

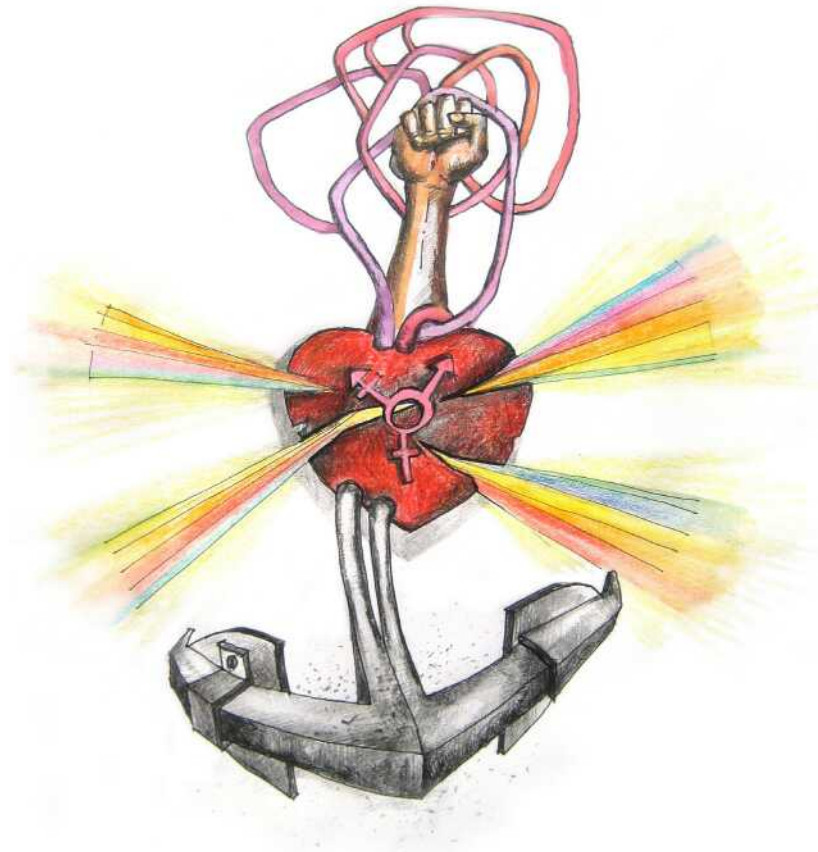


# UNITARIAN PERSPECTIVES

Reflections from South Africa

August 2020





# DEDICATION

This publication is dedicated to the memory of Rev. David Faure, who established the Free Protestant Church (later Unitarian Church Cape Town) in 1868 in Cape Town, South Africa, and Bishop Adeniran Adedeji Isola, who established the Unitarian Brotherhood Church (Ijo Isokan Gbogbo Eda) in 1917/1918 in Lagos, Nigeria, and also to honour:

The frontline and essential workers who have kept the essential activities going during the worldwide lockdowns due to the COVID-19 epidemic.

Those who have lost their lives or loved ones due to coronavirus or have suffered due to loss of livelihood, hunger, police brutality and/or gender violence.

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## Editorial policy

Unitarian Perspectives is an in-house publication of the Cape Town Unitarian Church. The articles published are the work of members of the congregation reflecting on theological and spiritual themes that either relate to their own experience, the South African context or the continent of Africa. The editorial team reserved the right to edit and shorten their contributions where it was deemed necessary. Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Cape Town Unitarian Church. All authors and artists retain the copyright to their own work. No reprinting or usage of any articles or art without permission.



# EDITORIAL



There is a saying in Africa: “It takes a village to raise a child”. Now that this publication is complete, I can say: “It takes a group of enthusiastic and committed people to publish a journal like this”.

Right from the start, the authors and team that produced it, committed themselves whole-heartedly to the project. I honour them and their enthusiasm. Despite the fact that very few of us are published authors and some of us had our doubts we persevered and for that I thank our inspired authors.

A special thanks goes to our sub-editor Laura Pohl who emerged as one of the main pillars to move the project forward.

Also thank you to our artists, Natalie, and Martha, for the beautiful art pieces they produced for the publication.

Liam, our graphics and layout artist patiently worked with us to create the final version.

Our editors and proofreaders though not professionals did their best to create a readable edition without too many errors despite limited resources.

Our distribution team launched the publication on social media and elsewhere in great style.

Last but not the least a special thanks to our minister, Rev. Nima Taylor, who embraced and supported the project from the get-go.

Given the fact that there were a number of prolific authors amongst the past ministers of Cape Town Unitarians, it seemed only right to give voice to our own thoughts in 2020. Little did we know that we would be working on this publication during the COVID-19 pandemic and a lockdown in South Africa. Most of the articles were already at an advanced stage when lockdown commenced, so few authors had the time to include their thoughts on the pandemic. We therefore decided to dedicate the publication to the brave frontline and essential workers who kept our society alive during lockdown.

The aim of this journal is threefold:

1. To document the theological and spiritual reflections of members of our congregation for the benefit of the Unitarian movement and future generations.

2. To give voice to Unitarianism in South Africa and Cape Town in particular.

3. To converse with and be inspired by the Unitarians who came before us and shared their thoughts with us.

I am sure that as you read these articles and the art that accompanies them, that you will be moved and inspired by the honesty, the courage and the explorative spirit articulated and communicated through them. You will find eleven creative individuals reflecting on their own spiritual and lived experience.

The authors and artists were free to explore any theme and this freedom created the wonderful and varied contributions you will find here.

If you read carefully you will also notice that some of the articles touch on similar themes without it having been planned that way.

We arranged the articles in alphabetical order using the surname of our authors.

May this publication travel far and wide and touch the hearts of many and yours too.

Many blessings to all our readers,

Rev. Roux Malan



# FOREWORD

As minister of the Cape Town Unitarians, I am honoured to share some details about this beloved spiritual family.

Our community minister, Rev. Roux Malan, and our many contributors have worked diligently to speak from their hearts, either through words or artworks, to share their deep connection with the unique flavour of Unitarianism here in South Africa.

As many of you probably know, the democratic ethos of this country was born out of the horrors of the Apartheid era, and it still has many challenges in the midst of so much diversity. There are eleven official languages in South Africa, as well as a myriad of different spiritual, religious beliefs and cultures. These differences continue to cause conflict, often manifesting in tragic ways.

We, South African Unitarians, endeavour to demonstrate the power of diversity and the ability of individuals to form a cohesive, united spiritual community regardless of our individual paths. At any of our services or activities, you will see Mandela's vision of the Rainbow Nation, from so many different walks of life, of all ages and backgrounds, coming together to encourage and support each other just as we are.

This publication is being created as we live through the historic time of a global pandemic, growing protests against police brutality and the increasing horror of gender based violence. Yet, in the midst of this environment, we have also found hope and inspiration. We had planned to start a pastoral care team this year, and the pandemic created a greater sense of urgency. We now have processes in place to support each member and friend, and find ways to help those most financially vulnerable.

Another priority this year was to create and implement a Lay Leaders programme, to strengthen our foundation and ensure stability and future growth. As I write these words, we have completed three of our twelve planned classes with nine eager students willing to spend hours on Zoom learning and exploring together. We look forward to graduating our first class in March of 2021.

We hope you will find great value and beauty in this publication.

Should you be inspired to make a donation to our beloved community, Electronic Funds Transfers can be made to: Standard Bank, Unitarian Church, Branch 051001, account number 070440719, address is 64 Hout Street, CBD, Cape Town, Western Province, South Africa 8000, Swift Code is SBZAJJ.

With love and light,  
Rev. Nima Taylor  
Minister, Cape Town Unitarians





**Chromodynamics #702: Trepanation, 2020**

Personal work by Martha Holmes: watercolor, pencil and pen on paper

# SUBSTANCE IN SILENCE

by Shelley Adams

As a ten-year-old child, I engaged in a silent exercise that opened me to a sense of belonging, warmth and greatness that is the Universe and the nature of who and what I am. At the time, I only had my Catholic religious upbringing to understand and articulate the experience so the best I could do was to say to myself “I am God”. I said this to express to myself that we are all part of and contain the spark of all existence, I had no other way to articulate the wholeness of our existence. Recognising the heretical nature of this thought but not necessarily of the idea I buried and never raised it with anyone.

Over the next ten years, I had interests, experiences and read books that helped to form my personal belief system. As a guiding principle, I understood my beliefs had to be flexible, changeable and adaptable to new ideas and truths as they became evident to me. I use the sense of “godness” as a litmus test to recognise them. And so, when Cape Town Unitarian sent invitations to participate in a silent retreat I jumped at the chance. In this article I share what I experienced on that silent retreat and how it changed my perspectives. I also reflect on how it relates to my first tangible and later direct experiences of the spiritual plane and my place in it.

## RETREAT AND SILENCE

I remember looking forward to the weekend with great anticipation. I had a 7-year old and husband at home, but I needed to be free of judgement, guilt or values being imposed on me. I felt like I was suffocating, and not because I was unhappy with my life but because it felt too full.

A few church members and I attended the 3-day retreat facilitated by Pat Oliver in October 2014. The weekend consisted of silence from Sunday evening to Tuesday afternoon interspersed with meditation, music and physical activities.

Over the next 3 days, I had simple moments of peace and joy that have not left me, despite it being 6 years ago. I recall spending my free time, standing and looking at the beautiful farmland and mountains on the horizon while listening to the sounds of nature. I wrote this on the last morning.

“I ate a second breakfast gleefully in a kitchen, at a table surrounded by cow decor, looking at slivers of a mountain-side framed in checkered blue curtaining.”

I remember the joy and humour of the moment and sense of connection with my surroundings and all the silent companions sharing my space.

The experiences I had on the retreat made me realise that we are all connected to each other. I recognised a presence and a rhythm that aligns us all to Source. This awareness presented itself to me as a visual impression of us all being connected at and from the chest to the beginning and end of all of life.

My deepest insight came through a meditation in which we identified a part of our bodies to “inhabit” that felt whole and healthy and from there, extended it to a vision of the greater universe and our place in it. The exercise was accompanied by music which created a feeling of physical and psychic vibration that made me feel like I could leave my body at any moment. After the meditation and towards the end of the day, I still felt like I was floating inside my body. I had to ground myself by reading a truly awful book in an attempt not to “float away”. This full day of silence was a moving experience that has never left me.

## INSIGHT AND VISIONS

When I returned home on Tuesday afternoon, I realised that I had gained a new insight. I could “see” individuals as two entities. One entity as their outer personality and a second as their true, inner, spirit self. I often saw the two entities acting in opposition to each other and what someone said or did reflected the misalignment of the entities. I also saw how the inner self could guide the outer self, with varying degrees of success. Often people were not aware of this inner being at all.

Most beneficial was when I turned that “sight” on myself and understood the violence of sarcasm, the misalignment of action to spirit caused by my fears.

I also realised that every choice we make takes us to the exact place we need to be; that every step we take in our life is blessed. So it is impossible to make mistakes because every choice we make is right.

When I arrived home my daughter, Willow, cried and accused me of abandoning her with only her (loving) father to take care of her, which, according to her, just wasn't the same. Through her tears, I saw her spirit rolling around laughing at the trick she was playing on me. I knew that while she had missed me and needed lots of hugs and kisses to make it up to her, she was fine. So, I played along. I said I was sorry and I wouldn't do it again. I then folded an origami book and filled it with poems to her. I called it “My Book of Love to Willow”.

In the days that followed, I was inspired to write about my experiences in poetry. On one occasion my inspiration compelled me to get out of bed to express my gratitude in the following words:

At the midnight hour  
When the sleep won't come  
And I see a light on  
But there's no rest won  
When I hear the sirens with  
Their haunting call  
My thoughts are words  
That I must write down

When I hear the snoring  
From my man below  
And I miss my daughter  
Sleeping right next door  
Yet I feel the stirring  
That I can't ignore  
My words are thoughts  
That I must write down

I still see the moonlight  
Lighting up the sky  
I still see the temple  
With a longing sigh  
Yet to know that God's will  
And my soul is aligned  
My thoughts are words  
That I must write down

Written on 8 October 2014 at 00h40

Over time, my ability to see and speak with people's inner person and not necessarily respond to the outer person led to me appearing a bit odd. I would consider and formulate an answer that would take time to address the inner with enough response to the outer person to make sense. My daughter started becoming distressed (read: impatient) at my long silences and my need to be still. Colleagues gave me strange looks and began avoiding me. I chose to let my "double vision" fade away after some time.

I realise now that I didn't know how to balance the demands of my life and the ability to perceive and speak to these dual entities at the same time. While this vision is lost to me for now, my understanding of our connection and the memory of that ability to "see" others still directs me in many ways with my "outer self" trying to do the best it can.

## MEDITATION AND YOGA

In the years after the retreat, I longed to replicate the experience of silence I had, and to be silent for more days at a time. In April 2019 my then 11-year old wanted to meditate. I found a 15-minute Isha Kriya, a meditation guided by Sadhguru which we did together.

The meditation is practiced in three parts. The first part is a mantra done in silence, the second is the repetition of the "A" sound seven times and the final part is pure silence. The meditation reminded me of the experiences of the silent retreat as its goal is to create a sense of "you" that is separate from your body and mind while the "A" sound produces a deep vibration in the body that settles the mind. I felt a deep sense of relief the first few times I practiced it, as the mantra gently encourages you to slough off the outer self and "sit" in a deeper sense of self. After the first few days of meditating, I researched Sadhguru and started following him in his wonderful and rich teachings on YouTube, books and his online programme. Sadhguru is the head of the Isha Foundation based in India, an organisation that is made up of over 9 million volunteers. He has been teaching yoga as a programme to self-improvement for 30 years and does so in a way that is geared to be easily understood by "logical" minds.

As I started listening to Sadhguru, he struck me as having a curiously "Unitarian" feel. He says he believes in nothing, identifies with nothing. He talks about the fact that "only that which we experience is real". I can relate to this wholly, as the first Unitarian source of "direct experience" has always given me my most powerful insights and unique experiences. And yet this latest episode, following 12 years after the last I had experienced in a forest, was different in that my primary mode of insight was through my body. For perhaps the first time in a long time, I was able to relate to my body in a positive way. And for the first time ever I could relate to my spiritual journey as an entity beyond and yet connected via my body.

One of my favourite quotes from Sadhguru is the way he describes thoughts and emotions: “Thoughts are dry, emotions are juicy”. He postulates that they are the same thing, that one arises as a result of the other and that emotions are slower for this reason. I have interpreted that fairly literally in that thoughts are electrical impulses, emotions are biochemical. Emotions are secreted and travel through our bodies.

They take us longer to process, even when our thoughts have changed, because they are physically present and cannot pass through us at will. In contrast, our thoughts change direction with every new idea or stimulus that comes our way and we leave our silent, wordless selves behind and wonder why we feel lost.

The idea that our bodies can be within our control through ordering and controlling our thoughts is not new. However Sadhguru is teaching yoga as a tool for us to learn how to do so. I became aware, as I practiced the Isha Kriya, that I was able to stay calmer and inhabit a quieter space within myself and I began to notice and became intrigued with the silences in my daily life.

There are many moments of silence in our lives, some of which we recognise as crossroads or places of transition or major change. However all of them are not that big.

What about the small pauses? The inbreath before shouting at a loved one. The choices we make that don't feel right but our rational mind tells us makes the most sense. The emotional charge we feel when we are with someone that makes us feel vulnerable.

And the pause when we deny the wild ruffian within ourselves the satisfaction of unleashing its wrath on someone who is being inconvenient.

So many of these small pauses go unnoticed because we aren't conscious of them. Life is too fast, too loud, too much. So many things to take notice of. Silence, pauses, yin – these are so easy to ignore. Silence's power lies in its subtlety and it is easy to look past it in search of a response to attention-grabbing speed, volumes and demands.

So much is said about mindfulness and being conscious, taking note of what we are thinking. And yet we most easily ignore our most basic wordlessness: our emotions. Our emotions have no words. They arise from the part of our brain that can only articulate through our biochemistry, through our bodies. It can only know who we truly are because it has no space to argue, it has no opinion, it has only itself.

## **YOGA AND SILENCE**

In following Sadhguru a childhood fascination I had with yoga, especially the kriya or energy meditations, has resurfaced. When my daughter and I started the Isha Kriya meditations in 2019, my sense of respite was almost overwhelming and I was emotional with relief and joy. The internal dialogue together with the audible sound of A, creates a vibration in the body and aligns it with emotions and thoughts.

Part of the Inner Engineering Online Course I did based on teachings by Sadhguru introduced the AUM chant meditation (done 108 times). The feeling I was left with was heady to say the least.

In my exploration of AUM, I encountered a number of bloggers and yoga practitioners that have said a lot about silence using better words than I have to explain their experiences.

In a blog about the AUM ([www.spiritsound.com/aum.html](http://www.spiritsound.com/aum.html)), David Gordon writes:

“In the Sanskrit tradition, this sound is called ‘Anahata Nada,’ the ‘Unstruck Sound.’ Literally, this means ‘the sound that is not made by two things striking together.’ The point of this particular distinction is that all ordinary audible sounds are made by at least two elements: bow and string; drum and stick; two vocal cords; two lips against the mouth-piece of the trumpet; the double reed of the oboe; waves against the shore; wind against the leaves. All sounds within our range of hearing are created by things visible or invisible, striking each other or vibrating together, creating pulsing waves of air molecules which our ears and brain interpret as sound. So, sound that is not made of two things striking together is the sound of primal energy, the sound of the universe itself. Joseph Campbell likens this unstruck vibration to the humming of an electrical transformer, or the (to our ears) unheard hummings of atoms and molecules.”

He continues to describe the four elements of the AUM and the three sounds made by the A, the U and the M:

“Which brings us to the fourth sound of AUM, the primal ‘unstruck’ sound

within the silence at the end of the sacred syllable. When one really ‘listens’ to this silent sound, this unstruck vibration, one comes inevitably to stillness, to pure and open existence. The poet Gerhart Hauptmann says the aim of all poetry is ‘to let the Word be heard resounding behind words.’ The sound behind the sound. And, in making the sound of AUM, we hear this unstruck sound most clearly in the instant when the last humming vibrations of the ‘M’ fade away. At that moment, that instant separating audible sound and silence, the veil is thinnest, and our listening awareness is most expansive. At that moment of silence, to use William Blake’s words, the ‘doors of perception’ are cleansed, and ‘everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.”

In another blog Chi Kriya Yoga with Mithi and Mehul (<https://www.chikriyoga.com/meditation/chanting-om-or-aum/>) they explain how the AUM sound fits into the yoga practice. In their exploration of the significance of AUM, Mithi and Mehul note that as a sound, AUM is like white light in that it contains all sound as white light contains all colours. They also note:

“Spiritually, it is a portal that can connect us to the Creator of this universe, like ‘Amen’ in the Christianity, ‘Ameen’ in Islam and ‘Hum’ in Tibetan Buddhism.”

In a truly beautiful description of his personal experience with Silence, Robert Rabin’s blog article called “Silence is the Mother of Existence”

(<https://www.elephantjournal.com/2014/08/silence-is-the-mother-of-existence/>)

he starts with this:

“Surrounding the thinking mind is a field of Silence. In this field, we sense and feel a presence that is both us and larger than us—it encompasses everything. In fact, this Silence is the mother whose arms cradle all of existence. When we put our attention on it, we immediately feel an unbreakable connection to life itself, a living bond with everyone and everything. This simple feeling of connection, this knowing that we belong, radically alters our priorities and goals, our values and motivations.”

In this journey and exploration of silence I realised that there are many opportunities to be. In and of itself it is a journey of letting go who we think we are, to being who we are which is both everything and nothing.

It is a humbling moment to realise that what we believe about ourselves is only that. It doesn't touch the truth of what and who we are.

On the last day of our silence at the retreat, I experienced such sadness and joy. It was too short and too special. I also realised, as we shared our last meal together after ending our silence, that the people I had spent 3 silent days with were not the same people I now ate and spoke with. I commented on how different everyone was now that we were talking to each other again.

Some people looked at me askance, perhaps a precursor of what I would experience in the days that followed, when I realised I could see people's inner and outer selves. I let it go through and I wrote

this entry in my journal shortly before we ended the silence. It is my reminder to me that who and what I am can be accessed via the simple vehicle of silence:

*It is the last hour of our silence, of going at the pace our bodies set. It is the last of our quiet time.*

*Mother*

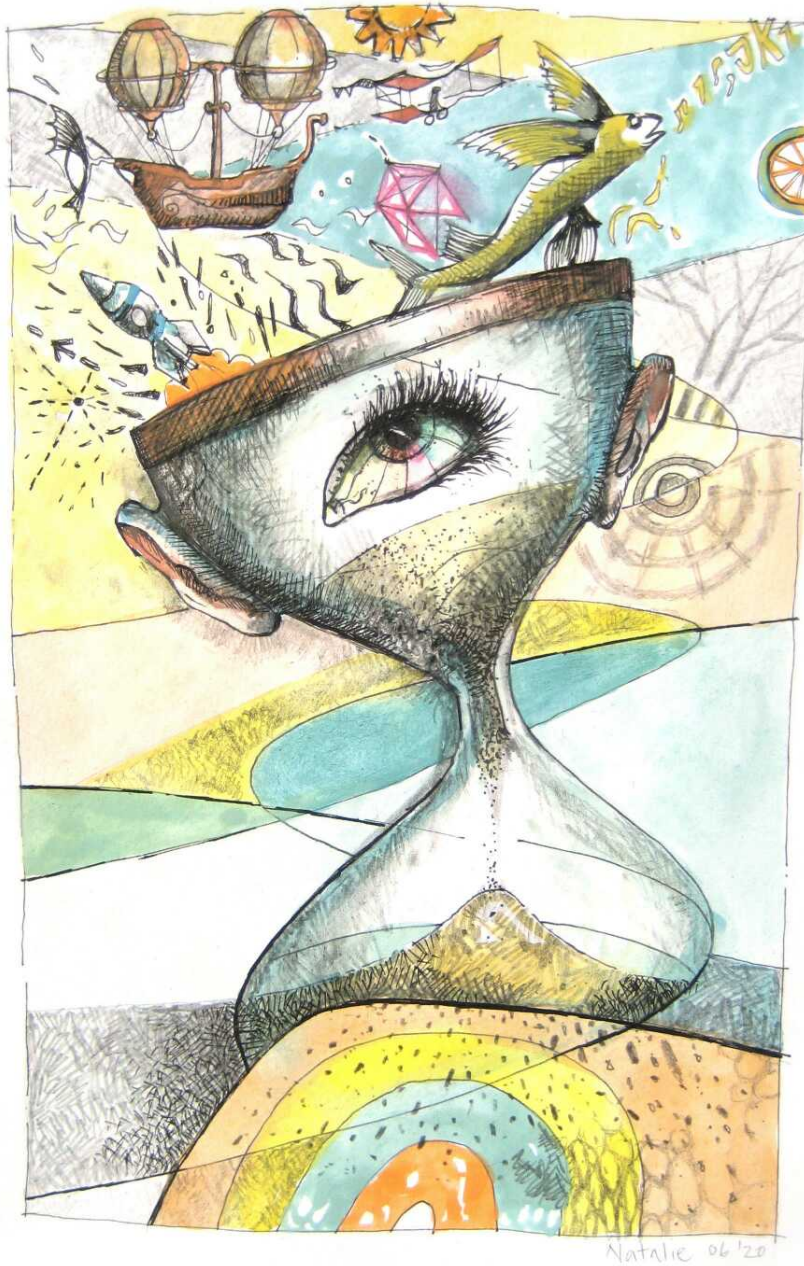
*My gratitude for the daughters  
you have brought into my life  
Thank you for the women who are leaving  
For we will never be these women again  
I'm so sad. My heart aches.  
I am so happy. My heart beats with joy.  
My girl and my man wait for me at home.  
Praise God the Father, Praise Goddess our  
Mother. We will never be these women  
again.*





Shelley Adams lives in Cape Town South Africa and has been a member of the Cape Town Unitarian (CTU) Church for seven years. She was introduced to the Unitarian Church in Cape Town when she was married by Gordon Oliver, the then settled minister. Shelley has served two terms as Council Chair and (Oct 2015 to May 2019) currently serves as a Member-At-Large with the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU). Shelley's interest in the Theological Circle was sparked by her enjoyment of writing and an idea and interest that had been on her mind for a while. She hopes the article connects her with like-minded people who enjoy the peace of quiet and who have deep gratitude for those who remind us to live fully.





**Sands of my mind, 2020**

Artwork by Natalie Billings, pencil on paper

# Perspectives on 'Sunday School'

## A Unitarian Reflection on Free Play as a Core Aspect of Children's Spiritual Development

by Emily Brown

### INTRODUCTION

If someone had told me in my twenties that I would be a Sunday school teacher by the time I turned forty, I would have laughed in their face. Yet, here I am, having re-established the children's program at the local Cape Town Unitarian Church for the better part of a decade.

My motivation for taking this unlikely step was twofold: my family, being vested in the Protestant and Baptist traditions in South Africa, was putting not-so-subtle pressure on my husband and me to bring our daughter into their religious affiliations. Having spent the first years of her life in England my daughter did not know much about formal religion. We returned to South Africa at the end of 2010 after living in the more secular British society for almost a decade. I realized that our religious indemnity was over - particularly when my daughter mentioned to me that Granny told her of a real human being travelling in the sky on a cloud ...

The ambivalence this left me with was unsettling. I knew my mom wanted the best for her granddaughter. The message of love she wanted to transfer to our daughter was deeply embedded in her Christian faith. I did want my daughter to know this bigger Love, sense of purpose and belonging that I experienced as a child. I knew that the fact that I grew up in a religious environment possibly increased my resilience as an adult. What I wanted for my daughter though was religion without social exclusivity and without dogma and institutionalisation. Hence my search for a free-thinking spiritual community began in all earnest!

I scoured the internet anew and to my delight I stumbled upon the Unitarians. A free-thinking group of average looking people in a building which very much looked like a church, complete with hymn books and a pulpit! The Minister, Rev. Roux Malan, who served the congregation at that time, came from a similar Afrikaans speaking and --- religiously conservative background as myself. To my disappointment, the Cape Town Unitarians offered no 'Sunday school'. It became my mission to create one.

My daughter is now in her teens and although she does not identify strongly with being Unitarian, she has a free-thinking mind and reveals a staunch sense of equality and compassion for her causes. I would like to believe that the Cape Town Unitarian Sunday School has something to do with it.

Writing this article for the “Unitarian Perspectives” offered me an opportunity to reflect on my experience as a coordinator of religious education, or as I came to see it, Spiritual Development (see Addendum 1 for clarification of terminology). Our congregation is small but ambitious. Despite many challenges I am satisfied though that thirty odd children attended ‘Sunday school’ during this time.

My approach to children’s spiritual development was strongly informed by my background in Psychology. I hope that this article and the perspective that I share will make a meaningful contribution to the field of Religious Education.

### **SACRED SPACE: MAKING ROOM FOR CHILDREN**



*Girls leaning over the balustrade of the gallery, the designated space from where our ‘Chalice Kids’ sessions started off.*

The gallery of our church being at the same time cosy and serene was the ideal space to start hosting our children’s sessions in 2011. Initially we offered only one session per month. Logistically it was challenging. Our church building hails from the early 20th century - a time when children were seen, not heard. We were also competing with a thunderous organ and I had to keep a close eye on a number of safety issues. Despite this the children took to the space immediately, often running upstairs as soon as they entered the church.

On several occasions, the gallery offered valuable opportunities for observing the proceedings in the sanctuary below. I recall how the children and I followed the explanations on four different displays during a Christmas service in December 2014. There was a nativity scene symbolizing Christianity, a candelabrum symbolizing the Jewish festival of lights, a Diwali mandala made from brightly coloured powders for Hinduism and a Yule log for the Pagan religion. Observing these four different religious traditions all celebrating universal light in a unique way prepared their young minds for concepts such as inclusiveness, diversity and tolerance.

While setting up the newly revived ‘Sunday school’, Reverend Roux suggested that I create something similar to ‘Godly Play’ to complement the monthly Chalice Kids sessions. Godly Play is a method of religious education used in some Montessori schools and makes use of a set of biblical figures. Being familiar with the workings of Play Therapy I was keen to try it out. Ours though was to be a Unitarian version and we called it Sacred Play.

*“Man, only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays” Friedrich von Shiller*

## SACRED PLAY

The gallery offered a free-standing bookshelf, seemingly unopened for years. I clearly recall how significant a moment it felt when I started clearing out the cupboard; removing a stack of dusty historical documents. This cupboard was to become the custodian of our ‘Sacred Play’ collection. Its purpose was to occupy youngsters on the Sundays when we didn’t offer structured children’s sessions. In addition the collection of items was to further their understanding of the concepts we exchanged during lessons.

I filled the cupboard with various objects, choosing those that could generate a sense of wonder and fascination or objects that have a religious connotation or spiritual significance. These included a magnifying glass, a lion, magnets, baby dolls, a model of Table Mountain, a tiny Bible, a feather halo, a menorah, and a lotus flower. There were also stars, the moon, and an ‘Earth’ globe as well as a Baobab tree, a rock, a piece of wood, a dolphin, various chalice-like objects, human figurines, a singing bowl, Rubik’s cube, a glitter wand and many more.



No commercial toys were added and certainly no toy guns, cars, or Barbie dolls. This was to be a different kind of play in which they followed their own script. The unfamiliarity of the objects prompted them to use their imagination.

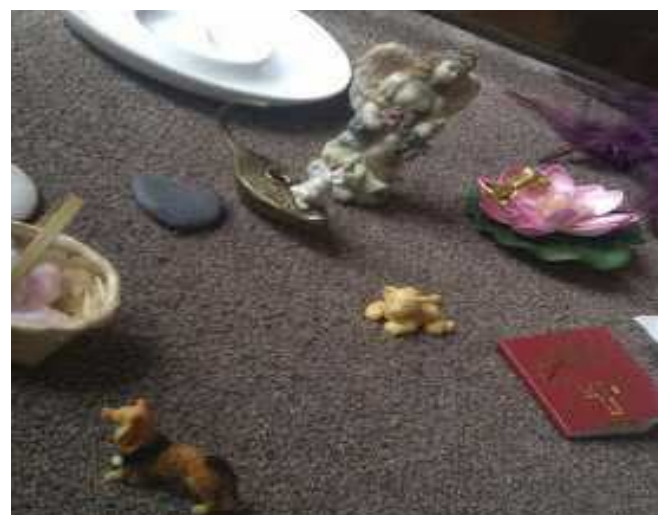
The collection grew over time and with every lesson I added an object we used in the lesson. At times children also brought items which were of significance to them. I asked members of our community for contributions of objects which had personal spiritual, moral or religious meaning to them and received a Jewish 'Ten commandments' from Israel, a precious set of dices made of ivory, a knee-high Buddha and prayer beads. Following a lesson on Fairness I added a set of old-fashioned scales - and it became the most popular item in the cupboard. Children mostly utilised the bowls of the scale as a swing for the baby figurines, and then tried balancing the two bowls – a valuable opportunity to experiment with concepts such as fairness, equality and balance.

The lion was popular too. Its jaw could open and close at the push of a button on its back – and it became the boys' favourite item. The lion roared vivaciously while clattering his jaws – offering ample opportunity to ask whether he will perhaps consider protecting the two baby dolls rather than scaring them off. We are fair and kind after all. I added a lion cub to the collection, to symbolise the notion of being vulnerable yet entitled to protection.



Children gravitated towards the cupboard and mostly played quietly, often solitarily, almost as if in contemplation. Initially I was concerned that they might not handle the objects with respect. They played with the objects with a sort of reverence though.

The earth ball did get kicked around and eventually deflated. It offered an opportunity to remind them to treat the 'the Earth' with respect. The creativity they displayed when putting the objects together or constellating a play scene was fascinating to watch. They were busy figuring out their worlds, imagining possibility, making sense of their thoughts, blending the awareness of their inner world with outer realities.





*In the first photo to the left is an example of a play sequence configured by a nine year old child. Note the heart shaped stone being put into an oyster. A female human figurine lying on the genie lamp. An angel is resting on a feather and on tissue paper with cloud imprint, at the 'feet' of a butterfly-shaped mirror. (One cannot but wonder whether this is a child's expression of Transcendence).*

*In the second photo a lion cub enters the scene and the angel awakens. Together with Wise Owl they visit the Buddha and offer him a lotus flower which brings him calm. Inside his lotus flower is a golden bow, an object we used during a session on Inherent Worth. Could this be a child's understanding of Collective Wisdom?*

Children often impressed me with the detail in the descriptions of their spontaneous play and how well they were able to express their thoughts and views of the world. They created meaning and sense of rather complex matters in very literal terms even though they were completely unaware of the metaphoric meanings they expressed. I tried making parents, fellow 'teachers' and child minders aware of this process and encouraged them to ask children about their play; to help them interpret or reflect what on what they saw and to allow their children to find their own meaning.

Over the years I noticed how Sacred Play facilitates free expression. I realised how well the Unitarian notion of Life as a spiritual journey is facilitated by the dynamics of Sacred play and how the process of Sacred Play created custom made 'moulds' in which their growing minds could be cast.



## REFLECTING ON SACRED PLAY

*“Human beings have no alternative but to formulate beliefs about their nature and the nature of their experience and to commit themselves to particular beliefs about themselves and the world by an act of faith. Holding beliefs or believing is therefore an essential constituent not only to meaning-making but of humanisation” – Michael Grimmitt*

During the seven years of coordinating, writing, and presenting input for our ‘Sunday School’ I often had to go the extra mile. Various challenges presented themselves. At times I felt that I had to compete for the children’s attention. ‘Teaching’ time was limited and so were their parents’ motivation for bringing them to ‘Sunday School’. Also, being born from parents who themselves were inquisitive and open-minded, the children asked tough questions. I had to think on my feet and prepare fellow teachers to do likewise. In resolving these challenges I regularly re-visited research, literature, and classical theories on children’s cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development (See Addendum 3 for a comparative table). These theories provided me with some insight as well as pointers by which to convey a concept to a specific age group. I compared existing theories with known Neuropsychological facts that I was familiar with and became aware of its limitations.

The relatively little research that is available on children’s spiritual development also became conspicuous, a tendency also noted by others in the academic field (See Addendum 2).

Most of the prominent theories originated in the Western world and seem to have been extensions from the era of Reason. Cognitive capacities it seems, were regarded as precursors to religious reasoning – which seemed to have been synonymous with spirituality and all things transpersonal.

Donald W Winnicott’s theory on child development proved most helpful. Winnicott was a British paediatrician whose theoretical conceptualisation of child development was founded on direct observations of a substantial number of young children he treated during his lifetime. His theory on Transitional Relatedness particularly contributes to the understanding of spiritual development. He describes a mental process which starts with the baby and over a person’s lifetime develops into an enhanced capacity to engage with religious and spiritual ideas. His concepts of transitional objects, transitional space and transitional relatedness came to mind while I observed children during Sacred Play.

According to Winnicott a baby uses a cloth or a toy as a substitute for the safety and calm of the mother’s presence. The baby is aware that the cloth is not the mother –yet at the time the cloth brings about similar feelings to what it feels when the mother present. It feels AS IF the cloth is the mother. Similarly, a toddler is somewhat aware that an imaginary friend is not real, yet it acts as if it is. The same tendency is found in adulthood, for example, a Manchester United football supporter is aware that he is only watching an activity where people attempt to kick a ball into a net.

Despite this, he is so seriously invested in the game that he experiences emotions similar to the ones someone will experience during real combat. As adults we know that a talisman is just an object, yet we carry it as though it has power to protect us. A statue, for instance, is only a conglomerate of metal, yet statues are toppled as if it is the body of the person itself which is destroyed. These are all examples of Transitional objects or phenomena.

Unlike both Kohlberg and Fowler (see Table in Addendum 3), Winnicott's theory does not offer a rigid, staged framework of faith development and this explains why the children I observed in Sacred Play seemed to have conceptualised spiritual aspects. He describes an inner process in which maturation is not necessarily linked to developmental or chronological age. In Winnicott's terms faith development is a process whereby a person acquires the mental ability to externalise and internalise aspects of one's inner world - and this became my focus.

Religious and spiritual phenomena are of similar making as the transitional phenomena mentioned above. We associate, attach value and meaning to certain objects and rituals. The emotions we attach to them and the way we behave towards them is telling of the way they are represented in our own minds. We know well that a chalice is but an object shaped in a particular form. We are not hallucinating about its magical powers or, in a delusional way, seeing it as a genie lamp. Yet we treat it with reverence. We bestow upon it values, associations and inner meaning.

This changes the way we behave towards the chalice. By behaving and relating to it as if it is an embodiment of those inner perceptions, we create an opportunity for those feelings to be transformed, re-internalised and integrated into our inner reality in a new order.

Transitional objects have various functions over the lifespan of a human being. For a baby they are to soothe itself in the absence of the mother. For adults they articulate inner and outer realities and act as a medium for a variety of emotions. Being able to do this; to use transitional objects successfully, adds to one's resilience. The process fails when a person is unable to internalise the aspects being projected onto the transitional object. It fails too when the transitional object is perceived as rigid and unyielding. If used with success the transitional object help internalises a specific mental event into working knowledge or into conscious memory. When a transitional object has served its purpose, it loses its value and becomes a memoir or something merely sentimental.

Children spontaneously venture into the realm of transitional objects (Winnicott's referred to this as an Intermediate Area). I often observed this when the children played with the various objects in our Sacred Play collection. The collection became an intermediate area or a negotiating space where both inner truth and outer reality meet. For children it was a simple exchange: using the more concrete object to juggle an abstract idea.



This process is not dissimilar to how adults go about with much more complex and abstract ideas and feelings. At various times over a lifetime, a person is confronted by harsh or conflicting existential realities. In order to respond to these effectively, one has to find a way to accept them as part of one's life experience. At these times our experience exceeds our understanding and our observations overwhelms our reasoning. Transitional objects and phenomena being neither exclusively part of reality nor of our inner perception provide a way to bring the two spheres in touch. This existential Intermediate space often constitutes the realm of the Sacred: that which we hold dear and that which carries the ability to transcend reality. In the Sacred Intermediate area things exist as a duality. This is the terroir of metaphors, of rituals, ceremonies, relics and myths. Using transitional phenomena successfully enables us to adjust to ideas and experiences perceived as bigger than ourselves. We adapt and evolve via the transpersonal world.

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the ideas presented in this article made me aware of the importance of a free and individual search for meaning. While children learn most of what they do by modelling older persons in their lives, they still need to be allowed to search and find that which will one day constitute their own truth. Over time I realised that by allowing children to 'play' as part of their 'Religious Education' allows them to develop a capacity; an ability to be spiritual. Facilitating play became a key process in their religious education. It ensures that Winnicott's Intermediate Area, that mental space where things become sacred, remains

open.

Having had the opportunity to 'play' in the realm of the sacred, children will be able to externalise aspects of life they find difficult to integrate. Instead of only externalising it, they will likely transition spontaneously by using a transitional phenomenon and internalise the emotions attached to the object. This to me is the essence and true intention of Religion. Those who can 'play' in the sacred space offered by the Intermediate area, will be able to continuously find new truth and meaning for themselves - and thus move their journey forward. I realized that 'playing' as children do in Sacred Play has a far wider application.

The practical implication of this, in my view, necessitates the availability of an area of free, non-verbal expression of spirituality - not only for children but for those of all ages. Being able to engage with something in a playful way is a precious gift. Playing is about occupying that intermediate space between what is real and what is fictional. It is juggling one's internal notions with that which is being perceived as belonging to the external world. Unfortunately, we lose this as we grow into adulthood. We lose interest in 'play' because we become so results driven and we do not do things for the sake of enjoyment any longer.

As Unitarians who liberated ourselves from traditional religion we may well lose our ability to engage in 'playing' sacredly. We may end up juggling ideas, toss around words, shuffle our feet along the aisles - and risk getting stuck in a spiritual comfort zone.

In this context our fourth Unitarian principle calls us to a continuous search for truth and meaning. This search must be personalized and progressive.

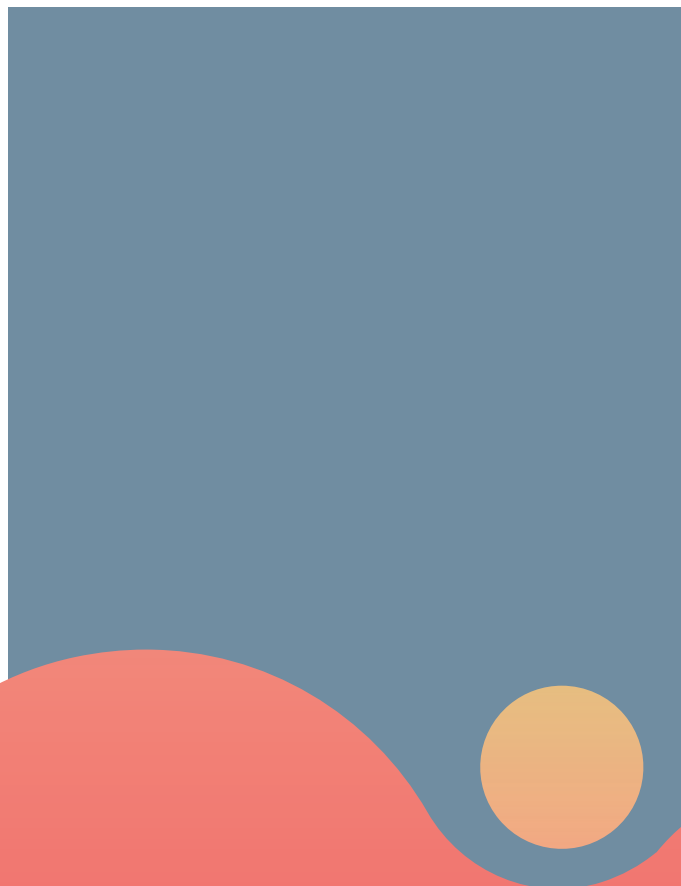
Therefore, my call is for a more concrete and tangible expression of faith. A faith that expresses itself in movement, in ritual, in art and in objects. In this way we will allow ourselves to be changed by this concrete and tangible expressions of our faith. As Unitarians we may become placid in our ability to 'universalise' – Fowler's epitome of faith development – or be fooled by thinking that intellectualisation or compassion is faith. Engaging in a post-naïve and post-enlightened spirituality will broaden our scope to include things unconscious and otherwise out of the reach of words and reason. In doing so, we ensure that we continue our never-ending spiritual journey.

#### **ADDENDUM 1**

In this article the term Spiritual development is preferred over the more frequently used 'Religious Education' or Faith Development. The term 'development' refers to a process of growth and unfolding and the term 'Spiritual' is used as follows: "Spirituality is defined as an innate ability to show awareness or consciousness of the surrounding world shown through wonder, a sense of compassion and love towards this world and everything in it, and for some people a relationship with a transcendent being, who can also be immanent in the individual. From this definition it appears that everyone has a spiritual aspect which may or may not have religious connotations". (Griesenberg 2000: 23)

#### **ADDENDUM 2**

"Sustained attention to spiritual development during childhood and adolescence in the social and developmental sciences has the potential to significantly enrich and strengthen the understanding of the core processes and dimensions of human development. This article seeks to set the stage for such an inquiry by exploring 6 themes for building a multifaceted agenda. It argues that spiritual development is (a) understudied; (b) a complex, multifaceted concept; (c) grounded in a human propensity; (d) overlaps with and includes many aspects of religious development; (e) a developmental process that is shaped by both individual capacities and ecological influences; and (f) a potentially powerful resource for positive human development " (Benson 2003: 205)



### ADDENDUM 3

A brief comparison of the stages of human development pertaining to spirituality as found in Classical psychological theories and Neuropsychology

Age	Kohlberg's stages of moral development	Fowler's stages of Faith Development	Piaget's stages of cognitive development	Erikson's stages of Psychosocial development	Neuropsychology
0–2 years Infancy	Pre-conventional: Obedience, reward and decisions based on self-interest	Undifferentiated Faith	Sensory-motor	0-3 years Trust vs Distrust  2-4 years Autonomy vs doubt	A period of rapid brain growth in which areas of the sensorimotor cortex and somatosensory areas expand.
2–7 years Early childhood		Intuitive-Projective	Pre-operational	5-8 years Initiative vs. guilt How am I expected to behave?	Perceptual development and coordination between functional areas increase. Temporal and occipital lobes mature.
7–12 years Middle childhood		Mythic-Literal	Concrete operational	9-12 years Competence: Industry vs. inferiority What am I capable of?	Latent period during which synaptic pruning and connectivity between areas occur on the basis of the child's interaction with his/her surroundings. Logical reasoning develops.
12+ years Adolescence	Conventional: Conforming Law and order Duty	Synthetic-Conventional	11 years + Formal-operational	Fidelity: Identity vs. role confusion Who am I in this world	Puberty sets off the expansion of subcortical structures and emotional reactivity occur as the result of limbic system development. A growing awareness of self occurs as the subcortical networks connect with the prefrontal area. Abstract reasoning enables adolescents to explore ideas and develop their own understanding of the world.

21+ years? Early adulthood	Post-conventional: Social contract Universal ethical principles	Individual-Reflective		Love: Intimacy vs isolation	Prefrontal areas and connections with the limbic system mature towards age 25 which enables executive -, reflective - and meta thinking.
40+ years?		Conjunctive		Care: Generativity vs. stagnation	Perceptual speed declines but cognitive functions and flexibility improve. Life experience prompts neurons to form tighter connections. The prefrontal lobe now being optimally connected to the limbic system results in increased resilience. Learned life skills and an individual's ability to contextualise add to an individual's problem solving capacity and allows for optimal adaptation.
45+?		Universalizing		60 + years Wisdom: Integrity vs. despair	Emotional control improves as the amygdala becomes less excitable. This implies that a person will be able to act from a well-integrated and tentative position, being able to suspend impulses and allow time for contemplation. Processing speed and memory recall may decline, but it allows for crystallised knowledge and wisdom to come to the fore.

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Emily Brown is a proud South African and the liberal spirit of Cape Town resonates strongly with her independence of mind. Her formative years were spent in the African bush, embedding her soul in the natural world. She holds three academic degrees, in subjects ranging from Zoology and Politics to Neuroscience. This reflects her wide range of interests and compassion for all things alive.



**Chromodynamics #42: Shadow Integration, 2020**

Personal work by Martha Holmes; watercolor, pencil and pen on paper

# BELONGING OR JUST FITTING IN?

by Celeste Esau

I always felt like an outsider. Dreams and visions of standing on the outside, looking in through a window, watching people out in the world living their lives seemingly with ease. I was out in the cold, feeling like an alien, being unable to decipher what was going on or how to fit in. I thought that I was being rejected by my mother and my community because I couldn't be like them. I thought that's what I was supposed to think ... but I didn't. I felt like I was other and that I just had not found my people yet. Many people have similar experiences of being disillusioned by what is presented as reality and truth. The brave venture to explore the concepts of the here and now in a world that seems to value conformity.

As a little girl, I often would be asked by adults in the community and teachers, "So what do you want to become one day?" and my answer was always "Nothing". This would upset them and I wondered how it was possible that they thought I had answered incorrectly or misunderstood the question. I always firmly believed that each of us had been called to be whoever we need to "become" anything! Another tradition that I am none too fond of is that of New Year's Resolutions. But I have long since learned that there is value to be found in most everything. It's usually just a matter of perspective.

At the beginning of this year in our Unitarian Chalice Circle, we were encouraged to "choose our word or centering thought" for the year. The word that came to me was "alignment with a capital A." I had been feeling a little off balance, a little out of touch, a little distant. Not in an uncomfortable way that makes one feel like pulling back or shrinking in but in a challenging way that sends one forth on a quest with an enquiring mind. When one accepts this challenge, the universe responds with opportunities and more challenges! One of these opportunities was a mindful movement and meditation group I attended to work with aligning my chakras (doorways to the body's energy pathways). When we worked with the Third Eye we were posed a question: How does your inner wisdom guide you?

Here's the response that came from deep within.

*Gently, Carefully, Freely  
It flows through me like a river  
And crashes over me like waves  
It lifts me up on gusts of inspiration  
And sways me with conviction*

My inner wisdom has been my most trusted source for guiding me throughout my life. It has provided me with peace and joy and love beyond all comprehension.

It has kept me reliant on no one but THE One and only source of all things (referred to by some people as God, Spirit, Nature, etc.) and encourages me to continue this journey of questioning and listening carefully for the answers that lie deep within.

How exciting then it was that I found the Cape Town Unitarian (CTU) community.

After spending time growing up in a rather conservative evangelical Christian community, I found myself, as a young adult, seeking what people referred to as “liberal” ways of worship. My husband was from the Moravian tradition and while we were often living too far from “a white church with a brass bell,” it was OK. Being Moravian was about Being moravian. It was about living your faith and I loved that. I also love the motto of the Moravian Church which is: In Essentials Unity, In Non Essentials Diversity, In All Things Love. I mean just WOW! It’s a lovely sentiment but the practice is often more challenging in real life. But I would not allow myself to feel disillusioned because I felt that I had stumbled across a very important breadcrumb.

The next big moment for me was finding the New Church in Buccleuch where I learned about Emmanuel Swedenborg and The Writings - most notably Secrets of Heaven, Heaven and Hell as well as Conjugal Love. For the first time, I felt I was being accepted as I am, not just tolerated. I felt at home and in heaven all at the same time. The three main tenets as I understood it were Love, Wisdom and Service working together to allow us to feel, know and be all that is.

Following the breadcrumbs eventually led me to CTU and from the moment I stepped into the sanctuary I knew that it was a welcoming place, beaconing me to explore further and step fully into myself. I enjoyed the service and the music and the fellowship but what really caught my attention was a colourful poster on the wall listing the Six Unitarian Universalist (UU) Sources ... and the very first of the six Sources?

I quote: “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

That sold me. I knew that I had finally found a place where people seem to be practising or at least striving towards direct experience and acknowledging it as a connection to source. When I then saw the poster with the Seven UU Principles that Unitarians strive towards it was further confirmation for me that this was the place I needed to be. The Seven Principles start with the inherent worth and dignity of every person (I thought, really? Even me?) and encircling all of that was Respect for the Interdependent web of All existence, of which we are a part. And I thought, YES!! Connecting with the One and being one with the oneness, acknowledging that we are all inherently worthy and a part of each other... connected to Source... and therefore our direct experience helps us to transcend the mystery of this world.

In conclusion, I’d like to share a poem that touched me deeply and inspired me to share my story.



## SHORT BIO ON THE POEM'S AUTHOR



*Angeline Rademeyer is a 20-something born and raised in Cape Town, South Africa, at the turn of a watershed decade for the country. As a millennial, she has a unique outlook on life but is surprisingly mature for her age. Her writing moves the very core of one's being as she touches on themes of love, grief and possibilities in the face of hardship.*

*Angeline was abandoned as a child after living on the streets for the first couple of years of her life. She grew up in the foster care system before being taken in by one of the child care workers deeply moved by this optimistic and determined little girl. Angeline's love for words, language and writing became evident at a young age.*

*She has entered various writing competitions and has even received awards for her writing even though she has been unable to attend any institutions of higher education due to socio-economic difficulties. Angeline lives on the Cape Flats and continues to dream about a better life for all.*

## HOPE

*by Angeline Rademeyer*

Hope is not something I see  
It is something I believe in, which is a far cry  
from where I used to be – lost  
No direction – confused, conflicted  
I made a deal with Hope  
I said I'll let you into my head space and  
promise to take the journey  
Of letting you into my heart's chambers

It is with great joy I can say that I see the  
world through Hope's eyes  
And Hope sees it through mine  
Hope is there to let me know it will all be  
alright  
Hope is also there to let me know don't get  
your hopes up too high  
Hope lets me see reality  
Hope tells me I'm here to inspire you, not  
to take you over entirely  
I must say I'm quite fond of having hope on  
my side

Hope means this for me:  
Helping  
Overcome  
Problems  
Every day and one step at a time

I encourage everyone to befriend Hope –  
give it another try  
Hope grows as you grow  
It's like a little seed  
it needs to be watered and cared for, so you  
can reap what you sow

Hope is not tangible, it moves through the  
world  
Hope is sensitive and caring  
Even on my worst days I can hear Hope  
knocking at my heart's door  
Just to let me know I'm here if you need me

I am your friend, as I have been for so long  
Even on the days you are upset with me I  
have your back  
Some days I swear I can hear Hope whisper-  
ing in my ear  
You've got this now – go out there and give  
it your best try

You don't always have to give the world the  
best version of yourself

All that matters is that you've tried

Hope's name is always mentioned when I  
pray  
I cannot deny the significant connection  
between Hope and the One  
I call my Father in the sky

Hope is love  
Hope is possibilities  
Hope is strength  
Hope is you and I

When I think of a world where dreams and  
aspirations come true  
I can hardly imagine it  
Without Hope with the mind map to see it  
through

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Aspie girl. Fibro warrior. Spiritual activist.  
Neuro-divergent for sure. That's me. I've always been one to think differently and see the bigger picture. I was lucky enough to grow up in a family full of such women who were my role models growing up as a Coloured girl in Apartheid South Africa. Rather late in life (depending on how you look at it) various specialists and doctors confirmed a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder which partly helped me understand how all my seemingly divergent parts were connected. One of the "side effects" of having my 8 senses work differently, in my opinion, is what the doctors call Fibromyalgia but is basically being in constant and mostly excruciating pain that cannot be treated or explained. Currently I'm focused on finding and nurturing deep connections with people and helping them attain enlightenment by just being... my husband says that sounds arrogant but if you know me then you'll understand.



**In Tune, 2020**

Artwork by Natalie Billings, mixed medium on paper

# The Wisdom of Africa, Christianity & Unitarianism

## Reimagining What a Community of Faith Can Be in Africa

by Roux Malan

Unitarianism has a small footprint in Africa when compared to other faith-based communities. It is also relatively new compared to the longstanding presence of Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, and Methodists on the continent. Due to their long history these denominations went through different stages of adaptation and inculturation in Africa. The theme of indigenisation, for instance, became an important driver towards the close of the 19th century. During this period, African leaders initiated an attempt to “indigenize the faith to a greater extent than had hitherto been the case” (Fatokun, 2005).

The result of this initiative was the birth of the so-called Ethiopian Churches (or African Independent Churches). Early in the 20th century, a second attempt “at stripping Christianity in Africa of foreign cultural imperialism came about with the establishment of African Indigenous Churches” (Fatokun, 2005). These churches adopted elements of traditional African religion freely to make Christianity relevant to African culture. In South Africa, the Zionist Churches are a good example.

Outside of the religious sphere, much has also been done by African scholars to address burning issues on the African continent such as African identity, colonialism, racism and poverty.

In African scholarship there is a long and admirable body of work for the restoration of African identity and dignity in post-colonial times.

In this article I reflect on the unique contribution Unitarianism can make in restoring identity and dignity on the African continent through its inclusive religious views and its emphasis on social activism.

### UNITARIANS IN AFRICA AND SOUTH AFRICA

In Africa, Cape Town Unitarian Church is the oldest Unitarian congregation on the continent. Established in 1868 by Rev. David Faure, it has maintained a small yet resilient community up until the present time. Due to its history and its position within the broader South African society, its church services for the most part maintained European values and world-views.

The first Unitarian church on African soil that made a strong attempt to incorporate the cultural and religious needs of Africans was established by Dr. Bishop Adeniran Adedeji Isola in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1918.

According to Sayavedra & Walker (2015), the meetings of this new church were conducted in the local Yoruba language and incorporated Yoruba musical instruments such as native drums. Hill, McAllister & Reed (2002), as cited in Sayavedra & Walker (2015), maintain that Bishop Isola based his teachings “on knowledge of the Bible; but also on a deeper understanding of the Yoruba concept of religion and faith in Ifa scripture”. (Note: the UNESCO archives states about Ifa “Ifa refers to the mystical figure Ifa or Orun-mila, regarded by the Yoruba as the deity of wisdom and intellectual development.”)

In more recent times, the yearning for a religious community that can embrace African culture and welcome people from different tribes is clearly expressed in the following the words of Isaac Choti, a Unitarian in the Kisii district of Kenya:

“I had been a Christian all my life, but my church had policies I didn’t like. Some churches make it hard for us. They say you can only come with one wife. But Jesus said come as you are. In UU, they welcome everyone” (Scott, 2009).

John Mbugua, director of UU congregations in central Kenya, describes his discovery of Unitarianism through a friend of his in the following way:

“I had never heard of Unitarian Universalism, but when he told me that it was a faith where everybody was equal in the eyes of God, I was blown away. It broke my heart. Even Hindus, Buddhists, traditional faiths. All are equal. Now we are all brought together by faith.” (Scott, 2009)

These quotes speak to the need for a restoration of dignity and the development of a new religious identity in Africa. When I joined the Unitarian Church in 2008, I was delighted to discover that the 6th source of Unitarianism makes room for earth-centered traditions and emphasizes the importance of nature in spirituality. It reads as follows “the spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature”. It dawned on me that indigenous African wisdom and traditions had a place within the Unitarian movement even though much still needs to be done to explore this possibility.

During my years as full-time minister (2007-2017) of Cape Town Unitarians, I early on engaged with a group of traditional healers in Khayelitsha, one of the townships in Cape Town. In September 2007, I invited them to a celebration of African culture during our weekly Sunday Service. They were delighted and marveled at the ease with which they were accepted at the church. For the most part traditional religious practices are rejected within many traditional Christian denominations in South Africa or at least frowned upon. Therefore, many Africans turned to the mushrooming African Independent Churches, where Christian and traditional African religious practices are blended. One such church in South Africa is the Zionist Christian Church better known as ZCC.

Unfortunately, the competing worldviews of traditional African and Christian European culture has been an enduring and sometimes painful one. My own country, South Africa, entered a new democratic dispensation in 1994 bolstered by a new

constitution that endeavors to make room for both African and European worldviews. Now, almost 30 years later, we as a country are still journeying toward the vision of hope and reconciliation that the late Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, among others, had for our country and for all of Africa. Many challenges remain. The outbreak of Covid-19 in March of this year will most probably present a massive challenge to the realization of this vision.

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FEELING AND THINKING**

The difference between African and European worldviews has been a field of study for many years. Some scholars believe that the difference lies in an approach to life that is orientated by either feeling or thinking.

If this is true, there is no question in my mind that should Unitarianism want to make a meaningful contribution to religion and spirituality in Africa, it needs to seriously reconsider the role and place of reason within our religious and spiritual experience.

The European philosopher René Descartes (1641) is well-known for the expression “Cogito, ergo sum” or “I think, therefore I am”. Are Unitarians likewise insisting that the highest expression of being human is our ability to think? Or are we willing to discover the value of feelings and community in our search for meaning and purpose in life? If we, as Unitarians in Africa, are open to consider this possibility, we will do well to engage with the work of the African scholar Leopold Senghor.

This Senegalese poet, politician and cultural theorist (considered to be one of the most important African intellectuals of the 20th century) did much to articulate the differences between the African and European worldviews. He initially argued that Africans place a greater emphasis on emotion while Europeans value discursive reasoning. According to him, African knowledge comes by confrontation and intuition while European knowledge comes by analysis and discursive reasoning (Gbadegesin, 1991). According to Gbadegesin, Senghor later modified this position. Senghor (1964), as cited in Gbadegesin (1991), said that: “the vital force of the Negro African ... is animated by reason”, but “it is not the reasoning-eye of Europe, it is the reason of touch ... the reasoning embrace, the sympathetic reason.”

Another contemporary African scholar and philosopher from Nigeria, Ada Agada, built on Senghor’s work and developed what he calls “consolation philosophy”. This philosophy seeks to understand human beings as a unity of feeling and reason and as such gives a deeper philosophical foundation for African culture.

Agada maintains that reason evolved from emotion. He therefore considers emotion to be a kind of primordial reason which he calls “mood”. Ada asserts: “Emotion supplies the primal, motivational energy of life while reason structures the realities we embrace by simple faith.” (Ada, 2018)

If Unitarian Churches in Africa wish to find ways to engage emotion and intuition as a valid and essential part of religious and spiritual experience, they need to pay attention to the following key elements:

- (1) reimagine their church structure and church services
- (2) bridge the perceived gap between Christianity and African wisdom
- (3) re-discover how to live in harmony with nature.

## **REIMAGINING CHURCH MEETINGS AND CHURCH STRUCTURES**

In the Zulu language in South Africa there is a phrase that says: “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”. Translated it means a person is a person through other people, or “I am because we are”. This saying encapsulates the importance of community with African society. The word “ubuntu,” roughly translates as “humanity,” has become a key expression of this value.

Laurenti Magesa (1997), the Catholic theologian and priest in Tanzania, summarizes the African worldview beautifully by citing these words from Charles Nyamiti, a compatriot and fellow theologian:

“This African view of the universe contains the following major themes: the sacrality of life; respect for the spiritual and mystical nature of creation, and, especially, of the human person; the sense of the family, community, solidarity and participation; and an emphasis of fecundity and sharing in life, friendships, healing and hospitality.”

An authentic African Unitarianism needs to find ways to encourage an expression of African values. For example, in Africa, meetings often include dancing and singing as an integral part of coming together and they

often last for far longer than a mere hour. Singing and dancing express the values of solidarity, participation and in some cases are associated with healing practices. In traditional African societies rituals also play an essential part in bringing people together and solidifying their communal ties. Meetings last longer because deep relations are not built through haste or speed. Can we develop rituals within Unitarian meetings in Africa that combine Unitarian and African values and express them in an authentic way?

Unitarians will do well to heed the warning of Oosthuizen (2000) who asserts that “while Western theology has been the intellectual foundation of the Western-oriented churches, these dispositions blindfolded theology to the issues at the gut level of Africa’s authentic existence. It smothered what is positive in the traditional African context.” To change this situation, Oosthuizen suggests that greater emphasis be placed on the church as an organism rather than an institution. Unitarians in Africa therefore will have to question an individualist approach to church life and find a structure that allows for a deeper sense of community. It needs to emphasize the building of relationships and community as the prime expression of church life and find a balance between love and reason.

## **BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY & AFRICAN WISDOM**

Most Africans who become Unitarian still maintain a strong connection to Christianity. Therefore, a key task for Unitarian leaders is to help these African Unitarians to connect both meaningfully and critically with the Christian tradition. Similarly, it will benefit Unitarian



communities to consider the African world view and religious experience.

Unitarians are well positioned to facilitate a conversation between liberal Christian and indigenous African views. Apart from the African philosophers already mentioned, the Unitarian-Universalist theologian Rev. Dr. Thandeka's exploration of "Affect Theology" can support this effort. She writes on her website [www.revthandeka.org/contemporary-affect-theology](http://www.revthandeka.org/contemporary-affect-theology) (accessed 2020-06-04) :

"Contemporary Affect Theology studies the heart of faith. It tracks how human emotions become religious feelings. The spiritual foundation of liberal faith, after all, is not a set of doctrinal claims or creeds or religious beliefs or ideas. Liberal faith begins with transformed and uplifted feelings that exalt the human soul and let us love beyond belief, come what may".

Another leading light in the North American Unitarian-Universalist movement who points to community as an essential part of the spiritual life is Rev. William G. Sinkford, the 7th president of the Unitarian-Universalist Association. During his leadership in the early 2000's, he argued for the need to reclaim a "vocabulary of reverence" within the Unitarian movement. He became an ardent advocate for "The Beloved Community". This term was first coined in the early 20th Century by the philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce, and was popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He envisioned the Beloved Community as a society based on justice, equal opportunity, and love for one's fellow brothers and sisters. Unitarians in Africa will do well to engage with the call

for social justice nestled within the idea of "The Beloved Community".

Furthermore, it is important to reflect on what "The Beloved Community" means within the context of our human dependency on the natural environment and as such become a call to action to mitigate the effect of climate change that is already ravaging parts of the African continent.

## **RE-IMAGINING OUR RELATIONSHIP TO NATURE**

Laurenti Magesa (1997, p. 60) points out that in African religion the participation of the human person in and through its community is of prime importance. However, the human community cannot be sustained without a sense of community with the earth and the natural environment. The relationship between traditional African views and nature is beautifully expressed by Fr. Edward Kanyike (2018):

"For traditional Africans, nature meant the entire world or universe, comprising both living and non-living things, visible and invisible powers, the natural phenomena, land, rivers, bushes, forests, jungles, animals, birds, insects, minerals and whatever they knew had not originated from them. Traditional Africans found themselves surrounded by nature and perceived it as an immense womb on which they depended for food, shelter, tools, medicines. It was a womb, warm and pulsating with life and reality. Even the spirit world was tacitly understood as inclusive in nature. To this womb they felt 'related' (= religion), bound fast by an

indissoluble bond. From it, they got insights into the future, thanks to the signs coming from it, which they learned to interpret. All this made them look at nature as a partner, or an ally in the fight against death. Nature was not a 'thing' to use, but rather a partner; more than that, a caring 'mother' to whom they owed love."

It is a theme largely lost within the modern-scientific and technologically orientated European worldview developed between 1800-1980, though partly recovered in the global post-modern digital age and with the current threat of climate change and Covid-19. African Unitarians will therefore do well to explore the wisdom that the African traditions offer in terms of the natural elements. Dominique Zahan, in his article called "Some Reflections on African Spirituality," makes extensive reference to the various shrines dedicated to the four "basis" elements: air, earth, fire, and water.

In his book, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: "Finding Life Purpose Through Nature, Ritual and Community"*, Malidoma Patrice Somé shows how the life of indigenous and traditional people offers a paradigm for an intimate relationship with the natural world that both surrounds us and is present within us. He also explores the importance of rituals within African society and shows how it speaks to the loneliness, anonymity, and ritual starvation of many Westerners. I believe his book is an important resource because many people living on the continent of Africa have been deeply influenced by Western worldviews while, at the same time, they hold indigenous views in high regard. Somé's teachings offer

a bridge between these two worlds. Caitlin Hoover concludes her reflection on his book, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, with these words:

"Somé argues that the individualistic thinking in the West which puts self-interest before all else is detrimental to Western society."

He proves this point by examining the role community, ritual and healing plays in the lives of indigenous people. Without making room for healing through ritual and creating ties with community, the West is truly living a life absent of all facets of human nature, it is enveloped purely in the physical realm (Hoover, 2016).

Given the crisis of climate change and the global Covid-19 pandemic, we are in serious need to rethink our relationship with each other and the community of life in which we all participate.

## CONCLUSION

Unitarianism has a small yet significant footprint on the African continent that is growing. As the Unitarian community grows and establishes itself on the continent, it needs to address the issues that other spiritual communities also grapple with, namely indigenization of the faith.

At the root of this indigenization lies the reconciliation of head and heart and the relation of the individual to the community. To bring this about, Unitarians need to acknowledge the importance of community and feeling within African society and find ways to foster its expression through dancing and singing for example.

Church structure needs to emphasize the cultivation of community as the prime value of church life and administrative control as secondary.

It also needs to find ways to help its members connect to Christian values in a new and liberating way because many who come to Unitarian Churches in Africa were only exposed to fundamentalist views of the Biblical message. It also needs to bridge the gap between Christian and indigenous worldviews so that members can have the best of both worlds.

Lastly, given the vast resources of living in harmony with nature, community and spirit available in the wisdom of Africa, it can develop creative ways to incorporate it within its ministry.

Finding an authentic African Unitarian expression will not come easily. It will take courage and a willingness to experiment. It will ask for innovation instead of slavishly copying existing forms and church structures from America and Europe. This quest does not have to be an either-or quest though. It can rather be a quest towards integration and wholeness. An either-or quest easily leads to violence while a quest for integration and wholeness can follow a non-violent path.

In this sense this work goes beyond merely seeking an African expression of Unitarian values. It participates in the larger work in the world to seek to relate in more equal and equitable ways that originate in the heart and then seek a structure to express itself.

It is seeking a new relation with nature, with each other, ourselves and with the unknowable larger whole in which we all participate.

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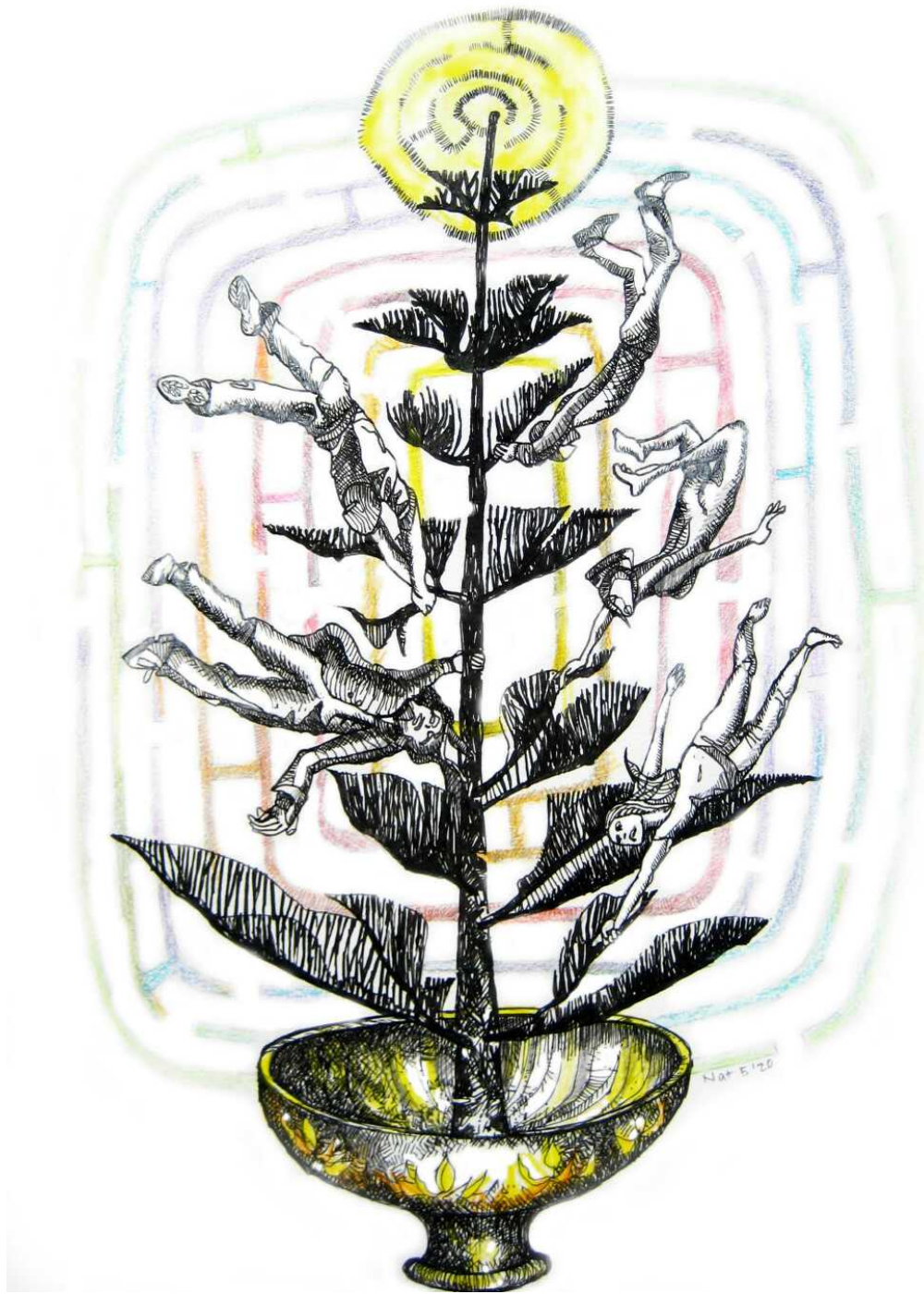
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Roux Malan served the Cape Town Unitarians as settled minister from 2008 until June 2017 and from 2018 transitioned into the position of Community Minister. As a Community Minister he conducts marriages and child blessing ceremonies and offers the Social Action Module of the Lay Leader Training of Cape Town Unitarians. He is passionate about the environment and finding the stories and practices in the different faiths that will support a sustainable, equitable and peaceful future for the African continent. He is a member of an inter-faith Faith Leaders Training Programme that trains leaders in faith communities to care for the community of life on Earth. With Gur Mouanga he heads up Faith-In-Action Africa that supports and motivates faith communities in Africa to make a positive difference locally



**Spiritual Journey, 2020**

Illustration by Natalie Billings, pen and pencil on paper

# Paving Ways to Interfaith Work

## Spirituality Beyond Religion

by Gur Milandou Mouanga

**T**he world in which we live today challenges us to overcome our differences and see possibilities that can sustain what we have in common. It begs for tolerance and acceptance in our relationships with each other. No matter how diverse and different our views might be, the most important challenge of our time is to build bridges of cooperation, rather than create bombs of destruction. Interfaith work can become such a bridge of cooperation if we choose.

During my seminary studies at Meadville Lombard in Chicago from 2015 to 2019, I had a great opportunity to learn about Interfaith work and how to get involved in it. I was particularly influenced by Stephen Prothero's book "God is not One". His book shifted my understanding of the world religions considerably from a conservative view to a more inclusive one. Prothero's book portrays a multi-dimensional view of God and makes reference to the eight main world religions: Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba, Judaism, Daoism, with a brief coda on Atheism. It taught me that the eight religions do not adhere to the same doctrines or rituals, and do not share the same goals. However, they all accept the idea of spiritual power.

Clearly, Prothero's book makes a strong case for the beauty and importance of interfaith work in our spiritual lives.

### WHAT IS INTERFAITH WORK?

Interfaith work values the idea that every religion or faith tradition has its own particular way of connecting to the divine or sacred world and that the world's religions should work together in building harmony and trust toward one another. Considering that each religion is a unique instrument of the divine, interfaith work aims at building a common understanding that the world religions together can become a glorious symphony.

In this context, the main purpose of interfaith work is to create a space that promotes a mutual understanding and collaboration between the different faith traditions. It aims to create a platform for dialogue to increase our understanding of and respect for other religious systems and institutions. In this way we can increase our appreciation of their values. Dialogue can enhance our sensitivity to the feelings of all professing religious people in their relationship with the divine.

This does not mean that interfaith work promotes a particular idea of universal belief or faith or implies a uniform idea of God. Rather it is a tool for building mutual understanding and tolerance among the faith traditions.

It emphasizes the universal principles and spiritual compassion taught by all schools of divinity and ethics. In doing so, it acknowledges that there is one light that shines brightly through each faith and within each heart. In its essence, this light is love; and love is fairly universal.

Furthermore, interfaith work does not take sides. In it, we start by listening to one another and then engaging in ways that accept and celebrate humankind in all its magnificent faiths, colours, cultures and traditions. We retain individual personal beliefs and philosophies while reaching out to the beliefs and philosophies of others. In doing so, we expand our understanding of others and enrich our own inner spirituality.

In an interview with Debbie Elliot, interfaith activist, Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said: “We are made for complementarity”.

(See <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/5177023>)

As such, Tutu’s assertion presents interfaith as reflecting the relationship between people’s beliefs and values. It is a collaborative creation celebrating the traditions and beliefs of people in a universal context that emphasizes spirituality over religion.

## **UNITY THROUGH DIFFERENT FAITHS**

Interfaith work is about considering the world through the lens of all the different faith traditions. It is an opportunity that can lead to creating theology together. It implies a cross-cultural and cross-communication skill that is reinforced by a culture of non-violence and conflict resolution.

Engaging with interfaith work enables us to meet and interact with people from a rich variety of cultures, colours and creeds. It moves away from “us versus them” or “me versus you.”

In today’s multicultural society, we are called to meet and become friends with people from different religious and faith traditions. It means attending an unfamiliar ceremony, such as participating in the holidays and festivals of different religions or joining in the family celebrations of friends from different cultural backgrounds. Since it is unfamiliar territory we often don’t know exactly what to expect, or how to behave. There is also the potential to offend our guest when we are unfamiliar with another faith tradition or culture. We may act oddly as we struggle to understand a new culture.

I remember an experience I had in Burundi while attending the International Council of Unitarian Universalist’s conference some years ago. I visited the Central Mosque of Bujumbura during Friday prayers, one of the most important services for a Muslim. I knew very little about Islam’s creeds and so I did not know how to follow their rituals. Instead, I sat in meditation posture while others were on their knees, bowing and reciting their prayers. A few minutes later, two ushers approached me and asked if I was interested in becoming Muslim. I answered that I was visiting from the Unitarian Church and that I wanted to experience the Mosque during prayer time. Unfortunately, it seemed as though this answer did not satisfy their expectations. They then called three other men who asked me the same question and suggested that I write my contact details in the visitors’ book so they could follow up with me.



Eventually they gave up when I did not want to provide them with my contact details. I could sense the embarrassment in their body language while leaving. Luckily, it was the end of the service and I quickly left.

My misadventure at the Mosque taught me that interfaith work needs preparation. Perhaps, in my case, a fair knowledge about Muslim creeds before attending the service would have been helpful. If we prepare ourselves beforehand it empowers us to do our own internal work before considering reaching out to others. In this way interfaith work invites us to challenge our own self-centredness and be open to work together on social justice, peace building and environmental issues.

As we prepare ourselves for this work it is good to be mindful that challenges and frustrations will be inevitable when we reach out to others so that we don't get discouraged easily. In doing this work we may come across individuals who consider themselves either privileged because of their faith or vulnerable due to prejudice against their religious traditions. Sometimes one will also have to be content to agree to disagree with one another. We should accept that differences exist and seek to understand them without compromising our own beliefs. This also holds true for agnostics or atheists or people who are less interested in theology.

As such, interfaith work can be a powerful tool for healing divisions by working toward breaking down stereotypes and finding areas of common ground. In this way we reinforce the idea that our similarities as human beings are greater than our differences.

## WHAT MORE FOR AFRICA?

In the context of Africa on both a continental and communal level, interfaith work has a lot to offer.

On a continental level, I believe interfaith work can build a solid foundation to assist people to be free to choose any religion. Its virtues can be mastered as a tool to foster a desire to create a space that promotes African humanism and establish a series of mechanisms that will act as a vital instrument to serve and inspire community norms and standards in the process of social justice, conflict resolution and peace talks.

On a communal level, interfaith work can improve community life in many ways such as:

- Contributing towards repairing the damaging effects that colonialism has had on the psychology, identity, and daily existence of the people of Africa;
- Assisting Africans to explore their original African spiritual roots without fear and to find a new way to connect them to a past that has been repressed by missionaries in Africa;
- Helping to create a new sense of empowerment in young people to think for themselves and go beyond narrow religious thinking;
- Helping to heal the animosity that often exists between Christians and Muslims and other religions on the continent by emphasizing what they have in common;
- Inspiring young people to get involved in

social action;

- And furthering the accountability of leaders, building a culture of human rights and education for women on the continent, as well as mitigating against the threat of climate change that is already impacting Africa.

In my own community in Cape Town, South Africa, I was afforded the opportunity to expand my spiritual exploration in lay leadership and community ministry. I found the interfaith work particularly relevant in so many ways. South Africa is a place of many people, many tribes and many beliefs. As a cosmopolitan country, South Africa is the home of both native Africans and Western cultures. Since 1994, these cultures have grown alongside each other with a vision of harmony, prosperity, success, trust and pride in humanity and in each other.

In addition, the vision of a rainbow nation guided everyone and has inspired the country to engage in a process of developing a new culture that is based on both traditional tribal African and Western beliefs. Developing along these lines, interfaith work can be a channel to seek understanding of both African and Western views and to find a strong way forward that accommodates both truths.

This rainbow country, together with the philosophy of Ubuntu symbolized by the founder of this new nation, Nelson Mandela, has over the years, challenged people of South Africa to recall what they were in the past and what they are becoming. Today South Africa has become a conglomerate of Africans, Westerners, Black Westerners and White Africans.

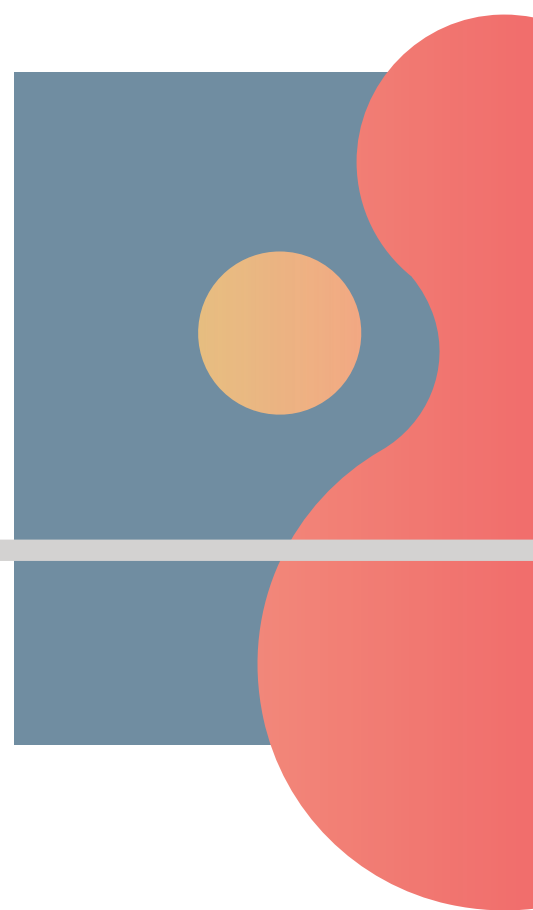
More importantly, the country has become a universe of unique life philosophies on which everyone's view of the world is founded, raising a unique South African culture that is expressive of the country's values and beliefs. This is where the virtues of interfaith work can intervene to consolidate the values which are dear to South Africans.

To conclude, interfaith work finds its focus in meaningful and mutual cooperation for the common good. As a process that helps people integrate their personal religious journeys in a meaningful way into their spiritual lives, it has the potential to significantly and positively impact people's lives and lift community norms and standards. This reality can only be fulfilled when people from the universe of faiths stand in the right relation to each other.

The lived experience of my interfaith class at Meadville Lombard was a turning point in my spiritual life. It has reconciled my sad feeling of loss that I have been carrying since I left my childhood Christian Pentecostal beliefs and moved to new beliefs based on the Unitarian and Universalist traditions. This feeling of sadness was the result of questioning and challenging my childhood faith that was also my family's and parents' faith. In general, Native Africans value family life more than individual life. So in the African view, opposing my family's faith is a disgrace and may lead to unfortunate situations for all the family members. My evolving beliefs have created disharmony in the family when I switched from my family's faith to another faith without my parent's consent. It raised within me feelings of guilt and made me feel as though I was a betrayer.

However, it is good to indicate that my new beliefs, based on the Unitarian and Universalist traditions, still allow me to hold onto my roots. They enable me to consider the connectedness, between my family's faith and my current beliefs, as the most important path that has shaped my spiritual journey today.

I believe people who find themselves in a similar situation can treasure this experience and take the lead to act with an attitude of an open mind and loving heart, rooted within the cultural context of tolerance, acceptance and mutual understanding. Interfaith work provides an ideal context to practice such a faith.





Gur Milandou Mouanga is from Congo-Brazzaville and has lived in South Africa since 2004. He worked for many years as a journalist, media consultant and marketing agent for South African and international firms. His interest in tourism led him to study at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Tourism Academy and Cape Wine Academy for qualifications as a tourist guide and wine Connoisseur. Gur is a manager at Groot Constantia Wine Estate. In his spare time, Gur is a dedicated community and voluntary worker, engaged with social justice and interfaith activities. He earned a Masters of Arts in Leadership Studies at Meadville Lombard Faculty in Chicago. He is currently studying for a Masters in Divinity, aiming to be ordained as a Community Minister. He serves as Lay Minister at Cape Town Unitarian Community and is part of the Pan African UU-ICUU Cooperative and Francophone UU Network. He is a co-founder of the movement Faith-in-Action Africa.



**One, 2020**

Artwork by Natalie Billings, pencil on paper

# Belonging to the Interdependent Web and Its Implications for Our Practice

## An Exploration of the 7th Unitarian Universalist Principle

by Elspeth Muirhead

I'm wading ankle-deep in the ocean. Waves foam around my feet, then the swirling water clears, leaving the sand grains and shells clearly visible, almost magnified. Staring down, I'm swept into the significance of the moment – I feel embraced, a deep sense of well-being, a oneness of everything within our cosmos. It's fleeting but feels eternally true.

On another occasion, years apart, while doing mundane tasks at home, I looked up and caught sight of a bee on my lavender bush – inexplicitly – the light shimmered slightly, colours intensified becoming more beautiful, more three dimensional – I felt as one united with the bee and bush – again deeply connected and one in universal love and oneness with nature.

Looking back, I can place these moments as examples of numinosity and specifically, 'participatory consciousness'. We are all different in what marks for us numinosity - experiences that awaken spiritual or religious emotion. Those times where I have felt one with nature and the universe can be called 'participatory consciousness'; a long-recognised mode of thinking in which the perceiver isn't separated from the world they perceive.

The 7th Unitarian Universalist Principle, 'Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part', gives me the language to conceptualise this experience. It captures, for me, the need to live in a way which acknowledges our embeddedness in the world. But to do so, we need new ways of thinking and talking about ourselves and our relationship to others - both human and non-human.

### ACKNOWLEDGING THE EVIDENCE OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS

At this point in time, Western Philosophy and its rational natural science dominates our understanding of the world. Segregation, distinction and individualism are central to its narrative. In examining this, Martha Saunders, retired lecturer of religious studies and Canadian UU, draws on environmental philosopher Charles Eisenstein's concept of 'two stories': one the story of separation and the other of connection.

The 'story of separation', Saunders explains, has prevailed for the past thousand years of Western thought. It places the spirit world and humans living on a 'spiritual' plane above the material world, which is viewed as a resource for human benefit. Humanity is, in essence, separated from the other-than-human world, in a story,

“of competition, of the commodification of everything including other species and even other members of our own species” (2019, p.2). Contrary to a view that separates us, Southern African Nguni Ubuntu philosophy conceives of personhood only in relation to community of others, best captured in the isiXhosa saying, “umntu ngumntu ngabantu,” often translated as, “I am because we are.” Ubuntu is then to be aware of one’s being, but also of one’s duties towards one’s neighbours. It expresses compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining a just and caring community (Lefa, 2015).

It also implies a deep inherent interconnection between all humanity. While this does not extend to other species traditionally, could it inform our relationships with other-than-humans too?

Ecological evidence has been accumulating that shows the vital unseen connections between other species and their environments. Trees, for example, are community-minded. Acacia trees pass on ‘alarm signals’ when antelope browse on their leaves, emitting ethylene into the air to warn other trees of the impending danger. Trees up to 50 yards away are triggered to step up production of poisonous leaf tannin within just five to ten minutes (Hughes, 1990). And beneath forests is a labyrinth of fungal connections between roots that scientists call the mycorrhizal network or, less formally, the wood-wide web. These interspecies connections bond trees so intimately that it is a struggle to view any tree as an individual. Through the network, older, larger trees send water and sugar to young trees to help establish them.

It’s even been shown that they tend to favour their own offspring – rather like us! In one experiment, seedlings of different species were planted close to one another but prevented by mesh from entwining their root system directly. Seedlings still connected through the fungi system, and when a fir seedling was stripped of its leaves and severely damaged, it responded by transferring both food and stress signals to its neighbours, triggering defensive enzymes that helped prepare the neighbouring pine seedling for onslaught. It seems as if the fir tree acted altruistically, opting to help another species in light of its own likely death (Fraser, 2015).

Humans too have surprising connections with a wider community. Our bodies are shared with countless tiny organisms, made up of trillions of non-human cells (outnumbering the human cells, in fact) (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2017). And, of course, evolutionary theory places us not as a separate species created by God, but as mammals, evolved from primate ancestors and, more anciently, small mammals, which were derived from fish.

When proposed, Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory directly challenged the Judeo-Christian world-view, Western philosophy and science of his time. DNA and genome mapping has since shown its accuracy. As cultural ecologist and philosopher David Abram (2010/2011) puts it, “it is an inescapable implication of the evolutionary insight: we humans are related by direct and indirect webs of evolutionary affiliation, to every other organism that we encounter” (p.77).

We share common ancestors. Moreover, Abram argues, “it is not only other animals, plants and simpler organisms that have contributed during the course of evolution to the unique character of the human creature, but also the fluid of the ocean and the many rocks that compose the soils and the way the mountains gather clouds above the high ridges”(p.77).

Clearly, no world view is immune to being shaken. As our knowledge of the world grows, our understanding of it changes, and we develop new ways of describing it. At this point in history, there are many who feel that we need a language to help us unlearn the narrative of separation and learn new ways of describing connection.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE METAPHOR OF THE WEB**

To start, I want you to think of a spider’s web. In autumn, I often come across the beautiful golden orb spiders’ webs in my garden, stretching across my pathway, connecting previously unrelated objects like a tree, the gutter, the gate, and a bush. A criss-crossed network of strands - delicate, intricate - amazingly strong and layered. For those born after 1990, the more relatable metaphor may in fact be the internet – a technology that has brought unprecedented contact between humans around the globe.

The metaphor of the web is very suitable for a shift in thinking from separation to connection. To begin with, webs are more egalitarian than the hierarchical Judeo-Christian view, which is often depicted as a pyramid. They spread out in all directions, expressing our close connections to others, including non-humans,

and our embeddedness in the world. Their strands are reliant on one another to make up the whole.

But what philosophical alternatives exist to support such a view of the world?

There’s the Gaia hypothesis, formulated by James Lovelock and Lyn Margulis in the 1970s. It proposes that all organisms and their inorganic surroundings on earth are closely integrated to form a single and self-regulating complex system, maintaining the conditions for life on the planet. The theory is named after Greek mythological earth goddess Gaia, whose name has become a metaphor and archetype for referring to earth and all who inhabit her. Initially met with hostility from scientists, the Gaia hypothesis is now studied in several scientific fields.

Another beautiful term, ‘Interbeing’, was coined by Thich Nhat Hahn, a Vietnamese Buddhist Zen master and monk, to express our interconnectedness with the cosmos, with everything (Thich Nhat Hahn,2017). In her reflections on this term, Martha Saunders notes that Interbeing is about more than the notion of interdependence, it suggests that we live inside that of which we think of as Other. With Interbeing, “we exist within the web; we are tangled up in it and it in us” (2019,p.3).

While these metaphors may help us conceptualise a connected universe, I find the reclaiming of animism by contemporary philosophers the most instructive on a way of being in a connected world-view. That is what I explore next.



## RECLAIMING ANIMISM

Graham Harvey (2005/2017) defines an animist as a person who, “recognises that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship to others,” (p.xiii). The implication is that our observation and engagement with our surroundings is not one-directional, but a reciprocal encounter. As French phenomenology philosopher Merleau-Ponty argued, we experience and perceive the world because we are part of it and it is part of us. Thus, to touch the coarse skin of a tree is to experience both one’s own tactility and to feel oneself touched by the tree. Our sensing and perceiving bodies exist in a web of other sensing feeling bodies (cited in Blackie 2018, p. 113).

The passage below, by South African writer Laurens van der Post, illustrates San thinking about our encounters with the world around us. An elder speaks at a campfire:

“One is never alone in the bush. One is never unobserved. One is always known... there is always an eye of some animal, bird, reptile or little insect and besides the eyes – don’t underrate them – there the tendrils of the plants, the grasses, the leaves of trees and roots of growing things...they too shake with shock of our feet and vibrate to the measure of our tread ... Often as I have seen a blade of grass will suddenly shiver at my approach ... I have thought that they too must have a heart beating within them and my coming has quickened their pulse with apprehension until I note the alarm vibrating at their delicate wrists ...” (in Harding, 2006, p.55).

The reclaiming of animism is particularly relevant in Africa today, for it includes due recognition to traditional African knowledge and spirituality. Societies and spirituality on the continent is traditionally animist, but colonialists, missionaries, and evangelical Christian groups worked hard to destroy local knowledge and spiritual practices. They often still do. Through the political and ‘scientific’ justification of colonialism, animism came to be associated with so-called ‘primitive’ people, early religions and childhood.

In post-colonial Africa, there has been a re-emergence of traditional thought. This, argues poet and academic Harry Garuba (2003), is, at a deep level, the thinking and spirituality of an ‘animist unconsciousness’ and involves a continual re-enchantment of the world’ (p.265). He writes that a resurfacing of African thought would see natural objects and landscapes spiritualised. Plants, forests, rivers, and mountains have significance not only as the dwelling places of spirits (usually deceased ancestors and ancient ancestral spirits), but also as living forces in their own right (Garuba, 2003; Bernard, 2003).

For centuries, animist consciousness in the social and spiritual landscapes of Khoisan and other African societies passed on ecological wisdom and practices that protected the environment from degradation. But modern attitudes led to a ‘disenchantment’ of the world and worsening environmental destruction. To reverse this, South African anthropologist Penny Bernard (2003) argues for recovering traditional ecological wisdom.

Our riverine systems, for example, need careful management to support the plants used by indigenous healers, the custodians of ancient knowledge, and to maintain healthy water for spirit forces to live in. Without care, ancient knowledge and wisdom, already under threat from development and Western education, may die out, at great loss to Africa (p.153).

For those of us from non-African cultures, contemporary philosophers and academics like David Abram, Graham Harvey and Sharon Blackie help us come to grips with an animism easier for us to be at home with, and I recommend their writing.

## **APPLYING THIS PERSPECTIVE TO OUR SPIRITUAL PRACTICE**

In exploring how to conceive of our world through a narrative of connection, not separation, I am conscious that our Unitarian way is not about the specifics of our beliefs, but rather how we live our lives. What does our 7th principle, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence," mean for our day-to-day and our spiritual practice?

It means that, just as we work for justice against cruelty, freedom from exploitation and the dignity of our fellow human beings, we can expand our notion of community to do the same for all species - non-human, animal, insect, plants and even landscapes.

How do we make this transition? What can we do to shift our understanding? I will focus on three aspects to draw our spiritual practices from:

### **1. Avoid being a tourist.**

We can develop a sense of earth, of Gaia,

as alive - and not just metaphorically. Recognise that the joy of sunlight is also the joy of the cosmos (Blackie 2018, p.122). Consider what the grass feels beneath our feet, or what a dragonfly sees when we are watching it. Talk to the birds.

My neighbour has long interactions with the birds in the trees around his house. He mimics their calls, the birds call back, and a conversation ensues. Why not read a praise poem to a tree? Sing to the forest or the ocean, as a way of weaving yourself into the world. Let it hear your voice... but first listen. Above all, always show courtesy in acting with the land (Blackie, 2018).

### **2. Show love and kindness.**

How do we apply the practice, the philosophy, of Ubuntu, to the other-than-human world? Perhaps the term 'other-than-human-persons' makes it easier (Harvey (2005/2017)), but while anthropomorphism (attributing human traits and emotions to non-human entities) can aid with empathy, the plant and the animal are not human and most probably wouldn't want to be spoken of in that way. Jewish Hasidic religious philosopher Martin Buber wrote of relating to the 'Thou' in a cat or a tree, not as an 'it'. Thus creating a respectful, mindful, even sacred relationship, rather than viewing a tree as a resource for harvesting or even aesthetically as an object for art.

There is much work to be done in recognising that animals, all sentient beings, also want to live happy, peaceful lives in their communities, and to ensure that their lives and living conditions improve. Science is now showing how we have completely underestimated animal intelligence and self-awareness.

We can also honour Gaia in many concrete, everyday actions such as recycling and buying local produce, as well as weaving rituals like greeting the sun and taking meditative walks into our spiritual practice.

### **3. Develop a participatory consciousness.**

A participatory consciousness means much more than that fleeting moment I described in the opening of this article, or a return to ancient, primal mode of consciousness. Participatory consciousness emerges in relationship with an animate world, an ensouled universe, with a past, present and an unfolding future. It is a felt sense of interconnection and reciprocity; an openness to the Other and mysterious regions of imagination and dream.

Joanna Macy, a Buddhist teacher and activist, writes about “deep time”, a phrase, borrowed from Deep Ecology, to refer to understanding our place in the sheer vastness of time. She calls for a new ensouled participatory consciousness, emerging from a relationship to a universe where we reconnect with the ancestors and past beings, with all beings we share earth with now and all as yet unborn beings of the future. This, she argues, is the required shift in consciousness required for a sustainable future.

## **CONCLUSION**

To live by our final principle, “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,” we must acknowledge our embeddedness in the world. For me, it is to live in an animate world and to consciously adopt the story of connection and Interbeing, applying Ubuntu to the other-than-human world too.

To do so, we may need to unlearn almost a thousand years of Western thinking and focus instead on re-enchanting the world with ecological wisdom and knowledge. I like to think doing so will help dismantle the exploitative, destructive approach to our earth and her inhabitants that thinking of each of us as separate beings in a hierarchy has enabled.

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Elspeth Muirhead is a member of Cape Town Unitarians. She found the Unitarian church when searching for a spiritual community that was Pagan-friendly after her Wiccan group dissolved. Having spent her young adulthood opposing apartheid, a spiritual community that is strong on social justice issues is important to her, as are our sources that draw on the world's religions and earth spirituality. As a Unitarian Pagan her path is rooted in the scientific world, rather than the supernatural, and she honours the seasonal celebrations. She finds meaningful ritual, self-reflection and meditation psychologically and spiritually nourishing, and would love to see a more authentic African earth spirituality develop in South Africa.



**Pondering Diversity, 2020**

Artwork by Natalie Billings, pencil on paper

# The Spiritual Landscape of My Life

by Rev. Gordon Oliver

**A**mong the significant features of my childhood and teenage years were three life-shaping experiences.

The first was the experience of my parents leading up to and well beyond my birth, a heart breaking story of deceit and betrayal on my father's part, in relation to my mother, creating a troubling influence, grounded in uncertainties, anxieties and much confusion, well into my adulthood years.

The second significant life-shaping experience was a new-found consciousness in my very early teens of the race-based political ideology being implemented by the newly elected apartheid government in South Africa in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The apartheid government was about to remove people of colour from the voters' roll. I listened with considerable concern to the political discussions among the adults in my family and I avidly read the newspapers of the day, acquainting myself with the apartheid system now taking shape and questioning its obvious injustice.

Over time, it became clear to me that liberal politics presented a moral alternative to the iniquitous political system rapidly taking root in South Africa. The seeds of liberalism had been awakened in my consciousness. A long-term consequence of this was my life-long voluntary activism in politics, driven by the obvious injustice of our country's institutionalised racist ideology.

The third of these life-shaping experiences was my abandonment of the religion of my upbringing, Roman Catholicism, at the age of seventeen. As a boy at boarding school, my faith meant the world to me. After leaving school I continued attending Mass at the local parish church for a while but it soon became meaningless to me and I dropped out of the church altogether.

## **BECOMING A LIBERAL**

These aspects of my early childhood years provided strong influences and motives that nurtured all of my later adult life. Unknown to me during my teens and twenties, liberal politics was later in life to provide the foundation to my interest in liberal religion. In my early fifties, having criss-crossed a changing landscape of different religious experiences over some thirty years, I came across a statement on Unitarianism, at St. Mark's Unitarian Church in Edinburgh, Scotland.

The statement described liberal religion (Unitarianism) as "that which is open to change and development in the light of new thought and discovery, recognising that people use words in different ways, so that religious language which is helpful to one person is limiting to another. What unites religious liberals, whatever their personal religion, is a common concern for the quality of life which is revered and celebrated. The emphasis is on being true to oneself. One is encouraged to emulate the lives

of those who show humankind how to be true to oneself, such as Jesus, Mohammed, the Buddha, Gandhi and countless others, but the relevance of the life and teachings of such individuals is a matter of personal choice. Liberal religion is open to new revelations from whatever source, in contrast to more traditional theologies that require conformity and adherence to a common creed or established teachings or scriptures". I felt this to be one of the most significant descriptions of religion that I had come across.

Thus, over the years, I had become aware of an underlying synchronous or corresponding connection in my life, a convergence of my religious and political value systems, recognising that religion and politics overlap to a significant degree, on the basis of how we relate to each other in terms of universal principles, morally and politically. Political injustice and racism were scourges that I believed were incongruent with a humane and just society and therefore with religion, i.e. the way we live our life. It follows that South Africa's change, in 1994, to a politically just system with a modern constitution entrenching a human rights ethos in our country reflected all the very best that had inspired me about liberalism over the years.

## **DEFINING LIBERALISM**

Having said that, I have over some years given much thought to contemplating what it means to be liberal, both in religious and political terms. The Concise Oxford Dictionary provides a synonym for the word liberal as 'generous'. Other meanings include abundant, copious, profuse and substantial. In the context of politics, economics and religion, liberalism would mean open-minded,

free-thinking, tolerant and non-interventionist. Leo Marquard, an early 20th century South African liberal, authored a booklet "Liberalism in South Africa" in 1965, a critique of which was published in the daily press by Robert Steyn.

Because liberalism had been, and still is politically discredited by some, Steyn wrote defending the author's stance on liberalism by saying "The converse of liberalism is not conservatism but illiberalism; that it is the absence of liberalism and not its presence that leads to the degeneration of society ... and that liberalism is the only really effective counter to ... totalitarianism" (Cape Argus, 12th August 1965).

In the context of religion, James Luther Adams, a liberal theologian of the 20th century, has become a significant influence in my life. Beach (1998) in his work on the life of Adams, attributes this definition of liberal religion to Adams: "...the genius of a liberal faith is that it is self-critical and, therefore open to, even demanding of, self-reform" (p.4). Beach (1998) quotes the words of Adams, "A faith worth having is faith worth discussing and testing...an unexamined faith is not worth having... no authority, including the authority of individual conviction, is rightly exempt from discussion and criticism.

The faith of the free, if it is to escape the tyranny of the arbitrary, must be available to all, testable by all... valid for all. It is something intelligible and justifiable" (p.30).

This speaks fully into my understanding of religion; it awakens and excites my spirit.



## THE SPIRIT OF BEING AND BELONGING

I'm inspired by the fact that these attributes of coming from a place of being open-minded, free-thinking, tolerant, self-critical, and open to and demanding of self-reform compellingly embrace the African spirit of Ubuntu – i.e. the spirit of being and of belonging – where I recognise my connectivity to and identity with you because I am intrinsically and fundamentally you. In essence we are one, there is no separation.

Such recognition appeals for a new-found compassionate community in which we acknowledge our roots, being nourished by and learning from them, while moving towards new ways of being in community, politically, economically and in terms of the ways we live and express our diverse religious reality. In this way we give a liberal expression to the fullness of a wholesome life.

## THE SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPE OF MY LIFE

These reflections have, since my youth, nourished a long and varying journey ranging from Christianity (Catholicism and Methodism) to Sufism and Quakerism while briefly dipping into so-called New Age thinking. During the last thirty years of my life, my spiritual home has been in Unitarianism while also practising a strong commitment to and involvement in inter-faith work, experiencing and promoting the richness of all religions and “the dignity of difference”, in the words of Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

My understanding and appreciation of the Unitarian way of life is that it epitomises a truly liberal approach to life, not simply

tolerating but encouraging the questioning of religious teachings and practices. There is no prescribing “the truth” as is in some religious traditions. Reflecting on and questioning of one's truth from a Unitarian perspective has a very different philosophical basis to that which is commonly understood by other religious traditions as being ‘right’ or ‘correct.’ For us as Unitarians, truth is not cast in stone where something is approached from a dualist approach as either right or wrong. Truth is evolving. My truth today is very different to what it was, say ten or twenty years ago.

Having been raised, as a child, in a very orthodox religious environment which did not permit any deviation from “the truth”, it came as a breath of fresh air for me to learn that questioning was encouraged. The Unitarian book of prayers and songs guides us: “Doubt is the key to the door of knowledge; it is the servant of discovery.” Building on doubt and questioning, I'm enlivened by the fact that our religious direction welcomes change and development in the light of new thought and discovery. It excites me that we are religious pioneers who are encouraged and enabled to push back and extend the boundaries or horizons of thought.

Imagine how knowledge and science would have been restricted if the likes of Galileo and Copernicus had succumbed to the doctrinaire stance of the Church of that time.

I close with the words of William Ellery Channing:

“I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit, which does not mechanically copy the past nor live on in 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 celebrate and give thanks for the richness and the beauty of my spiritual journey which has brought me to this place in my life, being among fellow travellers, like-minded souls who have a great love for each other. It’s a special privilege to walk alongside seekers such as these, sharing our joys and sorrows, growing in communion and community while celebrating our unique freedom together.

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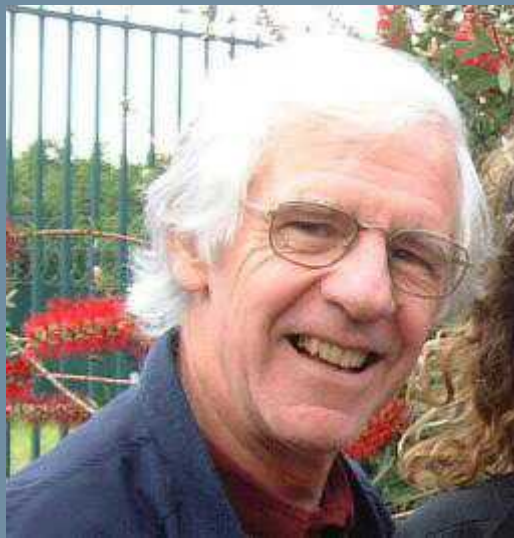
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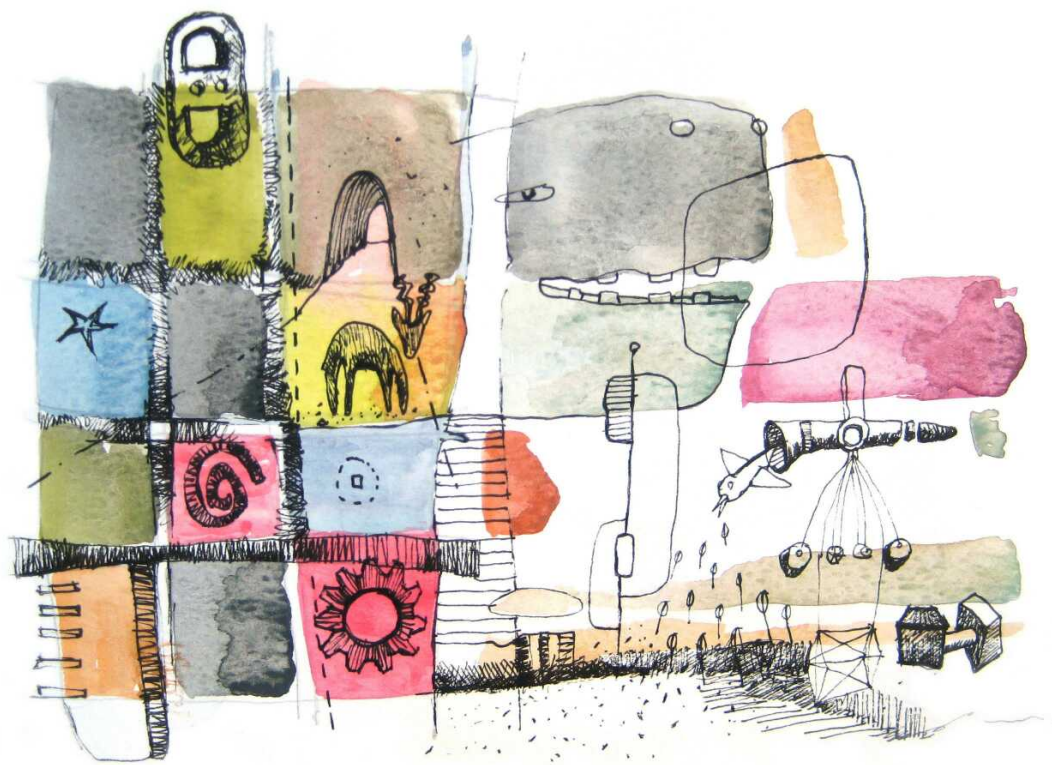
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**Chapters of time, 2020**

Doodled thoughts by Natalie Billings, mixed medium on paper

# European Missionaries and Unitarian Universalism:

## A Broad Historical Contrast to Consider

by Patrick Whang

### PREFACE

The purpose of this article is to raise important considerations and questions about the role that Unitarian-Universalism (hereafter referred to as either Unitarianism or UU depending upon the context) could or should play within South Africa and perhaps Africa as a whole. It also attempts to place Unitarianism within the historical context of Western religious thought and activity as a part of the process of colonization in Africa.

It asks the following questions: If Unitarianism is to grow and become “successful” within Africa, what must the definition of “success” be when one considers the historical context of Western religion in Africa? In addition, how can a historically Western “liberal” religious tradition such as Unitarianism, fit within this context? These questions (and potentially others) should be addressed in order to establish an effective vantage point from which Unitarianism can continue its work on the continent as a recently introduced non-indigenous religion.

### INTRODUCTION

Among the Western-based religions that have been introduced within the past few centuries, Unitarian Universalism may be considered a relatively small newcomer to the African continent.

A search of the Unitarian Universalist Association’s (UUA’s) website and blog provide the following excerpt:

Originally introduced in 1857, Unitarian Universalism existed as a handful of UU congregations in South Africa and Nigeria; within the last ten years, numerous congregations have emerged in Uganda, Burundi, the Republic of the Congo, and Kenya (Cherry, 2009).

In addition, Scott Kraft wrote an online article in the July 2009 edition of the UU magazine that describes his trip to Kenya to visit a small UU congregation in Nairobi. In this article, he warns that support for UU groups in Africa can lead to dependency which ends up turning into a “one-way street” and a long term “paternal” relationship between donors and recipients (Kraft, 2009). In contrast Kraft quotes Rev. Eric Cherry, former Director of the UUA’s International Office, who says that “traditional missionary work is not something that the UUA wants to do.

We operate more on a partnership model” (Kraft, 2009).

While the partnership model attempts to differentiate Unitarian work in Africa from that of other Christian religions, it is important to understand the historical context in which Christianity and its missionaries did their work in Africa.

Without understanding this context, Unitarianism may fail in its progressive mission to provide, as Rev. Cherry phrases it, a “saving message that is unique from any other religion in the world” (Kraft, 2009).

This article will focus mainly on Christianity and Unitarianism in Africa, and in particular South Africa. Firstly, because of the historical roots of UU, that stretch back to 19th century North America and the backlash against the Protestant orthodoxy of the time, which will be briefly discussed later. While Unitarianism strives for openness in theological ideas and promotes an ideal of embracing other religious practices, it is still based on a liberal Christian identity.

Secondly, Christianity has gained a deep foothold in South Africa. In a 2013 survey, 84.2% of South Africans identified themselves as Christians (Schoeman, 2017, pg. 3). This reflects the important role that Christianity played and continues to play in South African society. Other religions, such as Islam, are present within South African society, but the dominant presence of Christianity makes it an important focal point addressed in this article. It is also worthwhile mentioning that the same survey indicated only 5% of the population still adhere to traditional African religious practices.

However, many Africans have turned toward hybrid churches where Christianity and traditional African religious practices are merged. One such example in South Africa is the Zionist Christian Church (ZCC).

## **CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES**

Christian missionaries have had a long presence on the African continent. The inception of their work stretches back to the

early 15th century when Portuguese traders first began to establish trading posts along coastal areas of the continent. Along with these traders came the first missionaries. In the centuries that followed, their work was directly “sanctioned by the Portuguese Crown” (Levi, 2009, p. 364). Therefore, religion was in effect a state-sponsored enterprise where religion and politics intertwined. For example, in one case the Wolof leader Behemoui sent some of his subjects to Portugal to be baptized in order to enter into a “sociopolitical alliance with the Portuguese” (Levi, 2009, p. 369). However, the failure to convert the Wolof Kingdom to Christianity led to the Dominican missionaries being expelled, which resulted in Behemoui being “stabbed to death by a Portuguese soldier on account of treason” (Levi, 2009, p. 369).

By the 19th century, Protestant missionaries began their own push into the sub-continent of Africa as part of European colonialism. The overarching purpose of these missionaries was a “civilizing” mission to convert Africans away from their existing “heathen religions” as they were deemed by missionary societies (Hodge, 1972, pp. 91-92).

In southern Africa, missionaries did not bring valued goods with them but often possessed valuable skills such as building irrigation systems or demonstrating the use of firearms. It was these skills that became a “prized resource” to local chiefs who competed for the services of missionaries (Comaroff, 1985, p. 3).

In addition to politics, the economics of colonialism was also inextricably linked to the work of missionaries in Africa. It became the vehicle to provide the

“necessities” of civilization. For example, one scholar wrote the following in the context of the Nguni peoples in Southern Africa and missionaries:

The clothing which zealous missionaries thrust upon their converts for the sake of modesty . . . was for a time the most distinct emblem of black Christianity. Whether the convert earned his shirt by working for wages or fabricated it with European looms and needles, he was entering into new kinds of economic relationships (Etherington, 1978, p.116).

The commodity piece was now linked to the “salvation” offered by Christianity. In addition, the attempt to suppress the use of “native” languages, and to replace them with the language of European colonizers, became a method to indoctrinate indigenous peoples to adopt “civilized” ways. However, to be fair, missionaries were often instrumental in documenting indigenous languages and cultural practices which have been invaluable to preserving these traditions, for contemporary study and in recent times, to re-embrace this cultural heritage anew.

### **UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM: A VERY BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY**

Unitarianism traces its earliest roots to the more radical Reformation in Poland and Transylvania in the mid-16th century. In England, the first Unitarian Church was established in 1774 as an outcome of the Protestant Reformation in the United Kingdom. In America a merger of Unitarian and the Universalist faiths occurred in 1961 when the American Unitarian Association and Universalist Church of America combined to form the Unitarian Universalist

Association(UUA). The history of the two faiths, Unitarianism and Universalism, go back to the late 18th century of the United States.

The Unitarian movement had its roots within the Congregational Church and expounded on the idea of having no official doctrine that members had to adhere to. This tenant is still reflected within the UU today where the: “denomination stipulates that no minister, member, or congregation shall be required to subscribe to any particular interpretation of religion, or to any particular religious belief or creed” (Green, 2003, p. 578).

To complement the Unitarian historical lineage, Universalism grew out of an opposition to Protestant orthodoxy that claimed that only an elect group would be saved from sin and goes to heaven. Instead, the Universalist Church believed that ultimately everybody will be saved due to the saving power of the love of God. In others words they claimed a universal salvation as their name suggests. The Universalist faith came to fruition through a series of conventions, and through a major convention held in Philadelphia in 1790 (Green, 2003, p. 578). This inclusive salvic vision is also reflected within the current UU practices that emphasize a radically inclusive community that offers a home for people from the LGBTI community and the “Standing on the side of love” social action campaign of UU’s in America.

In fact, these progressive views have allowed UU to often be at the forefront of social issues that have plagued the history of the United States. UU has been vocal in its opposition to institutions such as slavery and has been a proponent of the separation

of church and the state. And in more recent times, as mentioned, it has advocated for gender equality and for the rights of gay, lesbian and transgender peoples.

In South Africa an earlier form of Unitarianism arrived on the continent's southern shores in 1867 with the founding of the Free Protestant Church under the guidance of Reverend Dawid Faure, who was influenced by the teachings of the American Unitarian Theodore Parker (Heller-Wagner, 1994). Faure preached a "new theology" (which was grounded on the essence of Christian faith) of "Love of God and love of neighbour" (Oliver, Unitarian Congregations – South Africa, n.d.). But while Unitarianism in South Africa has been open to all races and genders, the congregation has remained predominantly white over the years. This was certainly not because of any direct intention of the members nor of church leadership.

## **AFRICAN RELIGIONS**

In the past, Magessa (2002) argues that perspectives on African religions have largely been coloured by Western perceptions and philosophy. The traditional practices of Africans have been characterized as either "animism" or "fetishism" (religious practices which involve a veneration of animals or objects). This classification relegated the traditional religious practices of Africans as "primal". This also became the motivation for Christian missionaries to convert Africans to Christianity to "civilize" them.

But recent scholarship has examined religious practices conducted by various African groups and noticed several interesting facets of note. For instance,

it has been found that there are "many religious systems" within Africa (Beyers, 2010, pg. 3). This point demonstrates a diversity which belies singular stereotypes of African religions as a whole. However, while there is a diversity of religious practices, there are also common themes very similar to the common threads to be found within the Christian tradition. Beyers (2010) presented the following list of shared characteristics of African traditional religions:

- The belief in transcendence
- The transcendental in terms of life force
- The transcendental in terms of a Supreme Being
- The transcendental as the realm of spirits
- The sanctity of a unified society
- Homo Ritualis

It is these themes which may provide a relatability between African religious practices, beliefs, and rituals with other Judeo-Christian movements. These six themes provide an important point of engagement and conversation to allow Unitarianism to better interact with African religious traditions and in this way complement Western orthodoxy with African spiritual beliefs.

## **CONCLUSION**

Given the historical context referenced in this article, it is clear that Christian missionaries had a definite impact - both positive and negative - on the historical development of Africa during the colonial period. In contrast, Unitarianism has been a small, but progressive force in the history of the United States and likewise made a small yet significant contribution



towards a progressive society in Cape Town, South Africa.

It should however be noted, that Unitarianism developed its progressive stance within a Western context. Its opposition to rigid Protestant doctrine provided the foundation for the birth of a new non-doctrinal spiritual ideology. While this progressive religious perspective may appeal to some within South Africa and African society, for others it may be as foreign as the first European bible that was brought to the shores of Africa centuries ago. While Unitarianism may not be part of the broader controversial history of Christian missionaries within Africa, it must be cognizant of this broader historical narrative that is weaving the future of Africa and the societies in Africa.

Perhaps a better understanding of the six commonalities between traditional African religious practices and beliefs mentioned earlier might enable Unitarianism to better address the religious and cultural needs within the southern African context. Its neutrality and openness to various religious traditions can be an important impetus to bring a paradigm shift to how a historically “Western” religious movement can re-imagine religion within Africa.

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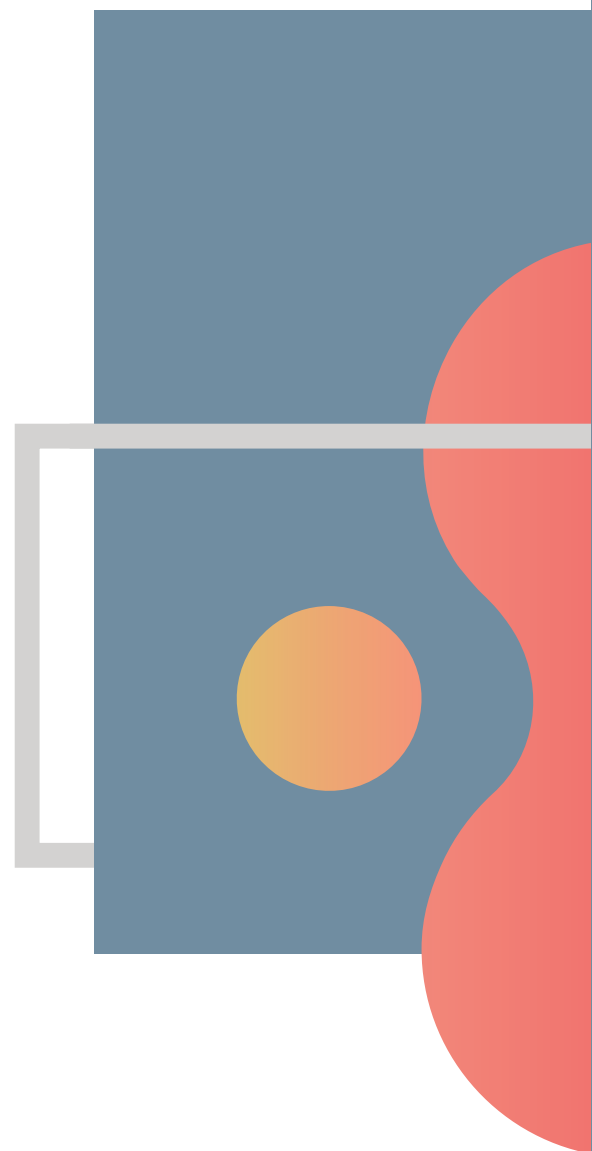
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**Chromodynamics #101: Intersection Types, 2020**

Personal work by Martha Holmes; watercolor, pencil and pen on paper

# Meeting the Open Spaciousness Beyond Myself

by Lionel Wingfield Willis

**E**ckhart Tolle, in his book, *A New Earth*, tells us that we humans have, in the past 100 years, killed some 100 million fellow humans. Take a moment and let that sink in. Isn't the cruelty we perpetrate on each other incomprehensible? If the world were an individual, it would be criminally insane. I want to share with you a solution to man's inhumanity that works, and does not require dogma or belief!

But first, let me tell you a little about myself. I was born in England in 1942. World War 2 was raging and V2 bombs were devastating the country and its people. My mother told me that she often threw her body over mine to protect me from flying shrapnel. In this turmoil I felt separate from others, incomplete, like something was wrong. I suspect those first impressionable years of life left a deep imprint on me and therefore I was living a life of quiet desperation.

Some fifty years ago, when in my twenties, my doctor told me I had stomach ulcers and that I should rest at home for a while. During this time, I made two decisions that changed my life. My first decision was to escape the rat race by building a boat and sailing around the world. The second decision was to learn to meditate.

I sailed several journeys from the UK to Brazil, the Caribbean and the USA, however I never made it around the world. I loved sailing and the adventure it brings, but despite this, I did not experience the

happiness I was seeking. It is then that it dawned upon me how to realise the joy that I believed lay within and I turned my attention to the life-changing power of meditation. I learnt Transcendental Meditation back in the mid-seventies and have practiced it on and off since then. Here is a glimpse into my meditative journey.

If I go quietly within and meditate upon "spirituality," what comes up for me is the age-old question: "Who am I?" I have a body. I have legs. I have hands. But that is not who I am.

I am not my legs. I am not my hands. I am not my body. So, who am I?

I have thoughts and feelings, but I am not those thoughts and feelings. Thoughts and feelings cannot describe the essence of who I am. The essence of who I am is closer to the young child I was before being contaminated by WW2 and the disturbed community into which I was born.

So who am I?

This question directs me to go beyond myself into a non-rational space, or my inner world. Therefore, meditation is essentially a journey into who I am.

When I move into that space beyond myself, I often feel my emotions rising and tears of joy roll down my face as the impact of recognition takes hold. This space is precious; so perfect,

so beautiful and so timeless. There is a letting go and I fall into the mystery of beingness. It is complete and whole, simple and perfect. It is infinite beingness and spacious open consciousness.

When I am there, I am still able to think and I am aware of what is happening to me. Perhaps this meditative journey is a journey into an ultimate reality where the world can be seen in a state of perfection. A space where there is love for everything and everybody. Where all is perfect, all is good, and all is OK.

In this spaciousness, I experience a profound feeling of oneness. Here, what I previously perceived as contradiction and paradox, I am now able to view in a new light of unity.

What appears to our focused consciousness is, in reality, not the truth. It's a distorted dream, a projection of a troubled mind. I believe that war is in fact, the outcome of seriously disturbed minds.

So who am I? I am this open spaciousness. There are however, times when thoughts cloud over this spaciousness. Times when my thoughts get distracted like monkeys in a cage and they start darting here there and everywhere. If this happens, I need to sit patiently at the entrance to the kingdom of heaven and wait for the calm to return. The default mode of open spaciousness is always available if I so choose to engage it.

When meditating, I am sometimes distracted by a dog barking in the distance or a car's squealing tyres, or something else that may enter into my consciousness. My mind's natural tendency is to follow one of these threads and then I am drawn away.

When this happens, it is my mind that is leading me. I have to consciously return to watching the mind instead, watch how it moves away from spaciousness and follows the stimuli. Then I choose to bring it back to open, spacious consciousness again. In this way, I find that mediation is awareness becoming aware of itself!

In this state of mind, I can choose to rest in the peace of my inner self and simply be. Through this process I have learnt to realise that this is who I am and not the damaged ego that struts its nightmare upon the stage of life.

What I find fascinating is that when in a normal state of mind, my awareness is framed by a limited, narrow, focused viewpoint. However, during meditation, it is as if the bandwidth of my mind expands. Now new insights and new perspectives can emerge and the disturbing thoughts and feelings gradually disappear. Realisations that were distant, vague and incomprehensible, gradually become closer and clearer. Ultimately, like stars appearing in the dark of night, a whole universe emerges. Suddenly, I feel connected, and I know I am blessed.

All religions point to this 'spaciousness' even though each religion looks at it from a different angle, a slightly different perspective. It is strange though, how we sometimes cling to 'old world' views - the distorted way the world often sees reality. For instance, some cling to the idea of a flat earth:

*"Don't disturb what I see as real. You make me feel quite uncomfortable! How will I keep my reality together if I need to let go of my old ideas and points of view?"* they say.

For all of us to enter into spaciousness there is a need for a small death to our old world view(s). For example, you need to let go of all that you think you know about God and through that process, allow your experience to open up to a new reality.

Look at the wonder of life! Scientific research tells us that we humans have evolved over millions of years from the amoeba to modern man. This is truly an incredible and almost unbelievable journey! Think of the wonder of the hundreds of billions of brain cells you possess. Each of your brain cells is as complex as a city and each single cell contains the entire human genome!

Think for a moment of the vastness of outer space. Scientists now postulate that there are millions and millions of planets that can support life. We humans are just starting on this journey of discovery into outer space and it is so important that we invest equally in our journey into our **inner space**. The mysteries of today's universe will be the facts of tomorrow.

Of course, now that I am nearing the end of my article and look back upon what I have written, the ego within me says, "*What rubbish! How can the world be perfect? Look at the wars, the greed, the racism, ... you name it.*" My answer is, "*Would you beat a child for not knowing adult ways?*" We all learnt to walk by repeatedly falling and getting up again. Each "fall" teaches us lessons which serve us on our unique paths towards the light.

The COVID-19 pandemic for instance, which we are currently facing, may be seen as an opportunity; a challenge for us to find meaning during this time of quiet isolation. To be removed from the noise of the

marketplace and to realise that which is always closer to us than we realise – our inner spaciousness.

It's as if we have a very close friend always beside us, but we never noticed it. Niels Bohr, the famous quantum physicist, once said that matter is more like a thought than a solid. Today, scientists tell us that the universe is just vibrating energy, a multidimensional field out of which everything in the universe is made. It therefore seems as though our minds decode these vibrational patterns into the best guess they can muster. In this way we are creating the world in a very real way. We could say we are not in the world. The world is within us.

So who am I?

Who I am is THAT.

That which is aware of my awareness. I am THAT indescribable consciousness that was before the Big Bang and will be long after this person which is me, has returned to dust.

In conclusion, there is a way out of our suffering and our disturbing thoughts and modes of being. It all boils down to your identity. Our normal (flat earth) perspective is only slightly wrong. We can either see the world from our limited ego-skewed perspective or from a position of raised consciousness. It requires only a small shift in awareness to move between these two states. But that small shift is the change that makes all the difference.

Remember that how you see yourself affects how you see the world. You have to stand in this awareness.

So I ask you: "Who are you?"

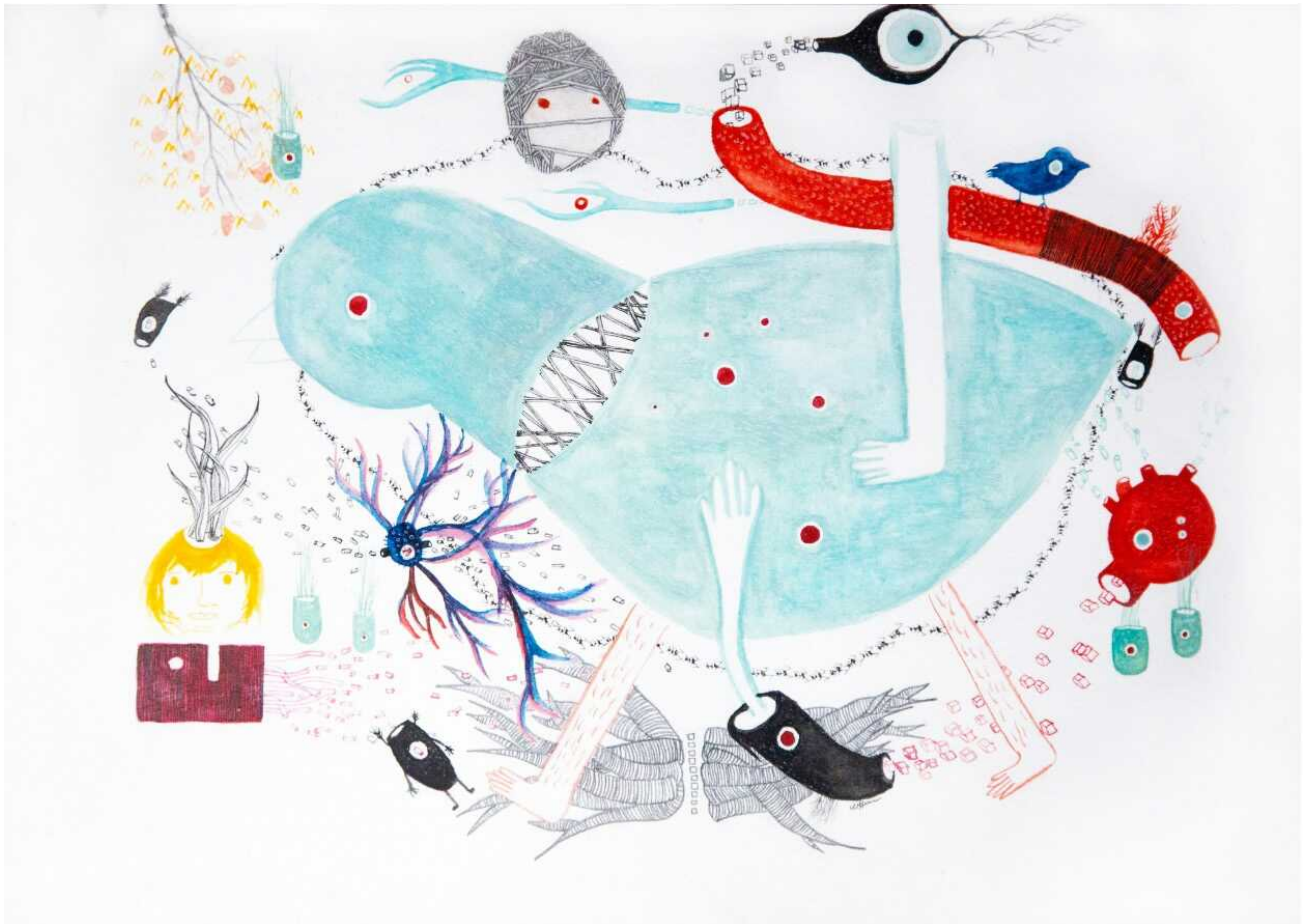


I was born in England in 1942. My parents were divorced when I was 8. There was just my mother and me. She did the best she could in the circumstances. She often prayed, "Gentle Jesus meek and mild, look upon a little child". I was somewhat dysfunctional, I felt alone, separate and incomplete.

I could not grasp what religion was all about. In my late twenties, I learnt to meditate. Here was perhaps the beginning of a gradual awakening. About five years ago, I was attracted to Unitarianism because of the open-minded approach of looking at all "Schools of Wisdom". I love to hear what these teachers had to say about the human condition and their pointers to freedom from suffering. I love the fact that although we are a spiritual community, each one of us is following their path.

So today I am 77, married for 46 years with two beautiful daughters. We live in Cape Town. From our window, we see Table Mountain on the left and Robben Island on the right. And from a certain point of view, quite perfect.





**Chromodynamics #197: Integration, 2020**

Personal work by Martha Holmes; watercolor, pencil and pen on paper

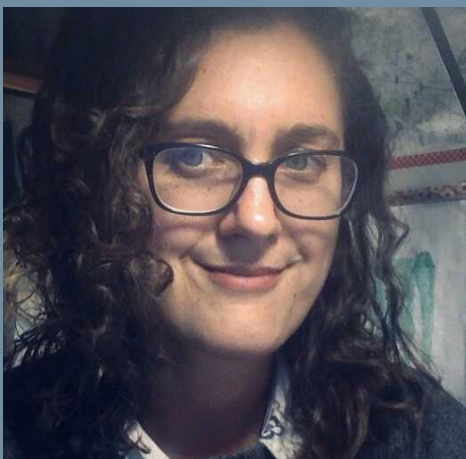
# ART AND DESIGN TEAM



**NATALIE BILLINGS, ARTIST**

Natalie grew up with a Jo'burg heartbeat pulsing in her veins. After qualifying as an architect at WITS University, she drove her entire life's possessions in a single car trip down to Cape Town to establish her professional career closer to the ocean. Natalie is a free thinking, liberal minded creative designer and member of the Cape Town Unitarians. She is passionate about good design and beautiful spaces, finds peace in the meditative motion of canoeing and is happiest with beach sand in her shoes and paint under her fingernails.

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**MARTHA HOLMES, ARTIST**

Martha is an expat who is delighted to call Cape Town her home. During the day she does science and at night she makes art. She enjoys the intersection between art and science as both seek to explore the line between what is known and unknown. She enjoys exploring the mountain and the sea with her son, husband and dog.

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**LIAM RAKER, GRAPHIC DESIGNER**

Liam is a professional multi-media designer with a passion for art and photography as well as his local culture. He grew up in an artistic community in Cape Town and spends his leisure time exploring the fields of Art such as painting, digital art, design, dance, photography, theatre and fashion.

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