

“A Community of Seekers”
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UUMSB
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Readings:

“We Are the Universe” Kenneth Patton

We are the universe, from which we can never be removed, for our minds are the world, our voices are the stars, our reverie is the sea.

Our blood mates the sea, our flesh weds the soil, our breath is the air returning to the air.

We are brief interludes between source and ultimate destinies, but we have not come forth, nor do we return, for we are with our source always.

Our identities and separations are delusions, for the world is the substance of our introspections, the intimate flesh of brothers and sisters; in the end we are buried under our own flesh.

We are declarations and epitomes of reality, all beginning with us, and all ending with us, for if it does not begin here, it begins nowhere, and if it does not end here, it never ends.

There is no fiefdom, no aristocracy of being, and we are no more than ant and sparrow, and the least daisy in the field.

The blade of straw, the grain of wheat in a billion bushels is the being of the wheat, the promise of future roots and grasses.

One instance contains all panoramas, one creature contains all life, and we are the gods, immortality and forever.

We create symbols for eternity: grass is our symbol, proliferating forever, interlacement of roots, the enduring ocean of waving blades beyond the powers of sight and affirmation.

Mind cannot encompass this wilderness of roots, infinite forest of leaves, this practical eternity of prairies; as a symbol for eternity, the grass will do.

and excerpt from *American Religious Humanism* by Mason Olds

“In 1954 Charles E Park’s “Why the Humanism-Theism Controversy is out of Date” was published as a pamphlet by the American Unitarian Association and was widely circulated. Park maintained that both the humanist and the theists have the same evidence. For example, the humanist says: “You cannot know that God exists; therefore he does not exist.” The theist on the other hand, says: “You cannot know that God does not exist; therefore he exists.” Park argued that “both positions have the same support from knowledge—none at all. Belief in God and denial of God are alike matters of faith, not of knowledge.”

According to Park, both humanists and theists are speculating; the main difference is that humanists stop sooner than theists. But this degree of speculation is no ground for ill feeling, argued Park: “Would it not be well to remember that our resources are too meager and our energies too scanty to be wasted in needless controversy?”¹

Sermon:

Looking at the same situation, with the same information, different people can come to very different conclusions about what is true and what they believe. This is true for all kinds of beliefs from the meaning of life, to what art means, to things as every day as how something should be organized. My husband and I have come up against this kind of issue many times in our relationship. We have theological differences, him being Christian, and me being Unitarian Universalist. We have a blanket that I insist is pink and he insists is red. I am sure there are unresolved conversations like this in your lives, with a partner or sibling, a friend or child.

Well, as you may know, my family moved a couple of weeks ago, and moving can bring out a lot of these kinds of issues. Money is stressful and meaning and value has to be ascribed to all the stuff in our lives, down to every last paperclip. What are we going to bring? What are we going to give away? What is worth saving? What might have meaning for our family or for someone else? Let me share just one example from our recent adventure. Something that you may not know about me is that I am a bit of a book hoarder. It is very hard for me to give up books, and I worked in a bookstore through high school, college, and part of grad school, so you can imagine how many I accumulated over the years. Well, I decided that since we were moving into a smaller place I would edit my collection. Pretty much since we met, my husband and I have had a disagreement about my books. I see them as a necessity. I never know when I am going to need a book from the past to find something for a sermon, or to remember a storyline in a novel, or to lend to my step-kids, or to one of you. I see them as potential energy, waiting there on my shelves. My husband sees them as clutter, heavy, heavy clutter. He sees how infrequently some of them get used and wonders if the public library would be just as good a place for those books to be. He also doesn't love carting them all in boxes when we move. I don't agree with his assessment, but I see his point on the moving part, so in preparation for our recent move, I got rid of old sociology text books with data that I wouldn't trust anymore, old novels, and anything else that I could bear to part with. I was proud of myself for getting rid of so much, and I dutifully packed up the rest for moving day.

Then came moving day. Well, actually the day before moving day, Tadd and I rented a small truck to move all our boxes to the new place. The next day we would have volunteers to help with the last minute boxes and all the furniture. We packed up the truck without too much trouble, got it over and started unpacking it. About a third of the way through, I said to Tadd, “this is ridiculous! I got rid of so much, and there is so much still here.” A patient man, Tadd said, “I am glad you see it that way.” I thought mean thoughts about my books and how heavy they are... But... two days later, when I unpacked them and put them on the shelves, I remembered how important they are to me. However, I was brave and I sorted out a couple more boxes that we could probably get rid of... maybe in a few months anyway.

When I was finished unpacking the books, Tadd looked at the overflowing shelves and said, “That is so you”. He was right. I feel a sense of security knowing all that potential knowledge is nearby. Tadd doesn't have that same feeling looking at the overflowing stacks. We will probably never agree, but I know that we can see each other's perspective. We have

¹ Olds, *AMRH*, p48

come to a point of not so much compromise, but understanding, coexistence, and most importantly, acceptance.

In our Unitarian history, in the 1920s and 30s, there was a similar process that we went through as a denomination. There were humanists and theists in conflict, because they had the same information, their experience, history as a denomination, scripture and traditions, and drew very different conclusions about their meaning. In our Exploring UU theology class this fall, we discovered that it is easy to get confused about humanist philosophy and what it has meant throughout history. Humanism is a tricky philosophy to pin down because there are so many varieties. The western varieties of humanism that we will talk about today are all related and they are Greek, Renaissance, and religious humanism. Greek humanism explored the norms of its time and asked lots of questions with a focus on human experience. In the Renaissance, this model flourished and explored theological ideas. Mason Olds, who we heard in our reading earlier, describes how (quote) “the Renaissance humanists revolted against the other-worldliness of medieval Christianity, turning their focus away from a preoccupation with personal immortality and toward making the best of life in the world. The ideal [hu]man was no longer the ascetic monk but the universal [person] of the world. They also reacted against religious restriction placed on knowledge; instead they increasingly relied on reason instead of faith.”² In the late 19th and early 20th century, new movements of humanism rose up, building on the humanist ideas of the Renaissance, including religious humanism. Religious humanism is a type of naturalistic humanism, whose philosophies center around the application of the scientific method to all aspects of life. Naturalistic and Religious humanism, in the words of Corliss Lamont, have a “world-view in which Nature is everything, in which there is no supernatural and in which [hu]man[ity] is an integral part of Nature and not separated from it by any sharp cleavage or discontinuity.”³ Early 20th century Religious humanists focused on how if this is the only existence we have, we are then called to build community on earth and to promote the welfare of all people.⁴ While religion is not necessary to humanist belief, the early religious humanists, and those that are still with us in Unitarian Universalism, believe that the form of religious community lends itself to developing ethical values and helping people to connect with nature and each other in positive ways. Some other flavors of humanism seek to be further separated from any institutional or religious community.

In the 1920s, there was a controversy in the Unitarian Church between humanists and theists. There were some humanists who believed that humanism was the next stage in the evolution of religion and therefore old ways should be abandoned, and there were some theists who felt that the faith was being taken apart by the growing number of humanists in Unitarian pulpits and congregations. Some theists talked about having a creedal statement as part of Unitarianism, and some humanists spoke of moving on from the church and building something different. In the mid 1930s, Fredrick May Elliot, who had contributed to a Humanist anthology of sermons, was elected to be the American Unitarian Association President. He worked to bring together theist and humanist leaders in creating a new hymnal *Hymns of the Spirit*, which was published in 1937. As a denomination, the Unitarians seemed to realize as Charles Park wrote in our reading earlier, that being so small, spending so much time and energy on this controversy seemed counterproductive. The fact was that both humanist and theist Unitarians and their neighbors the Universalists wanted to work for social justice, worship together in the liberal

² Mason Olds, “*American Religious Humanism*” p5

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⁴ 34-5

protestant tradition, and build community. They had different understandings of the underpinnings of why, but they were working for common goals.

In modern Unitarian Universalism, there are a variety of expressions of both humanism and theism. In the early 20th century we held on to our belief in free-inquiry and expression of belief. We made a choice to hold the container of our faith to be large, and to have a more complex religious community, to not be either solely humanist or theist. We have a variety of language to describe our religious experience, some of which is theist or humanist, much of which is a hybrid of the two. For example, many Unitarian Universalists believe in an energy or force that connects us one to another. If you have a name for that, what do you call it? Spirit of Life? Love? Joy? Peace? How about some others? _____ This is the fruit of the humanist-theist controversy.

In *American Religious Humanism*, Mason Olds tells a parable that is adapted from John Wisdom's essay, "The Gods". Here is the story:

"Two people had been away from home on an extended vacation. When they returned and went into their garden, one of them was surprised to see that some of the plants were doing well—so well, in fact, that he concluded that a gardener must have been caring for them. Yet inquiries indicated that no one had seen or heard a gardener. Observing how orderly and purposeful everything looks, he concludes that despite the lack of witnesses, a gardener must have been at work. The second person, examining the same garden, notices some rough places that indicate a lack of order. The first person, hearing this observation, suggests that the gardener may be invisible and inaudible. The second person remains convinced that there is no gardener; this is how the garden happens to grow when it is unattended."⁵

Olds' analysis of this parable is that with the same information people can come to radically different conclusions. I think in modern Unitarian Universalism, there is another analysis as well, a third person in the garden if you will, who might see the garden and suggest that while a gardener may not have come to tend while they were away, perhaps there is some kind of energy or force in the natural world that helped the garden along. Not an anthropomorphic gardener, but also more than nothingness. In Unitarian Universalism, we can hold at least these three explanations for why the garden looks as it does.

We have talked about binaries before and how categorical and polarized thinking can keep us from seeing other options. I think that our choice as a denomination to hold together after the humanist-theist controversy, was a move against this kind of thinking. We seek with our communities and congregations to hold a variety of understandings and to work together for justice and the world community. Ideally, we model what we seek in the world. Not that all people will believe the same things, but that a variety of beliefs be honored. Not that everyone will do the same thing with their lives, but that all have the opportunity to live full lives, and have access to resources and community. Not either/or, but both/and.

We look at the same information and come to different conclusions. May we remain open to one another and what new understandings are yet to break forth from our experience. May we go forth with open hearts and minds.

Amen.

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