

“Essentials of Humanism”

- by the Rev. Kendyl Gibbons

Let's begin with a clarification, and what is perhaps a controversial claim. Humanism, as a religious position and a spiritual path, *is not based upon the assurance that there is no such thing as a self-conscious, personal god*. Rather, Humanism is founded upon the much more radical claim that whether such a god, or goddess, or gods, exist or not, does not really matter all that much. As its name implies, Humanism is concerned with the world of human existence, as it is known through human experience.

The question of god, while potentially interesting in some ways, is secondary, and many practicing humanists have differed, and do differ, concerning it.

Some humanists are persuaded, on what seems to them good evidence, that the existence of a self-conscious, personal deity is clearly impossible. Others take a position of intellectual modesty which holds that there is insufficient evidence for us as human beings to know whether gods exists or not. Others, good humanists still, have had experiences that would make them think that perhaps there is some kind of larger being at the heart of the universe. And yet, what all three of these types of humanists have in common is far more significant than their diversity on this question.

What humanism does clearly deny—which distinguishes it from other religious positions—is any authority in direct divine revelation. Whether or not the gods exist isn't all that important, because we as humanists do not take their word for anything. What we are willing to say that we know about the universe in which we find ourselves, and the lives we find ourselves living, is based exclusively upon our own shared experience and reason. “Because the Bible tells me so,”—or the Quran, or Jesus, or Jehovah, or the Buddha, or any other religious authority—carries no weight with a humanist.

What we trust is that which can be proven, either by evidence and science and careful study, or else by the cumulative moral insight and experience of the human race. It is the attempt to make any collection of ideas—ideas which have their origins in some human mind—into sacred scripture supposedly revealed by the gods and thus above all criticism that humanists consistently reject. Thus it is that whether or not the gods exist is of minor importance, for they are of no help to us in any case.

Humanism begins with the premise that our human bodies and minds are the tools with which we must engage this world and our existence. As [my colleague] Forrest Church observe[s]d, we must come to terms with the twin realities of being alive and having to die. Ken Patton puts it more poetically when he affirms, *“Without any say in the matter we are born, and without vote or rebuttal we die.”* These two facts are the givens of human experience, and the question is then how are we going to respond to this situation? There are two possible responses which Humanism rejects, and this is why I would argue that it does constitute a legitimate spiritual path.

On the one hand, we could spend whatever time of awareness that we may have on this planet sulking because the conditions of life are not more to our liking. We can search, futilely, as far as anyone has ever been able to determine, for the antidote to death, refusing to acknowledge the necessity of our mortality, or perhaps drown that awareness in the chemistry of our brains with alcohol or drugs or other perception-altering practices. We can, in essence, reject the life that we are given, and die in bitterness if we choose.

On the other hand, we can take the knowledge of our impending death as a motive to run around frantically grasping and seizing whatever immediate gratifications seem to come to hand, as if every instant excitement or pleasure might be our last. We can try to experience the least possible pain and the greatest possible entertainment based upon blind impulse and live a life of selfish and superficial enjoyment, although many generations of experiment have testified that such pleasures usually burn themselves out quickly, and leave jaded disillusionment in their wake.

Standing in opposition to these two fundamentally immature reactions, **the faith of Humanism invites us to grow up**, to consider thoughtfully what might constitute a good life, a life worth living even in the face of certain death, and then to try such an approach, always leaving room for the fruits of both reason and experience to correct our course. As Kenneth Patton concludes, *“Our only wisdom is to bestow ourselves on the universe which upholds us, and to accept the necessity of its ways.”*

As a humanist myself, I cannot escape the view that all religious experience and traditions and institutions are necessarily human experience and traditions and institutions. From this perspective, all religions have their origins in the question of what it means to live well, to live a good life.

Some religions answer that question by supposing that our current lives in this world are simply preparation for other, future states of existence, so that what constitutes living well now is whatever will pay off in the greatest happiness and pleasure in the hereafter. Again, humanism is concerned not so much with whether there is or is not another world, but with how much present time and energy we invest in preparing for it. Many of us suppose that our state of consciousness after the body's death will be just what it was before the body's conception; non-existent. Others suppose that we cannot know the answer to this mystery, since no evidence seems sufficient either way. A few of us have had uncanny personal experiences that incline us to think there may be something more beyond this life. But here's the thing; if our primary focus is on what makes a good life here and now, we are called upon to do the best we can to do what is right in this world. If some future state were to exist, its moral laws might be the same as those which pertain to this one, and we would be inclined to do what we are doing anyway.

Alternatively, some separate moral system would invite us to do what is wrong as we understand it now in order to build up points for the future. It is this possibility that Humanism vigorously rejects. We are asked to do what is right, and to accept the consequences of our actions in the world in which we are now living. We are not to be bribed with promises of rewards, or intimidated with threats, into doing what we know here and now to be wrong. If it turns out that I have been mistaken in my guess, and in fact there is some judgment that follows my death, I choose to deal with it when it comes, in the confidence of having done the best I could with this life as I understood it. As Henry David Thoreau responded upon his death bed, **“One world at a time, my friend; one world at a time.”**

Humanism rejects suppositions about possible life to come as a source of knowledge about what makes our present choices good; however, it very intentionally accepts the reality of death as part of what makes the task of learning to be human urgent and compelling. Knowing that we are mortal and that our time is limited suggests that in order to figure out how to live well, we must start now; there is no time to waste feeling sorry for ourselves or playing around with trifles. In this respect, Humanism is a demanding spiritual path. It teaches that we are accountable, individually and collectively, for what we make of ourselves and our world. No tolerant parent is going to appear in the last act to straighten out the messes we have made, either in our relationships or on the globe. No divine puppeteer is pulling the strings that cause us to dance; we are free to choose among all the options we can discover or invent, and then we and everyone else must live with the results of our choices. And thus it is by their consequences, for ourselves and others, that our choices must be evaluated.

The sternness of Humanism lies in its teaching that we must not wait to be rescued or excused; the operation of cause and effect is never suspended in this world by special pleading, no matter how earnest. **We are called to spiritual maturity,** which means to submit as gracefully as we can to reality, to both the logic and the arbitrariness of the universe as it happens to exist. We may, of course, strive to change those realities through the application of intelligence, effort, and the principles by which the universe itself operates.

Much of human progress has occurred from the determination of our ancestors to understand why the world is the way it is, and having learned how it might be changed, to change it. There is nothing to stop us from eradicating diseases if we can figure out how vaccinations work; we are free to cross the oceans if we can discover the principles of navigation; presumably, we might lift the ancient curses of hunger or warfare from the human race if we had the knowledge and the will. **The good news of Humanism is that the well-being of this planet, and of our community most widely conceived, is the good we are called to seek.** We are not fundamentally deceived; there is no arbitrary obedience required of us against our own common sense. We have, of course, made both individual and collective mistakes from time to time. **As we learn to understand ourselves and our world better, the knowledge that we could make yet more mistakes should help us to cultivate a certain humility in our assertions about what we know.** Nevertheless, our deepest joy is trustworthy, and what sustains us in shared happiness and comfort is a fair guide to what it ultimately means to live well.

Humanism as a spiritual path invites us to aspire to pleasures that are deeper and more lasting than those of a juvenile hedonism. It begins with the understanding that no human being can be fully happy at the expense of another, or even in the knowledge of another's misery. Until all people have the opportunity to participate in creating for themselves good lives, as they would define them, none of us are as happy as we might be. The suffering of others always diminishes our own pleasures, for we are social creatures, and we are designed by evolution to reflect one another's experiences in our own perceptions. This is why a thoughtless grasping for selfish indulgences cannot make a satisfying life in the long run.

The second principle that Humanism invites us to grasp is the recognition that the deepest and most enduring pleasures require cultivation. By investing patience, practice, and self-discipline, we can learn skills that make life more rewarding, whether we become better hockey players, more expressive water colorists, better parents, more appreciative readers, better cooks, more precise scientists . . . the list is endless. The point is that we may choose to sacrifice immediate gratification in the service of a greater fulfillment later on, and the good life is one in which immediate pleasures are thoughtfully balanced with the cultivation of lasting happiness. ***The more you take time to know and understand human nature and the nature of the world, the more likely you are to be effective in making your life what you most truly want it to be.*** And of course, the good life is also one in which our vision of what constitutes the good life itself matures and expands and grows deeper over time. To engage in the kind of self-examination and reflection that is required for such intellectual, emotional and moral development is part of what it means to practice Humanism.

Humanism also affirms that this world is the kind of place in which the resources that we need for understanding and creating good lives are indeed available to us. We can live well, if we will go about it with persistence, humility, reason, and integrity. **This is quite the opposite, by the way, of a religion or philosophy that teaches, as some would say, that we can believe anything we want.** In fact, Humanism asserts, as in the third Manifesto, that we "...distinguish things as they are from

things as we might wish or imagine them to be.” Or in Kenneth Patton’s image, “*Our brains are unhitched from our longings... Our eyes will not lie to us on demand.*”

There are many things that I would like, or want, to believe, some of them very delightful ideas. Unhappily, the evidence has indicated that they are not true, and therefore as a humanist, I am called upon to regard them as lovely images, not as truth, no matter how much I want to believe them. This commitment to reality and the authority of evidence is one of the most central disciplines of Humanism.

But for all its celebration of our intellectual capacity to understand the world and ourselves, **Humanism is not just a function of the mind.** The life well lived has emotional, aesthetic, and moral fulfillments as well as mental and physical satisfactions, and these we ignore at our peril. Love for those closest to us and compassion for all creatures, the capacity to be touched by beauty and repulsed by ugliness, and the longing for justice in the world and honor in oneself are as essential to spiritual maturity and lasting happiness as intellectual reason or physical health. Each of these dimensions has its own perspective on truth, and is not subsumed by the others; reasoning will not make right what is wrong, nor make what is hideous lovely, nor make us love the person our heart shrinks from. We can certainly learn to see more clearly the moral subtleties of a situation, to appreciate harmonies of color and form in unlikely places, and to hold in esteem people we weren’t initially attracted to, just as we can also condition our bodies and educate our minds, but this is a process of cultivation, not contradiction. Humanism calls upon us to attend to all of our faculties, and to recognize that a life can only truly be well lived when it has developed satisfaction in all of these aspects.

In the end, Humanism is not a faith for the mindless or the heartless, nor for those without integrity, nor those who are merely cynical in their skepticism. *It is not a featherbed for the spiritually lazy who want to believe and do as little as possible with their all-too-brief, mortal lives.* Humanism calls upon those who embrace it to live as fully as we can, in all the authentic wonder and curiosity of which the human spirit is capable. It summons us to a persistent obedience to evidence and reason, to recognize in our deepest and most beautiful longings not the world that is, but the world that might be, if we, by our courage, intelligence, and dedication, will make it so.

It invites us into compassionate connection with others, so that we may build the common good, and in that enterprise make our own days glad. Humanism offers us no assurances of divine love or a life to come, but rather the assurance that this life matters, that we create our meaning here and now, in this very world. **It teaches us to find our satisfactions in work and service, rest and love, and to accept our fears and failures for what we may learn from them.** And by no means least of all, Humanism summons us to gratitude, not because some judging deity needs its ego stroked, but because that is how we become most fully human; because to live well is to live with intelligence and integrity, with justice and compassion, with wholeness and beauty and finally, inevitably, with thanks and praise, for all that is our fragile, tragic, precious life.