



# Northampton Unitarian News

Number 7, January to March 2005

## OUR FAITH (taken from our website)

### We believe that:

- everyone has the right to seek truth and meaning for themselves.
- the fundamental tools for doing this are your own life experience, your reflection upon it, your intuitive understanding and the promptings of your own conscience.
- the best place to do this is a community that welcomes you for who you are, complete with your beliefs, doubts and questions.

### We offer:

- liberty of conscience and freedom from imposed creed, confessions and dogmas.
- a fellowship where people come together to worship; to share times of celebration and trial; and to help each other in the quest for a faith to live by.

**We affirm** the universal values of love and compassion, peace, truth and justice.

**We welcome** all who come to us in the spirit of goodwill and enquiry, regardless of ethnic or religious background, age, gender or sexual orientation.



## SERVICE TAKERS FOR JANUARY TO MARCH 2005

We meet on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Sundays, at 10.30 a.m. Except where indicated, service takers are members of the congregation.

9 <sup>th</sup> January	Dawn Buckle, President of the General Assembly
23 <sup>rd</sup> January	Jack Knowles
13 <sup>th</sup> February	Jon Small (Candlemass)
27 <sup>th</sup> February	Penny Collins
13 <sup>th</sup> March	Sue Woolley (Angels)
27 <sup>th</sup> March	Frank Field (a Unitarian view of Easter)

**All are very welcome!**



**A GROWING FAITH**

Three years ago, I was in hospital. After major surgery and an unfortunate infection, I was weak and depended on a health orderly's daily assistance in washing myself. Dorothy was a committed traditional Christian, and knew that I was a Unitarian. Every morning, she began by washing my feet. The symbolism was not lost on either of us: indeed it made us both smile. One day she asked me "Does your faith help you?" "Yes" I replied. Nothing more was said and there was no feeling of embarrassment. We accepted one another's position.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "faith" as "reliance or trust in belief, founded on authority." Presumably the authority can be a religious text, or a spiritual leader. A profound problem arises for Unitarians and others, who find themselves unable to accept any such authority. Does this mean that such people cannot have a faith? I think not. The word "faith", in its religious context, surely implies not only something that is believed, and not capable of proof, but also something that affects our behaviour. If we believe like a young friend of mine, that it is enough to be honest and kind, then if we follow that belief, we are in fact living by a faith, for no-one can prove or disprove that honesty and kindness will benefit either the doer, or some small part of society. This is an example of a very personal faith, one that though held by others, has been worked out by an individual woman or man, on their own "authority". The late Dr. Alfred Hall, in his formerly much read book *The Beliefs of a Unitarian*, wrote that God had given us minds to think, as well as hearts to feel. It is possible to formulate a personal faith, with a set of guidelines for living, based solely on the use of the mind. For Atheists committed to human society, this is part of their faith. (The UN recognises that Atheists have a faith: no-one can prove that there is no God). In the nineteenth century, the French writer Gabriel Pascal produced such a scheme, based on the idea that nature was against humankind, which therefore needed to unite and act in mutual support in order to prosper, or indeed to survive.

Building a faith on such premises has at least one clear weakness: it takes no account of the spiritual experiences and teachings of leaders of great inspiration from Zoroaster, the Buddha and Abraham, through Jesus and the Prophet, to Baha'u'llah; as expressed in their writings as accounts of their lives. How are we to benefit from such sources, if we are unable to accept all the later interpretations, probable misrepresentations and references that were intended to be of only contemporary and not permanent significance? The answer, I suggest, lies not only in our intellect, but also, at a far deeper level, in our sense of what is right. Do we respond, or resonate to the words of a prayer or reading? There are ways of knowing other than through logical or scientific reasoning. Do we feel that they are true, or just "not for us"?

When I was teaching human rights, students sometimes found it hard to understand the concept of "natural law"; that is, law based on a "natural order" for society, which is akin to the order we find in nature. Planets move according to predictable paths, acorns produce oak trees and not firs, etc. Surely there must be a way, a natural way, under natural law based on reason, in which people can live together? Not perhaps easy to grasp at a first hearing. When however I asked "Do you remember a time when as a child, something happened to you or to a friend, which made you angry and you responded with "that's not fair"? There was always a positive response. Becky (Sue's ten-year old daughter) used these words earlier in our service, when she was disappointed that she wouldn't be able to come to our annual "walk in the park". She

knew nothing of ancient theories of natural law, but was responding to a sense of what she thought to be unjust, and was thereby illustrating the very essence of natural law, being fair. She was “resonating” to the ancient sense of justice in all human affairs. This sense of resonance, or of feeling “in tune” with events and ideas, can help us to feel and understand the spiritual experiences which prompted the writings and prayers of all faiths. Greater souls than our own can lead us on our journey. The question is not, what can we prove in some academic way, but does something inside us say “this is true” when we read or listen. Through daily prayer, as well as through what I have experienced in this our Worship Room, my faith has grown. Perhaps our inner voice or thoughts may say “not for me, but perhaps for others.” In this way we can be guided.

Dorothy would, I like to believe, have understood.

### **Frank Field**



#### **CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE: MY HERO/INE**

Our experimental “My hero/ine” service on December 12<sup>th</sup>. was a stimulating experience for the seven congregation members and one visitor, who came. I had been concerned, as to how many would want to speak, but in the event, everyone present participated.

Marie’s heroine was Gertrude Jekell, the famous garden designer, whose influence is still very much alive today. Her ambition had been to become a great artist, as her early works clearly promised, but increasing short sightedness, whilst she was she was still young, made this impossible. As a lady of some means, she could have languished doing very little. She chose another path, designing several hundred gardens, writing books on gardening, that are still read and working with the young Edward Lutyens in joint house/garden projects as a colleague and mentor.

Martin gave a brief but informative account of the life of Albert Schweitzer, who had given up the prospects of a brilliant career as an organist, to become a medical doctor and work among lepers and others in Gabon.

Mark, our resident Doctor of Music, was inspired by Olivier Messian. On the keyboard, he illustrated many birdsongs used by the composer in his works. Two quotes left a lasting memory. Messian said that he wrote “birdsong for people who live in cities and hear no birds sing and religious music, for those who have no faith”.

Penny admired and had been uplifted by the examples set by countless women who had worked and suffered, so that all women should have the vote. Tony had as a schoolboy, been impressed by the writings of Aldous Huxley. Tony’s headmaster

had strongly disapproved, but our future Unitarian was not to be diverted and Huxley's ideas regarding the study of other faiths, were to be a lasting influence.

Jon had known Stan Seamark, a locally famous registered conscientious objector in World War II. In a long life he had been active in peace organizations ranging from the League of Nations Union to CND. Spiritually Stan had been inspired by the writings of St. John of the Cross and impressed all who met him by his inner calm.

Frank spoke of Dag Hammarskold, the second Secretary-General of the U.N. who had also been inspired by St. John of the Cross and had left a parallel memory of inner calm coupled to an outstanding intellect.

Our visitor Harvey Brooker, concluded these accounts, speaking of two friends who were members of his "Prayer Trio" The subjects had been of such interest to those present, that when time was running short, it was agreed to omit two hymns!

**FF**



### **A THOUGHT FOR THE YEAR TO COME**

May We Be Keepers of Thy Flame  
*Rise up, o flame, by thy light glowing.  
Show us beauty, vision, and joy.*

O flaming chalice, symbol of a free faith,  
Burn with the holy oil of helpfulness and service.  
Spread warmth and light and hope;  
Warm hearts grown cold with indifference;  
Light dark places with justice; rekindle hope in despair.  
May we bring fuel for thy fire of love.  
May the oil of loving kindness flow from us to thy leaping flame.  
May hands of service shelter thee,  
That no winds of hate may extinguish thy brightness.  
May thy light and warmth be eternal.  
May we be keepers of thy flame.

**Richard S. Gilbert**

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