Oscailt

December 2025 **IRELANDS UNITARIAN MAGAZINE** Vol.21 № 12

New members L-R Cormac Hynes, Allen Willoughby, Larry Roe, Ann Willoughby, Rev. Bridget Spain, Stephen Harmon Vaughan, John Moran and Denise Dunne.

L-R Rev.Bridget Spain, Gavin Byrne and Eva Kortekaas

Eva Kortekaas took the service on November 9th, she is from the Netherlands and discovered Unitarian Universalism over fifteen years ago. She is an active member of the Netherlands Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Amsterdam. Currently Eva is a ministry student at Unitarian College in England.

Oscailt

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
St.Stephen's Green Unitarian Church
112 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23.

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e-mail: oscailtmagazine@gmail.com

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Advertising rates available on request. e-mail: oscailtmagazine@gmail.com

Front Cover: A full church at the carol service.
(photo P.Spain)

WE WISH ALL OUR READERS

Happy Christmas

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Oscailt

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.

With my Body I Thee Worship

I'm sure you are all familiar with the title of this address, 'With my Body I Thee Worship', as the wonderful euphemism from the marriage service; but I am not about to give you a spicy talk. Sorry! It will come clear in time why I chose this title, apart from, of course, making you all keen to attend….

I was brought up agnostic, but with a protestant culture and a Church of England baptismal certificate – so they told me, I have never seen it. I think they brought me to church about four times, but it didn't stick. Then I tried in my teens to be a Christian, firstly as a Methodist, like my friend at the time. Later, I tried to be Church of Ireland. I was at a Church of Ireland service one time when a posse from the Youth Group had returned from a stint volunteering in Africa, I think helping to build a school, and they were up on the altar steps giving a report about the experience. They finished by telling us that their hosts had taught them a local hymn, which they were going to teach to us. We were asked to join in once we got the hang of it, and to copy their actions. This basically meant waving their arms to and fro during the chorus. So I put my arms in the air and waved, only to realise that I was in a very small minority. In fact from where I was sitting near the front, I couldn't see any raised arms. I felt foolish, and waved my arms at a much lower level, while everyone else seemed to be sitting on their hands.

I have wondered from time to time why this is. These people would consider themselves normal and outgoing, so why this embarrassment at being asked to wave their arms in time to a song? I have a horrible suspicion that this congregation (yes, I mean you!) might be the same, silently labelling it as childish, or silly, or just unnecessary or too evangelical. (as an aside – why on earth would we hand over something as simple as waving to the evangelists?) We are quite a physically repressed culture. Think of our dancing – until Michael Flatley gave it a good shaking Irish dancing really only happened from the knees down. There is a lovely video on YouTube of an African man Irish dancing in the street in Waterford ("Some craic on O'Connell Street") – below his thighs he's doing the standard Irish one two three, but from the hips up, he's in Africa, his body and arms are fully involved. It is just wonderful, seeing what can be done if we could only all unbutton. I noticed this physical discomfiture when I was doing physical therapy.

Very few clients could relax, and almost all of them thought this was the natural way to be. We have been taught without actual lessons to be stiff and almost ashamed of our bodies.

We are very good in this church at silences, at thinking, or meditating which in my mind is the same thing except for those few who actually manage to empty their minds. Why would we shy away from a physical expression of awareness or of happiness?

We express emotion through movement quite often. We cry when we are sad. We are said to 'wring our hands' when we are worried or deeply grieved. We clap to show we agree with a speaker, or think a performer has done well. We run towards returning loved ones in airports, and share hugs. As children we may have jumped up and down with happiness or anticipation. Footballers do all sorts of happy gymnastics after getting a goal. So, can we wave our arms in joy?

When I was thinking up this address, I had the idea to read you a piece from a wonderful book called Married to a Bedouin. But when I went to look for it the piece was very short so I'm just going to tell you about it instead. The Bedouin Jordanian women blended prayer into their everyday actions, for instance saying Bismillah (in the name of God) before starting to knead their bread. This turned the whole physical act of kneading into an act of worship, but they probably didn't really think about it, any more than an Irish person does when they say "please god" after 'see you on Tuesday'. So is it worship? And what is 'worship' anyway?

Professor Brian Cox, the well known TV personality whose thesis was called "Double diffraction dissociation at large momentum transfer" so he knows about stuff, has said that he 'has no personal faith' but that he cannot be sure there is no god. He has described us, humanity, as being the Universe's way of learning about itself. That we are pieces of the whole, divided off in order to have experiences. I like this idea for it makes *us* God, if there is a god. I don't think there is a sentient god, although I am happy to think that there may be spirits of a lower level who organise minor things for us. But this is not the point I want to make.

What I am hoping by this talk is to make everyone more aware of their body as a way of expressing their feelings about the day, particularly on the happy days. Not just in church, though wouldn't it be fun to do a conga around the pews!, but all the time. We sing hymns, which is a fine way of using our bodies to "worship", that is, to be-

come aware of the fact we are alive, and I hope are mostly happy about it, but there are many other things we can do to express our awareness of our place in the Grand Scheme. This is, I think, what worship is. It is for me that sense of awe that is there whenever I stop to think about it. I don't too often because it can be overwhelming. To actually get your head around the fact that our little planet is here, on the edge of the Milky Way, but in the midst of a universe that is truly endless. That for whatever reason, life as we know it became possible here, and that because of a whole series of accidents, I was born, and have survived for this long, and mostly enjoyed myself. It is mind-blowing. It is coming face to face with this -that I think of as worship. The "Oh Wow" moment when once again you realise what a miracle you are involved with. You don't have to be in church for this, in fact I think church is where we come to put manners on our Oh Wows. They are more usual in day to day life. For some it is when the sun breaks through and lights up a beautiful scene; for some it is reading some really well-put words; for some it is a delicious food, or piece of music. Any of those sort of material things that can make us go Oh Wow, or Thank you, if our awareness of worship has been switched on

Musicians may have it easy, everything they do is physical. But are musicians always aware of the wonder of their ability as they play, or only of being outside themselves in the music? I suppose I am talking about 'mindfulness' which is a word I dislike because it brings us back into a sort of thinking state again, which we do too much of. It would be great to be physical and enjoy it without making it intellectual.

Many religions do this. The Sikhs in the Golden Temple in Amritsar feed thousands of people daily. The act of preparing the food is an act of worship, and a really useful one that visitors are invited to join in.

We all know of the whirling dervishes, who spin themselves into a trance; while all Muslims kneel and bow their faces to the ground, in a repetitive pattern that I think could become joyful, at least so long as you don't have bad arthritis. But here's a thought on the side- would all that movement slow down the development of stiffness and pain?

The Hindu religion contains many examples of the use of movements that are dance, or dance-like. When I was lucky enough to visit India, we passed, in our car, a small procession of local people going to a temple for a celebration. There was loud music from a sound system on the lorry that was leading, and then a colourful crowd of dancing laughing people, who turned wonderful smiles to us and waved as we took a photo. Some Hindu events (They don't really have 'services' as we know them) include waving arms and dancing feet, even in the temple. The 7 priests on the banks of the Ganges in Varanasi every evening as they say Goodnight to Mother River, make movements with their lamps. For the festival of Holi, people throw coloured powders on each other, which causes much merriment. There are movements and gestures that go with Aarti and Puja, and on other occasions, walking around a shrine is part of the worship.

Jewish worship has contained movements since the beginning. It is common for Jews who are standing to pray to rock to and fro, and there are patterns of approved movements to go with prayers. A psalm quoted in Midrash Tehillin, an 11th Century exegetical text, which means a text that explains a passage after careful study, says "All my limbs shall say 'who is like you Oh Lord'. It also mentions the use of the nose to smell and the ears to hear. I like the idea that simply smelling something is an act of worship. It can be, if you become aware of what you are doing and revel in it. I'm allergic to peaches so can't eat them but stood recently in a supermarket surrounded by their scent, and felt a moment of happiness

Pilgrimage is an example of an enormous physical input into worship. The Camino is popular nowadays, but people go to many shrines as an act of worship. The trip to Mecca is one of the five pillars of Islam. Lough Derg is a well known Irish one, but isn't it so like us Misery Guts that you have to walk on sharp stones barefoot and have nothing much to eat, instead of Revelling in the fresh air and scenery, and maybe even dancing ?

Fasting is common in many religions, but I think the feasting that follows is the real worship, as you discover again the joy of what you had denied yourself. The "Iftar", the meal Muslims break their daily fast with during Ramadan; Easter eggs in the days when we had eaten no chocolate for forty days; the bagels and cream cheese often eaten after

a Yom Kippur fast, these must all bring a special joy. And foods that are traditional to particular festivals bring us all a happiness often linked to nostalgia. We miss them when we don't get them, and eating them is an act of worship, in a way. First mince pie of the year, anyone?

All that cooking can be an act of worship, especially if it is done communally. We do something right, in my opinion, when we share drinks. We raise the glasses and say 'cheers' or 'slainte'. Many languages use a word that means health, but I think 'cheers' and the French 'a la vôtre' have it right. It is simply a moment of celebration of being us, of being alive.

We are all aware of the endorphins that turn up when we exercise. What we don't always do is tune in to this feeling and become fully aware of the wonder of actually having a body.

And now, two quotes without known authors:

"You can worship god as you teach your class in school or stock a shelf or negotiate a contract or promote a candidate or hug your children or build a house for homeless people…

"our souls and our bodies are deeply connected. What we experience on the inside deserves to be expressed in actions. And the actions of our bodies often influence and shape our hearts"

So, whether you consider it worship or not, I hope that when you get the choice to sit it out or dance – I hope you dance!

Madeline Stringer
St.Stephen's Green Unitarian Church




Christmas Messages

While most people love Christmas there is a sizable number who find Christmas difficult. This may be because of painful childhood experiences or because of a loss or trauma during the year. It may be just because the person is a bit of a grouch - someone not inclined to party. Christmas is an emotional time. No matter what our attitude is to Christmas, Christmas has the ability to magnify all our life experiences, the good and bad.

Christmas is the time for tradition. If something happens in a family at Christmastime two years in a row it becomes the family tradition. Something to repeat year after year - just because "*we always do this*". Yet as traditional as Christmas is Christmas and the messages that surround Christmas change over time, the changes only become obvious in hindsight.

Growing up in small town Ireland our Christmas started very close to the 25th December. It began when the Church Choir visited each street in the town in rotation over about a week. This was a red letter occasion. The Choir wore full robes, they brought the crib from the church. Now the figures in this crib were life sized, the whole thing was set in a cave. It was lit using a generator and the entirety was pushed or dragged on the large two wheeled vehicle that was and still is used to convey coffins from the church to the cemetery.

Houses along the route had illuminated stars shining in the window, the very odd house had a Christmas tree. It was a community event. Everyone came out and joined in the singing. The Christmas message of my childhood was that the birth of Jesus initiated the process of the Redemption of humanity. We believed every detail of the nativity story. We believed in hosts of angels bringing good news to the marginalized, we believed in the Virgin birth – even though we had no idea what that meant - we believed in stars to be followed, we believed that God loved us so much that He intervened directly in the world to save us.

This was before television advertising, we knew nothing about say the Queens Speech. This was the only message we

heard. We believed that Santa's reindeers could fly. Santa brought presents to good children and we enjoyed food that was only available at Christmastime. Turkey and ham, Christmas Cake and Pudding. Alcohol was so exceptional in our house one of my few memories of my grandfather is that one Christmas he drank a glass of Guinness! Christmas finished in new year when the Christmas cake was gone.

When our children were young the world of commerce was making its presence felt at Christmas. Christmas was about making magic for children. Our traditions centered around the visit to see Switzer's window in Grafton street. The window attracted a mob of excited children to watch mechanized scenes of elves making toys in Santa's workshop. There was the trip to Santa's magical, dimly lit grotto; which is now a thing of the past.

Despite having left the Catholic Church I was drawn back to Church on Christmas Day. I was not alone - the church was always packed on Christmas morning. Religion is now peripheral in the lives of most people. For the majority, the Christmas messages now come exclusively from advertising. The job of advertisers is not to bring hope to humanity or to enchant children; it is to get us to buy things. Brown Thomas now occupies where Switzer's once stood. The elves' workshop has long disappeared. Last year the Brown Thomas windows had of impossibly thin styalised female figures. One figure stands in front of a giant sized Quality Street sweet box. The following is from on Brown Thomas web site explaining the concept of the window:-

"our Christmas 2023 display was one of our most extravagant and joyful, complete with a giant bespoke sweet tin, emblazoned with the words "Grafton Street". The energy of this Christmas display was exuberant, moreish and playful, making it one of our favourites yet".

This year (2024) 'Dublin City Council's festive offering is, they say, an experience like no other where people of all generations can experience specially commissioned dynamic, colourful and imaginative light projections by leading artists throughout the city centre".

There is a more traditional note, the animal crib has returned to outside of the Mansion House, but the animals will be overnighting in Dublin they are sent back to their farm each evening to be tucked into their stables!

Christmas advertising starts after Halloween. The early start is driven by **our** reluctance to live in the present. We are impatient for constant distraction. Without exception adverts portray Christmas as a fairy tale of perfection. Decorations are themed, and colour co-ordinated. No one is overworked, impatient or frazzled. The table is laden with an obscenity of foods, with not a singed turkey leg in sight. People eat their sprouts! Families are made up of thoughtful, happy people, no one drinks too much. There is not one red faced cook multi - tasking in the kitchen. There are no dirty dishes. No leftovers to be shoved into the fridge.

Santa has disappeared from the dialogue and the Baby Jesus is most definitely relegated to yesterday's story. The festival is now so commercialised that it is not surprising that people want Christmas finished after Stephen's Day.

The persistent messages beamed to us is firstly happiness in found in consuming things- more is better. Secondly that "a version of a perfect life" exists and is achievable - if we try hard enough. Voltaire wisely remarked "perfect is the enemy of good". And thirdly that the world if filled with happy families that have achieved this perfection. That is surely the greatest porky.

We are not tied to this commercial fairytale. It is not too late, forget the advertisers messages, celebrate Christmas as you want to. Christmas is the time to revel in wonder and magic as children do, as we all did before worldly ambitions and responsibility replaced the imagination of childhood. Children love mess - forget order and neatness let there be messiness and look for magic. Nature makes this a time of magic. Our ancestors placed such emphasis on this magical time they built the tumulus at Newgrange to mark and capture its wonder.

The tilt of the earth and its orbit around the sun, creates the seasons and the hours of daylight and darkness. For six months each day has had fewer and fewer hours of daylight. December 21st is the shortest day yet on the 22nd December daylight has already begun to increase and this will continue until Mid-Summer. How miraculous is that! The return of daylight has never failed us yet. While we wait for the returning warmth, we can enjoy hunkering down in the light of a candle or firelight. Take a cue from nature. Slow down, recharge your batteries.

The Celts believed that as plants rest in winter so we should also rest. Allow the mind to rest and wonder at will. Dare to dream a little; allow it to sift through the experiences of the past year and to find in those experiences whatever grace the experiences brings. Every experience brings some grace even if the grace seems well hidden.

We may not believe that an actual star moved through the sky to guide the Magi to the Manger. The story is a metaphor for the belief that we each have our star to follow. Our destiny to fulfil The Buddha, Jesus and all spiritual traditions teach that the aim of religion is not pie in the sky when we die. But that we live life in all its fullness here and now. When we follow our star or destiny, we live the life we are meant to life.

When we try to live the dreams of advertisers, we are not being true to ourselves.

Follow your star, dream big, seek out the magic - don't wait to begin living. Try to live the twelve days of Christmas.

Rev.Bridget Spain
Minister Emerita
St. Stephen's Green Unitarian Church

Dublin 25th December 2024



Dublin Unitarian Book Club's choice for October 2025.

The Dance Tree

by

Kiran Millwood Hargrave

In 1518 a dancing plague (choreomania) gripped the city of Strasbourg during one of the hottest summers in Europe. It lasted 3 months with up to 400 people dancing on a daily basis and some say up to 15 deaths occurred each day. Most of the dancers were women coming from the poorest and most vulnerable parts of society.

The sixteenth century was plagued with extreme weather events, freezing winters followed by searing summers resulting in failed harvests. Medieval society was ruled by church and state and they had a blind faith in both. They believed that God was punishing them for their wrongdoings. The dancing plague was seen as a response to God's punishments and so this religious fervour was enabled by the local council and church so that those in it's grip could dance away their sins. As crops failed many took out loans from the church and landowners but when they were threatened with losing everything because they could not pay their debts many rebelled with dire consequences, the punishments meted out was torture and death. It was a time of social upheaval and hardship.

Caught in this chaotic world is Lisbet Wiler, a local bee keeper who is married to Henne. They live with Sophie, Henne's strict and unwelcoming mother. They have struggled like most and now their farm and beehives are under threat of confiscation and so Henne must travel to Heidelberg to plea their case to retain their livelihood. Lisbet is in the last stages of pregnancy but this is a very precious one as she has lost twelve babies up to now through miscarriage and still birth. Lisbet mourns her lost babies by creating a memorial to them deep in the adjacent forest, a Dance Tree, a "relic of the pagans who had their churches under God". It is to the Dance Tree that Lisbeth goes to make her private pilgrimages bringing tokens and offerings to her lost children like feathers and flowers. It is here she finds solace from the world.

There are many other characters in this story such as Agnethe, Lisbet's sister in law who has spent seven years in exile in a Monastery for a crime no one wants to talk about. She returns home during

this chaotic time. Ida is Lisbet's close friend and confidante and is married to Plater, a local magistrate with ambition for power. He is also vindictive, cruel and a perpetrator of domestic violence. The history and current relationships of Lisbet, Henne, Ida and Plater are told and unfold revealing dark secrets and awakenings.

The local council bring in Musicians to help "dance the plague out of the dancers". One of the musicians is Eren, a Turk who is billeted with Lisbet and Sophie while Henne is away. He is the feared stranger and considered an uncivilised heathen, yet as Lisbet gets to know him and their friendship develops and deepens as they respond to tumultuous events , it is the outsider that shows most compassion ,help and understanding.

The readers felt that the characters were interesting and relatable but could have been developed more as some came across as stereotypically good, as with Ida and Eren, or bad as with Plater.

The author covered many themes and issues, too many for some of our readers and like so many contemporary historical fiction novels they are seen through the lens of the 21st Century viewpoint.

Themes such as motherhood, miscarriage, marriage, misogyny, friendships and relationships, racism, xenophobia, patriarchy, and the power of the church and state.

That being said, you certainly get a sense of the time and place from the author's descriptive writing and you can imagine being in that medieval world.

The readers did enjoy this book as it was well paced and a page turner. It was well researched and well written. It had a good ending which was believable and kept within the context of the time. An overall good read.

Alison Claffey
St. Stephen's Green Unitarian Church



Christmas Raffle

On

Sunday 14th December 2024

The proceeds will go to charity

Christmas Tree Decorations

Jams - Chutneys - Raffle - etc,etc,

If you wish to contribute - volunteer - help

Contact Alison Claffey 086-3884943

A very happy Christmas to you all.

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**

Childrens Educational Trust Funds
The Damer and Singleton Trusts

Our congregation has two funds dedicated to supporting the educational needs of our voting members' children. For further information please contact any member of the committee if you want to know more, or write to Dennis Aylmer c/o aylmerd@gmail.com

Each week an e-mail circular is sent 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 complete the Weekly e-mail form available at

https://dublinunitarianchurch.us9.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=520442759bc8abadb1b0b3818&id=295c346bce

or visit https://www.dublinunitarianchurch.org/

and follow the link at the top of the screen
– *Sign up to Weekly e-mail* – to complete your details.

DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH

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

Managing Committee Notice

Annual Registration of Voting Members (2026)

For the Attention of All Members

If you are a Member of the congregation (*that is, if your name was entered into the Membership Book during any year up to and including 2024*) and you wish to have your name included as a **Voting Member** on the **Register of Voting Members** for **2026**, you should complete and return a **Voting Registration Form** by not later than **31st December 2025.**

Members who made an *identifiable financial donation to the church during 2025 have already been automatically registered as Voting Members for 2026 and **do not** need to complete a registration form. An email to this effect will be circulated to the relevant members in late October.

An *identifiable donation *is one that can be associated with a member's name, for example a cheque or a standing order - or any other method by which the donation can be recorded as coming from a particular member.*

If you are uncertain as to whether you have already been automatically registered as a Voting Member you should contact the treasurer, Rory Delany (treasurerunitarianchurch@gmail.com)

Please note that is the responsibility of the Member to ensure that his / her name is included on the Register of Voting Members.

Voting Registration Forms are now available for collection in the church. If you are a Member who can't attend church often, or who usually listens in online, a form can be sent to you on request by post or email.
Requests for **Voting Registration Forms** should be sent to;

(by post)

The Membership Secretary
Unitarian Church
112 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23

Dublin Unitarian Church

112 St.Stephens Green Dublin 2.

Service 11.00a.m.

Sunday Rota for December 2025

7th December	*Hope and Courage*
Service	**Gavin Byrne**
Reader	**Jennifer Buller**
Flowers	**Valerie Shanley**
Welcomer	**Valerie Shanley - Any Pollak**
Coffee	**Janet Mulroy, Sheila Hanley, Mary O'Brien**
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14th December	*Carol Service & Readings*
Service	**Gavin Byrne**
Reader	**Various**
Flowers	**Denise Dunne**
Welcomer	**Denise Dunne - Gráinne Carty**
Coffee	**Jennifer Buller, Emer O'Reilly, Malachy Hevehan**
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21st December	*Solstice*
Service	**Terry Dixon**
Reader	**Paul Murray**
Flowers	**Daniela Cooney**
Welcomer	**Colette Douglas - Paul Murray**
Coffee	**Alison Claffey, Therese Fontana, Jane Nolan**
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25th December	*Christmas Day*
Service	**Gavin Byrne**
Reader	**Shari McDaid**
Flowers	**Trish Webb-Duffy**
Welcomer	**Trish Webb-Duffy**
Coffee	**None**
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28th December	*FAVOURITE READINGS*
Service	**Pamala McCarthy**
Reader	**Various**
Flowers	**Therese Fontana**
Welcomer	**Janet Mulroy - Paul Murray**
Coffee	**Janet Mulroy, Gráinne Carty, Daniela Cooney**
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Frank Tracy gave a TalkWalk to Grangegorman Grave yard, which has the grave stone of Margaret and John Naylor, the full story is in Oscailt magazine edition November 2023.

Maeve Edwards, Doireann Ní Bhriain, Grainne Carty attended the launch of the Sunday Miscellany Anthology 2023 to 2025 in the Lexicon Library Dún Laoghaire.

Maeve and Doireann are both included in the list of contributors. The book has been nominated for ' An Post Irish Book Awards'.

It can be voted for at https://www.irishbookawards.ie .
It would also make a great Christmas present.