

Here and Now  
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UUMSB

I was out with my husband Tadd earlier this week playing cards with friends, including my regular hiking partner, Liz. We had a fun night and just as we were about to leave Liz said, “I was thinking about hiking the Seven Sisters on Saturday, are you in?” The Seven Sisters trail runs between Mt. Hitchcock and Mt. Holyoke in the Holyoke range. People often stage cars at both ends of the trail so they don't have to go up and back, it would be about 10 and a half miles of up and down, up and down, to do both directions. We have been talking about committing to this hike for years. She said, “I think we just need to decide we are doing it, and do it.” So we did, and that is why I am preaching from the floor today. I am very, very creaky on stairs. Sometimes you hike the mountain, and sometimes the mountain hikes you.

Do you believe that human beings have influence over what happens on Earth? That we can we can learn more about our world, ourselves and each other through study? Do you believe human experience has value and meaning? Well my friends, if so, you are probably a humanist. Mason Olds, who literally wrote the book on religious humanism wrote:

...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.”<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes in common parlance we equate humanism and atheism, but they are different things. Humanism is the radical idea, that grew out of the Christian church, that people matter. In her book *Fluent in Faith*, Unitarian Universalist minister, Jeanne Nieuwejaar wrote about her belief, rooted in faith and humanist thought saying,

I personally don't “believe” in God. I do not have an idea of a God who is active in my life, but I do have a deep and sustaining faith, a felt sense that life matters, that it is woven into the larger fabric of life with all its beauty and its suffering. I have a felt sense that I am not alone. I feel love and longing and connection and compassion.<sup>2</sup>

Early 20<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> While religion is not necessary to humanist belief, the early religious humanists, and humanist values with us in Unitarian Universalism, hold that religious community lends itself to developing ethical values and helping people to connect with nature and each other in positive ways.

Former Unitarian Universalist Association President and head of Amnesty International, Bill Schultz has written a history of the writing of the first *Humanist Manifesto* in 1933. It was a gathering of philosophers and thinkers who believed in the power of reason and the scientific method to bring human beings into a promised land of opportunity. They did not, however, spend much time on the very sticky wicket of evil and free will. Evil in this instance meaning the willingness to break relationship and long term communal well-being for immediate power.<sup>4</sup> The violence and suffering brought by the use of the scientific method in World War II blew a tank-fired hole right through the

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

2 Jeanne Nieuwejaar, *Fluent in Faith*, Skinner House 2012, Kindle edition Location 739

3 Olds 34-5

4 <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/27168.shtml>

middle of the first Manifesto. In the early 1970s, a second Manifesto was written to take more of this into account and the third, written in 2003, is further nuanced, including statements like:

**Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships.** Humanists long for and strive toward a world of mutual care and concern, free of cruelty and its consequences, where differences are resolved cooperatively without resorting to violence. The joining of individuality with interdependence enriches our lives, encourages us to enrich the lives of others, and inspires hope of attaining peace, justice, and opportunity for all.

Humanism is a “both/and” philosophy that is part of many religious and philosophical traditions. What it boils down to is this: Humanists live ethical lives because they reason that this is the way to build a world that honors the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and the only way to do this is by human hands—there is no force but human will to make it happen. That doesn’t mean that spiritual, deep, and even religious, language is not helpful to humanist work. As Rev. Jeanne Nieuwejaar wrote,

Belief lives in the mind. It is a cognitive, intellectual dimension of religion, made up of ideas. Faith is deeper. It is a profound existential sense of trust. Faith lives at the mysterious spiritual center of our being. It is “Primal sense of promise,” as Wilfred Cantwell Smith... once said. It is a sense of safety and coherence, a sense of serenity, of courage, loyalty, and comfort, a sense of feeling at home in the universe.<sup>5</sup>

As Unitarian Universalists, part of a tradition that has been radically shaped by Humanism, we have a unique opportunity to live into a faith that shares a resolution to strive toward a world of mutual care, and to talk about that journey and its affect on our lives, on what we hold most precious and to learn and grow through that experience.

Peter Mayer is a Unitarian Universalist folk singer who shares the story of an embrace of humanist philosophy in his own lifetime in the song “Holy Now”, which many of you have probably heard before. Peter uses the language of reverence, holiness, and miracle to describe his understanding of the world. He uses this language and nudges it in the direction of Unitarian Universalist understanding.

(Sing part of the song)

Peter shares his own experience, but the song also mirrors the movement of humanism through religious life, “It used to be a world half there, heaven’s second rate hand me down, but I walk it with a reverent air ‘cause everything is holy now.” Humanism in the Renaissance and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century sowed the seeds of modernism, and post-modernism. We have integrated so much of humanist philosophy into our tradition, it would be impossible to unravel it. It is in our principles and purposes, we *are* a humanist tradition. And we have brought that humanism along with us to new and exciting theological and faithful places.

When my friend and I were on the trail yesterday with the elevation changes, heat, and humidity, we had to push ourselves really hard to get home. At one point we stopped for a breather and marveled at the resilience of the human body. Think of all the things we are able to do and accomplish with these bodies. Farther down the trail we passed another group who was having a similar conversation. There was wonder in the air on that trail yesterday. And yet, we are also incredibly fragile. We are a miracle, it is such a wonder that out of all the possibilities of what we could have become, we are human beings, and that of all the human beings there are, we are each of us. The web

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5 Nieuwejaar, location 692

of life is a miracle. Of all the possible ways that things could interact with each other, we evolved in a way that we are in such deep relationship with every creature and thing on this earth. We are blessed by this connection in the ways that it supports and dazzles us with its beauty, and we as Unitarian Universalists have been called to repair the web where we can. We are in trouble as a people with fires burning again. or rather still, in the West, Iran and Iraq with temperatures never seen on earth before. We are at, hopefully not past, a crossroads, where the choices made by some will effect us all. At some level, we need to depend on the resilience of humanity, look at the choices before us, and “just decide to do it.” To have faith, and make hard changes.

I struggle with my faith in the power of human beings to do good in the world. I struggle with understanding all the wrong and evil that is done by people and how we reconcile that with a belief in the potential for us to do better at being human. Though some among us may believe in an outside force that pushes us toward good and connection, that is not true for all of us, and yet we are held in community and care. If we are all we have, if we are the ones we have been waiting for, if we, like Spider-man, have great power and great responsibility, we have the potential to shape our future. And, we are also interconnected with all of the people and choices, that might seek to veer us from our path—those who have different world-views and might seek to serve themselves above and before all others. We are all intertwined. I have faith, that the path of interconnection, love, compassion, and service toward others will thrive and welcome everyone who might wish to be a part. One of the ways I keep that faith is being in community with you. May we all be strengthened in our commitments to each other and to the potential for good and justice in humanity. May we be grateful for the free-thinkers before us who built a tradition where we can find a home.

So may it be.

Amen.