



Kensington Unitarians

The Newsletter

April 2009

What's On at Essex Church:

Thursday 2nd April, 7.00-9.00pm
Adult RE: "New-U"

Led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

Saturday 4th April, 10.30am
Walking Group: Thames Path
Meet at Embankment Station

Sunday 5th April, 11.00am

"A Life Lived in Fear
is a Life Half Lived"

Led by Angela Gasparotto

Thursday 9th April, 7-9.00pm

Creativity Group:

"Easter Mosaic"

Sunday 12th April, 11.00am

Easter Service: "Take One Egg"

Led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

Sunday 12th April, 12.30pm

Congregational Potluck Lunch

Sunday 12th April, 2.00-3.00pm

Nia Dance: Holistic Movement

Sunday 12th April, 3.30-5.00pm

"Songs and Silence for the Soul"

Sunday 19th April, 7.00-9.00pm

"Inspired"

Led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

Sunday 19th April, 12.30pm

Gardening Sunday

with Michaela von Britzke

Wednesday 22nd April, 7.00-9.00pm

Reading Group:

"Driving Over Lemons"

Sunday 26th April, 11.00am

"Assessing Our Assets"

Led by Rev. Jane Dwinell

and Rev. Sarah Tinker

Sunday 26th April, 1.00pm-4.00pm

Congregational Growth Workshop

Led by Rev. Jane Dwinell

Wednesday 29th April, 7.00-9.00pm

Management Committee Meeting

A Message from our Minister Standing Up For ...?

It's not too late. You still have time to register to take part in what promises to be one of this year's most talked about arts events here in London. If you are one of the 2,400 people chosen, you will have the privilege of inhabiting the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square for one hour as part of artist Anthony Gormley's living portrait of Great Britain. You will be up there all on your own. You can take things up there with you so long as you can carry them up there unaided. Once you are up on the plinth you will be free to do whatever you want to do so long as it does not break the law. The project will run for one hundred days, starting on July 6th, 24 hours a day, so there is a chance you may be up there in the dark.

It probably won't appeal to most of us and even if it does, it seems that competition for places on that plinth is going to be fierce. Over twenty thousand people had registered by the end of March, their names now awaiting a computer generated draw, which will ensure a fair representation from all regions of the UK and equal numbers of men and women.

The project is called 'One & Other' and Gormley's aim is to create a portrait of Britain now. Although some commentators fear that it will descend into a very public display of exhibitionism my hope is that something deeper will also be revealed. The plinth is 8 metres high and just beneath it will be a net projecting outwards at a slight upward angle. This is to protect someone if they fall. It is also to protect them from anything thrown from below. What an expression of our human vulnerability and essential aloneness. What an opportunity to 'stand up for something' – to take with you a message that you want the world to hear. Will some people dare to be simply their very ordinary selves? If nothing else this 4th plinth project will give the rest of us an opportunity to sit over a cup of tea and ask one another, "Is it art?"

Rev. Sarah Tinker



In this Month's Newsletter...

* "How I Came to Essex Church" by Debra Hinton * "Chinese New Year" by Juliet Edwards * "Epiphanies, God and Evil" by John Hands * "An Early Spring Walk" by David Talbot * Spiritual Bookshelf: "Starmater" recommended by Jenny Moy * "God, or Nature" by Will Lyons * "Ten Years at Essex Church" by Jane Blackall * Latest Performance by Kensington Community Singers * "Exploring Prayer" – a forthcoming RE course at Essex Church * Fairtrade Bananas * and more...

Kensington Unitarians

At Essex Church (founded 1774), Notting Hill Gate

We are here to share our experiences, to learn from each other, to explore our diverse faiths, to welcome spiritual seekers and offer companionship on life's journey.

We meet for worship each Sunday at 11.00am. The format of the service varies, and usually includes music, singing, meditation, an address, an opportunity to share joys and concerns, and a programme for children. Our activities also include religious education and spirituality workshops, engagement groups on a variety of themes, meeting for fellowship, a regular chanting session, and quiet meditation. All are welcome to come and join us.

Contact our minister to discuss our unique ceremonies, including child naming services, weddings, blessings, and memorials, which are available to all. Many other groups share our church building. If you are interested in hiring one of our rooms for your own organisation or event please contact our wardens by telephone or email.



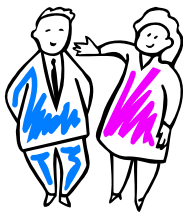
*Kensington Unitarians at Essex Church
112 Palace Gardens Terrace
Notting Hill Gate
London W8 4RT*

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Stewarding and Coffee



Stewarding:

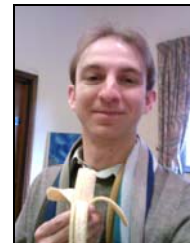
5 th April:	Jo Ridgers
12 th April:	Howard Hague
19 th April:	Christine Joshi
26 th April:	Sachin Joshi

Coffee:

5 th April:	Margaret Darling
12 th April:	Jo Tye
19 th April:	Julia Alden
26 th April:	Christine Joshi

Please speak to Christine Joshi if you would be willing to help out...

Going (Fairtrade) Bananas



Top row: Yasmin and Mike Pritchard, Margaret Darling, Doris Campbell and John Hands. Middle row: Cicero the rat. Bottom row: Juliet Edwards, Sam Reed, Sarah Tinker

We enthusiastically joined in the Fairtrade Fortnight here at Essex Church and as requested by the Fairtrade Foundation, we consumed plenty of fairly traded bananas and sent them photos of our munchings. It was good to join in a national event of this kind and to register our congregation's commitment to buying fairly traded items whenever possible.

The management committee, by the way, would like to make it absolutely clear that the rat (Cicero) lives with the Blair family and has not, and never will, join the rodent population here at the church.

May Newsletter Deadline



The deadline for submitting items for the April issue is **Sunday 12th April**. Please send items (such as poems, artwork, quotes, articles, notices, etc...) to Jane Blackall or any of the committee members before this date.

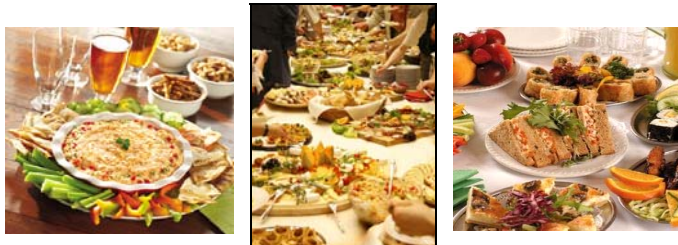
Thank you!!!

Dates for your Diary

Forthcoming Events at Essex Church

Congregational Easter Lunch

Sunday 12th April 2009



A congregational pot-luck lunch is planned for Easter Sunday, 12th April, so please think about what food or drink you might be able to bring along and contribute. Doris Campbell has volunteered to coordinate the lunch and will be wielding a sign-up sheet over the next few weeks so do let her know what you're planning to offer.

Membership Service & AGM

Sunday 17th May 2009

We hold a special membership service once a year at which the commitment of both new and long-standing members to the community is celebrated. It would be lovely if we had a good turnout for this special service on the 17th May. This service will be followed by our Annual General Meeting. It is important that members attend this meeting if at all possible so please put it on your calendar now and plan to come along. We are seeking nominations for the management committee election, so please consider whether you might be able to serve the church in this way, and speak to one of the existing committee members about what is involved.

Summer Celebration

Official Opening of our Kitchen and Toilets
and Unveiling of our new Wall-Hanging

Sunday 28th June, 12.30-2.30pm



We invite all friends of Essex Church to join us in celebrating:

- the official opening of our new kitchen and toilets
Come and try our new Dyson hand-dryers and electric doors!
- the unveiling of our 'Fabric of Diversity' Wall-Hanging
This splendid artwork is the fruit of our recent community arts project.

Pop in when you can, but let us know if you plan to come for lunch so that we can make sure there is plenty for everyone. Phone the Essex Church office on 020 7221 6514 or send an email to info@kensington-unitarians.org.uk.

Growing Our Congregation: Everyone Can Help!



Various growth related events are taking place over the next few weeks which people are invited to. Five of us will be going to a workshop on **Saturday 4th April** in Sevenoaks, Kent, to be trained in how to get our growth project going. We still have room for a couple of extra people so do let me know if you would like to get involved.

On **Saturday 25th April** Rev. Jane Dwinell from the UUA will be running two sessions on 'What Makes a Small Congregation Special?' and 'Opening the Circle: Welcoming New People to a Small Congregation' at a day workshop for the district in the Unitarian church at Golders Green.

On **Sunday 26th April**, Rev. Jane Dwinell will be co-leading worship here at Essex Church and then running a growth workshop specifically for our congregation in the afternoon. Do put this date in your diary as it would be lovely to have a good turnout.

We Unitarians are not the most evangelical of churches. Many of us, me included, can be quite reticent when talking about our faith to others. Yet I am very proud of the community here at Essex Church and of our wider Unitarian movement. It has made a profound difference to my life to find a church where I can belong and where I am accepted. In the last few years I have seen new members really enjoy settling in here and finding their place in the community. People have told me that their lives have improved because of attending this church; that it helps to be able to share this journey of life with others. I think that's worth sharing.

Rev. Sarah Tinker

Songs and Silence for the Soul:

Chanting and Stillness at Essex Church



**Sundays 12th April, 10th May, 14th June,
12th July and 9th August
from 3.30 to 5.00pm**

Suggested Donation: £2.00

We've been running this monthly Songs and Silence group here at Essex Church for over two years now and one of its delightful features is how the group varies from month to month, depending on who comes along.

In March there were just five of us, all regular attenders, and all women. We knew that it was International Women's Day so perhaps it was no surprise that we ended up spontaneously creating our own chant.

Girl and maiden, mother, crone.
Infant girl, you've just been born
Girl and maiden, mother, crone.
Maid embracing the unknown
Girl and maiden, mother, crone.
Mother nourishing seeds you've sown
Girl and maiden, mother, crone.
Wise one ready to go home
Girl and maiden, mother, crone.

We always meet on the second Sunday of each month from 3.30 to 5pm. We sing a wide range of chants from the world's faith traditions and sit together in candlelit silence. It's a gentle and healing, group-led space in which everyone is welcome to join. No particular singing skills are needed.

Phone Sarah via the church office on 0207 221 6514 or email sarah@kensington-unitarians.org.uk if you would like more information.

Sara, Sarah, Jenny, Freda and Cavell

...a continuing adult religious education course for new members ...

“New-U”



Thursday 2nd April from 7.00-8.45pm

This 3 session course is led by our minister Sarah Tinker and is open to everyone who is a member here at Essex Church or is thinking of becoming one.

It's designed primarily for people who feel new in some way - new to Kensington Unitarians perhaps, or new to Unitarianism or new to liberal religion or new to London or Britain. But anyone is welcome to come along as the course is mostly about getting to know one another better through conversation and activities.

How do we run Essex Church? What links are there with the wider Unitarian movement? What other activities are happening here in the UK and how do we find out more? What is important to us as liberal religious people? These are just some areas we will consider during these sessions.

The course is free to attend but we ask people to book a place by contacting Sarah on 0207 221 6514.

LDPA Visit to Down House

Wednesday 8th April 2009



To commemorate the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Darwin, there will be a Group visit to his home at Down House, Farnborough, Kent on Wednesday 8th April. Admission is £8.80 for adults, £7.50 for concessions. Admission is free for members of English Heritage. We will gather at the entrance to the house at noon.

Please inform David Usher if you would like to attend: dusher@sevenoaks-unitarians.org.uk or (01732) 465248.

The Spiritual Bookshelf

#3: 'Star Maker' by Olaf Stapledon (selected by Jenny Moy)

This is the third of a new series of articles in the newsletter where members and friends of the congregation tell us about a spiritual or religious book which has special meaning or value for them. Look out for future book recommendations throughout the course of 2009.

Last month, NASA launched a satellite designed to identify sun-like stars orbited by earth sized planets. Because planets are so small in comparison to stars and because stars are so far away, this is a very difficult task; the satellite looks for a reduction in the brightness of a star as a planet crosses in front of it and its instruments are so sensitive that if it focused on the earth it could detect a person walking past a lighted window.

When the satellite completes its mission, we should have some idea whether planets like the earth are rare or common. There are 100,000,000,000 (100 billion) sun-like stars in the Milky Way and potentially there could be a similar number of earth-type planets.

In the observable universe, there are 10 billion trillion sun-like stars (10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000). Even if only one in a hundred has planets, that's 100 billion billion planets. If one in a million have earth-type planets, that's still 10 million billion (10,000,000,000,000,000) possible places for life to develop – and who's to say that earth-type planets are the only place life can evolve?

Yet the chief scientist in charge of this mission to survey a small part of the Milky Way was quoted in The Guardian as saying "finding few or no earths indicates that we might be alone".

In such a mind-bogglingly immense and complex universe, why do we continue to fear (or hope) that we may be unique? The only intelligent, self-reflexive life-forms, the only ones trying to make some sense of our existence, to wonder what it's all for?

Is it because, despite an intellectual acceptance of Darwin, or Galileo, part of us still longs for a God who made us in his own image, a universe that revolves around the earth?

What kind of creator could be responsible, not just for the astonishing diversity of earth organisms – present, future & extinct – but also for those billions of other stars in our galaxy and billions of other galaxies in the night sky? What relationship to or interest could they have in this tiny part of their creation?

This is the question Olaf Stapledon sets out to answer in his 1937 book "Star Maker" – or as he puts it an "attempt to see man's life as a whole in relation to the rest of things".

It's an odd book - a serious theological treatise published as science fiction. It has no characters to speak of and either not enough, or far too much, plot.

Basically, it's a history of the universe, the entire universe, from big bang through to heat death – though focusing on the 100 billion years or so when it's both cool enough, and still hot enough, to support life.

Our own species is extinct before a tenth of that time has past: living and dying in isolation, without ever attaining interstellar travel – not even a footnote in galactic history.

The species that do play an important role in the eventual formation, first of a galactic, then of a cosmic mind are alien in ways that stretch our ability to comprehend: huge sea-dwelling mammals, like whales or dolphins, but skimming along the surface of the oceans with giant fins to act as sails; hive-minds, some insectoid, some like flocks of birds, communicating by radio waves; vegetable intelligences, spending their days in meditative sunbathing, mobile and active only at night.

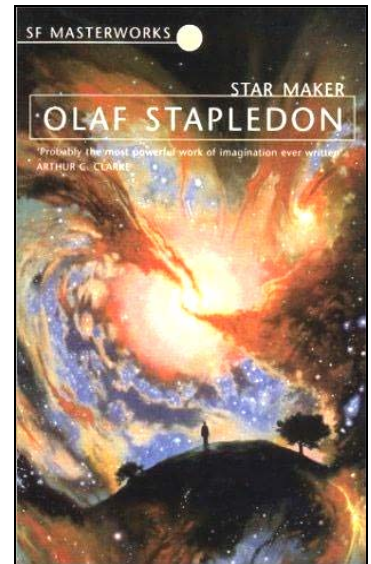
The individuals of one particularly important race are symbiotic pairings of two quite different species – one land and one water based. This idea, of composite minds and beings, wholes greater than the sum of their parts, is the leitmotif of the book: from our own experiences of union in loving relationships here on earth, to the entire universe as a self-aware organism.

In this moment of universal self-awareness, the climax of the book, the cosmic mind contemplates its creator and perceives that our whole universe is only one of infinitely many – imagined, contemplated, learned from...and eventually set aside as the Creating Spirit moves on to new explorations.

I read this book for the first time as a teenager, and it had a huge impact on my thinking about God, hope, consciousness and the meaning of our lives.

Olaf Stapledon served in the Friends Ambulance Unit in the 1st World War and the book is an attempt to come to terms with those experiences of pointless waste and suffering and with the looming shadow of World War II. Like Job, he refuses to console himself with assurances that God is just and beneficent so all suffering must in some sense be deserved or lead to a positive outcome. Also like Job, he is eventually able to find consolation in a sense of awe that overwhelms his pain and grief and rage.

(article continues overleaf)



The Spiritual Bookshelf

(‘Star Maker’ by Olaf Stapledon - continued from previous page)



Stapledon’s God is intensely alien: not a loving parent, a dispassionate artist. The entire book leads up to this revelation: that individuals, species, values, even life itself cannot be of ultimate importance to the creator of the universe.

Here is the moment when the awakened cosmic spirit first perceives this:

“In my agony I cried out against my ruthless maker. I cried out that after all the creature was nobler than the creator; for the creature loved and craved love, even from the start that was the Star Maker; but the creator, the Star Maker, neither loved nor had need of love

and yet...

whether or not one can love

whether or not one can forgive such a God

how can one not worship?”

The cosmic spirit continues:

“Suddenly it was clear to me that virtue in the creator is not the same as virtue in the creature. For the creator, if he should love his creature, would be loving only a part of himself; but the creature, praising the creator, praises an infinity beyond himself”

In peaceful times – when the world seems benign and nurturing, our flocks increase and our barns are full – we don’t need this kind of God, and may turn away in horror and incomprehension from such a vision. But in time of war and waste and chaos – times like the author’s or our own – when it seems impossible to find any meaning in existence without denying the reality of suffering, such a vision may offer a paradoxical comfort.

The universal spirit concludes:

“It is enough, and more than enough... to have been created, to have embodied for a moment the infinite and tumultuously creative spirit. It is infinitely more than enough to have been used, to have been the rough sketch for some more perfected creation... and so there came upon me a strange peace and a strange joy”

Jenny Moy

Our Warden’s Column

What’s On in Our Busy Building...



The March music exams are finally over - thank God! If I’d had to listen to one more grade one piano student stumble through the Pink Panther theme tune I think I’d have gone crazy. On the other hand, now the 2008 accounts are completed, I did a quick calculation of how much income we made from various groups and the Associated Board came out top, so I guess that’s worth a lot of out of tune violins.

Here’s a list of all the groups from which we made over £1,000

- 1 Associated Music Board
- 2 Ashtanga Yoga
- 3 Seicho no Ie
- 4 Tse Qi Gong
- 6 Beit Klal
- 7 Om Chanting
- 8 Kensington & Chelsea Council
- 9 Analytical Psychologists Club
- 10 Interfaith Seminary
- 11 Temenos
- 12 Guild of Pastoral Psychologists
- 13 Sufis

We also made quite a bit of money from TV companies for rehearsal space, castings and script readthroughs. Most of these were referrals from SHINE, who used to be based in the Christian Science Church next door.

What’s sustained me throughout March – aside from the thought of how much money we were earning – has been watching the progress of all the bulbs we planted in the autumn.

Winter aconite and crocuses have given way to daffodils and grape hyacinths and it looks like there are plenty of tulips on their way. You might even spot some bluebells and anemones in the middle bed if you look closely. Inspired by this, I have invested in some more lobelia – which did very well last year – and trailing nasturtiums. I’ve also put some hellebore in the bed at the top of the stairs. Sadly the lavender in the bed on the other side seems to have succumbed to the harsh winter and will need to be replaced. There’s plenty going on in the back garden too thanks to Michaela’s efforts, and we’re hoping to invest in a new bench to make the most of the coming summer. Hope it’s a good one. ☺

Jenny Moy

Kensington Community Singers at Essex Church



Thanks to everybody from Kensington Community Singers who sang in our service in March. The choir has been running for two years now, ably led by congregation member Jen Hazel, who came over from the States to study for a Masters degree in Performing Arts. Having been gainfully employed in a special school working with autistic children it was a shock to all of us to hear that Jen would have to go back to the States in order to sort out a more permanent visa. She hopes to return to the UK in the autumn and in the meantime the Community Singers will be taking a break unless a new choir leader arrives on our doorstep.

But there will still be opportunities to sing here at Essex Church and not just in our weekly Sunday morning services. Our monthly chanting group Songs and Silence continues to meet on the second Sunday of every month and we are planning some one-off singing sessions after services during the summer to which everyone is invited. There is also talk of a 'Big Sing' event sometime this year where we invite other singing groups to join us for an afternoon. So watch this space for more details and have a look at the video of the Community Singers' rendition of 'Lean on Me' – now on our Facebook page and shortly to be available on the choir page of our website – courtesy of Jim Blair who recorded it for posterity.

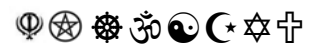
Sarah Tinker

Photos by Jim Blair





Multifaith Calendar



ॐ 3rd April – Rama Navami – Hindu

Rama Navami, the birthday of Rama, the seventh avatar of Vishnu, is celebrated at noon (Rama was born at noon), by arati in front of a picture of Rama swinging in a cradle.

✠ 5th April – Palm Sunday – Christian

Palm Sunday is the first day of Holy Week, when Christians remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, followed by his arrest and crucifixion. Many churches commemorate Palm Sunday by processions, where the congregation carry symbolic palm crosses, or branches of trees.

✠ 5th – 12th April – Holy Week – Christian

This is the most solemn week of the Christian year. Christians recall the events of the final week of the earthly life of Jesus.

✠ 9th April – Maundy Thursday – Christian

On Maundy Thursday Christians reflect on The Last Supper, when Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples. In blessing the bread and wine he told them to continue to do this to remember him. Known variously as Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Mass, or Breaking of Bread, depending on the church tradition, this is a central act of worship for most Christians. Some churches also remember Jesus washing the feet of the twelve disciples, as the feet of twelve members of the congregation are washed.

☆ 9th – 16th April – Passover / Pesach – Jewish

This Jewish festival lasts eight days and commemorates the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. The Seder meal, which takes place at home, at the beginning of Pesach, is an important highlight. The Haggadah, the story of the deliverance, is recounted, and special food, including matzah (unleavened bread) is eaten throughout the festival.



ॐ 9th April – Hanuman Jayanti – Hindu

Hindus celebrate the birth of Hanuman, the monkey-warrior. Hanuman is Lord Rama's supreme devotee, and his story is told in the Ramayana.



✠ 10th April – Good Friday – Christian

Good Friday commemorates the crucifixion of Christ - special services are held to mark the time that Jesus spent on the cross. Christians call this 'Good' Friday because of the greatest example of God's sacrificial love, in Jesus giving up his life for the sins of the world.

✠ 11th April – Holy Saturday (Easter Eve) – Christian

This is the last day of Lent, and in the evening many churches will have special services when the Paschal Candle is lit, and baptismal vows are renewed in preparation for Easter.

✠ 12th April – Easter Day – Christian

Easter Day is the most important festival of the Christian year, when the resurrection of Jesus is celebrated. Many Easter traditions, for example Easter eggs, symbolise new life.

☞ 14th April – Vaisakhi (Baisakhi) – Sikh

The Sikh New Year festival celebrates the founding of the Order of the Khalsa, by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, in 1699. On this day the 'Five Ks' were instituted and the amrit initiation ceremony was introduced. Sikhs visit the gurdwara and parades are held. Many Sikhs choose to be baptised into the Khalsa order on this day.

✠ 19th April – Easter Day / Pascha – Orthodox Christian

The date of Easter is calculated on a lunar calendar, but as many Eastern Orthodox and Armenian churches still use the Julian rather than the Gregorian calendar the calculation of dates differs from the Western churches, so at present there is no consistent relationship between the dates of the Orthodox and Western Easter.

✠ 23rd April – St George's Day – Christian

Although he lived and died in the Middle East, St George is the patron saint of England. All that is known for certain about St George is that he was martyred for his Christian faith and was a soldier. His red cross on a white background was adopted as a symbol after the Crusades.

...a local event that you might be interested in...

'Science, Consciousness and Spirit'

Matthew Fox and Rupert Sheldrake
in dialogue on science, consciousness and spirit

Monday 6th April 2009 at 7.00 pm
Colet House, 151 Talgarth Road, London

The study of consciousness is now one of the most exciting areas of science, and one where the limits of materialistic thinking have become most apparent. It also opens the door to explore the deeper and more experiential dimensions of faith such as mysticism and compassion. In this dialogue Rupert and Matthew will explore the frontiers of modern research and discuss how thinking about the nature of the mind can illuminate spiritual experience, and how spiritual experience can in turn illuminate our understanding of ourselves and of other forms of consciousness within the universe.

Tickets: £18.00 Website: www.scimednet.org

Universal Spiritual Gatherings at Essex Church



Run by graduates of the Interfaith Seminary these monthly Spiritual Gatherings are worship with a difference and this year feature guests from particular faiths. Hosted here at Essex Church, it is lovely to see our beautiful worship space put to such good use, with chanting, silence, music, prayer and inspiration.

Here are some dates for your diaries:

Friday evenings 6.35 for 6.45 to 8.15pm

10th April Dance with the Divine
with three Dances of Universal Peace

8th May Sacred Sound with beautiful chants
and mantras from different faiths

12th June Courage with Sikh chants
and Sikh tabla player

Donations are asked for, to cover costs.

"The Fabric of Diversity"

Community Arts Project at Essex Church



Over the last few months we have been running a series of textile art workshops at Essex Church. Participants have made and decorated felt squares to represent themselves, their place in the local community and varied connections in the wider world and the greater cosmos!

We are now joining these squares together to make a large wall-hanging, which will be displayed in the church, and an accompanying booklet will detail all the people who took part in its creation. The finished work will be unveiled at our Essex Church summer celebration on **Sunday 28th June**. Please put the date in your diary and plan to come along for this special occasion.

For more information about future arts projects at Essex Church please email arts@kensington-unitarians.org.uk.

This project has been generously supported by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea's Arts Grant Scheme.



"I recall the words of the African American writer James Baldwin - "...some people wish to colonize the moon, and others dance before it as before an ancient friend."

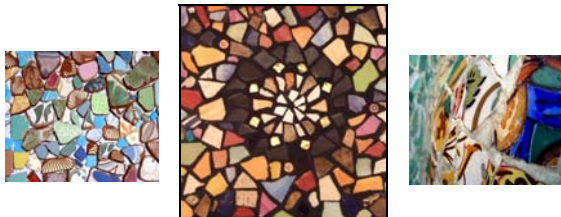
These words have helped me make sense of the choices that we have in this life – to objectify and control everything around us, or to celebrate and engage and dance with life. That is the theological, philosophical choice we face in all aspects of our lives. The liberal – liberating – choice is celebration – being artists. Creating We do it in different ways – but I believe it is important to encourage each other to understand that we can be artists of our lives together B choosing intentionally to celebrate and create beauty or insight or justice or transformation."

UU Minister - Rev. Linda Olson Peebles

Creativity Engagement Group

“Easter Mosaic”

Thursday 9th April, 7.00-9.00pm



This month we'll be creating mosaics from broken ceramic tiles. We have a collection of broken tiles to work with but if you have any smashed crocks or small found objects to bring along then please do. We do not want to be smashing things up in church on the night so please do this in advance! This session on Maundy Thursday will be loosely related to Easter themes, as we are saving old broken bits and pieces, and making something beautiful and new out of them with love. A donation of £3 is requested towards the cost of the boards and tile adhesive. All are welcome.

Jane Blackall

As usual, if this particular activity doesn't take your fancy, you are most welcome to bring your own crafts along, and simply sit with us in good company for the evening. There are usually biscuits and other goodies to eat too...

If you would like to know more about the creativity engagement group please do talk to Jane Blackall or Patricia Walker about our activities.

...forthcoming talks at Essex Church which you may be interested in...

The Alister Hardy Society

‘Mysticism and Contemporary Spirituality’
by Eley McAinsh

Tuesday 5th May 2009, 6.30 pm

There is a growing popular fascination with mysticism, but theologians argue more about what mysticism is not, than about what it is. Eley McAinsh is Director of the Living Spirituality Network, a research initiative of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and main producer of BBC Radio 4's Something Understood Cost: £4.00 (£2.00 concs)

**‘Understanding Consciousness
and Spiritual Experience’**

Saturday 6th June, 10.30-4.00pm

The day will seek to explore the subject from various viewpoints, each speaker bringing his/her own perspective and understanding. The day will include a debate between the speakers on the implications of the subject and where this might be leading, this followed by questions and discussion from the floor. Cost: £20 for non-members of AHS.

website: www.alisterhardyreligiousexperience.co.uk

‘Stories for Peace’

Friday 24th April, 7.30pm at Essex Church

An evening of stories and music with a programme of internationally renowned story tellers.

From Israel/Palestine: Roi Gal-Or & Muna Shaheen
The Healing Words International Team of Storytellers
UK Storytellers Sharon Jacksties & June Peters
music from Hawa w'al Sababah
hosted by Lalage Harries and Sef Townsend

The ‘Healing Words’ project began as a response to the violent events in Lebanon in 2006: Under tents in a pine forest, Story was used as a medium to dissolve borders and conflict between Arabs and Jews, to foster listening, and to create friendships. Over 2000 people came together to create new stories of hope, healing and peace.

In May 2009 the project will extend, taking 12 storytellers to work in Israeli and Palestinian towns and villages; giving performances, facilitating dialogue and listening circles with groups of Arabs and Israelis; bringing together children, and adults of different religions and backgrounds.

Tickets: £12/ concessions £9

Call to reserve on 07737 202047 or www.seftownsend.co.uk

Kensington Unitarians Programme Changes

As part of the overall plan to go for congregational growth we are doing our best to make our small groups and adult RE programmes as inviting as possible for newcomers. From the summer, we plan to dedicate Thursday night as RE night, so that courses can run on consecutive weeks - in the hope this will make it easier for people to remember and commit to a series of dates. Our long-running book group and creativity group are going to move to other nights to enable this to happen. As our building is in such high demand during the evenings it will take a little bit of wiggling to make the transition work over the first few months but we hope that by the end of the year it will all be running smoothly... To summarise the changes:

- **Book group** will move to Wednesdays from April. It will be the 4th Wednesday of the month until July but will move to the 3rd Wednesday from September. The meetings will continue to be in the library downstairs.
- **Creativity group** will move to the 1st Tuesday of each month from July. These meetings will also change location, to the church hall, so that we can more easily accommodate new people and have space to spread out. We hope to raise funds so that we can (eventually) expand the creativity group to run weekly as there seems to be some demand for this sort of activity to be held every week. This is a long-term project though...

Jane Blackall



"I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith.

I call that mind free which protects itself against the usurpations of society, and which does not cower to human opinion; Which refuses to be the slave or tool of the many or of the few, and guards its empire over itself as nobler than the empire of the world.

I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit, which does not mechanically copy the past, nor live on its old virtues; But which listens for new and higher monitions of conscience, and rejoices to pour itself forth in fresh and higher exertions.

I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering; Which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of God's children, and offers itself up a willing sacrifice to the cause of humankind.

I call that mind free which has cast out all fear but that of wrongdoing, and which no menace or peril can enthrall; Which is calm in the midst of tumults, and possesses itself, though all else be lost."

William Ellery Channing



A Fitness Fusion of 9 Movement Forms Sessions led by Sonya Leite

**Second Sunday of the Month from 2.00-3.00pm
(12th April, 10th May, 14th June, 12th July)**

Mondays from 11.00am-12 noon

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 the dance arts.

Cost £7 (£5 to Essex Church members)

Contact: Sonya Leite on 0207 371 1674

'Exploring Prayer'

A New Adult RE Course for the Summer



**Six sessions on Thursday Evenings
from 9th July to 13th August, 7.00-9.00pm**

This new adult RE course will run for six sessions, meeting weekly on consecutive Thursday evenings (7.00-9.00pm), from 9th July to 13th August. It is not essential to come to all of the sessions but we would appreciate it if you let us know in advance if you plan to attend... and it would be even better if you could commit to coming to at least four of the six nights.

The sessions will be partly based on the book 'Simply Pray' by Unitarian Universalist minister Erik Walker Wikstrom. During the course, we will focus on four types of traditional prayer which are shared by all the major world religions: naming, knowing, listening, and loving. It is our intention that the course will also provide opportunities for everyone to directly experience various different forms of prayer. There will also be plenty of time for your own personal reflection on the theme and chances to share your views and your own experiences of prayer with the rest of the group. We hope that the course will help each participant to find a way to pray that is authentic to them and their sense of the Holy.

We are still in the early stages of planning for this course and would particularly like to hear from anyone who has their own prayer practice and might be willing to come to the sessions and tell us about it. Please leave a message on 020 7221 6514 or email education@kensington-unitarians.org.uk.

There is also a tentative plan to start up a new regular weekly meeting at Essex Church in the autumn - some form of open, prayerful, quiet group-led space - to be held in an early evening slot. We have some preliminary thoughts about how this might work but the precise details will be shaped in part by feedback from participants in the summer prayer course.

Jane Blackall and Jenny Moy



Early Spring in Andalusia

My heart goes out to you Andalusia: throughout the years of your ordeal
There were – Oh! How many mornings, beautiful, blue
Shining as this; olive trees silver in the intense sunlight,
Oranges mysterious, like low fires glowing among dark green orchards;
Small birds in twittering choruses exuberant in early Spring,
All girded by mountains, like massive dogs crouching around a
Twitching flock. How many mornings beautiful as this when gunfire
Rattled from peak to peak, children screaming as their fathers were
Dragged out to face the execution squads: and sombre barrios where
Dreadfully at night lorry-loads of corpses were heavily flung out
To sprawl like builders refuse, wedged between rocks of the gurgling stream...
How many years of such anguish have you painfully endured, whilst in the cold
Countries of the north and east bombs rained down and bodies like yours
Sprawled in trenches and rubble, innumerable as the stones
On Salabrena beach.

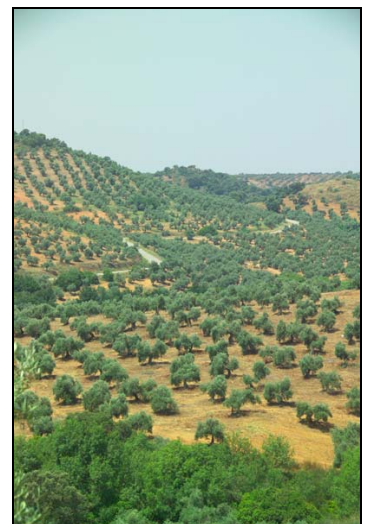
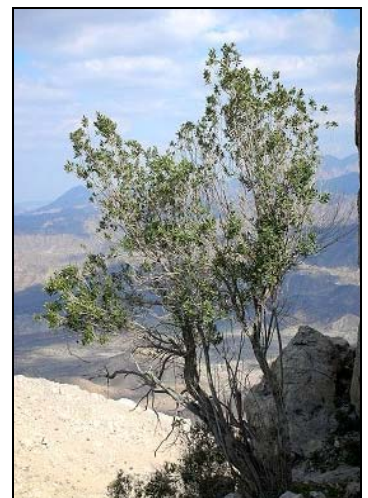
So much misery, so much hardship.

'Forget it! – far better to forget it!' I hear so many exclaim. But
what has been learned? How many now remember the killing fields of Cambodia,
The Rwanda massacre, the Congo, Abyssinia, Chechnya
Bosnia and Kosovo? What monster in us drives us to the
Jaguar sacrifice, when blood drenched the sacred altar stones, and
Gushed down streets like snow –melt water
From the summit of the Sierra Nevada? Why are we so fearful, so
Despairing, so frequently unloving? As if we lived each one of us alone
Banished to deserts where none but our lengthening shadow survives
To accompany us. For how, if we truly shared communion, if we loved
Fellowship and really rejoiced in the presence of other souls around us could we so
Dreadfully collapse into heartless slaughter, and tolerate the ignominy of torture?

Nothing responds from these delectable orchards: the mountains, immensely enduring
May well have their gods who dance their enormous energies
To and from the circumambient universe. Today all seems
Joyfully at play, and I surely long to join with them.
Some sages affirm somewhere, in some dimension good and evil
All that is antagonistic in us will be blissfully reconciled: and I so much
Want to believe it. I will stifle my forebodings, I will
Ignore my protests. May the soulful presences, the invisible
Earth-entities, the immortal divas triumphantly emerge to console and
Reassure us. I will not surmise there is more to regret than I
Sombrely sit gazing at.

Be still my heart, and laughingly rejoice in Andalusia
As she now is: recumbent in sunlight, calm and peaceful beneath
The silent bells of the campagna.

John Hands
Orgiva, Andalusia, March 2004



Bodywork Sessions:

Available on Mondays here at Essex Church between 10.00am - 4.00pm

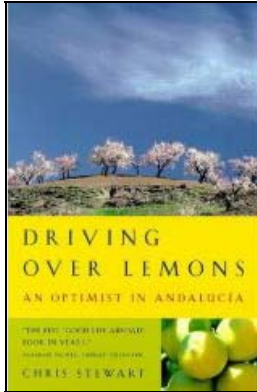
Using a combination of massage, aromatherapy and craniosacral therapy, Fiona Watson (ITEC dip.) can provide individual sessions to meet each client's unique requirements. For full details please phone Fiona on 07960 758068.

Reading Engagement Group “Driving Over Lemons”

by Chris Stewart

Wednesday 22nd April, 7.00-9.00pm

PLEASE NOTE DATE CHANGE



The reading engagement group’s next conversation will be about “Driving Over Lemons” by Chris Stewart. This book was chosen by Juliet Edwards and will be the focus of our next group on **Wednesday 22nd April**.

Information from Amazon UK:

“All Provençed out? Then head further south, to the breathtaking mountainous climes of Andalucia. Just don't be squeamish about driving over lemons. Chris Stewart, skilled sheep-shearer and sometime Genesis drummer, took one look at the Alpujarrás, the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, and decided that's where he wanted to be. This is the story of his adventures coming to terms with the terrain, the lifestyle and, of course, the locals, who possess all the rugged, homespun charm you'd expect. Stewart soon discovers all the hidden foibles of his bargain purchase, and spends the following year (rendered here in detail) installing the little luxuries of life like, say, water. However, just when you're worrying that all this might degenerate into a rose-tinted Englishman-finds-nature idyll, Chris's wife enters the fray. Nonsense-free, straight-talking and relentlessly unsentimental, Ada should be a required resource for all travel writers. Ada gets bored with the fake machismo of pig-killing, Ada sees through the selfless "help" of the natives, Ada calls a peasant a peasant. With her on board, Stewart has the perfect counterbalance to his declared optimism, and Driving over Lemons becomes a loving but clear-sighted encomium, economically and wittily written, to a wonderful part of the world.”

All are welcome to join the book group. Please do try to read the books before the meeting if you’re planning to come along. It would also aid discussion if you pick out favourite passages to share. Regular members of the reading group take turns in choosing books so we read a wide variety of material.

How I Came to Essex Church



A warm, sunny Sunday morning probably two years ago I decided to attend an Essex Church service. I'd walked by the church a few times usually on my way down to Westbourne Grove where I'd go to have breakfast at Tom's Delicatessen. Each trip I took a little more notice and interest in the church. First, I registered the word Unitarian and I vaguely recalled that my great-grandfather had been a Unitarian (but hadn't he also been an agnostic socialist?) although I never really understood what being Unitarian meant. My family wasn't religious at all. For us, organised religion was a trap waiting to snap tight on intellectual curiosity and freedom.

Next, I popped into the building foyer to read the noticeboard and I found I connected to many ideas. Finally, I chose to miss my breakfast at Tom's, and attend a service. It was summer and the congregation was small – holidays, I was told during coffee. The few people I'd met were friendly and the music was glorious and I left having had a pleasant experience. But I didn't return. However, during my visit I had signed the register and I began receiving the church newsletter. The newsletters persistently arrived and I truly enjoyed reading them.

The newsletters impressed me – so many articles reflected a broad search for spiritual meaning and understanding. This broad search seemed filled with questions which I recognised deeply. A respect for other religions was obvious – even a multi-faith calendar! How wonderful! Plus, there were picnics, outings, a book club, and many other activities which were all appealing. No traps in sight. Because I live in St. Albans, I went online to find a Unitarian congregation near me, but found only a small fellowship which met every third Sunday. But then, I thought, it had been Essex Church which initially drew me in and I did hope to live in London more of the time once my son is eighteen. So, this is how I came to Essex Church.

At the moment, I attend as many services as I can. Also, I've started the 'New-U' course to learn more about Unitarianism and it's been lovely meeting new people. I look forward to when I'll have time to participate more fully – the choir, book club, sharing circle... Funny, but I haven't been back to Tom's for breakfast in quite awhile.

Debra Hinton

Gardening Sunday

Sunday 19th April, 12.30pm



We had our first 'Gardening Sunday' of the year on 22nd March, making the most of the unexpected spell of good weather, and made good progress with tidying the back garden and putting some new plants in at the front.

Our next session in the garden will be after the service on Sunday 19th April. Please bring along some old clothes and any useful garden tools you might have.

Michaela von Britzke is coordinating the garden works so please speak to her beforehand if you might be able to bring along any plants, or compost, as it would be great if we can coordinate everybody's efforts.

...a forthcoming event which NIA fans might be interested in...

'Heart of Nia'

Saturday 12th September 2009, 10.30am-1pm

Urdang Academy, Old Finsbury Town Hall,
Roseberry Avenue, EC1R 4RP

Join Nia co-founder Carlos Rosas for a two-hour journey into the Heart of Nia. Through a powerful mix of music, movement, and heart-pounding joy, your body will soak up new sensations while your spirit plays!

Using a blend of classic Nia and freedance, Carlos will guide you into a deeper relationship with movement, opening the gateway for you to experience the Joy of Movement from the inside out. This one-of-a-kind Nia ride, punctuated with high peaks of athletics and sensuous valleys of stillness, will allow you to explore the essence of Nia in a new way as you connect with Nia's past, present, and future.

Cost: \$55 – register for the event online (*via US website*) at:
www.nianow.com/niafinder/event/heart-nia-playshop-0

Recommended by Sonya Leite

...an event organised by the Art and Spirituality Network...

'The Fool'

Saturday 30th May, 10.30am to 5.00pm

London Interfaith Centre
125 Salusbury Road, London NW6 6RG

A hands-on workshop inspired by the drawing methods of Cecil Collins, led by Maria Lancaster.

The fool represents that innate, inviolate primordial innocence which perceives directly and clearly, the recovery of which constitutes for me the object of all real culture, and all real education and civilisation.

Inspired by the vision and teachings of the late Cecil Collins – whose centenary is being marked by a display at Tate Britain – this workshop offers an opportunity to experience some of his teaching methods. A short video on Cecil's vision of the Fool will be shown in the morning, followed by a drawing workshop, working from the model in a series of short poses, working with movement and music, and using a wide range of drawing tools. The afternoon will be dedicated to developing paintings from some sketches from the morning session.

Materials are provided and no prior experience is needed.

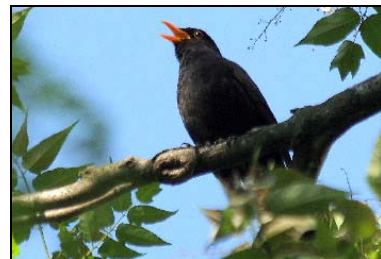
Cost £25 including drinks and all materials.

Please bring lunch to share

Further enquiries about the workshop:
maria.lancaster@waitrose.com

Dawn Chorus Walks

25th April and 3rd May 2009
at London Wetland Centre, Barnes



International Dawn Chorus Day takes place on 3rd May and is the worldwide celebration of 'Nature's daily Miracle'.

This chance to appreciate the nature reserve at its best as we celebrate international dawn chorus day. Call in advance to book into your early morning guided tour with the WWT experts who will help with bird identification.

There will be tours at 05.00, 05.30 and 06.00. A maximum of 20 people can book for each tour. Breakfast is included in the price from 6am. Booking is essential, call 020 8409 4400. Cost for WWT members is £20 (non-members must also pay the standard relevant admission price).

WWT website: www.wwt.org.uk

Essex Church Walking Group – An Early Spring Walk



“Have you ever stopped and reflected on how much we take for granted in our daily lives? Well, I had one of those moments sitting on the main line train to Richmond. I arrived at Victoria Station at about 9.10am, only to find out that both the District and Circle Line had been suspended between Embankment and Earls Court. So it was a bit of a surprise to find out that there would be no train to Richmond. It had never occurred to me that there would be no train from Victoria Station, as this is a major hub. Living in the centre of London and getting about by public transport is never an issue for me, as I am within 10 minutes of mainline, underground and bus stations. So it never occurs to me to check transport details, which is something I realise that most people do all the time. So I quickly headed for the main line station, where I was able to find an alternative route to Richmond. Of course, I will from now on be checking transport details. So if you are thinking

of joining us for the walk, don't do what I did, check beforehand! This was our third outing since our walking group started in January. David Talbot agreed to lead this walk so I'll let him tell you about it...”

Doris Campbell

Seven of us set out from Richmond station: Mary, Doris, Ann, Michaela, Carol, Will and me plus Buster the dog. Mary took a group photo then we quickly left the Saturday high street crowds behind and set out across Richmond Green towards the river.

It was a perfect day for being out and about, bright and not too cold. Walking along the towpath we passed by Petersham Meadows, Ham House and Eel Pie Island - a reminder of how important they were for food in past times. It was a famous venue for live music, most of the 60's rock bands played there but the hall burnt down some years ago. The riverbank was alive with early signs of Spring: ducks pairing off, black headed gulls coming into breeding plumage and buds and flowers appearing. Fortunately Michaela was able to identify those for us! We continued as far as Teddington Lock which marks the extent of the tidal Thames, we then turned away from the river towards Ham and lunch at the New Inn (or on the green for those with picnics).

Four of us enjoyed some excellent pub food plus a drink each on the house as they had made a mistake with Doris's order. Thanks Doris for suggesting that to the landlady! Because our lunch had been rather leisurely Michaela, Will, Carol and Buster decided to walk on ahead. Eventually we did leave the pub and entered Richmond Park by the Ham gate. This is the largest public space in London, now a national nature reserve covering some 2000 acres but first enclosed by Charles 1 in 1637. We did manage to see a couple of groups of red deer and many ring necked parakeets that have made the area their home.

We stopped for tea at Pembroke Lodge, sitting on the terrace and enjoying the view. I think it was Ann who remarked that living somewhere with an extensive feeling of space and expansive view would surely lead to one seeing the big picture or something like that. As this house was the boyhood home of the philosopher Bertrand Russell I wondered how living daily with such a vista had influenced him. We came out of the park via the Richmond gate passing the Star and Garter Home and down Richmond Hill pausing to admire the view that had inspired a number of artists including Turner and were soon back in the town at the end of our walk. Thanks to everyone for making it a very enjoyable day.

David Talbot

Forthcoming Walks:

Saturday 4th April, meeting at 10.30am at Embankment Station *(please note – there will be engineering works on the district/circle lines). Thames Path Eastbound – Embankment towards the Thames Barrier* *(there will be opportunities to cut the route short if required).*

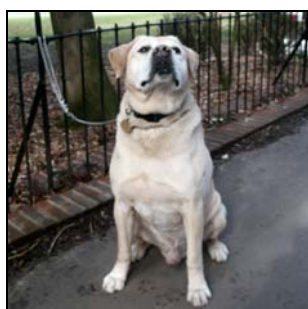
Please note: It is essential to let the organisers know in advance if you are planning to come on the walk and then to arrive promptly for the advertised start time. Please contact Doris if you are intending to come along for the walk in April.

Saturday 2nd May – Hampton Court

Saturday 6th June – The Chilterns

Saturday 4th July – Lee Valley Country Park

(photographs by Mary Spurr)



'Epiphanies, God and Evil'

An Open Letter from John Hands to Will Lyons

Dear Will,

I was very interested to read your column on epiphanies in the recent edition of our newsletter. As this is such an important aspect of our human experience I thought it deserves more than a few words over a cup of coffee on a Sunday. So I am offering you my reaction to your thoughts in the form of an open letter to you, which may be of interest to others. I feel I do very much understand your horror and revulsion at the events you describe in connection with the assault on Beslan school. And even while I have been writing this response to your account there has been yet another appalling decimation of young people's lives in Winnenden, Germany. And given the limitations of our knowledge of the universe and of the troubled depths of human nature, it is completely appropriate for us, when contemplating such events to exclaim: "How CAN there be a God in a world such as ours!" However, terrible as these events are Will, I do think there is more than this to be considered in this world, and –as I believe –the dimensions of spiritual life beyond it.

First, with regard to epiphanies. I would like to add to James Joyce's definition which you quote in your article, the vital factors of insight and transcendence. These too are aspects of what we ordinarily term "reality," and in the ways in which we move about the everyday business of our lives we may only rarely become conscious of them. Often the only way in which we can put ourselves in the way of possibly experiencing such transforming moments is to take a holiday or retreat from the ordinary business of life, go for long walks (or bike rides!) not necessarily alone but, if we are fortunate to have one, an understanding and sympathetic friend. Or we might attend a meditation group.

It was on such a group that I experienced the kind of epiphany which I have tried to indicate. There is not space for me to even begin to describe such a transcendent moment in my life. As I now realise, I had been prepared for it, inasmuch as prior to that moment I had done quite a lot of therapeutic work on myself and my relationships with other people, which has been of immense benefit to me. (And I should tell you, Will, that I certainly needed to do this work!) Also as a poet I have had experiences of rapturous insight, a few of which I have been fortunate enough to transmute into the form of poems. Of course I am not in the least unique in this respect. I dare say you yourself know about the inspiration of some form of artistic work, as do many in our church and in the society of which it is a part.



But such moments of epiphany do not in any way mitigate, much less seal us off from the infamy of this world. On the contrary, such moments render it quite excruciatingly painful. Because when you are thoroughly convinced that there is indeed a compassionate and completely loving God in this world, capable, and perhaps quite frequently expressing him/herself as a supreme person, you are left with the agonising realisation that we who share in his/her capacity for loving-kindness also have a capacity within ourselves for doing, or at least acquiescing in, appallingly evil conduct towards those very persons whom we are also capable of loving.

Will, I can only say that I do not know how this fundamental division in our human nature is possible. Nor is there any way in which I can know, since quite apart from experiences of epiphany, there is also mystery in this world. The mystery of gazing up at the night sky and exclaiming 'dear God, how can this amazing universe be here, and I, standing here, knowing that I am a part of it?'

And for me, this is the part that faith plays in my life. I know who I am, I am part of a species which certainly shared in the evolution of living creatures, but unlike them I am also a person, as a person, I experience compassion and love, (and silliness, and triviality, and all kinds of petty unworthiness) and I also respond to evil in the world and in myself, and know that this too is what I am capable of doing and being. But I know too, that at least as individuals we can become aware of the ability, or at least potential ability, to overcome this evil dynamic in ourselves.

But why is this potential in us so difficult to realise? Or - you may be thinking - why has this god you believe in made a morally better world so difficult to achieve? As I said, I simply do not know an adequate response to this conundrum: but I do think I may have a clue to it, and it is of course a clue which I am not alone in thinking of. This clue, as I call it, is that unless I – you – all of us – had sufficient freedom of will to undertake either good or evil actions there could be no human society – much less community – in the world.

An Open Letter from John Hands *(continued)*

Unless I am aware of my capacity for evil-doing in myself and others I would not know what compassion and love means. Unless I am able to say 'no, I do not love you', I cannot say 'yes, I do love you', unless I were able to experience this dichotomy in myself. I would have no incentive to summon up the will to make the moral effort to overcome it. And we would not understand what it means to mature as persons through our efforts to overcome evil and to act as humane and compassionate beings.

You may think – as I do – that this is a terrible price to pay for earning merit in the world: even perhaps for being able to love? But here I am at the limits of my comprehension of life's possibilities. As I said, I cannot begin to formulate an adequate 'answer' to account for its misery and suffering, and of the vast scale on which it occurs. I have to accept that this is part of the inescapable mystery of life and living.

Nevertheless this, for me, is part of the significance of my human condition. That unlike animals driven by their instincts, we are able to act intentionally, we have sufficient freedom of will to turn towards loving others of our kind, or to turn away from them and not love them. And we have the capacity to develop the sensitivity to grow in our awareness of how we relate to other people. For what could love be if we were compelled, or "programmed" to love another person – or the world of nature? It could be only the programmed response of automatons who respond as their manufacturers programme them to respond.

I cannot feel that God who created us as persons is a manufacturer of automatons, for me he/she is a maker, a doer in the world, and in an act of supreme self-denial and incredible grace (for of course he knew what we would be capable of doing with our relative freedom of will, apart from loving one another) he allows us to share in the freedom of his will; to do, or not to do, to make, or not to make, to love, or not to love, to be his agents in this most imperfect world.

I must end here, Will. I do not believe Charles Darwin, or any of his acolytes, understood the full meaning of what it means to be a human being. And I most certainly do not. Will you allow me to say God bless you Will – and many thanks for your article which has stimulated my own thinking, as I have no doubt it has stimulated others.

**Yours fraternally,
John Hands**

...a Unitarian event that you may be interested in...

FOY Conference 'Living Together in the Next Generation'



1st - 4th May 2009

Barnes Close, Chadwich

Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, B61 0RA

Led by members of Foy Council, our study topic for the Foy Conference this year covers the wide variety of issues facing our diverse society and the challenges and successes we may face in living together in the future. In addition during the weekend there will be free time for local walks, visits, worship/meditation and other activities. The Foy AGM is also scheduled to take place.

The Conference begins on Friday evening and ends with lunch on Monday. Registration starts at 6:30pm on Friday evening, with dinner served at 7pm. For those who cannot spare the time to come for the whole weekend we recommend day attendance on Saturday and/or Sunday. For this a special day-package is available, please contact Emily Hewerdine for further details. Accommodation is limited so don't delay – book right away! Closing date: 31st March 2009.

Email Emily on: emilyhewerdine@hotmail.com
or telephone her for a booking form on: 07890611205



"Both Passover and Easter are borne out of a history of the great suffering and pain at the heart of a people. Both faith narratives tell how, thanks to God, their ancestors were able to rise up out of suffering. These stories actually made these people a people. Both are stories of redemption and hope that tell us darkness can be overcome with God's guidance... Neither of these stories would be particularly important if they were merely ancient history. For us their importance comes at the mythical level - the level which says that a story is true - has the potential to be true, for all people in all ages. We celebrate these stories because they tell us something we need to know. It is possible to survive enormous pain and suffering. Everyone needs this knowledge."

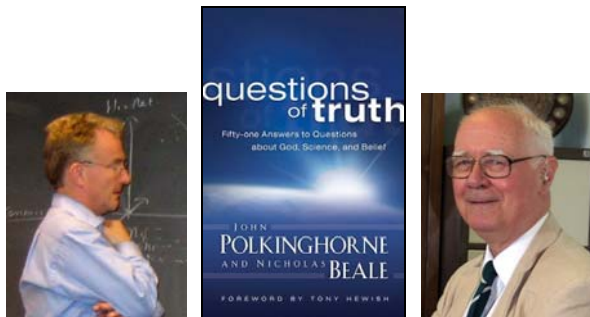
UU Minister - Rev Tricia Tummino

...two forthcoming RI lectures that may be of interest...

'Questions of Truth'

1st April 2009 at 7.00pm

The Royal Institution, 21 Albemarle Street, W1S 4BS



This event will offer a rigorous response to critics of the idea that faith and science can usefully cohabit in modern society. It is widely thought that religion is archaic and irrelevant with has no place in our scientific age, and that faith is superstitious nonsense that should have been left behind long ago. In this event John Polkinghorne and Nicholas Beale will offer a rigorous, authoritative and sophisticated response to critics of the idea that faith and science can usefully cohabit in modern society. John Polkinghorne is a major figure in today's debates on science and religion and together he and Nicholas Beale have been providing rational and reasoned responses to key questions arising from this discourse over the web for the last decade. From their different backgrounds and perspectives, they will talk about aspects of contemporary faith that are of deep concern to those who are serious about science and serious about faith.

'Saying is Believing'

Does what you say shape what you see?

28th April 2009 at 7.00 pm

The Royal Institution, 21 Albemarle Street, W1S 4BS

Intuition tells us that our descriptive language arises in response to information furnished by our senses; that we learn to name relevant aspects of our environment. However, in 1956 Benjamin Lee Whorf made the then radical suggestion that our language may actually shape our thoughts and perceptions of the world. This came to be known as the linguistic relativity or Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. One prediction of this hypothesis would be that the speakers of different languages might actually perceive the world differently. A popular example of this is the supposed extensive vocabulary the Inuit people have to name and perceive many more types of snow than speakers of other languages. Dr Sowden will discuss examples of cross-cultural research on colour cognition and what they tell us, together with current work that is seeking to unravel the mechanisms that accompany linguistic influences on thought and perception.

Tickets for each event cost £8 (£6 concessions)

Royal Institution website: www.rigb.org

Storytellers' Circle

Saturday 4th April, 11am to 2pm

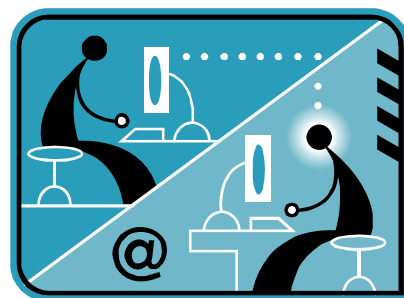


Richmond and Putney Unitarian
Church, Ormond Road, TW10 6TH

A quarterly gathering for all who wish to learn stories, and share ideas and techniques. Bring a packed lunch. Beverages will be provided. This circle will be gathered to provide an opportunity for those who use stories in worship and other settings to swap stories, share resources, and for new storytellers to have the opportunity to learn from other storytellers. Time will be set aside for both telling stories and discussion of tips and techniques.

This month's technique is using props. Please feel free to bring along your own props, as well as other resources (books, websites, etc.). Contact Linda Hart for more information (revlahart@gmail.com or 020 8332 9675)

Monthly 'PULSE' eBulletin Launched



The LDPA (our Unitarian district association) has recently launched a new e-mail Bulletin. This is a monthly publication, available only by email, which contains news, information and articles relevant to Unitarians in the South East.

If you would like to receive this monthly update, simply send an email with the word "subscribe" in the subject line to pulse.bulletin@yahoo.co.uk.



Chinese New Year

“Happy New Year!” I heard from the family I spent New Years Eve with and on the English/Chinese programme I listened to each day. It was a pun the Chinese delighted in. The English word for ‘New’ sounds the same as the Mandarin word for ‘Ox’ and this is the year of the ox.

I went to China to visit my daughter, Sarah who is in her second year teaching French and Spanish in an international school. We decided that I would visit for ‘CNY’, and we would fly to Shanghai for a week, then when she returned to teaching I would find my own way around Beijing.



But first, to celebrate the New Year. Sarah has a taxi driver, Mr. Yang, who takes her to and from school each day. He had invited us to spend New Years Eve with his family. Their flat is on the seventh floor of a block maybe ten stories high. It had a large living room with a glassed-in balcony, kitchen, bathroom and, I think, two bedrooms. It is his mother and father’s home and he and his wife and little boy (who had taken his first steps that very day!) live there too, which is quite typical.

Sarah says she speaks pidgin Chinese, Mr. Yang speaks a little English, and a cousin (who is unusual because at 25 she is unmarried and keen to study!) speaks good English. I know the words for ‘hello’ and ‘thank you’. ‘OK’ was very useful and I did a lot of smiling too! They all thought that I looked younger than my 65 years! I seemed to be given a lot of respect too as Sarah’s ‘Mama’.

The evening passed very pleasantly. The table was filled with snacks and I was encouraged to try everything. If there were things that I didn’t like, such as fish that seemed to be mostly bones, they weren’t offended. A lot of time was spent playing with the baby and also watching a large flat screen TV. There was a programme of variety acts that seemed to last for most of the evening. The camera panned over the audience, which included a number of dignitaries and invited guests, many wearing gorgeous brocade jackets in red or royal blue. Amongst the jugglers, traditional dancers and comedy acts I was rather delighted to see a performance by Riverdance. From time to time it showed the president visiting happy smiling communities in different areas of China.

They also changed the good luck decorations on and surrounding the front door – red of course! Then at midnight, wrapped up well for the below zero temperature, we all trooped outside to join lots of excited folk lighting fireworks. There was plenty of noise, to frighten off the evil spirits, and many spectacular large and colourful cascades. I was very impressed by the ‘sparklers’ that I was given because they had long cotton tapers which lit easily unlike the ones we struggle to light in the UK! The family thought I was very funny because I was dancing around writing my name! After about half an hour when what sounded like a war zone was quietening down we went back into the flat and the women went into the kitchen and made lots of dumplings, some with meat and some with vegetable fillings, which is the traditional food for new year – delicious!

At 1.30am, when Mr Yang deemed it safe to leave without stray fireworks being a problem, he drove us back to Sarah’s flat where we fell into bed and slept well. I thought I might get over my jet lag in one long sleep – not quite though!

On New Year’s Day, Sarah thought it would be interesting for me to see the Lama temple, which is very beautiful but we didn’t have a chance to go inside. There were queues of Chinese families all wanting to go in pray and throw handfuls of incense onto the bonfires in the temple courtyards. We looked in all the little roadside stalls instead and Sarah bought two lotus shaped candles and we each bought a lucky oxen toy and then went back to her flat by motorbike rickshaw and later got packed for Shanghai. Sorry, I haven’t got space to tell you any more!

Juliet Edwards

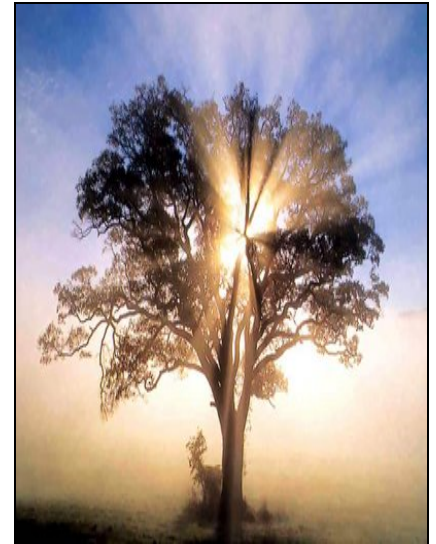


Deus, sive Natura (God, or Nature)

In this 'Darwinfest' anniversary year of the publication of 'The Origin of Species', I have noted many instances of theologians making what I would call 'Yes, but' claims, that while acknowledging the theory of evolution and great advances in science and medicine, there is still something 'other than' - some great, unseen, power behind this wonderful universe in which we live.

When David Darling took the service the other week, he included the hymn 'The Living God' which includes the following verse:

*There are other who proclaim
God and Nature are the same
And the present Godhead own
Where Creation's laws are known.*
(Hymns For Living 35)



For a long time now I have been attracted by the writings of the Jewish philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, 1632 – 1677 (although like most philosophical works, it makes my brain hurt!). Spinoza asserted that for a concept of god to make any sense at all, it must simply be nature. That is, god cannot be something outside nature that controls it, but must necessarily be part of it. According to Spinoza, God IS nature.

As a person very interested in physics and as a humanist, I prefer this theological outlook which, I think, sits very well with Unitarianism also. But there are some phenomena of quantum physics that are puzzling and to which we do not yet have the explanation.

'...in reality there are only atoms and the void.' Democritus (c. 460 - c. 370 B.C.)

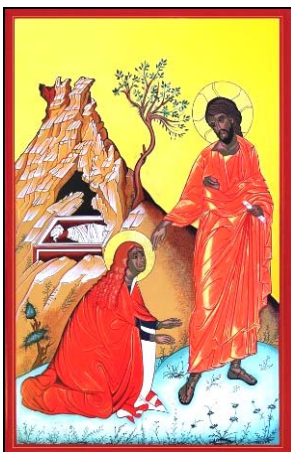
Common-sense "theories", cannot be relied upon when it comes to explanation of the behaviour of many systems at the sub-atomic scale and situations such as the two-slit experiment in which light appears to be a particle AND a wave. This where some theologians make out that there must be something supernatural to account for these 'mysteries'.

It is startling to realise that atoms are 99.9999999 (recurring) empty space and that if the protons and neutrons touched each other, all humanity would fit in the space occupied by a sugar cube. But, of course, this is impossible since the atomic forces which keep the atoms (more or less) stable would not allow this to happen. The ethereal forces themselves are part of the fabric of reality.

As an evolved species by natural selection our senses are limited. Our eyes see only a fraction of the electromagnetic spectrum. Our hearing and sense of smell is inferior to our domestic pets. But our level of consciousness has allowed us to supplement our limited faculties by building scientific instruments with which to probe the wonders of nature, e.g, electron microscopes, infra-red and radio telescopes. Enquiring minds have work out theories such as quantum mechanics which cannot be verified by direct observation but which have produced advances such as computers.

For me these, as yet unexplained, phenomena are a source of wonder. We find ourselves in this vast universe about which we are learning more all the time. We are evolving from and not to.

Will Lyons



“We received an invitation from our neighbourhood newspaper to place an ad for Easter. Someone suggested to me that, should we advertise, it should say something like, ‘Join us. We’re not sure what happened.’ I was tempted...

We’re not sure what happened. But, we know what it’s like to realise, to have it dawn upon us, that what we have known and loved lives on now with and within us, a part of who we are. We know that somehow, in our hearts and souls, resurrection is real: not that of the body, but of the spirit – a spirit renewed, even reborn, in the midst of our lives and our living.

We’re not sure what happened. But, we know that there is a difficult hope, a faith, that through the living of whatever sorrow and grief we feel (and will continue to feel on occasion) there is also a growing sense of grace and gratitude, of joy and thankfulness, in the mysterious and abiding astonishment of human being. In that wonder may we find our strength, our own sense of Easter.”

UU Minister - Daniel E. Budd

Ten Years at Essex Church

Over the last few months, whilst I have been trying to recruit people to write articles for the regular “How I Came to Essex Church” column in the newsletter, it has been in the back of my mind that I must’ve been coming here for nearly ten years now... and that it was probably about time I wrote something for that slot myself. In fact, I remember Patricia asking me to compose something like this about nine years ago, when she was newsletter editor! Better late than never...

I am able to put a precise date on it: the first time I set foot in Essex Church was 18th April 1999. I know because it was the day of the London Marathon that year (so I could find it by Googling) – a rather inconvenient day to cross the city by public transport, really – but I had spent much of the previous fortnight mentally preparing myself to be brave and give this mysterious Unitarian church a try... that morning I decided it was ‘now or never’ and with some trepidation I got out of bed early to give it a go.

Even now, I generally like to lurk in the shadows and keep a low profile, but in those days I was chronically shy and that was part of the reason why I ended up at Essex Church rather than any of the other Unitarian congregations in London (there are certainly plenty of churches that would be geographically more convenient given that I live in the East End). I had looked at the list of possible options and reasoned (correctly) that I would have a better chance of finding a larger congregation in the centre of London... somewhere I could hope to keep my head down, remain relatively inconspicuous, and avoid talking to anybody while I got a feel of the place and a sense of whether or not it was right for me. Thankfully, people were mostly sensitive enough to pick up on this and leave me to my own devices, as I might not have returned if I’d been pounced on too enthusiastically at that point (I now realise that this is a difficult balance to strike as many people are far more sociable than I am and would appreciate a warm welcome). I was very taken with the services – Rev. Art Lester was the minister at that time – and immediately felt a sense of resonance with what was going on at Essex Church. I remember flicking through the green hymnbook whilst sitting quietly before the services on many occasions... Unitarianism almost seemed too good to be true at that point and I almost think I was trying to scrutinise the words of the hymns to see if I was going to find anything objectionable under the surface... in fact the words were greatly reassuring as they made reference to such a wide range of sources. I was also reassured by all the ones from our Free Christian heritage as, for me, they underlined the fact that this was a church with a solid foundation and ‘proper’ roots.

I realise that I am telling my story in a rather back-to-front manner! The path that brought me to the door of Essex Church was a slightly peculiar and meandering one, though, so perhaps that is fitting. I grew up in a (nominally) ‘C of E’ household, then went to a Catholic secondary school, where I was thoroughly turned off all religion by the harsh attitudes to social issues that I encountered there. The issue that particularly inflamed me even in my early teens was the church’s take on homosexuality which, of course, contrasts so sharply with the inclusive attitudes that seem to have been the norm in Unitarianism for a long time now. In my early twenties I would probably have called myself agnostic and while at college I hardly gave spiritual matters a thought. Then in 1998, while I was studying for my MSc, I started hanging around with one friend in particular who was a devout atheist! He seemed to have

a lot of sense about other matters so I started to read up on atheism and the reasoning behind it. I soon came to think that ‘strong atheism’ required as much of a leap of faith as any other religious outlook and so my agnosticism was confirmed. However, in 1999, while in the first year of my PhD studies at Guy’s Hospital, I met a new friend who impressed me greatly. I very soon got a sense of him as a kind, thoughtful, cheerful chap – he was also, like me, a rare tee-totaller – so we often spent pleasant tea breaks together chatting about life, the universe, and everything to keep our spirits up during our long days working at the lab (often well into the evenings after everyone else had cleared off to the pub). Before long, I found out that he was a Christian and he belonged to an evangelical church, which surprised me. I had all sorts of preconceptions about people of faith at that point and was, if I’m honest, particularly suspicious of evangelical Christians back then. However, it was obvious that the church was extremely important to my friend, and was a vital source of strength for him. God was right at the centre of his life and his faith seemed to give him a depth and integrity that weren’t so obvious in many of the other people around me at that time... this really impressed me on some level even though I didn’t understand it. After a few months, he invited me to attend an Alpha course, and although on one level I was still very dubious and resistant I wanted to give it a fair hearing so I decided to go. Of course, the Alpha dogma was not for me, and I felt decidedly uncomfortable with the methods they employed... but the experience helped to me see the value in belonging to a church community and I began to wonder if there was another denomination out there that might be more liberal in outlook and more suited to me. I thought about giving the Quakers a try, as the only liberal religious group that came to mind, and looked them up online to find out what I might expect from them... but in the process I kept seeing mentions of another lot – the Unitarians – that I had never heard of before. The more I read, the more I liked the sound of them... and the rest is history! I count myself very lucky to have chanced upon Unitarianism (in this rather random and unlikely way) by the time I was just twenty-three. It has completely changed – probably saved – my life.

Over the last ten years I have gradually got more and more involved in the work of running Essex Church and also in nationwide projects for the Unitarian denomination. Fairly soon after joining this congregation I offered to set up a website for the church and have been the ‘webmistress’ ever since. I have edited the newsletter since about 2001 (or thereabouts – I’ve rather lost count!), set up our first engagement group back in 2002, been a member of the management committee, and got involved in many other exciting and challenging church projects along the way. I am hugely grateful for all the opportunities and encouragement I have been given by this church down the years and I know that I have learned such a lot in the process. Now, rather amazingly, I have joined the staff team, working one day a week as outreach officer and hoping to develop my role (by seeking financial support from external sources) to run more community arts and education projects here. I wonder what surprises the next ten years will bring...



Jane Blackall

...a forthcoming district event which you may be interested in...

LDPA Day Seminar:

“Religion and Spirituality in Contemporary Society”



Saturday 6th June, 10:30 - 4:00pm.

Essex Hall, Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY

The District is excited to offer a day-long Seminar on Religion and Spirituality, led by Fr. Adrian Smith. Adrian Smith is a noted author and commentator on contemporary religion and spirituality, and is in much demand throughout the country for his informative, stimulating and challenging presentations.

A former Catholic missionary in Africa, he is the author of numerous books which challenge the church and society to embrace new forms of religious thinking. In many ways, much of what he proposes is eminently Unitarian. The District Minister, David Usher, has attended one of Adrian Smith's seminars and found it extremely relevant and helpful.

Cost: £7 per person, payable on the day, £6 in advance (cheques payable to the LDPA). Bring your own packed lunch. Hot drinks will be provided. Advance bookings to the District Minister no later than 1st June. E-mail dusher@sevenoaks-unitarians.org.uk or call (01732) 465248.

Sunday Services at Essex Church

**5th April – “A Life Lived in Fear
is a Life Half Lived”**

Service led by Angela Gasparetto

Angela offers the following quote to give you a flavour of what to expect from the service on Sunday 5th April: “We can try to control the uncontrollable by looking for security and predictability, always hoping to be comfortable and safe. But the truth is that we can never avoid uncertainty. This not knowing is part of the adventure. It's also what makes us afraid.” (Words from Pema Chödrön).

12th April – “Take One Egg”

Easter Service led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

From ancient fertility rituals to modern cookery programmes, eggs play a crucial part in human life. Join us for this celebration of all that is egg-shaped, in which there will also be an opportunity to reflect on Easter's themes of redemption and resurrection.

19th April – “Inspired”

Service led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

As some congregation members return from our Unitarian General Assembly Meetings held in Chester, in this service we will explore sources of inspiration. What is it that re-energises us, brings us new ideas, helps us to re-commit to our highest values and goals?

26th April – “Assessing Our Assets”

Service led by Rev. Jane Dwinell and Rev. Sarah Tinker

What does liberal religion offer our world? What are the particular strengths and opportunities for our Unitarian community here at Essex Church? In this service we will celebrate what we have and explore what we could aim towards as a spiritual community in 21st century London.



One day a zookeeper noticed that the orang-utan was reading two books – the Bible and Darwin's ‘Origin of Species’.

Surprised, he asked the ape, “Why are you reading both those books?”

“Well,” said the orang-utan, “I just wanted to know if I was my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother.”

Submitted by Will Lyons

