

## **2/7/10 Sermon**

“Spiritual Humanism”

Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

Carl Sagan once said that “a religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by conventional faith.”

I believe he had Unitarian Universalism in mind when he said that. Religious Humanism is one of the primary sources of our spirituality because it is shaped to the needs of our times while sacrificing neither intellectual honesty or any spiritual longing of the heart. It provides a foundation for our morality and meaning grounded in human reason.

UUs recognize that human potential and the natural process of scientific and the moral, spiritual, social and cultural evolution that human creativity is bringing about. This is a creative spiritual process. It is awe-inspiring in its very nature. To appreciate this miracle is to speak to the heart and soul, the whole person, not just the intellect. The goal of our lives must be to achieve our highest spiritual evolutionary potential through the work for social justice with an emphasis on reason, compassion, community, nature and social responsibility in the way we live.

All that is human is religious declares the humanist manifesto. The mind is the source of creativity-of all that is aesthetic and sensual: art, music, literature, poetry, dance and drama. For most UUs religious spirituality arises out of our heart, with the holy at the center of the natural world and not some supernatural force. We have the ability to make our own lives meaningful through personal, observable, experiential and spiritual growth that provide a faith to support the good and opposing evil.

The Rev. Sarah Oelberg, an early leader of the Humanist movement, is right when she says that "our Humanist faith would provide me with the tools I would use to pursue the free and responsible search for truth and meaning." I like that our faith invites me to think for myself, to explore, to challenge orthodoxy, to doubt what I think I know, without retribution or condemnation. For us to be open to new ideas and perspectives allows me to live my faith while honoring reason and the integrity as part of my spiritual journey." Our faith is comfortable with a belief in a world without God or with a God fully present.

With or without that God, I believe that the entire universe is connected. Modern particle physics in the form of "String Theory" reinforces our Seventh Principle affirmation of the interconnected web of all existence at the center of our shared world-view. String Theory postulates that there is a super symmetry between all sub-atomic particles that transmit forces such as gravity to all other particles that make up matter.

Whether the universe is created or spontaneous, String Theory demonstrates a spiritual connection between all that exists. Our Humanist traditions, writes Oelberg, "lead the way to finding and respecting a wider relatedness with the world and its peoples. Its roots in naturalism (belief that God is part of nature) call me to environmental protectionism and efforts to create a more humane civilization."

Humanism, like all parts of our faith, is rooted in love and compassion for humanity and nature. The logic of Humanism is that all people have responsibility for the fate of themselves and future of the world and its people. Humanists believe that there is no supernatural God to guide our behavior or save us from ourselves.

A Humanist faith is not all that different from a theist's belief that God created us and gave us "free will" to do as we will. God of whatever understanding placed in our hands the freedom to act for good or evil to sustain humanity and the earth. A Humanist believes in the same freedom. Whether our beliefs arise from head or heart we are each called to work for peace and justice as a religious imperative.

One of the myths of our faith is that there is a divide between our Humanist traditions and the rest of Unitarian Universalism. Fundamental to our faith is an open and questioning mind that leads us to the realization that we all have a powerful and vital relationship with everything else. Humanism and theism both revel in the majesty of nature.

I remember a hiking trip atop Mt. Cannon in New Hampshire when my sons were young, bright and full of energy and the mountains were old, closed in upon themselves with fog, and the weight of the rock felt heavy upon me. There was no vista from the summit, but at our feet was a vast world in miniature unfolded in incredible beauty and mystical wonder. There were lichen and mushrooms, and a carpet of moss sheltered under the stunted old growth pines that had found the secret of survival above the frost line of a New England mountain.

In that moment, I felt the connection to all that was and would be. I understood the logic, science and spiritual majesty that combined to produce

such beauty – an experience ineffable, transcendent, yet in keeping with the laws of nature. It was a moment of reawakening to that which pulses at the core the human heart – as real as sinew and bone. In that moment, I felt alive and connected. It was enough for me that beauty, nature, life itself sprang from an unnamable, inexpressible source. That was enough for the Humanist “me.”

The challenge of life is to find balance in how we understand what we experience. Humanism calls us to be authentic in how we approach life, to acknowledge the reality of our existence, that we exist separate and autonomous, different from everyone else. The logic of our lives is that we will find different answers to the meaning of life. The common tragedy of our uniqueness is the growing reality that as separate personalities, we are essentially alone. “The price we pay for our intellectual and spiritual autonomy is existential loneliness.”

Our shared spiritual journey then is to heal the loneliness. Unitarians and Universalists can do that, for on a deeply spiritual level, we do enter each other's lives and touch at the most fundamental point, at what T. S. Eliot calls “the still point of the turning world.” We struggle together and in that commonality we find ultimate connection and healing.

A Humanist faith would never dismiss my understanding of the mystery and wonder of a mountain top epiphany or the experience of existential loneliness. Humanism honors personal experience as spiritual and teaches us to be honest with ourselves, open to new possibilities. Humanism encourages us to see the unique spark of universal dignity in each of us. How I interpret my experience is up to me.

Humanism supports a free and responsible search for meaning and truth that can take many forms. It is not “religiously hostile” to any theology, rather it recognizes that we are simultaneously mind and spirit, both autonomous and connected. Humanism extends to all a healing embrace for the profound depths of the human experience, providing a path to move from loneliness into fullness.

To trust this process is to have faith in one’s own ability to connect to others and to that which transcends the limits of the universe. That is what I think it means to be a Spiritual Humanist, to live in the heart of reason and reverence.