

Humanist Spirituality

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, Sep. 5, 2004
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

We have come together this morning to talk about, sing about, think about, the human condition. Of course, we come together every week to talk about, sing about, and think about our human condition, but today - we do so more explicitly, because our subject this morning is "humanist spirituality."

We've all heard the right-wing demagogues rail against what they call "secular humanism" - but secular humanism is decidedly not what I'm talking about today. Quite the opposite. I'm talking about something that is known as "religious humanism." It is a very different animal, a religious tradition, in and of itself, a spiritual path that requires just as much discipline as any other - for it is grounded in a response to the most basic experiences and expressions of the human condition.

Vincent Van Gogh put it succinctly in the quote I printed at the top of today's order of service: "I have a terrible need - shall I say the word - of religion. And then I go out at night, and paint the stars." That was Van Gogh's spiritual response to our shared human reality - and our lives have been enriched, by it.

This past Sunday we heard from Connie Barlow, about her religious response - a wonderful (and wonder-filled, I might add) example of the delicate balancing act that is required of a truly "humanist spirituality." On the resource table that Connie laid out for us to peruse last weekend, I spotted one book that particularly called to me. It was titled "The Sacred Depths of Nature," by molecular biologist Ursula Goodenough. I had enjoyed some of Ursula's other writing - I prefer to call her Ursula, since her last name's so difficult (is it "Good-e-now" or "Good-enough"?).

Anyway, I picked up the book, and quickly found the following passage, in which Ursula writes of an early experience she had that I think beautifully summarizes the human predicament:

One night, in her college years, after a particularly challenging science class in which she had become viscerally aware of just how miniscule is our tiny planet in the scope of the cosmos - a speck of dust in a remote corner of one galaxy amid a hundred-billion galaxies and all that - one night, Ursula was camping in the mountains of Colorado, looking up at the stars, when suddenly she felt overcome with despair. "The night sky had been ruined," she writes. "I would never be able to look at it again. I wept into my pillow ... A bleak emptiness overtook me. And so, [for a while,] I did my best not to think about such things [as the size and scope of the universe]."

But Ursula had the personal and intellectual integrity not to simply turn away in denial. She continued her studies, while at the same time journeying into the heart of darkness, and beginning a much deeper, spiritual work, that would consume her ever since.

"Since then," she says, "I have found a way to defeat the nihilism that lurks just behind our [human] comprehension of the infinite and the infinitesimal. I have come to understand that ... I don't have to seek a point in [it all]. Instead, I can see [what I am studying] as a locus of Mystery."

She uses a capital "M" when writing "Mystery" - and continues to elaborate: "The Mystery of why there is anything at all, rather than nothing. The Mystery of where the laws of physics came from. The Mystery of why the Universe is as it is."

Ursula's journey is the journey of humanism - religious humanism - a humanism that experiences a spirituality amid Mystery - Mystery with a capital "M."

Within our own tradition, many of our congregational and denominational leaders, for almost a century now, have espoused various versions of religious humanism. William Schulz, a former President of the UUA - now Executive Director of Amnesty International, who will be our guest preacher at Cincinnati UU "Celebration 2004" next month - was himself the youngest

signer of the Second Humanist Manifesto, and received the "Humanist of the Year" award back in 2000.

His religious path parallels that of Ursula. After experiencing an early, college-age disillusionment brought on by the tragic deaths of his mother, and two other family members in the span of less than a year, Schulz began the difficult work of fashioning a faith for himself - one that would remain true to his scientific and rational worldview.

Schulz's personal faith - a moving embodiment of what I am calling humanist spirituality - is perhaps best summed up in this passage:

"Occasionally, the splendor of the world," he says, "intrudes itself into my life in such a way that I cannot help but notice. Occasionally the glory of the stars explodes before me so that I cannot turn away."

Far from turning away, Schulz has engaged this world, this troubled existence, such that, through his work with Amnesty International, he was, just last year, named one of the 365 most influential people in the world. "Humanism," he writes, "beckons us to believe we can make a difference, to history. It is the source of my own passion for social justice."

"Where would we who cherish the natural world be," he asks, "without religious humanism's insistence that the world is a seamless garment, and that we humans are part of the weaving? When our UU principles revere the 'interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part,' they harken back to the fundamental humanist point - the second point of the Manifesto - that human beings are 'part of nature' and 'have emerged as a result of a continuous process.' "

Yet despite its influence on our Seven Principles, on our religious work for social justice, and even our Sunday morning liturgy - humanism has, for at least three generations, been the source of considerable conflict among Unitarian Universalists. The reason, I contend, is that we have allowed it to become not a philosophy, not a spiritual path, not an expression of personal integrity - but a label. Far too commonly, we UU's have - like many of our national political leaders - let ourselves fall into the trap of labeling one another, of either/or thinking. But we should know better; life is not black and white - it is gray.

The internal bickering I refer to, of course, is the old UU battle between what has been labeled "humanism," and what has lately come to be known as "spirituality" (once called "theism" - a parallel construction, at least in its "ism," to "humanism," but much more restrictive in its application).

The humanist / spiritualist dichotomy, I hope you will agree, is a false dichotomy - both historically, and today. So, too, the perceived dichotomy between "Unitarian" and "Universalist" - denominational and theological terms that, quite conveniently, but also erroneously, have sometimes been conflated into "humanist" and "spiritual," respectively.

Yet as we know - from our science, from practices such as yoga, from our own life experience - balance and equilibrium are natural states which all of creation seeks to maintain. To tip too far toward either end of the spectrum, either version of perceived reality, is dangerous - for the individual, for society, and for our congregations.

The good news is - and I want to make this, as they say, "perfectly clear" - we are not "Unitarians" or "Universalists," but rather Unitarian Universalists. Here at Heritage, we have it even better, because we are Unitarian Universalists, attending a Universalist Unitarian church. Talk about balance!

But back to my subject for today: that somewhat less sectarian balancing act known as "humanist spirituality." Let's hear for a moment the words of Sarah Oelberg, who writes in a pamphlet called "The Faith of a Humanist":

"We are all connected to the world, the cosmos, and everything therein. Humanism teaches that our well-being, and our very existence, depends upon the web of life, in ways we are only beginning to understand - that our place in nature is to be in harmony with it. Humanism leads me to find a sense of wider relatedness with all the world and its peoples, and it calls me to work for a sound environment and a humane society."

These words echo those of Bill Schulz, but Oelberg goes further. "As I grow older," she writes, "I appreciate more and more the need for a spiritual life. I find my spirituality mostly in using my intelligence and creativity - (remember Van Gogh?) - I find my spirituality in using my creativity to try to build an enduring peace and beauty in my life... There is a unique spark of divinity in each of us, by virtue of our human endowment; we need only

try to find it... My humanism helps me to see, that to be honest with myself, to face life openly, and to be loyal to high ideals, is to be spiritual."

Author Dan Wakefield - if you know him, did you know, too, that he was a Unitarian Universalist? - author Dan Wakefield distinguishes between the terms "religion" and "spirituality" thusly: "I think of religion," he says, "as the particular creed I believe in - [one among many] - the lens through which I relate to existence. I think of spirituality as including all religions - [as] a name ... for the whole thrust and impulse of humanity to see beyond its immediate concerns, and to act beyond ego - to take part in the painful and glorious process of creation."

Or as William Ellery Channing, to dip a bit further back in our tradition, put it in the 19th century, "I call that mind free which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit - and in them finds help to its own spiritual enlargement."

That's just what Ursula did, in her study of the stars. She found there "radiant signatures" of what she calls Mystery with a capital "M" - radiant signatures that brought her, in her own words, both to "reverence" and to the development of a "credo." Now we may not be accustomed to humanist espousing a credo - or perhaps, here at Heritage, we are - my buddy Bob Lamb will be doing something akin to that when he offers the reflection here later this month - but for today, let's hear from Ursula:

Here is how "I profess my faith," she says. "For me, the existence of all this complexity and awareness and intent and beauty - and my ability to apprehend it - serves as the ultimate meaning, and the ultimate value. The continuation of Life reaches around, grabs its own tail, and forms a sacred circle...

"I confess a credo of [continuation] - of human continuation. We may be the only questioners in the universe, the only ones who have come to understand the astonishing dynamics of cosmic evolution... We are, whether we like it or not, the dominant species - and thus, the stewards - of this planet. If we can revere how things are, and can find a way to express our gratitude for our existence, then we should be able to figure out, with a great deal of work and good will, how to share the Earth with one another, and with its creatures - how to restore and preserve elegance and grace, and how to commit ourselves to love and joy and laughter.

"It all comes back, in the end, to my father's favorite metaphor: 'Life is like a coral reef. We each leave behind the best deposit, the strongest deposit we can - so the reef can grow. But what's important, [in the end,] is the reef.' "

Let ours be a religion that cherishes the reef - the literal reef, the metaphorical reef.

Let ours be a religion that cherishes life - a truly humanist spirituality.