

Editor's Preface

It has been, according to the cover, 40 years since this Journal began publication, and you're probably wondering why this is only Volume 39? Even though the folks who used to print and distribute this publication for us advised us never to admit it, we've long operated a little bit in arrears of our own deadlines, and have even missed a couple of issues over the years. Sometimes good work falls behind. I like to think that we're closer to being on track, but I'm less concerned with that than (at least with things like cover dates and volume numbers) than I am with the Journal in terms of with where we want to be as a publication.

When I took over as editor seven years ago, JRH was a well-respected compendium of humanist views, mostly scholarly, speaking to a declining readership. It had been forged in a time when humanism was the dominant expression of UUism, and these pages were once envisioned as a showcase for humanism in all its aspects.

Times have changed, and humanism, while still the largest single expression of how UUs identify themselves, has not been able to sustain its UU hegemony, even as a variety of expressions of secularism, atheism, Freethought and naturalism have grown in the wider society. We have not been as successful as we had hoped to have been in drawing large numbers of new humanists into UU congregations, nor have we sent significant numbers to study for the UU ministry. Not as successful at stemming the drift of many among us towards more spiritual expressions of UUism.

But there is one thing at which we certainly have been successful—preaching and practicing the tolerance and acceptance that is the hallmark of a religious approach to humanism. It was often the humanists in our congregations who welcomed in the earth-centered religionists starting nearly a quarter century ago, despite reservations, and humanists as often as not, who made a place for, and sometimes joined in the Buddhist groups that began to meet under our roofs in the past decade plus. We didn't always do it gracefully, but we did it in service to our highest values.

This publication is the flagship for what was, back in 1967, known as the Fellowship of Religious Humanists, later the Friends of Religious Humanism, and today, HUUmanists. In the early years the voices that spoke from these pages were overwhelmingly male, and primarily those of clergy and academics. Articles, really shortened versions of learned papers with an occasional autobiographical account, were submitted and occasionally solicited, almost exclusively from the ranks of humanist thinkers, writers and artists.

Over the decades these metrics have changed. Male voices are still a slight majority, but there is far more balance. Sermons and transcripts of speeches are more frequently among the sources, as are edited and arranged excerpts from email chat line exchanges. In recent years we've also added the heritage document, a piece of the history of humanism, including some of the more obscure contributions. But perhaps the biggest change has been the cultivation of a range of points of view, including UUs with very different religious and spiritual perspectives from those of most of our members, and from folks who have blended their humanism with other religious expressions.

It is this particular mix to which I refer when I call this publication a conversation in print. Depending on how broad a definition one uses, and how the questions are asked, humanists are now suspected of being a slim majority or the largest plurality among UUs.

The presence of at least four other major perspectives, Christianity, theism, Buddhism and paganism, all at substantial levels, two of which did not exist as UU identities in 1967, means that we cannot any longer simply talk amongst ourselves.

In this issue, Frances Sink's "Soul Searching" brings a scientist's eye and a Christian upbringing to bear on the question of spiritual intelligence. Hers is a skeptic's point of view, with a somewhat more traditionally religious vocabulary, blending the observations of psychology and the insights of poetry. That her story now has a Buddhist chapter is almost stereotypically UU; that it manages to examine religious phenomena critically without dismissing them, invites in the widest possible audience. That it speaks convincingly of Soul without invoking the supernatural, makes it a tale worth the telling.

Jerome Stone also tackles a religious category of great interest, and a term still used by many who have left behind other trappings of traditional faith—the concept of the sacred.

Stone applies the term to events in human experience, and shows how other religious naturalists bring a decidedly human and humanistic dimension to this concept and that of God. In reviewing both historical and contemporary positions, Stone points to developmental and gradualistic differences, rather than hard categorical divisions—inviting us to compare our own usages and understandings, rather than automatically set ourselves in opposition to them.

Ann Fox wrote her short contribution as part of a sermon series on different aspects of UUism. Two things appealed to me: that despite the very sympathetic portrayal of HUUMANism, it's hard to tell if the author is humanist or not; and the emphatic declaration with which she ends: that "the person who has no time for spirituality is *not deficient!* The person who is deeply spiritual is *not deficient!*" Not every reader will agree with the details her somewhat truncated history of UU Humanism, but none will doubt her enthusiasm.

Paired with Fox's little hymn of certitude about the meaning of humanism within a UU religious life, is Arthur Falk's lengthy discourse on Darwinism, and the question of whether its adherents can derive from it alone, a meaningful approach to living. Falk has given this talk numerous times around the Midwest; I heard him at the West Michigan Freethought Association and asked him to submit a manuscript. It arrived promptly, as did a note saying there might be a revised version—there was. Three in fact, each one better, but also a little longer than the last. Arthur covers a lot of territory, giving us all much to chew over, especially given his penchant for combining philosophy and biology with observations on contemporary sexual mores. Between the length of the article and the complexity of the footnotes (don't skip these, there's a lot in them) you'll need to take a couple of breaks, before getting to the end. It'll be worth it.

The Heritage selection for this Fortieth Anniversary issue takes us back to Richard Wayne Lee's article of just over a decade ago, in which he set forth both the challenge to "starchy humanism" from what he deemed to be cultic inroads into UUism, and a rather favorable description of the new faith stance he saw emerging from that clash. Is a decade long enough to tell whether he was right? On the nature of the challenge itself, probably so. On the outcome of that convergence, perhaps not. But in his implied prediction that each group would transform and to a degree absorb the other, I find the gentle shock of recognition. Pagans and HUUMANists have made uneasy alliances along the way, and

New Age sensibilities, while hardly recognizable in an organized form, have insinuated themselves across the UU spectrum.

I invite some thoughtful observer to try their hand at writing the equivalent exposition/prognostication for the next decade. What say you to the current persistence of a less starchy humanism, along side an emergent UU/Buddhist set of practices, and the nascent flowering of post-Tillichian, post-process theology, ultra-liberal Christianity in our ranks?

Jerome Stone gets an unintentional double dip (unintentional at least on his part—I surprised him by wanting his “Axiological Determinacy and Ambiguity” subtitled piece, though not entirely for the reason I suggested in the last HUUMANISTS newsletter—that I simply couldn’t resist printing that combination of terms!) double dip, with a review of Daniel Dennett’s Breaking the Spell, and Daniel Ross Chandler weighs in with a passel* of book overviews.

So dig in, dear readers, and let me know if you’re as pleased as I am with this combination of soul and spirit and skepticism, of meaning and morality and meandering across the contemporary UU landscape. If we cause in you a combination of a couple of “aha moments” along with at least one “I don’t think so,” then we’ve done our job.

*In Chandler’s case, a passel is more than one, and fewer than the dozens he often submits. I don’t know how he finds the time to read all of them well enough to comment—it must be those long flights to Thailand.

Roger Brewin