

“Humanism – What A Piece of Work Are We!”

(Fourth in the series ‘Roots of our faith’)

Rev. Leland Bond-Upson, given at First Unitarian of Honolulu, 13Feb11

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Opening Words:

Intro –Take a good look at the portrait of Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) on the cover of your Order of Service. He is represented as kind and peaceful, and he was. In his lifetime he was known across Europe as “the Prince of Humanists.” His counterpart in humanist genius south of the Alps, was Leonardo de Vinci (1452-1519)

In these opening words, when Erasmus speaks of the ‘ardor of love’ he means agape, selfless love, God’s love for us, our loving kindness, our aloha toward others.

“Creep not upon the earth, my [friends], like animals.

Put on those wings that Plato says are caused
to grow on the soul by the ardor of love.

Rise above the body to the spirit,
from the visible to the invisible,
from the letter to the mystical meaning,
from the sensible to the intelligible,
from the involved to the simple.”

Sermon:

I love that Winnie-the-Pooh story. And it goes with Valentine’s Day and the subject of Humanism. The author, A.A. Milne, was a humanist, and his writing is all about human relations. All the animals in the stories act out of human faults and virtues. A theme of affection runs through it, affection despite our flaws. Owl is pompous, Rabbit is flighty, Eeyore has a good heart but is depressed, living as he does in a place that “is rather sad and boggy.” Tigger is hyper (bouncing). Roo is exuberant, and his mother Kanga is maternal and controlling. Piglet is timid, and Pooh is big-hearted, literary, and self-indulgent. Christopher Robin is a very wise and loving 6 year old. The Chapter where Pooh offers to share his house with Piglet I find poignant each time despite the many times I’ve heard it. It puts people first, friendship ahead of marginal comfort, sharing ahead of selfishness.

In two previous services we thought about what differences exist between Unitarianism and our conjoined non-identical twin, Universalism. We will explore some of that territory again this morning. Finding the balance between inward and outward is a worthy goal for anyone at any time, not least the 21st century. We seek to have rich spiritual lives, informed by the reality of the larger world—a place far too often bloody, greedy, and cruel—while in that world we seek to act ourselves modestly, wisely, discreetly, soberly, and reverently -- informed by an ever-deepening understanding of our selves and our relationship to All.

For today we take up a fourth tradition, Humanism, which, except possibly for spirituality, is also the oldest.

BTW, the subtitle of today's subject is "What a piece of work are we!" But you know, there's a sarcastic version of this expression that goes like this: "so, uh, *why* did Bob say that?" "Oh Bob, he's a real piece of work." Meaning, Bob's a jerk, or worse. But that's not the sense for today. I mean it in the most sincere and positive way. However, while I'm talking, I know I can't prevent you from keeping the other sense near at hand.

Our denominations (Unitarians and Universalists) were for many years the most welcoming home for religious humanists. After the merger, secular humanism dominated our movement for a good 30 years, and now religious humanism is back.

Humanism goes at least as far back as the Hellenes (the ancient Greeks), although I know some say that Confucius was a humanist. But in the west, certainly, it was the Greeks. They were the first to idolize the human body in abstract. They sculpted it, male and female, in myriad ways. In the original athletic games held in Olympia, the young men competed in the nude.

The Hellenes were the originators of the "humanities." They exalted the human ability to reason, speak, and to argue freely. They created alternative political systems designed to draw on the best qualities of humanity. They wrote history. They did mathematics and medicine. They were the first to express the enduring problems of human nature in both philosophy and drama. We *still* read Socrates and Plato. We *still* admire the Stoics. And we *still* go to theatre to see "Oedipus," and "The Trojan Women," where we sit, see, and hear, and are once again filled with terror and pity, because the difficulties these Greeks caused or had thrust upon them are the difficulties of our own time and of all times.

History, as we know, proceeds in waves. Many centuries were to pass before the humanities were once again kindling fire in people's imaginings. Here and there

over the next 1500 years we encounter a lonely individual who looks like a humanist, although the term itself was not used. Pelagius, in the 5th century, preached that we are not tainted with original sin. We remember Francis of Assisi in the 13th century because he concentrated not on theology but on creating a kinder world. For more than a century, his Franciscan order was the most-loved, until they too, fell, to avarice and sloth. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the sorriest specimen—a real piece of work--was the Franciscan Friar.

Then, coincident with the fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, there was a rebirth, a Renaissance. The Eastern Catholics fled west and brought their books. Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic texts lost to the west for centuries were suddenly available, and with them, a burst of interest in the humanities. It was called the New Learning.

There was a technological breakthrough at the same time. The printing press—conceived in China—finally set up shop in Europe, just in time to mass-produce the new learning. Erasmus' works became the first best-sellers.

Out of this came a renewed sense of the joy of existence, and, it was proclaimed, a new springtime of civilization.

The body was once again celebrated, sculpted, painted. Greek and Roman statuary was dug up and admired, instead of being smashed as idolatrous. The Popes became the greatest collector and patron of the arts.

For the most part, the Dark and Medieval ages were a time of group identity: you thought of yourself not an individual, but as a member of a guild, or of a holy order. You were a villager, or a townsman, or part of the lord of the manor's household, or a nunnery or monastery, or some other feudal group. Now there was an intense interest and faith in, and exaltation of the *individual*, and of individual thoughts.

The Wars of the Reformation ended this springtime, but the ideas and attitudes now had a life of their own, and ran along quietly half underground, bursting forth from time to time, such as in the works of Shakespeare. In *Hamlet* we hear this exaltation:

*What a piece of worke is a man!
how Noble in Reason!
how infinite in faculty!
in form and moving how express and admirable!
in Action, how like an Angel!
in apprehension, how like a God?*

The Enlightenment would take up these ideas, and this time, bolstered by the new sciences, made them stick.

Led by the Unitarians, an informal movement began in the 18th and 19th centuries to forge a new religion, more liberal even than conventional Unitarian Christianity, based as the new movement was on scientific discovery, reason, and rejection of discredited forms, rituals, and especially, superstitions.

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Throughout its history, humanism has been an attitude, a set of appreciations of and compassion for humanity. But most humanists were individual, with individual goals. In the 20th century, some humanists decided to get organized

In the early years of the 20th century, modernism was everywhere. Picasso was painting and Stravinsky was composing. The Great War came and went, and with it much of the delusions of war as a romantic endeavor. The grip of the old ways was steadily weakening. Women would soon get the vote. The intoxicating freedoms of the roaring 1920s were underway.

Certain ministers and religious laypeople began to talk of a new formulation for religion. John Dietrich, Unitarian minister first in Spokane and then in Minneapolis from 1911 to his death in 1957 was the driving force in creating a movement that was religious but not theistic. Religious—not atheist, but with hardly any reference to God. Radical!

It was too radical even for many Unitarians of the day, including a majority of the Unitarian clergy.

But the idea's time had come. In 1933, a group of self-described humanists fashioned a faith statement, a two-page document titled The Humanist Manifesto.

Thirty-four signed, all men. Almost half, sixteen of the thirty-four, were one Universalist and 15 Unitarians, led by Dietrich.

The original Humanist Manifesto

The Manifesto consists of an introduction followed by fifteen points. Here are some excerpts.

“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 . . . Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with the new conditions created by a vastly increased knowledge and experience . . .

“Religions have always been means for realizing the highest . . . abiding values, an inseparable feature of human life. . . .

“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. [Inclusive language is still 35 years in the future.] . . . Any religion that can hope to be a synthesizing and dynamic force for today must be shaped for the needs of this age . . . We therefore affirm the following:

FIRST: Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created.

SECOND: Humanism believes that man is a part of nature and that he has emerged as a result of a continuous process. [This is an affirmation of evolution.]

THIRD: Holding an organic view of life, humanists find that the traditional dualism of mind and body must be rejected.

It goes on to affirm cultural evolution and influence, rejects superstition in its many forms, then

SEVENTH: . . . Nothing human is alien to the religious . . . The distinction between the sacred and secular can no longer be maintained. [The religious is within us, not “up there.”]

EIGHTH: Religious Humanism considers the complete realization of human personality to be the end of man’s life and seeks its development and fulfillment in the here and now. [The basis for humanism’s devotion to social action.]

NINTH: In the place of the old attitudes involved in worship and prayer the humanist finds his religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being.

TENTH: It follows that there will be no uniquely religious emotions and attitudes of the kind hitherto associated with belief in the supernatural.

[Nine and Ten combined reveal the tendency in some humanists to believe that religious feeling was only found in low emotions and belief in the supernatural.]

FOURTEENTH: The humanists are firmly convinced that existing acquisitive and profit-motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate and that a radical change in methods, controls, and motives must be instituted. A socialized and cooperative economic order must be established to the end that the equitable distribution of the means of life be possible. The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the good. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world.

[Hmm. Sounds like a bunch of *Commies!* We should keep in mind that when these men came together, Roosevelt had just taken over in the middle of the Great Depression, and radical solutions were being widely considered.]

Humanist Manifesto II

Forty years later, in 1973, the American Humanist Association got together and issued the Humanist Manifesto II. Sadder but wiser, they made some changes.

The biggest difference was in recognizing that science and reason are not enough. The rise of dictatorships showed that some of its early Protestant critics were right when they charged that Humanism minimized human sinfulness, and its capacity for evil.

Humanist Manifesto III

In 2003, 70 years after the original appeared, the American Humanist Association published "Humanism and Its Aspirations," the "Humanist Manifesto III, a successor to the Humanist Manifesto of 1933."

Of the 90 or so signatories to Manifesto III are found the names of at least 10 Unitarian-Universalists, including Lester Mondale, the last surviving of the 34 original signatories. He was a retired Unitarian minister, and half-brother to Walter Mondale, the senator and Presidential candidate.

This most recent Manifesto is only one page in length, and covers six general topics, which are

"Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis."

[Still, we rely on science and reason.]

“Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change.”

[Again, we affirm Darwinian evolution.]

“Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.”

[There is no Divine revelation. Ethics are created by us, not God.]

“Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness. We seek to minimize the inequities of circumstance and ability, and we support a just distribution of nature’s resources and the fruits of human effort so that as many as possible can enjoy a good life.”

“Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships.”

[Hmm, that’s new.]

“Life’s fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals. We aim for our fullest possible development and animate our lives with a deep sense of purpose, finding wonder and awe in the joys and beauties of human existence, its challenges and tragedies“

In my view this is a weak attempt to give voice to parts of the human experience that reason does not know or understand.

Well, that’s organized Humanism, and it’s a positive force in the world.

But humanism reaches most us in other ways. Like the example of Albert Schweitzer in West Africa with his formulation “reverence for life.” It’s found in writings like those of Mark Twain, and Kurt Vonnegut, and in entertainments.

In Carl Sagan’s science fiction novel “Contact” the heroine Ellie Arroway valiantly takes a terrifying ride through space and time in order to receive confirmation that significantly greater understanding lies ahead, waiting for our race to grow into it. Sagan named his heroine for two of his heroes: Eleanor Roosevelt and Voltaire. (Voltaire’s given name was François-Marie Arouet.) Both were humanists. Jody Foster describes herself as an ethical atheist. I looked Carl up because I was pretty sure he was a humanist, and sure enough, he was named Humanist of the Year in 1981.

These humanists attempt to reconcile the inner and the outer, the mind and the heart, reason and intuition.

My own progress is that I rely on reason and scientific method and the evidence of the senses in most things, but I as a religious person am always listening, waiting, for truth, reality and revelation from every possible source. I feel we don't have so many such opportunities that we can afford to dismiss any of them.

For one instance, as the poet and visionary William Blake said, "Everything that can be imagined is an image of the truth."

As Erasmus gloried in Greek philosophy and human capability, he asked us to use our powers to explore other dimensions, for the purpose of a better life and a better world in which to live it.

There's another story I like very much. The story is from the New Testament and it captured something we feel is true about the essence of Jesus' teachings.

Here's the story. It's from the King James Version, the only version I care to read, despite its many errors.

^{7:53} And every man went unto his own house. ^{8:1} Jesus went unto the Mount of Olives. ² And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them. ³ And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst, ⁴ They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. ⁵ Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou? ⁶ This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not. ⁷ So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. ⁸ And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. ⁹ And they who heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. ¹⁰ When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? ¹¹ She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

That is humanism. This is mercy and self-understanding, which is a humanistic response to the human condition. *It puts people first.* The non-humanists advocate obeying the Law and the Prophets, regardless of the inhumanity.

Humanists like me like stories like these because they focus on and teach the very best of what it can be to be human.

The religious impulse is worldwide. The non-religious have never been popular. People like Christopher Hitchens and Bill Maher are right about the illogic and superstition and cruelty of traditional religion, but what do they offer in its place? Almost nothing. They're focused on the negative.

Though some humanists may claim they're not religious, in all important ways, their goals are the same as those of the religious humanists. Since one's ethics, politics, and religion are inseparable, secular humanists are full partners in our movement, but who I think might ask themselves if maybe they're missing some of the best parts. To resolutely secular Unitarians, I'd like to suggest adding a liberal portion of gentle, loving, superstition-free Universalist religious feeling. It's good and good for you.

Even if we are not pure humanists, we are pure humans, and our dreams are still the same—to be empowered, happy, connected, and working toward that day when, in the words of our old Unitarian hymn, "Earth shall be fair, and all her people one."