

June 8, 2008

Sermon “Being a Religious Humanist: Engaging Our Fifth Source”

“The living tradition we share draws from many sources.” Among these are, “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

Reason. Science. To the humanist Unitarian Universalist, these are the familiar and reassuring moorings to which we lash our otherwise free-floating “search for truth and meaning.” In a worldview that sees no evidence for the existence of the supernatural, that rejects any divine authority, we are free to wander where we will: from theory to theory, from self-help fad to new-age enthusiasm to pop psychologist to the latest political cause – all in our search for something to anchor our restless minds and hungry spirits.

If the six sources from which our tradition derives guidance and wisdom represent different tributaries, flowing together to meet in the strong and beautiful river that is Unitarian Universalism, the Humanist stream is an invigoratingly chilly one. A cold splash of water in the face when we are tempted to get carried away by vaguely feel-good concepts, ill-formed ideas and fuzzy language. Our Humanist source provides a bracing corrective to intellectual laziness.

This is the great virtue of Humanism. Science and reason provide a reality check in this age of anti-intellectualism and pat answers. This has also been traditional secular Humanism’s greatest weakness: its failure to address the human need for softer, warmer and more welcoming waters – waters that hold us up in hard times, soothe our aches and comfort our fears.

Can Humanism be humanized? Can reason and science, the rejection of the supernatural, be our anchor – a check against the ridiculous, the superstitious or the merely improbable – and still nourish our spirits? Can Humanism guard against the idolatries of spirit – the false gods of superstition and authoritarian tradition, of consumerism, nationalism and power – but also the idolatries of mind? The false gods of facts and figures, of technological know-how and scientific advancement for its own sake? Can science and religion co-exist and complement one another? Can reason and faith be partners in our quest for lives worth living? This is, after all, the promise of our fifth source: “Humanist teachings that counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

Is Humanism enough? Hamlet poses this question when he says, “What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?” Can we quintessences of dust be enough? Religious Humanism’s answer is, “Well, yes and no...”

Like traditional secular humanism, religious humanism eschews reliance on a supernatural god. Like secular humanism, religious humanism affirms that our shared fate is in our hands, not God’s. Unlike traditional secular humanism, religious humanism recognizes that the individual is nothing – cannot exist, in fact – without community, without relationship. Relationship to others, relationship to the living world, relationship to the past and future, relationship to a sense of the sacred. We need one another. We are religious creatures.

The story of my own spiritual journey may help illustrate how humanism has evolved in the past fifty years. As you know by now, I grew up in a strictly humanist Unitarian congregation. Reason and science. These were the measures of validity. An idea that could not pass these tests, that could not be defended by these standards, was an idea not worth having.

Not that we were an uncaring people. I also heard a demanding social gospel preached on Sundays. A liberal worldview that held up equality and fairness, honesty and self-determination, constant self-examination and an unforgiving conscience. A worldview that was, frankly, spiritually and psychologically exhausting. I learned at an early age that integrity meant living by one's highest values and that a life without such integrity was a life wasted.

There was beauty in my church, especially in the music. And there was humor, but often of a rather snide and dismissive variety. I cringed at our apparent sense of moral and intellectual superiority, especially when talking about those poor benighted Christians. Of course, there were many kind people in this congregation, but judgmental sarcasm and one-upmanship were common in this competitive academic environment. It was hard, if not impossible for a shy and insecure young person to feel very much at home there. It never occurred to me that the church might be a place to turn to in times of spiritual need. My church was rigorously Unitarian and did not embrace the more emotionally accessible and forgiving faith of the Universalists when the merger between the two denominations took place in 1961. We exemplified the humanism of the 1950s and 60s – proudly rational, intellectual and individualistic.

Ours was the humanism of the first Humanist Manifesto, authored in 1933 and signed by fifteen Unitarian clergy (all male.) The first Manifesto boldly stated that “The time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world. The time is past for mere revision of traditional attitudes. Science and economic change have disrupted the old beliefs...” It affirmed that the universe is “self-existing and not created” and that human beings are the product of natural evolution. It rejected the notion of an immortal soul, proclaimed that religion is a human creation and holds that values must be determined “by means of intelligent inquiry and by the assessment of their relation to human needs.” The end and purpose of life, it states, is “the complete realization of human personality.” The humanist “finds religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being.” It concludes, “Though we consider the religious forms and ideas of our fathers no longer adequate, the quest for the good life is still the central task for mankind. Man is at last becoming aware that he alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams, that he has within himself the power for its achievement. He must set intelligence and will to the task.”

It was a noble and idealistic document for a noble and idealistic religious stance. It was also arrogant in its smug dismissal of traditional religion; anthropocentric in its affirmation of humanity’s centrality; naïve about human nature, in those days before the Holocaust and nuclear terror; and coldly rational in its lack of attention to spirituality. I also struggled with the assertion that the truth existed, with a capital “T” – that if our searches for truth and meaning were all to somehow succeed, we would all arrive at the same conclusions. Such were the reservations about humanism that I developed as I got

older and continued my search for something in my religion that could answer my emotional and spiritual hungers without violating my reason and intellect.

As it turned out, my objections to the old humanism were shared by others. I discovered this at the first UU General Assembly I ever attended, the summer before I began seminary. There, I heard the Rev. Bill Murry speak about the “new humanism.” Imagine my relief and excitement to hear the president of the school I was about to attend expressing the very same reservations about humanism that I had been struggling with! And to hear that, yes, there was an alternative: a new religious humanism that drew its inspiration and spiritual sustenance from the natural world.

In his recent book, *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century*, Murry presents a softer and gentler humanism -- less anthropocentric, less cocky, less naïve – one that recognizes the validity of emotional and intuitive intelligence, the yearning to experience awe and reverence, and the need for an overarching story capable of moving and inspiring us. His work deals with the reservations about humanism I had been struggling with and, by setting them in an historical and cultural context, validates an alternative kind of humanism that he calls humanistic religious naturalism. A mouthful, I know. It’s a blend of religious *naturalism*, that contends there is no evidence for the supernatural, finding spiritual meaning in nature, and religious *humanism*, that provides an ethical element to the mix, insisting that humanity has the power and responsibility to act for justice.

Let’s start with the idea that human beings are not the end-all and be-all of existence. That we are not necessarily “the beauty of the world... the paragon of animals.” The same science that we humanists cling to as the final arbiter of truth tells us

that, in fact, we are just one of some thirty million species, all descended from the same speck of life, made up of the same few elements, existing on the same earth and subject to the same biological phenomena. We share the earth with species that are not inferior to us, who are complete and perfect in their own right. Our highly developed capacity for reason and our opposable thumbs are pretty remarkable, but so is the Canadian goose's ability to navigate through thousands of miles of sky and the earthworm's ability to regenerate its body or the cockroach's phenomenal ability to reproduce and survive hostile environments. The new humanism features a healthy humility in the face of the vastness and intricacies of nature and, with this humility, comes consciousness of our responsibility to treat the earth with reverence and respect. Unlike the old humanism, new humanists do not view the natural world as existing for the purpose of furthering the human enterprise. We humans are no longer at the center of the universe.

Neither are humans the creatures of limitless potential and nobility envisioned in the first Humanist Manifesto. The old humanism failed to take account of our human capacity for selfishness, greed and cruelty – for sin, if you will, and for the suffering we cause one another, our fellow species and the earth. In the words of Bill Murray, our humanist forebears failed to express any “sense of the tragic” in this early document. We are sometimes criticized by more orthodox religions, and justly so, for our inability or unwillingness to confront the human potential for evil.

With our modern communication systems comes the knowledge of humanity's too-frequent inhumanity. We can no longer ignore this facet of our human nature. As part of nature, we, like any species, are motivated by self-preservation and self-interest. But we also act altruistically and compassionately. A more nuanced understanding of

human nature, our capacity for both good and evil, is part of the new religious humanism. So is a determination to maximize expressions of the good and to control the evil, the destructive and life-denying aspects of our nature.

And, as natural creatures and full participants in the process of evolution, the new humanists derive deeply religious feelings from being in and observing the natural world and studying the astounding story of the origins of the universe and evolution. We need not exist in denial of the needs of the spirit, surrounded as we are by the wonders revealed by our senses and by science. An experience of unity, of oneness with the universe, is the natural response to the revelations of science about our origins, our place in the relatively tiny ecosystem that is planet Earth. Transcendence of the self, that quintessential religious experience, is founded on the rational, scientific understanding of the vastness of the universe, as is the experience of awe and gratitude for our place in this wondrous world.

Humanism is no longer the cold and unemotional worldview of the first half of the 20th century. One cannot help but respond with religious feeling to the facts that we know but cannot fully grasp – facts about the functioning of the human brain, about the relationship of energy to matter, about the possibility of other universes. We no longer believe that the human mind will inevitably unlock all the secrets of the universe. There are mysteries simply beyond our human grasp. This acceptance of mystery, too, is characteristic of the new humanism.

Some of us call this Mystery God. Divinity as a supernatural being who controls events, a being that resembles a person and has a personal relationship with us – that understanding of God is easy for the humanist to reject. Less easy to reject is the

conception of God as creative life force, or God as our attraction to the good, our capacity to love and to care, or as the totality of “all that is.” At the very least, the new religious humanism is less dogmatic than the old and more tolerant of the unknown and unknowable. We no longer have to choose sides between the voice of reason and science and the voice of faith and religious experience.

This openness to the possibility of there being phenomena beyond our human capacity to grasp would have been unthinkable in the old humanism. A related change is the questioning of absolute truth. As humanism has become less dogmatic and more tolerant, our post-modern culture has taught us to question the nature of reality as a solid, objective, universal absolute. The idea that reality and truth are created through our perceptions and do not exist outside of our senses calls into question the old humanist affirmation of a unified reality discoverable through scientific inquiry. The new humanism is less certain, less authoritative and more cognizant of the role of culture, personality, intuition and emotion in our understanding of truth.

It has been remarked that our UU congregations today are marked by a certain tension between our humanistic, non-theistic elders, with their strong commitment to social justice and rational problem-solving and their optimistic view of human potential, and the younger generation of spiritual seekers, with their desire for more ritual, more religious language and emphasis on personal spiritual growth. In some congregations, the humanists are feeling beleaguered and defensive in the face of a growing sense that their time is past, that they are considered irrelevant. Their contributions to Unitarian Universalism are felt to be disregarded by newer and younger members with their less

politicized interests and lesser commitment to reason as the sole path to truth and meaning.

This dichotomy will never occur in a congregation to which I minister, as long as I can help it. Humanism, old or new, continues to be the heart of liberal religion, even while we embrace a more subjective theology and spirit-centered practice. Dogmatism and intolerance, once so often found in our strongly humanistic congregations, can now be seen in our culture's growing suspicion of science and reason. We must beware of trading one dogmatism for another. Even as I become increasingly interested in exploring the ideas and language of reverence and holiness, my loyalties remain with humanism and my faith remains firmly planted in the ground of reason.

Happily, the two worldviews – the humanistic and the religious -- are no longer mutually exclusive. The old dichotomy is breaking down as we find common ground in nature – nature, or science – as a source of both knowledge and religious experience. Knowledge without feeling is sterile and even dangerous, unmoored as it is by human values. Feeling without knowledge is empty, shallow, transient – and equally dangerous.

Unitarian Universalism is a gift to those of us who seek a balanced and unfettered exploration of truth and meaning. It is big enough, rich enough, complex and flexible enough, to encompass both sides of our human understanding: the intuitive and emotional as well as the rational and empirically-based. In fact, our understanding is one-sided and distorted without both. Truth is evolving – and so is our ability to seek it, no matter the path we follow in the quest, no matter where it may lead us.

This is our great responsibility as religious people, and our great privilege as free thinkers – a privilege earned and fought for by the humanist branch of our tradition,

passed down to us and very much alive – a noble heritage that we honor; a brave and hopeful heritage that lives at the very heart of who we are as a religious people.

Amen.