

Humanism Today
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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This morning, I begin with a guessing game. I will quote the humanist wisdom of a historical person, and I will ask you to guess who said the words. Among other humanist words of wisdom, this person said the following:

“Each day I examine myself on three counts: have I been loyal to those on behalf of whom I act? Was I trustworthy in my dealings with my friends? Have I myself practiced what I have preached?”

“Do not be concerned about others not appreciating you. Be concerned about your not appreciating others.”

“Only the wisest and the dumbest never change.”

“To make a mistake and not to correct it is indeed a mistake.”

“Clever talk and a neat appearance are seldom signs of benevolence.”

“What I do not wish upon myself, I do not do to others.”¹

Any guesses as to who said those words? [Pause to hear guesses.] In fact, those humanist sayings are by Kung Fu Tzu, who was born in China in 551 BCE. In the mid-17th century, Jesuit missionaries Latinized his name to “Confucius.”

I recently completed an eight-week online course on humanism offered by the Church of the Larger Fellowship of the Unitarian Universalist Association. We learned about humanism as a social agenda, humanism as a spiritual practice, and humanism as a global movement. For me, the greatest surprise was learning that today’s humanism is not solely an invention of the Western Enlightenment. I guess my Euro-centric slip was showing.

The Western Enlightenment is but one strand in the fabric of global humanism. Over the past 20 years or so, neo-Confucianism is developing as a humanist movement in Asia. “Led by Tu Wei-

¹ These are famous sayings of Confucius according to *World Religions: Origins, History, Practices, Beliefs, Worldview* edited by Franjo Terhart and Janina Schulze, published by Parragon, [date unknown] New York, p. 265.

ming, Confucian scholars explored the relationship between Confucian humanism and the East Asian entrepreneurial spirit and argued that Confucianism provided an alternative view of Enlightenment rationalism and modern Western liberalism.”

“[Confucianism’s] main concern is to find the human *dao*, that is, the path a person’s life should take, and this *dao* is through the cultivation of *ren*, the virtuous disposition based on humanity. Indeed, the Confucian view that *ren* is what makes a human being a true human being is similar to Aristotle’s definition of human virtue (*areté*) as the excellent performance of human function as a rational animal, although Confucians emphasize not only rationality but also emotion and human relationality.”² No single culture has a monopoly on humanist “virtue ethics.” No single culture has a monopoly on “salvation by character.”

Global humanism may indeed mean adoption of such values as the primacy of reason, rejection of the afterlife as a motivation, human wellbeing as a defining characteristic of the Good, cosmopolitanism, and the equality of all people around the globe.³ However, those humanist values must be rooted in the particularities of each culture, each culture’s history and aspirations, or the values are likely to be rejected as implements of imperialism. Unitarian Universalists can look for ways to support indigenous humanisms. The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and the International Office of the Unitarian Universalist Association can guide us.

The institutional forms of humanism are many, and the vast majority are outside the Unitarian Universalist Association – The Humanist Center, the American Humanist Association, the Center for Inquiry, the American Ethical Union, the Council for Secular Humanism, the Institute for Humanist Studies, the Humanist Institute, and the Society for Humanistic Judaism, just to name a few. In today’s “global village,” it is not enough to limit our humanist focus on developments in this country or even on humanist developments in the West. We are called to global cultural literacy, not to American or European chauvinism.

² See <http://science.jrank.org/pages/9683/Humanism-Chinese-Conception-Contemporary-Revival-Confucianism.html#ixzz00AvZ1EP9>.

³ The summary of the Humanist complex of ideas is by Doug Muder in “Humanist Spirituality,” p. 8. See http://www.gurus.org/dougdeb/Essays/humanist_spirituality.pdf.

Besides being a global movement, humanism today is also a social agenda. As a social agenda, humanism has been concerned with issues related to population growth, sexuality, church and state separation, education, science, and ecology. Humanism's focus is on the wellbeing of people in *this* world, today and in the years to come. Humanism as a social agenda emphasizes freedom of choice along with informed consent. Humanism as a social agenda does not prioritize the rights and responsibilities of men over the rights and responsibilities of women.

Humanism as a social agenda is not about prioritizing science over the humanities. Humanism is expansive, ushering in one breath of fresh air after another over 2500 years -- from the Greek philosophers to the Renaissance men and women to the New England Transcendentalists of the 1830's and 1840's on these shores, to the great 19th century American humanist orator Robert Ingersoll to humanist psychologists, theologians, philosophers, artists, scientists, educators in the 20th century and today. Humanism has expanded our options, sharpened our reasoning, and improved our quality of life.

Besides being a global movement and a social agenda, humanism is arguably a spiritual path. Humanists, however, do not agree amongst themselves about whether or not humanism is a religion and offers a spiritual practice. Secular humanists say "no." Religious humanists say "yes." The remaining folks are divided.

I believe humanism is religious and offers unique spiritual resources in the context of our Unitarian Universalist movement. So does Doug Muder. In an address to the Humanist Association of Massachusetts, Doug Muder phrased the issue this way: "Humanist Spirituality: Oxymoron or Authentic Path to Enlightenment?" He asked, what if we had an authentically Humanist spiritual vocabulary that didn't have to be borrowed or transplanted or reinterpreted?

Doug Muder looked to the birthplace of Western humanism – classical Greece, where the schools Cynics, Epicureans, Sceptics, and Stoics elaborated what it meant for a human being to live a good life. He found in Stoicism, stripped of stereotypes, to be an authentic humanist spirituality. "[Stoicism] serves both liberation and connection. It is consistent with the political and cultural ideals of Humanism (many of which it invented). And its goals and practices can be

understood without reference to any theological or metaphysical speculations.”⁴ The spiritual practice of Stoicism is self-examination. The Stoic watches his or her thoughts or feelings, evaluating whether the thoughts or feelings are helpful. “The Stoic masters his mind by thousands of small corrections.”

Embracing Stoicism as a humanist spiritual path does have a down side, Doug Muder acknowledged. “If you ask me for the phone number of a Stoic teacher or meditation group, I don’t know one . . . For now, you still have to learn techniques and get community support from Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, or some other non-Western or non-Humanist group. But with that Stoic foundation, you aren’t learning to be a Buddhist, you’re a Humanist learning some techniques from a Buddhist. There is no division between your reason and your spirituality, or between your outer life and your inner life. You can learn one trick here and another there without feeling lost or fragmented, because your Humanism makes room for your spiritual practice.”

There is something to be said for Stoicism as a Humanist spiritual practice. If we can tame our thoughts, we can tame our feelings. If we can tame our feelings, we can respond instead of react in the face of life’s challenges. Stoicism as a spiritual practice reminds me of the thousands of small corrections of cognitive behavior therapy. Given brain chemistry within normal limits, baseline psychological health, personal coaching, social support, and sufficient motivation, both Stoicism and cognitive behavioral therapy can help us craft a satisfying and “prosocial” life.

While neither Stoicism nor cognitive behavioral therapy works for everyone, Doug Muder is onto something when he says that humanism makes room for spiritual practice. As you may know, I am a big fan of the six Sources of Unitarian Universalism: 1) direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder, 2) words and deeds of prophetic women and men (that is, social justice advocates), 3) wisdom from the world’s religions, 4) Jewish and Christian teachings, in particular, 5) humanist teachings, and 6) spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions. Unitarian Universalism is unique among religions by its embrace of all six Sources.

⁴ See http://www.gurus.org/dougdeb/Essays/humanist_spirituality.pdf, p. 10.

I believe that humanism occupies a privileged place among the Sources because of humanism's power to critique itself, as well as to critique the other Sources. Humanism contains valuable correctives to the human propensity toward self delusion and the outward expression of self delusion, which is oppression of others. Humanism as a movement is self reflective and self correcting to a greater degree than the other Sources.

Direct experience of mystery and wonder cannot persuasively critique itself, but humanism can critique such experience. Prophetic women and men can critique their own words from a humanist stance but not persuasively from outside a humanistic stance. The world's religions can critique themselves from the vantage point of greater and greater humanism, but they end up chasing their tails without reflecting from that vantage point. Interpretation of Jewish and Christian teachings can become more sophisticated and more relevant the more humanist they are. Without a humanist grounding, the teachings are at times incoherent. Earth-centered traditions, while aware of limitations of human thoughts and habits, nonetheless benefit from humanist critiques.

I identify as a mystic and a humanist. I look to my humanism to critique my mysticism. I do not look to my mysticism to critique my humanism. Humanism is self correcting because it depends upon a learning community engaged in "peer review," so to speak. Despite the efforts of groups such as Unitarian Universalist Mystics in Community and the Integral Life Institute, resources are not yet in place for mystics to effectively critique other mystics.

Humanism is also self-correcting because we are not finished learning to be human yet, individually or collectively. Humanism of the mid 20th century was at times arrogant and cold, scant comfort in difficult times. Today's humanism is warmer, more emotionally intelligent, less arrogant. It offers the spiritual resources of the arts, introspection, poetry, a focus upon the quality of life here today not and not upon the quality of life later and somewhere else. Humanism continues to encourage to facing "what is" instead of becoming lost in how one wants things to be. It encourages critical thinking and values precious human relationships.

Humanism is not in competition with the other five Sources of the living Unitarian Universalist tradition. Humanism's influence on them is what keeps each of them relevant, engaging, progressive, alive. Unitarian Universalist humanists need not be concerned that theism is gaining ground within the movement. Defensiveness makes no sense. Instead, humanists can critique other spiritual expressions and encourage healthy expressions of them from a position of strength, specifically from the position of mentor.

What might it look like for humanism to mentor the other five Sources of Unitarian Universalist wisdom? Take, for example, religious traditions based on Scripture – any tradition based on any Scripture. Rather than ridiculing Scripture-based religious traditions, humanists can support humanistic interpretation of Scripture. We might take as an exemplar retired Unitarian Universalist minister Peter Tufts Richardson, who notes, “When our inheritance in all branches of human religious culture is appreciated we must find room to hold and absorb into our living an appreciation of shared human kinship. All insights, all wisdom, the presence of all spiritual heroes, saviors, sages, teachers and exemplars, all the gods/goddesses, have a human face.”⁵

I conclude with an excerpt from Peter Richardson's meditation entitled “Scriptures” from *Sunday Meditations for Liberal Religious Worship*:

“There are myriad verses of scripture in the world.

Our human culture is deep.

There are hundreds of thousands of rhymes and reasons

to discover, to take to heart, to live by . . .

Scripture is as true, as humane, as strong for us

as the depth of heart and soul is for us.

There are a million verses there for us

from six continents.

There is beauty there

⁵ *Sunday Meditations for Liberal Religious Worship*, Peter Tufts Richardson, Red Barn Publishing, Rockland, Maine, 2009, page 7. See www.redbamrockland.com.

to inspire love in our hearts.

There is also fear and terror there

to inflame those who have lost generosity of heart.

Scripture gives us the rattle of death

and the embrace of love.

Every child has this inheritance

to fuel the emptiness

or to open the fullness . . . ”⁶

In our free and responsible search for truth and meaning, may we open to the fullness of our humanity. In the painstaking work for racial equity and social justice, may we open to the fullness of our humanity. May we critique ourselves first and critique everything from an ever more expansive humanism. May it be so!

⁶*Sunday Meditations for Liberal Religious Worship*, Peter Tufts Richardson, Red Barn Publishing, Rockland, Maine, 2009, page 70. See www.redbarnrockland.com.