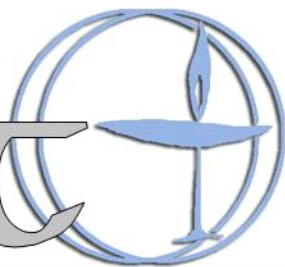


Oscailt



September 2024

IRELANDS UNITARIAN MAGAZINE

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A different kind of Harvest Thanksgiving

A harvest thanksgiving service is probably a favorite service, particularly in Protestant Denominations. Harvest Thanksgiving was once a staple of this congregation. However, we felt we were being dishonest, because we did not grow any of the produce used to decorate the building. Every item used to be bought in Smithfield Market! Then for many years we used Membership Sunday as an opportunity to sing the traditional Harvest Hymns.

Something different

Christian Aid works to relieve poverty and suffering in all parts of the world. Christian Aid gave me a different idea for how we could show our gratitude for the Harvest. The idea is to hold a harvest thanksgiving lunch. The congregation would share lunch in the Damer Hall after service. Diners make a donation for the lunch. The funds raised are donated to Christian Aid.

There are advantages to this idea

Sharing food builds a sense of community.

We enjoy a social occasion.

We are reminded of how fortunate we are to have food and security.

The money raised will be put to good use.

What is needed.

Volunteers to cook a lunch dish for 8/10 servings.

Volunteers to provide desserts.

Volunteers to help organise the event and to serve the food.

Volunteers to clean up afterwards.

When Sometime in late October.

If anyone is willing to become involved in the project please give details to Bridget email revbspain@gmail.com



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: L-R

Rev.Bridget Spain,
Rev.Will Humphrey & his wife.

(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 mans ears to open up with 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.

The Whole Self with Welcome and Love

“There is something in you, in each of us, that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in other people. And if you can’t hear it, then you are reduced by that much. If I were to ask you what is the thing that you desire most in life, you would say a lot of things off the top of your head, most of which you wouldn’t believe but you would think that you were saying the things that I thought you ought to think that you should say.”

Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman wrote that and he went on to say:

“But I think that if you were to be stripped to whatever there is in you that is literal and irreducible, and you tried to answer that question, the answer might be something like this:

‘I want to feel that I am thoroughly and completely understood so that now and then I can take my guard down and look out around me and not feel that I will be destroyed with my defenses down.’”

Today’s service is entitled, “The Whole Self with Welcome and Love”

I want to feel completely vulnerable, completely naked, completely exposed and absolutely secure. It’s an impossible contradiction... you can’t feel secure without being protected, and you can’t feel protected if you’re not defended, and you can’t be defended without being guarded...”

So this is the holy question, the sacred question in front of us: how can we welcome both the self that we project into the world and the self that we hide from the world? How do we welcome both selves? How do we love all sides of ourselves? How do we craft a space brave enough for those whole worlds of self to coincide?

It is in this spirit that we face the mystery of living, the mystery of the soul’s journey, the mystery of death, the mystery of the ultimate consummation of all things. And, question - who I am? - the guarded self and the projected self.

We guard against pain, and hurt - the core of that guarding is fear, and shame, and grief, and disappointment and uncertainty.

We create boundaries around these emotions and the things that we do not want to feel. Sometimes those are boundaries of etiquette - how proper something is. Sometimes those are boundaries around our own authenticity. Sometimes these are boundaries of social constructs: classes, races, ableism, etc. And sometimes these are boundaries within ourselves - in the mix of the unspoken rules that we hold for ourselves, the ought to’s and imposi-

tions.

Welcoming our whole self can be scary. Welcoming people can expose vulnerabilities. All of it can mean that I'm afraid. I'm afraid of losing control. I'm afraid that the love I put into the world and myself will only be returned with doubt or shame, or loneliness.

I know in the US, Unitarians are a group of people who tend to intellectualize, long before we feel. Is that also true for the dissenting church?

I can speak as myself now, I know that I intellectualise, I listen to the words and actions - categorically analyzing them, over analyzing them - preventing myself to be swept off in the emotions beyond the outrage for wrong words - I have to work toward allowing my body and my mind to be in the same space. To feel the emotions swell up and the intellect's guard down - to be a whole self - to love ever deeply, to observe love in others, to receive the love from all around.

And, that's the good news, the gospel of our tradition. You're worthy of love. Not only are you good enough, it is an inherent dignity. You have worth, and are worthy. When we were breathed into existence, Love was the flavor upon the holy breath - it is woven into our skins and calcified into our bones.

And it feels like - a dream? A dream that perhaps I could just be free to let my guard down, to have my risk and my safety - the impossible contradiction--both of these woven into a moment.

And, really the risk and the safety - it's vulnerability...I don't have it all together. And, that means I'm uncertain. And, that means I'm at risk when I'm exposed or in grief. It means that I'm not superman.

Dr.Brene Brown, patron saint of vulnerability, says that "vulnerability is the center of dark emotions of difficult emotions but it's also the birthplace of every positive emotion that we need in our lives: love, belonging, joy, empathy...

How many of you would agree that we're in a serious empathy deficit all around today?

A 14 year old girl comes home after school, Doc Brown tells this story, the girl comes home and tears emerge. No one sat with me at lunch. They made fun of my clothes. They made fun of my hair... What's the response?

Well, if you'd wear the nice clothes I buy you instead of that slop you always wear - and would it kill you to take 5 minutes and actually do your hair?

Or do we say, that is so hard - we channel our inner 14 year old with butterflies in our stomach and sweaty palms and say - that's hard. Tell me about it, and I'll empathize.

Do we channel the best versions of grandparents ever - Oh, I'm sorry - I'll put the kettle on and you'll tell me all about it. I'll listen to your experi-

ence.

Do we normalize it, that happened to me too in school - heck, that happened to me last week and it is hard, but you're not alone. I'm with you. If you can't feel secure without being protected, and you can't feel protected if you're not defended, and you can't be defended without being guarded.

Offering vulnerability takes down the guardedness. Offering empathy offers protection, weathers the storm.

I'm not superman—and Superman had his strengths but he also had his weaknesses. Kryptonite comes to mind, but there is also his search for meaning and connection - in Superman #662," a comic book issue published by DC Comics in 2007. In this issue, Lois Lane is injured and in critical condition, and Superman is seen holding her hand and confessing his love for her, revealing the emotional toll that her injury is taking on him. This moment is significant because it shows Superman's humanity and shows the depth of his feelings for Lois. So...Superman is vulnerable.

Do you think Superman did a risk analysis - do I risk everything I hold, in order to experience something deeper like love?

I don't have it all together. None of us have it all together. And, there are many things that I'm uncertain about. That's ok. We don't have to have all the answers. I'll put the kettle on and you'll tell me all about it. Actually, someone has the kettle on, and we'll have coffee and tea after the service and we can connect, all of us...

I'm not superman; I'm not Wonder Woman. I don't have to be and we don't have to pretend. But I know, the center of these difficult emotions is the birthplace of every positive emotion that we need in our lives: love, belonging, joy, empathy...

If you can't feel secure without being protected, and you can't feel protected if you're not defended, and you can't be defended without being guarded; So it almost feels like a standoff.

Offering vulnerability takes down the guardedness. Offering empathy offers protection, weathers the storm.

How do you push through the difficult times? How do you coach yourself through it? What's your self-talk? How do you encourage yourself to do hard things? What do you say?

Do you say things to yourself that you would never say to anyone else? Is your self critique scathing? Mean? Is it insensitive?

Is your self talk soothing, mentoring, reassuring - You'll get this yet. Slow down, breathe and you can do anything

Commitment requires a willingness to embrace risk and uncertainty, and to face the possibility of failure and disappointment, to look beyond our own shortsightedness, to empathize with our self, with our parents, and children and neighbors, to create spaces that allow for liberation, a released from the necessity of guarding a secret self, in yourself or in others.

To allow yourself to risk the broken heartedness that comes from letting down your guard. That's when we welcome our whole self - the dark emotions and the light ones. As the service began, I asked you to have a talisman of Love in your mind's eye.

Feeling this love artifact or talisman—does it help hold connection, belonging, joy, empathy, and awe? Can it help you to take the risk and welcome the whole self?

Love is the fundamental building blocks of building community. This is what it means to be a member of a church. Let us all take the risks and let all of us love ever more truly, with our authentic and whole self. I'll stop preaching now so we can get to that most holy of endeavors of sharing ourselves because someone has the kettle on and someone else has a listening ear for each of us and our journeys

May it ever be so.

Rev. Will Humphrey

The Atheist Delusion

The title of today's address is "The Atheist Delusion" It is intended as an attempted answer to the best-selling book by Richard Dawkins "The God Delusion" published in 2006, in which he argues against the existence of God The main thrust of his argument appears to be based on the deficiencies which he sees in the various religions, and in this respect, we would have to agree with him.

For the most part, and with some exceptions God has had the most unfortunate collection of public relations officers.

If we look upon God as a super-human being somewhere out there we have to say "his interview system for selecting his leadership team is hopelessly defective" That would certainly be an argument for the non-existence of such a CEO.

Dawkins refers to religious texts, such as the Bible and the Quran, which contain morally questionable passages. And he points out how these texts are interpreted to justify actions considered unacceptable to any right-thinking person.

In Deuteronomy we see "In the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes, completely destroy them"

And in the Quran "I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. Therefore strike off their heads and strike off every fingertip of them." It is hard to accept that exhortations like this can appear in any text claiming to be inspired by a God worthy of our belief.

Dawkins highlights easy-to-find examples where religion has been a source of conflict, violence, and division, The Crusades, the Inquisition, even modern terrorism.

And just think of the knots the mainstream Christian churches have gotten themselves into on the issues of the ministry of women and the fundamental rights of L-G-B-T-Q-+ people? In some religious headquarters it seems rationality has moved forward very little since the time of Galileo.

Dawkins also refers to the discrimination and violence inflicted on people who dare to hold different beliefs.

He rightly criticises the indoctrination of children thrust into religious belief systems long before they are capable of independent thought. All reasonable arguments.

But his case against the existence of God is much less persuasive.

He suggests (rightly) that any being capable of designing the uni-

verse would have to be at least as complex as the universe itself and he says this makes the existence of such a being unlikely.

He introduces the concept of the “Ultimate Boeing 747”. He says our trying to explain the complexity of life by invoking a designer only shifts the problem of complexity to the designer. His point is that this designer would need an explanation for its own existence, leading to an infinite regress.

But Dawkin’s argument fails to address the fundamental question of why anything exists at all and especially the existence of beings as complex as ourselves.

It is reasonable to argue against the concept of an external creator but we are faced with an extraordinarily complex interconnected universe.

Our universe has produced intelligent beings capable of asking fundamental questions about existence itself. How can a universe give rise to intelligence unless the underlying basis of the universe is itself intelligent? The fact that we are here asking the question suggests there is something more at play.

A reasonable answer to Dawkins point of view is the proposition that the underlying reality which we refer to as God is present in and through all things. In other words our God would be better described in terms of Pantheism.

In Pantheism God is seen as immanent, in other words the divine is present in all aspects of the universe. But we must go beyond any superficial notion that “Everything is God”, a far too simplistic idea.

Instead we have stop. We have to pay attention. Stopping to pay attention will allow us to really see the world in all its wonder. Then we might understand that what we see with our eyes and hear with our ears is the manifestation of an underlying intelligent reality.

Instead of looking for God “out there” or dismissing the idea of God altogether this mindful way of going about our days will help us notice a constant, direct relationship with a divine essence at the heart of the natural world.

You might ask “What happens then to this personal God with whom we are all so familiar?, the God-out-there to whom we used to address our prayers? Can we pray to a different God whose essence is buried deep beneath the surface of the natural world? The answer is “yes of course we can”.

But a word of caution! We have to remember this: We are finite beings attempting in some flimsy way to express what we feel about the infinite and the eternal, an impossible task. So whatever we

say and however we say it, it will be inadequate. Even so as thinking beings we have to try.

So, the God I am trying to describe is not personal in the sense that you are a person and I am a person.

The God of Pantheism is intrapersonal way beyond the closeness of any relationship we could visualise between one person and another however close the two might be.

The God of Pantheism is closer to me and to you than we are to ourselves.

The word personal is a hopelessly inadequate description of the personal relationship between ourselves and God-deeply-immersed-in-the-world.

I am sure Unitarians will not be fans of all the writings of Saint Paul, but he captures this idea of the omnipresence of God in his words issued during a visit to Athens. St Paul says: "In Him we live and move and have our being".

The interesting thing is that modern science, with its revelations about the interconnectedness and unity of all things, supports this way of looking at the world.

The discoveries in quantum physics, where we hear of particles entangled and influencing each other across vast distances, lends support to a pantheistic understanding of a unified reality.

Pantheism has the capacity to bridge the gap between science and spirituality. It promotes a worldview valuing both scientific knowledge and spiritual experience. This way of looking at things can only enrich our understanding of the universe and our place within it.

Next question: Can you pray to the divine essence manifested in nature? Why not? God is not only beside us, above us, and below us. God is in and through the very atoms of each one of us.

And this way of looking at God-present-in-the-world has ethical implications as well. We will be more inclined towards empathy, kindness, and respect for other people. This ethical way of looking at things can extend to all living creatures and to the environment itself. This view fosters a sense of responsibility and stewardship.

Pantheism encourages us to live in harmony with nature recognising not only the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, an idea with which we are familiar in this church, but the intrinsic value of all forms of life which is such a need in our world today.

Pierre Teilhard De Chardin was a French Jesuit, a scientist, a paleontologist. As you can imagine, his views were met with resistance from the Catholic Church. The Vatican was concerned that these ideas blurred the lines between pantheism and traditional theism De Chardin says this: "There is neither spirit nor matter in the world. The stuff of the universe is



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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



Dublin Unitarian Church

112 St. Stephens Green Dublin 2.

Service 11.00a.m.

Sunday Rota for September 2024

1st September *Favourite Readings*
Reader **Various**
Flowers **Janet Mulroy**
Welcomer **Janet Mulroy, Jennifer Flegg**
Coffee **Madeline Stringer, Paul Murray, Margaret Leeson**

8th September *Cultural Christianity*
Service **Patrick Rodgers**
Reader **Tony Roche**
Flowers **Daniela Cooney**
Welcomer **Paul Murray, Daniela Cooney**
Coffee **Janet Mulroy, Maeve Edwards, Gráinne Carty**

15th September *Sharing Gods Love Together.*
Service **The Moderator Rt.Rev.Alister Bell.**
Reader **Denise Dunne**
Flowers **Trish Webb Duffy**
Welcomer **Trish Webb Duffy**
Coffee **Lorraine Doyle, Katy Goulding, Alison Claffey**

22nd September *On Time*
Service **Noleen Hartigan.**
Reader **Doireann Ní Bhriain**
Flowers **Paula Mills**
Welcomer **Peter Fontana, Janet Mulroy**
Coffee **Andrew C-Crangle, Madeline Stringer, Trish Webb-Duffy**

29th September *Karma & Dharma*
Service **Rev.Bridget Spain**
Reader **Jennifer Buller**
Flowers **Emer O'Reilly**
Welcomer **Alison Claffey, Gráinne Carty**
Coffee **Therese Fontana, Peter Fontana, Emer O'Reilly**

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;
Andy Pollak; Peter White; Will O'Connell; Collette Douglas;
Malachy Hevehan; Paul Murray; Madeline Stringer; Gavin Byrne.

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Musical Director: Josh Johnston :- 086 892 0602

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

spirit-matter. No other substance but this could have produced the human molecule”

At the end of the day Atheism itself requires a form of faith, believing there is no God. It requires acceptance of the idea that life has no inherent purpose or meaning. But how can that be? The suggestion that the complexity of the universe as we know it is a result of pure chance is very hard to accept, much harder to accept than the idea of God.

The proposition that the existence of intelligent beings such as ourselves is the product of a universe which has no underlying intelligence is absurd, it makes no sense. Surely the evidence all around us points more convincingly to the existence of an underlying intelligence?

Sometimes we are reluctant to use the God word because of all the baggage attached to the word. But in the light of common sense and by simply stopping and really paying attention to the wonder of the world around us isn't it more reasonable to take just one small step in faith and say: “On the balance of probabilities, we believe in God and the God we believe in is closer to us than we are to ourselves”

Tony Brady

Dublin Unitarian Church

Insist that you forever begin

My address this morning offers some thoughts and reflection on the theme of renewal. Most of us come to a moment in our lives when we would like to make a fresh start. We reach some impasse in our life. We find disappointing shortcoming in the way we are living. We face unexpected illness, grief or sorrow. Maybe a fruitful friendship or a romantic love commences. Opportunity suddenly stares us in the eye. So, we think 'let's go for it. Let's make that leap and aim higher'. A rejuvenation, a rebirth, a renewal is taking shape.

The title of my address pays homage to the final line of Brendan Kennelly's much-loved poem 'Begin'. Composed in the late 1990s, after a period of illness, Kennelly writes in a celebratory tone exhorting us to be prepared, always to try to renew ourselves, to begin – again – and start afresh. The word 'begin' is used 7 times in the 24-line poem. Here are the four opening lines:

*Begin again to the summoning birds
to the sight of the light at the window,
begin to the roar of morning traffic
all along Pembroke Road.*

The natural world is defined by cycles of growth and decay, and we draw sustenance from the seasonal rebirth in these cycles. Ideas and aspirations of rejuvenation and renewal are embodied in spiritual yearning, in mystical search, and indeed in religion itself. The traditional Christian message celebrates a divine saviour come on earth who redeems and helps regenerate human existence.

Renewal appears hardwired into our everyday lives. We will likely come face to face with its possibility. But that meeting with a possible new destiny can be challenging. Renewal and rebirth may be a constant of human existence, but the process is fraught and may not succeed. So, can we readily renew ourselves? Are so called 'second acts' possible in life?

Reflection about renewing and reshaping one's life often leads me to think about the story and characters in Eugene O'Neill's masterful play 'The Iceman Cometh'. On the face of it, the play seems an unlikely candidate to offer insight into renewal.

The play is set in 1912 in a downmarket New York saloon and rooming house. The patrons, twelve men and three women streetwalkers, are heavy-drinking dead-enders who spend every possible moment seeking oblivion in one another's company. They drift purposelessly from day to day, each occasionally promising to reform and improve their lot, and only become fully alive during the semi-annual visits of the seemingly successful salesman 'Hickey', the redeemer-like iceman of the title.

During the play, the characters speak hopefully of turning their lives around – but they fail to make any progress. They return to their empty promises, delusions, and pipe dreams. They don't appear to have the necessary resolve. But perhaps matters are more complex for these beleaguered. So, what could such characters possibly tell us about renewal?

Eugene O'Neill's writing has the ability to articulate the deepest angst and recesses of the human soul, so that his characters, whatever their backgrounds, speak to a profound universal truth. These low-life apparent loser-types in the play powerfully remind us of our own deep need to renew ourselves, and of the difficulty of so doing.

If Eugene O'Neill is gloomy about the possibilities for renewal, the playwright and writer Samuel Beckett is more optimistic. He encourages us to 'fail better'. The exhortation 'fail better' appears five times in his 1983 story 'Worstward Ho', the first of which goes like this: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better'. Beckett is reminding us that failure is also about learning and what seems like failure may well contain the seeds of future success.

The actor, dancer and singer, Fred Astaire, is even more optimistic in the face of setback. The American songbook classic 'Pick yourself up' was written for the film 'Swing Times' in 1936, where it was introduced by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. It goes:

*Nothing's impossible I have found,
For when my chin is on the ground,
I pick myself up, Dust myself off,
Start all over again.*

Are there second acts? Can we usefully and positively rejuvenate ourselves? Can we get involved in undertakings that will regenerate fruitfully and give fresh life? The answer is of course *yes* – but with the caveat that determination is required. Renewal requires persistence and a resolute unwillingness to give up along the way.

It can help to underpin our determination by remembering that we are where we are now, because others have struggled before us. To persist is to pay homage to that great tide of humankind that came before us, that gave shape to our own DNA. We are inexorably woven into this grand project of humanity. To begin again *is* imperative.

And it helps if we can maintain an optimistic outlook despite setback. Believing that 'the glass is half full' is always a constructive mindset in pushing forward. An optimistic perspective, no matter how mild, facilitates a determination and the likelihood of positive outcomes.

I am fond of saying in this church that our task on earth is to try and live an authentic, worthwhile and decent life. A determined optimism will help us along this journey. In fact, I would venture further and say that a determined optimism might be considered as a tenet of Unitarian Universal-

ism, despite our unease with creed and dogma.

This grand project of humanity, into which we are all inexorably woven, is now being tested existentially, and practically, by climate change. It is the greatest challenge facing humankind. And at times we tend to despair and wonder what can we really do. How can we act, or react, positively? Al Gore is a former vice-president of the US and a climate activist, the founder and chairman of The Climate Reality Project, a nonprofit organisation devoted to solving the climate crisis. Here is Al Gore speaking recently about his stewardship of a bootcamp or training bivouac for young climate activists. He says:

‘We don’t have just one David (the David of David and Goliath), we have 3,000 Davids here at this training. And there are millions around the world. If you look at all the groups that are doing this work, it is the largest grass roots movement in the entire history of the world, and it is continuing to build.’

Al Gore continues: ‘I draw an analogy between this movement and the abolitionists, women’s suffrage, civil rights, and so on. With all of those movements, when the central issue was really crystallised as a choice between what is clearly right and just, and what is clearly unjust and wrong and deadly and dangerous, then the outcome becomes foreordained.’

He finishes off: ‘I bet on humanity. I believe that in spite of the well-known limitations we all have, and our vulnerabilities to pettiness and greed, and all of the things that can go wrong, we also really and truly have a capacity to rise above those limitations. We have demonstrated this in times past. We *are* capable of this. And the ability of the special interests, in this case the fossil fuel polluters to dominate laws and policies, is going to come to an end.’

Al Gore’s determined optimism provides valuable leadership to all of us in facing climate change and achieving planetary renewal.

Drawing towards conclusion. I read Reinhold Niebuhr’s Serenity Prayer before our period of reflection. Niebuhr was a Christian theologian with a belief in a divine God. He believed that Enlightenment rationality underestimated the human capacity for sin. He thought that you can’t use science to answer questions about life’s ultimate purpose and meaning. He was sceptical that secularism and reason alone can address life’s deepest problems. Niebuhr wrote, ‘The religious ideal of forgiveness is more profound and more difficult than the rational virtue of tolerance.’

The Serenity Prayer acknowledges a power, a presence, a divinity beyond the mere human and every day in coping with life’s difficulties. Perhaps it is not surprising that those seeking healing from addictive behaviour also acknowledge a power beyond themselves, and beg or entreat the support of that power.

Some of us here today will remember the annual Catholic retreat or

mission once popular here in Ireland. It was firmly believed that participation in such a retreat would inspire personal spiritual renewal. These retreats were often led by the Redemptorist congregation of brothers and priests who at that time very much espoused a God of Anger. Their fire-and-brimstone sermon delivery may have been counterproductive, but it does recognise a spiritual or religious dimension to much recovery and rebirth.

At this juncture, considering that I myself have attended quite a few of those fire-and-brimstone missions, I might entreat all of you to repent and be reborn. But I won't. I will more humbly ask that you accept that to begin, and start again, is an inherent part of the human condition. It may be difficult, but it is necessary. So, start that educational course... Join that charitable organisation... Get that medical check done... Renew your marriage vows... Take that holiday of a lifetime... Join a dating agency... Engage in some activism... Go for it, and if it doesn't work out, go for it again.

To conclude, I will read the last four lines of Brendan Kennelly's poem:

*Though we live in a world that dreams of ending
that always seems about to give in
something that will not acknowledge conclusion
insists that we forever begin.*

Aidan O'Driscoll

Address to St Stephen's Green Unitarian Church.

28 July 2024

Reading by Rev.Bridget Spain 13th August

At present I am not at peace.

A million things are zooming through my head, constant lists are being made and remade of all that I have to do, should be doing, and even worse should have done ages ago.

Oh and I've to write this piece too!

There are many things demanding attention and many 'selves' that want to respond in many different ways.

I realise this may not be what you want to read in a book on peace.

But it's true.

At present I am not at peace.

But here's the important bit... that's ok.

It's ok because it is simply how it is with me at present.

And I know, deep down truly know, that if I sit with the present moment as it honestly is, accepting it for what it is and accepting me for my reactions to it, then peace begins to steal in.

This is what prayer and practice have shown me over many years.

Peace is not something to be gained once and held on to forever.

Peace is a practice.

Peace is a choice.

Sometimes it is a very difficult choice, perhaps because the distractions are loud, or because I am pulled into past patterns or future anxieties.

So in these moments of non-peace we find ourselves in what is to be done?

I believe we must surrender to the present moment in its essential truth.

No matter how terrible that may seem, truth is the foundation of peace.

Secondly we must let go of how we would like it to be.

I would like to be at peace right now.

But I'm not.

If I spend my time thinking about how it should be then I will never touch peace.

The conditions for peace can only arise when we open the doors of the heart to reality as it is in all its wonder and even in all its pain.

How we face this reality then becomes important; and so the third step is to greet the now with stillness.

To abide in stillness in the present moment.
To anchor ourselves in its sacred potential as it arises from the Divine.
I am here, now.
All the conditions of my life, known and unknown, helpful and unhelpful have led to this moment.
When I am fully present to it, abiding in it, accepting its potential as grace, then there comes a shift which allows me to choose my reaction to it, to begin to choose peace.
This reaction will not change the present moment one iota.
But it changes me.
In changing me it allows for the gates of possibility to open in this moment, the possibility of growing in awareness, wisdom, compassion and love.
The moment may still be a difficult one.
But there is freedom in the moment to choose my reaction, and I choose peace.
Not peace as a mere cessation of conflict, but the peace that underlies all that is.
The peace promised to us as that which passes all understanding.
The peace that flows with grace.
The peace that changes me so that in me the world too may be changed.
At present I am not at peace.
But I know with truth, with acceptance, and with stillness, peace is possible in this and every moment.

Richard Hendrick

a priest-friar of the Irish branch of the Capuchin Franciscan Order.

Dublin Unitarian Book Club's choice for July 2024.

Gilead

by

Marilynne Robinson

Marilynne Robinson's Calvinist-infused Protestant faith is central to her writing and she is described as one of the most compelling Christian thinkers and writers of our time.

Gilead is a fictitious small town in the mid-west state of Iowa, home to John Ames, a seventy six year old fourth generation Congregationalist minister who is suffering from heart disease. The year is 1956 and at the bequest of his wife Lila, John is writing a letter/memoir to his son who is only 6 years old, who he knows will grow up without him.

John Ames has a strong presence and voice in this book. It is not overly preachy but a voice that's rooted in the rural community he hails from. John sees the beauty and sacredness in the everyday and ordinary whether it is workmen enjoying a smoke break, a young couple out walking or his wife and son playing in the back yard. The author's descriptions of these simple events and the surrounding natural environment give the reader a great sense of the time and location. Ames sees the world through the eyes of a pastor and so the basic essentials of life such as love, family, home, water, food and of course faith are running themes in the narrative.

As this is a memoir it is a slow and thoughtful 'epistle'. There is a rhythm to the language which seems from another time as if John Ames is an 'old timer', he forms a bridge between his past which will be very different to the future of his young son.

Ames letter tells of his family history. His grandfather who was a militant abolitionist who had biblical type visions and served as a chaplain in the American Civil War where he was injured and lost his right eye. He eventually took off and became a wandering preacher around Kansas where he died. John went with his father on a sort of pilgrimage to find his grandfather's grave and this journey is one of the most vivid and influential events of his life.

John's father, also a minister, was a pacifist and recoiled from war and violence and parted company disagreeably with his own father, who preached the sanctity of war in certain circumstances; ie against slavery. John's father longs for restoration not just with his own father but with John's older brother Edward, a prodigee who studied philosophy abroad but when he returned from his studies in Germany he had fallen away from his faith. Edward had been writing to John Jr and encouraged him to read philosophers such as Feuerbach in order to broaden his horizons and give him a jolt, he did read Feuerbach and so did his father who wanted to see what Edward and John were reading in order to counteract any unorthodoxy, but ironically it was his father's faith that

was jolted and not John's.

The question of faith and belief are central themes in the book as is the relationships between fathers and sons. The prodigal son references are a running theme throughout the novel and is explored more in the book when the 'bad boy' of Gilead returns home after twenty years and this is where the book picks up pace. The returnee, Jack, is the son of John's closest and long time friend since childhood, Robert Broughton. Robert is also a minister but of the Presbyterian faith. Robert is married and blessed with eight children. Ames is at times jealous of Robert as John's first wife, Louisa died in childbirth and the baby, Rebecca also died. His life has been sad and lonely and he endures it stoically until one Sunday Lila, a stranger sheltering from the rain turned up in church. She returned the following week and the rest as they say is history. Lila is a bit of a mystery and Robinson elaborates on her story in a follow up novel called *Lila*.

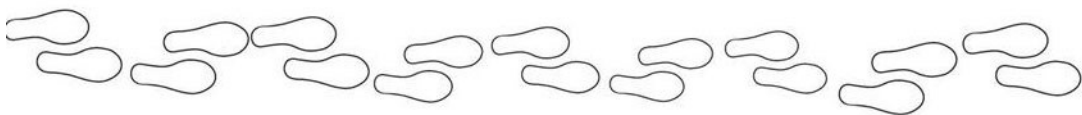
Robert's son Jack was baptised John Ames Broughton, much to the consternation of Ames. Jack is the favourite beloved child and can do no wrong. But he does, he was wayward, mischievous to the point of being a troublemaker and when he got a very young poor girl pregnant he absconded negating on his responsibilities and 'duty'. Ames cannot help being judgemental of Jack and finds it hard to forgive this trespass. They already have a fraught relationship so when Jack returns and renews their acquaintance Ames is on his guard especially as Lila and Jack strike up a friendship. On Jack's visits to Ames and Lila they talk about many matters such as faith, belief, predestination and forgiveness. Ames sees a change in Jack, there's a loneliness about him, that of a troubled soul. Eventually Jack discloses to Ames that he has a wife, Della and a son, Robert who are black. Their marriage is illegal in Missouri because of the laws against interracial marriage. Race, poverty and human rights do not intrude directly into Ames writings but as he recounts the personal experiences of people like his grandfather, Jack and the townspeople we get the picture of a complex time and place.

Jack does leave Gilead heading into an unknown future. (Robinson also has a follow up book on Jack.) Ames gives Jack his blessing and in that there is forgiveness, perhaps of the sinner but maybe not the sin.

In the end Ames has some serenity and is at peace with the world as he faces his mortality. He finishes with a sentence that encapsulates how he sees the world, how the ordinary can become the extraordinary with what he believes is by God's grace. "It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor grey ember of Creation and it turns to radiance, for a moment or a year or the span of a life".

The book club readers enjoyed this book and would highly recommend it.

Alison Claffey



City Walk

Last Walk in the series

Sunday 1st September *A Trip on the Tram -*

A short Luas journey to Dominick Street followed by a
walk around the Capel Street area.

All Welcome

Rory Delany

