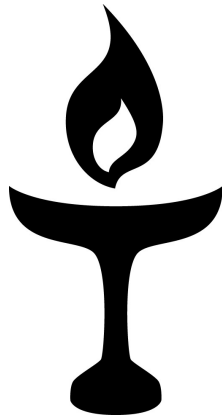


MU NOW



THE MAGAZINE OF THE MIDLAND UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION

ISSUE 63

SUMMER / AUTUMN 2021

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 Summer / Autumn 2021 issue of *MU Now*. There are some fascinating contributions, including "*What do you mean by Harvest?*" by David Mearman, as well as some inspirational reflections and prayers on gratitude and thanksgiving, from Margaret Harris, Rev Peter Godfrey and Rev Jeffrey Bowes, among others. Debra Burbery's President's Piece also spoke to this theme.

But *no* congregation has sent me any local news! I hope for a bumper crop of articles for the *District Round Up* in the next issue. 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, following on from the Autumn Training Day, is "Unitarian Values and Mission" and the deadline for submissions will be **Friday 7th January 2022**.

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



Are you enjoying the lush, green fields of the sunny, summer uplands?

Pausing now and again to look at the view?

Well, the weather has been a bit of a mixture and occasionally the view has been obscured by grey rain clouds but the 'new normal' is slowly, cautiously emerging.

I'm grateful that I can now sit outside a local café and have a coffee (and cake) and chat to friends and even people on neighbouring tables without feeling I'm imposing, as I might have done in 'pre-Covid times'. Thankfully, that friendliness has persisted, which is very welcome.

Whilst pondering over my coffee (the cake disappeared first!), I started to think about the simple pleasures in my life for which I'm grateful and the most important one to strike me was being able to have clean water 24/7. Of course, more recently it's been essential for personal hygiene reasons but the scientific breakthroughs that were needed also relied on the ability to provide this small, essential molecule quickly and easily.

The fact that we can wash ourselves, our clothes, water our gardens and perhaps grow our own veg during lockdowns without thinking about the supply of clean water running out what a privilege! Therefore, I am very grateful and give thanks to all the hard-working engineers, scientists and numerous 'back room' staff who have enabled us all to enjoy this simple, essential thing in our live.... clean water.

So, as you sit down to read this magazine with your cuppa (and biscuits?), perhaps give a moment's thought to those people for whom a glass of clean water is not an option.

www.wateraid.org.uk

Debra Burbery

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## District Minister: Autumn Update

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

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

Since the beginning of the first lockdown, 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. Now we are finally coming out of lockdown and are able to meet again in person, admittedly with some Covid precautions in place. Already, I have had a few invitations to lead worship in actual churches and chapels, rather than via Zoom. I look forward to seeing all of you when I am able to visit you in person again. I am also available to conduct Rites of Passage round the District, should the need arise.

The theme for the **Autumn Training Day**, Understanding our Values, Missions and Goals, was the result of a fascinating talk by Unitarian Universalist Laura Park at the Ministerial Old Students' Association conference in June. Both Rev Winnie Gordon and I were excited by it and wanted to bring some of her ideas to congregations in the Midlands. Please sign up soon.

I am sad to report that **the Black Country Group**, who meet in Dudley Old Meeting House, have reluctantly decided to close their doors.

**Vice-President:** I have done a couple of out-of-District services on Zoom, one at Golder's Green in north London and another at Newcastle upon Tyne. In October, I will be the guest of the Northern Unitarian Association for a whole weekend.

I will be undertaking **Chaplaincy training** with Unitarian College this Autumn.

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...**

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

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MUA Executive Committee Key Messages

The Key Messages from our May and July meeting, have already been shared in the relevant issues of *Bits & Pieces*, the monthly news-sheet sent to all congregations. They are reproduced below.

1 MUA Annual Lunch: it was agreed that the MUA Annual Lunch would take place this year, on Saturday 23rd October, at Kingswood Meeting House. The committee welcomed the return of this important social event. Further details will have been sent to Secretaries of all congregations by the time this magazine is published.

2 Resignation of member: Following several years' service, Rev Jeffrey Bowes of Coventry has tendered his resignation. The committee expressed their gratitude for his past service.

3 Closure of Kidderminster New Meeting House: it was resolved that the offer of the Trustees of Kidderminster New Meeting House Registered Charity No. 1,045,485, following the closure of the Congregation, to gift the assets to the Midland Unitarian Association, be accepted.

4 A3 colour printer: this item, formerly the property of Kidderminster New Meeting House, has been moved to Northampton Unitarians Meeting House and is available for MUA use. Contact Aleks Zgliniska for details: aleks.zgliniska@gmail.com

5 New national EC Link: Our new EC link person is Simon Hall, formerly of Northampton Unitarians, now of Leicester Great Meeting. Welcome!

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Sue Woolley: tel: 01604-870746; revsuewoolley@gmail.com

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## **District Round-Up**

Most of the MUA congregations have now opened their doors for in person services once more. I am thankful to say that we are still being cautious, still refraining from close contact and taking all the necessary post-Covid precautions. It remains to be seen whether the return of children to school and students to university will result in another spike in this dreadful virus this Autumn.

The **Cotswold Group** is pleased to welcome Rev Wyn Thomas, who will be spending one week a month with them, as Rev Mark Hutchinson has gone down to three-quarter time.

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“What do you mean by Harvest?”
by David Mearman

Some will know that since 1999, I have spent between three and six months of the year at my other home, 14 miles north of Stornaway on the Isle of Lewis, which forms part of the Outer Hebrides of Scotland.

I was introduced to one of the two village churches by neighbours, who were both in their early seventies, and went with them to the Evening Service. The Morning Service was in the traditional Gaelic language, as there were at that time many people in the 60+ age group, where Gaelic was their first, and quite possibly only, language.

It was on the first trip one September, that I popped round to visit these neighbours. Over a cup of tea and a bite to eat, known as a *strupak* in Gaelic, he was telling me about the old ways. This was when most households were living the traditional crofting life. This means a life based around self-sufficiency, living off your croft, which is known as a smallholding in England.

However, the crofting life also included line sea fishing from six man rowing boats, and the keeping of livestock – a cow, some hens and a few sheep. It was very much a community-based existence, and everyone in the village would be helping each

other. It is hardly possible to live a crofting life in the private, isolationist, town and city life we now have in most of the United Kingdom.

As it was September, I asked him whether a Harvest Service was going to be held at his church. His reply was nothing short of a book of revelations.

He said, “Yes, we do now, but if you had asked that question twenty years ago (pre-1980s) I would have said, ‘What do you mean by Harvest? Which one?’”

Then, for something like three-quarters of an hour, he painted a most fascinating scene of Harvest, which has remained embedded within me ever since.

“Well,” he said, “the Harvest is celebrated, and starts every day of the year, from the croft livestock, by gathering eggs and milk to drink, and to make butter and cheese. The daily Water Harvest from the local brook or stream (called a ‘burn’ in Scotland and the Isles) or from the local spring.”

“Then,” he continued,

“In February, we had the Cod Harvest, as we fished for them before they headed back north.

From February to April, we had the Calving Harvest, when the cow would give birth.

From March to May was the Peat Harvest, in which the year’s supply of peat was cut for use as household fuel. Also the Lambing Harvest, when the sheep would give birth.

During May, we had the Early Potato Harvest.

Between May and September, we had the Green Vegetable Harvest.

May to August saw the Trout Harvest.

June was the Herring Harvest. We fished for them on their outward southern migration.

June to July would be the Wool Harvest, with the sheep shearing.

August would see the Wild Berry Harvest – raspberries, blackberries, blueberries, redcurrants and gooseberries.

August to September would see the Hay Harvest – the hay was gathered into traditional tepee-like haystacks.

August would see the General Root Crop Harvest, of carrots, turnips, swedes and parsnips,

And the Oat, Barley and Corn (if you could get it to ripen) Harvest.

September would be the Tree Fruit Harvest, for crofters with trees, and the main Potato Harvest.

Autumn sees the River Salmon and Trout Harvest, but they are available at sea in all seasons except winter.

November would see the late Herring Harvest, as they returned on their northern migration.

And November to February would see the start of the Cod Harvest.”

He also explained that there were some Traditional Harvests, which might not be seen as such, like:

“From late Spring would be the Spinning Harvest, to make wool yarn, used in knitting or weaving. Most fleeces are sold to provide income, but some are kept back for spinning yarn for family or communal use.

All year is the Weaving Harvest to make the woollen cloth known as Harris Tweed. This is normally sold to provide income.

Also all year is the Crottle Harvest. ‘Crottle’ is a collective term for heather flowers, lichen, mosses and sometimes berries. These are gathered / harvested, then boiled in water to produce natural dyes for use on the wool.”

An earlier harvest which wasn’t mentioned by my neighbour, was the Kelp Harvest, which took place all year round in coastal regions, but is no longer done. In earlier times, kelp was burned, and the ash sold through agents, to make potash and soda. These were used by the soap and glass industries of the day and provided a good source of income. However, industrialised production and imported produce created a decline of small-scale production, which had all but ended by the late 1870s.

“So, do we celebrate Harvest? Indeed we do, but on a daily basis.”

From the texts of *Carmina Gadelica*, there is an incantation or prayer traditionally recited before starting the reaping of oats or barley, using a sickle or scythe:

“GOD, bless Thou Thyself my reaping,
Each ridge, and plain, and field,
Each sickle curved, shapely, hard,
And each ear and handful in the sheaf,
Each ear and handful in the sheaf.

Bless each maiden and each youth,
Each woman and tender youngling.
Safeguard them beneath Thy shield of strength,
And guard them in the house of the saints.
Guard them in the house of the saints.

Encompass each goat, sheep and lamb,
Each cow and horse and store,
Surround Thou the flocks and herds,
And tend them to a kindly fold,
Tend them to a kindly fold.

For the sake of Michael head of hosts,
Of Mary, fair-skinned branch of grace,
Of Bride, smooth-white of ringleted locks,
Of Columba of the graves and tombs,
Columba of the graves and tombs.

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## Gratitude and Thanksgiving

### The Stairway of Gratitude

Gratitude has many steps up its spiritual stairway. It often starts off as a 'thank you' reminder to a child but can rise to a life changing platform of unbelievable happiness.

As adults we can still use the polite 'thank you' to the bus driver or the shop assistant but it becomes less automatic when given with a genuine smile, which can be more happily received.

There is a Jewish collection of blessings to be used throughout the year for giving thanks for such as: seeing a rainbow or a star, the gifts of food, wine or water and even for visiting the bathroom for internal organs that function so well. Nothing is overlooked!

When on a walk or waiting, we can observe our own beautiful detail: such things as the shape of clouds, breeze on the face, tiny

flowers, cobwebs, smiles from strangers – the delight incurred can bring forth great gratitude to God. It is impossible to be downhearted or depressed when counting oneself lucky to be alive. The more grateful we are, the happier we are. And that is by no means all – the more grateful we are, the more we seem to attract that to be grateful for!

Another step along the stairway is to learn to be grateful for the things that go wrong, starting in a small way – for instance, a missed bus – another twenty minutes to wait. But it could provide an interesting chat to a stranger. Setting expectations in concrete can lay open the way to disappointment; leaving them open ended to Divine interpretation and surprise gives yet another opportunity for real gratitude.

However, being grateful for the things that go badly wrong can be much more difficult – seeing the bigger picture behind it all and lessons it provides us with is not easy, but the unhappiness we feel will fade more quickly when we are able to look at it in an appreciative light.

Setting out on the Gratitude Stairway can be a real adventure and something to look back on which has made a huge everyday difference to at least one Unitarian Oldie!

**Margaret Harris (Shrewsbury)**

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Gratitude for Simple Pleasures

Last month, I was preparing some thoughts for the Reading Fellowship. It was meeting on 8th August, so as a starter, I looked up the reading for that date in *Fragments of Holiness*, the delightful

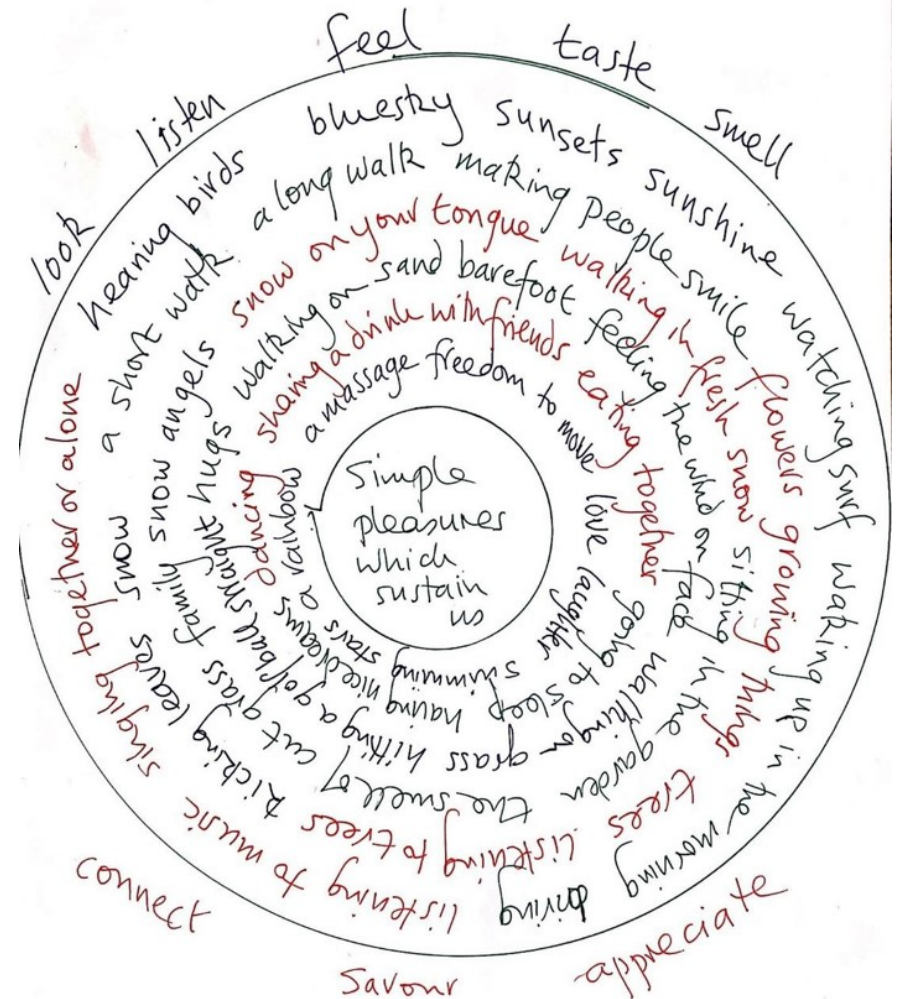
book of sayings for each day of the year compiled by Catherine Robinson. On 8th August, there was a quotation from Harry Lismer Short, one time Principal of Harris Manchester College Oxford. The reading included the interesting words, "Simplify our affections."

This fitted beautifully with an idea that was already in my mind – the joy of simple pleasures. As we thought about this at Reading, it quickly became apparent how grateful we all were for simple pleasures. Fellowship member Hester Casey created a beautiful picture to symbolise the simple pleasures we had spoken of. [reproduced overleaf]

The subject came to me when I was reading Ali Smith's novel, *Summer*. There is a part of the book where an actor takes a break from the daily grind of rehearsals, goes for a walk and comes across an old church. She goes inside and finds a workman mending some ancient seating. The joiner had repaired a broken pew by inserting a new piece of wood – but it looked different. The actor asked the workman what he would do about that. The man held up a tin of wood stain – "Little miracle," he said. "The best thing is, it'll last. Decades. Simple pleasures."

Simple pleasures. Anyone who has ever had to speak or write an article or sermon knows that it is more than half the battle if you have the subject. You become aware of things that fit the subject. Lo and behold! *The Inquirer* that same weekend had a poem by the late Muriel Hilton. Its opening words were, "To find enjoyment in the common things of everyday." It includes the words, "to be grateful for the manifold blessings of the day."

Simple things can often be remarkable. 'Gratitude for simple pleasures' took me back to a deeply moving article in the Lindsey Press book *With Heart and Mind 2*. It is by Rev Brenda Catherall



and describes how her young daughter had hospital treatment and, on the way home afterwards, they discovered that the hat that was on her cherished teddy had come off in the hospital and was now lost. Mother and daughter realised that there was no point going back to a crowded hospital to search for such a small thing.

Then, about a week later, there came a large, official-looking envelope from the hospital. To the amazement of mother and daughter, there inside was the hat. What an immense pleasure this small, simple deed of human kindness had given. The incident led Brenda to quote some words from Evelyn Underhill's poem, *Immanence*, in her article:

'I come in the little things,
Saith the Lord:
Not borne on morning wings
Of majesty, but I have set My Feet
Amidst the delicate and bladed wheat.

.....

In your strait garden plot I come to flower:
About your porch My Vine
Meek, fruitful, doth entwine;
Waits, at the threshold, Love's appointed hour.'

A modern poet who often speaks of the delight of everyday things is Mary Oliver. In her collection of poems, *Felicity*, there is one called *Nothing is to small to be wondered about*. **[it cannot be reproduced here for copyright reasons, but is available on the Internet]**

In another book, Mary Oliver has a poem about enjoying a sunset, seeing the sun going down. I remember thinking – but the sun doesn't go down. Am I being a miserable old man – a spoilsport? I hope not. I think it is just as amazing, just as wonderful, to think that it is us spinning away and moving round the sun. In any case, the sight of this happening is still amazingly beautiful.

It is also important to remember – with gratitude – that we often enjoy simple things because someone else has been working for us. For example, taking us by car, bus, train or aeroplane to beautiful places. Mahatma Gandhi made much of living a simple life, but one of his followers once remarked that it was quite complicated ensuring that the Mahatma managed to do this.

Simple pleasures – where would we be without them? They lift our hearts – often just when we need them lifting. When we think about it, as we do and should, we are full of gratitude.

I hope you know this from experience and that you will perhaps take a few minutes to list some of the simple pleasures for which you are grateful.

Peter Godfrey (Cheltenham & Stroud)

~~~~~

*"I awoke this morning with devout thanksgiving  
for my friends, the old and the new."  
—Ralph Waldo Emerson*

## Two Prayers of Gratitude

### Let me be grateful

Spirit of Bounty, Love and Care, let me be grateful for all the blessings of daily life.

For family and friends  
For work, for colleagues,  
for leisure in time alone and in good company  
for play, for teams,  
For commitments and shared ambitions

for home  
for neighbours  
for towns and cities  
for the nation  
for the world  
for this Universe that carries us, from which we have evolved, in which we are inseparably involved.

Let me be grateful for the things that fill my days and nights, commuting, working, sleeping, eating and drinking, for TV, for radio, podcasts, for books, magazines and newspapers, for the vast internet that serves us all, for conversation, for silence, for quiet times to think, and dream and pray.

Divine goodness at the heart of all we are and think and do, let me remember that my gratitude is my health, of heart and mind and soul. May I be daily grateful for daily blessings. May every soul share in such blessings, then let the thankfulness of all people over all the world never cease.

Amen

## A House Blessing

*[Light a chalice, or a flame for each of the homes the person or family have lived in before]*

This(ese) light(s) can help us to remember all the good times we have shared together in the home(s) *[Names]* have lived in before:

*[Say the places]*

And for each of them there are memories of good times, and less good times, triumphs and failures, sadnesses and joys.

Now here is a new home, a place of hopes and dreams for happiness and achievement.

Let's take a quiet moment to look back on memories of other homes, but more, to renew visions of hope for this house and this home

### Let's spend a time in prayer:

Our God, one who knew you most closely said that "In my Father's house are many mansions," and we are glad that we have our homes, warm and friendly, to spend our days and nights in. We remember those who have no home, no warmth, no friends.

Especially we are glad for this new home for *[Names]*.

We thank you that the paths of their lives have brought them to this [adjective – beautiful, happy, homely, etc] place, we are glad that they/he/she have this new opportunity to realise hopes and dreams and to make a good life and a home of joy together.

We thank you for good workmanship that makes a house into a place of security and peace, and for strength and confidence to overcome the results of poor workmanship.

We thank you for the community of people that make a house into a part of a neighbourhood, and good neighbours into friends.

We thank you for the family and friends that gather to make a new house a home for happy days, fond memories, and blessed tomorrows.

At this beginning of a new endeavour, we look forward with a mixture of hope and fear, confidence and trepidation, knowing that this beginning and the following time will give a mixture of happenings, bad and good, wanted and unwanted.

Whatever the days, months and years bring, may the hearts of those who live here and visit here always know that the door is ever open to all who come to call this house, home.

Amen

Let's go round the house and take thought for all the life that's lived in a house and hopes for good times, happy times and joy in those places.

#### LIVING ROOM

This is a room for relaxation, for entertainment, for cool on long hot summer days, for warmth around the fire on long cold winter nights.

We dedicate this room to its purpose; may it always be welcoming and comfortable.

#### DOWNSTAIRS TOILET AND BATHROOM

These rooms, and others like them, are for our health and comfort.

We dedicate them all to their purposes, may they be places of ease and refreshment and relief from the hurry of the day-to-day world.

#### GUEST BEDROOM

These guest rooms are hopes when empty, dreams of friendship and community for the future when occupied.

We dedicate these rooms to their purpose, may they be places of rest and relaxation, security and serenity for those who use them.

#### MASTER BEDROOM

These rooms are the private centre of the home, where a couple live out their special relationship.

We dedicate these rooms to their purpose, may they be a place of certainty, of confidence, of special secrets shared, where the sometime harshness of the world is softened.

#### OUT BUILDINGS

This is a place of many purposes, for guests, for work, for storage, for uses yet to be known.

We dedicate this place to its purposes, known and unknown, may it ever reflect all the good of the house and home we hope for.

#### THE KITCHEN

Here is the heart of the home, to eat together, to keep good fellowship together, to drink, warmed, relaxed, refreshed, to work together, to play together; all these have their place in the kitchen. Sharing good food and drink is first, last and always the act of community and friendship.

As we eat and drink together today, we dedicate this room and this home to its purpose, to our hopes and to the greater peace and joy of the world.

Our prayer then, God bless us, every one! Amen

**Jeffrey Bowes**

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Trees are Poems

Kahlil Gibran, author of *The Prophet*, wrote, “Trees are poems that the earth writes in the sky.” When I read that, my heart soared in recognition.

Because that is *exactly* the feeling I get when I walk in Salcey Forest and see the trees outlined against the sky, whether that sky is blue or grey. Each tree is unique, whether it is in its prime, or a young sapling, or an old tree somehow clinging to life, finding the strength to bring forth new growth each Spring. As J.R.R. Tolkien wrote in *The Lord of the Rings*, “some as different as one tree is from another of the same name but quite different growth and history; and some as different as one tree-kind from another, as birch from beech, oak from fir.”

Since lockdown began, in March 2020, I have walked most days in the Forest. I have watched the trees go through their annual cycle of the budding and new growth and blossom of Spring, through the full-leaved glory of Summer, and the fruits of Autumn, before their leaves start to change colour and fall. In the



Winter, some are naked and splendid, their bare branches writing patterns in the sky. And they are wonderful in their complexity.

I love the interplay between trees and the landscape they inhabit. This year (and last) I have posted hundreds of photos on Facebook of beautiful trees... because their beauty fills my heart with wonder and gratitude, that I live on the same planet.

To me, they represent the glory of God made manifest in creation.

After a gorgeous walk in the Forest last November, I wrote this: I am so blessed to live within walking distance of the Forest, particularly at this time of year, when the Autumn colours are at their most glorious.

Yesterday morning, I went for my walk early doors, and it was wonderful – wonder-full. The sun was shining and the golds, browns, coppers and bronzes of the Autumn leaves were glowing in its light. In this Autumn weather, I take the same route every day, out and back, because my circular ‘Summer’ route is too muddy, even with boots. And had it not been that the ground was both cold and muddy underfoot, I would have taken off my

walking boots, because it really did feel like I was treading on holy ground. At the furthest point of my walk, I went to turn round and this caught my eye:



I stood still, holding my breath, drinking in the beauty. I truly felt I was in the presence of the Divine. I don't know how long I stood there... a couple of minutes, perhaps. Then bowed my head and gave thanks.

The other wonder-full thing about yesterday's walk was the presence of a pale moon high in the blue sky.

And I think of the times I have walked through these same woods, my mind full of other things – the next scene for my book (I find walking helps me to think this through) or the tasks of the day ahead and have missed this glory.

Early morning sunlight
filtering through the trees,
sharpness of the shadows.
Pale moon in the blue sky,
pure birdsong in my ears,
undiluted wonder
takes my breath away.

Sue Woolley

MUA Congregations: Times of Services

As we start to meet in person once more, I have reinstated this list of service times. But please contact the congregation before travelling, in case they are no longer accurate.

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
Kingswood	Meeting House	11.00 am
Shrewsbury	Unitarian Church	11.00 am
Warwick	High Street Chapel	4.30 pm

First Sunday of the Month:

Dudley	Old Meeting House	3.00 pm
Northampton	Unitarian Meeting House	11.00 am
Oldbury	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
Stourbridge	Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel	3.00 pm

Third Sunday of the Month:

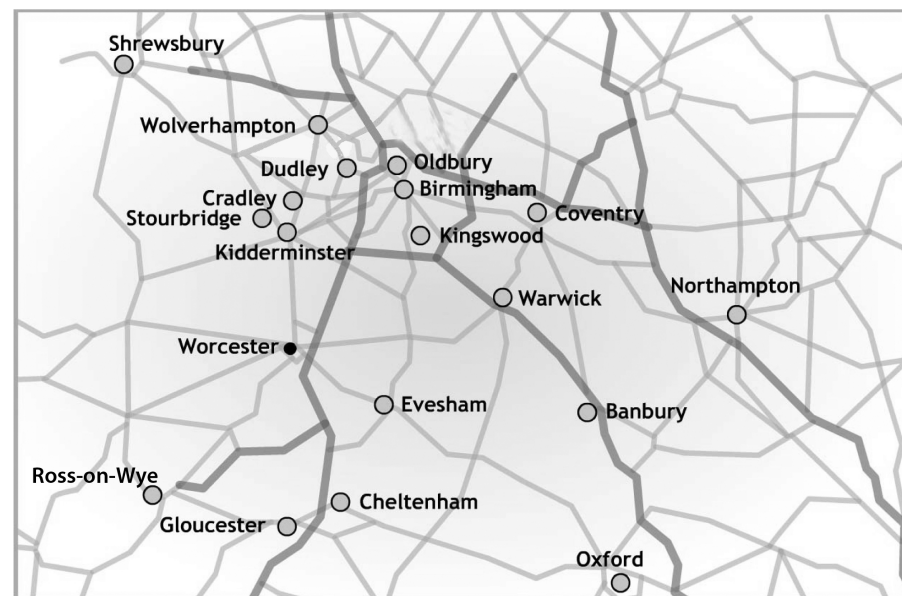
Dudley	Old Meeting House	3.00 pm
Northampton	Unitarian Meeting House	11.00 am
Oldbury	at Dudley	3.00 pm

Fourth Sunday of the Month:

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

MUA Congregations: Contact Details

Name	Contact	Details
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The Winter 2021/22 issue will be published in January.

**Please may we have your contributions on local matters,
and on the theme of “Unitarian Values and Mission”.**

by Friday 7th January 2022

Thank you!