sprit

Volume 14 Issue 9   **September, 2018**

Schedule of Services

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

2 Sept.,   Dr Max Lawson "Cervantes' Don Quixote reconsidered."
Idealism in a crazy world

9 Sept.,   No meeting.

16 Sept.,   Martin Horlacher, "On Virtue: Honesty, Integrity, Ethics and Empathy."
How do we define right and wrong, particularly in today's ultra-complicated world? It's not an easy question to answer, and one that numerous philosophers have been puzzling over for millennia. Consequentialism, virtue ethics, deontology...ends, means, intent...which matters most?
And, arguably most importantly, where does the concept of empathy fit into it?

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23 September, Rev Rex Hunt, "Revisiting Harvey Cox's On Not leaving it to the snake' The creative advance of any generation rests upon the responsiveness of a pitifully small margin of human consciousness."
In the mid 1960s a young fresh-faced associate professor at the Divinity School of Harvard University, called Harvey G. Cox, burst onto the theological scene.
An American Baptist by birth, and building a reputation as a bit of a radical, he was a frequent contributor of articles to such esteemed publications as The Christian Century, Theology Today, Christianity and Crisis… and Playboy.
Back then it was his first book, 'The Secular City', that was getting rave reviews - both positive and negative - from all and sundry.
But it is from one of his lesser known books, called 'On Not Leaving it to the Snake', a collection of previously published articles in various publications, that I want to spend a little more time on today.

Wings of the holy, human spirit. by Robert Fulghum

The spire of the great cathedral at Ulm in Germany is the tallest steeple in the world—529 feet. Seven hundred thirty-eight stone steps take you to the very top. I counted them. And if you can still breathe and focus your eyes when you get there, you can make out two prominent landmarks: the foothills of the Bavarian Alps south of town, and the high bluffs overlooking the Danube River to the east.

In the late sixteenth century, Hans Ludwig Babblinger lived here. A maker of artificial limbs, a craftsman with special skills and some local fame for those skills. Since amputation was a common cure for ills and wounds, he was a busy man. As his hands worked, his mind was often elsewhere. For Babblinger was one of those who imagined he could fly.
In due course, he used his skills and dreams and the materials in his shop to craft wings. And as fortune would have it, he chose to try his wings in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps, where upcurrents abounded. One day, one wonderful day, in the presence of reliable witnesses, Hans jumped off a high hill and soared safely down. Sensational! Babblinger could FLY!

Shift of time and scene. It is the spring of 1594. King Ludwig and his court are coming to Ulm for a visit, and the city leaders want to impress him. "Get Hans Ludwig Babblinger to fly for the king!" Of course. Unfortunately, because it suited the convenience of the king and the townspeople, Babblinger chose the nearby bluffs of the Danube for his demonstration. The winds there are downcurrents. The great day arrived—musicians, the king and his court, the town fathers, thousands of ordinary folk, all gathered at the river. Babblinger stood on a high platform on the bluffs, waved, crouched, and threw himself into the air.

And went down into the river like a cannonball. Not good.

The next Sunday, from the pulpit of the great cathedral, the Bishop of Ulm called Babblinger by name during the sermon and shamed him for the sin of pride.
"MAN WAS NOT MEANT TO FLY!" thundered the prelate.
Cringing under the accusing wrath of the bishop, Babblinger walked out of the church to his house, never to appear in public again. Not long after, he died. With his wings and dreams and heart broken.

Recently I was a passenger in a glider surfing on a thermal wave at five thousand feet. Babblinger and the Bishop of Ulm came to mind. Below me I could see a hot-air balloon, an ultralight aircraft, other gliders, and three parachutists swinging down from the sky. Above us, a 747 wheeled east toward Chicago, slanted up toward thirty-eight thousand feet.
How I wished I could call Hans Babblinger from his grave to a seat in the glider and say, "Look! Look and be not ashamed. Man was meant to fly."

Historically, the symbol of the pulpit has been the pointing, damning finger. Accusing men and women of sin, failure, wickedness, iniquities, and the pride of thinking for themselves. Preaching that on this earth there is no hope—in this life there is no glory.

I say the pulpit should stand for wings. Not angel wings or eagle wings or any other wings you've ever seen. Wings of the holy human spirit—wings that lift heart and mind to high places. Wings for all the inspired to try again and again to stretch human possibility. Wings like that can't be seen, I guess You have to believe in them to see them in your imagination, and you have to take risks in dangerous places to see if they work.

Most of the people who go to the church at Ulm now are tourists. The few solemn folk who sit beneath the ancient pulpit during Sunday services are outnumbered by the hang-gliders flying in flocks off the foothills in the bright morning air in the great cathedral of the world. Wherever you are, Hans Ludwig Babblinger, I thought you would like to know.

The preceding story was presented by the Rev Geoff Usher at a recent service..

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"The Shame"

8/2/2018

To Jan Tendys, Editor, Esprit.

Dear Jan,

We are writing to place on record our appreciation for the current issue of Esprit and to encourage the use of this kind of medium to promote our aims and objectives . Despite our enthusiastic support for your use of the social media to do so, we also value greatly your effort in giving us oldies a hard copy to enjoy reading without an I phone or computer.

In particular we would urge you to send hard copies to our members who, like us do not or cannot catch up with the modern technology. This advice applies especially to the above article on page 3. Thin skinned people might criticize you for sending out hard copies of this article to the oldies in the congregation, but we would disagree. Even those of us who have complete trust in our children need to be alerted to the rights and responsibilities of our aging friends and of the resources that are available to ensure our safety and security.in a quickly changing society.

We don't think you should change your mailing routine just because some people might be offended. Unfortunately it is happening in real life, and everyone needs to be aware of that.

Eric Stevenson and Barbara O'Brien

(The above refers to an article, "The Shame" in the August <u>Esprit</u> and the question of whether it was suitable to be sent to our senior members, some of whom are now in retirement or nursing homes. I have taken Eric and Barbara's advice. *JT*)

Some Aphorisms

The nicest thing about the future is that it always starts tomorrow.

2. Money will buy a fine dog but only kindness will make him wag his tail.

3. If you don't have a sense of humour you probably don't have any sense at all.

4. Seat belts are not as confining as wheelchairs.

5. A good time to keep your mouth shut is when you're in deep water.

6. How come it takes so little time for a child who is afraid of the dark to become a teenager who wants to stay out all night?

7. Business conferences are important because they demonstrate how many people a company can operate without.

8. Why is it that at school reunions you feel younger than everyone else looks?

9. Stroke a cat and you will have a permanent job.

10. No one has more driving ambition than the teenage boy who wants to buy a car.

11. There are no new sins; the old ones just get more publicity.

12. There are worse things than getting a call for a wrong number at 4 am; for example, it could be the right number.

13. No one ever says "It's only a game" when their team is winning.

14 I've reached the age where 'happy hour' is a nap.

15. Be careful about reading the fine print, there's no way you're going to like it.

Contributed by Carolyn Donnelly

Neoliberalism, Social Democracy

An extract.

By the 1970s, however, the postwar order was running out of steam economically, providing an opening for a neoliberal right that had been been organizing and thinking about what it saw as the drawbacks of the postwar order and was ready with explanations for the West's problems as well as solutions to them. The collapse of communism provided neoliberalism with a further boost by promoting market triumphalism and removing the external enemy—communism—that had led many on the right to view checks on markets as a reasonable price to pay to counter left-wing radicalism. By the end of the twentieth century an emboldened neoliberalism, insisting that markets worked best when left alone and the best government was one that interfered with them the least, had captured the ideological high ground, and many social-democratic parties, too, began to aquiesce, chipping away at the restrictions the postwar order had placed on markets.

This neoliberal turn led to the economic opposite of what was achieved during the postwar period—slow and inequitable growth—with predictable political consequences. During the postwar period the success of democracy in Europe in particular was built upon a belief in the primacy of politics: governments promised citizens that they could and would protect them from social dislocation and economic suffering. But over the past decades national governments have lost power to markets, international organizations, technocrats, and in Europe the EU, leading many to conclude that their leaders were no willing or able to do so. The result has been growing democratic dissatisfaction and support for populist right-wing movements that promise to blow the system up.

The West is currently in the midst of perhaps it greatest crisis since the end of the Second World War. The irony is that the contemporary period resembles in important ways the one in which Marx came of age. Then as now, capitalism was bringing the world together and generating prosperity for some and economic and social dislocation for many. The neoliberal right's reaction has been to double down on the primacy of economics, calling for more leeway for markets, more limits on state regulation, and more welfare-state cutbacks. As in the past, such policies have generated economic inequality, social divisions, and political dissatisfaction and extremism. In response, some liberals have begun questioning the viability and even desirability of democracy. This is also, unfortunately, nothing new: during the nineteenth century, liberals like Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill lived in mortal fear of the threat to private property posed by democratization, and during the twentieth century, libertarian icons like Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises argued that if democracy threatened markets, it should be reined in. Today books with titles Against Democracy, Against Elections, and Democracy and Political Ignorance are increasingly common.

Parts of the left have also reacted to the current crisis by returning to arguments based on the primacy of economics: Marxism, as noted, is again fashionable and figures on the left increasingly denounce capitalism as irredemable and claim a better world can only emerge with its transcendence. No longer confined to the academic and activist left, this outlook has been lent credence by some of today's most prominent intellectuals. Thomas Piketty's Capital in the Twenty-First Century (itself an attempt to update Marx's perhaps most famous work) is invoked as proof that extreme economic inequality is inexorably produced by capitalism. Wolfgang Streeck, meanwhile, has influentially argued that the contemporary crisis is simply a manifestation of "an endemic conflict between capitalist markets and democratic politics." It is, as he puts it, a "utopian" fantasy to assume the two can be reconciled.

What these thinkers miss is that it was only through a belief in the primacy of politics, as instantiated in the postwar social democratic settlement, that capitalism and democracy proved able to coexist amicably. Without the economic growth generated by capitalism, dramatic improvements of Western living standards would not have been possible. Without the social protections and limits on mar-

-kets imposed by states, the benefits of capitalism would not have been distributed so widely, and economic, political, and social stability would have been impossible to achieve. A tragic irony is that the very success of this social-democratic compromise made it seem routine; we forget how transformative it actually was. Partially as a result, social movements were often slow to react when at the end of the twentieth century the West began abandoning this compromise. This has brought the reemergence of a form of capitalism Marx would have recognized: prone to crises, growing inequality, social conflict, and in tension with democracy.

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The above comes from a <u>Dissent Magazine</u> article by Sheri Berman: "Marxism's Fatal Flaw:" https://www.dissentmagazine.org/ online_articles/karl-marx-at-200-fatal-flaw-politics-social-democracy
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The Brexit Tragedy

(This article was posted to twitter by a Unitarian group in the UK. It was written by Professor Chris Grey in April, 2018. Events have moved on from then, but Grey shows how this extraordinary policy came about. JT)

There have been many attempts to pin down what support for and opposition to Brexit mean. It plausibly codes old versus young, nativists vs globalists, provincials vs metropolitans, social illiberals vs social liberals, protectionists vs free traders (and yet also, on some accounts, free traders vs protectionists), uneducated vs educated, unskilled vs skilled, racist vs tolerant. It undoubtedly reflects many combinations of these and other dichotomies.

But an under-discussed issue, which cuts across many of these pairings, is the way that Brexit polarises simple and complex apprehensions of politics. The great achievement of the Leave campaign was to make Brexit seem simple: both as a choice, and as a process. It was a simple choice — taking back control, for who would not want to do that? And a simple

process — the very next day after a vote to leave the German car industry will tell the EU to give us a great deal; anyway, there are hundreds of countries outside the EU and they manage fine, as did we before we joined. Overall, the Leave message was 'follow your instinct'.

The great failure of the Remain campaign was to make staying in the EU seem complex. Given that for decades almost no one had presented a positive vision of the EU, choosing remain was presented as an impenetrable, transactional calculus of costs and benefits the nature of which, it seemed, no one could really agree upon. And arguing that the process of leaving was difficult seemed boring to many voters whilst, for committed leavers, just went to prove how far Britain was entwined with the EU. Better to cut the Gordian knot now. Overall, the Remain message was 'read this report'.

It's this dichotomy which gave Michael Gove's□ much-quoted remark "I think that the people of this country have had enough of experts" such traction, positioning 'the people' with their salt of the earth wisdom against 'experts' with their pointy-headed data. That distinction feeds into many of the polarities of the vote (especially those around age, education, class and metropolitanism). But it is worth looking at the whole of what Gove said: "I think that the people of this country have had enough of experts with organizations from acronyms saying... that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong, because these people — these people — are the same ones who got it consistently wrong". Instead, he argued, "I'm asking the public to trust themselves" saying he had "a faith in the British people to make the right decision".

For those who profess not to understand what 'populism' means, this is an object lesson. It is, precisely, about elevating 'the people' above 'these people'. The mythologised people speak for a purer truth than the experts, for all their so-called cleverness, can ever know. It's nonsense, of course, and Gove almost certainly knows it. But it's undoubtedly effective campaign politics, as the outcome of the vote shows.

However, this then leads to what has become the central problem — one might call it the tragedy — of Brexit. No matter how simple the Leave campaign made it sound, the reality of Brexit is massively complex, as some of the Brexiters now in government such as David Davis and, to an extent, Gove himself have been forced to recognize. Just undertaking any one aspect of what Brexit involves would be a major task: re-engineering almost the entirety of trade and regulatory policy, and much of security and foreign policy, has all but overwhelmed governmental capacity.

As Nick Cohen has argued, the real lie of the Leave campaign wasn't the £350M a week for the NHS absurdity, but the promise that it would be easy. There's just no way that any country in the 21st Century can detach itself from whatever its long-term economic and geopolitical anchors may be without sustaining massive damage. It is irrelevant that many countries in the world are not in the EU: those countries have different histories and different economic and geopolitical anchors and would also be damaged were they to abandon them. No developed, democratic country in modern history has ever attempted such a thing.

Thus, however effective the Brexiters were in (very narrowly, let's not forget) winning the Referendum vote, the moment at which their ideas became government policy they fell apart. Such simplifications cannot survive exposure to complex realities. What we have seen since the vote is Brexiters leaping hopefully upon one simple solution after another only to see them crunched out of existence because they can't be translated into workable policy. We won't accept sequencing; it will be the row of the summer. Then, sequencing is accepted without demur at the first meeting. The financial settlement? The EU can go whistle. Then it gets agreed. A deal can be done in months, and we won't ever (need to) agree to a transition period that makes Britain a vassal state. Then the impossibility of the time frame becomes undeniable and a transition period is both sought and agreed. The current version is that there's no need for an Irish border, that's just EU malice and, anyway, it can all be sorted out with technology. We know how

that's going to end.

Such examples could be endlessly enumerated. The details in each case are different, but they all have an identical structure. Brexiters proclaim a simple solution, dismiss the warnings of all those who know the complexities and vilify those who issue them, and then — either quietly or sulkily — are forced to realise that their simplicities were, after all, wrong.

Each of these episodes creates a situation unsatisfactory to all. The Brexiters clearly don't like the outcome, but that doesn't mean that Remainers are getting their way either. All that is happening is, at best, damage limitation. So far, that applies just to the various components of Brexit that have been dealt with in the negotiations. Eventually, it will apply to the whole thing. Because Brexiters are not learning from these reverses. They are not abandoning their simplifications. They just keep moving on to new ones. Assuming we do get to Brexit day in March 2019 then, again at best, we'll end up with a messy fudge: nothing like Brexiters promised would be gained, and nothing like as good as what is being lost. This is lose-lose politics.

The villains in this piece are many. The leaders of the Leave campaign who mis-sold Brexit to the public and the newspapers who supported them are the most obvious. They could, after all, during all their years of campaigning, have developed detailed, realistic plans. Some leavers did, indeed, do so producing the 'Flexcit' plan (many aspects of which can be argued about, but it was certainly a serious and detailed proposal), but neither this nor anything like it was ever adopted by the leading Leave campaigners. It just won't do for them to say now that it is for the government to work out the details of what they persuaded people to vote for.

But a great deal of the blame lies with Theresa May and her closest advisers in the months following the Referendum. That was the time when an effective leader would have said something like: this vote has happened and must be respected (many Remainers will disagree with this, but politically there wasn't any

realistic alternative for any Prime Minister, certainly not any Tory Prime Minister). She could have continued by saying that what the vote meant in practical terms now needed to be established, that it was a major moment in Britain's history, that the country was clearly very split, that some consensus was needed, and that a cross-party commission along with, yes, experts in various key issues would be established. The country would plan carefully, take its time, and get it right. In the meantime, she could have given a unilateral promise to EU-27 nationals in the UK that their status and rights would be assured, whatever happened. And whenever toxic and divisive statements, threats or indeed violence occurred, she and other government ministers could immediately and robustly repudiate and condemn them.

The outcome of such an exercise would almost certainly have been a soft Brexit which respected the Referendum, whilst giving most people some of what they wanted and some people all of what they wanted. That is to say, roughly, Remainers would have got the single market and freedom of movement and leavers would have got an out from CAP, CFP, future foreign policy and defence integration, and direct EU budget contributions. Many of the complexities around citizens' rights, the Irish border, and regulatory agencies would have been lessened if not even removed. And by the time Article 50 was actually invoked, a detailed, workable, realistic set of proposals would have been developed.

Instead, without any public or even, apparently, Cabinet debate, May gave the Ultras the lock, stock and barrel of what they wanted. We know this wasn't automatically entailed by the Referendum because, were that so, it would not have taken seven months for her to announce it. This was not only massively divisive for the country but, crucially, it endorsed rather than challenged the simplifications of the Ultra position. It, therefore, baked those simplifications into government policy — and into the Article 50 notification letter — ensuring that it was undeliverable. The greatest irony of that is that it has ensured that the Ultras will end up being disappointed and will cry betrayal (and already are). No doubt they would have done so anyway, but now their protests have greater traction since May promised them the impossible. At the moment she was strong, and when they would have been forced to accept it, May dodged the chance to stand up to the Ultras. Now, when she is much weaker, it is too late, and she is stuck with gradually retreating on her endorsement of all their unworkable slogans.

This, in turn, has set up a situation where the entire country is undertaking this huge change in a spirit of sullen resentment and anger. That is obviously the case for remainers, who have been treated with complete contempt and are simply expected to 'suck it up' even though, the voting statistics suggest, they include the majority of those who actually have to deal with the practicalities of Brexit, whether in the civil service, business or civil society, and the majority of the economically active population. But it is no less true for leavers. They continue to be as angry as ever — you only need to spend 10 minutes on social media to see that — and believe themselves to have been betrayed or, at the very least, are bemused as to 'why we can't just get on with it'. Notably absent is any sense of joy or excitement from those who support Brexit or even, now, any great claims for its benefits, rather than a kind of Dunkirk — we can get through this, and it may not be as bad as people say — doggedness.

This is the inevitable consequence of taking a set of simplistic political assertions and trying to translate them into complex policy realities. It is no good dismissing this as elitism. In any part of our daily lives, we can't buck the realities of complexity — say, when buying a house or fixing a car — by just trusting our instincts that such things can be achieved without regard for those realities, be they legal or mechanical. Which is why it is absurd for Brexiters to complain that all would be well if only everyone 'got behind' Brexit. If their simplicities were right, it would need no such enthusiasm for them to be proved so.

We can't will the world to be different to how it is, even if we wrap it in a sacred flag and call it the 'will of the people'. Responsible and competent political leadership consists not of concealing complex realities but of explaining them. That isn't elitism. Elitism is pretending to the public that the simplicities are true whilst, behind the scenes, knowing and acting differently. Whether out of contempt for the ability of 'the people' to understand complexity, or fear of those who pronounce that 'the will of the people' is to ignore it, this is precisely the basis on which Britain is currently governed. The obvious danger of this is that it will further corrode trust, further toxify political culture, and further increase the demand for simple solutions to complex problems.

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Newborn Spring
Green tender hands droop
Glutted on Earth's warming breast -
Trustfully dozing.

Earth Thirst
Glazed in crazing cracks,
Mounded lips parted and split -
Dry earth longs for rain.

By Jacqueline Spring

Haiku Seasoning

A years haiku reflections -

On a life's seasons.

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 .* Please note that all membership applications are subject to approval at a meeting of the Committee**.** Ask Rev. Geoff Usher 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 the15th of each month: jantendys@yahoo.com.au or hand to Jan Tendys at the Sunday service.

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

 Website www.sydneyunitarians.org