If Not God, What? Humanist Elevator Speeches

by Brian Eslinger, Sarah Oelberg, Elz Curtiss

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"Responsible Irreverence" means admitting that we honor the dreams, feelings and deeds of others, because whether we are humanists or theists, meditators or pray-ers, we ourselves are nothing more than collections of dreams, feelings and deeds. All of us—liberal or conservative, theist or atheist—are therefore equal, under something larger (even if it's just our exhaustion from dealing with chaos), to those whom we would criticize. Curtiss

I

(Delivered under this article's title at the UUA General Assembly, Boston, June 2003)

I'm Brian Eslinger, minister of the UU fellowship of Ames, Iowa. My elevator answer is at the end so you'll be sure to remember it. I want to say a little first about how I arrived at this answer—beginning with a story from my childhood about farming and gravity and buckets.

If you grew up on a farm—or had parents who grew up farming, some of this might be familiar; for others, you'll have to imagine your grandparent's farm. We moved to the central Iowa farm of my mother's family when I was about 14 years old. This was a place I'd visited as a child and with which was truly in love. Very quickly I joined my father in working the land that had been part of my family's story for more than 100 years.

When fall rolled round that second year on the farm we agreed that I could drive a tractor, but being significantly underage, not in the field after dark. Good sense and necessity are, however, different things on the farm. Late one evening I was huddled between the reassuring fenders of our old International Harvester. Winter was coming on and in spite of my many layers it was chilly after dark on those open fields. I was pulling a disk behind me, a twenty-foot wide contraption with many round metal blades about ten inches wide, for smoothing out the plowed ground. I raised the disk out of the ground and headed in to get some gas.

We used a gravity-feed tank to fill the tractors: a great big barrel that holds several hundred

gallons of gas, propped up on stilts. I pulled up next to the feed tank, loosened its cover, hopped up on the front wheel to reach the hose and began to fill the gas tank on tractor. I stood there watching my breath, trying to warm my fingers. Once it was full I shut off the valve on the big tank and replaced the nozzle on a hook on the stand.

To turn around and head back out into the field I had two choices: one was the safe, long way round, circling all the way behind the corncrib. Of course there was a short cut—this involved a very tight turn in front of the corncrib. Being young I was sure I could make that turn, and I nearly did, until—well, you know the physics of pulling something behind you—over the loud hum of the tractors engine I heard a snapping sound. The very last disk blade caught the gas hose and tore the valve off. Gas was pouring out at a rate that would have made Isaac Newton proud.

I first tried to jam a glove up into the hole, then two gloves. When this didn't work, I remembered the buckets—dozens of five-gallon plastic buckets—in the barn next to the tank. I grabbed a stack of them and stuck one under the mutilated gas line. While the bucket filled I yelled for help, honked the horn, then replaced the full bucket with a new one. This process repeated itself over and over until the last trickle of gas dripped into the final bucket. There was an awful lot of gas soaking into the ground, but it wasn't a total loss; the full buckets would keep at least my older brother's '68 Impala running all winter. But at the moment the last drop fell, I wasn't looking for any silver linings.

I could barely stand. Soaked and stinking of gas, I headed to the house. My Mother offered sympathy and a shower, and had hot cocoa waiting for me when I was clean, but I knew the real wait was for my father to return from the fields. I wasn't sure how he would react—times were tight and that was a lot of gas I'd lost. But on hearing my tale of woe he wasn't angry, instead he simply shook his head, let a slight smile cross his lips, and gave me this look that was filled with compassion. That was the last I ever heard of this incident.

When I left the religion of my childhood, a Methodism brought to that farm by my grandfather's English father and Scottish mother, it was much the same—as though the spigot was knocked off my tank of certainty. What came flooding out had no place to go at first. Much of the religion of my childhood, rituals and beliefs that were devoid of meaning for me, ended up spilled on the ground, and there was an empty hulk above me. I felt rather empty for a while, but then found different buckets to catch pieces of my ethics, my tentative faith, my certainty. A fair amount of my early teachings ended up in one of those buckets, useful in different ways.

I still wanted to hang on to many of the teachings of the man, Jesus of Nazareth. His cry for justice and adherence to the radical economic laws of his Jewish forbears; the radical inclusively of the good Samaritan and the constant challenge to stand up for your beliefs, even in the face of death. To me that he was human makes the words all the more challenging. A lot of the rest of that childhood faith soaked into the ground, but several buckets remain filled from it; in my faith I can't escape the fact that I too can make difference in people's lives.

Other buckets received wisdom from other traditions. One was labeled Zen Buddhism; I found myself filling that bucket sitting in meditation halls and reading Buddhist teachings on

compassion and interconnectedness. From the earth-honoring traditions of Native American spirituality, and the sense of ritual of Paganism, came buckets that reinforce my sense of reverence for planet earth. Western philosophy also filled one of those buckets that helped me keep some sense of myself as a religious person, some sense of how I valued the world and found my place in it.

The most important bucket of all was one I discovered after all the others, labeled Unitarian Universalism. Here I found that my odd religious thoughts weren't so odd after all. Here I found a people who valued the journey and human experiences more than the dogma. Here too I discovered religious humanism, in a turn-of-the-century Episcopal Church built on a Native American holy site over looking Lake Minnetonka. In that church, I found a religious humanism expressing most fully all those qualities I'd kept in my many buckets from those various religious paths, and the truths of the human beings they helped me to understand. As a religious humanist I am in a tradition that takes human life as its primary text and honors all our experiences as valid ways of learning.

You've probably never stood under a gravity-feed tank with a shower of gasoline pouring over you, but all of you have made mistakes, and have felt the sense of terror at the emptiness. And all of you have felt that sense of compassion and acceptance that followed for me on that day. The next time I felt that compassion from my father was when Rev. John Cummings spoke of religious humanism at my ordination at that church, as a UU minister. That day my father no longer frowned at my newly found religious path. I saw that same slight smile of acceptance—that this is just the way things were going to be—and this was just who I was.

Those who call themselves religious humanists fall into two groups. The first leans heavily on the historical development of religious as well as humanist traditions; these are those folks whose ethical orientation is towards this world, and whose values and beliefs express a primary reverence in the life we live, on the planet we inhabit. But these folks can also be uncertain explorers of the divine, or even believe in God, though these are not their primary concerns. Creating a better life and a better environment for life is at the center of their religious ethical imperatives. This could be called "big tent humanism."

The second group might be called philosophical or ontological religious humanists. This group patterns their understanding of reality on the horizontal plane of existence. Naturalists in the full sense of the word, this group doesn't believe in or care about the existence of a supernatural world; the one we have is plenty. One who takes such religious humanism seriously will be skeptical of the mystery, and at the same time humble in the face of it—for the history of science has taught us that truth is always subject to change. In the ethereal world of the arts and emotional experiences we find ourselves nurtured by the beauty of existence, that joy of just being alive.

There is a great deal of overlap in these two groups. I include myself in that overlap. I'd never seek to draw someone into one group or the other by telling them: "If you believe that, then you're surely one of us." Nor would I seek to exclude someone whose ethics have us rubbing shoulders. The task at hand is far too big for us to want to define or exclude anyone willing to join with us. Both are of vital importance to religious humanism and Unitarian Universalism. In

the elevator I would say this on behalf of both groups:

Religious Humanism is a tradition that celebrates the beauty of life as it is experienced in our lives, as it is expressed in the arts and the natural world and in love itself. Religious Humanism also challenges us to respond to that beauty by bringing forward the best of ourselves, to help make that same experience possible for all people, to help us to create a world where justice is possible, where peace is permissible, and where compassion is a standard to which all our actions are held. All of life is our text. All of human experience is our revelation.

II

(Delivered under this article's title at the UUA General Assembly, Boston, June 2003)

I'm Rev. Sarah Oelberg, minister of the Nora Unitarian Universalist Church in Hanska, Minnesota, a town of 350 people that has had a Unitarian church since 1881, with services in Norwegian until 1930.

I am also the acting President of HUUmanists, (Capital "H," Capital "U," Capital "U," "manists") formerly known as the Friends of Religious Humanism, (which made us sound vaguely like the Friends of Public Television) and before that the Fellowship of Religious Humanism, but feminists suggested we shouldn't be just "fellows." Since there was also a perception that humanism might be on the decline in the UUA, we have decided we should be an organization specifically focussed on UU humanism, so we are now HUUmanists!" I am a Religious Humanist, and have been one all my life. I was raised Unitarian Universalist, in fact am a fifth generation Unitarian. I grew up in a series of UU churches in the Midwest and Midsouth, the geographic heart of humanism. I couldn't imagine anyone being anything else.

I came from a mixed family: my father was an atheist, my mother a humanist. My first formal lesson in humanism occurred when I was five years old, at the Sunday School at the Unitarian Church in Oklahoma City. The teacher was having us practice a song for presentation to the congregation the next Sunday; the song was "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." As we were singing, all of a sudden the minister came running in screaming: "No, no, you can't sing that song." The teacher fled in tears. The minister sat us down and said:

> You may wonder why I think that's not a good song. It's a song about love. But Jesus can't love you. He's dead.
>
> Some of those stories are true and some are not, but it's only one of many books that have good stories, and we can't believe those stories just because they're written in a book, even an important book like the Bible. You need to think about those stories and decide for yourself if they're true, if they make sense.

He went on to say:

> Jesus was a great man and taught many good things, about loving and caring for other people and being good, but you don't belong to him. You might belong to your parents,

> maybe, but not to a man you never met. You're your own person, and you should never, ever think you are weak, and that you need to depend on someone else, no matter how strong they seem. Because you are strong, and can do whatever you decide you want to do in your life, you will grow to be responsible for yourself.

In that little intercourse with the children he taught the basic precepts of humanism: he taught us that showing love to humans is a worthy goal, and that immortality is found in the examples we set and the work we do. He taught us that we gain insight from many sources and all cultures, that there are many religious books and teachings that can instruct us about how to live, that we need to think for ourselves, and that we have the power within to do so. After that humanism became my religion.

Religion is that which people have invented to help them explain the big unanswerable questions in life. Religion also provides a solace in need, and gives meaning and direction to our lives. It tells us what is right and what is wrong, and how to act. Humanism for me does all that and more, since it also challenges me to think and to be responsible and to weigh things rationally and make my own decisions. Religion does not need to be theistically based in order to support how we live in the world; it is far more than belief in God. Humanism does for me what religions in general do for other people.

In these ways Humanism is my religion. This is different from being a religious humanist—although I am that, also. Look up the word religion; it is far more than belief in God. I regret the fact that many younger UUs, and those newer to our movement, may have not always experienced the wonderful, warm, "religious" humanism of my youth. In recent years some of the louder humanist voices have tended to be rather shrill and rigid.

There is a curmudgeonly negative humanism that is all too prevalent today, and it has allowed the dilution of UUism's recent humanist underpinnings. That dilution doesn't just affect humanist UUs, it also harms any whose spiritual approaches are rooted in the ideas of the Enlightenment, which call on us to be careful in our claims, and critical but fair in approaching the claims of others. There are plenty of critical Christians and Jews and others in our ranks. And sometimes we forget the fairness part—being overly critical can lead to being negative and unaccepting of the views of others—humanists are not the only critical ones (not even the only UUs) susceptible to this failure.

The only other time that I thought about giving a speech in an elevator was when I was working at Yeshiva University in New York City. Every day for twelve years I rode the elevator twelve floors up to my office. I was the only female Gentile on the faculty of that esteemed Orthodox Jewish University. And as such I experienced some discrimination; for example I couldn't eat my lunch in the faculty lunchroom because I was "tref." Many times as I was going up, I imagined what I would like to say to certain people, if I had the courage to do so. I never did, but I composed a lot of speeches in that elevator. I have to tell you that the best, most effective elevator speech I ever saw, not heard, was an unspoken one that was given by a visiting professor from Emory University, a black man who was also a Gentile, and was resenting some of the things that I was. He carefully timed his getting on the elevator one morning so that he got on at the same time that the Dean did. He carefully turned his briefcase around, and on the other

side was a sign that said: “Beware: there’s a ham sandwich in here!”

Here is my (twelve floor) humanist elevator speech:

It can and does make a difference, giving respect, dignity, justice, peace and good will to the human community. It is committed to discovering objective truth through the use of reason, science and direct experience, while recognizing that there are other ways of knowing. These tools tell me that we are an integral part of the interdependent web of nature, the diverse peoples of the world and the commonweal. Therefore we have a responsibility to be actively engaged in the world, to care for our environment and care about other people of all kinds and in all situations. It gives me my ethical grounding. It is a religion of responsibility, but also of joy, as it celebrates the arts, music and crafts, which result from human creativity. Humanism is what gives my life meaning.

III

(Elz Curtiss’ commentary was part of a broader UUMA email exchange around issues of hatred and social responsibility in the weeks immediately following General Assembly)

After the excitement I experienced at this year’s GA (primarily by avoiding ALL workshops on polity and process!), I came up with the following reflection. It was stimulated by my dissatisfaction with the third of President Sinkford’s three priorities. Why was a goal of “anti-racism” so disturbing to me—while the proffered substitute, “anti-classism”—no less so? I care about both those issues. So where would I want to get us, with our vision of social justice?

When dissatisfied, I always look for a positive next move. This GA, I did not have to wait long. It came as I listened to Sarah Oelberg’s introduction to her elevator speech (that panel was the best thing I went to at this or many other GAs! This is a remembered paraphrase: Sarah, I promise to buy your tape!)

She said that in getting away from our humanist heritage, we had disempowered more than just UUs with non-theistic spiritual practices: we had cut out many other UUs who honor fundamentals of the Enlightenment. She then specifically, inter alia, named my type, which she called “The critical Christians.”

Good name. I accept it. Indeed, it has got me thinking, “What does it mean to be a ‘critical UU Christian?’ ” How do we get past sharing Jesus as a way of affirming this religious posture?

What I would lift up is a faith position I’ll call “Responsible Irreverence.” It is my reinterpretation of the Reformation’s prophetic vision, in the context of our Purposes and Principles. It also assumes that we are privileged not as white folk, but as citizens of a fundamentally decent country (check with the Pakistani UUs, if you doubt this assertion). It is also my attempt to move Sinkford’s third goal past its details and line it up with his first goal, which honors David Bumbaugh’s call for grandeur of language about our visions. As with “critical Christianity,” the product is a tension between acceptance and examination.

"Responsible Irreverence" means respecting the dreams and feelings of most of the folks with whom we disagree. On the "Irish Riviera," with which I am very familiar, this means understanding that a people who for 900 years had neither food nor shelter nor political power in their own country will always thrill to the American Dream, and celebrate its prosperity. In anti-racism, it means understanding that this same gratitude will live in the hearts of other immigrants—and most historically literate African-Americans—as they recall their own or their ancestors' much, much greater suffering and oppression.

Responsible Irreverence means shifting our rhetoric against "isms" to a renewal of the old Scottish Common Sense call for empiricism—itemize what you see, test what you itemize, and draw no conclusions beyond what you have proved. This means eliminating from our vision the idea of "collective guilt" and getting back to the Constitutional process of proving individual crimes by individual people—whether George W. Bush or police officers doing an urban crime sweep. Or, in the case of anti-racism and patriarchy: our own forebears and congregations. Sometimes, we, too, need to learn when to quit beating people up—especially, in our Puritan case, ourselves.

Responsible Irreverence means removing the issue of "whose eye is involved" from the question of beams and motes, and going after flaws based on the damage they do to real people. Find, describe and preserve real evidence. Don't get stuck on who might or might not display these flaws, and the anger we felt when we first learned about these injustices.

Responsible Irreverence means admitting that we honor the dreams, feelings and deeds of others, because whether we are humanists or theists, meditators or pray-ers, we ourselves are nothing more than collections of dreams, feelings and deeds. All of us—liberal or conservative, theist or atheist—are therefore equal, under something larger (even if it's just our exhaustion from dealing with chaos), to those whom we would criticize.

Responsible Irreverence honors the process of building community through small group conversations among non-homogeneous peoples, rather than the shouting matches of mass media and large demonstrations. Quit debating details with those who share most of our vision, and learn to converse with those who don't yet see it.

I would therefore expand but honor President Sinkford's third principle with this openly Enlightenment (humanist) reformulation: "We seek a new way to lift our voices in the dialogue of this great country. We would show Responsible Irreverence toward that which this nation holds dear. Our goals shall be to protect and disseminate its greatest values, wherever we may find them, while carefully—with infinite compassion and patience toward those who built them—dismantling and redistributing the wealth and glory tied up in its Golden Calves/Sacred Cows."

In conclusion, I would neither support racism, nor abandon our work against it. Rather, what I—still a Christian—reject is our use of the confessional stance. It implies that we are special in our sinning (we are not), and powerless to achieve larger cleansing—for which we must ask some God or secular entity. But I remember when I heard President Sinkford announce that glorious Supreme Court decision (Ed: striking down the Texas Sodomy statute). I thought first

of Gene Navias, and then of all our prophets of sexual equality. They stood up for our larger covenant, and have made it (almost) national law!

In this regard, I lift them up as my model. It is time to quit setting ourselves apart from America, in this or any other way, and enter its long-haul conversations with a breadth and depth of theology. Let us use that language of reverence to include all who dream of embracing our liberty and law, whether here or in some other country—and to offer them more than a list of particular flaws.

(Ed.: I have tried to keep some of the spontaneous quality that these exhortations had in their original deliveries, while editing just enough to make them flow on the printed page. Since both the verbal presentations were delivered twice in differing versions, what appears here may vary from what some readers heard in person on the tapes.)