

The Faith of a Humanist

Sarah Oelberg

I was first introduced to Humanism in kindergarten. Our Sunday school class had just sung "Jesus Loves Me" when our kindly Unitarian minister came in and told us how lovely our singing was. Then he asked what the song meant to us and he told us that it was a song about love-not the same kind of love that our parents give us, but a wonderful kind of love for everyone that a man named Jesus, now dead, tried to teach when he was alive. He told us that the Bible is a book that tells stories about some of the ways Jesus showed his love for people, and that there are also many other books that teach us about love. He said we do not belong to Jesus-maybe to our parents, but our bodies and our ideas can not be owned by anyone except ourselves. And he said that we should never think of ourselves as weak. For if we try, we can do and be almost anything we want. We do not need to have someone like Jesus look after us; we can take responsibility for our own lives and accomplish marvelous things.

This is such a sensible and simple philosophy that I remember it still, and I have followed it since. In that brief conversation with a group of children, the minister managed to cover the basic tenets of Humanism:

- Showing love to all humans is a worthy goal.
- Immortality is found in the examples we set and the work we do.
- We gain insight from many sources and all cultures, and there are many religious books and teachings that can instruct us about how to live.
- We have the power within ourselves to realize the best we are capable of as human beings.
- We are responsible for what we do and become; our lives are in our own hands.

However, I did not learn everything I needed to know about Humanism while in kindergarten. Through my years of religious education in various Unitarian churches, I felt the affirming love of a religion that had a deep concern for the worth and dignity of all people-including me. I learned to affirm and celebrate life in this world and to work for the betterment of the world and its people. I was nurtured by the feeling that I had the potential and the freedom to experience all kinds of things, to enjoy life and liberty, and to explore many different ideas. I was encouraged to use my mind, to question even the seemingly obvious, and to trust in my own experiences and perceptions.

As I became more involved in the world, I came to value many expressions of the human spirit and the power of human imagination. I appreciate art, music, poetry, drama, and literature. I came to realize that creativity is best nurtured in a climate of freedom where innovation is esteemed. I am glad to have a religion that encourages me to explore and express my aesthetic and sensual side, and to open my heart and mind to the fullness of life in all its aspects.

During the years of my formal education, I particularly valued that Humanism honors reason and encourages integrity. I liked that it invited me to think for myself, to explore, challenge, and doubt; to approach the important questions of life with an openness to new ideas and different perspectives; and then to test these ideas against reality, filter new knowledge through my own active mind, and believe according to the evidence. Humanism provided me with the "tools" I would use to pursue the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." It invited me to ask about each idea, "Is it reasonable and responsible to believe this? Does it make sense in terms of what is known about the world and the universe?" This is not to suggest that we do not also learn and gain insights from intuition, hunches, flashes of inspiration, even emotion or unexplainable experiences-we do. But when making important decisions that will affect ourselves and others, it behooves us to test our perceptions against reality.

This testing led me to realize that we are all connected to the world, the cosmos, and everything therein. I discovered that Humanism teaches that our well-being and our very existence depend upon the web of life in ways we are only beginning to understand, that our place in nature has to be in harmony with it. Humanism leads me to find a sense of wider relatedness with all the world and its peoples, and it calls me to work for a sound environment and a humane civilization. Because everything is interconnected, I cannot be concerned with my own life and the future of humanity without also being concerned about the future of the planet.

My Humanist religion also prods me to consider the moral principles by which I should live. Humanist ethics, based on love and compassion for humankind and for nature, place the responsibility on humanity for shaping the destiny and future direction of the world. I am called to find my better self and to try to become the best person I can be. Humanism also makes me aware of the existence of moral dilemmas and the need to be very careful and intentional in my moral decision-making, for every decision and action has a consequence now and for the future. I am compelled by my own analysis of the world situation to become involved in service for the greater good of humanity, recognizing that things are changing so quickly that an open-ended approach to solving social problems is needed.

As I grow older, I appreciate more and more the need for a spiritual life. I find my spirituality mostly in using my intelligence and creativity to try to build an enduring peace and beauty in my life. My Humanist belief helps me to see that to be honest with myself, to face life openly, and to be loyal to high ideals is to be spiritual. There is a unique spark of divinity in each of us by virtue of our human endowment; we need only try to find it. My search for that spark within me gives me constant challenge and consoling calm.

Finally, I have come to respect the important role Humanist principles have played in history. From classical Greece through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the modern age of science, there has been a grandeur in Humanism that has animated some of the most influential people and generated some of the most enduring ideals. I have been particularly inspired by the very Humanist sentiments of the women ministers in

Iowa at the end of the last century, and I am proud to play a small part in continuing their legacy.

These are some of the things I have learned since kindergarten, and some of the reasons I am proud and happy to be a Unitarian Universalist Humanist. It is a religious perspective for those who are in love with life, and one that I embrace joyously.

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