

Kensington Unitarians

community - spirituality - conscience



NEWSLETTER
SPRING 2025



Our Creative Community

Our Art Play Crafternoon is just one of many opportunities for you to get involved and make a creative contribution here at Kensington Unitarians. Read on for details of how you can sing, dance, paint, write, and reflect with us this spring.

**Join us for
Community
Singing!**



**Enjoy our
next Tea
Dance!**



**Sign up for
Summer
School**



www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Coming up...

March

Sunday 2

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)
12.30pm Community Yoga with Hannah (in-person)
7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 5

7pm Poetry Group with Brian (in-person)

Friday 7

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 9

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)
7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 12

7pm Community Singing (in-person)

Friday 14

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 16

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Sarah Tinker (hybrid)
12.30pm Find Your Voice: Singing with Margaret (in-person)
1pm Art Play Crafternoon (in-person)

Wednesday 19

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (in-person)

Sunday 23

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)
7.30pm Better World Book Club: 'Every Kind of People' (online)

Wednesday 26

7pm Community Singing (in-person)

Friday 28

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 30

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall and Dr. Alex Brianson (hybrid)
7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

April

Wednesday 2

7pm Poetry Group with Brian (in-person)

Friday 4

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 6

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)
12.30pm Community Yoga with Hannah (in-person)
7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 9

7pm Community Singing (in-person)

Thursday 10

7pm Committee Meeting (online)

Friday 11

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 13

11am Sunday Service led by Dr. Patricia Brewerton (hybrid)
12.30pm Find Your Voice Singing with Margaret (in-person)
7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 16

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (in-person)

Friday 18

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 20

11am Easter Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)
12.30pm Community Bring-and-Share Lunch
7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 23

7pm Community Singing (in-person)

Sunday 27

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)
12.30pm Essex Church AGM (hybrid)
7.30pm Better World Book Club: 'The Life Inside' (online)

May

Friday 2

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 4

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)
7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)
1-3pm Tea Dance with Rachel (in-person)

Wednesday 7

7pm Poetry Group with Brian (in-person)

Friday 9

7pm Heart and Soul with Jennifer (online)

Sunday 11

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Stephanie Bisby (hybrid)
12.30pm Community Yoga with Hannah (in-person)
7pm Heart and Soul with Sara Helen (online)

Wednesday 14

7pm Community Singing (in-person)

Friday 16

7pm Heart and Soul with Alex (online)

Sunday 18

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Sarah Tinker (hybrid)
12.30pm Find Your Voice: Singing with Margaret (in-person)
1pm Art Play Crafternoon (in-person)
7pm Heart and Soul with Charlotte (online)

Wednesday 21

7pm Heart and Soul with Brian (in-person)

Friday 23

7pm Heart and Soul with Rita (online)

Sunday 25

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Michael Allured (hybrid)
7.30pm Better World Book Club: 'Reading Lessons' (online)

Wednesday 28

7pm Community Singing (in-person)

Thursday 29

7pm Committee Meeting (online)

Friday 30

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)



Join us for hybrid services at 11 am every Sunday, in person and online.

Please keep an eye out for last minute additions to the programme. Visit [kensington-unitarians.org.uk](https://www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk)

Introducing our Minister

For those who haven't yet met our Minister here's an introduction to Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall.

Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (she/her) was appointed Minister with Kensington Unitarians in May 2023. She has been connected to the congregation since April 1999, first as a member, then as an active volunteer, before joining the staff team as part-time Outreach Officer in 2008, and becoming full-time Ministry Coordinator in 2021, to steer the church community through a time of transition.

Jane is positively evangelical about the transformative power of engagement groups and created 'Heart and Soul' circles as a form of contemplative spiritual gathering where people can share deeply about their lives. Jane is increasingly energised by the potential of online spiritual gatherings to make our activities more accessible for those who find it hard to participate in traditional in-person services due to factors including disability, ill-health, neurodivergence,

geographical isolation, work commitments, or caring responsibilities; she has first-hand experience of several of these issues.

Jane has been very much involved in organising Hucklow Summer School, the annual Unitarian residential for adult religious education and spiritual development, since 2005. In recent years she has co-developed and co-facilitated LGBTQIA+ training on the theme of 'Working on Our Welcome', to improve the levels of awareness and sensitivity in our denomination around issues of gender, sexuality and relationship diversity, and to help make our congregations ever more hospitable.

Jane also serves as a spiritual director working with people from various Christian denominations, and those who are on the fringes of faith, or outside of the mainstream religious traditions altogether.



Prior to ministry training with Unitarian College (2018-2021), she gained a first-class BA in Philosophy, Religion and Ethics, at Heythrop College (2011-2017). Jane previously worked in academic research, in the field of medical imaging and radiological sciences, gaining her PhD in the Computational Imaging Sciences Group at Guy's Hospital, King's College London. When she is not working (or glued to the internet) Jane loves gardening, birdwatching, baking, listening to podcasts and audiobooks, and making art, and she is a fanatical follower of bike racing on TV.

To contact our Minister, email: jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

'JUST ONE THING' Making Connections

In each edition of the church newsletter we suggest 'just one thing' you might do for the benefit of our community. This time I'd like to encourage you to make new connections. At the end of each service we say: 'The congregation very much has a life beyond Sunday mornings; we encourage you to keep in touch, look out for each other, and do what you can to nurture supportive connections.'

One key way of making such connections is to hang around after services (whether in-person or online) and take the time to engage in conversation and get to know others more deeply. As one of our Unitarian hymns states, 'the church is a living fellowship', and our fellowship is strengthened when we show up on a regular basis, take an interest in each other, and take time to cultivate right relationship within our community. Our small groups, such as Heart and Soul, or

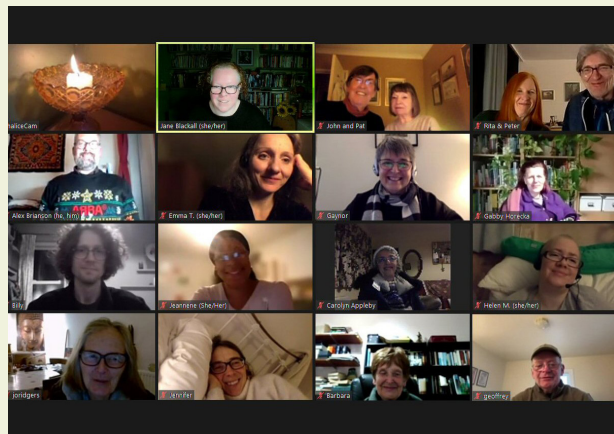
activities such as the Art Play Crafternoon or Community Singing are also great opportunities to hang out with fellow congregation members and slowly build community. Or if you're someone who listens to our services via YouTube or the podcast stream maybe you could drop us a line via email. It's great to hear from you and feel connected with our larger congregation around the world.

One final aspect of making connections that you might consider is connecting people you know outside the church – your friends and acquaintances – with our congregation. If you like what we do here then help us spread the word!



Drop it into conversation that you've been to the Unitarian church – maybe even pass on a copy of this newsletter – and let them know what they're missing. We know there are so many people out there who would benefit from participating in a community like ours – and we'd benefit from having them on board too – so please do look out for those opportunities to connect new people to Kensington Unitarians!

Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall



Heart and Soul Contemplative Spiritual Gatherings

Heart and Soul is a contemplative spiritual gathering in which you can take time to reflect on life in the company of others. These gatherings have been running for over a decade in-person at Essex Church and also more recently online via Zoom. Sessions follow a reassuringly regular pattern, with readings and music from a range of sources, time for guided prayers of gratitude, compassion for others, self-reflection, and silent meditation. Each session closes with refreshments, relaxed conversation, and an opportunity to get to know others at a deeper level.

Online: Fridays and Sundays at 7pm

Online gatherings are on Fridays and Sundays at 7pm, except the fourth Sunday when we hold the Book Club. Email jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk for more information and to sign up for a session.

In-person 19 March, 18 April & 21 May, 7pm (Third Wednesday of each month at Essex Church)

In-person gatherings on the Third Wednesday of each month. We ask that if you have symptoms of respiratory illness (e.g. sore throat, runny nose, coughs) you stay home to help keep everyone safe and well. Do email Jane to let her know you're planning to attend (jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk).



Community Lunch – Easter Sunday, 20 April (after the service)

All are welcome to this simple bring-and-share lunch. We hold these community lunches about once a quarter after a service. Let Liz, who is coordinating our Easter lunch, know if you are planning to come along and what food or drink you are intending to bring (or contact our minister jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk). We are always glad of volunteers to help with the clearing up!



Community Yoga with Hannah

2 March, 6 April & 11 May, 12.30pm

Come along for a gentle and relaxing, one-hour Hatha yoga class to help reduce stress and get your body moving. No prior experience is necessary, no advance sign-up required, and all levels welcome. Mats are provided, but do wear comfortable clothing that you can move in.

Interested, but not in London? Hannah also teaches free, virtual yoga sessions on Mondays (5:30-6:30pm via Zoom). Contact Hannah for full details: hannahmarieking@gmail.com

Art Play Crafternoon

**Coming up: 16 February,
16 March, 18 May, 15 June,
20 July (no session in April
due to Easter Lunch)**

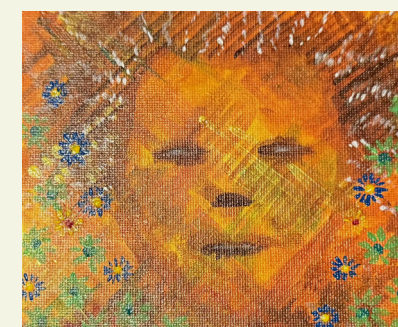
All are welcome to join us for at this relaxed art-and-craft hangout after the service on the third Sunday of each month. We'll get some basic art materials out to play with or you can bring your own craft project to work on in good company. It's not about showing off your amazing artistic skills – it's about having fun – and experimenting with colour, line, and form.

Some of those who were present at the first Art Play gathering in January share their thoughts:

Patricia: 'I have absolutely no artistic talent as you can see from my pathetic effort at painting a tree. That is what that brown blob is - honest! Didn't matter at all. I found that splodging around some paint allowed me to really chill out in a fun way whilst enjoying friendly chatter.'

Rajan: 'The 'Crafternoon' was a wonderful chance for me to play with paints, eat a slice of Jane's delicious cake, and have a very enjoyable natter with fellow crafters. As the photo of my 'output from the session' shows clearly, there was absolutely no expectations or judgements placed on the quality of the end products we created. Some were taken home at the end of the day, some left to dry at the Church - others responsibly 'recycled' on-site (the name of the person who told me cheerfully, as we were packing away, "Mine was absolutely awful. It's in the bin" will remain a secret.). The joy was in the convivial process of making art in good company. I'll be back.'

Julia: 'Working together to create a piece of art, or just doodling, fostered open and authentic communication. I felt I got to know others differently... a more relaxed conversation flowed. It was fun!'



Community Singing

12 & 26 March, 9 & 23 April
& 14 & 28 May, 7pm (The Second and fourth Wednesdays of each month)

Please note these sessions are sometimes subject to last-minute changes; sign up with jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk to be kept informed.

Join our community singing group at Kensington Unitarians. All abilities welcome! The group is led by an experienced musician who has been leading a similar group in the neighbourhood for the last 20 years and who now wants to extend the invitation by creating a sister group for our Unitarian community and beyond. This is not a choir that will perform; it's just for the joy of singing together as a regular practice. We will sing a mix of pop, country, gospel and folk, all sung a capella. We will sing from lyric sheets, not scores,



so there is no need to be able to read music. Our group leader is expert in bringing everyone's contribution into a joyful whole; whether you are new to singing or a professional musician, there is a place for all voices.

Please note: we ask that if you have symptoms of respiratory illness (e.g. sore throat, runny nose, coughs) you stay home to help keep everyone safe and well.

Chalice Lighting Poem by Eliz Beel

Light of the Chalice;
small, slim, but ever bright:
t'is a rowing boat:
carrying our hopes to the skies;
home of our Aspirations,
Otherworldly,
but warm, and wise.

Getting to Know You... John Humphreys



I am John, a 75-year old retired doctor, and have been coming to Essex Church for around six years. My wife wanted to come to a One

Light interfaith gathering which are held monthly at the church and we both came to a Unitarian service a week or two beforehand to see what sort of place the church was.

From my first attendance, I felt welcomed by both the congregation and Sarah Tinker who was then the Minister. I connected with the sense of enquiry and curiosity in the services and the variety of topics stimulated me both intellectually and spiritually. I also loved the strong connection to music and singing.

Before coming to Kensington Unitarians, I had been an attender at Quaker meetings and recognised at Essex Church a similar focus on social justice and inclusion. I have been exploring my understanding of a Higher Power as a central part of attending 12 step recovery meetings for the past twenty five years. This exploration has included attending Buddhist meditation retreats and other spiritual and religious gatherings. I particularly love choral evensong which has a timeless connection to my childhood.

However, the scientific and rational part of my brain has always kept me from fully committing to any religion which required belief in and worship of a superhuman power or God. I have difficulties in fully understanding the language of spirituality and religion, but then I also have difficulties in understanding the languages of quantum mechanics and philosophy which often to me seem better places to study the unknown. I do know that as a member of Kensington Unitarians,

I am free to explore and discuss my uncertainties within a supportive and inclusive community.

Since my retirement I have tried to maintain a routine which includes physical and creative activities, an appreciation of the healing power of nature, and regular attendance at various spiritual gatherings. At my centre I try to maintain the need to come back to this present moment and let my true self guide me in a life based on spiritual principles. I sometimes wonder if this constitutes the "pick and mix" approach to religion and if so, does it matter?

I value the help and discussions I have with our amazing Minister Jane and members of the congregation at Essex Church. Both the Sunday services and the Friday online Heart and Soul group are important times for me to reflect on my life. I am looking forward to attending Hucklow Summer School for the first time this year.



Tea Dance: Sunday 4 May, 1pm-3pm

As you can see from the photos, we had a lovely time at the Festive Tea Dance in December! Rachel Sparks will be back to lead another dance on Sunday 4 May (there might be a few extra helpings of cake on offer as Jane will also be celebrating a special birthday this weekend!)

Tea, cake, partner dancing (Ballroom and Latin), and a few line dances – all are welcome – from complete beginners to life-long dancers. Even if you think you have two left feet, don't worry, this will be a relaxed and welcoming space for all to enjoy (there'll be a social dance lesson for complete beginners at the start of the afternoon). Our events are LGBTQ+ inclusive and we encourage gender-neutral dance partnering which means that anyone can lead or follow. There's no need to bring a dance partner so just come as you are. This event is free of charge; donations will be invited in support of 'Say it Loud Club' (charity for LGBTQ+ Asylum Seekers and Refugees). Help with baking and hosting welcomed.





Minister's Reflection: 'Light Relief'

From the service on 17 November 2024. Join us for services each Sunday, 11am-noon
– or catch up on our YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/@kensingtonunitarians

Reading: 'What We Need' by David Budbill

The Emperor,
his bullies
and henchmen
terrorize the world
every day,
which is why
every day
we need
a little poem
of kindness,
a small song
of peace
a brief moment
of joy.

This morning's service has the title 'Light Relief' – a theme that was chosen in part because we have a number of rather heavy themes to tackle this month – fixed dates in the calendar like All Souls and Remembrance – and it felt like time for something a little more light-hearted to shift the mood a bit. At the same time I'm conscious that a number of people in our wider community have been hit hard by the outcome of the recent US elections – understandably so – and others are ground down by witnessing seemingly intractable conflict around the globe. So first I want to acknowledge how tough it is to face the state of the world right now, pick ourselves up after repeated blows, and carry on.

So today's service is meant to be a reminder of how important it is for each of us to stay in touch with our sources of uplift and joy

even when – especially when – things seem bleak. This is not about being Pollyanna-ish, denying reality, or burying our heads in the sand – it's about remembering to reconnect with the things that make life worth living – to keep reaching out to art, beauty, nature, and each other – rather than being overwhelmed and crushed by it all. Taking time for the good stuff might allow us to regather our strength and re-engage with the sacred work of repairing the world.

The words from D.H. Lawrence on your order of service gesture towards the approach we're going to take this morning. He wrote: 'Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into

the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.'

Let's focus on staying in touch with what's still good in the world – reconnecting with our sources of uplift and joy – even when our personal situation is really tough, or the world seems to be falling apart, or it's all happening at once.

I don't know if this resonates with you, but at times when I'm feeling all too painfully aware of all the horrors going on around the world – the brutality of war, genocide, and creeping fascism are right up in our faces (not to mention all the more bloodless forms of cruelty like austerity that have been drip, drip, dripping away for years) – and the impact of all this is getting ever closer to home – in these times I do feel some kind of duty to at the very least bear witness to these horrible aspects of our shared reality (and, as far as is possible, make whatever small contribution I can to resist the world's evils). Sometimes I find myself feeling a kind of pressure, coming both from within and without – a nagging sense that it's wrong to turn away from it all – almost obscene for me to just go on living my nice life, having a laugh, enjoying myself, while so many others are suffering, and the planet is burning.

I think that view is not entirely without merit... but this is one of those 'both/and' service topics. Maybe some of us are more temperamentally inclined to stay in touch with what's going on in the world, and we find it hard to look away from the latest outrage and injustice we've been made aware of. Maybe some of us just find it all too overwhelming, and focus on doing our bit closer to home. Maybe some of us do bury our heads in the sand, and simply avoid engaging with this tough stuff.

I suppose the heart of today's message is to encourage each of us to stay awake and pay attention to what's real – both the good and the bad bits of life – and to strike a better balance in where we put our awareness and attention. On the one hand – it is really important to bear witness to suffering and injustice – and use whatever means we have at our disposal to push back against the wrongs we see. On the other hand – if we focus relentlessly on horror and awfulness we are liable to drown in despair – and that doesn't help anybody really – so we must make sure we regularly come up for air. So many

of us are caught up in it – this feeling of impotence at being unable to stop bad things happening – of metaphorically watching dozens of car crashes unfold in slow motion all around the planet each day. It is all too easy to feel overwhelmed and crushed by the scale of it. And I suspect that's when we're more likely to become fatalistic, engage in denial, or disengage altogether and just look the other way.

Activist burnout is definitely a thing too – I've known a number of good, kind, passionate people who have made

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apart around us"**

themselves physically and mentally ill through trying to save the world single-handed – people whose conscience calls them to make great sacrifices for the greater good and who find it intolerable to sit on the sidelines – such people sometimes rail at those of us who don't seem to be pulling our weight in the struggle for liberation. And I understand this too – though such righteous anger can sometimes alienate potential allies – but we really do need all hands on deck for this task.

However, if we are going to do our bit for the betterment of the world, we need to be in it for the long haul, and this will require us to engage in practices of renewal on a regular basis. We need to periodically regroup and regather our strength for the fight. And that's what I want to remind you of today: it is vital to take time to reconnect with the good things in life, the things that make life worth living, and reach out to others who care about the things that really matter for mutual support. Let's give ourselves permission to enjoy ourselves – It is alright to fully live this life we've been given – even when the world is apparently

falling apart around us. We can still gather together to sing, dance, make art. If it makes you happy you can wear your brightest frock to church – to paraphrase Victoria Safford, in the piece Sonya read earlier, you can: 'punctuate your days with sacred celebration and with rituals signifying joy, no matter what you have – or don't – to work with, no matter what fury the world outside is howling. Savour life and breath and all you days no matter what is dealt to you.'

I don't often set homework for you but this week I've put a little green slip in your orders of service – it's inspired by the words of David Budbill we reflected on for our meditation today – 'Every day we need a little poem of kindness, a small song of peace, a brief moment of joy.'

In the week to come I invite you – I might even go so far as to say I encourage you – to collect or create a brief moment of joy each day and jot it down on your little green handout (and if you're at home you can get all this information on the website and create your own list). This might involve noticing the good stuff that is already happening around you or it might involve going out of your way to make good things happen. I'm hoping this might kickstart a habit of finding these moments of joy – of 'light relief', indeed – regardless of what else is going on in your life and the wider world... if you manage to keep it up for a week, see if you can keep it going through advent and beyond (and if you miss a day don't let that stop you! You can just carry on the next day...)

On the back of the little slip I've printed some suggestions you might try (some of these were crowdsourced from my friends on Facebook and some I've already done myself this week):

Maybe look up some music you used to listen to when you were a kid, or a teenager, and sing along (or dance) with gusto to your old favourites (I was singing along to Doctor and the Medics' 'Spirit in the Sky' this week and I know Jeannene liked that one in her teenage years too). Or reach out to reconnect with a friend who you haven't been in touch with for too long and let them know you're thinking of them fondly. Perhaps spend some time playing (or cuddling up) with a friendly cat or dog (or if you don't have access to any pets watch cute cat and dog videos online). This is a big one – create

something! – write a poem, draw a picture, take a photo, knit a scarf, bake a cake – or just set aside ten minutes for a quick burst of creative play (if you have watercolours, felt tips, plasticine to hand). Or you could do a random act of kindness for a neighbour or a stranger – or express your specific and sincere appreciation towards a friend or acquaintance – right out of the blue. How about going out to a beautiful place in nature that you don’t manage to get to often (or you’ve always meant to go but not got round to). Or spending time in a familiar place with the intent of noticing and appreciating your usual surroundings with fresh eyes.

See how you get on with this – I look forward to hearing more – maybe tell our WhatsApp group.

I want to close with some words from Rick Hanson – he’s a Buddhist-leaning psychologist, and senior fellow of UC Berkeley’s Greater Good Centre, and a all-round good egg who I’ve got a lot of time for – and he shared these words of wisdom a few days after the US election: ‘Throughout history, most people have lived under tough conditions while still finding their ways to be happy. If they could do it, we can, too. Know that most things are beyond your control. Try to accept this fact, and uncertainty, and not always knowing. [And then...] What brings you to peace? Neurologically, it helps to raise your gaze, look out a window, take a bird’s-eye view. Take some breaths, with the exhalations longer than the inhalations. Tune into the internal sensations of breathing, which will help to quiet inner chatter. Look around and see so many things that are [as yet] unaffected by the political ups and downs: trees reaching for the sky, birds flying, friends cooking dinner, good music, laughter, love flowing. Turn toward whatever are reliable sources of well-being and comfort and wisdom for you: perhaps the simple taste of a banana, the hug of a friend, the eager look in your dog’s eyes, the vastness of the night sky, the onward developments of science, the perennial insights of the great teachers, or the simple rainbow beauty of an oil sheen in a puddle.’

Wise words from Rick Hanson. And may it be so for the greater good of all. Amen.

General Assembly of Unitarians and Free Christians - Annual Meetings ‘25

The Annual Meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarians and Free Christians are just 11 weeks away and bookings are now open! This year we will be back at the Hilton Metropole in Birmingham. This location has advantages such as good transport links and excellent accessibility within the building. Although it is in an urban setting, there is a pond on the grounds with a walking path, offering a connection with nature during the weekend. We will do our best to create spaces inside for quiet spiritual reflection, so that you have a place to pause and be calm.

We are very pleased to have Alison Webster, General Secretary of Modern Church and Mission Theologian in Residence at Citizens UK as our keynote speaker. The inspiring Rev Maud Robinson will lead our Anniversary Service, which is always a highlight. We also have a solid line-up of workshops, talks, and interactive sessions. There will be sessions to feed your spiritual soul, make connections, and spark ideas to take back to your home congregations. The full schedule will be published shortly, but

highlighted workshops will be featured on the Annual Meetings website as information comes in.

The Annual Meetings are open to everyone, with costs for the full three days – including accommodation and food – from £80-£450, depending on age and means, with subsidised tickets available for first-time attendees, younger adults, and those less able to afford to attend. Please note that subsidised tickets are limited and are distributed on a “first come, first served” basis.

Bookings close on 14 March 2025. Children’s bookings close on 21 February, due to the need for additional Safeguarding planning and arrangements.

Visit the annual meetings website for more information: www.unitarianmeetings.com



How to make a donation to our church

Your donation will help us continue our work and keep our progressive religious message out in the world. Our annual budget is around £180,000. That’s around £3,500 running costs each week to pay for our staff team, run our programme of activities, and maintain our building.

A monthly standing order is the simplest way to support the church. A one-off donation by cheque or bank transfer is always most welcome. You can also set up regular payments via PayPal. Perhaps you might consider leaving a legacy donation in your will. Further details, including a Gift Aid form, are available on our website: www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk/get-involved

Thank you to everyone who has made a donation or taken out a standing order to support the work of this church. Your generosity is much appreciated! Your contributions will help keep our progressive spiritual message out in the world.

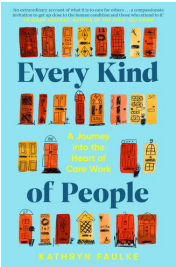
Better World Book Club

The fourth Sunday of each month, 7.30-8.45pm on Zoom

We’ve been running the ‘Better World Book Club’ for over a year now. The books have been chosen to cover a range of social issues we might do well to be more informed about, interleaved with books on spiritual and ethical matters, on living well in hard times. In order to make this as accessible as possible we aim to choose titles that are available in print, e-book, and audiobook formats, and we will buy a few copies for the church library for people to borrow. Although it’s great to have people joining the group on a regular basis you are also most welcome to ‘drop in’ for a particular book that appeals to you.

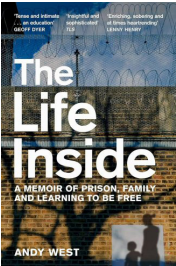


Please email Jane to let her know if you’re planning to join and for further details. See contact details on p3



Sunday 23 March: Every Kind of People by Kathryn Faulke

Our fifteenth title is ‘Every Kind of People’ by Kathryn Faulke: ‘A luminous, uplifting and deeply moving memoir by a care worker, told through her funny, heartbreaking, sometimes frustrating, and always eye-opening encounters with the often overlooked and marginalised people she cares for. Kate never expected to become a home care worker. But when she left her senior role in the NHS, burnt-out and disheartened, she thought caring for people in their own homes would be a simpler job. Despite being determined not to become too involved with her ‘customers’, she soon found herself developing firm friendships, forging deep connections and bearing witness to the extraordinary drama to be found in ordinary lives. With energy, compassion and clarity, her memoir gives an astonishing insight into this unsung - and often maligned - profession, and into the hidden lives of the housebound and infirm.’

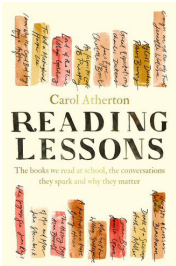


Sunday 27 April: The Life Inside by Andy West

Our sixteenth title is ‘The Life Inside’ by Andy West: ‘Can someone in prison be more free than someone outside? Would we ever be good if we never felt shame? What makes a person worthy of forgiveness? Andy West teaches philosophy in prisons. Every day he has conversations with people inside about their lives, discusses their ideas and feelings, and listens as they explore new ways to think about their situation. When Andy goes behind bars, he also confronts his inherited trauma: his father, uncle and brother all spent time in prison. While Andy has built a different life for himself, he still fears that their fate will also be his. As he discusses pressing questions of truth, identity and hope with his students, he searches for his own form of freedom too.’

Sunday 25 May: Reading Lessons by Carol Atherton

‘A passionate, provocative and blisteringly smart interrogation of how we experience art in the age of #MeToo, and whether we can separate an artist’s work from their biography. What do we do with the art of monstrous men? Can we love the work of Roman Polanski and Michael Jackson, Hemingway and Picasso? Should we love it? Does genius deserve special dispensation? Is history an excuse? What makes women artists monstrous? And what should we do with beauty, and with our unruly feelings about it? Claire Dederer explores these questions and our relationships with the artists whose behaviour disrupts our ability to apprehend the work on its own terms. She interrogates her own responses and her own behaviour, and she pushes the fan, and the listener, to do the same.’





Hucklow Summer School, 15-22 August 2025: 'Finding Our Religion: Being Unitarian in the 21st Century'

"In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity" – Peter Meiderlin

As we mark 30 years of Summer School (originally known as Religious Education Summer School) in 2025 we will turn our attention to the question of what it means to be religious, as progressive people of faith, at this moment in history. During the week, through daily talks and in-depth engagement groups, we will have a chance to examine, explore, reclaim, and affirm our religious identity as Unitarians and Free Christians, in this historic and radical faith tradition which upholds unity and embraces diversity. What would it look like for us – individually and collectively – to move beyond the spiritual 'pick-n-mix' and take our religion more seriously? How might we deepen our spirituality, develop theological and philosophical literacy, engage wholeheartedly with tradition, and allow ourselves to be transformed by our personal and communal religious practice? Can we discern and articulate a way of being unapologetically religious that helps us to live well, here and now, and build a better world for future generations? Join us as we tackle this theme and celebrate our 30th anniversary.

Hucklow Summer School is an annual Unitarian religious education gathering held each August at the Nightingale

Centre, Great Hucklow, in the Peak District (with a limited parallel programme accessible online). Summer School focuses on matters of religion and spirituality and intends to draw out and develop the potential of all participants. We aim to provide a balanced programme, offering a rich mix of activities for both the heart and head, and a variety of optional sessions showcasing activities which participants might "take home" and try out in their own communities. We also ensure that there are plenty of opportunities for relaxed fellowship and fun during the week. Summer School brings Unitarians together and allows them to get to know each other deeply and form lasting connections.

Each person is part of an engagement group which meets for two hours each day to explore a given theme. This year's options are:

- A: 'The Words we Speak Become the House we Live In': Constructing a Contemporary Unitarian Identity' with Danny Crosby and Arek Malecki
- B: 'Our Religious Toolkit: Equipping Ourselves to Face Life's Complexities and Thrive' with Michael Allured and Christina Smith
- C: 'The Religious Life: Integrating Our Faith and Daily Living' with Jane Blackall and Charlotte Chanteloup
- D: 'Reclaiming Ritual and Exploring

Ancient Wisdom' with Kate Dean and Rita Woditsch

- E: (online only) 'The Flame and the Chalice: Discovering our True Self in Sacred Community' with Lizzie Kingston-Harrison and Rob Oulton
- F: (online only) 'The Great and Fiery Force': Getting to the Heart of Unitarian Spiritual Practice' with Laura Dobson and Stephanie Bisby

Applications are due by 22 April 2025. A deposit of £100 is required for residential participants. Full payment of £90 is required for online participants. The balance will be due on 30 June 2025.

Adult (Standard Rate, Residential): £640
Adult (Supporter Rate, Residential): £720
Adult (Champion Rate, Residential): £800
Adult (Online Programme): £90

There is also a children's programme led by Claire Ayers and Tim Harrison.

Visit the Hucklow Summer School website at www.hucklowsummerschool.co.uk for more information and to apply. Please do not let a shortage of money prevent you from attending. Some bursaries are available to help with the cost (and donations to the Hucklow Summer School bursary fund are always welcome). We encourage you to seek support from other potential funding sources – please contact us as soon as possible if you are likely to need assistance with funding.



Getting to Know You... Pat Gregory



I am a passionate grower of organic vegetables and flowers on my very small allotment in West London which

has an abundance of nature spirits. It is central to my spiritual life and one that I will never take for granted. It keeps me grounded when life gets too chaotic and gives me joy when I least expect it. I also love to feed people so being able to share the harvest is a real blessing.

For many years I worked at a community centre in Hammersmith. It was a challenging but really fulfilling job where I was privileged to meet with people from many backgrounds, cultures and beliefs. They shared their lives, loves and problems and although they appeared different, they all had one thing in common – the need to belong. When I retired, I really missed this sense of community and the feeling of belonging.

Even though I had grown up in a religion hating family I had a sense of being much more than just this body, so I had a strong desire to seek the divine. I had attended many church services, studied the Course of Miracles, joined Quaker meetings, been on numerous Buddhist retreats and had a short spell with Scientology until they decided I should leave! I had not encountered the Unitarians but was curious.

I first visited the Kensington Unitarians in 2018 with my husband John who is also part of the congregation. It was a Sunday service led by Sarah Tinker who was minister at the time. The week before I had been to an evening of chanting at St James Church in Piccadilly and whilst there, I picked up a flyer advertising Interfaith One Light Gatherings which were being held monthly at Essex Church. I had walked past this very interesting building many times and I became drawn to find out more about what was going on inside.

My first impression of the Sunday service was a sense of lightness and care. I felt refreshed by the lack of hierarchy that I associated with many church services and the congregation were welcoming and inclusive and there was a keen sense of social justice. I felt at home and relaxed.

Since then, I have attended regularly and feel so grateful to our minister Jane for keeping the congregation together especially during lockdown. We now have a thriving hybrid community which has enabled many more people to connect and share their lives wherever they are. I also love the online Heart and Soul Contemplative Spiritual Gatherings which I attend on Friday evenings. These have become such an important part of my life and have allowed me to be more open and unafraid of showing my vulnerability. I now look forward to attending the Hucklow Summer School for the first time this year.

I give thanks to this place of peace and the congregation. It is what church is all about.



How to become a member

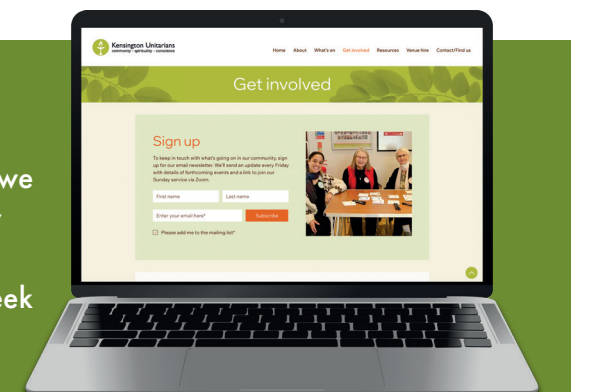
Membership is about affirming your personal commitment to this community and the Unitarian ethos. Each member is a vital and valued part of this church and its mission and its work in the world. Membership does not depend on your financial contribution to the work of the church (though of course we are very grateful for your regular donations, which help to make possible the ongoing work of the congregation, particularly during these economically challenging times).

If you are relatively new to this community, we ask you to attend and engage with our Sunday services or other activities for three months (in-person or online) before applying to join, so that you can get to know the congregation, develop a sense of belonging, and discern whether it is right for you. New members are formally approved by the committee and personally welcomed by the minister and chair at our annual membership service. Please contact our minister if you think you would like to join the church this year.

If you are already a member of this church, we ask you to re-confirm your membership each year, ahead of our membership service and AGM which takes place in spring (27 April at 12.30pm). Thank you for your support!

Stay in the loop...

If you would like to be kept informed about upcoming events we encourage you to sign up for our weekly email bulletin. Every Friday afternoon we send out an update with a Zoom link for the Sunday's service and reminders about what's on in the week ahead (and forthcoming events you might like to sign up for). Sign up via our website: www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk



Visit from Heart of London Threshold Singers

On 24 November 2024 we were delighted to be joined by the Heart of London Threshold Singers for a service reflecting on the threshold between life and death.

The founder and director of the choir, Natacha Ledwidge, spoke to us of their activities: ‘Our choir is now ten years old. We sing when invited at bedside in hospices, hospital wards, private homes, remembrance services... and also at other more joyful Thresholds such as weddings and baby blessings. We are all volunteers and sing for free, though occasional donations toward choir costs are welcome! We choose songs to respond to the client’s musical taste, spiritual leanings, feeling into the moment what song may be most needed. Our repertoire is around 50 songs now! We invite people to relax deeply and even fall asleep if they wish, and if they do, this feels like we are doing our job really well! Most of the songs we offer are composed by Choir members written to communicate peace, comfort, love and presence... Both for the dying and for anyone going through a crisis or difficult time. I have often found myself singing or humming a song to myself in difficult situations... it’s so soothing.’

We closed the service by inviting everyone to join in with a responsive reading on living and dying:



‘Living and Dying’ by Jane Blackall

Spirit of Life, God of All Love, help us to face our human predicament, and come to terms with the knowledge that our lives will end someday. To deny death is to deny life; may we live honestly, courageously, and wholeheartedly, knowing that death will be our life’s completion.

Grant us awareness that our time is limited, though its span is not yet known, that we may make the most of each moment and relish life’s journey to the very end. We do not know for certain what lies beyond the threshold of life and death; may we come to accept this mystery, and appreciate the here and now.

Encourage us to prepare ourselves – practically, emotionally, and spiritually – that we might be more ready to meet death, whenever it comes for us. This is the time for us to put things right and deal with unfinished business; may we make the most of the time we have left, living wisely and well.

Awaken in us a love of righteousness; call our hearts to truth and beauty. Remind us of what matters most, so that we do not fritter our time away. Each day is a fresh chance to love and be loved; may we reach out to others, building loving connections, bringing compassion and kindness wherever we go.

Help us to be good companions to others as they move towards the end of life, offering our presence and attention, and showing up for each other as best we can. It is said that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’; may we also be the ‘village’ that surrounds each soul on their dying journey, and cares for their caregivers too.

Spirit of Life, God of All Love, bless us in our living and in our dying. Grant us the courage and clear vision we need to embrace reality. This is our human condition; these are the days we are given; may we use them in the service of love, justice, and peace. Amen.

Nia Dance

Holistic movement and Dance at Essex Church

Rediscover the joy of movement and the meaning of true fitness! Nia is holistic movement for body and soul. It is an expressive movement practice promoting fitness, creativity, and wellbeing. Nia classes combine the grace and expressiveness of dance, the power and explosiveness of martial arts, and the wisdom and stillness of yoga and tai chi. Nia provides a holistic workout and leaves you feeling energised, relaxed and centred. It suits any level of fitness, age, and experience, working from where you are now. To find out about Nia see: www.nianow.com

Nia Dance takes place in-person on Fridays from 12.30-1.30pm. £10 per session (or £40 for 5 classes). Or online on Wednesdays at 12.30pm. For more information contact Sonya Leite on 020 7371 1674 or email sleite@hotmail.co.uk

Finding Your Voice – Monthly Singing Classes

16 March, 13 April & 18 May, 12.30-1.15pm
(Sunday lunchtime, once a month)

These relaxed and fun singing classes are for anyone who is prepared to open their mouth and make a sound. Using a few simple exercises you’ll gain joy and confidence in singing. Classes are led by Margaret, an experienced and encouraging teacher, who has worked as a professional singer all her adult life. Drop in to one of these free and friendly sessions at Essex Church.



One Light Gatherings

11 March, 8 April & 13 May, 7.30pm (Second Tuesday of the month, meeting at Essex Church)

Onelight Gathering is a welcoming circle whose sacred lineage is heart and soul connection, open to any faith or none. It is an offering from the compassionate heart to nourish and restore you. There is singing, readings, sharings, and a creative altar-building ceremony on universal themes that touch all lives. You will find warmth, sustenance, kindness, inspiration and encouragement. Free (donations welcome to cover costs of materials used, snacks and to offer half to the church). For more details contact Alison: contact@onelightgathering.co.uk

Kensington Choir

Monday evenings 7-8.35pm, Essex Church

The choir is a 30+ strong SATB four-part harmony choir based in West London. The singers all share a passion for singing and enjoy all the aspects that come with being a part of a choir; well-being, improved breathing, focus on musicality, friendship, delving into historical music periods and singing soulful music. Kensington Choir repertoire is vast and varied and sometimes includes classical pieces, spirituals and Christmas music. Join us to sing an eclectic mix of music, meet new people, and have fun!

Try a FREE taster session! Term dates and membership information on the website (www.kensingtonchoir.com) or email roseanna@kensingtonchoir.com

Poetry Group

5 March, 2 April & 7 May, 7-8.30pm
(Wednesday evening, once a month)

Our poetry sharing group meets in-person on the first Wednesday in each month (with a winter break – there will be no gathering in January). Bring along a favourite poem to read on any subject. Maybe it’ll be a poem you have written yourself, one you’ve just discovered, or a poem you’ve known for many years. Let us know if you plan to come and send a copy of your choices to Brian (brian.ellis@outlook.com) so they can be printed for everyone.



Poem from Marianne Harvey-Bertrand

This Too Shall Pass

At a pride of place, but no longer really seen,
A feather which has been hanging on the doorknob,
Catches my eyes away from the television.

It must have belonged to some majestic great bird
Revered by the ancients, a sea eagle perhaps,
Now a Navajo artifact with turquoise beads.

I see evil welcoming itself in the Black House,
Decomposing our world into rot within hours,
Ripping our earth of promises that it could heal still,

That we could quell the wrath of fire, the famines,
Droughts, floods, discrimination, war, genocides,
Elons, felons, oligarchs, magalomaniacs.

That feather was given to me out of love, hope,
A ritual of goodwill for sentient beings.
“Feather, Spirit of Light and Love what will it take?

My feather, faithful to itself, transcends all time,
All questions, all prayers, all songs and all poems.
“This too shall pass, for that is the way of the world”.

Three Poems by Brian Ellis

Under a Tree

a summer shower heavy
spontaneous and I run
under a tree where soon
rain drips through the leaves
and cats; tabbies, Siamese,
moggies, and dogs; terriers,
Great Danes, mongrels and all
fall from the sky wet as I
and just as soon disappear
as the clouds pass by leaving
a bedraggled ginger cat
to sit beside me to who in
conversation I address a miaow
“all right mate but that fairly
threw it down girls and boys”
it replied, and slowly
wandered off

Your Poem

you read
your poem
in your voice
a tongue
not mine
but I sense
you and your
poem live
where I also
am alive

Dancer

held within a fallen yew
in a moment of dance
she was carved free

leg high arms reaching
balanced she stands
lithe but still until light slips
along her polished grain

then she moves
leaping with the rhythms
of the earth

FUSE 2025

Bookings have opened for the District's annual Festival of Unitarians in the South East (FUSE), to be held at The Friars monastery and retreat centre at Aylesford in Kent on the weekend of 27-29 June 2025. All are welcome.

This will be our third and final year at this venue, so if you haven't had the chance to attend and experience this historic location – don't miss the opportunity! For our full programme, booking and further details please visit: www.LDPAunitarians.org/fuse2025

What's on offer? A rich mix of music and song, prayer and meditation, talks, workshops, socializing, nature walks, and a children's programme, all at this historic friary.

What's the theme? Captivating the Peacemaker. Our theme speaker is James Frey Croft, a cleric, activist and storyteller who will base our weekend on building communities and justice grassroots movements. Workshops are centred around re-energizing ourselves and inspiring us and others to join our congregations in justice work and peacemaking.

There are 50 bedrooms available this year. These are mainly in the original Tudor guest houses, where there is now WiFi. Allocation of rooms is on a first come, first served basis, with only a very limited number on the ground floor with en suite bathrooms. So let us know if this is a requirement when you make your booking. The bedrooms are comfortable, and the food is good, but the centre does not meet full hotel standards. There are hotels and bed and breakfast in Aylesford and nearby Maidstone if you'd prefer. Booking closes on 15 May. This is six weeks before the start of FUSE.



Pocket FUSE: 'Walking Each Other Home'

Back in the autumn we hosted the first 'Pocket FUSE' event on behalf of the LDPA (our district association). This day workshop was led by Stacy Makishi from New Unity on the theme of 'Walking Each Other Home' and featured story, poetry, meditation and ritual to explore depth and deep connection. Thanks to Hannah King for these photos of the event.



Unitarian Meditation Opportunities



All this is too good to keep to myself... Besides the many wonderful opportunities with Kensington Unitarians I found my way to the Thursday evening weekly online Unitarian meditation sessions. It's called, 'Together in Meditation'. You too can attend for free. For more details email Lizzie Kingston Harrison: ekingston@unitarian.org.uk

In addition there are the three times a year Meditation Fellowship residential weekends run every year at Sarum College in Salisbury, Wiltshire in May and November. (See photo.) This year it's there 16th-18th May and 7th-9th November. Between 11th-13th July this year it's also running in the Lake District at Glenthorne Quaker Centre, Grasmere, Cumbria in the north of England. The weekends cost £275, with a required deposit of £100. Booking has opened for May. Contact Alf Withington (Booking Secretary) Email: alfwithington@gmail.com.

Beautiful old Cathedral Close, Salisbury is where I was both November 2023 and 2024. In one of the sessions we did a walking meditation. Firstly, together we stepped consciously aware of our senses as we made our way to the cathedral cloisters. Our task was to walk around the square of them seven times. I experienced it most visually and got distracted at one point when I observed a flyer about climbing the cathedral tower. I temporarily stopped the meditation and went off and bought a ticket to join the tour and gradually climb the 332 steps to the bottom of the steeple with a guide on the Monday morning as I was staying an extra night. It's from up there that I took the photo.

I'm not very new to meditation. I first came across Mindful Meditation in about 2006 when I did a 6 or 8 week course at City Lit adult education college in central London; it filled the bill in enabling me to learn to put into practice an observation I had worked

out in my twenties or so, years before. At that point I wrote a poem I called, 'Now Is All There Is.'

Now Is All There Is

*I stopped living
In view of the future,
Always waiting for what would be -
Life as a wife,
Life as a mother
And then I noticed
Some times never come.
I am who I am.
Life has begun,
The only truth is now.*

However the realisation didn't bring me clarity of how to live in this way. I'm going to tell you some ways that have guided me. And how it benefits me is that it gets me to Stop and have a physical rest during the day and mentally cast aside my worries. Overall I feel calmer and more focused in my life.

The free app, 'Insight Timer' continues to be an invaluable tool for my meditation practices. On it there are oodles of led meditations on numerous themes. In fact, I went on to pay the quite modest annual fee some months ago to access the Plus meditations and courses of

various lengths. However, I have been quite on and off about using it.

So coming up to The Meditation Fellowship weekend in Salisbury, daily using the Insight Timer app I followed Ciara Conlon's 10 day course, 'How To Create A Solid Meditation Habit' to enable me to be ready. It worked! Afterwards, having been decidedly greedy there I took up another 10 day course, 'Hungry For More: Overcome Food Addiction' by Julie Reisler, which was another worthwhile experience. Since that weekend there last November I have kept up a twice daily meditation practice most days. I practically always listen on Insight Timer. As recommended I usually do a short led one when I wake up and I generally do another when I come in from being out. In fact, I have various courses of theirs on the go. In addition, if I can't sleep I do a Yoga Nidra. My favourite version is with Mary Maddux. It's about 18 minutes long. It nearly always sends me to sleep. However, most meditation is for being awake.

*Words by Carolyn Appleby.
Photograph: Sarum College, Salisbury,
from the Cathedral spire.*



Minister's Reflection: 'Just a Person'

From the service on 20 October 2024.
Join us for services each Sunday, 11am-noon
– or catch up on our YouTube channel at
www.youtube.com/@kensingtonunitarians

Excerpt from reading 'Ke Motho Fela' by Art Lester:

When I first went to Botswana in 1982, I struggled with learning Setswana. I didn't ever get very fluent in it, but I could just about get around. I found the major thing to be a matter of learning those phrases which were most used as people massaged the complexity of the day—for even in a rural village with little other than huts and goats, life is complex.

A phrase I often heard in all sorts of contexts was: "Ke motho fela." I understood the words, but I confess not the significance of them. If you asked someone for a loan to buy mealy meal, they would say, "Ke motho fela." If you asked which church they went to, "Ke motho fela." If you needed some advice, even from the chief, they would say: "Ke motho fela." It means, simply, "I'm just a person."

Being just a person meant that you were not unusual in any important way. You weren't rich, and so you wore old clothes to tribal courts, even if, like Madame Kabileng, you had a new Mazda pickup truck stashed away behind your rondavel. Being just a person meant that you weren't arrogant about your beliefs or your opinions, and that—at least—you paid lip service to the notion that everyone is equal. I won't try to claim that this was really

true—many people held private high opinions of themselves. And I won't necessarily agree that a kind of mutually enforced humility is the best way to live your life. But I did find it restful to be among people who at least valued the existence of ordinary personhood.

Somehow calling it "just a person" misidentifies just how important the task of personhood really is. We seem to be faced here with yet another paradox: how can it be that something which everybody has the ability to be can be a high calling? And yet it is just that: a high calling. Think now, just for a moment. Look back at the lives you have lived and remember someone who had a special gift of personhood. They might not have been successful in worldly terms, may not have had letters after their names or titles in front of it, may have been poor or plain or even stupid in academic terms. But they will have had—and more importantly—revealed to you something of this gift. Can you remember someone like that? If you can, give them a moment's thanks and admiration. It could be that they have left us something of profound importance, without which we would be much the poorer. And if there has never been anyone like that in your life... it's time to start looking again.



As I mentioned earlier in the service, the words of my first minister, Art Lester, stuck with me for many years. 'Just a Person'. This phrase has come to be a shorthand in my mind for a whole cluster of ideas about that much-misunderstood virtue that we're exploring today: humility.

Too often, I think, we tend to think of humility in quite a miserable light. If someone were to suggest that we need to show humility it might be taken as saying that we should think less of ourselves, we shouldn't get ideas above our station, we should get back in our box. We might feel chastised by it. Imagery around humility often shows humble people literally grovelling or making themselves small.

The theologian Ronald Rolheiser describes this common-yet-mistaken view of humility well, I think. He writes: 'Humility should never be confused, as it often is, with a wounded self-image, with an excessive reticence, with timidity and fear, or with an overly sensitive self-awareness. Too common is the notion that a humble person is one who is self-effacing to a fault, who deflects praise (even when it's deserved), who is too shy to trust opening himself or herself in intimacy, or who is so fearful or self-conscious and worried about being shamed so as to never step forward and offer his or her gifts to the community. These can make for a gentle and self-effacing person, but because we are denigrating ourselves when we deny our own giftedness, such humility is false, and deep-down we know it, and so this often makes for someone

who nurses some not-so-hidden angers and is prone to being passive aggressive.'

Words from Ronald Rolheiser – a helpful take on what humility is not. But if that's not it – what is? The most succinct take on the matter I've found comes from Wayne Teasdale – an interesting character, a monk who combined Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist spirituality – Wayne Teasdale simply wrote: 'Humility is, most fundamentally, a relationship of truth with ourselves.' And Ronald Rolheiser also made something of the etymological connection between humility and humus – the earth, the soil, the ground – when he said 'the most humble person you know is the person who's the most grounded, that is, the person who knows they're not the centre of the earth but also knows that they aren't a second-rate piece of dirt either.' Another take on it is in the words on your order of service (which are also on the website) from Janis Abrahms Spring: 'Humility is the disposition to view oneself as basically equal with any other human being even if there are objective differences in physical appearance, wealth, social skills, intelligence, or other resources... It is the ability to keep one's talents and accomplishments in perspective, to have a sense of self-acceptance, an understanding of one's imperfections, and to be free from arrogance and low self-esteem.'

Perhaps the virtue of humility is one of course-correction – finding a middle way – if we're in danger of becoming either excessively egotistic and self-important OR excessively self-deprecating and lacking in confidence – the virtue of humility might call us back to this 'relationship of truth with ourselves' that Wayne Teasdale describes. It reminds us that we are no more special – but crucially no less special – than anybody else with whom we share this planet. It is a corrective to an overly inflated or an overly depressed view of ourselves and our worth. We're just a person. But at the same time – what a thing it is to be a person! – as Art Lester said, it's a high calling.

I don't know if any of you saw the Wim Wenders film, 'Perfect Days', which came out this year? Absolutely wonderful film. The central character lives a simple life, he works cleaning public toilets in Tokyo, and he is such an extraordinary portrait of humility. He sees all things, all people, as

equally important, and he goes about his work with diligence and care, as if it really matters, without really engaging in worldly status games. I can't do the film justice – I hope you find a way to see it if you haven't already – but it came to mind when I read this piece by a UU minister, Barbara F. Meyers, written in 2007 (I'm going to share an extended extract as I was taken with a number of resonances):

'When I first began attending a Unitarian Universalist church... I eagerly soaked in

"A humble person's self-esteem is an accurate, not over-estimated, not underestimated view of his or her abilities and worthiness. One can stand one's ground when challenged, cope with failures, and not be overly proud of one's successes."

everything new that I was learning. One Sunday I remember distinctly was a lay-led service by a dearly beloved elderly couple who had been members for a long time. They had just been on a pilgrimage to Japan, where they visited representatives of a number of progressive Japanese religions, and their service was a report of their adventures. The religion they spoke of that I particularly remember was a religion named Ittoen founded in 1904. Members of this religion seek to live a life having no possessions and in humble service to others... their chief religious ritual practice is called Rokuman Gyogan, and consists of humbling oneself by cleaning toilets. They believe this humble act purifies them for the future of the world without conflict.'

Meyers continues: 'There was something so striking about this story that I remember it clearly nearly 20 years later. (We should have all of our sermons remembered for 20 years!) I think it was the idea that doing one of the lowest most humble tasks in

life, cleaning toilets, could be a religious act, and that this could prepare us for world peace. At first I thought "You've got to be kidding!" Surely, cleaning toilets couldn't be a central religious ritual for a modern religion! This idea was vastly different from any religious thinking that I had been exposed to. But they weren't kidding. Doing a lowly task can be part of a religious practice – allowing one to demonstrate humility. I think this was this "radical" idea that struck me so clearly when I first heard it. A person who has humility, a humble person, is generally regarded as unpretentious and modest, someone quiet, self-effacing, understated, someone who doesn't think or act like he or she is better or more important than others.... A humble person's self-esteem is an accurate, not over-estimated, not underestimated view of his or her abilities and worthiness. One can stand one's ground when challenged, cope with failures, and not be overly proud of one's successes.'

So what does humility require of us? What would it look like if we were to live with humility? If we really believe we are 'just a person' (and so is everyone else) then how might that show up in our behaviours and our interactions with those around us as we go about our daily lives?

Rev. Clay Nelson, who was Unitarian minister in Auckland New Zealand, made the observation that 'humility understands that the delights, pains and needs of others are as important as our own.' One insight I take from his words is that we need to cultivate awareness of our impact on other people, and their impact on us too of course, and weigh up our competing needs and preferences. There's a balance to be struck – it's not OK to insist on getting our own way regardless of the cost to others – but nor is it OK to be a doormat who always gives way to more forceful personalities (or to people who supposedly have a higher social status). I almost want to call it pathological selflessness.

If we truly believe that our time, energy, and contributions are worth just as much as other people's – no more, no less – then surely we should honour our agreements with others (as far as humanly possible). This is perhaps a subset of a larger category – that we should honour the social contract – not consider ourselves

to be too big (or too small) for the rules of social engagement to apply to us, not go looking for reasons why we're an special exception, why we don't need to hold up our end of the deal. A classic example of this is timekeeping – I'm sure you've heard various stories, as I have, of big-shot superstars who turn up late to their own gigs, so that fans who have paid a fortune for tickets are faced with dilemmas – missing the last bus home, facing babysitting dilemmas, or even finding that (when the star eventually shows up) the long-awaited gig ends up being 15 minutes long as the venue pulls the plug (because of a local authority noise curfew that everybody knew about ahead of time). I suppose the assumption is that the superstar sees themselves as more important than the little people and doesn't care about their impact on others. But I bet most of us can think of situations in our own lives where we've been messed around, let down or left hanging – when people have reneged on commitments, inconvenienced us in ways large or small, apparently for no good reason – or, if we're honest, times when we've let others down in turn. Humility requires us to keep an eye on this – to be self-reflective and to take feedback from trusted others – to keep learning, growing, doing better – but not getting so mired in critique and self-doubt that we are unable to act or make a mark in the world.

And I think that's an important thing to note, in closing: Humility does not mean dismissing your own value, your own capabilities, your own potential. Remember what Wayne Teasdale said: 'Humility is, most fundamentally, a relationship of truth with ourselves. ' That includes an honest self-assessment of your gifts as well as your limitations. And some of us may really need to hear that reminder again and again. The reminder that we matter as much as anyone. Don't think 'ah well, nobody will notice' if you don't turn up to a gathering, or you don't step up to contribute to a project, or you don't speak up when you have something to say. Please don't sit on the sidelines of life; don't dismiss the value of whatever contribution, large or small, that is uniquely yours to make. One way or another, we all have a part to play in sustaining our community, and in making the world a better place.

70th Birthday Wishes

In December we wished our former Minister Rev. Sarah Tinker a very happy 70th birthday - and celebrated with cake - at our festive lunch.



I want to close with a short prayer for humility. These words are adapted from Alex Jensen.

Spirit of Life, God of All Love, we find you in those humble places. The quiet, still spaces where we find we are held in a love greater than ourselves.

*You are the wind in each breath;
The fire in each soul; The subtle heartbeat of creation all around us.*

Your love is unimposing yet firm and steadfast, present to all those who would know your peace.

You challenge us in moments of arrogance and move us to listen deeply when we fail – as we always do—to see the fuller picture.

You find the gentle words to speak life into us and hold us close when all else around us and within us feels broken. You remind us that we are loved and saved just as we are.

Remind us of who we truly are. And help us to see you – grant us the wisdom to listen for you – in those unlikely places – in the small, humble, everyday moments where you are to be found. Amen.

Contact Kensington Unitarians

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WhatsApp Group

Our InTouch WhatsApp Group is a gentle space for checking in and encouraging each other. If you're a member or friend of the congregation and would like to be added to the group just get in touch with Jane (see details, left)

