

Editor's Preface

As I edited this issue, the diamond anniversary of the issuing of the Humanist Manifesto (May 1, 1933) slipped by, largely unnoticed by UUs and by humanists in general. To be honest, I would not have noticed the specific date myself, had I not been participating in a “Fourth Principle” workshop at the Central Midwest District Assembly, on “Theological Diversity in Our Congregations.” Joined by representatives of UUs for Jewish Awareness and CUUPs (the UU Pagan’s equivalent to HUUmanists), I was lifting up the recommendations of William Doherty in a recent issue of *The World*, for a uniquely UU calendar of celebrations.¹ Along with the dates (here in chronological order) of Michael Servetus’ execution, King John Sigismund’s Edict of Toleration, John Murray’s first American sermon, Channing’s Baltimore Sermon, and Emerson’s Divinity School Address, Doherty’s group of some sixty UU parents selected the issuance of the Manifesto as the most recent “foundational story” in our liberal religious history.

I found this reassuring, especially as the HUUmanists on-line discussion has recently suffered another round of laments about how UU humanism is being pushed around and pushed aside by a combination of multifaceted superstition and “emergent Christianity.” “Push back,” has always been my motto—responsibly, respectfully, and firmly. We are a driving force in one of the most diverse religious movements in an increasingly diverse society. We are responsible for most of that movement’s progress in the last three quarters of a century; surely we can do better, can offer better, than repeated complaints about how we are badly done-to by our non-naturalistic co-religionists?

Perhaps if your primary experience of UUism is in an isolated congregation that used to be humanistic in character, and now seems to suffer creeping spiritual vacuity, you have a right to sigh and fret. But if you had seen the crowds who showed up for HUUmanist speakers in Portland last June at the GA, or spent some time at our booth and mingled with the enthusiastic new members, and with the teens who told us that “Yeah, Humanism is cool!” and appealing to more and more young UUs, you’d lose that defeatist attitude quickly. In either case, read the Manifesto, our Heritage piece for this issue, relish it and be renewed. Then read the other articles, and take heart, for as John Murray advised the early Universalists, we shall “give them be not Hell, but Hope and Courage!” Well, in our case, a little (non-metaphysical) Hell, too.

Bill Murry was one of those GA speakers, and we turned so many away from a crowded lecture hall that we had to schedule a second appearance—and filled that one also. Bill’s remarks, reprinted here, were a summary of his well-received *Reason and Reverence*, a response to those who find humanism to be *too* rational—that is, dry and lacking something heartfelt. The “spiritual aspects of the natural world” are what Bill appeals to, and he invokes the Transcendentalist heresy of Nineteenth-century Unitarianism to show that he’s not just waving some warmed over New Age bromides at the complaint. He proposes that the divisions between UU theists and humanists are not the yawning chasm that they once were.

Marilyn Westfall, who as an American Humanist Association Board member, is closer than Murry to the secular kind of humanism in which that many UUs find themselves having one foot, nonetheless lends support to his thesis, by finding, in Jesus of Rio, a traditional religious symbol with real secular appeal. Marilyn clearly finds that gulf wider in most respects, but notes there are still areas of overlap where she can recognize the value religion has for many people. She endeavors to lift up parallel strains in the humanism of the three Manifestos, suggesting perhaps that much as religious art can speak powerfully to the rationalist, so an intellectual assessment of human emotions can resonate for people of faith.

Perhaps the toughest short piece to write about any subject is a systematic. For Religious Humanism this would include, at a minimum, a scientific and philosophical explanation of human existence, an orderly cataloging of humanist beliefs, practices and values, and a working theory of how we know all of what we know about these matters. Charlie Vail, who has offered a number of thoughtful pieces on the HUUMANIST on-line chat, takes on the challenge for us. He sent this initially with simply a request for commentary, and I've convinced him that a number of you can join me in helping him hone what is already a brave attempt.

This past February, HUUMANISTS joined with two local UU congregations and the Chicago Area UU Council to sponsor a conference on the occasion of Darwin's 199th birthday. Arthur Falk's "Darwinism and the Meaning of Life" (JRH, vol 39 #1) was the Keynote address. Karen Quinlan followed his scholarly presentation with a Sunday service appealing to all ages, doing a nice job of blending personal reflection, an entertaining (silly and informative) story, and readings from Connie Barlow, (an atheistic science educator who speaks comfortably in a language of reverence), with an overview of Darwin's professional and philosophical development. It's not an easy combination to fit into the confines of a Sunday service, and she does it with the aplomb of one seriously considering the UU ministry.

Finally, I've succumbed to the temptation after nine issues, to include my own musings beyond the editorial role. This is also my first piece as a reporter, though as you will see, the story I assigned myself to write in Memphis evaporated, and a very different one took its place. This is more reflection than timely journalism, but since I accepted the press credentials and the reduced price conference registration, I felt honor bound to publish something!

All of the above is dedicated to the memory of our friend and mentor, Rabbi Sherwin Wine, founder of Humanistic Judaism. HUUMANISTS co-sponsored one of his last public appearances, at General Assembly just a few weeks before his death. Rabbi of course, means *teacher*, and he was, and remains the best of those to many of us.

Roger Brewin

1. William J Doherty "Home Grown Unitarian Universalism,"
<http://www.uuworld.org/issues/spring2008.shtml>

