

Note: This service consisted of four reflections, one by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull, and three by members of UUMeriden who identify as humanists, Randy Heath, Douglass Peary, and Steve Volpini. All of the reflections are included here.

“A Piece of Work”

A Reflection by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
in the context of other reflections for a service on Humanism
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT
April 23, 2017

“Oh, what a piece of work are we...” Whenever I sing these lyrics, I can’t help but smile, recalling the little girl who lived next door to us in Montclair, NJ. That little girl is now grown with children of her own. But the memory is vivid. Linny was “a piece of work” – or so her Dad always described her. High as his standards were for his two daughters listening and obeying—and they were by no means cruel standards—they were unrealistic for Linny. When her Dad called to her, Linny, at the ripe age of three, would walk off into her own sunset and wave her hand dismissively behind her back. I wonder if it was something she learned in the permissive ambience of our Unitarian Universalist Sunday school, which she attended regularly, or if it just came naturally or if it was a fine blend.

Linny is in good company. We as Unitarian Universalists and we as human beings altogether may be described as “a piece of work”—“marvelously wrought” as the lyrics go and full of p and v, that is, petulance and vigor. If we approach religion and faith with open eyes, open minds, and open hearts, it is not surprising that the perspective we refer to as humanism has laced our theology for well over a century.

Written, preached, practiced, and understood—humanism is multi-dimensional, but with a personality not unlike Linny’s. Individuals proclaiming themselves humanist do not readily defer to authority. For many years I mistakenly equated humanism and atheism. This isn’t necessarily so. As I embark on my own rediscovery of humanism, I’m humbled by how multi-faceted it is, albeit definitively anti-authoritarian.

Consider the wording of one of the sources from which our living tradition draws: “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.” While this is not the final word on humanism, it contains a noteworthy balance. Reason and science score high, but so does admonition against elevating “the mind and spirit” to the veritable status of deity. In other words, let’s not worship reason and science. Reason is fallible; science is continuous discovery.

Randy and Max and Steve and Doug have raised their own voices on what it means to claim humanism as one’s dominant theological/philosophical outlook, along with an introduction to the history of humanism in American Unitarianism. Historically, humanism found its way into Unitarianism rather than Universalism. While both were initially theistic—Unitarianism holding to the notion of one God and Universalism, to the understanding that a loving God opens the gates of heaven to everyone—the intellectual forces within Unitarianism were ripe for the

budding theology of John Dietrich and Curtis Reese, both Unitarian ministers in the early 20th century. Dietrich was the first of the two to use the term humanism; Reese had chosen the term “democratic religion”. They were separated primarily by terminology and a few hundred miles between their pulpits—Dietrich in Minneapolis and Reese in Des Moines. While Reese eventually adopted Dietrich’s choice of terms, the two were on the same path.

It was not long before a brouhaha of religious controversy erupted within Unitarianism. Among the catalysts was a sermon given by Curtis Reese at a summer school for Unitarian clergy at Harvard Divinity School. “The Content of Religious Liberalism” was his chosen topic. The point of explosiveness in his congregation of peers came with his statement that “Liberalism is building a religion that would not be shaken even if the very thought of God were to pass away.” (38)

During my own seminary education in the 1960s the “death of God” controversy was raging, catalyzed by a professor at Emory University, a Methodist School. Thomas Altizer was in his late 30’s when he tapped into the philosophy of the 19th century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, in asserting “God is dead.” That is, we can in our time no longer believe in a transcendent force acting in human history. “God is dead” was the caption on the cover of *Time Magazine*, October 22, 1965. Specifics are another story for another day.

In our own time, in our own faith—and it does take faith to believe in God and/or humanity in this slice of history that we occupy—“Humanism at 100” is a feature topic in the current issue of *UU World*, the journal of our Unitarian Universalist Association. Kris Wilcox, a lay humanist from Arlington, Massachusetts, looks back at a century of theological history and lends contemporary perspective. She contrasts secular humanism with congregational humanism and highlights the risk of either-or thinking—or “seesaw thinking”—within the pluralism of humanist thought. I especially perked at her reference to the words of Rev Amanda Poppei, senior leader of the Washington Ethical Society and vice president of the UU Humanist Association:

“By keeping us focused on static positions rather than deeper explorations of belief and practice, this ‘seesaw’ is limiting for everyone. It reinforces stereotypes of ‘the older, cranky Humanist who just wants to go to lectures about science and doesn’t like the minister.’”

Oyveh!

Again, as I embark on my own rediscovery of humanism, I’m humbled by how multi-faceted it is. Consider Wilcox’s concluding observation:

“UU Humanism today is an unfolding work. Across a century of change, it has been enlarged by challenging ideas like liberation theology and feminist thought, scientific breakthroughs and seismic cultural shifts. It has been humbled by human failures and learned to make room for doubt and awe while holding to Dietrich’s belief that responsibility and possibility in human life are located here and now, within us.”

After years of relentless search for truth and meaning, “reverence for life” was the philosophy adopted by that iconic humanitarian and member of the Unitarian Church of the

Larger Fellowship, Dr. Albert Schweitzer. Wonder, awe, and reverence for life move hand in hand with respect for science, reason, inquiry, and all that constitutes the piece of work we are when we morph, dare I say, into “the better angels of our nature”.

Whatever the particulars of our varying and evolving theologies, we are all to some degree, like little Linny’s—defying authority, walking off into our own sunsets, and dismissively waving our hands behind our backs. Might we also stop, turn around, and embrace whatever wisdom calls to us with good humor, humility, grace, hard-earned wisdom, and the transforming, though not necessarily transcendent, power of love.

So may it be and Amen.

Sources:

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Mason Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, Revised Edition, Fellowship of Religious Humanists, Minneapolis, MN, 1996.

Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought*, Henry Holt and Company, 1933.

Time Magazine, October 22, 1965.

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“My Path to Humanism and UU” A Reflection by Randy Heath

Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
April 23, 2017

Good morning. I’m Randy Heath, and would like to share with you my own path to Humanism and to UU and how they intersect.

Show of hands - how many of you grew up UU?

[Follow up note: In the service that morning, only ONE hand went up! We’re all refugees from somewhere, from something.]

I grew up Methodist, happy enough and secure in the knowledge that, just like the Monty Python sketch, I was proud to be a Protestant, and didn’t kneel to Rome or anyplace or anyone else.

But even from a young age, the stories of talking animals and living in whales and boats filled with every creature on earth didn’t seem very realistic to me. Nonetheless, I went on, grew up, loved participating in youth group, loved the friends and the overnight retreats, etc.

Ultimately, a fictional lion drove a stake of doubt through the heart of my beliefs. We had a speaker come – I don’t recall if he was a ministerial intern or an author or who – but I was very much looking forward to the event, as it focused on *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. I did not yet know how ardent a Christian C S Lewis was, or that there was a lot of Christian mythology woven into the Narnia series. This was the first I’d heard of it. I recall the speaker saying that if we “opened our hearts to God”, “asked him sincerely to come into us”, we’d feel something wonderful, and amazing, etc. I did as he instructed that night and many times after, sure that this grownup had a secret he was sharing, some knowledge he was privy to that I wasn’t yet. But that night and all the other times, it was to no avail. Nothing happened. Oh well – god works in mysterious ways when he doesn’t feel like granting your requests, right?

Life went on, and I learned more and more about the world, its people and the many religions. It seemed odd to me that people around the globe believed so many different and often conflicting things. The whole “god of love” or “god is love” bit grew increasingly absurd as I learned about the horrors that were suffered by humans and living things every single day. The desperate pleas of the starving, the dying, the diseased, all clogging up the “Prayer-Waves” with prayers for sports teams, Christmas presents, college admissions, safe airplane flights, etc., seemed to “get answered” or “get ignored” at about the same rate.

By college or shortly thereafter, I was at best a deist – perhaps there was some force that deliberately created the universe to begin with, but it seemed obvious to me that he’d buggered off to somewhere else since then.

Science was the next step that pushed me along the path. I had always been interested in science, particularly the space program, since I grew up in the 70’s and 80’s – the Apollo program and

the Space Shuttle were ever present. But sometime after college I began to get interested in life, where it came from, why we were here. I already knew religion didn't have any meaningful answers – just loads of amusingly artificial creation stories obviously fabricated by people. Science offered a different way of learning and looking at the world, one that was testable and verifiable.

But science doesn't take care of the human angle – it's a tool for learning and discovering, the most powerful tool mankind has ever come up with for uncovering and understanding what is true. And while it reveals the evolutionary origins of humanity and even of our traits and urges, such as empathy and compassion and cooperation, it doesn't typically inform us on social topics like:

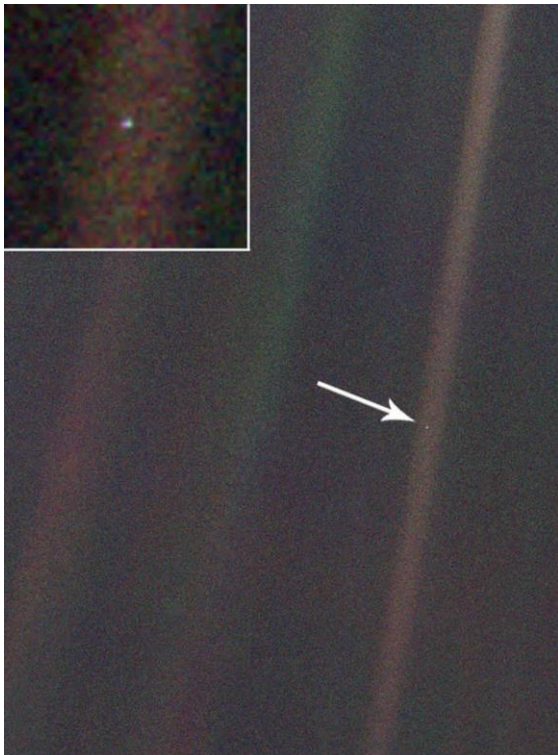
“How do we organize our lives?”

“How do we live in harmony with one another, with other life forms, with our planet?”

“Why should we desire peace instead of war?”

It does lend to these questions with its insights – the pale blue dot story springs to mind. I am curious how many people know the back-story of The Pale Blue Dot?

THE PALE BLUE DOT OF EARTH



Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 1994

This image of Earth is one taken by the Voyager 1 spacecraft on February 14, 1990 from a distance of more than 6 billion kilometers (4 billion miles) and about 32 degrees above the

ecliptic plane. In the image the Earth is a mere point of light, a crescent only 0.12 pixel in size. Our planet was caught in the center of one of the scattered light rays resulting from taking the image so close to the Sun. This image is part of Voyager 1's final photographic assignment, which captured [family portraits of the Sun and planets](#). This assignment, the idea to turn Voyagers cameras BACK towards us, was Carl Sagan's. Here is the image with Sagan's words on it.

“Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there--on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

Our posturing, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.

It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.”

That story underscores the intersection of science and humanity for me, the bridge that knowledge alone cannot cross. It produces the profound awakening that the preacher with his story of Aslan could not evoke in me.

Carl Sagan's protégé, Neil deGrasse Tyson, complimented Sagan's words with the following description of our connection to everything:

“We are all connected;
To each other, biologically.
To the earth, chemically.
To the rest of the universe atomically.”

...which leads me to how, on that pale blue dot, science taught me that every living thing is connected – and why this is true and how it can be demonstrated.

This understanding and perspective, coupled with learning about evolution and genetics, is what brought me ultimately to land on humanism. Having this cosmic perspective, how then do I structure my life? How do I look at my relationship with others and the world? What guiding philosophy replaces that deism or dependence on supernatural guidance, with its carrot of heaven and stick of hell?

Humanism

“Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.”

The American Humanist Association, <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/>

And Humanism led me to UU, whose values read like a Humanist laundry list.

So in the other direction, I'd ask you to consider these few questions, and whether perhaps you might have some humanist leanings within the structure of your UU beliefs?

[The list of questions is borrowed from “Atheists Are People Too!” A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister at All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa, OK, September 5, 2004, found at: http://allsouls.publishpath.com/Websites/AllSouls/images/Sermons/2004_sermons/09-05-04_athiests_are_people_too.pdf (typo is theirs and needed for URL)]

- 1) Do you believe that human beings are responsible for their own destinies?
- 2) Do you put your trust in thought and reason more than tradition?
- 3) Do you feel that the scientific method is the best means we have discovered for advancing truth? In other words, do you feel we should base our opinions on evidence rather than faith or superstition?
- 4) Do you believe that human beings are the makers of history?
- 5) Do you believe that human beings are the creators of moral values?
- 6) Do you believe that religion is a human enterprise and that human beings have created religion?
- 7) Do you believe that ideals such as justice, freedom and equality have a value in and of themselves and therefore do not require a divine source for their authority?
- 8) Do you think it is immoral to wait for God to act for us?
- 9) And finally, do you believe that the responsibility for the kind of world in which we live is up to us?

How did you do? If you answered yes to more than a few, consider exploring how humanism fits into your UU experience.

“On the Life of John Dietrich”
A Reflection by Rev. Douglas Peary

Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
April 23, 2017

Good Morning, I am Rev. Douglas Peary. I was raised as a Fundamentalist Christian and became a UU with a Humanist minister at age 29 in 1972 and I became a Humanist.

I wrote several Volumes of Humanist Heroes stories randomly and then put them all in three volumes called *Humanist Heroes Through the Centuries from the 1600's to the Present*.

The last person I wrote about was John Dietrich (1878 to 1957), who was active as a Unitarian minister. In each of his first two churches he increased the membership by hundreds and attendance by thousands. He wrote 1500 to 2000 sermons, which he called Documents, and is known as the Father of Religious Humanism, based on about 40 to 60 of his sermons that had been edited and published.

I found his views much like my own, so I obtained permission to edit about 250 of his sermons that were stored in an unreadable format at his last church, First Unitarian, Minneapolis, Minnesota. I discovered two of his granddaughters, Louise and Anne. We attended an anniversary event in October 2016 marking 100 years since their grandfather started at the church in 1916. The granddaughters then found about 300 more sermons, and I am editing them.

Rev. Dr. John Hassler Dietrich started as a Fundamentalist minister in the Reformed Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This was the faith of his birth. He was defrocked after five years, in 1911, for being too liberal.

Dietrich became a Unitarian Christian minister in Spokane, Washington in 1911. While there he became a Unitarian Scientific Religious Humanist. Dietrich himself decided on the name Humanism for his beliefs.

In November 1916 Dietrich became minister at First Unitarian in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Finally he was a Secular Humanist public speaker from his position as minister. By then he didn't want to be called minister or Reverence; and he wanted only the duties of research, writing and speaking. His speeches were one hour in length; and he called his writings documents rather than sermons.

Dietrich's last church in Minneapolis grew from under 100 members to over 3,000, plus many more visitors. He was on the radio and published his sermons individually and in sets. They were distributed worldwide. Most of them are now missing, so if anyone finds more, please contact me. I have only about 400, which I am editing. I have 10 volumes published, four more in process, and more planned.

My own journey was similar to Dietrich's, with Bible College, Secular College, and UU Seminary, a Humanist writer, speaker and full time Federal Investigator for 30 years, speaking part time with no church of my own.

Dietrich wrote and spoke like a dynamic Evangelist but as a Seeker after Truth for humanity. Reading his sermons feels like listening to an Evangelist. He did not call himself an Atheist or a theist. He was a Universalist in practice by valuing all people no matter what they believed in Religion. He found that scientists who studied the Universe found natural law governing the universe and biology and evolutionary natural law governing all life, with no evidence of or need of a creator. Religions in the Middle Ages were found to be destructive, based upon their made up stories of Gods. The Founding Fathers of America provided for freedom of religion to keep them powerless to be destructive of others.

Atheists are wrong to ridicule believers because they believe the way they do. They are all still our brothers and sisters, and we don't know everything by any stretch of the imagination. We do not make friends by ridiculing people who disagree with us. Science is in its infancy and people use it to do both good and evil. Humanism sees that every good thing done in the world is done by humans, not Gods. We, not religions or Gods, create morals, ethics, and medicine to heal people, and make wars. You name it, good and bad, it is done by people; so we need to take charge and do what is good for our descendants to come to have better lives than we have. I am an atheist but I want to be known positively and first as a Humanist, not as an atheist.

The best we know is that the Universe and the world are natural. We are evolved animals with a larger brain. No creature, including us, has a soul, heaven or hell or a second life. In my Humanist Heroes presentations I gave their views of dying. Mark Twain was asked how he felt about dying. He said, "I was dead for billions of years before I was born and it didn't hurt me at all." Since I have no choice in the matter that is satisfying for me and in the words of Ingersoll "death is only eternal Peace." I would rather have the truth than false hope.

In the words of Dietrich

"Those who find Humanism's notion of religion without God absurd, have not been able to sound the depths of its mystic meaning. Those who too easily stigmatize its devotion to reason and reality as cold and meaningless miss its profound call to life and purpose... Our sojourn here becomes a wonder-awakening romance, a pilgrimage through mysteries and marvels, and as we walk together, comforting each other, inspiring each other, helping each other, loving each other, our hearts burn within us."

“Reflection on the American Religion”

Steve Volpini

Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden

April 23, 2017

I am a humanist, an atheist, a freethinker. I am also a Unitarian Universalist.

Unitarian Universalism has long seemed to me to be the American religion. The church’s ideals are those of the country. Both value liberty and honor science and common sense. It is difficult for me to separate patriotism from my religion.

This is what Thomas Jefferson expected would happen...but more about that later.

I’m drawing today from a book: *Nature’s God: The Heretical Origin of the American Republic*, by Matthew Stewart. It confirmed my feelings, but also solidified my beliefs.

Stewart points to Deism. This is a philosophical movement, which provided the light in the Enlightenment. Central was the study of Nature and the search for Truth. It was part of the ferment that grew out of the Renaissance and the Reformation, with critics questioning the authority of the church. This also shook the crown, because kings claimed to derive their legitimacy from God.

The Deists studied the Greeks and the Romans. They rediscovered the ancient wisdom that had been lost for many centuries.

This is the world of Jefferson and Franklin and John Adams and George Washington—all of whom could be said to be Deists. These are the Founding Fathers of our country: educated, independent, bold.

The Deists believed in trusting their senses and their reason, as opposed to being told what to think by the clergy. Ben Franklin wrote that he was “scarce 15” (in 1720) when he “began to doubt of Revelation itself.” He left the Bible behind.

By the time of the American Revolution, 55 years later, a large contingent of the educated were decidedly not “Christian” as the term is now used. One of them, a diplomat, wrote in a Treaty, “The Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.”

The most liberal church in the pre-revolutionary country was Unitarian, which was considered by others to be “atheism in the pulpit”. This was a form of Christianity that was stripped of any belief in the divinity of Christ and of the Trinity. Henceforth, Jesus was admired because he had some powerful good ideas.

The Founding Fathers exulted in science and new ideas. Astronomy was gaining importance in the 1700s, and astronomers were detecting distant stars and contemplating different worlds. “The universe,” John Adams believed, “as distinct from God, is both infinite and eternal.” And those

thinkers were convinced that other stars had other planets and those planets had other inhabitants—perhaps more advanced than ourselves.

Jefferson put the notion of God on a shelf. “And if we could all...leave the subject as undefinable, we should all be one sect, doers of good, eschewers of evil,” he wrote. DOING good—in this world—was all that counted.

The clergy, Jefferson thought, corrupted true religion. Just to be clear, what counts as corruption (I have shortened the list) are as follows:

- The immaculate conception of Jesus
- His deification
- The creation of the world by him
- His miraculous powers
- Resurrection
- Original sin
- Atonement, etc. etc.

If the clergy should not put shackles on what we believe, neither should the government, he thought. “The legitimate powers of government reach actions only and not opinions,” he wrote. The religion that the Founding Fathers hoped for America “measures piety in terms of doing good rather than believing rightly; that which imposes a duty on oneself, as opposed to one’s neighbors; and that which builds the bonds of community even while robbing the priesthood of its corrupting political influence,” he wrote.

Famously, Jefferson wrote, “I rejoice in this blessed country of free inquiry and belief, which has surrendered its creed and conscience to neither kings nor priests, the genuine doctrine of one only God is reviving, and I trust that there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die Unitarian.”

Ethan Allen, too, not a Virginia gentleman but a rougher patriot, also believed that after the Revolution the improvement of succeeding generations in the knowledge of nature and science will exalt the reason of mankind...and will bring them back to the religion of nature and truth.” That is what is meant by Nature’s God.

Deists, freethinkers, and atheists were the men who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. I daresay they got it right. More of us need their clear-eyed courage.