Sources of Our Living Tradition: Humanism

by Christine Robinson

> *The decade of the 70s, with its emphasis on human potential and the overthrow of authorities, was very congenial to the Humanists in the denomination, too, and by the end of the decade they had a sense that they* were *the denomination, that the essence of Unitarianism was Humanism, and sometimes even that this was the only legitimate kind of Unitarianism. However, just as they supplanted the Transcendentalists who supplanted the Christians, they, too, were being slowly supplanted; not so much by any particular theology, but by a post-modern understanding of the multiple nature of truth and the desirability of nurturing religious diversity.*

During the years that the document called "The Sources of our Living Tradition" was being crafted and voted on by the General Assembly, the Radical Right was nearly hysterical about Humanism. They usually called it "secular Humanism, or "Godless" Humanism, and for a while, all of the ills of the world, from a rising divorce rate to abused children to the federal budget deficit were due to the overwhelming influence and values of secular and especially Godless Humanism. This was heady stuff for a minister in one of the few denominations that embraces humanists—I had been a Unitarian Universalist all my life and I had never in my wildest dreams imagined that we were so powerful! In the end, it was hard to use the power, though, because the charges turned out to be so absurd.

In that atmosphere, it took some gumption for the UUA to assert that Humanism is one of the sources of our living tradition. Not that there was really any choice, for many, many Unitarians are Humanists … religious, secular, godless or otherwise … depending on what choices you offer people, between one-third and one-half of UUs claim on surveys that they are Humanists. Indeed you can make an argument that, whatever other beliefs they have, almost all UUs are humanistic in their beliefs, that is, they are focused on this world and making life better for people here and now.

The constructs of faith and belief that we call Humanism are ancient and have been called by several names. Socrates was executed for "atheism" and "corrupting youth" because he was teaching a version of Humanism. There is a Christian Humanism which is orthodox in belief but which concentrates not on heaven but on earth, and not on praising God but on serving God's children. I once heard a Catholic nun claim to be a Humanist and when challenged, answered, "The last thing our Lord said was, 'feed my sheep.'. He didn't say 'Convert them and send them to me in heaven,' he said, 'feed them.' Our life on this earth is important. God wants each and every precious human being to have all that they need for a full life." This is a strong Humanistic expression of an orthodox faith. Contemporary author Kurt Vonnegut said the same thing in his characteristically offbeat way. "Take care of the people," he said, "and God almighty will take care of himself."

UU Humanists believe that religion is too important to be based on unprovable beliefs, such as a belief in God. They wish to base the meaning of their lives on something that they can be sure of, that is here with us, that gives us meaning and

purpose. The most obvious value to replace God is of course, the human being, the fulfillment of human life, and the development of human potential.

The Greek philosopher Protagoras makes this point perfectly. He said, "Man is the measure of all things. Concerning the gods, I am not in a position to experience their existence or otherwise, for the difficulties are many which prevent this experience, and life is short." That is to say, we cannot know much of the divine, but we do know much of the human. That should be the center of our values and of the meaning of our life. Warren Lewis, a member of the congregation I serve, who died last month, had written out his humanist credo, which was read at his memorial service.

> I believe that the only reality is the physical reality we can see and touch. Human development is my "spiritual reality." Science is my religion; the human body is my study; the correction of scientific error is my mission; art is my pleasure; that human potential is unlimited is my belief. Traditions and rites mean little to me except as a source of good poetry and great music. Science is my sacred word: an understanding of the world around us in all its infinite complexity. This includes human behavior and the human mind.

Humanists like Warren believe that human nature is essentially good, and destructiveness and human evil arise from failures to develop. There is nothing so horrifying to a Humanist as the traditional Christian ceremony of baptism that "washes away" the original sin of an infant. To call a human infant evil is, to a Humanist, a desecration of all that is holy in the world. Humanism, when it expresses itself in social movements, works hard for conditions which will help human beings develop the goodness which is latent within them, and to eliminate those conditions which frustrate the human spirit and lead to anger, crime, or starvation of body or mind.

Humanists believe that religion is something you do, rather than something you think or feel. Humanists are not alone in this, of course. This is a way of religion which shows up in one form or another in every tradition. Religious Humanism is more likely to offer tasks than beliefs. Humanists don't dream or pray about the dignity of persons or the value of this present life; they roll up their sleeves and get to work. They find their sense of meaning in life as a consequence of their service to these ideals rather than as a consequence of simply believing.

Religious Humanism includes reverence for the natural sources of our being. We did not create our own lives. It is appropriate, say Humanists, to have an attitude of thankfulness and to cultivate a general sense of gratitude for all we have been given. This, of course, is another place where Humanism and other religious faith systems intersect, for gratitude is a part of all religious life.

Our denominational history is a story of young radicals railing against the old fogies and then eventually becoming old fogies themselves, ripe for attack by the new breed of radicals. The Pilgrim's faith was supplanted by that of their liberal Christian descendents in the 18th century. The liberal Christians faced the challenge of the Transcendentalists in the mid-19th century. At the time, there was a big fuss about whether a denomination which, no matter how liberal, still was a Christian denomination, could tolerate these folks who didn't all want to be called Christians. In the end, the stress was placed, not on Christian doctrines but to the values which Unitarians had held stressing individual

freedom of belief and lack of imposed doctrine and creed, and the denomination as a whole lived up to the promise of its values and accepted the radicals into its midst. When Unitarian Humanism arose at the beginning of the 20th century, the same issues were raised again … can a denomination which, no matter how liberal, is at least focused on God, expand enough to include people whose focus is on people? The answer was yes.

The precursors to Unitarian Humanism (such as Felix Adler's Ethical Culture movement) coincided with the rise of science in popular estimation, beginning with the science of evolution. While the Fundamentalists and, for a while, mainline Christians, despised the theory of evolution because they believed it degraded humankind, liberal religionists attempted to use the theory to exalt humanity, its growth, development, and possibilities. These sentiments, along with increasing impatience with traditional theological language and ritual, were especially strong and well organized in places like Ohio and Minnesota. The dispute between the (mid) Westerners and the more conservative Easterners rocked this denomination and very nearly caused a schism. In a peace-making move, the statement of "Things Commonly Believed Among Us" was created to define, and explain the Westerners' proto-humanist religious beliefs: the 1873 document included:

- We believe that to love the good and live the good is the supreme thing in religion.
- We hold reason and conscience to be final authorities in matters of religious belief.
- We honor the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old or new.
- We revere Jesus, and all holy souls that have taught men truth and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion.
- We believe in the growing nobility of Man.
- We trust the unfolding universe as beautiful, beneficent, unchanging order; to know this order is truth, to obey it is right, and liberty, and stronger life.
- We believe that we ought to join hands and work to make the good things better and the worst good, counting nothing good for self that is not good for all.

In the early twentieth century, Curtis Reese, a Baptist, was one of a number of Protestant clergy who converted to Unitarianism and then to Humanism. "The basic content of religious liberalism is spiritual freedom," he said, and from there laid out a naturalistic humanism which called upon science and observation for all knowledge of truth. God, scripture, even intuition, were seen as pre-modern answers to questions that science and reason could better attend to. Reese and others felt that they had found a kind of religion that was self-evident to all who would break free of the indoctrination of their childhoods, a religion that was based on reason rather than faith, and on science rather than religious experience.

The Humanist Manifesto (1933) affirmed that human life is of supreme worth and that this life is an end in itself rather than a means to any other goal. This document, signed by a number of Unitarians as well as several outside the movement, proclaimed the great end of human life as the "complete realization of the human personality." It

claimed that the universe is "self-existing and not made," and defined religion as "those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant."

Although the Humanists were at first careful not to deny the possible existence of God, but simply to concentrate on what they considered more important things, the anti-metaphysical ethos of the movement sometimes became a contempt for theological speculation and even for those people whose beliefs were more traditional. Tolerance took a back seat to exciting ideas in those years.

On the other hand, the Humanist emphasis on this life and on the development of the human personality placed Unitarians in the forefront of much of the social change of the mid-century. Many Unitarians were involved in the civil rights movement because of their convictions that segregation violated their faith in the dignity of all human beings. Unitarian ministers were frequent marchers. The death of James Reeb, a Unitarian minister from Washington, D.C., was one of the final straws that brought the federal government into an active role in the civil rights struggle. When the struggle for justice moved north, where most of the Unitarian churches were, Unitarian churches were often centers for Fair Housing and Human Relations committees, integrated summer experiences for children, and other attempts at furthering racial justice and awareness.

I grew up in a family, and later, in such a Unitarian Church—determinedly Humanist in their orientation. I was encouraged to believe that reality was a unified whole and that we human beings were able to understand it. I was taught that "religion" centered on our ethical actions in the everyday; that it's practice would make the world a better place and allow human potential, now partly hidden by poverty, racism, and lack of education, to blossom. Ours was, we were told, a "religion for Mondays," and our faith and our hopes were centered right here: in a world we could increasingly understand, in tasks for our hands to do right now, in a focus on making this precious life better for all people.

We were taught that the important thing in matters of faith was to follow one's own faith experience, and not simply to accept what others said was true. We were introduced to the varied faiths of humanity and encouraged to see and appreciate the ethical precepts which they often shared while rejecting all that would be contrary to a rational, materialistic understanding of the universe, such as virgin births, thunderbolts from the gods, and various versions of an afterlife. This world was enough, we were taught; this life rich and lovely, and no God was necessary given the vast potential of human nature which was evolving.

We were also taught appreciation; for the wonder of the natural world, its beauty, its intricacy, and for ourselves as persons of ultimate worth and as members of this nobly evolved human race. Spirituality is not a word that Humanists use easily, but there's no other to express this: the spirituality of Humanism is in service and wonder. But the aversion of many Humanists to spiritual language has a blind underside, which is overconfidence in reason. In that overconfidence, Humanism fails to take into account the unconscious powers of mind and society, and the impact of religion and culture in both shaping and restraining reason.

In an important way, all of this is recapitulated in each individual life. As the cocky college student discovers that she is not as free as she had imagined, or the seasoned professional finds that his relational life has fallen apart just as he has reached the peak of his powers, or the young mother discovers that her special needs child has opened her eyes to a new and kinder world, or the retiree heaves a sigh of relief and looks around at

satisfying achievement now in the past and takes up painting or weaving or story telling in libraries, so those who rely on reason alone may discover a need in their lives for something else with deeper implications.

The decade of the 70s, with its emphasis on human potential and the overthrow of authorities, was very congenial to the Humanists in the denomination, too, and by the end of the decade they had a sense that they *were* the denomination, that the essence of Unitarianism was Humanism, and sometimes even that this was the only legitimate kind of Unitarianism. However, just as they supplanted the Transcendentalists who supplanted the Christians, they, too, were being slowly supplanted, not so much by any particular theology, but by a post-modern understanding of the multiple nature of truth and the desirability of nurturing religious diversity.

This ideal encouraged the UU Christians who had been quietly hanging-in, wondering if they really belonged in the denomination, and the equally beleaguered Transcendentalists, to contribute to the denominational discussion again; it allowed other religious expressions, in particular paganism, to develop. Perhaps most of all, it allowed congregations to begin to experiment with a wider range of worship styles, to try new kinds of music, add some rituals that appeal to emotion rather than reason, and to generally warm things up a little. These changes have not always felt comfortable for some Humanists.

But Humanism is a noble faith, and it is a life's task to live it well. It is a faith, which can give meaning and satisfaction to a life of love and service, which engenders gratitude, compassion, justice and love. I grew up with good people who were faithful to those beliefs and who wanted to pass them on to their children. And while things have changed, and as we explore the other theological options open to us, we also realize that we are all, to some extent, Humanists. We may be Christian Humanists or Agnostic Humanists or Pagan Humanists, but all of us place high value on the human experience, on justice and equity in human life, and concentrate our religious efforts on this life rather than on the next.

Unitarian Universalism is not a faith that appeals to mystical new-agers, pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by believers, or anyone else so focused on the divine that what goes on here is unimportant. We're all Humanists. We are almost all followers in the footsteps of Henry David Thoreau, who, when asked on his deathbed whether he could see the next world, irritably replied, "One world at a time!" Although the Humanist-dominated era of our denomination appears to be over, it has given all of us a vibrant reminder of the value of this life, these people, and justice, equity and compassion played out right now, on this earth. For that reminder and direction, all UUs are profoundly in the debt of the Humanists. May they live forever!