

Greenville UU Fellowship  
Sources VI: Guidance of Reason  
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*Note: There were two other reflections that went along with this homily. One from Don Youngblood and the other from Ron Hilderbrand.*

The first Humanist Manifesto was published in 1933 and was intended to be an antidote to religions that promised supernatural revelation. According to Raymond B. Bragg, one of the creators and signers of the original 1933 document, "The Manifesto is a product of many minds. It was designed to represent a developing point of view, not a new creed. The individuals whose signatures appear would, had they been writing individual statements, have stated the propositions in differing terms. The importance of the document is that more than thirty men have come to general agreement on matters of final concern and that these men are undoubtedly representative of a large number who are forging a new philosophy out of the materials of the modern world."

The original manifesto has since been superseded by two different updates, and the third Humanist manifesto, with its six points is now the official word of the American Humanist Association. Here are the six points codified in 2003:

- Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis.
- Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of evolutionary change, an unguided process.
- Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience. (See ethical naturalism.)
- Life's fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals.
- Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships.
- Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness. //

The first manifesto has fifteen "theses," which get significantly simplified by the time we get to the 6 I just shared. That's good, since it is much easier to share 6 pithy tenets than fifteen wordy proclamations. At the same time, the depth of thinking found in the original is not to be dismissed. Two of the fifteen points put forth in 1933 bear repeating here.

First, number seven: “Religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious. It includes labor, art, science, philosophy, love, friendship, recreation—all that is in its degree expressive of intelligently satisfying living. The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained.”

“The humanists are firmly convinced that existing acquisitive and profit-motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate and that a radical change in methods, controls, and motives must be instituted. A socialized and cooperative economic order must be established to the end that the equitable distribution of the means of life be possible. The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world.”

Humanism is anti-capitalist, y’all! This is another significant source of our work for justice, equity and compassion. It does not solely originate with either the social gospel or the Hebrew prophet Amos’ exhortation to let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Commitment to the common good is a significant value. And the common good means that there is enough for everyone. That one person’s needs or beliefs do not supersede another’s. That when we have to make difficult decisions, we do it together, and we do it for the good of all, not for the good of the people in power.

Part of working toward the common good in a Unitarian Universalist context is reaching toward true religious pluralism and acceptance. The third principle calls us to acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.

Often, when we look superficially at a given tradition, we don’t get the whole picture – and it is easy to conflate humanism with atheism – which is not accurate. Some humanists are atheists, and some are not.

Secular and religious humanism share the same philosophical grounding, but are expressed in different ways. According to Suzanne Moore, Religious humanists yearn to “express transcendence and connection with others... [while] Essential to the secular view is the insight, rooted in science, that reality is mundane. It’s the domain of matter, energy, and their interactions — and nothing else.”

Religious humanism, in the tradition of the earliest Humanist organizations in the UK and US, attempts to fulfill the traditional social role of religion. Secular humanism considers all forms of religion, including religious humanism, to be superseded.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular\\_humanism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular_humanism))

This is a significant point – for humanists who are also Unitarian Universalist, and most especially those who participate in a UU congregation – the assertion that humanism is post-

religious, or that humanist belief supersedes religion, can all too easily translate into an assumption that humanists are the most spiritually evolved of all people. That humanism is inherently better than traditional religion. It is, unfortunately, a conclusion that is sometimes drawn – if you examine humanist discourse over the years. But we know that any tradition can be misinterpreted by both believers and outsiders – see Christian or Islamic fundamentalists – and so it is our work as Unitarian Universalists, whatever our religious or secular interpretation of belief, to practice true religious pluralism in our communities and refuse to let these harmful assumptions take precedence.

My father and I periodically repeat a good-natured conversation that goes like this: We'll be having a chat about religious things or church, or whatever, he'll pause and say, "are you **sure** you believe in God?" and I'll respond, "are you **sure** you don't?" Neither of us actually answer the question because we aren't trying to change the other's mind. I think what this illustrates is that each of our beliefs are so fundamental, and at the same time, so personal, that it doesn't quite compute – to either of us – that someone to whom we are so close, whose opinions and understandings so often are so similar to our own – since they are based on the same basic principles and values – it doesn't quite compute that we disagree on such a basic and fundamental point.

I literally don't understand what it means to **not** have a personal connection to something mystical or divinely transcendent. And I imagine my dad feels the same about **not** having that connection. But we don't go into the conversation with any anxiety or animus about whether we agree because it doesn't matter to our relationship, we are secure in our own beliefs and happy for the other person to be making meaning in the best way possible for them.

In some sense, all Unitarian Universalists are humanists because we believe that it is our work to make the world a better place here and now. Hear the words of the UUA's president, Susan Frederick-Grey, "Individuality celebrates the very real differences between people, without denying our fundamental interdependence, while individualism understands a person as separate, dependent on no one. Individuality recognizes that each of us, varied as we are, exist within a context of mutuality, shared fate, and collective responsibility..."

...We don't create any real positive impact alone. Community gives us strength. Love gives us courage. Remembering we are not alone—remembering the people, the family, the community, the ancestors we belong to—gives us resiliency and power to keep on loving, keep on acting, keep on working for the values and commitments we hold dear."

<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/president-spring-2019>)

And so in the context of Unitarian Universalism, which is the foundation of both of our values, we understand that at the most basic level, no religious expression is more evolved than another – because that's not the question we're trying to answer. Instead, we are concerned with the tasks of making meaning, building community, and creating a world with more justice, more compassion, more access, and more LOVE. That is the work that our Humanist source calls us toward.

May it be so.