

Evolutionary Humanism

By Ellen Campbell

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In the nearly fifty years since I became a Unitarian, I have attended more meetings than I can count in which the first step was to introduce ourselves and describe how we came to this religious community. Often people told stories about beginning to question their "birth religion" when they were perhaps 12 or 14 years old. They might have challenged the priest or Sunday school teacher, or simply within themselves rejected what they were being taught. And that was the beginning of a journey, sometimes with many stops along the way, that brought them to Unitarianism.

That was not my story. I grew up in a Presbyterian home. My parents were pillars—first of the large, downtown church we attended until I was about twelve, then of the small neighbourhood church a few blocks from our home. My sisters and I went happily to Sunday School and later the youth group, while my parents were involved in every aspect of congregational life. The theology we were taught was relatively liberal—my mother had been very put off by "born-again" evangelists in her youth. More problematic, perhaps, were the behavioural strictures—no drinking or smoking, of course, but also no dancing or movies on Sunday. (Quite OK on other days, though.) The strongest swear words my teacher father uttered (at least within our hearing) were "fuzz" and "sugar." We were nice, respectable middle-class people.

After high school I headed off to a Presbyterian liberal arts college, where I was active in the Student Christian Movement. One of the other SCM participants came from a somewhat similar background. His family was Congregationalist. In fact his grandfather was a Congregationalist minister—part of the Social Gospel movement, and a very liberal Christian. Doug had been encouraged to question, even as a child, and by the time he hit college had pretty well rejected even the very liberal Christian theology he'd been taught. So part of our dating time was devoted to probing discussions about theological questions—to which I had no satisfactory answers. By the time he went off to graduate school he had decided he was a humanist Unitarian, and I had come pretty close to the same position. When I joined him two years later, we began attending the Unitarian Church in Urbana, Illinois.

From the late fifties until at least the 70s, humanism was the orthodoxy of most Unitarian churches, including this one. Corliss Lamont, a Marxist philosopher, wrote what was probably the definitive text, The Philosophy of Humanism, which is still available in its 8th edition. In it, he set out the ten central propositions in the Humanist philosophy. They include the following:

- Humanism believes in a naturalistic metaphysics or attitude toward the universe that considers all forms of the supernatural as myth; and that regards Nature as the totality of being and as a constantly changing system of matter and energy which exists independently of any mind or consciousness.
- Humanism, drawing especially upon the laws and facts of science, believes that man is an evolutionary product of this great Nature of which he is part; that his mind is indivisibly conjoined with the functioning of his brain,; and that as an inseparable unity of body and personality he can have no conscious survival after death.
- Humanism, having its ultimate faith in man, believes that human beings possess the power or potentiality of solving their own problems, through reliance primarily upon reason and scientific method applied with courage and vision.
- Humanism believes . . . that human beings, while conditioned by the past, possess genuine freedom of creative choice and action, and are, within certain objective limits, the masters of their own destiny.
- Humanism believes in an ethics or morality that grounds all human values in this-earthly experiences and relationships; and that holds as its highest goal the this-worldly happiness, freedom and progress—economic, cultural and ethical—of all mankind, irrespective of nation, race or religion.

Although I hadn't questioned the religious ideas I'd been taught as a young person, it was exhilarating now to be part of a community in which the life of the mind was paramount. It was also a community in which social action was part of the religious life. This was early in the civil rights movement, and the three Unitarian congregations that were part of our early married life were all engaged, in one way or another, with that movement. I was proud to be part of a religion that wasn't limited by mythology, and was engaged in the important struggles of our time. The words "God," "sin," "salvation," and "prayer" dropped from my vocabulary and were replaced by "conscience," "freedom," "reason," and "tolerance."

One of my favourite Unitarian hymns was the one we sang just a few minutes ago. The tune was familiar—"A Mighty Fortress is our God" was a staple of the Presbyterian hymnbook—and Martin Luther and J.S. Bach were a wonderful musical team. But in the 1960's we didn't

sing the words we do today. Let me read you the words of the hymn as it appears in the 1964 Unitarian Universalist hymnbook:

Man is the earth upright and proud:
In him the earth is knowing.
Its winds are music in his mouth,
In him its rivers flowing.
The sun is man's hearthfire;
Warm with the earth's desire,
And with its purpose strong,
He sings earth's pilgrim song;
In man the earth is growing.
Come lift your voices, fill the skies
With your exultant singing.
Now dedicate your minds and hearts,
Beauty and order bringing.
Your labour is your strength;
Your love will win at length;
Your minds will form a plan
To draw man unto man.
His day is just beginning.

That hymnal was published almost simultaneously with Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique, and it would be a decade or more before women began to demand that the words of hymns and other religious material reflect the whole of humanity. But the other change in the words is the one I want to emphasise today. All of the pronouns in the old version were in the second person—you, your. The pronouns in the new version have been changed to first person plural—we, our. For me, that's symbolic of one of the cracks I began to perceive in the practice of humanism I found in the 1960s.

Unitarian churches in the sixties and seventies—and even later—weren't always particularly cordial places. Most of us were recent converts, and we felt, as converts often do, that we had discovered the Truth. We were convinced that our truth—and that was the truth that each of us individually had come to—was in fact the "real" Unitarianism, and, indeed, the only rational position that anyone could possibly take. So our commitment to "freedom, reason and tolerance" honoured tolerance only in the breach. Our impassioned individualism made for often prickly religious communities.

We certainly weren't tolerant of the faiths we had left, and most of us were ex-Christians. One thing I had to come to terms with was my Christian background. Even though my "conversion" hadn't been precipitous or even self-induced, I felt that I was now "enlightened," and had left behind the "narrow thought and lifeless creed" that we sang about in another popular Unitarian hymn. But it was at a World Council of the YWCA in 1986 where I began re-thinking my response to Christianity. One of the delegates was from Namibia, still a part of South Africa at the time. She was called home partway through the meeting when her husband was arrested for union activities. There was a service, led by the women of Southern Africa, to see her off. I was deeply moved, as were all of us at the meeting, at the courage and the optimism that these women displayed. It was clear that their faith sustained these women through dark times that I could barely imagine. I did not share their beliefs, but I could no longer dismiss their faith as a "lifeless creed." Later experiences with Unitarians in other parts of the world and with people of other faiths didn't change my core humanist beliefs. Indeed, they often helped me clarify them. But they enriched my appreciation for the variety of ways in which people express their deepest values.

The humanism I discovered in the sixties was intensely human centred. "We are the earth upright and proud, in us the earth is growing." We were confident that our science would unlock the secrets of the universe and our technology would make individual life better. While we didn't say, with the Psalmist, "Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands," many of us did, I think, believe that humans were the highest order of creation, and were in control of the world. That "species-centred" view seems much less tenable now. Our seventh principle, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part," reflects this. The challenge to my "old humanism," for me, is in the last six words, "of which we are a part." Not "of which we are observers" or "students," but of which we are a part. And this is another of the ways in which my humanism changed. I believe we will—and should—go on learning about the world around us and the universe in which it exists. But I don't believe that we will ever fully understand the mysteries of the universe or of the world or of our own minds because we cannot stand apart from them.

Most of us weren't tolerant of religious practice that went much beyond "hymn-sermon-hymn" sandwiches, with a generous serving of classical music. "Social Action services" were often little more than panel discussions or lectures, with a hymn and some piano music

thrown in for good measure. As I grew older, and my life grew more complicated, I found that the parts of the service I valued most were not necessarily the sermon or the performed music, but the communal aspects of our time together: the hymns (at least when we knew them well enough to sing out), the readings, the quiet meditation time. I was less likely to be bothered by the religious language that would have caused me to grate my teeth in my twenties.

The Sunday service became the centerpiece of my religious practice. It is where I feel most connected to my deepest values and most a part of my faith community. Here I experience a unity, not with some external force or being, but with what I might call the collective human experience within that natural world.

So, the humanism I found in the late fifties and sixties isn't the same as the humanism I embrace today. It is less individualistic, less dogmatic, less arrogant, perhaps. It is what has kept me within this theologically diverse, challenging community for nearly fifty years.

I don't think I am alone. Fifty per cent of the members of this congregation who filled out the questionnaire for the search committee indicated that they are theologically humanist. But there are differences today. When I became a Unitarian, most people of my age—and those of the next generation—had been raised in religious families—or at least families which had attended church regularly. We "came out"—rejected our previous religious background, and carried baggage from that change with us. Today, as I observe, more people are "coming in," coming from families in which religion was less central, and are looking for the support and meaning that a religious community can provide. There is, perhaps, less of the anger and angst that was typical of earlier decades. Theology is less of an issue and more of a context, perhaps, within which our spiritual journeys take place.

On the first page of the Fall 2007 issue of UU World, there is a brief excerpt from an address by Rev. Robert Fulghum at this year's General Assembly. Perhaps it expresses what draws us together today.

We come to this place because we need each other. We need to see each other, we need to touch each other. . . We need each other. So we come to this place. We come to work, to talk, to sing, to laugh, to dance. We call this a religious community, not because this . . .is holy ground,

but because what we do here, what we say here together,
and what we are here, makes it a sacred gathering.

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