

Humanism

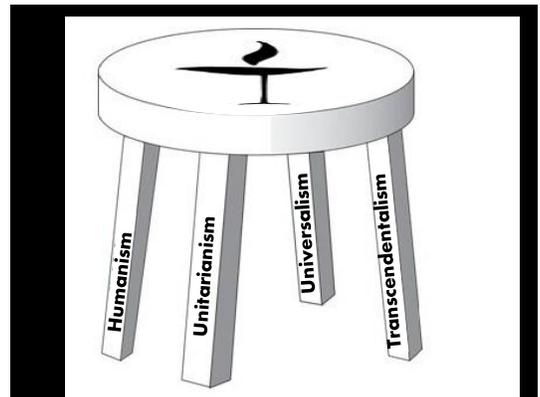
*A Sermon preached for the All Souls UU Church
By Christine Robinson on February 20, 2022*

About the time I went into ministry, 40 years ago.... the Religious Right was focused on a whipping boy...the root of all evil in this nation....and it was...Humanism! Godless Humanism, no less. Godless humanism was blamed for supposed social ills like abortion and divorce, for crime rates, for wayward teenagers...and on and on. They got a lot of press for their accusations. It was all very hyped up. Perhaps some of you remember that era.

As the new minister of a UU Fellowship whose members...good people all, and mostly thinking of themselves as Humanists...were struggling with the tasks of managing their congregation and paying their part time minister, I was astounded. Us, the root of all evil? What.... power! I wondered why I didn't notice more of it around me.

It made for a few fun sermons. After all, most of us don't get called the root of all evil every day. But then, other scapegoats for the discomforts of change arose and the Religious Right dropped us cold. Oh, well!

We've been focusing this year on the intellectual basis of our faith, which I'd like to picture as a four-legged stool. Our denominational history and thinking is formed by two theological positions, Unitarianism and Universalism, and two philosophies, Humanism and Transcendentalism. Four "isms" are the legs; we each sit on the stool, grounded and held by these four legs, and it's good to know about them



Of course, in this non-creedal faith, where you are free to believe and explore as your spirit takes you, these four "isms" don't limit your explorations. Indeed, even while we explore the roots of our denomination in four "isms" we should be aware that as somebody said, "Every 'ism' is a 'wasim'."

Many UU's for instance, are intrigued by Buddhism and engage in Buddhist practices. I myself am drawn to the wisdom of the Tao Te Ching. These days, many UU's think of themselves as atheists

or pagans. All that diversity is fine with us. The seat of our UU stool is broad enough for us all. But historically and institutionally, we have these four legs.

Humanism is at least as old as Socrates and it is as new as the “New Humanism” movement about which you heard in the reading. Humanism places the human race, with its potential and accomplishments at the center of the matrix of values that make up all of our lives, rather than any sort of God. That usually, but not necessarily means that that Humanists don’t believe in God. There have been many versions of Humanists through the ages, such as Renaissance Humanists who thought of themselves as thoroughly Christian but who constructed an educational curriculum which taught men to revere all human knowledge, even that of non-Christians such as Socrates and Plato. Beethoven brought a version of humanism into classical music, which is why Sharon is treating us to Beethoven this morning.

I once knew a radical nun who had set up a food program for the homeless and addicted in her neighborhood. When people muttered that she should be tending the spiritual life, she responded by saying, “The last thing our Lord said was, 'Feed my sheep'. He didn't say 'Convert them and send them to me in heaven,' he said, ‘feed them.’ This is a strong Humanistic expression of an orthodox faith. Other Humanists are a little more off-beat



Humanism as a faith statement says that human beings, as individuals, as a species, with our glorious faculties and our nearly unlimited possibilities are what is ultimate in our world, and what is Good is the beauty we experience, the love we feel, the powers we gain, and so on. Humanists generally feel that it is at best immature and at worst dangerous to project any of these qualities on a supernatural God, whether personal or impersonal, and believe that there is enough of meaning right here in our physical and intellectual forms to keep us satisfied.

Those who are humanists will find the Greek Philosophy of Stoicism and parts of the European philosophy of existentialism congenial to their thinking. Someone told me lately that he considered humanism the faith of romantic stoics and Existentialism the faith of pessimistic humanists...and anyone who understood that on first hearing gets an "A" in Philosophy Class! Here it is again: Humanism is the faith of romantic stoics and Existentialism the faith of pessimistic humanists.

The Unitarian Universalist denomination is one of the few in which Humanists can be out of the closet, and many of our congregations, especially lay-lead ones, are predominately Humanist in their orientation. Our denomination, of course, began as a sort of semi-heretical, liberal Christianity. In the mid-19th century, spurred by Emerson and other Transcendentalists, many Unitarians and Unitarian congregations dropped much of the specifically Christian language and adopted a kind of general theism; a belief in a God, sometimes a non-personal God, which could be known in many ways, not just through the teachings of Jesus. There were some liberal Christian Unitarians who didn't like this development, but when human beings are involved, freedom usually brings change.

American Humanism began with Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* and set thoughtful people to imagining a philosophy of life which focused on human good and this life without taking a stand of other aspects of life, such as God or the afterlife, which, they very sensibly pointed out, we don't know anything about. After the Civil War, Humanism spread, spurred on by European intellectual developments such as Evolution Science and Literary...and Biblical Criticism. After World War I, a vigorous Humanist movement was often led by Unitarian ministers. UU ministers led others at the University of Chicago to form the American Humanist Society in 1927. This organization still exists.



At the same time as the Humanists formed a group of their own, whole chunks of Unitarian congregations began to think of themselves as Humanists. Naturally enough, the Christians and transcendentalists thought that this was taking things just a bit too far, and, once again, talk of establishing a creed for the sake of determining who could be a Unitarian came up again for a while...and then died down.

The first Humanists thought of themselves as Religious humanists. They acknowledged a spiritual energy in human beings which they revered, and they loved to re-define traditional religious language to their purposes. Those Humanists had poets and hymn-writers among them, and of those, Kenneth Patton was king. We'll sing a final hymn by Patton, and here he is on the meaning of Worship.

Let us worship, not in bowing down,
not with closed eyes and stopped ears.
Let us worship with the opening of all the windows of our beings,
with the full outstretching of our spirits.
Life comes with singing and laughter,
with tears and confiding,
with a rising wave too great to be held in the mind
and heart and body,
to those who have fallen in love with life.
Let us worship, and let us learn to love.

-- Kenneth L. Patton

This was the religion of my childhood, growing up in a Unitarian and then a Unitarian Universalist church. This particular reading was so much a part of my growing up that I could recite most of it, and for many years, when someone would say, "Let us bow our heads and pray", my first, and most spiritual impulse was to sit up straight and behold the wonder of the world with my open eyes and ears.

Here then, are some tenets of Religious Humanism.

1. Humanists believe that religion is too important to be based on unprovable beliefs such as belief in God. Humanists believe that we need to base the meaning of our lives on something that we can be sure of, that is here with us, that gives us meaning and purpose. The most obvious value to replace God, is, of course, the Human being, the fulfillment of human life, and the development of human potential.

The Greek Philosopher Protagoras makes this point perfectly. He said: "Man is the measure of all things. Concerning the gods, I am not in a position to experience their existence or otherwise, for the difficulties are many which prevent this experience, and life is short." That is to say, We can not know much of the divine, but we do know much of the Human. That, then, should be the center of our values and of the meaning of our life.

2. Humanists believe that Human nature is essentially good and destructiveness and human evil arise from failures to develop. There is nothing so horrifying to a Humanist than the traditional Christian ceremony of baptism which "washes away" the original sin of an infant. To call a human infant evil is, to a Humanist, a desecration of all that is holy in the world. Humanism, when it expresses itself in social movements, works hard for conditions which will help human beings develop the goodness which is latent within them, and to eliminate those which frustrate the human spirit and lead to anger, crime, or starvation of body or mind.

Of all the values which I received from my Humanist upbringing, the most important was an oft-repeated faith in the dignity and worth of every human being as someone with the potential to grow in goodness. This is an extremely challenging article of faith; and it is an article of faith. It is no more provable than is the existence of God or the divinity of Jesus or the reality of reincarnation; indeed, there are days when any newspaper would seem to make belief in the dignity and goodness of humanity seem quite outlandish. Nevertheless, humanists hold strongly to this belief, and the world, I believe, is better for their faith.

3. Humanists believe that religion is something you do, rather than something you think or feel. Humanists are not alone in this, of course. This is a way of religion which shows up in one form or another in every tradition. However, Humanists have, perhaps, taken this style to an extreme. Religious humanism is a task rather than a belief. Humanists don't dream or pray about the dignity of persons or the value of this, present life, they do it. They find their sense of meaning in life as a consequence of their service to these ideals rather than as a consequence of simply believing.

It is these two tenets; in the dignity and value of every person and in the necessity of doing as a necessary part of believing that Humanism finds its ethical system. It is said that Humanism has no values except fulfilling one's self, and this is not true at all. Strictly taken, Humanism gives us more advice than most of us want about living a good life. Drinking oneself to death is a sin against the potential each of us has within. Telling lies is a sin against the relationships within which we exist and allowing human beings to starve to death is a kind of deicide, a killing of something of ultimate value. Discrimination against persons because of race or sex offends a humanist understanding of the essential equality of human beings. Conditions which thwart the growth and freedom of the human spirit are to be vigorously opposed. Blasting the earth into empty space with nuclear weapons is, to a Humanist, the destruction of every iota of value in the universe and must be avoided at all costs. Taken seriously, Humanism is an extremely challenging way to live, and humanists have often found themselves working on the frontiers of social change with other religious people who believe in the importance of this life.

Finally, Religious humanism includes reverence for the natural sources of our being. We did not create our own lives. It is appropriate, say humanists, to have an attitude of thankfulness and to cultivate a general sense of gratitude for all we have been given. This, of course, is another place where humanism and other religious faith systems intersect, for gratitude is a part of all religious life.

Responsible criticism of Humanism falls into two categories, logical and theological. Logicians point out that Humanists reject belief in God because there can be no proof of such a being but

embrace the worth and dignity of humans as if that can be proven. Modern Humanists take that criticism to heart, as you will see.

Theologians point out that it is idolatrous to worship or to hold up as ultimate something which is destructible and temporary, and humanism almost certainly falls into this category. Science tells us that humanity is almost certainly doomed in the long run, when our sun burns out, and our daily newspaper presents several much more immediate possibilities for human degradation or extinction. This decreases the satisfactions of holding the Human as the meaning of our lives.

However, for those who do find within themselves a faith in the goodness and dignity of humanity and who do not believe in or are not troubled by the possibility of human extinction, Humanism is a satisfying, challenging, and noble system of faith.

Humanism was flushed with success in the middle of the last century. They had lots of adherents, they had worked hard for the worth and dignity and just treatment of all human beings in the successes of the civil rights movement. At some point in all this, Humanism morphed into something they called "Secular Humanism." Secular humanism was seen as a totally rational movement which rejected all things religious. One of its proponents was Gene Roddenberry, the producer of *Star Trek*. Someone once said that "Roddenberry is one of the saints of humanism, but he saddled the movement with its most difficult-to-shake stereotype: Spock. Smart, logical, honest, and well intentioned, but self-righteously clueless about the unquantifiable side of life, *Star Trek's* Spock epitomizes both the positive and negative sides of the secular humanist image."¹

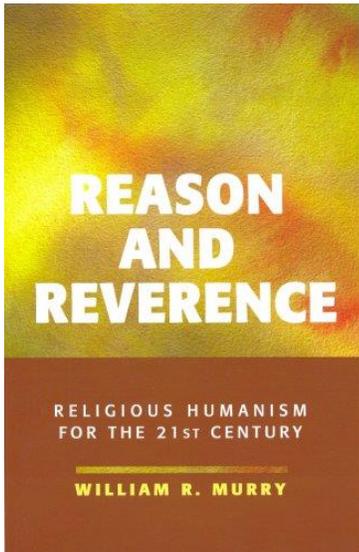
Within Unitarian Universalism, the ascendance of secular humanism began to wane in the 1980's. The UU Christians of New England and the Universalist Christians in the south began to speak up to object to belonging to a denomination that allowed but never acknowledged them. UU women began to object to the very male dominated Humanist leadership and, especially, language. I still remember the moment when I decided that I would never again sing a line like, "Brother love binds man to man," which the men of the day insisted should include me. In this matter, I'm afraid, the Humanist leadership was as bull headed as Mr. Spock. UU women started studying the Goddess. As a new minister, it seemed to me best to take all the theological ferment as a gift and begin to ask how Unitarian Universalism could embrace and practice theological diversity, and many congregations took the same tack.

For 40 years or so, Unitarian Universalism has been a very diverse religious community, gathered around doing things together that help us grow in our own sweet ways. Worship has changed to include more that might appeal to the feeling side of our lives, there is more talk about spirituality, which might be considered attention to intuition and religious experience. There are

¹ Chaplain Greg Epstein at "The New Humanism" conference held at Harvard in 2010, as reported in the UU World

still plenty of Humanists among us, although the Millennial generation and later seem to prefer to call themselves atheists rather than humanists.

Some years ago, the Rev. Bill Murray, proposed a new Humanism; a humanism defined in ways more appealing to younger generations and cognizant of the criticism humanism garnered as it began to wane amongst us.



Murray calls his theology humanistic religious naturalism. By “humanistic” he means centered in the human, by naturalism, he means to indicate that he believes that this natural world that we can see and touch and live in now is the only one of importance to us, and by religious he means that this is no mundane, take-it-all for granted philosophy of life but one steeped in the religious or spiritual sentiments of awe, wonder, joy, and thanksgiving. If that philosophy intrigues you, the book is available widely and has great potential for a book or study group!

Humanism has been in our UU bones from the beginning, and it was our visible UU body for a while, and it is still with us as a vital and commonly chosen philosophy of life. It’s one of the legs of the four-legged stool that forms the solid surface which grounds the explorations which are the hallmark of Unitarian Universalism.

Benediction: Life comes with singing and laughter,
with tears and confiding,
with a rising wave too great to be held in the mind
and heart and body,
to those who have fallen in love with life.

Whatever your theology, I bid you go and fall in love with life!