

Invitation to Reverence

- a sermon message compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

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Reading

Excerpt from Humanist Manifesto I (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 problem of human living in the Twentieth Century. Religions have always been means for realizing the highest values of life...[but] today man's larger understanding of the universe, his scientific achievements, and 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 none the less 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.

We therefore affirm the following:

- Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created.
- Humanism believes that man is a part of nature and that he has emerged as a result of a continuous process.
- Holding an organic view of life, humanists find that the traditional dualism of mind and body must be rejected.

[...]

- Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values. Obviously humanism does not deny the possibility of realities as yet undiscovered, but it does insist that the way to determine the existence and value of any and all realities is by means of intelligent inquiry and by the assessment of their relations to human needs. Religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method.

[...]

- Religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious. It includes labor, art, science, philosophy, love, friendship, recreation - all that is in its degree expressive of intelligently satisfying human living. The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained.

Sermon Message

Our worship focus over the past month has been on reverence – we’ve explored what it is as a virtue, questioned its value and relevance, its essential pairing with the work of justice, and debated its necessity in the 21st century. The issue of reverence – particularly the topic of “the language of reverence” has been a hot one within our UU tradition since 2003 when our then UUA president, Bill Sinkford, gave a sermon in Texas that set everyone’s hair on fire. He was actually misquoted by a reporter as calling for more “God-talk” in our congregations....which isn’t what he said exactly....but nevertheless, the very suggestion of the need for a vocabulary of reverence led to a firestorm of reaction ranging from relief and support to calls for Sinkford’s resignation. The debate...the dialogue continues, thankfully with somewhat less heat.

The Rev. Dr. Kendall Gibbons, a UU leader in the religious humanist tradition, once wrote that:

Each generation and each of us as individuals must make the language of reverence our own. The call for such a vocabulary is a call to move forward, not backward. It is a call for creativity, for experiment, a demand that we speak the truth as we know it. It summons us to recount to one another those moments that left us with a lump in the throat or a song in the heart; those night vigils in the hospital that ended in an embracing peace; the hours of soul searching that ended in remorse and a resolution to do better next time. **It is an invitation to build from the wrecked timbers of old ritual the new structures of ceremony that can give shape to our reverence in the most awesome, meaning-laden moments of our lives.** We are always in the process of giving birth to a new language within the religious community of shared memory and mutual promise—**by telling the truth about our spiritual journeys**, and by participating together in rituals that give fresh form to the ageless human impulses of homage and awe.
(*Gibbons*)

As this discussion has been a foundational one for the entirety of my identification as a UU, as it has been for many of us, I want to conclude this month’s focus on reverence by sharing with you an excerpt of a talk given by the Rev. Dr. David Bumbaugh at the Fourth Annual Symposium of the

Boulder International Humanist Institute, in Boulder, Colorado in 2003. He takes us back to what he sees as the invitation to reverence written into the original Humanist Manifesto of 1933.

Hear now his words:

It was [eighty-three] years ago that a group of scholars issued the “Humanist Manifesto”, a document outlining a new religious vision, more adequate to the challenges and the opportunities of the twentieth century. The Manifesto was not the product of some whimsical enthusiasm. Rather, it was **the culmination of a complex process** which had its roots in the thought of Theodore Parker and other Transcendentalist thinkers of New England, as the implications of that radical religious vision had been worked out in the Western Unitarian Conference, and within the Ethical Culture movement, by some elements of Reformed Judaism, and among a variety of other religious liberals. To these philosophical, ethical, religious concerns were wedded the insights and imperatives of those who advocated the scientific method as the appropriate means for understanding the world and humanity’s place in that world.

It is ironic that increasingly over the decades, humanism has been identified as a secular ideology. Indeed “secular humanists” is the common term by which the spiritual descendants of the original signers of that document are currently known. As I read the original Manifesto, however, it is clear that the signers did not define themselves as “secular” or as **the enemies of religion**. The Manifesto affirms the ongoing importance of religion for human life. It defines religion as “the quest for abiding values” and it insists that while fashions in theology may shift the shape and form of religion, **the religious quest for abiding values is a constant of human experience**.

The Manifesto did not seek to abolish religion, but rather to set out some imperatives by which to structure and revitalize religion so that it might more adequately serve the human community in the modern. The signers of the Humanist Manifesto were concerned to challenge the various dualisms which fractured the human community – the dualisms defined by body and mind, by humanity and nature, by sacred and secular, by knowledge and faith, by reason and revelation. They envisioned **a radical unity** out of which might emerge a truly moral and ethical social structure.

The Manifesto was issued in a highly problematic context and the years have not been kind to the dream that it sought to advance. The catastrophe of the First World War was still reverberating around the globe. A continuing worldwide depression had served to lay bare the brutal injustices of the economic and political systems under which humanity labored. And, of course, the premonitions of an even greater catastrophe on the horizon haunted the troubled dreams of many.

Confronting this reality, much of mainstream religion declined the invitation to dialogue that the Manifesto presented, and retreated, instead, into neo-orthodoxy. From that position, theologians were able to distinguish between “moral man and immoral society,” to decry the social iniquity of the times, but to offer little hope for any effective corporate response to growing evil. **The optimism and confidence in human capacity that under-girded the Humanist Manifesto**, tempered though they were by a realistic estimate of the human condition, were radically out of fashion. The consequence was that religion and humanism quickly ceased to encounter each other outside the vital, but admittedly local dialogue within Unitarian and Universalist and a few other self-consciously liberal groups.

Overtime, Humanists began to accept as home the ghetto to which they had been consigned. Humanists accepted the charge that they were secularists, materialists, rationalists and the

implacable foes of the spiritual and emotional qualities that romanticized religion emphasized. **Living under this imposed definition, Humanism gradually lost the vocabulary of reverence that I believe had been the native tongue of the signers of the Humanist Manifesto.** Over time, Humanism came to be understood by many as an artifact of a by-gone, dated, slightly quaint era and its advocates were seen as aging dinosaurs who did not yet realize that their era had ended, and that they had been replaced by an upstart, irrepressible spirituality.

[...]

Watching this development, I have found myself wondering why Humanists, who once offered a serious challenge to traditional religion now, find that increasingly we are engaged in a monologue. I would submit to you that to some degree at least we are talking to ourselves because **we have allowed ourselves to be defined by the opposition.** We have dismissed mainstream religion as an atavistic aberration. We have given up the hope of a constructive dialogue. We have manned the ramparts of reason and are prepared to defend the citadel of the mind against this new superstition until the very end. **But in the process of defending, we have lost the vocabulary of reverence, the ability of speak of that which is sacred, holy, of ultimate importance to us, the language which would allow us to enter into critical dialogue with the rest of the religious community.**

The sad thing is that Humanism, with its emphasis on the ongoing search for truth and understanding, with its insistence that revelation is not sealed, with its conviction that all truth is one, with its commitment to “truth, known or to be known,” has an inherited vocabulary of reverence implicit in its underlying assumptions - a vocabulary of reverence which is drawn from and depends upon the ongoing scientific enterprise, the enlarging exploration of the universe and humanity’s place in the universe.

The key to the recovery of a humanist vocabulary of reverence is to be found, I believe, in the second affirmation of the original manifesto. After affirming that the universe is “self-existing and not created,” the manifesto went on to insist (in the language of the time), “Humanism believes that man is a part of nature and he has emerged as the result of a continuous process.” If we take that assertion seriously, then it becomes clear that our growing understanding of the nature of the universe is, in some sense, also a deep anthropology - a source of **continuing revelation** concerning our own nature.

[...]

When the Humanist Manifesto declared that we are part of nature and we have emerged as the result of a continuous process, it not only denied the creation stories of the western religious traditions, 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 humming birds 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.

It is a religious story in that it calls us out of our little local universes and invites us to see ourselves in terms of the largest self we can imagine—a self which was present, in some sense, in the singularity which produced the emergent universe, a self which was present, in some sense, at the birth of the stars, a self which, in some sense, is related through time to every living thing on this planet, a self which contains within itself the seeds of a future we cannot imagine in our wildest flights of fancy.

It is a religious story in that it whispers of a larger meaning to our existence—a suggestion that in us the universe is grasping for self-knowledge, for self-understanding, for insight. How we participate in this process, or what the ultimate consequence of this process may be, we cannot know. But if, as the Humanist Manifesto suggests, we are not separate from nature and we are a result of nature’s inherent processes, then our struggles with meaning and purpose, our endless search for insight and understanding cannot be limited in their significance or consequence to the human enterprise alone, but must be part of the emergence of the universe itself.

It is a religious story in that it implies a broader ethic for our lives. To understand the human race as related in the most intimate of ways to all living things on this planet; to understand the earth not as the platform on which life exists, but as itself a living being, regulating its complex systems in such a way as to sustain ongoing life; to understand our own physical beings as a congeries of ancient living forms, quietly and unobtrusively contributing to our ongoing existence while pursuing their own mysterious imperatives; to understand ourselves as the incarnation of those same forces and substances and circumstances which produced galaxies and stars and planets is to enlarge our sense of responsibility and our definition of moral living. **In light of this enlarged revelation**, the ethic of the main-chance, the ethic of short-term benefit, the ethic of immediate gratification, the ethic of tribal values and ethnic identities so prevalent in our world are challenged in the most profound way and found in every case to be inadequate.

We are driven to recognize the paradox that our individual well-being is rooted in the understanding that at heart we are one with all things and our sense of separateness is ultimately an illusion, while at the same time affirming that our individual separateness is a consequence of the drive of the universe for differentiation and complexity. We are driven by our story to seek an ethic that respects the individual and the ground out of which the individual emerges. This implies a deep concern for ecojustice that reaches across class, racial, ethnic, even species distinctions and embraces a vision that responds to the largest sense of self we are capable of entertaining.

Brian Swimme has suggested that the religious story for our time is the “Universe Story.” I would add that the human story and the universe story are the same tale. If the Manifesto was right when it insisted that we are part of nature, not separate from it, that we represent a continuing natural process, then it becomes clear that the challenges, the hopes, the dreams, the aspirations which find expression in our lives are not separate from the context in which we have evolved, in which we are rooted. We are not encapsulated, separated, isolated beings. **Whatever we are, the universe is.**

[...]

This is a religious story; it invites us to awe; it demands a vocabulary of reverence. It is a story that is uniquely appropriate to the Humanist tradition. It emerges from the scientific enterprise. It seeks to overcome the ancient dualisms that, over the ages, have diminished the human spirit. It offers a clear alternative to the limited faiths and narrow fundamentalisms that compete for the allegiance of the human community— one that does not have to deny the categories and assumptions upon which our

daily lives are built, but can embrace the emergent insights and understandings which enlarge our vision of ourselves and the context in which our lives are lived.

The Humanist Manifesto was an invitation to revision the religious enterprise and to challenge the prevailing attitudes and assumptions of the religious community. We are called, at this moment in time, to **renew that undertaking**—to find or build a vocabulary of reverence adequate to the vision which is emerging around us—a vision which is the result of the drive by the universe to know itself and understand itself—a vocabulary adequate to describe a universe which regularly confounds our expectations...**We are children of, expressions of a universe that is not only “stranger than we know, but stranger than we can know.”**

It is incumbent upon us to challenge the parochial and limited claims of traditional religions with the enlarging and enriching and reverent story that is our story and their story: the Universe Story.

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed be and Amen.

Sources:

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