



Schedule of Services

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



A trip down memory lane: Candace Parks, Eric Stevenson and Barbara Gray.

4 October, There will be no service this Sunday.

11 October, Rev. Geoff Usher “The Unitarian Dance”

The Unitarian dance is the tension between individuality and community, between tolerance and conviction, between thinking and feeling, between the head and the heart. The success of the dance depends upon preserving the whole of the encircling sphere.

18 October, Rev. Eric Stevenson “Who made the Golden Rule?”

Where did our sense of right and wrong come from? How reliable are the sources which combine to create my moral code? Reference: Lloyd Geering’s recent book “Re-imagining God”, chapter 11, on Ethics.

25 October, Rev. Geoff Usher, “Nothing to be Gained”

We live in a world where ridiculous errors abound. We try to contribute as few as we can to the total, but we make some too, and others just happen in ways past explaining. What can we say but we’re sorry? What can we do but move on?

Suffering with a Non-theistic God

Rev. Eric Stevenson

“Note from Editor: Although this article is a bit longer than what we usually run in this newsletter, those of us who were privileged to hear Eric Stevenson deliver this talk at our service on 8th October were deeply moved by it and felt it needed to be shared. Eric has kindly given us permission to publish his talk here.”

The above was written by Candace Parks when this article was published in the November 2006 issue of Esprit. Your present Editor believes it is worthy of a reprint at this time. JT

During September I spent a memorable holiday in the home of a lady whose every physical exertion produced agonising discomfort. Bedridden and living in an oxygen tent, the very challenge of living caused her repeatedly to lapse into sleep with exhaustion. Every effort is being made to alleviate her bodily pain but the burden of her suffering is heavy indeed. It is not only to do with her physical affliction; it has to do with the price she has chosen to pay in order to maintain her customary cheerful, uncomplaining, positive life-style., and to continue fulfilling her role as a devoted grandmother. This lady has become my icon for accessing the suffering ones of this world. I am dedicating this address to her. She, together with my many other friends who suffer, is the inspiration for what I am going to say.

The degree to which we suffer is idiosyncratic. It depends on our particular sensitivities to both mental and physical pain. It differs from person to person according to the length of time we are subjected to it, the injustice we feel concerning the circumstances which have caused it, the prospect of relieving it, the way in which it frustrates our cherished ambitions, the shame and the self-blame we attach to it, our willingness to admit our weakness and dependency in the midst of it, etc. Most of these conditions lie within reach of our capacity to do something about them

Thus the degree to which Suffering is felt under similar conditions for each one of us is vastly variable. Therefore, no one has the right to be critical of the way we react to it. You

cannot be blamed for registering a high level of Suffering by those who think you ought to be able to bear it. They cannot find fault with you if, to the exclusion of all else, your Suffering suddenly demands the centre stage of your awareness. Moralisers have no grounds for condemning you for lack of courage or perseverance. And even when you feel like giving up, or becoming cynical, or bitter, or withdrawn, nobody in their right mind could be justified in pointing the finger at you. The only person who knows what your Suffering is like is you. Therefore you need never feel under judgement for the way you choose to deal with it.

While some of the strategies for dealing with our Suffering are quite understandable, some are more helpful than others. Completely withdrawing into oneself is sometimes necessary for healing. Once having suffered, however, withdrawing into a cocoon can also be a way of our avoiding being hurt again. Unwillingness to expose oneself to the risk of Suffering again can be to forfeit an enriching and fulfilling life. For example, the Suffering associated with the rupturing of an intimate relationship is for most of us like being torn apart. But to love someone like that is to risk the pain of parting. It has been said that our Suffering is the honouring of such love, and not to have loved is never to have lived. In the present context we could also add that not to love again is not to be able to live again. To risk the Suffering is the cost of loving; it is also the price we pay for living life to the full.

There are some who choose not to disclose their Suffering, and try to endure it in private. Withdrawing from the world of close sharing relationships is sometimes because the sufferer is afraid to admit his vulnerability or because he doesn't want his friends to be alarmed or burdened by his problems. When the pressure builds the more he tries to suppress it. It is then, when we are feeling that we are reaching the limit of our endurance, that letting off steam with a friend is probably long overdue. We must never under-estimate the tolerance levels of true friends, or their capacity to be with us in our difficulty.

Another positive strategy for coping with Suf-

-fering is to form as constructive an attitude toward Suffering as we can, and to do so either before or after it strikes us. (It is hard to do so while it is happening to us!!)

Because we have been brought up in a traditionally conservative Christian culture, the contemporary wisdom about Suffering usually kicks in when we are exposed to it. We begin to ask the usual questions, "What have I done to deserve this?" or "Was this meant to be?" or "Has this been sent to teach me something?" or "How come the good people are made to suffer and the wicked get off so lightly?" Our attempt to form an attitude toward suffering is thus strongly influenced by religious questions. Theistic belief paints a picture of a God who has a plan for our life. He is all knowing and all powerful, an out-there God who intervenes at will in the affairs of human beings and who can act in nature sometimes contrary to the natural laws of the universe. Taken to extremes this God is responsible for dealing with Suffering and not we ourselves. This God is supposed to know what is good for us, is able to be upset by the things we have or have not done, and is quite capable of afflicting us with correctional or punitive circumstances. If pleaded with, this same God who has caused our suffering can turn around and comfort us and even remove the hurt with which he has afflicted us. But he doesn't do it for everybody!!

Although the last sentence sounds like good news for God's favourites, it doesn't make sense to me. I think that this kind of God if he existed is cruel, fickle and calculating and I have to confess that, for me, that God is dead!! And the questions which I have just listed above are meaningless. I, myself am ultimately responsible for trying to make intelligent sense of my own Suffering, and for working out a way of coping with it without the help of a God like that. But that does not mean I am an atheist; I am simply into experiencing a different kind of God which I feel close to when I am honestly searching for meaning in my Suffering.

My search begins with Life. My limited understanding is that God is not a person but a Presence. This is a Presence not only which is in all things, but in which

also all things exist. My non-theistic God is the ground of all life and being. So I attribute supreme worth to Life in all its forms and the matter out of which it has been evolved. By valuing Life in such a way I am bound to value human life with all its ups and downs. My attempt to make sense of Suffering is therefore to accept it as an integral part of my reality, all of which is bound up in the Spirit of Life. The belief that all things are in God helps me to suffer along with the Spirit of Life which encompasses all of life's dichotomies including both pleasure and pain. Our part in the onward flowering of creation takes us all in the same Spirit down through the vale of tears as well as up into heights of ecstasy. They are both a part of life, and insofar as God is also within me, my God is no longer a spectator of, but a participant in my Suffering as well as in my joy.

My sense of the pervasiveness of God, particularly as it enfolds and incarnates my relationships, is probably the greatest sustaining resource in Suffering that I have as a non-theistic believer. **When I am prepared to let a friend suffer with me, someone who accepts, and understands and loves me, that is comfort Divine.** The listening ear, the non-judgemental attitude, the compassionate heart, the sheer presence of a like minded person...all usher me into a healing experience of the sacred when I am Suffering. The opposite experience of weeping together with a wounded soul also has the effect of consolidating a relationship and better equipping the grieving parties to deal with their future life crises. I am not trying to be Jesus Christ when I choose to be with somebody in their Suffering. I am simply trying to put simple, loving relationships at the heart of my religion. Such experiences of Divine consolation are to be spiritually ingested and treasured. It is possible to survive on their memory when the going gets tough again.

I have been deeply moved by the courage with which some people have battled with their Suffering, even though they have endured it for a limited time. When Suffering overtakes me, I have found their struggle to be another source of inspiration. I have been impressed by the brave efforts of some of my relations and friends who have tried valiantly,

but in vain to find hope in the face of tremendous odds, even though tragically they failed to do so. Their suicide has broken my heart, but their battle prior to giving up on Life has been the inspiring part. Taking their own life has brought a forceful message home to me of the fruitlessness of ending it all. I cannot justify ending human life just because it is uncomfortable, otherwise I would have to agree with the mass euthanasing of all who suffer. But because of what I have already said about the intensity of another's pain, I must respect their decision to do what they have had to do. Regarding the suicide of my dear friend and brother-in-law this year, I am convinced that there was enough love in the world and in my relationship with him to help him win through in the end if only he could have perceived it and taken it to heart.



When I embrace my capacity to Suffer in the universal dimension of a Suffering God, I become a fellow Sufferer with all creation. This is where meaning for me comes alive. **The state of being one with every conscious creature who is Suffering is the ultimate consolation for me. Suddenly Compassion, and not Pleasure becomes both the antonym and the antidote for Suffering. Dedicating our life to being one with the Suffering ones, and not just pitying them, transforms our capacity to bear our own Suffering with courage.** But sometimes we have to wait until Suffering strikes us before we learn this beautiful lesson. It is most significant that many of those who have become well known as Sufferers on the world stage, have also become famous for their transformed lifestyle of Compassion. Princess Di is a perfect example of this. Jesus of Nazareth was another. (see my footnote) A living Australian example is my dear friend and colleague, Dorothy McRae McMahon. Dorothy, out of her agonising separation from Barry,

found the strength and honesty to declare her true identity. Among many other advocacies her stand in the face of ridicule and persecution made a powerful and personal statement about the integrity of gay spiritual leadership in the established church.

In conclusion the Spirit of Life constrains us to suffer along in the Spirit with the rest of Creation. For what it is worth, this non-theistic believer feels that that same Spirit within and around him is also the dispenser of Compassion for the Suffering ones when he allows Suffering to motivate him to care. It ushers him on to holy ground when he is able to weep with those who weep and have them weep with him. **I give reverence to Life despite the fact that it isn't easy. It invites me to be open to chance, and not to be haunted by providence.** The unexpected and undetermined circumstances of Life give me the freedom to decide how best to cope with them. Suffering for me is not an atonement; it is not a punishment or a chastening; nor is it intentional or previously determinative for good or for evil. The Suffering that the circumstances of life present to me gives me the choice to gain wisdom from it and to build up a reserve of courage and hope for the future. It is part of the celebration of my humanity to take responsibility to do so and to admit my openness to learn from it and grow from it as best I can.

Out of respect for my Christian heritage and speaking as a post-Christian progressive believer, I would like to add Jesus of Nazareth to my honour roll of Sufferers in the public arena. I think that the real suffering of the historical Jesus took place, not on the cross, but in the grinding poverty and oppression under which he lived in destitute circumstances as a child of landless peasants in rural Palestine. In his Suffering he identified with the pain and ignominy of the unemployed, the homeless, the hungry, the sick and the blind, the plight of abused women and children, the religiously unclean, the dispossessed and the outcast in his own community. It was out of that kind of Suffering that he emerged to champion the cause of the poor. Out of that Suffering and Compassion he developed the guts to subvert the violent and unprincipled policies of church and state. He did so at the

risk of being assassinated. And he was.

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**Emphases by present Editor. JT**

Read about violence & injustice in Palestine under the Romans:

<http://www.catholicireland.net/the-holy-land-in-the-time-of-jesus/>

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**Looking at the
First Humanist Manifesto**

Note from the Editor: Whether members of the Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship call themselves a Humanist Unitarian, a Mystic Humanist Unitarian, a Mystic Pagan Humanist Unitarian or any other hyphenated form of Unitarian—or whether they insist on Unitarian only as their label—we are all influenced by the Principles we have adopted from the UUA, and any Humanist could accept them.

Like the Adler quote below, the Humanist Manifesto of 1933 was written before western people became conscious of sexism in language. This was noted by Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons in her address “Manifesting Humanism” dealing with what endures from this first statement of Humanist ideas. She noted too the overly high optimism of their socialist faith. She goes on to say:

A second, more generalized optimism permeates the manifesto as an expectation that the development of the human species and its culture constitutes a straightforward linear process of evolution. This arose in part out an historical moment when it was still possible that the agonies of the first world war had indeed represented the war to end all wars, and the European colonial empire project of ‘civilizing’ the ‘primitive savages’ of the globe had not yet been repudiated. The early humanists did not have the consciousness, which the genocidal end of the twentieth century has driven home for us, of how quickly supposedly ‘modern’ and ‘highly civilized’ people can descend directly into irrational, barbarous violence. They assumed that education was a one-way process, that there was no retreat from information once provided, or from exposure to a cosmopolitan perspective. The ultimate triumph of the western Enlightenment was for them such

a deeply founded article of faith that they could not even recognize it as such; their confidence in reason, tolerance and democracy as self-evidently superior social principles assumed that the only meaningful questions were about how to get there, not whether that was in fact where everyone wished to go. They assumed, too, that the exponentially cumulative increases in scientific knowledge which they observed in their own lifetimes, and correctly anticipated would continue, could only work to humanity's general benefit; the more we could know, individually and collectively, the better of we would be. Thus culture, being a product of human interaction with the natural and social environment, would be inevitably improved by the spread of information, technology, prosperity, and western standards of justice. **They did not foresee the extent to which the replacement of traditional custom and constraint by individual preference might work against the general good; they took it for granted that the direction of human evolution was toward ever greater personal autonomy, and that this was for others, as they found it for themselves, unambiguously a good thing.**

That assumption, that evolution was on their side, so to speak, led to the third aspect of what now seems like unwarranted optimism on the part of the early humanists; which was that they had only to state their ideas with clarity and integrity in order to see them spread easily across the intellectual and cultural landscape. This of course is a danger confronting any group which talks primarily among itself; that its members will come to see their shared ideas as self-evident, and needing only to be properly explained in order to make just as much sense to everyone else. The authors of the first Humanist Manifesto were persuaded that humanism was going to sweep the nation and the world -- indeed, they thought the process had already begun - and when that happened, they wanted people to get it right. It was for this reason that they spent many months in animated, not to say agitated, correspondence about the document they proposed to publish. They wanted to set a standard that could be referred to whenever someone started to ask, well what IS real humanism, anyway?

They recognized that they were a small minority at the time, but they didn't expect it to remain that way. Just like Thomas Jefferson predicting in his day that every young man then alive in America would become a Unitarian before they died, the humanists of 1933 foresaw the decline of the institutional church into an anachronism, and the dissemination of humanist ideas across all segments of society. There are many suppositions about precisely why this did not happen, but the bottom line is that it turned out to be not nearly as easy as they thought.

Now as the 21st century dawns, the humanist community is sadder and wiser, perhaps, than in those heady days, but we are still here. Women's voices and feminist values have been incorporated into the 'manly attitude' once advocated by humanist pundits, and we know that it's no picnic, and there are no guarantees - which is as it should be. However, to my mind, none of this suggests that the Manifesto failed. No single document, even with 34 of the most brilliant and prestigious of signers, is going to inaugurate the beloved community of justice and kinship on earth, and that was not the purpose in 1933 anyway. Neither was it in 1973, when the second manifesto was published, nor most recently, in 2003, when a third was added to the sequence. This process of subsequent reconsiderations and new publications makes it clear that humanism itself is an evolving universe of thought, which can only be approximated in the periodic effort to describe it to ourselves and others. We expect and intend to learn as we go, to incorporate the lessons of experience by observing how far off the mark we sometimes are, by trying again to sort out the essentials of our message from the accidents of history. **We have by now given up, I hope, on two losing propositions. One is that if only we humanists were clear about what we believe, and could state it to everyone's satisfaction, all human suffering and all the world's problems would be over. And the second is like it, that if only we could get everyone to agree with us, and become humanists, all human suffering and all the world's problems would be over.** Personally, I don't believe that it's ever going to happen that all human suffering and all the world's problems will be resolved; I just don't think the universe op-

erates that way. In fact, that is why humanism is important to me, because I think that we finite, fallible human beings need some guidance for living with the suffering that is part of life, and the problems that are part of the world. And for this purpose, it seems to me, those humanists of 1933 still have a lot to say to us.

To begin with — and this is why I always have and continue to consider myself a religious humanist — **they affirm the importance of humanity's quest for the highest, abiding values of life.** They called, not for a petulant renunciation of all religious emotions, institutions, or satisfactions, but rather for a vital, fearless and frank religion that would be capable of addressing authentic human experience and genuine needs. It was because they believed such a religion to be possible, and humanism to be the basis for it, that they went to the effort of creating and publishing their manifesto.

Based on their description, it seems to me that such a religious perspective has its own unique disciplines; it was never about believing whatever you want. Rather, it means accepting the authority of evidence, logic, and reason, even when wishful thinking appears so much more comfortable. It means acknowledging that we are, individually and collectively, a product of natural processes in a material world, not the darlings of a universe designed especially for us. It means resigning ourselves to the understanding that we are all in this together; nobody gets special preference, or exemption from the human condition. It means taking responsibility for the consequences of our actions, and choosing to behave ethically because it is the right thing to do, not because it will pay off, either here or hereafter; to live, in other words, without cosmic guarantees, or the expectation of rescue or reward. **It means finding our joy in the satisfactions of human creativity and relationships, discovery and problem solving, and the full realization of personality in a shared world, rather than imagining some divine affection or approval for our lives.**

Seventy five years ago, some three dozen thinkers and leaders asserted that it is possi-

-ble to live from this point of view. They said it in the language of their day, making the assumptions of their time, as clearly and boldly as they could express. Not surprisingly, they were mistaken about some aspects of the details; it would not be possible for us today to return to the implicit faith in human progress that colored their confidence for the future. But like all pioneers, they opened a road that did not end with their own journeys; they invited us all to leave the confinement of tradition and convention, to suppose that however startling or uncomfortable the truth might be, we could deal with it, and still find meaning and joy along the way. **That summoning courage, and that trust in the enduring power of the human spirit, never grows old.** If, as I expect, I live for another thirty some years, perhaps I will have the opportunity to see what changes emerge in Manifesto IV, as humanism responds to the unfolding of this new century. No doubt we will learn some things between now and then; no doubt some of what we think we know at that point will turn out later to be wrong. But we will stay on the journey, still guided in part by what Ray Bragg and Roy Sellars and John Dietrich and their buddies once set forth -- about affirming life, rather than denying it; about eliciting the possibilities of life, not fleeing from them; and establishing the conditions of a life well lived, not just for the smart or the lucky, but for everyone. That's the living heart of humanism, and it stands the test of time.

Emphases by the present Editor JT

The UU Humanist Association has made Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons the Religious Humanist of the year. She is the senior minister at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church In Kansas City. See:

<http://humanists.org/blog/201507/kendyl-gibbons-2015-religious-humanist-year>

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**“The divine in man is our sole ground for believing that there is anything divine in the universe outside of man.”**

Felix Adler, 1851– 1933, Founder of the Ethical Culture movement.

**Weakening gun laws amid controversial shotgun debate 'huge mistake', John Howard says**

Former prime minister John Howard has warned it would be a "huge mistake" to water down Australia's gun laws amid debate over a controversial shotgun.

The Federal Government has agreed to allow the importation of the Adler lever-action shotgun in a year's time, pending a review into the system.

Gun control advocates say the rapid-fire weapon from Turkey should be permanently banned because of its fast firing rate and its eight-round capacity.

Mr Howard, who introduced a ban on automatic and semi-automatic weapons following the 1996 Port Arthur massacre, said he did not believe Australians wanted to see weaker restrictions.

"If the Government ends up letting this in, and not treating it as I think it should be on the evidence available to me at the moment — treated as akin to an automatic or semi-automatic — then I would be very critical of that, certainly, and that would be a huge mistake," Mr Howard said at a Sydney function organised by Gun Control Australia..... The Coalition temporarily suspended imports of the Adler weapon in July as part of a firearms review triggered by the Martin Place siege.

It has now agreed to a 12-month sunset clause on that suspension, following a deal struck with NSW Liberal Democrat senator David Leyonhjelm on a migration vote. Mr Howard said while the Federal Government was free to make deals to get legislation through Parliament, he disagreed with the senator's stance.

"Any winding back of the laws concerns me, and I'm critical of any winding back. I really am," he said.

***Above is part of an article from the ABC by political reporter Francis Keany, 10 Sep 2015***

***So what does our new PM think? Ask him: <http://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/>***

Office Address PO Box 545, Edgecliff, NSW 2027.

## Wikipedia on Australian gun laws:

Gun laws in Australia became a political issue in the 1980s. Low levels of violent crime through much of the 20th century kept levels of public concern about firearms low. In the last two decades of the century, following several high profile multiple murders and a media campaign, the Australian government coordinated more restrictive firearms legislation with all state governments.

A common misconception is that firearms are illegal in Australia and that no individual may possess them. Although it is true that Australia has restrictive firearms laws, rifles and shotguns (both of which include semi-automatics ***Can this be correct? JT***), as well as handguns, are all legal within a narrow set of criteria.

As of 2015 about 815,000 people had a gun licence in Australia and there were around 3.5 to 5.5 million Registered Firearms in Australia. Most people own and use firearms for purposes such as hunting, controlling feral animals, collecting, security work, and target shooting Read more: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun\\_laws\\_in\\_Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun_laws_in_Australia)



Adler lever-action shotgun from Turkey. Photo :ABC

### 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](http://www.sydneyunitarians.org) . 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 the 15th of each month: [jtendys@yahoo.com.au](mailto:jtendys@yahoo.com.au) or hand to Jan Tendys at the Sunday service.

Although we have an Associate Minister, Rev. Geoff Usher, we are primarily a lay-led congregation. **Perhaps you have a topic to share?** We welcome any topic ideas, offers to speak or names of suitable speakers for our meetings whom we could approach. *Please see Caz Donnelly at the Sunday service.*

**Fellowship contact** [www.sydneyunitarians.org](http://www.sydneyunitarians.org) or ring 02 9599 11 80