



## Schedule of Services

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

**2 July, Colin Whatmough, "Why Australia is going backwards in Education."**

**9 July, No meeting.**

**16 July, Rev. Daniel Jantos, "Taking Inventory"**

Zen master and teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn, likes to speak and write about "coming home to yourself." If the analogy holds true, then it's worth asking about the state of our home place. Does "coming home" provide us with a source of comfort and renewal? Or, is the home-place cluttered with the stuff that heightens our anxiety's and fosters habit patterns of obsessiveness? This reflection will hope to provide us a chance to take an inventory of our minds' and souls' "home places."

**23 July, Rev. Geoff Usher, "Diversity Without Division."**

American UU minister Mike Young has postulated a hierarchy of responses to diversity, starting with tolerance as a minimum, followed by affirmation, and culminating in a position that cherishes theological diversity as a positive good. He claims that only where diversity is valued, cherished, and celebrated can the kind of community that keeps us alive and growing be created.

**30 July, Dr Max Lawson, "The Spiritual Journey of Christopher Isherwood: from Cabaret to Vedanta."**

Although best known for his Berlin novels and as a gay icon, Christopher Isherwood was also on a spiritual path which included Quaker and Vedanta (Hindu) traditions.

### **Note on Wisława Szymborska, the author of the poem on p. 7**

Wisława Szymborska, (born 2 July, 1923 - died 1 February, 2012), was a Polish poet whose intelligent and empathic explorations of philosophical, moral, and ethical issues won her the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996. Szymborska's father was a steward on a count's estate and she attended the Urszulanki Sisters' Gymnasium. During the German occupation she participated in underground educational gatherings, while working as a railroads employee. After the war she joined the Polish United Workers' Party. Although initially close to the official party line, Szymborska gradually grew estranged from Communist ideology and renounced her earlier political work, discarding much of her earlier poetry.

## Charles Dickens, Liberal Christianity and Unitarianism

*By Dr Max Lawson*

A distinctly religious flavour, if at times faint, permeates all of Dickens's novels. Such an attitude was one of the reasons that Dickens was such a widely read author in the Victorian era. What Dickens's religious beliefs actually were, however, are somewhat difficult to identify.

It is easier to begin with what Dickens didn't believe in and work our way to what were indeed Dickens's attitudes in the field of religion.

**Dickens was dismayed by the state of the Church of England in which he had been baptized.** In particular, he detested the Evangelical wing of the Church of England and its counterparts in other denominations. Pay-back time came in the Evangelical and Non-conformist press at the time of the death of Dickens, when, rather than eulogies, hostile criticism was the order of the day. 1.

The Evangelical ministers in Dickens's novels have absurd names - for example, The Rev. Bonanges Boiler or Rev. Melchisidech Howler.

The most scathing portrait of Evangelicals is that of Mr Murdstone (note his name and what it rhymes with - and I am not thinking of curd!) and his appallingly vindictive sister whose name on her travelling trunk is spelled out in heavy nails. In church, Miss Murdstone, in her praying, "emphasized all the dread words with a cruel relish" and the most lasting effect of the Murdstone religion on poor David Copperfield was his remembrance that in church services he was constantly poked in his sides till they ached by the Prayer Book of Miss Murdstone. 2.

As a child I was haunted (and still am) by eagle nosed Basil Rathbone cruelly flogging David Copperfield for some minor misdemeanour. (That early film version with Rathbone as Murdstone and W.C.Fields, as Micawber, in my opinion still remains the best-filmed version of the novel.)

**Cruelty to children is always the subject of Dickens's rage in his novels** - for example, in Oliver Twist and Nicholas Nickleby. Even after David Copperfield escapes the clutches of the Murdstones, he ends up at Salem House, whose headmaster Mr Creakle is also an Evangelical lay preacher. At Creakle's breakfast table there is his toast, marmalade, newspaper and cane. On one day Creakle is all sweetness and light, fawning on the parents and stroking the children's heads. On the first day of actual school, however, it is like the opening of the duck-shooting season, with Creakle storming down the aisles, indiscriminately slashing out with his cane.

"Spare the rod and spoil the child" comes of course from the Old Testament and Dickens stresses that the Murdstones, Creakle and their like justify their cruelty by heavily relying on the Old Testament, which they regard as of equal value with the New Testament.

A minor character, Mr Chillup, late in David Copperfield says, "I don't find authority for Mr. and Miss Murdstone in the New Testament" and "I have not found it either," said David.

Dickens also found fault with an emerging movement in The Church of England variously known as the Oxford Movement, The Tractarians or the Puseyites (the last term being derogatory and the term always used by Dickens when describing the movement).

The leader of the Oxford Movement was John Henry Newman, an Oxford Anglican vicar who wanted his church to be restored to its basically Catholic tradition, being particularly critical of what he perceived as state interference in church matters. Newman, along with Pusey and other Anglican clergy, produced a series of Tracts for the Times. In one such tract Newman argued that Anglicanism was the "via media" avoiding both the embellishments of Roman Catholicism (for example, the central, absolute authority of the Pope and the doctrine of Purgatory) and on the other hand the diminishment of Protestantism (for example infrequent observance or abandonment of the service of Holy Communion.)

Tract 90, however, was the last straw for the Bishop of Oxford who forbade further tracts, after reading Newman's arguments that the mainstay of the Anglican church, the 39 Articles, which were loosely worded admitted of a protestant or Catholic interpretation.

In hindsight it seemed inevitable that Newman converted to Rome, abandoning "the via media" - for him the sheer weight of the Roman Catholic tradition being irrefutable.

Pusey, Professor of Hebrew at Oxford, became leader of the Oxford Movement. After Pusey there was a second wave of the Movement which stressed ritual and elaborate services, becoming known as Anglo-Catholicism.

**Dickens, although a professed Christian, detested Evangelicism, (as already mentioned) - yet also said in a letter to a friend that he was getting "horribly bitter about Puseyism."** Following the convulsions within the Church of England, Dickens took "a plague on both your houses" approach. As for Roman Catholicism, Dickens revealed in his travel book Pictures from Italy a stridently anti-Roman Catholic approach which lost him both friends and readers.

Where was the liberal Christian Dickens to go? He was ripe for Unitarianism.

In 1842 Dickens returned from a visit to the United States where he had been greatly impressed by the Unitarian Boston minister William Ellery Channing, of whom Dickens wrote very appreciatively in his travel book, American Notes (chapter 2).

**This led to Dickens joining the Little Portland Street Unitarian Chapel. Although Dickens is often claimed as a Unitarian, more strictly, there was a Unitarian phase in Dickens's life when he was formally a Unitarian, becoming a close friend of Edward Taggart, the minister of the Little Portland Street Unitarian Chapel**

Taggart shared with Dickens - to quote the novelist - "that religion which has sympathy with men of every creed and ventures to pass judgment on no one." 4.

It was during Dickens's formally Unitarian phase that Dickens wrote for his children The Life of Our Lord (1846) but not published till 1934. This work is distinctly in accord with English Unitarianism of the period. It stresses Jesus as a great moral teacher and does not dwell on any supernatural elements in the Christian story. For example, there is no reference to the doctrine of the Trinity or the Virgin Birth. Dickens wrote very simply that "the name of the father of Jesus was Joseph and his mother's name was Mary."

**The religion of Dickens was clearly one of a liberal Christianity of a strongly humanist and humanitarian kind.** Such religion is reflected in his ever so popular Christmas Books which are full of motifs of change of heart, rebirth and deeply Christian feeling, but you can't extract any systematic theological belief system from such books. What we can extract from The Christmas Books in particular is that Dickens wanted the Spirit of Christmas to be spread year round.

**The solution to the ills of society had to be on an individual basis. Dickens had no time for politics or politicians (after all he had been a parliamentary reporter) and his treatment of all aspects of politics and political rallies and campaigns in his novels is deeply satirical.**

This is not to say that Dickens was not keenly aware of all the issues of his day as reflected in his involved editorship of two weekly journals in succession Household Words (1850-1859) and All the Year Round.

Dickens followed closely developments in the Church of England as he did other changes in Victorian society. Within the Church of England there developed the growth of the "Broad Church" movement, the leading figures being Arnold of Rugby and Dean Stanley (Arnold's biographer). This movement emphasized a very liberal approach to Christianity, placing a strong emphasis on good works rather than worrying about the after-life. It was also very open to scientific discoveries and theories.

Being so compatible with Dickens's own outlook the Broad Church Movement led

Dickens back to being nominally at least Anglican, being buried in Westminster Abbey, and in the funeral service eulogy Dean Stanley spoke of “the simple and sufficient faith of Dickens.”

**As Dickens scholar Humphrey House stressed “such simple and sufficient faith” was what many lay people in every social class in England were willing to entertain, namely a Christian sentiment unconnected to dogma. To such people Dickens appealed and increased their number.” 5.**

**What Dickens believed in and promoted in his novels was fellowship, acting kindly towards ones fellow human beings, being warm hearted and generous individual acts of human kindness.** No matter how much the good characters in Dickens’s novels are mistreated, humiliated, cheated of their money by swindlers, victims of the law, cruel educators and puritanical religion, the good characters find one another, help one another and are united in human solidarity. This may be wishful thinking, but such fellow feeling proclaimed Dickens is the only hope for humanity.

**The religion of Dickens remains very congenial to Unitarianism.**

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**Notes:**

- 1. Dennis Walder, Dickens and Religion, (London: Routledge, 2007 (1981), p.5)**
- 2. Humphrey House, The Dickens World, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 121**
- 3. Michael Slater, The Genius of Dickens, (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2011 (1999), p. 159.**
- 4. *Ibid*, pp. 168-169.**
- 5. Humphrey House, *op. cit*, p. 109.**

**Emphases by present editor, JT.**

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## **We need our country; our country needs us**

Increasingly, our leaders talk of Australian values and presume that these arose organically, as though through some moral forge. An alternative view is that our national character and sense of identity have been shaped mostly by the land itself: we are a nation of individualistic, resilient and resourceful individuals because our land is isolated, expansive, capricious and unique.

Our country’s dust, drought, flood, blood and harsh beauty have made us what we are.

In a report published today, the Pew Charitable Trust compiled a series of perspectives on how people living in remote and rural Australia see their lives and country. We interviewed about 12 groups over the course of a year, trying to understand the intricate relationships between our people and our nature.

The core questions addressed in these accounts are simple. How do we see our land? How do we live in it? How do we care for it? How are we shaped by it? What do we value in it, or seek from it? And to what extent does the land now need us?.....

**(The study found many positives in the way Outback people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, from all walks of life, cared about the country.)**

....Of course, there are also some notable inconsistencies among the perspectives we investigated, indicative of unresolved issues that need attention and a better process for conciliation or mutual understanding. For example, the values attributed to dingoes and wild dogs, and hence their management, remain highly polarised among people living in remote Australia. The elements of water and fire are pivotal in the Outback, and their use is often also contested.

Furthermore, just as our society has been moulded by our country, increasingly we are reshaping the country, deliberately or inadvertently, expertly or ineptly. **Across most of the world, biodiversity is in decline particularly in areas with high human population density and extensive habitat destruction.**

The Australian Outback is one of the world's few remaining large natural areas, along with places like the Amazon Basin and the Sahara. Such areas are most likely to long support functional and healthy ecological processes and biodiversity.

However, somewhat counter-intuitively, in much of the Outback, nature is in decline even in its most remote and sparsely populated regions. This decline reflects the loss from many areas of a long-established, intricate and purposeful Indigenous land management, that has long moulded its nature. Now, fire is often managed inexpertly or not at all, leading to uncontrolled and destructive wildfire. And the decline of biodiversity and loss of productivity in remote Australia is due also to the extensive spread of many pests and weeds introduced over the last century or so, and the inadequate resources committed to their control.

Inexorably, we will lose much that is special in our nature unless we can collectively address these causal factors and manage our lands more effectively. The land managers we talked to are skilled and willing, but they need more support.

One example is Les Schultz, a Ngadju elder from the country around Norseman in south-western Australia. He told us he wants to see the Great Western Woodlands managed properly, saying,

*“We will always be around, and it ticks all the boxes of everything good in terms of outcomes for Ngadju people and the general community .... We need Ngadju rangers with boots on the ground.”*

A similar call comes from some pastoralists, such as Michael Clinch from the Murchison region of WA. He inherited a land long over-exploited by unsustainable levels of grazing, and is now seeking new management approaches to take his land on “a journey of redemption”:

*“The Outback, to me, is the cathedral of Australia. We’re desperate to reclaim the quality and value of the Outback, and to achieve that vision we need support ... We’re not asking for a handout, but by jeez we’re asking for a hand*

*up. We need assistance to rebuild and re-structure our grazing. If we don’t do it, who the hell will?”*

The accounts showcase people at home in their country. Such accounts, of characters living in the bush, have long been emblematic for our nation. But these lives represent a diminishing minority of Australians.

In our increasingly urbanised society, for much of our nation’s population, the bush remains quixotic and unfamiliar, to be experienced superficially or fearfully. One objective of this collation is to allow urban Australians to see and feel the country through the eyes and hearts of those who are immersed in it.

We would like all Australians to more appreciate the care bestowed on our land by those who cherish it, the benefits we all derive from that care, and the need to better support those who seek to maintain our natural legacy.

We cannot live well in this land unless we understand it, and value it.

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***Above is part of an article which is based on “Outback Voices,” a report compiled by the Pew Charitable Trusts. The article is written by John Woinarski, Professor (conservation biology), Charles Darwin University, for The Conversation.***

**Geographic definition of outback as used here.**



## To read the whole article:

<https://theconversation.com/we-need-our-country-our-country-needs-us-77944>

***A question to ponder: "individualistic, resilient and resourceful" - does that apply to us urban Australians too?***

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## ***Why is the Australian government funding Hollywood films at the expense of our stories?***

Watching David Stratton's loving recall of Australian films of the past 50 years over the past three weeks on the ABC, makes you realise how much impact they have had on us all. As one actor says, our films stop us from being mute. They give us a voice. They demonstrate the uniqueness of the Australian character, sensibility and humour.

They have documented cultural changes and the enormous challenges that this old/new country has faced. The films themselves stand alone as amazing and thrilling moments in our shared cultures. They have also provided a forum for public debates around Indigenous rights, new migrants, the rights of women and environmental issues.

Many individuals stand out in this extraordinary history. Actors and the extraordinary characters they created: David Gulpilil, Jackie Weaver, Hugo Weaving, Michael Caton, Judy Davis, Toni Collette and Eric Bana. Directors such as Rolf De Heer, Paul Cox, Phillip Noyce, Gillian Armstrong and Rachel Perkins. Writers such as Andrew Bovell and Jocelyn Moorhouse. And films such as "The Castle", "Newsfront", "Picnic at Hanging Rock", "Animal Kingdom", "Muriel's Wedding", "The Tracker", "Rabbit Proof Fence", "Sunday Too Far Away" and "Samson and Delilah".

Stratton himself has made an amazing contribution with Margaret Pomeranz, commenting on and critiquing the work. This retrospective, interspersed with his own story, showed how his world was changed by his passion for film. As an English migrant coming to Australia, he discovered the wealth that his adopted country could provide .

It is wonderful that this biopic was funded by the Adelaide Film Festival and others to celebrate not just David's contribution, but the incredible contribution of our filmic storytellers.

Yet over a five-year period, the Australian Government has cut funding for our major film funding agency Screen Australia by more than \$51 million. Instead, it has given at least \$70 million over the same period to American producers to enable American blockbusters to be made in Australia, as well as providing generous tax breaks.

These unremarkable films include "Thor: Ragnarok," "Alien: Covenant", "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales" and coming up "Aquaman". While this subsidy may provide temporary employment for technical crew members and other support people, (and "Aquaman" will star Nicole Kidman, alongside Amber Heard) it generally does not provide work for Australian filmmakers; be they writers, actors, editors, or directors.

**Most importantly, diverting scarce film funding to Hollywood prevents an Australian film (or several Australian films given the size generally of their budgets) being made.** As an example, the wonderful "Last Cab to Darwin" received less than a million dollars in government funding and nevertheless made \$8 million at the box office.

It seems extraordinary that this argument should still need to be made. Why would governments not want to support Australian stories and Australian films?

As Stratton showed us, Australia produced the first feature film in the world made in 1906. It then took another 70 years for Australian films to be made in any quantity and that was because of the dominance of the Hollywood film industry.

Enlightened governments have provided subsidies to make Australian films from the 1970s. This is one reason why the Australian film industry has produced such a stellar number of great films since then.

It seems perverse that an Australian government is now giving money to Hollywood producers to make their films here and not

continue to support the work of its own people. Why?

**Written by Jo Caust, Associate Professor and Principal Fellow (Hon), University of Melbourne for The Conversation**

**To see accompanying photos:**

<https://theconversation.com/why-is-the-australian-government-funding-hollywood-films-at-the-expense-of-our-stories-79898>

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## A Contribution to Statistics

Out of a hundred people  
those who always know better  
-- fifty-two

doubting every step  
-- nearly all the rest,

glad to lend a hand  
if it doesn't take too long  
-- as high as forty-nine,

always good  
because they can't be otherwise  
-- four, well maybe five,

able to admire without envy  
-- eighteen,

suffering illusions  
induced by fleeting youth  
-- sixty, give or take a few,

not to be taken lightly  
-- forty and four,

living in constant fear  
of someone or something  
-- seventy-seven,

capable of happiness  
-- twenty-something tops,

harmless singly, savage in crowds  
-- half at least,

cruel  
when forced by circumstances  
-- better not to know  
even ballpark figures,

wise after the fact  
-- just a couple more  
than wise before it,

taking only things from life  
-- thirty  
(I wish I were wrong),

hunched in pain,  
no flashlight in the dark  
-- eighty-three  
sooner or later,

righteous  
-- thirty-five, which is a lot,

righteous  
and understanding  
-- three,

worthy of compassion  
-- ninety-nine,

mortal  
-- a hundred out of a hundred.  
Thus far this figure still remains unchanged.

~ Wislawa Szymborska ~

(Poems: New and Selected,  
trans. by S. Baranczak and C. Cavanagh)

***Do you agree with Szymborska's estimations? If not, with which items would you disagree?***

***Surely more than twenty out of a hundred are capable of happiness — at least some of the time.***

***We Unitarians nowadays don't often use the word "righteous". Does that relate to our not having a creed? Do you think we ought to retain the concept of righteousness? JT***

## Ode I. 11

Leucon, no one's allowed to know his fate,  
Not you, not me: don't ask, don't hunt for answers  
In tea leaves or palms. Be patient with whatever comes.  
This could be our last winter, it could be many  
More, pounding the Tuscan Sea on these rocks:  
Do what you must, be wise, cut your vines  
And forget about hope. Time goes running, even  
As we talk. Take the present, the future's no one's affair.

~ Horace ~

(The Essential Horace, edited and translated by Burton Raffel)

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There was an old man whose despair  
Induced him to purchase a hare:  
Whereon one fine day,  
He rode wholly away,  
Which partly assuaged his despair.

There was an Old Person in Gray,  
Whose feelings were tinged with dismay;  
She purchased two Parrots,  
And fed them with Carrots,  
Which pleased that Old Person in Gray.

~ Edward Lear ~

### 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 the 15th 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*

Fellowship contact 0466 940 461

Website [www.sydneyunitarians.org](http://www.sydneyunitarians.org)