

WHOLE PERSON HUMANISM  
UU Church in Meriden  
04/27/14  
John B. Hooper

“I’m a Humanist.”

I always wonder what people expect when I say that. Some probably think, “Here comes another speech on the importance of science as the only way to really understand things.” Others may say to themselves, “Here we go, another lecture on the evils of religious language.” Or maybe: “Not another anthropocentric rant by an atheist who thinks that humans are the only specie that really matters.” Actually, when I say, “I’m a Humanist,” I’m simply saying that I recognize that I am a Human Being, who is fascinated by the possibilities that lie in becoming more fully human, and determined to find out what they are. If I were a big-brained fish I would be a “fishist” or maybe an “Ichthyist.”

We humans are deeply imbedded in our world. Even the use of the word “environment” implies too great a separation between ourselves and the rest of existence. We relate to the world around us in three different but inter-connected ways: (1) By directly experiencing (“feeling”) it with our senses - the so-called First Person mode, (2) by interacting with others both verbally and non-verbally – the Second Person, and (3) by observing the world around us, gaining an understanding of the universe and our place in it – the Third Person. Of course, all three of these existential modes of relating to the world happen simultaneously, continuously generating the thoughts and feelings that define our inner life.

Over the past few decades, there have been enormous advances in what may be called “the sciences of experience.” We now know that we are essentially hard-wired for empathy and compassion. Our brains did not evolve to enable us to think, but rather to help us make our way in the world. Cognitive scientists have shown that emotions and feelings are not epiphenomenal to thought, but an important component in the process by which we “make our way in the world.” To realize the full potential of our humanity, as individuals and as communities, we must pay close attention to all three of these relational mechanisms, which define our lives. And, we must work to strike the appropriate balance among them. This is what I call becoming a “whole person Humanist.”

Problems arise when one mode of relating is given undo preference over the others. We can see this clearly when we look at religion. Religion in America is displayed across an eclectic and ever-changing landscape. For example, the rise of the religious right and its infiltration of the political process are of concern to all who see them as serious threats to the separation of church and state. Religious fundamentalists focus on first-person beliefs and feelings and, divide the world into believers and non-believers. They have little or no tolerance for third person analysis of their beliefs. However, at the other end of the religious spectrum – or should I say the non-religious end of the social spectrum - there are the so-called “secularists” who are skeptical of feelings and beliefs, and promote science and critical thinking as the most appropriate ways to appreciate existence. At the far left end of the secularists are the doctrinaire atheists who strive for the elimination of religion in all its forms. They tend to divide humanity into the rational and the irrational. When I think of the rigid positioning of both the religious fundamentalists and the doctrinaire atheists, I’m reminded of something the American humorist, Robert Benchley, once said:

“There are two kinds of people in the world. Those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who don’t”

But what about the rest of us who are situated somewhere between the religious fundamentalists and the doctrinaire atheists on the ideological spectrum? We Unitarian Universalists like to “build our own theologies.” Some UUs develop a theistic perspective. Others, including most Humanists, find no need for a god concept. But few Humanists call themselves “atheists,” even though technically we are. Recently I attended a lecture by the famous primatologist Frans Dewaal on his new book entitled “the Bonobo and the Atheist.” When Professor Dewaal was asked about his own life stance, he said he considered himself an “apatheist.” (Woody Allen had a similar take on this – “Not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on Sunday.”) God or no God, it just doesn’t matter. I sort of identify with the apatheist position. Why waste time arguing about it? Let’s just live our lives as if we – individually and collectively - are responsible for what we make of them. Because there is absolutely no reason to believe that this is not the case. I think most Humanists and probably most UUs are theological apatheists. Indeed, a 2005 UUA Commission on Appraisal report said the results of several surveys suggest that 65-84% of UUs do not make the “transcendental dimension assumption” whether or not they call it “God.” (UUs seem to be pathologically polysyllabic – see what I mean?) Being theological apatheists does not mean we are apathetic about anything else. Our seven principles call us to a life of action infused with love and reason. The same goes for the secular Humanists. Bette Chambers, former president of the American Humanist Association, makes the case for Humanism this way:

“Humanism is the light of my life and the fire in my soul. It is the deep felt conviction, in every fiber of my being that human love is a power far transcending the relentless, onward rush of our largely deterministic cosmos. All human life must seek a reason for existence within the bounds of an uncaring physical world, and it is love coupled with empathy, democracy, and a commitment to selfless service which undergirds the faith of a humanist.”

Sounds like whole person Humanism to me.

These are exciting times for UUs and for Humanists. While many of our fellow Americans are clinging to the literalist beliefs of the past and others are attempting to construct a life based on the rejection of those beliefs, a growing number of others are looking for a better way. I want to spend some time examining this third way, but before I get into that, let me tell you briefly about my own continuing attempts to better relate to the world and how they led to my standing here before you today.

I was raised in eastern Massachusetts as an Episcopalian. (Show Hymnal)

This is the 1940 edition of The Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America. Here’s what’s inscribed on the flyleaf (Read flyleaf inscription):

First Prize  
“Name That Hymn” Contest  
St. Paul’s Junior Young People’s Fellowship  
November 7, 19... (Well, you don’t have to know the exact year.)  
Won by John B. Hooper

This is still one of my most cherished possessions.

As a young person, I was especially drawn to the resonance of the Anglican music and to the community experience of liturgical ritual. So, I went on to sing in the choir and then to become an acolyte. After years of dedicated service, I was appointed head acolyte in my late teens. In the meantime, I had made up my mind to become an Episcopal priest. But then something happened that abruptly changed the course of my life. I call it my inverse epiphany experience.

One Sunday, after doing my head acolyte thing of carrying the cross at the front of the procession of priests, other acolytes and the choir into the church and up to the chancel, I settled in for yet another service. Of course, by then, I knew the entire liturgy pretty much by heart, so I was free to observe the faces and body language of folks in the congregation. While I was watching the faithful filing up to the altar rail to receive communion, it struck me: Many of them looked like automatons. There was no passion in their faces – no emotion. And I thought to myself: This is nonsense! I didn't only know it in my mind; I felt it at the core of my being. It was a life changing experience. Like being “born again” in a weird sort of way.

And, I loved the freedom that casting off all supernatural crutches gave me. I began carrying pocket editions of the writings of Bertrand Russell and Friedrich Nietzsche around with me, and quoting from them to any unsuspecting “victim” who would listen. I had the same level of enthusiasm for my newfound atheism as today's young freethinkers, who relish the writings of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens – the so-called “Four Horsemen of New Atheism.” I was a committed atheist and existentialist long before I became a Unitarian Universalist.

Of course this change of circumstances put a significant damper on my priestly ambitions. Now what would I do with my life? Well, since math and science seemed to come naturally to me, I went on to college and graduate school, studied chemistry, and became a scientist – almost by default.

I had put away the religion of my childhood and become a NONE – that's spelled N-O-N-E: the term that is now used to refer to that ever-growing class of people who say they have no religious affiliation. NONEs have gotten an awful lot of attention recently. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life has conducted a series of surveys; including one published a short time ago, on the religious affiliations of Americans. The results present both a challenge and an opportunity for Unitarian Universalism. Here are a few excerpts from the survey results:

One fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today. ...

The growth in the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans – sometimes called the rise of the “nones” – is largely driven by generational replacement, the gradual supplanting of older generations by newer ones. A third of adults under 30 have no religious affiliation, compared with just one-in-ten who are 65 and older.

The ranks of the mainline denominations become more and more depleted every year. The challenge for Unitarian Universalism is not to be perceived as just another organized religion. If we are, our numbers may not just stay level, they will probably drop precipitously. Younger people in particular are looking for new ways to come together in community outside of the traditional “religious” model. And this is where our opportunity lies. We have not been and are not now a “traditional” religion.

Like many others when I finally found Unitarian Universalism after wandering around in Noneville for 25 years, it felt like coming home. Three things in particular drew me to this way of life: First, Unitarian Universalism is a religion of freedom and responsibility, not creeds – one

could actually be an atheist or an agnostic and still be a UU! Second, it is concerned with life before death, not with any postulated “hereafter” – the seven principles are about action, not belief; and Third, it’s all about reason and compassion.

In short, I was drawn by what I now know is the Humanistic core of Unitarian Universalism. And this brings me to that third way. I firmly believe that if it is presented in the right form – most likely outside of the traditional congregational assembly – whole person UU Humanism will appeal to a large fraction of today’s young NONEs.

The NONEs are not monolithic, but many of them are very uncomfortable with traditional religious language and practices. They tend to avoid the major organized religions – indeed some of them are “recovering” from one of these religions. They are drawn disproportionately to the secular community and, because of the influence of the so-called new atheists, many of them equate the word “religion” with “belief in God.” The Humanists in the secular community are not anti-religious and the Humanists in Unitarian Universalism are not theistic. As Andre Comte-Sponville says in his Little Book of Atheist Spirituality, “All theisms are religious but not all religions are theistic.” In essence, the bulk of both the secular Humanists and the UU Humanists are apatheists.

This is from the poem “The Duck” by Donald Babcock

Now we're ready to look at something pretty special. It's a duck, riding the ocean a hundred feet beyond the surf. No it isn't a gull. A gull always has a raucous touch about him. This is some sort of duck, and he cuddles in the swells.  
He isn't cold, and he is thinking things over. There is a big heaving in the Atlantic, and he is a part of it.  
He looks a bit like a mandarin, or the Lord Buddha meditating under the Bo tree.  
But he has hardly enough above the eyes to be a philosopher. He has poise, however, which is what philosophers must have.  
He can rest while the Atlantic heaves, because he rests in the Atlantic.  
Probably he doesn't know how large the ocean is. And neither do you. But he realizes it. And what does he do, I ask you? He sits down in it! He reposes in the immediate as if it were infinity — which it is. He has made himself a part of the boundless by easing himself into just where it touches him.  
I like the duck. He doesn't know much, but he's got religion.

To me, one of the most exciting recent developments in American Humanism is that atheists and secular Humanists are realizing the importance of 2<sup>nd</sup> person Humanism and are forming congregations (or “communities”) themselves. My friend, Greg Epstein, the Humanist chaplain at Harvard puts it this way in his recent book “Good without God:”

(T)he single biggest weakness of modern, organized atheism and Humanism ... has been the movement’s own tendency to focus on religious beliefs, when the key to understanding religion lies not in belief at all but in practice – in what people do, not just what they think. ... (N)ow we need to sing and to build. We need to acknowledge that as nonreligious people, we may not need God or miracles, but we are human and we do need the experiential things – the heart – that religion provides: some form of ritual, culture, and community.

Greg is practicing what he preaches. He started the Humanist Community Project at Harvard, which is flourishing. When you visit them it feels a lot like it does when you walk into a

Unitarian Universalist congregation. As Greg observed, Humanism is not just a philosophy, it's a way of life that is defined by the way we treat each other.

I'm worried, however. I'm worried because, in this age of instant communication and 24/7 news cycles, the people at the extremes seem to get most of the attention. The doctrinaire atheists and the religious fundamentalists each paint a picture that doesn't include most of us. The anti-religionists overemphasize the third person analytical perspective and the fundamentalists overemphasize the first person experiential perspective. On the other hand, Humanists who are mainly secular, such as the members of the American Humanist Association, and Humanists who are Unitarian Universalists operate under the principles of whole person Humanism. The so-called secular and religious Humanists need to work together to provide places for the NONEs to feel at home. The Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association (HUUmanists) has as its main mission, being a bridge between the secular community – especially the NONEs - and Unitarian Universalism.

Maria Greene, the director of development and communication for the UU Humanists (HUUmanists) recently wrote an article in an American Humanist Association's Humanist Network News explaining what Unitarian Universalism has to offer all Humanists who are looking for community. She says:

- (1) We have Roots: Did you know that the authors and half of the signers of the original Humanist Manifesto were Unitarians or Universalists? That the AHA's primary founders were UU ministers, and that the UU Humanist Association (then called the Fellowship for Religious Humanism) was founded by the same man ([Edwin H. Wilson](#)) who was the executive director, and sole employee, of the AHA for over 20 years?
- (2) We have People: The UUA has around 160,000 members (roughly half of whom identify as Humanist) and over 1,000 congregations. It has many more members if you count those who consider themselves UUs but do not belong to a congregation. The AHA has approximately 23,000 people and 179 local groups. There is tremendous growth potential for organized Humanism if the AHA and Unitarian Universalist work together.
- (3) We have Infrastructure: Almost all UU congregations have buildings with meeting space, classrooms, kitchens, halls, libraries, parking, insurance and maintenance staff. They often have paid staff (usually helped by volunteer committees) for children's education, youth programs, music, counseling and crisis support, outreach and office administration.
- (4) We have Programs: To name just a few: The existing "Religious Education" curriculum for kids needs some beefing up for Humanism/science/critical thinking but it is not indoctrinational and teaches about world religions in the way public schools should but don't. The OWL human sexuality program for teens is fantastic and secular. The Coming of Age program and Bridging ceremonies are both excellent. The local and [national/international programs](#) for [social action](#) are superb - dealing with issues like LGBT rights, immigration rights, justice for low-wage workers, racial discrimination in the judicial system, and others. Humanists who are interested in becoming chaplains or ministers are welcomed at [UU seminaries](#).
- (5) We have Culture: There are some beautiful UU traditions that Humanist communities could embrace. [Flower Communion](#), for instance, is a gorgeous practice where everyone brings a flower (purchased or, more commonly, cut from a garden or responsibly plucked from a field) and they are all gathered into big baskets that are brought up to the front by children. At the end of the service, everyone brings a different flower home. They have, Jazz bands, drumming circles, youth programs, old fashioned country fairs; they sponsor folk musicians in coffeehouse performance series, host classical concerts, and on and on.

If you plan to attend the UU General Assembly in Providence this summer, make sure you come to our program on “Reaching Out to the Nonreligious.” We will describe and celebrate three models for how individual UUs and congregations can reach out to a large fraction of the NONEs: The Humanist Congregation, The Humanist Service, and the Humanist Community.

Before I close, let me share a little story that I found on one of the many Humanist blogs. I think it illustrates the kind of whole person Humanism that we need to foster in our every day interactions.

Imagine this:

You are driving down the road in your very tiny "Smart Car" on a wild, stormy night, when you pass by a bus stop and you see three people waiting for the bus:

1. An old woman who looks very very ill.
2. An old friend who once saved your life.
3. The perfect partner you have been dreaming about.

What would you do, knowing that there could only be one passenger in your car?

This is a moral/ethical dilemma that was once actually used as part of an employment application process. This problem was presented to 200 job applicants. The candidate who was ultimately hired had no trouble coming up with his response. He simply answered: “I would give the car keys to my friend and ask him to take the old woman to the hospital. I would then stay behind and wait for the bus with the partner of my dreams.”

The people who have had the most influence on me, the ones I have come to trust in my personal dark times, do not attempt to infuse me with hope, but rather enfold me with understanding and empathy. They don't attempt to provide solutions to my problems, or even imply that a solution is to be had. They simply abide with me, physically and emotionally, while I am going through whatever it is that is troubling me. There is nothing more comforting to me in trying times than knowing that the person standing in front of me, looking into my eyes, cares enough to truly share my pain in the very moment of its occurrence without resorting to platitudes or hopeful prevarications. Sometimes, they don't say a thing. They just take my hands and nod their heads with tears in their eyes. And they literally bring me back to life. Which is really all there is. I don't think I'm going out on a limb to assume that most of us here now have had experiences like this. In fact, wanting that kind of mutual connection is one of the reasons we come together in rooms like this. I and my sisters and brothers in the UU Humanist Association want to help others – particularly those who do not need a God in their lives - to find places like this. Will you help us? Make sure to visit our website at [humanists.org](http://humanists.org). Thank you for your attention and thank you for having me here today.