

RESOURCE 4.2

Lives of unbelief:
extended interviews

The following interviews accompany Aubrey Wade's portraits, 'Lives of unbelief'. They are extended versions of those found in the book (Section 4, pages 18–19). Ideas for teaching and learning can be found on Resource 4.1 online. A gallery of Aubrey's portraits from five countries is available:

www.aubreywade.com/unbelief



Caz and Tallis

Caz Ingall (40) and her daughter Tallis (13) stand beside the ash tree planted on Tallis' placenta.

The tree stands in a small clearing in Tallis Wood, the woodland Caz

and her husband Tom planted near Leamington Spa, UK, whilst she was pregnant with their first child. 'It just felt absolutely right to give the placenta back to the earth,' says Caz, 'so it could continue to give life after it had done its work sustaining Tallis' life.'

In Celtic astrology February, the month of Tallis' birth, falls under the sign of the ash tree, 'so we planted the only ash tree in the woodland on her placenta. It was a lovely thing to do together after she was born. We offered gratitude and prayers for a vibrant and healthy life.'

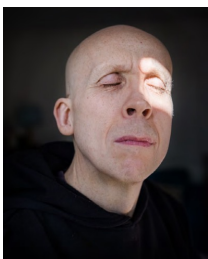
Caz, who does not believe in God, considers herself to be spiritual but not religious.

'I take my lessons from life and am strongly influenced by what I see around me in the natural world,' says Caz. 'Its cyclical nature, for example, I recognise those rhythms in my own journey through the years. That can play out across the year and across the seasons but it can also play out throughout the day – the constant cycle of growth, expansion, contraction, life, growth, death and rebirth.'

'The miracle of life is something quite profound but it's something we take for granted,' she continues. 'It's part of everything that is and it's an inevitability of the world we live in. It's like spring, or the urge to grow, to breathe, to live. Even in the most harsh conditions there's an urge for life. I can't understand it or explain it, nor do I feel like I need to.'

'The meaning of life is to live and die and be a part of everything that is, a part of the continuous cycle. As humans, we tend to over-complicate things.'

Image and interview © Aubrey Wade 2019



Jay

Jay Livingstone (48), an agnostic originally from Birmingham, UK, is searching for a concept for the soul.

Jay grew up in a deprived neighbourhood of Birmingham in

the 1970s, during the atomic era and the Cold War. 'I never believed in God. Science spearheaded our vision of the future,' he says. To Jay, it felt like an optimistic vision. He pursued his studies and embarked on a professional career as an engineer. 'I thought science had all the answers I needed.'

Until, at the age of 27, his girlfriend's heart suddenly stopped. 'She died three times, but the doctors brought her back,' he says. When the doctors told him they couldn't repair her condition, it challenged his trust in science. 'As an engineer, I couldn't accept this.'

He started down a path of seeking answers. 'Science provides no comfort for the fear of dying, for example.

It is amazing at improving our lives, but when trying to answer life's bigger questions, it just leaves you out in the cold.'

'I no longer believe things have to be one thing or another. I'm interested in the space in-between. I try to reimagine this world with more of a mystical and magical sense. For example, in the shamanic journeying I'm doing to try to connect with my soul.'

'The beats of the drum put my brain into an altered state of consciousness and I engage with a different world. But when I describe what I see, is it a metaphor I'm describing, or did my soul really go into that world? There are certain things we can't understand.'

'Grasping the concept of the soul,' he concludes, 'is like trying to grasp soft sand falling through your fingers. The moment you try to name it or give it a form, it instantly becomes wrong, incomplete.'

Image and interview © Aubrey Wade 2019

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Lola

Lola Tinubu, 53, is an atheist and a humanist who lives in London, UK.

She is the co-founder of the Association of Black

Humanists, a group for people, particularly from the African diaspora, who are freethinkers, non-believers, atheists and humanists.

‘I grew up in a Seventh Day Adventist family. I had a happy childhood and felt safe, but we were also taught that the outside world was evil. I grew up with a segregated view of the world and fear of others.’

‘My father encouraged me to watch science documentaries with him. After one screening, he said, ‘science is fact, but our faith is the truth.’ That was probably the moment the penny dropped for me. I started reading and haven’t stopped since. One of my goals in life is to learn as much as I can. It’s an endless journey that will occupy me for the rest of my life.’

‘It took me nearly three decades to leave the church. When I became non-religious, I hurt my family but I didn’t harm anyone. I believe harm is the measure of good and bad. We should strive to avoid harm.’

‘I think the way to understand the world is through investigation, science and research. Science tells us about how things exist at their fundamental state, to the best of our current knowledge. Science can also guide one in making moral decisions.’

‘For example, understanding the environment is now a moral issue. How we care about others and the other species we are sharing the planet with. And how we regard others too. Science has shown all human beings belong to the same species so we should respect and care for each other.’

‘I don’t believe in the supernatural. Everything is within nature. Humanism is about how you live without belief in the supernatural. So humanism includes a kind of philosophy and moral guidance. There being no ultimate meaning of life doesn’t mean our existence needs to be meaningless. The beauty of believing that nothing is beyond questioning is that we can determine for ourselves what is meaningful to us and give life meaning.’

Image and interview © Aubrey Wade 2019



Robert

Robert Freudenthal (32) is a member of a liberal synagogue in London, UK.

He describes himself as Jewish but not God-centred. When he got married a few years ago, he decided to explore different communities

and explore how to think about God.

‘There are things I like and things I don’t like about the religious practice. Although I identify as not believing in God in a religious sense, I am relaxed about the language of God in services or rituals.’

‘In Jewish practice it’s quite common to have that sort of dissonance. For me it’s completely okay to be 100% atheist and still go to religious services.’

‘Religious scriptures can help us understand ourselves, the relationships we form, and the world around us. I see God in that situation as just another character in the story, like Moses, or the Pharaohs, or whoever else.’

‘For me it’s really important to have a sense of connection with the world around us, whether that’s seasonal or weekly change, the natural world, or our history in terms of migration and movement of people.’

‘The Jewish calendar and the rituals mark the passing of time and provide anchor points to reflect on life. Observing them locates me within a community of people, strengthens my relationships, and encourages me to think about how I can contribute to making the world a better place.’

‘Whether you’re from a Jewish family, as I am, or whether you convert to being Jewish, very much part of being a member of that community, and being a part of the ritual, is having a sense of connection with the stories of people before you. Feeling connected to the struggles that previous generations have gone through is helpful in understanding what’s happening in the world at the moment.’

‘The Pesach (Passover) Seder, for example, is more about liberation from slavery and the ways in which we were and still are oppressed [than about God]. It’s an opportunity to talk about contemporary issues. This year we included a chilli pepper on the Seder plate to represent the climate crisis.’

‘In Judaism there’s this concept of repairing the world (‘tikkun olam’). It’s the idea that social action, doing work in order to help people, can be seen as a form of religious activity. That really speaks to me.’

‘Being part of a religious community offers music, spirituality and relationships, but more than that, it reminds me I’m on a journey to understand myself better and motivates me to help others around me.’

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