

“Religious Humanism Is Alive and Well?”

A sermon by Jim Coakley

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Reading - Passage from Emergent Religious Principles from “*The Sacred Depths of Nature*” by Ursula Goodenough

Humans need stories – grand, compelling stories – that help to orient us in our lives and in the cosmos. The Epic of Evolution is such a story, beautifully suited to anchor our search for planetary consensus, telling us of our nature, our place, our context. Moreover, responses to this story – what we are calling religious naturalism – can yield deep and abiding spiritual experiences. And then, after that, we need other stories as well, human-centered stories, a mythos that embodies our ideals and our passions. This mythos comes to us, often in experiences called revelation, from the sages and the artists of past and present times.

Sermon -

How many of you would consider yourselves humanist? I’d like to see a show of hands, if you feel comfortable doing so. While hands are raised, please look around and notice the percentage of people in the room with their hand raised. Does it look like less than 50%?

Did you know during the first half of the 20th century, those identifying themselves as humanist comprised an overwhelming majority in many Unitarian congregations? Did you know much of what you see and hear in our theology today is founded on humanist principles? Since much of our membership growth in recent years has come from people with non-UU backgrounds, I thought it would be helpful to highlight this significant part of our history and talk about how Religious Humanism is evolving both in our denomination and at our Fellowship.

As many of you know, I am a seminarian at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, which historically has been one of the leading proponents of humanist theology. Since I came to UUism from a decidedly Christian background, I had little exposure to Humanism. Yet Humanism has always surrounded my engagement with many of you here. I felt if I planned on serving a UU congregation as a professional minister, I needed to fill in a major gap in my background knowledge. Last January, I took a course called Religious Humanism, taught by Dr. Bill Murry, a former president of Meadville Lombard, a retired minister, and author of several excellent resources on Religious Humanism. One of his books, *“Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century”* is the primary source for this sermon.

The class resonated with me because I discovered my own faith journey had evolved to something very similar to the theology I read about and the ensuing class discussions. My purpose today is to try and share my insights with you in 20 minutes or less, with the assumption that many of you are on a similar journey and that my message will resonate. I will provide you with a short history of Religious Humanism, discuss its evolution, and give you one brief example of how this might apply to our faith community.

If I were required to describe Humanism in 20 words or less, I would say “It is a philosophy which finds ultimate meaning and purpose in the human journey rather than in anything supernatural.” If we keep this definition in mind and look at recorded history, we find examples of Humanism dating back to ancient times. Forms of Humanism existed at the time of Confucius around 500 BCE. Several prominent Greek philosophers expressed skepticism towards belief in their gods. Humanism prominently resurfaced during the European Renaissance with a focus on this world rather than the next, placing a higher value on reason, and the promotion of the critical study of ancient texts. When Martin Luther set off the Protestant Reformation in Germany in the 16th century, he helped propagate an important premise of Humanism, “the priesthood of all believers”. The implication Luther set forth is that the responsibility for a faith journey rests with the individual rather than church doctrine or traditions. Humanist elements were also present at this time in the theology of the prominent reformer Michael Servetus, whose writing heavily influenced early Unitarian leaders. Specific anti-supernatural beliefs were prevalent such as the rejection of the divinity of Christ, the

denial of the existence of angelic beings, the replacement of the Devil with the human propensity for evil, and a belief that Hell was nothing more than eternal death.

Although humanistic elements had been around and debated for centuries, several prominent 18th and 19th century theologians and philosophers lay the groundwork for 20th century humanist thinking. They refuted the existence of God and argued that religion was purely an internal experience for each individual. Biblical critics began to realize scriptures were literary works with specific cultural context rather than the inerrant word of God, and were therefore open to greater interpretation as human experiences. Finally, the advancement of knowledge through the scientific method strongly influenced theology by arguing that one should only believe what can be proved empirically. Darwin's theory of evolution was a turning point in humanist thinking because it put in doubt the whole premise of supernatural involvement in human creation and the concept of immortality. Thus the 20th century was born with humanist thought on the upsurge and its acceptance more widespread.

You will note that up to this point I have intentionally not used the term religious with regard to Humanism. The reason goes back to my original summation of Humanism as rejection of the supernatural. Throughout the history I have just described, Humanism surfaced both as secular and theist thought. Sometimes humanist thinkers wrestled with the existence of God and all things supernatural and at other times they were concerned merely with the parts of Christian theology they believed had been invented by humans and therefore should have no authority over one's personal faith journey. It wasn't until the 20th century in America that the term Religious Humanism became wildly used.

Three Unitarian ministers, John Dietrich in Minneapolis, Curtis Reese in Chicago, and Charles Potter in New York City are considered the founders of the movement. They used their pulpits to preach the rejection of all things supernatural and a philosophy of empowerment and advancement of humanity through education and the elimination of barriers to human potential through social action. Because they believed that Religious Humanism was the natural progression of religious thought and their movement would eventually become widely accepted and even replace traditional religion, they used the term Religious Humanism, rather than merely Humanism. They believed humans need the communal aspects organized religion

provides. At this point, the distinction between secular and religious Humanism became clearer.

They along with others signed the Humanist Manifesto in 1933, a 15 point document outlining the movement's position on the supernatural, immortality, the irrefutability of the theory of evolution, the use of the scientific method in matters of faith, as well as social concerns such as distribution of wealth and other areas "to establish a satisfactory life for all, not merely for a few". It became widely debated in the popular press and, as you might expect, was strongly criticized by the leaders of the established Christian denominations. Nevertheless, the religious humanist seed planted in the Unitarian tradition took hold and grew to become the dominant theological perspective.

However, by the 1950s the popularity of Religious Humanism had waned for a number of reasons. The foremost was the effect the brutality of World War II had on the optimistic outlook for human civilization and its development. Religious Humanism was criticized for not addressing the human capacity for evil and destruction. Additionally, over time the faithful themselves became too dogmatic and were not viewed as welcoming by outsiders, especially theists. They became defined more by what they were against, such as belief in God, the afterlife, and creationism, than the positive aspects they stood for, such as the improvement of the human condition, the celebration of human accomplishment, and social evolution. Religious humanists were perceived as too intellectually focused to the exclusion of matters of the heart, spirituality, and caring for those facing the harsh realities of human life. In fact, even Dietrich had been criticized for his lack of pastoral care for the sick and dying; he rarely made hospital calls. There was also concern Religious Humanism was so focused on scientific progress and the resulting rise in the standard of living, that it neglected the issues of environmental degradation. Finally, Religious Humanism was perceived as too individualistic and did not stress the communal aspects of congregational life.

In recent years in many congregations, and ours is no exception, religious humanists have taken a back seat as others joined with more divergent faith journeys, especially those seeking a more spiritual path. Thankfully, our congregation has evolved to a more inclusive spiritual community with grace and maturity not always seen elsewhere. Stories of conflict and

congregational splits are not infrequent over the use of the word God or the use of Christian traditions such as baptism and Christmas. When I first joined our Fellowship 15 years ago, I remember finding it odd that we spent so much time in choir practice substituting words like God, savior, and church with spirit of life, love, and humanity. But overtime, we have matured and become much more accepting of non-humanist traditions which I believe has a lot to do with our continued vitality and strong growth in membership.

After grounding our class in the history of Religious Humanism, Dr. Murry turned our attention towards the future development of the movement. He acknowledged past criticisms and offered a modified theology based on his own ministerial experience and the 21st century sensibilities of a post modern world. As the title of his book implies, his goal is to combine the emphasis on reason from the past with a greater emphasis on reverence for the mysteries of life and human complexity. He begins by grounding the religious story in nature. Dr. Murry believes religious humanism should be perceived through the lens of religious naturalism and I quote, "Naturalism is a philosophical perspective that denies the existence of the supernatural and maintains that there is only one realm, the natural universe." Obviously it is closely related to Religious Humanism, but focuses more on nature for matters of ultimate concern. By expanding the theological boundaries to include the entire universe, it deemphasizes the focus on humans and turns our attention to the feelings of awe, wonder and reverence found in nature. It provides the religious story historically absent from religious humanism; how the world came to be and the place of human life.

David Bumbaugh, another Meadville Lombard professor, ties this religious naturalist perspective back to the Humanist Manifesto in his essay, "Toward a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence".

*When the Humanist Manifesto declared that we are part of nature and we have emerged as the result of a continuous process....it gave us an immensely richer, longer, more complex history, one rooted in a system which invites not blind faith but challenge and correction and amendment, one which embraces "truth known or to be known." It also gave us a language of reverence because it provides a story rooted **not** in the history of a single tribe or a particular people, but a*

*history rooted in the sum of our knowledge of the universe itself. It gave us a doctrine of incarnation which suggests **not** that the holy became human in one place at one time to convey a special message to a single chosen people, but that the universe itself is continually incarnating itself in microbes and maples, in hummingbirds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in stars and atoms and every living thing. A language of reverence for Humanists begins with our understanding of this story as a religious story – a vision of reality that contains within it the sources of a moral, ethical, transcendent self-understanding.*

Ursula Goodenough acknowledges the same sentiment in the passage I read before the sermon. Her book *“The Sacred Depths of Nature”* has been out since 1998 and I’m sure many of you have read it. It was another required reading for the course and I found her insight fascinating and her writing style very accessible. Goodenough, a Professor of Biology at Washington University, has also served as the President of the American Society of Cell Biology and of the Institute of Religion in an Age of Science. Her book reads like the popular “Something for Dummies” series by providing a very understandable account of the origins of the universe and the evolution of life on Earth, but she adds something very meaningful at the end of each chapter, reflections. These are short one to two page entries on how she finds religious meaning in the science she describes. I found them very meaningful and actually typed each of them up in my notes for easy reference in the future. I highly recommend this book to anyone looking for deeper spirituality drawn from science and nature.

Dr. Murry merges Religious Humanism and Religious Naturalism into one theology called Humanistic Religious Naturalism. He believes when religious humanists surround their beliefs with Naturalism it brings more focus on the interdependent web of life, places the community above the self, and acknowledges the human freedom to choose between creative or destructive power. In his words, *“Humanistic religious naturalism acknowledges the complex moral make-up of human nature and encourages us to live reflectively, aware of the consequences of our actions, and to live conscientiously and sensitively, maximizing our*

beneficial actions and minimizing our destructive ones.” Humanistic Religious Naturalism

upholds five critical affirmations making it a viable religion for this century:

1. human beings are an integral part of nature;
2. humans have a responsibility to sustain the natural world;
3. religion and science are completely compatible;
4. humans are more balanced and humble when reason and reverence are combined;
5. transformation occurs through values which help make lives more fully human.

This last affirmation, “transformation occurs through values which help make lives more fully human” along with the phrase “humanistic religious naturalism.... encourages us to live reflectively” immediately caught my imagination. The memory of my first vision quest experience as a Coming of Age mentor rushed back to me. It was the first time in my life I was asked to sit quietly for six hours in nature and reflect. It was a very profound experience for me. Normally, I would have thought meditation was a practice associated primarily with other faith traditions such as Buddhism, Islam, or Roman Catholicism. I would never have considered it a humanist practice, but after this class I realize such reflection is an important part of Humanistic Religious Naturalism. I was able to reflect on the incredibly timeless story of creation and my unique place in it. I came away humbled and inspired to make a difference, especially in the development of the young men I was mentoring and my impact on the environment.

As a faith community, I suggest we could have a stronger emphasis on meditative practices associated with Humanistic Religious Naturalism to open each of us up to becoming more fully human. I suggest taking a lead from other religious cultures and set aside periods for reflection. For example, Yom Kippur and Good Friday are days intentionally set aside for personal reflection on right living. We could set aside a period during a similar time of year for meditation. Just as Good Friday is followed by Easter Sunday in the Christian tradition, a weekend focused on meditation and reflection could be followed by Sunday services focused on rededication to the vision of the future for human potential.

So in conclusion, I would like to acknowledge the important role Religious Humanism has played in the development of our Fellowship. As we grow larger and more diverse, I would like to lift Humanistic Religious Naturalism up as a viable evolution of the humanist philosophies first recorded centuries ago. For me, it not only seems logical, but the awe I feel towards nature and my reverence for the interdependent web are the very core of my ethics.

Humanistic Religious Naturalism is a very viable theology for me and I encourage you to explore the possibilities for you as well.

Amen.

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