

OUR FIFTH SOURCE: HUMANISM

Rev. Kit Ketcham, Feb. 2008

With Malcolm Ferrier as co-preacher

KK One of the most vivid memories of my youth is the day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. I was 21, still unemployed after college graduation, sitting in front of the TV at noon watching the popular soap opera of that day, General Hospital, with my dad, who was home from the church for lunch. We were in the midst of some medical emergency onscreen when the news that our President had been shot pre-empted every airwave.

We sat in shock as the dreadful news unfolded, awaiting the latest developments in fear and trembling. I'll bet most of you have your own tales to tell about some historic moment in your world experience and how your life was different from that moment on.

We tend to remember the events that shape our lives; often the more radical the change, the more vivid the memory. I also remember the moment when I acknowledged the shift in my religious outlook and said to myself, like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, "Wow, I don't think I'm in Kansas anymore."

It was because of a song I heard one day on the radio: "It ain't necessarily so, it ain't necessarily so, the things that you're liable to read in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so."

WHAT??? I thought. Someone dares to say this in a Broadway song? What would my conservative family think if they heard it? And what would they say if they knew I agreed?

This was a huge moment of truth for me. I knew I didn't believe all the stuff I'd learned in Sunday School; I didn't approve of God's handling of the Promised Land crisis, when he told the Hebrew children just to go and take it from the Canaanites; I had a lot of questions about water and wine and people being raised from the dead.

I hadn't challenged my parents or my teachers on any of this. I was pretty sure I wouldn't like the answers I got. But here was a popular song which crooned my own heresies in an authoritative and melodious way, resonating in my young heart.

My opinion-forming style is to listen, rather than argue, to use my internal morality gauge and reason to determine right from wrong, to think about consequences, and to allow others to form their own opinions in their own ways. I tend to look for ways we agree, rather than ways I disagree with someone.

So I quietly acknowledged to myself, in my twenties, that I was more of a humanist, in my heart, than I was a traditional believer. At that point in history, humanism didn't have such a red-hot reputation. It was getting a lot of criticism from the orthodox religious world as a philosophy which contended that humans were the be-all and end-all of the universe, the most powerful and highest of creation's huge output.

Malcolm, how about your early involvement with Humanism?

MF: When I was a teenager, I lived with a stern Baptist Family in Toronto. Their son Murray became my mentor, hero and friend. He flew and lived through forty missions over Europe in an RCAF mosquito fighter. He was a marvelous pilot. He then became a test pilot for DeHavilland, flying some of the first jet planes. He crashed into a mountain in bad weather while testing navigation equipment.

I wrote his folks a note, filling it with conventional condolences and how wonderful Christianity was with its assurances we'd all meet again in heaven some day. But I knew even then that I didn't believe it, and sought more rational ground. I was becoming a closet Humanist.

KK: Let's talk some more about Humanism and religion. Why don't you go first?

MF: A definition of Humanism with which I'm comfortable: the commitment to the search for truth and morality through human means in support of human interests. It rejects the validity of transcendental or supernatural justifications or rationale. One often hears the term "secular Humanism", with the strong implication that H has no component of sacredness. I'd disagree: glorying in the wondrous joy of human feeling and expression is intensely sacred and religious.

I think many people would say humanism is a religion in that it is a set of guiding principles to direct life choices. Kit, I bet you have a bit more to say on those matters?

KK Sure. I'd like to invite you all to turn in your hymnal to that front section where our principles and sources are printed and let's read the opening lines of the Sources and then skip down to the section on humanism.

"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."

Let's unpack this a little bit. Earlier, we read a long list of affirmations of humanism as a philosophy. This is often called The Humanist Manifesto, and this is its third iteration.

Originally published in the 1930's, the Manifesto boasted many renowned scientists, philosophers, and thinkers, including several Unitarian ministers, signing onto a document stating, in essence, that traditional religion had outlived its usefulness and that a new religious approach centered on scientific reasoning and devoted to meeting human needs, was necessary.

Over the years since then, the Manifesto has undergone some changes and re-statements, but it retains the underlying faith that human needs and abilities and the natural world are a sufficient and necessary foundation for a religious path that does not need supernatural events to bolster its claims.

Early humanism often was assumed to be atheistic and many humanists are atheists. But this often, not always, but often means that they have no belief in a supernatural deity which governs the universe in a personal way and have found their “power beyond human power” in the concept of Natural Law, mysterious, yet discoverable in the many manifestations of the earth and the unfolding universe.

My favorite of the 20 or so affirmations in our reading today is this one: “we believe in optimism rather than pessimism, hope rather than despair, learning in the place of dogma, truth instead of ignorance, joy rather than guilt or sin, tolerance in the place of fear, love instead of hatred, compassion over selfishness, beauty instead of ugliness, and reason rather than blind faith or irrationality.”

This, for me, is the human heart of religion, expressing human aspirations, acknowledgement of reality, hope for a brighter future for self and others, and the value of learning as a tool for overcoming fear, hate, and selfishness.

My definition of religion is that it is our public expression of our relationships with ourselves, with others, and with the universe. These are the ways I choose to relate to myself, to others, and to the universe.

Malcolm, you'll have some ideas, no doubt on all this?

MF: Well, that's us started in that we have pretty good brackets around humanism and declare it a legitimate religion or code of ethics. It's often helpful to look at historical roots, and important people in the earlier days. I should note right away though, that many people who we would now define as humanists were not so declared during their lifetimes. This is simply because the term did not then exist.

Let me start with my favorite humanist, a fairly modern one, Bertrand Russell, in many ways my number one intellectual hero. He lived until he was 98 and had a profound influence on three generations. During his lifetime at any time he had 40-odd books in circulation, and he achieved this remarkable productivity by writing 3000 words per day, virtually completely unedited. He would probably have used the term humanitarian rather than humanist, because of his total and deep commitment to social change, liberal anarchism and skeptical atheism.

My first exposure to his writing was when I was a teenager, just as I was shucking off the extremely tight strictures of living in a Baptist minister's household for four years. This was Russell's book "Why I am not a Christian". Russell had a passionate desire for certainty in knowledge. He was a pacifist, and in fact, was jailed for his views in 1918. Altogether, my hero, and I would recommend him to you, particularly its most popular book, history of Western philosophy. Kit, your turn again, I think.

KK. When humanism became part of the Unitarian Universalist Sources, which is our theme for this worship year, the wording of it was somewhat different from the wording of other 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.”

This language contains a warning, unlike other Sources which may offer challenges or affirmations. It warns us against idolatries of the mind and spirit. And what I get out of that language is that humanism is our anchor in the shifting winds of popular religion. Humanism reminds us that we humans are capable of idolatry, of worshiping idols, in other words, of excessive devotion to causes or ideas that do not lead to human growth and human progress as a species.

Humanism as a philosophy and as a source of UUism counsels us to consider our behavior and our attitudes through the lens of reason, to examine the claims of culture and tradition by holding them up to the light of critical thinking, to rely on our human minds and hearts to know right from wrong rather than accepting traditional thinking as dogmatic and inflexible rules. Humanism reassures us that we humans have an innate moral compass, even though many humans decline to use it.

We do not need a supernatural power to tell us what to do; we can rely on natural law to inform us of what is best for human survival and human flourishing. The universe around us is our best teacher and we can trust it. Malcolm. I'd like to hear more from you on a couple of the clauses in the H Manifesto.

MF: I'll start with the very first one. "We are committed to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems." This is a good alternative definition of humanism and

resonates with me, particularly because my inclinations, training and professional work were all in science. I have always been very uncomfortable with the "soft" sciences such as psychology, because in my view you can never prove anything, and there is immense uncertainty and variability in the subject matter, plus endless inconclusive arguments on virtually every topic.

I will not dare claim that science can explain behavior, and will simply note that the humanist commitment to applying science to as much as possible leads to clarification. That's why this first manifesto principle appeals to me, particularly in that much societal progress can be made by technological fixes.

My other favorite affirmation is the one on protecting and enhancing the earth and preserving it for our children and grandchildren. As I fear you all too tediously know, this has been an obsession of mine for close on a decade. And I'm so glad to see more and more people appreciating it and more and more people of every stripe trying to do something about it.

I confess to perverse pleasure in doing as much as I can to save energy of and altering my lifestyle, thereby quite appreciably to cutting down on personal travel and waste, and therefore pollution. It's no use waiting for Washington, or anybody else to mandate such changes in attitudes: it's up to each individual. The thought of our generation turning over a messed up earth for our grandchildren is to me and abhorrent concept.

KK: You're on a bit of a roll – why not add a few more tasty bits?

MF: Here goes. Humanism implies free will, and that we have control over virtually everything we do. There is no fatalism about it, as we have the power, individually and collectively to push for changes in humanity and social structure in ways we deem desirable.

Humanism is the source of one of my favorite words: creativity. The human mind and will have boundless possibilities for enhancing the individual and the community.

About immortality. My views here mirror the standard humanistic perspective in that immortality means your memory lives on in the minds of others, particularly those in your family. Better yet, if you can write almost anything really, your words have a certain measure of immortality. (Kit,, do you realize and accept your immortality!?). It is to me a sobering thought that whatever you do has some prospect of lasting for some considerable time, so you better give your best thought to what you're doing.

Prayer is something that many humanists struggle with. Kit, do you talk to your cat? I certainly do, and it is a very fine conversationalist, in that it seldom replies. What may you ask, has this to do with prayer?

My view is that when you think or say something in every day life you are using your conscious mind. In the nighttime, your subconscious mind takes over works on your daytime thoughts and rearranges them and often solves problems. I bet many of you have gone to bed puzzling the answer to the crossword clue for 17 across, and woken in the morning with the answer to jumping out at you.

That to my mind is prayer: considering something in your conscious mind, and having your subconscious mind act upon it and often presents a solution. When a person "prays" she is simply summoning her subconscious mind. A bit daft, you might say? But it works for me.

(And then there's) dealing with dying. This is of course an immensely difficult subject for everyone, humanist or not. You would think that dying would be harder for the nonreligious. For us, death is the end as final as turning off the television and throwing it in the lake.

However falsely, believers can look forward to eternal bliss or, if not this, at least Justice or resolution of some kind. Picturing a deity's hand upon the cosmic helm, believers can hope for all accounts to be settled at each injustice compensated for, with every life set firmly into meaning's great template. How strange, then that despite the comfort and support their beliefs are said to bring, most religious people appear to fear dying and to dread death.

My belief and perception is that the humanistic view of living fully is totally satisfying. I seek no more, and if I feel I have tried my best to live well, and to contribute socially, I am in need of no more. Kit, I leave it to you to wrap all this up

KK. Malcolm has shared his thoughts about the concepts of immortality and preparing for our inevitable death. Immortality as a religious concept is reliant on supernatural forces, but I see it in a somewhat different, though related, way. Certainly human memory is a form of life after death, as is our art: writing, music, all our creative products, as well as the human beings we have nurtured in the many ways we can nurture.

But I think we experience extended life in a very biological way as well, and that is as our human bodies return to the earth to become part of the earth, whether buried and disintegrating naturally or by cremation and scattering of remains. However our families and friends choose to dispose of our bodies, we continue to live on in the ecosystem of the earth. That's probably yet another good reason to eat organically!

Malcolm has also mentioned prayer and I have my own approach to that, as well. I am one humanist who doesn't struggle with prayer, probably as a result of my Baptist DNA! But I don't ask for anything but strength and the knowledge to do the right thing, when I pray, whether I am concerned for myself or for another person.

It doesn't make sense to me that a supernatural being would shift the order of the universe just to make me happy. It does make sense to me that I would have an innate ability to do the right thing, to find the strength I need, by looking for it internally, and I do this through prayer.

I pray aloud nightly and as I hear my words and struggle to make them accurate and honest, I am changed, I see my mistakes and my blessings more clearly, and I forgive myself as I acknowledge those mistakes and begin to decide how to make amends. And I do often find the answer waiting for me in the morning, usually in the form of a shift in my attitude and a readiness to change my actions.

As we've worked together on this sermon, I've been delighted to have the chance to share with Malcolm my humanistic religious thinking and I'm thankful that he was easy to persuade to do this with me. We represent two different incarnations of religious humanism, and our congregation represents many more! And that's the way it should be, I think. We are so different; our life's paths have brought us together here and we each stand in a unique setting, the result of many experiences, of many gene pools, many talents and great creativity.

May humanism, as one of our Sources, be regarded with honor and respect and may humanists regard our other Sources with honor and respect, for it has long been a paradox within UUism that humanism and its reliance on reason and science is often at odds with other world religions, particularly theistic religions.

Yet all these strands form the core of Unitarian Universalism. We need them all, as we create a religion in these days that is capable of rising to the many challenges that our evolving world faces.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #311, Let it Be a Dance

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that as human beings, we have the innate ability to choose good over evil, to examine our lives through the lens of critical thinking, and to work to improve conditions on this earth for ourselves and the generations of life to come. May we hold fast to our humanity, expressing it through our arts, our writings, our thoughts, and our choices. And may we recognize that others have found different paths, as meaningful to them as ours are to us. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.