



Newcastle upon Tyne Unitarians
(Church of the Divine Unity)
Ellison Place
Newcastle upon Tyne
Tyne and Wear
NE1 8XG
info@newcastleunitarians.org.uk
Tel: 0191 232 2348
Mobile: 07506 255 731

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Hello

Updates on what's happening at Newcastle upon Tyne Unitarians – from January and February 2022

Here's the service summary letter from Newcastle upon Tyne Unitarians for January and February 2022 – and welcome to the New Year! The electrical inspections at the church have finished, so from 6 March 2022 we will be offering the option for people who are not on Zoom to join in services by coming to the Turner Hall. We will set up a screen and projector to show the online Zoom services. We will be having these until the end of April 2022, as this is what we have arranged with our worship leaders, and also, due to the need to balance keeping the meeting space warm with keeping it well ventilated and giving everyone chance to space out, we will need to be able to meet in the main Church Hall before we can all gather in person once more.

We are asking anyone who comes to the building to view our Zoom services to do the following:

- Please call on: 07506 255 731 or email: info@newcastleunitarians.org.uk in advance to say that you are coming, so that we have an idea of numbers.
- Please take a Lateral Flow Test before travelling to the church for services and only join us for worship or other events if your result is negative. If you need one we can supply them, please ask for one the week before or arrive early enough (30 minutes in advance) to take one.
- Wearing a face covering or shield is a personal choice, but we ask people to do so indoors, particularly if you are sitting 2m or less away from someone. This does not apply if you are eating and drinking, or if you have a medical exemption from wearing a mask.
- Within the building, please maintain a safe social distance from people you do not have regular social contact with of around 1-2m.
- Please keep your hands sanitised.

- If you have any symptoms of Covid-19 or a positive test, do not attend events at the building. Please follow government guidance to stay at home, self-isolate and arrange a test (more details here: <https://tinyurl.com/3vtnzbyj>).
- If you test positive for Covid-19 during the week after attending an event here, please call us on: 07506 255 731 and inform us so that we can let others know, and also provide you with any support you may need from us. We promise that we will not pass on your identity to anyone we contact – we will only say that there has been a confirmed positive case among people who attended the event.

As ever, whilst we're not all meeting in person, we will keep in touch with everyone by phone calls and letters, and I will keep everyone informed about what's happening. I'll be sending out these letters summarising what's happening with services and other aspects of our community life, and offering excerpts from services which I hope you will find interesting.

If you want to get in touch, please call on: 07506 255 731 or email: info@newcastleunitarians.org.uk, I'm happy to discuss things anytime.

In fellowship,

Louise Reeve
Chairperson, Newcastle upon Tyne Unitarians

January 2022 Service Highlights

2 January 2022 – New Year's Service – 'Lighting the Chalice'

Louise Reeve introduced the New Year with a discussion of our beloved Unitarian symbol, the chalice. Here is her address:

Address: "Lighting the Chalice"

At this still very dark time of the year, with its long evenings, when we look to the fresh start promised by the New Year and the promise of longer days, the chalice is a good place to start! It is the symbol of our religious and spiritual tradition. I find it fascinating, because, like so many symbols, it can mean many things at once, to many different people. We've heard earlier that to Rev. Charles Joy, its cross-like shape, and the implicit reference to the chalice used in communion services, was a link to Unitarianism's Christian origins, but also that it is distinct from traditional Christian views, and contains within itself the inherent freedom for its followers to carve out their own path.

Rev. Sue Woolley, in her excellent book "Together in Diversity", notes: "The chalice lighting was the one Unitarian ritual I asked about, about which there were no negative or even ambivalent comments. Some saw it as: 'an essential aspect of every service; a very meaningful, symbolic act'. It was valued as: 'a visible and uplifting boundary to our special time together by some, and for others 'the connection it (and associated chalice readings) gives me with other Unitarians'. One person commented: 'Chalice lighting is an essential ritual in terms of making our services feel 'religious' ...and also in terms of reminding the congregation of our connection to something bigger'.

When I became Unitarian – or at least, when I became part of a Unitarian community, I have probably always been a bit Unitarian – I was struck by how the chalice is both material and immaterial. The chalice itself and candle are physically present. They can be held, grasped, their weight felt in the holder's hands. The flame dances, flickering, ever-changing and immaterial. As we ourselves are beings possessed of bodies and spirits, so we too exist in both the physical world, and the world of the spirit.

Obviously, the chalice is a symbol of light, both physically present in the candle's flame, and spiritual. I was once asked to explain "what does Unitarianism mean to you?" during a city centre Churches Together week, in which churches across Newcastle opened their doors to all who wanted to come in and attend events specially put on during Lent to explain more about our individual beliefs. I replied that to me, Unitarianism is about the search for spiritual truth.

All human beings on Earth are united by our essential humanity, our capacity for spirituality, that spark within us that seeks answers. As we are all different,

both as individuals and as human societies and cultures, so our religious and spiritual traditions differ, often radically. Yet, all of us are human, and some truths seem to me to be close to universal. Nearly all spiritual paths seem to converge on the importance of treating others as you would be treated, that justice must be done, that the strong should not trample the weak, that we should not make our happiness and fulfilment conditional upon material gain, and, increasingly, I think, acknowledging our role as stewards of our previous Earth, the only home we have and one we must take care of. Thus, for me, the chalice symbolises the universal human potential for enlightenment, and our human right to be free to search for truth.

Laura Dobson, who some of you may know, comments on the importance of fire and flame in spiritual practice, saying:

“We light our chalice at the beginning of every service to signify that we are creating sacred space. The act of lighting our chalice connects us with other Unitarians all over the world who start worship in the same way. The chalice cup signifies the cup of community that holds us together. The chalice flame also symbolises our community; a flame is dynamic and changing, and it needs three elements:

Fuel – material things such as a building, chairs, our sound system, money, our laptops and smartphones, webcams, paper so that we can send letters to people who aren’t able to join us online – all the physical things that we need to sustain our community.

Heat – the spark of intelligence, the warmth of human connection, even the friction of honest disagreement! All the thought-provoking and moving moments that contribute to the energy and vitality of the life of our community, as we support each other on our spiritual journeys.

Air – the element of air is associated with the Spirit, the same word – *ruach* – means both ‘breath’ and ‘spirit’ in Hebrew. Inspiration, the breathing in of that invisible element of Spirit – creating deep moments of sacred connection in meditation, in prayer, and in listening to each other. With the element of air, we also give people the space to develop their own spiritual path, free from the restrictions of dogma, whilst being held in the warmth of human community.”

In the American UUA tradition, this cleansing role of fire plays a very important part in a common New Year ritual – the Burning Bowl, or Fire Communion. We are going to have a simple version of this ceremony after our next hymn, for which you will need your candle, or your pen and paper. This is a ritual held on or near the first Sunday in January, when many Unitarian Universalist congregations gather to bid farewell to the old year, and to release it, then to welcome in the New Year. In the words of Rev. Elizabeth Harding, “The fire communion separates the end of the year from the beginning, helping us to put in perspective the joys and sorrows, the changes

and transitions, the ups and downs of the year. It's a celebration of the calendar's year's end and year's beginning."

In the traditional ceremony of the burning bowl, people are invited to write down words, or a phrase, to sum up what they wish to release before entering the New Year. They then come forward to burn that piece of paper.

I am adapting this for our online worship as follows – we will not be setting fire to paper in our homes! Instead, I will invite everyone who has a candle or tealight to light it. We will have a few moments of contemplation, wherein I will ask everyone to think about what you would like to release about the year just gone. If you are using a pen and paper instead of a candle, please write this down.

We will then hold what we wish to release in our minds, and either extinguish our candle, or tear the piece of paper in half.

Then, we will take a few moments to contemplate our hope for the year to come. If you are using a pen and paper instead of a candle, please write this down. We will then either light our candles, or hold the paper in front of us, and contemplate what we hope for, for our future."

9 January - Rev. Sue Woolley

Rev. Sue Woolley presented a service on the "Seven Pathways to Wisdom", exploring Richard Rohr's work on what wisdom means and ways to reach it. She included this alternative Lord's Prayer:

"Alternative Lord's Prayer

Spirit of Life and Love, here and everywhere,
May we be aware of your presence in our lives.
May our world be blessed.
May our daily needs be met,
And may our shortcomings be forgiven,
As we forgive those of others.
Give us the strength to resist wrong-doing,
The inspiration and guidance to do right,
And the wisdom to know the difference.
We are your hands in the world; help us to grow.
May we have compassion for all living beings,
And receive whatever life brings,
With courage and trust. Amen."

16 January – Diana Bebb

Diana presented a service on the topic of “Fear”, looking at how fear can be useful and part of ourselves. It included a reading from Sarah Wilson’s book: “First, We Make the Beast Beautiful”, an introduction to which can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vl7hYcUW4Y>

23 January – Rev. Paul Walker

Rev. Paul Walker joined us from Stockton Unitarians to present a service on “The Overvaluing of the Negative” and how we can change our focus, including a video from the University of California.

30 January – Joan Cook

Joan Cook led us in informative worship looking at Robert Burns’ life, in particular his views against slavery, and including this famous poem of his:

The Slave's Lament (1792)

“It was in sweet Senegal that my foes did me enthrall,
For the lands of Virginia,-ginia, O:
Torn from that lovely shore, and must never see it more;
And alas! I am weary, weary O:
Torn from that lovely shore, and must never see it more;
And alas! I am weary, weary O.

All on that charming coast is no bitter snow and frost,
Like the lands of Virginia,-ginia, O:
There streams for ever flow, and there flowers for ever blow,
And alas! I am weary, weary O:
There streams for ever flow, and there flowers for ever blow,
And alas! I am weary, weary O:

The burden I must bear, while the cruel scourge I fear,
In the lands of Virginia,-ginia, O;
And I think on friends most dear, with the bitter, bitter tear,
And alas! I am weary, weary O:
And I think on friends most dear, with the bitter, bitter tear,
And alas! I am weary, weary O.”

February 2022 Service Highlights

6 February 2022 – Louise Reeve and “A Celebration of Love”

Louise Reeve led this service as part of the ‘Celebration of Love’ initiative organised by the GA Weddings Lead, Rev. Melda Grantham. Here’s her address.

Address: “Love In The 21st Century”

This service is part of the ‘Celebration of Love and Weddings Initiative’ by Rev. Melda Grantham. Melda Grantham, the Weddings Lead for the General Assembly, recently invited all UK Unitarian congregations to take part in a survey of weddings and their role within our movement, and to take part in a ‘Celebration of Love’, a nationwide initiative which will take place between 25th January which marks *Dydd Santes Dwynwen*, the Welsh Patron Saint of Lovers and 14th February, which of course is St. Valentine’s Day. Melda hopes to repeat this next year, as we’ve been unable to do all that we wanted to do due to Covid, but the intention is that it will be an opportunity for congregations to invite couples who have been married in their buildings, along with their families, friends, people who are planning to get married, the local community, anyone, and everyone, to a special event which can take any form that you would like. We hope to take part in this in future.

As we’ve heard at the start, there are a huge number of different types of love. Hopefully, we will all experience at least some of them over the course of our human lifetimes. Next week, we will have a Valentine’s Day Miscellany, in which we will celebrate romantic love in particular.

I also want to talk now about romantic love. Partly because there are so many kinds of love... one could speak all morning on *philautia*, *philia*, and *agape*. And perhaps we will return to these kinds of love in future services. But now, as we approach spring, Imbolc, and Valentine’s Day, let us talk of romantic love: *ludus*, *eros*, and *pragma*!

Unitarians, famously, have campaigned for marriage equality, for the rights of same-sex couples to marry. Our Chief Officer at the time, Derek MacAuley, gave evidence in Parliament during the debate over the ‘Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill’ which became law in July 2013. One year earlier in 2012, our movement made history when Cross Street Unitarian Chapel in Manchester became the first place of worship to register for civil partnerships, and after the passing of the Same Sex Couples Bill, Ullet Road Unitarian Church in Liverpool conducted the first religious same-sex civil partnership in the UK.

What do I feel about this considerable achievement? Well, firstly I hope that at some point in the future, this congregation will be in a position to register our building as a place for same-sex marriage – this is something that has to be done as a separate action to registering for opposite-sex marriage. We

have not done it yet due to the impending sale of our building; currently, the URC church near our own church is the only site in Newcastle upon Tyne where same-sex couples can marry.

But secondly, I feel as though we have opened a previously closed door and walked out of a small room – only to find another room on the other side, containing many more closed doors we perhaps didn't realise were there!

Do we actually have marriage equality? Well, in England and Wales, you can marry someone of your gender, or the opposite gender. That's great, if you identify as male or female, whether that be as a cisgender man or woman, or transgender. But what if you don't? What if you are genderfluid, or non-binary? To clarify a few words I am using, the term 'Cisgender' refers to a person whose gender identity matches the sex — female or male — designated on their original birth certificate. 'Gender fluidity' refers to change over time in a person's gender expression or gender identity, or both, so that a genderfluid person is flexible in regard to the sex with which they identify. Someone who is non-binary does not identify as either exclusively male, or exclusively female.

In the UK at present, to marry, you must present yourself as male or female, regardless of whether that is your gender. Is this really equality? Or do we now need to open another closed door and let more light in?

Let us go further. Some American Universalists certainly have! They have created the UUPA society: Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness. They describe polyamory as: "The philosophy and practice of loving or relating intimately to more than one other person at a time, with honesty and integrity. By 'love', we mean here an intimate, romantic, stable, affectionate bond which a person has with another person, or a group of people. This bond usually, though not necessarily always, involves sex. Other terms often used for polyamory are responsible, ethical, or intentional non-monogamy..."

Polyamory is a general term covering a wide variety of possible relationships. The essential feature of all these styles is the realisation that it is possible to have multiple simultaneous love relationships in a context of openness, honesty, and integrity."

They comment: "Unitarian Universalists are drawn together by the shared need to discover our own truth rather than accepting any existing dogma. We come together to share our findings, but primarily we come together to share our questions. Is it any wonder that some of us also reject dogma and choose to live in the questions in the sexual and loving aspects of our lives? Many polyamorists practice, in diverse ways, a strong integration of sexuality and spirituality." Is this another door to be opened?

And what of people who are asexual, demisexual and aromantic? For those unfamiliar with these terms, an asexual person does not experience sexual attraction to anyone, an aromantic person does not experience romantic

attraction to other people, and a demisexual person can only experience sexual attraction after first developing a strong emotional bond with someone. One of my abiding memories of the 'Working On Our Welcome' LGBTQI awareness course for Unitarians and liberal religious people which I attended in 2018 was the empathy exercise in which we heard seven descriptions of different people – here are a few of them:

- Ali is approaching forty, studying part-time for a degree and working part-time for a charity, and their youngest child has recently started school. They are trans, and non-binary gendered.
- Zena has recently celebrated her fiftieth birthday, and works for a web design company. She is polyamorous and shares a house with her two partners, Peter and Steve.
- Jim is in his late twenties. He enjoys pub quizzes and has recently taken up pottery. He lives alone but spends a lot of time with his friends. Jim is asexual.

We were asked to think about what might make them feel comfortable or uncomfortable at the church, including: things they encounter before they arrive, as they enter the church, in the service, after the service, and at other activities and services. Are the doors of our congregations open to people whose sexual orientation does not match what we have traditionally thought sexual orientation looks like? How do we look through their eyes?

Sometimes, when you have a lot of doors to look at, you can feel very confused, as though you no longer know which way to go. It can even be tempting to stay where you are, or perhaps to turn back and flee through the door behind you, pulling it shut. We can find ourselves wondering: "If everything can be changed, what is certain anymore?" Our values may be called into question. Our unspoken beliefs suddenly need to be spoken about, and our language challenged. We may find ourselves shouting inside our heads "I didn't *mean* to cause any offence!" or even thinking of that excellent quote by Grandpa Simpson, as spoken to Homer: "I used to be with 'it', but then they changed what 'it' was. Now what I'm with isn't 'it' anymore, and what *is* 'it' seems weird and scary."

Or we may not. 'We' is a funny word. Who is this 'we'? Perhaps some of us are not thinking that. Perhaps some of us are thinking "About time!" or "Please, let me come here and be myself". Those unspoken assumptions can cut deep. I hope it is not oversharing to say that the unspoken assumption often reflected both in our society and sometimes within our religious life, that the highest aim of all human beings must be to be in a romantic relationship – and its corollary, that if you're not, there's something a bit strange about you – can make life very difficult if you happen to be female, forty, child-free and unmarried. Yet I do feel welcome here.

We say “All are welcome here”. I think that to truly celebrate love, we need to realise that that’s a journey, not a box to be ticked off, considered to be ‘done’! and that we don’t need to do any more. As we explore our own human nature, we need to continually think about what who “we all” are, and how we expand and grow our communities. Growth can hurt, but if we don’t grow, we die. So, let us live together, in love.”

13 February 2022 – Ben MacLeod and “Valentine’s Day Miscellany”

Continuing our focus on love and marriage, Ben led the congregation in celebrating Valentine’s Day with various readings, poems and stories.

20 February 2022 – Chris Newsam and “Newcastle United? FC”

Quaker Elder and worship leader Chris Newsam led a fascinating service looking at the history of our famous local football team, and asking what it means to belong to a community.

27 February 2022 – Margaret Robinson and “Education”

Margaret Robinson, from Stockton Unitarians, led us in a fascinating service about education, featuring this alternative version of the Lord’s Prayer.

‘Alternate Lord’s Prayer’ adapted by Lesley McKeown

Spirit of Life, source of our being,
Where goodness and creative loving kindness dwell:
Help us create a better world
Where all creatures have food, shelter and warmth.
Remembering our frailties as humans,
Forgiving others as we forgive ourselves,
Let our conscience and reason
Lead us into paths of goodness and right conduct,
Where our fellowship of love and service to humanity
Will lighten the darkness of the world,
Forever and ever. Amen.”