

A Sturdy Freedom
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It is a great pleasure to be here, and an honor to be invited to participate in this annual revival service. Such extraordinary collective religious events have a long tradition in the United States. I think back to the time of the second great awakening in the early 1800s, when famed preachers like Lyman Beecher and Charles Grandison Finney visited camp meetings that lasted for days of preaching, singing, and spiritual community. Historians have observed that this popular religious enthusiasm arose in response to many of the social and economic changes taking place as the United States matured into a genuine nation in the early 19th century. Concerns about collective social morality were widely shared, the most prominent issues being slavery, alcohol, and to a lesser extent, women's rights.

The ironic thing is that although the second great awakening came about in response to the increasing atomization of American society – the geographic and economic mobility of the western frontier, and the anonymity of growing eastern cities – it offered a solution that was also located in the unique agency of the individual. The conversion experience – that emotional and spiritual event which in an instant transformed a person from a lost and worldly sinner into a lover of God and follower of Jesus – was understood as entirely personal. Unlike earlier Calvinist Puritans, the revivalists did not believe in pure predestination. For them, conversion was ultimately a gift of god, but it was first of all a choice; a decision made by the individual to embrace the offer of salvation and the life of virtue. No one could do this on another's behalf; each individual had to come to his or her own reckoning with god. This experience of the warmed heart stood in contrast to the liberal emphasis on intellectual understanding of god's abstract nature and universal design. The deism of the founding fathers had not expected to experience god as a present reality, so much as to appreciate the complexity of creation and the wisdom of its author as a kind of intricate, cooperative puzzle of knowledge, the solution to which would unfold piece by piece as a collective endeavor.

For the orthodox revivalists, their purpose was to create an emotional experience so intense and persuasive that individuals would commit to a set of social virtues that were seen as necessary in order to address the most urgent problems facing the young nation. This perspective emphasized the radical difference between the situations faced by previous generations and the unique challenges of their own historical moment; as well as between the life and behavior of the unconverted sinner and the transformed values of those newly saved. Less flamboyant, but more enduring, the liberal institutional churches of the standing order saw a continuity of aspiration between the generations, and insisted on the freedom of individual conscience and intellect, to

explore, discover, and create, rather than conform, in order to ameliorate unjust social conditions.

Tonight, in the early years of the 21st century, I want to suggest that our own era has some similarities to that of 200 years ago. We are invited to understand that the challenges we face – terrorism, ecological climate change, economic globalization, energy gluttony – are unprecedented, and that only a transformed consciousness can respond radically enough to address them effectively. Yet I would contend, and I suppose that we are gathered as Unitarian Universalists because we share the notion, that the ideals of liberalism remain valid, whatever the crisis before us. It is not by laying aside the lessons of history and the disciplines of reason that we may best equip ourselves and our culture to confront the urgencies of our age. We are here tonight, as I understand it, to renew our commitment to the heritage of that liberal tradition, with its insistence on human liberty and equality, an accurate knowledge of the world and ourselves; to reaffirm that study freedom. And I in particular am here, I take it, to remind us of, and to celebrate, the particular strand of that heritage identified for the past century or so as humanism.

Acknowledging our humanism begins with a particular history that we adopt as our own. It is not a specific national or ethnic or even institutional history; rather, it is the story of a cluster of ideas, as they emerge and grow and are suppressed and reemerge in various places and moments of human society over time. These ideas include the fundamental equality of human beings with one another, the capacity of the human mind and the process of reason increasingly to understand the nature of the universe, the necessity of individual freedom as a precondition for a just society, and the expectation of happiness and fulfillment in this life and this world. These ideas can be traced across cultures and eras and continents; wherever they grow bright and become influential, we humanists find our ancestors. We find them among the philosophers of ancient Greece, who dismissed the gods, and turned to examine the stuff of the world and the idea of a good life. We find them among the early sages of the far east, who advocated self-awareness, compassion, and impersonal cosmic forces. We find them among the scholars and artists of the European Renaissance, who loved the beauty of the world and questioned the authority of the churches. We find them among the scientists and inventors of the Enlightenment, who created a method of self-correcting knowledge, and among the revolutionaries who insisted upon the rights of humanity, and the iniquity of both slavery and kings. We find our forbears among the courageous reformers who have challenged tradition and public opinion in order to change long-standing injustices. We find them among the skeptical thinkers who disprove superstitions, who unmask pious frauds, who dare to imagine a world without gods. Every time an institution is founded for the purpose of increasing knowledge and advocating reason, we see the influence of humanism at work. Every time a community gathers in the name of simple humanity, to celebrate the wonders of this world, and the

possibilities of this life, we see the light of humanism spread. To have a humanist identity is to claim this history as one's own, to see yourself as a participant in this tide of freedom and reason, contributing your share to its work, rejoicing as it gains ground. This is our story, not of ultimate salvation, but of the progress of and hope for humanity. A humanist identity grounds itself in this story.

Humanism begins with the premise that our human bodies and minds are the tools with which we must engage this world and our existence. Ken Patton puts it poetically when he affirms, "Without any say in the matter we are born, and without vote or rebuttal we die." These two facts are the givens of human experience, and the question is then how are we going to respond to this situation? There are two possible responses which Humanism rejects, and this is why I would argue that it does constitute a legitimate spiritual path. On the one hand, we could spend whatever time of awareness that we may have on this planet, sulking because the conditions of life are not more to our liking. We can search, futilely as far as anyone has ever been able to determine, for the antidote to death, refusing to acknowledge the necessity of our mortality, or perhaps drown that awareness in the chemistry of our brains with alcohol or drugs or other perception-altering practices. We can, in essence, reject the life that we are given, and die in bitterness if we choose. On the other hand, we can take the knowledge of our impending death as a motive to run around frantically grasping and seizing whatever immediate gratifications seem to come to hand, as if every instant excitement or pleasure might be our last. We can try to experience the least possible pain and the greatest possible entertainment based upon blind impulse, and live a life of selfish and superficial enjoyment, although many generations of experiment have testified that such pleasures usually burn themselves out quickly, and leave jaded disillusionment in their wake. Standing in opposition to these two fundamentally immature reactions, the faith of Humanism invites us to grow up, to consider thoughtfully what might constitute a good life, a life worth living even in the face of certain death, and then to try such an approach, always leaving room for the fruits of both reason and experience to correct our course. As Kenneth Patton concludes, "Our only wisdom is to bestow ourselves on the universe which upholds us, and to accept the necessity of its ways."

As a humanist myself, I cannot escape the view that all religious experience and traditions and institutions are necessarily human experience and traditions and institutions. From this perspective, all religions have their origins in the question of what it means to live well, to live a good life. Some religions answer that question by supposing that our current lives in this world are simply preparation for other, future states of existence, so that what constitutes living well now is whatever will pay off in the greatest happiness and pleasure in the hereafter. By contrast, humanism is concerned not so much with whether there is or is not another world, but with how much present time and energy we invest in preparing for it. Many of us suppose that our state of consciousness after the body's death will be just what it was before the

body's conception; non-existent. Others of us suppose that we cannot know the answer to this mystery, since no evidence seems sufficient either way. A few of us have had uncanny personal experiences that incline us to think there may be something more beyond this life. But here's the thing; if our primary focus is on what makes a good life here and now, we are called upon to do the best we can to do what is right in this world. If some future state were to exist, either its moral laws would be the same as those which obtain in this one, and nothing different could be required of us than what we ought to be doing anyway. Or otherwise, some alternative moral system would invite us to do what is wrong as we understand it now, in order to build up points for the future. It is this possibility that Humanism vigorously rejects. We are asked to do what is right, and to accept the consequences of our actions, in the world in which we are now living. We are not to be bribed with promises of rewards, or intimidated with threats, into doing what we know here and now to be wrong. If it turns out that I have been mistaken in my guess, and in fact there is some judgment that follows my death, I choose to deal with it when it comes, in the confidence of having done the best I could with this life as I understood it. As Henry David Thoreau responded upon his death bed, "One world at a time, my friend; one world at a time."

Humanism rejects suppositions about possible life to come as a source of knowledge about what makes our present choices good; however, it very intentionally accepts the reality of death as part of what makes the task of learning to be human urgent and compelling. Knowing that we are mortal, and that our time is limited, suggests that in order to live well, we must be about it; there is no time to waste either feeling sorry for ourselves, or playing around with trifles. In this respect, Humanism is a demanding spiritual path. It teaches that we are accountable, individually and collectively, for what we make of ourselves and our world. No tolerant parent is going to appear in the last act to straighten out the messes we have made, either in our relationships or on the globe. No divine puppeteer is pulling the strings that cause us to dance; we are free to choose among all the options we can discover or invent, and then we and everyone else must live with the results of our choices. And thus it is by their consequences, for ourselves and others, that our choices must be evaluated. The sternness of Humanism lies in its teaching that we must not wait to be rescued or excused; the operation of cause and effect is never suspended in this world by special pleading, no matter how earnest. We are called to spiritual maturity, which means to submit as gracefully as we can to reality, to both the logic and the arbitrariness of the universe as it happens to exist.

We may, of course, strive to change those realities through the application of intelligence, effort, and the principles by which the universe itself operates. Much of human progress has occurred from the determination of our ancestors to understand why the world is the way it is, and having learned how it might be changed, to change it. There is nothing to stop us from eradicating diseases, if we can figure out how

vaccinations work; we are free to cross the oceans if we can discover the principles of navigation; presumably, we might lift the ancient curses of hunger, or warfare, from the human race, if we had the knowledge and the will. The good news of Humanism is that the well-being of this planet, and of our community most widely conceived, is the good we are called to seek. We are not fundamentally deceived; there is no arbitrary obedience required of us against our own common sense. We have, of course made both individual and collective mistakes from time to time, as we learn to understand ourselves and our world better, the knowledge that we could make yet more mistakes should help us to cultivate a certain humility in our assertions about what we know. Nevertheless, our deepest joy is trustworthy, and what sustains us in shared happiness and comfort is a fair guide to what it ultimately means to live well.

But for all its celebration of our intellectual capacity to understand the world and ourselves, Humanism is not just a function of the mind. The life well lived has emotional, aesthetic, and moral fulfillments as well as mental and physical satisfactions, and these we ignore at our peril. Love for those closest to us, and compassion for all creatures, the capacity to be touched by beauty and repulsed by ugliness, and the longing for justice in the world and honor in one's self, are as essential to spiritual maturity and lasting happiness as intellectual reason or physical health. Each of these dimensions has its own perspective on truth, and is not subsumed by the others; reasoning will not make right what is wrong, nor make what is hideous lovely, nor make us love the person our heart shrinks from. Humanism calls upon us to attend to all of our faculties, and to recognize that a life can only truly be well lived when it has developed satisfaction in all of these aspects.

Humanism as a spiritual path also invites us to aspire to pleasures that are deeper and more lasting than those of a juvenile hedonism. It begins with the understanding that no human being can be fully happy at the expense of another, or even in the knowledge of another's misery. Until all people have the opportunity to participate in creating for themselves good lives, as they would define them, none of us are as happy as we might be. The suffering of others always diminishes our own pleasures, for we are social creatures, and we are designed by evolution to reflect one another's experiences in our own perceptions. This is why a thoughtless grasping for selfish indulgences cannot make a satisfying life in the long run. Moreover, humanism invites us to recognize that the deepest and most enduring pleasures require cultivation. By investing patience, practice, and self-discipline, we can learn skills that make life more rewarding, whether we become better hockey players, more expressive water colorists, better parents, more appreciative readers, better cooks, more precise scientists... the list is endless. The point is that we may choose to sacrifice immediate gratification in the service of a greater fulfillment later on, and the good life is one in which immediate pleasures are thoughtfully balanced with the cultivation of lasting happiness. The more you take time to know and understand human nature and the nature of the world, the

more likely you are to be effective in making your life what you most truly want it to be. And of course, the good life is also one in which our vision of what constitutes the good life itself matures, and expands, and grows deeper over time. To engage in the kind of self-examination and reflection that is required for such intellectual, emotional and moral development is part of what it means to practice Humanism.

Humanism also affirms that this world is the kind of place in which the resources that we need for understanding and creating good lives are indeed available to us. We can live well, if we will go about it with persistence, humility, reason, and integrity. This is quite the opposite, by the way, of a religion or philosophy that teaches, as some would say, that we can believe anything we want. In fact, Humanism asserts, as in the third Manifesto, that we "...distinguish things as they are from things as we might wish or imagine them to be." Or in Kenneth Patton's image, "Our brains are unhitched from our longings... Our eyes will not lie to us on demand." There are many things that I would like, or want, to believe, some of them very delightful ideas. Unhappily, the evidence has indicated that they are not true, and therefore as a humanist, I am called upon to regard them as lovely images, not as truth, no matter how much I want to believe them. This commitment to reality and the authority of evidence is one of the most central disciplines of Humanism.

A humanist identity also carries these values into our lives in the present day. We affirm our humanism in the practices of freedom, reason and respect, both in our own personal behavior, and also in the principles that we support in our culture and society. Humanism is founded in the surprisingly daring proposition that ordinary individuals are the best judges of what will make them happy, and that to a very great extent, people should be allowed to do whatever it is they think is most likely to make them happy. This freedom has limits, of course, where it impinges on the freedom or well being of others, but it teaches us in a fundamental way that as we do not wish for anyone else to impose their views on us for our own good, so we must not seek to impose our views where they are not shared. Now this principle says nothing about making our views as attractive and persuasive as we can; indeed, at the heart of freedom is the discipline of persuasion. We are called upon to be able to explain why our convictions make sense in a way that someone else can understand; we can expect our ideas to prevail only if we can gain the free assent of our neighbors and fellow citizens. This can be a demanding discipline, and the use of force is always a tempting option, when we think we know what the right answer obviously is. Yet a true humanism demands that we protect not only our own liberty, but everyone else's, in the knowledge we are only as safe in our freedom of thought and conviction as the least powerful and disenfranchised minorities are also free. We do not believe that some are saved, and some are damned; that certain people are special, and others are expendable. Humanism calls upon its adherents to honor the common humanity in every person, and to be examples of tolerance, and engagement with views other than their own.

In fact, everything we do, everywhere we go, is viewed by the public as a demonstration of what humanism is about. Whether we are rude or gracious to those serve us; whether we are responsible or careless with our promises; whether we do business fairly, how we treat our spouses, children, and friends, the way we function in the political arena; how we respond to crisis and challenge when they come, the way we cope with disappointment or loss; our capacity for creativity, even the very balance and order of our lives, all make a statement about humanism as a philosophy and a faith. To have a humanist identity is to accept this responsibility for representing our fellow humanists and the movement as a whole; it is to agree that the consequences of a humanist perspective are demonstrated by how we conduct ourselves. If our behavior in any circumstance reflects poorly upon us, it is not just our own characters that are tarnished, but also the public perception of that humanism whose adherents we claim to be.

Side by side with our commitment to freedom stands our insistence upon the guiding power of reason. This is not to say that all our experiences, or even all our decisions, are perfectly rational. No human being has ever achieved such a state, and in some sense to do so would be to cast off the organic nature of our existence. We recognize that we are creatures of instinct and impulse, of needs and yearnings that are not always logical, and humanism teaches us to be content with that reality, not to seek to transcend it into some realm of disembodied ideas and perfection. But notwithstanding this embrace of our wholeness and finitude, we remain committed to the ways that logic, reason, and understanding can help us live better, happier lives. To think carefully, to act rationally, to approach the world with a healthy scientific curiosity – all these make it more likely that we will be able to live as we would wish, and create fulfillment for ourselves and others. Moreover, we have found that knowing how things work is a fulfillment in itself; our curiosity is both instrumental and also intellectual, and our minds have satisfaction in knowledge for its own sake. Additionally, as important as reason is to the development of the individual mind, we also find it indispensable as a public discipline. In making collective decisions for the common good, it is necessary to have a conversation in which facts are accurately reported, and the logical consequences of actions are thoughtfully considered. In the absence of reason, tyranny of one form or another becomes inevitable.

Finally, to have a humanist identity is to be engaged in a continuing process of inquiry – about the world, and ourselves, and the best way to live. It means being at peace within ourselves about the fact that we do not have all the answers to all the dilemmas of the human condition, and that even the answers we think we do have are always subject to reconsideration in the light of new information. It is to accept and embrace change as the one enduring quality of reality; it is to abandon the quest for perfection, permanence, certainty. It is this acknowledgement of all that we do not

know – which Socrates would have called true wisdom – that saves us, if we abide by its disciplines, from hubris and arrogance. We are watchers on the shore of wonder, along with all our human brothers and sisters, and every acre we gain on the island of knowledge makes that much more coastline for our further exploration. Merely claiming to be a humanist is not in itself an accomplishment; only if our humanism makes us wise and honest and modest, compassionate and gracious; only if it motivates us to learn, to create, and to serve; only if it makes us eager for freedom and faithful to our covenants, is it anything to brag about. And indeed, if it does all that, there will be no need to brag, for the value of a humanist identity will be clearly apparent for all to see.

In the end, Humanism is not a faith for the mindless or the heartless, nor for those without integrity, nor those who are merely cynical in their skepticism. It is not a featherbed for the spiritually lazy, who want to believe and do as little as possible with their all too brief, mortal lives. Humanism calls upon those who embrace it to live as fully as we can, in all the authentic wonder and curiosity of which the human spirit is capable. It summons us to a persistent obedience to evidence and reason, to recognize in our deepest and most beautiful longings not the world that is, but the world that might be, if we by our courage, intelligence, and dedication will make it so. It invites us into compassionate connection with others, so that we may build the common good, and in that enterprise make our own days glad. Humanism offers us no assurances of divine love or a life to come, but rather the assurance that this life matters, that we create our meaning here and now, in this very world. It teaches us to find our satisfactions in work and service, rest and love, and to accept our fears and failures for what we may learn from them. And by no means least of all, Humanism summons us to gratitude, not because some judging deity needs its ego stroked, but because that is how we become most fully human; because to live well is to live with intelligence and integrity, with justice and compassion, with wholeness and beauty and finally, inevitably, with thanks and praise.

We are star-stuff, my friends, risen into consciousness for this brief moment of opportunity to know ourselves, and the glorious, complex enormity of the universe in which we have our being. Let us carry that awareness into the lives we lead, into the relationships we conduct, into the work we do, into the communities we touch. Let our humanist identity gather us here, its sturdy freedom releasing the creative spirit among us, and the power of transformation into the world.