

Listening To Reason

Rod Richards

Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona

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Reading

Excerpts from "[Why I Am An Infidel](#)," by Luther Burbank

There are always at least two sides of every question which may be suggested to the human mind. Sometimes both views are correct, but far more often one is right, and according to facts and truth, the other wrong. All personal, social, moral and national success depends upon the judicious wisdom of our choices made by the aid of science. Narrow personal prejudices and feelings quite too often becloud the issue and ultimate defeat is the inevitable result.....

Ancient tribes and nations had many gods, often one for almost every phenomenon of nature. The Hebrews have the credit of inventing the conception of our monotheistic Jewish-Christian God, who however is represented as having most of the weaknesses and bad habits of primitive man; this was a step in the path of evolution toward man's present conception of God; the God within us is the only available God we know and the clear light of science teaches us that we must be our own saviors, if we are to be found worth saving; in other words, to depend upon the "kingdom within." The manhood and womanhood which would make the most of life in ~service~ to others is a sublimated form of the best of self which leads the way to a long lifetime of usefulness, happiness, health and peace.....

But even man today is far from free. Slaves yet to war, crime and ignorance --- the only "unpardonable sin." Slaves to unnumbered ancient "taboos," superstitions, prejudices and fallacies, which one by one are slowly but surely weakening under the clear light of the morning of science; the savior of mankind. Science which has opened our eyes to the vastness of the universe and given us light, truth and freedom from fear where once was darkness, ignorance and superstition. There is no personal salvation, there is no national salvation, except through science.....

Is there a problem equal to the building of a better humanity? Our lives as we live them are passed on to others whether in physical or mental forms tinging all future lives forever. This should be enough for one who lives for truth and service to his fellow passengers on the way. No avenging Jewish God, no satanic Devil, no fiery hell is of any interest to him. The scientist is a lover of truth for the very love of truth itself, wherever it may lead. Every normal human being has ideals, one or many, to look up to, reach up to, to grow up to. Religion refers to the sentiments and feelings; science refers to the demonstrated everyday laws of Nature. Feelings are all right, if one does not get drunk on them. Prayer may be elevating if combined with works, and they who labor with head, hands or feet have faith and are generally quite sure of an immediate and favorable reply.

Those who take refuge behind theological barbed wire fences, quite often wish they could have more freedom of thought, but fear the change to the great ocean of scientific truth as they would a cold bath plunge.

Mr. Bryan was an honored personal friend of mine, yet this need not prevent the observation that the skull with which Nature endowed him visibly approached the Neanderthal type. Feelings and the use of gesticulations and words are more according to the nature of this type than investigation and reflection.

Those who would legislate against the teaching of evolution should also legislate against gravity, electricity and the unreasonable velocity of light, and also should introduce a clause to prevent the use of the telescope, the microscope and the spectroscope or any other instrument of precision which may in the future be invented, constructed or used for the discovery of truth.

The Living Tradition which we share draws from 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.

In the Lutheran church in which I grew up, the word "Humanism" had a definite stigma attached to it.

We had made our peace with Catholics by this time. Though we still considered some of their doctrines about Purgatory and the Virgin Mary hopelessly misguided and un-Biblical, it was accepted that they were still part of the Christian family.

As for those who practiced non-Christian religions, they were not saved, certainly, but our minister was able to refer to them as seekers of Truth, and once described the

various world religions as spokes on God's wheel. What we Christians knew, he concluded, that others did not, was that Jesus was the hub of that wheel.

But "Humanism" was certainly not counted among those spokes. If Humanism had been introduced into the metaphor, it might have been as a stick thrust rudely in between the spokes as the wheel tried to turn. Humanism was seen as an arrogant rejection of true religion; an unholy usurping of the place that was rightfully God's; a dangerous deification of humans and their abilities; a shameless worship of Self. Whereas people of other faiths might be forgiven as misguided, humanists were willfully disobedient to the Word of God, believing only in themselves.

I will admit that it was a little hard for me to shake that notion of humanism. Even as I began to question the God of my childhood, I had enough experience with humans (most notably with *myself*) to know that we did not qualify to take God's place.

Ironically enough, it was in theological school that my understanding of humanism deepened, that I began to grasp it as a valid religious expression, and one that spoke to me. My questions seemed to be corresponding quite closely with those of many Humanist thinkers, within and outside the Unitarian Universalist tradition. I found, to my surprise, that the Midwest, my birthplace, was also the birthplace of the Humanist movement within Unitarianism and Universalism.

With Curtis Reese, minister of the Unitarian church of Des Moines, Iowa, who helped kick off what became known as "the Humanist Controversy" when he said to the Harvard Summer School of Theology in 1920 that "Liberalism has insisted on the essentially natural character of religion...[It] is building a religion that would not be shaken even if the thought of God were outgrown." (*Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History* by David E. Bumbaugh, pg. 138)

With Unitarian minister, John Dietrich, who, in the 20's & 30's, gave a series of sermons with such titles as "What If the World Went Humanist?" to such large crowds in Minneapolis that he had to move from the First Unitarian Society (which seated about 600) to a theater downtown (that seated about 1700, and was always comfortably filled and sometimes packed). (And his sermons were often well over an hour long, folks. I thought maybe we could rekindle that tradition in our new space here....no?)

With Brainard F. Gibbons, minister of the Universalist Church of Wausau, Wisconsin, who addressed the Universalist Assembly of 1949, saying, "Divine revelation has been replaced by human investigation...superstition by reason, the closed mind by the open...Hence, Universalists today consider all religions, including Christianity,

expressions of human spiritual aspirations, not God-founded institutions...[we consider] faith the projection of known facts into the unknown, not blind creedal acceptance; [we consider] the supernatural merely the natural beyond man's (remember it was 1949) man's present understanding, not a violation of nature's laws." (*Universalism in America*, edited by Ernest Cassara, pg. 272)

And it became clear to me that humanism is not so much about where one will *end up* upon engaging a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, it does not necessarily determine the conclusions which one must draw. It is about where one *begins* that search. In a very sensible way, Humanism asks where else we can start our search but with ourselves, (what else can we *bring* to the task but ourselves?), and what other tools can we be expected to use but our own very human capabilities? Why, at the door of the church, should we suspend the use of reason, pretending to believe what we doubt and trying to deny what we know to be true? Why is science so often viewed as an enemy to religion rather than an invaluable process and method by which we learn more about the world? Why are we asked to focus so intently on our relationship to an entity whose existence we cannot be certain of while our relationships with each other suffer from our inattention, and even more from the artificial divisions that religions help create?

It reminds me of [a story](#) I read about a four-year old girl who had a terrifying nightmare. She woke up crying, and went rushing into her parents' bedroom where she snuggled up with her mom to be comforted. After awhile, the mother led the girl back to her own room, where she put on a night-light.

"Do I have to be alone?" the girl said, trying to compose herself.

"You don't have to be afraid," the mother reassured her. "Even if I'm not here, God is always with you."

"I know that God is here," the girl replied, "but I need someone in this room who has some skin!"

Humanists understand that little girl.

The [newest version](#) of the Humanist Manifesto (the second revision since the original came out in 1933), presented just last year, says, "Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity..Humanists long for and strive toward a world of mutual care and concern, free of cruelty and its consequences..."

As Luther Burbank said in the reading, "...the God within us (the one who shares our skin) is the only available God we know and the clear light of science teaches us that we must be our own saviors, if we are to be found worthy of saving; in other words to depend upon the 'kingdom within.'"

In other words, we, wearing our skin, without needing a God or a sacred Scripture to tell us, have the awareness and the ability and the responsibility to answer that little girl's call...because we know that her call echoes in cries of terror from war-torn streets; it echoes in the stark sounds of silverware against plates in lonely rooms; it echoes, haltingly, voice cracking, amidst tears and creaking chairs in unforgiving hospital rooms; it echoes through the uncertain actions and the unexplainable frustration and the uneasy restlessness of people who are all-too-often too caught up in a swirl of activity or imprisoned in the mechanized monotony of the everyday or lost in the mind-numbing distractions that this society affords us. We may hear it from the folks in Florida as they attempt to rebuild under the threat of an unimaginable *third* hurricane. We may have heard it from amidst the agonizing events in Russia. We may have felt it as we watched those who lost loved ones in the tragic circumstances of September 11th, 3 years ago, as they gathered to remember. We may hear it all the way from Sudan, as people struggle to survive the violence and cry out for help...We recognize the call everywhere, from fear, from loneliness, from pain and frustration and need, that cry *of* human *for* human, that plea for help, for contact, for comforting, for listening, or sometimes for not that much of anything, really, or any *one* thing, except our presence, our steadfast presence...and maybe a reassuring touch from skin to skin.

Humanism hears that call.

But in spite of this warm and passionate vision of humanism, it must be noted that some have experienced humanism and humanists very differently within our congregations and our movement. They have experienced humanism as having a fiercely individualistic focus rather than an invitation to community; they have experienced it as a rationalistic fundamentalism rather than an invitation to sincere and reasoned exploration; they have experienced it as an undue concern with the scientifically circumscribed potentialities of humans at the expense not only of an unexplored spiritual realm but of the natural world and the interdependent web of all life. For all the talk of open minds, they have experienced humanism as a closed heart. Why is this?

When Humanism was starting to be recognized as a valid religious expression that was welcome within Unitarian and Universalist congregations, there were some who, very

understandably, felt that they had *arrived*, that Humanism, finally, was *it*. You can hear it in the triumphant, and somewhat dismissive, words of Rev. Brainard F. Gibbons of Wausau, Wisconsin, when he says, "Divine revelation has been replaced by human investigation, ignorance by knowledge, superstition by reason, the closed mind by the open, stagnation by progress, celestial nonsense by common sense." You can hear it in the almost apocalyptic vision contained in the sermon entitled "What If The World Went Humanist?" by Rev. John Dietrich of Minneapolis, when he says, "Then the altars and temples that have so poorly served our fathers will mingle with the ruins of Jupiter and Osiris, for we will have discovered the secret of life." (*What If The World Went Humanist?* By John Dietrich, pg. 112)

There was a feeling, sparked by this profound revolution toward a wider understanding of religion, that persisted through the intervening years and up to the present among some, that with Humanism we had reached a pinnacle, a peak, that the history of religion had shown a steady progress toward... *this*, a reasoned religion, an objective view of the realities of our place in the world. Now, stripped of all that unnecessary spiritual baggage, (what Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker might have called "the transient" as opposed to "the permanent,") now we had a religion that matched human adulthood. Far more damaging than their certainty was the attitude among some Humanists that they now "owned" Unitarian Universalism, that the marriage of these two traditions, as appropriate as it seemed, meant that Humanism was something of an official philosophy, a "litmus test," if you will, for prospective Unitarian Universalists. Let me state clearly that this was not and is not the attitude of the majority of humanists, but it was the attitude of a vocal minority within some congregations.

But most humanists know that this attitude is hogwash. For one thing, to heed the guidance of reason and the results (and, I might add, *the process*) of science, means that one is ever open to new data. Evolutionary understandings have long-ago grown away from the idea of "onward and upward" progress. Humans, for all of their potential, have not quite lived up to the optimistic forecasts of early humanist thinkers. And humanism has grown in its understanding of the natural world to include interdependence rather than mastery for a metaphor.

Indeed, one of the primary similarities that I see between Unitarian Universalism as a whole and Humanism in its present incarnation is the explicit willingness to adapt and change based on new experience, information, and insight. "The lifestance of Humanism," says Humanist Manifesto 3, "--guided by reason, inspired by compassion, and informed by experience—encourages us to live life well and fully. It evolved through the ages and continues to develop through the efforts of thoughtful people who recognize that values and ideals, however carefully wrought, are subject to

change as our knowledge and understandings advance." (That could describe Unitarian Universalism also, right?)

Carole Martignacco, a Unitarian Universalist minister, author of *The Everything Seed* (and a friend of mine, I'm proud to say, along with the illustrator, Joy Troyer), said she wrote the book to tell a simple origin myth, one true to the understanding of physics that would use the language of poetry (and the two are growing closer together all the time, it seems)...She includes a quote in her author's note by mathematical cosmologist, Brian Swimme which says, "Every child should be told: you come out of the energy that gave birth to the universe. Its story is your story, its beginnings are your beginnings." I am reminded of the Carl Sagan saying: "We are made of star-stuff." Miraculous. And though this story as it stands is so beautiful to me, though I could easily adopt it as my creation story for all time, Carole says she wrote this story with the full awareness that scientific theories are continually changing...continually changing, growing, reforming into new images and stories and understandings.

The Humanist insistence that we must include scientific realities within our religion has been an immeasurable gift. It has affirmed for me the realization that all the miracles I will ever need occur *within* the boundaries of the natural world. *And* I think it has helped us, as the words of the source say, to guard against "idolatries of the mind and spirit."

Humanism can make an idol of reason or the scientific method, but only by betraying the very nature of humanism itself. At its best, Humanism reminds us that truth is ever-expanding and so our search for truth and meaning is an ever-evolving process; that certainties are subject to revision; that reason is a powerful tool with which to explore the world, but not an end in itself; that this life, with its joys and beauties, challenges and tragedies, is where we must find our purpose; and that responsibility for our lives lies (where else?) with us.

When we seek to escape from the realities of this life, humanism reacquaints us with its wonders. When we find ourselves in despair over our ignorance, humanism reminds us of all that we can learn. When we begin to clutter the unknown with our fervent certainties, humanism reminds us that we really don't know. It resists our stubborn urge to stop knowledge in its tracks; it foils our attempts to solidify what is necessarily fluid; it questions our attempts to describe what is indescribable and insists that our spiritual flights of fancy be grounded in the life-giving soil of reason, observation, and experience. Far from the picture of humanism in my childhood as decidedly anti-religious, I now see it as a protector of what is holy, smashing the idols of our wish-fulfillment religions, guarding the mystery and miracle of life with the

clear-eyed integrity of agnosticism.

Luther Burbank caused an incredible stir when he published the article that Morris read from. He received over 500 letters in one day, many from people who were angry at his perceived blasphemy, some from people who thanked him for his courageous stand, saying words that they had always believed but were too scared to voice. Some of the letters were from people, many of them ministers, who were sure that Burbank was simply unclear in what he was saying. "You can't really mean you're an *infidel*," they said.

But Burbank had always been clear. "I do not believe what has been served to me to believe," he had written, "I am a doubter, a questioner, a skeptic." And in a follow-up interview, Burbank indicated that he had, indeed, double-checked with the dictionary. "I am an infidel," he insisted. "I know what an infidel is, and that's what I am."

But if he doubted and questioned, it was so that he could more clearly see and experience the wonder of life. As his friend, Judge Ben Lindsey, said at his memorial service, "To him as to few other men it was given to know, that all comes from the same universal ebb and flow of protoplasmic energy, and he quoted Burbank as saying, "'I love everybody. I love everything! I love humanity--I love flowers--I love children--I love my dog--I am a lover of the man Jesus--I am a lover of all things that help.' With such perfect love," Lindsey concludes, "he was too fine and brave to be orthodox."

Too fine and brave to be orthodox. So today we honor the infidel. Today, we celebrate the doubter. Today, we pay tribute to those who keep us honest and honor that thread of our tradition known as humanism, that calls us to engage all of our human capabilities in creating a more loving, a more just, a more compassionate world.

1. Closing Words #680 (Barbara Pescan)

Because of those who came before, we are;

in spite of their failings, we believe;

because of, and in spite of the horizons of their vision,

we, too, dream.

Let us go, remembering to praise,

to live in the moment,

to love mightily,

to bow to the mystery.