

Sermon: A comment on Humanism

I cherish the Humanist tradition, so I was looking forward to reading an article in the March 2010 issue of Quest by Reverend Kendyl Gibbons, a leading UU Humanist Minister. The article was called “Practicing Humanism.”

I was only a short way into the article when I found myself becoming uncomfortable. Given my sympathy with humanist ideals I was surprised at my reaction. On reflection, I think that my problem was with the idea that you could practice any one of our six sources of UU faith in isolation.

For me it seems, Unitarian Universalism is a package and each of our six sources are important to our faith.

I wanted to formulate a response... and this is it. I hope that I will offend no one. My goal is not to criticize another's faith but to understand my own faith in the context of a dialogue.

I guess that I have a problem with labels in general. I don't like the way they limit our understanding and force us into predetermined boxes. But some people seem to like some labels. Reverend Gibbons for one seems happy with the label Humanist.

Reverend Gibbons lays out a clear dualistic choice. She says that we can either develop our faith by applying our faculty for observation, and reason, or we can seek insight directly from a higher authority, be that human or superhuman. Her premise is that Humanists have made the choice to take responsibility for what they know, based on observation and reason. For Reverend Gibbons we are either Humanists or we are something else. We either base our faith on observation and reason or we don't. It is that kind of forced dualistic choice that makes me uncomfortable.

I admit to a certain unease with the self assurance of some Humanists. Those who like Gibbons claim that all we need to know about our values can be determined from our human resources of observation and reason. I prefer to acknowledge that I just don't know some things and that I stand in awe of a creation that defies my full comprehension.

Humility is central to my personal faith. If you must have a label, I am a Humilitist. A Humanist then places humanity at the top of a system of values. A Humilitist acknowledges, at least the possibility of a higher power.

Reverend Gibbons writes that the Humanist view is that there is no moral authority or power in the universe greater than the human intellect. Human Perception, reason and the accumulation of human knowledge and aspiration will be sufficient to guide us in answering the essential questions of life.

For the humanist, values are a product of our biological and social evolution. We value love, for example, not because it is a transcendent principle but because it evolved as a useful emotion to ensure the nurturing of our children and the care for one another within our social groups.

Reverend Gibbons writes that the primary motivation of all people is to be good, to live satisfying lives, to escape as much pain as possible and to postpone death as long as possible.

For the Humanist we need only observe what values lead to these results in order to know what values should guide us in life.

There is irony in Reverend Gibbons assertion that grounding our faith in human knowledge, human reason and human experience is the best way to live satisfying lives and to escape as much pain as possible. Studies consistently conclude that people whose faith includes some concept of God are measurably happier and more contented than those without such a belief. If Humanists are to do what observations tell us will lead to happiness, then it would seem that they should cultivate a belief in a higher power.

Reverend Gibbons does say that she knows that she is grateful and accountable. This makes me want to ask: Grateful to whom... accountable to what? Can you be grateful without having an object of your gratitude? If your life and your experience is really the end result of a random series of chemical and biological reactions to whom or to what are you grateful?

It is just not enough for me to ascribe the source of love, compassion, truth and beauty to the evolutionary process.

I once read a short poem that I have been trying to find ever since. It described a tiny blue white planet in an infinite universe; a planet, tiny and utterly insignificant in the vastness of the universe. By some unlikely combination of factors, the spirit of love, compassion, truth, justice and beauty came to life on that tiny blue-white sphere and they flourished for a miniscule fraction of time in the vastness of eternity. Then the sun which gave life to that planet exhausted its fuel and it expanded and burned that planet to a lifeless cinder and love, compassion, truth and justice disappeared from the universe forever...

The concept the author of that poem was making us look at is the concept of transcendence. Are these values of love, compassion, truth and justice just a matter of chance, or are they built into the universe, an inevitable consequence of consciousness.

Let me be clear. I accept fully the scientific view of the birth of the universe and the process of biological evolution. I believe that there is always a scientific, non religious, non supernatural explanation for everything that happens in the universe. If that were not so, we could prove in a scientific way or at least in some statistical way that God exists.

But if we could prove God's existence in a scientific way then we would no longer have real free will. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer has written: "A God that could be proved scientifically would be an Idol." And I might add that we would be a slave to that idol.

Octavius Brooks Frothingham, a Unitarian minister in the 19th century got it right when he spoke of "The Hidden God of our experience." Frothingham wrote: "this Hidden God, this inaccessibility of God, is actually a positive spur to human nature. Such a conception of God strengthens because, while it kindles the imagination and exalts sentiment, it leaves will and endeavor free. Unburdened by the present God of Christian tradition, a person is thus able to do his or her own work, without interference from specters. The intruding God mars God's own best creation."

It is the fact that we can never prove the existence of a moral force in the universe that makes the decision to acknowledge one such a truly astounding creative act of human consciousness and free will.

I said that we can always find a scientific explanation for everything that happens in the universe. Well let me qualify that in a very important way. I just finished reading “The Grand Design” by Steven Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow. They assert that given the laws of quantum mechanics and relativity the creation of the universe was inevitable and requires no act of divine intervention. Yes... I said, given the laws of quantum mechanics and relativity... But why should there be laws of quantum mechanics and relativity. If the universe was created spontaneously by the laws of quantum mechanics, how were the laws of quantum mechanics created. It seems to me that we will never be able to explain why there is something rather than nothing. And that is truly the ultimate question of faith.

The beauty of Unitarian Universalism is that each of us is expected to have a faith that is unique to their experience of life. My faith is profoundly affected by my own unique experience of reality. In my experience the universe and life and the fact of self aware consciousness is infinitely awesome, mind boggling, and majestic beyond words and beyond a simple mechanistic explanation. Humanism by itself just does not address that experience of reality.

I refuse to take this beautiful creation and the experience of consciousness for granted. This created world is the most amazing theme park for the exploration and enjoyment of being conscious, and the exploration of meaning. I feel that this theme park is uniquely created to teach me something, if I will only listen.

I had an epiphany many years ago. I came to accept the importance of belief in a power greater than myself. If you believe that you are the most powerful thing in the universe then that can become a crippling burden to bear. I find great comfort in the phrase, Thy will not mine be done.

There are many wonderful aspects of Humanism that I incorporate into my own faith, but Humanism can never be the whole picture for me. The whole picture is hidden from me or is at best visible through a glass darkly. I believe we can only find our place in the universe if we acknowledge that some things are beyond our ability to observe and to measure. That, in the final analysis is the problem that I had with Reverend Kendyl Gibbons article on humanism. There was a little too much hubris, pride or arrogance in the human condition and not enough room for awe, wonder, mystery and humility.

My faith requires the fifth source humanism: 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; But it also requires the other five:

- 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.

We have a faith that is made rich by many facets of reality and the human consciousness. May we cherish each of these facets and be fully open to the unique gifts that each of them brings into our lives.

So may it be... Amen