



Kensington Unitarians

Newsletter: February 2017

What's On...

Thursday 2nd February, 7-8pm
'Heart and Soul':
'Practical Wisdom'
Led by Jane Blackall

Sunday 5th February, 11am-noon
'Speaking Words of Wisdom'
Led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

Sunday 12th February, 11am-noon
'Seeking Inner Wisdom'
Led by Jeannene & Sarah

Sunday 12th February, 12.30pm
Inclusive Communion
Led by Sarah Tinker

Sunday 12th February, 2-5pm
Sunday Afternoon Tea Dance
Led by Rachel Sparks

Sunday 19th February, 11am-noon
'The Quest for Wisdom
- Are We on Track?'
Led by Harold Lorenzelli

Sunday 19th February, 12.30-1.15pm
'Finding Your Voice'
Singing Workshop with Margaret

Sunday 19th February, 2-3pm
'Nia Dance' with Sonya Leite

Monday 20th February, 6.30-8.30pm
'A Taste of Playback Theatre'
With Veronica Needa

Wednesday 22nd February, 12.30pm
'Nia Dance' with Sonya Leite

Thursday 23rd February, 7-9pm
Creativity Group: Wall-Hanging

Sunday 26th February, 11am-noon
'Findhorn: Values in Action'
Led by Rev. Sarah Tinker
This will include a charity collection for
'Generation. Education. Period.'

Sunday 26th February, 12.45-2.00pm
Conversations on Wisdom
Please bring a short reading
or piece of wisdom to share.

Wisdom

A Message from our Minister



Jesuit priest and storyteller Anthony de Mello described gaining wisdom through 'reading the book that is you'. I find this a helpful reminder, counterbalancing some of modern life's temptations: the flitting from one spiritual experience to another, the eagerness to buy one more book, to download one more podcast, to hear one more inspirational speaker who has just flown in to speak to their devoted followers. We are blessed with unbelievable riches when it comes to wisdom. Paths that were once offered only to the initiated are now freely available to us all if we have the money and the time to access them.

And haven't we all benefitted from wisdom gained from external sources? Yet for most of us such wisdom needs to be processed, lived into, so that it becomes part of us. We might describe that as taking it into the whole of ourselves – no longer just an idea held in our heads but a truth known in every fibre of our being. Such wisdom can then be called on to help us in times of need because it already exists within us.

I remember a phrase used in the feminist movement for the deep listening that can happen in small groups: 'hearing one another into speech'. This term, first used by theologian Nelle Morton in the 1970s, reminds us of the profound gift of being truly heard. Being encouraged to tell our stories, to articulate our experiences helps us make sense of our lives, it allows wisdom to flourish within us.

Wisdom may indeed be the reading of the book that is you. Wisdom seeks a deep self-understanding, a knowing ourselves well enough to recognise some of our deeper impulses, shaped as they are by our history and experiences. Reading the book that is each of us to *another* is a further step on the wisdom path. Reading the book that is you to another, telling our stories from deep inside, that is an act of love, an act of community-building, an act of sharing that reminds each of us that we are not alone. I look forward to hearing more of your life stories this month.

Rev. Sarah Tinker

'Bless anything that shows you wisdom. Anything that shows you wisdom has become a part of who you are and has drawn you closer to life. The Tibetans have reverence for those who have passed along to them the priceless gift of the wisdom to live well. Perhaps this means having reverence for all of life, the ant and the hawk, the enemy and the friend, the lover and the parent and the child. All have offered us the opportunity to know ourselves and to know life. The chance to befriend life. This is true of our wins and losses, our illnesses, our celebrations, our joys and sorrows. All offer us wisdom. Bless them all.'

Rachel Naomi Remen

In this month's newsletter...

* Sunday Afternoon Tea Dance * Visit from Alex Gowing-Cumber of Inclusive Church * A Taste of Playback Theatre with Veronica Needa * 'For the State of this World' by John Hands * 'What Does it Mean?' sermon by Jane Blackall * Film Reviews by Liz Tuckwell * 'Findhorn Adventure' by Sarah Tinker * Warden's Column: Top Ten User Groups in 2016 * Committee News * 'Language of Spirit' sermon by Sarah Tinker * and much more...

Kensington Unitarians

At Essex Church (founded 1774), Notting Hill Gate

Kensington Unitarians are a community of kindred souls who meet each week at Essex Church in Notting Hill Gate to explore, reflect, converse, be still, share joys and sorrows, and support one another on life's journey. We are proud to be part of a worldwide and historic liberal religious tradition.

Our main activity is Sunday worship and we hold a service each week at 11am. All are welcome. Services are usually themed and include readings from a variety of sources, prayers, music, singing, stillness, and a short sermon. Our children's leaders provide an alternative programme of activities for younger people.

Small-group activities are another key part of our programme. We offer courses and one-off workshops exploring spiritual and religious matters and considering life's meaning together with others on the spiritual journey.

If you are aware of any member of our community who is unwell or suffering in some way and who would welcome contact from others in the church, please contact our minister.



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Volunteering Rotas: Stewarding, Coffee and Greeting

Stewarding:

5th February: Melody Chapman
12th February: Brian Ellis
19th February: Michala von Britzke
26th February: Julia Alden

Coffee:

5th February: Liz Tuckwell
12th February: Juliet Edwards
19th February: Melody Chapman
26th February: Sue Smith

Greeting:

5th February: Michaela von Britzke
12th February: Sue Smith
19th February: Brian Ellis
26th February: Melody Chapman

We circulate the rota list each month by email. Please contact Jane if you are willing to be on the rota mailing list.

rotas@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Inclusive Church: Our visit from Alex Gowing-Cumber



It was a pleasure to welcome Anglican priest Alex Gowing-Cumber to help lead our service in January. He spoke of his own faith journey and of the valuable work done by the organisation Inclusive Church, which works to end any forms of discrimination in churches. Alex offers spiritual companionship sessions and creative therapy. He encouraged us to make our mark with paint on a canvas. What a cheery bunch this picture shows us to be!

We made a collection for the work of Inclusive Church in the following week's service and raised £121.70 to send to them.



'Many of us look around at the problems in the world and feel ready to throw up our hands in defeat. But committing ourselves to ongoing justice work, together with a community of like-minded individuals, can restore hope in the possibility of change and in our own abilities to bring about this change.'

Jill Jacobs

Thematic Ministry: Wisdom



We've reached month three of our first year of thematic ministry and this month our focus will be 'wisdom'. One of the aims of thematic ministry is to encourage people to get involved, to make the theme part of your own focus for the month. Below are some ideas about this month's theme for you to explore and do have a look at the themes for the months ahead in case there's a particular reading or song you'd like to offer or maybe a piece you'd like to write for the newsletter. Let us know.

March – 'Good and Evil' / April – 'Transformation'

May – 'Connection' / June – 'Courage and Resilience'

July – 'Identity' / August – 'Triumph/Disaster'

September – 'Purpose/Mission' / October – 'Generosity'

Wisdom has various meanings. We might think of it as good sense, as the ability to discern or look deeper. It might involve foresight, the ability to think through possible consequences of actions, or right judgement about situations. The insights of the world's religions are sometimes described as 'wisdom traditions'. We sometimes sense wisdom in another person and appreciate their insights. The flip side of wisdom might be foolishness. Yet our errors may lead us to wisdom and the holy fool has oft taught the powerful that there is strength in vulnerability, power in gentleness, insight in laughter.

- What are some of your favourite sources of wisdom? How do you use them at present and how might you deepen your relationship with such a source?
- Are there particular people who have guided you well in life? What do you appreciate about them? What did you learn from them?
- Are there some particular insights that you have gained through life? How would you describe your own inner wisdom?
- Spend time today listening to your body wisdom. What does your body want you to hear at the moment? Is there a message you are blocking in some way?

Come along to our monthly conversation on Sunday 26th February, 12.45 to 2.00pm and bring a short reading or piece of wisdom to share with us all.

Sarah, Jeannene, and Jane



Rachel Sparks Dance Presents Sunday Afternoon Tea Dance

**Sunday 12th February, 2-5pm
with a dance lesson for beginners
at 2.15pm here at Essex Church**

Join us for a tea dance with social dancing and actual tea and cake! Come and enjoy a gentle afternoon learning some basic social dancing steps with Rachel who can teach even the most left-footed people. This is an inclusive event for anyone including LGBTQI+ people and we ask that everyone is respectful to each other. The partnering at this tea dance is gender-neutral, meaning anyone can lead and anyone can follow, and we are completely body positive. The venue is wheelchair-accessible and has gender-neutral toilets. We ask you not to wear high heels as we need to protect the floor!

You are invited to bring your own home-made cakes to raise money for our charity, Diversity Role Models.

Tickets: £10 on the door

(free entry to members of Essex Church)

For more information contact:

rachel@rachelsparksdance.co.uk

www.rachelsparksdance.co.uk/

www.facebook.com/rachelsparksdance

With thanks to the management committee of Kensington Unitarians for supporting inclusive dance.



'In our current moral climate, in order to deeply embrace life's ambiguities and uncertainties, successes and failures, we need an ethics that is capable of stretching rationality and including the emotions; we need ethics that... fosters a proper training of moral imagination.

Much that we value depends on what we notice through imagination. Evil conditions often persist because we lack imagination, because we are not able to let go of certain familiar images. Conversely, human beings flourish when they can see beyond what is externally visible. Although moral rules and norms may guide our responses, it is the images that help us 'see': what we 'see' and not 'see' gives the direction to what we choose to do and what, in a moral sense, we choose to be.'

Anna Abram

'Heart and Soul'

Midweek Spiritual Gatherings

Thursdays 2nd February
and 2nd March from 7-8pm

Gathering at 6.45pm downstairs in the library
Followed by social time and refreshments



Come and join us for our monthly alternative spiritual gathering, with music and silence, words and prayers, and a chance to explore the evening's topic in relation to your own life. This will be followed by refreshments (Jane's home-made cake!) and fellowship. All are welcome to join us.

Jane will lead the February gathering on the theme of 'Practical Wisdom'. According to Aristotle, the virtue of Phronesis, or practical wisdom, is the guiding virtue which helps us to live well and weigh up the competing claims of lesser virtues. In this month's Heart and Soul we will share our own reflections on practical wisdom and how we might cultivate it in our own lives.

If you would like to know more about 'Heart & Soul' gatherings at Essex Church email jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Inclusive Communion

Sundays 12th February, 12th March
at 12.30pm Down in the Church Library



Once a month we hold a small-group communion, after the main morning service, downstairs in the library. A team of volunteers take turns in leading the services so we experience a variety of approaches. All are welcome to participate. If you would like to find out more about these services then please feel free to speak to Jane Blackall or Tristan Jovanović.

12th February – led by Sarah Tinker

12th March – led by Jane Blackall

9th April – led by Tristan Jovanović

Church Committee Report



The church committee met on a cold January night and appreciated the warmth provided by our new heating system. There are still some teething problems with its programming but its efficiency is much appreciated. The committee commiserated with church staff who'd had three plumbing emergencies to deal with in quick succession. The blocked soil stack took days to clear and has shown a need for remedial action on all our pipes and drains where limescale is causing problems. We were delighted to see our newly sanded and finished wooden floors and to hear that the old church organ has now been delivered to a congregation in Kracov. Isn't our building looking smart? We do need still to work on the sound system and the microphone stand. Our new plumber has fitted an easier press button flush in one of our toilets.

Progress continues on updating the photoboard and early February is the last call for anyone who'd like a new photo of themselves to be used. Look out for a new church management system for membership which we are trialling.

We are grateful for all the justice work Carole Grace has instigated whilst she has been on the committee, including raising £181 for Children in Need on a sponsored walk. Although she is now standing down, it's good to know she and Liz Tuckwell will still be encouraging our social action work. We're also grateful to Brian Ellis who has agreed to join the committee. Our next meeting is on Thursday 9th March.

Good Cause Collection of the Month

Generation. Education. Period.

Collection on Sunday 26th February

Thanks to the committee for making a collection for this charity with which I'm involved. Imagine a room filled with girls who do not know why they menstruate or where the blood comes from that soils their clothing so heavily that they are too embarrassed to attend school. This is 2016 in villages in rural Laos and Cambodia, where girls and women are often unable to participate fully in education and work life because of a lack of sanitary products. This GEP social enterprise aims to provide sustainable feminine hygiene solutions for women/girls in socially disadvantaged regions. Khmer women are being trained to sew these simple, washable, hygienic sanitary kits. Mentors have been trained to run GEP workshops to explain how the kits work and their social, health, environmental and economic benefits.

The sanitary pads are made from absorbent cotton fabric and have cotton wings that fasten securely around the underwear to hold the pad in place. It is hoped that the pads will have a lifespan of three years. They cost around £10 to produce. Your support will allow women and girls to better cope with menstruation and continue to live their lives in a normal, dignified way that most of us take for granted. How many re-usable sanitary kits do you think we could provide from our collection here at Essex Church on 26th February? **Julia Alden**

For more information: www.generationeducationperiod.com

Recent Charity Collections:

November – **Send a Child to Hucklow** - £153.49

December – **Refugee Council** - £289.03

January – **Inclusive Church** - £121.70

For the State of this World



For the state of this world
For the fear and anger and pride
And bitterness of it
Let my tears fall

For those burnt in man-made fires
For those washed away in floods
For those twittering their lives away
In disease-ridden shacks and slums
Let our tears fall

For those without food
In an abundant world
For all those without water
In a polluted world
Let our tears fall.

For the mountains of wealth
Poured out in pursuit of transitory pleasures
For the global enterprises gleefully invested
In the making of weapons
Let our tears fall.

And for the cruelty of crabs
Devouring a helpless wandering seabird
For the quick extinction of scurrying insects
For the destruction of whales, tigers, and elephants
For the pitiless squashing of thousands of
Birds, hedgehogs, badgers and rabbits
Beneath a million indifferent motorway wheels
For the predatory instinct which drives
Us and all Nature to the brink of extinction
O Loving One
I cry out to you.

I cry out to you
What can this all mean?
For all this misery and premature death
O Loving, smiling, infinitely Compassionate One
Let our tears fall.

John Hands

Cultural Outings

Thanks to Carolyn Appleby, a group of us from Essex Church will be joining a packed audience for a one off screening of an important documentary called 'Embrace' on 6th February. It's about women's body image and is being hosted by Nicole Schnackenberg who ran a workshop for us here at Essex Church in the autumn based on her book 'False Bodies, True Selves'. We may have one spare ticket for this sold out showing – ask our minister if you'd like to join us.

Are there outings you'd like to organise in the year ahead? Have a chat with Sarah or Jane for easy ways to make a plan.

Warden's Column

We were so busy with building work last year that I forgot to do my annual "Top 10" of highest paying users. Last time I did this, in summer 2015, I wrote

"It's been satisfying to watch our lettings income grow year by year since I started this job in 2006. However, I think we may now be reaching a natural plateau, as it's becoming physically impossible to squeeze any more groups into the building."

This has turned out to be correct, with income actually decreasing slightly last year as we lost a couple of substantial bookings (Russian Ballet £2k, Taiji £1k) and others reduced their usage (Seicho no Ie -£2k, Music Board -£1k, Analytical Psychologists -£1k). Beit Klal Synagogue are also leaving us next year, after many decades of worshipping here -£4.5k in reduced income will be the smallest part of that loss for us. However, we have a new yoga group starting this year & others (Streetdance, Sing & Sign, Alternatives) increasing their usage, so I'm hopeful we can maintain income levels in 2017.

I also wrote *"My prediction for the top 10 high paying groups of 2015 is therefore that it will be the same as 2014: with the Associated Music Board and Little Foxes sliding down the ranking and Ashtanga Yoga and John Stirk Yoga moving up – John may even manage to overtake Seicho no Ie in pole position!"*. I am pleased to say, I was almost entirely right - except that the Music Board slid out of the top 10 altogether. The 2016 Top 10 is almost identical, except that Streetdance (having increased from 1 to 3 classes per week) came in at number 5, displacing IGAP (Independent Group of Analytical Psychologists)

2016 Highest Paying Users

1. John Stirk Yoga - £6k
2. Tse Qi Gung - £5.5k
3. Beit Klal - £4.5k
4. Little Foxes - £4k
5. Streetdance - £4k
6. Ashtanga yoga - £4k
7. Seicho no Ie - £4k
8. Meditation - £3.5k
9. Pastoral Psychology - £3.5k
10. Analytical Psychology - £3k

My 2017 prediction is much the same, with either Alternatives or Sing & Sign coming in to replace Beit Klal. Some of the positions within that may shift about a bit and my best guess for the top 5 is: John, Tse, Ashtanga, Streetdance, and Foxes.

As I was doing this analysis, a question that came up for me is how the overall balance is shifting between our main usage categories of: exercise and yoga; other religious groups; psychologists and children. I might do some analysis on that for a future article. Given that Beit Klal are leaving us and Seicho no Ie have moved to a smaller room, I suspect that over the time I've been here the balance will have shifted substantively away from religion towards children and yoga - with psychology also increasing slightly - but it could be interesting to put some actual figures on that (if you like that sort of thing!)

Watch this space :-)

Jenny Moy

'A Taste of Playback Theatre' with Veronica Needa

30th January and 20th February, 6.30-8.30pm
Here at Essex Church



Building community through personal stories, Playback Theatre creates a ritual space where any story - however ordinary, extraordinary, hidden or difficult - might be told, and immediately made into theatre. And where each person's uniqueness is honoured and affirmed while at the same time building and strengthening our connections to each other as a community of people. It is created through a unique collaboration between performers and audience. Someone tells a story or moment from their life, chooses actors to play the different roles, and then watches as their story is immediately recreated and given artistic shape and coherence.

*All welcome! Two evenings for newcomers
as well as experienced Playbackers to come together
for an evening of fun, playfulness and creativity.*

Members of the congregation free of charge. Donations welcome!

For more information see: www.playbackschooluk.org
info@playbackschooluk.org +44 (0)207 221 2694

'Finding Our Voice' Monthly Singing Workshops



Sunday 19th February and 19th March 2017
after the service from 12.30 to 1.15pm

Margaret has worked as a professional singer all her adult life and is also a very experienced singing teacher. She is leading monthly sessions to help us all find our voice. These workshops are for anyone who is prepared to open their mouth and make a sound. Margaret will show us how to improve the quality and strength of our voices. Using a few simple exercises we'll gain joy and confidence in singing by learning how to produce and develop the voice, something everyone can do. We'll work with the breath and overcome unconscious blocks that can prevent us singing with our true potential. Fun and achievement are guaranteed and sessions are designed for everyone, whatever your experience or ability.

Creativity Group

Thursday 23rd February, 7-9pm



Sue Smith is encouraging people to participate in making another embroidered wall-hanging for the church, this time to represent the seasons of spring/summer. If you would like to come along on the 23rd February, Sue can give you some help to get started, or alternatively you can speak to Sue after one of our Sunday services.

We are thinking about winding down the monthly meetings of the creativity group after the February gathering as the numbers have been quite low during the recent run. If you have been intending to come but haven't got round to it and you would be sorry to see it come to an end then please speak to Sue, Juliet or Jane ASAP so that we can make an informed decision about the group's future.



Fitness Fusion of 9 Movement Forms

Third Sunday of the Month from
2-3pm: 19th February, 19th March,
16th April, 21st May, 18th June...

Midweek classes on Wednesdays
from 22nd February, 12.30-1.30pm

An hour of whole-body conditioning, done barefoot to diverse music. Delivering a cardiovascular workout for any level of fitness. Specific routines allow you to experience - the power of the martial arts, the stillness of the healing arts and the joy of movement through dance.

Cost £10 for drop-ins (£8 to concessions / church members) or a block of 5 classes for £40 to use within a three month period.

Contact: Sonya Leite
on 0207 371 1674

Film Reviews: 'Sully' and 'It's a Wonderful Life'



'Sully: *Miracle On The Hudson*' is a film based on a true event, when a pilot safely landed a plane in the Hudson River on 15 January 2009 after it was struck by a flock of Canadian geese only a few moments after take-off from New York's La Guardia airport. He was then investigated by the National Transport Safety Board to see if he had made the right decision in doing so rather than trying to land at an airport. He was finally vindicated. It was directed by Clint Eastwood and stars Tom Hanks as Sully. I recently watched 'Sully' and thought it was a very good film. I was also struck by a couple of things.

One, here was a film that actually praises experience and age. Sully, Chesley Sullenberger, was a pilot nearing retirement when the incident occurred. He used his considerable aviation experience of forty years, to quickly judge the correct thing to do in a matter of 208 seconds and in so doing, saved the lives of the 150 passengers and the five crew. He had the experience and knowledge to know which option offered the best chance of survival, even though it seemed the most unlikely one. Nowadays, in Western society, it often seems that youth is prized above all else and sadly, elders and their knowledge and experience are not respected, unlike in other cultures.

Second, saving the passengers was not a solo effort as the film does take pains to make clear. The whole crew and the ferry boats, the coastguard, the helicopter rescue pilots all came incredibly quickly and worked together to save the passengers, and played a significant part in ensuring that not a single life was lost. At that time of year, the Hudson river was freezing and the passengers unless rescued quickly had only a few minutes to live. When we hear so much about competition being the natural and best way, it is refreshing to be reminded that crises need people to come together to resolve problems.

It's A Wonderful Life is a favourite film of mine and one I watched recently in a cinema just before Christmas. It is often shown at that time of year. I have never seen it on the big screen before. I'm sure that most of you have seen it. I suspect that many people think this film is just schmaltzy and feel good, and there are elements of sentimentality but there also some very dark moments and some interesting ideas.

The film starts with the hero at a particularly dark point in his life, when he is contemplating suicide and wondering what difference he has made in the world. An angel called Clarence is sent to save him but is first shown George's life up to that point. George's life seems often to have been one of sacrifices and disappointments, he didn't go to college or travel the world to keep his father's savings bank going and stop Mr. Potter, the local unscrupulous financier from controlling all the town. He didn't even get to go to war because of a medical condition in his ear, caused when he saved his younger brother from drowning.

George is driven to contemplate suicide by his uncle losing the day's takings, he accidentally leaves it in the newspaper of Mr. Potter, who, of course, doesn't return it. George knows that this will result in the bank examiner seeing the accounts don't tally and probable imprisonment and disgrace. A despairing George shouts at his uncle, rows with his wife and children and ends up in a fight in a bar. George is about to throw himself into the river when Clarence jumps in first and forces George to save him.

He then shows George what life would have been like in his town without him. For a start, it would be called Pottersville after the local unscrupulous financier and no longer Bedford Falls. It is now a town given up to commercialism and pursuit of pleasure. The working people live in Potter's slums rather than decent housing because the savings bank wasn't there to give them loans to build houses. Most of the people he knows have worse lives; his brother Harry, that he saved from drowning as a child is dead, his mother runs a boarding house and seems a mean old woman, his former employer, a pharmacist, is a drunk and a beggar because George wasn't there to stop him from accidentally killing a child by sending the wrong medicine and so end up in jail.

I think that is a major attraction of the film as most of us, I am sure, have at one time or another wondered what the point of our life is and if the world is a better place for us being in it even if we haven't contemplated suicide. The difference for us is, we don't get a chance to see how our actions have affected other people for better or worse. The film also shows the consequences of being unkind, when in a bar, George is hit by a stranger who turns out to be the husband of George's sick daughter's teacher. George had shouted at her for letting his daughter go out without a coat although George's wife has told him that it wasn't the teacher's fault. I do know that sometime when I've had a bad day, a simple act of kindness or politeness, such as being offered a seat on a crowded train can completely change my mood and attitude. Who knows if one action can have more consequences than you can imagine? It reminds me of the song by Heather Small, the M People singer – 'What have you done today to make you feel proud?' The next line goes on, 'It's never too late to try.'

Another interesting thing about 'It's A Wonderful Life' is that it shows the banking system as bad when controlled by self-interested individuals. Something we know all too well now and a lesson we still seem not to have learnt. The film shows that money can be used to improve society when a community controls its finances. The Bailey's Savings Bank uses its money to build decent new homes for the community rather than making profits. And George is saved at the end by the whole community of Bedford Falls coming together and offering their money to cover the loss at the bank. The importance of community is emphasised and that being a decent person is more important than having wealth or fame.

If you haven't seen 'Sully', it's well worth catching at the cinema or on DVD and if you have never seen 'It's A Wonderful Life', I recommend watching it next time it's on the TV.

Liz Tuckwell



'What Does It Mean?'

Address by Jane Blackall from 8th January

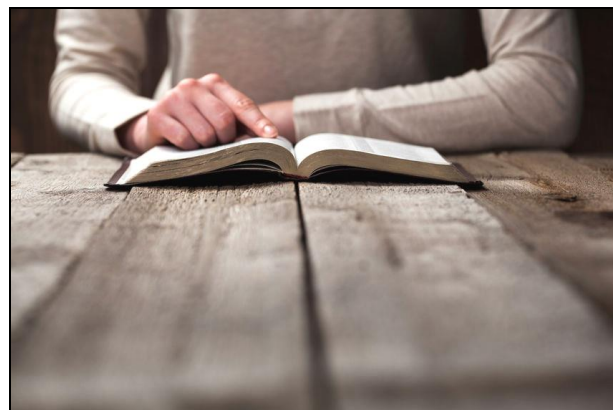
This sermon is also available online as a podcast.

When people ask me what exactly it is we do here on Sunday mornings – and they do ask, occasionally, though not as often as I'd like – one of my better responses is to say that we 'come together to share the search for wisdom, truth, and meaning, gleaning it from wherever it can be found'. I remember a long-standing and faithful member of this congregation, my great friend Patricia Walker-Hesson, who died a little over seven years ago, telling me that on her first visit to this church, just after this building was opened in 1977, she was impressed that the readings in that very first service she attended were taken from the Qur'an and the Evening Standard. For her, that marked the Unitarian church out as something a little bit unusual – a church open to gleaning wisdom, truth, and meaning from wherever it could be found.

In most religious traditions one of the primary sources of wisdom, truth, and meaning is scripture. Each faith has its own sacred texts and its own story about their origins. However, I think it's fair to say that contemporary Unitarianism has a slightly uneasy relationship with sacred texts, at best. There are regional variations, both within this country, and worldwide, but I think I'm right in saying that Bible readings are unlikely to be a feature of worship in all that many of the Unitarian services up and down the country this morning (a few though). Or indeed in the UU services over in the States in a few hours' time when they've woken up.

In our first reading today we heard John Buehrens, one-time president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, make a plea for the liberal religious (that's us!) to re-engage with the sacred text of our heritage and discover its peculiar treasures instead of tossing the Bible aside and allowing others to have a monopoly on its interpretation. And I would agree that if we choose to ignore this part of our heritage – all the collected wisdom of the scriptures and the tradition that's grown up around them down the ages – we're really missing out on some good stuff. So if we're going to do as John Buehrens suggests – to engage more deeply with scripture and do so with our intellectual integrity intact – I suggest we would be wise to dip our toes today into the world of hermeneutics – that is, the theory of interpretation, the theory of understanding what things mean, if you like. I need to tell you at this point that I spent a large part of last summer writing an essay about hermeneutics and it was the most painfully mind-bending essay I have ever written. ...but the good news is that I went through that traumatic experience so you don't have to! and in a few minutes I will give you my best attempt at explaining hermeneutics-in-a-nutshell.

To backtrack for a moment though: this is the second month of our themed-ministry project here at Essex Church and the theme we've chosen for January is 'understanding'. We will be exploring a different aspect of 'understanding' in each service this month. So today's service is about understanding texts – things that other people have written down. Anything that was written down by another person, probably in another place / time, which is the least bit ambiguous, and about which we might find ourselves asking: '*...but what does it mean?*' I'm mainly going to focus on sacred texts today, the Bible in particular, because of the Christian heritage which our denomination is rooted in, but bear in mind that much of what I'm going to say is applicable to texts of all sorts: historical texts, political texts, legal texts, literary texts, philosophical texts (in fact there's an even wider and more abstract usage of



'text' than that... but let's not go there). So even if you're utterly resistant to engaging with religious texts it's still potentially useful! But those texts which we might call 'sacred' are those which have been set apart and lifted up by our forebears. They are the spiritual classics which can be read anew by each generation, and over the course of each lifetime, offering up valuable new meanings in a changing world. So I hope by the end of this service anyone who's hesitant about reading scripture, or who has just drifted away from it over the years, might consider giving it another chance.

So let us begin. The process of understanding things that other people have written down, especially historical sacred texts, invariably involves some sort of interpretation. The key point about it being a *written* text from another place and time is that we don't have direct access to the person who wrote it, or the circumstances they wrote it in, so we can't just ask the author to clarify what they meant – though even if we *could* ask them that doesn't necessarily settle the matter – for hermeneutical reasons that we'll come back to later on... And there are, potentially, all manner of other obstacles to proper understanding: 1. We can't just leap in a Tardis to visit the time/ place the text was written to 'see for ourselves'. 2. Most sacred texts were originally written down in languages that most of us don't speak and have been translated into ones we do. 3. The contents of the Bible were selected by committee – somebody else chose what was left in / what was left out a long time ago – shaping the text we are working with. And then there's the weight of Christian history/tradition that has piled on in the intervening years... there are potentially quite a lot of obstacles to overcome when we're trying to interpret scripture.

A question that is often asked of religious liberals is this: 'can a text just mean anything you want it to mean?' This question is sometimes posed with hostile intent by those who are sceptical about the liberal approach (but it's not an unreasonable question, really: as soon as you move beyond a naive realism or literalism then what is there to constrain you?). And as we heard in the reading from Mary Wellemeyer earlier, 'people read the same words and learn different lessons'. Her poem reflects on how people can use the very same text to inspire acts of war and violence or lives of justice and peacemaking. Surely we would not want to say that these two interpretations are equally good? And indeed Mary Wellemeyer's poem seems to suggest that, if in doubt, we should choose the interpretation that helps to bend the moral arc of the universe towards justice. The great thinkers of hermeneutics – the hermeneuts! (I think that's what you call someone who does hermeneutics) – those who developed theories of interpretation over the last few centuries – have, broadly speaking, offered three perspectives on how we interpret texts. Some put their emphasis on the author, some put their emphasis on the reader, and some give priority to the text itself, what is actually written on the page.

'What Does it Mean?' (continued)

The first, and earliest, group of thinkers – those who prioritise the author – reckon that the meaning of the text is definitively determined by whatever the author intended it to mean. Which sounds like common sense! Now, that's all very well, but how are we as readers supposed to work out what that is? The author of our sacred text is more than likely long dead and may not be known to us by name [and let's neatly sidestep for today the question of what happens if we consider God to be the author of the scriptures, which is the case in faith traditions that believe in divine dictation] If we take this view - that the author determines the meaning - then the best we can do is to try and empathise with the person who wrote it, find out as much as we can about their context, the time and place and historical situation they were writing in, the rest of their work, and anything else we can find out about them to help us intuit what they most likely intended. There's no way we can ever know if we got the meaning 'right' but if we are going to give priority to the author's intention then we must try to establish what was in the author's mind. And – just to step back from sacred texts for a moment, and think about texts in general – there are some situations where focusing on the author's intention seems absolutely right: if you're reading a will, or a love letter, you really want to know what was in the author's mind. Some people who favour this author-centred approach do concede that there's a difference between the 'meaning' of a text (what the author intended) and its 'significance' (what you, the reader, takes from reading it – its impact on you). So in this view the question 'what does it mean?' is narrowly focused on the author's intent but there's another question - 'what does it signify?' - and that is more about the effect on the reader.

Then there's a second group of thinkers – hermeneuts! – mostly postmodernists who prioritise the reader's response to the text and disregard the idea of a meaning fixed by the author. If we ask 'what does it mean?' then their response is more-or-less: 'well, that's up to you'. This is easiest to make sense of if we consider those texts which can be thought of as 'open' or 'productive' – these are texts that may be intentionally ambiguous, to provoke the reader into fresh thought, and to freely generate new meaning. In the context of scripture you might think of parables, poetry, and psalms as 'open' texts which can be regarded in this way, where there is more scope for using your imagination. Other texts, such as historic reports or direct teachings, might be considered 'closed' texts and are perhaps less suitable for this reader-centric approach to interpretation. The meaning of 'open' texts is always provisional and incomplete, so you are free to play (though you might choose to limit the range of interpretations that are considered valid on a pragmatic/ethical basis, such as whether they seem to do you good, or serve your community). The third group of thinkers – those who prioritise the text itself – what's actually on the page – include two of my favourite hermeneuts: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. In this way of thinking, once the work is written down, it is separated from the author, the original audience it was intended for, and the conditions it was written in.

One of Gadamer's most important ideas was the 'fusion of horizons' and I'll try to explain roughly what he meant by that. Brace yourselves. Every person – including the author, and the reader – has their own 'horizon'. This is their outlook, their way of seeing the world, and it will have been shaped by the time and the place they are living in, and the culture and traditions around them. Every person has picked up a whole bunch of prejudices – literally, pre-judgements – about the world we live in and (for

Gadamer) that is not meant in a negative sense. He's *not* talking about prejudice in the way we usually speak of it, in the sense of bigotry. These pre-judgements are necessary to help us make sense of everything we encounter. For Gadamer, prejudices or pre-judgements include generalisations based on our previous experience – in fact our prejudices include everything we know, both consciously and unconsciously, even things like the meaning of words, facts, preferences, and aesthetic judgements. Some of these prejudices will be legitimate, well-founded, and helpful. Others will not. This collection of prejudices we have picked up, largely just by accident of where and when we happen to have been born in the history of the universe, makes up our worldview or 'horizon'.

So: the reader has a horizon, the author has a horizon, and the text also has a horizon. The text's horizon is not exactly the same as the author's, partly because the author can't really consciously express the entirety of their own worldview in a single text, and partly because the text is likely to be shaped by psychological, ideological, and social forces of which the author is unconscious (so, like I mentioned earlier, even if you *could* ask the author what they intended, there's more in the text than even they know about: Ricoeur referred to this as a 'surplus of meaning'). According to Gadamer, to understand a text properly, there must be a 'fusion of horizons'. The reader must have some sort of encounter/ dialogue with the text, bringing open questions to it, and being willing to be changed by the experience and gain new insights from the exchange. You aren't going to reach an authentic interpretation of the text if you just approach it with a closed mind, looking to have your prejudices confirmed. However, if you open yourself to it, the 'horizon' of the text and the 'horizon' of the reader fuse and the reader will be transformed. On the basis of this 'fusion of horizons' our provisional prejudices are revised and next time we meet a text, as a reader, we will be bringing a new – broader – horizon to it.

So there is your whistle-stop tour – a beginner's guide to hermeneutics. Or at least a small corner of it. I did my best! Meaning is not necessarily fixed by the author once-upon-a-time, nor is it always frivolously made-up anew by the playful reader (though there are circumstances where both of these approaches are OK). There is always this possibility of a direct, transformative, encounter with the text itself. And that's where you will find your answers to the question '*...but what does it mean?*' When it comes to understanding texts – especially sacred texts – there are a number of different and legitimate approaches to interpretation. As religious liberals we have both the freedom to explore these texts unconstrained by literalism and the responsibility to engage with the texts and offer a progressive interpretation to the world. I'd like to end now with these words from the UU minister Lynn Strauss, the ones that are printed on the front of your order of service today, in the hope that you will be inspired to have your own encounters with sacred texts, to find new wisdom, truth, and meaning, and to share your findings here with the rest of us. As Lynn Strauss puts it:

*'A sacred text is a text set apart and lifted up...
a text that creates life and meaning.*

The text, the story does not end...

*we are part of the on-going, eternal, sacred story of life.
Revelation is not sealed.*

*We create, beauty and meaning and relationship,
out of the very suspension of the ending of the sacred text.
Every day is a new page to write upon, to read, to listen to...
to discover hidden meaning.'*

Amen.

‘Language of Spirit’

Address by Sarah Tinker from 22nd February

This sermon is also available online as a podcast.

I don't know how many of you will have shared my childhood love of I Spy books. For those of you who have never heard of them, they are small books on a particular topic – that encourage children to be observant, and to make a note of what they see. Some of my favourite topics included *The Night Sky*, *Horses* and *I Spy on The Motorway*. Every time you spotted something pictured in the book you'd award yourself points, 10 points perhaps for finding something simple or as many as 250 points if you discovered something really hard to spot. In the very early days of the I Spy books you could send your completed book to Chief I Spy who would then send you back a signed certificate. But in later editions you were trusted to fill in your own certificate and I was probably not the only child to start cheating, just a bit. If you've been in a bookshop recently you might have seen the latest publishing phenomenon – re-writes of the old Ladybird books. I'm pleased to be able to tell you that I Spy books are also being reworked for the 21st century – to entertain us later I have copies of *I Spy The UK – While It Lasts* and *I Spy Signs and Instructions you Must Obey*. In these books you can earn 20 points for a home-made sign and 30 for philosophical graffiti – of the kind once found on the back of university toilet doors.

These books gave me the idea for our own I Spy project for the rest of this year – *I Spy Religious Language*. So far I've only managed to make a list of words for us – of 36 religious words for us to spot – but there's space for more. My draft version of it can be found on the back of today's hymn sheet (*also on the opposite page*) and you can use it in any way you want. Give yourself points for using a word maybe or highlight the words you never use, or really like or dislike, underline the ones you wish you knew how to use in a sentence. Are there words you used at some time in your life and now avoid? Or vice versa?

One of the aims for our year of thematic ministry was to deepen our religious understanding as a community and to do that I think we need a vocabulary of faith that we're comfortable in using. Discomfort with using religious language has long been an issue for some of us Unitarians. I've described it at times as an almost allergic reaction to words like God and sacred and the divine. Though we know that Unitarianism emerged from the Protestant tradition, from the non-conformists of the 17th century onwards, yet in some of our Unitarian congregations there'll not be a Bible reading heard from one Christmas to the next. Though we'd happily read a Sufi prayer or a Hindu scripture. We find it easier to sing words like 'holy', or 'God' or 'mercy' than to say them. The use of metaphor and other symbolic language comes more easily to us in song and poetry – in our everyday language we may be more tentative – because we're less practiced in using a language of faith, a language of spirit.

We may want language to be precise. We expect when we speak to be understood in the way we meant to be understood. But dig a little more into human discourse, both spoken and written, and we come up against the limitations of language don't we: the limitations of any language in conveying the multiple possible meanings that can be ascribed to any word. We may as well be shouting 'Mulla Nasrudin' and 'Bon appetit' at each other over a cruise liner's dinner table as happened in our story earlier on.



We know that our language is shaped by our culture. In turn our culture, our ways of being in the world can be said to be shaped by our language. When I joined a Unitarian community it was because they'd asked me to join one of their small groups that met over a number of weeks to explore the possibility of building our own theology. I found it so fascinating to be creating community together, where we encouraged one another's spiritual growth. At our best we do this well – make opportunities for exploration of deep spiritual questions together, feeling safe enough to tell our truths, knowing that we'll be listened to and our views will be accepted for themselves, for ourselves. At our best in our small groups we are allowed to be curious about each other's faith, to ask questions to help clarify meaning, to be questioned and not feel put on the spot. Never feeling we have to apologise for our thoughts but rather be encouraged to express ourselves more. Not pushing our own faith positions on to others, not needing people to agree with us, but valuing being understood, and everyone being open to the possibility of being changed by the process of communicating together.

That's us at our best. And in Unitarian small groups I've also experienced most of the opposites – where poor facilitation or unclear group agreements leave people potentially uncomfortable, unwilling to speak their faith, confused by other's language yet not quite safe enough to ask for clarification.

One of the exciting developments in Unitarian circles in the time I've been around has been a growing interest in mystical or contemplative paths – the unknown, the inexpressible, the inward journey to the heart. Unitarianism was for so long the path of the rational, the explainable, and yet we seem now more able to combine seemingly divergent paths, seemingly different languages of spirit, not so separate or irreconcilable after all.

I asked Antony to read the first few verses of John's Gospel that are such an expression of the gnostic tradition, of knowledge through inner exploration, of the power of the word to create. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not."*

Language has creative power. The 'word' becomes embodied and when we speak and listen from the heart as well as from the intellect we engage in a shared process of creativity. When we make use of traditional religious language we are reclaiming ancient vocabulary and I believe we have every right to bring our interpretations to such words, acknowledging that ours will not be the only interpretation, remembering that no one group can ever claim to hold the one and only truth.

As Unitarians our sacred texts may be found anywhere and everywhere. They are open to interpretation and we recognise that interpretations will change over time because for us religion is a human construct as is language. Yet religious language points to something greater than us, words are in some way mediating the sacred for us and our use of words will shape our individual living, and our ways of being together in religious community. My hope is that engaging with language of the spirit

- will strengthen our sense of being members and friends together in our church,
- will give us a way of communicating more effectively about spiritual matters
- and will give us a greater ability to speak of our faith with other people in our lives.

UU Minister Jeanne Nieuwejaar has written powerfully of this task of reclaiming religious language in her book *Becoming Fluent in Faith*. Let me end with her inspiring words: *“For those beyond our congregations, my dream is that we might be able to speak fluidly and compellingly about our faith so that those in need of a community of strength and solace, a community to hold and guide their spiritual journeys, will have a clear understanding of who we are and what we can offer to them and to the world. But I also long for strength and clarity in how we talk about our faith so that those who may never choose our path still will understand it, and will respect it as a religious path with substance and meaning”*. So may it be for us here at Essex Church, for our community of faith and understanding.

Amen.



Religious Language

with Kensington Unitarians

Agnosticism		Love	
Angelic		Mercy	
Atheism		Mysticism	
Atonement		Panentheism	
Blessing		Pantheism	
Covenant		Prayer	
Deism		Redemption	
Divinity		Resurrection	
Doctrine		Reverence	
Eternal		Sacrament	
Evil		Sacred	
Faith		Salvation	
Gnosticism		Sanctuary	
God		Sin	
Grace		Soul	
Holy		Theism	
Hope		Theology	
Humanism		Worship	

Findhorn Adventure



Seventeen Unitarians arrived at the Findhorn Foundation in the far north east of Scotland in early January to spend an Experience Week together. An Experience Week is the classic way to get to find out more about this fascinating spiritual, and environmentally aware, community that started back in 1964. I'd been there twice before to attend conferences but this week gave me a far greater sense of how this community continues to move forward. We were inspired by photos of a bleak and windswept caravan site in the 1960s, now transformed into a tree and bird filled garden landscape, beautifully maintained and so in tune with the natural world. Their carbon footprint is half that of a standard community of a similar size and they are pioneering the development of eco-housing. But what impressed me the most was their holding of spirit at the centre of their actions, attuning with their work teams before each meeting, working always for the highest good of all. Their meditation sanctuaries and Universal Hall hold such a sense of peace, tangible from the moment you enter them. I've brought back some ideas about how our own communities might learn from Findhorn and I'd certainly encourage anyone else interested in such matters to make a trip up there if the chance comes your way. It's not a cheap place to visit and my week was part funded by our generous congregation's committee. The LDPA (London District) Council gave me a grant towards travel costs, for which many thanks. I'd encourage anyone wanting to attend some conference or event to think of asking for a grant from Unitarian organisations. They're often glad to be able to help.

I'll be telling more about Findhorn in our service on 26th February and we now have a special smoke free candle for our chalice as a gift from their community to ours.

Rev. Sarah Tinker

Services at Essex Church in February

**Sunday 5th February, 11am
– 'Speaking Words of Wisdom'**

Service led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

A celebration of the many sources of wisdom available to us in the 21st century and a caution about our use and misuse of sacred texts.

**Sunday 12th February, 11am
– 'Seeking Inner Wisdom'**

Service led by Jeannene Powell and Sarah Tinker

We sometimes speak of an inner wisdom. In this service we'll consider the many paths to knowing ourselves better – through our bodies and deepening emotional awareness.

**Sunday 19th February, 11am
'The Quest for Wisdom
– Are We on Track?'**

Service led by Harold Lorenzelli

How many of us would describe ourselves as wise, and if we do what do we mean by that? Is wisdom definable as a quality or are there just wise acts? Do we always follow good advice, and if we do, or don't, what impels us to behave the way we do? Where does our communal worship fit in to the picture? These and other related questions will form the response to the question: The quest for wisdom, are we on track?

**Sunday 26th February, 11am
– 'Findhorn: Values in Action'**

Service led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

How one community in north east Scotland lives its values through inner listening, right relationship and living sustainably in co-operation with nature.



Our 'Chance to Reflect' Workshop on New Year's Day 2017.