

The Meaning of Humanism

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My background is in Humanism. I have toiled in those vineyards for quite a while, and over the years I have given considerable thought the *The Meaning of Humanism* in two respects: First, what is meant by Humanism—what it actually is. And, more recently, what it means to us personally—what it means in our lives.

I'd like to share some of my thinking with you this morning and, along the way, hook it up to some of the basics of Unitarian Universalism.

To satisfy my own curiosity, how many of you here this morning consider yourselves Humanist? Raise your hands. Most, but not all. And even among those who raised their hands there is likely a divergence of opinion on just what exactly is meant by Humanism.

So let's begin with some boundaries, the first of which is a categorizing. In familiar usage, the word humanism means different things to different people in different contexts. Dictionaries define it variously as the quality of being human, human nature, the study of the humanities, and learning in the liberal arts. We who call ourselves Humanists mean something quite different, something that goes well beyond those dictionary references—beyond academic study, beyond philosophical abstractions, and beyond the humane sentiments of humanitarianism.

To us, Humanism is a complete approach to life, a living philosophy of moral development and action, of progress and achievement, and of well-being and fulfillment. A lifestance, which is a category that also contains the world's normative religions. Now religions themselves can be defined in many different ways but, however you define them, they are lifestances while not all lifestances are religions. Humanism is one of those.

It is often said that religion consists of beliefs, practices, and institutions. Humanism itself offers the first two—belief in each other practiced in ethical relationships—but not necessarily the last. Add an institutional or congregational component and you have a religion—a Humanist religion.

So, while Humanism per se is not a religion, you can easily base one on it. The mid to late nineteenth century was rife with them. My religious preference, Ethical Culture, is the only one founded in that rich intellectual and very human era that survives and flourishes today.

Yet religious expressions of Humanism abound in the twenty-first century. Many of today's UU congregations can be so categorized. And, when stripped of their ancient but well-maintained facades, so do other religious approaches to life. For example, the Dali Lama is fond of calling Buddhism the Humanism of the East.

Anywhere you have people banded together to give life to the beliefs and practices of Humanism—people who live out their Humanism in covenant and community with others—you have a religious expression of Humanism. Or, simply put, religious Humanism. Like Unitarian Universalism, religious Humanism is a religion of shared and

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

developing values , values that lead us to choose to attribute significance to each other and to ourselves, and that causes us to strive for the betterment of all.

In considering how our religious expression of Humanism can further the aim of creating better ways of being together with those like us and those unlike us, one of my predecessors as senior clergy at the New York Society for Ethical Culture, John Lovejoy Elliot, said:

“Those who have long discarded belief in the supernatural still are in the presence of revelations which are the foundation of faith. We, too, have our revealed religion. We have looked on the faces of women and men that can be to us the symbols of that which is holy. We have heard the words of sacred wisdom and truth spoken in the human voice. Out of the universe there have come to us these experiences which, when accepted, give to us revelations not of supernatural religion but of a natural and inevitable faith in the powers that animate and dwell at the center of an individual’s being.”

Those are stirring words that awaken something within us. When thinking of Humanism today, many see dryness, a brittle lack of animation, and despair in the face of that in which they could just as easily rejoice—nature and life itself. For Humanism is a broad and inclusive lifestance that combines the emotional and the intellectual, the social and the individual, and the affirmative and the critical into an empowering whole.

However, even within those parameters, there’s more than one understanding of Humanism. Get any two committed Humanists together and you’re likely to come up with at least three perspectives on this or pretty much any other subject. Maybe that’s why some feel that committed Humanists should be just that—committed! All that diversity of emphasis is why it’s important to have a common understanding of Humanism. Not one you necessarily favor above all others, just one we all know and can accept.

So let’s begin with a definition of what Humanism means, what it is. And for that I turn to the opening lines of *Humanism and It’s Aspirations* or *Humanist Manifesto III*, released by the American Humanist Association in 2003. With an impressive array of endorsers, including a score of Nobel laureates, it has some authority.

The very first sentence sums up the whole of Humanism in a taut, thirty-word description:

“Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.”

That’s Humanism in a long sentence or a short paragraph. It’s all there—our willingness to accept growth, improvement, and progress; our naturalist outlook; our belief in both the capability and necessity for human beings to live ethically; our recognition that personal fulfillment is tied to our social nature, and the Humanist aim of more fulfilled living.

“Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life (a lifestance) that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.”

Let me pause, on the declaration that Humanism is a naturalist outlook. Note we say “without supernaturalism.” Humanism operates within the context of philosophic naturalism but makes no claim that our knowledge of the natural is complete. Indeed it

can be argued, and I do, that it is the business of the scientific enterprise to expand the natural world into the previously viewed domain of the supernatural, just as it is the business of the religious enterprise to create better ways of being together—more cooperative, less competitive ways, that stress our likeness rather than our unlikeness.

Every time science and reason expand our knowledge of the natural world, the supernatural is diminished in scope and influence, just as it is by every instance of human goodness in the service of each other.

That somewhat lengthy preamble is Humanism in brief. But before getting into the meaning of Humanism, a final word on what Humanism means. The late Kurt Vonnegut summed it up this way, “Being a Humanist means trying to behave decently without expectation of rewards or punishment after you’re dead.” Kurt was pretty plain spoken.

Now let’s look at the animating, empowering meaning of Humanism to each of us personally, and to all of us collectively—satisfying, ethical living that aspires to the greater good of all, a better world if you will.

You will notice, eventually if not immediately, that aspects of Humanism’s meaning parallel aspects of the UU’s Seven Principles and the source from which they are derived. Specifically:

The choice to attribute “worth and dignity [to] every person” and the ideal of a world of “peace, liberty, and justice for all” both resting on “teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science.”

Or, in Humanist-speak, our capacity to live ethically, our aim of more fulfilled living—indeed our unattainable ideal of perfected living—and our naturalist outlook.

As part of nature, we are reminded that we are an integral party of all that is, and of the process of all that has been and all that will be. Thus viewing life as sufficient unto itself, and freed from the rule of royals, the dictates of deities, and the pressures of prelates, we are liberated to soar across previously divisive borders, be they ideological, political, or both.

How can you not love that?! Love, reciprocity, mutuality, relationships, process—all are Humanist notions.

Humanism’s meaning is seen in its love of life, the true love of life. Most people when they say they love life are saying, “I love my life.” Implied in that is, “but not necessarily yours—or even you.” That’s not the way it works in Humanism.

I realize that loving humanity as a whole is a whole lot easier than loving it one person at a time. Yet, acutely aware of our vast and complex, some would say infinite interconnectedness, I see that I simply cannot love my life without loving life itself. And that includes you. I can’t love myself without being deeply, cellular aware of your equal worth and dignity. And it is that attribution, the first of the Seven Principles that, combined with our naturalist outlook, animates Humanism and gives it meaning.

Ethical Culture Leader Matthew Ies Spetter who, as a child, was witness to the greatest of human tragedies and worst of human atrocities, said, “The humanist idea of love is to accept the fact that all life is marred by imperfection and that, nevertheless, we must be loyal and struggle with our differences and injuries while keeping a thirst for dignity alive.”

A thirst for dignity is a thirst that cannot be quenched simply by satisfying one’s own ego. It is a thirst that is slaked only through a lived respect for others.

Our values—Humanist values—are animated through respectful, ethical relationships. Ethics begins with judgment and choice, and our faith in each other is inspired and animated by the deliberate and reasoned choice of attributing worth to all. We are committed to treating each other as having inherent dignity, and to forming relationships that take the other into account. Not just you and not just me, yet more than we.

Relationships based on values, illuminated by reason and incorporating a faith in our ability to progress toward our highest ideals, are reciprocal relationships. If I honor you by acting so as to elicit the best in you, I am in that very act bringing out the best in me. This sense of reciprocity, of seeing ourselves as part of an organic, an interactive whole, reinforces our attribution of worth and dignity to every individual.

We know that how we choose to treat others is what is most important, as the kind of world in which we live radiates from personal decisions and interactions. The kind of world we long for and strive toward is one in which we make informed choices that balance individual freedom with social responsibility. Ethical relationships bring out the best in each other. And this turns us toward each other rather than away from each other. And that's how the foundation of social justice is built.

What the world needs, and the optimist in me says is longing for, is a uniting lifestance that does not challenge traditional beliefs but rather sets them aside in favor of a new way of viewing the purpose of life. You do not have to long for a better life in another realm to recognize the gaping chasm between what is and what can be. And what can be wrought through our own efforts ought to be if for no other reason than that it can be.

The world in which we live is not the world of our dreams. A hopeful vision of tomorrow sees timeworn paradigms giving way to a more informed and humane view. One that relegates personal belief to the private sphere while bringing into the public square reasoned inspiration and guidance for moral living that transforms the way humanity views the meaning of life.

If we have learned one thing over the course of human history, it is that questions of origin and destiny, questions of ultimacy do not provide the answers to living in harmony with others who think and act differently than we do. For that we have to turn to the lessons learned from living—to values derived from human need, interest and experience.

Ultimately, Humanism is not about ultimacy but about intimacy—about relationships, about ethical relationships. And those who value intimacy with another can more easily appreciate the enriching qualities of difference and embrace those most unlike and unknown to them nearly as readily as they do those most familiar to them.

When we are thus engaged in the flow of life we can progress toward our highest ideal of perfected living. Attain it, no, it always lies beyond our grasp or it wouldn't be an ideal. It would be reduced to the incremental goals necessary to life but insufficient to give it true meaning.

The successive approximation of the ideal of global harmony, of a just and abundant life for all, is not a business plan that can be parsed into strategies and tactics. It is a process of ethical living. It is the deep and abiding understanding that relationships of respect—relationships that connect personal living with moral responsibility to and for community—are what bind us together in universal citizenship.

It is not our thoughts, our beliefs, or our politics that create or comprise the kind of world we long for. It is our actions as expressed in ethical relationships that lead us to a shared responsibility for the kind of world in which we live.

And the hallmarks of the kind of world we long for are justice and equality in human relationships, be they between individuals, groups, or nations; the free and responsible search for truth and meaning without motivation to foist our way of believing on others; the right of conscience and the understanding that democracy is more than a political system but is also a lived personal commitment to the equal rights of others; and an abiding respect for the interconnected and interdependent web of which we are a part.

The Humanist view that this life is all and enough adds importance to life itself. The record of human advancement through human effort lends significance to our actions. And the demonstrated capacity of people to do wonderful things gives hope to our aspiration of perfected living.

Let me close with the words of the founder of the Ethical Humanist movement, Dr. Felix Adler.

“Life is worth living to those who have worth; life is worth living ... for the purpose of adding to the moral worth of those who live it. And we add to our moral worth in two ways; by living rightly, according to the light we already have, and by constantly seeking for new light.”

That quest for new light, that mutual pursuit of a brighter world, the willingness to work together to bring it about in the informed belief that we can move toward our highest ideals through respect for each other and love of life, that is the meaning of Humanism.