

ODYSSEY

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René Descartes was once asked by what faith he lived. He replied: “the faith of my King and my Nurse.” That response may have been disingenuous; after all, those were times when candour could be costly. And yet, for many of us this is precisely where we begin. It certainly was for me, if by my Nurse I mean the source of my earliest nurture. In due course I would make many changes, both in faith and in environment. If I didn’t anticipate the former, I always expected the latter. I can’t remember a time when I didn’t dream of moving to another part of the world. As soon as I had learned to read I began to devour books and articles on exotic places, and I still possess the notebooks I made when I was eight years old listing places I would like to live in, mostly in the southern hemisphere, though as events turned out I never even visited the southern hemisphere till I was in my mid-fifties. Canada was not on the list, though at an early age I was designated to represent Canada in an Empire Day pageant at school.

I was born into a social setting and a way of life that now seem unutterably remote. For the first decade of my life I lived in a tiny village in the depths of the Dorset countryside, the kind of setting described in Thomas Hardy’s novels, and which had changed remarkably little since he wrote. It was an anachronistic survival. For instance, when I later heard contemporaries of mine speak of the profound impact upon their lives of the onset of the great Depression, I can’t identify with that from personal experience, though I was well into my fifth year when the crash of 1929 came. We were protected, living as we were in a setting that was more feudalistic than capitalistic. The whole of that little village of Tincleton was owned by the wealthy squire who lived in the big house up on the hill, and all the residents worked directly or indirectly for him.

We had little money, but we had a house provided for us, with a large garden in which we grew much of our own food. The only amenities were one little village shop, the school and the church. There was no electricity, no piped water and no sewerage. There were far more horses than cars around, although of course the squire had his own chauffeur-driven car, and when he passed through the village we boys were expected to raise our caps with due deference. That deference was reinforced by what we learned at the school and at the church, which ran the school. The most-used hymn was “All things bright and beautiful”, which celebrated the glories of Nature but also included the verse which ran: “The rich man in his castle,/ The poor man at his gate:/ God made them high or lowly,/ And ordered their estate.”

From a very early age I was free to roam through the fields and woodlands, and absorbed a feeling for Nature that became a permanent part of my personality, and has led me to so much ecological activism in more recent years. As for organized religion, there was simply “the Church”. No one ever asked which kind of church; to all intents and purposes there was only one, the parish church. Not that the villagers were a churchgoing lot; for a great many of them the one occasion in the year when they attended was the Harvest Thanksgiving, which was of

course a personally meaningful occasion, governed as we were by the swing of the seasons. But we children were all sent to Sunday school and church, not only because parents felt it would do us good, but also, to put it crassly, because we were bribed to go. If we did, we were given an album in which a stamp was placed for each Sunday of attendance. A full, or almost full, album meant that we were invited to the Christmas party at the Big House, which included a conjuring show and a gift of books, and also to the summer outing to the seaside. There were scripture lessons every day at school, so I became familiar with Bible stories. The Book of Common Prayer was regarded with exactly the same degree of reverence as the Bible – not that, in either case, it went very deep. We learned how to use the appropriate religious vocabulary without, in many cases, having much idea of what it really meant.

I never heard any open expression of scepticism. The whole traditional theology washed over us without much impact but without being questioned. We instinctively felt that to question any of it would be unspeakable wickedness. So I don't know how it came about that at the age of about eight or nine I began to wonder whether the whole religious system to which I was exposed might not be a gigantic hoax perpetrated by people who really knew better, in the same way as Santa Claus was. I remember watching the vicar's every move during the service to see if he would make a slip and give the game away, which seemed possible because much of what he said was obviously done by rote. In view of the wickedness of such ideas, of course I kept them to myself, and in time succeeded in suppressing them altogether. The next stage in this process came when at the age of 12 I found myself in the broader setting of the Dorchester Grammar School, to which I had won a scholarship. I was still naïve enough to say something in class reflecting what I had earlier been taught about Adam and Eve, to which one of my classmates retorted: "You don't really believe all that nonsense, do you?" It was my first exposure to the seductions of infidelity. Until then I had lived in a world where even though the accepted religious scheme of things sat so lightly on most people it was never openly challenged.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. In 1936 my family, which by now included three younger sisters, left the secluded security of Tincleton and moved three miles to the much larger village of Puddletown. It was a bad time to be moving. The Depression was by no means over, and the new job my father had been promised did not work out, so we were fully exposed. For me it was a lonely time. I had just started at the Dorchester Grammar School, and the new friends I made there lived in widely scattered places, so we only saw each other at school. I went for long bicycle trips by myself and became a keen amateur botanist. My one meaningful contact with others in the village was the church choir, into which I was accepted. From the choir loft above and behind the congregation I listened to two sermons each Sunday from the pulpit occupied back in the 18th century by Theophilus Lindsey. It was there that he went through the struggles of conscience that were eventually to take him out of the Church of England and to found the first Unitarian congregation in the English-speaking world, as recounted in the comprehensive collection of his letters put together a few years ago by Grayson Ditchfield. But of this I had no inkling at that time. I had never heard of Lindsey, or of Unitarians.

Two years later we moved to Dorchester, then a town of about 10,000 people. It seemed as though we had arrived in the metropolis. There was quite a good public library, and I was near to school and friends. All I lacked at that stage in my odyssey is what many people have testified did so much for their own development – a good mentor. I continued for the most part in the process I had developed over the years of working things out for myself, since my interests tended to be different from those of my peer-group. But I could have done a better job of it with some advice and guidance.

I was 14 when the war broke out. At that time I had developed a strong interest in Utopian communities, and voraciously devoured all the books on that subject that I could lay hands on. This combined with my continuing interest in exotic places, leading me to devise plans to found such an ideal community in a remote place in the South Pacific. It was, I suppose a form of escapism from the harsh realities stalking Europe at that time, but I had every intention of following through on it and managed to procure charts of Pacific islands in the teeth of wartime regulations which assumed that anyone other than masters of ships must want them for some sinister purpose. All this sank so deeply into my consciousness, although I outgrew these idealistic plans, that many years later, when I was in New Zealand, I actually made a point of visiting those islands.

But as I developed I came to agree with what Milton had written three hundred years earlier: “To sequester out of the world into Atlantick and Eutopian polities, which never can be drawn into use, will not mend our condition; but to ordain wisely as in this world of evil, in the midst whereof God hath placed us unavoidably.” Yes, I needed to work for social and political change. I started to get reading material from a variety of left-wing organizations. Then came a new and unexpected development. The London printing presses of the Communist *Daily Worker* were destroyed in an air raid. That had no immediate impact on the paper’s publication, for it had already been banned for opposing what it then denounced as an imperialistic war. But they still needed a press for their pamphlets and other publications, and they purchased our local county newspaper. A group of people the likes of whom our little town had never seen before arrived to work on this, rented a large old house and set up a semi-commune. Before long I and a few of my school friends were hanging out there, talking about the coming revolution and helping spread propaganda about Russia, which at that point had just been invaded by Hitler and become our wartime ally.

I mentioned earlier my lack of a mentor. I now came as close to finding one as at any point in my teenage years. One of that group of Communists was a man in his late fifties or early sixties called Jim Crossley. Jim was a paradoxical character. A ministerial colleague once told me that the reason he had become a Unitarian was that he was temperamentally a conservative, but in any other denomination his views would have made him a radical. It must have been a psychology of the same kind that took Jim into the Communist Party, of which he had been a member ever since it was formed.. He was certainly no ideological hard-liner. We looked on him with some awe as a man who had read Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

three times and was now embarked upon a fourth reading. At any rate, when I got carried away and asked him about joining the party, he quietly evaded the issue and gave me the time I needed to change my mind, which I did within a few months. It was just as well, because when later I was applying for a visa to go to the United States during the McCarthy era I was required to swear on oath that I was not and had never been one of 21 different categories, of which Communist was at the top of the list. As for Jim, when eventually the rest of his group went back to London, he stayed on in Dorset, married the widow of a farmer and settled down in the countryside.

During this period I had still remained more or less attached to the church of my upbringing. After some initial hesitation I followed the path of least resistance, was confirmed by the bishop and became a server at the altar. But there was a growing feeling that all this was becoming just a hollow performance. The church observances were not meeting my deeper needs. Most of my peer-group had already dropped out of church attendance and I felt the same motivation, but whereas they didn't look for an alternative, I felt a need for a spiritual home and began to explore possible options. As I did so, it gradually became clearer to me that there was an underlying intellectual component to my disaffection. There were things I was supposed to believe, and I didn't believe them. Was there any religious body that didn't insist upon these intellectual contortions? I needed to find out.

During my earlier search for sites for an ideal community I had acquired an ancient copy of the Yearbook of the Commonwealth of Australia. One of the items in that book was a long list of the results of the religious census. Here was a place to begin going down the list and checking them out in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. When at length I got down to "U", it looked as though I had found what I was looking for. The encyclopaedia gave the address of Essex Hall, and I sent for literature. When it came, my impression was confirmed. Yes, this might indeed provide me with a spiritual home. I was also informed that the nearest congregation was in Bridport, fifteen miles away, and was given the address of its minister, Randall Jones. So I wrote to him. Could I come and talk with him? He replied that this wouldn't be necessary; he was planning to pass through Dorchester in a few days' time and could stop by and see me. And so I had to tell my mother what I was doing. She didn't understand, but put no obstacles in my way. Randall Jones came, we talked for an hour, at the end of which I asked him "And how do I become a Unitarian?" "Well," he replied, "on the basis of what you have told me, I can say that you don't have to *become* a Unitarian – you already are one!" I felt a bit deflated at the time, having expected to hear of some rites of initiation, but on reflection I came to see that he was right. He knew that I was a Unitarian before I did.

So I had become a Unitarian before I had ever, to my knowledge, met a real-live one. Looking back, I can see how fortunate this process was. In the first place, if I had in the first instance just walked into a service at that Bridport church, I might not have related so well. It was on the most conservative wing of Unitarianism. The preaching was certainly liberal, but the hymnbook and orders of service dated from well back in the Victorian era. In the second place, I knew that

what I was joining was not simply a local congregation, but a worldwide movement, and that has continued to be my perspective ever since, as against many members I have subsequently met whose affiliation has been so narrow that they have not transferred to another congregation after making a move.

What I have just been describing took place at the end of 1942. I was 17. I screwed up my courage and went to tell the vicar. He was kindly at first and tried, of course, to dissuade me. If I had come to tell him I was joining the Roman Catholic Church, he said, he would have been sorry, but would not have been concerned over the fate of my immortal soul. Now he was. But I could no longer accept the presuppositions of his arguments and that was the end of it. He preached a sermon about my perdition the following week, I was told. Now I cancelled my subscription to the *Daily Worker*, which had resumed publication, and took out a subscription to the *Inquirer*. It was time to turn my attention to other concerns. I was reaching the age to be conscripted for military service. I hated militarism, and for years I had resisted joining the Officers' Training Corps at school. After war broke out, pressure to do so built up, but I still resisted, wondering whether to become a conscientious objector. In the end I decided that Nazism was a worse evil than war, and at that moment an opportunity arose to avoid joining the OTC and not to lose face. An Air Training Corps was established as an alternative, and it was this that I joined. I left school with a scholarship to go to Oxford, and again fortune favoured me.

The British government had a scheme to keep the universities open under which one could combine the first university year with the first year in the armed forces, dividing one's time between the two. It's only recently, on looking back, that I have come to a full realization of what this meant for me. Had I gone directly into flying training, I would have been fully trained by the spring of 1944, which could well have resulted in my name being on a war memorial, as the names of many with the same date of birth as mine were. Or alternatively I could well have been part of the armada that took such an enormous toll of life in the great raid over the historic city of Dresden, and would have had to live with feelings of guilt haunting me for the rest of my life. As events actually turned out, I was fully trained by the spring of 1945, three weeks before the end of the war in Europe, and I never was sent to the Far East.

It was in Canada that I did my training, under the Commonwealth Air Training Plan, at a base in Manitoba. On my occasional weekend leaves I went to Winnipeg, and was most hospitably welcomed by the Unitarians there. It was while I was there that I came to the decision that I wanted to become a Unitarian minister as soon as I was free. Six months later, back in England, I was accepted as a prospective student by Manchester College, Oxford, though I still had to complete my military service and my undergraduate work. I was stationed then at an airfield in Lincolnshire, and began to attend the little church in Gainsborough. When they found that I was planning to enter the ministry, they asked me to conduct a service. I had had no experience in public speaking, but I consented, bought a book on the subject, and practised by taking off to a field where I could address myself to the sheep. Strangely enough, it worked, and I gratefully

remember that dozen or so members in Gainsborough who turned out more than once and encouraged my efforts.

It's relatively easy to check my religious evolution from that point onward, because I have written records, some of them published. They show my hopes and my aspirations, my beliefs and my doubts. What they don't show, except by implication, is the emotional difficulties I experienced in my transition. One of the results of a socially secluded upbringing, which had placed me very clearly outside those strata of society that would naturally be called upon to provide leadership, was that I had to wrestle for years with a sense of social inferiority and inadequacy. I compensated for this by more than making the grade intellectually, which I found I could do everywhere, but this over-balanced my personality in that direction – which, after all, may be one of the reasons why I found being a Unitarian so congenial.

As I look back and try to put all this in some sort of perspective, I see a variety of factors at work. I've already mentioned that it was a search for satisfaction at a feeling level that started me on my journey, but I could have met that need alone among the Quakers, whose meetings I also attended from time to time, and still do. But I had discovered that feelings could never be fully satisfied so far as I was concerned without intellectual satisfaction as well. There have been times when these two aspects of my personality have been in tension, if not in conflict. I was rapidly drawn to the radical wing of Unitarian thinking, and for a time subscribed to freethinking and rationalist journals as well. But I found no spiritual satisfaction there. There were times when I felt the pull of my inherited tradition and wanted to accommodate as much of it as I honestly could in my current living and thinking, and there were times when I was moved towards the wholehearted rejection you encounter, for instance, in so many ex-Catholics or ex-fundamentalists. It came as a revelation for which I was thankful when I read in a little book by W. G. Tarrant that there have been two strands in Unitarian history, the rational and the mystical, and that the movement cannot be understood in terms of either one alone.

In 1947 I got my release from the Air Force and returned to Oxford. During my undergraduate years, when I read philosophy, politics and economics, majoring in philosophy, and during my subsequent years in theology at Manchester College, I still subscribed to the conventional view that described people with a religious commitment simply as "believers", as though this intellectual process of believing were the primary aspect of religion. Although I had rejected the traditional system of beliefs, I still wanted such a system, and hoped to work out one which would serve me for the rest of my life. Only slowly did I move to the position I have held for many years now, that in the striking metaphor of H.A. Williams, "the wine of life cannot be contained within the bottles of intellectual definition." I must acknowledge here my indebtedness to the influence of the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (particularly his Gifford Lectures on *The Mystery of Being*), and of his American disciple Henry Bugbee, under whom I studied at Harvard at the cost of some derision from my Unitarian supervisors at the Divinity School, who saw him as woolly-minded and unsystematic. That evolution has given me a real sympathy for those people who go through life embracing one system after another as the final

Answer. I could see the humour in the situation complained of by an intending candidate for the Anglican ministry with whom I once talked. He too was studying philosophy, and his problem was that each philosopher he read was so persuasive that he couldn't see how any other view of things could be possible – and yet they all contradicted each other!

I had had no need to pick up my county scholarship to the university, since as an ex-serviceman all my fees, both undergraduate and graduate, were covered by the government, so I had no need to take employment during the summer vacations, and took the opportunity to verify the cliché that travel broadens the mind. In 1950 I spent time at the founding meeting for the Albert Schweitzer College, held amid the magnificent mountain scenery of eastern Switzerland. Another person present at that camp was Margaret Smith, who had been president of the UYPL, and whom I had met intermittently at various gatherings during the previous four years. We spent a lot of time together there in the mountains and travelled back to England together, spending a couple of days in Paris that left us with nothing but our railway tickets back to London and half a 5-franc note that had somehow got torn, and which I still have as a souvenir. Three months later, we were engaged, and married in the summer of 1951. We subsequently had two children and four grandchildren. Unhappily, Margaret spent the last 25 years before her death in 2006 contending with the increasing ravages of rheumatoid arthritis.

A fellow-student during my last year at Oxford was Charles Forman, who had just graduated from Harvard and come for a year at Manchester College. He encouraged me to do the same in reverse, and I succeeded in putting together enough scholarship help to make this feasible. I was accepted into the Master's program at the Harvard Divinity School, while Margaret got a job at the Fellowships Office of the AUA in Boston. At the end of the academic year, Margaret's boss at the Fellowships Office, Grant Butler, who was married to a Canadian from Manitoba and maintained a summer residence there, invited us to join them, which we were delighted to accept, particularly since it would enable us to visit the friends I had made in Winnipeg. As there was plenty of time before the return trip, we decided for once in our lives to see the Rockies and the Pacific coast. This we did, travelling by the Greyhound bus. Then we retraced our way back east, arriving at the end of August in Montreal and having reduced our available funds to a level which would enable us to go no further. For better or for worse, we would have to stay there for a while and find remunerative employment.

Like many other North American churches, the Montreal church had suspended services for the summer, and the minister, Angus Cameron, was at his summer home in New Brunswick. When he returned and the church reopened at the beginning of September, we had a stroke of good fortune. The congregation had already decided to sponsor a new suburban fellowship on the Lakeshore, but procedures were still under discussion. To have a qualified minister available for the job was an obvious solution, and I was given a one-year contract as assistant to the minister, which could simply be a board decision without all the formalities of calling a regular minister, and with the understanding that my primary duties would be facilitating the establishment of the Lakeshore fellowship. Margaret meanwhile found employment as a substitute teacher.

The relationship with the Montreal congregation was a very happy one, and on a number of occasions I was called upon to deputize for Angus in the pulpit of the downtown church, as well as conducting regular services on the Lakeshore. Angus assigned me to lead an adult study group on what it means to be a Unitarian, and when I complained that I couldn't find a good book to propose as background reading, he shot back, "Why don't you write one, then?" I took him seriously, and the result was my first book, *An Unfettered Faith*, which was entirely written in Montreal, although it wasn't published until after I got back to England the following year. It evidently met a real need, for it went through three printings; parts of it were translated into German and Hungarian, and when John Kielty, secretary of the GA, was invited five years later to deliver the Minns lectures in Boston, he devoted a whole section of one of those lectures to the book, saying, "It is particularly valuable to hand to the intelligent man or woman who has given up all churches and rejected a belief in God". That had indeed been just what I had intended it for when I wrote it, by contrast with other books devoted chiefly to demolishing orthodox beliefs.

That year in Montreal confirmed me in the feeling that had been incubating since my earlier winter in Manitoba, that I would really like a settlement in Canada. The problem was that openings were few and rare. So at the end of the church year we sailed for England on a freighter with ten other passengers, coming in by way of the Manchester Ship Canal. We lodged temporarily with our respective parents in turn while I explored several possibilities for settlement. By the first Sunday in September I had received and accepted an invitation to Ipswich, and came directly from that to these meetings here at Hucklow. Those of my colleagues who were familiar with the situation at Ipswich thought I was out of my mind, and I must admit that by conventional standards they had some grounds for so thinking. To be sure, Ipswich's old meeting-house was one of the finest of its kind in the country, and had just been one of very few nonconformist buildings to receive a grant for external renovations from the Historic Churches Preservation Trust. But on the negative side the list was long. The neglected graveyard in front of the building was so overgrown that it was impossible to read the notice-board from the street. The meeting-house itself was not being used for services. It was very dirty and reeked of coal-gas leaking from the pipes that served its lighting; its hot-water heating system had been allowed to freeze up in a cold spell and the pipes had burst. The adjacent hall was being used for services, but it too was in poor condition. The ancient slow-combustion stove had rusted almost through and consequently disgorged fumes; an external tap on the wall had leaked water, leading to rot in the floor, which had gone unnoticed until the piano fell through. The congregation was tiny and elderly; the average Sunday attendance for the previous year had been seven.

Why then did I go there? Quite simply, because the congregation was honest about its predicament. They knew they were hovering on the brink of extinction and were prepared to support any desperate remedies I might propose, irrespective of what had been done before, whereas other congregations which had not sunk so low simply wanted to perpetuate patterns they had inherited from the more prosperous Victorian era while they waited, in the usual

metaphor of the times, for the tide to turn – an interesting phrase, for the tide, of course, is completely independent of any human effort. There would be no opposition in Ipswich to my trying to build upon the experience Margaret had gained at the Fellowships Office in Boston and I had applied in my work to get the Lakeshore congregation on its feet in Montreal.

So we moved to Ipswich and went to work. Funds were limited, but the hall floor was repaired and new heating installed. We had work parties to cut down the tangled elderberry growth around the approaches. We began more striking and unconventional advertising in the press, and I cultivated the newspaper's editors and columnists, who were quite sympathetic if we could provide material that was newsworthy. One significant opportunity came up before long. In January the London Philharmonic Orchestra was booked for a concert in Ipswich, under its conductor Sir Adrian Boult. Knowing that Sir Adrian was a Unitarian, I wrote to ask him if he would be prepared to speak at a Saturday night meeting under our auspices, and he graciously agreed. We now had a deadline to complete the work renovating the hall with a new coat of paint and colourful drapes. We borrowed extra chairs to use its full capacity, and in the event this turned out to have been necessary. The place was packed, and in its report the *East Anglian* newspaper had a front-page photograph of Sir Adrian with myself. It had been so successful that the following year we invited the former Home Secretary, Chuter Ede, to come for a similar meeting, with similar results.

A trickle of newcomers began to appear at our services: one or two on most Sundays. Some came back a second time; a few became part of the congregation. By the end of the first church year we had taken in a handful of new members, and were at work on restoring the meeting-house. A party of UYPL members came up from London for a work-party to clean it, and we were fortunate in having that work taken up by a new caretaker, Sandy, an enormous woman from a neighbouring cottage, who took a great pride in her work and made the place shine. The old gas-lamps were taken out and electricity installed, with heating under some of the individual box-pews that made the place usable except under the most extreme weather conditions. By the end of the second year average attendance had quadrupled – from 7 to 28.

It was at the end of my first year in Ipswich that I received, out of the blue, a letter from the search committee of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. They had heard of me; would I be interested in their vacant pulpit? Margaret and I looked at each other. This was just exactly what we had been hoping for – but the timing was all wrong. The progress in Ipswich was still so precarious that it might not survive a change of ministry. I was of course committed only to give the normal three months' notice of leaving, but I felt I had a moral obligation to stay at least another year, despite overtures from other congregations in England as well as from Vancouver. So I reluctantly wrote back to Vancouver to that effect, and thought this was the end of the matter. To my utter amazement I received a reply saying in effect, "If we were prepared to wait a year, would you come?" This was too much. I accepted the call and we worked out the details by correspondence. That was the unorthodox way I candidated, sight-unseen, for Vancouver. As for Ipswich, I was relieved in due course to see that the gains were not lost. Instead of the

intermittent short ministries of which mine had been the last, my successor Nick Teape was there for 17 years and his successor Cliff Reed for 36.

My own ministry in Vancouver lasted for 35 years. By the time it began the chief features of my personality, my life-experience and my professional orientation had been staked out, providing the foundations upon which subsequent years have enabled me to build. I was by now living, I hope creatively, in the tension between the traditional and the innovative, the rational and the mystical, the human and the natural beyond the human, between self-development and social involvement. Before proceeding to details of how this continued to develop, I should add one other brief comment on the move.

At the end of the war, the GA had established a Commission to make recommendations for postwar planning, including some of the best minds in the denomination. In its final report, among the Commission's recommendations was one that, in its words: "It is especially desirable that, as opportunity occurs, one or two English ministers should settle in Canada." There was no one better qualified by past experience than I was to fulfil that hope. But when the time came, I met with strong opposition from GA headquarters, citing what was commonly being called a shortage of ministers here. I had in fact considered this, and concluded that it was really a matter of how one calculated a shortage. The conventional method was to relate the number of ministers to the number of congregations. My own view was that it was more realistic to relate the number of ministers to the number of lay members, and when that was done British Unitarians actually had more ministers in proportion to the membership than any other denomination, and far more than Unitarians in Canada.

My approach here was, I suppose, in large measure an outcome of the way in which, as I have already described, I became a Unitarian, joining an overall movement rather than a local congregation. And in fact the Commission on the Work of the Churches had arrived at a point of view consistent with this, saying: "If we are to make full use of our personnel, the ministers must come to be regarded as the servants of the whole body, not only of the local congregations, and come to regard themselves as such." In other words, the problem was not one of supply, but one of distribution, and was not going to be resolved without a wholesale reorganization of the whole denomination which could be accomplished only by a highly improbable consensus among the existing congregations. At any rate, nothing effective had been done, and perhaps it is not coincidental that two of the seven ministers on that Commission also subsequently left the country.

By contrast with the negative reaction from headquarters, I received a highly appreciative letter from a man I admired and respected, the aged Dr Alfred Hall, saying that if he had been in my shoes he would have made the same decision. And a particularly touching gesture at that point was the unexpected appearance at the Salford dockside, as we embarked on a sister ship to the freighter on which we had come to England, of J.B. and Ada Tonkin, who had gone to Vancouver thirty years earlier and were now living in retirement in Yorkshire.

Vancouver proved to be a congenial environment. It had changed in the immediate postwar period from being a colonial outpost to a cosmopolitan centre, largely through the arrival of immigrants from Europe who, had it not been for the war, would have been social, economic and cultural leaders in their native lands. The Unitarian congregation, which had stagnated for years and been dependent upon grants both from London and from Boston, had at last begun to grow during the ministry of my predecessor Lex Crane, and continued to do so even during the period without a minister. It was poised to take off like a rocket after my arrival, rapidly outgrowing its little old building. We went from one Sunday service to two and then to three, with the children's program accommodated in rented premises around the neighbourhood. It soon became evident that we would have to rebuild, and the funds for such a major project would have to be found somewhere. It took us eight years and a substantial bank loan, guaranteed by some of the members putting up their own homes as collateral.

I had not supposed that we could repeat the Ipswich experience of quadrupling the congregation, but we did more than that, though of course it took longer. The membership went up from 125 to well over 600, with as many children enrolled in our church school. We also spawned three suburban congregations. From time to time I received invitations to move, which were occasionally quite tempting, but each time I ended up by reaffirming my decision to stay. I used to say that I would sooner live with my own mistakes than with someone else's, but the joke going around in the congregation was that I would never leave Vancouver while there were some of the surrounding mountains that I had not yet climbed. That was a bizarre exaggeration of something not altogether untrue. Much has been written about the spirituality of mountain climbing, and that has been something I have certainly experienced.

I have now lived in Vancouver for 59 years, apart from one year in Victoria to get off the turf when I retired in 1991. There's something to be said for long ministries, especially in terms of relationships with families. Three weeks ago I officiated at the funeral of someone older than myself whose parents I had known well. But I also reckon that I have had at least three ministries in Vancouver, there was so much change both in myself and in the congregation.

At first I was the only Unitarian minister in the province, and there were very few in the neighbouring American state of Washington. But after all, in Ipswich I had been comparatively isolated from ministerial colleagues by English standards. Nowadays we have a cluster which meets monthly in Vancouver. As the congregation grew, I began to turn my attention to the greater difficulty in maintaining an intimate sense of community, building I suppose on my earlier preoccupation with intentional communities, and setting up a number of small sub-groups in which people could get to know each other deeply enough to interact as authentic persons. A major influence upon me at that time was my discovery of Martin Buber. I don't know how it came about that I went through my theological training without being exposed to the work of this prophetic figure. When I first read *I and Thou*, it hit me with the full force of a revelation. It subsequently led at least half a dozen study groups on that book, and each time it yielded new riches. In 1962 I delivered a series of six sermons that I called *Sinews of Strength in a Free*

Congregation, and on looking back I see that series as a watershed marking the consummation of my shift from a primarily intellectual and individualistic approach to religion to a primarily experiential and communitarian one. I don't attribute this reorientation solely to Buber; it came also out of past reflection, reading and dialogue, and in particular to my friendship with an older member of the congregation, Watson Thomson, who had extensive practical as well as theoretical knowledge of the advantages and hazards of close-knit communities. As the sixties progressed I also participated in a number of sensitivity and encounter groups, including a memorable one in California during my first sabbatical in 1969 co-led by Sam Keen and Bishop Jim Pike. These groups, I should add, were at a safe distance from my own congregation. I even yielded once to a request to lead one myself during a conference here in Hucklow, feeling that people here would not open up to an extent beyond my capacity to handle, but the experiment was so unnervingly successful that I never ventured to repeat it.

Social action made increasing demands upon my time and energies. The Vietnam War was a prime example. I early felt, as did an increasing number of the congregation, that the war was immoral. We were soon involved in the underground railway for draft resisters and army deserters who were beginning to stream into Vancouver. We designated them refugees of conscience, using the church to channel funds for their support coming for the most part from well-wishers south of the border. On one occasion I took a flight to California, where I rented a car for a midnight rendezvous with a deserter who had escaped custody and evaded recapture, bringing him back to Canada to testify before a court of inquiry that had been set up to determine whether he had been illegally shipped back over the border into the hands of the American authorities by the RCMP.

I have over the years been involved in less dramatic ways in public issues. At one point I was among a small group who organized a new civic party in an attempt to oust the old guard entrenched at City Hall. Our success surprised even ourselves -- I have long been accustomed to being on the losing side in politics -- but before long it suffered the usual fate of all broad coalitions, and much of it was co-opted by the establishment. I have been active on federal and provincial issues too, but not as a member of any party, and I was the first president of the BC Civil Liberties Association, now a major force in the province. At a broader level, I have since my earliest days in the ministry been active in the cause of peace and disarmament. I took part in peace marches in Vancouver from the days when the few hundred participants were derided as Communists or Communist dupes till they eventually mushroomed to more than 30,000 marchers. From the sixties onward, I began to focus on the subtler perils to our world: firstly, the exploding population, and later, increasingly, our ecological damage. The latter tied in with the growing Unitarian emphasis upon seeing ourselves as part of the interdependent web of being rather than as the lords of creation celebrated both in much Christian thinking and in the dominant humanism of the fifties and sixties. This has taken a larger place in my thinking and activities since my retirement, and I am one of the Elders of the David Suzuki Foundation, one of

the leading groups working to combat climate change and pollution resulting from our current way of life.

The other broadening I have felt over the years relates to the history and geography of our own Unitarian movement. From 1952 onward Margaret and I were active in IARF, and subsequently received a joint award for distinguished service from its North American chapter. During my first sabbatical in 1969 we made a pilgrimage to historic Unitarian sites in Europe and visited a number of present-day Unitarian movements there, mostly in those days on the other side of the Iron Curtain. The Polish story had enough of an impact upon me that I have now made six visits there, which resulted in my little book *Racovia*, telling the story of the sixteenth-century Unitarian community there. I have also made ten visits to the Unitarians in Transylvania, where as soon as the partner church arrangements were set up in 1990, Vancouver Unitarians entered into a fruitful partnership with the congregation in the city of Brasov. Elsewhere in the world, I have spent time with Unitarian congregations in New Zealand and Australia, as well as visiting the congregations in India. I have studied in some depth the need for theologies to reflect local as well as universal features, a subject on which we Unitarians have been laggards by comparison with people in some other denominations. I hope that the existence now of ICUU will promote more dialogue in this field. And at a still wider level, I have over the years been active in interfaith work, as the spiritual foundations of life cherished in all traditions are increasingly threatened by the inroads of secularization and consumerism.

During the whole of my ministerial career, the discipline of writing has been a valuable part of my spiritual development, though this has not infrequently been at the expense of reading. Besides the books already mentioned, I responded in 1962 to a request from the UUA to write a manual for meditation which I called *The Uncarven Image*; it was subsequently republished in a British edition. Six years later I wrote a replacement for *An Unfettered Faith*, reflecting my change of emphasis in its title *On Being a Unitarian*. It went through several printings and a German edition was also published. My next sabbatical was devoted to the research required for responding to a commission from the Canadian Unitarian Council to write the story of our movement in Canada. This was pioneer work with all the fascination of a detective story – perhaps I should say, of a detective story with some of the pages torn out and often replaced by completely unhistorical legend. I think I finally succeeded in uncovering the real facts, for few statements had to be corrected in the updated edition which appeared in 1995. My last attempt to give a general picture of what Unitarians are all about was published in 1985 under the title *The Unitarian Way*, and has had an interesting sequel.

When I came over to England last year I had the misfortune to spend some time in hospital, and during my convalescence at my sister's home in Dorchester I reached down her copy of that book, which I had not looked at for years. I was immediately struck by how relevant it still was, and with a few changes would be completely so. I ventured to say so to Lynn Hughes of Blackstone Editions, which had published *Racovia*, and she immediately accepted the idea of publishing a new edition. Meanwhile I had been re-reading my copy of Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*, and noted that it had been reissued to mark his ninetieth birthday. Might this republication mark mine? The timing was short, but lo, it was precisely on my birthday that my own

consignment of this much more beautifully produced edition arrived at my home. Let me add that this word “Way”, with its variety of meanings and historical applications, seemed particularly appropriate. It is the accepted English translation of the Chinese word *Tao*, which leads on to another train of thought, for which I will share now a quotation from the autobiography of Herbert Read. He wrote:

“I became acquainted with the main tenets of Taoism, and discovered how closely, and with how many facets, it embodies the truths towards which I have stumbled since I began to think about the problems of life. It would be absurd to describe myself as a Taoist, because the idiom in which this philosophy of life is expressed is an alien one, coloured by the circumstances of a distant time and land.... But actually I have not sought out this philosophy, to adopt it. My attitude was inherent in my personality, and was brought to expression by self-examination in the light of experience.” (*The Contrary Experience*, p.186)

I quoted that because I could have written it myself, word for word. That is my attitude toward life and death, expressed not only in Taoism but in a Japanese form in Shinto, and in the centuries-old aboriginal spirituality of the place where I have now lived for so long. Like Read, I am not going to pin myself down with a label that puts me in someone or other’s pigeon-hole, to be interpreted as they see fit. I am driven by a quest for wholeness. I subscribe to an ecotheology which sees me as part of one vast ongoing Whole, pictured also in the other great metaphor that I share with Herbert Read, that of the Tree of Life. And I am fortunate in the people I find at hand who are on the same Way, not only Unitarians, but people like Sallie McFague, one of the finest theologians of our time now resident in Vancouver, and Diarmuid O’Murchu, that creative thinker whom the Catholic Church is now broad enough not to throw out, and whose seminar I was privileged to attend a couple of months ago. If he comes to your area, don’t let the opportunity pass.

I have no doubt transgressed my time-limits, but this has after all been a long life, and one in which I now feel I have been singularly fortunate. To paraphrase T.S. Eliot, I shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all my exploring will be to arrive where I started and know the place for the first time. I hope I really am getting to know it better: this place called life, this exhilarating, bewildering, ecstatic, painful experience. And this is the end of my unfinished Odyssey – unfinished because if it were otherwise it would not be an odyssey but an obituary.
