

The Humanist Manifesto

Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern

[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)

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Opening Words and Call to Worship:

From David Bumbaugh's essay "Towards a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence,"
reprinted in part in this month's UU World magazine:

In us the universe dreams its dreams. In us the universe struggles for moral vision. In us the universe strives for self-understanding. In us the universe seeks the meaning of existence.

Reading:

From the preamble to *The Humanist Manifesto* (1933):

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. Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with new conditions created by a vastly increased knowledge and experience. In every field of human activity, the vital movement is now in the direction of a candid and explicit humanism. In order that religious humanism may be better understood, we, the undersigned, desire to make certain affirmations which we believe the facts of our contemporary life demonstrate.

There is great danger of a final, and we believe fatal, identification of the word *religion* with doctrines and methods which have lost their significance and which are powerless to solve the problems of human living in the Twentieth Century. Religions have always been means for realizing the highest values of life ...

Today man's larger understanding of the universe, his scientific achievements, and his deeper appreciation of brotherhood have created a situation which requires a new statement of the means and purposes of religion. Such a vital, fearless, and frank religion capable of furnishing adequate social goals and personal satisfactions may appear to many people as a complete break with the past. While this age does owe a vast debt to the traditional religions, it is nonetheless obvious that any religion that can hope to be a synthesizing and dynamic force for today must be shaped for the needs of this age. To establish such a religion is a major necessity of the present. It is a responsibility which rests upon this generation.

Reading:

"Prayer for a Time of Trial"

from *Consider the Impatiens!* by Rudolph Nemser

(illustrated by Fran Shimmin):

I do not pray, as some,
never to judge a fellow human being
If the Universe is to be moral
we are called to stand for good,
judge others as ourselves

I do not pray never to judge,
for I value dignity of all life too much
to turn a blind eye to power's abuse
I shall always judge tyrants:
others or myself

Rather I do pray
for wisdom
to recognize the limits
of what I know and what I understand

for honesty
to acknowledge I see the world
but from a single perspective
and secrets lie beyond my sight

for humility
to know what I most condemn of others
I most dread of myself

for genuineness
that each act of judging be for good
and not self-aggrandizement

for compassion
never to forget we all,
within our limitations,
do the very best we can

May these prayers, which only I can answer,
be fulfilled.

Sermon:

This sermon is part of a series in which we look at the various kinds of theology and philosophy that are contained within our very own membership here.

If we were to look at demographics, I would imagine that we would find the majority of our members are those who joined in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and that the majority of those are humanist. Humanism in those decades dominated our faith communities, and

it still does. [We asked for a show of hands and easily half of the congregation called themselves "humanist."]

Well, if we wondered about the continuing strength and influence of humanism in our overall movement, we need look no further than the 1997 UUA General Assembly [Bill Murray, "Religious Humanism: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," p.1]. At the assembly that year, one of the speakers asked all those who were humanist among the delegates to stand. Over half of the people in the room rose to their feet. There was no other group that was singularly as well represented at that convention, nor is there a group as significant in our movement today as the humanists. So it is with humanism that we begin our journey through the theologies that live under our Unitarian Universalist roof.

The roots of humanism go back at least to ancient Greece, to its love affair with the human form and human capacity to reason. During the Renaissance, there was a revival of this love of classical ideals and proportions, of restraint, balance, and a belief that art and letters could be known and drawn with a subjective eye, and life liberated from emotionalism. Aristotle's mean was the ideal. Happiness was not a feeling, but "life in accordance with virtue." Beauty was a form emblazoned on our minds before we were even born -- an ideal that existed, pure and singular, if we could but find it. There were answers, and perfection was to be found if humanity could but bring all its faculties, and particularly reason, to bear on the endeavors, whatever they were. Da Vinci studied human anatomy, but also invented such tools for modern living as the corkscrew and the parachute. He was *the* Renaissance man -- expressing the broad range of perfection that humanity could when its skills and gifts were unleashed in their fullness.

The Enlightenment took this fascination and faith in human abilities to still a new height. Now it wasn't just human reason, restraint and human gifts that could bring about great things, but it was the scientific method. Here was an approach to problem solving and to epistemology that coupled reason with empirical observation, that resulted in theories, which themselves were subject to testing. It was the new hope -- a hope for objective, verifiable findings, and soon all subjects of inquiry were being subjected to its methods. Social, political and economic issues were examined with these tools.

Religion, not surprisingly, was not spared this new approach to inquiry. As a result, its age-old beliefs, its canon, its rituals even were also held up to the light of reason and subject to scientific review. The challenges it faced because of this were immense. Darwin's findings about natural selection and variation offered a credible alternative to the creation stories. In the 19th century, a school of biblical criticism out of Germany applied knowledge of history, archeology and literary criticism to the Bible. What it revealed was evidence that this text was more like a library than a single piece written at one time. It was clearly written at many different periods by many different authors, with many different perspectives -- not all of which could be harmonized. As a result, the assertion that the Bible was a text as handed down by God, protected, and infallible grew harder and harder to defend. Moreover, all around, the inexplicable, miraculous and supernatural was, through science and study, becoming explicable, natural and hardly mysterious at all.

With all these changes, some found reason to let go of allegiance to the teachings, the rituals, the myths that had formed the foundation of their religion beliefs and practices. The Unitarians, being mostly university-educated clergy and members of a free faith, were among the first to use the tools of the Enlightenment to strike out beyond the bounds of Christianity, to a new religion grounded in science and reason.

In the teens and '20s of the 20th century, the first ministers and lay people begin to publish and to speak of this new religion. John Dietrich, who is considered by many to be the father of religious humanism, described his new faith to the annual gathering of Unitarian laity and clergy. His defense was that this faith was not radical at all -- arguing that ritual, myth and belief in the supernatural had never been at the foundation of Unitarianism, but instead transformation of society. Despite credible arguments by Dietrich and others, many clergy were upset by this new movement within their faith. Indeed, by the 1920s the American Unitarian Association argued that this group had gone too far -- that the freedom of belief that Unitarianism has always guaranteed to its members and clergy was never meant to include a freedom to reject a belief *in God*.

Despite protestations, however, the movement could not be stopped. It continued to draw followers and develop such that by 1933, a group of committed believers of this new faith, men who called themselves "humanists," drafted and published what they called the Humanist Manifesto. The Manifesto was signed by 34 men. Of those original signers, one was a rabbi, one was a Universalist minister, and 15 were Unitarian ministers or laymen [Edwin Wilson, *The Genesis of a Human Manifesto* (ed. Teresa Maciocha): Humanist Press, 1995, p.xii]. If ever anyone doubted the role that our movement has played in the development of humanism, that fact alone should put the question to rest.

At the heart of the Manifesto was a call to action, a call for a religion that moved beyond old and outdated forms and teachings. It wanted a religion up to date with the times, that honored the revelations of science and reason. It was not a movement for compromise or blending. This was a revolution of sorts and they framed their call with that kind of urgency and unbending force: "The time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world. The time is past for mere revisions of traditional attitudes."

The Manifesto had 15 points. Another sign of the power and influence the humanists had on religion, particularly ours, is that what they say seems obvious and acceptable to us now. However, when it was written in 1933, these assertions were far more revolutionary. Although we will not read through all 15, among them were the following:

* That "man is a part of nature and that he has emerged as the result of a continuous process." In other words, an assertion of creation by evolution.

* That man's religious culture develops gradually over time and is molded by the particular culture from within which that religion emerges -- a kind of cultural sensitivity to the study and understanding of a religion's teachings. It speaks of a belief that not

everything a religious tradition teaches needs to be taken as a universal truth. Some are particular to the culture that gave birth to them.

* That there is no division between the secular and the sacred. In other words, that the sacred is tied up in the ordinary, woven together, not off in the heavens somewhere, unreachable from this ordinary and fallen world. The idea that "all is sacred" is, in fact, such a given for us that Helen Karr wove those words across the stole she made for this church's ministers.

* Finally, they asserted in the Manifesto that there is, as yet, no proof of a cosmic guarantor of human values (that means God). I would agree that, as yet, there is no proof -- no universal, repeatable, scientific proof -- and indeed the fact is there may never be such, but one thing I like is that they leave the possibility open for such proof!

When asked what a humanist is, one wit replied, "A Unitarian who can't break the habit of going to church." Indeed, the authors of the Manifesto also don't want to dispense with religion. So they redefine it. Religion, they assert, consists of those actions, purposes and experiences that are humanly significant. For them this tends to boil down to a commitment to the development of the fullness of each human personality in this life. It is a call to self-culture and, when expanded to others, a call to social justice work that seeks to eliminate the barriers and oppressions that keep a person from flourishing. *Their goal, in short, is nothing less than the perfection of each person and human society.*

These were bold and heady visions. "[Man] alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams," they wrote, "[and] he has within himself the power for its achievement."

Many of our members who joined UU churches during the '50s and '60s and '70s, as we said earlier, joined because of our strong humanism. They influenced who we became in great ways. By and large, these members were known by their firm commitment to social justice, their belief in the rational endeavor, their loyalty to science, and by a shared belief in the promise of human progress over time when the best of human abilities is brought to bear on its most challenging issues. Theirs was and is a challenging and optimistic faith.

It also, however, had a few weaknesses. Let me just mention three.

First, that unbending conviction that all must be abandoned for this new faith meant that the spirit of humanism was all too often an intolerant spirit. "I was raised a Catholic too," someone once said to my roommate at the time -- a woman kind enough to come with me to a guest preaching gig hours out of D.C. where we lived. "But I got *over* my Catholicism," the man finished. The heady conviction that humanists were on some new trajectory that was ordained by history and science contributed, ironically, to a kind of fundamentalist spirit that disrespected those who didn't agree.

Second, the belief in science and reason as guaranteeing human progress ignored humanity's potential for evil. The optimism of many humanists was, in this sense, overly optimistic, and the events of World War II helped to shatter some of that optimism. In this war we saw the most advanced nation in the world using *science* to engineer the most efficient genocide ever. The early critique of humanism by liberal Protestants that humanism had no conception of human sinfulness proved on the mark. Science and reason, we learned the hard way, were not alone to be trusted to see that good was done. Human evil had to be accounted for.

Third, after years of humanism's singular appeal to reason, a desire arose to reclaim a place for human emotion, *and* a place for awe, mystery, wonder. It was acknowledged that humanism, as it had been lived, did not touch the whole of human experience. That it had a lopsided sense of human development and fruition, and -- to be even more frank -- that its solely rational approach left many cold or at least unsatisfied. Wasn't there something more, folks asked. And so, ministers like David Bumbaugh, as you heard in our opening words this morning, and Rudy Nemser, in his prayer, are among those who have responded and are still responding to this need, working toward a humanist vocabulary of awe and reverence.

To its credit, the humanist movement is responding to the critiques of itself. There is right now a silent birth going on of a new, more rounded humanism informed by the extremes and the errors of its past. This new religious humanism is trying to account in credible ways for human evil, to find a place for emotion and awe, and make room for others who do not share its beliefs in a kind of orthodox manner. It is allowing for the need for ritual and myth. And reclaiming a stronger and clearer role for covenantal community in the starkly individual quest for truth. [In his paper, "Religious Humanism: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," Bill Murray, president of Meadville/Lombard Theological School, explores this new humanism.]

Just as humanism's assertions are already woven into the fabric of our Unitarian Universalism, our Unitarian Universalism is changing the warp and woof of humanism also. The impact of this bold new faith movement was in fact as revolutionary as its founders dreamed. Even Martin Luther King Jr. was moved enough to say he'd rather be a humanist committed to justice than a Christian complacent with injustice. Moreover, our own mission statement is informed by an unstated belief that what matters is what we do in this world, and that we need to hold each other to bringing the best that we are to bear on these efforts.

So let us continue to explore the gifts of this thread of the faiths we bring to this community, to deepen and develop it here so it grows to encompass our newer and newer vision of the world, and may we continue to be challenged by its call to action.

So may it be. Amen.

Closing Words:

"Summer Lesson" by Rudolph Nemser

This I have learned
Because we can,
we must try to change the world
fully
wisely
restlessly

There is no one else --
no understudy
no rescuer
no on-call substitute
we are, each, alone
with the world in our hands

We throw away, give away, drink away,
salt away, sleep away, diet away
leave behind us as unwanted trash
enough to feed and clothe families
neighborhoods
villages
a world
the other world
while destroying our own

We have so very much
not only goods
but spirit
energy
confidence

*how can we do less
than try to change the world?*

We are, every one of us, alone
with the world in our hands