

JUNE BELL

A PEAL OF BELLS

A BOOK OF POEMS AND PROSE

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UNITARIANS IN EDINBURGH

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June Bell
1998

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FOREWARD

It was purely Andrew Hill's idea to produce a selection of my written works to mark my 80th birthday. We have agreed what to include in a publication suited in size to the volunteer activity of a busy minister.

It is not a collection best read straight through; though dipping in may, from time to time, reveal some rough natural groupings of subject and approach belonging to different phases of my life. Nevertheless the limitations of space and concern for paper=trees do result in some inevitably unexpected juxtapositions. Also lack of degenderisation in earlier poetry is regrettable, but there you are.

My thanks are offered to Andrew for the idea and for his secret researches; to Margaret Hill for typing up the complete folio of pieces from which the selection was made; to Celia and Roy for their kind and surprising words; to the many people who have inspired me and who have collectively made occasions of inspiration.

By the way, I've known quite a number of Peters, and ever so many people called "You"

June Bell
17 March 1998

MEMORIES OF JUNE

Roy W. Smith was General Secretary of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches 1979 - 1994. For the whole of this period June was an Assembly activist

It seems as if I have known June Bell for ever - well almost! We have certainly been friends since I first began working at Unitarian Headquarters in London in 1961, although I must admit that those earliest memories have become somewhat dimmed with my advancing years. However, I do remember June's passionate concerns for young people and the importance of their roles in a progressive religious movement.

I have special memories of being with June in July 1969 for the historic twentieth Congress of IARF (the International Association for Religious Freedom) held in Boston, USA, the week before the first moon landing. It is still a delight to read June's perceptive and incisive report of the proceedings of a congress at which the dropping of the words "Liberal Christianity" from the organisation's title opened the way in June's words "at last to those liberals of other-than-Christian persuasion to feel entirely free to join a world wide religious movement which now offers no suggestion of specialisation." I was one of the relatively few Europeans at that time who were excited by this change and June certainly helped inspire me to make IARF a major focus of my denominational work during the coming years.

In 1979 as I was appointed General Secretary of our General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, Dr. June Bell was enthusiastically elected Vice-President. For twelve months, under the Rev. Hilton Birtles' assertive presidency, June was preparing herself and us for her challenging presidential year. I was still learning the ropes and trying to grow into a demanding job; and at times I could hardly keep up with June's persistence and enthusiasm. Many were the times when I was in the shower and my wife Carole would call out "June rang!"

Many are my memories of June Bell on GA Council, committees, subcommittees, interviewing committees, steering committees (for some of which she was responsible

for setting up) - always alert, ever on the ball, never wasting her words of wisdom. Over many years June Bell has been one of the most important and influential thinkers and voices in our Unitarian movement. In retrospect I appreciate more and more her confronting the older order and goading us on to shape a more democratic Unitarian organisation (we still have a long way to go, haven't we, June?) She pushed me as General Secretary, firmly and lovingly, to be more initiating and innovative, hearing my moans about the reality of denominational resources, but always willing to give that extra bit more of herself so that we could take a few steps forward.

June and I did not always see eye to eye, indeed at times she really infuriated me (and probably vice versa!) but our respect and affection for each other rarely diminished. She was one of a few special people who helped me to grow into the final, most demanding and most fulfilling job in my working life.

Thank you, June. It's a pleasure to join in wishing you a very happy 80th birthday and many, many healthy and happy returns.

Much love,
Roy

12th February 1998

A VERY SPECIAL KIND OF PERSON

Celia Kerr was a member of St. Mark's Unitarian Church, Edinburgh before her removal to Windermere. Like June, Celia is a former President of the Unitarian General Assembly.

June Bell is such a very special kind of person that I was delighted to be asked to write part of the introduction for this book. It feels so good to be able to pay tribute to someone who, at eighty years of age, has lived her life to the full.

We first met in early 1981, when as President of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, June welcomed the Rev. Ken Sawyer from Wayland, Massachusetts to St. Mark's, home of Edinburgh Unitarians, for a pulpit exchange with our own Andrew Hill. My initial impression was of awe at this diminutive, perspicacious woman who greeted him in the name of the General Assembly and of the congregation in an everyday Fair Isle cardigan and trousers, complete with Presidential chain.

Here, I felt, was one who would brook no nonsense. Her lofty position in the denomination and the way she bristled with energy and determination bore this out. The most convincing sign for me was the fact that her hair was firmly controlled in three plaits, plaited together and held in place by what looked remarkably like a leather shield and wooden spike.

I knew in theory that beneath the armadillo-like protective shell there had to be a softer centre, but it took time to find it. At an evening Worship Workshop I gathered my courage and challenged June, amongst others, about what seemed to be an inflexible attitude to others' theistic beliefs. My boldness left me drained and tearful, but June, clearly shocked and hurt to learn of my impression, took the first step towards healing. Over lunch at her home I soon found the soft, warm person underneath and discovered a true friend.

This exchange enabled me to grow and stretch and 'find my feet', a process which June has actively encouraged ever since. I'm sure many readers will have experienced something of June's remarkable ability to comfort, nurture and inspire.

We travelled together by car to Great Hucklow for the very first Unitarian Lay Leadership School. I was glad of her company because she knew the way so well! June had been travelling to Derbyshire since she was a student at Cambridge, initially to Flagg: her favourite place. There she discovered her potential to be more than just a blue-stocking, living happily with things of the intellect. She learnt the value of people and community and enjoyed deep discussion about the unquantifiable things of the spirit.

For me that entire week was a liberating experience. Sharing a room with June was a mind-expanding experience. Every morning I was wakened by tortured moans of, "Oh, no! Not more floods!", "What? A tornado!", "Will this drought never end?", and/or "Oh, thank goodness!" I soon realised that June was listening to the world weather forecast on a radio held together by sticking plaster and string. She is very much a part of, and completely wrapped up in what is happening to our living earth.

June nurtures the earth by gardening, composting, making-do-and-mending, avoiding disposable goods, purchasing with consideration for the effect this will have upon animals, plants, the earth's natural balance and on other people and by recycling. She lives 'simply, so that others might simply live'.

She tells me that she is glad of every year of life which offers new opportunities to make amends for past mistakes. Her writings are a clear expression of her deepest feelings, which she shares here with others. She is grateful for the chance to become a more caring, loving person, partly in the hope that her example will help others to change their attitudes.

Her theory works: having a friend like June has encouraged me to constantly challenge myself. In my memory, I hear and repeat her words, "I'm learning something new every day!" and thank God that I know such a clear-sighted, loveable and loving woman.

Celia Kerr

FLU

As I lie,
I see trees against the sky.
Finely chased
Twigs of poplar, thin black laced
Against the grey
Of still, chill, January day.

I wait to see them hung
With crimson tassels, plump and careless flung,
By sweeping wind
Through the fanned crown that dinned
Up against the blue arch
Of storm scoured skies of March.

January 1940

SILENCE

My Lord went off to fight
(My lord the valiant Knight)
- He got upon his horse and rode away.
When the sound of hooves had died
Silence fell behind the ride,
And pungent steaming dung piles mutely lay.
My lady passed her days
In dull domestic ways,
As the sunshafts of the year slipped down the walls.
And the silence stretched her heart
Till she feared the strings would part:
And the mice ran unmolested through the stalls.
My lord of wrong and right,
He rides another fight,
For slander strikes behind and in the shade;
But my lord of right and wrong
Is sensitive and strong,
And proves his name alone and unafraid.
My lady of today
Sees him ride, but not away;
Glimpsed between the weekly clamours of her car:
And she lays herself aside
Till he shall win the ride,
And lifts the load of silence she must bear.

October 1962

I KNOCKED UPON YOUR LIFE

I knocked upon your life; you opened it
And let me in.
Thus can by intrusion
Friendship begin.

I brought my life along, and so we showed
Each other round,
And in our brief communion
Fulfilment found.

What thing you gladly gave me with both hands
You cannot know,
For no man to another
Himself can show:

And when your troubles closed your life to me,
I looked them through,
And selfish in my need
Saw only you.

And from your hunted hounded place of pain
Still you forbear:
Humbled am I to find forgiveness there.

But though I value it surpassing much,
I cannot claim
The right to take a share in your life's flame:

Your fire of life is fighting for its life,
Lest you should break;
You cannot pause to give,
Nor would I take:

When circumstance relents its bitter grip,
And lets you live -
Then let my life and yours
Together give!

November 1962

WE PLAYED A GAME TOGETHER

*He who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sunrise (William Blake)*

We played a game together
Uniting hand and eye.
It did not matter whether
You won it, or did I.

You hold the rod, I watch it
And not your staring eyes:
You loose the rod, I grasp it
To catch it as it flies.

Too soon, and I have fumbled,
And knocked it to the floor -
Too late, and it has tumbled.
You hold it as before -

When it falls, I dive behind it
Scarce slower than my sight,
Yet I may seize and find it
If I catch it in its flight.

Thus you bid me take our sharing
Or be it joy or pain
As if I should be daring
To let it go again.

The tender splendid pleasure
Rerising as the sun
Is not possessed as treasure,
Not owned, but known and done.

Yes, I can take it lightly,
When I am up and gay;
But I will not take it slightly
And flick its worth away.

And if it takes me deeply,
Then it is I who say
That I cannot count it cheaply
And will face what price I pay.

16th December 1962.

FROM THE GREY ROOF OF CLOUD

From the grey roof of cloud above to the car's roof
Unending hour by hour the fierce rain slopes.
Inside, with dry grey blanket, weatherproof,
My body rests, my blinded spirit gropes.

And when the sky is emptied for the day,
The smooth loch's weedy ebb begins to rise,
One blanket blown, the other pushed away,
I go to look for God behind my eyes.

In myriad streams the sodden hillside weeps,
Heather and bog and steel-blue rib and scree:
Rounded brown shoulders rise to stony steeps,
And rust-red broken bracken: these I see:

Young ferns uncurled: and butterworts are pale,
Like small green starfish clinging to the peat;
Fragrant bog myrtle scrub; and full and frail,
Primrose and violet cluster at my feet.

The crinkled pink of oak leaves: burnished rose
Of scaling pine boughs under black-green crown,
I see: and still the unceasing torrent flows,
White spate in boulder-bed cascading down.

And over Arnisdale, I turn aside,
Spring up by mossy ledge to smooth topped stone,
The washed-out sundown cirrus rays flung wide -
And sit, knees up, at peace, to wait alone:

Wait for the outer beauties to break in
And wake the singing deeps within my soul;
But waiting on the swell of life within,
Look - and at once gapes still the ragged hole.

Ten month's acquaintance stepped, and came at last
Still-born to harsh uncomprehending end:
I and my blindly driven hope outcast.
The place still bleeds, where I have lost a friend.

The hidden grief engulfs with hungry claim
The beauties that should quicken God in me:
Their strength is spent ere it assails its aim.
The full intense communion cannot be.

Time heals the emptied womb. This too will heal,
And unresentful, I can take it so.
I shall know that which now I cannot feel,
Watching and waiting, I rise up and go.

May 1963

HEARTSEASE

I found my lover first as the sun began to rise,
- A fleet of crimson galleons spread out across the skies,
The low mist lying beyond the limestone wall,
Brown bullocks dazed and drooling, and swelling curlew call:
And as the golden winking eye became the day begun,
So he drew near behind me, till lips and breath were one.

I found my lover long ago at sunrise in June,
And shamed am I to tell it, that I scorned him too soon.

When lilies of the valley graced Monsoldale in May,
I went to love another, and turned my love away.
The next was younger far than I, and his loving did but last
Midsummer in the meadows, by Michaelmas was past.
My years growing on me, took the next but one to wed,
And shared his home and children, his boots and his bed.

I still saw my lover, but once a year, no more,
And in five years he forgave me and loved me as before.

In ten years our loving was sealed one starry night
Before the singing lark at four had risen on her flight.
A sleep and waking sweetness of breast and strong embrace,
And of many tender kisses from his smiling half-seen face:
A right thing, a light thing, that I gave the lark to bear,
Lest it leave my heart's recesses in the rest of the year.

The larks sing every summer, and the yellow heartsease
blow,
When I and my lover our promised loving go.

June 1963

WALK TO THE CANAL

We took a wet walk in the afternoon
Where the tremendous cedar skyward towers,
Its lacey top remote beneath the showers
That saturate this warmly dripping June.

Freshened and sweet the soaking greenstuff smelled,
Big balsam poplars weighed the air with scent
Heavily close about us as we went
To where the little weed-rank river swelled.

There where the reeds and hanging willows grow
Above the bridge the weir-checked waters spill,
Spreading and intermingling at will,
Free in their natural way to run and flow.

But further, to the towpath, we slid down,
Where banks and lock gates channel a still flood,
Swirling is sobered, ripples die in mud,
In ordered smoothness life and freedom drown.

Sudden a lashing shower, and we were sent
Through the drenched grasses to a little wood.
Spattered with rain, in sure restraint, we stood,
Hidden and close, yet distant by consent.

Things in that walk are as my love for you -
Warm and pervading as the poplar smell,
Or sadly beating as the rain that fell,
Or sweeping free as river waters do:

But it must stumble as that other stream,
Parcelled by locks, held by containing walls;
I may not hear its strong impertuous calls:
I may not move to realise the dream.

Love does not heed the circumstance of man:
Love in his ways is no more kind to us.
I am not glad to suffer gently thus,
But I am glad to love you as I can.

30th June 1963

AUTUMN WHIRLWIND

Frustration is
To be twisted,
Spun on tip-toe,
By whirlwind in the grit and dust,
Wild bitter gust,
Sweeping the crisping leaves, dead brown and rust,
Waste papers careless thrust
Creased and greased,
Cast down and now flung up, -

- To be spun dry,
Bound in the unseen coils,
Trapped in its toils,
Wrapped
In the swirling gritty waste,
Wound round
Twisted and wrung
Faster and tighter spun . . .
Till the time of endurance done
The wind drops.

And the limp crumpled garment of my being,
No longer seeing,
Slumps on the ground,
Crumpled flat and dry.
Life has a bitter taste.

October 1963

WILL YOU COME?

Let us steal, steal an hour
Of sunshine and delight:
Its to rob none
To steal one's right.
Let us steal, steal away..
From our two lives' confines
To live a free hour
When the sun shines!
Let us steal, steal from life
That which is given free -
Togetherness.
- Will you come with me?

18th January 1965

THE LIFELESS PART

Empty, empty, where the dark wind blows, -
Shall such a desert blossom as the rose?
Are rose roots buried where sands blow up and fall?
Do thorn sticks quicken within a garden wall?

Nothing, there seems, where the dust storms rise
Arid and barren behind your still, flat eyes.
A plain, dry place where little got to grow,
Being little wanted or tended long ago.

The land round the desert, it grew up a man
Who lived in some half way, half a life's span.
Till a woman chanced to go where none before had been,
And suddenly the roses sprang and budded out green.

Then the man knew what love was, that came within his ken:
And the man knew what life was, that slept in him till then -
And soft tender green things unfurled and were revealed,
As new living water swelled up from wells long sealed.

Somewhere a garden shall grow behind your face
(that hides and exposes the dead-alive place) -
There loving and beloved and other things shall grow,
Till in all the barren desert the fragrant roses blow.

2nd February 1965

SLOWLY, SLOW

Like signal wires beside the track
That swiftly dropped are swift caught back
The cable of my life is slung,
And I on your support am hung.

U-looped between, its lead weight drags
As time its four-days, three-days, lags.
And somehow, in its cold-steel core
Unyielding life creeps three-days, four.

Twice in the week I am caught up,
While comfort slowly fills my cup,
Bear with me, bear me, till you know
The whole sad load that trails below. *15th February 1965*

SUBDUING

The out-turned forefront of my mind
Has duties severally aligned:
Keeps tabs on all the household chores,
And greets the callers at its doors;
Preserves a constant reasoned range
In varied daily interchange.

But in behind the giving face
Nothing retains its settled place.
Resentment, passion, wild despair
Boil in unceasing turmoil there,
And times, the outer shell stretched thin
Can scarcely hold confusion in.

Only on some rare separate days
The tumult halts in brief delays,
Stilled and subjected for a spell
As like some slow repeated bell
Comes echoing all my being through
The sure and strong content of you.

1st March 1965

A LEARNING FOUND

Spring breaking suddenly after the wet snow,
from running slush straight to a week of sun,
mild and sweet,
morning and evening ringed with clamorous song
that plucks my heart and throat
crying out glory! glory!
and stills my feet -

Such spring brings
A sudden rushing rise of live green things;
So that, my muscles tensed in the fresh unrest
That surges still when the stretching day is done,
If I close my eyes
There on the dark lids stayed
Bold like an unfurled crest
Stands a new grass blade.

Instantly clear,
Perfect, green and near,
Glimpsed and then gone:
But instant too
Swift hurled
Some fiercer blade
Cleaves heart and throat unstayed
Comes to sharp rest,
Lodged in my very ground
Quivering as my lips are quivering
At a learning found.

Simply, I want to be
That which helps life to spring up new in you,
That which brings joy to leap
In your sad deeps.

That love has need to be beloved I know,
And that for me this cannot now be so;
Only my sudden learning starkly showed
My longing and concern are stilling deep,
To help you grow;
Loving can have untaking need to give
Simply itself to help another life.

(Might this be God?)

5th April 1965

CHERRY BLOSSOM

And when in May
I close before you kneeled
To part a way
Within your cautious shield,
You gently dumb
Took in my quiet embrace
Though yet part numb
To my opposing face:
Then indescribable intense delight
Stood in my arms alive and soft and white,
Which afterward I found at once to be
The tossing blossom of the cherry tree -
So now apart,
Each foaming tower of flowers
Tugs at my heart
To tell me it is ours.

U.S.A., May 1965

PART OF THE WAY

After these months have passed, I don't recall
The words you said
As in the hurt and fury of it all
I held your head,
And bade you cry, go on and cry!
Under the open sky.

Indignant grief burst up, and cursing too
And broke in part
A short harsh access for my entry to
Your trampled heart,
As you poured forth again, again,
Yours smarting angry pain.

So as the passionate storm its raging spent
In the still night,
Together from the wind-strained trees we went
Out into light:
Side by side in moonlight trod
Part of the way to God.

5th November 1966

ROUND THE TRIANGLE

I walked three roads and back again,
A man on either hand *,
While striped below the starry wain
A cloud roofed golden band
Told that the shortest night contained
The longest day pre-planned.

I walked as I have walked before
In nights of other years,
When burdens of old songs we bore
In tens or threes or pairs,
With loving less or loving more,
And never thought of cares.

Then headlights shot our shadows stark
And passed upon their way,
And shadows one with all the dark
Were gone as fast as they,
And left no more nor less a mark
Than any shadows may.

Many have walked that way, and we
Have only names behind;
But mark of liberal and free
Is not to Flagg confined:
The being of Foy company
Remains in life and mind.

2nd July 1965

* Stanley Kennett and Bert Wilkinson

LIFE THAT IN ME HAS REST

The world spreads out unfenced beyond my garden lawn:
Dream journeys climb at length to end in kitchen walls:
Life to which I was born
Starts where I am with endless unrelenting calls.

Heavy the yoke to which I find me always strapped
If I should strive to soar or struggle to be free.
Life in which I am trapped
Recalls me to submission unconcerned for me.

"Life is a privilege": but this seems meaningless.
"Life is a gift": but I am not accepting and devout.
Life "meant to be" like this
Is privilege and gift that I could do without.

What then? if I have been misshapen from the start?
How then, rightly to use each cross-grained day?
Life of which I am part
Shall heal me if I give it unresisted way.

8th November 1965

VICIOUS CIRCLE

The practice of religion in a secular society
(An exercise exhibiting a fair degree of piety)
Can well deter the ordinary layman. Should he try it? He
May find he is expected to display a chaste sobriety
Illiberal and alien. In order to apply it, he
Must regulate to customary notions of propriety
His vitalizing libido. This will invoke anxiety,
Especially if he should feel determined to deny it. He
Perforce will seek assistance from a doctor of psychiatry
Who, be he of the less familiar Jungian variety,
Perhaps may urge his patient to pursue to his satiety
The practice of religion in a secular society.....

circa January 1970

TWO WINDS AT ONCE

The morning of December first,
The day came dark and slow,
Soaked through the heavy cloud at last
By driving rain and snow.

"Tragedy! Il neigel" she cried,
Delighted and dismayed.
Both joy and fear were groundless, for
Only the wet slush stayed

Against the sun thin orange wisps
Came scudding up the sky,
While high behind the west wind's sweep
Thick grey drove swiftly by.

I never saw two winds before,
Though I shall often find
The spirit's winds in conflict blow
Through my young daughter's mind. *2nd December 1966*

ON NOT BEING ABLE TO WRITE

I might become a poet. I say might,
Had I not too few words and little sight.
And anyhow, my soul is not alight.

It can't be out. That's foolish, I suppose
- Or I'd be dead, as everybody knows.
It's just it doesn't flame, it only flows.

I cannot conjure flame. I have to wait,
Endure my muse' mute pause: anticipate
Something will still become articulate

Fired by unflaming, lesser, steady fire.
Meantime my empty hands too often tire.
Real poets find so many things inspire . . .

April 1970

COUNTRYMAN OF THE EARTH

I am man, human as all men are:
I need to drink and to eat,
Harbour my body heat,
Live under roof, within wall,
As men do, almost all;

Yet when I can, I will sleep under the stars.

I can speak. Man makes a talking sound,
Tells happening, dream, or hate:
But speech makes separate
Men who together from birth
Share all water, all air, all earth.

Therefore, whenever I can, I will sleep on the ground.

I shall live, and, surely as all men, die:
Go from safe womb and grow,
Love and beget and know,
Bend over book or wheel,
Forget how to feel -

So, when I can, I will sleep under the sky.

Youth Sunday, 1970

TWO WAVES

So. The slow
Incessant ebb and flow
Of wild salt tides of long ago
Rolled the shoals of shingle to and fro
Over the four-square timbers smooth and bare.
On soles as smooth and bare I balance there
Knowing through skin of naked toe and heel
The steady wood-strong feel
Grow in me as I go.

So long ago.

Year after year
Slowly we have grown near
- One follow or the other steer -
Albeit motives were not always clear.
Now friend, you send me - in uncertain hand -
A certainty that I can understand
Sure as the timber felt beneath my tread
As though your presence were in-bred.
And it will last ahead
When you are dead.

November 1970

HUCKLOW

Wet gold grey
The day blows away:
With gusty breeze
The west wind tries his best
To hold the sun above the tossing trees
But it will not delay.

Nor will my day;
I too go gold and grey
 old and grey. . .

August 1971

A MILE IN 12¹/₂ MINUTES

Does he recollect the dancing? (under distant deodars)*
Ruffled hair a halo against the coloured stars;
Done with formal natter, and his coat's laid by,
- Can this be tha fella they all say's shy?
Taking every girl to dance - flushed, excited, gay -
Why is he so different from what he is by day?
Bold, blue, patterned tie, dapper white shirt,
(I standing watching in my red maxi skirt)
- Hey! - take away my bag - its my turn now -
Crazy - jig, free style, you needn't know how,
Drop into the rhythm, surrender to the din,
Backing and advancing like Miranda's Inn -
Come up near him, he turns his face away.
Look at me! Why don't you look at me! I say,
He plays at giving, but he won't relate?
I'm running circles round you! I state.
Running running running - we both played fun,
But were we any nearer when the dance was done?
In the shield against encounter, did I make a dint,
Running round a runner in a 12 minute sprint? *January 1971*

GOD IS . . .

God is the nature of other things,
God is the burning of nettle stings,
God is the crashing of thunder storms,
God is the terror of shapeless forms,
God is the darkness of age-old caves,
God is the sweeping of ruthless waves,
God is the shame of loss of face,
God is the silence of outer space,
God is the ice-blue heart of cold,
God is the sorrow the bell has tolled,
God is the glint in father's eye,
God is the fear of those that lie,
God is the stuff of nightmare dreams,
God is the havoc of flooded streams,
God is the pain of an empty room,
God is the blow of the sonic boom,
God is in all of the here and now,
God is in I, and God in Thou. *Holiday Conference, 1968*

OH PETER!

Oh Peter!
What could there be sweeter
Than finding you the prompter of surprise
Penman of writing I don't recognise;
Sending me beauty blue and green and white
The spread in breadth of soaring mountain height,
Sending me pleasure that you think of me,
Sending reproach you did not mean nor see.
False modesty negates me:
My fancy of you as a young admirer dates me;
Where is the courage for the open meeting
That should have let me send you Christmas greeting?
The courage to admit I find you charming
Your warmth and wit a trifle too disarming,
Reaching across the gap of miles and years.
Scared, I retreat behind the wall that's theirs,
Fear that you'd be embarrassed if I sent
Churlishly nurse my own embarrassment.

So! You have waked my muse, and I'm your greeter.
Happy New Year, I love you, good friend Peter!

23rd December 1975

SHEEP

It takes the oddest things to make me weep.
Rounding the winding grass-verged Border road
I found the way was filled with lambs and sheep.
From wall to wall, a wave, the whole flock flowed,
Meandering at more than walking pace.
Behind, three shepherds ran with coat and crook,
Scurrying, flapping, keeping chivvying chase,
Determining the way the creatures took.
I stopped the car and turned the window down,
Better to hear the voice of baa and bleat
As ringstraked, speckled, white and cream and brown,
They shuffled, pattered by on small black feet,
Till bumping blundering passed the last plump ewe.
The red-faced shepherd briefly caught my eye,
Attention unrelaxed.

Driving on through,
With sob-caught breath I wondered why I cry.

April 1974, completed February 1976

BELL TOLLS OR GOD IS DEAD?

Pondering God's demise, some wise recluse
Can call upon experience profuse
- His own and others', limpid or abstruse,
To justify without excuse the use
Of that expressive phrase, the living God.
Beyond the image of our gaze He stays
Despite the nature of the form we raise:
So Bonhoffer and our strange recluse deduce.
But should it be that men created God
(As many wise from time to time have said)
And He lives only through their ways and days,
When man is gone, then God is gone and dead.
Word against word: reason of heart or head?
What have we left but tolerance and truce?

April 1976 revised January 1997

MANTIS

What unexpected friend of mine
Dispatched to me a Valentine?
I can't recall at all before
That postie dropped one through my door,
Or schoolmate, student, would-be-wed
Has left me puzzled or misled
With greetings fond or amorous
But bafflingly anonymous.
Yet making snowy gloom seem rosy
Came charming Miss with puss and posy
To tell me someone thinks of me
Warmly and well (and punctually.)

Then - what astonishing surprise
Startles my sleepy morning eyes.
Whose skilful signatory hand
Has penned a mantis there to stand?
And horrors! does she prey? - or, stay, -
A very different matter, pray?
The textbooks truthfully relate
She gobbles up her nuptial mate
An end no-one I know would court,
And not a complimentary thought.
At that, I chose the other sense,
And saw him praying in defense
(Forsure the sender must be he
In spite of Sex Equality)
Though why he must be suppliant
I've tried to find a cause and can't.

Faced with this mute appeal from - who?
There must be something I could do.
With closer focus, narrower scope
I pondered on the envelope:
Dismissed the postmark; conned the script
And in my visual memory dipped.
There safely cherished in its nook

I found the bold familiar look
And stayed no longer in the dark
Even without your sealing mark.
Oh, thank you for my Valentine
Kindly and tender friend of mine!
And, please you, take this doggerel
To bring and ring you joy from

BELL 12-14 th February 1977

FIFTY YEARS ON - FOR JUBILEE GA GAZETTE

At GA 2028

The most of us will be The Late,
All bald and grey heads laid to rest,
The good, the better and the best.
Today's full beards and rampant locks,
Will they serve great or lesser flocks?
(Will they have flocks to serve at all,
Or all pursue some other call?)
The future Units who belong
10, or 10 hundred thousand strong,
Will they in duty feel they ought
To think our heritage of thought
Or will they with a kindly care
Dismiss us all as old and square?
Do we with our demise connive
Supposing we shall stay alive?
Dreamed ever those heretic Arians
Of GA Unicentenarians?

April 1978

MESSAGE FOR ALL REGULAR GA ATTENDERS

To our excluding and perennial shame
We WILL assume all others know our name.
Don't leave first-timers in bewildered lurch
Please - PLEASE - announce your name and church.

April 1978

I WISH I LOVED THE HUMAN RACE? OR ON NOT WATCHING THE TELEVISION

My friends who watch the box each night
Before whose bored escapist sight
(Mine would be, were I in their place)
Pass faces of the human race,
Respond to me with veiled surprise
Apparent in their goggle eyes
When each and all become aware
My eyes are not (if I am) square.

Now they look out when they look in,
And here the differences begin.
With eyes and ears and feelings glued
They view the global multitude.
The noted figures of the day
Confront them in diverse array-
Bellowing, bluffing, Freudian slipping,
Threatening, jesting, ego-tripping,
Projecting each with look and voice
The public image of his choice.
Be they thus skilful or inept
My friends these images accept.
Or fat or thin or short or tall
They recognise them one and all.
While I with such acquaintance scant
Feel overwhelmed, and ignorant.

My own assessment of their taste
With some reserved concern is laced.
It often seems that politics
Is little more than knavish tricks;
And politicians promise fair
But really only seem to care
About their own ascent to fame,
And never taking any blame.
I'd rather tend my garden gay
Than watch some sex and violence play.

I'd rather make tomatoes grow
Than see some semi-naked show.
I'd rather hear the lark and wren
Than any sick comedian.
In short, if I am up and doing
I'm happier than televiewing.

While world events around me roll
I pause to look in on my soul
And ponder from a different view
The things that other people do.
It helps me understand with grace
The foibles of the human race.

1975-80

THE HUCKLOW CHOIR

Tune: Upidee Upida

The Hucklow choir was fading fast
Doh re mi, do re fah
When through the Social Hall there passed
Doh re mi re fah
A sage who cried in accents sweet
"It's better if you watch the beat!"
Doh re mi re doh re fah, doh re mi, doh re fah
Doh re mi re doh re fah, doh re mi re fah.

'Oh stay' he cried 'upon that G;
You're singing in a minor key"
He mopped his brow, he beat his breast,
And came in after all the rest.

That songster by a faithful hound
Next morning nowhere could be found:
He'd fled across the downs so free
And laid down low on Linden Lea.

Doh re mi re doh re fah, doh re mi, doh re fah
Doh re mi re doh re fah, doh re mi re fah.

Great Hucklow, 1982

BONNIE PRESSY JUNY
OR THE OLD GREY MARE,
SHE AIN'T WHAT SHE USED TO BE.

Tune: Annie Laurie

Liberton Brae is bonnie
Of that there is nae doot,
And 'twas there that Prezzy Juny
Did all her typing oot.
 Her muckle great mistakes
 Make all her readers curse
 But forgive her frequent failures
 For her writing is so much worse.

Like the horns of a hieland wether
Are the curls of her silvery hair,
She boasts nae kilt nor bonnet
But troosers she'd aye wear.
 Her voice is loud and clear
 And haggard is her ee
 And for bloody British Railways
 She'd lay her doon and dee.

Her hips are made of plastic;
She hirples round nae mair
Her veins are less elastic
But neither swell't nor sair
 Her mind she disnae close;
 In her ways she isna set;
 And by the year two thousand
 She'll aye be growing yet.

Unitarian General Assembly Meetings, Newcastle 1981

OUTING

Five ladies were for Chatsworth bound
One beaming summer's day,
They strolled along the grassy ground
Beside the Derwent's way,
The gentle brown winged mallards meek
Went paddling to and fro
With beady eyes and yellow beak
Inquisitive and slow.
The ladies took their lunches out
Unwrapped their packets neat
And soon discovered there's just nowt
A duck declines to eat.
With flapping haste and eager quack
Ducks scrabbled up the bank
And waddled here and there and back
On red and scaly shank.
They squawked, they rushed, they grabbed, they fought,
They scuttled in pell-mell
That they no manners had been taught
The ladies soon could tell.
The sardine buttles went down fine
The cheese ones were a hit;
The sausage rolls were next in line: they gobbled every bit.
Unheeded went our protest wails:
No "thank you" did they say,
They stuffed their crops, then turned their backs,
Popped in - and swam away.

Great Hucklow, 1982

WHAT MAKES HOLIDAY CONFERENCE

Sun, clouds, mist, blue and sudden showers that splatter,
The cattle's bellow and the martins' chatter,
And in the trees the sound of wind is sighing,
The week is flying.

Children launch bubbles, look upon a feather,
And confidently get to know each other,
While weary mums with resignation sighing
Hug children crying.

Part-singers inharmonious clash and fumble;
Reporters hesitate and wordless stumble
For failure in a new adventure sighing,
But dogged, trying.

The epilogue commands our quiet consenting
The programme's tense and joyous grip relenting;
And all the time the spirit's wind is sighing,
The days are dying.

The week's play through, we know it must be ending.
Together we are bonded in befriending
No more in any desolation sighing,
But glad replying. *Great Hucklow, 1989*

LOOK YOUR LAST

So look your last on all things lovely every hour
And feel the chill fresh wetness of the burn,
Taste new-baked bread and smell the velvet gilly-flower,
Hear robins sing, watch autumn colours turn.

Not only human greed and vain endeavour
May use it up, and wipe it all away:
Your eyes and ears shall one day close for ever -
Take therefore every earthly beauty of this day.

*July 1990 acknowledging Walter de la Mare
Tune: Londonderry Air and words "Let Us Sing" 2*

EVERY MORNING

Every morning when we wake
Dear Lord, a little prayer we make
That chapel, ere the breakfast gong
Won't be too cold, nor yet too long.

And every evening at sunset
In blessed study groups we sweat
And choir, where it is uncertain that
We shall sing true, or sharp or flat.

We are not wholly daft or slow
Who live our week at Great Hucklow
Dear Lord, pray do not think the worst
That we know where to slake our thirst.

O let us see another year
Sanction such riot - if you dare.
And now to Eric let all bow
And say good-bye - but just for now.

*Great Hucklow 1983
with apologies to Dylan Thomas and the Rev. Eli Jenkins*

WIDE GREEN WORLD

Wide green world, we know and love you:

Clear blue skies that arch above you,
Moon-tugged oceans rising, falling,
Summer rain and cuckoo calling.
Some wild ancient ferment bore us,
Us, and all that went before us:
Life in desert, forest, mountain,
Life in stream and springing fountain.

We know how to mould and tame you,
We have power to mar and maim you.
Show us by your silent growing
That which we should all be knowing:
We are of you, not your master,
We who plan supreme disaster.
If with careless greed we use you
Inch by extinct inch we lose you.

May our births and deaths remind us
Others still will come behind us.
That they also may enjoy you
We with wisdom will employ you.
That our care may always bless you
Teach us we do not possess you.
We are part and parcel of you.
Wide green world, we share and love you.

*May 1984,
Words and tune "Let Us Sing" 8*

TIME

We set a frame on nature
With hours and months and years,
While each unknowing creature
Lives on all unawares.
They know the light and darkness
They know the moon's four weeks;
The sun in all its starkness
To them their timing speaks.

We need expedient naming
And arbitrary dates,
But artificial framing
Our being alienates
From rhythms that enshrine us
Like fern and embryo curled,
From forces that align us
With all the living world.

So let the sun tell seasons
And grant the moon its phase.
Forget the useful reasons
For counting hours and days.
We sprang from dark and daylight,
From ebb and flowing tide.
Our nature is our birthright
And may not be denied.

*2nd June 1985,
Words and tune "Let Us Sing" 12*

EARTH, AIR, FIRE AND WATER

Air and water, fire and earth
Meet my needs and gave me birth,
Water, fire and earth and air
In all these does being share.

Air for me my living breath:
Losing air I gain my death.
If lakes and streams and wells go dry
Waterless and parched I die.

Fire I need for warmth and light
Or cold I perish in the night.
I fall to earth beneath my feet
If it gives no food to eat.

But as human I aspire
Beyond earth, water, air and fire;
Spirit in me breathes, burns, flows
As on earth my body goes.

Pulsing power which all creates
All known being permeates.
This my soul, my God, my sense,
Essence of the elements.

July 1986

A FRIEND SAID

"We humans are aggressive folk"
I disagreed with what he spoke,
But on reflection must concede
Destructiveness is there indeed.

That which in ourselves we hate
We push away and reinstate
In others: there we see it plain
And fear it might get back again.

"They're bad" we say "and must be killed!
Then we with virtue shall be filled,
They've got the things we want for us!
Kill them, for war is glorious!"

Aggressiveness once had its place
When carnivores we had to face.
We needn't use it that way now.
We simply must discover how

Each can contain their own ill-thought
And right what wrong we each have wrought
With word and gesture from the heart
In world where weapons have no part.

Holiday Conference, Great Hucklow, August 1987

PLANET EARTH

Sing we of the circling planet,
this our home and heritage.
It has spawned us, while in aeons
turning age succeeded age.
Everlasting sun shines on it
source of life which yet can kill,
If we do not curb our taking,
to our wisdom bend our will.

Would we keep our wealth of species,
leave some untouched wilderness,
We must aim at wasting nothing,
seek all ways of using less.
We must check our careless squander,
though it cost us grief and pain;
Look for thrift instead of profit,
save, recycle and sustain.

We before all other creatures
hold Earth's future in our hands,
We can choose to spoil or nurture
all its seas and all its lands.
But all marvels it has builded
shall live on beyond our sight
If we love our living planet
rolling blue through endless night.

October 1989 after Felix Adler

THERE BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD

Deaf speak, but cannot hear my voice;
Blind peer, but cannot see the sky.
These limits are not theirs by choice.
There but for grace or chance go I.

Worn joints, and weak and wasted limbs
Must sit and watch the world go by,
Suffering life's indifferent whims.
There but for grace or chance go I.

The senile and the sick in mind
With self and reason gone awry
Are still a part of humankind.
There but for grace or chance go I.

The stunted and the injured brains
Whose language lacks and concepts die -
Their witlessness the world disdains.
There but for grace or chance go I.

I will not in revulsion turn,
Impatient jeer or curse or sigh,
But in compassion humbly learn
There but for grace or chance go I.

*September 1990
preferred tune: Herongate*

FOUR AGES OF GROWING

See, here's a baby - mine, or someone other's.
We don't all have them, but we all had mothers.
Cradle it, cherish it, love it all you can
If you want it to grow to a woman or a man.

Now here's a child, asking why? where? what?
Give it all the patience and knowledge that you've got;
Watch it and heed it and respect its common sense,
And give it every chance to get its own experience.

Here's a half-and-half thing, stumbling through its teens,
Boasting independence but mostly lacking means.
Train it and trust it and back its rebel stance:
The task of separating can't just be left to chance.

Last there's a grown-up, young, middleaged or old,
Parent-child-and-adult altogether rolled.
Best it lives life fully before it has to go -
Even all the adults still have time to grow.
completed August 1991

HIDDEN MUSE

My muse not dead
But fled
Is hidden
And does not heed
My need
When bidden.

Eyes speak to me -
Don't see:
No dreaming.
Don't reach my goal
The soul
Past seeming.

Great Hucklow, 1997

OUT LIKE A CANDLE

I've burned the candle at both ends
But it will last me yet.
From one wick, flame still bright ascends:
The other I have set
Within its pool of cooling wax
Lest I am tempted sore
To struggle over rasher tracks
Where I have leapt before.

Life and the candle both are short -
The flame is guttering tall.
It's light new promise now has caught;
I've not yet done my all.
And till death snuffs with gentle blow
This incandescent dust,
I'll do the things I want to do
Before the things I must.

* * * * *

So now the flame no longer is;
The smoke curl disappears.
Left in your thoughts and memories
Are bits of all my years.
There lies my immortality:
Take of it what you will.
Grieve not, beyond your need, for me.
I am content and still.

April 1994

EPITAPH

Here lies June Bell, my erstwhile friend
Who went on growing to the end:
Grew veggies in her garden bed
And wisdom in her heart and head.
Though plastic hips did well support her
Her temper and her back grew shorter;
And now she's given up the game
She's back in th' cosmos whence she came.
written for Building Your Own Theology, December 1983

SONNET FOR THE WINTER SOLSTICE

What is this thing that passes we call time?
We anchor it with calendars and clocks,
Apportion it with pendulum and chime,
And calculate its aeons from the rocks.
The earth unfailing, orbits its ellipse;
The sun, to us, has zenith and nadir.
From summer peak to winter low it dips -
Soaring again, declares another year.
Darkness and light define our human days;
The shortest day and longest night invite
Dismissal of the dark with Christmas blaze
Marking some pagan festival of light.

But when, that past, so tardily is told
New Year's first day, my year is ten days old.

29 th December 1995

DO GENTS SHUT IN LAVATORIES GOSSIP?

Fragment of doggerel inspired (believe it or not) by something said in a talk on women's spirituality Tune: "Does Santa Claus sleep with his whiskers Over or under the sheet?"

Do gents shut in lavatories gossip
Over or under the door?
Or do they peer through the parallel gaps
At the sandals or boots of the neighbouring chaps?
And do they regain their decorum
When they get outside once more?

Unitarian Holiday Conference, August 1993

MY COMPOST HEAP

Red cabbage waste with the white bloom on,
Giant walnut leaves, and foxgloves gone to seed,
Smashed eggshells, poppy pepper pots,
Pineapple tops, and rooty leafless stumps
Of cauliflowers; and dog dirt from the lawn;
Blown roses with the petals hanging on,
And thorny stems, and twigs, to be picked out
Because they never seem to rot at all;
Old peach stones; plums and plums and plums -
Rotten, bruised, bird-pecked or too small to use;
Grass, groundsel, chickweed, dock and shepherds purse,
Heartsease, all faces; withered flowers and pods;
Tea leaves and orange rinds and apple cores,
Blue rime on squeezed out yellow lemon skins;
The contents of the vacuum cleaner bag;
Old strawberry plants, and stubborn root of fern
Cast annually from the old heap to the new;
Dead peonies; but not potato peels
Lest they spread scab; nor city rubbish blown
To rest in corners at the front - tinfoil,
Bus tickets, crisp bags, fag ends, shopping lists,
- Bonfire for them, along with sticks.
And under things I still can recognise
Are microscopic bugs and musty moulds,
Squashed sodden stuff and muddy soft brown sludge,
And worms - pink, plump and moistly wriggling,
Or clustered, white and tiny; slaters; slugs
Slimy and grey or handsome big and black,
Making my mould for me, my fertile soil,
Being my thrift, turning my season's wheel,
Letting me act my part in nature's play,
Binding me to the world where I belong.

published in 'Celebration: another anthology of prayers, meditations and poems by contemporary Unitarians' (Unitarian Worship Subcommittee 1988)

SONGS FOR CHRISTMAS ENTERTAINMENT
AT ST. MARK'S 1990

Skylights are dripping, Plaster is cracking, Gallery's sagging, Wet rot below; Pews are all slipping, Money is lacking, Spirits are flagging, We'd better go.	The church has no foundation, It's sinking in the ground. It's life is in its people Wherever we are found. We like some walls around us, A roof above our pews, But what holds us together Is all the things we do.
--	---

A church is a living fellowship,
So is the Women's League
Where ladies can care, and secrets share,
None of your cheap intrigue.

Where bonded by common women's needs
Triumphs and joys and moans,
They broaden their minds and laugh off their binds,
Over the tea and scones.

It came upon the midday clear,
That anguished song of old:
"Will someone light the heater, please,
The water's running cold!"
But those at babel in the hall
Heard not the solemn plea,
Save one who, hovering, went to help,
And thus aloud cried she.

"O ye beneath that pile of cups,
Whose form is bending low,
Who toils above the kitchen sink
With slippery hands and slow:
Look now! for glad and golden flame
Comes swiftly to the jet.
Rest not beside your weary load:
You'll get the lot done yet!"

Who is my God, I ask, Of what is my faith made-oh, As I address the task Of forming my own credo, Not writ in holy tome Nor preached as solely true, But something nearer home That's sense to me and you.	Busy Bees are sewing Table cloths for tea: Knitted scarves are growing, Socks for you and me, Seamstress each rejoices In her every stitch: Up to us the choice is Which warm mitt is which.
---	---

Joyful, joyful, GA Meetings,
Here we meet with all our friends;
Much to do and time is fleeting,
But the fervour never ends.
Find our rooms, and in we settle,
Then it's smiles and hugs all round -
After that we're in good fettle
For the sessions that abound.

Each day there's a Business Meeting
Where we gather to discuss
Why the hall has awful seating;
Do they want to muffle us?
There are microphones down there, and
We all want to have our say.
Not to worry, fair is fair, and
Roving mikes are on the way.

GA Staff are at their stations,
Campus staff are keen to please
Delegates from congregations,
Visitors from overseas,
Midnight writers busy scrieving
All the news for GA Zette -
What a shame we'll all be leaving
When the Meetings all have met.

Who would the prisoner free From unjust fetters, Let them join Amnesty, And write more letters.	What though each hope is slight, Discouraging every fight, They'll labour day and night To free a prisoner.
--	--

MEDITATION IN ST. MARK'S

written and used in St. Mark's following Princess Diana's tragic death

We come together to worship - to affirm the worth of things.

Today many of us will still be carrying with us strong emotions of shock, grief, bereavement - even anger and resentment - that a woman so valued and loved has been so abruptly and prematurely banished from her life and ours. May we be comforted in this loss, especially if her going has wakened memories of personal losses closer to us. Others too have been valued and lost.

How can we worship death? What values can we find in it?

It is good when death gives release from pain, or from vegetative existence, or ends a life of one who truly no longer wants to live.

It is good when death brings relief from exhausting and unremitting devotion of a carer.

It is good when death brings us to our senses, reminding us what part we play in the death of others, however indirectly.

It is good to be reminded of our own mortality, that we may live in such a way as to leave great worth of our lives behind us when we go.

Death brings us new beginnings. We who live on can value every death to remind us we can begin again. It is easy to hope others will not now drink and drive, nor pry into the private lives of public people. Better we look to ourselves. Will you in silence think for a while what changes in your own way of living you want to make, and try to resolve to make them?

Frances of Assisi wrote a great paean of praise for all things natural. Surprisingly to us, but perhaps natural to a saint, he (in translation) said:

Oh thou, most kind and gentle death
Waiting to hush our latest breath
May it be so for each of us when our time comes.

CLOSING WORDS

Let us in all our dealings be as kind, compassionate and courageous as Diana was. *September 1997*

WHAT IS UNITARIANISM?

Unitarianism is a liberal religious movement. It has grown out of Christianity in the west but finds like thinkers and believers among most other religions, and value and inspiration in their teachings.

It is the embodiment of the recognition that for many people their own reason and conscience are the ultimate authority for their beliefs about ultimate things. Therefore the only dogma of Unitarians is that they have no dogma.

Within this freedom Unitarians believe what they can believe, which is not necessarily what they like, nor what they have been told is true.

Unitarianism is an open consensus of these personal beliefs - such as that no-one has the whole truth about anything; God is what one finds God to be; each should learn to relate well with his or her God, with self, with fellows and environment; Jesus was a great man among other great men and women; dignity and integrity are to be found and must be respected in all humans of whatever race colour or creed; the world's resources need to be more fairly divided among the world's peoples; humans are inherently both good and evil; what we believe today, we and our children may not believe tomorrow; guidance is better than instruction in religious education; and that while some are sure of an afterlife, others are not, and this life should be lived to the full.

Worshipping congregations in churches, fellowships and individuals who cannot or do not want to support churches all further Unitarianism in Britain.

*originally written for a competition in St. Mark's,
later published by the Unitarian Information Office*

VALUES

Real cherishing needs change to our value systems. That means swapping something you value for something you value more. So we must learn -

- to value the world more than our convenience

Never do anything by electricity you can do by hand.
Electricity = CO² = global warming.

- to value the world more than our satisfactions and comforts

Use less of everything. Nature no more has infinite resources than she has power to clear up indefinitely. Turn down the thermostat and put on a sweater. Recycle everything recyclable. (Ever noticed someone quietly collecting the dead paper napkins on occasions like this to use as kitchen roll? Trouble is, I've become less surreptitious and got competition.) Paper = trees = leaves.

- to value the word more than wealthy one-up-man-ship

Where can we substitute the ecologically friendly for the fashionable? Can we bear to? It was Dudley Richards taught me the dye in coloured toilet paper poisons the sea. But recycled - no, not toilet rolls. You know what I mean.

- to value the world above our distastes or superstitions

Throw away nothing that can still be eaten. Find a way to eat it. Eating properly reheated food does not kill you. (I've been doing it all my life. And did not my good Scots husband tell me "It's always better on the second day"?) The same food twice running may be distasteful to us - much of Nature is distasteful to us - but I do believe the view the Genesis writers ascribed to their creator God, who "saw everything he had made, and, behold, it was very good".

from 'Cherishing the Living Earth'
keynote speech Unitarian General Assembly, Glasgow 1996

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