

# “Our Six Sources: Human Mind, Human Spirit”

Reverend Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
10 April 2011

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## Responsive Reading #650

### “Cherish Your Doubts” by Robert T. Weston

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth.

*Doubt is the key to the door of knowledge;  
it is the servant of discovery.*

A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error,  
for there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief.

*Doubt is the touchstone of truth;  
it is an acid which eats away the false.*

Let no one fear for the truth,  
that doubt may consume it; for doubt is a testing of belief.

*The truth stands boldly and unafraid;  
it is not shaken by the testing:*

For truth, if it be truth, arises from each testing stronger, more secure.

*Those that would silence doubt are filled with fear;  
their houses are built on shifting sands.*

But those who fear not doubt, and know its use,  
are founded on rock.

*They shall walk in the light of growing knowledge;  
the work of their hands shall endure.*

Therefore let us not fear doubt,  
but let us rejoice in its help:

*It is to the wise as a staff to the blind;  
doubt is the attendant of truth.*

## **Meditation Words**

“The Gift” by William Stafford from *The Way It Is*

Time wants to show you a different country. It's the one  
that your life conceals, the one waiting outside  
when curtains are drawn, the one Grandmother hinted at  
in her crochet design, the one almost found  
over at the edge of the music, after the sermon.

It's the way life is, and you have it, a few years given.  
You get killed now and then, violated  
in various ways. (And sometimes it's turn about.)  
You get tired of that. Long-suffering, you wait  
and pray, and maybe good things come - maybe  
the hurt slackens and you hardly feel it any more.  
You have a breath without pain. It is called happiness.

It's a balance, the taking and passing along,  
the composting of where you've been and how people  
and weather treated you. It's a country where  
you already are, bringing where you have been.  
Time offers this gift in its millions of ways,  
turning the world, moving the air, calling,  
every morning, “Here, take it, it's yours.”

## **Reading                    “Nothing's a Gift” by Wislawa Szymborska**

Nothing's a gift, it's all on loan.  
I'm drowning in debts up to my ears.  
I'll have to pay for myself  
with my self,

give up my life for my life.

Here's how it's arranged:  
The heart can be repossessed,  
the liver, too,  
and each single finger and toe.

Too late to tear up the terms,  
my debts will be repaid,  
and I'll be fleeced,  
or, more precisely, flayed.

I move about the planet  
in a crush of other debtors.  
some are saddled with the burden  
of paying off their wings.  
Others must, willy-nilly,  
account for every leaf.

Every tissue in us lies  
on the debit side.  
Not a tentacle or tendril  
is for keeps.

The inventory, infinitely detailed,  
implies we'll be left  
not just empty-handed  
but handless too.

I can't remember  
where, when, and why  
I let someone open  
this account in my name.

We call the protest against this  
the soul.  
And it's the only item  
not included on the list.

## Sermon: “Human Mind, Human Spirit”

It was a confrontation with the promise of catastrophic consequences.

The transcript of a tense radio conversation between two officers, who were posted at different stations, tells the story of what happened on the night of October 10th 1995:

Station No. 1: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision.

Station No. 2: Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision.

Station No. 1: This is the captain of a U.S. Navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course.

Station No. 2: No, I say, again, you divert YOUR course.

Station No. 1: THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER ENTERPRISE. WE ARE A LARGE WARSHIP OF THE NAVY. DIVERT YOUR COURSE NOW!

Station No. 2: This is the Puget Sound lighthouse. It’s your call. . .

Sometimes a healthy sense of certainty can get in the way. And, sometimes, we have no better friend than our capacity to doubt.

“Doubt is the attendant of truth,” our earlier reading reminded us.<sup>1</sup>

And doubt is something of a spiritual practice in this faith. Maintaining a healthy skepticism would seem to be an essential element of spiritual fitness for any Unitarian Universalist.

We come by this honestly. Indeed, our embrace of doubt—our willingness to live with uncertainty rather than false confidence—has a lot to do with how our faith came to be what it is today.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Weston’s “Cherish your doubts” from *Singing the Living Tradition*, #650.

Wrestling with theological questions about the nature of the divine  
and the place and potential of human beings  
is what led our religious ancestors to move away  
from the religious doctrines they had inherited.

From the Reformation through the Enlightenment and beyond,  
our forebears brought critical reason to bear  
on the religious questions of their times.

Under such examination, early religious liberals began to distance themselves  
from the doctrine of the trinity,  
the notion of original sin, and what they saw as the hollow threat  
of eternal punishment in a fiery hell.

With their higher estimation of human nature,  
early Unitarians and Universalists began to accept responsibility  
for building a better world in the here and now.

Embodied in this outlook was optimism for the future,  
for the promise of progress, the hope of creating heaven here on earth.

It's no surprise, then, that those who went before us in this faith  
had a relatively easy time embracing the latest learnings from science.

Where other traditions worked themselves into a tizzy  
to either discount or deny the theory of evolution,  
we took it to heart, incorporating it into our theology—  
boldly proclaiming a belief in “progress. . . onward and upward, forever.”<sup>2</sup>

Where other traditions have struggled—and some struggle still—  
to reconcile faith and science, we have seen them as essential partners  
in the larger conversation about the role and responsibility of human life on  
this planet.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, our tradition of critical inquiry  
brought about a radical shift within our faith  
to the new philosophical position called Religious Humanism.

---

<sup>2</sup> James Freeman Clarke, *Five Points of Unitarian Faith*.

In 1933, thirty-four people—the vast majority of whom were Unitarian and Universalist ministers—drafted and signed a document called *A Humanist Manifesto* that articulated a vision of a new religion for a changing world.

The preamble proclaims:

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. In order that religious humanism may be better understood we. . . desire to make certain affirmations which we believe the facts of our contemporary life demonstrate.

They then state fifteen theses, which include affirmation that the universe is “self-existing and not created,” that humans are “a part of nature” and “emerged as a result of a continuous process.”

They rejected the “traditional dualism of mind and body” and found unacceptable “any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values.”

They asserted that “the way to determine the existence and value of any and all realities is by means of intelligent inquiry and by the assessment of their relations to human needs.”

They were convinced that the time had passed for a belief in the divine, but affirmed that “Religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant.

Nothing human[, they said,] is alien to the religious.

It includes labour, art, science, philosophy, love, friendship, recreation—all that is in its degree expressive of intelligently satisfying human living. The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained.”

And in their final thesis, they said:

“humanism will: affirm life rather than deny it;  
seek to elicit the possibilities of life, not flee from them;  
and endeavour to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all,

not merely for the few.

Born largely out of Unitarianism and Universalism,  
religious humanism became, quite naturally,  
the most prominent part of our identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the decades that followed the writing of the *Manifesto*,  
many of our congregations came to embrace the tenets of humanism  
as deeply as they did their faith as Unitarian Universalists.

The embrace was more pronounced in some places than in others,  
but I think it's safe to say that this congregation  
was, itself, for many decades a hotbed of humanism!

That doesn't mean that we aren't still.

But, there has been a shift in the understanding of humanism in recent years,  
and maybe a tempering of some of its hopes, too.

In the last hymn we sang is an example of what I mean.

“We are of life, its shining gift, the measure of all things;  
up from the dust our temples lift, our vision soars on wings;  
for seed and root, for flower and fruit, our grateful spirit[s] sing.”<sup>3</sup>

It's one of my all-time favourite hymns,  
though it's been some six years since I've sung it.

It's the first line in that third verse that troubles me—  
that we are “the measure of all things.”

It's an idea first championed by the philosopher Protagoras  
in Greece almost twenty-five centuries ago.

It was radical at the time and controversial to some still today.  
There was a time when I found it liberating,  
but now I just find it uncomfortable.

---

<sup>3</sup> “Life is the Greatest Gift of All,” #331, *Singing the Living Tradition*.

While I understand the idea behind it—  
that humans live at the pinnacle of intelligent life on this planet  
and are free from the whims of the gods—  
there is, there, for me, though,  
the seeds of arrogance that sometimes bloom from humanism—  
the notion that humans are above and not accountable to the web of life,  
a temptation to privilege reason over all other ways of knowing,  
and an inclination to view as inferior  
anyone who hasn't attained enlightenment by the same path as our own.

That's why I consider myself, at least on my best days, as a "humble humanist."

I believe that's the call put to us by the fifth source of our faith,  
which states that Unitarian Universalism draws on:  
"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."

It's that last bit that is meant to guard against not only religious superstition  
and spurious spiritual teachings, but also against any humanistic ideology  
that would or could, in the extreme,  
come to undermine the fabric of life itself.

Unchecked, humanism, like so many other philosophies,  
can become narrow and rigid and confining  
when it is overly focussed on itself.

Forrest Church described this well:

"When reason is reduced to rationality, [he said,]  
it too can become an idol.

"We lose track of the spirit, even of such documents as *The Humanist Manifesto*,  
by focussing on the letter.

"The more legalistic thinkers among us believe that in order to be intellectually  
legitimate, any opinion we hold, religious or otherwise,  
must be verifiable as fact.

"Such people hold that anything that is not rational is irrational  
and therefore to be rejected.

“A sound reason[, he reminds us, though,] knows it’s own limitations.

“It suggests that beyond the rational lies a transrational realm.  
We enter it in our dreams; we enter it in moments of worship.  
We enter it in singing, when the tunes are good, even if the words are not.  
We break through to a transrational realm beyond knowing or naming.

“By ignoring this reality in a narrow attempt to guard the portals of rationality against all intruders, we betray the teachings of both reason and science.”

Speaking further to this risk—of making an idol of reason, Church goes on to say that “Given the dangers of idolatry, paradoxically it is our virtues, the very things of which we are most proud, that are most likely to betray us.”<sup>4</sup>

The writer and feminist leader Gloria Steinem tells the story of how she learned this lesson the hard way.

“I took geology,” she told an audience at Smith College, “because I thought it was the least scientific of the sciences.”

“On a field trip, while everyone else was off looking at the meandering Connecticut River, I was paying no attention whatsoever. Instead, I had found a giant, GIANT turtle that had climbed out of the river, crawled up a dirt road, and was in the mud on the embankment of another road, seemingly about to crawl up on it and get squashed by a car.

“So, being a good codependent with the world, I tugged and pushed and pulled until I managed to carry this huge, heavy, angry snapping turtle off the embankment and down the road.

“I was just putting it back into the river when my geology professor arrived and said, ‘You know, that turtle probably spent a month crawling up that dirt road to lay its eggs in the mud by the side of the road, and you just put it back in the river.’

“I felt terrible,” she said. But in later years,

---

<sup>4</sup> Forrest Church, *Our Chosen Faith*, Chapter 9.

I realized that this was the most important. . . lesson I learned, one that cautioned me about the authoritarian impulse . . .”

What wisdom did she discover?

“Always ask the turtle.”

That, to my mind, is a beautiful summation of a more humble humanism.

What most moves me about the role of humanism in this tradition is the invitation it offers each of us to bring to our faith the fullness of our humanity—our highest hopes and wildest dreams, our most irritating shortcomings, and, even, our capacity to do harm.

Its summons to struggle with questions of deepest meaning. To listen to our doubts and to heed the ethical demands of being alive.

Its challenge to step with courage into the freedom that this life affords—to discover within ourselves the passion that empowers us to live into the promise of our being.

But, mostly, I am grateful for humanism’s call to grapple with what we owe in return for this great gift—these precious days of ours, loaned to us by life itself.

The *Humanist Manifesto*, as you might well expect, is an evolving document.

In the almost eighty years since it was written, it has undergone two major revisions.

Today, it includes this beautiful affirmation:

We accept our life as all and enough,  
distinguishing things as they are  
from things as we might wish or imagine them to be.

We welcome the challenges of the future,  
and are drawn to and undaunted by the yet to be known.

May we live our lives as though they are, indeed, “all and enough.”

That in gratitude for the amazing journey  
the very stardust our DNA has travelled down through time,  
we might leave to those who will come after us  
an enduring legacy of life and of love.

Amen.

### **Closing Words – “Fully Alive” adapted from Dawna Markova**

Let us not die unlived lives.  
Let us not live in fear  
of falling [down] or catching fire.

Let us choose to inhabit our days,  
to allow our living to open us,  
to make us less afraid,  
more accessible,  
to loosen our hearts  
until they become a wing,  
a torch, a promise.

Let us choose to risk our significance;  
to live so that which came to us as seed  
goes to the next as blossom  
and that which came to us as blossom,  
goes on as fruit.