



**Spirit of Life** Unitarian Fellowship

Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre  
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(near Milsons Point Station)

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## Schedule of Services

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

**1 September                      Martin Horlacher                      "Memory and Dream."**

It has now been fifty years since Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Half a century on, much has changed both in America and around the rest of the world - and yet, in many ways, we've still got a long way to go. What will the next fifty years bring, and are we prepared for them?

**8 Sept.      Morandir Armson      "George Orwell: The Thinking Person's Scalliwag."**

George Orwell, the nom de plume of Eric Blair, is often described as the 20th century's best chronicler of English culture. He wrote literary criticism, poetry, fiction and polemical journalism. He fought in the Spanish Civil War, and was also a member of the 'Sallywags', the ultra-secret, anti-Nazi force, set up by the Special Operations Executive. All through his career, he was attacked for his beliefs, by all sectors of politics; he was unpatriotic, he was too patriotic, he was a Communist, he was an anti-Communist, he was insufficiently pacifistic, he was a supporter of Right-wing warmongers. Yet, all through his career, Orwell sought to steer his own ethical course. This talk will examine Orwell's ethical framework, and seek to explain some of his more controversial views.

**15 Sept.      Carolyn Donnelly                      "The Religion of Beatrix Potter."**

Beatrix Potter is well known as a writer and illustrator of children's books. However, maybe there is more to this woman, who was influenced by Unitarianism.

**22 Sept.      Rev. Geoff Usher                      "Worship: Transitive or Intransitive?"**

People are more likely to engage in worship when they do it in the company of others who also are engaged in worship. If we use "worship" as a transitive verb, the object of worship is likely to become the essential element: what is worshipped becomes more important than the people who are doing the worshipping.

**29 Sept.      Ginna Hastings                      "The 8 Habits of Love"**

In this talk Ginna will be discussing a book "The 8 Habits of Love" and align the ideas with both good mental health and our seven principles.

## Transhumanism

*Martin Horlacher*

*The following poem was written by Margaret Armstrong's grandson, at age 11, in response to a picture, as part of a class exercise.*

In the big empty room  
The old man sits.  
Misty eyes, weak and  
Seeing yet unseeing,  
The white hair neatly combed.  
Hunched over he sits.  
The polished wooden chair  
Creaking like his bones.  
On the table lies  
A bowl of untouched fruit  
That sits as a reminder,  
Of spring, and youth,  
And the laughter of old.  
But now, the autumn leaves,  
Litter the ground like the  
Deathly silence he feels,  
Inside his soul,  
Which is lost, and wandering,  
Crying quietly over the spilt milk  
Of the past.  
The record player sits  
Under the coat of dust,  
That binds it from the world.  
The smell of sawdust tingles,  
In the air like  
A pale scent that  
Lingers yet wishes to go.  
Outside the window,  
The evening sighs,  
Bleeding the memories,  
Of his wisdom.  
By the door,  
Sits the old, musty,  
Worn out shoes,  
That sit forgotten,  
Like a dog left in  
The rain.  
The old man sits,  
Wondering about the past.  
Yet not about the future.  
For too soon it will pass,  
And the life will fade.  
And now, he must sleep...

Conor McCammon

Transhumanism – whether we like it or not, it is the future of the human race, and that includes you. But just what does it entail? What are the implications for our children and grandchildren, and for all of us alive today? And what are the implications for the world we now live in, for democracy, for contemporary notions of human society? But, most importantly, what will it mean when it comes to how we view what it means to be members of the human race?

The more things change, the more they stay the same...right?

Well, I'm starting to wonder – and, in this case, it all comes down to technology. Like it or not, the extent to which technology plays a role in the lives of every human being on this planet here in the year 2013 would literally have been inconceivable to almost any man or woman living a century ago. I realise perfectly well that it may be a cliché to say that, but that doesn't stop it from being true. In 1913, the First World War, and all of the destruction wrought by the technology used to fight it, had yet to happen. And even those individuals who were aware of the technology that was soon to be used – openly and extensively, at least – in that great conflict, who were developing and building it, being trained in how to use it...would even they have been able to conceive of the kinds of terrible technologies to be used for conflict now, the nuclear bomb being just one example?

I consider myself a fan of that much-maligned (and unfairly so) genre of literature known as science fiction – and, as a fan of said literary field, I can tell you, it's actually one of the scariest genres you'll ever read, much more so than fantasy, and even more so than horror. This is one way I've heard it put, and I think it sums it up quite nicely: fantasy, generally, is the literary genre about things that you'd just love to have come true, but most likely never will. Science fiction, by contrast, is generally all about the kind of stuff that you would never want to have become reality – but which, unfortunately, one

day probably will. Anyone who's read George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, or just about anything in the "cyberpunk" sub-genre, will more than likely know what I'm talking about.

But what's even scarier than science fiction itself, is when it becomes science fact – and I think that the past one hundred years or so in particular attest to this. There's no denying that technology has done many wonderful things for the human race, or at the very least for a sizeable portion of it. Many of us live in greater comfort and security today than we would have just one hundred or even fifty years ago, let alone two or three thousand. We're living longer, generally a lot more comfortably – all that and more. All of that has been said before by God knows how many, and so, I'll just get right to the point: what about the downside to it all? Oh yes, I think there is one. I try my absolute best to give credit to the wonderful, useful potential of human technology. But, I personally don't think that enough is said today about the terrible implications that that very same technology could have, and is already having. And I'm not just talking about bombs, guns, lasers, and other nasty things that anyone would agree are effective at causing damage. Perhaps, at least, more pervasive a topic relating to this overall theme – and one that I really don't think is spoken about enough – is that of the international and apparently increasingly popular movement known as "transhumanism".

Wikipedia, that both increasingly popular and contentious online encyclopedia that (it should be remembered) anyone can edit, defines transhumanism as:

"An international intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally transforming the human condition by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities. Transhumanist thinkers study the potential benefits and dangers of emerging technologies that could overcome fundamental human limitations, as well as study the ethical

matters involved in developing and using such technologies. They predict that human beings may eventually be able to transform themselves into beings with such greatly expanded abilities as to merit the label 'posthuman'. Transhumanism is therefore viewed as a subset of philosophical 'posthumanism'."

Now, if that all sounds like the stuff of pure, unadulterated fantasy...let me assure you, it isn't. To a fairly large degree, it is, I think, still what one could call science fiction – but just remember, antibiotics (as well as most modern medicines), open-heart or brain surgery, submarines, televisions, telephones, space shuttles, walking on the moon, computers, DVDs, pacemakers, artificial hearts, and atom bombs all used to be science fiction, too.

"Life wasn't meant to be easy."

That might well be true, at least to some extent – no doubt, it certainly made sense enough to former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser to use it as a quote in a moment of political rhetoric, though I'm just as certain he was both feeling (and regretting) it when he was caught without his trousers in a seedy hotel in Memphis, Tennessee, back in October 1986. But don't try using that little aphorism, true though it may be, to explain to any one of the likely billions of people on this Earth who suffer or have suffered, directly or indirectly, from some terrible physical, psychological or emotional affliction. Be it amputees, wounded veterans of war or victims of crime, or any man, woman or child who has suffered as a result of any one of the thousands of communicable and non-communicable diseases brought on by a virus, bacterium, ageing or unfortunate combination of genetic factors – tell any one of them that, hey, that's just life, and I think he or she would be most likely to bust your beak.

But what if there was a way to replace or regrow amputated or damaged limbs and organs, to cure any disease or infirmity, to not only vastly extend the lifespan of a human being, but also arrest and possibly even reverse the inevitable effects of old age on that

man or woman's mind and body? To cure the incurable, allow the blind to see again and the deaf to hear, to let the paralysed walk and feel once more. Wouldn't that be a *good* thing?

On the face of it, yes. So - cybernetic and/or biomechanical implants and/or replacements for body parts we've lost to accidents, disease or ageing; biological and/or molecular engineering to "improve" the human condition (or at the very least our chances of longevity and success in life); biologically-integrated techno-organic nanotechnology, to repair damage to one's body as soon as it occurs; fully-fledged cybernetics, including one or more forms of "direct neural interfacing" that will allow our brains to connect directly to high-powered computers (heck, that would probably allow us to become computers!); cloning, be it individual organs or complete human beings; so-called "designer babies" – that is, the ability to choose not only your offspring's gender, but also their appearance, intellectual, artistic and athletic abilities, sexual orientation, and basic personality, amongst other things...well, some of those, at least, would be good. Wouldn't they?

And therein lies the rub, at least in my opinion. History has taught us that technology can bring with it many benefits for the human race – I, for one, am a believer in the ideal that the purpose of science should be to serve humanity. To a wonderful extent, it has already done so. But I also believe that any dose of idealism should also be balanced with a healthy measure of realism. And it is this, I think, that some of the most prominent and outspoken proponents of the transhumanist movement do not do.

.....One of the most outspoken and passionate believers in the benefits of transhumanism in today's world is undoubtedly the American author and inventor Ray Kurzweil, who has published a number of books on the topic. In some of these books, he has made a number of specific predictions regarding the exponential progress of technology and its integration into human life, including the ideas that nanotechnology will allow humans to radically – and perhaps indefinitely – extend their own lifespans by the year 2050,

and that sentient artificial intelligences will exhibit moral thinking and come not only to perceive, but also respect, human beings.

Indeed, from what I've read about Kurzweil, he appears to espouse his views on what he sees as a "desirable" future for the human race with a zeal that arguably borders on being religious. I guess this is ample evidence, if anything, that even some Unitarians might arguably not be able to see the forest for the trees. According to his profile on Wikipedia:

"Though Kurzweil's parents were Jewish, they raised him as a Unitarian Universalist and exposed him to many different faiths during his youth. Kurzweil presented sermons at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego in January 2000 upon publication of [his book] *The Age of Spiritual Machines*. He gave a 2007 keynote speech to the United Church of Christ in Hartford, Connecticut, alongside Barack Obama, who was then a Presidential candidate. In [his book] *The Singularity is Near* he expresses his belief in a need for a new religion based on the principle of mutual respect between sentient life forms, and on the principle of respecting knowledge. This religion would not have a leader, instead being purely personal to adherents."

I hate to say it, but when some people accuse Unitarians of being too "New-Agey" and not "doctrinaire" enough, they might just have a point – at least as far as Ray Kurzweil is concerned. Though it's not only fellow religionists or ardent believers in spirituality who have criticised Kurzweil over this – Mitch Kapor, the American blogger and internet activist has said of Kurzweil's views:

"This proposition that we're heading to this point at which everything is going to be just unimaginably different—it's fundamentally, in my view, driven by a religious impulse. And all of the frantic arm-waving can't obscure that fact for me."

One of the most well-known and outspoken *critics* of the transhumanist movement and its stated aims and goals is the Japanese-American author and political scientist Francis Fukuyama. Indeed, his attacks on the

movement have at times bordered on the ferocious.

Fukuyama is well known in many circles for his 1992 non-fiction book The End of History and the Last Man, in which he argued that the progression of human history as a struggle between competing ideologies is, for the most part, at an end, with the final and best form of human government – Western liberal democracy – having been decided upon by the majority of individuals in this world, even if their respective nations have yet to properly achieve it in their own right. In his 2002 book, Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution, he strongly criticised the transhumanist movement, arguing that the ideal of a posthuman utopia is too dangerous and open to abuse to be a viable future for the human race in terms of the threat it could pose to a workable socio-political order and perceptions of human worth and dignity, no matter how well-intentioned those who engage in bringing about such a utopia may be.

Naturally, Fukuyama and other such critics have themselves been criticised in turn by transhumanist thinkers. Ronald Bailey, an outspoken transhumanist and science editor of the American libertarian magazine Reason has been particularly effusive in his disapproval of Fukuyama's arguments, stating:

"Fukuyama identifies transhumanism as 'a strange liberation movement' that wants 'nothing less than to liberate the human race from its biological constraints.' Sounds ominous, no? But wait a minute, isn't human history (and prehistory) all about liberating more and more people from their biological constraints? After all, it's not as though most of us still live in our species' 'natural state' as Pleistocene hunter-gatherers."

"Human liberation from our biological constraints began when an ancestor first sharpened a stick and used it to kill an animal for food. Further liberation from biological constraints followed with fire, the wheel, domesticating animals, agriculture, metallurgy, city building, textiles, information storage by means of writing, the internal combustion engine, electric power generation, antibiotics, vaccines, transplants, and contraception. In a

sense, the goal toward which humanity has been striving for millennia has been to liberate ourselves from more and more of our ancestors' biological constraints."

On the face of it, Bailey does make a good point – but not as good a point, in my opinion, as does Fukuyama and other critics of transhumanist philosophies. If anything, I find Bailey's relentlessly positive view of a posthuman future world worryingly sanguine at best, and, at worst, dangerously naïve. He lambasts Fukuyama's statement that transhumanists will "deface humanity with their genetic bulldozers and psychotropic shopping malls", and sums up his counter-thesis to Fukuyama's argument with:

"The crowning achievement of the Enlightenment is the principle of tolerance, of putting up with people who look differently, talk differently, worship differently, and live differently than we do. In the future, our descendants may not all be natural homo sapiens, but they will still be moral beings who can be held accountable for their actions. There is no reason to think that the same liberal political and moral principles that apply to diverse human beings today wouldn't apply to relations among future humans and posthumans...I say, bring on those genetic bulldozers and psychotropic shopping malls that help people to live healthier, smarter, and happier lives."

In my opinion, there is every reason to think that an evolutionary step into a transhumanist world – a posthuman revolution, in other words – could and quite likely would entail a scenario a lot messier than the one Bailey envisions. And that is something worth remembering...

***The above is a shortened version of a talk Martin gave to our Fellowship.***

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### ***Class Warfare Anyone?***

***Warren Buffett, the mega-rich American investor. "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning."***

Quoted by Ross Gittins, Sydney Morning Herald, August 28, 2013

## Hajom Kissor Singh

Hajom Kissor Singh (June 15, 1865-November 13, 1923) was born and lived all his life in the Khasi Hills of the state of Meghalaya in north-eastern India. With no knowledge of the faith in other lands, he became a unitarian through his own studies. After communication with American and other Unitarians, he founded a Unitarian church in the town of Jowai, now the headquarters of the Indian Council of Unitarian Churches (ICUC). Singh led a growing Unitarian movement in his state where there are now more than 30 churches having some 10,000 members.

Kissor was the older of two sons of Bor Singh, a police sergeant in Jowai, a town in the mountainous, north-eastern most corner of India where the Jaintia Hills and the Khasi Hills meet. The Khasi people, a tribe that had come to India from Southeast Asia, had their own non-Hindu religion featuring belief in a creator God, and whose shamanistic practice was based upon the propitiation of good, evil, and ancestor spirits. "In the Khasi religion at present," Singh wrote in 1891, "there are thousand of demons and many rites and customs. I believe our forefathers had few demons; and I have heard from old people that at first our forefathers worshipped and offered sacrifices to God and not to demons."

Until about 25 years before Kissor's birth, the Khasi language had no script. Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missionaries created the first Khasi text when they produced a Khasi translation of the Bible. Thereafter, they opened the first Khasi schools and printed primers and a book of grammar.

At age 15 Singh converted to the Reform faith of the Welsh missionaries. By the time he reached the age when he might have matriculated from college, he had acquired the means of self-education. He was a good student, especially of religion. This led him to become a "questioning member" of the Methodist Church, doubting orthodox Christianity. He recorded his difficulties, concerns, and original thinking in a diary which demonstrates a keen mind, precocious wisdom, and compassion.

Singh observed that the Welsh missionaries

had done away with fear of demons, only to replace it with fear of hell. He deplored their hostility to Catholic missionaries wishing to settle in the Khasi Hills, as well as their unfriendliness to himself when he concluded from his studies that he would have to leave their church to seek "the true religion of Jesus, the love of God."

Margaret Barr, a British Unitarian, served the Khasi Unitarian Community after Singh's time. She wrote of his religious outlook, "He felt and declared that the message of election, damnation, and salvation—by going to a certain church and profession of a certain creed—was incompatible with the teachings of Jesus as he read for himself in the Gospels . . . He tried to persuade his fellow Christians that the essence of Christianity was to be found in Christ's way of life and scale of values and not in any scheme of salvation by blood or faith . . . whether Pauline or Calvinistic."

Young Singh had reached classic Unitarian convictions and had begun appealing to others to see their merit, without knowing that anyone else in the world thought as he did. When he was 25, he learned from a Brahmo convert (a member of the liberal Hindu Brahmo Samaj—or Society of Brahman) of Charles Henry Appleton Dall, an American Unitarian minister in Calcutta. Dall, Singh was told, thought as he did. There soon ensued an excited exchange of letters between the two men. Dall sent a volume of the writings of William Ellery Channing. Singh suddenly understood that many others, called Unitarians, shared his faith. Thereafter he called his faith "Ka Niam Untarian" (The Unitarian Religion.)

Singh began gathering friends in his home for religious discussion. Dall continued to write to him, encouraging his efforts, and also sent more Unitarian publications. After Dall died in 1886 Singh was grief stricken and discouraged by the loss. "I confess that I have got great light from him," he recorded in his diary. "I hope to further the cause of . . . Unitarianism in the Khasi Hills but now that my helper has died it will be very difficult to do this alone."

According to Singh's biographer, before receiving Dall's help he already had vision and faith, but he had lived in an intellectual vacuum and was much in need of links to a larger world of religious thought and history. Helen Tomkins took charge of the Unitarian Mission of the American Unitarian Association (AUA) after Dall's death. She sent Singh copies of the Unitarian Magazine. He soon wrote to the magazine's editor, Jabez T. Sunderland, who sent more literature.

On September 18, 1887, an anniversary date Khasi Unitarians celebrate, Singh led the first real church service in his home in Jowai. One woman and two men joined him as the first members of a new church. Around this same time U. Heh Pohong, a man who lived about 20 miles away in the village of Nongetalong, received Channing's writings and also broke from Calvinism. A little later a Khasi pastor, David Edwards, in the village of Raliang, became Unitarian and left his pastorate. These three joined their efforts to promote, "a religion which they could preach with conviction." Of the three Kissor Singh was best educated, as well as a natural leader of great ability.

A statement of faith was adopted by the Khasi Unitarians, and reported in 1888 by Singh in the Unitarian: "We believe (1) in the unity of God; (2) in the Fatherhood and Motherhood of God; (3) in the Brotherhood of Man; (4) in Love, Union, Worship, and Faith; and (5) in Immortality."

Sunderland was a source of major assistance to the Khasi Unitarians. He solicited funds from Helen Bates and others of Waterville, Maine and used the money to publish 500 copies of Singh's A Book of Services and Hymns in the Khasi Language, 1892. Funds from London were used for publication of several tracts in Khasi in 1893. By 1889 the Jowal congregation had gained 30 members who acquired a church building. They soon opened an elementary school, teaching in the Khasi language.

Singh and Sunderland met in 1896. Sunderland wrote, "I have never been more impressed with any religious movement than this in the Khasi Hills. Everywhere I saw evidences, sincerity, consecration and warm at-

tachment to the religious faith which the people had felt had done so much for them. The whole movement is unique in the fact that it has sprung from the soil. It is my privilege to aid in the formation of a Khasi Hills Unitarian Union."

By the end of 1899 Khasi Unitarians under Singh's leadership numbered 214, with an average attendance at services of 148. He wrote a catechism, The Book of Brief Questions About Unitarianism, which has only recently been translated in English. Adapting some of the traditional values of Khasi culture, Singh defined Khasi Unitarianism in terms of duty to God, to fellow humans, and to oneself.

Magnus Ratter, a British minister, wrote of Singh's many skills. An amateur medicine dealer, he provided medicine for the ill. A member of the board of the local Khasi bank, he siezed upon real estate bargains and bought houses the Unitarians could use. A surveyor, he was eventually head clerk in the deputy commisioner's office in Shillong. Filling all these roles, he also did the work of his ministry, leading many services and giving much counsel.

Kissor Singh's pioneering and eminently successful life was not without tragedy. Several members of his much-loved young family died, first his wife and then their children. He was left to raise alone a son and three daughters. He hoped his son, Ekiman Singh, might be a successor in his ministry. When the boy was 15, Singh sent him to the United States to study. The young man was not able to thrive in a culture so different from his own. He died of pneumonia in 1923.

Article by Spencer Lavan

For bibliography see:

<http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/hajomkissorsingh.html>

The above is taken from The Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography

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# Monastic Spelling

The new monk is assigned to helping the other monks in copying the old canons and laws of the church by hand.

He notices, however, that all of the monks are copying from copies, not from the original manuscript.

So, the new monk goes to the head abbot to question this, pointing out that if someone made even a small error in the first copy, it would never be picked up!

In fact, that error would be continued in all of the subsequent copies.

The head monk, says: "We have been copying from the copies for centuries, but you make a good point, my son"

Then, he goes down into the dark caves underneath the monastery////where the original manuscripts are held as archives in a locked vault that hasn't been opened for hundreds of years.

Hours go by and nobody sees the old abbot.

So, the young monk gets worried and goes down to look for him.

He sees him banging his head against the wall and wailing.

"We missed the R !"

"We missed the R !!"

"We missed the damn R !!!"

His forehead is all bruised and he is crying uncontrollably.

The young monk asks the old abbot: "What's wrong, father?"

With a choking voice, the old abbot replies: "The word was...

CELEB R ATE"

***Contributed by Candace Parks.***

## 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 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](mailto:jtendys@bigpond.com) 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*

**Fellowship contact 0466 940 461**