

THE GUIDANCE OF REASON  
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This year I took on the task of exploring the several sources of our faith. Although many Unitarian Universalists have examined the seven principles, and much has been written about them, we have not, as a faith tradition, explored in great depth the sources. We looked at the first five and are now ready for the fifth source, the one that I would wager, most of the members of this congregation claim. Here are its words:

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

When Unitarian Universalists are polled as to their theology, almost half name themselves as humanist. All our other theologies; theist, Christian, Buddhist, pagan, are divided among the other half. Here in the Midwest, we have an even higher concentration of humanists.

Let's see how many of us here today claim humanism as our spiritual path. Hold up your hands, please, if you call yourself primarily a humanist.  
(Pause....)

Humanism, as an agnostic, even atheistic religious movement, began here in the Midwest. It was centered in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois and Michigan, but it built on the work of the more radical Transcendentalists and other religious liberals. Throughout the Midwest the teachings of this new development in religion spread, through fiery rationalistic sermons, speeches and essays. The women ministers of the Iowa Sisterhood were supported by and supportive of many of the humanist leaders.

Soon the radicals found themselves in a struggle with the Eastern theists who wished to remain within the larger Christian family. At the annual May meetings- the precursors of our General Assemblies- the question was discussed and debated. Because Unitarians did not believe in holding heresy trials, and because the radical humanists were not gracious enough to resign their pulpits, there was no easy way to dismiss them. Thus humanists and theists continued arguing and discussing.

Those ministers who led the traditional wing of the Unitarian Church questioned whether a minister who did not profess a belief in God, or those who followed him or her, could still be a Unitarian. This struggle became known as "the problem of the Western Conference". (The Western Conference being all land west of the Alleghany Mountains.) There was even a "Free Church Movement" that threatened to split the Unitarian Church. And, even though the Unitarians argued among themselves, they regarded it as a brotherly disagreement, and still wanted to remain in fellowship.

Finally in 1894, the Unitarians adopted a document, written by William Channing Gannett, called, "Things Commonly Believed Among Us." It consisted of a

constitution with a preface that acknowledged that, because Unitarians practiced and believed in congregational polity, there were some (many?) in their group who did not adhere to its words, and they did not need to in order to remain Unitarians. This document was one of several precursors to our current Purposes and Principles, which is now under revision again.

Eventually, in 1933, Humanist Manifesto I, the foundational document of humanist religion was published. It was signed by 34 authors, educators, and Unitarian ministers. However, because these almost heretics still adhered to the "Things Commonly Believed Among Us", they were still part of the Unitarian Church. The issues raised by ministers who declared that they were humanists, or even atheists, but still members of the church remained with us for a very long time. And still remain. The Rev. John Buehrens tells the following story in A Chosen Faith.

...(G)ood people of faith know that the purpose of ministry is not necessarily to fulfill expectations. Early in his ministry, John Wolf, now the (retired) minister of one of our largest congregations, All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was interviewed by a ministerial search committee. After awhile they said, "We like you very much. We'd like you to be our minister. But there's just one thing we don't understand. Unitarian Universalist ministers are generally thought to come in two varieties, humanist and theist. Which are you?"

"That depends," said Wolf.

Shocked by such blatant opportunism, one of the committee members asked, "What on earth do you mean?"

"That depends on you," John replied. "If you folks are theists, then I'm a humanist. But if you're humanists, then I'm a theist."

This wasn't just an attempt to avoid a new job. It was good theology. My teacher Harvey Cox might have called it a "theology of juxtaposition," running the rasp against the grain. When people take pride in trusting God, then the prophetic thing is to test what difference that makes in their day-to-day treatment of other human beings. When they pride themselves too much on being ethical and humanistic, then perhaps they need reminding that the long-term capacity to embrace the second great commandment-to love one's neighbor-depends on the depth of our ability to live out the first-to love the Ground of Being with all of one's heart and mind and strength.

The days when we could easily divide our theology between humanism and theism are long gone. When we agreed that non-Christians could also be Unitarians, we opened the doors to an expansion of theologies. However, we do ask those who join our ranks to agree on a set of values. We do this through our covenant. We know this covenant as our Purposes and Principles.

All of this Midwestern, American humanistic history would not have been possible without the Enlightenment that began centuries earlier in Europe.

It was during the Enlightenment that Western Civilization began to value each individual person. We began to value the use of reason-originally to understand

our world and how it operates. It was not long, however, before the use of reason called into question long-assumed facts. These facts had to do with what we call the great questions: Where did we come from? What is our purpose? Where are we going? The questions of science intruded upon the questions that faith had long settled.

Scientists found answers to the questions that seemed to contradict long-held realities. And a few religious liberals used their ability to reason and embraced the answers science found.

Darwin is the primary example: he took many years to fully embrace the ideas his research pointed toward. Finally he published his findings, and advanced his theory of natural selection. And, of course, the uproar that followed was even greater than that he had anticipated. Darwin had studied religion. Members of his family were Unitarian. His wife was greatly distressed that his devotion to reason and science overcame his devotion to religion. And yet his devotion to the scientific method forced him to disrupt his comfortable life with controversy.

As all of us know, he is still a controversial figure-though not among scientists, nor Unitarian Universalists. We accept, in the document that lists the sources of our faith, the guidance of reason and the results of science as necessary to our liberal religion.

Our fifth source continues, warning us against idolatries of mind and spirit. Traditionally we have read this as cautioning us to be careful what we worship. And if you protest that you worship nothing, may I remind you that Emerson says, "A person will worship something-have no doubt about that. .... Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

The caution for religious humanists, I believe, lies in too narrow a definition of what we hold to be most worthy of our worship. If what is best and brightest in the cosmos lies only within the heart and soul of humankind, the temptation is to fall into a kind of self-worship, a very dangerous idolatry. If we identify as humanists, it is too easy to deny the possibility of evil-doing among our fellow humans, and especially ourselves.

Then, if faced with evidence of horrific acts of humans, we either deny it, or fall into despair as the base of our value system crumbles.

If we embrace humanism, we must be careful to embrace humans themselves, in all their complexity, with all their faults; and still be able to say: Despite our flaws, we humans are the cosmos raised to consciousness. We are magnificent creatures, and we are called to great tasks. We are obligated to educate all humans to become the best they can be. It is our responsibility to care for this planet upon which life came to self-consciousness.

Some of our scholars work on this task. They ask, is humanism sufficient? Some say yes, many say no. Meanwhile those of us who live and work in our congregations may continue thinking in old theologies, in old dichotomies-theist or humanist.

When I first was approached to minister in Muskegon, as an extension minister, I was invited for a long weekend. I met with many groups during that weekend. At one such meeting, a man asked me: "Well, Nana'. Which are you? Humanist or Theist?"

Not having heard of John Wolf's clever reply, my answer was, "It's the wrong question."

I continued, saying that most of the ministers and ministerial candidates I knew had moved beyond those two categories. I knew a few pagans, had heard of Buddhists; but most of us called ourselves Unitarian Universalists. We struggled to find the right name for our theology-panentheist? Process? Whatever it was it was based in humanism, but reached toward the natural world. And it was too complex to answer either, "Humanist" or "Theist."

I now think that William Murry has given it a name-humanistic religious naturalism. Murry says that we can all unite under this label. I think he is correct-that almost all of us can embrace this path.

Murry points out that theists see God present in nature, thus they can embrace humanistic religious naturalism. And the God they see is not a supernatural God, more as a force for good, or love itself. Humanists can experience transcendence, awe, and reverence at the sight of the Grand Canyon, or a spectacular sunset, or magnificent mountains. Emerson and Thoreau pointed the way to this denouement. Mary Oliver is our current poet who best speaks to this understanding of the sacred.

I would like to share with you the words of an African-American writer, born free in Baltimore in 1825, and a member of the First Unitarian church of Philadelphia. Her name was Mary Ellen Watkins Parker. I share part of her poem at this time, to illustrate that we religious liberals see the world in all its detail and revere it; and also because it is so timely.

The Crocuses

They heard the South wind sighing  
A murmur of the rain;  
And they knew that Earth was longing  
To see them all again.

While the snow drops still were sleeping Beneath the silent sod; They felt their new life pulsing Within the dark, cold clod.

I encourage you to read William Murry's book, Reason and Reverence. His work is being read and discussed by humanists within the Unitarian Universalist world, and reaching beyond it. He points out that naturalism fills the empty spaces many of us feel in humanism. It enriches our understanding, and lifts our eyes beyond our own navels, or even the faces of our fellow humanists.

When I was a student minister, I officiated at several memorial services. At one of the first, an elderly lady said to me, "I'm a Unitarian, but its not much comfort on a day like today." I understood her to be a humanist Unitarian, and that she felt somewhat challenged as she faced the death of her friends and

her own aging. I did not have the language or skills to address her need to fill that empty space at that time.

I think that adding religious naturalism to humanism helps us recognize that there is, indeed, something larger than the self. And the more we use our reason and science to explore the cosmos, the greater that something larger becomes.

I think that embracing the world in its detail and the cosmos in its grandness gives us a feeling of connection to that something larger. And humans seem to need that feeling of connection.

And I think that religious naturalism gives us permission to feel awe, wonder and reverence. Too often, humanists reject these feelings, fearing that they reference something supernatural. The God that theists need is present in this world, not some supernatural place. Yet humanistic religious naturalism does not require a deity. It is accessible to agnostics and atheists.

I believe that this path is the next logical step in humanism. I encourage those of you who embrace that path to explore its possibilities. I find them exciting and accessible.

Whatever theology we embrace, may we all enjoy the emergence of the first crocus, and may we share the joy and challenges of living in this beautiful, challenged world.

Shalom and Saalat.  
Blessed Be and Amen.