

“The Faith of a Unitarian Universalist Humanist”
Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield
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What church would have YOU as its member or friend? YOU with all your thoughts and opinions. You with all your questions and doubts. You with all your idiot-syncretisms, as an old boyfriend of mine used to call it. You with all your gifts...and all your foibles. What church would have YOU? What church would have me?

If you were here several weeks ago when I delivered a sermon I named “Faiths”, you know that, as your minister, I like to have a theme to loosely tie the church year together—a point of view that I said I will come back to now and again when I lead worship, a frame through which we can look at our lives together or from which you can take home things to ponder on your individual path or with your family. It seems useful to me in this Bicentennial Year, when we are looking back at our history, addressing the physical needs of the building in which we meet and which we inherited from those who came before, to think about what it is we think or believe around here. So it will be that you will hear me consider what I am calling the Faiths of Unitarian Universalism, all those different theological threads which form the tapestry of our faith. Your color isn’t quite the same as mine. The person near you in a pew may have a different shade, bright or subdued, sparkling—drawing attention to itself—or happy to sit quietly in the last row, adding texture.

Unitarian layperson Adlai Stevenson once wrote: “I think one of our most important tasks is to convince others that there’s nothing to fear in difference; that difference, in fact, is one of the healthiest and most invigorating human characteristics without which life would become meaningless. Here lies the power of the liberal way: not in making the whole world Unitarian, but in helping ourselves and others to see some of the possibilities inherent in viewpoints other than one’s own; in encouraging the free interchange of ideas; in welcoming fresh approaches to the problems of life; in urging the fullest, most vigorous use of self-criticism.”¹

I began our series that September Sunday talking about Faiths in a more general way and then more specifically about Judaism, that Sunday was just before our Jewish friends and

¹ In *A Chosen Faith*, John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church, 81.

members celebrated their High Holy Days. If you missed it, you can find it on our Facebook page or soon, hopefully, on the restored Sermon Archive on our church's website. Thanks Nick! As the year goes on, you will hear me consider the Faith of a UU Theist, the Faith of a UU Christian, the Faith of a UU Buddhist and more. In a few weeks we will touch on the faith of UUs who find inspiration in nature and earth based theologies, as we have a multigenerational service on October 28. This service sometimes called Samhain or Day of the Dead. On that occasion I ask you to bring a picture or memento of a loved one or pet who has died to place on our altar of remembrance which we will create together. I will be bringing pictures of my parents, a watch that was my grandmother's and a photograph of my cat Snickers who died in January. And then that evening we will gather, those who wish, at 6 PM for an autumn potluck and a wonderful short film made by friends of mine about the Mexican Day of the Dead, *Illuminacion*.

But today, it is the Faith of a UU Humanist. Unitarian Universalism has had a long, interwoven relationship with Humanism. Some might say it has been and continues to be a complicated relationship. Doug Muder, who is the Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University once wrote, "What other religious group would showcase an outspoken atheist at its national convention, as the Unitarian Universalists did when they invited Kurt Vonnegut to give the prestigious annual Ware Lecture at the General Assembly of 1984?"² You may know that the UU Humanists have their own national organization (HUUmanists) with their own journal (*Religious Humanism*), just as do the UU Christians (you'll hear more about them in December).

Once upon a time, Humanism seemed to be the dominant outlook in Unitarian Universalism. My dear friend and colleague Ken Sawyer who is now retired after 38 years from the First Parish in Wayland once said in an auction sermon called "Humanism is Alive and Well and Living in Unitarian Universalism!" that "Humanism seems to be a less predominating outlook in Unitarian Universalism than it once was. This is a source of delight to those who feel more place has been given to alternative outlooks and practices they favor. It is a source of worry and even dismay to those who liked it when it seemed, at least where they worshiped, that Unitarian Universalism was basically a religious form of Humanism. This was more true outside

² <http://thenewhumanism.org/authors/doug-muder/articles/a-church-that-would-have-you-as-a-member>

New England, but even in most of our New England churches, Humanism tended to be the largest influence.”

Humanism being the default has shifted somewhat with new interest in the language of reverence, influences from world religions, and so on. Many of my colleagues have begun revisiting their Biblical studies, as I have, studying with Carl Scovel every other month. We want to know our whole tradition. We want to know why we have the Good Shepherd in our window and the Baptismal Font from Woburn, which, if you haven't noticed it, is tucked over by the door by the electronic organ. But humanism today remains one of the largest identity groups in Unitarian Universalism.

What is humanism anyway? Humanism is defined as a non-theist tradition that focuses on human potential and emphasizes personal responsibility for ethical behavior. There are strains of humanism going back to the ancient Greeks, as my sister Bonnie Catto would tell you. Some of you met her last year when the current small group went with her and me to see the ancient exhibits at the Museum of Fine Arts. Bonnie is a Professor of Latin and Greek with a specialty in Lucretius. Modern day Religious Humanism is largely derived from the writings of the early American Unitarian Humanists, including Joseph Priestley, Thomas Jefferson, and John Haynes Holmes. The Reverend Sarah Oelberg describes Humanism as including the following values:

"Showing love to all humans is a worthy goal.

Immortality is found in the examples we set and the work we do.

We gain insight from many sources and all cultures, and there are many religious books and teachings that can instruct us about how to live.

We have the power within ourselves to realize the best we are capable of as human beings.

We are responsible for what we do and become; our lives are in our own hands."

If you want to hear more from Oelberg, pick up a copy of the brochure "The Faith of a UU Humanist" at the back of the sanctuary or by the front door.

So the humanism we are talking about is one where we question, where we test the principles we feel are working in our lives, our perceptions, against reality. We ask ourselves, "Is it reasonable or responsible to think this?" And there is a piece of not looking for help "out there" somewhere but rather to put our feet to the fire and get busy with the tasks at hand.

That makes sense to us UUs and the way we talk, and the way we try to walk the talk. But when you try to give any kind of true definition, you get into the same quagmire, at least in my mind, as you do when you try to define what a Christian is, or a protestant, or a Buddhist. There are just so many shades and hues. One writer - the executive Director of the American Humanist Association - identified eight kinds of Humanism. Using one of the broader definitions, pretty much all UUs are humanist, as well as most mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. In fact he contends that Cultural Humanism, “the rational and empirical tradition that originated largely in ancient Greece and Rome . . . now constitutes a basic part of the Western approach to science, political theory, ethics, and law.”³

A couple of years back, my son Nigel blogged an article named, “I am an atheist and I am not alone.” In it he says, “By calling myself an atheist, I simply mean that I don’t buy the existence of a god as we primitive humans understand it. It doesn’t mean that I dislike those who do not think as I do. Nor does it mean that I am immovable in my own beliefs, just that the only things I have “faith” in are reason, life experience, and the general tendency toward decency of most people, especially in times of crisis. I saw this first-hand living blocks away from the World Trade Center on 9/11. This tendency of decency towards one another I believe is an instinctual trait that has allowed us to survive throughout the millennia of our existence on this Earth.”

Nigel goes on later to say, “I am completely comfortable with my beliefs and don’t feel that they are meant as a threat to any of my friends and family who are “of faith”. My mother happens to be a Unitarian Universalist Minister who preaches every Sunday, and I was brought up in the UU church. For those who aren’t familiar, being a UU is about as close as you can get to being an agnostic while still being able to call yourself Christian, (he’s wrong there . . . many or most UUs do not identify as Christian) it is basically up to the member to find one’s own relationship with God, and Jesus is not believed to be the literal son of god as is the case in all other Christian based faiths. Still, even after growing up as a part of this community, for which I have respect, I found it was not for me.”

³ Facts from sermon by Ken Sawyer.

Funny thing is, I could have written about same thing when I was the age he was when he wrote this several years ago. I found Unitarian Universalism when I was about his age. What interests me is how he didn't feel the strong humanist strand in the UU church he was brought up in and feel that it was of value to continue in relationship with a UU community. He doesn't mind when I take my grandchildren to the UU Church in Long Beach, and he values my choice of calling. Does his atheism make him a secular humanist?

Ken Sawyer was Nigel's minister growing up. Ken says that "by the narrowest definition, that of Secular Humanism, no UU can be a humanist, because all of us — by being in a religion at all — are by definition not secular. Secular Humanists have their own groups, like the American Rationalist Federation, and of course many are happy on their own. In any case, they don't see Humanism as a religion, they see it as an alternative to religion, the one they favor."

But we choose to be here. We choose to part of the Unitarian Universalist religion and be in dialogue with each other. The humanists with the theists, the wiccan with the Buddhists. And dare I say it, there is a strand of humanism, however we understand, through all of these, at least in how they show up in a UU Church.

I am ending these words today with words written by an esteemed colleague who died this past August. Ed Harris was a Unitarian minister, a poet and a civil rights activist. Here is what Harris wrote about humanism:

"Dare I say it? I want a human Humanism. I want a Humanism, not of the philosophers — the abstract thinkers, those sheltered in ivory towers, those trapped in the brilliance of their own minds issuing pronouncements and manifestos — but a Humanism for the people, the man and woman in the streets, the poor who live in villages all over the world. I want a democratic Humanism, a creatively democratic Humanism.

"I want a Humanism that is joyful and a little messy. I want a Humanism that is funny, full of jokes, stories, and tales. I want a Humanism that is relaxed, friendly, helpful, not one that is full of bile, criticism, and always whining about how stupid it is to believe in God or religion.

"I want a Humanism that puts the head back on the body, that recognizes we have bodies — bodies that [leak, smell,] are awkward, and, though they may be beautiful, ultimately fail. The Humanism of the mind is the Humanism of the perfect idea, the principle, the system that issues a list of impregnable right positions. This Humanism should retreat for a while; it should rest up, then wake up and smell the corpses of ideologies' inhumanity.

“I want a Humanism that sees the human, not at the pinnacle of an evolutionary chain of being, but as part of this natural world. I want a Humanism that loves this Earth, our home. I want a Humanism full of rhyme and poetry, unafraid to play. All thought and no play makes Humanism exceedingly dull. I want a Humanism that can be stated in terms of caring, loving, promoting, building, doing, and being. What does the humanist love? The record suggests that the humanist loves abstractions.

“Let abstractions be damned! I want a Humanism that is about men and women, about the struggle to live decently in this world. I want a Humanism that gives us a road map for the future, that points us towards a planetary perspective; that fosters, not correct thinking, but joy in living; that encourages the creative power of every human being; that affirms life in all its expressions; that elicits possibilities for a humane future; that has no argument with the world.

“I want a Humanism that loves differences, that is joyful, that celebrates this life and this world.”⁴

So do I, Ed. So do I.

May it be so. Amen.

⁴ Ed Harris in sermon by Ken Sawyer (2005).