

WELLSPRINGS OF OUR LIVING TRADITION: THE SPIRIT OF HUMANISM

A Second Sunday Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
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One of the highlights of the 2000 General Assembly of the UUA in Nashville was a program titled “Humanism/Paganism: Can This Marriage Be Saved?” It began with an amusing skit illustrating two very different approaches to the beginning of a Sunday service. “The ‘pagan service’ began with a profusion of flowers and a ritual of four candles in unusual and imaginative directions that left the congregation dizzy. The blessings began with rainbows, moved through gentle rain to blizzards, and ended with a curse: may your congregational meetings be long. Finally, the ‘congregation’ joined in a rousing hymn to the tune of ‘Gimme That Old Time Religion’ . . .

Chorus:

Gimme that old time religion,
Gimme that old time religion,
Gimme that old time religion,
It’s good enough for me.

First verse (pagan version):

We will worship like the Druids
Running naked through the woo-ids,
And drink strange fermented fluids,
And it’s good enough for me.

In sharp contrast, “the ‘humanist service’ began with announcements of the RE curricula: ‘Aristotle for Toddlers,’ ‘Civil Disobedience in the Sandbox,’ and ‘Plato and Playdough.’ The reading from Bertrand Russell concluded: ‘Hence, common sense leaves us completely in the dark.’ Finally, the committee on lyrics was concerned about the lack of agreement on wording so we sang the ‘hymn’ titled ‘Coffee, Coffee, Coffee’”

[insert lyrics here]

[“Humanism/Paganism: Can This Marriage Be Saved? II,” www.uua.org/ga/ga00/239]

That amusing skit illustrates what **seems** to be a division within Unitarian Universalism between those of us with a **humanistic** orientation and those of us with a more **spiritual** orientation. This morning I hope to bridge that gap. Let me begin with an appreciative review of the contributions of humanism to our faith movement and to American society. Humanism has followed an interesting path. Humanism first arose as a protest against religious authority, then itself occupied a position of authority, and more recently has re-defined itself in softer terms.

Let me start with humanism as **protest**. If we were to row upstream to the headwaters of humanism, we would end up as usual with the ancient Greek philosophers. The skeptical attitude toward religious and political authority that began with Protagoras and his contemporaries was forced underground by the Roman Catholic Church until nearly 2,000 years

later, when scientists and philosophers of the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods began to challenge the Church's doctrines about the natural world. Even though Galileo was forced in old age to renounce his claim that the Earth revolved around the Sun instead of *vice versa*, he quipped, "The intention of the Holy Ghost is to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how heaven goes." [Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, p. 319]

Although Enlightenment skepticism originated in Europe, it came to full expression in America, and it was here that the story of humanism becomes intertwined with our faith movement. William Murry, former president of Meadville Lombard Theological School, has just published an excellent book about contemporary religious humanism titled *Reason and Reverence*. He says, "The ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists were instrumental in the rise of religious humanism. Emerson's critique of the authoritarianism of the church and the Bible, along with the Transcendentalists' vision of the divinity of humanity, the importance of free inquiry, and personal religious experience, helped to pave the way for humanism." [p. 28]

Among Emerson's contemporaries, there were other kindred spirits who, even though they did not formally identify themselves with our faith movement, nevertheless contributed mightily to the rise of humanism. One of them was Walt Whitman, widely regarded as America's greatest poet. What is **not** widely known is that it took nearly thirty years for him to find a commercial publisher who was willing to print his most famous collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*. There were two reasons for this reluctance. First, his poems were scandalous in their explicit references to human sensuality, and second, he was a sworn enemy of institutional religion. In his preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he wrote, "There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done. They may wait awhile . . . perhaps a generation or two . . . dropping off by degrees. . . . A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. The churches built under their umbrage shall be the churches of man and woman." [quoted by Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, pp. 214-215]

Another famous kindred spirit was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an early champion of women's rights, "who held the church responsible for much of the subjugation of women, which she saw as beginning with the biblical account in which Eve is blamed for the entrance of sin into the world. Far from seeing Eve's act as the fall of humankind, as Christian theology taught, Stanton maintains . . . that the act of eating the apple was the unlocking to the human family of all the realms of knowledge and thought:

Yes, when Eve took her destiny in her own hand and set minds spinning down through all the spheres of time, she declared humanity omnipotent, and today thinking people are rapt in wonder and admiration at the inventions and discoveries of science, the grandeur of man's conceptions, and the magnitude of his works.

An advocate for the religion of humanity, Stanton believed that 'what we call God is the infinite ideal of humanity.'" [Murry, p. 30] In 19th-century America, such ideas were considered heresy.

During the first part of the 20th century, humanism gained a strong foothold in American universities and in Unitarianism. In 1933 a group of academics and Unitarian ministers (plus a single Universalist minister) published what they called a Humanist Manifesto that rejected belief in a supernatural God and human immortality, and proclaimed confidence in the ability of

human reason to solve the social and economic problems of humankind. The signers of this Manifesto included the father [J. A. C. F. Auer] of one of our members, Jannie Osborn. Since then, the ravages of a worldwide economic depression, the Holocaust and World War II, and numerous armed conflicts have called into serious question the optimism expressed in the original Manifesto. Subsequent revised versions of the Manifesto (II published in 1973 and 2003) acknowledge the human capacity for evil and the role of emotion as well as reason in addressing human problems.

For more than fifty years, humanism was the prevailing ideology in most UU congregations. “Many of the old-guard humanists were rigid thinkers who defined humanism too narrowly and did not welcome those who did not fully agree with them. Their philosophy was shaped by positivism and rational empiricism. It was a bloodless, passionless religious philosophy, and while it articulated humanism effectively for many decades, the times changed and the old humanism did not.” [Murry, p. 50] The tension between old-line humanism and more contemporary perspectives appeared within many UU congregations, and it was often amplified by gender and generational differences. The humanists were predominantly older males, and the more spiritually-oriented members tended to be younger people, especially women. I believe that one factor in tipping the scales within our congregations has been the influx of women into the UU ministry during the past twenty years. Today half of all UU ministers are women, who bring a more “spiritual” orientation to their role as leaders of worship and congregational life.

Even though more UUs continue to identify themselves as “humanist” than any other single orientation, it is a new form of humanism characterized by **reverence, respect, and responsibility**—the “three R’s”: **reverence** for the awesomeness and mystery of the natural world, **respect** for the validity of other points of view, and **responsibility** for the fate of our planet and future generations to come. Ultimately, each of us strikes a balance between the skeptic and the believer that lies within us—between scientific explanation and mystic wonder, between doubt and faith, between knowledge and mystery. In seeking that balance, we are in distinguished company. Albert Einstein wrote, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. . . . This knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of the devoutly religious men.” [“What I Believe,” quoted by Murry, p. 18] In that spirit, let me close with the final lines of George Eliot’s famous poem titled “The Choir Invisible”:

Oh, may I join the choir invisible of those immortal dead who live again
 In minds made better by their presence; live in pulses stirred to generosity,
 In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn for miserable aims that end with self,
 In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,
 And with their mild persistence urge [mankind’s] search to vaster issues.
 So to live is heaven; To make undying music in the world.

[“The Invisible Choir,” quoted by Murry, pp. 95-96]