

February 2010

IMaUU Newsletter

Volume 2 Number 2



Greetings, friends! I'm happy that more of you were able to send in contributions (and they're wonderful contributions!) for this month's newsletter. First, here are the ones that arrived just a little too late for the February issue, followed in some cases by a March update as well. Then, those that arrived within the past few days. You may already have read some of them, as they were sent to us all – I'm including them here so that there's a record of them on the CUC website (http://www.cuc.ca/programs/individual_members.htm).

There were a couple of positive responses to last time's reflective material, so there will be more of that in future newsletters. This time, the check-ins are themselves a rich resource for reflection. Keep responding, please, and don't hesitate to question my ideas or those of others – that's what it's all about, as noted in this first message

from Noreen Smith

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Hi Anne and friends

I have just had a chance to read this month's newsletter. I have to say I really enjoyed the reflections Anne! For me this is more of what I am searching for and needing right now. I enjoy the check in and getting little glimpses into others lives and I do feel a connection to this group, but I also am struggling to find spirituality and figure out what my beliefs are and who I am and who I am striving to be. Your reflections have given me an excellent starting point for my own thoughts to progress from.

Here is a belated quick check in:

I have found the days to be very busy and though I meant to check in I just couldn't get to it. I have been busy studying to be a gymnastic competition judge, and did my first meet this Sunday. I have been working on my home business taxes (why I don't organize everything beyond the shoe box method, is beyond me). I did buy a Quick books accounting program this week to help me organize better for next year, now I must self train myself on using it! We have had a lovely winter in FSJ having just wrapped up our ice festival, and having the Olympic torch relay here on Sunday. Nice thing about a small city is I was about 10 feet away from the runner as he made it to the podium to light the big flame. Very thrilling!

followed a few days ago by:

Hi Anne and friends,

Funny you should mention about introducing others to this group. I gave as much info as I could to two friends this week. I keep all the newsletters in a binder as well as any other info. I'll let you know what they think next time I see them! So here is my check in:

I have had a busy month, with driving out of town for my children bowling tournaments and gymnastics. Generally we have to travel to Prince George which is about 5 hours away. We have been so lucky to have very nice weather for February. Usually we can expect lots of blizzards and temperatures in the -40 degree range. This year we have spent all month in the low teens and today is sunny and +8...a real treat - though lots of muck with the snow melting so fast!

I had a tough week here. I had dental surgery which left my face looking like a pumpkin and 6 stitches in my gums...ouch!

I also had a real scare this week that I would like to share. I was driving to the hardware store and had to cross the busy Alaska Highway. As I approached the intersection the light was green and had been for long enough for a couple of cars to go through. As I was about to make my way through the intersection, out of the corner of my eye I saw a big semi rig pulling a trailer. I slammed on my brakes just before entering the intersection. The van in the lane beside me was not so alert. The rig crashed into the van (full size 15 passenger size), spun it around and pushed it for a way before the rig finally stopped. This was absolutely terrifying because if I had not watched and had been struck in my minivan, I am absolutely sure it would have been the end of me. Now just so you know, the man that was struck appeared to be OK. Others stopped to help and he was able to exit his vehicle and was standing and talking to the people who were helping. The truck driver was also badly shaken.

After pulling over to the side of the road to have a shaky cry I was struck by so many thoughts. First I thought how weird that the lights were still changing from red to green and the traffic within seconds had resumed and all the people continued on their way and their lives, when the men in the van and truck and me had just been put off course in ours. I spent the day thinking about all the what ifs. For instance, just before I was at the intersection there was a vehicle turning ahead of me. He was very slow and I was feeling impatient and wondering why he wouldn't hurry up (didn't he know I had somewhere to go?). What if he had not been in front of me to slow me down? I thought of the man in the van. He was from the Hutterite colony and normally his van would have been filled with women and children, why was it not at that time? I really felt that something bigger than this world had intervened and saved me. I felt that I should give a prayer of thanks but I didn't know who to say it to. So out loud I said "*Thank you Jesus, heavenly angels, and the spirits who are watching over me, and if it was you grandma from the spirit world than I thank you too.*" I felt a bit foolish saying it like this, but I wanted to cover all my bases!

This has left me thinking all week that I really need to solidify my beliefs and try to figure out what my belief system is. I absolutely believe divine intervention was at work this week, but feel very lost in knowing how to react to this knowledge and who to say my prayers to.

I would greatly appreciate any emails from any of you telling me how you are living or try to come to terms with your spirituality. I know that the wonderful thing about UU is that we all have our own person beliefs and that what you believe may not be what I need, but I would love to hear from you anyway!

I apologise for the ramble, but feared if I took the time to proof read and articulate further I may miss the check-in again, so you are receiving this off the cuff.

Cheers!
Noreen Smith

a response from Alison Kilpatrick

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Dear Noreen:

I thought the bit about the dentist was tough enough :-)) but I read the rest of your story, transfixed. You have a gift for having placed me there, with you, during your driving-through-the-intersection episode. Virtual tenterhooks and all that jazz!

But when you wrote, "*So out loud I said* 'Thank you Jesus, heavenly angels, and the spirits who are watching over me, and if it was you grandma from the spirit world than I thank you too.' *I felt a bit foolish saying it like this, but I wanted to cover all my bases!*", I laughed right out loud. Me, who sneaks into a Catholic church on occasion (having been raised Anglican) for that peculiar form of respite, but who also has plans to erect a fairy table in the backyard and also wonders, hmmm, do the elders, any of them, have any idea what we're up to??

I hope you're feeling better and really, it's all the dentist's fault :-)).

Virtual hugs to you.

Alison, in Clementsport, Nova Scotia

from Janet Vickers

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Sorry I didn't get around to sending you anything - had it on my list of to do but was busy with our daughter home from South Africa and a friend who was having a holiday here for two weeks. On top of that we are packing to move to Gabriola. If I don't send anything for next month you could use this. Also to let you know that my Lipstick Press now has a website <http://www.lipstickpress.com> and we have just published another book which I will promote as soon as I have time.

followed by

I am sitting in my neighbour's house while our stuff is being moved from our house on to the moving truck. Tomorrow we head out to Gabriola in two cars also full of stuff and will stay at friends' on Gabriola tomorrow night and then move into our new home on the 27th Feb. Our address is 767 Chelwood Road, RR #1, Gabriola BC V0R 1X1. My new email as of March 2nd will be janetvickers@shaw.ca.

Here's hoping all goes well - we shall be more relaxed when things are in place.

Regards, Janet Vickers

from Kim Stark, also in February

<mailto:starttle@gmail.com>

Hi there,

I never check in or participate in this newsletter/connection process at all really (though I do read parts of it sometimes when there is a moment), and I have often thought about withdrawing from this "community" you are trying to create. But each time I decide I definitely will write and withdraw, I think about this very tiny nature school I run in London, and I am given reason to pause. The reason is this: we are a very tiny nature school. We have ten kids and a staff of two. And what we are trying to do really is create community, because I believe that people learn better in community, where they can be seen and heard and valued for who they are, rather than be reshaped to fit into a box that maybe will not serve them in life. And here is what I have to say about creating and sustaining community, especially a kind of "alternative" community that requires mindful, intentional and active participation on the part of its members to grow and be sustainable and that also requires its members to step outside their comfort zones, or their own busy schedules occasionally...it's bloody hard!

Several things have prompted me to write this: first, the situation in Haiti and especially what it must be like to be a child there right now; second that it is Ground Hog Day and what that means on all the different levels; third, your plea for people to participate, to connect, to be intentional about being a community at a distance; and fourth, a book I just read to my students by Kate DiCamillo called The Magician's Elephant.

Before I explain the connection between all these things, maybe I should tell you some things about what I do with my time and with my life. I am a single mom with two kids. Several years ago, when I was in seminary, I designed and developed a curriculum for UU Sunday school programs and bravely took it to the UUA General Assembly in Portland OR. At the same time, I was valiantly trying not to have a crisis of faith and I was hoping that going to GA would help with that. What happened instead was that I met a lot of discouraged and overworked but really dedicated volunteer Religious Education people who left me notes all over my display table and sought me out at restaurants to talk to me about this thing I had created. But the crisis of faith eventually won out and I stopped offering the curriculum for sale, quit seminary and entered my own "dark night". What would I do with my life now?

I did a lot of things during this dark night, but one thing I did not do was think about Unitarian Universalism or nature and peace curricula, or how to reach kids that were having trouble or make lesson time of any kind better for them or more fun or less tedious or more real or anything at all to do with kids or school or teaching. And that is when a neighbour I did not know literally leaped into my path and asked me to start a school. I am not kidding. He asked me to start a school based on this curriculum I had designed for UU Sunday schools. He would provide all the funds and he had a building. How he even knew about this curriculum or who I was or anything still remains a mystery, but the end result is that now I operate a small, not-for-profit private school with a hands on, experiential, cross-curricular, nature-based curriculum (that's a mouthful isn't it?).

So I think about children a lot and I remember what it was like to be one (because I am Peter Pan-ish and have never really grown up) and the situation in Haiti made me think two things. First, I wondered what it must be like to be a child there, and I was heartbroken by the thought, because, at first I thought "there is nothing I can really do." And then I thought (and I am not even kidding): *"This is a paradox. Always, with this sort of thing, there exists this paradox. It is easier to help those in great need if they are not a part of our community. It seems more urgent or maybe even that our help is worth more in a crisis, than here at home."* I have heard the same debate with regards to poverty, illness, homelessness, lack of literacy-everything. It is true, I cannot directly and this minute change anything that is going on for the children of Haiti, but what I do, even though I do it for a very few children right now, just might change what the world looks like 10 or 20 years from now.

Most of the kids who attend my school were not successful in public elementary schools. A lot of them have learning challenges. It would take a book to tell you how different these children are now, to what they were when they started school in September. And the difference is not that they understand math better, or can write really good essays now, or even that they are better musicians, artists, actors. It is not that they can spot where a deer path runs through the woods and follow it until they find the animal itself. It is not that they have become so much a part of the woods that the birds will land on their hands when they are still. It is not that even the smallest four year old could lead anyone unerringly through the acres and acres of forest without becoming lost, even though all these things are true.

It is that, somehow, these children have become comfortable with themselves. They have been truly seen and found -- by me, yes, but also by each other, in our tiny child-led community. And because they themselves have been found, they can put themselves in someone else's shoes, they can admit when they are wrong and instead of feeling badly or stupid about it, can think together to find a solution, they can listen to each other and really hear, and most of all, they can allow their natural sense of justice and compassion to come to the forefront.

I believe these kids have the power to change the world. I wish to be part of the community that preserves and nurtures in them this power. I wish for the overworked, overwrought, completely exhausted parents who are part of my school community and the other adults who are part of the wider community, to see this too and help me. But even if they don't, or can't or won't, I can and I will and that is a powerful feeling. Imagine the power it would have if we all felt it?

Each day, my little brood and I spend several hours out in the woods. No matter the weather, no matter the temperature, there we are, visiting our favorite haunts, tracking, hunkering down, trying in vain to light fires without matches. Today, being Groundhog Day, and one of our favorite haunts being a Groundhog Hill, there was a lot of talk about the seasons and about the meaning of Groundhog Day. We went to the hill. We sat. We waited for ground hogs. None came. But, there was a rabbit, several squirrels, a whole harem of wild turkeys, deer, a coyote, a fat, very black raccoon, traces of beaver and hawk, and some teeny tiny tracks that must have been made by a very small rodent. No ground hogs. No shadows either. The kids cheered. They crowed in triumph. Soon winter would be over!

Now, these kids experience winter on a whole different level than other people so I can understand their excitement. I too, would like winter to be over. I am so cold, I might never warm up again. But when winter is over, it will be harder to find the animals we like to watch. When winter is over, we will not be able to visit the Groundhog Hill because for many months it will be too wet and it is also where the coyotes den in the spring, so it will not be safe to go there. The deer will disappear too and the birds of prey and the fat chickadees we are taming, will go wild again.

Right now, animals and birds are hungry. They are cold. Food and safe shelter is hard to find. Tracks and traces are easy to see. So out there in the woods, where it is dark and cold, animals who would otherwise not be in community, are. And it is a rich and fertile time of learning for the kids who belong there too. What does that say about winter? We talked, the kids and I, and we decided that six more weeks of winter might be a good thing. There is a lot to be done, a lot to discover, a lot to explore, before spring comes again. And really, no matter how hard we hope and want to believe in a groundhog and her shadow, the truth is, where we live, there will always be six more weeks of winter on the 2nd of February. And you must have winter in order to have spring.

Today, the kids and I finished reading The Magician's Elephant. It is a beautiful and heartbreaking and redeeming book. It is about being seen and found and loved and being home. One of the things we have been studying at school is homes. People homes and animal homes and what makes a home. What we discovered is, home is wherever you can be yourself and be welcome and worthy, it is a place where you are safe, found, loved, seen and valued for who you really are. Most of the animals whose homes we have come across live in community, which is part of the feeling of home -- part of the critical criteria for "home" according to my 4th graders.

At Sitting Tree School, we try to forge a community where you can be seen and heard and valued and safe and cared for. It is challenging and tiring and some days I wonder whether it is worth it. Mostly this is in the mornings when it is dark and I have not had enough sleep. And then I see the kids, and I see how they work in community and how they are changed by being a part of it and how the whole community is changed each time one of them does something a little differently, a little more authentically. And I hope the grown-ups are watching, because there is a lot to learn there about cooperation and support and accountability and transformation and acceptance and good humour too. But the best thing about my day (and this is how I gauge how well I am doing my job) is when we are tired and cold and hungry out in the woods and one of the kids says "*Kim, can we go home now?*" And the home they are talking about is school.

I am attaching something we do for homework every night (there are variations on this) if it is of interest to anyone. It is an awareness exercise and I find it is good for slowing down, and remembering what has real value in life. It is meant to be done with another person but you can do it alone too.

I hope you are well.

best, Kim

from Elisabeth Michnick

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Life has been very busy. What with the exciting Olympics to watch and the many activities here at my retirement home. A movie was produced of the drama group I am a part of. and another one of an intergenerational exchange I participated in. Both turned out very well I have been writing poetry in our poetry group. Last week I participated in a meeting about the redevelopment of a subsidized housing project close to my home. These are mainly activities I never participated in my life before. Part of my philosophy has been that if you miss opportunities in life you should not despair because they may well occur later. This has proved very true for me Old age so far has been rewarding and happy. Bye for now

a response from me

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Thanks, Elisabeth! I'm so glad you're finding old age is rewarding and happy. I have a little project developing in my mind at the moment called "reclaiming old age" – because I'm disturbed about all the emphasis on staying young whatever our age. "Old" seems to be a taboo word, whereas it could be a good one, as you illustrate.

followed by

I am almost overwhelmed by the depth and breadth of all the wonderful contributions above. It almost makes me reluctant to include a check-in of my own, because my life seems so ordinary. But then I remember the wisdom of the saying, "**bloom where you are planted**", and realize that even the most commonplace of our experiences has the potential for learning and wisdom and – at least as important – deep joy. So I offer you one of my commonplace happenings this month: on a late February day I looked out from the house to our almost-adjointing pond, which still had ice around the edges, and saw a fish swimming! Now this is just an ordinary goldfish, only about six inches long, one of several that inhabit the pond – but to see that it (and, I later saw, some of its companions) had survived the winter, was my annual February thrill. Since then, more snow has fallen and the temperature has dropped again – **still, I know they're there!**
Love, Anne

I had planned to include with this issue excerpts from a service I led years ago on the theme raised by several of the check-in contributions -- namely the relationship of our rational beliefs to our personal experience -- but there's so much here already that I'm going to save that for next time, and just offer you these snippets from the service, which I hope complement what you've already read above. More in April!

Welcome

..... whether you consider yourself a theist or an atheist,
an agnostic or a humanist, a sun-worshipper or a rationalist,
or whether you don't know quite who you are or where you fit,
whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey,
welcome here today!

Opening Words

*For the beauty of the earth, this spinning blue green ball, yes!
Gaia, mother of everything, we walk gently across your back
to come together again -- to remember how we can live,
to remember who we are, to create how we will be.
Gaia, our home, the lap in which we live -- welcome us.*

Song

Winds be still. Storms clouds pass and silence come.
Peace grace this time with harmony.
Fly bird of hope, and shine light of love,
And in calm let all find tranquillity.

Happy Spring to you all!

photos received from the Annapolis Royal Historic Gardens, a few days ago

