

A Skeptic's Spirit
A Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
On May 8, 2011
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Readings

This reading is from *The Good Book: A Humanist Bible* written by A.C. Grayling

Seek always for the good that abides.
There can be none except as the minds finds within itself;
Wisdom alone affords everlasting and peace-giving joy,
for then, even if some obstacle arises,
It is only like an intervening cloud,
which floats beneath the sun but never prevails against it.
When will you attain this joy? It will begin when you think for yourself,
When you truly take responsibility for your own life,
When you join the fellowship of all who have stood up as free individuals and said,
“we are of the company of those who seek the true and the right, and live accordingly;
In our human world, in the short time we each have,
We see our duty to make and find something good
for ourselves and our companions in the human predicament.”
Let us help one another, therefore, let us build the city together,
Where the best future might inhabit and true promise of humanity be realized at last.

This reading is taken *from the words of Stephen Fry*:

During an interview on the website “the Big Think” Stephen Fry -- the writer and actor who played the Learned Butler Jeeves, on the British program *Jeeves and Wooster* – and who was awarded 2011 lifetime achievement award from the *Humanist* Chaplaincy said:

Atheism comes into rather a bad press and I suppose I'd rather describe myself as a humanist, who human... I don't believe there is a God. .. What? Why? Who said? Where? Come on. And I love how when people watch, I don't know, David Attenborough or Discovery Planet type thing you know where you see the absolute phenomenal majesty and complexity and bewildering beauty of nature and you stare at it and then... and somebody next to you goes, “And how can you say there is no God?” “Look at that.” And then five minutes later you're looking at the lifecycle of a parasitic worm whose job is to bury itself in the eyeball of a little lamb and eat the eyeball from inside while the lamb dies in horrible agony and then you turn to them and say, “Yeah, where is your God now?” ... You can't just say there is a God because well, the world is beautiful. You have to account for bone cancer in children. You have to account for the fact that almost all animals in the wild live under stress with not enough to eat and will die violent and bloody deaths. There is not any way that you can just choose the nice bits and say that means there is a God ... The wonder of nature must be taken in its totality and it is a wonderful thing. It is absolutely marvelous and the idea that an atheist or a humanist if you want to put it that way, doesn't marvel and wonder at reality, at the way things are, is nonsensical. The point is we wonder all the way. We don't just stop and say that which I cannot understand I will call God, which is what mankind has done historically.

You know if we empower ourselves with responsibility over our actions.. and responsibility for directing and maintaining and creating our own ethical and moral frameworks, which is the most important thing really isn't it because ... the idea that we don't know right from wrong, but we have to take it from words put down in a book two, three, four, five, six thousand years ago and

dictated to rather hotheaded neurotic desert tribes is just insulting. It's just no, I mean you know if there were a God he would want us to be better spirited than to take his word for everything. Wouldn't he? If he gave us free will would he really want us to say, "No, I have to abide by everything that's written in this book, all the laws of circumcision and of eating and of... and what to do with menstruating women?" I mean, "I won't think for myself because that's not required of me." Come on. It's just not good enough and you know I have no quarrel with individuals who are devout and who have faith. I don't want to mock them. I really don't, but damned if I'm going to be told by them what to do with my body or damned if I'm going to have the extraordinary battles won by enlightenment over the past 400 years, to have those battles abdicated by a new dark ages.

Sermon

I look sometimes at the religious landscape of the world and I feel ~~dismay~~-disgust. Global warming could just as easily describe the spiritual climate around the world as fundamentalist religious fervor raises the global political temperature. And yet at the moments I might most easily despair, I remember that I am a Unitarian Universalist and that we are an entirely different kind of religious creature. We are the children of faith married to reason, of skepticism wedded to wonder. We are the children of mystery made fast to science. We owe much of what is best in Unitarian Universalism to an enduring humanist spirit. And that spirit is worth visiting and understanding.

Long ago there was one church, the Holy Roman Church and everything that stood outside it was heresy. The church was all powerful – dictating belief, education, marriage, health care, and people's private lives and economies. Yet, while it did these things it stood as far apart from people's lives as it could: the clergy lived in sequestered communities, the churches, built at the expense of and by the labor of the people, were not, truly sanctuaries for the people, the pope lived in his own gated and guarded community, the bishops who carried out his wishes lived opulent lives and wrestled for control of various regions, and scripture which the church claimed to interpret into law was written in a language that only the clergy and not even all of them could read. The people were bowed down and dwelt in shadow. And yet, over time, there was a struggling toward change, because there is a spark in humanity that cannot be entirely quenched. That spark ignited the Renaissance in art and kindled philosophy with such brilliance that new possibilities are still coming to light today. And still – it is a struggle. And still there is deep shadow.

I would call the spark Skepticism – and humanism is its beacon.

Skepticism is natural to people – it is the partner of learning. Skepticism is the leading edge of curiosity, it is the movement of critical thought and it resides in every person – though it can certainly be blunted and even suppressed.

Humanism arose in the Renaissance -- like a child that suddenly can reach the countertop where the cookies are. Whether they had to drag over a chair, form a new religious movement, translate a text, publish under a pseudonym, or suffer exile, arrest, or death humanists took religion down from the exalted height upon which it had lived for centuries and asked boldly – Why can't I read the text? What does the text mean? Why should I not question this? Does it really serve or enrich our lives? what does this mean for my life? Does it make the world more fair? And above all – does it degrade life in the service of an idea?

Humanism began with a daring question – the question of freedom of will – Desiderius Erasmus engaged in a debate with Martin Luther contending that humanity did have free will. Now – that probably sounds like one of those arcane, foolish, and perhaps useless questions but it wasn't really. On the one hand Luther believed that we were all predestined to our fates and that only the grace of God and our affirmation of belief could save our immortal souls since we were all born in the original sin of Adam and Eve. Erasmus, on the other hand, believed that we could, with our own virtue, make choices and commit acts of goodness that could themselves redeem us. You might still be thinking that this is

just as important as angels dancing on the head of a pin – but really -- if we play no role in our own fate – in this life or any other – we are mere specks floating in the dim light of history. However – if we have choice, if we have the capacity for goodness then not only are we — more than that original sin – but we are also agents of history, creatures that matter, and human being is not a mere shadow of divine being – but has divinity in itself. We are, beyond original sin and able – independent of the priesthood – to reflect upon good and evil and act upon those reflections.

Now – you may be enough of a skeptic yourself to be sitting there thinking – eh – what does this have to do with me? I mean – I broke free of all that years ago. Well – you probably wouldn't have, had it not been for all the humanists who came before you. Those who demanded that humanity stand up to our full height, who pulled the bible and the whole cookie jar of faith down off the high counter top and just kept asking questions.

It was humanists who looked at the God of the Hebrew Scripture and asked – is this God an inspiring example or simply a terrible warning? Is this a real God worthy of belief or a metaphor? And if it is a metaphor – might there not be others that would serve as well – if not better? It was humanists who looked at the God of the Christian Scripture and asked – what sort of God would send his own son or any creature to be intentionally tortured and killed? What sort of God would demand payment in blood for sins and errors? What sort of God would silence women and condone slavery?

Like so many forms of thought, humanism changed over time. Our own religious movement was home to some of the strongest humanistic thought in American society. In the late 18th century ministers who helped shape the early Unitarian Church – like the Reverends Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew in response to the excesses of the so-called Great Awakening. Around the country preachers whipped the people into a frenzy over salvation and encouraged people to worship in a fevered spirit and to give themselves over to the fear of God. The humanist voice of our early movement questioned the abandonment of reason, questioned the fear of God as the beginning of wisdom, and instead encouraged people to discover their inborn power to choose the good. Although the debates were heated – they didn't result in heretics burning at the stake – only in acres of pamphlets printed to fan the fires of debate far and wide. They also resulted in the churches of New England being won over to the progressive movement that was only just beginning to call itself Unitarianism. And then, in the 19th century people like Ralph Waldo Emerson looked at the religious landscape and wondered whether it was really very human to be quite so restrained and reasonable whether we might thrive better in our churches and our lives if we dug a little deeper into our souls and remembered that the purpose of religion ought to be lift humanity up in body, spirit, intellect, and society. Emerson claimed that new revelations were emerging in the blowing of clover and the working of the human mind.

While the circumstances may look different, in response to every era the voice of humanism rises and asks again: Why should I not question this? Does it really serve or enrich our lives? what does this mean for my life? Does it make the world more fair? And above all – does it degrade life in the service of an idea?

And just so, as science was rising around the world, it found a ready partner in humanism, as both humbled orthodox religion in their claims about evolution, reason, genetics, and human freedom. Both served, at least at first, to shrink the cosmos down to formulas and human scale and to try to bring the great mysteries into understandable and reasonable dimensions – though you and I know that the cosmos has since expanded staggeringly, again. Still in the nineteenth and early twentieth century the heady combination of science and humanism seemed to make all things possible for a humanity ever more the agents of our destinies.

Unitarian Universalism has always been a home for the humanist spirit, though in the second half of the twentieth century humanism became, largely, another name for atheism. In the larger society and within our own faith humanism became an important way to affirm that, in fact, god was not the manager of human affairs. The Holocaust knocked unquestioning faith out of many folk but even more

– the destructive power of ideologies made it clear to people who looked reflectively on history that any idea can become a God set up over people – with devastating and inhumane consequences. Fascism, Nazism, Communism each demonstrated that the greatest danger is in the unthinking veneration of principles over people – ideas over realities. Karl Popper, a 20th century philosopher critiqued both ideology and religion and wrote: “We all remember how many religious wars were fought for a religion of love and gentleness; how many bodies were burned alive with the genuinely kind intention of saving souls from the eternal fire of hell.” And Stephen Jay Gould, the natural scientist and philosopher said: "Skepticism is the agent of reason against organized irrationalism--and is therefore one of the keys to human social and civic decency."

Skepticism has remained on guard – but the tides are considerable. From the anti - Communist Red Scare Witch Trials of the 50s to family values of the Religious Right to the Fanaticism of Islamic Extremists and the violent colonialism of Jewish Extremists –to the hysteria and story-telling that passes for news today we are beset by false idols that exhort people to sentiments and acts of violence. It is pathetically easy to raise up an idea and then make that idea God and then explain – in a voice suffused with passion and conviction – that the God/Idea has given them a special mission. You can tell when such a God has been created as soon as the fevered Followers are willing to threaten, target, maim or kill any who oppose them. You can tell when ideas have become like Gods when people cannot discuss them without belittling and then vilifying one another. Suddenly each has become a high priest certain of an eternally true idea. It was William Blake who said: The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, and breeds reptiles of the mind. An expression that seems truly appropriate when we think about the fact that the reptilian part of the brain is considered the most basic and primitive aspect – reactive, automatic, fight or flight.

In our hymnals at the front we have our seven principles, which act as guides to our congregations that we might remember our best path. But we also have our sources of spiritual insight and among them is the fifth: Humanist teachings, which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit. At first Unitarian Universalist Church in Hyde Park in the high arch of the marble sanctuary there is an empty niche – as though some carved saint got tired of standing there and simply wafted down and walked out. But the niche has always been empty. It was put there by the co-architect and minister the reverend Van Ogden Vogt, who intended that every worshippers eye would be drawn up to the empty niche and that each would be reminded that there are many heroes and saviors and therefore not grow to proudly venerate only one. But, as luck, and human nature would have it – we do tend – even in open space – to create our own Gods and then sacrifice others upon their altars.

Even humanism can lose its way and make a God of its own skepticism. Over the last few years there has been an outpouring of skeptical writing – from Daniel Dennet to Richard Dawkins to Sam Harris and there have been times that I have wondered while reading them, whether atheism had become their new God. And yet I realize that their angry polemics exist because they fear, as I sometimes do, for the future of this world.

Unitarian Universalism is especially graced in that we can equally revere teachings of many faiths. We can see that the same light of human hopefulness shines out on Diwali, Christmas, Yule, Chanukkah, Wesak, that the fasting and feasting of many faiths speaks of a common yearning for cleansing and renewal, that the awe that humans experience can be felt in prayer, by the side of a great waterfall, in the realization of a new insight, through a fresh revelation made by science. But, in the midst of our celebration humanism asks that we make sure that we have not abandoned reason or betrayed life in a fever of delight. As a religious movement we are beckoned by the beauty in the world’s many religious paths and we are reminded to look with critical eye at every idea and ask the questions inherited from our humanist forebears.

Does it really serve or enrich our lives? what does this mean for my life? Does it make the world more fair? And above all – does it degrade life in the service of an idea?

And we need that critical eye more than ever. Our faith stands a crossroads in religious history. And, frankly, our unique blend of reason and spirit is more needed than ever. And the gift that we have received from humanism is most needed.

It is easy for us to hear and feel comfortable with the ideas of the third humanist Manifesto which says:

Humanists are concerned for the well being of all and respect those of differing yet humane views. We work to uphold the equal enjoyment of human rights and civil liberties in an open, secular society and maintain it is a civic duty to participate in the democratic process and a planetary duty to protect nature's integrity, diversity, and beauty in a secure, sustainable manner.

Thus engaged in the flow of life, we aspire to this vision with the informed conviction that humanity has the ability to progress toward its highest ideals. The responsibility for our lives and the kind of world in which we live is ours and ours alone.

Humanism keeps us deeply connected with this world and all the life and meaning that here dwells. When William Blake invites us to see the world in a grain of sand – and eternity in an hour, we can – without reference to a force or being beyond this world – see the intrinsic wonder and the inherent value that abounds around us. When we listen to the compassionate voices of humanism we are called to heed the cry of the world and to cherish all life upon it.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are a new kind of religious creature. For each one of us here – whether a person who holds to a faith in something we call God or never lets that word pass her or his lips -- we are each freed from savage deities. We crouch in no shadows and each one of us knows that he or she can encounter the world and the questions of being and while a minister can teach and point and remind – none of us requires an intermediary to deliver us the truth. We will each seek truth in the company of kindred seekers and those who have found paths that serve life and love. We are the children of faith married to reason, of skepticism wedded to wonder. We are the children of mystery made fast to science. We are born of the dust of stars and the dreams of our ancestors. And despair will run headlong away before us when we fully receive the gifts our inheritance and stand at our full height among all the mysteries and miracles and all the known worlds.