



Schedule of Services

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

2 March Dr Max Lawson “Elizabeth Gaskell and Unitarianism.”

Prolific Victorian author Elizabeth Gaskell (today best known for her novels Cranford (1853) and North and South (1855) was the wife of a prominent Unitarian minister who encouraged the writing of his wife’s “social protest” novels. This legacy and the continuing implications for Unitarian Universalism are explored.

Also our AGM

9 March Morandir Armson “The Religion of the Incas”

In the Tawantinsuyu, the vast and heterogeneous Inca Empire, a number of polytheistic religions were practiced by its different peoples. Most of these were connected only by the veneration of Pachamama, the Earth goddess, and Viracocha, the great creator god . This presentation will examine the subtleties of the Inca religion, and seek to paint a portrait of this vanished faith.

16 March Helen whatmough “Thoughts about Class in Australia”

Social distinctions? The C word? Class warfare? Egalitarian tradition in Australia – “fair go” – classless Australia: a myth? Changes over time. Thoughts to discuss.

23 March Rev. Geoff Usher “Do It Now”

Did you make any New Year Resolutions? Do you remember what they were? Have you kept these resolutions? Have you done all you decided - or thought - you would do?

At the beginning of every year, it can seem as though there is endless time stretching out in front. For all the important things - and perhaps the less important things - it can seem as though there are plenty of days to fit everything in.

And what happens?

30 March Dr Max Lawson “The Spiritual Quest of Emily Bronte”

Although Emily Bronte’s father, Patrick, was a member of the Evangelical wing of the Church of England to which her sisters Charlotte and Anne subscribed, Emily broke the mould. Not a Sunday-School teacher or a regular churchgoer like her sisters, Emily Bronte struck out on her own spiritual path as revealed in her poetry, and her novel Wuthering Heights. (1847)

A Mere Bagatelle?

Audrey Lowrie

They say that a message that continues to reverberate in the listener's mind long after its delivery, is an important message well communicated.

My guess is that Morandir's recent talk 'A Mere Bagatelle' probably had that niggling, reverberating, effect on all of us who heard it.

Morandir drew together three historical events: a planned massacre (in the late 17th century) of one Scottish clan by another; the genocide of the Tutsis by the Hutus in Rwanda in 1994 (preceded by the mass killing of Hutus by Tutsis in 1972); and the racially motivated riots in our own backyard, Cronulla in 2005.

And he posed the questions---- "how is such planned killing possible, and what does this say about the human moral framework?"

The talk prompted much discussion on the question of freedom of action and free will. But at the end of it, we had no immediate answer to the question put by Eric "So, what can we do about it?"

This article is my attempt to provide my own answer to Eric's question.

We know that philosophers always draw the distinction between freedom from and freedom to. My own interest (as a psychologist) has long been in freedom to (i.e. why did people have such difficulty acting according to their important long term goals, such as giving up smoking or sticking to a healthy diet, when experiencing an incongruent short term goal, such as craving a cigarette, or being offered chocolate cake?).

The research to date, using MRI scans and other brain imaging technology, has shown us that the more we activate our frontal lobes when challenged by incongruent goals, the more we are able to act according to our cool-headed, thought-out values rather than act on our hot-headed in-the-moment desires¹.

And the research tells us that the capacity of relatively healthy individuals to engage their frontal lobes is distributed along a bell-shaped curve (meaning that it's easier for some, harder for others, and most fall somewhere in the middle), but that basic capacity can change quite rapidly in response to immediate circumstances. Stress, poor sleep, and a nutritionally poor diet are all known to reduce the energy a brain has available to allocate to its frontal lobe functions.

My own research found that the capacity of individuals to act according to their long-term values, rather than according to incongruent, primed, desires or habits (in other words, to exert their free-will) increased over the longer time the more it was exercised, but reduced over relatively short time spans unless a period of relaxation and replenishment was allowed (just like physical muscle-power, use makes muscles stronger over time, but they always tire with extended use in the short term).

This reduction in available power as we act on our 'free-will' is called 'Self-Regulatory Depletion' and the cutting edge of research in psychology is now looking at how people can best reduce the pressure of incongruent desires in order to conserve their self-regulatory efficiency, thereby maintain the highest possible reserve of 'free-will' capacity.

However, Morandir's talk, has continued to whisper to me about the social importance of freedom from.

We know that in the relatively recent past, the common scaffold for our thinking about causes and effects relied on mechanical metaphors that developed out of a Newtonian world view. Events, even human behaviours, were primarily perceived as having an identifiable source, and a definable outcome, and progressing in a linear fashion from A through B to C, according to pre-determined hierarchical, and orderly laws. However, in more recent times, Relativity, Quantum, and Chaos theories have allowed us to imagine an undetermined universe with events and even human behaviours emerging out of complex systems (with only arbitrarily identified 'beginnings' and 'endings') that necessarily entail uncertainty, chance, and the ever availability of choice and change.

So it seems that our knowledge, language, and discourse, about freedom of action and free-will has finally caught up with much of our experience and our felt sense of our 'selves' as autonomous, choice-making organisms. After all, even *Wikipedia* tells us that a number of the massacring clan at Glencoe chose to warn their hosts of the planned killings, some broke their swords rather than carry out their orders, and reinforcements who were meant to arrive to assist the killers claimed to have been "delayed by the weather", and just didn't turn up. And we probably have little doubt that many individuals in both Rwanda and Cronulla also chose to march to their own drummer, rather than follow the herd.

Of course, our experience tells us that the more our society supports our personal values, the easier it is for us to act on them, and because of this, many writers such as Daniel Dennett, and Jeremy Rifkin, argue that freedom (from) evolves in parallel with the socio-economic conditions that promote and sustain it.

Jeremy Rifkin has argued that freedom of thought and of action increases from mythically based tribal/subsistence economies through theologically based ones to mercantile, and then psychologically aware cultures (see Empathic Civilization, (2010)).

In order to function effectively, he says, mercantile cultures must have evolved both the degree of interpersonal trust, and the acceptance of difference necessary to practise the ever increasing exchange of an ever increasing variety of goods and services that a mercantile economy requires. And psychologically aware cultures build on those qualities, elevating both the sense of autonomy, and interest in individual differences, that tends to promote empathy.

And empathic cultures, by definition, are cultures that respect individual choice, promoting freedom from external constraint in lifestyle choices.

A glance at the on-going research that has been conducted since 1981 by the University of Michigan on world-wide changes in cultural values in relation to changes in economic activity, confirms Rifkin's thesis (see this on-line by googling 'World Values Survey'). The World Values Survey shows us that as cultures move away from subsistence economies and traditional, authority-based world views, acceptance of difference (and therefore freedom of choice (or freedom from)) increases.

However, the very point of Rifkin's 2010 book Empathic Civilization is to put the argument that we are on the very cusp of deciding whether global warming is going to advance or halt the steady progress that the world has so far made towards the expansion of empathic cultures.

Rifkin concludes his book with this statement:

"Ironically, climate change is forcing us to recognise our shared humanity and common plight as never before. We are truly all in this life and on this planet together, and there is nowhere for any of us to escape or hide, because the

entropic bill our species has created has now enveloped the earth and threatens mass extinction.

My sense is that while the initial response to climate change, which has teetered somewhere between disinterest, denial, and at best, weak acceptance -- that is, without commensurate emotional and political commitment—is fast changing.

We are entering a new phase in which the ‘real-time’ effects of climate change are beginning to impact on whole regions of the world, affecting large segments of humanity. The first reactions that are coming in are fear and anger on the part of the victims, and feigned interest among those not yet affected. That is going to change rapidly in the coming decade as the effects of climate change ripple out to include ever increasing pools of humanity.

At some critical point the realization will set in that we share a common planet, that we are all affected, and that our neighbours suffering is just like our own. At that juncture it will be too late for recriminations and retributions will do nothing to address the enormity of the crisis at hand.

Only by concerted action that establishes a collective sense of affiliation with the entire biosphere will we have a chance to ensure our future”.

So, in writing this article up, my answer to Eric’s question about ‘how we might best promote freedom and empathy in the world’, became ----- ‘commit to *taking global warming far more seriously, and act on that commitment*’.

I wonder what yours might be?



What If This Road

What if this road, that has held no surprises
these many years, decided not to go
home after all; what if it could turn
left or right with no more ado
than a kite-tail? What if its tarry skin
were like a long, supple bolt of cloth,
that is shaken and rolled out, and takes
a new shape from the contours beneath?
And if it chose to lay itself down
in a new way; around a blind corner,
across hills you must climb without knowing
what's on the other side; who would not hanker
to be going, at all risks? Who wants to know
a story's end, or where a road will go?

~ Sheenagh Pugh ~

Philosophy with Calvin and Hobbes

An address given in January 2011

Martin Horlacher

Opening words

Who would ever have thought that a newspaper comic strip about a bratty six-year-old and his imaginary friend, a sardonic, anthropomorphic tiger, could provide not only whimsical, warm-hearted entertainment for both children and adult readers, but also offer some very meaningful and perceptive insights into this thing we call everyday life?

From November 18, 1985, until December 31, 1995, a reclusive cartoonist from the village of Chagrin Falls, Ohio, named Bill Watterson produced what is, in my opinion, simply one of the finest newspaper comic strips ever written and drawn by any man or woman. I first discovered it in my local newspaper back in Hong Kong when my age could still be measured in single digits, and even then it made a great impression on me. Its name is Calvin and Hobbes.

Although it features an array of cleverly thought-out characters with distinct personalities and quirks, its two central and most important characters are those whose names make up the strip's title. The first, Calvin, was named by Watterson for John Calvin, the sixteenth-century French Protestant theologian, polemicist, and author of the thoroughly unChristian doctrine of predestination. The other, Hobbes, was named by Watterson after the seventeenth-century English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who could be said to have held, as Watterson has put it himself, "a dim view of human nature".

Don't let any of that put you off, however. Although the strip is, at times, piercingly satirical and blackly funny, the overall worldview presented in it through the eyes of six-year-old Calvin and his imaginary tiger friend is ultimately one that is strongly positive and life affirming. Although Watterson makes his views on life and the human condition pretty clear, he never does it in a preachy or heavy-handed way. And, best of all, he actually makes it funny.

If only so many other philosophers had that talent, too.

Seriously, though, although it's now just over fifteen years since Watterson retired Calvin and Hobbes, the strip has remained close to my heart and soul in a way that certainly no other example of the newspaper comic medium from America ever has. Indeed, it has had quite a few philosophical points to make that have left an indelible mark on me. Let me tell you about a few of them.

Address

I think it's fair to say that Calvin and Hobbes made a very big impression on me during my childhood. From what I've read on the internet over the past few years, it seems that quite a few people feel the same way about the strip – and not all of them were children when they first discovered it. I have no doubt that not everyone would be able to immediately grasp just why a comic strip would mean so much to so many people, or how anyone to whom it does mean something could claim to find a philosophy in it that they feel has influenced their outlook on the world. I mean, it's just a cartoon, right? The main characters are a selfish six-year-old boy and his imaginary friend. And the book collections, most of which I own, have titles like *Something Under the Bed Is Drooling*, *Weirdos from Another Planet!*, *Scientific Progress Goes "Boink"*, *Attack of the Deranged Mutant Killer Monster Snow Goons* and *Homicidal Psycho Jungle Cat*. And yet, this comic strip has had a lot to say to me.

I've never quite been able to pinpoint just what it was that so endeared me to *Calvin and Hobbes* so much more than just about any other newspaper comic strip at such a young age. Maybe I

fell in love with the simple but beautiful artwork, whether it was rendered in black and white six days a week, or in beautiful colour for the larger strip on Sundays. Maybe it was the humour of the dialogue and the imagination of the many fantastic stories.

Or, dare I say it, it may have more than anything been because the central human character was a bratty, obnoxious, boorish, arrogant, and ill-tempered, yet hugely imaginative, creative, and energetic prepubescent boy who reminded me somewhat of myself. Certainly, at the time, I could easily see that he didn't act the way you'd hope your own six-year-old child ever would. Yet, in spite of all of those flaws, he is also shown to be a highly intelligent and philosophical child. Indeed, Watterson himself has clearly stated that he never intended for Calvin to be thought of as a literal six-year-old – very few boys of that age, if asked why they were looking for frogs by a stream, would reply that they were merely obeying the “inscrutable exhortations” of their souls.

It's also vital to note that although Calvin makes many outrageous and downright wacky assertions throughout his adventures, Watterson has also stated that one of the reasons he has had such fun writing Calvin's character is that he often completely disagrees with him. In one strip, for example, Calvin and Hobbes are walking along, when Calvin proclaims, “I don't want to pay any dues in life. I want to be a one-in-a-million, overnight success! I want the world handed to me on a silver platter!”. Hobbes simply rolls his eyes and quips, “Good luck”, to which Calvin retorts, “Surely you concede I deserve it!”. Using the character, Watterson makes a very good point that **inside every adult (and quite often not very deep inside), there is almost certain to be a bratty kid who wants everything his or her own way.**

The character of Hobbes, then, functions perfectly as a foil for Calvin, almost always providing the voice of clarity and reason. He is a very interesting character. He is Calvin's imaginary friend, you see, and appears, when seen by anyone else in the strip, as a stuffed, toy tiger. To Calvin, however, he is perhaps more alive than anyone else – a true friend,

perhaps one of the few friends that a loner like Calvin has, and although they quarrel regularly, and almost always disagree vehemently about various topics relating to the superiority or inferiority of human beings compared with animals, it is clear that the two of them are soul mates, through and through.

Watterson has stated that he considers Hobbes to be neither a figment of Calvin's imagination, nor a toy tiger who magically springs to life whenever Calvin's around, and that is exactly how I have always felt about him. Although he often expresses his disdain for the human race generally, and makes no secret of being proud to be a tiger, Hobbes is arguably the more moderate and even slightly humanist of the two characters. If he is to be considered a facet of Calvin's psyche, then he is undoubtedly the more realistic part of Calvin's personality, as opposed to Calvin himself's unvarnished idealism. In another strip, whilst out for a walk in their local woods, Calvin nonchalantly asks Hobbes, “Do you believe in the devil? You know, a supreme evil being dedicated to the temptation, corruption, and destruction of man?”. Without a second's hesitation, Hobbes flatly responds, “I'm not sure man needs the help”. Calvin, looking off into space with a troubled expression, says, “You just can't talk to animals about these things”.

If anything, the character of Calvin serves as a way for Watterson to make a very valid point or tell a life lesson, though as I mentioned earlier, he never does it in a heavy-handed way. This is almost always done by having Hobbes make an observation about one thing or another at Calvin's expense, but not always. Even in examples of the strip where Hobbes does not directly appear, a lesson is often imparted at Calvin's expense, even if he himself doesn't necessarily take it to heart. In one strip, whilst sitting in his classroom at school, Calvin angrily demands of his teacher, “What assurance do I have that this education is adequately preparing me for the twenty-first century? Am I getting the skills I'll need to effectively compete in a tough, global economy? I want a high-paying job when I get out of here! I want opportunity!”. His teacher curtly replies, “In that

case, young man, I suggest you start working harder. What you get out of school depends on what you put into it". Calvin looks a little nonplussed for a moment, then scowls and says, "Oh. Then forget it".

Indeed, I do think that one reason the character of Calvin strikes such an emotional and intellectual chord with me is the fact that, despite his intelligence and philosophical mind, he still has something of a real six-year-old boy in him. Yes, he is, on one level, very naïve in that he is so self-absorbed and blindly idealistic in the way that he views the world around him and his place in it – yet this helps, for me at least, to make him even easier to relate to and sympathise with.

And nowhere is this more evident than in the strips which showcase his sensitive side. In a strip very early on in the series' history, Calvin finds a dying raccoon in the woods, and takes it home. Despite his best efforts, he is unable to save it, and he weeps openly, despite his parents' attempts to comfort him. He has learned a very valuable life lesson about the inevitability of death for every creature, and when he later asks Hobbes to promise him that he'll never go anywhere, his imaginary friend solemnly promises to be with him always.

Sombre moments like that are rare in the strip, which make them all the more powerful when they do happen. In this way, I think it's a good thing that Watterson chose primarily to focus on the humorous situations that would arise out of the mythology he had created for his characters. And some of the best moments in this vein within the strip have arisen out of two more characters – Calvin's mother and father. Although they are never given names within the strip itself, it becomes clear from fairly early on that Calvin's dad is a hard-working patent attorney, and his mum is a stay-at-home mother who has what is arguably an even more taxing job – keeping Calvin in line.

Perhaps the best strips involving the parents are those in which Calvin pesters his father with made-up "opinion polls", warning him that his approval ratings as a father are slipping

and that he's looking unlikely to be returned at the next "election". (Admittedly, I suppose those polls would focus primarily on the six-year-old male and stuffed-tiger demographics.) The father's response is generally very acerbic, and one can't help but wonder just how close to the edge his experiences with his son take him. He's obviously pretty resilient though, and it seems he does have genuine life lessons to teach Calvin, even if they have to come with a healthy dose of sarcasm. In one strip, Calvin walks up to his father, and point-blank asks him, "Dad, are you vicariously living through me in the hope that my accomplishments will validate your mediocre life and in some way compensate for all of the opportunities you botched?". Without batting so much as an eyelid, his father responds, "If I were, you can bet I'd be re-evaluating my strategy". In the final panel of that particular strip, set several minutes later, Calvin, with a sour expression, says to his mother, "Mum, Dad keeps insulting me".

Okay, so maybe Calvin doesn't always learn something.

But, ultimately, it is the strips which feature Calvin and Hobbes themselves, and their interactions with each other and the world around them, that I have found carry the deepest, most memorable messages.

Sometimes, these particular strips have covered some very profound themes – sometimes nothing less than the very absurdity of life itself. In one such strip, Calvin and Hobbes are walking along in the woods on an autumn afternoon, and Calvin says, **"Isn't it strange that evolution would give us a sense of humour? When you think about it, it's weird that we have a physiological response to absurdity. We laugh at nonsense. We like it. We think it's funny. Don't you think it's odd that we appreciate absurdity? Why would we develop that way? How does it benefit us?"**.

Hobbes replies, "I suppose if we couldn't laugh at things that don't make sense, we couldn't react to a lot of life". He keeps on walking, whilst Calvin stops and stares into space for a moment, before saying (half to himself and half to whoever else), "I can't tell

if that's funny or really scary".

Indeed, I personally find that to be one of the scariest things I've ever read.

And what of that terrible thing that permeates our lives that we call politics? Well, Watterson makes his views on that aspect of our existence in one strip with a political philosophy that could only come from Calvin's so-called "reasoning", when he says to Hobbes, "When I grow up, I'm not going to read the newspaper and I'm not going to follow complex issues and I'm not going to vote. That way I can complain that the government doesn't represent me. Then, when everything goes down the tubes, I can say the system doesn't work and justify my further lack of participation".

"An ingeniously self-fulfilling plan," replies Hobbes.

To which Calvin says, "It's a lot more fun to blame things than to fix them".

Yet again, Watterson makes a compelling argument without resorting to using a sledgehammer – and he does it all by letting a self-absorbed six-year-old speak his mind.

I really do admire how Watterson is able to do this – by showcasing the ignorance and selfishness of an egotistical brat, he is able to make a point about the many similar individuals who populate this world. In another strip, Calvin has set up shop behind a cardboard box, on which he has scrawled, "A swift kick in the butt - \$1". Calvin laments how poorly business is turning out, saying, "Everybody I know needs what I'm selling!".

Watterson has also, through Calvin, made known his intense dislike for the "psychobabble" and "politically correct, New Age, academic jargon and art-speak" that seems to be so prevalent in academic writing nowadays. In one strip, Calvin deduces that the purpose of writing is, among other things, to "inflate weak ideas" and "obscure poor reasoning". Thus, he titles his school book report "The Dynamics of Interbeing and Monological Imperatives in Dick and Jane: A Study in Psychic Transrelational Gender Modes". "Academia," trumpets Calvin, "here I come!".

As good friends as they obviously are, Hobbes still serves very much as a foil to Calvin's impetuous, conceited and arrogant nature, and, yes, Watterson always manages to do it in a way that's fun to read, or at the very least cute to behold. In one of the later strips, Calvin asks his tiger friend what he would like to have more than anything else in the world, right there and then. After thinking for a moment, Hobbes says, "A sandwich". Calvin berates him for his lack of imagination and naiveté, stating that he would wish for "a trillion billion dollars, my own space shuttle, and a private continent!". In the last panel, set in the kitchen, Hobbes munches happily on a peanut butter sandwich, saying, "I got my wish". Calvin, judging by the sour expression on his face, is not amused.

Watterson has written in one of the Calvin and Hobbes books that the character of Hobbes has always helped him to gain perspective, even if Calvin isn't always as fortunate. In another strip, Calvin wonders if there might in fact not be an afterlife, that what we have here and now is all we'll ever get. After some thought, Hobbes smiles and says, "Oh, what the heck. I'll take it anyway". And although Calvin laments that if he's not going to be eternally rewarded for his behaviour, he'd sure appreciate knowing that now, I have to say that Hobbes's outlook on the whole situation is the one I more closely identify with – and the one that I hope the majority of people in this world are inclined to identify with, too.

Readers of Esprit will just have to wait for the next issue to hear Martin's amusing and important concluding thoughts. Sorry. JT