

ORDER OF SERVICE - APRIL 25th 2010
Thoughts on the General Assembly Meetings

WELCOME

CHALICE CMC

Come, let us light the flame of truth
The flame of hope
The flame of peace
The fire of our faith
Come let us light the chalice flame

INTROIT - SPIRIT OF LIFE

CALL TO WORSHIP - CMC

Spirit of Life, come unto me
Spirit of Life be with each of us
Here and now
In this place
In the everlasting now
And let us remain with that spirit
As we invite each other
To be here now
In this place
In this time
Together

HYMN red 20 Behold us lord a little space

PRAYER CMC

Sweet Spirit of our days

Prayer does not always come easily to our hearts and minds

So busy are we that often we reach out in prayer only in times of struggle and distress.

At such times it is hard to find that place of quiet reflection we need, and so we run around in our heads trying yet failing to find it.

So, sweet spirit of our days, may we learn to come to prayer as easily as we breathe, naturally, gently, always.

Let us become so practised in the journey to the divine that we may find our way without conscious thought.

We cannot do this when our minds are busy with the million and one things we think we must achieve each day, each hour.

May we learn to set the busyness of the day aside and be here now.

Let us be here now

Let us let go of the things we have done

Let go of the things we must do later

Let go of the things we have forgotten to do

Let go of the pain of loss

Let go and realise the importance of being here now

That we may sink down gently into that place of prayer and reflection

To rest gently with the divine spirit within.

Sweet spirit of our days

We bring to you in prayer

All that our hearts and minds hold

All the questions and the doubts

All the concerns and all the joys.
Sweet spirit of our days
Let us be here now
Wholly with all that is divine and true.
Let us be here now, always. AMEN

READING - words written by Thomas Moore in his introduction to the 2002 edition of *Dark Night of the Soul* by John of the Cross, "What Now"

"A life of contemplative devotion could be somewhat easier for the ones who remove themselves apart in mountaintop monasteries than for those immersed in the world. Monks and nuns may well struggle mightily with their inner shadows, but the focus of their lives is primarily on a direct relationship with ultimate reality.

What about those of us who struggle each day to pay taxes to a government we may not agree with, spending our weeks engaged in labours we may not find fulfilling? Those of us who are called in the night to nurse a sick baby or pick up a rebellious teen from the police station? Those of us exhausted from a day of chopping our twenty-first-century wood or carrying our twenty-first-century water that the thought of getting up an extra hour earlier each morning to sit in silent meditation feels like adding another ten pounds to our already barely manageable load? What about those of us who spent our youth trying every way we could find to "get to God" and ended up in Cincinnati or Santa Fe, with a couple of failed marriages behind us, ownership of a modest business, and credit card debts for pleasure we cannot

remember? Those of us struggling to keep our community water clean and our kids crack-free and our own co-dependent tendencies in check? Many of us have reached a plateau and have become resigned to the aridity of our spiritual lives. We are probably caught in the wilderness of what John calls the 'night of sense'. We no longer pursue the spiritual fireworks we once found so compelling. The 'highs' we used to attain while chanting and prostrating and dancing for God have proven to be fluff obscuring the simple quietude of divine suchness. And yet, there is bitterness and grief in our capitulation. We may no longer be suffering from the delusions of a spiritual carnival, but we have lost something vital.

Maybe what we are missing is love. Maybe we have forgotten that the only reasons to strive and to surrender, to sit in the silence or to make a joyful noise unto the Lord, is because ultimate reality is Love, and it is only by loving that we remember. Be still now, John would say. Borrow a moment from each day to stop and touch down with the stillness that is your true nature, which is God's true nature, which is nothing, which is love.

HYMN red 105 Like a mighty river flowing

READING - Eila Forrester, "Standing Still" – taken from "Celebration" a Worship Committee book of prayer and meditations.

On this desolate day, on this deserted shore,

The empty sea engulfs me.

I stand: only the echo of crunching pebbles, only the lonely cry of a curlew somewhere inland, to disturb the quiet.

I need this emptiness, this expanse of sea, to refresh my soul.

I stand and stare without thought letting the sea and the wide grey sky absorb me.

Why do we build lives so full of fret and anxiety that the innermost parts of the soul's core are choked with busyness?

I had almost got to the point when I did not notice the hand I love touch mine, to the point when I asked, but did not hear, how my friends lived their lives.

- Until I stopped by this shore.

I have resolved so often before to stand still.

What is the point of my resolving yet again?

I who believe in inward things neglect my own inwardness.

How can I offer peace to others if my own soul knows none?

But I will not feel guilt or self blame.

I will not destroy this moment.

I know that here, on a grey day, there is an emptying and a renewal.

I know that this moment has come before: startled by the flame of a flower, caught by a line from a poem my soul's refreshment comes.

I know now that this is prayer.
Stand still and hold it.

MEDITATION - MUSIC FROM CD

Instead of words now for our meditation, let us now be still, borrow a moment from this day, now, touch down with the stillness that is our true nature, which is God's true nature,

HYMN green 49 what is this life if full of care

ADDRESS

The running title for today's service was "Thoughts from the General Assembly", and what I want to do is to share with you something of the atmosphere of those few days created by almost 400 Unitarians working, worshipping, living, eating and socialising together in community for four days, for it is that which is so hard to bring home, that sense of community, that sense of purpose and excitement, and it is that which keeps so many of us going year after year, knowing the nourishment it may bring, the inspiration it may fire, the wisdom that may be imparted accidentally or deliberately as we mingle, converse, socialise, meditate, and worship, and tackle the seemingly obligatory difficulties, together.

Now the ultra observant among you will have noticed that I am sporting a green ribbon tied to my right wrist. Some of you will even know what

it signifies, for either you too were given ribbons to wear at a very special service that truly began the days of the recent Unitarian General Assembly Meetings in Nottingham, or you have already read the short article in the new May Fellowship, which by dint of some hard work by several people actually, against all the odds managed to reach completion. I think perhaps I am the only one who was given a ribbon to have kept it on and it's not because I can't get the knot undone, I could easily take it off, but I have continued to wear it for over two weeks for a very real purpose. It is a gentle reminder that I need to live more in the present moment, to let go of what happened yesterday and cease to spend all my time planning for tomorrow, and be present in each and every **now**, relishing every moment as it comes - easier said than done! Each time I catch sight of this ribbon however, I am reminded of a beautiful service led by a group of young people at the GA, a service in which the value of living in the now was very beautifully conveyed. Not to ignore the past or the future but to recognise the value of the present. In a very important way, being at the General Assembly Meetings must be lived very purposefully in each here and now, exploring all that is now, experiencing what is happening right now, for there is only one chance to do so - just as we only have one life to experience and live. The GA programme is packed and the only time to live anywhere but **right now** is that moment between sessions when one checks the programme to check where one needs to be right now - even when through weariness or information overload that somewhere is away from the hustle and bustle, browsing in the bookstore or lying on ones bed or walking gently away from the busyness.

I was so inspired by that opening service, led by the young people, accompanied by the rhythm and all embracing sound of the samba drums beating their captivating beat, it made me feel alive, invigorated - remember I had been there for nearly two very busy days already so perhaps it was the tonic I needed added to the energy that comes in the gathering of a large group of different people from different places together into one community.

I want to tell you just a little about the University campus in which we met. It was compact, reasonably modern, its architecture was strange and somewhat eclectic, lots of wood and bright colours; but it also had a large rustic-looking pond, with Canada geese and fish and bridges to grassy banks with tables and seats on which to sit and ponder, and a heron, a grey heron, who (I swear) posed for photographs. The weather that week was suddenly and wonderfully warm, dry and sunny; coming so swiftly after the long chill of winter it was in itself an invitation to wander outside, and enjoy the waterside. One day, feeling simply too tired to take on any more information, however interesting, I strolled along the wooden boardwalk beside the pond and watched the geese and the heron and the carp beneath the water and let myself simply be, warmed by the sun, enchanted by the wildlife and nourished by the quiet afternoon, and felt my spirit lifted. Later I had to rush to be somewhere important, but in that brief moment by the pond, in the sunshine, I drank in the moment, the "now" and was renewed.

Taking time out in a busy week is one thing, but what about those times when we simply can't find ourselves, its not so easy then, but... I can't remember where but I read or heard fairly recently a little bit of common sense philosophy; it was the answer to the question most of us ask ourselves from time to time, "where should I be now, and I am not talking about the times we go up stairs and have to come down again to remember why we went up in the first place, nor the moments we spend looking into a cupboard or the fridge, clueless as to why! I'm talking about those times in our life when we are unsure and the question is perhaps more about feeling lost; but the answer to "where should I be now" is this, "look down at your feet, look at the place they are standing on – this is where you are meant to be right now" this is always our starting point, our 'now' this here and now is what we have. If we all started from 'now' our lives would be perhaps less fraught, and more purposeful. It is certainly a lesson I need to be reminded on often; like many of us, I spend too much time making lists, physical or mental "to-do" lists, living life eventually as if the lists are in charge, worrying about the next thing and the next thing. I have a section at the back of my diary of blank "to-do" lists. I have found this has a place but that place is not in the centre of my life, it supports my flaky memory! I find if I just sit down and write down everything I think I need to dothe list sometimes becomes too big and seemingly unachievable, and I spend more time worrying about how much I have to do and my time to do these things is fraught with worry about what I have not yet done.....aghhhh!!!

I think I need this green ribbon round my wrist to remind me to be still and have faith in my own ability to achieve that which must be achieved, give myself the courage and freedom to put that long list of things still to achieve before some deadline arrives to one side. I need this ribbon to catch sight of every now and then to let it bring me back to the "now". Eila Forrester wrote about that moment in her meditation "on a grey day", reflecting on her ability to calm other souls where her own knew not peace. It is in the times we give up to simply being in the present moment that prayer exists, that peace exists, it is in the accepting of being in the present moment that we do as Jesus bid and love ourselves, recognising the divine nature that rests like a fragile flame within us.

I have to tell you that I came back to work on Wednesday morning at half past eight in the morning, feeling like Atlas must have done just as the world was placed upon his shoulder. I had this huge list, there was so much to be done, it seemed impossible. And yet an amazing number of tasks have been achieved in the last four and a half days.

Everything that needed to be done was done, and there was still time to look round and be, just be, not do, not achieve, but just be, part of the universe, part of all creation, part of the whole, the wonderful, miraculous, living, breathing, whole, Everything that needed to be done was done, because for much of that time I stayed in the 'now' dealt with each task and let then next come to me rather than rushing to seek it out.

If you really want to know the details of the General Assembly Meetings, to discover how the debates over the various motions panned out, or what the theme of the Anniversary Service was, or what the fringe events offered, you will have to read the GA Zette or wait, hopefully for those who attended the meetings to report in the June Fellowship; today I just wanted to share with you one brief moment, one brief but important moment, the moment we were reminded to live in the present moment, to grasp the wonder, the beauty, the awesome possibilities in simply being, now.

AMEN

HYMN *green* 42 *we rest awhile quietness*

OFFERTORY

NOTICES

BENEDICTION CMC (inspired by the words of Thomas Moore - in the
reading above)

Let us be here now
Whatever the time, whatever the place;
Let us borrow a moment from each day
To stop
To be with the stillness
And with love
And the nothing
That is God.
AMEN

HYMN *green* 53 *Calm soul of things*