

BODY AND SPIRIT

Based on the service led by Alastair Moodie at Glasgow Unitarian Church on 19th May

“The truth is not just within me, it is also all around me; it is in all other people as well, just as much as it is in me, and maybe some truth can only be revealed in relationship and through dialogue. That is why we need community. As a Unitarian I have an obligation to listen to my inner self, the voice of God within me, and also to listen to the voice of God in all other people. I have to listen to the voice of God speaking in other people in my congregation as well as all people I come across in my life. I am an individual-in-community, and it is only by respecting both poles of individuality and community that I can form a genuine truth-seeking, life-giving faith.” Stephen Lingwood, Unitarian Minister

New Age literature is often found in bookshops in the section called Mind Body Spirit. *Psyche* is a Greek word meaning mind or soul. *Soma* is a Greek word meaning body or material being. Thus we get the word psychosomatic to refer to the interrelationship between mind and body. *Pneuma* is the Greek word for spirit, the supra-personal, or the divine spirit. It can also refer to the life spirit or the breath of life or energy. There can also be a sense of what gives meaning or of what is experienced in the mind and the body.

A lot of people, including most mental health professionals, struggle to answer the questions: What is the mind and what is the relationship of the mind (psyche) to the brain (soma)?

We are told that the brain contains 100 billion neurons and the number of connections between the neurons is incalculable. The brain operates by electrochemical energy that flows ceaselessly as long as there is a spark of life. The brain extends throughout the whole body by virtue of the nervous system. Through the nervous system the body experiences and interacts with what is outside the body: its total environment – physical, social, relational, cultural, informational, educational and occupational. There is a continuous two-way flow between what is inside the person and what is outside the person including other people.

Dr Dan Siegel has described how the mind regulates the flow of energy and information and how the mind is also shaped by the information from the nervous system and by the experience of the other in relationship. The mind is a self organising process that can change the structure of the brain itself. For example, it has been proved by brain scanning that effective psychotherapy, working with the therapeutic relationship, can change the pattern of brain activity. Such is the electrochemical dynamism of the brain that it is continuously changing in response to lived experience, both internal and external. Behaviour is driven by these brain patterns. All the time we are adapting to our environment and we are functioning effectively when we experience outcomes that satisfy our needs well enough.

One way of describing this is to say that we are conducting countless transactions with our environment and in particular with our social and relational environment. It is a continuous process of give-and-take because we are so interdependent. More than that, I take into myself what I experience from outside myself and what I taken becomes part of me as much as what I eat and drink. Thus there is no absolute separation between my self and your self. Insofar as we transact with one another, both verbally and nonverbally, you become part of me and I become part of you, both positively and negatively. We belong together, you and I, as members of "we".

A healthy system is an open system that changes and adapts in response to the flow of information, emotional energy, and total experience. We human beings are gifted with a capacity for awareness and reflection, for learning and changing, all in response to the real lived experience. For example, we may decide that a habitual pattern of behaviour is not serving us well enough or indeed may be causing us problems and difficulties. After reflection we may decide to modify our behaviour and to look for ways to reinforce that change, including the help of others.

It is now well established that the brain is incredibly social. It evolved to be interconnected. The truth human genius is our capacity for cooperation, including the generous sharing of intellectual property. We can only truly gain by making intellectual property everybody's property. I am referring here primarily to scientific knowledge.

Dan Siegel suggests that personal insight about my past, present and future constitutes a mindsight map of "me". Empathy, and understanding of what's going on inside you, constitutes a mindsight map of "you". Morality, a focus on the greater good, requires a mindsight map of "me", "you" and "we"- a sense of the right thing to do on this planet when I am "we".

That is the moral imperative: a sense of identity as WE, as an interdependent community, so that attitudes and actions, choices and behaviours, are modified on the basis of what is right and good for all.

I see a link here with Jesus and the golden rule. Jesus is a man who represents the divinity of each and every human being and the ethic of unconditional love among us.

In some religions there is a negative version of the golden rule. In other words, it is the precept not to do to others what you would wish others not to do to you. The Christian version is much more positive and active and it has inspired a huge amount of humanitarian service. Jesus said, "Do to others what you would wish them to do to you." In other words, behave towards others as you want them to behave towards you, for example, with respect, care, thoughtfulness and understanding. In the Jesus also said, "Love one another as I have loved you." He also said, "Serve one another, as I have served you."

Within traditional Christianity there has been a Gnostic influence that deemed the soul and matters spiritual as good and the body and all natural matters as corrupted with evil. Therefore the focus of religion was on saving the soul, even at the cost of inflicting suffering on the body. From that perspective our life on Earth is simply our preparation and our testing for the next life. The natural world was valued as no more than a means to an end. There are fundamentalists, both Christian and Moslem, who continue to believe this. But the consequences, actual and potential, of such bad theology are destructive, inhumane, and ultimately catastrophic.

Unitarianism inherited the Protestant tradition that emphasised the individual conscience and the individual responsibility for the fate of his or her immortal soul. Nevertheless, a person's religion or spiritual life was practised primarily within a faith community, a parish church or the local congregation. With the decline of institutional religion, the care of the soul has become a matter for individual choice and often a matter of neglect.

In patterns of living, particularly in our cities and towns, the trend is towards more people living singly. Recently it was reported that in Glasgow as many as 42% of all households comprise of one person. People who live alone are not necessarily lonely, and studies suggest that a lot of people are affiliated to one or more formal or informal groups. Yet modern life has become more atomised and people bemoan the lack of a stronger sense of community.

It seems obvious that the majority of people are not attracted to joining congregations. Among the mainstream churches declining membership has resulted in smaller congregations with possibly a greater sense of togetherness. You can get to know one another far more readily in a group of 50 people than in a gathering of 500 people. But if the 50 or fewer persist with the old practices that once worked for 500, the form of church service, the few scattered among too many pews, the impersonal worship, then the prospects for survival are not good.

For a small religious or spiritual community to thrive there needs to be enough vitality and a willingness to experiment and change. It means developing new ways to communicate, for example, by the use of the Internet. We have done well here to develop a website which has been successful in attracting some interest. But we need to build on that experience and strive to improve and extend what we have to offer.

The global community cries out for the fulfilment of a vision of minds, bodies, and spirits living in harmony, peace and justice with an equal sharing of the Earth's resources and an equal sacrifice for the sake of future generations. Policies and behaviours that frustrate this ecological and humanitarian vision must be challenged at every opportunity.

Last week I made a small gesture. I have some shares in Standard Life, the insurance and investment company, because I held an endowment policy at the time of demutualisation. I decided to exercise my right to attend the company's annual general meeting in Edinburgh. The following day the Herald reported that a shareholder had quizzed the Chief Executive about his enormous bonus. The question to the Chief Executive was this: "But for the incentive of £5 million in bonuses what would you **not** have done for the company during the past 12 months for your huge salary of £775,000?" There was no answer.

The same shareholder questioned the company chairman about his complacency and his lack of concern for the 600,000 customers who have had their bonus cut to 0.25%. He pointed out that many of these long-term savers will be unable to pay off their mortgages and are at risk of losing their homes. The chairman denied complacency but he offered no comfort to those customers. I am the shareholder who asked these questions in an attempt to hold these powerful people to account.

The spiritual community needs prophets who will discern the signs of the times and apply transcendent values and principles that present an alternative set of priorities to those pursued by the rich and powerful. I suggest that we must be willing to be controversial and to take a stand in the public square.

During the run-up to next year's unprecedented referendum on Scottish independence there is a growing ferment of activity at the grassroots among mainly younger adults who seek a new vision for the future of Scotland both in society at large and also among the many diverse communities to which they belong

I am experiencing among these activists a deep concern for the spiritual and moral poverty of our society that is dominated by consumerism, greed, selfishness and growing inequality. They are asking searching questions and thinking for themselves; surely we in the Unitarian community should welcome that. Indeed, as a liberal, inclusive, non-dogmatic, spiritual society, we could be in the vanguard of a growing movement.

There is a power in thinking clearly, in seeking new solutions, in challenging the status quo, in practising deep democracy, and in showing moral courage. If we dare to fulfil our prophetic calling, we can with others make a difference and contribute to making a better world.