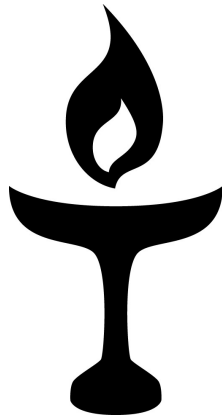


# MU NOW

\*\*\*\*\*



\*\*\*\*\*

## THE MAGAZINE OF THE MIDLAND UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION

ISSUE 66

SUMMER/AUTUMN 2022

\*\*\*\*\*

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

### Officers of the Midland Unitarian Association

#### THE PRESIDENT

Ms. Debra Burbery,  
23a Ashford Way, Pontesbury, Nr. Shrewsbury SY5 0QT  
Tel: 01743-792722 e-mail: [debraburbery@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:debraburbery@yahoo.co.uk)

#### VICE PRESIDENT

Ms. Cressida Pryor,  
12, Cheltenham Road, Winchcombe, Glos. GL54 5ND  
Tel: 01242-604120 e-mail: [zenziallink@hotmail.com](mailto:zenziallink@hotmail.com)

#### IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT

Ms. Diane Rutter,  
2, Packhorse Cottage, Packhorse Lane, Hollywood B47 5DH  
Tel: 0787-1215-920 e-mail: [dianerutter2004@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:dianerutter2004@yahoo.co.uk)

#### SECRETARY / DISTRICT MINISTER

Rev. Sue Woolley, BA, MPhil, Dip RS (Open), Cert.Min.  
5, Martins Road, Piddington, Northampton NN7 2DN  
Tel: 01604-870746 e-mail: [revsuewoolley@gmail.com](mailto:revsuewoolley@gmail.com)

#### TREASURER

Mr Sandy Ellis. TD, BA, FCMA  
The Hermitage, Sale Green, Nr. Droitwich, Worcs. WR9 7LN  
Tel: 01905-391607 e-mail: [sandyellis1932@gmail.com](mailto:sandyellis1932@gmail.com)

### 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.

**In this issue:**

MUA Officers and Aims of the Executive Committee	2
From the Editor	4
President's Piece	5
MUA District Minister Autumn Update	6
MUA Executive Committee Key Messages	7
GA President Update	8
Ideas for a Service of Remembrance for the Time of the Pandemic by Louise Reeve, Peter Flower & Leslie Schipa	11
The Spring Training Day, on Reaching Out to the Wider Community by Jeffrey Bowes	12
Awakening (by David Taylor, Peter Godfrey, Elaine Nomura and Sue Woolley)	16
MUA Congregations: Times of Services	30
MUA Congregations: Contact Details	31

**From the Editor**

Welcome to the Summer/Autumn 2022 issue of *MU Now*. It includes an article which I commend to all lay worship leaders and ministers, about the idea of leading a service of remembrance for the time of the pandemic. And an interesting review of our Spring Training Day, with many hints and tips on how to reach out to the wider community. Plus four fascinating articles about various experiences of 'Awakening', as well as Debra Burberry's Presidential Piece, which also addresses the theme.

But no District news! I would be most grateful if you would send me some for 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, due out in January, is "My Ideal Day" The deadline for submissions is Friday 6th January 2023.

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!

*Sue Woolley*

## President's Piece



By the time you read this it will be well into the start of September, the month of Michaelmas, the feast of St. Michael and All Angels (29<sup>th</sup>), which commemorates the Archangel Michael's victory over Lucifer, when he and his gang were cast out of heaven.

It is also the point where autumn starts, the nights lengthen, and we turn to face the winter.

What has this got to do with the theme of 'Awakening', you may be asking yourselves. Well, one definition of Awakening I found was **a throwing off of indifference or ignorance**. Also, after a bit of research, I found out that St. Michael is represented by the element of fire, and he is said to, amongst other things, spark a desire in individuals to learn about their spiritual truth and develop a stronger relationship with God, get rid of their fear and so love God with a fiery passion. Strong stuff!

So, perhaps this autumn could be a time for me to work at whatever my spiritual truth is and make my relationship with my version of God stronger – not take things for granted – shine a light on areas that I might be a bit ignorant about. For example, whilst preparing a service recently, I found that biblical commentaries were much more interesting than I had previously thought, and I feel I should definitely read a bit more about the background history of other religious, sacred books.

Hopefully, this may lead me to lose my fear/ignorance and increase my understanding of what I consider to be my God and

love it all the more. Although I don't think I'm a fiery passion sort of person... but who knows!

Will you be 'throwing off any indifference or ignorance' and awakening a desire to learn a bit more about your spiritual truth in the coming season?

**Debra Burberry**

~~~~~

## 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, and will be continuing to do this, now that we're all back to in-person services again. I have also (sadly) conducted a couple of funerals.

In June, I attended **Northampton Pride**, which was a joyous occasion.

By the time you read this, the **Autumn Training Day**, on the theme 'Inspirational Collaboration', will be about to take place at Kingswood Meeting House, on Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> October. It promises to be an interesting day, so please sign up if you are interested. (see p. 12 for a review of the Spring Training Day).

**GA President:** I have now visited nearly all of our District's churches, chapels and meeting houses, with my President's hat

on, and have been warmed by the welcome I have received. There is a separate article about my Presidential doings on page 8.

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**

~~~~~

## **MUA Executive Committee Key Messages**

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

Treasurer Elect: Mr Sandy Ellis will be retiring from the post of Treasurer at the 2023 AGM, after an unprecedented 40 years in office. The EC is delighted to announce that Mr Kieren Mardle-Moss of Coventry Unitarians has volunteered to succeed him and will be shadowing him this year.

Pro Canva account: the MUA has signed up for a free Pro Canva account, to enable the production of MUA-wide publicity materials. The contact for this is Aleks Zglinska (e-mail: [aleks.zglinska@gmail.com](mailto:aleks.zglinska@gmail.com))

Debra Burbery: tel: 01743-792722; [debraburbery@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:debraburbery@yahoo.co.uk)  
Sue Woolley: tel: 01604-870746; [revsuewoolley@gmail.com](mailto:revsuewoolley@gmail.com)

## **GA President's Update**

My first Presidential visit took place a scant three days after our GA meetings, when I led worship for Stourbridge Unitarians. And the invitations to visit and to lead worship began to pour in. I soon realised I would have to do something to keep track of them all and concocted a spreadsheet with the months of the year across the top, and the list of engagements down the side. It has helped me to avoid double-booking myself – always a good thing!

It has been wonderful to visit so many churches, chapels and meeting houses around the country, to meet so many lovely Unitarians, and to bring the greetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches to them. One thing that has intrigued me is to learn that there is no such thing as “a traditional hymn sandwich”. I knew this to a certain extent, from my long experience of preaching around the District. But I have now realised that innocuous phrase means very different things to different congregations and I have got accustomed to asking the person inviting me to send me their typical order of service. And then shoehorn what I want to say into that structure. It's been challenging, but fascinating.

To date (as of 10th September) I have led worship in fifteen different congregations: nine around the MUA (at Stourbridge, Northampton, Warwick, Shrewsbury, Birmingham, Cheltenham, Evesham, Kingswood and Coventry), but also at Rosslyn Hill, Hampstead, Taunton, Leicester, Hull (a 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary service), Kendal, and Sheffield Upper Chapel, led one workshop (at Rosslyn Hill), attended the Western Union's AGM at Taunton and the Yorkshire Unitarian Union's Summer Social at Scarborough, as well as attending one ministerial induction

(Laura Dobson's at Chorlton), one funeral (Mike Tomlin's at Middlesbrough), and a retirement do (for Stella Burney from the Nightingale Centre). I have been very grateful for my little car's efficient air-conditioning!

There have been some happy coincidences of location and timing: I discovered that the day after my visit to the Western Union, I was due to lead worship at Cheltenham, and so was able to visit Bayshill on my way home; and my presence at Stella's retirement do was followed by a worship service at Sheffield Upper Chapel.

This week, I have had to prepare a statement about the late Queen's passing on behalf of Unitarians in the UK, a copy of which has been posted on social media, and will appear in the next issue of *The Inquirer*. I have also sent a letter of condolence to Buckingham Palace.

As you all know, I am also a working minister and have tried to keep up with as much of my normal work as possible (except for leading worship, once I had visited each congregation as President). It has been a busy and most interesting time.

The rest of September will be quieter – I will be attending my first national EC meeting at Essex Hall, and have something secret to do at the end of the month (all will be revealed in my next update!) I'm also looking forward to spending a quiet week in the Cotswolds with my husband, before plunging back into the fray in October.

October and November are going to be very busy. I am looking forward to participating in the Rivington Pilgrimage, and to leading worship at Ullet Road, Liverpool, Newcastle-upon-Tyne,

Stockton, Cross Street, Manchester, Edinburgh and Oxford in October. Only one of which (Edinburgh) is via Zoom. Then in November, I will be visiting Hinckley Unitarians for their 300th anniversary service, and the congregations of Golder's Green and Dukinfield. And attending my second national EC meeting, this time via Zoom. I also hope to be representing the denomination at the Cenotaph on 13<sup>th</sup> November, although I haven't heard anything yet.

The month of December is currently completely free (!) and I'm looking forward to a traditional family Christmas.

All in all, the first four months or so of my Presidency have been busy and fascinating. It has been a privilege to be invited into so many Unitarian congregations and to share worship with them. I have been most grateful for the kindness of the Unitarians who have invited me into their homes or arranged hotel accommodation for me. And I have been very appreciative of the efforts everyone has gone to, to cater for my dietary needs – I am a coeliac and cannot eat anything which contains gluten.

### **Sue Woolley, President of the General Assembly**



Receiving the Presidential medallion from outgoing President, Anne Mills  
(photo by Maz Woolley)

## **Ideas for a Service of Remembrance for the time of the pandemic, by Louise Reeve, Peter Flower and Leslie Schipa**

On 20<sup>th</sup> July, Louise Reeve asked a quick question on the UK Unitarian Worship Leaders Network page of Facebook. She wrote, “I’m thinking about organising a service of remembrance. Many of us lost people during the pandemic whose funerals we could not go to and I wonder if it is appropriate to organise a service for our Newcastle congregation in which we can take time to remember those who have died. Has anyone held a similar service, and do you have any advice? Any thoughts on timing? I’m thinking that All Souls’ Day / Samhain would be an appropriate time of year. Thanks in advance.”

There were two very helpful responses from Peter Flower and Leslie Schipa, and I thought that if anyone was thinking of putting such a service together, these two responses might lead the way. I asked their permission to copy and paste them for *MU Now*, and here they are.

Peter Flower: We’ve not done it as such but it sounds like a great idea. I did a recital in the chapel one year on All Souls Day which was a piano only arrangement of *Fauré’s Requiem* and we just had the chapel candlelit and had a lot of tea lights on the altar table for people to light as and when they wanted to. One of the local funeral directors used to do an annual memorial service which we were heavily involved with, although it had to be held elsewhere due to the numbers involved. It does feel like a lot of people didn’t get the farewell we may have wanted for them or that they deserved.

Leslie Schipa: I have a service\* that isn’t specifically for the people we’ve lost and more an overall ‘what we’ve lost’ kind of thing. It involves a ritual of writing down what we lost, e.g. time with loved ones, career opportunities etc, and placing those written slips of paper in a bowl that I pour water over to wash them away as a way to let go. The second part of the service is to acknowledge, however big or small, what we gained. Those are put on display to share with each other and we are given musical time of reflection to come up and read them. If you want to focus on those we’ve lost, consider allowing people to submit photos and short bios of each person ahead of time and leaving them as a display for all to see. You could also double it up with births, adoptions, marriages, and other positives that we gained as well.

\*Leslie also kindly gave me her permission for you to e-mail her if you would like details of the service. Her e-mail address is [la.schipa@gmail.com](mailto:la.schipa@gmail.com)

~~~~~

## **The Spring Training Day, on Reaching out to the Wider Community, by Jeffrey Bowes**

There were three presentations: Social Media by Sue Woolley, Social Events by Diane Rutter and Awareness Raising by Aleks Zglinska.

### **Session 1: Social Media, led by Sue Woolley**

The ‘takeaway’ from this session was to do it well, or not at all. Keeping up to date, posting regularly (frequently for preference),

and a fresh appearance on pages and posts are key. There was a printout of PowerPoint slides.

## Session 2: Social Events, led by Diane Rutter

The takeaways from Diane's session:

- 1 Organise things you enjoy
- 2 When someone suggests an activity get them to organise it
- 3 Don't organise on your own.

Diane joined lots of local and other church social groups to make contacts and find the lay of the land. Don't duplicate what's done elsewhere. Go to where people are and invite directly, 'You have to go to the world, it won't come to you; people wait to be invited.' What do you do? Who do you know? Who do you mix with socially?

She suggested using the acronym CAPS to decide on the kind of social events to offer:

Context  
Audience  
Purpose  
Setting

**Context:** What can you offer? Food (fish & chip supper) with a quiz, a takeaway night. Coffee morning (Kingswood don't charge for coffee & biscuit, take donations). What are others doing (what's missing). Musical Bingo, silent auction, concert, beetle drive (reindeer at Xmas), match the famous couple, icebreaker activities.

**Audience:** Who is in your locality? What age are they? What will they expect? (e.g. for tombola, food, or booze?). Whoever turns up, never say 'No.'

**Purpose:** Enjoyment, for social events, so don't charge, take donations. If the event you are organising is a fundraiser, make this clear from the outset.

**Setting:** What space can you use? A volunteer's garden or home, a garden centre, park, pub, some other venue for an outing, a visiting Sunday to go to other churches. Make sure it's safe and liability insurance is covered. Remember safeguarding requirements and have a person for that on the day – someone trained.

**Bear in Mind:** If the activity has to be sold, seek an enthusiast to do the selling. Be your own best showpiece and don't sweat it – stay simple. Don't expect — hope. Never do it alone, never expect anyone else to work alone. Think about copyrights.

Events should be regular with decent publicity efforts.

## Session 3 Awareness Raising, led by Aleks Zglinska

A website <https://www.awarenessdays.com/> is a digital curation of UK, US and international Awareness Days, Weeks, Months and Events.

February in the UK is LGBT History Month, dedicated to promoting LGBT equality. Aleks recounted how Northampton Unitarians were involved in the 2022 month and used that to make some general points.



1 Is this something that Unitarians have taken a stance on? [there's a document that lays out GA resolutions here: <https://www.unitarian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Where-we-stand-GA-Resolutions-Oct-2018.pdf>].

2 Attend events or campaign as *Unitarians*.

3 Remember, *they are already in the room*. Don't wait until you have, or know you have, a deaf person, a trans person, an addict, in your place. They are already there – if they are not, think, are they excluded by your not being ready?

Each town has different groups that will promote and arrange activities for their social justice causes, e.g. Trans Day of Remembrance (20 November each year), Black History Month (October <https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/>), social justice generally. Let those groups know that Unitarians are available and willing to support them.

**Rituals:** These can vary from the serious and solemn (e.g. the Orlando shootings) to the quirky and amusing ('Believe in Dog' for dog lovers). People will turn up to celebrations of something that is in their lives. Make the event memorable by:

- 1 including songs, poems, readings, etc, on the theme.
- 2 including an action (e.g. planting a tree of remembrance).
- 3 offering something to take away (button badge, leaflet, goody bag, etc).

Some examples:

Vigil night before Mothers' Day  
Pet remembrance  
'Blue Christmas' for folks that struggle with it

**Other venues:** The Camerados (<https://www.camerados.org/>) have values that align with Unitarians. It's about humans being human together and offers virtual public spaces, 'living rooms.'

The Red Door Café ran successfully at Kidderminster church. Open the door and provide tea and coffee (tlc too). The most important thing is to provide one-to-one conversation. Failing that, take people out for coffee.

~~~~~

## Awakening

The theme of 'Awakening' has proved a popular one. Here are four very different 'takes' on it...

### Awakening at the End of the World

As the theme of this issue of *MU Now* is 'Awakening', this led me to think of my first visit to Scotland and, to be more specific, the island of Iona.

Iona is a small island in the Inner Hebrides, off the Ross of Mull on the western coast of Scotland. It is mainly known for Iona Abbey, though there are other buildings on the island. Iona Abbey was a centre of Gaelic monasticism for three centuries and is today known for its relative tranquillity and natural environment. In 2019, the island's estimated population was 120.

It was Easter 1992, and I was 23. I had naively decided to make the journey from Stourbridge to the remote Scottish island with no plans! The coach from Wolverhampton took six hours with no stops. Once at Glasgow bus station, I barely managed to catch the last coach of the evening to Oban on the West coast. Even now I



remember stopping for a toilet break, and finding a public telephone box, ringing my parents. When asked where I was exactly, I replied that I had no idea! Three hours later I arrived in a dark, rainy and mostly closed Oban. By pure serendipity I found a B&B (not having booked anything in advance).

The next morning some incorrect but well-meaning information from the landlady meant that I missed the ferry to the Isle of Mull. With time on my hands, I got chatting to the town's postman. He pointed out to sea to the lone figure of a man in rowing to shore; he was a local fisherman who would, he was sure, take me to Mull.

After a brief friendly chat, the fisherman agreed to take me to Mull in his fishing boat, but only if I could get a dozen people together! How do you round up 12 strangers all wanting to go to Mull in a town you have never visited before? Simple. You go into the office of the large ferry company and announce at the top of your voice that you have a boat that could take them on their journey rather than waiting hours for the next ferry. To my amazement a dozen people got up and followed me out of the office!

We all stood cramped in the small fishing boat, having paid our fee to this shrewd fisherman. Alighting at the other end, the next dilemma (for me at least) was how to get to the other end of the island to catch the ferry to Iona. I spent a rainy Good Friday afternoon in the local pub, reading my book and nursing a pint of Guinness, until the coach came along to pick up the ferry passengers who had decided against joining me in the fishing boat.

An hour or so later, I was on the small ferry to take me the short distance to Iona. There is something otherworldly about the

island as you approach it, almost as if it is not part of the real world.

Once on Iona my problems really began. Where was I going to spend the night? I had nothing booked. Iona is only three miles long by a mile wide. It has a small, close knit population. And this being Good Friday, pilgrims had already booked their accommodation well in advance.

Luckily for me, the friendly landlady of a B&B (probably the only one on this tiny island) suggested I go to the Bishops House, a Christian retreat centre, and offered to ring ahead for me. Sure enough, in the true nature of Christian charity, they found me a bed for the night.

As dusk gave way to darkness I performed my own pilgrimage around the island, starting with the small St. Oran's chapel, beautifully decorated with dozens of candles, a true beacon in the darkness.

At one point, I stood on my own, on the edge of the beach, looking out into the darkness. The only sounds were the wind and the waves at my feet. I was truly standing at the edge of the world. I had with me a small card, with a prayer of St. Columba:

*"Alone with none but thee, my God  
I journey on my way.  
What need I fear, when thou art near  
O King of night and day?  
More safe am I within thy hand,  
Than if an host didst round me stand".*

At last I was at my destination. Goodness knows how far from home, with nothing planned or booked in advance, here I was, standing at the most sacred site in Celtic Christianity.

I realised, my ‘awakening’ if you like, that in the words of Julian of Norwich (which many have turned to during the pandemic): *“All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”*

I had trusted and believed that I could reach my goal. I cannot remember now if I consciously thought of or called upon God to assist me on my way (although I certainly did say a few prayers on my way back as I sat in Glasgow bus station on a Saturday night!), but I had trusted that all would be well.

My other ‘awakening’ was the realisation of the kindness of strangers. Those random people we all meet on our journeys who are only too happy to help – the postman, the fisherman, the landlady etc. And this is what makes us human, our inherent desire to do good. It may not always seem this way, but I believe it is what brings us closer to God.

I will leave you with another prayer from St. Columba, which I wrote down as I stood amongst the candles in St. Oran’s chapel that Good Friday night on Iona in 1992:

*“May the fire of God’s love burn brightly and steadfastly in our hearts like the golden light within the sanctuary lamp”*

**David Taylor, Stourbridge**

~~~~~

*‘If we want a viable world, we must awaken within ourselves a new reverence for nature.’*

Every time I receive a copy of *MU Now*, I make a note in my diary of the theme and deadline for the next issue – how good can you get! The trouble is that I then forget the deadline until I get right up to the date in my diary. I always think of the person who said he loved deadlines – because he liked the ‘whoosh’ as they went past. This time, actually, my item may arrive a few days before the deadline as I shall be away on holiday in Bude on the actual day. Nobody wants to be worried about missing a deadline while on holiday, so here goes.

The date of the deadline may have got lost but the theme hadn’t. I found throughout my ministry, often with two services every Sunday, that having the themes well in advance meant that I could link them with events in the news, articles in papers and books that I came across between the date of having the theme and the date of delivery. So it has proved in this case.

A few weeks ago I was fortunate to be in Reading when Karen Armstrong was launching her latest book in the Minster. The book is called *Sacred Nature*. Armstrong was a nun who ‘climbed over the wall’. Since then she has written many books that have been widely acclaimed, especially her *History of God* and her book on compassion. [*Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Ed.]

In many ways this latest book is also about compassion – compassion for the natural world. It presents a challenge to all people of any faith or none. Wake up! ‘If we want a viable world we must awaken within ourselves a new reverence for nature’.

I am sure that all of you who are reading this will have had many deep and joyful experiences in nature. Two weeks ago I had over

two hours in the glorious Westonbirt Arboretum amongst its trees. Seeing this amazing variety of beautiful trees was a stark contrast to another experience. My walk from home to the little group of shops less than half a mile away is via a passageway to a short cul-de-sac called The Luggs. As I enter The Luggs. I have for sixteen years been greeted by a tree at the side of a narrow lawn. A month ago – it was gone. Felled to its stump. Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem *Binsey Poplars* came to mind. It was composed after he had seen some trees cut down, part of which reads,

*O if we but knew what we do  
When we delve or hew -  
Hack and rack the growing green!  
Since country is so tender  
To touch her, being so slender  
That like this sleek and seeing ball  
But a prick will make no eye at all,  
Where we, even when we mean  
To mend her we end her,  
When we hew or delve:  
Aftercomers cannot guess the beauty been  
Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve  
Strokes of havoc unselfe  
The sweet especial scene,  
Rural scene, a rural scene  
Sweet especial rural scene.*

I don't know why the tree in The Luggs was cut down. The narrow strip of land on which it stood seems to be owned by a little house on the opposite side of The Luggs, but I haven't seen anyone there to speak to... When I lived in Altrincham the whole area in which we lived was owned by the Lord of the Manor, who lived in Dunham Massey – and no tree could be cut down without

his permission. It seemed dictatorial but there was much to be said for it.

I am sure you have read the poem 'I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree' or heard it as a song. My father used to sing it about the house. He would have been about fifteen or sixteen when the song was first being sung. It was published in 1913 and was written by Joyce Kilmer – an American writer who was killed in the First World War. It is far better as sung by Paul Robeson which you can easily find online.

The song also reminds me of Ogden Nash's words: *I think that I shall never see a billboard lovely as a tree. / Perhaps unless the billboards fall I'll never see a tree at all.*

In her book Karen Armstrong looks at the attitude of people and societies towards the natural world from the earliest to the present times. In doing so she shows how at one time, the 'little things' that we now take for granted were considered to be sacred, holy. This attitude meant that animals, water, land, trees and other people were treated with loving care. Armstrong is making the case that we have lost this sense and if we are to survive we must find it again.

One of the points she makes is that whereas for ancient people it was as if everything was God, nowadays we have separated God from ourselves and nature. At one time there was a sense of the sacred in all religions, today we have lost that sense. We have shoved God up into heaven. Armstrong writes of us seeking a supernatural God in the distant heavens instead of aligning ourselves with 'Sacred Nature' of which we are a part.

Armstrong is calling for an awakening – a new (or renewed) reverence for nature, a sense of the holiness of all things. An

awakening to how we are dependent on ‘ordinary things’. An awareness that will lead us to care for these things. Humanity and the natural world she says, are inseparable – our entire existence depends on nature.

Armstrong is not entirely optimistic. For example she writes, ‘*The Qur’an* reminds us of an important truth: the natural order cannot be sustained without balance. Our lack of respect for this delicate equilibrium has perhaps irreparably damaged our environment. *The Qu’ran* insists this balance must be evident in society and here too we fall short. Our religious scriptures and political traditions nearly all emphasise the importance of sharing essential resources equitably, yet despite our proud talk of democracy and justice, we have consistently failed to achieve this’.

What does all that Armstrong is saying mean for us? A great deal, but I shall give just two extracts from the book:

‘If we allow it to enter our lives, nature can inform our minds and become a formative influence. We can begin by taking simple steps, perhaps sitting in a garden or a park for ten minutes a day, without headphones or a mobile phone, simply registering the sights and sounds of nature. Instead of taking photographs of our surroundings, we should look at the birds, flowers, clouds and trees and let them impress themselves on our minds’.

Apparently the Chinese call this *a quiet sitting*, during which we are not ‘watching a score of different objects but a whole in which each thing has its perfect place’. Armstrong writes of us coming to ‘see the extraordinary in the unremarkable’.

In the closing pages of her book Armstrong writes that, ‘The object is to extend the mind.....breaking down barriers of egotism and habits of self-regard, to realise our profound connections with

and, indeed, our dependence upon all our fellow creatures and the natural world. In the process we will develop new habits of mind and heart. We should start, perhaps, with nature, looking closely at our immediate environment, making ourselves aware of the magnificence of trees, flowers, birdsong and clouds, until they are no longer just a backdrop to our lives but a daily marvel. We must also recognise the essential ‘holiness’ or ‘otherness’ in nature that makes it more than a resource; we should recall what sages have said about its mystery and inscrutability’.

*‘If we want a viable world, we must awaken within ourselves a new reverence for nature’*

**Peter Godfrey, Stroud**

~~~~~

Several years ago I was very fortunate to go on a pilgrimage to Israel. We visited many holy sites and were amazed and surprised that they had not only survived for over 2000 years, but that they were beautifully kept and protected by the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Communities, with the involvement and support of various Christian denominations.

We travelled widely in Israel and on the West Bank, and also had a stay in Jerusalem. While in Jerusalem we visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which most Christians, particularly the Orthodox and Roman Catholic denominations, believe is the site of Jesus’s crucifixion, tomb and resurrection.

I found it overcrowded with people from every corner of the globe and noisy and hectic. I found it interesting as one finds a museum interesting, but emotionally it left me unmoved.

After our visit there our fearless leader, a lady Anglican Priest said to us, "Now I am going to take you to the true place of the crucifixion and tomb." We drove a short distance (by coach) to the outer side of the city walls. There we found "The Garden Tomb".



(photo: commons.Wikimedia.org)

The Garden Tomb is so difficult to describe because of its beauty, its heartfelt message, its waves of love, peace and calm, and its deeply prayerful atmosphere. I was absolutely thrilled to find this heart-warming, spiritual sanctuary which spoke to me immediately: that it is of course THE place. To me it was entirely obvious that this was the Garden with the Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea where Jesus was laid (John 19:41). The final confirmation came when I looked out from the garden to see Golgotha right in front of me, an adjacent rocky cliff which looks like the shape of a skull. Extraordinary! Obviously this is the place.

Modern archaeologists say that it does date back to the 1st century CE, and it is outside the City Walls, and does have a green hill shaped like a skull next to it. Other archaeologists say that the Walls have been moved, and that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is THE place. However, it doesn't really matter as long as when you visit Jerusalem you remember to ask for The Garden Tomb. Many tours don't know to take their tourists there, but all the pilgrims and religious seekers and those who are awake never fail to see it.

One awake person who was taken to see The Garden Tomb in 1883 was Gordon of Khartoum, who immediately recognised it for what it was. When he returned to London he set about raising funds to buy The Garden, and established The Garden Tomb Association, which received finance from several members of the Anglican Church. Today it is still financed by Christians, all of them from Protestant denominations, and many of them Evangelicals, and is still a UK charity, with a rota of people (some of them retired vicars and ministers) who go out there for weeks at a time to take care of it.

So if you happen to visit Jerusalem, be awake, and visit The Garden Tomb; you will never, never forget the stunningly beautiful and deeply spiritual experience.

**Elaine Nomura, Warwick**

~~~~~

The 19th century Russian novelist Turgenev once advised, "You have to arrange life so that every moment is meaningful."

And yes, I agree that this ought to be something towards which we aspire. As Joshua Becker explained in readings I shared in a

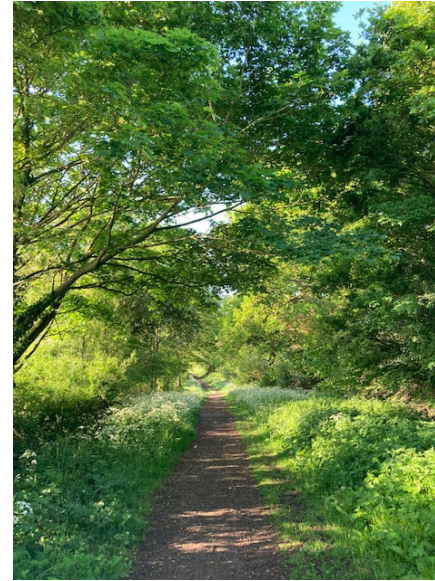
recent service, the process of doing something is as important as the final outcome, and if we want our lives to be rich and meaningful, we need to celebrate, to be awake to, the small moments along the way, rather than being so fixated on our end goal, that we tend to “focus positively on the outcome while lamenting the journey.” Which is such a waste of potential joy!

And Friedrich Schiller, the German playwright, once wrote, “Do not lose yourself in the distant time! Take the moment that’s yours.” Over the past few years, I have come to believe that God’s presence *is* everywhere, in our ordinary, everyday lives, in all the moments we disregard and rush through, because our eyes are fixed elsewhere. I believe that through sacred living – weaving moments of attention into our everyday lives and recognising the sacred there – we will find that which gives our lives purpose and meaning. Sacred living (or mindfulness, as Joshua Becker calls it) is about living with a new level of awareness. It is about going through each normal day paying attention to what is happening in each passing moment. It is about noticing the presence of the divine, the numinous, everywhere – in the natural world, in other people, in ourselves, in the mundane tasks of our lives, and in things that happen to us.

Because today is all we have. I believe that today is the only place in which time touches eternity. I love the Sanskrit affirmation, “Look to this day – for it is life, the very life of life. In its brief course lie all the verities and realities of your existence: the bliss of growth, the glory of action, the splendour of beauty. For yesterday is but a dream, and tomorrow is only a vision, but today well lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope. Look well, therefore, to this day.”

Yet how often do we spend our days (or one day, or even part of a day) being totally present? Appreciating every moment, every interaction, every person or object or phenomenon our senses come into contact with? I know I don’t!

So how do we spend our days? Many of us, especially as we grow older, spend them living in the past, looking back with either pleasure or regret (or a mixture of both). And there’s absolutely nothing wrong with being nostalgic about our past lives, so long as the past is a place we visit, rather than the place we live. As the Sanskrit wise one said, “yesterday is but a dream.” It is no longer real.



Others of us spend our days in the future, always heading towards the next goal, the next hill to climb. Our diaries are full for weeks to come, and there always seems to be a long to-do list on the go. I write a new one, every Monday morning, to make sure that all the things I need to get done in the forthcoming week, somehow get done. And yes, forward planning is important, as we try to juggle home life, work life, looking after children, looking after parents, some sort of social life. Including a regular walk in the Forest – see above – where I have experienced much awakening.



And yes, I concede that if we didn't plan, everything would come down crash. But sadly, this means that we are often so fixated on the outcome of what we are doing, we forget to enjoy the process along the way.

I do try to be spiritually awake and aware, and to be present for as much of my waking time as I can, so that I can appreciate the world around me, the people around me, more. But sometimes, I just want to blob. To turn off my brain and sit in front of something entertaining on the television. Or lose myself in a wonderful book. And I have found that it is nearly impossible to do this "mindfully". I sit with my eyes flying across the page, filling my mind and heart with the story that is going on in front of my eyes. I guess that at such times, I am fully present to what is happening in the book. And the words I'm reading can provide awakenings of their own.

Or am I misunderstanding what Turgenev meant? Does arranging our lives so that every moment is meaningful mean something else? Is it more about being present to what we're doing – whatever that is – whether or not it has meaning for us? This is about mindfulness – being awake and aware at every moment, so that we are fully present to each passing moment, however insignificant it may feel.

I believe that the kind of awakenings that David Taylor, Peter Godfrey and Elaine Nomura describes in their reflections above, are available to us all. So long as we *are* awake, aware. Let us all strive to be open to appreciating the multifarious processes of our lives, rather than being fixated on only the outcomes. May we focus our joy on the journey as well as the finish line.

**Sue Woolley (District Minister)**

## 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<br>Cheltenham &<br>Gloucester | Unitarian New Meeting Church | 11.00 am |
| Evesham                                  | Bayshill Unitarian Church    | 11.00 am |
| Kingswood                                | Oat Street Chapel            | 11.00 am |
| 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 |
|-------------|-------------------------|----------|

### 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   | 11.00 am |

### Third Sunday of the Month:

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

### Fourth Sunday of the Month:

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



## MUA Congregations: Contact Details

| Name                    | Contact           | Details                                         |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Birmingham              |                   | unitariannewmeetingbirmingham@yahoo.co.uk       |
| Cheltenham & Gloucester | Alison Thursfield | 01242 254825<br>thursfieldalison@gmail.com      |
| Coventry                | Francesca Rogers  | info@coventryunitarians.org.uk                  |
| Cradley                 | Sheila Powell     | 01384 838729                                    |
| Evesham                 | Lesley Harris     | 01242 573927<br>agonoid@gmail.com               |
| Kingswood               | Maria Govier      | 07816-159199<br>maria.heath@icloud.com          |
| Northampton             | Aleks Zglinska    | 07970-785159<br>aleks.zglinska@gmail.com        |
| Shrewsbury              | Fiona Checkley    | 07487 531 913<br>shrewsburyunitarians@gmail.com |
| Stourbridge             | David Mearman     | 01384 376478<br>davidmearman@hotmail.com        |
| Warwick                 | Elaine Nomura     | 01926 611964<br>emtnomura@aol.com               |



**The Winter 2022/23 issue will be published in January.**

**Please may we have your contributions on local matters,  
and on the theme of “My Ideal Day”**

**by Friday 6th January 2023**

**Thank you!**