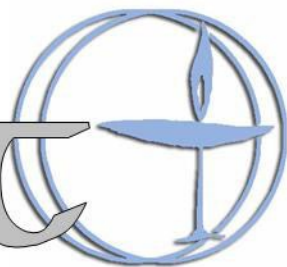


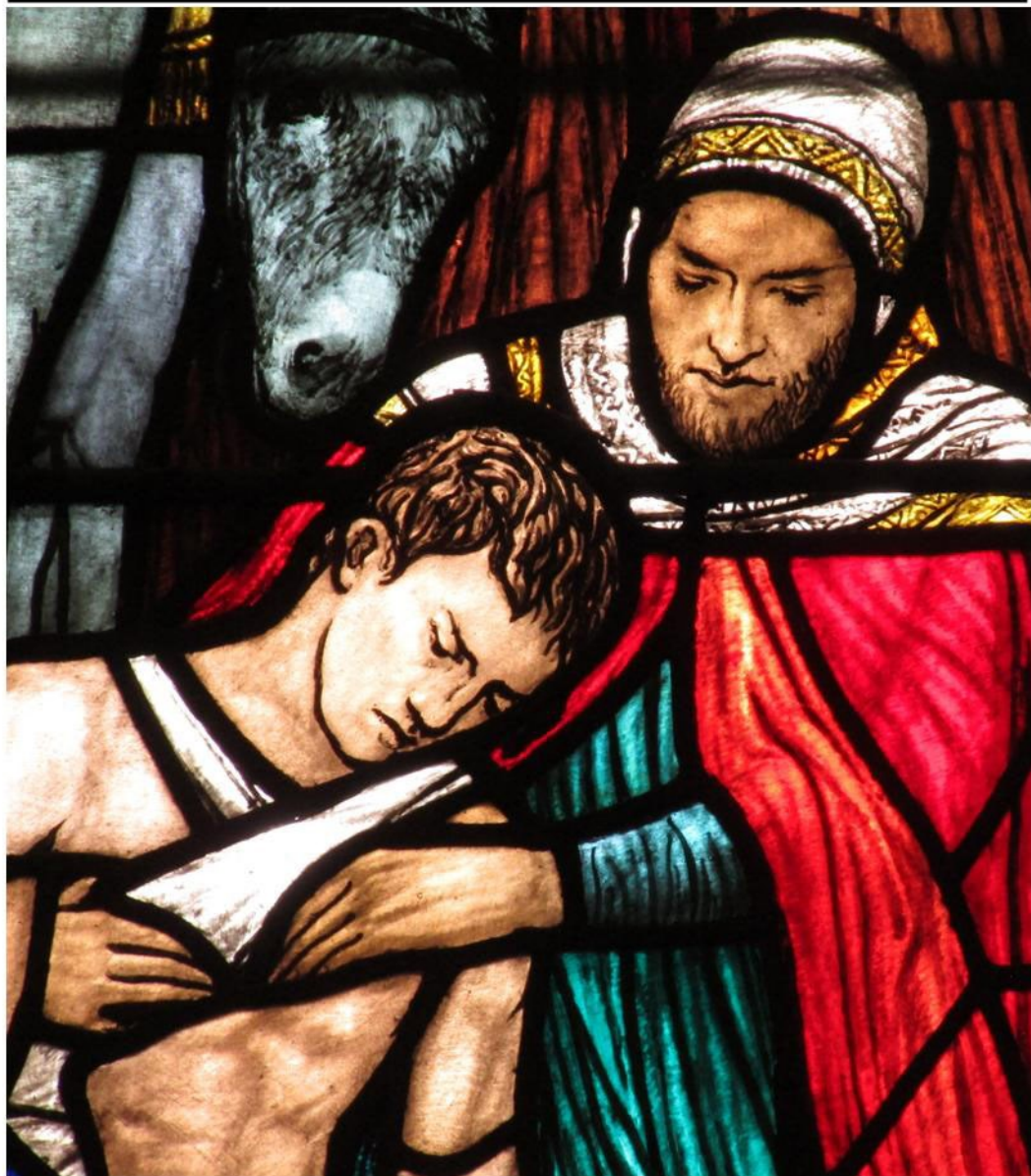
Oscailt



September 2023

IRELANDS UNITARIAN MAGAZINE

Vol.19 Nº 9





City Walks



The last in the series of *Summer Walks* organised by Rory Delany, will take place directly after Coffee and Sunday Service on 3rd September.

Sunday 3rd September *A Trip on the Tram -*

A short Luas journey to Ranelagh followed by a walk around the area of Lower Rathmines.

All Welcome

Rory Delany



Oscailt since January 2005 has become the monthly magazine for Irish Unitarians. Originally it was the calendar for Dublin but due to popular demand by non members this new format was born and continues to grow and flourish.

Oscailt is Published by the
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Front Cover: Detail from the good Samaritan window.
(photo P. Spain)

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Our magazine title, **Oscailt**, is inspired by the account of the **Healing of the Deaf and Mute Man** in St. Mark's Gospel, Chapter 7. Jesus commands the man's ears to open up with the Aramic word "Ephphatha" - open ! The Irish word *oscailt*, (from the verb *oscail*, to open), means an opening, or, metaphorically, it could mean a revelation or a beginning.

Seeking Refuge

The movement of people from one location to another, one country or from one continent to another is nothing new. Migration is as old as humanity itself.

This coming and going has been driven by any number of factors. The earliest reasons for migration were probably a matter of basic survival: Securing food and resources, ensuring greater safety, adapting to changes in climate over time and relieving population pressure.

And apart from necessity you can imagine there must also have been people who just wanted to explore, people who wanted to find out what was over the next mountain, what was beyond the next sea. And I am sure there have been very many people moving away

simply to seek a better life, and who could blame anyone for that? Today these seekers of a better life abroad would be objected to as simply “economic migrants”.

Now if migration is as old as humanity itself – and it seems to be - why the fuss about migration in our time? Just think of the illogicality of the objections. A particular example can be found in the United States of America, a country whose population today is largely comprised of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants from the old world. Those who object to refugees arriving in the US need to be reminded of the words appearing in a plaque at the Statue of Liberty :

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free. the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these the homeless, tempest tossed to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door”

Wonderful sentiments for sure “Send these the homeless, tempest tossed to me”, but these fine words fail to ring true today.

Today it is more a case of “thanks a lot, your parents have built up this country but the rest of you stay where you are”. Fortress America has not only become an idea in the minds and practice of some people, it has even given rise to a board game called

“Fortress America”. Admittedly the board game is based on the concept that the US is being attacked on all sides by invading forces rather than by unfortunate people seeking shelter.

The UN tell us that as of the end of 2022 there are more than 100 million refugees in the world, people who have been forced to flee war, conflict, and persecution. 100 million people, so many people in our time lacking a basic necessity, a place to call home.

Faced with this statistic we would do well to remember the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

"Refugees are not an inconvenience; they are a summons to conscience."

I mentioned Fortress America but we cannot afford to be smug when it comes to the issue of immigration. We don't have to travel to the US to find lip-service paid to the idea of respecting our common humanity. Here in Europe we have our fortress constructors as well, people who protest at the attempt to house refugees. Another case of a prosperous community defending its boundaries and keeping the poor outside the walls

The Mediterranean has become a watery grave for so many refugees. The International Organization for Migration estimate that 30,000 refugees and migrants have been reported dead or missing on their journey across the Mediterranean to Europe, and that is only since the 1st of January 2000.

We can become desensitised by the numbers. Millions displaced worldwide, tens of thousands lost in the Med, hundreds missing when a refugee boat capsizes. Is there any mention of a search for bodies when a migrant boat goes under? Not much at all, after all these are just the bodies of the poor. These outsiders are nobodies.

By grouping people together in statistics we fail to see the faces of the lost – all of them different. And we fail to appreciate the pain and the suffering of the people left behind. Each one of these numbers is a person – a real person, someone just like you and me

– just like everyone listening to this, a person with the same hopes for happiness. Each person lost was someone full of dreams, an individual with potential, seeking a better life. Each one setting out on this perilous journey in hope and each one a life extinguished too soon.

A quote from the Dalai Lama:

"When we see photographs and reports of refugees, they are our brothers and sisters."

Our response to this suffering will be the measure of our humanity. Here we are, on a fragile vulnerable planet. Even this week we see large parts of the planet on fire, in other parts people drowning in floods. What would it say about a civilisation on the point of climate disaster if we still divide people according to wealth, or colour?, if we still fail to take care of one another? We are all in this together. How could it be right if we secured our borders, turned our backs on those in need and created a 'Fortress Europe'?

All the great religions as well as humanists and agnostics of goodwill, they all preach the same message: the Golden Rule. The teaching is very simple. We should treat other people as we would wish them to treat us and we should refrain from doing to other people

whatever it is that we would not like done ourselves. The universal message is "be a good Samaritan", "care for the poor and the most vulnerable", "love your neighbour". And you might ask "Who is my neighbour?" According to the old Roman Catholic Penny Catechism my neighbour is all mankind, everyone, every single person.

Migration is not an anomaly, migration is not something new. Population movement has been woven into the fabric of human existence since time immemorial, way back to the time when our distant ancestors migrated out of Africa. Migration is evidence of our basic desire for a better life.

So, are there any simple actions that we can take to ease the plight of refugees? and even to reduce the need for people to leave their home countries for economic reasons?

But before we even begin to look at the list think of the importance of our day to day friendly interactions with people who are new to Ireland. That is fundamental – a friendly welcoming attitude. But there is more:

First of all: We can educate ourselves and others: We start by informing ourselves about the issues that cause people to become refugees.

Listen to people and get to understand the challenges these people face in their home countries. With information we will be better able to dispel the common misconceptions about refugees and immigration.

Next: We can donate, making sure to give to reputable charities, organisations that directly support refugees. And we need to support programs to improve the lot of people in their home countries, Not only giving food but the means for people to grow their own. Not only giving technology but the means for people to develop their own industries.

And here at home on our website here you will see we have a Unitarian Welcoming Committee. There is a link on our website that allows you to support a family who have had to leave home in terrifying circumstances.

Next: We can advocate for Policies that Support Refugees, fairer policies that offer more resources and better treatment for migrants. How do we do this? We can email politicians locally nationally and internationally. You might ask – “will they listen”? “Is there any point in this?” There is. At regular intervals these good people seek re-election and they will pay attention to a pile of requests from their constituents.

Another practical step is to spend mindfully, to support Fair Trade products and buy from ethical companies. Watch out for fair trade labels and support ethical businesses. In this way we help ensure that food producers and workers enjoy fair pay and safe working conditions. If people could make a fair living where they are, then - as we can all imagine – they wouldn’t feel the urgent need to leave their home country at all. People don’t leave home and risk their lives just for the fun of it.

And finally: We can volunteer. There are so many organisations working with and supporting refugees. On the Irish website of the UN Human Rights Council there is a list that offers a great number of possibilities for actively helping out.

More than 60 years ago President John F Kennedy in his inaugural address issued this warning in relation to world poverty:

“If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich”

These words still act as a reminder to us today in a world where the most striking differences between us are the differences between those who have and those who have not. The small minority with the resources, the comforts and the security and the large majority with little or nothing. A comfortable minority safe behind their walls and gates and many fleeing from war or famine or environmental chaos people with little resources, few comforts and no security. And haven't we all noticed how people with money and skills are never considered “refugees” or called “economic migrants”? People with the money can travel the world as they wish and be welcomed everywhere

If JFK were here today and if he was issuing a warning for our time he might say something like this:

"If a compassionate society cannot safeguard the displaced and the dispossessed, it cannot protect the privileges of the fortunate few."

The message:

We need to lower the walls of our fortress of privilege and open our hearts to the needy people shivering outside. Why? because in a just world, the measure of our society is not how we treat the richest among us, but how we support refugees and the poor.

Tony Brady

Dublin Unitarian Church

12 July 2023

The purpose of Life

ONE GREAT QUESTION underlies our experience, whether we think about it consciously or not: What is the purpose of life?

I believe that the purpose of life is to be happy. From the moment of birth, every human being wants happiness and does not want suffering. Neither social conditioning nor education nor ideology affect this. From the very core of our being, we simply desire contentment. I don't know whether the universe, with its countless galaxies, stars and planets, has a deeper meaning or not, but at the very least, it is clear that we humans who live on this earth face the task of making a happy life for ourselves. Therefore, it is important to discover what will bring about the greatest degree of happiness.

For a start, it is possible to divide every kind of happiness and suffering into two main categories: mental and physical. Of the two, it is the mind that exerts the greatest influence on most of us. If the body is content, we virtually ignore it. The mind, however, registers every event, no matter how small. Hence we should devote our most serious efforts to bringing about mental peace.

From my experience I have found that the greatest degree of inner tranquillity comes from the development of love and compassion.

The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater our own sense of well-being becomes. Cultivating a close, warm-hearted feeling for others automatically puts the mind at ease. This helps remove whatever fears or insecurities we may have and gives us the strength to cope with any obstacles we encounter.

As long as we live in this world we are bound to encounter problems. If, at such times, we lose hope and become discouraged, we diminish our ability to face difficulties. If, on the other hand, we remember that it is not just ourselves but that every one has to undergo suffering, this more

realistic perspective will increase our determination and capacity to overcome troubles. Indeed, with this attitude, each new obstacle can be seen as yet another valuable opportunity to improve our mind!

Thus we can strive gradually to become more compassionate, that is we can develop both genuine sympathy for others' suffering and the will to help remove their pain. As a result, our own serenity and inner strength will increase.

Ultimately, the reason why love and compassion bring the greatest happiness is simply that our nature cherishes them above all else.

I believe that at every level of society - familial, tribal, national and international - the key to a happier and more successful world is the growth of compassion. We do not need to become religious, nor do we need to believe in an ideology.

All that is necessary is for each of us to develop our good human qualities.

With apologies to his holiness the Dalai Lama for
editing his webcast .

Tenzin Gyatso; The Fourteenth Dalai Lama from a live webcast

Emer O'Reilly
Dublin Unitarian church



A place of worship since 1717

UNITARIAN CHURCH

Prince's Street, Cork.

Registered Charity Number 0000246

Service: Sundays at 11a.m.

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www.unitarianchurchcork.com

**Jazz Vespers,
first Friday of the month @ 6pm.**

An ecumenical service with the Methodist church.

Please Note

If you are aware of any member of our community who is unwell, or who has suffered a bereavement, and who would welcome contact from others in the church, please e-mail Rev.Bridget Spain.

Vestry 01 - 4780638

e-mail: revbspain@gmail.com

Childrens Programme - Sunday Club

Takes place on the 2nd Sunday of each month

For any queries about Sunday Club, or to volunteer as a leader, please email Denise at sundayclubunitarianchurch@gmail.com

DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH

Lunch-time service every Wednesday from 1.10 to 1.40 p.m.

Each week Eileen Delaney sends an e-mail circular as to what is happening in the church and the other activities associated with the church.

If you would like to receive this information you should send your details requesting your name be added to the list to:-
[**eileendelaney76@gmail.com**](mailto:eileendelaney76@gmail.com)



Dublin Unitarian Church

112 St. Stephens Green Dublin 2.

Service 11.00a.m.

Sunday Rota for September 2023

3 rd September	<i>A Mystic</i>
Service	Pamela McCarthy
Reader	Maeve Edwards
Flowers	Daniela Cooney
Welcomers	Maeve Edwards, Janet Mulroy
Coffee	Madeline Stringer, Paula Mills, Charlie Kinch

10 th September	<i>An Original Thinker</i>
Service	Rev.Bridget Spain
Reader	Colette Douglas
Flowers	Paula Mills
Welcomers	Colette Douglas, Catharine Cook
Coffee	Tony Shine, Michael Robinson, Paula Mills

17 th September	<i>Poetry for the Soul</i>
Service	Rev.Bridget Spain
Reader	Paul Murray
Flowers	Janet Mulroy
Welcomers	Janet Mulroy, Emer O'Reilly
Coffee	Colette Douglas, Janet Mulroy, Lorraine Doyle

24 th September	<i>Civil Disobedience</i>
Service	Rev.Bridget Spain
Reader	Emer O'Reilly
Flowers	Colette Douglas
Welcomers	Frank Tracy, Gavin Byrne
Coffee	Emer O'Reilly, Maeve Edwards, Alison Claffey

Services are broadcast live from the church each Sunday at 11a.m.
On our WebCam, click and connect at www.dublinunitarianchurch.org

Recordings of previous services are also available on the website.

LOVE IS THE DOCTRINE OF THIS CHURCH
THE QUEST OF TRUTH IS ITS SACRAMENT
AND SERVICE IS ITS PRAYER.

TO DWELL TOGETHER IN PEACE

TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE IN FREEDOM

TO SERVE MANKIND IN FELLOWSHIP

TO THE END THAT ALL SOULS SHALL GROW IN HARMONY
WITH THE DIVINE

THIS DO WE COVENANT WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH GOD.

DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH

112 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23, Ireland.
Unitarian Church - Dublin Registered Charity Number 20000622

Service: Sunday at 11a.m. Phone: Vestry 01-4780638

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Vice Chairman: Dennis Aylmer; Secretary: Trish Webb-Duffy; Treasurer: Rory Delany;
Tony Shine; Andy Pollak; Peter White; Will O'Connell; Collette Douglas;
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Treasurer: Rory Delany: 087-2217414,

e-mail: treasurerunitarianchurch@gmail.com

Musical Director: Josh Johnston :- 086 892 0602

Caretaker: Kevin Robinson Telephone: 4752781

Recordings of the church services are available on the church website.

Sex

and that sort of thing

In Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, in a particular art gallery, one of the most striking paintings is called the Prude. It depicts the side view of an elderly woman staring out a window, and in the background are religious artefacts. The painting is interesting because the woman is, you could suggest, universal, she could be from Mullingar or Portlaoise or Dublin, and she carries a view, and this is 1939, that there is an awful lot of stuff going on of which she does not approve.

A striking thing about the gallery's art, and it is important to point this out, is that in this, and another superb gallery, paintings, as you would expect, very much reflect the era in which they were created, and of course there was the violent intrusion of first the Nazis and later the Soviets.

A picture of the Two Graces, one of them naked, is from 1937. An oil painting from 1932 is of clothes free Women Bathing, but as we move into the Nazi and Soviet periods, joyousness, *joie de vie*, is largely absent. We are, for example, presented with sturdy workers and the Red Army being cheered as it marches towards Latvia.

Our discussion is, as indicated, about sex, and the historical shifts in the content of art generally can perhaps be mirrored in how over the decades we, as a society, have dealt with sex, love, pleasure, reproduction, and indeed how our ethics surrounding these have altered. Our focus is on ethics.

When you ask people who have lived many decades about our society, they will frequently say that there is a drift, a lowering of sexual behaviour standards, a lack of discipline, and that no ethic has emerged to replace that of the Christian churches which are largely ignored, especially by the young.

They will say that there must be barriers, taboos to certain types of behaviour (which, of course, is undoubtedly true, to protect the young if nothing else) and that the family of man, woman and children is being weakened. It is, perhaps, time (and churches and the wider society have an obligation here) for us to be brave, to seriously debate how we can develop a new sexual ethic, an updated moral paradigm for how we go about our sexual activity.

Pleasure

Many of us were brought up to believe that sexual pleasure was only allowed in marriage, and that one married an opposite gender partner who was loved, and then, and only then, the couple could set about the fun of making children and would stay together until death did them part. But much of that scenario is now crumbling. Women are much less likely to stay in intolerable relationships, there is divorce and the way is open for gay marriage. And substantial numbers of people live with their partners without marrying.

In a few decades everything changed. Even the Catholic Church eventually shifted its position which had stated that procreation was the primary purpose of marital sex and that the expression and fostering of love between the couple was secondary (*The New Dictionary of Theology*).

This previous stance was part of the attempt to deny that sexual pleasure was every man and woman's entitlement, to deny as Wordsworth put it, that "pleasure is the tribute we owe to our dignity as human beings". John O'Donoghue believed that this was a profoundly spiritual perspective. "Your senses," he said, "link you intimately with the Divine within you and around you."

The wonderful Mary Oliver in the poem *Wild Geese* puts pleasure on a heavenly plain (Poetry Pharmacy). She suggests that we must treat the soft animal of our bodies with kindness. We should allow ourselves to love what we love, with feelings that need not always be held in check by rationality. Rather than fight it we should celebrate and nurture our animal self.

However, any attempt to civilize ourselves is often our greatest source of pain, she adds.

The body denying tradition in some branches of Christianity is lamented by Nancy Mairs, *Ordinary Time* (Spiritual Literacy, Frederick and Mary Ann Brussat).

"You would think," she says, "wouldn't you, that a faith founded on the premise of reincarnation, would hold in certain respect, perhaps in outright reverence, the body, the very form in which the Divine elected to be housed."

"The world," she says, "may well end if you cut down its trees and pave it over, it may well end if you permit its people to go unfed and unclothed and uneducated, while you prosper. But the world will not end if you touch your genitals. The world will not end even if you touch someone else's genitals. I can think of sound reasons not to do so, but fear and disgust should not be among them.

Your body is not a pest house, it is simply a body: who you are: part of God's creation, a small part, true, but as real and lovely as the rest. If you love every part, evil will not enter the worl----d through you."

Luther, surprisingly to many perhaps, believed that lovemaking was not only sacred but also delightful. The best place to be at Christ's Second Coming, he said, was to be united in the act of making love. (Edward Hayes, in *Secular Sanctity*).

Through sex, according to Sallie Tisdale an essayist (Daphne Rose Kingma in *Heart & Soul*), "we partake of the one experience above all others which allows us the bliss of true union."

So, what is being intimated up to now is that the body itself and the joys than can ensue from it, are to be celebrated, not imprisoned in a musty religiosity.

This is not to suggest that what Mary Oliver calls the soft animal within us should have carte blanche to run wild. Even the ancient Greeks who had no concept of sex as sin, and for whom the craving for sexual pleasure was an accepted addiction, realized that the dangerous hunger for sex had to be kept in check.

Which is why, for them, marriage was a necessity. Women were cloistered at home often surrounded by guard dogs. After marriage, a main purpose of which was to produce a male heir, women and men often had little to do with each other. It was accepted, (according to *The Intimate History of the Orgasm*) that men would also be bisexual.

Love Sceptics

And the Greeks were skeptical about love, which it was said made men copulate too often and lose their strength. The incessant physical longing of love was regarded as a disturbance of the body's natural balance, a disease which deprived the mind of its control of the body.

British philosopher, A.C.Grayling, (*The Heart of Things, Applying Philosophy to the 21st Century*) also looks at love with a cynical eye. He tells us that the first phase of what is termed love is a "species of frenzy" which the Greeks feared as a punishment from God. And the second phase is a "species of intermittent anaesthesia in which numbness makes almost bearable the anxious boredom of parents and the tensions, provocations and annoyances of living squashed against another person year after year in a small space".

"Whatever name is best appropriate to the reason why a couple stick together through routines of domestic life, moving groceries and

children about at frequent intervals and watching too much TV, it is not love,” he says

Grayling does say, however, that the mutual benefits of living in a committed relationship deserve celebration. But there is an exception. And that is where “narrow, ignorant and ungenerous views of what is accepted in human relationships excludes all but monogamous heterosexuals from the great good that human affections and shared lives offer”.

So far, we can perhaps agree that bodily pleasure is a good thing (even though there have been contrary voices), that views on the concept of love (a short phase of sexual infatuation and a long phase of habit and inertia, as Grayling amusingly expresses it) can change, and that some boundaries are necessary to deal with the “soft animal of our bodies”.

What should these boundaries be? Where would we look for at least refreshed protocols for our sexual behaviour? Protocols that would enhance our humanity. Well, one lead could be from the young, not because they have necessarily thought it out! Largely, it seems they have been led by their hormones.

But chats with a psychologist, retired social workers, and people of other professional backgrounds and experience, suggest that the young have indelibly decoupled love and sex. Of course, many older people have experienced sex without love and many young people fall in love. But it is not now as often expected that, like a horse and carriage, love and sex needs must go together.

For many young people, says Richard Holloway (*Godless Morality, Keeping Religion out of Ethics*) sex is an appetite to be satisfied with no necessary connection to any kind of relationship. Recreational sex, he uses another word, is purely functional, pleasurable, and done for its own sake.

And, if it leads to sexual love and the development of a sexual relationship, a different code (of ethics) comes into play, requiring exclusivity, as well as honesty about other sexual encounters. The emotional connection alters the ethical dynamic in a subtle way creating a bond that opens each partner to the possibility of harm as a result of the conduct of the other. Any infidelity hurts, and damages, and is therefore wrong, says Holloway.

With recreational sex, his thesis goes, there is no relationship to be broken. Traditionalists might say that it is wrong to treat sexuality with such triviality and, indeed, many of us may doubt that there is no bond to be broken, but Holloway directs us towards John Harris, who wrote *Wonderwoman and Superman*.

Harris wrote, although it hardly a new idea, that “for a moral judg-

ment to be respectable it must have something to say about just why a supposed wrong action is wrongful. If it fails to meet this test it is a preference and not a moral judgment at all.” Holloway goes on to say that we may find recreational sex displeasing but we ought to be careful about dismissing it as immoral behaviour.

There is a definite need, writes Holloway, for a sense of balance in human sexuality, so that “we do not constantly swing between the extremes of abnegation and over-indulgence.” And whatever guidelines are adopted, “will have to be applicable also to gay and lesbian people”. This goes without saying, but it raises an important strand in establishing a reconsidered framework for sexual activity. Montaigne, who is often quoted (*How to Live, A Life of Montaigne, in one question and 20 attempts, Sarah Bakewell*) was willing to query what were seen as certainties and prejudices.

We should, he said, do something we have not done before. He was fascinated by change. He loved Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. People alter. They turn into trees, animals, stars, or disembodied voices. And he wrote about what he saw as his sexual inadequacies. His view seemingly being that he communicated so much else about himself, why not his sexual part.

So, we should maybe be able to think of sex protocols in terms of change, as Montaigne might have done. (All of which is against a background that monogamy is the official social norm in only 16% of human societies, and among the 850 or so human societies recognized by anthropology 83% practice polygamy). And another change that needs more public understanding and an ethical basis, (as does recreational sex), is sexual fluidity, in other words how over a life time the sexual gender preferences of men and women can change.

Sabra L. Katz-Wise says that for many of us changes in our lives are constant “yet it is a misconception that sexual orientation develops at an early age and remains stable throughout one’s life”. Changes in sexual orientation are a “common thread” in many people’s lives.

This is distinct from bi-sexuality and can be experienced by people of any sexual orientation. And AARP, a prominent US organization for people of 50 and older, says that sexual orientation is “not carved in stone”.

A great sadness in life, for many people, is how through inertia, cultural background, age, or society’s disapproval, they deny themselves, or are denied, an intimate partner, a partner who would fulfill many of their needs. They lose this opportunity because while a poten-

tial relationship may be loving in the widest sense, it would not be seen as what we traditionally regard as “love”.

So, perhaps as an antidote to loneliness if nothing else, should we not encourage meaningful coupledness among men and women (men/men, women/ women) liaisons even if Cupid misses the ultimate target of love?

Should we not take into our ethical paradigm that sexual orientations are not immutable and that love, the ideal of course, and intimate alliances may (to misquote a bit) “alter when they alteration find”.

Indeed, should we not be discussing whether sex is a value in itself, needing boundaries and rules, of course, but an activity, an appetite, which can stand alone with minimal relationship requirements? A step too far for many of us, perhaps!

So, the suggestion is, that we open our minds to new or less understood modes of sexuality, and meld them within our ethical thinking. Ralph Helverson (*Living in the Question*) says there is a “persistent disposition to put people in pigeon holes, order them as they ought to be and then get on with our business. We all have settled opinions that new ideas must confront.”

Some of these settled opinions are about sex ethics. It is perhaps time for fresh thinking, for inclusion in a revamped framework, recreational sex, the separation of love and sexual activity, and fluidity.

Paul Murray
Dublin Unitarian church

July 2, 2023

**Dublin Unitarian Book Club's
choice for July 2023.**

The Colony

by

Audrey Magee

The location for this novel is on a remote island off the west coast of Ireland with a dwindling population standing at less than 100. It is 1979 and Ireland is on the cusp of change and the Island and its inhabitants are portrayed as a metaphor for the larger populace of the time and the effects on a country that was colonised.

The elder matriarch Bean Ui Fhloinn is staunchly traditional, only speaks Irish and is deeply rooted in the past. Bean Ui Neill is her daughter and is pragmatic and will compromise to a degree in order to survive but ever wary of changes and the stranger. Mairead, Bean Ui Neill's daughter in law is a young widow who is trapped on the island physically and spiritually, she longs to escape this world of sameness and is constantly reminded by the rest of her family of her duty and destiny. James, Mairead's sixteen year old son is ambitious and is fighting for his way out of a life he doesn't want but is under constant pressure to fulfil his duty to support his family by becoming a fisherman like his grandfather, father, and uncle, who were all drowned at sea. Micheal, Mairead's brother in law is the canny businessman and operator and takes from all sides in order to make a profit. Frances, Micheal's side kick and Mairead's other brother in law is waiting in the wings and there is always a sense of menace and threat around Frances as he eyes up Mairead and bides his time for her to see him as her next husband.

Into this island community come two visitors. The first one we meet is Mr. Lloyd, an English artist looking to revitalise his career and marriage. He's looking for the authentic experience and grandiosely sees himself like the artist Gauguin who went to Tahiti. He maintains a coloniser's attitude towards the islanders, he's arrogant, has a sense of entitlement, is condescending and ever polite but is dismissive of them as is shown when he is requested not to paint any of the people, only

the landscape, to which he dutifully ignores almost immediately and proceeds to sketch James.

Lloyd rents a cottage from Micheal expecting quiet and solitude and is totally outraged when along comes the second visitor who is renting the neighbouring cottage. This is Jean Pierre (JP) Masson, a French linguist who has been visiting the island for four years and is writing his doctoral thesis on the Irish Language. He also has a sense of grandeur about himself and sees himself as the rescuer of the Irish language. He fraternises with Bean Uí Fhloinn on a daily basis and is well liked by the islanders as he ingratiates himself with them by bringing presents and speaking their language. He too is outraged by the neighbouring cottage being rented to an English man, who is not only disturbing his work but is corrupting the language by speaking English to the islanders, who are willing to converse bilingually as they know that this is the future.

JP and Lloyd take their dinner with the family in their kitchen and it is at these mealtimes that the two often lock horns, and ironically mock each other's colonial past and current attitude to the islanders. We see how they treat the islanders, Lloyd befriends James and teaches him to paint only to discover that James has a raw talent that he'll never have, and he promises to take him to London where he can exhibit his works but is all along plundering James' artistic insights. Lloyd also convinces Mairead to sit for him nude for his great masterpiece. Mairead is also JP's lover for the time he is there. None of this goes unnoticed by the 'elders'.

The writing and prose are wonderful and the descriptions of the landscape and animals very vivid. There was a great sense of the island and the people's lives as the author described how they moved to it's rhythm of everchanging weather, migratory birds and colonies , and also the islander's use and knowledge of local flora and fauna.

The book has a tense atmosphere, not only because of the friction between JP and Lloyd ,there's underlying money issues between Micheal ,Frances and Bean Uí Neill and there's the mistrust between the Islanders , the mainlanders and now the new tourist 'colonisers' .

Also it is 1979 and the author punctuates each chapter with a short fact based report on some of the terrorist atrocities perpetrated on all sides that are happening at the time in Northern Ireland. As

the book progresses these killings seep into the conversations of the islanders and we get to know their individual stances on the 'troubles' in the North. It culminates with the killing of Mountbatten and as James is planning on going with Lloyd to London Mairead warns him that London won't be easy for him.

It becomes obvious why the elder islanders asked Lloyd not to paint them as they knew how they would be seen. He finishes his great artistic work by painting all of the islanders with his own colonial vision of them. Mairead is the mythological island goddess, James is not an artist but is firmly put back in his traditional role as a fisherman, Frances is depicted as a terrorist, there are old crones and peasants etc. Lloyd's character is true to form as he betrays James by not taking him to London, how could he be upstaged by one of the natives especially as he also appropriated his ideas and style which would be blatantly obvious if James also exhibited his paintings. JP too finishes his thesis and has great aspirations of getting his professorship, fame and recognition on foot of it. He too has plundered the island for his own gain and leaves very satisfied and guilt free.

In true Irish style the ending sees the islanders continue with life as before there is no major drama yet you know that there are repercussions from the many betrayals and sense of loss which will be felt behind closed doors.

The book club readers felt that the book was very enjoyable and interesting and would give it a recommendation as a good read.

Alison Claffey

Dublin Unitarian church

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