

I

If you've been paying attention, you may know that Karla and I have been preaching a series of sermons over the past several months on the six theological sources of what we call Unitarian Universalism's living tradition.

We started last fall with experience of transcendent mystery and wonder and then moved on to words and deeds of prophet women and men, wisdom from the world's religions, and, last month, spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions that teach us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

And if my math is correct, that's four down and two (or three) more to go—math isn't my strong suit.

So today, I want to invite you to join me in reflecting on what, for many of us, is one of the primary sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith: the teachings of humanism, which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, warning us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

But before I get started, I want to ask you something.

How many of you would use the word "humanist" to describe your metaphysical or religious perspective of the universe and life and everything that is? [Show hands.]

I'm not surprised. Because a number of surveys over the past fifteen years indicate that when Unitarian Universalists are asked to choose a label that describes their theological perspective, about half say that they are humanists.

But to be fair, let me ask you another question or two. How many of you would *not* use the label "humanist" to describe yourself? [Show hands.]

And how many of you just aren't sure what it means to be a humanist? [Show hands.]

Well, I'm going to do my best this morning to do something about that by telling you what humanism is.

And, though it may come as a surprise to some of you, I want to start off by saying that I am a dues-paying, card-carrying member of the Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association. (Pause.) Well, almost. (Pause) I don't have a card because the UU Humanist Association doesn't have membership cards. But I do pay my dues and, in return, they send me their journal, *Religious Humanism*, which I read—*religiously*—twice a year when it comes in my mail.

So, although humanist is my preferred way of identifying myself religiously, I am a humanist. But like Roger Cowan, I am a humanist who prays—a religious, not secular, humanist who doesn't choke on the word God.

II

In the readings that Erik shared with you, we heard that humanism is the shifting of emphasis from God to humans, making the enrichment of human life, rather than heaven or hell, the focus of our concern. Humanism emphasizes the value of *human* reason, *human* responsibility, and *human* compassion. “It invites us to think for ourselves, to explore, challenge, and doubt, to approach the important questions of life with an openness to new ideas and different perspectives and then to test these ideas against reality, filter new knowledge through our own active minds, and believe according to the evidence.”

Humanism is a rational philosophy, informed by science, that affirms the dignity of each human being. (Inherent worth and dignity. Does that ring a bell for Unitarian Universalists?) It is an approach to life based on reason and our common humanity—a perspective that sees the universe as natural and self-existing, not created; guided only by the laws of physics, not supernatural forces.

Humanists hold that all values—religious, ethical, social, or political—have their source in human experience and culture rather than “divine revelation” or theological dogma. And they assert that, because this is the only life and only world of which we have certain knowledge, human beings alone are responsible for our own destiny and we owe it to ourselves and others to make this the best life possible for ourselves and all with whom we share our world.

Well, I’ve got to say—that sounds pretty good to me! And I think that most of you would probably agree. So I guess that means we’re all humanists, right? (Pause.) Can I get an “amen”? (Pause.) Or maybe: “Yes. That appears to be a valid logical conclusion!”

So, yes, I’m a humanist. (Pause.) But that’s not all I am. And that’s not all we are—as human beings or as Unitarian Universalists.

III

Humanism is, and has been for many years, one of the most important sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith, calling us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science.

The history of humanism within Unitarianism began just over a hundred years ago, in 1912, when John Dietrich, a Unitarian minister in Spokane, Washington, began using the word humanism to refer to his belief in a “religion without God.”

Dietrich’s new humanism spread rapidly among Unitarians, especially in the Midwest, leading to a heated—and extremely bitter—controversy between theists and humanists at the Unitarian National Conference in 1921. Twelve years later, a Unitarian college professor, Roy Wood Sellars, drafted the original Humanist Manifesto and Unitarian ministers comprised fifteen of the thirty-four signers (along with one Universalist minister, Clinton Lee Scott, and one very liberal Jewish rabbi).

By the time Unitarians and Universalists joined together in 1961, “religious humanism had replaced liberal theism as the [theological or] ideological center of” our new Unitarian Universalist tradition. And by the end of the 1970s, many UUs believed that Unitarian Universalism and humanism were identical and that being a humanist was the only legitimate way to be UU—so much so that Unitarian Universalists who identified themselves as theists or

liberal Christians often felt that they were being pushed out of the denomination by an increasingly “rigid humanist orthodoxy.”

It was about that time that I discovered Unitarian Universalism. But, like many of you, my journey from the unquestioning Christian faith of my childhood through doubt, agnosticism, skepticism, secularism, and atheism to humanism and Unitarian Universalism began much earlier.

I was a curious child. And, like many children, one of my favorite questions to ask was “why?” And, unlike some of my friends in my Methodist Sunday school class, I wasn’t satisfied by answers that didn’t make sense to me.

As I grew older, I found it harder and harder to believe in God as a supernatural, all-powerful, all-knowing, eternal Being who created the universe and came to earth in human form to save at least some people from eternal punishment for the “sin” of being human beings.

It just didn’t make sense to me. So reason “killed” the religious faith of my childhood and, over the years, I evolved (or, as far as my family was concerned, devolved) into one of those dreaded, evil secular humanists that Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson said were destroying American civilization and family values.

I’m not sure I ever called myself a secular humanist. But that’s what I was—someone who was concerned with the here and now and didn’t feel there was much point in speculating about the hereafter or supernatural; one of those social and political liberals who supported women’s rights, gay rights, abortion rights, civil rights and wanted to take prayer out of the public schools.

But then something happened. I had children. And, like many parents with young children, I began to look for a *religious* community—a faith community in which my children, and I, could seek life’s deeper truths, meanings, and values without all the emotional and theological “baggage” of traditional religions. And what I found was the Eno River UU Fellowship in Durham—a community that welcomed people like me who believed that it’s important to live a good life but couldn’t believe in a supernatural God, miracles, heaven, or hell; a community in which most people called themselves humanists and humanism wasn’t a four-letter word. And that’s when I first started calling myself a humanist—a *religious*, not secular, humanist—even though I wasn’t exactly sure what that meant.

IV

But I also have to say that, for me and, I know, for many Unitarian Universalists, humanism has, over the past twenty years, lost at least some of its appeal.

Over time, I came to see more clearly the fallibility and frailty (as well as the arrogance and destructiveness) of our human species. Over time, I came to more fully realize that reason and rationality are not the sole or ultimate tools for understanding the universe or ourselves.

There’s a joke that goes like this: How many secular humanists does it take to screw in a new light bulb? (Pause.) The answer is none. The light of reason is the only light they need.

Now, don't get me wrong. Reason and science are good. As Pi Patel, the main character in *Life of Pi*, said: "Reason is excellent for getting food, clothing, and shelter. And nothing beats reason for keeping hungry tigers away."

But reason and science aren't enough in and of themselves. Albert Einstein was right when he said that although religion without science is blind, science without religion is lame.

And, as neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has noted, Descartes was just plain wrong when he said: "I think, therefore I am." Human beings are not just big brains. We are more than "thinking machines." We are both mind and spirit. We are beings who think and feel, who decide and dream, who love and care for each other even though, more often than not, it is completely irrational to do so.

Reason and science are great. They've led to longer and happier and better lives for millions of human beings. But they also have serious downsides. Because, with all due respect to Immanuel Kant, reason is much better at determining the best means to an end than whether the end, itself, is good. And science and technology have given us not only more effective treatments for cancer but also nuclear weapons and global warming.

Reason and science are good. But they're not enough. Because they're not all we are as human beings.

And so, an authentic humanism cannot be just about heeding the guidance of reason and the results of science. Instead, an authentic humanism must embrace our whole human nature—not only our reason but also our compassion, our imagination, our intuition, our creativity, our emotions, our moral conscience, and the spirit within every human being that is the source of everything that is good and noble about being human.

Mind *and* spirit. Spirit *and* mind.

Reason *and* compassion. Imagination *and* reason. Reason *and* emotion. Conscience *and* reason.

V

Humanism has been, and always will be, an integral part of our Unitarian Universalist heritage, tradition, and faith.

But what Unitarian Universalism needs, I believe, is a "kinder and gentler" form of religious humanism—a new naturalistic humanism like that proposed by the Rev. Bill Murry, who is a *bona fide*, card-carrying UU humanist, former president of Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, and one of my professors when I was in seminary there.

What Unitarian Universalism—and, more importantly, the world—needs is a humanism that, in Bill's words, calls us to "[become] more fully human" by transforming our "mind[s] and heart[s] from self-centeredness to a sense of [ourselves] as part of a larger sacred whole"

The ancient Greek philosopher, Protagoras, once said that "man is the measure of all things." And what he meant is that because we have no choice but to see the world through human eyes, through our human experience, with our human brains. The human perspective is the only perspective we know. Our values, our hopes, and our dreams are *human* values,

hopes, and dreams. And too often, as human beings, we judge what is good and right and true by what is good and right and true for us as human beings.

But because, as Unitarian Universalists, we believe that human beings are part of the interdependent web of being, inextricably connected not only with other human beings but with all life and all creation, we know that human well-being, individually and as a species, cannot be the sole or ultimate goal of human life. If human beings are the universe becoming conscious of itself, then human beings must also be the *conscience* of the universe, seeking the flourishing of nonhuman, as well as human, life through the just and sustainable use of the earth's resources.

And so, we need a humanism that, as John Dietrich, the founder of Unitarian humanism, recognized shortly before his death in 1957, is a bit less anthropocentric. Or, as another of my professors, David Bumbaugh, who is also a card-carrying UU humanist, has written: we need a humanism that "celebrates human embeddedness in a natural world that is everywhere sacred.

What we need, David says, is a humanism that embraces both reason and reverence. What we need is a humanism that balances its respect for reason and science with a recognition of the value of human intuition and imagination.

What we need is a humanism that does not make an idol of reason and science.

What we need is a humanism that does not claim that Unitarian Universalism and humanism were identical and that being a humanist is the only legitimate way to be UU

VI

As a human being, I can't help but be a humanist (at least in the broadest sense of the word).

And what's true of me, I believe, is true of all of us. We are human beings. We are all more human than otherwise. And we are all humanists.

Because, to paraphrase UU minister, Christine Robinson, "we're *all* humanists to the extent that we value human experience and reason. And we're *all* humanists when we work for justice and concentrate our religious efforts on this life rather than the next."