

Religious Humanism
Rev. Amy Bowden Freedman
Channing Memorial Church
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READING: *Humanist Manifesto*

The time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs through out the modern world. The time is past for mere revision of traditional attitudes. Science and economic change have disrupted the old beliefs. Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with new conditions created by a vastly increased knowledge and experience. In every field of human activity, the vital movement is now in the direction of candid and explicit humanism... There is great danger of a final, and we believe fatal, identification of the word *religion* with doctrines and methods which have lost their significance and which are powerless to solve the problems of human living... Religions have always been means for realizing the highest values of life.

The Humanist Manifesto speaks directly to us. The time has come for us to recognize the widespread changes though out the world. Our sense of order and meaning has been shaken. Our lives are influenced by the increasing speed of communications, modern technology, and the globalization of commerce. Old beliefs have been disrupted. This is due in part to our vastly increased knowledge and experience. Science tells us of the melting of the polar ice caps. Political leaders report that North Korea is testing nuclear missiles. Many American soldiers return from Iraq or Afghanistan disfigured and traumatized by the war that continues on our behalf. During this economic recession, many of us struggle to make ends meet.

During this time of trial and rapid change, it is essential for religion to be vibrant and fresh. Instead of empty rituals and tired doctrines, we need an approach that helps us engage with the problems of human living. As the reading states, "Religions have always been a means for realizing the highest values of life."

What is the Humanist Manifesto? You may be surprised to learn that it was originally published in 1933. This document emerged after a controversial period in Unitarianism in the early 20th century. As you know, our religious roots are Christian. Through out time, our spiritual ancestors have upheld freedom of conscience and did not have a creed to which members must ascribe. However, along the way, this principle was challenged. There were times in the history of our movement when religious leaders asserted that Unitarianism required discipleship to the Lord Jesus Christ or a belief in God. Those who insisted on statements of faith were usually reacting defensively to new perspectives.

One of those new challenging perspectives was the Humanist Manifesto, a two page document signed by 34 men, fifteen of which were Unitarian ministers or laymen, and one Universalist minister. The signers were intellectuals of various disciplines. Together they proclaimed a new age calling for religion to move beyond outdated forms

and teachings. The Humanist Manifesto outlined fifteen affirmations for a “vital, free, and frank religion”. The signers declared that it was not only possible but imperative to have religion without God. I will have copies available for you in case you are interested in reading this document.

I believe that it is because of humanist ministers like John Dietrich and Curtis Reese that our Association is as theologically diverse as it is today. Even as I preach about Humanism this morning, I recognize that there are members of the congregation who are theist, pagan, Christian and Jewish.

I was raised in a congregation that was predominantly Humanist. When I went to seminary so many of my classmates were Theist or Christian, that I was surprised to discover the results of a survey published in 1998 outlining the theological make-up of our Association. 46% of Unitarian Universalists reported that they are “**theologically humanist**—more than twice the number who identified with the second most common perspective, **nature-centered spirituality**, and far more than the 13% who called themselves **theists** or the 9.5% who described themselves as **Christians**.”ⁱ

What is humanism? The pamphlet that we have out front defines “The Faith of a Humanist” as follows:

Showing love to all humans.

Immortality is found in the examples we set and the work we do.

We gain insight from many sources and all cultures.

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.ⁱⁱ

Of course, such a liberal perspective gives rise to many different types of humanists and a variety of actions. The most distinctive rift is between the Secular and Religious Humanists. Secular Humanists quip that a Unitarian Universalist is a Humanist who can’t break the habit of going to church.

Religious Humanists tell Secular Humanists that as critics of religion, they do not understand that a free faith such as ours exists. Secular Humanists need to get up on Sunday morning to experience the value of belonging to a non-creedal congregation.

I believe with the signers of the first Manifesto that Humanism is deeply religious. The support and challenge of a gathered community can help us live ethical lives. It is too easy to be swept up in the demands of daily life. In order to keep aligned with moral values and ideals, we need a weekly centering ritual with music, inspiring words, and shared intention. We need a place to mark the transitions of our lives. Children and youth need the steadfast support of a community of all ages where they are affirmed as unique individuals and taught to be curious and respectful of the world around them. It takes practice and intention to keep an open mind, to nurture a loving heart, to recognize the injustice of our times, and then to work for positive change. Quite simply, this community of faith helps bring more love and understanding into the world.

Of course, it is also possible to uphold these principles and believe in God. As Curtis Reese famously said, “Theism is philosophically possible, but not religiously necessary.”

Our Humanist principles call on each one of us to active participation. Instead of a hierarchy, this is a grassroots religion. It is the people of this church that make decisions about our direction and programming.

A good example of Religious Humanism in action took place here recently at Channing. When we had a shortfall in our Annual Fund Drive, we were facing significant cuts to next year’s operating budget. This was a difficult problem. Church leaders recognized that we might need to reduce staff hours or cut important programs. The Governing Board called a special meeting of the congregation. One of the proposals to save money included closing the church for the summer during the steeple restoration. You expressed a commitment to keep the operations at the current level. Many of you spoke to me about how valuable summer services are not only to you personally but as a liberal religious presence in Newport.

The good news is that through increased contributions and a commitment to fundraising events the staff and programming for the upcoming church year was preserved! This means that we will remain open in this Summer.

We just crossed a huge milestone as a community. We removed the bells from our steeple which is of interest not only to our own members but to the wider community and folks around the country. After years of planning and hard work, scaffolding is finally being erected and the restoration will soon be underway. I would ask the people who helped accomplish this to stand but it took all of us to accomplish this from the Property Committee to the Grant Writing Team, Vision-casting, Strategic Planning, and every contributions to the Capital Campaign—many people helped to make this possible. This deserves a round of applause!

At a time of economic recession, this is no small accomplishment. We might have decided to take the summer off but you showed your commitment and dedication to this community affirming our shared ministry. So, now we have this great opportunity to move forward with our services and programming in July and August. I’d love for us to move forward in a way that is fresh and new. The question is how do we do that?

Peter: Oh! Oo, oo! (Raising hand)

Amy: Anyone else? Just kidding, yes, Peter.
(Peter runs up and whisper in ear)

Amy: You think we should have an Altar Call? What does having people proclaim Jesus have to do with Religious Humanism? Were you listening to my sermon?

Peter: Of course I was, an Altar Call in the spirit of religious humanism. Let everyone know what is needed not only to keep the doors open but to remain a welcoming vibrant community. I know that many of you go to the beach or sailing or travel in the summer but just imagine if everyone here commits to do one thing one Sunday.

Amy: A Unitarian Universalist Altar Call! Now *this* truly is an act of faith! There are many different opportunities to be of service this Summer: assisting with Sunday Services, assistant teaching our children, ushering, fellowship, being a tour host, and leading fun and games in Touro Park.

Peter: Are we going to do this?

Amy: Let's try it.

Peter: Importance of belonging, connecting, etc.

- Assisting with a Sunday Service
- Teaching Assistants, Dr. Seuss
- Ushers
- Fellowship, on the lawn
- Tour Hosts, open to the public
- Fun and Games in the Park

CENTERING IN PRAYER

Prayer in a Time of Trial from *Consider the Impatiens!* Rudolph Nemser

I do not pray, as some,
never to judge a fellow human being
If the Universe is to be moral
we are called to stand for good,
judge other as ourselves.

I do not pray never to judge,
for I value dignity of all life too much
to turn a blind eye to power's abuse
I shall always judge tyrants:
others or myself

Rather, I do pray
for wisdom
to recognize the limits

of what I know and what I understand

for honesty
to acknowledge I see the world
but from a single perspective
and secrets beyond my sight

for humility
to know what I most condemn of others
I most dread of myself

for genuineness
that each act of judging be for good
and not self-aggrandizement

for compassion
never to forget we all,
within our limitations,
do the very best we can

May these three prayers, which only I can answer,
be fulfilled.

Amen

BENEDICTION, Rev. Amy Freedman

As we prepare to leave this beautiful place,
let us remember that Channing Memorial
is not made of stone and mortar.
Our religious home is a bridge of human relationships.
We, the men, women, and children who gather
in celebration and struggle,
who offer our gifts of love and service
to one another and the local community
together, we give this church life and purpose.
Go forth in love, go forth and bless the world.
Amen.

ⁱ p.xiii

ⁱⁱ Sarah Oelberg, "The Faith of a Unitarian Universalist Humanist" (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2000).