

**THE SUM OF ALL REVERENCE**  
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It is commonly held that ministers really only have one sermon in them and that each Sunday we're just trying to get at it from a new angle. Mine goes something like this, we are, each of us, precious, profoundly good, worthy, loveable and loved. Our human journey is to realize that goodness and the love infusing our lives, to be transformed and healed by that goodness and love. Carrying that knowledge deep within us, we can transform ourselves, all beings and the earth.

OK, so we can all go home now.

But wait... there are subsets of sermons, and this one comes under the category reclaiming religious language. As a faith tradition working to be free of creed and dogma, we put aside much about traditional religion. Yet as we stand in deliberate contrast to fundamentalisms of any stripe, we can cede too much ground. Because we don't agree with conservative interpretation of concepts like salvation, atonement, surrender, we are too quick to give them away altogether. We are above superstition and religious mumbo jumbo. Such words are icky, even harmful. We're better off without them.

Yet we lose much in a helter-skelter, reactive rush to distance ourselves from a narrow and even punishing religion.

Concepts like salvation, sin, surrender exist because they speak to the human condition, to the universal nature of the human spirit and psyche. We miss out on their transformative power when we reject them out of hand. These *can* be words of healing and transformation – the very kind that of healing that is the ultimate goal of my single sermon in many guises.

So I will always urge you to re-consider, re-interpret, re-embrace religious language.

Today I'm suggesting that we reclaim another religious word – humanism. Wait, you ask, is humanism religious? And if so, don't I already embrace that? I suggest that humanism is indeed religious, and it has been hijacked by another kind of fundamentalism. There are those who have made it synonymous with an almost militant secular atheism. Here again, we lose something when we forget the wide and long river of humanist thought throughout history and our faith tradition.

Our religious forebears in Europe were Renaissance humanists who promoted human worth and dignity, the full realization of human capacity. Even as they thought the fullness of

human expression glorified God, their concern lay in human experience.

Walt Whitman, the great American mystical-transcendental poet, was a wild-eyed humanist. He found the sum of all known reverence in humanity. Yes, bibles and religions might be divine, but they are so because they are human expressions.

“I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still.  
It is not they who give the life – it is you who give the life.”

Whitman didn't mean this in a post-modern, reductionistic sense that religion and God are merely creations of the human mind. Whitman believed in a God that he saw in every human being he ever met. He seems to be saying, look at this amazing world we live in. Look at these amazing bodies. Look at all we are capable of. This is holy, “the sum of all known reverence.”

Whitman was intoxicated with the holiness and sacredness everything. “The sun and stars that float in the open air; the apple-shaped earth and we upon it.” His eye did not flinch from poverty, degradation, and suffering, he simply saw the humanity and worth of each person whatever their condition. And he loved us all. He wrote remarkably erotic poems about a very physical love of men. He wrote plenty of erotic love poems about women as well. He was likely bi-sexual, but I actually like to call him omni-sexual. He saw divinity, worth, dignity in every human being and he fell in love with all. Randy guy that he was, he wrote of this love in erotic imagery.

His are like the love poems to God of other mystical poets like Rumi and Hafiz. He wrote grand hymns to humanity, to the broadest, best, deepest, purest, realest, truest in us all.

This is the kind of humanism that has been part of our faith tradition from the beginning. So it is not surprising that Unitarian ministers were so influential in the rise of modern humanism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Of the 34 signers of the Humanist Manifesto in 1933, about half were Unitarians. The preamble of that document begins:

“The time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world. The time is past for mere revision of traditional attitudes. Science and economic change have disrupted the old beliefs. Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with new conditions created by a vastly increased knowledge and experience. In every field of human activity, the vital movement is now in the direction of a candid and explicit humanism.”

The word religion itself is identified with “doctrines and methods that have lost their significance and ... are powerless to solve the problem of human living in the Twentieth Century. Religions have always been means for realizing the highest values of life.” Though forms of religion vary and change, “religion itself remains constant in its quest for abiding values....”

So now, our “larger understanding of the universe,... scientific achievements and deeper appreciation of brotherhood, have created a situation which requires a new statement of the means and purpose of religion.”

The Manifesto lists 15 affirmations of humanism, among them that they, “regard the universe as self-existing and not created.” That “Humans are part of nature”; that there are no “supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values.”

Religion consists of “those actions, purposes and experiences which are humanly significant,” and its goal is the “realization of human personality,” not at some millennial moment but “in the here and now.”

Finally they asserted that “humanism will affirm life rather than deny it, seek to elicit the possibilities of life, not flee from it, and endeavor to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely for the few.”

The Humanist Manifesto was a profoundly *religious* document. Though they found no need for a deity who had supernatural powers to judge and alter human lives, they were not willing to cede the religious ground.

As Unitarian minister Rev. John Dietrich, early humanist and signatory of the Manifesto wrote in his 1927 sermon *Unitarianism and Humanism*, “By religion, I mean the knowledge of and duties toward humankind.” His humanism did not deny God; rather it put “faith in humanity, a knowledge of humankind and our duties toward one another first...”

Another Unitarian minister and signer of the Manifesto, Rev. Curtis Reese, addressed the Harvard Divinity School in 1920. “Humanistic liberalism understands spirituality to be man at his best, sane in mind, healthy in body, dynamic in personality; honestly facing the hardest facts, conquering and not fleeing from his gravest troubles; committed to the most worthwhile causes.... To know one’s self as inherently worthwhile. To find fullest expression in the widest human service and consciously to become a co-worker with cosmic process, is spiritual experience deep and abiding.”

Eighty years ago, this view of religion was like a breath of fresh air through our faith. Though

it was not immediately adopted by Unitarians everywhere, and in truth never fully has been, it brought freshness and life to a faith stuck in the past.

It is refreshing even today, especially in the face of so many absolutist fundamentalisms.

What matters is here and now, this life. We are not here to earn reward in an afterlife. We are here to live our fullest human potential and to help others do the same.

Yet somewhere the term humanism became synonymous with a secular atheism, which too often gave rise to a new rigid dogma and the sense that religion itself is dangerous and harmful. Often in our congregations it became synonymous with people who never wanted to hear the word God.

The Humanist Manifesto deliberately speaks of *religious* humanism. In it humanism is a religious endeavor, which can lead to “deep and abiding” *spiritual* experiences. The signers were certainly agnostic and many were likely fully atheists, but that particular issue was of lesser concern. They cared about human living, human life.

Depending on your definition of God, I am either an atheist, an agnostic or a believer. Far more central to my theology is this kind of profound religious humanism.

I am incredibly grateful to be alive on this “apple-shaped earth.” To live here and now in fullness, to live up to my capacities, to help others do the same. Honestly facing the hardest facts in myself and in the world, affirming, not denying, seeking possibility not fleeing from it, supporting the rights and dignity of all people, not merely of the few. To know that I have come “out of the stars” is magic and mystery enough.

That makes me a humanist before I am anything else.

Now one real criticism of this 20<sup>th</sup>-century humanism is that it puts too much stock in the capacity of humans for good, all but ignoring our twin capacity to do great harm, which succeeding years of that century and this laid bare. We modern religious liberals are uncomfortable with the concepts of sin or evil in ourselves and in the world. Even as we are born whole and good, we have a capacity to do great evil.

Nevertheless, I believe we must start with the inherent worth and dignity of every person and recognize the depth of our interdependence. This is what I learn from humanism which must for me the starting point. Your human life matters – who you are and what you do. Here. Now. In this life. So go forth and develop your great gifts that you might serve the world.

Ultimately all this leads to gratitude. Gratitude is, I think, Whitman's sermon. To be alive in a body is a gift almost beyond believing with all its "unspeakable joys and sorrows." Yes, sometimes it is harrowing, but there is also, ever and always, beauty, love, possibility and hope.

I sometimes use angel cards in my spiritual practice. They are silly and sweet little cards with words of inspiration or challenge – play, creativity, honesty, surrender – accompanied by delightful drawings of angels. The gratitude card depicts an angel on her knees, arms and wings outspread, head thrown back before a setting sun. At my best, that is how I feel about being alive – an awestruck, open-hearted, reverent gratitude for all that is. I have come out of the stars such as our bright, life-giving sun.

Now, I do not believe in actual angels at work in the world any more than I believe in a Supreme Being who hears and answers prayers. But I do believe there are "angelic" forces alive in the world, perhaps because I am confronted daily with the human angels all about me.

The sum of all known reverence I add up in you,  
whoever you are;  
The wonder everyone sees in everyone else they see,  
and the wonders that fill each minute of time forever;  
Will you seek afar off?  
You surely come back at last ...  
finding ... happiness, knowledge, not in another place –  
not for another hour, but this hour.

May It Be So