

Homily-The Humanist In Me, January 24, 2010

Reading by Greta W. Crosby: UU minister?

If I could give you one key, and one key only, to more abundant life, I would give you a sense of your own worth, an unshakable sense of your own dignity as one grounded in the source of the cosmic dance, as one who plays a unique part in the unfolding of the story of the world. When you and I look at these trees, these flowers, anything at all, we are the universe looking at its handiwork. You have perhaps seen the pattern of cross and yarn called the eye of god made first in our Southwest homage to the sun. We, too, all of us together, all the eyes of all the creatures, are the eye of god. That is why we need each other, our many ways of seeing, that together we may rejoice, and see clearly, and find the many keys to more abundant life. Once we are sure of our own innate worth, something that cannot be taken from us, we no longer need to prove it in elaborate ways so often damaging to others and to ourselves. . . . Secure in the sense of our own worth, we can rejoice in the worth of others and love out of fullness. Let us affirm one another as unique, irreplaceable persons.

Reading: by Robert Eddy, UU minister; from Humanism: Secular and Religious
I'm a member of a Unitarian Universalist Church, and proud of it.

My religion is secular humanism. Many people find those statements contradictory. Is Unitarian Universalism simply humanism in sheep's clothing? Many Unitarian Universalists call themselves humanists, but many others object to this label. They see it as a way of removing themselves from the community of religious people in which they want to remain. They often feel more comfortable with liberal Catholics who share their commitment to the wellbeing of humanity than they do with people who call themselves humanists. Nevertheless, whether we want to use the label or not, I think most of us would be considered humanist by our opponents. But—and this is a very big “but”—the fact that most or even all Unitarian Universalists are humanists does not make Unitarian Universalism the same thing as humanism.

Many of us share a strong humanistic faith and equally strong ideas of how that faith should be applied to local, state, and national problems. But if we insist on making our church a place where only humanists are welcome or comfortable, it will no longer be a Unitarian Universalist Church. To be faithful to our tradition, we must not only allow diversity of faith—social as well as theological—we must fight for it.

Homily- “The Humanist in Me”

loosely adapted from the Rev. Bruce Clear

What most people know about humanism they learned from the lips of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and other televangelists. One key leader of the religious right, Tim LeHaye, wrote an immensely popular book years ago about humanism that has probably been read by more people in this country than the works of humanist writers Bertrand Russell and John Dewey put together. Let me share with you what lots of people know, or think they know, about humanism, as explained by LeHaye in his popular book entitled *The Battle for the Mind*. A few excerpts will do:

Humanism is not only the world's greatest evil but, until recently, the most deceptive of all religious philosophies. Humanists are committed to doing away with every vestige of the responsible moral behavior that distinguishes man from animals.

No humanist is qualified to hold any governmental office in America—United States senator, congressman, cabinet member, State Department employee, or any other position that requires him to think in the best interest of America. Humanists work untiringly to keep parents from injecting any moral ideals into their children. Believe it or not, their goal is a worldwide generation of young people with a completely amoral (or animal) mentality.

The book continues in this vein, on and on with invective against humanism. Since I think you probably get the idea, mercifully, I'll end the quotes here.

But Humanism was not simply created for the benefit of televangelist fundraisers, to help put the fear of God into their potential contributors. Rather, humanism is an ancient tradition, tracing back over the centuries to the early Greek thinkers. Those Greek thinkers, people like Socrates and Aristotle, identified human reason as far more powerful and effective than superstition, and urged civilization away from reliance on magical and supernatural understandings of life. Like many others, I first encountered the word “humanism” when studying the Renaissance period of history, when the great writers, artists, and scientists of our civilization turned their attention away from the heavens and discovered human beings in a new light. The scientific explorations of the Enlightenment added to the momentum of humanism by offering the scientific method as a new standard for evaluating truth; as a new measure for testing human knowledge.

Humanism—as an organized movement in the United States— began within Unitarian churches. In the opening years of this century, John Dietrich, a Unitarian minister in Spokane, Washington and later in Minneapolis, was preaching a non-theistic religion he called “humanism.” In Des Moines, Iowa, a Unitarian minister named Curtis Reese was preaching a non-theistic religion he called the “religion of democracy.” When these two ministers met at a conference in 1917, they discovered the similarities of their messages and Reese eagerly adopted Dietrich’s label, “humanism.”

Throughout the 1920s, the humanist view attracted many followers in the UU denomination. Eventually, the Humanist Fellowship was formed, largely by Unitarians at the University of Chicago. This group later reorganized as the American Humanist Association.

In 1933, a statement outlining the philosophy of humanism was published under the title, “A Humanist Manifesto.” Of the 84 people who originally signed the document, over half were Unitarian ministers. The most famous signatory, though, was John Dewey, the philosopher, who was then at the University of Chicago, and later at Columbia University.

Nowadays on surveys, about 54% of Unitarian Universalists consider themselves to be Humanists. So, even if you are not a Humanist, having an understanding of what Humanism means is important for participating in the UU version of progressive spirituality. However, understanding Humanism can be difficult because it can be a hard term to pin down to one meaning. Some people call themselves religious Humanists, some call themselves secular Humanists, some just call themselves Humanists. You will find a wide variety of other types of Humanisms on the Internet. But, is there a common core among Humanists?

I think Humanism’s central core is the belief that we have access to no higher authority than the human mind. No book, no tradition, no priest is sacrosanct. There is no father-god authority. All authorities are subject to critique, and their pronouncements are subject to critical analysis. This doesn’t mean that all authorities are illegitimate, or that their pronouncements are wrong. It does mean that in every case it is up to each individual to analyze and to decide for herself. In this way, Humanism is extremely anti- totalitarian. No religious power, no political power, no economic power, no social power merits unquestioned homage. Rather, the critically thinking human mind is the best source of authority that we have.

Besides this defining belief, all Humanisms include other beliefs, too: Belief in the ultimate importance of this worldly life, rather than that of some afterlife. Belief in the importance of the full development of our potentials for growth, fulfillment, and creativity. Belief in the importance of constantly expanding and improving what we know about ourselves and our world; that is, a constant search for increasing truth. Finally, belief in the importance of improving the lives of all people.

Beyond these several beliefs held in common, there are many variations of beliefs within Humanism. However, the major division within Humanism is that between secular Humanism and religious Humanism. My sense is that in the past 15 years or so this secular vs. religious division has become more of an issue within the UU denomination; that 25 years ago UU congregations heard very little “religious-type talk,” and that such talk has increased within UU in recent years. This shift has been welcomed by some UUs and definitely not welcomed by others—even causing some to leave their congregations. So let me say a few words about that secular vs. religious division within Humanism. Let me first talk about secular Humanism.

The term secular was first put in front of the term Humanism in the 1930s, I suspect to differentiate it from those Humanists who believed in some type of “world soul” or mysticism about the “being” of the Universe, and from the notion that truth could be found in ways other than science. These mystical ideas had been put forth by the Idealists and Transcendentalists of the 1800s, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, and even by the respected British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead in the 1920s.

By the 1930s, many Humanists felt that it was time finally to leave all mystical thinking behind. Clearly, the scientific method was the way to truth. The discoveries in physics and Darwin’s explanation of evolution were probably all that were needed to explain the workings of the Universe. Fledgling sciences, such as psychology and sociology, would be added to the “hard” sciences of physics and chemistry to round out our understanding of the world. The study of theology would gradually fade away among the intelligentsia, though there probably would always be the remnant of humanity who would need or want the soothing comfort of religious mythology: a god to pray to, and the promise of eternal life.

Secular Humanists typically see religion as a problem to be solved and eliminated. At its worst, religion is a totalitarian system subjugating the mind to dogma and the body to misery. Even at its liberal best, religion is an out-of-place carryover from pre-scientific, superstitious ages. It has no place in truly modern societies. People should all just grow up. Perhaps the greatest proponent of this view was Robert Ingersoll, the famous atheist orator of the late 1800s who drew crowds of hundreds and sometimes thousands by berating religious superstitions and dogma. Currently, the best-selling proponents of this viewpoint are Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins.

Now: secular Humanists, in spite of the primacy they put on the sciences as the way to truth, are not necessarily of the coldly objective type of personality. Secular Humanists can be devoted to the arts, to philanthropy, to caring for others, and to improving

society for everyone. These, along with a commitment to search for truth, can give great meaning to the lives of Humanists of the secular persuasion.

But here, I think, we arrive at the crucial point of difference between secular and religious Humanists: secular Humanists generally believe that, other than the purpose and meaning that you give to your individual life, the Universe itself is purposeless and meaningless. Everything in the Universe—including we humans—are just “frisky dust”: atoms and molecules blindly obeying the laws of physics. The evolution of life on this planet has been meaningless—just random genetic mutations leading to variations in characteristics, some of which have fit better in their environment and so have multiplied and lasted.

Within the human species, random genetic mutations led to the evolution of feelings, thinking, and altruism and these characteristics have persisted because they have led to survival advantages for our DNA. Love and morality, knowledge, and attraction to beauty are basically just further developments of these traits, which have randomly evolved and could have just as easily not appeared had the environment been a little different. Love and morality, knowledge, and beauty can be enjoyed and appreciated, and can give meaning to the individual life, but they should be recognized as accidents of nature—the tools of genetic survival.

So, for the secular Humanist, life and the Universe have no “meaning” other than what we humans create for ourselves. Those of us who realize this should unflinchingly face the fact that individually and collectively we came to exist for no cosmic purpose, and we will leave behind no cosmic meaning. We live and we die on a middling planet orbiting a middling star, both of which eventually will cease to exist, leaving behind no trace of our lives except atoms and radiation.

Now to shift gears: Religious Humanism shares with all of Humanism the belief in the ultimate authority of the human mind, and shares the several other beliefs that I mentioned as common to all of Humanism: Belief in the ultimate importance of this worldly life, rather than that of some type of afterlife. Belief in the importance of the full development of our potentials for growth, fulfillment, and creativity during this life. Belief in the importance of constantly expanding and improving what we know about ourselves and our world; that is, a constant search for truth. Belief in the importance of improving the lives of all people.

Some writers claim that religious Humanism is nothing more than this fundamental core of Humanism with the addition of an appreciation for congregational religious-style rituals with which to experience more intense emotions and communion with others.

But to me, this definition of religious Humanism would be just secular Humanism with rituals. No, I think that for Humanism to be religious it must include truly religious aspects, and it does. Religions provide explanations of the purpose and meaning of existence, and so does religious Humanism. Religious Humanists usually believe that there is more to the Universe than just “frisky dust” being driven by the laws of physics. They believe that the development of the Universe indicates that it has an inherent drive toward increasing degrees of complexity, increasing degrees of consciousness, and increasing degrees of beauty, truth, and goodness.

Religious Humanists look at the history of the Universe, starting with the Big Bang, and they see a Cosmic process moving from simpler structures to more complex ones. Moving from the simple, hot plasma created by the Big Bang, to the creation of electrons, protons, and neutrons, and then eventually these particles came together becoming the simplest atoms, which later coalesced into the first stars, which then created more complex and heavier atoms, which then coalesced into planets where atoms came together to make molecules containing many atoms. Then on Earth, at least, some of these molecules organized into what we call life: these were single cells that could reproduce and could take active steps to survive. Single cells remained the only life on this planet for the next 2.2 billion years. Then, in less than 2% of that time, suddenly all the major bodily forms of animals appeared. Some of these animals had rudimentary brains, and at least since then, 500 million years ago, consciousness has existed on this planet. That is, within these brains, the stuff of the Universe became conscious. About 200,000 years ago, some animals evolved into humans, homo sapiens sapiens—who have the most complex, and the most conscious of all brains, creating the human mind. With the development of the human mind, the Universe became self-conscious; able to reflect on the fact of existence and of being consciousness. Then, over the past 9000 thousand years as humans settled into more stable agricultural communities, there has been a rapid evolution of the mind in the sense of increasing knowledge, of increasingly sophisticated forms of art, and of morality increasingly guided by compassion rather than aggression—morality evolving from the ancient Code of Hammurabi, with its eye-for-an-eye ethic, all the way to the modern development of social democracy in some European nations with an ethic based on care.

Religious Humanists look at this 13 billion-year history of evolution in the physical world, within life, and within consciousness, and see our Universe as having this very progress as its purpose. They don't say that there is a complex superhuman-like consciousness—a God—designing and intervening in this evolution. Rather, they say that the direction of this evolution, this

progress, is an inherent property of the “stuff” of the Universe; that, the Universe itself is moving toward ever greater degrees of complexity, of consciousness, and of beauty, truth, and goodness.

For each of us as individuals, religious Humanism says that we are, currently, the leading edge of this Cosmic evolution. Each of us is the product of, and the beneficiary of, the entire history of the evolution of the Universe that has now created you and me. We are a link in the chain of the evolutionary movement. And, as a link in this chain, each of us feels within our own nature the Cosmic attraction to, the urge toward, beauty, truth, and goodness. Each of us feels most fulfilled when we allow these to guide our life; when our life is an enactment of these. That is, the purpose and meaning driving the entire Universe is also the purpose and the meaning of your individual life. In this way, each of us advances, as best we can, the progress of the world.

Because of the way that religious Humanists view the meaning of the Universe, their attitude toward traditional religions is often more accepting than that of the secular Humanists. Many religious Humanists view traditional religious mythology as ways of expressing the human need to enact and to understand our place in the evolution of the Cosmic drive toward Goodness. This need is something that humans feel, and religions have developed, in part, to satisfy that need. Every culture and every individual interprets that need using the conceptual tools—the ideas—available to it; thus are the various religious beliefs. But virtually every religion includes some version of the Golden Rule, expressing that common drive toward Goodness.

Humanism is just the newest way of interpreting our human situation within the Universe. Humanism is an interpretation that says that our beliefs must be compatible with science and must be subject to rational critique—in this way our beliefs differ from those of most religions. But this doesn't mean that those traditional religions are simply mistaken or wrong. Rather, traditional religions are just older interpretations that don't fully accommodate more recent scientific and philosophical viewpoints; but they can still serve a useful purpose for most people. Old-fashioned Newtonian physics doesn't accommodate the more recent viewpoints of relativity physics and quantum physics, but still Newtonian physics works pretty well in everyday life; we sent astronauts to the moon using only Newtonian physics.

So, while still valuing scientific truth and its distribution, for many religious Humanists, the important thing about a person's religion is not so much the specifics of the beliefs, but rather how well that person's religion functions as a catalyst generating Goodness in that person's mind and actions. That is, religious Humanism is less concerned about whether someone believes the Earth was created six thousand years ago, and more concerned about whether he forgives sinners or stones them.

John Dietrich, that prophet of the humanist spirit and a secular humanist, wrote in the later years of his life:

“I realize now how my utter reliance upon science and reason, and my contempt for any intuitive insights and tangible values which are the very essence of art and religion was a great mistake; and the way in which I cut [humankind] off from all cosmic relationship, denying or ignoring every influence outside of humanity itself, was very short sighted and arrogant.”

The humanism in me is of the religious sort, meaning that it provides for me a statement of meaning which can guide my life. This is the approach to humanism advocated by the famous American philosopher John Dewey, one of the “saints” of humanism.

In 1934, the year after he signed the Humanist Manifesto, he published a wonderful little book called *A Common Faith*. In this book, Dewey distinguishes between “religion” (which he describes as a specific set of beliefs) and “religious” (which is a specific quality of experience). His thesis is that there is a religious dimension to human experience whether or not one holds the beliefs of any specific religion. Dewey speaks out strongly against “religion” as an institutional force, but he urges us to embrace the religious quality of human experience in our lives, with or without a formal religion to go with it.

Amen.

Closing Words by John Dewey

The things in civilization we prize most are not of ourselves. They exist by the grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received, that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible, and more generously shared than we have received it.