

## ***Reverent Humanism***

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*We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia. Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here.*

—Richard Dawkins

*Less and less do I see any difference now between research and adoration.*

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

*We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature, so that creation need not play to an empty house.*

—Annie Dillard

### **CHILDREN'S FOCUS**     *Happy Birthday Moon*, by Frank Asch

Summary: Bear misinterprets an echo as the moon speaking to him. They have a rich conversation which leads to giving one another birthday gifts. Then they even forgive one another for losing the gifts!

### **SERMON**

25 years ago this spring, I was looking for friendship and community—when I saw the newspaper ad for a meeting of the Humanist Association. I didn't know what a humanist was, but in the back of my mind I remembered some preacher condemning humanism as the source of American moral decline. So I figured it might be for me.

The meeting was held in the Dietrich Room of the First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis, which I had never heard of either, but I found myself in harmony, philosophically, with the Humanist group. Unfortunately, I didn't share that group's interests which, that first night at least, seemed to be bashing the excesses of religious orthodoxy. I never went back.

But I did go back to the Unitarian Society where on the next evening was held a gathering of the Young Adult Group. Here I met several people who would become my very good friends, including Jane.

I would later learn that this special room was named after John Dietrich, who had been the minister of the First Unitarian Society there in the 1920s and 30s. He was also one of the chief architects of the religious humanism which, while scandalous in his time, was to become the dominant philosophy in 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarianism.

Humanism is a term which has been applied in many different ways over the centuries. The “religious humanism” that inspires me today evolved from the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment focus upon freedom and reason, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Darwinist focus upon empiricism and the scientific process.

Religious Humanism evolved from the liberal humanistic Christianity of Unitarians and Universalists in the 1800s as these traditions moved from their institutional roots in the American colonies to the Midwest and then the West coast. Over about a century, in this unpoliced pioneering environment, individual religious beliefs became nuanced and varied. And as a result, the annual meetings of the Western Unitarian Conference would regularly include disputes over just what beliefs Unitarians held in common—or whether there should be a shared creed at all.

Then in the 1920s, John Dietrich, and Curtis Reese, Unitarian minister in Des Moines, Iowa, stated explicitly that their religious views were no longer theistic. Initially there were attempts to oust these atheistic ministers. But the liberal rules of the Western Conference did not allow for their excommunication. Had it turned out differently, a separate humanist church may well have split off and we wouldn't be the theologically diverse lot that we are here today.

By 1933, the growing humanist movement had coalesced enough to issue its first Humanist Manifesto. True to form the authors insisted that this was not a creed but an evolving document of which even they did not agree on every detail. The Manifesto was signed by a couple of dozen Unitarian ministers, a rabbi, some leading thinkers of the day including John Dewey, and one Universalist. True to form humanism *has* continued to evolve, and a Humanist Manifesto II was issued in 1973; number 3 came out several years ago.

By the 1960s, when the Unitarians and Universalists finally formally merged, religious humanism had come to dominate our movement. But since then we have been broadened by other powerful movements including feminism, earth-centered traditions, and Buddhism. Today we are a movement of theistic and atheistic Christians, monotheists, pantheists, and polytheists of countless other stripes, and agnostics who prefer a wide range of labels, or none.

Ironically, if it hadn't been for the atheistic humanists making their way into our movement, there might not have been room later for the goddess folks. Actually some of the humanists were kind of grumpy about the pagans and the new agers coming in in the 90s, saying, “we worked so hard to get one god out of our congregations and now you wanna bring in a whole bunch of ‘em?” But as usually happens in an inclusive environment, we gradually figure out how similar we are across our differences, and we come to celebrate our common interests.

I still call myself a religious humanist though, if I must have a label, perhaps partially out of nostalgia. I admire and am so grateful to the people who forged that intellectual tradition and built its institutions so that these would be available to me at a difficult turning point in my life. But I would certainly not martyr myself for the label. Nowadays there are people who call themselves secular humanists, and naturalistic humanists, and even naturalistic theists and liberal christians all have views similar to what I call “religious humanism.”

So when I tell you what *I* mean by this term, I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that religious humanism offers a path to wisdom, salvation, or social harmony unlike *any* other. Still, I'll tell you what it means to me:

As a religious humanist, I affirm that the focus of religion should be on living in the here and now. I use more mystical language periodically, in a poetic sense, but I have to acknowledge that I am not in touch with any higher consciousness that might exist beyond the boundaries of the natural world.

As a humanist I understand that everything I experience or believe is limited and distorted by the human faculties with which I perceive and comprehend. I relish encounters with both the tangible and the intangible. I experience wonder and awe and love and even the unexplainable... and I say that these are real, but I understand them as entirely *natural* experiences.

Mathematics, forgiveness, the big bang, serendipity, logic, human culture, and the color purple: each of these will remain forever outside my ability to fully grasp, and yet I delight in their mysteries even while I will probably always be trying to analyze their origins and meanings.

Also, as a religious humanist I affirm that human beings can, must, and do make choices. The laws of nature are real but they have not predetermined our futures. So our choices have consequences.

As a humanist I affirm and support the ideals of human equality, civil liberties, global interdependence, and environmental consciousness. And finally, I believe that "spiritual" endeavors are no more valuable than science, art, education, community, and friendship. As far as I can tell there is simply no meaningful way to divide the sacred from the profane.

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There are some common misconceptions about humanism. Do humanists believe that humans are basically good? No. But humanists reject the notion that people are basically bad. Rather: we have the capacity and the responsibility to choose.

Do humanists believe that human values are the pinnacle of evolution? No. Human values are far from perfect, but: there is no other source to draw upon. Humanism confirms we have to figure this out on our own, using our relationships and our intelligence. Humanism says: there is nowhere else to turn for answers, *we have to figure this out* on our own ... although it doesn't say that we ever will.

And while I affirm and defend much of humanist philosophy, there are also some tender spots for me.

1<sup>st</sup>, Humanism has traditionally denounced theism. I find this usually unnecessary, sometimes arrogant, and generally inconsistent with the humility essential to humanism.

2<sup>nd</sup>, with their strong emphasis upon reason, early humanists tended to dismiss emotion, intuition, and other tools for gaining knowledge. They thought a Spock-like focus on the facts was not only essential, but sufficient.

3<sup>rd</sup>, the early humanists tended to be overly-*optimistic* about the future of society and our human role in shaping the planet. That optimism is undergoing adjustment right now, though, after a century of “progress” in weapons and heavy industry.

And finally, humanism tends to be activist—determined to shape the world. This isn’t terribly surprising—that a movement that grew up in the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century would have a “can-do” spirit. So maybe this is my age talking or maybe I’m reflecting on the state of the world, but my own evolving Humanism is gradually shifting toward a more Taoist appreciation of *non-action*, which is not passivity but, at its best, effortless spontaneity in going with the flow of the cosmos.

That’s a very quick summary of my take on religious humanism. Of course none of this theory matters unless those of us who call ourselves humanist are honest, kind, productive people.

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Honest, kind, productive...and *reverent* as well. I am, after all, formally known as the Reverend Paul Beckel. If that seems like an odd title for a humanist, then I should be more clear.

Reverence is an experience of awe and gratitude... an acknowledgement that I am in the presence of something beyond my comprehension.

Humanists are sometimes unsure about reverence, or unsure how to express it. We are proud iconoclasts. We may so enjoy being *irreverent*, that we can go to the extreme of disrespecting other sacred traditions. We may go too far because we know that skeptical irreverence is important—essential even—to keep us honest. We appreciate the Buddhists saying: “If you see the Buddha by the side of the road, kill him.” That’s strong humanist language for “If you think you’ve figured it all out, you’re in danger of deluding yourself. Smash that idol immediately.”

But reverence does not have to figure it *all* out. Reverence acknowledges the blessings which surround us at every moment. While my inner scientist and philosopher may speculate about *where* all these blessings come from, Reverence simply enjoys them.

Reverence acknowledges, marvels at, and celebrates the *energy* in the roaring rapids, in sharp winter winds, in desert sands, and in the moon, and in echoes from the past.

Reverence acknowledges that there is no absolute distinction between dead matter and life. There is a continuity, rather, with all things connected: from physical/chemical processes...to biological life...to consciousness...to beauty...to the ineffable.

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In a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip, Calvin is sitting at his school desk reading a test question: “What was the significance of the Erie Canal?” He answers, “In a cosmic sense, probably none at all.”

Reverence acknowledges that Calvin is right—in the cosmic sense, our small lives may not matter...and yet, we don’t live in the cosmic sense, we live here and now and therefore we do have significance.

Reverent Humanism means standing in that tension between the cosmic and the microcosmic... standing in awe looking inward *and* outward... energized by that wonder and awe to make a difference in the here and now.

Reverence is joyful, but not like a mindless, passive high. It is, rather, an effort to *re-make oneself* so as to reflect those qualities that we most admire. Reverence moves us not only to enjoy but to *serve* the ideals of truth, beauty, and goodness.

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The Buddhists strive to burst every illusion and crush every idol. Does this lead to disillusion and despair? No, because it leads to seeing things clearly, and when we can see clearly we revere what we see.

Art calls us to pay attention. What is the point of those gigantic sculptures of ordinary things like trowels and plants? They remind us: “Look, pay attention, find the wonder and magic in *all* things. The grains of sand all about you are HUGE.” The little children scampering underfoot are HUGE. The mouthful water that we carelessly spit out after brushing our teeth, it is HUGE—there is no life without it.

We can experience reverence in the way we eat; in our consciousness during mundane chores. We can experience reverence in our greeting to one another, like the Hindu greeting, “Namaste,” which means I salute the divine within you.

We commit to reverence when we accept our failing bodies. And when we touch, reverently, the bodies of others.

We commit to reverence by honoring our gifts—which means developing them.

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Humanists sometimes get testy when it is implied that, being so focused on reason and human experience rather than the guidance of a higher power, they cannot be moral. With Leonard Nimoy’s death, this week, however, I am reminded of Mr. Spock—who may not have been all human but was in some ways the most moral character on the Starship Enterprise—because his judgment was never clouded by how things would affect him personally.

Still, rather than Spock, I am personally more of a fan of Moonbear. Although Moonbear is pretty literal, and blinded by his naïve impressions of the moon and his own voice, he discovers beauty and purpose within whatever is set before him. He is both observant and generous. Both observant and generous: a witness and an aide to creation, “so that creation need not play to an empty house.”