

Humanism

Adapted from Essentials of Humanism by Kendyl Gibbons

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Adaptation by Joanna Foley

What does faith mean to you? That's a question that Jeff and I have been exploring with those of you who've taken part in our recent Stewardship small group meals. As we have broken bread together, our guests came up with interesting answers, sometimes declaring themselves atheist or agnostic or humanist.

Today's message is an adaption of a sermon by Kendyl Gibbons from a book called Humanist Voices in Unitarian Universalism. We're going to explore how humanism looks at the world and how it is similar or different from Unitarian Universalism.

The terms atheist and humanist are sometimes used interchangeably but they are not, in fact, the same. A person can be an atheist without embracing any of the commitments of Humanism. A person could be indifferent about the possible existence of supernatural beings and still live as a committed Humanist.

Humanism is a religious position and a spiritual path. It looks beyond the idea that a self-conscious personal god does or does not exist.

Humanism is founded on the more radical claim that the existence or nonexistence of such a god or goddess or gods (plural) does not matter much. Humanism is focused on the world of human existence as it is known through human experience.

What Humanists are willing to say about the universe and our lives is based exclusively on our own shared experience and reason. "Because the Bible tells me so"—or the Buddha—carries no weight.

We trust that which can be proven by evidence, science or careful study. We trust the cumulative moral insight and experience of the human race. Humanism encourages us to distinguish things as they are from things as we might wish or imagine them to be.

Humanism begins with the idea that our bodies and our minds are the tools with which we must engage this world and our existence.

Humanist philosopher Ken Patton sums it up: “Without any say in the matter, we are born. Without vote or rebuttal, we die.” These two facts are the givens of human experience. The question becomes, how do we respond to this situation.

We can consider thoughtfully what might constitute a good life, a life worth living even in the face of certain death. All religions have their origins in the question of what it means to live a good life.

Some religions answer that question by supposing that our lives are simply preparation for other, future states of existence. If you believe that, what constitutes living well now is whatever will pay off in the greatest happiness in the hereafter. This approach might be characterized as Let us try-- for Pie in the Sky-- By and By.

Many people suppose that our state of consciousness after the body's death will be just what it was before the body's conception: nonexistent. Others suppose that we cannot know the answer to this mystery. No compelling evidence is available either way.

A few of us have had uncanny personal experiences that incline us to think there may be something more beyond this life. I am one of those people. But I and many others think it is most important to focus on what makes a good life here and now, calling upon ourselves and others to do our best to live with Right Action in this world.

Humanism accepts the reality of death as part of what makes learning to be fully human an urgent and compelling task. Knowing that we are mortal and that our time is limited says that we must start now in figuring out how to live well. Humanism teaches that we are accountable, individually and collectively, for what we make of ourselves and the world.

Humanism calls for living a life where we are not waiting to be saved or rescued or excused. We seek spiritual maturity—submitting as gracefully as we can to both the logic and the arbitrariness of the universe as it happens to exist. And as UUs we strive to change those realities by applying intelligence, effort and the principles by which the universe itself operates.

History tells us that human progress occurs when people are determined to understand why the world is the way it is, figuring out how it might be changed and then proceeding to change it—in the company of like-minded people.

Humanism says that the wellbeing of the planet is the good we are driven to seek. There is no arbitrary obedience required of us against our own common sense. Humanism begins with the understanding that no human being can be fully happy at the expense of another or even knowing about the misery of other people. Until all humans have the opportunity create for themselves their version of the good life, none of us is as happy as we might be.

The suffering of others always diminishes our own pleasures. We are social creatures, designed by evolution to reflect one another's experience in our own perceptions. In short, the interconnected web of all existence of which we are a part is a basic tenet to UUs and to Humanists.

Humanism teaches that the more you take time to know and understand human nature and the nature of the world, the more likely you are to be effective in making your life what you most truly want it to be. Over time our vision of what constitutes the good life matures and expands and grows deeper.

But for all its celebration of our intellectual capacity to understand the world and ourselves, Humanism is not just a function of the mind. It teaches us that the life well lived has emotional, aesthetic and moral fulfillment as well as mental and physical satisfactions. Love for those closest to us is one aspect of this. The compassion for all creatures is another. Also important are the capacity to be touched by beauty and the longing for justice in the world. Humanism asks us to attend to all these aspects of our life.

Humanism invites us into compassionate connection with others so that we may build the common good and in that enterprise, make our own days glad.

It offers us no assurances of divine love or a life to come but rather the strong belief that this life matters, that we create our meaning here and now, in this very world. It teaches us to find our satisfactions in work and service, rest and love and to accept our fears and failures for what we may learn from them. This resonates with our UU belief in creating beloved community.

Humanism summons us to gratitude because that is how we become most fully human. To live well is to live with intelligence and integrity, with justice and compassion, with wholeness and beauty. And finally with thanks and praise to ourselves and our fellow humans, for all that is in our fragile, tragic, precious life.