

# **Reason and Reverence**

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Religious humanism and religious naturalism go together very well because from humanism comes the emphatic conviction of the value of every human being, a belief in the worth and dignity of human beings, and an ethic that emphasizes love and social justice and opposes oppression in all its forms. From naturalism comes a sense of awe and wonder and reverence and mystery in the face of life and the universe that provides a deep spiritual dimension humanism by itself has lacked.

## **1. Introduction**

For the last twenty or thirty years we humanists have been a target of the religious right, *and* of criticism from within our own Unitarian Universalist Association. Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and their followers have accused us of being anti-American, anti-moral, and the people responsible for everything they believe to be wrong with America, such as reproductive choice, anti-poverty programs, the feminist movement, gay rights, sex education and laws against compulsory prayer in public schools. In a recent book,<sup>1</sup> Dinesh D'Souza accuses humanists and other liberals of being responsible for 9/11 because we favor women's equality, reproductive freedom, gay rights and have taken God and the bible out of the public schools—all of which are anathema to radical Muslims (as well as, apparently, to Dinesh D'Souza).

Falwell and company are right in giving humanists credit for helping to bring about beneficial social change. But they are dead wrong in thinking that these changes are bad and in calling humanists a threat to the nation's morality; humanism is a highly ethical way of life.

We have been criticized by liberal Christian theologians for lacking a secure foundation for either worship or ethics. Reinhold Niebuhr said humanism lacked a transcendent perspective from which to judge the human enterprise. And, within our own religious movement, we have been criticized for being too human-centered, too rationalistic, too optimistic about human nature, lacking in spirituality, and close-minded.

A few years ago a *UU World* article by Warren Ross entitled "The Marginalized Majority: UU Humanism in the 1990s"<sup>2</sup> suggested that although a majority of UUs identify as humanist on surveys, humanism is losing its vitality, and UU theists are more vocal and increasing in number. At a recent GA, humanists discussed the question of whether we should stay within the UUA or leave and form our own religious organization.

More recently, attacks on theistic religion have been making the bestseller lists. Sam Harris started it with *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*. Richard Dawkins added *The God Delusion* and Daniel Dennett gave us *Breaking the Spell*. Now Christopher Hitchens has written *God Is Not Great*. The June 25 issue of *The Nation* magazine features an article entitled “The New Atheists,” by Ronald Aronson. Drawing on several nationwide polls, Aronson believes as many as 25 percent of Americans (one in four) are unbelievers despite the fact that in most surveys over 90 percent claim to believe in God. It all depends on what questions are asked and how they are asked. Aronson also points out what a number of people have noted, that these critics of religion offer nothing to take the place of traditional theistic faith. That creates a tremendous opportunity for humanism, for I believe religious humanism could fill that hole for many more people as it does for most of us.

In what follows I want to answer some of the criticisms leveled against humanism, and I want to describe the exciting new humanism I believe has been emerging among UUs in recent years. I am calling this new humanism “humanistic religious naturalism;” it is the merger of humanism and religious naturalism.

## **2. Humanistic Religious Naturalism**

Religious naturalism means two things—first it refers to the denial of the supernatural. It says there is no supernatural realm and there is no supernatural God. The natural order is all there is. Humanism has of course always agreed with this.

Second, religious naturalism refers to the religious and spiritual aspects of the natural world. For UUs this goes back to Emerson whose great essay on “Nature” articulates his sense of the religious aspect of the natural world. For me it means the feelings of awe and wonder and reverence I have when I walk in the woods or gaze at the night sky or ponder the amazing complexity of the human body and the human brain or the unimaginable vastness of the universe.

Religious naturalism maintains that human beings are products of nature and natural causes. We are simply one of a prolific nature’s multitudinous creations, each unique and special, and all part of one interdependent web.

Religious naturalism can be either theistic or non-theistic. Its theistic form affirms a God who is not supernatural, but is a part of the natural order, a force for good or love. That’s an important distinction. In Western culture a supernatural God tends to be authoritarian and patriarchal. To be human means to be obedient and submissive. And George Lakoff has taught us that an authoritarian, patriarchal deity often results in a patriarchal and authoritarian family.

A naturalistic deity, on the other hand, is neither authoritarian nor patriarchal, but embodies feminine qualities such as nurturing and caring and cooperation, and leads to families with those characteristics. In this framework to be human means to be caring, compassionate, nurturing, cooperative and non-hierarchical. We humans are symbolic animals, and the symbols we live by make a difference.

It seems to me that religious naturalism is the basic theological perspective of liberal religion, especially Unitarian Universalism. It is the glue that holds us together and makes us unique. In the recent study by the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association entitled *Engaging our Theological Diversity*,<sup>3</sup> the vast majority of UUs who identified as theists described God as a force for good within the world, or the power of creativity or simply as mystery. This rejection of supernaturalism seems to be a central characteristic of religious liberals, whether they retain God language or not, and it is one of the things that distinguishes us from other forms of Western religion. We find the sacred in this world, not in another realm.

I think this is important because it means that the difference between UU theists and humanists is not as great as it used to be and as many people may think today. It also suggests that religious naturalism is one of the things that both unites us as a movement and at the same time makes us different from traditional religion. Religious humanism and religious naturalism go together very well because from humanism comes the emphatic conviction of the value of every human being, a belief in the worth and dignity of human beings, and an ethic that emphasizes love and social justice and opposes oppression in all its forms.

From naturalism comes a sense of awe and wonder and reverence and mystery in the face of life and the universe that provides a deep spiritual dimension humanism by itself has lacked. Moreover, humanism has been too human centered and has needed a larger, more inclusive foundation which naturalism provides. Richard Dawkins said he could not be a humanist because humanism was “too anthropocentric,” but humanistic religious naturalism is not anthropocentric. Moreover, humanism has been too cold and rationalistic. That too is remedied by naturalism. Further, every religion needs a story, and religious naturalism gives us a meaningful story, the epic of cosmic and biological evolution. Thus, religious naturalism provides a foundation for a new, more open and inclusive humanism.

From religious humanism comes the affirmation of the intrinsic value of every human being—the insistence that all persons are ends in themselves and not means to another’s ends. It holds that we humans make our lives meaningful through service and through personal and spiritual growth and by optimizing the good and opposing that which is evil. It emphasizes reason and critical thinking and natural intelligence in seeking truth and guiding one’s actions. It emphasizes life in the here and now and does not expect another life after death. It upholds intellectual honesty and rejects superstition.

Since it denies the supernatural, religious humanism insists that we can rely only on ourselves to establish a better world. It is optimistic about the future, although this optimism is tempered by its understanding that we humans too often pursue our own interests at the expense of the common good. And it finds great value in human beings coming together in religious community to deepen their understanding, support and strengthen their values, celebrate life’s passages and work together for a better world.

Thus, humanism provides the values that naturalism lacks, and religious naturalism provides what humanism has lacked.

Humanistic religious naturalism is the merger of those two religious perspectives, resulting in a religious philosophy that, in my view, speaks to the contemporary liberal mindset and to current issues in a meaningful and powerful way, that offers depth and purpose to human life without sacrificing intellectual honesty, and that is a more open and inclusive humanism that speaks to the heart as well as the mind.

### **3. Background**

The seeds of religious humanism in the western world were sown by the biblical teaching that human beings are created in the image of God, and that therefore humankind is the highest form of life created by the deity. The Christian tradition added the doctrine of the incarnation, the idea that the divine became human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. When you demythologize and de-divinize the incarnation, what remains is the view that human beings are what is highest, best and noblest in the world and most worthy of respect and honor. And when you universalize the incarnation you have the perspective that everyone is potentially an incarnation of what people have for centuries, considered to be the qualities of divinity.

It took many centuries for the full implications of these Christian doctrines to flower into humanism, and it required the emergence of modern science, the Enlightenment and especially Darwinian evolution, to shake the foundations of the Christian worldview. Luther, Schleiermacher and Emerson helped to prepare the ground out of which humanism could grow, Luther by removing a priestly mediator between God and humanity, thus making each person responsible for his or her own religious life; Schleiermacher by understanding religion, not as beliefs or doctrines, but as an internal personal experience of each individual. Then the pantheism of Emerson removed God from the heavens and placed the divine within humanity and the natural world.

Religious humanism as we know it has been around for less than one hundred years with John Dietrich and Curtis Reese first proclaiming Unitarian humanism in the middle of the second decade of the last century. The famous humanist-theist controversy that almost split the Unitarian Association occurred in the early 1920s, and the first Humanist Manifesto was published in 1933. We are still a young movement.

### **3. Human Nature**

Humanistic religious naturalism maintains that human beings are part of the natural order. We are one hundred percent physical beings. We are biochemical machines. We have no immortal soul dwelling within our physical bodies, as western religion and philosophy have taught for over 2,000 years. What we call the mind or soul or spirit is simply the functioning of the trillions of cells in our brain, probably the most complex organism yet developed by evolution.

Humanistic religious naturalism does not believe that there is life after death. We live on in the memory of those who loved us and whose lives we touched, and we live on in

the form of our contributions to making the world a better place. We can be sure of only one life, but that one life is enough.

In the book I emphasize our freedom to make choices, which is a traditional understanding of humanism. I have come to believe that as fully natural beings, who we are and what we say and do is a product of our genes and the millions of influences on us, including all our experiences since conception. I agree with Spinoza who said: “The mind is determined to this or that choice by a cause which is also determined by another cause, and this again by another, and so on *ad infinitum*.”<sup>4</sup> We make no choices that do not have hundreds, thousands or even millions of causes behind them. The traditional idea of a totally free will is a remnant of a pre-scientific era that believed in the “ghost in the machine” theory.

I became a UU thirty years ago. I thought of it as a free choice, but it really was not, for by that time I could not remain a liberal Christian. I chose to become a UU because of the person I had become at that time, because of all the influences that had determined me to that point. Could I have remained a minister of the United Church of Christ? Yes, but only if some things that happened to me or some influences on me had been different. Tennyson’s “Ulysses” said, “I am a part of all that I have met.” I would revise that by saying “I *am* all that I have met.” As natural beings we are subject to the laws of nature, and causation is one of those laws.

That does not mean that the future is pre-determined. The causal stream flows on, but we can influence the form it takes by what we do today. For example, we can decrease the threat of terrorism by changing our Middle East policies, or we can continue to increase that threat by maintaining our present policies. Similarly, we can decrease crime and drug use in the U.S. by creating better housing, educational and job opportunities for those who are poor and oppressed, or we can fail to do those things and continue to have too much crime and drug use. When we understand the laws of cause and effect, we can influence the future.

It has always bothered me that humanism emphasized the greatness of human beings and the endless possibilities of human progress and said almost nothing about sin and evil. Corliss Lamont in his excellent book, *The Philosophy of Humanism*—a book I love and use in my humanism classes—expressed his belief “that human beings... can build an enduring citadel of peace and beauty upon this earth.”<sup>5</sup> I wish I could believe that, but the evidence of the last 100 years of war, persecution, tyranny, the Holocaust, torture, terrorism and what we used to call “man’s inhumanity to man” have forced us to re-think our understanding of human nature.

There is nothing inherent in religious humanism that says we must ignore the demonic or destructive aspect of humankind and be overly optimistic about human nature. Perhaps we have put too little emphasis on evil because we are fundamentally rational people, and much that is evil arises out of the irrational in human beings. Without losing our fundamental respect for human beings, we need to affirm the magnitude of moral evil in the world and to understand its sources in self-interest, hubris

and egocentricity that become arrogance and the desire for power over others. We are capable of both acts of moral courage and acts of heinous depravity.

If the book ever goes into a second printing I will emphasize more than I did human aggression as one of the sources of evil, aggression that we see in particular when the restraints of civilization are removed, as with the figure of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. We also see it in war. Chris Hedges writes in his important book, *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*: "Killing unleashes within us dark undercurrents that see us desecrate and whip ourselves into greater orgies of destruction. The dead, treated with respect in peacetime, are abused in wartime... Corpses were impaled in Bosnia on the sides of barn doors, decapitated or draped like discarded clothing over fences."<sup>6</sup>

Humanistic religious naturalism can suggest what to do to diminish the degree of destructive behavior. Human beings are neither inherently good nor evil. We are educable; that is, we become moral or immoral persons in large part by the way we are brought up and by the social conditions in which we live. Humanistic religious naturalism needs to promote parent education and better parenting; we need to work to create the social conditions for a more humane and caring society, and that certainly includes better education, especially science education, a more just and equitable income distribution that would raise the living standard of poor people, and it includes opposing discrimination in all its hideous forms. I do not believe in utopia, but I do believe societies can do better, especially in this country where there is the wealth and the know-how. What is lacking is the will, the commitment.

## **5. Epistemology—How Do We Know What is True?**

Another aspect of this new humanism has to do with how we decide what is true. The "culture war" that pervades politics as well as religion can be understood as a conflict between two modes of thought. One is based in revelation from a supernatural source as interpreted by evangelical preachers, Roman Catholic priests, and others. This kind of thinking sees the world in terms of absolute truth and absolute moral values. It is dualistic in that it thinks in terms of natural and supernatural, temporal and eternal, body and soul. Human beings are creatures of a supernatural God, and to be human is to be obedient to his will and fit our lives into his divine plan. This type of thinking claims its truths to be final and absolute because it is based on a higher authority.

The mode of thought that humanism espouses relies on the human ability to use our intelligence and our reasoning capacity to determine what is true and right. It relies on observation, reflection, critical thinking, and testing by experimentation, and it builds on what is learned in this way from generation to generation to expand knowledge and understanding. It does not claim absolute certainty, for it regards knowledge as dynamic and growing as humankind learns more about the world and human nature. Instead it maintains that our knowledge involves degrees of probability

But humanism has also been criticized for being *too* rational. We are said to lack warmth and passion and caring; we are cold, all head and no heart. Moreover,

postmodernism reminds us that we human beings have used our intelligence and reasoning powers to confirm our prejudices and to exploit our fellow human beings. It seems that we are not only rational animals but also *rationalizing* animals.

To be sure, the use of our reasoning and our intelligence has been the source of progress in just about every human endeavor, and its greater use in religion would result in progress in that area too. We can be proud that we stand for what is reasonable in religion, for its opposite is what is unreasonable in religion.

Nevertheless, in our search for truth and our decision-making, we need to include our emotions. We are not only thinking beings; we are also feeling beings. And recent studies have shown that reason and the emotions are not separate and distinct as has often been assumed.

In her book, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, University of Chicago scholar Martha Nussbaum makes a convincing argument that emotions pervade the way we think, and that they are part of what makes us human. In Nussbaum's view, it is not so much that we have two minds, a thinking mind and an emotional mind, as it is that our one mind consists of both rationality and affect. She suggests that our emotions are suffused with intelligence and discernment, and are therefore a source of deep awareness and understanding. Emotions, she maintains, are judgments of values. For example, we become angry when Congress passes legislation that promotes the interests of the big oil companies because we recognize the injustice involved.

Knowledge and the use of it require us to have a balance and reciprocity between intelligence and emotions. Intelligence can serve to rein in or redirect emotions that are potentially destructive, and it can support socially beneficial emotions and direct them in effective ways. Emotions can inspire and motivate us in positive directions. Bertrand Russell put it well: "The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge."

## **6. Religious Naturalism**

I want now to elaborate on the meaning of religious naturalism and the significance of merging humanism with naturalism. But let me begin with a story, a story that comes from the book, *Skeptics and True Believers*, by the physicist Chet Raymo.<sup>7</sup>

The red knot is a sandpiper that every year travels more than 18,000 miles from the arctic islands of northern Canada to Tierra del Fuego, at the southern tip of South America and back again, stopping along the way on several Atlantic beaches. During their stay in the southern hemisphere they replace their tattered feathers in a long molt ensuring their flight equipment to be in top condition when, in February, they begin their journey north in flocks of thousands. They stop on their way for food, always at the same beaches or marshes where they have fed for centuries. From the northern coast of South America they embark on a weeklong non-stop flight that takes them to Delaware Bay just as horseshoe crabs are laying eggs by the millions. There they gorge themselves in order to be prepared to engage in the next leg of their long journey—non-stop to the islands north of Hudson Bay. There in the long summer they mate and breed.

By mid-July the female knots abandon their offspring and head south, and a few weeks later the males follow. The babies fend for themselves until late August when they too commence their 9,000-mile journey. Now here is the amazing thing. “The young red knots, by the thousands and *without adult guides or prior experience*, find their way along” the very same migration route of their parents, stop at precisely the same beaches and marshes for food and join the others at precisely the same place in Tierra del Fuego.

How do they do it? How do they know where to go along a route they have never traveled to a destination where they have never been? Scientists can only surmise that the red knot’s genetic inheritance includes “a map for the journey and the instrumental knowledge to follow it,” but saying that is simply to emphasize both mystery and the amazing nature of life.

Love of nature and feelings of reverence and amazement toward it is a long tradition in our Unitarian heritage, beginning in particular with Ralph Waldo Emerson whose first major publication was his great essay on “Nature.” Early in the essay he writes:

If the stars should appear *one* night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But *every* night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile... The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible, but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence.

Like Emerson I love to go outside on a clear night and gaze at the sky glittering with the lights of thousands of stars, most of them larger than our sun, and as I ponder the unimaginable vastness of what I am seeing and the incredible distances between the stars, I am overcome with awe and amazement.

The unimaginable vastness of the universe and the incredible complexity of life evoke awe and reverence greater than anything I experienced as a theist. As a religious naturalist, I feel wonder and amazement at nature’s majesty, beauty, complexity and power; I feel joy and comfort among its trees or by its waters and refreshed and rejuvenated from working in its soil or walking in its woods. Recently I was watching a program in the Planet Earth series, a program about marine life. The remarkable beauty, the incredible diversity and the incomprehensible numbers of living things in the oceans blew my mind. I sat on my couch in utter amazement.

I feel reverence when I ponder the incomprehensible vastness of the universe and the equally mind-boggling smallness of the sub-microscopic world. That the universe, in the title of a book by physicist Freeman Dyson, is “infinite in all directions” is beyond my ability to imagine. I find that the more I learn about the world from modern science, the more I am in awe. That the DNA in a single cell in my body that is so small I cannot see it, if stretched out would reach from fingertip to fingertip of my outstretched arms; that



there are trillions of cells in my body and that there is enough DNA in those cells to reach to the sun and back a dozen times, these facts fill me with wonder and astonishment. And the fact that the Milky Way Galaxy has a trillion stars and that the universe contains at least 50 billion galaxies, and thus hundreds of trillions of stars similar to our sun, fills me with an amazement far beyond my power to describe.

Chet Raymo suggests that we can think of “all scientific knowledge that we have of this world, or will ever have... as an island in the sea of mystery.”<sup>8</sup> The sea is infinite, and even as the island expands it does not diminish the sea’s infinite and inexhaustible mystery. In fact I have found that my sense of wonder and mystery grows and deepens as my knowledge of the universe increases.

Even the immense power of nature as exemplified in earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis and tornadoes is a source of awe. That nature’s power can destroy human beings and human creations is reason for great sorrow, but it is not the result of malice, and certainly not “the will of God” as is sometimes said. We can use our ingenuity and creativity to do all we can to protect ourselves from nature’s destructive power, but we will never be entirely successful. Nature is like the Hindu godhead that consists of the creator (Brahma), the preserver (Vishnu) and the destroyer (Shiva).

For religious naturalists, living in a natural environment is a spiritual experience. Freed from supernaturalism the religious naturalist can be devoted to a nature that nurtures and sustains. It is not incidental that people speak of “mother earth” or “our mother the earth.” Our ties to nature are deep and intimate.

Every religious vision needs to be anchored in a *story* that provides an account of how the world came into being, the place of human beings, and the meaning and direction of life, especially human life. The traditional stories that have sustained western culture for several millennia are no longer efficacious for most of us, but modern science has given us a new story with multiple layers of rich meaning. That story is the epic of cosmic and biological evolution.

That story is a religious story because it calls us out of our little self-centered worlds and enables us to see ourselves as part of the great living system we call the cosmos. This story gives a larger meaning and a broader ethic to our lives. For the religious naturalist our connection to nature is a profound spiritual experience that evokes awe, wonder and reverence.

The epic of cosmic and biological evolution is the narrative that underlies humanistic religious naturalism and that provides the individual with a meaningful worldview and a sense of belonging to a larger process. The epic of evolution that begins with the big bang provides us with a vision of the universe as a single reality, one long spectacular process of change and development, an unfolding drama, a universal story for humankind—our story. Like no other story it humbles us as we contemplate the complexity of the cosmic process, and it amazes us when we try to imagine its magnitude. Like no other story it evokes reverence as we feel its power, and awe and

wonder as we visualize its beauty. Like no other story it gives us a scientifically based cosmology that tells us how we came to be and what we are made of.

As Amy Hassinger notes, “The basic elements of our bodies—carbon, calcium, iron—were forged inside supernovas, dying stars, and are billions of years old. We are, in fact, made of stardust. We are intimately related to the universe.”<sup>9</sup> “Out of the stars we have come,” sang UU minister Robert Weston years ago in a wonderful reading retained in our hymnal. Like no other story it teaches us that we are all members of one family sharing the same genetic code and a similar history, and it evokes gratitude and astonishment at the gift of life itself and inspiration for responsible living. Like no other story it gives meaning and purpose to human beings as the agents responsible for the current and future stage of evolution, psychosocial evolution.

The epic of evolution is “everybody’s story,” but it is uniquely the story the religious naturalist claims. It is a story with a scientifically based worldview and values that are both scientific and morally relevant to the human situation. It is a story of the creative powers of matter-energy and of the changing and adaptive powers of living cells. It is a story of the growth and transformation of living beings. It is *our* sacred story.

The late Carl Sagan wrote: “A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later such a religion will emerge.”<sup>10</sup> That religion is emerging among us, among Unitarian Universalists.

## **7. The Environment**

One of the benefits of combining humanism and religious naturalism is a strong environmental ethic. Humanism has historically emphasized human beings and ignored our natural environment. Perhaps that’s excusable since humanism began about 100 years ago before we were aware of the dangers of industrialization to the environment. When you merge naturalism with humanism you have an environmental ethic based, not simply on the adverse effects of the environmental crisis on human beings (though that is very important), but also on the inherent worth and sacred nature of the natural world. That gives it a two-fold basis for a strong environmental ethic, a necessity in a world threatened by environmental destruction.

## **8. Spirituality**

Over the last twenty-five or thirty years spirituality and spiritual growth have become important in UU congregations. We humanists have been reluctant to adopt the emphasis on spirituality in part, I suspect, because it has connotations of supernaturalism. But it need not. Spirituality can have meanings that we humanists can affirm. In fact spirituality is already part of the lives of most of us, and it is an essential part of *religious* humanism.

We misunderstand spirituality if we think it refers only to tuning out the world through meditation or prayer. A true spirituality will make us more aware of people and

of human needs. The truly spiritual person is someone who cares about others and works to end poverty, hunger, malnutrition, and all forms of injustice and oppression. To me a loving, caring person is a person who is alive spiritually.

The word spirit comes from the Latin word *spiritus*, meaning breath, so spirituality is the breath of life, what makes life vital, that which gives us something to live for, that which deepens and broadens our lives and makes us truly human. Compassion and caring for others is a true measure of spirituality. UU humanist theologian Sharon Welch writes that spirituality is that which brings people into full engagement with the world.

I think of the spiritual as a quality of life in this world. For one thing it is the dimension of depth in our lives. It is the opposite of what is shallow in our society—the materialistic consumerism of our culture, the preoccupation with things and with what is trivial in life. People who are talking about spirituality are seeking greater depth, greater meaning, something more than what our culture says is the good life.

Parker Palmer has defined spirituality as the eternal human longing to be part of something greater than our own egos. For humanists that means being part of a cause or an institution that is larger than ourselves, dedicated to making the world a better place. That cause could be humanism itself, or Unitarian Universalism, or freedom, or social justice or a number of other possibilities.

One of my former students suggested that to her spirituality meant love of the universe. To me that means experiencing the sense of reverence, awe, and wonder at this incredible universe in which we live. It also means love of life and gratitude for one's time on this beautiful earth. Carl Sagan said it well: "When we recognize our place in an immensity of light years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual."<sup>11</sup>

## **9. Ethics**

A few years ago an old friend visited the church where I was preaching and heard a social justice sermon. As we talked during coffee hour she asked, "But without God what is your foundation for ethics and morality? Why a concern for justice? Why be good at all?" I answered that a commitment to the welfare of all human beings was the cornerstone of my ethics, but that answer did not satisfy her.

The idea that ethical living depends on belief in God and following his commands permeates our society. For this reason, there is a popular misconception that humanism is unethical, having no basis for differentiating between right and wrong.

That idea is based on the assumption that religion must be the basis of morality. That assumption is not true historically, logically or empirically. It can be shown that moral precepts developed over thousands of generations in human societies without a religious basis. Religion came later.

I also believe that brain research, neuroscience, will eventually show that evolution has wired our minds with moral precepts. Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson believes, for example, that cooperativeness and empathy, which are the bases of much of our moral behavior, are inherited because people who cooperate tend to live longer and produce more offspring. Thus genes predisposing people toward cooperative behavior would have come to predominate in the human population as a whole.

Recent brain research has shown that generosity and altruism activate a primitive part of the brain that is activated in response to food or sex. The result is a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction. Giving is pleasurable; our brains are wired to enjoy altruism.<sup>12</sup> Jesus' teaching that it is more blessed to give than to receive is corroborated by neuroscience.

The late UU minister John Ruskin Clark wrote these words which sum up what I believe about the origins of ethics: "Norms of good and evil, of right and wrong, did not spring full-blown from somebody's head; they developed slowly over generations of trial and error; it is part of the mark of being human that we benefit from the experience of others; To recognize that concepts of good and evil are derived from human experience is to give them a timeless validity... The realization that morals are empirically grounded does not invalidate traditional norms; it greatly reinforces them."<sup>13</sup>

## 10. **Conclusion**

I believe that any religious faith that is truly relevant to the 21st century must have at least these five characteristics.

First, it must affirm that human beings are an integral part of nature. We are not separate and distinct from the rest of the natural world; we are part and parcel of it. We are related to every living creature, both plant and animal. We are not dominant over nature as once we believed, but are its stewards and trustees.

Second, therefore, any religion of the future will affirm humankind's responsibility to preserve and sustain the natural world. The future of life on this planet and indeed the survival of the planet itself depend on it.

Third, any viable future religion must take seriously the implications for religion of the remarkable discoveries of the modern natural and human sciences. The religion of the future should be a religion that learns from science and adapts its teachings accordingly.

There are three ways in which religion and science have been related. One of these is that religion simply rejects the discoveries of modern science as illustrated by conservative Christianity's rejection of Darwinian evolution. A second way is what is called parallelism, which regards religion and science as dealing with two different kinds of knowledge and thus like parallel lines, never intersecting. Liberal Christianity generally holds this view and thus can accept both God and immortality and evolution. The third way is what I think of as a marriage of religion and science. This means that

religion learns much from science and adapts its worldview to what it learns. That is the way of humanistic religious naturalism.

Fourth, a 21st century religion will recognize the importance of both reason and reverence. The human ability to think critically and constructively has made possible our many artistic achievements and medical and technological advances, but it is only reverence, understood as feelings of respect and awe, that can save us from the hubris that would destroy all the good we have accomplished. As Paul Woodruff writes in his elegant little book, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*. “Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations.”<sup>14</sup> And it is reverence that keeps human beings from acting like gods. It is thus essential to our true humanity. And while reverence is not only a religious quality, a religion without a profound sense of reverence is no religion at all.

Finally, the religion of the future must affirm those values that help to make our lives more fully human. Becoming more fully human involves the transformation of the mind and heart from self-centered-ness to a sense of one’s self as part of a larger sacred whole and to a deep commitment to the human and natural worlds. It is about transformation from a shallow life of fear, greed, hedonism, and materialism to a meaningful life of love and caring, gratitude and generosity, fairness and equity, joy and hope and a profound respect for others.

The grounding of religious humanism in religious naturalism makes it possible to affirm a perspective that includes these five characteristics and thus qualifies as a religion for the 21st century.

Let me close with those words from Carl Sagan quoted earlier: **“A religion that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge.”** I believe it is emerging among us Unitarian Universalists today.

## *Notes*

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  3. Commission of Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association, “Engaging our Theological Diversity,” Boston MA, Beacon Press, 2005
  4. Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics part II*, New York: Penguin Books, Prop. 48

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5. Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, Washington, D.C., Humanist Press, 1997, p. 15
  6. Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, New York: Anchor Books, 2003, p. 89
  7. Chet Raymo, *Skeptics and True Believers*, New York, Walker, 1998, pp. 20-23
  8. *Ibid.*, p. 47
  9. Amy Hassinger, "Welcome to the Ecozoic Era," *UU World*, XX, no. 1, spring 2006, p. 28
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  11. Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, New York: Random House, 1996, p29.
  12. *Washington Post*, 5-28-07, p. A-1 and A-9
  13. John Ruskin Clark, *The Great Living System*, Boston, Skinner House Books, 1977, p. 186-7.
- Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 3
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