



Kensington Unitarians

Newsletter: July 2014

What's On...

Tuesday 1st July, 7-9pm

Women's Spirituality & Sexuality
(n.b. advance booking is essential)

Thursday 3rd July, 7-8pm

'Heart and Soul' Spiritual Gathering
'Life Savers'
Led by Jane Blackall

Sunday 6th July, 11am-noon

'Chapeau!'
Service led by Members
of the Congregation

Monday 7th July, 12.30-1.30pm

Nia Technique with Sonya Leite

Thursday 10th July, 7-9.00pm

Creativity Group: Printmaking
(or bring your own craft project)

Sunday 13th July, 11am-noon

'The Heart's Longing for the Divine'
Led by Sarah Tinker with musicians
Razia Aziz and Kathryn Gilfoy

Sunday 13th July, 12.30pm

Small-Group Communion
Led by Jane Blackall

Sunday 13th July, 2.00-3.00pm

Nia Technique with Sonya Leite

Monday 14th July, 12.30-1.30pm

Nia Technique with Sonya Leite

Thursday 17th July, 7-9pm

Management Committee Meeting

Sunday 20th July, 11am-noon

'Containing Multitudes'
Led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

Monday 21st July, 12.30-1.30pm

Nia Technique with Sonya Leite

Sunday 27th July, 11am-noon

'Breathing Underwater'
Led by Sarah Tinker and Joy Croft

Sunday 27th July, 12.30-1.15pm

'Finding Your Voice'
Singing workshop with Margaret

Monday 28th July, 12.30-1.30pm

Nia Technique with Sonya Leite

A Message from our Minister:

'How Do You Cope With This?'

That was the question a fellow minister asked me last month. We were staring at a front page photograph in a daily newspaper. Perhaps you saw it: two teenage girls hanging from a tree, with many people standing in vigil beside them. The girls were cousins, called Pushpa and Murti, aged 14 and 15. They had been raped and murdered and when their families first went to the police to report them as missing they were ignored because they came from such a poor background.



Shocking stories of the mistreatment of people around our world are not unusual but to be faced with such a graphic photograph of such a terrible wrong made it hard to ignore. The girls were dressed in brightly coloured saris. Information soon emerged about their lives. They were keen scholars and hoped to finish their education and then work to bring money back to their families. They were loved and cared for. Like most people in their village, they had no bathrooms and would go out to the fields to relieve themselves. They belonged to the Dalit caste, once known as 'untouchables'. So shocked were their fellow villagers by this crime and by the police lack of response that they stayed by the girls' bodies hanging from the tree for many hours, honouring their memory and ensuring that this crime would be noticed by the world.

How do you cope with this? There have been times in my life when the world's problems have felt too much to bear. I've had to turn away because the burdens I was already carrying were more than I could deal with. At times it's as if a part of me has to shut down in order for the rest of me to keep going. At these times I would avoid looking at such a photo or I would notice it but not allow its subject to touch me. But at other times I cope differently. I allow myself to feel what there is to feel: horror, rage, revulsion, fear, sorrow, helplessness, and the shame I experience when I acknowledge how privileged a life I live in comparison to those girls. Instead of backing away I try to breathe in the reality of how violent and cruel we human beings can be towards one another, breathe in the anguish of love and loss, breathe in the pain of existence. And at some point I light a candle and dedicate its light to all those who suffer. And you, how do you cope with this? Perhaps one way is to bring such issues to our community here and together we can sit in vigil, acknowledging the wrongs that are done to the world's innocents, wrongs done to girls like Pushpa and Murti.

Rev. Sarah Tinker

In this month's newsletter...

* Photographs from our 'Friendship' Service and Midsummer Lunch * Essex Church AGM *
'How to Do Photography Magic' by Caroline Blair * Images of God from our Children's Group
* 'Flower Communion' by Annette Percy * 'A Postcard from South Africa' by Iona Blair *
'Thoughts on Friendship' by Veronica Needa * 'A Speedy Response!' by John Hands
* Farewell to David Usher * 'Choose to Bless the World' by Rev. Sarah Tinker * and 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.



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Notting Hill Gate
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Office Telephone: 020 7221 6514

Email: info@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Web: www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk

'Finding Our Voice'

Singing Workshops with Margaret Marshall



Sunday 27th July from 12.30 to 1.15pm

Margaret Marshall 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 our 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 these sessions are designed for everyone, whatever your experience or ability. All are welcome.

'Heart and Soul'

Midweek Spiritual Gatherings

Thursday 3rd July from 7-8pm

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



Our July gathering will be led by Jane Blackall on the theme 'Life Savers'. Come and join us for our monthly alternative spiritual gathering, with music and silence, words and prayers, chance to explore the topic in relation to your own life. Followed by refreshments and fellowship.

If you would like to know more about these gatherings please contact jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk.

Volunteering Rotas: Stewarding, Coffee and Greeting



Stewarding:

6 th July:	Eliz Beel / David D
13 th July:	Juliet Edwards
20 th July:	Annette Percy
27 th July:	Natasha Drennan

Coffee:

6 th July:	Amanda / Roy Clark
13 th July:	Caroline Blair
20 th July:	Veronica Needa
27 th July:	Sara Taylor

Greeting:

6 th July:	Liz Tuckwell
13 th July:	Gina Bayley
20 th July:	Elisa Melgosa
27 th July:	Carol Sheppard

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

Our 'Friendship' Service and Midsummer Lunch on 22nd June



Sarah leading the service



Carol and Sarah enjoying the congregational lunch



Jane's fancy cake



Our congregation, including a number of overseas visitors, and friends who had been specially invited for the service.



Members of the congregation enjoying the bring-and-share midsummer lunch



Jeannene planning a workshop

How to do Photography Magic: A Report from the Creativity Group



The third session of Roy's three-part photography course was on 'what you can do with your photograph after you have taken it'. Digital photography has opened up a whole new world of effects that used to require highly skilled specialist work in the darkroom. Roy showed us how we could use cheap (Photoshop Elements) or free (gimp.org) processing software to do all kinds of magical things to our photographs. In a demonstration that was well pitched at beginners and those who had tried this before, he showed us how to crop, adjust the lighting, change the intensity of highlights or shadows, and numerous other tricks. There was plenty of time for questions and answers so peoples' interests could be addressed individually. There was just time to start us off on the tricky but fascinating science of 'selecting' in a photograph, by which you can move something to where it would look better, get rid of one person from a group, give emphasis to an attractive feature while blurring or shadowing another, even make someone look slim or young; this led to a short but lively discussion about the ethical implications of presenting tampered with photographs as if they were real.



It was not a photography session as such, but I just had time to capture this particularly lovely rose in the church garden...

Caroline Blair



'Whenever there are disappointments — an unfulfilled wish, a broken promise, an expectation gone wrong — impermanence reminds us that while they cannot be undone, they are not permanent, and that their intensity diminishes with the passage of time.'

Just as the lesson of impermanence helps us to deal with our disappointments, it also helps us to temper the highs of successes we achieve or the euphoria of dreams fulfilled. Impermanence reminds us that they too do not last indefinitely, and that we should not be carried away by our great joys because if we are, there will be no cushion to land on when we come down.

Simply taught, impermanence reminds us that everything we experience is subject to change, both positive and negative, and that this realization can temper our emotions and help us find greater stability and peace within ourselves.'

Tenzin Tethong

The American Connection: A Rhapsody in Catford!



Friday 18th July 2014, 7-9pm
Lewisham Unitarian Meeting House,
41 Bromley Road, Catford, SE6 2TS

Music by Gershwin, Korngold, Bernstein, Copland and More

Andrew Wickens – Violin; Elizabeth Hills – Piano
Terri Quaye – Vocal Pianist; Remi F & Jules Phoenix

£8 / £5 conc. on the door includes refreshments.

Summer concert presented by lewishamunitarians.org.uk



A Fitness Fusion of 9 Movement Forms

**Second Sunday of the Month from 2-3pm:
13th July, 10th August, 14th September**

Also each MONDAY lunchtime from 12.30

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 (£7 to concessions / church members).

Contact: Sonya Leite on 0207 371 1674.

Essex Church AGM

Annual General Meetings are not everybody's cup of tea so it was lovely that so many of our members and friends were able to stay for ours at the beginning of June. In our service that morning we had welcomed the following people as new members of our congregation.

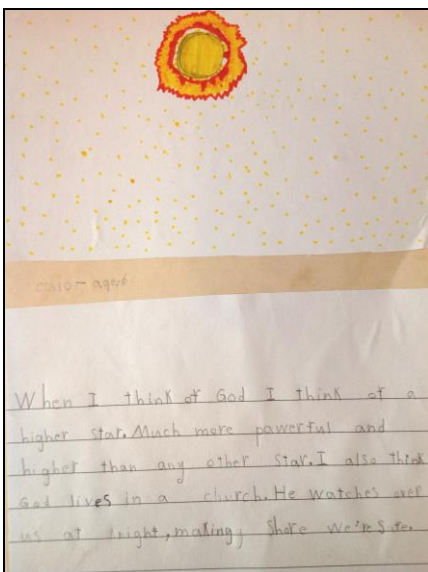
Carolyn Appleby
Sam Boyero and Caio
Roy Clark
Billy Jackson
Ellen McHugh
The Nist-Alam family
Annette Percy

It is a real pleasure to welcome newcomers and we hope that each of them will find their own particular ways to make this congregation their own. We each bring our differing gifts as well as our needs to this community and it is a real pleasure to hear of people's growing involvement. If you feel called to membership of Kensington Unitarians then do not hesitate to speak with me, Sarah or Jane to find out more. At the end of my annual report I wrote that "we should be proud of what we have achieved but not rest on our laurels. Let us continue to work together to provide a welcoming, inclusive, compassionate and stimulating community to all who walk through our doors." I look forward to working with you all in the year ahead.

I must also record all our thanks to Carole Grace who so graciously shared her birthday Pimms with us after the meeting - a most civilised start to a Sunday afternoon.

David Darling

Our Children's Group – Images of God



It's lovely to see more children and young families attending our services recently. We're going to be working on the Unitarian Chalice Award Scheme over the next year so come along whenever you can and let's earn some certificates! Here are some of our recent attempts to draw our image of God. What would you draw, I wonder?

Children's Leader, Sam Boyero

A Postcard from South Africa

As a rosy dawn broke on the morning of April the 5th, my daughter Amber Skye made her way into the world. She was born into a warm birthing pool in our bedroom, surrounded by candlelight and the smiling faces of her family and midwife, Karen Clark.

I had been seeing Karen on a monthly basis for antenatal check-ups since my partner Mark and I moved in October to the village of Bathurst, in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. Karen visits were always a pleasure; we would sit and chat over a cup of tea, before listening to the baby's heart-beat, then checking her growth and position, which Karen did with her expert hands, rather than by ultrasound scanning.

Karen is a professional midwife, trained in South Africa and the UK. She worked in hospitals and clinics for many years, getting an insight into current medical practices and procedures. She became disillusioned with the way pregnancy and childbirth have become seen and treated as pathological conditions that require medical intervention and management.

Currently in South Africa 60-80% of births in private hospitals and around 30% in public hospitals are done by caesarian, a serious operation which is not without risks. Yet, Karen believes caesarian may only be required in about 15% of cases. Women are led to believe it will be safest for them to accept medical intervention in the birth process; when in reality often medication and procedures are not in the best interest of the mother or child, but rather to the convenience of doctors and hospitals.

Karen believes that women are thus being denied their right to natural childbirth, which can be one of the most meaningful and empowering experiences for women (and their partners). Karen established her own practice, 'Birth Without Fear' offering her midwifery services to women looking for an alternative to the mainstream. Having delivered over a thousand babies, Karen is well qualified to support women in dealing with most situations, reserving transfer to a hospital for genuine medical emergency. This gives women the best chance to have their own extraordinary and empowering experience of childbirth, in the comfort of their own homes, in the company of their loved ones.

Amber is a lovely, happy, content little baby, feeding and growing well. Although natural childbirth was not easy (my only painkiller was a cup of tea!), I am truly grateful for the opportunity to achieve the impossible in a peaceful and nurturing environment, free from unnecessary medical intervention and medication. Thanks Karen!

The maternal mortality rate in South Africa is appallingly high for a country that has the many signs of being highly developed. Karen argues that many of these deaths occur, not in isolated rural areas, but in hospitals. She claims women regularly have to wait 5-6 hours for an ambulance when in labour – enough time for an emergency to end in tragedy for babies and mothers. Karen thus set up a rural birth centre in the town of Hamburg, where she lives. Local women, living far from a hospital and with low income, can come to the birth centre for antenatal and postnatal check-ups. The centre also provides a safe place for them to give birth, with the support of a professional midwife, and a place to rest for a few days after the birth. Karen offers this service to the women of local communities drawing on the income from her private clients (like me) and the occasional donation.

If you would like to find out more about Karen and her work, or about home births, or you would like to make a donation, please contact Karen :karen@birthworks.co.za and visit her website www.birthworks.co.za.

Iona Blair



'This church is to save people from fear. This church is to save people from the hells of alienation and loneliness. This church is to save people from the kind of individualism that affirms your importance while starving your soul. We see that kind of individualism everywhere, don't we? It manifests as a consumer mentality, buy buy buy, what you want, what you deserve, and you'll be happy. It manifests as a sense of entitlement, as resistance to doing things we personally do not like, even if it is good for the group. This church saves people from those kinds of hells, and from the hell of hate: hating others, and self hate. From the hell of judgment: which sets us apart from others and cuts us off from them. And this church is for saving people, not from some hell out of some medieval tale, but from the worst fate of all, which is to have nothing

for certain except for this one precious life, and to realize, in our final days, that it was meaningless or nearly so, because we sought only pleasure and fleeting, shallow things, did not wake up to its potential, to our potential. This church is for saving people from meaninglessness. We do that, not by me [*the minister*] telling you the meaning of your life, but by encouraging you and helping you to live a meaningful life. We won't tell you the meaning of life, we will help you live meaningful lives. And you do this for each other.'

UU Minister Rev. Angela Herrera

'Spiritual Life Skills' Forthcoming Workshops



'Enlivening Worship' with Sarah Tinker & Jane Blackall Saturday 19th July, 11am-4pm

A workshop for all those interested in creating enlivening worship in Unitarian and Interfaith settings. Aimed at those new to worship leading as well as for those with experience, this workshop will cover music, choice of materials, themes, prayers and meditations, as well as presentation styles and ways to appeal to all of our senses. You'll have a chance to reflect on your own style of worship leading, the strengths you bring and ways you might stretch yourself further. We'll take some time to consider how best to create an atmosphere that encourages a connection with something greater than ourselves and how embodied worship reaches the parts that other worship just can't reach.

Cost: £5 / £10 / £15 (pay what you can afford)
To book, email: jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

'Celebrating Life's Moments' with Ant Howe and Sarah Tinker Saturday 20th September, 10.30am-4pm

Come and learn more about leading rites of passage ceremonies such as funerals, weddings and child blessings. A workshop both for those who are new to the role of celebrant as well as for those with some experience, with advice on resources, settings and how to connect with people at key moments in their lives. You'll have chance to think more about the role of such ceremonies in our lives both individual and communal, and clarify some of the important elements of such services for you. Ant Howe has wide experience in creating rites of passage ceremonies and probably leads more such services than any other Unitarian minister currently. He brings useful insights into what people most need at such turning points in life.

Cost: £5 / £10 / £15 (pay what you can afford)
To book, email: sarah@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Creativity Group: Printmaking

Second Thursday evening of each month
10th July, 14th August, 11th Sept, 7-9.00pm
(N.B. we will be downstairs in the library in July)



Our next project in the creativity group will be printmaking. If you would like to try making block prints using lino or speedy-carve you will need to have the appropriate materials and tools. The pictures above show some prints that were made in the group a few years ago when we last did block printing (prints by Jane Blackall, Juliet Edwards and John Carter). The deadline has already passed for you to let Jane know you want her to order the necessary materials and tools on your behalf but if you would like to buy your own please contact jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk as soon as possible and she will let you know what's needed.

As ever, you are welcome to come along with your own craft materials, and simply enjoy the company of the group.



Our creativity group meets once a month to focus on a particular art or craft medium or a certain project for each quarter of the year so that we can go deeper into it during that period. One of the particularly enjoyable features of this group is the space it offers for fellowship and conversation while we are each working on our individual projects alongside one another. If you don't fancy the art or craft we are 'officially' focusing on then you are always welcome to bring along whatever you're working on and do your own art/craft whilst enjoying the good company of the group.

Jane Blackall



'It's never a mistake to be generous, even if you afterwards start regretting it and feel unrewarded or unappreciated.'

Carolyn Appleby

Flower Communion

(from the service on Sunday 15th June)

Sarah asked me to tell you something about the origins of the Flower Communion.

The Czech Unitarian movement was founded in Prague at the beginning of the 1920s when there was a surge of enthusiasm for more liberal religion than had been practised during the Austro Hungarian Empire. The first minister, Norbert Fabian Čapek, had returned from a period in the United States and he was encouraged by Charlotte Masaryk, the American wife of the President of the new Republic of Czechoslovakia, who was herself a Unitarian. With help from British and American Unitarians the Czech Unitarians purchased a building in the centre of Prague on Karlova Street, very near to the famous Charles Bridge. The congregation grew and in 1923 Čapek decided that he would like to devise a simple communion service to celebrate the diversity of people as well as what they had in common. He decided that his celebration of communion should not be a cheap imitation of the traditional Christian ritual: it had to be something distinctive which didn't show discontent or displeasure with any particular ideology, but rather would offer common ground for all people of good will. The main aim had to be to celebrate the variety of human identity and the unifying presence of the principles by which we live.



Symbol of the Czech Unitarians

Čapek said that as his symbol of communion he had chosen the most tender, most accessible and most beautiful gift of nature – flowers. And he commented that a flower is godly. However hard we tried we could never make one. It would appear faded, without scent, without life.

The Flower Communion became a very special occasion in the Czech Unitarian year and it remains so today. It is usually celebrated on the Sunday nearest to the anniversary of Čapek's birth.

The Symbol of today's communion as expressed in Prague

1. Each one of us is symbolised in the flowers.
2. The flowers, together in a bouquet, symbolise our togetherness as a congregation.
3. The manner in which we each chose and brought the flowers symbolises our individual freedoms.
4. When you leave this meeting, quietly, without hurrying, each one of you is invited to take a flower from the bouquet which we all made together, and this should be done without conscious choice as a symbol that you do not choose who you wish to accept as one of our church family.

But for now our vase of flowers serves as a reminder that together we will make every effort to create an atmosphere here which is favourable for spiritual growth. Each year it is celebrated by more and more Unitarian congregations around the globe. This simple ceremony is a fitting memorial to a man who was true to himself and to others.

Annette Percy

The Consecration of the Flowers *(A translation of Čapek's words:)*

Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask your blessing on these flowers, your messengers of fellowship and love.

May they remind us, amid diversities of knowledge and of gifts, to be one in desire and affection and devotion to your holy will.

May they also remind us of the value of comradeship, of doing and sharing alike.

May we cherish friendship as one of your most precious gifts.

May we not let awareness of another's talents discourage us, or sully our relationship, but may we realize that whatever we can do, great or small, the efforts of all of us are needed to do your work in this world.

Remembrance Sunday

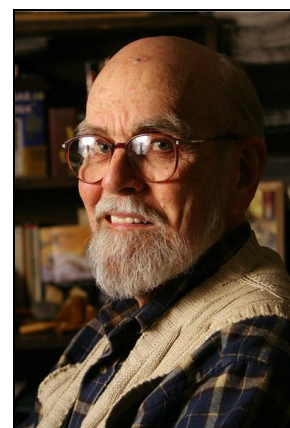


November is still a few months away but I'd be grateful to hear from people who would like to be actively involved in our Remembrance Sunday service on November 9th. This year marks the centenary of the start of the First World War and there has already been considerable public debate about how such a sombre centenary should be remembered. Hardly a celebration, yet nonetheless an important event. What are your thoughts?

Sarah Tinker

'Have compassion for everyone you meet even if they don't want it. What seems conceit, bad manners, or cynicism is always a sign of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen. You do not know what wars are going on down there where the spirit meets the bone.'

Miller Williams



Thoughts on Friendship



I was an only child. Of older parents, who adored me but left me pretty much to my own devices. And I was quite content to be alone, a friend to myself. There were the neighbours' children, and I knew them, so I was not completely solitary. I sometimes played with them, but mostly I was quite happy - reading, making things, watching television. On my own.

Some of my parents' friends were MY friends too. Auntie Laura was very special, a Russian émigré, an opera singer who had to sing in bars to survive, until she married Uncle Dick, a sea captain. She was also a whiz with needlework, and I am good with my hands too. We were creative together. I never felt she was older or bigger than me. She was my friend.

Then of course there were school friends. I loved school. How many of us are lucky enough to say that? I was in the 'out' crowd - with the geeks, and the weirdoes. A good place to be I thought, competing with Michael Ma, Alan Au and Rachel Speak in maths and physics. Good fun! I was hopeless in sports, but I still managed to become Captain of the Rounders Team. We lost every game of course. I like to think I could do a better job of that now. I am certainly fitter now than I ever was when I was 12 or 16.

I remember there was a moment, I think in my late teens, when I realized that when I was talking to people, I wasn't looking at them in the eyes - I looked at maybe their chin or nose. But I recall the shift from looking at them generally, to meeting them through their eyes. That was scary. It's still scary. Good.

And I am in still in touch with a whole gang of my school friends. We meet for dinner every time I visit Hong Kong, my original home, where many of them still live. And there are a clutch of us who live in Europe. We have holidays together, maybe once every other year. We went to Scotland once, then Prague, and Barcelona too where we talked and walked for so many hours that we decided that the next holiday had to be at a spa resort or in a cottage with a good wood fire. No more walking, just talking. And cooking for each other.

And over the years, from being a child who was quite alone, and almost, almost unfriendly, and with few playmates, I have followed a calling to work in a special kind of theatre that brings people together to make friends*. And which requires me to work with teams of people very playfully, developing their creativity and childlike aliveness. How good is that! And this work has generated deep connections for me with people all over the world. I think it was J L Moreno who said it, but I am sure others have too, as I will now.... that truly - its never too late to have a happy childhood.

So there are old friends, new friends - and I know some of us are very particular about who we call a friend. There are friends and there are acquaintances. But friendliness is an attitude towards life, isn't it.

I drive along the road and pull up at a zebra crossing. I gesture to the two people who are waiting, inviting them to cross, and smile. They set off crossing the road confidently with a smile towards me. And when I am crossing a road I make a point to wave a thankyou in the direction of the nearest driver, even if I cant see them properly through the windscreen.

Then there was a time when I sat next to a young man on the tube going home, who needed some directions and in my attitude of friendliness, AND when he said that he had only just moved into a flat near Portobello Road, I chatted about the neighbourhood amenities, and about our Notting Hill Carnival, and so forth, in a neighbourly, friendly sort of way. This almost got me into trouble. I had to gently disentangle myself when I suspected he was developing an entirely inappropriate romantic interest in me!

Another time - on a bus - I had a long conversation with someone who had only just arrived in the country. He was very young, looking for accommodation, and a little anxious. I gave him an idea of the options I knew of, and then we talked about this and that, and then when I got off I wished him well, and wished him courage. And sometimes when the postmen drop mail through my door, or when the council men come to clear the bin cupboard just outside, I yell a cheerful thankyou if I am in.

I am not always so friendly though, especially to myself.

But lately, I feel a growing need to make a new kind of friendship. I grew up in metropolitan Hong Kong. I feel more at ease going up an elevator to the top floor of a skyscraper, than I am standing at the foot of a tall tree. And we know our world - our planet - needs our true friendship. So theres something for me about meeting nature - the raw earth - and making friends with it. In a deep way. And wondering how that will change my life. That's scary. Good.

Veronica Needa



**Playback Theatre - An improvisational form of theatre which enables story-sharing in a public context, Playback Theatre is now practised in over 60 countries around the world. First developed in the mid 1970s by Jonathan Fox and the original Playback Theatre company in upstate New York, it has found a wide range of applications from community celebrations, organisational development, to alleviating suffering in crisis contexts.*
www.playbackschooluk.org / www.londonplayback.co.uk
www.trueheart.org.uk / www.playbacktheatre.org

The International Association of Liberal Religious Women (IALRW) Invites you to the

2014 IALRW Conference

20th-23rd August 2014 at Jury's Inn Birmingham

'Raising our Voices for Change towards a Sustainable World'



Speakers: Loreta Castro, Barbara Beach, Shizuyo Sato, Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth, Afroze Zaidi-Jivraj, Tehmina Kazi

Study Group Themes:

Religious Freedom Interfaith Dialogue;
Sustainable Livelihood (Women's Empowerment);
Sustainable Environment;
Justice, Peace-Building & Education

On 21st August we will have our keynote speaker, Loreta Castro from the Philippines, who will talk about the peace process that has finally de-fused the confrontations of Muslim insurgents in the southern islands and the largely Christian central government. Other panellists and participants will share their experiences and projects in our thematic study groups and in smaller more personal circles. 22nd August includes an optional lunch and bus trip to Coventry Cathedral and its associated Centre for Reconciliation (cost of £50 for this extra event). The Closing Ceremony will be held on 23rd August at Birmingham University. Karen Armstrong will be opening the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) Congress the following day.

Registration: Full participant **£150** (excludes day trip to Coventry; student and local volunteer discounts available)

For more information see: www.ialrw.org

Our own Annette Percy is already booked in to attend and she will be happy to guide a newcomer.

This conference will be followed by the Congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) from the 24th-27th August at Birmingham University.

International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF)

'Challenges for Religious Freedom in the Digital Age'



34th World Congress 24th-27th August 2014 University of Birmingham

At this IARF congress we will consider how the last quarter-century's paradigm-shifting leap in communicative power has shaped the encounter of beliefs, and might inform the ways in which it continues. Contributors will address the advantages that have accrued for the struggle for freedom of belief, as well as the challenges that have arisen for it, from the output of the digital technologies that have revolutionized communication, relationships and identity in recent decades.

Karen Armstrong will deliver the keynote address at our Opening Ceremony on Sunday 24 August 2014.

Our three plenaries over three days will address the following topics: "The coming-online faith world" (Human Rights Defence in the Developing World); "How (not) to Liberate the World" ('Digital Utopianism'); "Educational potential of religious narrative animation" (How can animators help teachers?) Over two days, this long-standing IARF tradition will allow you to meet one another in encounter groups of 10 or fewer, chosen to balance gender, age and faith identity. These encounters begin with self-introductions followed by discussion of your respective faith orientations, and issues around interfaith relations – as well as some conversation on the theme of the event and how it relates to your personal and group lived faith.

Registration: \$390 (conference only; no accommodation).

The IARF have reserved student accommodation which may be booked at the rate of £45.60 per night.

For info see: iarf.net/congress/2014-birmingham/

Conference Grants: A grant to help with the costs of attending either or both of the IALRW and IARF events can be arranged through the Essex Church committee. Please speak to Sarah, our minister, if you might like help to attend.

Cultural Outings



Our tickets for the Proms on August 14th have already been snapped up but if you have ideas for a cultural outing that you might like to arrange then do get in touch with committee member Natasha Drennan (tash_drennan@hotmail.com) who organises outings for our congregation. In recent times we have been on walks, to exhibitions, visited London Zoo late at night, to concerts and plays. London is an exciting place with so much going on, but it does take a bit of sorting and it's more fun to go somewhere in good company with others.

Farewell to Pamela Ramsden

In July we are bidding a fond farewell to the Rev. Pamela Ramsden, Interfaith Minister, who has for the last ten years facilitated the One Light Spiritual Gatherings that take place on the second Friday of the month here at Essex Church.

Pamela writes that "Facilitating the services at Essex Unitarian Church for the last ten years has been a momentous experience for me and a truly beloved service. I have worked with and learned from so many remarkable people of such wisdom, humanity, presence and love - both Interfaith Ministers - as well as teachers and leaders too numerous to list here from different faiths and traditions, including of course yourselves Sarah and Jenny. And I have witnessed so much joy, such open heartedness, such depth of devotion. I can hardly express how much gratitude I feel for this amazing opportunity and experience".

Pamela is going to be kept busy with her new role as grandmother and also with her life's work - the Action Profile® system of movement analysis for fulfilling individual and group potential. But we hope she will come and visit from time to time. We are fortunate that the Rev Joanna Ryam, who has long connections with Beit Klal Yisrael, the Jewish synagogue that hold many of their services here at Essex Church, is stepping forward to organize One Light Gatherings from now on. Do come and experience the rich and varied worship experiences that they offer. In July Razia Aziz and Kathryn Gilfoy will be singing both at our Unitarian service and at the One Light Gathering. Prepare to be delighted by their soulful sound.

Sarah and Jenny

Why I Attend Essex Church

Whereas I have been a Unitarian for many years, I have not always found my niche at every Unitarian Church I've attended.

One summer day last year, soon after I'd moved to Surrey, I decided to get on 'just any bus', and be led to a Unitarian Church. After about 50 minutes, as the bus was about to reach its last stop on its route, our magnificent building uncovered itself to me. I made a mental note of the name, looked it up online as soon as I returned home. I was delighted to read that this Church was holding a 'Bring & Share' lunch a few days later, as I had been missing 'Potlucks' since coming back from The States. Even before that Sunday Service started, my heart had told me this is where I belonged.

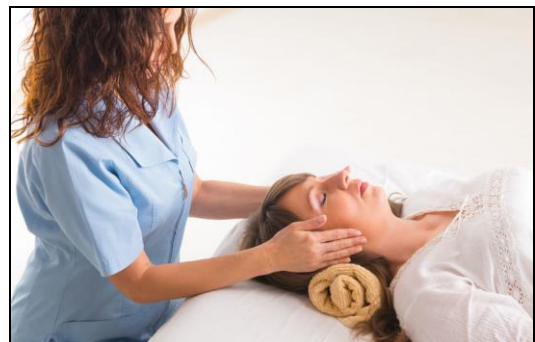
Since that day, I have been marvelling at the positive effect this Church has on me - I am invariably inspired by the themes of the Sunday Services, whether led by our Minister, Rev. Sarah Tinker and/or another person; I delight in Sarah's storytelling skills (props notwithstanding!). I regularly find myself wiping off tears, tears of being moved by some words, tears of laughter. Not once have I felt like dozing during the Service, so much do I enjoy every part of it.

In my new Church Home I have found friendship, support, fun! I have picked up new skills at the workshops I have attended, as well as learning a lot from Sarah and others, directly or by their being such an example to me...

When I was volunteering abroad (January-February 2014), one of my weekly highlights was to listen to the Sunday Service Podcasts on MY Church website! Gratitude to everyone!!

SC

Reiki Healing Sessions at Essex Church



A Reiki master and his students are offering Reiki sessions here at Essex Church, currently on Wednesday evening in the library. Come along from 6pm onwards or you can contact Antonio Moniz on 07939 709 488. They suggest a minimum donation of £5.00, which they then donate back to us at the church for the use of the room. Let them know if a daytime session might be easier for you.

Unikids - Way Out West

25th-28th July 2014 - New Forest



A weekend of fun, exploration of the local area, creativity and pony trekking for 7-14 year olds. Burley Youth Hostel. Transport from London included in a mini bus. Cost: £110. There are grants available if families would like support.

Contact John Harley (jharley@unitarian.org.uk) for more information. For further information and booking forms go to: www.unitarian.org.uk/pdfs/events/WavOutWest14.pdf

One Light Spiritual Gatherings

'The Soul'



Friday 11th July 2014

6.30-8.15pm – Here at Essex Church

The gatherings are led by graduates of the Interfaith Seminary.

Information from One Light: 'Come and enjoy as we gather for deep healing and loving connection to Spirit. Come help us create a sacred space, bringing in the One Light, One Love for which we all long - with silence, music, meditation, and eternal inspiration from all faiths and none. Bring your beloved eternal self, your family, children and friends'

11th July – 'The Soul' with Rev Razia Aziz & Rev Kathryn Gilfoy: Razia brings us deep connection to the Divine through remembrance. Her voice reaches through the music for the soul. Remembrance of God exists in every nation, culture, language and tradition. As such, Razia is equally happy to sing songs and chants from a range of traditions and sources. In this service Razia will be singing mainly her own wonderful compositions. Kath will weave beautiful harmonies into the songs

This event is free. Donations for expenses are welcome. Any surplus will go to Essex Unitarian Church

For further information contact Interfaith Reverends Joanna Ryam 07929 836 935 / Pamela Ramsden 07966 478 980

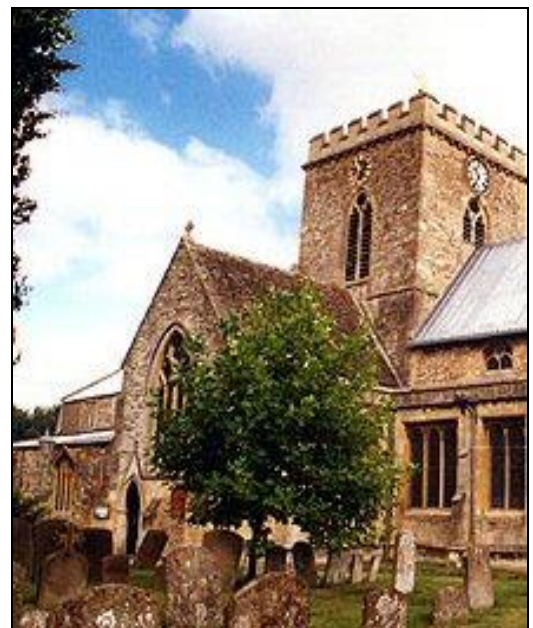
8th August – *Simplicity*; 12th September – *Safety*; 10th October – *Art*; 14th November – *Wisdom*; 12th December - *Gift of Light*

The Church of SS Peter and Paul at Wantage, Oxfordshire

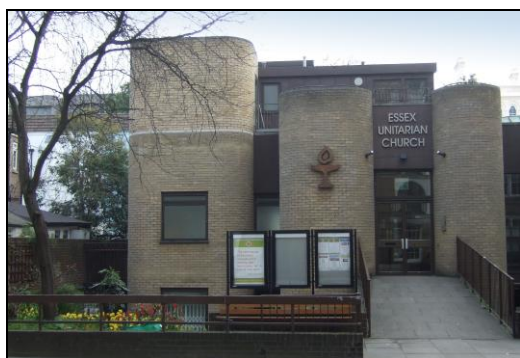
Comfortable it was to see them: clergy and members
Of the church committee, quietly sitting around a table
Under the bulky, corpulent arch in the North transept,
Being attentively fed by one of the sextons or vergers
Like elderly infants in a huge Victorian pram. Quiet, amused
Chatter, jovial commentary, kindly self-indulgent half-confessions
In between Morning Prayers at eight-thirty, and Evening Prayers
At six-thirty. Special Services arranged for appropriate occasions;
Virgin and Saviour suitably invoked: Confessions by appointment.

All cosily clasped like a cardinal's ring: between thirteenth century
Arcades and pillars, colourful Victorian stained-glass windows, two
Twenty-four-light early eighteen-century chandeliers, fine, full-length
Fifteen-century knightly brass tombs, misericords and
Carved choir-stalls. Our Anglo-Catholic tradition so cosily, comfortably
Luring you in – if you have a mind for it, and a heart eager for conformity.
Hungry for a Pope who tells you, a cardinal who tells you, a priest who
Tells you, tells you: this is what religion is, a Great Comfort, this
Is how it should be –i' nit, i' nit i' nit? –yes! this is how it should be
now and forever and ever: Amen.

John Hands, Sept 17th 2012



What's Going on in Our Busy Building?



July and August tend to be more about what's not happening in the building than what is happening – it's the only time of year we're not that busy.

Having said that, there's a flurry of activity in the first three weeks of July this year: with eight days booked for music exams; a prize-giving for the Lloyd Williamson School & Nursery, who use our basement as one of their three sites, and a public open day for a local mental health charity. Even in the last week of July, there's another open day for NHS Mental Health Services & the Interfaith Seminary use us as a "Robing Room" for their ordinations in the Christian Science Church next door – but once we get into August, things go really quiet.

We have several religious groups meeting here that don't take a summer break: Sufi Zikr meditation on Monday evening; Vedic meditation on Mondays & Wednesdays; Reiki healing on Wednesdays; Beit Klal Synagogue on Fridays & Saturdays and Seicho no Ie on Saturday evenings – but apart from that, things really quieten down. The Tai Chi groups on Monday & Wednesday run year round, but all the yoga classes take a summer break and so do the children's activities. Even the nursery is much quieter during the summer holidays.

This year, we do have a couple of new one off bookings though. On 12th & 13th August, the University of Kentucky has hired some classroom space for a London field trip and from 26-28 August we're hosting a summer school for young musicians. We also have our regular booking as a resting space for police and London Transport stewards during the Notting Hill Carnival on Sunday 24th & Monday 25th.

I've got to admit, I always look forward to this time of year & enjoy the building being so peaceful. Sometimes we take the opportunity to get major work done, and this year the big project is resurfacing the flat roof around the manse flat and the shed roof in the back garden – and that should be happening as this newsletter goes to press. Maybe I'll finally manage to get all the signage updated and tidy the cupboards! In any case, I appreciate the way our general busyness lets me enjoy this quietness – and how this fallow time readies me for the rush of new enquiries and communications from groups at the start of the autumn term.

Jenny Moy, Essex Church Warden

Foodbank Update



Thank you to everybody for their continuing contributions to our Foodbank collection. We recently received the following message of thanks:

I just wanted to say thank you for the recent donation of food to Ealing Foodbank. You might be interested to know that we have fed 933 people, 378 of them being children, and have given away 8.2 tonnes of food since we opened in October last year. We now run 3 centres, in Acton, Greenford, Southall and will be opening our fourth in Hanwell at the end of this month.

We are very grateful for all the food donated, and each month this year so far, we have given away more than we have received - which is really good news, and shows to indicate just how important every delivery of food is to us. Please would you pass on our thanks to all those involved? All the best, Janet Fletcher

Juliet Edwards kindly transported the last batch of food and reports that the food bank are particularly grateful for donations of sugar, fruit juice, instant mashed potatoes, tinned meat, tinned veg (particularly potatoes, carrots and veg other than peas/baked beans) & cup-a-soups.

A basic wish-list of items (note highlights):

- Milk (UHT or powdered)
- **Sugar (500g)**
- **Soup (e.g. cup-a-soup)**
- **Fruit squash / juice**
- Tinned meat pies
- **Tinned veg (e.g. potatoes, sweetcorn, carrots, preferably NOT peas/baked beans)**
- Pasta Sauces
- Sponge Pudding (tinned)
- Cereals
- Rice Pudding (tinned)
- Instant Coffee
- **Instant Mashed Potato**
- Rice
- **Tinned Meat / Fish**
- Tinned Fruit
- Jam
- Biscuits or Snack Bars

If you would like to donate any of these items please bring them along to church next time you come.



Small Group Communion



**Sundays 13th July, 10th August
at 12.30pm Down in the Church Library**

On the second Sunday of each month we hold a small-group communion, after the main morning service, downstairs in the library. These services are led by different members of the congregation. A team of volunteers take turns in leading the services so we can experience a variety of different approaches. The line-up for the next couple of months is as follows:

13th July – Led by Jane Blackall

10th August – Led by Sue Smith

If you would like to find out more then please feel free to speak to Jane Blackall or Tristan. All are welcome.



“Once I heard Dean Sperry in a lecture at the Harvard Divinity School say this: There had been times, he said, when he scarcely knew what he believed or whether he believed anything at all — times when he was baffled, confused and dismayed—as, no doubt everyone is sometimes. And at those times, he found great good in the Communion. For here was something which generations of people has said and done over the centuries. And somehow, regardless of doctrine, that gave him a thread of continuity, a kind of steadying. In that service, it was as if he felt himself one with the age-long movement of humanity, together, through thick and thin.”

W L McKinstry (from *uuchristian.org*)

Farewell to David Usher



We recently heard that David Usher, who has served as District Minister for the last seven years here in London and the south east, is going to be moving to California to take up an Interim Ministry with a congregation there. David has been a great supporter of the District's 26 congregations and has often congratulated us here at Essex Church for all that we do.

Highlights of David's time as District Minister include establishing FUSE as an annual weekend of fun and fellowship in February each year, supporting congregations in securing professionally trained leadership and helping to establish Simple Gifts, our movement's social action project based in Bethnal Green. David's humour, good sense and positive approach to religious organisations has been much appreciated and we wish him all the best for the future. We'll miss him.

The LDPA Council are already thinking about best next steps and have asked congregations to get back to them with ideas about what we want from a District Minister. What are the key aspects of the role. If you have any thoughts on this do let a committee member know.

Where Is God?

It's as if what is unbreakable —
the very pulse of life — waits for
everything else to be torn away,
and then in the bareness that
only silence and suffering and
great love can expose, it dares
to speak through us and to us.

It seems to say, if you want to last,
hold on to nothing. If you want
to know love, let in everything.
If you want to feel the presence
of everything, stop counting the
things that break along the way.

Mark Nepo



A Speedy Response!

I feel challenged to make my own response to Sarah, our minister's June 15th sermon, in which she confessed to her own fascination with experiences of speed! Of course I know - viz have felt for myself what she means. The exhilaration of swooping or diving or plunging or zooming through air, water, or on motor-roads or race-tracks at speeds which would have caused howls of fear, anguish or sheer disbelief on the part of our grandparents. Even my parents thought that trains travelling at around 75 mph (like the erstwhile 'Silver Link' from Kings X to Edinburgh, in 1936 I think) were far too risky. But as they couldn't afford to travel on them anyway it was just something to 'cluck, cluck' about from their newspaper reading, or the Pathé News at the local cinema.

A modern form of a novel experience then? Something to be glad we can relish and crack on with? On the contrary, I think that if we go on capitulating to our obsession with various forms of increasing speed, we might soon discover that it encompasses certain social and personal penalty points; not at all unlike the effects we are collectively experiencing in the various activities which are associated with global warming. And of course one of our most popular forms of speed indulgence is directly connected with this – I refer to our obsession with car-speed – and the pollutative effects of this.

The costs of this form of social addiction are astronomic! Years ago in the sixties or seventies I read (and retailed to my sullen Triumph ton-up social studies apprentices) that the average global casualty figures for road accidents were something in the region of around 25 million. Of these a sizable proportion were fatalities. Apart from the huge amount of pain and distress caused to the victims, consider the material costs involved: not altogether off-set, I suggest, by the built-in obsolescence or destruction rate of vehicles which manufacturers are no doubt delighted to replace.

I don't think I need to dwell any longer here on all the other ramifications of this sphere of our obsession with speed. Yes of course I know that there was an accident rate in the horse-drawn ages too for which we have no statistics, only anecdotal reports. Gee-gees are animals which sometimes go ga-ga, and kick out or drag their riders or the occupants of the carriages or carts or chariots they pull to bleak destruction. No doubt history doesn't remind us very often of all this, but simply took it for granted. But although we seldom have to reckon with the aberrations of horses when we travel, are our own lustful urges to drive fast or dangerously any more under our control?

I would like to suggest we should ponderously insist on bracketing speed as an addiction which like all other forms of addiction, is easy for some people to get on to, but very difficult to get-off. Indeed without the restraints and barriers we have set up in various occupations to prevent or ameliorate obsession with speed the situation would be even more lethal than it now is.

For example, in both world-wars for some time would-be pilots sometimes crashed more planes than they brought safely back to base. Like-wise eager, would-be bus and lorry drivers crashed into other road-users at an alarming rate. Eventually fairly elaborate psychological tests had to be devised in attempts (eventually quite successful) to weed out unsuitable would-be drivers, and these have been refined and extended today to bring down the element of adventitiousness to something closer to zero. If you are a long-term successful accident-free pilot, or driver of a heavy vehicle today you have surely earned your laurels.

I have taken space to highlight only one of the spheres in which our obsession with speed shows itself so dramatically. But really when you come to think about it, speed is an obsession which shows itself in almost every direction of human activity. The increasing rapidity of all forms of communication – especially of course electronic communications, and having to almost continually do things now which with less competitive pressure might have been left till tomorrow, lays a heavy toll upon our health, personal stability, and peace of mind. Of course our entire social and economic structure has become a kind of metaphorical engine or whirl-e-gig. We are to some extent allowed space to look around and enjoy our capacity for play while we are in our younger school and pre-school years, but even this is being steadily whittled away by over-ambitious parents and head-teachers anxious for the commercial or academic success of their children.

To conclude, I would tactfully try and point out that forms of addiction are an integral part of most - perhaps all - people's temperaments. Kept under control or wisely dispersed or tapped away in various forms of creative activity (perhaps especially physical activity), our addictive urges are part of the personality-dynamo which drives our complex, interlocking social and personal activities. Addiction is a way of discovering that we find what we are absorbed in delightful and pleasurable – and we find that we can't wait to go on experiencing more of it! I suggest one Answer to this threatening situation is to earnestly engage in pursuits which disperse the intensity of our form of addiction into other fields of human activity. Details of how we might do this are beyond the scope of this little filibuster. But as Unitarians we are supposed to be thoughtful and reflective, so I am sure that your minds are already racing to alternative possible outlets for our potential obsession with speed. Let's talk about it –eh? Thank you for listening.

John Hands

New Book for the Library

The Dignity in Dying organisation has a faith leaders section and they recently organised a very interesting debate on assisted dying, which I was fortunate enough to attend. Rabbi Jonathan Romain is the chair of this group and he has published a book, a copy of which is now in our library: 'Assisted Dying – Rabbinic Responses'. This collection of essays raises many of the issues that we have discussed here at Essex Church and in our wider Unitarian movement over the last few years. We are still the only religious group to have publicly affirmed our support for assisted dying for those who seek it whilst in the final stages of terminal illnesses. This doesn't mean that all Unitarians have to share this view but it does perhaps highlight our commitment to freedom, when such freedom will not bring harm to others. Lord Faulkner's Bill on Assisted Dying receives its second reading in the House of Lords on 18th July. A poll in 2010 showed that 80% of people supported the right of terminally ill adults to be helped to end their own lives. What do you think?

Sarah Tinker



'We can all learn something important from [LGBT] Pride: because shame is not reserved in our culture for people who are gay. Shame is let loose on every one of us any time we are a little bit "queer" - any time we stop hiding the fact that we're different in some way from the norms that surround us. The message of shame is always "you'd better not let anyone know." Shame cuts a person off from some part of themselves. Shame convinces us that we have to hide and hold back and never let anyone know that we aren't just like the Joneses and everyone else. And that hiding and holding back - and especially the deep sense of inadequacy that grows from them - damages the human spirit.

I'm going to say that again, because I think it is vitally important. Shame damages the human spirit. It attacks people at the deepest part of their being and convinces them that they are not worthy, not important, not good enough, not acceptable as they are. And that is in direct contradiction to what we, as Unitarian Universalists, hold to be true. Shame does not believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. In fact, shame destroys that dignity.

That is why we all have something to learn from [LGBT] pride. That's why we should listen closely to anyone who has found the strength to stand up and claim their dignity in the face of shame. What pride is about – [LGBT] pride or any kind of healthy pride - is integrity. Integrity that puts all the pieces of a life back together again and says, "All that I am is okay."

From www.upuertorico.org (author unknown)

Good Cause Collection of the Month

The Mayhew Animal Home



Collection on Sunday 27th July

For our next charity collection we will be supporting the Mayhew Animal Home in Kensal Green, one of the most effective animal welfare organisations in London, reaching thousands of dogs and cats to escape a life of abandonment, neglect and cruelty each year. More than just a rescue and rehoming centre, The Mayhew strives to tackle the companion animal welfare crisis through the delivery of a number of community-based outreach programmes. The Mayhew has a team of Animal Welfare Officers that respond to animal welfare issues out in the wider community and deliver a range of community initiatives, including a Trap, Neuter, Release programme for London's feral cats, cross collaboration with government and NGOs working to address the challenges of irresponsible ownership, and provide ongoing support to carers and pet owners in difficulty.

For more information visit: www.themayhew.org



Previous Charity Collections:

Thank you for your generosity in contributing to recent charity collections. I am pleased to let you know that we will be sending the following donations to good causes:

April – Send a Child to Hucklow - £116.48

May – Christian Aid - £115.03

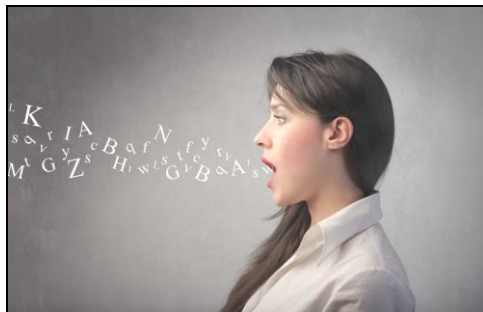
June – GA Sunday - £ 240.52

Pictures of Friendship



On 22nd June ur growing children's group responded to the service theme of friendship. It was lovely to see Lark again.

Thoughts & Words



I tend to be a stickler regarding semantics, because of the power words carry, and I hereby apologise to quite frequently bothering others in this respect!

As to thoughts, even a word that is blurted out with no apparent thinking is preceded by a thought, thus making thoughts just as powerful as words. If you don't agree, do ponder a little on the expression 'Perish the thought'...

However strong one's intention is to say what one means, frequently words are spoken/texted/emailed in such a hurry, that they take even the speaker/sender by surprise. How often does one kick oneself for what one has just uttered, as words cannot be taken back *per se*.

For me, one consolation is what some spiritual schools teach one to say – out loud or silently - "*Cancel Cancel*", immediately after one becomes aware of any detrimental thinking/speaking. Whew! What a responsibility!! Yet what a privilege it is to know that, once we choose to be vigilant about our thoughts and words, we literally participate in Creation.

SC

Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) Summer Meeting



Saturday 19th July from 2.00pm

SimpleGifts (Unitarian Centre for Social Action)
117 Mansford Street, London E2 6LX

The summer gathering of the UCA will take place at the site of the former Mansford Street Church and Domestic Mission in Bethnal Green. It will be an opportunity to learn about the rich heritage of Unitarian Christian engagement with urban ministry, as Rev. David Usher will provide the background story to the Domestic Mission movement. Rev. Rob Gregson will then provide an insight into the contemporary incarnation of this commitment to the Social Gospel with a presentation on a new justice initiative, SimpleGifts.

The afternoon's activities will begin at 2pm with worship. At 2.45pm there will be the presentations from David and Rob. The afternoon will conclude with tea at 4pm. There will be no charge for taking part in the meeting but donations to the UCA would be gratefully accepted.

It would be helpful if you were able to indicate your interest by contacting Jeff Gould, UCA Events Officer, Tel: 01625403509 or email: jeffreylanegould@btinternet.com.

Art Exhibition: Heidi Ferid & Louise Whittles



Heidi Ferid & Louise Whittles invite you to a studio exhibition.

Friday 4th July 6pm - 9pm and
Saturday 5th July 12.30pm - 4.30pm

Triangle Studios, 19 Warburton Road, Hackney E8 3RT

SimpleGifts - Unitarian Centre for Social Action

Come to be inspired and be inspiring! Spaces are limited, so please RSVP by Friday, 4th July: info@simplegiftsucsa.org.uk

Social Action

FUTUREVISION

THE QUESTION: What is — or even should there be — a future vision for social action and social justice work on the part of the UK Unitarian and Free Christian movement?

THE REALITY: One way or the other, we will make critical decisions about our Unitarian social action/social justice commitments. Not always—but all too often—our congregations tend to limit their vision and our true potential for positive change is left unexplored.

THE HOPE: That by working together—with *SimpleGifts* and other interested parties playing various leadership and mentoring roles on several issues—we can actively shape the future of social reform in this country, not simply react to it.

THE INVITATION: Rob Gregson and Ann Howell of *SimpleGifts* invite you to a half-day event for a guided-yet-open discussion about the future of our reforming and justice-making common faith.

Help us “think forward” to what a UK-wide vision for social action and social justice might look like over the next 5, 10 and 20 years.

THE EVENT:

Saturday, 12 July, 11:00 to 3:30
SimpleGifts, 117 Mansford St, London E2 6LX

Lunch provided; some home hospitality available for guests coming from afar. Easy access by public transport and fully accessible facilities.

**Please RSVP at info@simplegiftsucsa.org.uk or
0741 128 0667**

This event made possible in part by the generosity of our supporters and the GA Millennium Fund.



'Choose to Bless the World'

Sermon by Rev. Sarah Tinker – 8th June 2014

An audio podcast of this sermon is available on our website.

I wonder how blessed you are feeling this morning? You might want to hold back your judgement on that until you've found out just how long this morning's sermon is – bearing in mind George Burns' remark that "The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible".

This idea of feeling blessed has been much on my mind these last few weeks – after I'd visited an older woman living in the same care home as my mum. She said she was happy for me to tell you this story and I'll call her Aileen. Aileen is bed-ridden, misses her cat and dog, doesn't have many visitors as her family live far away. But when I asked her how she was doing a few weeks back she replied 'I feel blessed Sarah, quite blessed.' You've perhaps had people say that to you from time to time; you've perhaps said it yourself. And probably most of us who do use such a statement don't mean that we have just won the lottery. Like Aileen, who went on to explain that the sun was shining and a blue tit had just visited the bird feeder outside her bedroom window, we are all capable of finding blessings in perhaps not the best of circumstances, we are all capable of noticing life's small pleasures. But today's service is focusing on something else – *our* ability to bless the world. Now I don't suppose many of us wake up in the morning and think the opposite - that today I shall curse the world. But actively choosing to bless the world does require a bit of work or at least a bit of thought. And most of us have some hurdles in the way, barriers that may stop us from considering ourselves as a blessing to others.

We may have a block caused by the very word 'blessing' itself. In some religious communities a blessing can still only be given by certain people but within our Unitarian faith – just as anyone is welcome to lead worship or conduct a wedding ceremony, for example here at Essex Church – so each of us can bless others. And what is a blessing, what does it mean to bless? To me the very word itself has an ancient, almost mystical sense to it. I like the definition we heard from David Spangler earlier on: "It's an invocation of the presence and the power of the sacred upon a person's life or upon the function of an object". And Spangler goes on to suggest that a blessing can describe our very orientation to life itself – and as such can go on all the time as "an act of discovering the part of us that moves in harmony on the dance floor of creation".

If we step over the block that may be there for us in using this word *blessing* then I'd suggest that the next block to overcome may be our sense of self-worth, the 'who am I to bless the world?' kind of feeling that can come when life has knocked us back a bit, when we don't feel great or worthy or even very capable, those times when just getting up and out and putting one foot in front of another can feel a struggle. During our low times it may seem an impossibility for us to be a blessing to others.



My colleague Ant Howe writes movingly of this: "Now I'm quite open about the fact that in the past I've been depressed. I'm not talking feeling a little bit down here, I'm talking about feeling all the time that I was inadequate. That I was damaged goods. That everything I touched I make worse... and that happens to most of us at some point I think... And the turning point for me? Well, I thank God that against those feelings of depression and worthlessness I learned the truth of our Unitarian faith: that every person has dignity and worth. Not born into sin as some churches might tell you, but born blessed and born to be a blessing. So many religions and churches will tell you that you're a sinner...you need to be saved...you're worthless.... Thankfully you'll never hear that in a Unitarian church because we know the truth that God loves us so much that we already born saved, that our lives are a gift...." Words from Ant Howe, minister of our Kingswood congregation south of Birmingham, who will be joining us in September to run a course as part of our Spiritual Life Skills programme.

Jewish therapist Rachel Naomi Remen writes that a prayer is about our relationship with God whilst "A blessing is about our relationship to the spark of God in one another. God may not need our attention as badly as the person next to us on the bus or behind us on line in the supermarket. Everyone in the world matters, and so do their blessings. When we bless others, we offer them refuge from an indifferent world." Refuge from an indifferent world is a powerful image for me of what we may sometimes need most when life is tough.

When we are at our lowest we sensibly may turn inwards for a while, we may seek a place of healing within. I think one of the things that can start to bring us back to life and love again is then to turn our attention back outwards towards the world once more and to remind ourselves that we matter, that others matter and that it matters what we choose to do or not do. From here we can tell ourselves that we can make a difference, that rather than being victims of life's troubles, we are active participants and through small gestures of awareness of our attitudes we can make things better, gentler, sweeter, even more polite! Yes, I'm still pondering that story we heard earlier on about the World's Politest Man – the thought that the rude man on the bench might actually have been the politest man but that he was only going to be polite once he started his lecture on the subject – that is a funny thought. But it's about as funny as people who go to church, and Sunday morning being the only time they express their faith in action, in love. The rest of the time they're mean and horrible. G.K. Chesterton wrote that "Just going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in your garage makes you a car."

‘Choose to Bless the World’

Sermon by Rev. Sarah Tinker *(continued)*

Faith has to be lived, has to be expressed in practical actions and in a way of being in the world, a way that is a blessing rather than a curse. That I think is what being a blessing is: living as a beneficial presence in the world – and reflecting divine love and truth here on earth. On the back of today’s yellow hymn sheet there is a box in which you can write down some of the ways you choose to bless the world – talking with a few people earlier on we came up with some lovely, simple examples – making a cup of tea for people, picking up litter, smiling at someone, making a phone call or sending a card – simple human gestures of kindness and love. Kindness and love expressing the simple reality that we are all human and that we all have particular gifts and talents to bring to the world. Our task is to recognise the gifts and consciously choose to use them.

I want to finish by repeating that short reading we heard earlier, written by theologian Rebecca Parker ...

Your gifts

whatever you discover them to be
can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind’s power,
The strength of the hands,
The reaches of the heart,
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting
Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
bind up wounds,
welcome the stranger,
praise what is sacred,
do the work of justice

or offer love.

Any of these can
draw down the prison door
hoard bread,

abandon the poor,
obscure what is holy,
comply with injustice

or withhold love.

You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?
Choose to bless the world.

We know it’s not always easy, yet still we can choose consciously, deliberately, to bless the world wherever possible. May it be so.

With thanks to the Rev Ant Howe, whose ideas were the basis for this sermon. Come and hear more from Ant on Saturday 21st September when he co-leads our Spiritual Life Skills course - Celebrating Life’s Moments, an introduction to leading rites of passage ceremonies. Ant will also be co-leading our Sunday service on 22nd September.

Sunday Services at Essex Church



6th July, 11am – ‘Chapeau!’

Service led by Members of the Congregation

The Tour de France makes its *Grand Depart* in Yorkshire this weekend, and is due to roll into London on Monday. In the world of cycling the term ‘chapeau!’ is used to express respects for another’s achievements or heroic efforts (‘chapeau’ literally meaning ‘hat’, you are metaphorically doffing your cap, or taking your hat off to them). In this service we will be paying tribute to such underappreciated achievements in all spheres of human endeavour. You might like to wear your favourite hat to church today!

13th July, 11am –

‘The Heart’s Longing for the Divine’

**Led by Rev. Sarah Tinker with musicians
Razia Aziz and Kathryn Gilfoy**

Mystics throughout the ages have described our human yearning to merge with the Beloved, with God. Through music and poetry we can transcend everyday concerns and know ourselves as One with all that is.

20th July, 11am –

‘Containing Multitudes’

Service led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

How can we comprehend the reports of famous people who hid their abuses of power for decades? How can we best acknowledge such fragmentation within ourselves?

27th July, 11am –

‘Breathing Underwater’

Service led by Sarah Tinker and Joy Croft

At some point in most of our lives, despite our best plans to the contrary, we are likely to find ourselves ‘going under’. What skills might best help us through such times?

