

WEEKEND GREETINGS FROM EMMANUEL ROAD, 2020

Posted on May 30, 2020 by Andrew Brown



White rose in the garden of the Cambridge Unitarian Church

Greetings to you all once again. As always, I hope that you have got through another week of the lockdown in reasonable enough shape.

During the week two things happened which have generated the content of this week's message and encouragement to thought. The first was a good question posed to me by a member of the

congregation about the kind of online activities (services/conversations etc.) [a church such as our own](#) is/might eventually offer if we continue to be unable to meet again in person soon. The second is the ongoing assault on both truth and democracy that is now openly being waged both here in the UK and in the US under the cover of the COVID-19 epidemic.

As usual, I'd value your thoughts and comments on these matters either by phone, email or, of course, via the comments section below.

Let me start with online services.

The reason for so far only offering a recording of our church's service of mindful meditation service ([links available here](#) and again below) is because it offers an appropriate holding position which balances gently and, to my mind, appropriately, the need many of us have for a time of spiritual/religious sustenance/quiet as well the need to be reminded (again gently) of the constant need to engage (as individuals and as a church) in acts of radical social justice - acts which are always needed but which are clearly going to be needed in spades as this COVID-19 event continues to unfold. There remains a question of whether this service should also now be offered on Zoom as a live, once a week, event? Any thoughts on this?

So far there has been from us no online/pre-recorded morning type service on offer. This is because [our own morning service](#) is a much, much more problematic affair. For starters its reliance on hymns and music, as well as an eighteen minute long address which requires conversation (both in the service and afterwards in coffee and around the lunch table) to round it out properly, all serve to make doing this online next to impossible and which simply wouldn't work in the effective way it did when we could meet face to face over the course of a number of hours. I need to add that neither will it work well when we can return to meeting in person because of the social distancing restrictions we will have to implement. To get a proper sense of why I say this may I strongly encourage you all to read the excellent articulation of how things are likely to be for churches in the near (and perhaps even longer term) future that is to be found in the United Reformed Church's new document *Ready for the new normal: A discussion paper for a pandemic recovery and resumption plan*. It sometimes speaks in religious terms we would not use, but everywhere the document is filled with important thoughts/insights/suggestions that are highly relevant to all churches, such as our own, who are part of the Protestant tradition.

You can read the document at the following link:

<<https://urc.org.uk/images/Communications/New-Normal-2020.pdf>>

However, there's another reason for not merely reproducing what we already do in the morning (or even something a little bit like it) that is intimately related to the current COVID-19 event.

In the most recent issue of *The Hedgehog Review*

<<https://hedgehogreview.com/blog/thr/posts/radical-hope-amid-catastrophe>> [Vafa Ghazavi](#), a doctoral candidate and John Monash Scholar at Balliol College and lecturer in politics at Pembroke College, University of Oxford, writes an excellent and insightful piece drawing on Jonathan Lear's book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Harvard University Press, 2006). You may recall I've given a few addresses myself drawing on this book, most recently, for example, *After this, nothing happened*. What Vladislav Surkov's dark arts can teach us about Black, or Holy Saturday . <<https://andrewjbrown.blogspot.com/2018/03/after-this-nothing-happenedwhat.html>> (This Holy Week address from 2018 was a warning about what seemed to me to be threatening to come to pass in our own democracy. It brings me absolutely no pleasure at all this week to have turned out to be fairly close to the mark.)

Anyway, Ghazavi's basic question is: *What happens to a culture's social order and the beliefs that sustain it, in the face of a microscopic enemy that has little regard for borders, power, class, or celebrity?*

Here are two paragraphs from the beginning of the essay which raise the question I want to raise here:

A way of life is teetering on the brink. We can't say yet what the extent of the transformation will be but it will reach into every aspect of human relations: care, parenting, work, schooling, production, consumption. No social context is exempt: neighbourhoods, workplaces, churches, the public sphere, cities, countries, geopolitics. As the crisis spreads to low-income countries with less capacity to respond either on the health or economic front, the global dimensions will become more salient.

When a collective culture is threatened with collapse, so are the reference points for defining a good or morally excellent life. Though harder to discern than the material losses, the present upheaval will imprint itself on the life of the mind and that of the soul. It is not just that some acts will cease to be possible during this interregnum but that their meaning for us might radically change even once it is over.

Please do take time to read Ghazavi's piece for he says some very important things.

<<https://hedgehogreview.com/blog/thr/posts/radical-hope-amid-catastrophe> >

We are all, and I mean all, in this situation and this means any new online service/s we think about providing must acknowledge the difficult truth that, in only ten short weeks, the reference points for defining a good or morally excellent life have gone for us. I am currently trying to think about ways to frame this insight that can be properly explored by us online (as this lockdown may go off/on for a long time yet) but which will also continue to work when we can meet together face to face once again. But it's not easy to do because, as Ghazavi notes, 'we can't say yet what the extent of the transformation [of our society, politics, religion etc.] will be.' It will take time and that requires from us both radical hope and radical patience – one good way to practise such a patience that we can offer is through the current service of mindful meditation even though it, too, may turn out only to be a necessary holding position to be let go at the right time. Let's not rush to premature solutions that may well merely turn out to be reinforcing our old, problematic ways of being. As the old saying I learnt as a child goes, 'slowly, slowly catchee monkey.' Please let us all use some of our lockdown time to reflect and think deeply about these things without the pressure of coming to immediate solutions. The service of mindful meditation can help hold open this critical, patient space for us.

So, although inbetween regularly contacting everyone in our community I am thinking a great deal about this matter, I hope you can see why my preference is to stick for a while with offering the mindful meditation service either in its current recorded form or, if this is what you might like, in a live form that can end with its own time of conversation, as did the service BC (Before COVID). It has the singular and excellent benefit of providing us with genuine continuity with our past way of doing things but does it, I think, in a way which keeps things open for whatever it is we will (must) become. Trying to reproduce the

old morning service in any fashion (as are many churches) will, I fear, simply box us into old problematic (BC) habits and could cause us to lose this unique, once in a lifetime opportunity truly to affect radical change in the way we do church in the future.

As I begin to draw to a close please let me thank you again for all your conversations with me via email and/or phone about the above matters and much else. Do also remember I'd genuinely be glad to hear your own thoughts on the matters outlined and that you can be in touch with me at any time if you fancy/need to shoot the breeze in a more general way about life, the universe and everything –good or bad.

Lastly, I must offer my apologies for not being able to join you at the *Time of Conversation* events between 11.30 and 12.30 on Sundays. Most of you won't know this but on Sunday mornings since the lockdown began I've been going with Jenny and my shopping trolley on a trip to a supermarket to help her get in a single, basic, weekly shop so she doesn't need to make repeated, much more risky, visits to small local convenience stores. This means, alas, that I cannot join you at that time on a Sunday but I'm pleased that some of you were able to say hello to Jenny last week when I used my mobile phone to join for a few minutes at the beginning of your meeting whilst we were sitting on a bench on Midsummer Common. Whilst I was away in London the truly wonderful [Debby Lauder from Row](#) took on this important job, something for which I, and I imagine all of you, are profoundly grateful. Anyway, be assured, Jenny and I are thinking fondly of you all as we wend our very slow, but still merry way through the supermarket aisles and then back home along the river laden with good provisions in the form of both food and the fruits of our own conversation . . .

If you wish to join the *Time of Conversation* at 11.30am on Sundays up to and including Sunday 28th June please visit the church contact page and send a message to the secretary (Brendan Boyle) who 'll be happy to provide you with the necessary link and password.

[CHURCH CONTACT PAGE](#)

Heartfelt thanks to Andrew and Brendan for organising this weekly event. Why not try doing the mindful meditation before joining in? I do realise it's not quite Sunday morning as we once knew it but, as my words above suggest, I think it is a good and healthy holding position to practise for a while as we begin to think together more deeply about how to move

appropriately into a new, necessary and very different way of doing things.

Here are the links again to the service:

[Order of service for the Evening Service of Mindful Meditation: The Mystery and Miracle of Life”](#)

[MP3 of the Evening Service of Mindful Meditation](#)

And now, for the delectation of your eyes, I leave you with a few attached photos of some of the flowers currently blooming in the church and manse gardens. Just click on a photo to enlarge it. Enjoy!

Love and best wishes as always,

Andrew





















Add caption