

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Vulnerable Humanism of the Heart”

Samuel A. Trumbore November 5, 2017

Call to Celebration

Humanism has dominated our Unitarian Universalist congregations for over sixty years. We started moving in that direction over one hundred years ago after World War One. I think of that war as having a similar power over liberal Christians as the Holocaust had over liberal Jews after World War Two. The senseless and pervasive death and destruction drove the question, how can any God that is all powerful allow this to happen? How can a God that is all knowing and all good permit such waste of human life? What value can come from following a God that offers no protection from this kind of suffering? Believers have answers to those questions of course, but Humanists have decided a better way is to look to reason and human experience for guidance in how to live in this world.

But Humanism is not the same as atheism. Humanists may be unbelievers or agnostics or believe in a higher power or a loving presence that animates existence. Humanists choose to focus on living in this world rather than preparing for one to come. They are concerned with how to be good and live well here and now rather than earning merit to gain entrance to heaven or a better rebirth. They think if there is life after death, we will be measured by our deeds rather than our creeds.

Over the years, the problem for Humanism that developed is a reputation for being intellectual and argumentative; a Humanism of the head rather than the heart. This has limited its appeal, especially to those for whom the emotional component of religious life is important.

I'm happy to say, that is changing. Let us explore how Humanism is developing and evolving this morning, as we join together in the celebration of life.

Sermon

Sometimes I wonder how my faith will hold up when I hear the grim reaper sneaking up behind me and putting his boney hands around my neck. [The Rev. Kaaren Anderson](#), former minister at First Unitarian Church in Rochester, was put to the test in just this way.

At the time, she was serving her first Unitarian Universalist church in Rockport, Massachusetts after graduating from seminary. She was starting a long distance relationship. She was under a lot of stress, feeling overwhelmed most of that summer and fall – not an uncommon experience for someone getting used to the many demands of ministry. She developed one strep infection after another. She took many rounds of antibiotics, yet the bouts of sickness wouldn't let up.

By January, she had a strep pneumonia infection. This was the same infection that killed puppeteer Jim Henson. The disease was filling up the glands in her neck and constraining her ability to breathe. She barely survived emergency surgery. Her family was called to be with her in what had the potential to be the last hours of her life. Each day her partner, her sister and brother-in-law were at her side, calming her down, explaining various medical procedures and her care, holding her hand and kissing her forehead.

The third night in the ICU, she panicked. It felt like her throat was closing up again. She writes:

I had this unshakable feeling that I was going to die, right then and there. As I wrestled for some sense of self control, I remember staring up at the ceiling, with the air vents pumping and the EKG clicking, and I thought, “This is it. This is the end.”

For all of us, this moment will come. Some of us will be conscious of it, others may not. It is one of those proverbial foxhole moments when we discover if our faith will stand up to that moment or not. It is a moment of profound vulnerability, with all our defenses stripped away before the doorway through which we pass and cannot return.

For many, the belief in God and the promise of a heavenly reward provide comfort in that moment of spiritual nakedness. Not Humanists like Kaaren. I and many of my Unitarian Universalist colleagues have been at the bedside of dying unbelievers. Most of them have faced that moment with a sense of acceptance, peace and gratitude for the life they have lived, all they have received and all they have given. They do not approach the end with fear of what will come as they cross the threshold of death.

Sometimes, though, long before this moment, the non-believers who haven't had this experience of facing their mortality don't take seriously the distress and anxiety people have as they confront life's challenges. The diagnosis of a terminal disease, an accident that disables, the loss of a beloved spouse, family member or friend, can cause deep inner pain and suffering. Rational philosophical arguments or textual Biblical dispute can feel hollow in the face of life changing loss. It is not uncommon in non-believer circles, especially male unbelievers, to try to shut down and deny the vulnerabilities inherent in human existence. I can hear them saying to themselves my favorite pastoral response parody, “Buck up you sniveling coward.”

I recognized an acknowledgement of this tendency when my family heard [the conversation between Bill Moyers and Greg Epstein](#), the Harvard Humanist chaplain, at the Hall of Philosophy during week three of the Chautauqua Institute this past summer. In the video clip I showed you (52:50 – 55:37), he admits to the existence of that vulnerability. Let me repeat his words again:

But on a personal level, I've struggled with understanding who I am as one being on this very big planet; very small planet; a pale blue dot. I've really had to learn how to be just a vulnerable person over the last several years.

In my community, we've figured out quickly that if you bring a lot of people together and ask them to talk about what it means to be good, we've all got theories, we've got positions we want to take, we've got lectures we want to give one another – particularly the men in the community and I'm a man so I blame myself too. What is really important to do is to allow people to say, "What is it that is hard for you about being human? What is it that is painful? What is it that is scary?" Can you find a space here to talk about that; to accept that; to accept yourself; to accept others in their pain and in their uncertainty? I've found that that [conversation] is the closest to true good that I am able to experience.

The tension he identifies shows up between two different approaches to Humanism: the secular Humanist and the religious Humanist. I found an excellent explanation of the difference between the two in a new book I'm sure some of you would enjoy reading as much as I have, called, [*Humanist Voices in Unitarian Universalism*](#). In the introduction, the editors, the reverend's Kendall Gibbons and Bill Murry, delineate the difference:

... religious Humanists emphasize the importance of coming together as a community of people with similar beliefs and values, whereas secular Humanists generally do not...
Religious Humanists also value sharing feelings and emotions more than secular Humanists do.

Religious Humanists do not generally focus on the rejection of the supernatural. Many are neutral or even indifferent to the existence or the non-existence of God. What is far more important to them is the focus on living a good life here on earth rather than preparing for a life to come. They do not accept as authoritative words revealed in scripture. They may have appreciation, affinity, maybe even reverence for those words but not feel bound by them. They consult them as one source among many for personal and community guidance. Humanists must decide for themselves the guiding principles to which they will commit themselves. And that commitment is one that approaches truth in a converging spiral rather than through prophetic revelation.

The problem with this approach is its rational, analytical nature. Most of us do not live our lives in converging spirals that lead us to the ultimate truth. For most of us, life is messy. Stuff happens that shatters us and disrupts our best laid plans. A beloved child dies of an overdose; we get a debilitating chronic illness, the real estate and financial markets tank, we lose our jobs, a climate denier is elected President, our child becomes disabled, we are forced to deal with systemic racism day after day without relief, the list of troubles is endless.

Though many in the middle class are good at hiding it, we are all profoundly vulnerable to having our house of cards collapse before a capricious gust of the winds of fate. And death relentlessly stalks all of us until we are finally gathered in like grass before the scythe.

Religious Humanism answers we must take into account the whole person. The Rev. Mark Ward has some beautiful words to express this:

Reason is an important tool ... but religion is grounded someplace deeper, where we experience the joy of living and we are connected intimately to all that is. ... In religion, we seek to address not just what is but also what we hope for and what we dedicate ourselves to. We rely on it to navigate the shoals of love and grief, compassion and estrangement, gratitude and disappointment, and mystery and wonder...We are fragile, fallible sorts for whom just being is a blessing and love is a polestar.

Kendall Gibbons adds:

Humanism is not just a function of the mind. The life well lived has emotional, aesthetic, and moral fulfillment as well as mental and physical satisfaction, and these we ignore at our peril. Love for those closest to us and compassion for all creatures, the capacity to be touched by beauty and repulsed by ugliness, and the longing for justice in the world and honor in oneself are as essential to spiritual maturity and lasting happiness as is intellectual reason or physical health.

Let's return now to Kaaren Anderson staring death in the face not knowing if the next breath will be her last. She writes:

And then it happened. This calm, this blanket of comfort, enveloped me, and I said out loud in my head, "You know what, if I die now, it's okay. It is. I've lived a good life, and all that matters is, I'm loved, and I love. How lucky am I. I'm loved." I did not call out to a god to save me or a magical force to remind me that there is something after this reality as we know it—some life to be reborn into. Being loved was sufficient; it was ... enough.

She continues:

So here's the thing: This was the moment of my reckoning regarding belief. But it was more as well. It was the marking of when I really became a Humanist. Up until that time, my belief in humans as the agency for one's salvation and transformation was theory. It was reason, conjecture, perhaps even a little leap of faith.

But there, in the ICU, my Humanism moved from an intellectual construct to a force that solidified itself deep within me. It became more than a theory or an intellectual construct; it became part of me. It is me. Both intellect and heart, woven into my understanding of the world.

Kaaren's experience deeply resonates with my heart. I've come to what I imagine as a similar experience but through a different path, through the discipline of sitting very still, watching my breath come in and out, noticing the constant flow of physical sensations throughout my body arise and pass away, watching the process of my mind valuing that which is pleasant and unpleasant, observing the mind at work trying to make sense of it all. I practice observing the difference between being absorbed into the contents of my lived experience and being mindful of the process of consciousness in action independent of the content being considered.

Somehow, and I don't fully appreciate how it happens, when I'm in that clear, mindfulness state, my heart, at times, can fill with love and appreciation that radiates out in all directions. It is an experience of love for the world and for being itself that I imagine is an analog for the human experience one might have loving God. It is a moment of reflective gratitude for the opportunity to be able to participate here and now as a living being and share this experience with others. I don't have a sense that it comes from a source outside myself. It is more a sense of oneness with what is, an at-home-ness with being, a lack of separation from the universe, from the interdependent web of existence of which I am a part.

I guess this makes me a UU Buddhist Humanist! Through Buddhist meditation practice, I have access to a human experience of self-transcendence. And that experience has infused my life with meaning and purpose. It has also significantly liberated me from the fear of death.

I'd like to close with some more excellent words from Kendall Gibbons, one of the great Humanists of our generation.

In the end, Humanism is not a faith for the mindless, the heartless, those without integrity, or those who are merely cynical in their skepticism. It is not a feather bed for the spiritually lazy who want to believe and do as little as possible with their all-too-brief mortal lives. Humanism encourages those of us who embrace it to live as fully as we can, in all the authentic wonder and curiosity that the human spirit can generate. It summons us to a persistent obedience to evidence and reason, to recognize in our deepest and most beautiful longings not the world that is, but the world that might be, if we, by our courage, intelligence, and dedication will make it so... Humanism invites us into compassionate connection with others, so that we may build the common good and, in that enterprise, make our own days glad... And by no means least of all, Humanism summons us to gratitude, not because some judging deity needs its ego stroked, but because that is how we become most fully human. To live well is to live with intelligence and integrity, with justice and compassion, with wholeness and beauty, and, finally, inevitably, with thanks and praise for all that is our fragile, tragic, precious life.

Benediction

The innovation of Unitarian Universalism is not centering any one story of faith. Instead we are encouraged to look within and look beyond ourselves as we stand in awe at being here at all. We can be together, as Kaaren Anderson writes, "as people experiencing our different kinds of awe, talking about it while living in the world, with honor and dignity toward self and others, in a way that makes life worthwhile and the planet thriving for future generations."

Or as UU's like to say, "We need not think alike to love alike!" For me that is the heart of a Humanism willing to acknowledge our vulnerability in the face of death.