

Everyday Spirituality, Part 3—

Abundance of Life through the Lens of Religious Humanism

Rev. Roger Jones
October 13, 2013
UU Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #38, Morning Has Broken; #354, We Laugh, We Cry; #355 We Lift Our Hearts in Thanks
Special Music: for cello and piano: Panis Angelicus, by Cesar Franck; You Walk with Me, by David Yazbek from *The Full Monty*.

Shared Offering:
For [Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services](#)

Joys and Sorrows

Pastoral Prayer for Columbus Day

In this country, tomorrow is Columbus Day, a day recognizing the encounter of European travelers with varied communities of native peoples on the islands and continents of the Americas. As we reflect on the richness of our history, let us not forget the devastation, heartbreak and bloodshed that many native peoples have endured. As we gather today on this gentle place—this land under our feet, here in this lovely valley—let us imagine those peoples who called this land home for centuries. Let us be humbled by their spirits and mindful of them while we as a congregation prepare to build for the next half-century of this beloved community.

As we consider the embedded inequities we inherit and live with and live within, let us remain open to those who still struggle for environmental justice, social equity, personal dignity, and inner peace, in this country. Let us engage complex challenges with humility and curiosity. May we be able to be a force for healing. Amen.

Readings: #515, *Singing the Living Tradition*
[Gospel of Mark 2:23-27](#)

Sermon

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” The Golden Rule. Versions of it have existed in most religious traditions and many cultures: Treat others as you would like to be treated, and refrain from acting in ways that would cause harm to others. Dr. William R. Murry points out that this rule, this idea, exists in ancient philosophy, and predates theistic religion. It does not need a divine source to make it right. It makes sense, he says. It feels right. Human experience confirms: it’s a good rule.*

Religious humanism says that living a moral, good, and abundant life does not depend on the existence of a supernatural source of goodness. Humanism finds enough non-theistic reasons for us to live with joy and act with kindness, honesty, courage, compassion and generosity. For example, our evolutionary survival as a species depends on cooperation with others and respect for differences among people.

In this country, religious humanism claimed its place in the religious landscape in 1933, with the publishing of the Humanist Manifesto in a magazine. Those who put their names under the advertisement were a few dozen philosophy professors and Unitarian ministers. Plus one Jewish rabbi and one Universalist minister.

Through much of the 20th century, Humanism was the dominant religious attitude of many UU congregations, including ours in Sacramento. It was a humanistic perspective that first drew me into a UU church in the Midwest, 31 years ago. On our first visit, my friends and I marveled at singing familiar Protestant hymn tunes but with some of the words replaced by non-theistic ones. Growing up in my middle-of-the-road church, I had never sung “Morning Has Broken” in worship! I didn’t know you could use a poem in place of a Bible reading. I found nourishment in the UU preacher’s humanistic language for addressing the struggles and aspirations of life. She was a breath of fresh air.

These days, our Unitarian Universalist congregations embrace a wide realm of religious words. We have a larger toolbox of spiritual practices and perspectives. We use what works for us, look for what helps us make sense of life. We try out new tools—varied scriptures, music, words, and insights. We borrow tools from one another. Humanism is one of those tools. Since discovering that first UU congregation 31 years ago, I’ve gone back to visit it. Its toolbox of religious language and spiritual practices has grown larger. So has mine. I find comfort, meaning and hope in a variety of sources. But a humanistic outlook is my touchstone in speaking about matters of faith.

[Religious and secular humanism(s).]

William Murry is a retired Unitarian Universalist minister and a former president of [Meadville Lombard Theological School](#), my own seminary, in Chicago. He’s a leading proponent of religious humanism in our movement. He makes a distinction between secular humanism and the religious kind. Secular humanism is often aimed at rejecting and refuting beliefs in a supernatural God. Religious humanism says merely that such beliefs are not necessary to live an authentic life or promote a good society.

Most humanists hold similar attitudes about science, reason and freedom of belief, whether or not they join a congregation. What makes a humanist a *religious* one, Murry says, is that we seek the support of spiritual community—places where we can share our values and find help in living them out. We are drawn to engagement with others to explore questions of meaning, purpose, and hope. We seek to build communities of respect, places where we learn compassion and practice it. In spiritual community we seek to celebrate life and love. In short, a religious humanist is a humanist who comes to services.

Both kinds of humanists have been accused of being too “heady”—too focused on intellect, reason, argument. Murry says this is not a fair description anymore. He notes that human motivations are a combination of reason and feeling, a mixture of thoughts and emotions. In the past several decades, philosophy, psychology, and the social sciences have shown that we choose our

actions not by the head alone, but also by the heart. We make choices based on reason and on feeling. We strive to be good people because it feels right.

Humanism asserts the need for compassion, respect, freedom and love in human relations. It affirms the experience of wonder and the expression of reverence. And it affirms happiness!

Yes, humanism is bold to say that happiness is a worthy goal for human life, and everyone deserves to be happy. Many religious traditions have affirmed this too, but this message got obscured in histories of authoritarianism and imposed spiritual shame. The value of human happiness has no true place in a fundamentalist religion, dictatorial communism, or intolerant nationalism. In such rigid ideologies, happiness is sacrificed to the system.

Let me say that many moderate mainstream religious traditions and communities do promote happiness, joy and pleasure in life. They embrace the spirit of Psalm 34 when it sings: “O taste and see, that the Lord is good.” O taste and see, that life is good! While leaving the Lord for others to ponder, religious humanists keep affirming the goal of human happiness.

[Spirituality and humanism.]

For this sermon series, I’ve called spirituality “that which draws us toward wholeness.” Everybody deserves the opportunity to move toward more wholeness in our lives. The philosopher Robert Solomon says: “Spirituality means... the grand and thoughtful passions of life/ and a life lived in accordance with those grand thoughts and passions. Spirituality embraces love, trust, reverence, and wisdom as well as the most terrifying aspects of life, tragedy and death.” (Murry, 64)

As I see it, the vision of religious humanism is the full flourishing of every human being. In this vision, humanism overlaps with nearly all progressive expressions of religion. In the second century, when the Christian movement was barely 100 years old, one of the church fathers was Irenaeus of Lyon. Irenaeus wrote: “The glory of God is the human person, full alive.”

The full flourishing of the human being is a reflection of the glory of God! The same humanist vision, with a different way of saying it.

Religious traditions are created in human communities, for human ends. Even if a tradition is based on a divine concept, it was created by people. Of course, *not every* aspect of every tradition is beneficial to every person. Some customs are harmful. Some ideas are dangerous. Hence we need—all of us, everywhere, deserve and need—the freedom for dialogue, reason and reflection. Our tools of mind and heart can help us decide whether a given religious idea serves a human end or whether that practice or idea is instead repressing human dignity and freedom.

[Jesus the humanist.]

Two thousand years ago, on a Saturday, the day of rest, the Sabbath, Jesus of Nazareth was on the road with his disciples. They were hungry. As they passed a field of grain, they plucked some of the grain and prepared it for eating. The rule keepers of the Jewish faith heard that Jesus had allowed his disciples to do this work on the Sabbath, violating a commandment. So the rule-keepers confronted him about it. “You’ve got to be kidding me!” said Jesus. Well, there’s no record that he said it that way. According to the Gospel of Mark, this is what he did say: “The Sabbath was made for people; we were not made for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:23-27) The rule exists for the goodness of our lives; we do not live to serve the rule.

I can see where the rule keepers were coming from. They were the Pharisees. They were devoted to the faith of their people, the faith of their fathers and mothers. They cared about doing the right thing. That’s admirable, isn’t it?

Moreover, as Jews they lived under constant threat from the Roman Empire. It felt risky to have a radical rabbi asserting his own authority, and inviting disciples to question the standard view of the Commandments. Perfectly understandable. Keep things orderly and safe! Follow the rules.

But for Jesus, their caution looked like narrow mindedness and hard-heartedness. It looked stingy and unfair. In contrast, he took the side of his hungry followers. He took the side of human

flourishing, of permission-giving, of generosity. He did not reject his own tradition, but he used a real-life situation to invite critical reflection on his religion. This makes him a good humanist. Reflection, reason, fairness. Supporting real needs and human flourishing. He said: traditions are here to serve people; we don’t serve them. Amid worries of scarcity, he preached the spirit of abundance.

[Scarcity and abundance.]

In any given situation, distinguishing abundance from scarcity may depend on your perspective. It may depend on what you choose to see. For example, during autumn in many parts of the country, trees lose their foliage. As they get less warmth and sunlight, their leaves lose moisture, change color, turn brittle, and fall. What an image of scarcity: branches turning bare and brown after a summer full of green. Yet many people plan their vacations in order to watch this happening. Leaf peepers! Right now they are descending on New England.

They long to see the beautiful mix of brown, gold, yellow, and so many shades of red. They see abundance! As UU writer Brian Nelson says, these travelers find beauty in watching Mother Nature’s practice of drawing back and letting go. (Nelson, 183)[†] When I grew up in the Midwest, in the fall I watched how brown leaves would carpet the yard, hiding all the grass. I loved kicking the leaves ahead of me as I walked the sidewalk, and feeling the crunch as I stomped in a pile of them. I loved raking them into big piles—such an accomplishment for a kid. It was fun to see how many leaves you could stuff into a trashcan or bag. They spoke abundance to me.

Perhaps, in order to calm our worries of scarcity, we can call on a few humanist spiritual practices. Maybe we can crowd out worry with a joyful sense of abundance.

One practice is to celebrate life’s blessings with an attitude of gratitude.

This is what Murry says: “To be grateful for the gift of life, the bounty of the earth, the joy of love and human encounters is, I believe, a rich part of what it means to be religious.” To cultivate this attitude, of course, we need not have a divine object. Yet we do well to consider the ways we are

dependent on people other than ourselves, and on other creatures, and on forces beyond ourselves. As living beings, we are inter-connected and mutually dependent.

Robert Solomon speaks of spirituality as a “larger sense of life.” (Murry, 63) This resonates with me: a larger sense of life. It’s so easy to let myself get pulled into a narrow, small sense of life. To get pulled into the details of tasks and schedules. Distracted by the annoyances of the day, I get so accustomed to the things around me that I take for granted the textures, colors, flavors, and music of everyday life. But the practice of noticing everyday blessings is a way to cultivate a larger sense of life

An attitude of gratitude. Abundance. Words that appeal to the religious humanist in all of us. Yet we know that around the globe, for too many people, there may be no larger sense of life. For them, life is too short, harsh, full of hurt and hardship. To the humanist in all of us, this is a moral challenge. Murry writes that all “human beings are of inestimable worth and far more important than property, wealth, or even one’s own pleasure.” (Murry, 77)

If we aspire to live by the principle that everyone has worth, and everyone deserves happiness and safety, then we work for the wellbeing of other people. We strive to ease burdens of pain and hunger, to reach out when others are oppressed or in danger. We advocate and work to make human flourishing possible for future generations of people. We want to help. It makes sense to us. It feels right.

This leads us to the counterpart of gratitude, and that is the practice of generosity. What does generosity look like? Many things, I think.

Giving of your time and attention, your money and talents, your care and kind words.

Giving of yourself in service to others. Putting in several hours at a volunteer work party. Giving up your convenience for the benefit of others, surrendering a good night’s sleep to help another. Giving up your place in line or yielding your turn at the traffic stop. Generosity opens the way to a larger sense of life.

When we think of generosity, we often think of money. But it’s much more than money. People

without money can still practice generosity. Deciding how... is part of our spiritual practice!

Yet money can play a role, as a medium of exchange. We receive money in exchange for our talents or possessions; people pay us for things they value. We spend money to obtain services and items we value. When we give it away to express our values, it is an exchange of value.

Generosity is a natural human trait, a physical one. Murry notes that studies of the brain have shown that when we act with generosity, it can stimulate the same primitive part of our brain that is stimulated by eating food or having sex. I wish I had pointed this out before we took the offering.

Even so, Murry notes, generosity may not happen easily. In spite of that pleasure spot in the brain for generosity, our evolutionary heritage also makes us naturally selfish and guarded, which is the opposite of generous. This is why learning to be generous... is a spiritual practice.

When we think and reflect on acts of generosity, we feel our inter-connectedness with others and with life. When we feel connected, we long to be generous. By growing in generosity, we enjoy it as an everyday opportunity.

These are two primary spiritual disciplines of religious humanism: an attitude of gratitude and the practice of generosity. Through gratitude and generosity, we share in the fullness of life.

We seek to experience the blessings of joy, respect, belonging, safety, and peace. May we strive to extend these blessings and share them.

By our deeds of generosity and service, by our acts of kindness and courage, let us promote the full flourishing of the whole human family. May we celebrate life, and the life of every human being.

Let us give thanks for the gift of life, now and always. So may it be. Blessed be and amen.

*Murry, William R. *Becoming More Fully Human: Religious Humanism as a Way of Life*. New Haven: Religious Humanism Press, 2011. All quotations but one come from this book.

† Nelson, Brian. *Earth Bound: Daily Meditations for All Seasons*. Boston: Skinner House, 2004.