians and Gavin Lloyd who came all the way for the 1 hour event on the train from Oxford!

So, if you are ever in Stourbridge, please feel free to come along to

a service. To find out future dates for services, contact:

**David Mearman** on 01384 376478 or email:  
david.mearman@yahoo.com

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## How can we make a difference?

The address below was delivered by **Rev. Ant Howe**, at the Asparagus Lunch in Evesham on Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> May. It was so relevant to this theme, that I asked Ant to send it to me for inclusion in this issue.

Just to let you know: excited as I am to be here, I won't be dressing up as asparagus as was done in the cathedral recently!

I am, however, glad to be asked to lead worship today. I think it's 10 years since I last led worship at the Asparagus Lunch Service.

Now, I don't know, if like me, you can remember asking for a drink as a child, only to be told 'There's plenty of water in the tap!'?

I felt a little hard done by because I had a friend who had a soda-stream at their house, and we didn't have one!

The soda-stream always seemed like quite a magical device to my young eyes:

It seemed to turn tap water into amazing fizzy drinks. All you needed was water and the flavoured syrup of your choice and the soda-stream did the rest.

You might remember the advertising slogan: 'get busy with the fizzy'!

Fizzy drinks always seemed more interesting to the young me than plain ordinary tap water. I remember suggesting on a few



occasions that we get a soda-stream at our house, but sadly my suggestions were not taken up.

‘Who wouldn’t want a soda-stream in their house’, I thought? It would instantly open up a whole world of different flavoured drinks with lots of added fizz!

I guess my parents thought there were better things to spend money on.....

But even now I still like fizzy drinks – and prefer carbonated water to plain old still water.

And for fizzy drinks we have a Unitarian to thank!

Why would I bring this matter up at the Annual Asparagus Lunch Service?

Well the person who discovered how to produce carbonated water – and therefore fizzy drinks – was none other than the Unitarian trail-blazer Rev Joseph Priestley.

Joseph Priestley, you might know, helped to found the first avowedly Unitarian church in England – Essex Street Church....

He lived, for over a decade, in Birmingham.... And a memorial to him can be found at Unitarian New Meeting in Birmingham (though it’s quite difficult to read!)

He was a minister, scientist and author.

I’m not sure Priestley’s book ‘The Rudiments of English Grammar adapted to the use of schools with observations and style’ is widely read today - - and I’m not sure what he would make of my grammar or sermon style come to think of it!

Priestley again is also credited as the person who discovered oxygen.

And, in a way, the lovely parsonage I live in today is sort-of due to Priestley:

The riot in Birmingham, which would cause Priestley to move to America, was the same riot that stretched eight miles south of Birmingham a few days later, where the rioters burned down the original Kingswood Meeting House and the parsonage which went with it.

No drawings of the original chapel or parsonage survive, and I do wonder whether the first house was nicer than the second – the one I occupy now – but I doubt it.

Having lost his house and laboratory, and fearing for his life, Priestley moved to London and then to Pennsylvania where he lived out his remaining years.

His gravestone reads:

*Return unto thy rest, O my soul,  
For the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee.  
I will lay me down in peace and sleep  
Till I awake in the morning of the resurrection.*

He was perhaps the greatest scientist of his era – yet didn’t lose that faith that there was something more.

Some of the churches and chapels which Priestley helped to found here in England survive to this day. He dared to preach of a faith which was exciting and amazing; we owe Priestly a great deal.

Now I guess that most people here will know that original reason the asparagus lunch began is because Evesham would’ve been so busy, and bustling, during the asparagus season that it made it easier for dissenting Ministers to meet.

I don't know if Priestley ever did come to Evesham under such a guise....

He was certainly around at the time when it was dangerous and illegal to profess Unitarian views. Yet he helped with the formation of what would become our Unitarian movement.

He helped to put the fizz into our faith!

I wonder how much fizz is left?

I wonder what Priestley would make of the Unitarian movement today?

If Priestley were to pay us a visit, would he see us as a religious movement fizzing with vitality.... or would he judge us to have gone somewhat flat and past our best?

Now I know that we face challenges very different to the challenges which Priestley faced in his day. It's not easy trying to sustain our communities with low numbers and limited resources.

But I do wonder if what is often missing from Unitarianism today is the excitement and dynamism.

We console ourselves by saying "Well it's not just us. Churches everywhere are declining"..... but that's not totally true.

There are churches up and down the UK which are growing and some are full to overflowing. These churches are ones that are fizzing with energy and enthusiasm. The beliefs may not be quite to our Unitarian taste, but nobody can fault the commitment or deny that they are successful. They will take risks for their faith. What about us?

Perhaps when Priestley took ordinary water and made it fizzy he was actually provided us with an important lesson: sometimes it's not enough to just be ordinary.....

There are times that ordinary won't do.... Sometimes we crave something more- - and that applies to our religious lives too.

Now I have had it said to me "It's all very well you talking about those growing churches, but they have rigid beliefs and that just wouldn't suit us Unitarians"..... and I agree.

But I also think back in my mind's eye to that soda-stream I so desperately wanted.....

I remember thinking about all the different flavours which would be available to me.

All I would have to do is take something very ordinary (tap water), add my preferred flavour, and then the magic soda stream would turn it into something amazing!

Now we have many different flavours of Unitarianism. You can be Christian flavour, like me.... Humanist, theist, nature-based, agnostic..... all sorted of flavours. That's fine by me.

What I am suggesting is that we need to get to the part where we inject the fizz.... The excitement... the dynamism.

I can look at what is happening in the world today and feel very flat and depressed.....

There has to be something in my religious life which gives me hope for the future.

I need fizz in my faith!

So, how do we do it?

Well, that's a problem Unitarians have been wrestling with for a long time!

Now, when I have a problem I usually turn to the Bible for some advice.

In the Bible, in the Epistle of James we read 'Faith without works is dead' - - and I guess most Unitarians would go along with that. We Unitarians have always seen action as an important part of our faith.

But what makes faith fizz? Well, the Book of Galatians gives a statement to consider: "Faith, energised by works of love"

Faith, energised by works of love.....

Implying that there is a process.

You take your faith – whatever flavour it might be - you mix it with the ordinary and everyday (because faith does have to be grounded in reality)..... But then you add something which makes it vibrant and exciting.

Faith energised by works of love.....

A bit like adding the fizz to your chosen flavour of syrup and water in a soda-stream.

Faith energised by works of love: what might our works of love look like?

Perhaps the most loving thing we can do is to be willing to change our comfortable way of doing things, so that we might appeal to people for whom finding Unitarianism could be life-saving.

St Paul remind us "Love doesn't insist on its own way".....

It's not just about us: we have already experienced the blessing of our Unitarian faith..... but what about others?

If you take time to explain what Unitarianism is about to many people they will say "Well that's what I believe too" yet they don't join our communities.

Why? Because they can believe those things at home.

Beliefs alone won't get people to our churches – and certainly won't get them to stay.....

People join churches when they find something that they can't get anywhere else. Something so vibrant and life changing that they want to commit to it.

I still believe that Unitarianism could be that.

I really don't mind if you believe something different to me - - what I want to know is have you found something so wonderful that it makes your spirit fizz to the point you have to share that blessing with others?

Now, I never did get that soda stream I so desperately wanted, but I did find Unitarianism, which is better - - and for that I continually give thanks.

And I never dreamed that I would be following in the footsteps of the person who unlocked the secret to fizzy drinks and who helped to put the fizz into our faith!

Some time ago I wrote an article for *The Inquirer*. In the article I talked about how the situation in many of our communities is so critical that we face the real possibility of our movement being extinct in a few years' time.

I don't know whether that will be the case - - I hope and pray not.....

If our Unitarian movement is to survive then we all have a part to play.

I know that some of us are increasingly tired, but here's my plea:

Let's find the fizz in our faith, whatever of flavour of Unitarian you happen to be.

Let's try to make it exciting, allowing works of love to energise our faith. And when others come, let's welcome them as they are, not try to make them like us.

*Sing in celebration, time to remember  
those who in past ages kept love of truth alive;  
Now, in dedication, as we pay them homage,  
We too would pledge for truth and love to strive.*

*We who share their vision must share their labour,  
Marching to the future – a new world yet to be.  
This shall be our mission – to extol compassion  
Til humankind become one family. Amen.*

~~~~~

### **Ten easy things we can try:**

1. Smile at people as you pass by.
2. Look at sales assistants' name tags and say thank you to them personally.
3. Sing along to the radio more often.
4. Buy fair trade products if at all possible.
5. Sit outside in good weather and read for an hour.
6. Learn to meditate.
7. Try buying your next piece of clothing from a charity shop - you'd be surprised at the bargains you can find.
8. Write an 'old fashioned' letter on a well chosen card/paper to someone you haven't heard from for a while.
9. Dance more - even if it is just around the kitchen!
10. Say 'yes' to someone or something once a day - you never know what adventures it might lead to.

**Debra Burbery**

## **District Events**

### **Local Leadership Strategy Group Autumn Training Day**

### **SAFEGUARDING**

**Workshop Leaders:** Rev. John Harley and Liz Hills.

**Where:** Unitarian New Meeting Church, Ryland Street,  
Birmingham B15 8BL

**When:** Saturday 4th November 2017

**Times:** 12.00 noon – 5.30 pm (coffee/tea from 11.30 am)

**Cost:** FREE

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### **MUA Annual Lunch**

**Guest Speaker:** Rev. Feargus O'Connor  
Minister of Golder's Green & St. Albans

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

**When:** Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> October 2017

**Times:** 10.30 for 11.00 am - c.4.00 pm

**Cost:** £10.00 a head (to be confirmed)

(A letter will be sent out in early September about this)

## MUA Congregations: Times of Services

### Every Sunday:

|                          |                                 |          |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|----------|
| Birmingham               | Unitarian New Meeting Church    | 11.00 am |
| Cheltenham & Gloucester  | Bayshill Unitarian Church       | 11.00 am |
| Evesham                  | Oat Street Chapel               | 11.00 am |
| Kidderminster            | New Meeting House               | 11.00 am |
| Kingswood                | Meeting House                   | 11.00 am |
| Northampton <sup>1</sup> | Unitarian Meeting House         | 10.30 am |
| Shrewsbury               | Unitarian Church                | 10.30 am |
| Stourbridge <sup>2</sup> | Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel | 11.00 am |
| Warwick                  | High Street Chapel              | 4.30 pm  |

<sup>1</sup>1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> only from July; <sup>2</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> only from July.

### 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 |
| 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 |
|----------|-----------------------------------|-------|

### Last Sunday of the Month:

|         |                      |          |
|---------|----------------------|----------|
| Banbury | Unitarian Fellowship | 11.00 am |
|---------|----------------------|----------|

## MUA Congregations: Contact Details

| Name                    | Contact               | Details                                          |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Banbury                 | Michaela Heppingstall | heppingstall@googlemail.com                      |
| Birmingham              |                       | info@birminghamnewmeeting.org.uk                 |
| Cheltenham & Gloucester | Alison Thursfield     | 01242 254825<br>ajthursfield@tiscali.co.uk       |
| Coventry                | Francesca Rogers      | 02476 605055                                     |
| Cradley                 | Sheila Powell         | 01384 838729                                     |
| Dudley                  | Barbara Russell       | 01902 650168<br>barbara-russell@blueyonder.co.uk |
| Evesham                 | Lesley Harris         | 01242 573927<br>agonoid@gmail.com                |
| Herefordshire           | Isabel Pebody         | 01989 565804<br>isabel@pebody.net                |
| Kidderminster           | Margo Zglinski        | 01384 257302<br>mjzglinski@hotmail.com           |
| Kingswood               | Nina Caddick          | 0121 430 8421<br>ninacaddick@hotmail.com         |
| Northampton             | Mark Beaumont         | 079804 98970<br>drmarksmusic40@yahoo.co.uk       |
| Oldbury                 | Pamela Rose           | 0121 422 0311                                    |
| Shrewsbury              | Belinda Cousens       | 01743 718237<br>belindacousens@btinternet.com    |
| Stourbridge             | David Mearman         | 01384 376478<br>davidmearman@hotmail.com         |

| Name          | Contact         | Details                                              |
|---------------|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Tamworth      | Sandy Ellis     | 01905 391607<br>sandyellis@tiscali.co.uk             |
| Warwick       | Elaine Nomura   | 01926 611964<br>emtnomura@aol.com                    |
| Wolverhampton | Barbara Russell | 01902 650168<br>barbara-russell<br>@blueyonder.co.uk |

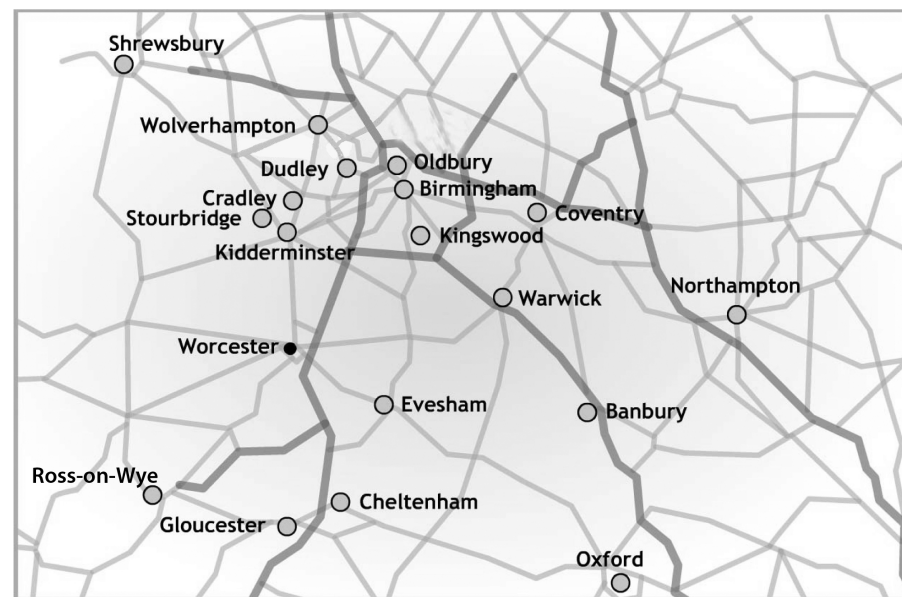
### Friendship's solace by Bronwen Taylor

“When we are sad and sore distressed  
And life seems not worth living,  
Our friends will help us through,  
We know that we are blessed  
With all they offer of their love,  
In heartfelt giving.

And though the road may often seem  
An uphill climb that's wearing.  
Our journey's not alone  
And we may always lean  
On those whose hand is ever there,  
In friendship's caring.

Compassion, kindness, hope remain  
In words so gently spoken.  
From sorrow's anguished depths  
They'll strive to ease our pain  
Which hurts, but solace helps to heal  
The heart that's broken.”

*Tune: Middleton*



**The Summer/Autumn 2017 issue will be published in  
September.**

**Please may we have your contributions on local matters,  
& on the theme of "Living in an era of change"**

**by Friday 1<sup>st</sup> September 2017**

**Please note: I will not be around to acknowledge contributions  
until then, but please send them anyway!**

*Thank you!*