

WALKING MORE HUMBLY – AND THRIVING

Lecture 3 in the 2011–2012 Minns Lectures

What Was and Is Required:

Three Forums on the Renewal of Unitarian Universalism in the 21st Century

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The Rev. Alan Taylor, Sr. Minister, Moderator

Respondents:

The Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Johnson-Doyle

The Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie

What doth the Lord require of thee

but to do justly, to love mercy,

and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8

The Rev. Dr. Johnson-Doyle

First, my thanks to the Minns Committee, to Alan and the kind folks here at Unity Temple, and to John for his words and his invitation. I'm honored.

John asked that I specifically think with you about humanism, which I'm happy to do. I grew up as a Unitarian Universalist in the Pacific Northwest, where humanism and religious naturalism have long been fused into one. I serve a congregation in Rockford which has been led, over its history, by classical Channing-style Unitarians, by transcendentalist-inspired radicals, by liberal Christians, by theistic humanists, by at least one sociopathic narcissist and, before me for almost thirty years, by a secular humanist. The congregation, I think, is still trying to get used to me – an ontological Taoist, an ethical Christian, and an epistemological humanist. So the question of what humanism is and might become in a thriving Unitarian Universalism, what humanism might mean in a post-modern, post-denominational world, what about humanism, to borrow a phrase, is transient and what is permanent, this question is of great interest to me personally and of great importance to Unitarian Universalism, especially here in the upper Midwest.

I want to begin, however, quite afield from Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Chicago, where humanism as a religious force among us really took off. Quite afield – namely, 1504 in Florence, Italy. It was in that year that Michelangelo finished his commission to turn a large block of marble into a statute of the Biblical hero, David. You’ve all seen an image of this statue, and some of you have probably seen it in person. It’s so ingrained in our consciousness that it can be hard to recognize the revolutionary nature of the work – there is no humility here, only power and the celebration of the human body. The muscles bulge, the eyes command, and nothing is hidden, nothing is shameful about humanity.

John Dietrich did not invent humanism. Humanism is not a special providence of Unitarian Universalism. These Catholic Renaissance humanists – Michelangelo, Rafael, Erasmus, and the rest; if anyone deserves credit, they do but of course, they claimed to be giving re-birth – re-natality, Renaissance – to the Ancient Greeks, whose celebration of wisdom, sexuality, arts and culture, and humanity was lost to the “dark ages” of Christian imperialism.

It is not a coincidence, David Bumbaugh taught me in my Unitarian Universalist history class, that it was Northern Italian humanists like Fausto Sozzini who embraced and spread Miguel Serveto’s ideas, who celebrated humanity and the gift of reason, denied original sin and sacrificial atonement, and started us down the road to seeing Jesus as a human being, not God.

Humility? Not so much. The humanism of Michelangelo’s David proclaimed, in every taut ligament, that we’ve had enough of self-abnegation, enough of self-mortification. God has blessed human beings with bodies and minds and creativity and intelligence, so let us give thanks through how we live, through the use of these things for good.

If we can find the pro-humanism thesis in 1504 Florence, we find the Hegelian anti-thesis in Adrienne Rich’s 1977 poem *Natural Resources*:

There are words I cannot choose again:

humanism androgyny

Such words have no shame in them, no diffidence
before the raging stoic grandmothers:

their glint is too shallow, like a dye
that does not permeate

the fibers of actual life
as we live it, now.

There is a humanism that must die, or is already dead,
though the body may still be a little warm:

A benevolent but colonial humanism,
one that believes that the Brights have all the answers,
that we know what is best for you.

A humanism that strips from the world any sense of enchantment or mystery, one that
sees itself as a kind of bleach for the mind, fading all the color, cleaning out supposed
imperfections.

I've chosen the bleach metaphor deliberately, for there is a kind of humanism which is
color-blind, and not in a good way, a humanism that cannot recognize that its allergy to
prayer and spirit and movement, its fondness for discussion over experience and its
willingness, indeed, eagerness, to pounce at every intellectual or grammatical error, these
qualities are a huge turn-off for many people of color, and for many young adults.

When I was doing my internship, at one of our humanist temples, the first Unitarian
Society of Minneapolis, where John Dietrich had preached for so many years, I preached

an Earth Day sermon and closed by reminding folks, á la Chief Sealth, that we are a strand in the web, not the weaver.

Afterwards, I was cornered in the lobby –

“It sounded like you were saying there is a weaver of the web.

You’re not saying that, are you?!?”

No, I assured, whether or not there is a weaver, my point is only that it ain’t us.

He was only partially reassured.

This form of humanism is dying as a religious option among us. If Sam Harris and the rest of the aggressive atheists want to keep this option alive, that’s their business. But if we cling to this humanism, then we deserve neither to inherit our history nor thrive in our future. This way of doing humanism must die.

But, as our foray into sixteenth-century Florence should remind us, this particular, twentieth-century atheistic humanism is not all that humanism is. And I, for one, am not ready to give up on humanism altogether.

If humanism will be part of a thriving Unitarian Universalism into the future, it seems to me that it will have a few key distinguishing characteristics. Briefly, let me name five.

1. It will be ecological. Humans are part of the natural world, not apart from it. William Murry describes his perspective as “humanistic religious naturalism” – and I appreciate the sense that “humanistic” is an adjective and not a noun, a way of being religious. To place humanism in the context of religious naturalism and ecology is one way of staying humble – a clear reminder of the “something larger than ourselves to which we belong.”

2. It will be spiritual. David, standing there in marble, is spiritual. A thriving humanism will celebrate that human beings are spiritual, that we participate in something larger, which we can call spirit or a hundred other names, but which is bigger than us and is not fully known.

Which will never be fully known. Walk humbly with your God. A sense of spirit, a willingness to shut up and listen, to feel, to pray, to be in religious community with folks who are theists and deists, Christians and Pagans, to hold no veto power over the words which may be said from the pulpit, this sense of spiritual maturity and spiritual energy will be an essential part of humanism if humanism is to continue among us. To do this, we must forever and unambiguously disassociate “atheism” from “humanism.” We’re smart enough to handle a simple Venn diagram. Not all atheists are humanists and not all humanists are atheists. Some humanists are theists, some are agnostic, and many find debates about God to be totally and completely useless.

This, let us remember, was John Dietrich’s original point: Dietrich was a theist. He believed in God, but he thought we spent too much time talking about God and not enough time talking about and doing things to celebrate humanity and make human life better.

3. It will be ethical. Humanism, at its best, has insisted on this brute fact before all others – before you stands a human person. Say it with me: the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

That is an ethical challenge of the first order; to see worth and dignity in every person; no matter how different they might be from us, no matter what they’ve done or failed to do. This is partly an act of humility, that others are human too. But in a world of suicide and self-injury, of anorexia and addiction, humanism can also be an appropriately egotistical act – to remember that “inherent worth and dignity” means you, too. You are a human – imperfect, as we all are, but worthy. Your body, your life, has dignity too.

4. It will be scientific. I take a lot of post-modernism seriously, but those post-moderns who reject the scientific process as another meta-narrative make, in my mind, a category error. Humanism should still affirm science, the freedom to engage in discovery through science, and should be willing to adapt its ideas based on scientific progress. This, too, is an act of humility – for science affirms, always, that we are still learning, that ideas can be disproved. And nothing inspires humility quite so much as knowing that we can see

only 2500 of the 300 billion stars in our galaxy, and that our galaxy is only one of at least 200 billion galaxies in the universe. Before that fact, one can only kneel in awe.

5. It will be universal. Humanism needs to be more humble about culture and diversity, less colonial and more curious. But as a matter of faith, I still believe that we are one human family, that all people are kin. I want a humanism that says, proudly, that human beings have more in common, by virtue of our shared humanity, than whatever divides us. This is not to erase difference – indeed, the opposite. When we are more comfortable in our common nature, we need not fear diversity or erase variety.

When humanism does these things – and it can – then I think it can reclaim or discover enough diffidence, enough power, to stand before the raging stoic grandmothers with integrity. If humanism sings and dances, if it moves us to celebrate our bodies and to put them on the line for the sake of other human beings, if humanism inspires confidence, curiosity and creativity, if it moves us to make the world better, and reminds us that we can do so, if humanism opens its heart and its mind, well, then, I hope that humanism will continue to shape our faith and our lives for the century to come.