

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 119, July 2015

Conference Registration Issue

The Climate Change Encyclical

A MORAL PROBLEM DEMANDS A MORAL SOLUTION

Pope Francis's encyclical on climate change, *Laudato Si'*, [from *Laudato Si', mi' Signore*: "Praise be to you, my Lord"] is the most astonishing, and perhaps the most ambitious, papal document of the past 100 years since it is addressed not just to Catholics, or Christians, but to everyone on Earth.

It sets out a programme for change that is rooted in human needs, but it makes the radical claim that these needs are not primarily greedy and selfish ones.



We need nature, he says, and we need each other. Our need for mutuality, and for giving, is just as real as the selfish aspects of our characters. The care of nature and the care of the poor are aspects of the same ethical commandment, and if we neglect

either one we cannot find peace. **He launches a ferocious attack on what he sees as the false and treacherous appetites of capitalism and on the consumerist view of human nature.** For Francis, there is a vital distinction between human needs, limited but non-negotiable, and appetites, which are potentially unlimited. **The poor, he says, have their needs denied, while the rich have their appetites indulged.** The environmental crisis links these two aspects of the problem.

This criticism attacks both kinds of defenders of the present world order: the deniers and the

optimists. The document is unequivocal in backing the scientific consensus that anthropogenic global warming is a clear and present danger. It blasts the use of fossil fuels and demands that these be phased out in favour of renewable energy. But it is also explicitly opposed to the idea that we can rely on purely technological solutions to ecological problems. **There will never be a technological fix for the problem of unrestrained appetite, the pope claims, because this is a moral problem, which demands a moral solution, a turn away from the intoxications of consumerism.**

We possess the power to destroy the planet and most of the multicellular life on it, but the balance of terror no longer exists in the same form as it did when the use of nuclear weapons would be punished by nuclear retaliation: the poor world will now pay for the crimes of the rich, and our children and grandchildren must pay for their parents' self-indulgence. This is what he means by an "ecological debt". The sometimes apocalyptic tone, with the threats of resource wars as well as ecological catastrophe, arises from the sense that this debt must at some time be terribly repaid.

The pope is scathing, and rightly so, about the lack of action that followed high-minded declarations in the past. Why should this time be different? The answer is that we cannot go on as we are. Self-interest alone will not avert the catastrophe. Without a moral and imaginative structure that links our wellbeing to that of others, so that their suffering feels as urgent as ours, we will render our planet uninhabitable. **The pope is trying to change our understanding of human nature. Many people will disagree with his understanding. But he is right that no smaller change will do.**

Guardian Weekly editorial 26 June 2015

The Loss of Nigel Leaves

Nigel Died in London at the age of fifty-six

A massive and unforeseen heart attack

*Priest, Academic, contributor to Sea of Faith,
Fellow of The Westar Institute*



Current President of Sea of Faith in Australia (SoFiA) Rodney Eivers writes:

I am saddened to have to pass on to you the news of the death of Nigel Leaves. He died of an unexpected severe heart attack in England at the age of fifty-six.

Nigel was very important to the Sea of Faith. He wrote two books on the writings of Don Cupitt.

Our older members will recall that he was the host for the first national Sea of Faith Conference which was held in Perth, and which turned out to be a very memorable affair.

He did not take an active part in SoFiA affairs after he moved to Brisbane but was a speaker at several of our conferences.

Other books which he wrote, with a progressive Christian thrust, were *Religion Under Attack* and *The God Problem*.

Nigel was a Keynote Speaker at the NZ Sea of Faith Conference in 2013. You can read his address at [www.sof.org.nz/2013leaves keynote.pdf](http://www.sof.org.nz/2013leaves%20keynote.pdf)

You can read an extended tribute (including a 10-year-old video clip) from the Westar Institute at <http://www.westarinstitute.org/blog/nigel-leaves-a-tribute/>

ALL ABOUT US

SEA OF FAITH: EXPLORING VALUES, SPIRITUALITY AND MEANING

We are an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.

Our formal name is The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Inc.

We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

“Sea of Faith” both traces the decline of traditional Christian influence in the West in the past 250 years and invites the viewer to consider what might replace it. In New Zealand, Sea of Faith provides a forum for the continued exploration.

The Sea of Faith Network itself has no creed. We draw our members from people of all faiths and also from those with no attachment to religious institutions.

Our national **Steering Committee** publishes a Newsletter six times each year, maintains a website at www.sof.org.nz, assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference.

We have five **Life Members**: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Noel Cheer, Ian Harris and Fred Marshall. (The late Alan Goss was, for a time, a Life Member).

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Deadline dates for submitted Newsletter copy for 2015 are: 21/08/15, 21/10/15, 21/12/15.

Members may borrow books, CDs, and DVDs from the Resource Centre which is managed by Suzi Thirlwall phone (07) 578-2775 email susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz Refer to the catalogue on the website.

Membership of the national organisation costs \$20 per household per year (\$30 if outside NZ). Both charges drop to \$15 if the Newsletter is emailed and not on paper.

To join, send remittance and details to The Membership Secretary (listed above) or Internet bank to 38 9000 0807809 00 and tell pcowley@paradise.net.nz your mailing details.

Bonus: If you already receive the paper version then you can receive the email version in addition, *at no charge*. Send an email requesting that to pcowley@paradise.net.nz

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CONFERENCE 2015

Date: October 2 – October 4, 2015

Venue: St Cuthbert's College,
Epsom, Auckland

Theme: Micawber vs Cassandra:
Responding to an increasingly
uncertain future

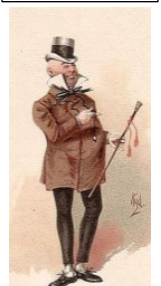
Keynote Speakers:

- Sir Lloyd Geering
- Rod Oram, business commentator
- Kennedy Graham, Green Party MP
- Anjum Rahman, Waikato Interfaith Council

The Conference Programme and the Registration Form were sent to members with the July Newsletter. You can see that data, and even enrol, on the website at www.sof.org.nz



Cassandra:
“The Future
is all bad!”



Micawber:
“Something
will turn up!”

DEALING WITH INESCAPABLE REALITIES AGING AND DEATH

Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine and What Matters in the End **by Atul Gawande**

Atul Gawande, MD, MPH, was born in Brooklyn, New York, to Indian Maharashtrian immigrants to the United States. Soon after they moved to Athens, Ohio, where he and his sister grew up and attended Athens High School.

He is a surgeon, writer, and public health researcher. He has been a staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine since 1998, and has written four *New York Times* bestsellers about science.

In *Being Mortal*, Atul Gawande tackles the hardest challenge of his profession: how medicine can not only improve life but also the process of its ending.

Medicine has triumphed in modern times, transforming birth, injury, and infectious disease from harrowing to manageable.

But in the inevitable condition of aging and death, the goals of medicine seem too frequently to run counter to the interest of the human spirit.

An obsession with risk is stultifying the lives of the most vulnerable in our society, in the years when their choices should be most cherished and respected – even if those choices shorten their lives. We have exalted longevity over what makes life worth living. More chillingly, Gawande shows how infantilisation of the old is promoted by profiteering companies. Building more compassionate institutions is not only straightforward, it costs nothing more, and the benefits in terms of improved quality of life are immense.

If the first half of his book concerns nursing homes and how we can age with self-respect, the second half concerns palliative care and how we can die with grace.

The intrusion of commercialised medicine, and the elevation of the interests of insurance companies over those of patients, can complicate these issues considerably, but Gawande remains clear-sighted through the muddle of anxieties, conflicting emotions and vested interests.

Towards the end of the book, he tells the story of his own father's decline and death from a tumour of the spine. He finds doctors communicate most effectively when they jettison the position of detached, clinical observers and talk in terms of how they feel: "I am worried about your tumour because ..."



Often the bravest and most humane decision, he realises, is to do nothing at all.

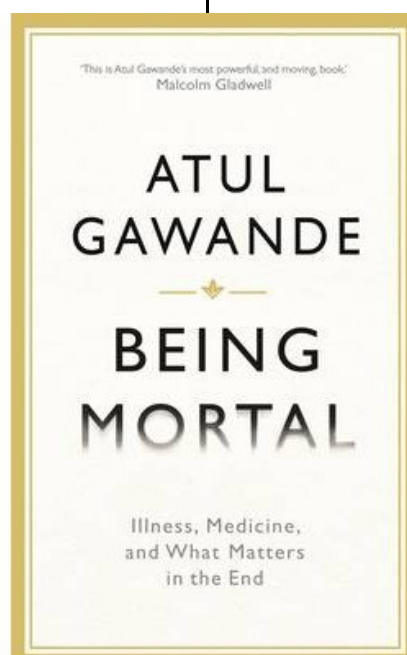
When time becomes short, Gawande has the presence of mind to ask his father: "How much are you willing to go through just to have a chance of living longer?" The answer helps guide his father to a relatively peaceful death in the arms of his family, as opposed to a technologised end in an intensive care unit.

Have we exalted longevity over what makes life worth living? And do we infantilise the old?

This is an original and moving exploration of illness and death.

The message resounding through *Being Mortal* is that our lives have narrative – we all want to be the authors of our own stories, and, in stories, endings matter. Doctors and other clinicians have to get better at helping people with their endings, otherwise more and more of us will end our lives babbling behind shining doors.

**Noel Cheer
and several reviews found on
Wikipedia**



DOES CAPITALISM STOKE THE FIRES OF GLOBAL WARMING?

A Review by Ian Crumpton of Christchurch

Widely regarded as the most significant book on the environment since Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," Naomi Klein's latest work is the result of five years' research covering the science, the politics and the economics of climate change. If you didn't know it before, when you read this book you will realise that climate change is the most serious problem ever to face humanity, that market driven capitalism has greatly exacerbated the problem and that initiatives are gathering strength to deal with both the deficiencies of capitalism and the global heating resulting from our profligate fossil fuel based consumption.

This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate
by Naomi Klein, Allen Lane, 2014

Klein argues that a system based on economic growth is no longer compatible with human well-being and progress—or even with human survival. We need to reconstruct society along lines that go against the endless amassing of wealth as the primary goal. Society must be rebuilt on the basis of other principles, including the "regeneration" of life itself and what she calls "ferocious love." (Spiritual values?) This reversal in the existing social relations of production must begin immediately with constraint of the fossil-fuel industry and economic growth.

The book includes a comprehensive account of the tactics used by the fossil fuel industry to render impotent any efforts to reduce national carbon footprints; this has been done so successfully that many Americans simply don't believe climate change is happening, and the nation as a whole has not co-operated with any global efforts to deal effectively with the issue. New Zealand is no better. Klein shows how the "free trade" (corporate rights) agenda has resulted in greatly increased emissions.

We learn that if climate change had been addressed seriously in the 1960s, when scientists first raised the issue in a major way, or even in the late 1980s and early '90s, when James Hansen gave his famous testimony in Congress on global warming, the Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change was first established, and the Kyoto Protocol introduced, the problem might have been addressed without the abandonment of capitalism. Today such incremental solutions will no longer work. The numbers are clear: Over 586 billion metric tons of carbon have been emitted into the atmosphere by human activity. To avoid a 2°C increase in global average temperature, it is necessary to stay below a trillion metric tons in cumulative carbon emissions. At the present rate we will arrive at the one trillionth metric ton – equivalent to the 2°C mark – around 2039. Once this point is reached, feedback mechanisms will come into play, bringing runaway global heating. To avoid such catastrophic heating, real revolutionary ecological change, unleashing the full power of an organized and rebellious humanity, is required.

Our economy is destructive of many forms of life, including human life. What the climate needs to avoid

None of this, Klein assures us, is cause for despair. Rather, confronting this harsh reality head on allows us to define the strategic context in which the struggle to prevent climate change must be fought.

collapse is a contraction in our use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion. Because of our lost decades, we

must turn this around now. Klein claims that such a turn-around is possible, but it involves challenging the fundamental logic of deregulated capitalism. The state in a capitalist society seeks to free up opportunities for capital accumulation on behalf of the system as a whole. This must change.

So-called “geo-engineering” is a dangerous trap. Seeding oceans with iron to absorb carbon, putting reflective particles in the upper atmosphere, inventing carbon sucking machines simply promise change without having to change. Mere improvements in carbon efficiency are too small as long as the scale of production is increasing.

None of this, Klein assures us, is cause for despair. Rather, confronting this harsh reality head on allows us to define the strategic context in which the struggle to prevent climate change must be fought. What is required in a rich country, as detailed in *This Changes Everything*, is not an abandonment of civilization, but a reversion to about the standard of living of the 1970s. A return to a lower per capita output requires redistribution of income and wealth, social planning, decreases in working time, and universal satisfaction of genuine human needs (a sustainable environment; clean air and water; ample food, clothing, and shelter; high-quality health care, education, public transportation, and community-cultural life). Most people could experience a substantial improvement in their daily lives with such changes as these. What Klein envisions would truly be an ecological-cultural revolution. All that is really required, since the necessary technological means already exist, is people power: the democratic mass mobilization of the population to force such change.

Such people power is already emerging in the context of the present planetary emergency. It can be seen in the massive but diffuse social-environmental movement, stretching across the globe, representing the struggles of tens of millions of activists worldwide. She picks up the term “Blockadia” to refer to these movements, now beginning to network, and picking up strength and determination.

Klein upsets the existing order of things in her book by declaring “the right is right.” By this she means that the political right’s position on climate change is largely motivated by what it correctly sees as an Either/Or question of capitalism vs. the climate. Hence, conservatives seek to deny climate change—even rejecting the science—in their determination to defend capitalism. In contrast, liberals, caught in the self-same trap of capitalism vs. the climate—tend to accept most of the

science, while contradicting themselves by pretending that there are easy, non-disruptive ways out of this trap via still undeveloped technology, market magic, and mild government regulation—allowing climate change to be mitigated without seriously affecting the capitalist economy. Rather than accepting the Either/Or of capitalism against the climate, liberals convert the problem into one of neoliberalism vs. the climate, insisting that greater regulation, including such measures as carbon trading and carbon offsets, constitutes the solution, with no need to address the fundamental logic of the economic and social systems.

Ultimately, it is this liberal form of denialism that is the more dangerous since it denies the social dimension of the problem, and blocks the necessary social solutions. Hence, it is the liberal view that is the main target of Klein’s book. In a wider sense, though, conservatives and liberals can be seen as mutually taking part in a dance in which they join hands to block any solution that requires going against the system. It is her constant exposure of this establishment farce that gives Klein’s book its cutting edge.

Klein does not deal here in any depth with the nature of system change, and the full scale of the transformations required. Her aim is more urgent and strategic one of making the broad case for System Change, not Climate Change. Millions of people, she believes, are waking up to our dire situation. Capitalism, they see, is now obsolete, since it is no longer compatible either with our survival as a species or our welfare as individual human beings. Hence, we need to build society anew in our time with all the human creativity and collective imagination at our disposal.

This book really is a game-changer. Looking back through history, we see that change builds slowly, then often suddenly, a tipping point is reached. Here we have a chance to build a culture with a primary thrust much broader than the personal accumulation of capital. The values of conservation, spirituality, neighbourhood, pacifism, and fair sharing must come to the fore, and quickly. Climate change is not only a threat – it is also an opportunity.



Naomi Klein

Ian Crumpton, Christchurch

FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENTS

Opinions from SoF (NZ) Members

A comment by Robin Boom of Hamilton

CRITIQUING AND CRITICIZING ISLAM

The article 'A Message from the Dispossessed' by Chris Hedges in Newsletter 118 (March 2015) fails to address the real reason for radical Muslim attacks against the west. It seems all religions are up for ridicule except Islam, so when *Charlie Hebdo* magazine takes the liberty of drawing pictures of the prophet Muhammad, a violent backlash was always a high probability.

The Danish cartoons portraying the prophet Mohammad almost a decade earlier got similar violent responses. According to the Hadith no images of the Prophet are allowed, so when anyone takes the liberty of publishing such pictures or cartoons, there are serious consequences.

However when Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism are ridiculed, these other religions take it on the chin. Here in NZ when Te Papa displayed the Virgin in a Condom exhibition knowing that such a exhibit was offensive to many tens of thousands of Catholic Christians and other Kiwis who would have considered this piece of artwork extremely bad taste, we have the Association of Rationalists and Humanists applauding the museum with an Award for displaying this offensive exhibit. Fortunately Catholic Christians and others who were offended by this display of 'freedom of speech' or 'right to offend' did not take up arms but turned the other cheek as their Jesus taught them to. So we have a double standard, where all religions except Islam are allowed to be mocked.

So why are we so precious about Islam? Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS categorically stated in his latest broadcast 'Islam is not a religion of peace... It is a religion of fighting'. Islam has always and will always spread by the sword, and within the pages of the Quran and Hadith, Muslims are urged to kill the infidels, and as Europe and the West abandon traditional faiths en masse they have

become the infidel. Interestingly within Islam, Christians and Jews are classified as *Dhimmi*, who theoretically are allowed to live peaceful lives in Islamic communities and are even 'protected' by Muslims, but have to pay a tax for this privilege, although they will always be second-class citizens.

Boko Haran in Nigeria are out to kill and destroy Christians and infidels striving for their own caliphate and Islamic ideology, as does Northern Sudan against the largely Christian South, and elsewhere in Africa there are similar militant Islamic risings. Syrian and Iraqi Christians in particular are targeted by ISIS rebels, and if they are lucky are told to either convert or be killed. Now the West faces a dilemma. What does it do with returning ISIS fighters? Allow them back in and turn a blind eye to the atrocities committed by the regime they have fought for, hoping they will go back to being upstanding citizens? They joined ISIS driven by Islamic ideology and unless such ideology is renounced, denounced and deserted, it will fester away in their closed communities, breeding more disaffection within. The Western media needs to be honest and make it open season on critiquing and criticizing Islam. If satire is such a tool for doing so, so be it.

Je suis Charlie.

Robin Boom, Hamilton

A comment by Brian Lilburn of Christchurch

THE GLOBAL DRIFT TOWARD THEOCRACY

It *is* happening, but if asked to take a good hard look at it, people tend to react like the girlfriend in a recent popular song: "I don't want to think about it. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to know about it."

The next US president US will [possibly - ed] be Republican (right-wing-Christian); Russia combines

intolerant Christianity with nationalism; Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia are all tightening up to become more Islamic-governed ... many other signs, but the main future one will be the UN-encouraged flood of immigrants into Europe. They will be predominantly Sunni Muslim. Sunni are 70-75 % of Muslims. They have a fast-paced natural reproduction. Although not all Sunni clerics are militant, many are skilled, fiery 'crusaders' (on Facebook!) for their branch of religion.

Religion is no longer Father McKenzie sitting in a quiet church working painstakingly on his sermon and hoping one or two will turn up to hear it. The present Pope is a 'recovery' Pope for that branch, and near my own home is ample evidence of its post-earthquake wealth ('Nazareth'). **Religion is semi-tribal Big Business.** The organizations incorporating hosts of believers belong to various sometimes-competing branches of religion, but they are unified in their opposition to individualistic "spirituality" and to any real progress toward a secular civilization of views, values and ethics based on natural knowledge without religion. Such progress might rob them of land and property and rights that partly exceed the rights even of private business corporations. Most religious branches have a powerful lobbying influence on government, even our's. However, the aim of the most powerful branch is to *be* the government; to enforce its exclusive world-view and code of behaviour by means of a legal and military arm.

The population of many countries are unquestioningly religious, and because of conflict among religious branches and corruption among their elites, have failed to achieve reasonable standards of living. Representative in the UN from those countries are from among the elitist leaders. The UN also suits the transnational corporations seeking cheaper labour. The UN needs their money. No wonder the UN allows itself only one side of the argument over the mass-movement of the "religious" poor seeking jobs and material improvement.

PRE-CONFERENCE READING

<http://sof.org.nz/2015studyguides.htm>

SNIPPETS

In writing about the religious developments undertaken by the otherwise unnamed prophet called "Second Isaiah", Karen Armstrong (*A History of God* p75) provides us with a useful distinction. "... *the new theology succeeded not because it could be demonstrated rationally but because it was effective in preventing despair and inspiring hope.*"

The Optimist believes that ours is the best of all possible worlds. The Pessimist fears that he is right.

This comes from the song "Hands" from the album "Spirit" by singer/songwriter Jewel.

**If I could tell the world just one thing
It would be that we're all OK
and not to worry 'cause worry is wasteful
and useless in times like these
I won't be made useless
I won't be idle with despair
I will gather myself around my faith
For light does the darkness most fear
My hands are small I know
But they're not yours, they are my own
But they're not yours, they are my own
and I am never broken.**

Religion is fundamentally a practice that helps people to look at the world as it is and yet to experience it — to some extent, in some way — as it should be.

See also page 10

HOPE WAS HIDING IN PANDORA'S BOX

In ancient Greece there were two brothers named **Epimetheus and Prometheus**. They upset the gods and annoyed the most powerful of all Gods, Zeus, in particular. This was not the first time humans had upset Zeus, and once before, as punishment, he had taken from humans the ability to make fire. This meant they could no longer cook their meat and could not keep themselves warm.

However, Prometheus was clever and he knew that, on the Isle of Lemnos, lived Hephaestus, the blacksmith. He had a fire burning to keep his forge hot. Prometheus travelled to Lemnos and stole fire from the blacksmith. Zeus was furious and decided that humans had to be punished once and for all for their lack of respect.

Zeus came up with a very cunning plan to punish the two brothers. With the help of Hephaestus, he created a woman from clay. The goddess Athene then breathed life into the clay, Aphrodite made her very beautiful and Hermes taught her how to be both charming and deceitful. Zeus called her Pandora and sent her as a gift to Epimetheus.

His brother, Prometheus, had warned him not to accept any gifts from the gods but Epimetheus was completely charmed by the woman and thought Pandora was so beautiful that she could never cause any harm, so he agreed to marry her.

Zeus, pleased that his trap was working, gave Pandora a wedding gift of a beautiful box. There was one very, very important condition however, that she must never open the box. Pandora was very curious about the contents of the box but she had promised that she would never open it.

All she could think about was; what could be in the box? She could not understand why someone would send her a box if she could not see what was in it. It seemed to make no sense at all to her and she could think of nothing else but of opening the box and unlocking its secrets. This was just what Zeus had planned.

Finally, Pandora could stand it no longer. When she knew Epimetheus was out of sight, she crept up to the box, took the key off the high shelf, fitted it carefully into the lock and turned it. But, at the last moment, she felt a pang of guilt, imagined how angry her husband would be and quickly locked the box again without opening the lid and put the key back where she had found it. Three more times she did this until, at last, she knew she had to look inside or she would go completely mad!

She took the key, slid it into the lock and turned it. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and slowly lifted the lid of the box. She opened her eyes and

looked into the box, expecting to see fine silks, gowns or gold bracelets and necklaces or even piles of gold coins.

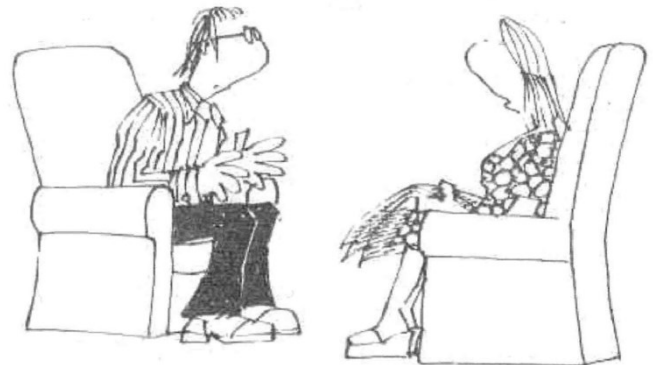
But there was no gleam of gold or treasure. There were no shining bracelets and not one beautiful dress! The look of excitement on her face quickly turned to one of disappointment and then horror. For Zeus had packed the box full of all the terrible evils he could think of. Out of the box poured **disease** and **poverty**. Out came **misery**, out came **death**, out came **sadness** - all shaped like tiny buzzing moths.

The creatures stung Pandora over and over again and she slammed the lid shut. Epimetheus ran into the room to see why she was crying in pain. Pandora could still hear a voice calling to her from the box, pleading with her to be let out. Epimetheus agreed that nothing inside the box could be worse than the horrors that had already been released, so they opened the lid once more.

All that remained in the box was **Hope**. It fluttered from the box like a beautiful dragonfly, touching the wounds created by the evil creatures, and healing them. **Even though Pandora had released pain and suffering upon the world, she had also allowed Hope to follow them.**



Do you realise that for the cost of a bottle of quite average wine we could receive a whole year of Newsletters from the Sea of Faith?



*Yes, I read about it at www.sof.org.nz/latestcontents.pdf
So, what are you waiting for?*

RELIGION WITHOUT GOD

T.M. LUHRMAN, NEW YORK TIMES DECEMBER 24, 2014

This Christmas our family will go to church. The service is held in a beautiful old church in the charming town of Walpole, N.H., just over the border from Vermont. The Lord's Prayer hangs on the wall behind the sanctuary. A lectern rises above the nave to let the pastor look down on his flock. The pews and the side stalls have the stern, pure lineaments suited to the Colonial congregation that once came to church to face God.

Except that this church is Unitarian. Unitarianism emerged in early modern Europe from those who rejected a Trinitarian theology in preference for the doctrine that God was one. By the 19th century, however, the Unitarian church had become a place for intellectuals who were skeptical of belief claims but who wanted to hang on to faith in some manner. Charles Darwin, for example, turned to Unitarians as he struggled with his growing doubt. My mother is the daughter of a Baptist pastor and the black sheep, theologically speaking, of her family. She wants to go to church, but she is not quite sure whether she wants God. The modern Unitarian Universalist Association's statement of principles does not mention God at all.

As it happens, this kind of God-neutral faith is growing rapidly, in many cases with even less role for God than among Unitarians. Atheist services have sprung up around the country, even in the Bible Belt.

Many of them are connected to Sunday Assembly, which was founded in Britain by two comedians, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans. They are avowed atheists. Yet they have created a movement that draws thousands of people to events with music, sermons, readings, reflections and (to judge by photos) even the waving of upraised hands. There are nearly 200 Sunday Assembly gatherings worldwide. A gathering in Los Angeles last year attracted hundreds of participants.

How do we understand this impulse to hold a "church" service despite a hesitant or even nonexistent faith? Part of the answer is surely the quest for community. That's what Mr. Jones told *The Associated Press*: "Singing awesome songs, hearing interesting talks, thinking about improving yourself and helping other people — and doing that in a community with wonderful relationships. Which part of that is not to like?"

Another part of the answer is that rituals change the way we pay attention as much as — perhaps more than — they express belief. In "The Archetypal Actions of Ritual," two anthropologists, Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, go so far as to argue that ritual isn't about expressing religious commitment at all, but about doing something in a way that marks the moment as different from the everyday and forces you to see it as

important. Their point is that performing a ritual focuses your attention on some moment and deems it worthy of respect.

In Britain, where the rate of atheism is much higher than in the United States, organizations have now sprung up to mark life passages for those who consider themselves to be nonbelievers. The anthropologist Matthew Engelke spent much of 2011 with the British Humanist Association, the country's pre-eminent nonreligious organization, with a membership of over 12,000. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, a prominent atheist, is a member.

The association sponsors a good deal of anti-religious political activity. They want to stop faith-based schools from receiving state funding and to remove the rights of Church of England bishops to sit in the House of Lords. They also perform funerals, weddings and namings. In 2011, members conducted 9,000 of these rituals. Ceremony does something for people independent of their theological views.

Moreover, these rituals work, if by "work" we mean that they change people's sense of their lives. It turns out that saying that you are grateful makes you feel grateful. Saying that you are thankful makes you feel thankful. To a world so familiar with the general unreliability of language, that may seem strange. But it is true.

In a study in which undergraduates were assigned to write weekly either about things they were grateful or thankful for; or about hassles; or "events or circumstances that affected you in the past week," those who wrote about gratitude felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic about the coming week. There have now been many such studies.

Religion is fundamentally a practice that helps people to look at the world as it is and yet to experience it — to some extent, in some way — as it should be. Much of what people actually do in church — finding fellowship, celebrating birth and marriage, remembering those we have lost, affirming the values we cherish — can be accomplished with a sense of God as metaphor, as story, or even without any mention of God at all.

Yet religion without God may be more poignant. Atheists trust in human relations, not supernatural ones, and humans are not so good at delivering the world as it should be. Perhaps that is why we are moved by Christmas carols, which conjure up the world as it can be and not the world we know.

May the spirit of Christmas be with you, however you understand what that means.

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THE LAST WORD

Laurie Chisholm, Chairperson



In 2011, Conference was about “**Pulling Us Back From the Brink**” and Jeannette Fitzsimons delivered a magnificent talk, saying that we faced multiple, interrelated crises, and that the politicians would only respond if we, the people, clamoured for change. In 2015, we are revisiting the theme, and the crises, climate change above all, have only become more urgent. The theme this time is “**Micawber vs Cassandra: Responding to an Increasingly Uncertain Future.**” Although there are few signs that humanity is willing and able to do what it takes to avert a crisis, we decided that we didn’t want to paint an alarmist picture. Instead, we are aware of an oscillating mood: sometimes we are convinced, Cassandra-like that disaster is inevitable, at other times we just ignore the problem or hope optimistically, like Micawber, that something will turn up to save us before it is too late. The first part of the Conference title, Micawber vs Cassandra, refers to this debate that is to be found within each of us.

There are courageous people who are acting against the direction we have been going in. **Naomi Klein**’s latest book, *This Changes Everything*, is an impressive survey of the current state of things. She makes plain the fundamental conflict between profit-oriented business and limiting climate change and what an uphill struggle it will be to get the oil companies to leave fossil fuels in the ground. **Hugh Wilson** endeavours to live without using fossil fuels and his life’s work is restoring native forest in the Hinewai Reserve on Banks Peninsula. **Vandana Shiva** is an Indian physicist who concluded that the nuclear industry served death, so she changed career, campaigning on behalf of peasant farmers against agribusiness and genetic engineering to help ensure life for them. From her I learnt that modern agriculture uses far more calories (from fossil fuels) than it produces in the crops it harvests, in stark contrast to traditional peasant farming. **David Suzuki**, a Canadian science communicator and environmental activist, made me aware of the wide-ranging effects of the collapse of salmon stocks in

many rivers. Bears eat the salmon and spread essential minerals originating in the sea into the surrounding forests. Without this natural fertilizer, the forests will eventually die. Many others could be mentioned, including Wendell Berry, James Lovelock, George Monbiot and Al Gore.

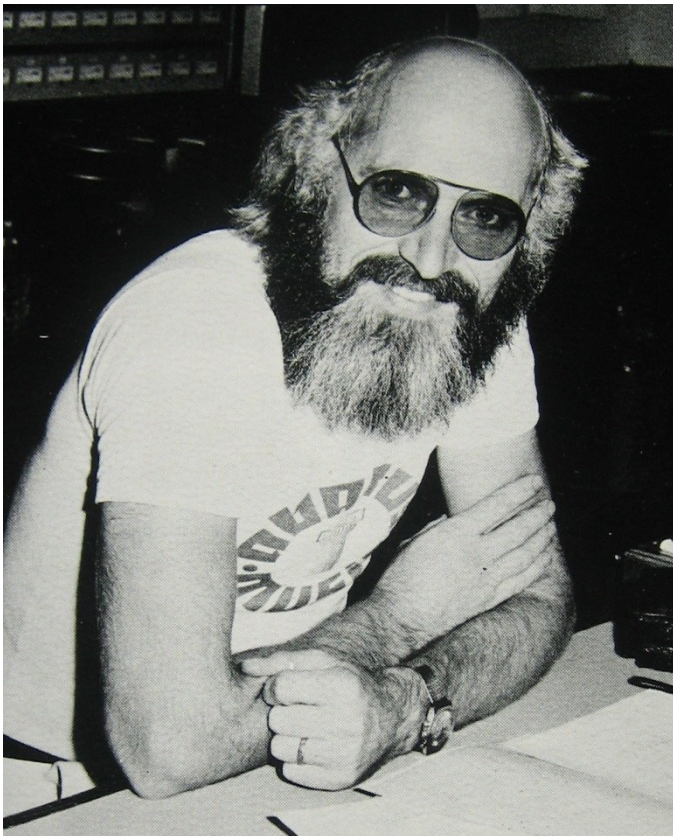
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian executed at the end of World War II continues to engage my attention. During the 60s, Bonhoeffer was interpreted through his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, in particular, the theological letters. There he advocated a religionless Christianity and argued against a Christian apologetics that tries to keep humans in a state of dependency and that argues for a God of the gaps for which science as yet has no answer. Humankind, he said, has come of age.

Reading Eberhard Bethge’s biography convinced me that this was a one-sided interpretation. More recently, Bonhoeffer’s poems have deepened that conviction. Bonhoeffer wrote no poetry until the enforced passivity of his imprisonment. What he produced may not impress the literati, but it is a concentrated expression of his thoughts and feelings on the situation. Most of them are to be found in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, but in the 60s, I just skipped over them. One of them, *Von Guten Mächten*, has become one of the most popular modern German hymns, an absolute favourite for New Year’s Eve services. Astonishingly, Youtube has over 200 versions of it, including one of the English translation [see the end of this article - ed] but note that quite a bit gets lost in the translation and that two verses are not included. This poem was written at the beginning of 1945, close to his death and after all the reflections on a new theology that so captivated John Robinson and others.

Another memory keeps popping up. During my time as parish minister in Huchenfeld, Germany, the local parish youth group, rather too evangelical for my taste, organised a concert with the singer Siegfried Fietz. I hadn’t heard of him until then, but young people obviously had. They came from all



around, completely filling our church on a Saturday night. Fietz was an imposing, larger-than-life figure, balding, but with a large beard. What impressed me most was his singing of another Bonhoeffer poem, *Night Voices in Tegel*. (I'm sure he also sang *Von Guten Mächten*, his biggest hit). The young listeners were absolutely quiet through the gruelling, fifteen-minute piece. My first recent attempt to access this



song or obtain its text from the Internet was unsuccessful, but I now have it. Fietz has just released a 3-CD set of 37 songs in honour of Bonhoeffer, including his poems, so I have now at last been able to re-hear and read this impressive work (this poem is not in my German edition of *Letters and Papers from Prison*).

Lying on his bed in prison at the end of the day, he longs for a turning point that would bring an end

to the suffering and asks for the ability to stand firm until then. He hears the sounds around him – the guards, a distant pair of lovers. Then he is aware of a choir of all sorts of people:

Brother, we are calling you, do you hear me?

A clock striking midnight awakens him. In the depths of darkness he accuses others and then realises that he himself is also among the accused.

*Fearful of suffering and poor in deed
we have betrayed you in front of others.*

*We saw the lie raise its head
and have not honoured the truth.*

*We saw brothers in great need
and only feared our own death.*

Brother, pray for me!

As dawn begins, he hears footsteps. The guards come close to his cell, and Bonhoeffer goes hot and cold; he knows what this means. But another prisoner is taken away for execution.

*I go with you brother, and hear your last words.
Brother, when the sun fades for me, live for me.*

*Brothers, stand firm, until after long night, our
day arrives.*

Are we not faced, like Bonhoeffer, with a similar overwhelming challenge? Must we not also admit our complicity in runaway climate change and long-standing environmental degradation. And surely there is something to be learnt from his honesty, clear thinking, and courage to act.

Laurie Chisholm

SOME WEBSITES:

English version of Von Guten Mächten:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dWCPeH6BA8

German originals of three of his poems with commentary:

www.iivs.de/~iiv00550/bonhoeffer/gedichte.html
