

The Voice of Amida Shu: Pureland Buddhism

Absolute Grace

Total Engagement

Issue 37 Spring 2019

RUNNING TIDE



Honen establishes Jodo Shu

Edition 37 - Faith

RUNNING TIDE

Running Tide offers a voice for faith and practice, as well as critical, existential and socially engaged enquiry within the broad framework of Pureland Buddhism. We publish short articles, poetry, pictures, interviews, comment and Buddhist resource materials. Opinions expressed are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Amida Order, Amida Trust, or other associated organisations. Running Tide is distributed by:

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Amida Order & School

The Amida Order and Amida School are a religious order and community, respectively, following the Pureland tradition, established under the auspices of the Amida Trust. In this periodical the letters OAB after a name indicate membership of the Order of Amida Buddha and the letters MAS indicate membership of the Amida School. The Amida School is also referred to as Amida Shu. All Order members are also School members.

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EDITORIAL

Hi, I am Robert and with others am going to organise our Pureland Buddhist magazine, 'Running Tide' gathering content for a proposed three more editions this year, Easter, Summer and Winter.

Each edition will loosely have a theme on which I would love contributions from both our Sangha and others. I say others because I want to include a regular section called 'Other Perspectives' which will include thoughts from differing sources to those of Pureland Buddhism. I hope that you bear with my addition on this point as I feel that Dharma can be Dharma whether it is categorised as Buddhist or not.

I thank all the contributors, it has been a great privilege to read their creations; Dharmavidya, Andrew Cheffings, Andrew Nicholls, Satya Robyn, Dayamay, Colin McDougall Vimalashri Yaakov, Richard Ollier, Kent Nerburn, Jef Jones and Becky

Waldron. Finally an additional thanks to Kaspia Thompson and Rozanne Everitt for their support.

I want these editions to encompass skilful means as a way to transmit Dharma and therefore look to both head and heart with content. In an attempt to tap into our emotional side and look to the poetic we will include poems and more poetic types of work. I hope that the poems will be expressions from our own community, so ignore the literary critics: if your poems are heartfelt then please submit them.

The editions and themes

Easter – Faith

Introducing uplifting notions on faith to establish for the year.

Summer – Women and diversity in religious organisations

Buddhism like many traditions in the West is increasingly being challenged by what could be called a rightful demand for inclusion.

Winter – Meditation

The winter can be a time to slow down and reflect and so we may look to meditation as a response to the season's calling.

And dear Sangha if you could send me some of your material covering one of these topics for future editions then it would be good.

I hope that you enjoy.

Faith by Dharmavidya

We are so lucky to have a preview of Dharmavidya's new book of which this excerpt deals with faith, from a collection of teachings that Kasper is putting together into a book this year. Also just a note that Dharmavidya's book on Dogen: The Dark Side of the Mirror, is available now.

Anshin: Part One ~ It's Alright

The term anshin is Japanese. It is commonly translated as 'settled faith'. As such it is one of several forms or aspects of 'faith'. Other aspects are shinjin, bodaishin, and another for which I do not know the Japanese term, but which, in the language of India is

called abhilasa. Each of these is worth a teaching

in its own right, but we can briefly define them as follows.

Dawning Trust

Shinjin is the dawning of trust, the opening of the heart. It involves a 'turning around' or change of heart, often springing from contrition or inspiration or a juxtaposition of the two. We can think of Shakyamuni seeing the 'Four Sights'. In such an awakening one is seized by new light, or, driven by a sense of having gone astray, seeing new possibility and feeling new verve. In a sense, and sometimes actually, shinjin precedes anshin and can be its foundation. Then we

can say that anshin is the maturing of shinjin.

Faith in Action

Abhilasa and bodaishin can be thought of as flowing from anshin and so as being subsequent, at least in a logical sense. Abhilasa is something like 'willingness', the willingness to do whatever is for the general good. Bodaishin is really the mind of enlightenment, or, at least the condition of heart that conduces to it, sometimes called 'the Way-seeking mind', a great compassion toward all sentient beings. So we can understand anshin as nested within these wonderful spiritual qualities. When we call out toward what is sacred to us, that calling is truly spiritual if and when it is touched by such qualities.

These are what we worship and aspire toward, hoping that they will be granted to us, will bless us and hold us. This is what we pray for.

Although I have described them somewhat as a sequence in the last paragraph, all these dimensions of 'faith' really function together. They are its modes or moods. Insofar as one's life is grounded in faith, at any one time one or other of these aspects will be showing.

Trust in the Heart

'Faith' in Buddhism is perhaps not identical to faith in other religions, since here there is more emphasis upon a state of 'heart' or 'mind' and less on belief or assertion. Buddhism is not so much

adherence to a creed and more a journey of exploration and grace, so that faith, here, is the willingness to wholeheartedly entrust oneself to that journey irrespective of where it may take one. The obstacle is attachment. Faith is like letting go of the rail on the side of the swimming pool whereas attachment is like adding more and more rails. Soon the rails, though each initially seemed so necessary and fine, have become the bars of the cage in which one has one's limited existence. Inside one's cage one may read about the wonderful life of liberation, but it lies beyond one's reach.

Entering Upon the Path

Even if we manage to leave our cage, squeezing

out between the bars and slipping away, we may still be bringing some attachment with us. We may think that we are going to develop these qualities as personal characteristics, we are going to get and possess them, and (secretly hoping) be admired for them. They are going to displace the characteristics that have been given to us by our immemorial karmic history, most of which are nothing like so noble, and we shall then be more perfected beings. Such is the pride we carry into our spiritual life.

However, what we gradually or suddenly learn or realise is that it does not work quite like that. It is not really that any part of what we are is given up, but it all comes to be bathed in a new light. That light may be

thought of in many ways — the light of the Buddhas, the Divine Light, the Light of Truth, whatever. This thing we call 'faith' that brings peace to us like a miracle, is not something we manufacture, nor own, but is a kind of grace that alights when we start to take ourselves less seriously.

To Know the Self is to Forget the Self

This diminishing seriousness is a function of familiarity. As we come to know ourselves better, to see ourselves more clearly, we perhaps start to realise that we are not actually as special as we always wanted to think we were. We find in ourselves much the same characteristics — good and bad — in varying degrees as we find

in everybody else. Their joys and sorrows, pride and shame, anxiety and relief, peace and panic, are all rather similar to our own, and our own to theirs. As this obvious truth become real to us, much of the mesmerising fascination of our own story fades. It is not that it vanishes, but it becomes less compelling, less central to the meaning of life.

Bedrock

When I recognise common humanity more authentically, something deep relaxes. It is as if a cosmic grandmother had soothingly said, "It's alright." That is faith. I am never going to be self-sufficiently perfect or self-justifying, whether in rightness, saintliness, victimhood, vengeful

heroism, or whatever other role might offer itself. I rely upon something vaster, pervasive, and beyond grasp. This "realisation of alrightness" is shinjin. When it is established in an enduring deep way, that is anshin. When it expresses itself in action, that is abhilasa. When it transforms one's perception of the world, that is bodaishin.

Such anshin faith provides a kind of bedrock in one's life that is independent of condition or circumstance, which is why it is called "settled". Although the vicissitudes of conditional existence in a world of impermanence continue, when one's heart has been touched in this way one can face whatever may come and not lose faith.

Poetry Page

Water – Andrew Cheffings

I rise and subside,

Like a wave on the sea,

Ever-changing,

Really, there is nothing to
me.

The Sangha is my only
stability.

On the surface,

The sea seems grand and
powerful,

And I admire the most
powerful waves,

Which crash onto the
shore;

But beneath the surface,

Is just a huge mass of dark
water-

Sometimes dead and
heavy,

Sometimes, gentle, healing
currents flow,

Warmed by Amida's Sun;

And the dead water comes
to life,

And sings its heart song.

Imperfect Dharma,

Imperfect Sangha-

Would that words and
practices could convey,

Include all and never
exclude,

And allow all the healing
we need.

Views of faith from our Sangha

Andrew Nicholls

My faith is what guides me helps to make sense of a world of anger, greed and delusion. Where people hate for no reason and live with guilt and jealousy.

It gives me the inspiration to try to make a change, in terms of understanding and overcoming those poisons within my own personality. And to attempt to support others with those poisons and give a way that they too can overcome delusional behaviour.

My faith helps me to see beauty in all things, be they now or in the past, living or not. The seasons and the planet, all that is before us and all that is around us. It gives me

hope and it gives me comfort.

My faith gives me the Buddha, the Dharma and my sangha.

My faith – Satya Robyn

How can I say anything about my faith that makes any sense? As I sit and struggle to begin this piece of writing, I realise that what is necessary is the very thing I'm trying to write about. I need to have faith that the words will appear – that I will be able to say something intelligible and that my experience might mean something to you too.

When I realise this, I acknowledge my apprehension of the blank page and I start to type anyway. For me faith involves exactly this kind of 'leaning in' which is the

opposite of fear. It means taking a risk and trusting that I will be held, one way or another.

Faith doesn't mean imagining that everything will work out in the way I want it to. Of course, things often don't. We are let down by people or circumstances, we get sick... This is the dukkha that the Buddha brought our attention to in the first Noble Truth – we can't avoid suffering. Having faith doesn't mean believing that things won't ever go horribly wrong!

For me faith means instead that I trust that I will somehow survive the difficult things that happen, until of course I don't, and that even when I die I will be okay. As Dharmavidya has said, 'I'm not okay, you're not okay, and that's okay'.

Having faith enables me to withhold judgement when things feel difficult. Instead of being sure that difficult situations will lead to further difficulty, I remain open to the possibility that these difficulties may be 'just what I need' to learn what I need to learn or to change in a way I need to change. Having faith also gives me a sense of consolation, of comfort – an 'everything is going to be okay' kind of feeling.

Where has this faith come from? I don't remember feeling very much of it when I was younger. I think most of my faith came through absorption, by being around other people who had faith. This has happened both in person, as I've witnessed Dharmavidya's faith and some of it has rubbed off on me, and through books, as I've been inspired and

reassured by the writings of Terrance Keenan, various Christian writers and others.

I think that acting with faith also leads to more faith. When I take a small risk and act with love instead of fear, more often than not I'm pleased that I've done so – things turn out okay. This encourages me to try to do the same again.

Finally I'm sure that all the spiritual practice I've done has seeped into me and imbued me with faith in some mysterious way.

I'd hoped I'd write something beautiful and mysterious, and instead I've written this. Now I need to have faith that what I've written is okay, that it's enough, and that I can send it off without others judging me or making a fool of myself or

not living up to the standards I've set for myself. Or, these things will happen, and that will be okay!

I'm so grateful for the faith I have, and for all the sources of faith and grace in my life.

Namo Amida Bu.

Faith by Dayamay

There has been a shift in my faith these last couple of years, maybe it's been defined by my increasing levels of devotion to the Buddha and the Sangha. It's as if my mind has become closer to and more influenced by my heart. Like my own life has become less oriented towards a future of safety and comfort, pleasure and happiness, and more aligned with the suffering in the world. I feel

connected to life, humanity, compassion and all of the need on this planet; as if my own personal salvation depends on the liberation of all beings, and the alleviation of their pain. Suffering is a universal language which inscribes itself into the hearts of people who live passionately and share generously. Probably the most intuitive faculty of the awakened being is their capacity to receive and understand the anguish of others.

When we connect on a level which includes our deep and meaningful struggles with the human condition, we re-affirm our place within the benevolent universe. We express the fullness of life. The struggle is where the power is. The struggle shows us the border

between ourselves and that which exists above and beyond sentient life. The position from which it becomes possible to reach for another love. Something greater becomes discernible, beyond the senses, but a tangible presence which lifts and stimulates, holds and sustains.

The Samsaric universe doesn't recognise the difference between good and bad. It has no prejudices and operates from a place of neutrality. In the mind of nature there is no sin, no transgression, there is only consequence. A sequence of thought, impulse and deed stretching back to the ultimate beginning. Action and reaction reverberating between states of inertia. Animating the passive into the sphere of the active. What happens now will

propagate into the unmanifest forever, the future will be permanently marked by choices and decisions.

My faith has become an expression of cause and effect. The fluctuations of my influences on the vast history of time and space have converged and solidified in this moment. Seeds of dark karma surface from the depths of my mind, stretching towards the light of Dharma and reaching the fertile ground of Sangha, as presided over by limitless Buddhas. With both feet grounded on and rooted in the principles of enlightenment, my faith becomes a vehicle of transformation through which action and reaction both align with the qualities of the Pure Land.
NAB

Faith by Robert Waldron

The word that usually translates as faith from the Pali language, the language of the original Buddhist texts, is *Saddhā*, which literally means "to place the heart upon. Its meaning can vary a lot, depending on what we put our heart upon or the quality with which we give our heart over. Therefore there are numerous different ways faith can be manifest in our Buddhist and other traditions.

Buddhists have faith when we trust that the practice of the Buddha's teaching will bring about the transformations that we are seeking. In this world where many activities, people, politics and even those close can prove to be untrustworthy we have to surrender to a trust.

This in effect is love, the trust that a helpless young child born into this world has in its mother. The spiritual contract of trust between a child and its mother turns into a human contract and therefore will be Bombu in that it is subject to human frailties. The trust of Buddha is to have faith in the infinite in that what is, is as it should be. We may sometimes feel that this trust lets us down, but it is our bombu nature not the Buddha nature that has what could be perceived as shortcomings.

So faith can be viewed as a surrendering, however not passive, but an action that leads us on a pathway that has been trodden by many for millennia. The shared journey can bring us into contact with Sangha, past, future and present and we become infected by this

good virus that permeates our interconnectedness.

For us Buddha is our object of faith and the mind is shaped by the object of its attention and in this process of change and transformation we experience grace. We let the lord Buddha into our mind and this begins to create us, not like a creator god, like a teacher that shapes our mind.

We are called to have faith in the Buddha, the dharma (his teaching) and the saṅgha (the community). A faith in the conviction that good deeds have positive effects, and not so good deeds negative effects. Therefore faith changes our mind and through the Bodichitta (heart felt compassion) we are drawn to leading a life of charity, morality and religious qualities.

As Buddhists we are not asked to simply "turn the other cheek"; we are challenged with the proposition that 'hate never dispels hate, only love dispels hate'. Therefore as Buddhists we are called to action in that we are required to love where there is hate. This is a most difficult leap of faith especially coming from a warrior culture, however so did the Buddha who led by example.

So as my leap of faith, I say that Pureland is here and now and that the reason that I have not entered is that my thoughts are deeply a product of my conditional experience. The house is on fire and I often fail to see that the front door is open and Amida Buddha stands outside waiting as a

parent for his/her child.
Namo Amida Bu.

In my Buddhist book - Richard Ollier

In my Buddhist book I think I read with gratitude,

That Quan Shi Yin doesn't just hang out with the real cool spiritual dudes,

In the clean and shiny shopping malls of the mindful,

But can also be found in the dark, careless corners where the self-intoxicated busk tunelessly and the night polishers cannot reach.

Also I understand that, like Jesus I am told, she visits those of us in Hell.

So here we are then, she and I, in that dark realm,

Where the window is too
high to glimpse the Pure
Land,

All those miles away to the
West,

Enduring (or not) a
sentence measured in
kalpas not years,

(Why is everything in
Buddhism so big, or
long?).

I am here because I doubt
her love can save me;

She is here because she
knows it can.

Faith by Vimalashri Yaakov Matri

The word faith in Hebrew
is emoonah (e-moo-nah;
"e" as in egg, "moo" as in
moon, "nah" as in nut).

As one would easily detect
from hearing the sound of
this word, the beginning of

emoonah is emoon.
Emoon is the Hebrew word
for trust.

So in Hebrew emoonah
(faith) shares the same
linguistic root as emoon
(trust). Emoonah and
emoon consist of the same
first four letters: Alef, Mem,
Vav, Noon.

There is another
interesting linguistic
association here. The
Hebrew word imoon is
written with those same
four letters (Alef, Mem,
Vav, noon). This suggests
that the root of imoon
might be the same as in
emoonah (faith) and
emoon (trust). Imoon is
the Hebrew word for
practice.

All those three words in
Hebrew begin with the
letters Alef and Mem: Alef
and Mem constitute the
two letters with which we
write in Hebrew the word

for mother. In Hebrew it sounds: Em (here also: e as in egg).

So in Hebrew the words for faith, trust, practice and mother have a strong linguistic connection.

I would like here to reflect shortly on those virtues of faith, trust, practice, and the attitude of motherhood.

When I reflect on the question: What is my faith? I am somehow drawn to think of the experience of trust.

The dictionary tells us that "trust" is a firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something.

When I experience some form of trust that has been established between someone and myself, I feel free to think and behave, and free to create. I feel

safe, because I have been "received" (accepted) by this person whom I trust and who trusts me. Indeed, by trusting a person and being trusted, I have been made safe by them: I have been saved. I feel love for the person I trust and who trusts me, as through our relationship I can be who I am, I can feel alive, and I can make mistakes and feel safe that my future trials will be welcomed. If some persons feel they trust me, I believe they experience the same with me.

It is not a trivial matter to experience trust. For some people, it is a rare experience indeed. And many of us go through certain periods of life, when it is a rare thing.

Thus, when I reflect on this rare and special experience of trust, I think it is not only a wonderful feeling

(to trust someone, to be trusted by someone) but also a wonder-full feeling. Trust is not only an important contributor to life's meaning, but something which belongs to the Brahma Vihara - the realms towards which we are invited to feel awe and wonder. As we do not know where trust comes from, what its sources are, and how it functions, trust belongs to the realms of mystery. Trust comes and goes, it cannot be manipulated. It is grace.

Trust, as I can see and feel it, is holy. I know I ought to fully respect a person whom I trust, as he or she has brought me closer to these sacred realms. Through trust I can touch the four Brahma Viharas (linguistically: the abodes of Brahma): kindness, compassion, an earnest wish for the success and

good welfare of others, and the love to serve the other, whether it is in times of suffering, or in times of pleasure.

How difficult it is to have faith in trust!

Trust is hard to achieve. It builds slowly, and may be destroyed quite easily. It is evasive (this is another reason why trust belongs to the realms of mystery). Two persons are trying hard to achieve trust in their relationship, but foolish (bombu) nature tends to disrupt it.

Confusions and misunderstandings creep into the dialogue, the eyes may expose vulnerability and suspicion, which are sometimes - or often - stronger than the common wish of the two persons to trust each other. Real trust should bear (withstand and carry) those contradictions of trust and

distrust, of knitting and unknitting, of knowing and confusion.

Looking again in the dictionary, I can find yet another meaning for "trust". It is also the state of being responsible for someone or something (like in the phrase: a man in a position of trust).

What a responsibility it is to be trusted by another person; What a responsibility it is to build trust between people; What a responsibility it is to feel I am trusted: a responsibility to respect and care for the person whom I trust and who trusts me, a responsibility to feel the merit and gratefulness of being in a relationship with the person who brings me to creativity, who causes me to feel alive.

What courage is needed here! In order to benefit those with whom I share this life, in order to benefit the world into which I was born, I have to take upon myself this willingness to be open to the paradoxes of trust. This is originally the role of the mother, the human being whose ability is caring for the growth of trust in her baby.

Practicing this ability, this is my responsibility as a human being.

Following these reflections, what is my faith? My faith is the practice of guarding and consecrating trust.

Faith - Jan Wizinowich

Faith is something that is difficult to write about because it means containing a measureless concept within a sign system that can never

really contain it. We can't know the entire nature of the world we live in and so we need to have faith in the unknowable forces at work. This is what has frustrated science, a belief system that is conditioned on knowing the world in a finite theoretically unified way.

So for me:

Faith is surrender without relinquishing personal responsibility. It's trusting that my words and actions, if done in "good faith" are enough, regardless of the outcome.

Faith is responding to the inevitable dukka with the knowing that all shall be well, even if it isn't the outcome or story we envisioned.

Faith is taking a first step without seeing the staircase or where it leads.

Faith is knowing that the discomfort and upheaval we're experiencing is the universe speaking to our hearts and allows us to open even a little.

Faith is letting go of opinions and judgement so we can see through to the heart.

Faith is traveling and being at home in the world

Faith by Colin McDougall

As I write the winter months have arrived. The Christmas period is approaching rapidly, nature has revealed her seasonal beauty. Looking out I see that the frost has begun to form, the wind has brought its northern chill. The frost clinging on to the roof tops, droplets of fine rain descending from the cold winter sky. Witnessing nature's

offering brings a cold shiver, but it also is a sight to behold, the impermanence of the seasons finally arriving home. This, for me, a final confirmation that winter has begun.

Although there is evidence of beauty amidst the winter months, I can often feel quite sad, if not also a tad depressed once the sun light has been replaced by the dark and murky night. A cry from within that longs for those warmer summer days. The long days of sunshine that are often accompanied by a gentle summer breeze. It is during this period that the positive memories have receded into only but a flickering light.

This change that mother earth brings, at some level, reminds me of my faith. It comes and it goes. Sometimes the faith I

recognise feels like a summer day, this providing a feeling of radiant warmth, holding me as a mother holds her child in a warm and loving embrace. Whilst on other occasions, the feeling seems empty, lost and abandoned. Feeling alone, cast in the midst of a cold, stormy, winter night.

As the Christmas period approaches, although a time of celebration, a collective psychosis seems to fill the air. The increase of consumerism, the endless rush towards the material would appear to crush the very spirit of the religious festival. The celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ and other spiritual aspects of life seemingly being relegated to the bottom of the to do list. If on the to do list at all.

I can feel a degree of despair when immersed in such feelings, which only serve to deepen my 'seasonal' negativity. These feelings arising from the pit of my stomach, attempting to crush, what feels like my weakened spirit.

It is during these times that I become more aware of my need to be 'held'. Searching for a deeper spiritual connection. A calling out to Amida, whose picture hangs upon the wall. His warmth radiating around the room. This, with casting my attention to the Buddha icons around my room going some way to help to settle my yearning from within.

Although this helps to some degree, ultimately, it is knowing that there are likeminded people out there. In essence, for me,

it's the sangha that really makes a difference. This provides the key to my faith. While reading the communication from across the miles this helps to provide the conditions that offer a sense of summer warmth blowing gentle throughout the community. While reading Dharmavidya's messages, this provides the summer sun. This collectively allowing for a sense of peace and a connection to faith. Nab

View of faith Rennyō:

"To awaken a single thought of faith of the supreme Buddha-Wisdom,

I assure you, is due to the working of Amida's Light.

Faith does not arise from within one's self;

the entrusting heart is itself given by the Other-Power."

Other Perspectives on faith

Kent Nerburn was asked to offer a response to his thoughts upon faith and this was his most generous and poetic response.

Introduction to the author

Kent Michael Nerburn born in Minneapolis, and is an American author. He has published 16 books of creative non-fiction and essays, focusing on Native American and American culture and general spirituality. He won a Minnesota Book Award in 1995 for *Neither Wolf Nor Dog* and again in 2010 for *The Wolf At Twilight*.

He has been called “one of America’s greatest living Spiritual Teachers” and one of the few authors who can respectfully bridge the gap between Native and non-Native cultures. He acts as a conduit that goes some way to attempt healing the deep wounds between Non Native and Native.

Kent’s Offering

Benediction

Drifting snow,

Why do I sing?

— Ojibwe song

Continued.....

The snow came again last night. She left before the dawn, bestowing in her wake a benediction upon the earth. Now, in morning light, she greets us gently, a prayer shawl donned upon the land.

Here and there a whirling gust, whipped up by some angry and isolated wind, rises tiny and intense like a petulant child trying to start a fight. But this is not his day. The world is silent and at peace, and the tracks and markings we have made upon the earth, the endless measurements and passages, are again forgiven.

I hold my breath. All is white and still. The pines stand in steeped reverence against the sky. The elms reach out their fingers in naked supplication. And the birch, kindred spirits to the winter earth, show off their



white and graceful elegance against the mantle of their sister snow. Far in the distance, the thin line of forest is a lacework tracery, flashing diamonds of crystal light against the cold brilliance of the day.

A fox braves the brightness of the morning sun and rushes across the fresh eternity, for a moment immortal, like the first shooting star that ever cut across an evening sky. He bounds and scabbles, crazed by his blind exposure, then disappears into the distant woods. But he is not followed. This is not a time of hunting. The world still

wakes in gentle wonder; it is not yet a time of passions and of fears.

It makes the heart gentle, this snow, burying the sharp edges of life and cutting us off from time. Our traces on the surface of the land are gone; our lives devoid of history once more. All is singular; all is one. We are children at the dawn of time.

Begin again. Begin again. This snowfall says, begin again. It is the purest absolution, and falls in vast forgiveness on us all.

Excerpted from Native Echoes: Listening to the Spirit of the Land by Kent Nerburn, published by

Wolfnordog Books. Visit Kent's website at www.kentnerburn.com.



Other perspectives: an interview with a Unitarian Pastor

No matter which faith you believe, it always seems of importance to acknowledge and respect the beliefs and practices of faiths that are different from your own. That's why within these editions of 'Running Tide' we will take at least one section to look at another view. Therefore we asked Becky Waldron, a young journalist in Brighton, to interview Jef Jones, a lay Pastor of the Unitarian Church in Brighton and Hove.

Becky Waldron talks to Jef Jones

Fittingly, this is similar to the approach that Unitarianism takes within its church; " It's a community based on values, mutual respect and support for each other on

the spiritual path", I am told by Jef Jones, a Lay Pastor of the Unitarian Church in Brighton and Hove.

I head down to the church to speak to Jef in order to get a better understanding of what exactly Unitarianism is, and what it means to be a Unitarian. Having previously done some research on the church, the Brighton branch specifically, I had some knowledge on it, but still was curious to find out more as it seemed to be a more fluid type of faith that had different definitions to everyone you might speak to.

"If you were to ask the current congregation, everyone would have a different take on

Unitarianism. Some are Buddhist orientated, there's a pagan stream, some people are very rational humanists and some more mystical" Jef says. He also explains that the church does tend to attract people from the more mainstream Christian churches who want something maybe a bit looser, a bit more settled, a bit more questioning. In contrast, the church also attracts those from certain new age realms who desire something less loose, they want to be held in a community whilst they seek their truth... whatever that may be.

However, let's go back to the roots of Unitarianism, how and why exactly did this faith come to be? The first Unitarians came about in the sixteenth to eighteenth century and were part of the

enlightenment movement, questioning religious superstition and the privileges of aristocracy. They searched outside Christianity at Eastern religions and even Greek philosophy, they valued science and reason. As you may have gathered, Unitarianism comes out of Christianity, but is no longer typically a Christian faith.

Some pioneering Unitarians were scientists, they questioned Christian doctrines, the miracle of Jesus and the Virgin Mary and believed that Jesus was not the son of God, he was a human. Jesus was not God and could not have been because God is one, God is a unity, hence the term Unitarianism.

For their time they were very liberal and politically controversial, especially when they initially rejected

the idea of the holy trinity which was an extremely radical thing to do at the time. A time where it could be punishable by death to stray from the mainstream religion of the country.

"They were brilliantly annoying" Jef laughs, telling me that the early Unitarians remind him of current minority and civil rights groups we have in the world today: the LGBTQ and feminists, for example. "Those who will not settle, will not cease struggling until they are recognised as human beings".

Despite the rejection of the belief that Jesus is the son of God, they do still have a very strong respect within the community for Jesus, and hold on to beliefs that he was a prophet. Most Unitarians who say they believe in

God probably don't believe in God as a separate something somewhere or as a god who is a power. They see 'God' as a sacred principle of creation. Interestingly, I learn that lots of Unitarians don't use 'God' at all. This is because many do not want to pin themselves down. Pin themselves down to what exactly, I don't know for sure, but me and Jef ponder how demanding some religions can be. There can be a lot that is expected of one individual from some religions; to believe in a certain thing, to feel and behave in certain ways and I think this is exactly what the Unitarian church is trying to avoid. The church and all that is within it is an invitation, not a command. "We don't evangelise" says Jef. The term 'church' is also something I question Jef

about, as the word church has many of its own connotations. Some will call it a church, and some prefer not to use that word, this seems to be typically Unitarian, which is admirable, no one person has a rigid set idea of what the faith should be or is. However, Jef discusses that it is a church, the space is exactly what a church should be.

I am intrigued to know what a 'typical' service at the Unitarian church may entail. As such an all-encompassing faith, I feel I must know what kind of direction this ambiguous church takes.

"A typical service? We might have the bible sometimes, we use the Qur'an, not often, but sometimes. A lot of poetry! We have some more scientific readings and in every service there are

hymns. Some hymns are old fashioned," Jef goes on.

"There's something beautiful and moving in these old hymns. I love them but I don't believe a word of them." Then there's a pause... "Our attitude is that attitude: being open to seeing some truth, beauty, joy meaning even in things you don't believe in. In finding a way of respecting them, holding them to some reference even though they are not for you".

One very important aspect of a service, too, is a time of silence. This silence may come in the form of reflection, meditation, stillness or simply just being.

"There is prayer in this church, it's a strong tradition. When I lead

prayers I invite people to call themselves into the presence of what is sacred to them, then pray to the mystery of mysteries. Maybe I pray to God the father, or God the mother." I am further informed, as Jeff explains the typical service I get a better sense on the church and the people within it.

With this issue of Running Tide taking the theme of 'Faith', Jef and I discuss the concept of faith.

" I ask a lot of people 'what do you believe?' 'Do you believe there's life on other planets?' People would answer so differently to each other. For most all people it's increasingly based on a person's experience," Jef says. "There is something beyond us, even if it's just the universe" and this is something most Unitarians would associate with, and I

believe probably many other faiths too. We also agree that we are all guilty of turning to faith and religion when we are feeling pain, or when something bad has happened. We use faith as therapy. I am not sure however if guilty is the right word here, as is it so terrible to turn to something higher when we need it most? "There aren't neat answers to why bad things happen. Don't trust people who have the neat answers! Suffering is necessary in life, these are the conditions. Live each day skilfully, and mindfully and do not think about why."

All very good advice. It seems that one conclusion we came up with here was that faith and pain are closely linked, do we turn to faith because we are in pain? Or maybe the

existence of a faith keeps an inner pain at bay.

I asked the Pastor, what does faith mean to you, what does it mean to the Unitarian church? "To quite a few it would mean nothing..... they would talk about their values, not having a faith. To me it means [long pause] I have faith in a loving, creative and mysterious God, who I will never fully understand ... I think. It's too late for a tidy theology!" Indeed, it is too late for a tidy theology.

"There is a point where language cannot describe our spirituality" Jef says pensively. This stirs up something interesting here, because he is right. Faith and spirituality, they are feelings, aren't they? Believing, meditating, praying and all these practices whatever form they take- mantras, hymns

– is a feeling inside all of us somewhere we cannot quite pinpoint where, that evokes such a sense of something other, something bigger.

I think this is something that all the members of the Unitarian Church, and whoever may attend on their spiritual journey, all have in common, that sense of something more. That sense of unity. "This is a place where they might be in a meditative space, think about their lives and recharge batteries. Be quiet, be with other people who are quiet. Be thoughtful, dream a bit."

Having met with Jef to discuss the Unitarian Church, Unitarianism and faith itself turned out to be a wonderfully long discussion on the above, and more. It felt so rewarding and important to have this conversation,

Jef and I both agreed. Not only did I learn about this unique faith, but we explored spirituality, human beings and life itself as a whole, there was much we agreed on and it brought this sense of collectivism. Our conversation shone a light on the similarities we all have as human beings, just trying to make our way through our little lives and our big and mysterious universe.



Brighton Unitarian Church

Honen "quote for the day"



"There is no place where the moonlight fails to grace, but it only abides in and purifies the hearts of those who gaze upon its face."

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