WHAT DOES HUMANISM MEAN TODAY?

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In addition to our statement of Unitarian Universalist Principles, we also have a list of the sources our religious tradition draws upon. One of these is "Humanist teachings which counsel us to head the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit." This morning I would like to share with you what this means for me.

In 1963, at the invitation of a friend, I attended a Unitarian church for the first time. I was a junior in high school, living in Spokane. The minister was Rudy Gilbert, a deeply thoughtful man with a rich baritone voice. He was speaking a religious language I had never heard before.

Up to that point, largely at my mother's urging, I had attended Lutheran churches in the various cities we lived in. I had dutifully completed the confirmation program, taken my first communion and sung in the youth choir. But as hard as I tried, I couldn't bring myself to believe the Apostles Creed. While I admired the figure of Jesus, the rest of it, frankly, didn't make much sense to me.

What I heard at the Unitarian church, while new to me, *did* make sense. Rudy was a humanist who believed that religion should be grounded in reason and human experience. It should be concerned with interpreting the good life in terms of human values and directing our religious aspirations toward the enhancement of human life. It should be focused on living this one precious life we have to the fullest rather than laying up store for riches in an afterlife we have no reason to believe exists.

As it happened, Unitarian humanism was born in Spokane. John Dietrich had been a minister in the Reformed Church serving a congregation in Pittsburgh between 1905 and 1911. Although he was a popular preacher who substantially increased the size of his congregation, he came to doubt the infallibility of the Bible and the central teachings of the Christian church. Facing a heresy trial, he resigned instead. When he heard of this, a local Unitarian minister suggested he apply for the Unitarian ministry. Once accepted, he was called to the Unitarian Church of Spokane.

Under Dietrich's leadership the congregation quickly outgrew their old church building and began meeting in a theater accommodating an audience of hundreds who flocked to hear him speak. It was in Spokane that he moved away from liberal Christianity, towards what he came to call a "naturalistic humanism." It was naturalistic in the sense

that it embraced the findings of science, including the theory of evolution, and, as a consequence, denied the existence of the supernatural and the personhood of God.

Dietrich soon found others in the Unitarian ministry who shared his views, and the humanist movement in Unitarianism began to spread, but not without controversy. Dietrich went to Minneapolis from Spokane in 1916. While there he partnered with ministerial colleagues to advance the humanist position. They were met with resistance from Unitarian clergy who argued there is no religion or morality without belief in God. In 1921 the so-called Humanist-Theist Controversy brought the issue out in the open. At the Unitarian General Conference that year Dietrich and his opponent, William Sullivan, a former Catholic priest and minister of All Souls Church in New York City, represented the two points of view.

The matter was not resolved on that occasion, but the humanist position steadily gained ground. In 1933 a group of Unitarian ministers and university professors drafted "A Humanist Manifesto." The manifesto consisted of fifteen brief theses. These asserted that religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created; that human beings are part of nature and emerged as a result of a continuing process of evolution; that religion is a product of human development interacting with the natural environment and the social milieu of the individual; that modern science has rendered supernatural guarantees of human values untenable; that outmoded notions of god must be replaced by a naturalistic understanding of the universe; and that the goal of life should be to realize one's fullest development and to find fulfillment in the here and now. The manifesto also insisted that institutions existed for the enhancement of human life and faulted both church and society for their shortcomings.

Religious humanism predominated in mid-western and western Unitarian churches and many churches, even in the east, that were founded in the 1950s and 60s. It was especially prevalent in the Fellowship movement following World War II. But it was not universally adopted. Ours is a free religion and thus we have no uniform creed or confession of faith. Many Unitarians, and Unitarian Universalists after the merger of the two denominations, were and continue to be theists of one kind or another. A number of congregations, particularly in New England, identify themselves as UU Christian churches. While humanism is enshrined in the statement of the sources of our faith, it has faded somewhat from view.

There is confusion today about what humanism means. On the one hand, there is a division between the religious humanists and the secular humanists. If I may say so, the secular humanists are more strident in their atheism and denial of anything suggestive

of spirituality. Religious humanists, while believing that religion is a human construct, nevertheless find inspiration in the writings and teachings of many spiritual traditions. We—since I consider myself a religious humanist—find no evidence for the existence of a supernatural, personal creator of the universe, but we remain receptive to transcendent experiences that reveal hidden dimensions of life. As Thoreau once said, "The Universe is wider than our views of it."

On the other hand, there has been a proliferation in the last thirty years or so of varieties of spirituality, such as Buddhism, yoga, paganism, shamanism, and the like. In many cases these have blended together with other religious identities, forming hybrid expressions of faith, such as — in the case of our own churches — UU Buddhists, Jewish UUs, and numerous idiosyncratic combinations. These are not necessarily in conflict with religious humanism. Buddhism, for instance, posits no kind of supreme being or eternal soul. But these other forms of spirituality do resist the notion that humanism denies their validity. During the past few years there has been a call in our denomination to reclaim religious language, urged by those who feel that words such as grace, sin, salvation, forgiveness, and redemption continue to have meaning apart from their sectarian origins. For these and other reasons, humanism is less prevalent today in our Unitarian Universalist churches.

In American culture as a whole, religious humanism contends with those who argue that there can be no morality, no sense of absolute right and wrong, without God. Many evangelical Christians believe that AIDS, natural disasters, abortion, and promiscuity are attributable to wide-spread atheism. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2017 there were no self-professed humanists or atheists in Congress. There may well be non-believers but it would be the kiss of death for anyone to admit it. Apparently it is more acceptable to be a hypocrite, a bigot, and a sexual predator than it is to be an atheist.

What, then, does humanism mean? Secular humanists deny the existence of anything supernatural, God included. Religious humanists see no evidence of the existence of a supreme being who created the universe and rules over it, granting favors to some, punishing others, promising everlasting life to the devout. We are atheists with respect to that notion of God, and we are reluctant to use the word God because it is so often understood in that way. But there are aspects of nature and human experience that, while difficult to explain, are nevertheless numinous. They have a spiritual quality. They give rise to religions and notions of deity, but they are prior to them. They are intimations of a reality that eludes any final and conclusive definition, either scientifically or theologically. Gods and religions are examples of what philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called "misplaced concreteness."

It might seem contradictory to suggest that there could be such a thing as humanist mysticism. Most people associate mysticism with visions of God, but consider what essayist Scott Russell Sanders writes in his book, *A Private History of Awe*:

> I wish to follow that bright thread, from my earliest inklings to my latest intuitions of the force that animates nature and mind. In the world's religions, the animating power may be called God, Logos, Allah, Brahma, Ch'i, Tao, Creator, Holy Ghost, Great Spirit, Universal Mind, Manitou, Wakan-Tanka, or a host of other names. In physics, it may simply be called energy. In other circles it may be known as wildness. Every such name, I believe, is only a finger pointing toward the prime reality, which eludes all descriptions. Without boundaries or name, this ground of being shapes and sustains everything that exists, surges in every heartbeat, fills every breath, yet it is revealed only in flashes, like a darkened landscape lit by lightening, or in a gradual unveiling, like the contours of a forest laid bare in autumn as the leaves fall.

There is nothing exotic or uncommon about such awakenings, he continues: "I am convinced they come to each of us, whatever our age or circumstances, whatever our beliefs about ultimate things. The enlightenment I wish to describe is ordinary, earthy, within reach of anyone who pays attention." Sanders is what I would call a religious naturalist. He sees no dichotomy between the perennial wisdom of religion and the story of the universe as told by science. "Today," he notes, "physicists and biologists no longer describe the universe as a machine but as a pulsing web, a dance of energy, less like a clock ticking than a mind thinking—the same luminous, animate universe, I believe, as the one described by the great mystics and witnessed by anyone who is sufficiently awake."

In his sermon, "A Humanist Looks at Mysticism," John Dietrich said much the same thing. At certain moments, he writes,

> We become conscious of the life that flows through nature, and makes it like ourselves a living thing. We realize that as far back as our imagination can reach, this life force has been moving and changing and evolving into the myriad forms which make up the wonder of the world, and it is this same life force that inspires and lifts us. We are a part of the creative process. Out of the vital sources of the world we have emerged, and we move along in the great river of cosmic being…. We are but fragments in the boundless sweep of being, links in an infinite chain of existence…. We flow from the eternal source, and are parts of the infinite whole…

In a similar vein, physicist Alan Lightman describes in his book, *Searching for Stars on an Island in Maine*, a transcendent experience he had drifting on a boat at night:

> I lay down in the boat and looked up. A very dark night sky seen from the ocean is a mystical experience. After a few minutes, my world had dissolved into that star-littered sky. The boat disappeared. My body disappeared. And I found myself falling into infinity. A feeling came over me I'd not experienced before…. I felt an overwhelming connection to the stars, as if I were part of them. And the vast expanse of time—extending from the far distant past long before I was born and then into the far distant future long after I will die—seemed compressed into a dot. I felt connected not only to the stars but to all of nature, and to the entire cosmos. I felt a merging with something far larger than myself, a grand and eternal unity, a hint of something absolute.

Working as a physicist for many years, Lightman has always held a purely scientific view of the world. He sees no reason to believe in God, or in any other unproven hypothesis. "Yet after my experience in that boat," he concludes, "I understood the powerful allure of the Absolutes—ethereal things that are all-encompassing, unchangeable, eternal, sacred. At the same time, and perhaps paradoxically, I remained a scientist."

I could just as easily have quoted Emerson, Thoreau or Margaret Fuller because the Transcendentalists shared a similar point of view. The experiences described by Scott Russell Sanders, John Dietrich, and Alan Lightman—and by many others besides—are essentially *human* experiences of a connection to the entire cosmos, of merging with something far larger than the self, "a grand and eternal unity." They do not pit science and religion against each other. They do not require a supernatural explanation; they are their own evidence.

If I prefer term "religious naturalism," it is not because I no longer consider myself a humanist, but because the word humanism seems to put humankind on a pedestal. We are and must be concerned for the welfare of humanity, but we must be aware of our shortcomings as well as our achievements as a species. We are not set apart from the rest of nature; we are part and parcel of it. We are co-dependent, not only with the whole of nature, but also with the rest of humanity. We rise or fall together. And if there is any meaningful sense of morality it consists in allying ourselves with the creative forces that uphold our world and not the negative ones that threaten to destroy it. Transcendent experiences of union with these creative forces both affirm our relation to a greater whole and give us hope that the forces of life are stronger than those of death. In this sense, religious humanism is a form of this-worldly spirituality, honoring both reason and science and our need for connection to one another and the cosmos that is our home.

Walt Whitman was a poet of the soul and a religious naturalist. He wrote:

> …having look'd at the objects of the universe, I find there
> is no one nor any particle of one but has reference to the
> soul.
> Was somebody asking to see the soul?
> See, your own shape and countenance, persons, substances, beasts, the
> trees, the running rivers, the rocks and sands.

Like Whitman, I find the soul nowhere else but here, in this life, in this earth, in this body. And this is what humanism means to me.