

REASON, REVERENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY: Considering Our Humanist Source

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A visitor to my home once remarked that by the looks of its contents, I was either profoundly confused or marvelously eclectic. The jury may yet be out on that.

But imagine the hope struck in my heart when I found this marvelously eclectic Unitarian Universalist faith! This faith that dares us to explore; this faith bold enough to hold to no creed but love; this faith brave enough to seek truth without claiming to own it.

In this faith we are free to draw wisdom and inspiration wherever we might find it. We've articulated these six as our foundation:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

All of these are our teachers. But the one Unitarian Universalism may be most associated with in the modern world is our Humanist source. People quite often associate Unitarian Universalism with Humanism because we are known as a rational religion, a religion that respects science, that places credence in the natural rather than the super-natural, and holds a belief in *this* world, not another one of some other place and time. This rejection of supernaturalism often distinguishes liberal religion from other Western religions.

On the threshold of the season celebrating what is deemed by many as supernatural, it is timely to remind ourselves of the nature of our Humanist source.

Scholars often differentiate between two kinds of religion, termed mythos and logos -- Mythos relying on sacred narratives and Logos relying on logic and reason. Mythos, as you may expect, refers to religions based on myths – stories that provide an explanation of why

things are as they are to give meaning to life as we know it – such as the Christmas stories from the Christian bible.

By the way did you realize there are two different Christmas stories in the Bible -- one in the Matthew, the other in Luke -- and that even though there are significant differences in them, down through time *both* have come to be told as absolute truth? The familiar version enshrined in Western tradition actually *blends* elements of both stories.

But really -- that's not terribly important. Because it's my belief that the religious or philosophical myths we inherit were *never* intended to be taken as literally true, but were more probably understood, even in their own pre-scientific societies, for just what they are – metaphorical tales to explain a reality that was too complex, too vast, too mysterious to grasp in any other form.

So, on the one hand we have religion of mythos. On the other we have religion of logos. Logos is rational religion, which generally means religion based on the scientific-empirical view of the world – a view that factors in what we discover through science and through experience. Rational religion has its roots in Greek philosophy.

Yes, the Greeks are known for their mythology, and much of their early rational religion was more of a rationalized version of that mythology. But the seeds of rational religion we claim today took root in that time, notably through the philosopher Protagoras who said, *“About the gods, I am not able to know whether they exist or do not exist.”*

Now ... myths and stories are not in themselves a bad thing. They are important to human life and learning. Stories help us render the ineffable more ... well, effable. They not only help us understand our lives, they can also teach us how better to live them. Which is why the prophets of every age have used stories to teach us how walk more morally, more compassionately and more justly through our world.

To that end, let us remember this: A story need not be literally little-t “true” to be big-T “True.” A story need not be factually accurate to present a higher truth. It need not be fact that some ancient Emperor pranced through the streets stark naked to understand the story of the Emperor's New Clothes as fable about the dangers of self-deception, greed and group-think.

Where we get into trouble is when certain stories, certain myths, somehow harden into a perception of fact – when someone or some society converts mythos to logos. There are a number of motivations for calcifying myths into facts, but the most prevalent is to enable those who are privileged to remain in power.

Such a conversion of myth into fact through a theology known as “fundamentalism” actually gave rise to Religious Humanism in the early 20th century. It was then a Unitarian preacher named John Dietrich championed humanism as a counter to the rise of theistic fundamentalism that insists that scriptures are literal and inerrant truths given by an unseen God, rather than a collection of sacred stories. Dietrich went on to become one of the 34 signers of the first Humanist Manifesto in 1933 – about half of those signers were Unitarians. The Manifesto was updated in 1973 and again in 2003, each time calling for an end to racism and poverty, war and violence -- each time

insisting on the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the freedom of all to understand world through their own experiences in the here and now. Each iteration of the Manifesto is signed by notable Unitarian Universalists as well, including John Weston, the writer of the piece we shared earlier this morning, “out of the stars we have come”.

Incidentally, Manifesto III it was also signed by 21 Nobel Laureates. We are in good company, folks. But then -- we’re in good company just because we came through these doors this morning.

Our Humanist source counsels us to heed the guidance of reason, and the results of science, and warns us against the idolatries of the mind and spirit.

First, Religious Humanism insists we explore and doubt and debate and otherwise bring the powers of reason and intellectual integrity to bear upon our perceptions of reality. It asks us to test whether any idea is *reason-able* to believe. It dares us to think for ourselves – *and then double-dares us to challenge what we think.*

Second, Religious Humanism counsels us to heed the results of science. With the rise of the scientific age, the logos of Humanism challenged the mythos of other religions in new ways, questioning supernatural religion not only by means of reason and logic, but also by constantly-evolving scientific method.

The best known of challenge to fundamentalism posed by Humanism’s faith in science is Darwin’s theory of evolution, the evidence of which counters any literal reading of any culture’s creation stories. All of a sudden, humanity in the Judeo-Christian tradition was *not* exiled from a garden paradise, but crawled up out of the sea to see what’s going on up here.

Wait ... did I just say “humanism’s *faith* in science”?

Yes, I did. Because only the *second* definition of faith has anything to do with belief in a deity. According to Merriam Webster, the first definition of faith is more at “*complete trust or confidence in someone or something.*” So yes – Religious Humanism holds a *devout faith* in science – having arisen as an *intentional* new religion of logos to counter religious mythos in its time and ours.

Now ... having taken Humanism’s counsel to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, we find an interesting temperance in the third phrase, when it warns us against “idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

I love that phrase – *idolatries of the mind and spirit.* There’s a whole serious of sermons right there, but that will have to be for another time.

For our purposes this morning let us just note the bold beauty of this: *at the same time Humanism elevates human thinking – it also cautions us against making idols of our ideas.*

While Religious Humanism insists that we search and search again – it also declares we *must not worship what we find.*

Why? Because what we find will evolve as we grow - and we must be willing to evolve with it. For the Manifesto says nothing if not that humans and human understanding are in a constant state of change.

So, we get the reason part of our Humanist "Reason, Reverence and Responsibility."

But, is there reverence?

If Humanism rejects the supernatural, no deities in the sky or elsewhere holding sway over the universe, and asks us to rigorously engage our own minds -- but then also admonishes us not to worship our own minds – what, then, does Humanism *revere*? *Is there anything sacred here?*

In the wee hours a couple of nights ago, our little dachshund woke me up to go out to the yard. I was annoyed, since she's been trained to wait for first light. And then I looked up into the chilly night sky and saw Orion's belt gleaming through the darkness ... and I thought of our reading from Robert Weston:

*This is the wonder of time;
this is the marvel of space;
out of the stars swung the earth;
life upon earth rose to love.*

This is the reverence of Humanism. Reverence for the mysteries of life. For however diligently science seeks to explain it, there is so much we still don't know, and maybe never will.

Scientists once thought the smallest particles of the universe were atoms.

Until they discovered electrons and protons.

And then they found quarks.

Now science has uncovered "strings" – energy like infinitesimally tiny bits of spaghetti but millions of times smaller – that vibrate just like strings on a guitar or violin but at a fantastically high frequency that we cannot hear – and yet they appear to be holding our universe together.

And so it seems science has finally brought us to the place the ancient Sufi poet Rumi tried to tell us about some 800 years ago when he said, "we have come to the place where everything is music."

Religious Humanism reveres this music of our universe. Unitarian Universalist Rev. David E. Bumbaugh puts it this way: "Humanism, with its emphasis on the ongoing search for truth and understanding, with its insistence that revelation is not sealed... has ... a vocabulary of reverence which is drawn from ... the enlarging exploration of the universe, and humanity's place in the universe."

Because ... even with the increasing intricacies of scientific method and the vigorous reason required to distill and quantify perceived reality, these methods can only hope to tell us HOW our universe works.

Not WHY.

At least not in any concrete way. Science can tell us *that* human life evolved over millions of years, *but not for what purpose.*

At its core, may I be so bold to say, Religious Humanism suggests that the WHY – is – *love.*

Lest you think that oversimplifies the matter, I dare say the *least* simple aspect of human life on planet earth ... is love. Else we'd have gotten that "love your neighbor" thing down by now, don't you think?

Else we wouldn't have to gather in front of the courthouse as we did yesterday just to demand the right to share food with hungry people.

Else we wouldn't be grieving a system that lets those of the fringes of our society go over the edge, or worse, pushes them there, and then says they had it coming.

Else we wouldn't have Ferguson, Missouri.

So, while our Humanist source holds that we evolved through millions of years of earthly life, it urgently insists we did so not for the sake of some *deity*, but for the sake of *humanity.*

For the sake of each other, for the sake of the stranger, for the sake of the Earth, for the sake of becoming the *humans* we must be if we are to transform the chaos of this world. *This chaos of own making.*

And so finally, Religious Humanism says we are *responsible.* That we neither await nor petition some supernatural force to come look after us, or fix what we have broken, or provide escape from the consequences of our actions and inactions, or to intercede in the world on our behalf.

No, *we* are the intercessors. *We* are responsible for what *has* happened and what *is* happening. This makes our Humanist source a powerful ethical and moral compass. In Religious Humanism, we do what is right and good because it is right and good -- *right now*, not for the promise of some future other *better* place or for the dread of some future other *worse* place. Our immortality is gained not by creed or confession, but by the legacy of our good work in this place, in our time – because Religious Humanism is not an *other-worldly* faith, it is a *this-worldly* faith.

Many Western religions we know condemn Religious Humanism as selfish and narcissistic – while we insist in its deepest and most fervent practice, the Religious Humanism we claim as a source of our Unitarian Universalist faith is *anything but.*

The Humanism we cherish is both guided by reason *and* inspired by compassion, grounded in human welfare *and* shaped by human need.

Often people say they appreciate Unitarian Universalism because it is a religion that does not ask you to check your mind at the door.

My dear ones, our Humanist source begs us not to leave our *hearts* there either.

How blessed, how glorious that life on this earth has evolved that you and I should be here this morning in reason and in reverence and in responsibility for the journey of passion and compassion we have undertaken together in this faith.

A season is upon us that some decry as having set fable into fact. What is it but a season of the story of human perseverance ... from the Maccabee's lamps, to the Solstice celebration of returning light, to a social revolutionary born destitute but under a star. All these that we might rise again to love.

Many of us come today with heavy hearts for the state of our world. For the hungry people in Stranahan park yesterday. For Michael Brown. For systemic greed, corruption and lust for power. And sometimes for the state of our own families, which so often behave so badly this time of year.

Still ... we come today to a season born of hope that darkness cannot last. Belief that the light will return once more. Faith that however bruised and battered we humans may be, there is yet something in us determined to get up tomorrow and try again.

In that spirit then, the Reverend Audette Fulbright, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Cheyenne, Wyoming, shared this poem earlier this week. It's called, "Prayer for the Morning After Ferguson."

Did you rise this morning,
broken and hung over
with weariness and pain
and rage tattered from waving too long in a brutal wind?
Get up, child.
Pull your bones upright
gather your skin and muscle into a patch of sun.
Draw breath deep into your lungs;
you will need it
for another day calls to you.
I know you ache.
I know you wish the work were done
and you
with everyone you have ever loved
were on a distant shore
safe, and unafraid.
But remember this,
tired as you are:
you are not alone.

Here
and here
and here also
there are others weeping
and rising
and gathering their courage.
You belong to them
and they to you
and together,
we will break through
and bend the arc of justice
all the way down
into our lives.

Reason ... reverence ... and responsibility – indeed.

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