



Black Lives Matter

On June 12th I sent out this email to all members and attenders of the Meeting House:

"We cannot fail to be aware of the tragic death of George Floyd, and the subsequent outpourings of grief and expressions of pain and anger both in the US and in this country. As a Unitarian community, we are proud of our open-minded and open-hearted attitudes – to be valued to no small degree – BUT my sense is that we could do more."

And I went on to ask how we might make our implicit goodwill more explicit. The Zoom service on 21st June created and conducted by Ali Mercer was very much in the spirit of this and in a discussion afterwards it was agreed that some kind of statement should appear on our website. Tessa Forsdike and Liz Constable have worked hard on drafting a statement – thank you Liz and Tessa! This is still a work in progress and because the website represents the views of the congregation it is vital for everyone to have the opportunity to offer input – please convey reactions/thoughts/suggestions to Tessa *as soon as*

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possible.

During the discussion, a member pointed out that journalism was an area where diversity needed promoting and mentioned The George Viner Memorial Fund. There are also maybe ways in which ISCRE (Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality) can be more actively supported - I'm exploring this. Meanwhile any further suggestions or practical responses to "Black Lives Matter" will be welcomed.

Ann Baepler (Chairperson)

Black Lives Matter Statement

One of our core Unitarian principles is that we are all equal and we do not discriminate on any basis. This stance informs all our actions. We support the Black Lives Matter movement as an extension of our core beliefs.

Historically Unitarians have been involved in the anti-slavery campaigns. Along with many others, prominent US Unitarians such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Lloyd Garrison and Samuel Joseph May were active in the struggle, as well as in the UK Unitarian Minister William Roscoe, William Smith MP (grandfather of Florence Nightingale), Rev. Thomas Cooper (Unitarian Minister at Framlingham) and Clementia Taylor, born in Norfolk, who founded the Ladies London Emancipation Society. Locally in more recent times, the Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House has been supportive of multi-ethnic integration, including offering our Hall as a venue to the newly formed Ipswich Caribbean Steel Band in the early 1950s and from 1980 onwards, hosting the Interfaith Civic

Black Lives Matter Statement cont.

Celebration of Community for several years. In the late 1970's the then Minister Rev. Cliff Reed and the congregation were involved with the original launch and the work of ISCRE (Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality), which continues today.

As Unitarians, we remain vigilant in educating ourselves to question, recognise, and challenge the many forms of prejudice and unconscious biases that we may embody. To unlearn some of our prejudices requires a collective and individual commitment on our parts. We are intentional in amplifying the voices and experiences of all people who have faced racial, economic, or gender-based discrimination, harassment or violence. In committing to lend our support to Black and Ethnic Minority led, or supported, organisations, we understand the need for policy reform and structural changes within our national community to balance and create a more equitable and fair society for all. We commit to learning how to play our parts in the potential changes and transformations that will lead to racial and economic justice in the UK.

As a congregation we are ready to commit to the following –

- To honour the dignity and value of every person, and to work to protect safe, secure and healthy life chances for all.
- To campaign and serve as allies for social justice and anti-racist movements that work towards equality for all people
- To examine our own unconscious prejudices and undertake the self-work to change
- To act with courage in challenging examples of unconscious racism with the goal of raising awareness and changing behaviours.
- To educate ourselves about Black and Ethnic Minority histories, and to support all efforts to deepen understanding of the lives and experiences, past and present, of these groups.

We rely on every member of our congregation to consider their additional individual commitment and to act upon it.

Time to honour Suffolk's forgotten

hero – reprinted from the East Anglian Daily Times - PUBLISHED: 01:01 13 April 2007 UPDATED: 17:01 26 February 2010

On Christmas Day 1817, Suffolk-born Thomas Cooper and his wife Ann arrived at a Jamaican sugar plantation. The Unitarian Minister had been engaged to instruct 400 slaves in the ways of Christianity: perhaps because their owner wanted to improve their spiritual well-being; perhaps because he hoped it would make them more compliant and less likely to rebel.

Trading in slaves had been outlawed by the British Government a decade earlier, but slaves were still more than propping up the economy in the West Indies, the United States and other parts of the Americas.

The Coopers, essentially rural folk, cannot have imagined what they would find at the end of their long journey; but the experience of their three-year stay changed their lives and helped give the campaign for the abolition of slavery a crucial second wind. They were sickened by what they saw, and said so. Cooper would later write: *"Liberty seems evidently to be the natural right of every human being."*

One of his accounts tells of three elderly female slaves being flogged because they were late arriving for work in the field - the whipping taking place just outside the window where the Coopers were having their breakfast. How could anyone not feel like protesting? *"The state of morals and religion is as bad as can . . . be imagined, both among Whites and Blacks,"* he would contend.

Then there was Thomas's own maid-servant, who became pregnant by an overseer - probably raped. Sadly, the baby died. That was viewed as a financial loss for the estate - a potential slave dead - and so money was deducted from the minister's salary! After they returned to Britain, Thomas Cooper published a vivid and powerful eyewitness account of his findings. This caused a sensation and helped rekindle the fire of those hoping to stamp out slavery once and for all.

Slave-owners, he wrote, "flourish by preying on the blood and sinews of that vast host of miserable beings whom the government allows them to hold in oppression". The slave system was *"notoriously most unfriendly to the production of life and . . . tends directly to its destruction"*.

Time to honour Suffolk's forgotten hero cont.

Vested interests hit back, of course. Both Thomas and his wife were lambasted. *"I am become an object of brutal attack for having presumed to tell unpleasant truth in the ears of the oppressors of the unhappy sons of Africa,"* he wrote.

Cooper later gave evidence to Parliament, showing that while the trade might have ended, the lives of slaves in the West Indies were still marked by brutality and depravity.

The Rev Clifford Reed stumbled upon details of Cooper's campaign and believes history ought not to have forgotten him.

The Ipswich Unitarian Minister explains:

"At that time the abolitionist movement had had one big triumph - they'd got rid of the slave trade - but that had been hard work. The idea was being put about that maybe things were better (for the slaves). Some of the abolitionists were getting old, tired, and it may be that something of the steam was beginning to go out of it, even though most of those people knew perfectly well that the real enemy was slavery itself and not just the slave trade.

I'm not going to claim too much for Cooper - I'm not going to say he's another Wilberforce - but I do think he was one of those people who helped re-ignite the cause with his revelations. The slave-owners could no longer pretend 'Oh, things have improved now.'

He did cause a considerable furore in the newspapers and the slave-owners tried to rubbish him. They came down on him and his wife with what you might call character assassination. But Cooper stuck to his guns. He wouldn't shut up and kept on talking about it. Then, when the issue of complete abolition came up and Parliament started having hearings about it, Cooper was one of those called to give evidence - and of course he used his account. In that sense he did play - and I don't know exactly how you'd quantify it - a significant part in bringing about the abolition of slavery itself.

Those who thought the abolition of the slave trade was enough, he proved them wrong. And those who pretended slavery wasn't so bad, he proved them wrong. And for those who knew slavery was the real enemy, he provided new evidence - a new impetus."

Thomas Cooper's willingness to stand up and be counted - along with that of his wife, who must have been a great supporter of his - is even more creditable

in light of his country town heritage.

Husband and wife both hailed from quiet Framlingham. Thomas, born in 1791 or 1792, was apprenticed to tailor John Hart when still quite young, but showed academic talents and was induced by the Unitarian Minister to prepare for the ministry.

As non-conformists were at that time not allowed in the universities, they had founded their own institutions for learning: the Dissenting Academies. Cooper studied at one in East London and then spent three years ministering in Moreton Hampstead in Devon, between Exeter and Dartmoor.

It was then that estate owner Robert Hibbert decided that Christian instruction would benefit both his 400 slaves and himself and chose Cooper to go out to Jamaica. Intriguingly, Hibbert was also a Unitarian.

In those days there were slave-owners in all the denominations, just as there were abolitionists in all the denominations, says Clifford Reed.

"This was an example of a slave-owner appointing a pretty inexperienced young man, as he was then, who went out with the job of preaching to the slaves. Heaven knows what Cooper expected. It would be lovely to know.

He would have known something of the slavery issue, because the abolition of the slave trade had already occurred some years before. He may have thought, as Hibbert himself liked to believe, as did others, that the abolition of the trade had improved the conditions of the slaves in the West Indies - the argument being that, with the slave trade gone, they could no longer replace losses and so they had to treat their slaves better.

They propagated this myth that slaves were really quite content and happy and well looked after. As to whether they believed it, I don't know. I suspect some of them did. Hibbert, although he owned the estate and had been born in Jamaica, lived in this country. He hadn't been to Jamaica in years; he lived in Bedfordshire!

It may be he genuinely believed that by sending Cooper out there he could actually improve things. But when Cooper got there, he found that things had not improved at all for the slaves: that all the brutality and degradation still went on. What he commented was that not only were the slaves themselves brutalised and degraded, the people who

Time to honour Suffolk's forgotten hero – cont.

were in charge of them - the managers and the overseers - were utterly brutalised too. Slavery was, in and of itself, evil. And so he did what he could over there."

The experience, says the Rev Reed, must have also been a terrible challenge to Cooper's faith because he'd been sent by a man of the same denomination and who, by all accounts, was in many ways a very nice and generous man.

"In fairness to him (Hibbert) he had actually reduced the output of his estate by 25%, so not to work them so hard. He wasn't an 'evil' man, but he was a good man involved in an evil trade. But for Cooper it must have been difficult that this man had sent him into a situation of utter horror. He had to deal with that, and it radicalised him in his beliefs."

Unfortunately for the owners, hopes of turning heathen Africans with their own identities into models of honesty, gentleness and patience - whose compliance would be rewarded with eternal life - went badly wrong.

Many owners claimed the Bible encouraged slavery, says the Rev Reed, but when slaves discovered they were not driven cattle but mortal beings, a powerful desire for liberty and justice quickly grew.

"When they read the Bible they found the story of the Exodus" - the fleeing of Hebrew slaves from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. "Also, in the New Testament, they found Paul saying that within the Church there was no such thing as bond and free: you are all one in Christ Jesus. It was saying 'You are all on the same level'; and so it didn't take long for the slaves to work out that Christianity did not support slavery."

Thomas Cooper was sent back to England in 1821: possibly because he was causing a fuss; almost certainly because the Christianity he was promoting might, it was feared, encourage the slaves to rebel. Back in England, his conscience didn't allow him to keep quiet. He wrote his account, first published in the Unitarian journal *The Monthly Repository*. In 1824 it was given wider publicity by being published as a book, *Facts Illustrative of the Condition of the Negro Slaves in Jamaica*, by the Anti-Slavery Society. In 1832 he gave evidence to Parliament as the abolition of slavery in the British Empire grew closer. Clifford Reed believes Thomas Cooper did missionary work around the country before returning to his

hometown of Framlingham in 1854 as Minister of the Unitarian congregation. Ann, the woman who stood by his side during his anti-slavery crusade, had sadly died by this time, though he had a second wife, Phoebe. Cooper was Minister in Framlingham until he retired in 1874, and apparently became friends with the rector, who was initially disapproving of his brand of theology! *"He doesn't appear to have been a particular firebrand when he came back,"* adds the Rev Reed with a smile. Thomas Cooper died in the autumn of 1880, at the age of 88, and is buried in the town. Clifford Reed came across the Thomas Cooper story only when he was doing some research work on one of the old families connected with Framlingham Meeting House. He read a reference that one member of this family, Ann Woolnough, had married a Unitarian minister who had gone to Jamaica. *"This interested me, because my wife is Jamaican and I've been to Jamaica several times. So I thought 'I must follow this up.'"*

He dug and dug, but material wasn't easy to come by. He struck lucky with Dr Williams's Library in London, the top research library on English Protestant nonconformity, which held Cooper's writings. *"One can go there and read the primary sources. It is powerful. It's horrific the things he describes, and he feels it very strongly."*

Unfortunately, Thomas Cooper's profile is low in the wider world. As far as the Rev Reed knows, there's no memorial to the Minister or Ann. Would he like to see a plaque or something similar? *"I think it would be nice. We know he lived in the manse - which is the house next to the Meeting House, though it's not the manse any more - and we have the Meeting House itself; so there are buildings associated with him where such a plaque could go. In this particular year, when we are thinking about slavery, the fact that Framlingham produced a man who did play a significant role in the abolition of slavery, I think Framlingham should be proud of someone like that and remember him."*

History isn't just about dead men; it teaches us lessons about how to live now. In the past, people would preach in favour of slavery. Happily, that's all changed. But, as Clifford Reed says, *"It does remind us always that we have to keep things under review: that we have to examine what we're doing as a society, and are there evil things happening that we are just accepting and not questioning?"*

Virtual PRIDE Parade



Because of the Covid lockdown, the 2020 Suffolk PRIDE Parade is being held virtually – and above is a photo of some of our congregation who gathered while socially distancing as far as possible to film a 20 second contribution to the virtual parade. We blew whistles, waved balloons and banged saucepans – quite fun!

<https://www.facebook.com/NewSuffolkPride/>

Virtual Services in July

5 July – led by Martin Gienke, Bury Unitarians.

12 July – led by Jodi & John Warren. Ipswich Unitarians.

19 July – led by Alan Ruston, Lay Preacher, Watford Unitarian Fellowship

26 July - Flower Communion.

The service to be conducted by Martin Gienke on 5th July is intended as a celebration of sun and summer with readings, music and meditations to lift the hearts and spirits in this strange time. It will include hymns to familiar tunes, but with new words, and music from the Grand Canyon Suite, Cirque du Soleil, and Celtic Mist. Readings range from those by Leonard Mason, Navajo Indians, Hako Ceremony to contemporary literature.

During this time of lockdown we have been pleased to welcome extra people (and animals) to our services – including adults who attended our Sunday School as children; previous members now living in the US and Canada and new visitors – as well as Robert and Liz's cats and Ali's dogs ... all are welcome!

Birthdays in July

Happy birthday to Angus Hamilton on 1st; Pipiri Hudson on 6th; Beatrix Stevens on 15th; Edmund Reed on 28th and special happy wishes to Cherrie Wilkinson who will be celebrating a milestone birthday on 2nd.

Volunteer for Ipswich Museums to record your experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ipswich Museums look after objects that tell the story of thousands of years of people living, working and playing. We need your help in recording the COVID-19 pandemic. We want to know how people's lives have changed, what they're thinking and what objects they'd show people to explain how they lived through this time.

They might choose to record by taking photos on their phone, creating a scrapbook, recording a diary, creating crafts, paintings, drawings, videos, song writing... and anything else you can think of! You could record every day, once a week or just on important days.

People could volunteer as a group or by themselves. We want to hear from shopkeepers, families, students, medical professionals, delivery drivers, shop workers, teachers, all keyworkers, disabled people, LGBTQ+ people, people experiencing homelessness, people living in multigenerational households, people with mental health difficulties, refugees, people from migrant communities, people with long-term health problems, people who have been furloughed, farmer workers, young people, older people, people who have had major life events changed, kids, grown-ups, parents and you.

To get involved people can contact me directly (Eleanor.root@colchester,

WhatsApp/text/phone 07971 096011) or fill in their details on our website -

<https://cimuseums.org.uk/yourstories/>

Meeting House Restoration Update

Work has continued during June on the Restoration of our Meeting House and progress has been made especially on the East wall, where all the render has been stripped, the timber repairs and diagonal metal strips fixed, the indumission strip of fire resistant plastic has been installed above the top windows to protect the roof and three quarters of the sheep's wool insulation has been installed. Part of the insulation of the topmost part of the roof (inaccessible except through the walls) has been fitted.

On the South side the repairs have proved more problematic as the wall curves and is irregular in form. However all the red battening is almost finished, the timber repairs done with Douglas Fir and 2 of the new windows have been fitted (not yet the glass). A new bevel has been added to the plinth to allow water to run away and new lead flashing has also been fitted. On the West elevation all the render has been stripped and it is being surveyed to decide which timbers will need replacing.



Looking through the South wall into the interior of the Meeting House

Positive thoughts

We all send our good wishes and hold Mark Hawes in our thoughts with positivity as he heals from the consequences of past necessary treatment.

We also send good wishes to his family and to Sandra and Malcom Hawes.

Book Group

Our next meeting is on Thursday 2nd July at 7pm to discuss a book suggested by Morag Blue – ‘*Larchfield*’ by Polly Clark. We will be holding the meeting online as before and all are welcome to join us ... even if they haven't finished reading the book! If you would like to be included on the Zoom invitation, please let Riena Jackson know - mjack76748@aol.com

Poetry Group

Our next poetry session will be on Thursday 30th July. Our chosen poet is the African American poet Rita Dove.

For the June meeting we read and discussed poems by Edward Thomas and below is one that made a big impression on all of us. He wrote it shortly before leaving for France to fight and die in the Great War –

And you, Helen

And you, Helen, what should I give you?
So many things I would give you
Had I an infinite great store
Offered me and I stood before
To choose. I would give you youth,
All kinds of loveliness and truth,
A clear eye as good as mine,
Lands, waters, flowers, wine,
As many children as your heart
Might wish for, a far better art
Than mine can be, all you have lost
Upon the travelling waters tossed,
Or given to me. If I could choose
Freely in that great treasure-house
Anything from any shelf,
I would give you back yourself,
And power to discriminate
What you want and want it not too late,
Many fair days free from care
And heart to enjoy both foul and fair,
And myself, too, if I could find
Where it lay hidden and it proved kind.

Tools with a Mission -

Clearing out your garden shed or workshop?
you can still contact your local collector using our
'Find a Collector' webpage –
www.twam.uk/findcollector

Address from Dan Cohen – invited to give an address to his Unitarian congregation in the US, Dan has adapted it to share with us -

Something wonderful happened when one evening a Transcendentalist fell asleep and awakened the next morning as a Unitarian...

I have never been particularly attracted to dogma-based religious beliefs because I have always been driven to question the dogmas. I don't generally accept things at face value, am always looking for the exceptions to rules and generally disregard traditions that never made sense to me or were, at the very least, overly tired and perhaps no longer relevant.

As Yoda, the Star Wars iconic Grand Master of the Jedi, might have said about me, "a born-again iconoclast..., you are!"

I was raised in a Jewish family. Though I enjoyed many of the traditions of Judaism, the actual beliefs never really strongly resonated with me, and I never really felt myself to be a part of a religious community; a community of deep and lasting traditions for sure, but a community encompassing a particular belief system..., well, not so much. After my Bar Mitzvah, the coming of age ceremony for Jewish boys at the time of their 13th birthday, I rarely attended synagogue, and I drifted away...

During my medical training in Boston, I was strongly influenced by mentors who encouraged me to look at clinical problems, and by extension a more inclusive range of life's issues..., intellectually. By this I mean that I was trained to look at clinical problems from at least three or four directions, sort of like points on the compass – harkening to spiritual traditions of many pagan cultures – in order to more fully understand the complexities, the benefits, and what scared me most importantly, the risks to my patients. I was rigorously mentored to transcend unidirectional or bi-directional thinking in order to consider the expanded range of clinical diagnostic possibilities and the probabilities of each of these possibilities, in a data-driven universe.

At this point most of you are probably asking yourselves, "What is Dan going on about? What does this have to do with Transcendentalism and Unitarianism?" Well..., just hold on please.

The American Transcendentalist movement originated in the early 19th Century and was a philosophical approach to theology that transcended the traditional dogmatic dictates of Christianity. Transcendentalism encouraged self-reliance and acceptance of perspectives of many individuals, apart from those of the mainstream clergy, that added further texture to the basic elements of theisms. Cherishing idealism, the inherent goodness of people, and an examination and appreciation of the elements and rhythms of nature, became fundamental to this philosophy, as did the role of independent thinking. These concepts stood in sharp contrast to the more dogma-driven beliefs and parochial dictates of traditional Christian clergy and constituted the foundational seeds planted and fertilized in the rocky soil of New England; specifically, and most prominently, in Massachusetts.

Transcendentalists were attuned to look for evidence of divinity in nature, in humanity and in individual human behavior. For many transcendentalists, divinity was not solely bestowed by God, but rather also arose from within each individual, encompassing elements of intuition and self-defined and sustained personal spirituality. Divinity was pervasive in nature and in all of humanity and was not limited by externally imposed constraints.

The transcendentalists searched for truths. Whereas some have written that empiricism, knowledge derived from the powers of observation and sense experiences, was discounted by the transcendentalists, in my view that is a shortsighted conclusion, likely based upon 19th century limitations on the acceptance of emerging scientific methodologies that were based upon directed observation and hypothesis-based experimentation. Descriptive biology and mathematics were notable exceptions, though Charles Darwin was originally chastised, despite the profound evidence of natural selection on the islands of the Galapagos archipelago; and Isaac Newton, was viewed with suspicion as a mystic. Both Darwin and Newton were English Unitarians..., by the way.

Interestingly, transcendentalists were often Congregationalists, members of independent, often democratically governed, churches – sound familiar? Ultimately, transcendentalists incorporated into their philosophy lessons arising from the 18th century "Age of Enlightenment" when the natural, physical and

Address from Dan Cohen – cont..

biological sciences began to flourish and political discourse also broadened toward more discerning multifaceted perspectives, often resulting in elements of friction with the more limited and constrained theological Christian explanations for life, understandings about God and parochially dictated parameters for human behavior and human associations.

The transcendentalists did not reject all beliefs encompassed in Christianity's dogmas, but rather held views that transcended these beliefs, to be more inclusive of what nature, rationalism and enlightenment had to offer. They offered alternatives to rigid Christian dogma with a philosophy that encouraged questioning and personal searches for truth and wisdom. Humans and human experiences were at least as important, and possibly more important than many, but by no means all, teachings of Christianity.

Additionally, and perhaps most importantly of all, transcendentalists were also social reformers, supporting education for all, women's and workers' rights and abolition. Fundamentally, they had strong beliefs in the goodness and resilience of humanity and the capacity of individuals to transcend many of life's circumstances and challenges, fostering growth and well-being apart from strict traditional religious influences.

Quintessentially, transcendentalists asked questions, lots of questions, challenging the more limited messaging of Christian clergy. Do not Unitarians mistrust the relevance of dogmas and ask questions?

When I lived in Boston, my apartment was just down the street from the First Church, Unitarian Universalist, on Marlborough St and a few blocks from the Arlington Street Unitarian Church just across from the Boston Public Garden and, as an aside for those of you who know Boston, around the corner from the Bull and Finch pub, the visual springboard for the television show *Cheers*..., "where everyone knows your name!"

Immersing myself in the history of New England, I was drawn to an examination of the America transcendentalist movement. I read much of what

Emerson and Thoreau had written, and bits and pieces of other transcendentalists also, Alcott and Channing for example, and spent many afternoons and evenings in Concord, the literary epicenter of 19th century American transcendentalism, and at Walden Pond, a serene place for contemplation, examination of nature, of self and self-reliance and spirituality..., most notably for Henry David Thoreau.

After completing my medical training, my interests in transcendentalism lay dormant as my professional career took me far away from Boston, where I had intellectually come of age. It was not until many years later, after I met my wife Suzanne, that I had my first real taste of Unitarianism and began to rethink the connections with transcendentalism. I felt as if I had found some long-lost roots, that had never fully developed their deeper taps, and I became comforted by the fellowship and the eclectic membership that flowed from this liberal theological community.

Walking hand in hand with Suzanne I began a journey toward Unitarianism, our liberal theological tradition, fostering not just tolerance of diversity – a concept that often sorely misses the point in my view – but, more importantly, fostering acceptance of diversity and the encouragement of individuals to explore and question. It is not surprising that I found a home in Unitarianism because my career has been devoted to helping others without bias or prejudice, and with an intellectual curiosity built upon a healthy, questioning skepticism, the "four-points-to-the-compass" paradigm.

Suzanne and I went to Boston in December 2006, and Suzanne performed a contemplative spiritual ceremony at the water's edge of Walden Pond on a crisp and frosty winter solstice evening under a Maxfield Parrish darkening bluish-black sky at twilight, with moon aglow and stars bursting forth. I knew at that moment I was hooked... Thoreau's ghost was surely watching and probably joyously laughing..., assuming there are such things as ghosts. We attended a service at the First Church two days later.

In my view, Unitarianism is not a religion in the traditional sense but more of a theological philosophy, a way of looking at the world and spirituality that stresses individualism and viewpoints apart from

Address from Dan Cohen – cont..

dogma. From my perspective, a religion is something that is more defined and based upon a set of beliefs and differing between religions. One cannot believe in Christianity and also believe in Hinduism or Judaism or “whateverism.”

Unitarianism encourages the intellectual pursuit of truth that includes, subject to each individual’s perspective and abilities, an examination of the paradigms of various religions. In Unitarianism, my views become more paramount, and how I interpret things is what matters most to me, not what I am told to believe. I am encouraged to examine religion and faith from multiple perspectives, like the four points of the compass, to draw my own conclusions and then generate the next set of questions to explore on my personal journey. I own my own spirituality and each of you owns your own spirituality.

The Unitarian’s journey is not built on a foundation of blind faith, but rather a set of guiding principles. In America, the Unitarians have adopted seven principles that provide the substrate for what we believe. The fourth principle – “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning” – and the seventh principle – “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” – are the closest links to what the 19th century transcendentalists believed in, what set them apart from the traditional churches of the day and what distinguishes, and continues to set apart, Unitarians from other religious communities today.

So, just what is our Unitarian faith, or asked another way, just what do Unitarians believe in, and do we all believe in the same things?

I used to maintain that there is no specific Unitarian “faith” but now, presumably wiser, I think that was incorrect. One might reasonably posit that Unitarian faith means faith in one’s self-reliance, and in one’s intimate and unique judgements, and in humanity more broadly, and in the beauty of nature, and in the waxing waning rhythms of the seasons, and in reason, and in objectivity, and in science, and in charity, and in social justice, tolerance and more importantly acceptance of diversity, and in working to reverse global warming and climate change, and in intellectual

examination, and in human resilience, and in empathy, and in compassion, and in unique spiritual exploration..., perhaps even spiritual explosions and even fireworks, and for many -- in God or Gods in whatever manifestations may suit each individual’s purpose under heaven; all of these beliefs mixed up together like a higgledy-piggledy alphabet noodle soup. Makes me hungry just thinking about it.

If that is the Unitarian faith, then I can adhere to that faith. I believe in these things, not just as rights but also as responsibilities!

William Ellery Channing, the early 19th century American transcendentalist and Unitarian minister wrote, “To live content with small means; to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion; to be worthy; to listen to stars and birds, babes and sages, with open heart; to study hard; to think quietly, act frankly, talk gently, await occasions, hurry never; in a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common -- this is my symphony.” (abridged quote)

Unitarians are the modern-day transcendentalists, and we should look back with some pride on what our forebearers taught us. We must continue to walk in their footsteps, and yet we must, most importantly, cast new pathways for the future and, to expand on Robert Frost’s celebrated sentiment, perhaps take “the roads less traveled by” and that may ultimately make all the difference.

Shalom Aleichem, may peace be in your hearts. Share your love with all!

By Dan Cohen



Meeting House reflection in the Willis Faber glass building

Benjamin Lay – his story

For those who despair at the treatment of black people, I bring you a positive story of one of the greatest sons of Colchester, the abolitionist Benjamin Lay. Benjamin Lay? No? Have you heard of William Wilberforce?

It is a pretty safe bet that for every 1,000 people who know of William Wilberforce, no more than the odd one might have heard of Benjamin Lay. In many ways this is understandable enough, but if anyone deserves to be remembered as one of Colchester's greatest sons, it is the gloriously improbable and largely forgotten (at least in his home town) Quaker who became one of the greatest figures in the world in the abolition of the slave trade.

He was born in Copford in 1682, to second-generation Quaker parents. He was a hunchback with a projecting chest, and his arms were as long as his legs and so spindly that they could barely support his weight, in fact legs which might put John Cooper Clarke himself to blame.

He was a strict vegetarian; he ate only fruits, vegetables, and honey, and drank only milk and water. He did not believe that humans were superior to non-human animals and created his own clothes to boycott the slave-labour industry. He would not wear anything, nor eat anything, made from the loss of animal life or provided by any degree by slave labour. He might have been a Quaker, but as the Meeting very quickly discovered he was no quiet meek Quaker, but quick in tongue and harsh in criticism of the other members for their unfair commercial dealings and power seeking. He made it his business, his vocation, to be a thorn in the sides of his 18th-century brethren. They put up with him for quite a while, endlessly, and hopelessly, trying to shut up or kick out their most violent and exhibitionist critic. but eventually his sheer rudeness and forthright words forced them to ban him from attending Meetings. He was apprenticed first to his uncle, a glover with a shop in Colchester High Street, but he didn't seem to last very long, presumably fell out with him, and went

to work instead for another uncle in a farm near Colchester where again he didn't last long, and instead went to sea for ten years as a common sailor - goodness only knows how he fared – then improbably found a wife, Sarah Smith, as small and deformed as he was and pitched up in Barbados where he planned to open a general store. But what he saw there horrified him: everywhere he looked he saw slaves starved to death, he saw them beaten to death and tortured to death, and he was horrified. He first began advocating for the abolition of slavery when he saw an enslaved man commit suicide rather than be hit again by his owner. His passionate enmity of slavery was partially fuelled by his Quaker beliefs. Lay made several dramatic demonstrations against the practice. He once stood outside a Quaker meeting in winter with no coat and at least one foot bare and in the snow. When passers-by expressed concern for his health, he said that slaves were made to work outdoors in winter dressed as he was.

Unable to stand it any longer he set forth for Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly love and made himself known to the local Quakers there, who he persuaded to write to Colchester for the necessary reference. For some reason they gave him one and he set about raising Cain with them once he had discovered to his horror that most of them were slave owners. For the next 25 years he waged a virtual one-man guerrilla campaign against the city's Quaker 'apostates', terrorising them in their meeting houses and savaging them in print with a prophetic fury that harked back to the first heady days of the Commonwealth.

He had a propensity for theatrical tricks to drive his points home. Once he entered the Meeting for worship dressed as a soldier with a sword. Denouncing the evils of slavery, he pierced his Bible with his sword. Concealed in his Bible was a bladder filled with red juice that splattered onto Friends sitting near him, symbolizing the blood on Quakers' hands for not standing firm against slavery. On another occasion he kidnapped the child of one of the more prominent Quakers and hid him at home for two days. When he judged the mother was sufficiently distressed and agitated he returned the child saying *"There you are madam, now you know how a negro women feels when her child is taken from her"*

They soon followed the example of Colchester and ejected him from their society, which in Pennsylvania,

Benjamin Lay – his story – cont.

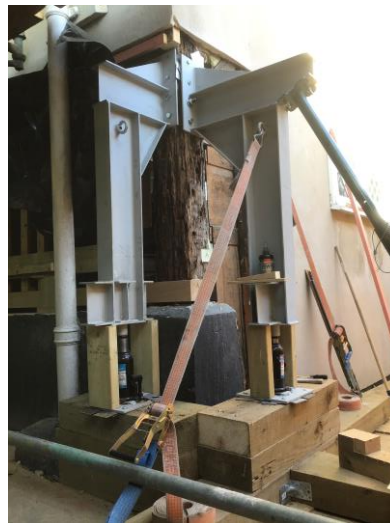


a state founded by and run by the Quakers meant virtual exclusion from society: But he met and befriended someone incredibly important – Benjamin Franklin, a future Founding Father of the USA, who would publish Lay's book - All Slave-Keepers That Keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates. When he was first invited to tea, he enquired whether the person who served it was a slave or a free man, saying that if he was a slave he would be out of the door quick sharp, but finding him to be free invited him to sit with them and eat the sandwiches. After the death of his wife, Lay went to live in a simple cave, with a roof of evergreen and an extensive library. Lay's favourite meal was *"turnips boiled, and afterwards roasted"*, while his drink of choice was *"pure water"*. He made his own clothes from flax to avoid the exploitation of animals - he would not even use the wool of sheep. Lay's passionate fight against slavery broadened into a democratic and egalitarian opposition to exploitation — animal, human, environmental — in all its forms. Benjamin may have been the most radical person on the planet. His picture is everywhere in Philadelphia. In 1758, the year before Lay died aged 77, the Philadelphia Quakers ruled they must no longer take part in the slave trade The Quakers would go on to be at the forefront of the campaign against slavery, which would ultimately be abolished in the US in 1865. He was buried in an unmarked grave next to his wife. Weirdly, considering that he eschewed worldly goods he left 40 lbs of whalebone and 12000 pins. Equally curiously, before he left for America he had donated £218/6s- a huge sum- to Colchester Quakers in trust for the poor of Colchester. That trust cannot

be traced today, it was probably rolled up in the '60s. Benjamin Lay. Colchester's greatest son perhaps? He helped us to understand what was thinkable and what was politically and morally possible in the first half of the 18th century — and what may be possible now.

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Structural work on the Meeting House

Disclaimer –

We welcome contributions from all members and friends of our congregation. Views expressed in the articles are those of the individual and not necessarily those of our congregation or of our Unitarian community

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Thought for the month

Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.

- Nelson Mandela