

## Aspects of Religious Humanism

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Rev. Bill Murry, UU minister and longtime President of Meadville Lombard, our religious humanist seminary in Chicago, in his preface to *A Faith for All Seasons*, says: “No religion is worthy of its name unless it provides a vision of meaning and purpose for the individual’s life and help in times of personal crisis. Unitarian Universalism has been accused of failing to provide these. It has been called a fair weather faith, beneficial to its adherents on sunny days, but not helpful when the days are overcast.” He writes: “To be human is to endure pain and loss and the separation of death ... To be human is also to question the reasons for and the meaning of suffering, loss and death ... Non-theistic humanists doubt the existence of a supernatural Creator and hold that we are responsible for ourselves and the world, and we are not to expect a supernatural power to intervene on our behalf or empower or comfort us in times of need.” Murry describes a rich UU faith appropriate to all the seasons of our lives, with or without God. He suggests the key to a vibrant Unitarian Universalism is that we embrace our Judeo-Christian roots while remaining open to new revelation through religious humanist wings. Kendyl Gibbons, Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis and a leading religious humanist, concurs, saying: “At the most basic level, believers of all kinds want the same things. We want to be good people, to live satisfying lives, and to escape as much pain as possible and postpone death for as long as possible. I want those things, don’t you?” We are a religiously diverse faith.

As Unitarian Universalists we covenant to encourage each other on our spiritual journeys. So what is spiritual for us? What deserves our ultimate trust and devotion? Theists and atheists often frame and contextualize their answers differently to such questions of meaning-making. A religiously diverse UU congregation cannot reliably encourage and assist its members on their individual spiritual journeys unless our conception of our spiritual journeys is broad enough to include theists, atheists, and those who just don’t know. This is why religious humanism is so important to our movement. A large portion of us sitting together on any given Sunday morning are religious humanists, whether or not our theology includes God. This year will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the merger of the Universalist Church of America with the American Unitarian Association to form the Unitarian Universalist Association. In the decade leading up to merger, two strong voices, one Universalist and one Unitarian, applied religious humanism within our faiths to try to envision a religious humanism worthy of our historic faiths. It is upon their shoulders that we now stand.

Kenneth Patton, a Universalist minister who brought Universalism back to Boston, served the Charles Street Meetinghouse as its minister from 1949 to 1980. Membership in the Universalist Church of America had peaked shortly after the American Civil War. In the 1930’s, religious humanist ministers were among the fastest growing segment of ministers for both Unitarians and Universalists. Beginning in 1946 a group of young Universalist ministers, calling themselves “The Humiliati,” sought to universalize Universalism. Their primary symbol was a circle representing all of reality, with an off-center cross, reminding people that while Universalism

had emerged from Christianity, it now represented a faith far broader than Christianity alone. Ken Patton was called to the Charles Street Meetinghouse to help build a religious humanist faith that included sacred texts and symbols from all the world's great religions. On accepting this charge, Patton said, "Granted that our roots were in the Judeo Christian tradition, but do we have to be stuck in the rut in which we originated?" And in his Berry Street lecture delivered at the 1965 General Assembly of the then-recently formed UUA, he went further, saying: "Religion is the one institution in society concerned with [our] plentitude of being in all its dimensions and in its totality. The outer reaches of the province of religion encompass the universe and its meaning for [humans]. In its human outreach, religion evaluates human history, taking in the whole life from birth to death and beyond death." After Ken Patton, no UU would argue that one can answer such questions only from the perspective of a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim or a Buddhist, but rather that UU's can employ our human reason, combined with these ancient religious traditions, to help us answer questions of meaning in our lives.

Religious humanism came early to Unitarian's in the form of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Transcendentalists. A few Unitarians were prominently involved in the Humanist Manifesto of the 1930's, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN in 1948. In the two generations immediately preceding and following merger, religious humanism became such a prominent part of what it meant to be Unitarian that for many UU's religious humanism and Unitarian Universalism became synonymous. Even today, when someone asks why we can't have more UU services like they experienced when they first came to this faith, I generally understand that to be a request for more openly religious humanist worship instead of honoring the ancient religious traditions. But whichever religious traditions we honor in our own spiritual journeys, we are all UU's. A major source for reconciling the different strands of our faith at the time of merger was Professor James Luther Adams, a Unitarian minister and ethicist who taught and wrote about the basis of all ethical religion. Adams thought that UU's could draw upon the best of our religious roots, even while strengthening our wings for justice. He said that Unitarian Universalist conclusions -- about economic opportunity, feeding the hungry, providing healthcare for all who needed it, abolishing capital punishment, and the woman's right to control her own body -- emerge naturally from our fundamental beliefs about the nature of being human, and our own orientation to the divine mysteries.

Adams articulated a set of guiding principles for our free faith that he summarized as "Five Smooth Stones of Religious Liberalism." He said, first, as a community we are always open to change, nothing is complete or final. Meaning has not been captured for all time but changes as we grow and respond to our environment. We are an emerging phenomenon, an expression of life on this planet earth. Hence nothing can be completed and unchanging, there is always more to be revealed. He said we need to understand our roots as we learn to shape our wings: Our movement is a radical expression of what came forth from the Judeo-Christian traditions. He argued that we cannot ignore, nor should we be ignorant of faiths that have come before or co-exist with us. He thought that our deep religious diversity made UU's uniquely suited to reconcile the Judeo-Christian traditions which surround us and from which so many of us have come forth. For we who are willing to realize that reality is change, that we each are a part of the process of emergence and unfolding of life on this planet, Adams felt there is no other approach so fully consistent with the reality we see around us. Our context is determined by all that preceded us and we have complete freedom in every moment! We are part of the unfolding

revelation of life on this earth, and as such, what we say amongst ourselves, and how we behave towards each other, truly matters at a very deep level. We are a microcosm of the macrocosm, each deeply interconnected with all that is.

Adam's second stone is that all relations between people ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not upon fixed creeds or coercion. Revelation is continuous and our search must be unconstrained. Our denomination has made this 'stone' so foundational to our movement that 5 of the 7 Principles approach it from different angles. These are: the inherent worth and dignity of every person; seeking justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; promoting a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and affirming the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Recently deceased UU minister and religious humanist Forrest Church, in his final book, *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*, affirms that: "Religious experience springs from two primary sources, awe and humility ... *God* is not God's name. *God* is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each. Call it what you will: spirit, ground of being, being itself; it remains what it always has, a *mysterium tremens et fascinans*, an awe-inspiring, mind-bending mystery."

Thirdly our faith affirms the obligation to direct one's effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community. As the ancient Hebrew prophet Micah expressed it: "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" A faith that is entirely inwardly focused cannot meet this requirement. We must live our faith through our actions in the world if it is to change the world. James Luther Adams said, "A faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring us to grief." For many of us action on behalf of social justice is the foundational stone upon which the rest of our faith is built. My wife, Loretta, and I became members of First Parish UU in Concord because of its strong commitment to social action. Social action remains at the core of our personal spiritual journeys. I believe that a faith without a strongly felt need to help address the injustices of this world often fails to be a vital faith. We participate in the world and our faith ought to encourage us in our manner of participation. This is why Rev. Martha and I devote so many sermons to social justice, it is not our entire faith to be sure, but it is very deeply embedded at the core of our faith. We are a community of practice and our practice is work for justice.

The fourth stone has to do with community. We can accomplish our transformative work in the world only by working together in community. Living our faith faithfully, in the midst of Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and other religious and secular communities, requires us to be at least comfortable with them. Nick Carter, the liberal Baptist President of Andover Newton Theological School, calls this "border crossing"—learning to live with and to prosper among those to whom you are a stranger in a strange land. Who we associate with, and how we associate, can help to determine how we will act and who we become as a people. By our coming together as a community of faith, with clear values and purposes, we help to transform ourselves into our best selves, and collectively we achieve that which we could never have achieved alone. This is the theological importance of our community as we pursue our own individual spiritual paths together. To do it in community is the essence of growing into our faith in the midst of a broader community, border crossing in order to welcome and be welcomed by every stranger in this strange land. We are pilgrims on a spiritual journey in community.

Which brings us to the fifth and final stone: We must pursue this faith with a spirit of optimism in the face of all the cruelty and ignorance and meanness that the world possesses. We know and acknowledge that this world contains much ugliness and evil, yet we refuse to let that fact dissuade us from the good. This concept is so very important to my personal sense of self that this stone should have my name written upon it. Optimism is for me the fuel that powers our productive engagement with the world. I cannot imagine anyone being entirely open to emergent revelation, or to allowing true freedom in religious pursuit, without being confident of the goodness of the universe. Despite the tragic nature of much that is going on in this world, and the utter depravity and cruelty of some humans to other humans, life is fundamentally good. We work year after year for social justice because we feel the world may become just a little bit better as a result of all of our efforts. But like the Christian Apostle Paul said, if we do all that, and do not do it out of a sense of deep and abiding love, it is for naught. Love redeems our actions in this world.

So let me end with words Forrest Church spoke to his NYC congregation the day after the September 11, 2001 attacks: “How precious life is and how fragile. We know this as we rarely have before, deep within our bones ... How profoundly we need one another, especially now, but more than just now. We are not human because we think. We are human because we care. All true meaning is shared meaning. The only thing that can never be taken away from us is the love we give away. So let me [say] simply... I love you. I love your tears and the depths from which they spring. I love how much you want to do something, anything, to make this all better.” So it is for our faith. We act because it is right to do so, and we believe that by so acting we make the world a more just and righteous place. I remain fundamentally optimistic about the goodness of this community, and hence the goodness that we can collectively do in this world. I have recently been asked for my help, so now I am actively working with the current Presidents of Meadville Lombard and Andover Newton to see if we can combine these two large institutions for teaching UU ministers, such that in the next generation we educate UU ministers with stronger roots and stronger wings, able to embrace this post-modern world equipped with a faith more than adequate to the need of our congregations. We are human beings actively involved in the great work of being human. That is enough. Granted, we all are limited, broken, deeply flawed human beings with feet of clay, but we also are a beautiful flowering forth of the goodness of life on this earth. We are a faith movement full of opportunities for growth and are able to offer people real meaning for their lives. We are blessed: with openness to continuous revelation, freedom of belief, commitment to social justice, a willingness to live in community, and an ultimate optimism about the goodness of humans and all of creation. Go forth then, blessed and assured, embrace your spiritual path however you may find it, I love you all dearly. Blessed Be and Amen.