

Faith of Unitarian Universalist Humanists

Unitarian Universalist Humanists hold a religious perspective that is grounded in the natural, not the supernatural; emphasizes the worth and dignity of human beings rather than the glory of God; and considers social justice and social responsibility far more important than personal piety. Humanists are part of a broad, worldwide tradition that has been a vital part of Unitarian Universalism for nearly a hundred years. Among the sources of our Unitarian Universalist tradition is “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.”

The emphasis on reason and on human agency does not preclude religion or spirituality. While respecting science and reason, Humanists experience a sense of awe and wonder in contemplating the mysteries of life and death in the natural world and the human place in that world. Although many who consider themselves Humanist are also atheist or agnostic, the terms are not interchangeable. As Rev. Kendyl Gibbons writes, “Humanism looks beyond the idea that a self-conscious, personal god doesn’t exist. Rather, Humanism is founded on the much more radical claim that the existence or nonexistence of such a god, or goddess, or gods, does not matter much.” Humanists find good that which supports human flourishing and the well-being of the planet we call home. This is the basis for an ethical stance that invokes justice and compassion in human relationships as strong values. In particular, Black Humanist thought is rooted in the oppression and suffering of Black people, insisting that oppressed people must work for their own liberation, without reliance on the aid of a supernatural God.

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition is intertwined with Humanist thought. We believe in the importance of the lives we live; we wonder and rejoice in the natural world; we welcome the discoveries of science and human reason; and we believe that it is human beings who have the capacity to dismantle injustice and care for one another.

— John Hooper

Being a Humanist calls me to my better self. It holds me in blessed community during the good times and the hard times and allows me to continually search for more meaning and understanding in both the worlds of science and art. And my Humanism is shaped by love. Participating in a religious community makes my Humanism whole because I don’t exist in the world as a lone entity. I am a part of that whole; I knew this even as a child. Being a Humanist is a religious act for me. When I look at a sleeping baby or the wrinkled, arthritic hands of my mother; when I listen to Kiri te Kanawa singing the aria (cantilena) from *Bachianas Brasileiras* no. 5 by Heitor Villa-Lobos; and when my eleven-year-old grandson gives me a hug and says, “I love you, Grammie,” I am stopped in my tracks at the wonder of life. The miracle, the science of cells and bodies, the unlikelihood that all of this could come together and create life itself, causes me to pause with great awe. And I am thankful. My religious Humanism is filled with gratitude.

— Rev. Ginger Luke, minister emerita, River Road UU Congregation, Bethesda, MD

The church family of my childhood is the reason that the Humanism that guides my life is rooted in the love and care of other human beings. My Humanist approach to living prioritizes practices of community. The love and care that were given to me and

required of me during my childhood in the A.M.E. Zion Church epitomizes the roots of my Humanist practices today. Sister May taught me to recognize what is possible when human beings are responsible and accountable to one another. Humanism is the way I honor the radical love, work, and yes, even the faith of my ancestors. And now Humanism is one of the primary influences on how I grapple with hard questions about the ways our bodies, race, gender, sexuality, justice, and thoughts about (yes) God help us face the sometimes overwhelming existential questions of our collective existence—who, what, where, and why are we here?

—Emerson Zora Hamsa, candidate for Unitarian Universalist ministerial fellowship

I find transcendence in human relationships. I get that humans will let me down and will hurt me as well. They will disappoint, betray, and otherwise fail me. But they also have repeatedly saved me from a selfish me-ism that can destroy my well-being and lead me to false idols. They have loved me so fiercely that I am brought back from despair, loneliness, and isolation. They have cajoled me into my better self when, frankly, I sometimes don't want to bother with the effort. They have challenged me to aspire to possibilities that I fear are unobtainable, because they see something in me that I far too often can't see in myself. This understanding is the Humanism that has transcended the intellect, buried itself inside me, and inspires and heals me daily.

—Rev. Kaaren Anderson, former co-minister, First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY

I could not accept the idea that the collective suffering of those I saw on a daily basis had any value at all. I needed to explore an alternate response that uncompromisingly affirms—at all costs, including even the rejection of Christian concepts such as God—the demonic nature of collective suffering because human liberation is more important than the maintenance of any religious symbol, sign, canon, or icon.... After taking a deep breath, I spoke a new word: God does not exist. Even with this confession made, I was still committed to doing theology, but without reliance on notions of God. I would do theology as a Humanist.

—Rev. William R. Jones (1933-2012), former community minister, Florida State University

When I look out at the congregation I serve on Sunday morning, I feel so grateful that we exist—that the families and individuals sitting in those chairs have found a home with us. Time and again, newcomers will say to me, “I stopped being able to believe in what my church taught when I was a teenager. I thought the idea of a community was lost to me forever. I can't believe you're here, that there's a place where I can be part of a congregation and believe everything we say here.” Newcomers look at our community like a present they didn't even know they would be getting, a place where they can be fully themselves.”

—Rev. Amanda Poppei, senior leader, Washington Ethical Society, Washington DC

My faith is centered in the conviction that there is ultimately no separation between me, us, and all that is. This conviction is not only a source of comfort but also a source of power. It guides me when I am dispirited or confused, when I am tempted by hubris or idolatry. As a faith, it locates all value in what is, not what is supposed. It grounds me and stirs my imagination and my hope.

—Rev. Mark Ward, lead minister, UU Congregation of Asheville, NC

My personal theology or worldview has four parts: My answer to the question about God, gods, or a higher power is atheism. My answer to how I should live my life is Humanism. My answer to where I can practice my beliefs, find community, and grow into a better person with others is Unitarian Universalism. And a final piece connecting the rest is Religious Naturalism, which is an orientation to all of existence grounded in the material world. My deepest religious questions have little to do with the nature of the divine or with humanity's relationship to any deities that may shape our world. My questions have everything to do with our relationships with each other. How do we tell our stories and remember the lessons of our collective heritage? How do we live out our lives and leave legacies we can be proud of for future generations? How do we as individuals make decisions that make, and build on, positive change in the world around us?

—Kevin W. Jagoe, First Unitarian Congregational Society in Brooklyn, NY, and Church of the Larger Fellowship

My ministry was always about understanding the world, our place in it, and the construction of meaning in human lives. I was fascinated by the recognition that in as far as we know, human beings are the meaning-bearing, meaning-creating instruments of a universe that, apart from us, seems to have neither meaning nor purpose. There grew in me a conviction that because we are instruments of meaning in this universe it matters what kind of meaning we build with our lives. Not knowing why it matters, or to whom or to what, I was certain that in every decision, we create the person we will be and subtly change the universe, however minutely, forever.

—David Bumbaugh, minister emeritus, Beacon—UU Congregation, Summit, NJ

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Resources

Kendyl L. R. Gibbons and William R. Murry, eds., *Humanist Voices in Unitarian Universalism* (Skinner House)

Daniel Kanter, *Faith for the Unbeliever* (Skinner House)

William R. Murry, *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century* (Skinner House)

Paul Raser, *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century* (Skinner House)

UU Humanist Association, huhumanists.org