



Schedule of Services

Services are held every Sunday at 10:30 at Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre

3 February Ginna Hastings Unitarian Spirituality, body, mind and soul

This talk is taken mainly from one given by Jim Nelson, minister of Neighborhood UU Church in Pasadena, CA, with permission. Jim raises the point that in Western society body, soul and mind are often kept quite separate in theological and spiritual thought. In this talk, Jim seeks to put a new, Unitarian bent on all this.

10 February Jan Tendys "Work and Love"

It has been suggested that work and love are the two areas of life most likely to provide the possibility of happiness. Let's consider that.

17 February Morandir Armson "Imagined Deities"

Faith would seem to be an important element in religious belief and practice. But can one have faith in something that one knows to be false? This talk will focus on the phenomenon of imaginary religions; those religions which revere fictional, imaginary or post-modern deities. From Jedi-ism and Discordianism, to the Church of the SubGenius, the Church of Ponies, and the Cthulhu Cult, this presentation will shine a light on those who believe in believing".

24 February Rev. Dr. Ian Ellis-Jones "Why There is No Such Thing as the Universe".

Using empiricism and Buddhist teachings, Ian will show why there is no such thing as the "universe."

3 March Rev. Geoffrey R. Usher "Meaning Beyond Ourselves".

How often have we heard someone say: "I am not religious, but I am spiritual"? How many of us would be comfortable saying it about ourselves?

Many people who do say it mean that they have a sense that there is something beyond themselves; a sense that there is a spiritual dimension to life; a sense that there is a deeper meaning to life than the purely materialistic level.

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***May we learn from everyone we meet; may we offer generously what we know.  
Rev Naomi King***

# Refugees

*Jenny Toisuta*

Thank you for the opportunity to share worship with you this morning and to talk about refugees. I know that your group is deeply concerned about the issue of asylum seekers and am grateful that you are interested in looking at this issue in greater depth than so many in our Australian society who get caught up with the slogans. Today I plan to focus more on my own personal journey with refugees but before I do so I thought it might be helpful to give you some general background.

What do the terms "Asylum Seeker" and "Refugee" mean?

**An asylum seeker is someone who is outside his or her country of origin and claims that they would be in grave danger if returned to their own country. Everyone has a perfectly legal right under the United Nations Convention to flee their country of origin and seek protection in another country. They also have the right to have their claims assessed in relation to the UN Convention by an independent and impartial decision maker and, if found to be a genuine refugee, to be resettled in another country.**

**A refugee is someone, living outside his or her country of origin, who has been found to be someone in need of protection. A refugee has been able to convince an independent decision maker that there is nowhere at all in their own country where they can safely relocate. It is not enough to face extreme poverty or even discrimination. They must face a serious threat to their life or liberty in the foreseeable future because of one of five convention reasons:**

- a. **Their race**
- b. **Their nationality**
- c. **Their political opinion.**
- d. **Their religion or**
- e. **Their membership of a particular social group**

There are millions of people world-wide who have either been found to be refugees but cannot find a third country to take them, or are asylum seekers still waiting for their

claims to be assessed. (Note people fleeing persecution but remaining in their own country are not defined as refugees but displaced persons).

## **Some statistics**

In 2010/2011 only 2.7% of permanent migrants to Australia were asylum seekers who arrived by boat. The fact is that we welcome far, far more business and skilled migrants and those who can invest large sums in our economy than those fleeing persecution in their home countries.

On 31 August 2012, there were 7,338 people in detention in Australia of whom 1,403 were children. No other developed country treats its asylum seekers so harshly. The average cost we, as taxpayers, pay for each person detained by immigration is \$137,317 a total of \$15.7 million annually and of course this will be far greater now that we are holding people for long periods of time in Nauru and Manus Island.

Out of 44 industrialised countries, Australia received only 2.67% of the applications for asylum. By far the most went to Europe 74% and USA/Canada 23%. Australia accepted only 0.23% of the world's refugees and was 47th in ranking. By population size we ranked 71st and by per capita wealth we ranked 7th in the world! Pakistan, Iran and Syria each hosted more than 1 million refugees in 2009. We hosted 22,500! Worldwide 80% of refugees were hosted by developing countries. Developed countries host only 20% and we are near the bottom of the list.

## **Becoming a refugee**

In my experience over the last 10 years the process of becoming accepted as a refugee is a tough one. Asylum seekers must convince the authorities that they are truly in danger. Highly traumatised people are interviewed for several hours and have to describe in detail the situations from which they have fled and the abuse they have suffered. If they cannot remember time sequences or get their facts muddled they can be rejected on credibility grounds. There are no legal appeals against credibility findings.

In the past the process for people held in offshore detention centres was deeply flawed. Lawyers flown in to assist them often are only given ½ a day to complete forms and prepare a statement of claims. In my experience it takes upwards of 20 hours to

prepare a good protection visa claim.

No wonder so many asylum seekers fail. However, the amazing thing is that when boat people apply for a merits review, 79% were successful in 2011-2012. This is much higher than those applying on shore and shows that most boat people actually are found by the authorities to be people to whom Australia owes protection under international law. They are not just seeking a more comfortable life in Australia but through a very thorough process are able to convince an independent decision maker that their lives and liberty would be in danger if they were returned to their country of origin.

### **The Solution.**

There is no easy solution because of the huge numbers of people worldwide who are forced to flee from persecution in their own countries and seek protection in a foreign country. (In 2009, the UNHCR found there were 10.4 million such people worldwide). However I can give a few pointers, which I have taken from an excellent paper by Pamela Curr and Jana Favero of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre:

**1. We should immediately resettle one thousand of the twelve hundred people in Indonesia who have been found by the UNHCR to be refugees and are waiting for resettlement. We should take a further four thousand approved refugees and stateless people from Malaysia. Unless we do so these people will spend years and years in limbo without work and without education for their children and are highly likely to resort to using the services of people smugglers. Australia has recently increased its annual refugee intake to 20,000. This is a very good move. We need to increase the numbers coming from our region to convince people awaiting resettlement that there is hope if they wait.**

**2. We need to increase our funding to the UNHCR in Indonesia and our regional neighbours and tie that funding to the protection of human rights of asylum seekers in the region. At the moment it is taking far too long to assess their claims and the process is sometimes flawed. The long delay in processing is another**

**incentive for people to get on boats.**

**3. We need to make it easier for refugees in Australia to sponsor their families to come here. At the moment it is taking 23 years for refugee family reunion visas to be approved so that of course many families are tempted to use the only option open to them i.e. to come here by boat so that they can rejoin their loved ones. Many will continue to do so even risking going to Nauru or Manus Island and all the suffering and mental health risks this will entail.**

### **My personal experience**

I am a member of **Balmain for Refugees** which actually grew out of a talk by Sister Lorraine Phelan from NSW Ecumenical Council who spoke at the World Day of Prayer at Balmain Uniting Church in March 2002 on the problems facing asylum seekers particularly those in immigration detention. This was soon after the Tampa affair. Balmain Uniting Church has always had a strong orientation to social justice and our members were horrified about the way Australia was treating these vulnerable people but we didn't know in what concrete way we could assist. A group of us felt that at least we could show our solidarity with people forced to spend many months and often years in detention by visiting them and offering friendship. We wanted to provide companionship to people who were lonely and stressed because of all the restrictions of detention and worry about their future.

Five of us started visiting Villawood Detention Centre. Our first visit was a shock to me. At that time, a double three meter high fence surrounded the whole centre with razor wire at the top. We queued up for over an hour to get in and could not take our mobile phones in or anything else except some drinks and snacks. We were searched as we went in and had to show driver's licenses as evidence of our identity.

Once we passed the security check we had to again put our names down and be let in by another guard into a separate visiting area and wait for those whose names we had called to come out – sometimes this could be half an hour as the detainees had to be called from their rooms and didn't always

hear their names being broadcast over the loud speaker.

The worst part was saying good-bye at the gate – knowing that we were going out to freedom and the people we had visited had to go back to their rooms behind another fence.

As we got to know some of the detainees, we realised that they had not been treated fairly. We were horrified to find that they were frequently being pressured by immigration officers to give up and go home even though they were desperately frightened of what might happen to them if they did. We found that many of them had failed to get recognition as genuine refugees not because they weren't in danger but because they had not had proper legal advice and, in many cases, even when they did have lawyers or migration agents, the agents had given incorrect or too superficial an explanation about their background and the persecution they had suffered or of why it was dangerous for them to be returned to their own countries.

Often we found that the next time we visited some of those we had visited in our last visit were no longer there – they had been forcibly deported even though, as we got to know their stories we were convinced that they would face persecution and even death when they returned home. Detainees described to us how they were woken at night by guards with torches checking that they were still there and of their fear of being called to “property” which usually meant that they were about to be deported.

Some of the detainees we knew had lodged appeals with the Federal Court against the decision that they were not refugees. We tried to find pro bono lawyers to represent them because the grounds for getting a decision overturned in the Federal Court are very complex legal ones and only a lawyer can represent them in court.

Gradually, other volunteers joined our group. Some visited with us. Others agreed to take up individual cases and, with guidance from us, to prepare appeal letters to the Minister asking him (or her) to use his or her special powers to intervene in their cases. Others assisted those who won their cases or were granted bridging visas and were released into the community.

The focus of my volunteer work emerged several months after we started visiting, when I was attending a court hearing with a detainee from Bangladesh and happened to be introduced to a man from Aceh in Indonesia who was also waiting for a hearing. Because I had lived for 30 years in Indonesia and spoke Indonesian, I thought I could be especially helpful to this man, we'll call Rustam, who had already been in detention for 1½ years.

Rustam had fled Aceh and Indonesia in 2000 because he believed that the Indonesian security forces were looking for him and that he was in danger of being kidnapped by them and then “disappearing”. This was at the height of the military crack down in Aceh against the Aceh Freedom Movement known as GAM. This was a very dangerous time in Aceh when large numbers of men, particularly young men, were arrested or kidnapped and killed.

Actually Rustam's only “crime” was to have been involved in the setting up of an organisation attached to his local mosque to shelter and provide food for Acehnese from nearby villages who had fled their homes when the Indonesian military tried to arrest all young men and boys on suspicion that they were supporting the independence of Aceh. However, because of his activities, the Indonesian security forces had branded him a threat to national security. One of his brothers, who assisted him in this work, disappeared and no trace of him has ever been found. Rustam believed he would suffer the same fate if he stayed in Indonesia.

Knowing that he could not get a passport in his own name, he arranged to get a passport in a false name and fled to Jakarta leaving his wife who was pregnant with their first child. After getting a visitor's visa to visit Australia he left for Sydney and found a migration agent to whom he paid a thousand dollars to lodge an application for protection on his behalf.

The Department of Immigration and then the Refugee Review Tribunal decided that he was not in need of protection but feeling convinced that it was too dangerous for him to return he stayed on illegally in Sydney and was picked up working at a factory and taken to Villawood.

After I met Rustam, I was able to get

copies of the forms the agent had filled in and asked him to sign. He had kept a copy of the information that he had written out for the agent. To my horror the information on the forms was different from what he had written. The agent did not even show that he had arrived on a false name. I found a barrister who thought that the decision of the Refugee Review Tribunal was legally flawed and he agreed to take his case at the Federal Court.

**Rustam was really moved by his generosity and told me “no matter whether I win or lose for the rest of my life I will never forget Andrew’s kindness to me.”**

The Federal Court cannot make a decision on whether a person is in need of protection or not but only on whether the decision maker followed correct procedures. So unfortunately, as frequently happens, we lost the case.

The only alternative left was to appeal to the Minister to ask him to grant Rustam the right to have his case reconsidered by the Department and the Refugee Review Tribunal. So, after many hours of discussion with Rustam and lots of Internet search for reliable reports about the situation facing Acehnese who supported independence, I wrote a letter to the minister on his behalf explaining why I believed it was too dangerous for him to be returned to Indonesia. The letter also set out why I believed that the decision of the Refugee Review Tribunal had been wrong.

Eventually the Minister agreed that the Department could reconsider his case. The officer who heard his case at the Refugee Review Tribunal was so convinced that an injustice had been done that she told him immediately the hearing was finished that she would be recommending that he be given protection. (Normally it takes weeks or even months to get a decision).

However, his relief was short-lived when he realised that because he had been forced to flee to Australia using a false name, he was only entitled to a Temporary Protection Visa. This meant no free English lessons, no Centrelink and most importantly no right to bring his family to Australia or even to leave Australia and spend time with them in a place like in Malaysia where he could travel safely. If he left Australia he could never return.

He was devastated and so was his wife who could not understand how this could be. It took three more years before his case was again considered and he could get a permanent visa and start the long process of applying for a visa for his wife and son.

His wife and son did arrive in Australia in 2007 and the family are now living in Brisbane. They have two more children (3 years and 18 months) and his wife, after taking a break to care for her young children, has started English lessons again three days a week. Rustam’s English has now improved greatly and he works as a taxi driver. He longs to use his skills as an electrician but to go back to TAFE is impossible because he could not support his family on Centrelink benefits.

After I met him, Rustam introduced me to four other Acehnese and a family (two parents and three young children) who were also detained in Villawood at that time. So I set about trying to help them. All have since been found to be refugees and are married and living and working in the community.

**Over the years, I have assisted many other Acehnese, whose initial requests for asylum had failed. Some of them had been picked up by immigration and put into detention others were in hiding in the community. Still others arrived in Sydney on various visas having fled Indonesia when life became dangerous for them because of their political beliefs and activities and we lodged applications for protection.**

I have also assisted those who left wives and children behind in Indonesia when they fled for their lives to go through the complex process of obtaining visas for their families to join them after they were found to be refugees. On their arrival in Australia I have assisted the families to access government services (Medicare, Centrelink and English classes, enrolment in schools) and generally to adjust to life in Australia.

Other members of our group have assisted detainees from other countries and Frances Milne, our coordinator became very active advocating more publicly on behalf of the church for fairer and more compassionate treatment of people fleeing persecution. Frances has coordinated groups from all over Sydney who visit Villawood and worked

closely with lawyers involved in High Court cases over complex legal issues relating to the rights of asylum seekers.

### **What has this meant for Balmain Uniting Church**

As I said at the beginning, members of the Balmain Uniting Church are deeply committed to issues of social justice. Our members have been involved in many different programs - innovative programs for Aborigines at Broken Hill, justice for Palestinian people living in Israel, support for families of young people who are addicted to drugs, a playgroup for people in Balmain needing activities for their children and social support for themselves as well as developing the curriculum for ethics classes in New South Wales schools.

**We have had a special commitment to Refugees and the church has provided financial support to meet some of our expenses. We regularly report to Church council about our work and lead services of Worship from time to time especially during Refugee Week on refugee issues. Once a month in our Church service we offer special prayers for asylum seekers whom we are helping.**

From time to time some of the refugees we've helped who are Christians join us for special services or occasions. This morning, an asylum seeker from Iran, who has recently been released from detention, is actually being baptised in our church.

### **What has this meant for my own faith journey?**

These last ten years have been extremely challenging but also fulfilling ones for me. **As has so often happened in my life, I made what I believed was a small commitment to assist asylum seekers and then found I had stepped out into a wide unknown with great challenges.** I sometimes wonder whether I would have dared to take that step if I had known what was ahead of me. I suspect I would have doubted my ability to cope with it. But throughout it all, I have felt a strong sense of not being alone – that God gives me strength each step of the way. And the Balmain Uniting Church fellowship has continually supported and encouraged me.

This has been a common thread in my life. As a 23 year old, new social work gradu-

ate, I volunteered to be sent by the Australian Council of Churches to teach at a social work academy in Jakarta for two years. I extended my time there and then married a man from Indonesia. In the end I lived for thirty years in Indonesia having been incredibly enriched by the people with whom I lived and worked and the challenge of understanding and appreciating the rich diversity of Indonesian cultures. Living through the final years of President Sukarno and then the rise and fall of Suharto, bringing up three children in Indonesia and 23 foster children (mainly relatives) who lived with us over the years and working in a variety of local communities, was a great challenge but also a source of great satisfaction.

In my work with refugees and asylum seekers there have been moments of great joy. For instance when a man or a family is released from detention into the community after up to two years in detention. Often the early months are a struggle for them – life on the outside is harder than they imagined and their experience in detention or before they fled to Australia have left deep psychological scars which sometimes haunt them. However, I have witnessed the strength of the human spirit and the role their own faith has played in their lives.

I have also seen how families, finally reunited after years and years of separation, can start life anew. **A young girl, who at the age of 10 struggled to understand why she should be kept behind razor wire and refused to give her friends at school her phone number because she was too ashamed, is now preparing to sit for her final high school examinations and hopes to get into medicine. I will never forget her regular questioning “Aunty Jenny when can we leave this place”. And my despair when I could only answer, “Voni I don’t know but I am doing my best.”** What a joy to see how she has matured and become such a fine young woman. Out of that entire struggle, something great has flowered.

There have been moments of great sadness and anxiety, when people we believed to be in real danger were deported. Sadness too when some of them contacted us and told us they were on the run or in hiding in their country or trying to escape over the border to somewhere where they hoped to be safer.

I have been reminded again and again of my own human limitations – that I can only do my best and pray that those whom I believe to be in danger will be given strength to endure the privations that they may face. I am reminded again and again that this is an imperfect world – that human institutions and human beings can cause so much suffering for others. In particular I see so often the suffering caused by wars and conflict and of greed and ruthless struggles for power.

**For me too it has been important to reach out to people of the Moslem faith. We sometimes discuss religion but always in a spirit of respect for each other's faith. I believe that it is really important for Moslems to know that Christians care about them. They feel confused sometimes by our very secular society and by prejudices towards them. They appreciate that I too am a woman of faith – albeit it a different one. Many Moslems whom I have come to know are devout people who are trying to live out their faith. Whilst sometimes I become frustrated by the beliefs of more conservative Moslems particularly regarding women, as with Christians, I find there is quite diversity of beliefs and interpretations and it is important to demonstrate the things we hold in common. Indonesians have a lovely saying "Tak kenal, tak bisa sayang" which loosely translated means "If you don't know me, you cannot love me." I think this is one of the tragedies of Australia – so few Australians really get to know Moslem people and so cannot appreciate them.**

In my work, I am often reminded that love is costly and that in many societies suffering and discrimination arise because people are not prepared to forgive past atrocities. Reconciliation in communities torn apart for decades by conflict requires incredible strength and wisdom. I despair sometimes as I look at the situation in Aceh. A thirty-six year struggle for independence has left the Acehnese community deeply divided and many experiencing deep sorrow and anger due to the loss of their loved ones. In my heart I know that the only hope is that people can forgive each other and be prepared to put aside past hurts. But there has to be trust on each side, honesty and an end to strug-

gles for power and wealth whatever the cost. Something must be done about the poverty, injustice and inequality in Aceh, as it must in all parts of the world.

As we look at our own society too, I am constantly reminded that we live in an imperfect world. What can I do against such injustice?

**For me my faith has always been about trying to be an instrument of God's peace and of supporting the weak and downtrodden in society, though for me that will be in a low profile way. What I have done is a drop in the ocean but I hope it has been meaningful to those for whom I have cared. I believe that whatever you and I do is valued by God and important as a concrete expression of our faith.**

#### Further Reading

1. Refugee Council of Australia website: Myths about Refugees and Asylum Seekers
2. Asylum Seeker Resource Centre: Submission to Expert Panel. July 2012.
3. Asylum Seekers Resource Centre: Statistics. October 2012.
4. John Menadue, Arja Keski-Nummi and Kate Gauthier: A New Approach. Breaking the Stalemate on Refugees and Asylum Seekers. August 2011

*The above talk was given by Jenny Toisuta at our Fellowship service on 28th October, 2012. Emphases added by the present editor.*

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seeker of truth

***follow no path
all paths lead where***

truth is here

~ e. e. cummings ~

(Complete Poems 1904-1962)

Would you care to join Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship? Membership is open to all adults and includes this newsletter. Full membership \$50 concession \$20 . If you would like to join us as an active member of Spirit of Life, please ring **0466 940 461** or consult our website www.sydneyunitarians.org . Please note that all membership applications are subject to approval at a meeting of the Committee. Ask Rev. Geoff Usher or Ginna Hastings for an application form at the Sunday service.

If you have a news item or written article you believe would be of interest to the congregation, we invite you to submit it for Esprit. It would be helpful if items for publication, including articles and talk topics with themes could reach Esprit editor by the 15th of each month: jtendys@bigpond.com or hand to Jan Tendys at the Sunday service.

Do you have a topic of a spiritual nature that you would like to share with the congregation? Please see *Caz Donnelly* at the Sunday service. As Unitarians, we support an "Open Pulpit" and invite members of the congregation to lead the service if they so wish.
Fellowship contact 0466 940 461

Wisdom and Success

Ginna Hastings

I have been reading a book by Sir Richard Branson, humanitarian and founder of the Virgin Group - interesting ideas about entrepreneurship and capitalism. I was particularly struck by the following excerpts which pose the question:

How do we measure wisdom and success...?

WISDOM: Richard Branson is dyslexic and struggled academically and left school at 16. In 1969 at age 18, he wrote: "The views of any person must be tolerated, not only because some of them may, for all we know, be on the right track, but because it is only through the conflict of opinion that such words as knowledge or wisdom can have any meaning. For however depressing are the setbacks suffered in conflict, they are infinitely better than the sterile silence of death that follows when people are stifled and silenced."

SUCCESS: In 2011, he wrote: "Looking back, I believe that having at least the foundations of a more formal education, going to a school that taught good manners, the benefits of debate, respect for other people's ideas and for each other and broadening your outlook is very important in shaping the person you eventually become." Nothing about test scores...

Quotes to ponder

After the game, the King and the pawn go into the same box. Italian proverb

Wood burns faster when you have to cut and chop it yourself. Harrison Ford

**I don't believe in astrology. I am a Sagittarius and we're very sceptical.
Arthur C Clarke**

**A computer once beat me at chess, but it was no match for me at kickboxing.
Emo Philips.**

Contributed by Caz Donnelly