

## **GOD-FEARING HUMANISTS**

Unitarian Universalism is undeniably rooted in humanism, both historically and theologically, but a certain kind of humanism: one that's mystical, religious, god-fearing. A humanism that struggles to bridge heaven and earth, affirming the gifts of both realms, responsive to omens of the divine yet fully grounded in nature.

I know, I know, there are numerous other species of humanism, including secular humanists who are prone to spend more time downgrading faith in god than advancing faith in people. As a minister friend of mine put it: "I tend to be wary of professional atheists. They spend far too much time thinking about God." And, frankly, I find the breed of "new atheists" a bit sneering and pompous, dumping all religion as irrational and barbaric...without any discriminating or positive regard. They unwittingly play into fundamentalism's hands by buying into its narrow definition of what authentic religion is.

In truth, Unitarian Universalists are spiritually ambidextrous: we're a reasonable religion with mystical sensibilities—in short, theological hybrids. I like the way colleague Frances West puts it: "The humanist and the theist live in me, each sometimes puzzled by the presence of the other, but willing to keep talking. So may it continue."

Clearly, there's a danger in either extreme. Dry humanism can trap one in the mundane and material, making one oblivious to transrational (note I didn't say irrational) insights and nudges. On the other hand, theists can get lost in the supernatural ether, when our main human mission is to make this one precious earth more beautiful and just.

Let me spend a few moments at the outset of this sermon, to disclose my bias. Here it is: I contend that Unitarian Universalism is the only world religion where you can honestly and

honorably straddle the three A's (atheism, agnosticism and affirmatism) simultaneously, if you so choose, which I do.

And this is why. Each of these three attitudes brings a valuable gift to the theological table, providing a system of checks and balances in one's religious philosophy. Blaise Pascal—an eminent 17th century apologist for the Christian religion, as well as a mathematician and an experimental scientist—noted as much in his confessional volume, **Pensees**:

*Denying, believing, and doubting completely are to humans what running is to a horse.*

Let me elaborate. **Atheism** is a purifying influence, eliminating obsolete or cruel ideas of the divine. Hebrew prophets spent the bulk of their time raging against childish notions of the Creator. Atheism at its healthiest, dare I say, at its holiest, provides a critical, cleansing role in the pursuit of reasonable religion.

**Agnosticism** supplies the essential gift of measured indecision, challenging human beings to handle the sacred lightly without forcing it into formulas, to “live in the questions” (Rilke), rather than yielding to either certainty or apathy.

**Affirmatism** (my coined word) insists upon the inherent sacredness of existence, announcing the “lurking-places of God” (Thoreau) in our given natural realm. In my book *Wrestling With God: A Unitarian Universalist Guide for Skeptics and Believers*, I note six such lurking-places of the divine in my life: service, stuff, silliness, struggle, silence, and surrender. You would have your own list of where the sacred touches your life. You might call such connections God, as I sometimes do, or you might not; that's why we're Unitarian Universalists.

In any case, healthy atheism produces a more creative agnostic, while affirmatism impels us to be more supple atheists and agnostics. For, if we're theologically uptight, we're all too likely to “make premature peace” with either our ignorance or our biases. I want to live with a wide-open soul!

So, god-fearing or mystical humanism is perhaps the most profound puzzle we Unitarian Universalists harness, then ride. Some do it side-saddle, tentatively; others with both hands to the reins, galloping full-bore ahead. In any case, it provides a spirited jaunt!

Now, there are lots of ways of illustrating our theological hybridism as Unitarian Universalists. A couple examples.

In the newspaper recently there was a report touting the medicinal value of prayer based on research conducted at the Heart Institute in Kansas City. The results were published in a respected medical journal. Overall, patients who were prayed for did 11% better than the patients in the control group, better by looking at 35 medical measurements. And it should be noted that neither prayers nor patients knew one another.

Now, as Unitarian Universalists, we consider prayer primarily as a discipline to center our own spiritual state rather than to reap specific rewards. Furthermore, we contend that any of our human prayers can be answered yes or no or maybe! But, and here's the other side of the paradox, as mystical humanists, we refuse to be stunned by any scientific study that proves the medicinal value of prayer. Why? Because our spirits are wide-open to mysteries and blessings beyond our prediction. And, in the name of human compassion, we regularly hold tight our fellow kin in our thoughts and prayers. I certainly do.

Let me offer another example, rather homely yet poignant, that shows our Unitarian Universalist commitment to straddling the known and the unknown, science and mystery. It occurred early in my ministry in Davenport, Iowa, back in the early 1970's. During the course of every church year, I would meet individually with each of our 1st and 2nd graders. The child and I would engage in personal conversation, with my first telling what I found meaningful in my life followed by relating why I came to church—and being the paid minister didn't count.

I then asked, in return, each of these youngsters what was exciting and precious in their daily lives. They would say things like "Mom and Dad, Christmas and soccer, friends and reading alone in their bedroom, camping under the stars and creating stuff." And more, much more, straight from their bursting little hearts.

My wee buddy, Adam Burke, told me that two things stood out in his life thus far: "Dinosaurs and magic." Now, without over-theologizing this second-grader's response, I like to think that Adam's passions referred, in his own way, to something of earth and heaven, the familiar and the mysterious. Dinosaurs and magic. Adam was drawn to both realities, and so are we adults.

I painted the particular words of each child on a beautiful stone that I'd found in the Mississippi River region, then presented it to them as a gift in a simple ceremony. Twenty-five years later our paths crossed again out here in San Diego, where Adam was serving as the best man at his sister Abby's wedding, that I was conducting. After the service, when Adam was signing the marriage license, he nonchalantly reached down into his tuxedo pocket and pulled out his worn yet cherished rock and said: "Tom, this stone always sits on my bedstand, wherever I've lived, reminding me of our Quad-Cities congregation and our sharing time together. And, you know what, dinosaurs and magic—or some version thereof—are still among my favorite things!"

And so, my fellow Unitarian Universalist partisans, we're called to be fully rational and fully spiritual and fully compassionate—and fully open to the dinosaurs and magic that cross our path! We heed Ezekiel's imperative to "go up into the gaps."

And speaking of gaps, I'm reminded of our family sabbatical excursion to the Sistine Chapel in Rome twenty years ago. My mind's eye is still riveted upon the dazzling panel in Michelangelo's ceiling mural depicting Adam and God. Adam raises an arm in the direction of the Infinite One, whose extremity, in turn, stabs down toward the dewy creature. Index fingers on both hands reach toward the other but do not touch. Everything trembles in midair between these

outstretched fingers of humanity and divinity tirelessly striving to connect. And so it goes. In that zone where we reach but do not ultimately grasp one another is precisely where the bulk of our religious life is carried out...where the paradox of mystical humanism is ridden.

And I say: Hallelujah for a religion, such as ours, huge enough to house our whole, wacky, wistful, wondrous selves! I don't know about you, but I'm an unrepentant theological crossbreed. Mine is a humanism informed by faith stories of the Jewish and Christian heritages, in alignment with attitudes from eastern religions, bathed in mystical sentiment, and rooted in earthly pleasures and ashes.

Who really wants it all wrapped up, who really wants to be theologically set in stone? Not us. For Unitarian Universalists, being theological hybrids isn't a desperate position of last resort; it's our first choice, it's the way we want to do religion, it's the way we want to walk and talk, live and die during our sojourn on this planet. Yes, it is, yes it is.

Which reminds me of the humorous story of two guys, Schwartz and Rosen, who are strolling to synagogue. Someone stops them and asks Rosen, "Why are you going to synagogue? Schwartz is a believer—I know why he's going. But you're not religious!" Rosen answers, "Well, Schwartz goes to talk to God, and I go to talk to Schwartz." You see, a full-fledged, hearty religion, such as ours, includes both human conversation and divine communion, an intriguing mix of Schwartz and Rosen.

Okay, I owe you some words of explanation. What does it mean to be god-fearing humanists? Well, I'm not positive, but I've got my hunches, and the rest of this sermon will be an attempt to wrestle with that very phrase.

For starters, I use the term god-fearing not in any sense that we humans are terrified by or should grovel before deities, not at all, but because Unitarian Universalists are the kind of seekers who fear (as in respect) the creative, unpredictable, transforming Spirit that brought us into being, that nourishes us along the way, and that refuses to relinquish its loving hold on us. An Eternal Presence, if you will, that is felt more than defined, and more mysterious than not.

Call it the Great Spirit, an Infinite Spirit, or the Spirit of Life, call it what you will but a Spirit, nonetheless, that beckons us to surrender to life's universal flow without ever shrinking our own integrity. A spirit we didn't create, can't control, and only occasionally can comprehend...but a spirit that breathes throughout our very beings!

When you scrutinize the thought of the signers of the Humanist Manifesto back in 1933, 75 years ago, you discover a couple of things. First, most were card-carrying UU ministers. But more than that, while the signers were neither secularists nor supernaturalists, they exuded an obvious fondness for the sacred. As someone noted, "these humanists had a rich God complex."

Unlike the orthodox theists of their day, they didn't worship an omnipotent, patriarchal figure high in the sky. But, and here's a major but, they were highly-reverent travelers, they handled holy things with feeling, they were utterly open to the divine circulating throughout this one, precious world. Listen to John Dietrich from our Minneapolis congregation of that era:

*Our Humanism should try to retain some of the qualities of the mystic...recognizing that there is in the universe, including human life, something mysterious, something greater than the individual.*

Other signers like Unitarian minister, Curtis Reese, from Des Moines, Iowa, were opposed to any understanding of God that demanded that humans prostrate ourselves like a serf before a feudal lord. He attacked autocratic religion but preached a democratic religion wherein "humans consciously become co-workers with cosmic processes." Can you sense how fervently

these ardent humanists believed in some sort of partnership between heaven and earth as the supreme calling of us all?

As mystical and nature-centered humanists, our UU foresters and brothers, were theologically ambidextrous without being phony or wobbly. They knew that authentic spiritual travelers must be both hard-headed and soft-hearted. They asserted that although there wasn't any ultimate truth to seize, there were plenty of pen-ultimate claims to embody along life's path.

And, so, I say, may we follow in their stead, may we incarnate a free and fluid faith, may we be serious without turning grim, may we be playful in the name of religion without being frivolous, may we never harm anyone with our view of either humanity or divinity, and may we become seekers who are equally agile whether meditating upon the heavens or protesting earthly wrongs.

What helps me more than anything else in this holy quest is recognizing that humanism—or being fully human—is literally and spiritually related to some very simple, bedrock terms: being **humane**, being **humorous**, and being **humble**.

Being humane or compassionate is the consummate bridge between sky and soil. For if God or Goddess refer to anything, they've got to refer to love, justice, and humaneness. And, so, it's rather basic; we mortals both resemble the divine as well as fulfill our human destiny—namely, whenever we dare to be loving, just, and humane at core.

Humor is central as well. There's nothing that more quickly spans heaven and earth than when we engage in full-belly laughs. Laughters last and laughing may just be the healthiest single thing we humans ever do any day of our lives. Humor is a saving grace; for when we are able to laugh at ourselves and at life's foibles, we join the company of the holy spirits who are constantly chortling just to keep their sanity.

As it's written in *The Ramayana*: "There are three things that are real: God, human folly, and laughter. The first two are beyond human comprehension, so we must do what we can with the third." Amen!

And, finally, being fully human requires us to be genuinely humble. In our cosmos, quantitatively speaking, human life is infinitesimal and random yet capable of grandeur, even goodness. The wily old Romans were being neither romantic nor unaware of our potential for evil, when they said that the world's marvels are many, but none is more wondrous a puzzle than the human being. Wondrous puzzles indeed and worthy of respect but not of worship.

You see, we Unitarian Universalists are humanists in the uncompromising sense that, in the last analysis, we must define ourselves in terms of human duties and human yearnings. But we aren't the center of the universe, no matter how bloated our egos might grow. And we don't possess a god's-eye view of reality. When all is said and done, the one thing of which we can be absolutely sure, as humans, is that we're neither angels nor demons, and whereas the divine certainly flows through our innermost fibers, we aren't Gods either. And, some place, deep-down in our souls, we know that.

Oh yes, we're crucial contributors, even co-partners in the ongoing creation, but we didn't start existence, we're not all that great at sustaining it, and we won't likely end it. We're robust mid-streamers, earthlings who've come from the dirt—the humus (another root of the word human)—and we shall return to the dirt. That's our story, and it's a noble yet humble one.

And with the sacred interval that remains to each of us, our faith urges us never to betray the magnificence of our humanity. But rather to live our days with overflowing humaneness and bellies bursting with humor, and, as the Hebrew prophet Micah phrases it: to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.

And that mission should prove enough for one lifetime; I'm sure it will.

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